

AUSTRALIA IN TOULOUSE: HISTORY OF A BOOK COLLECTION¹

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The creation of the Australian book collection at the *Université de Toulouse le Mirail* is a unique and interesting story and this presentation should provide some insights into the teaching of Australian studies in France in general, with specific references to the study of Australian literature at the University of Toulouse.

The present Australian collection contains about 1 500 to 2 000 titles and is part of the 40 000 books belonging to the English Department library. More than fifty percent of these books are literature. Why Australian books in south western France? This collection exists because some members of the teaching staff took a special interest in the field and made sure that the department library bought the books that they wanted and needed for their teaching courses and for their research. In France the creation of specialised collections that are not part of 'canon' teaching syllabi, depends to a large extent on the enthusiasm and energy of individual teachers rather than general library collection development policy. No doubt the same would be true in Australia or New Zealand for the creation of a Belgian Francophone literature collection but this is inevitable in French universities, where libraries and documentation have rarely been at the centre of the stage. When budgets are small, it is not easy to finance what many would consider 'the edges'! This is also the weakness of such collections because if the 'resource person' is no longer there for one reason or another and the collection has not reached a threshold survival level, it can stagnate and eventually disappear.

Our research centre, the *Centre du Commonwealth*, was created by Victor Dupont in 1967. The book collection was deposited in the department library's special section devoted to the literature and civilisation of Commonwealth countries; in the early days this was confined to Australia, New Zealand and English-speaking Africa. Today in the English department at the *Université de Toulouse le Mirail*, when Commonwealth literature or civilisation is on the syllabus, we are talking about Australia, Canada, the West Indies or English-speaking West or South Africa but there will be little about East Africa, India or New Zealand (except for Katherine Mansfield's short stories). Victor

Dupont, professor of English at the University of Toulouse in the sixties and early seventies, had written his thesis in 1941 on utopias in English literature. I don't know what kindled his interest in Australian and New Zealand literature, whether it was his study of utopia or his marriage to a New Zealander, probably a bit of both, but he was the professor in charge of the research centre and he directed it until he retired in the mid-seventies. Professor Dupont supervised research on Janet Frame and also supervised work on the social novel in New Zealand and the novels of John A. Lee. And even from the seventies, when students were more interested in 'pure' literature subjects, we have a thesis on 'Reality and Literary Illustrations of Rural Australia up to 1900', also supervised by Professor Dupont.

Studying English in a French university up to very recently (and sometimes even today, although things are changing), has meant studying English/American literature and doing some 'civilisation' (a look at contemporary society and a historical look at one or two other periods). Undergraduate courses were, and still are to a large extent, developed in literature, civilisation and language in order to prepare students for the two competitive post-graduate teaching recruitment exams. The *Agrégation* is required for teaching in the senior years of the *lycée* (16 to 18yr olds): in recent years, about 100 people have been recruited in English every year. The students have a common literature, civilisation and linguistics syllabus and they have to choose an extra optional subject from one of three areas. The *CAPES* (*Certificat d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement du Second Degré*) provides the qualification for teaching in the junior years of secondary schools (11 to 15 yr olds): about 1 000 people have been recruited in English every year. The syllabus consists of three works out of the ten literary works on the *Agrégation* syllabus and one 'civilisation' question. Except for one or two questions, the syllabus changes every year. Shakespeare is always present at *Agrégation* level and nearly always at *CAPES* level as well. The other two literary works for the *CAPES* are usually by one British and one American author.

Up to now, Australia has never been part of the *CAPES* syllabus and has only been included in the *Agrégation* syllabus three times. The only Australian author to be on the *Agrégation* syllabus was Patrick White in 1977 for his novel *Voss*. The other two occasions were in 1997 when the question of the 'Republican Debate in Australia' was on the optional civilisation syllabus and

in 2002 when ‘Reconciliation in Multicultural Societies: the Case in Australia, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand’ was also a question on the civilisation syllabus. Even though Australia has been absent from the competitive recruitment syllabi, the Australian books bought in Toulouse belong to the same categories as the British or American books. About sixty percent of the Australian collection belongs to the Dewey 800s: we buy predominantly literature, mainly fiction and literary criticism. We regularly buy poetry even if not many students borrow poetry, but that is not just Australian poetry. Our drama collection is not very big but contains writers like David Williamson who has visited our university.

Approximately twenty-five percent of the collection is on history, with a few books on geography. The rest of the collection belongs to the Dewey 300s; we have a number of books on Aboriginal and other ‘minority’ groups in Australian society. The 1997 *Agrégation* question on the republican debate meant that we bought more books on Australian politics that year than usual. For over twenty years the English department in Toulouse has regularly organised courses at third year level on different aspects of women’s studies, and the number of books on women in Australia is growing. A few years ago Miriam Dixson, author of *The Real Matilda*, visited the university. There is a handful of books on Australian English and the present Assistant Director of the department, Anne Przewozny, wrote her thesis on Australian English.

So if I am right in saying that French university library collection policies are often dictated by the competitive teaching examination syllabi, one could say that French university libraries don’t need Australian collections and thus we come back to the role of individual members of the teaching staff who insist that less usual domains be part of the general teaching syllabus. As I said earlier, this dependence on individuals is also a weakness of the system. For example, when Victor Dupont retired in the mid-seventies, nobody took over New Zealand studies and soon the number of students wishing to work on New Zealand dwindled. Xavier Pons was recruited by the English department in the early eighties; he had written his thesis on Henry Lawson and has been very active over the last twenty years in getting the library to buy Australian books and journals. Professor Pons has also been responsible for arranging a number of visits by Australian authors such as Janet Turner Hospital, Frank Moorhouse, David Williamson and Bobbie Sykes.

At the University of Toulouse students get their first chance to study Commonwealth civilisation in second and third year undergraduate courses and sometimes an Australian/Canadian/West Indian author will be part of one of the literature courses. But it is at postgraduate level that students have a real possibility of studying Australian authors and society if they so wish. The dissertation subjects for both MA and PhD in Toulouse over the last few years have included, among other Australian writers, Elizabeth Jolley, Peter Carey, Frank Moorehouse, Christopher Koch, Murray Bail, Philip McLaren and Christos Tsiolkas. A number of dissertations have been completed on different aspects of Aboriginal life and literature and we have even had one on 'Irish perceptions of Australia'.

In the seventies and eighties the purchase of Australian and New Zealand books was financed by the research centre and the Commonwealth collection was increased by a few dozen books a year. The Australian Embassy used to donate books and we have a certain number with the golden 'Australian Embassy Donation' stickers on the front page. Up to the mid-nineties we used to buy our books directly from the Co-op Bookshop in Australia. Ordering was never a problem but from time to time getting books through Customs and getting bills paid on time was an extremely frustrating and time-consuming business. Nowadays all documentation bought by the university goes out to tender and in 2004 the Erasmus bookshop in Amsterdam gained a four-year contract for books printed in English. From my point of view, these new market regulations have made things much easier. Invoices come in Euros and I no longer have any dealings with Customs.

The *Centre du Commonwealth* no longer exists and has been replaced by a larger research structure called *Cultures Anglo-Saxonnes*. Although the CAS has a larger budget than the *Centre du Commonwealth*, it covers other research areas as well as Commonwealth studies: as a result some years there is not much money. Every year the department library spends about £1 000 to £1 500 on Australian books and journals, and the financing comes partly from the CAS and partly from the library budget.

Since the year 2000 the library network of the universities in the Toulouse and Midi-Pyrénées area catalogues all acquisitions in the French university union catalogue system (*SUDOC*, *Système universitaire de documentation*) which is managed by *l'ABES* (*Agence bibliographique de*

l'Enseignement supérieur). The advantages of shared cataloguing, especially in smaller libraries with few members of staff, are evident.

When it comes to cataloguing Australian books, they seldom already exist in the database. Around seventy percent of the Australian books that arrive in the library are not in SUDOC but fortunately we are able to import the relevant records from the National Library of Australia. The union catalogue has also allowed us to become more visible on a national level and we now receive inter-library loan requests, about ten a month, which is nine times more than we used to! Inter-library loan requests are most often for our Australian books, followed by women's studies and cinema books.

The Australian collection in Toulouse has managed to go beyond the survival threshold and, even if a future member of staff working on Australian literature were less active in ordering Australian books, our holdings have become important enough not to be forgotten when working on collection development plans. It is also contacts with groups like the Australia and New Zealand Library and Archives Group and the stimulation of workshops that encourage and help librarians like myself, who are not Australian/New Zealand specialists, to keep informed and up to date. Even though the Australian collection is small, it is visible within the library and is rich enough to allow students to get some idea of Australian life and discover Australian literature, a first step in going 'down under'!

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Note

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the London Workshop of the Australia and New Zealand Library and Archives Group (ANZLAG) in 2007. Fionnuala Bhreathnach is the Librarian in charge of the *Bibliothèque Études du Monde Anglophone & Sciences du Langage* at the *Université de Toulouse le Mirail*, France.