

# MY EIGHT YEARS IN MELBOURNE

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I spent eight years in Melbourne between 1958 and 1968 (this period also covers twenty-eight months of military service in Noumea) as a Senior Tutor, then Assistant Lecturer and Lecturer in the French Department of the University of Melbourne. In January 1968, I joined the French diplomatic corps at our embassy in Tokyo, a first assignment which was followed by others in Bucharest, Ottawa, Bern and Dublin.

Two quite ordinary events persuaded me to look back on my Australian experience.

During a short visit to Pont-Aven, a charming little Breton village set in a luxuriant landscape, which was made famous by Gauguin ('Cité des Peintres' featuring seventy-three galleries for a population of 3,000), our attention was taken by a window-display of aboriginal paintings. It was not exactly a new discovery for us as we had had several opportunities to appreciate this art form which, to be honest, had not particularly attracted us at the time. But the paintings and drawings we were admiring now left us astounded. Fortunately for my finances, the gallery was closed.

The second event which triggered my sudden renewed interest in Australia was the rediscovery of old photos taken during a dinner-dance to which I was kindly invited by students. Normally, I would have pushed these black-and-white photos into the back of a drawer, but instead I took them out of the box and began musing over them. Memories rushed back, reviving lots of unexpected details, colours, discussions. At that very moment, I decided to try to delve into that distant past.

In July 1958, after an endless non-stop flight in a propeller-driven constellation (London – Los Angeles – Honolulu – Fiji – Noumea – Sydney – Melbourne), where I was the only passenger travelling all the way to Australia, I finally landed and found myself in an obviously temporary building equipped with a broken-down loudspeaker, which made it more difficult for Dr Herbert to meet me. He welcomed me warmly and drove me to Professor Jackson's home where I must have cut a rough figure, exhausted by jetlag after travelling half-way round the world. (It took three weeks for the noise of the propellers to disappear.)

My first weeks were spent in a sort of boarding-house for confirmed bachelors, where I had the privilege of being served tomato soup for dinner every night.

My colleagues welcomed me warmly and Professor Jackson rapidly managed to organise my residence in a cottage on campus at Trinity College. I loved the atmosphere of that house which was an exact copy of graduate houses at Cambridge, the perfect setting for profound academic reflection!

I enjoyed my stay there immensely. I greatly appreciated the kindness and the tolerance of the Dean of Trinity who, knowing that I was not an Anglican, was understanding enough to exempt me from the weekly session of Bible reading.

I had excellent relations with my students. Of course, I was only a few years older than most of them, but it was very pleasant to talk to them. They did not hesitate to come and speak with me in a frank and direct manner. Two weeks after starting my work, two charming girl students invited me to accompany them to the theatre. A little surprised by this initiative, and not used to this kind of familiarity, I thought it preferable to decline politely, claiming problems in settling in.

In the French Department, there were several French members of staff, often a little over-enthusiastic. We had just about colonised the language departments' shared staff-room. German colleagues were almost forced to brush up their French in order to participate in our conversations and share our jokes.

All my colleagues spoke French with me, which created a French atmosphere, thus overcoming any bouts of homesickness and nostalgia. We regularly organised 'banquets' with the participation of several of our wives. As I used to sing and strum on a guitar, I was asked to perform. I cannot help remembering, with an indulgent smile, that the morning after one of those festivities, in spite of promises of help, my wife and I found ourselves to be the only two reporting for duty to wash the dishes for forty guests.

I shall always be grateful to Professor Jackson for giving me complete latitude in organising my classes, for introducing new courses and above all for approving all my cultural initiatives, even those outside the University (theatre broadcasts with Radio Australia, recordings, publications). He encouraged my participation in the Alliance Française de Victoria as Vice-President, then President. My intention is not to boast or show a flattering résumé (it's a bit late

for that!), but to emphasize the broadmindedness and freedom I enjoyed, in strong contrast to the constrictions of the post of Assistant I held for two years at the University of Aberdeen.

I really felt that everything could be achieved in this ‘lucky country’ provided you were prepared to roll up your sleeves and forge ahead. The University was my world. I spent long hours there (my wife ‘exiled’ in North Balwyn was less impressed). I felt perfectly at home.

Once outside the University, the picture was quite different. I must confess that I did not know much of Australian life. Our neighbours were polite but kept their distance and rarely opened their doors. They occasionally talked to my wife (who is from Scotland) but I could feel some suspicion towards me (and yet there were no nuclear tests at that time!). I sometimes had to put up with rather unfriendly remarks aimed at ‘new Australians’ who were taking the jobs of the natives. We lived in excellent material conditions (far better than those we would have known had we stayed in France), but for my wife it was a period of great solitude, all the more so as my hours at the University, followed by my various activities (theatre rehearsals in the evening ...) left me little time to enjoy the pleasures of discovering this immense country.

I enjoyed practically everything I did, although there was one event which will ever remain in my memory. As President of the Alliance, I thought it was a good idea to recruit a French cook to cater for the annual dinner which was held in the town hall in Kew. The cook was probably able to cater for a dozen people, but unfortunately, out of 400 guests, at least 100 were never served the main course. Several of the distinguished members of my committee decided to refuse to pay the bill. Furious, the frustrated cook took the Alliance to court. It was a traumatic experience, not on account of the result (we had to pay 50%), but because the eminent judge (rather old and tired) had a catastrophic manner of address, particularly for a foreigner used to the verbal style of academics. I might add without wishing to be nasty, that the ladies of my committee, very vocal in destroying my cook, did not consider it necessary to be present in court.

As a Breton used to the maritime climate of Brittany, I suffered during the periods of intense heat and drought, keeping an eye, like everyone else, on the level of the dams.

A few lines on sport. I was amazed at the passion, the seriousness of Australians for sport. One day, I saw a notice inviting members of staff who

wished to practise volley-ball, to attend a session open to everyone. A French colleague and I decided to go. We walked into a beautiful hall where sweating giants were jumping and firing the ball at one another, the 'explosions' of the ball being amplified by the walls of the stadium. We joined them, ill at ease, wondering if we were in the right place. It's easy to guess what the result was. At the end of this special ordeal, I felt obliged to offer some sort of apology to the man in charge. He was very kind and advised us to attend training sessions to improve our style. We naturally declined that generous invitation. Our objective was to have a good time, not to train for the Olympics. My wife and I were also asked to come and speak to our son's primary teacher who was shocked that he was not interested in sport.

I enjoyed the University campus, but also the neighbouring districts of Parkville, and particularly Carlton with its small Italian restaurants, many of which didn't have liquor licences but discreetly served wine in tea-cups (Australian wine, often very good, which I occasionally buy).

We are very happy to have lived and worked in Australia. We now realise the contrast between the 'normal' life we enjoyed there, compared to the exotic, glamorous, but demanding and impersonal one we had as diplomats.

By choosing with enthusiasm a far-flung country in spite of our parents' disapproval, we certainly opened up our horizons, but at the same time loosened the links we had with our families in France and in Scotland.

I regret not having made more effort to keep in touch with colleagues and friends in Melbourne. Whenever I watch an international rugby match and hear the Australian national anthem, I cannot help but feel some emotion and memories come rushing back.

As Musset wrote: 'Un souvenir heureux est peut-être sur terre plus vrai que le bonheur.'

*Dinard, France*