

BOOK REVIEWS

Rosemary Lancaster, *Je suis Australienne: Remarkable Women in France, 1880–1945*, Perth, University of Western Australia Press, 2008, ISBN 978-1-9214-0113-8, 264 p., rrp AU\$ 29.95.

Je suis Australienne has a beautiful cover image. A black and white interwar photo captures a woman with hat on a balcony framed by shutters, looking out over the Seine and Paris. The theme of this book is the journey to France, voluntary or involuntary, and the tensions and emotional stresses involved in cultural adjustment and adaptation. The ongoing interest in this subject has been demonstrated in many of the current cluster of autobiographical tales by young Australian women, including Sarah Turnbull's *Almost French*.

In *Je suis Australienne*, there are stories of war (nurses in the Great War, Nancy Wake in the Resistance in World War Two) and peace, of travellers and novelists (Tasma, Christina Stead) and of change over time from the 1880s until World War Two. Rosemary Lancaster's subjects vary in social milieu and in period. Some were sent to France and some went by choice, an interesting dichotomy in the book between voluntary expatriates such as Stella Bowen and Christina Stead and involuntary visitors such as the Great War nurses and the 1880s schoolgirl Daisy White.

One effective study is of Stella Bowen and her Paris years (1922–1933), which captures her worldview and experience, drawing effectively on her letters and her autobiography, *Drawn from Life*, to delineate the experience of being a woman, an artist and an expatriate. The studies based significantly on novels, of Tasma (Jessie Couvreur) and Christina Stead, work as exegesis, but are otherwise limited, although Lancaster effectively draws on Patricia Clarke's biography of Tasma.

At times Lancaster is much better when writing about life than when writing about literary accounts of life. Her study of wartime nurses and their experiences on the Western Front and after is based on letters, including several from the Australian War Memorial collection. It offers a deeper analysis of the human situation, fresher and more perceptive, as it takes the tale from war to other fields; from hospitals to leave in Paris and the south of France and in some tales after the war, from the glitz of Monte Carlo to ruined villages.

Je suis Australienne offers a collection of studies which are lightly, rather than tightly, bound together by their three characteristics—Australian women who went to France. Its several studies furnish a valuable record of different phases and aspects in Australian women's interactions with France

but the totality could have been more illuminating. Unfortunately, the book's predominantly literary history/literary critical style does not always bring out the nuances of the original accounts such as Daisy White's fascinating diary of an Australian schoolgirl in France, 1887-1889. In an era when scholarly writing has discovered a new opaqueness (written for other academics) this book has a more traditional style which is more accessible than many products of the cult of the new, but it could have sparkled more on the page.

Stephen Alomes

Deakin University

Stephen Dando-Collins, *Pasteur's Gambit: Louis Pasteur, The Australasian rabbit plague and a ten million dollar prize*, Sydney, Vintage Australia, 2008, ISBN 978-1-74166-703-5, 337 p., rrp AU\$ 34.95.

This book is a clever example of popular history-as-drama—it is plotted with suspense, like a novel, but is based on thorough research in both Australia and France. Winner of the 2009 Queensland Premier's Award for history, *Pasteur's Gambit* is an extraordinary story, combining themes such as the professional and scientific rivalry between Pasteur and Koch, personal, political and cultural conflicts between 'ignorant' colonials and 'arrogant' Europeans, blatant conflicts of interest and dastardly conspiracies, sabotage and self-interest—all of this set against the struggle to establish a new scientific mentality and the movement towards a mature sense of Australian identity. The author also revels in the cast of colourful characters he has to work with, from the cunning politician Sir Henry Parkes to the stubborn and slightly arrogant Louis Pasteur, from the patient and diplomatic young emissary of Pasteur, Adrien Loir, to the mysterious unqualified 'expert' scientific officer Oscar Katz and the prejudiced, self-important members of the Rabbit Commission, even including the glamorous Sarah Bernhardt and her travelling troupe, as well as a host of vividly drawn minor characters.

Stephen Dando-Collins spins the vast wealth of his research into a carefully constructed and entertaining tale. Chapters 1 to 7 represent a virtuoso overture introducing the major players and establishing the background context for Pasteur's science and the rabbit eradication prize, and also the complex

political environment in the Australian colonies. The author swiftly sketches in the development of Pasteur's scientific ideas and contributions to the field of new microbiology: improved understanding of fermentation techniques, isolation and culturing of microbes in order to develop vaccines for anthrax and for the cure of rabies. He also notes the bitter scientific rivalry between Pasteur and the German bacteriologist Robert Koch, and the emerging anti-vaccination attitudes among the German and British medical establishment. Chapters 4 and 5 document the growing rabbit problem in the Australasian colonies and the politics behind Sir Henry Parkes' announcement of an international competition to find a scientific solution. Chapters 6 and 7 outline the very particular situation of Louis Pasteur in 1887, at the time of the announcement, his ambitions for the nascent Institut Pasteur, and his stubborn certainty that he deserved to win the generous prize money.

Chapters 8 to 19 present the first phase of the central drama. We see the political and bureaucratic machinations of the setting up of the Rabbit Commission and get a detailed account of the prejudices and hidden agendas of the various members. This is followed by a day-to-day reconstruction of the proceedings of the Commission, including its behind-the-scenes attempts to undermine and sabotage the whole Pasteur mission; Chapter 19 recounts what was ultimately the only real success of the mission, the successful trial at Junee of a vaccine against anthrax.

Chapter 20 offers an interlude as we witness the grand opening in Paris of the Institut Pasteur, which Louis Pasteur had hoped would have the financial support of the substantial Australian prize. This is followed in Chapters 21 to 24 by the final phase of the drama: the Rabbit Commission's biased and unfavourable progress report which scuttles Pasteur's hopes of winning the prize money.

Chapter 25 gives us another entertaining interlude with the visit of Sarah Bernhardt and her company to Sydney, and her amorous adventures with the book's central hero, Adrien Loir. The tale is then brought to a satisfying conclusion by the three final chapters and the epilogue, in which the author outlines the subsequent developments in the lives and careers of the book's central characters and the final twists of the Pasteur mission's activities in Australia. Although Loir failed to win the rabbit eradication prize, as his mentor had confidently expected, Pasteur's representatives remained in Australia for several more years and generated millions of francs for the Institut Pasteur

through their microbiological work on anthrax and pleuro-pneumonia vaccines for the sheep and cattle industry.

The author tries to wring every drop of drama and suspense out of what is, admittedly, a fascinating and gripping episode where colourful personalities come to grips at a key moment in the history of both the Australian nation and of scientific mentalities. This leads him occasionally to over-egg the pudding, especially by his technique of ending each chapter with a cliff-hanging statement such as:

The war between Pasteur and Koch would be fought in many ways and in many places. But the most bitter campaign in that war would soon be fought in far-off Australia.¹

or:

But ending the impasse with Pasteur's representatives all depended on whether Robert Koch was prepared to play dirty and sabotage Louis Pasteur by sending his own chicken-cholera microbes to Australia. Would Koch play along with the Rabbit Commission? Would he send his microbes to Sydney?²

One can understand his desire to present the drawn-out bureaucratic proceedings (and underhanded dealings) of the Rabbit Commission in a way which grips the reader's attention, but this technique sometimes becomes faintly comical.

As a final note, I have to report that, unfortunately, this book falls victim to what seems an increasingly common tendency in current publishing, that of inadequate proof-reading. The text is noticeably dotted with minor errors of spelling, punctuation or even syntax, which are frequent enough to become irritating to an old pedant like me. They are particularly noticeable in the fairly regular appearance of French words and expressions in the text, which in almost every case are misspelt (usually because of the lack or misplacement of an accent). One might have hoped that special attention would be paid in these cases, but there are also inexcusable lapses of attention to ordinary English, such as the amusing notion of a 'sky-terrier'³ substituting for the Skye terrier that was one of Sarah Bernhardt's pet dogs quarantined on Rodd Island, the experimental base in Sydney for Pasteur's representative Dr Adrien Loir. But putting such nitpicking aside, Stephen Dando-Collins has to be congratulated for his masterful control over the vast bulk of his material and

for the entertaining way in which he melds the scientific detail into the human drama of this extraordinary tale.

Maurice Blackman

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Notes

- 1 Dando-Collins, *Pasteur's Gambit*, p. 34.
- 2 Dando-Collins, *Pasteur's Gambit*, p. 153.
- 3 Dando-Collins, *Pasteur's Gambit*, p. 255.

Stephanie Anderson (tr. and ed.), *Pelletier: The Forgotten Castaway of Cape York*, Melbourne, Melbourne Books, July 2009, ISBN 978-1-8770-9667-9, 370 p., AU\$ 39.95.

‘On 13 December 1875 the French ship the *Jura* sailed into the port of Toulon ...’. On board the *Jura* was a rather anomalous passenger: a Frenchman coming home after seventeen years, who, during that time, had undergone a transformation of identity as radical as any one might imagine. Shipwrecked at the age of fourteen, Narcisse Pelletier had become an integrated member of an Utaalnganu speaking group of Cape York Aborigines. At the age of thirty-one he was lured away by a passing English ship, and brought back to France to reunite with his family.

Narcisse Pelletier was already a seasoned cabin boy when he boarded the *Saint-Paul* for a voyage that was to take him as far as Sydney. He had been poorly treated on a previous voyage, and must have felt some trepidation as he set out again on a far longer trip. The ship stopped briefly at Bombay, then in Hong Kong, where more than 300 Chinese workers were recruited for the Australian goldfields. It became clear during the voyage that the captain had stocked the ship with insufficient provisions both of food and water, and the consequent unrest among the Chinese workers and the crew, together with slow sailing weather, prompted the captain to take a dangerous shortcut through the Louisiade Archipelago in the region of New Guinea. It was there that the ship became wrecked upon a reef.

This fascinating and scholarly book centres on the story of Pelletier as recounted by himself to a French surgeon and savant, Constant Merland (*Dix-sept ans chez les sauvages. Les Aventures de Narcisse Pelletier*, Paris, E. Dentu, 1876, re-published in 2001 by Cosmopole, Paris), ably translated by Stephanie Anderson. Merland begins by retelling in detail the shipwreck and the sailors' risky sea-voyage to Cape York (leaving behind the Chinese workers on an island), Pelletier's abandonment on reaching the coast and his rescue by an Uutaalnganu family. The writer then switches to an ethnographic mode, describing, in turns, the geography of the country where Pelletier lived, with its flora and fauna; the social customs of the Uutaalnganu, their language and gestures; their beliefs and medical treatments; their funeral rites and other kinds of social ceremonies, dances and songs; tribal wars, punishments and conflict resolution; hunting, fishing and cooking techniques, and the construction and crafts associated with them. It ends with Pelletier's restitution to France and to his family.

A simple translation of Merland's text would probably have been of interest to specialists only, given the difficulty for the general reader of determining the historical, linguistic and ethnographic validity of Merland's account. However, Anderson's treatment of her material goes far beyond a simple re-presentation of the original. In her lengthy introduction, Anderson takes on the task of carefully (indeed, minutely) assessing the quality and accuracy of the information provided by Merland to the best of her and other experts' ability. From this work it emerges that Merland was a generally faithful and objective recorder of his subject's descriptions of the Uutaalnganu people's daily existence and his own adventures following his shipwreck.

The translated account itself is interwoven with detailed explanatory and descriptive notes at each possible point—indeed, some pages contain more words in the notes than in the main text. The translation is framed at the beginning by Anderson's introduction and an ethnographic commentary by Athol Chase, a specialist in the region occupied by the Uutaalnganu people historically and at the present time. At the end of the book are appendices, copious notes, a bibliography, and modern photographs of Uutaalnganu and closely related groups from the eastern Cape York region where Pelletier had lived. Two contemporary news stories are included as appendices, as well as facsimiles (transcribed and translated) of the first three letters Pelletier wrote

to his parents while returning to France, and a transcription and notation of Uutaalnganu songs as remembered and sung by Pelletier.

The latter two appendices in particular expand the story in interesting directions, and will extend the book's appeal for specialist readers. Merland, careful also to extend his own book's appeal to all possible readers, commissioned a musician, Édouard Garnier, to transcribe and notate the songs remembered by Pelletier, accompanied by an introductory essay, included in translation. Garnier's essay, which is certain to be of interest to ethnomusicologists, shows the musician trying (and failing) to understand the nature and quality of the songs he was hearing. He finds them at once 'formless, somewhat monotonous in character and [with] no more tonality than structure' and 'reminiscent of church plain-song and especially of Breton choruses'—such that he wonders whether Pelletier was not mixing in elements of the music heard in his youth with the songs he subsequently heard among the Uutaalnganu. The letters show Pelletier grasping at memories of his former native tongue, and quite quickly (with the help of French-speaking co-passengers) recovering control of the language, progressively approaching correct spelling and grammar over the course of the three brief letters: the first letter opens 'papa nanan gene sei par nore' ('papa maman je ne suis pas mort') and the third, 'Mon cher père et ma chère mère et mes chère frère [sic]. Je vous embrasse de tout mon cœur'.

Merland did not entirely confine himself to description or narration, but, aware of the questions his contemporary readership might have entertained, he speculated on what the information he was recording suggested for current debates on the nature and development of language, society and industry. Anderson has not flinched from representing Merland's attitudes in her translation: 'les sauvages' is rendered as 'savages', and when Merland writes that 'among the savages, thought never soars up towards the higher realms, it never embraces intellectual questions', he is simply reflecting contemporary thinking. However, one interesting element of Merland's account is that he also, however tentatively, challenges or seeks to modify that thinking, noting in several places that the Uutaalnganu demonstrated considerable linguistic and social complexity where his contemporaries would expect to find simplicity. One significant omission from Merland and Pelletier's account—lamented by Anderson—is any description of Pelletier's interior life as he made the transition from a Frenchman to an Uutaalnganu man, and back again. Perhaps it was impossible to formulate any words for this. However that may be, Anderson's

book leaves the reader to imagine such an encounter between people of two worlds as will rarely, if ever, occur again in future, unless deep in the Amazon or the interior of Papua New Guinea, and never in the wake of a shipwreck.

Judith Bishop

Sydney

Shannon Bennett, Scott Murray & Friends, *Shannon Bennett's Paris: A Personal Guide to the City's Best*, Melbourne, The Miegunyah Press, December 2009, ISBN 978-0-522-85671-2, 302 p., rrp AU\$ 45.

Despite the wide availability of culinary encyclopaedias and chefs' dictionaries, mistakes in French on restaurant menus are as common as ever. (I could not convince a waiter once that the sauce he was serving was 'béarnaise' and not 'bernaise'.) Of course, the more prestigious the establishment the more egregious the mistake. One that stands out in Melbourne is the name of Shannon Bennett's fine restaurant, *Vue de monde*, the offending 'de' remaining unchanged since its inception.

There was nothing to worry about, however, in Bennett's personal guide to Paris and the city's best. The book is published, surprisingly, by MUP's prestigious Miegunyah Press imprint, with all the quality paper, colour photography, editing and layout that are the hallmark of these productions. As if mindful of possible criticisms, a note about venue details explains that variations in spelling are due to the fact that the names of restaurants and hotels have been taken from official websites or signage by the front door.

Shannon Bennett may have struggled with French at school, which he freely admits, but he certainly knows Paris, its food and the relationship between the two: restaurants, casual brasseries, bistros and bars, markets, specialty shops and hotels, in Paris and the provinces, from the most expensive to the moderately priced. One can imagine, with envy, Shannon, Scott and their mainly young friends, all knowledgeable, cashed up, eagerly descending on the various venues, then later comparing notes. He takes us to his favourite places and lists his favourite Parisian treats, where to get them and what they cost: macaroons, for example, which are nothing like Grandma's rocky little mounds of coconut. As Scott Murray has been going to Paris nearly every year since 1977, his reviews are sometimes added to Shannon's, giving an interesting depth and variety of perspective. Comparing their experiences, one

can see that former icons like Fauchon's store and the Brasserie Lipp seem to have lost their former lustre.

Although the choice is personal and not exhaustive, the book provides a wealth of information, both for the connoisseur and the first-time visitor to Paris. There are sections on what to look for in fine dining, how to choose a restaurant, an extensive comparison of the GaultMillau and Michelin guides, the best way to book a restaurant or hotel including websites, how to choose wines, and even how to deal with difficult waiters. All this is very well explained and taken seriously, but with a light touch. All the information one could wish is provided, with full details for each venue summarised beside the text, including the website and any Michelin or GaultMillau ratings.

However, this book is much more than a personal foodies' guide to Paris. There is a great deal of extra information presented on pages that look like green or buff sheets or cards of hand-made paper. The most numerous after Shannon's Favourite Parisian Treats are his Parisian Recipes: you will find all the old favourites, but also many newer ones such as caviar served with pancakes and duck-leg *confit* with *pommes sautées*. The green pages offer information on a wide variety of topics from a short history of French food, books on French food and restaurants, to lists of books and films set in Paris, non-fiction books about Paris by foreigners, book and DVD stores, bread and wine merchants, museums and parks. Some of Bennett's travelling companions have their say on areas they know well, together with little inserts from other chefs: Stephanie Alexander's France and Marco Pierre White's Top 10 French Dishes of All Time.

The excellent layout makes all this information easy to access. It is complemented by photographs of Paris, old and new, postcards and details of typically French wrought iron and plaster work. Amusing line drawings fill up smaller spaces. All in all, this is a delightful book to own. Although it is a hard-back, its compact size can fit into hand luggage or a large handbag. Perusing it will make the long hours in the plane pass very quickly indeed. For those who may not be able to make the trip or consult the book, Shannon Bennett's five most exciting Paris restaurants are: Pierre Gagnaire, Le Meurice, L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon, Le Chateaubriand and Brasserie Bofinger.