

THE HUGUENOT SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA

WALLACE KIRSOP

It is hardly surprising in an age when many people are fascinated with family history that a Huguenot Society should emerge in Australia. Apart from the Huguenot heritage that is so widespread in the British Isles we now have fellow citizens from the Netherlands and from South Africa who can lay claim to French Protestant origins. A study group was formed in Sydney in 2001. Two years later it had become a fully-fledged society with its own newsletter, *Huguenot Times* (ISSN 1834-3244), first appearing in Autumn 2003. The latest number—11, Autumn (May) 2008—is still edited by Robert Nash, the indefatigable Secretary of the Huguenot Society of Australia. Branch groups have functioned in Brisbane and especially Melbourne for some time, and these are now about to become formal Chapters of the parent Society in Sydney. Overall national membership stands around 300, a figure to be envied by ISFAR. Information can be obtained from PO Box 184, Newtown NSW 2042, by e-mail: ozhug@optushome.com.au or on the web: <http://members.optushome.com.au/ozhug>. In addition to learning how to get access to the Society's publications, including a forthcoming directory of Huguenot families in Australia (over 400 names already recorded), readers will be able to learn about the meetings and other functions held in their respective States.

It is one thing to draw attention to a related body, albeit one giving major attention to genealogy, another to situate it in the wider historical project that is at the core of ISFAR's (and hence *Explorations*'s) business. The easiest way to do this is perhaps to explain why someone with no known Huguenot ancestry can belong to the Australian society and to its venerable London model, which, in the genteel nineteenth-century style of similar bodies, designates all its members as Fellows. In fact my first step in the late 1950s was to join the Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme français, which was itself set up in the early 1850s. Why? For the simple reason that anyone concerned, as I then was, with the history of ideas and literature in late sixteenth-century France had to be aware of the Reformed input into the national debate and therefore to be a user of the Society's remarkable library at its premises in the rue des Saints-Pères. Much later, research on an eighteenth-century venture in subscription publishing led me to explore networks in the Huguenot diaspora and to work in libraries and archives in Paris, Geneva, Lausanne, London, Berne and other places. Even

in the century of their official proscription in France Protestants did not cease to be an influential presence through a highly effective underground.

Historians at large have come to pay more attention to the minorities whose stubborn existence gives the lie to myths about national unity and uniformity. The important publications of recent decades on the Protestant and Jewish communities in France are far from being inward-looking. The crude debates of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have given way to genuine curiosity and to a desire to bring together collections of documents and up-to-date critical materials. Researchers in Melbourne have the advantage of access to a complete file of the *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme français* in Monash University Library and to the publications of the Huguenot Society of London in the State Library of Victoria. Nothing else would have been appropriate in a city dominated by the memory of Charles Joseph La Trobe!

Monash University