

MADemoiselle AUGUSTINE SOUBEIRAN
(b. FRANCE 1858 – d. SYDNEY 1933)

IRENE CUNNINGHAM

Augustine Soubeiran was the co-principal of Kambala Girls' School in Sydney from 1891 to 1914. She was born in France in 1858, and little is known of her early life. An obituary in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 1 June 1933 described her as "the daughter of noted French educationists", and she was believed to be of Huguenot descent. It had been thought that she was at Madame Trollet's School at Lausanne in the 1870s, but a search by the Lausanne archivist who has access to complete records of this school found no evidence of her enrolment. It is not known what brought her to Sydney or when she arrived, but in 1884 she was teaching French to a small number of pupils in Woollahra. A fellow teacher was Louisa Gurney, an Englishwoman who had migrated to New South Wales in 1878 to join her brother who had been appointed Professor of Mathematics at the University of Sydney. Mademoiselle Soubeiran returned to France in 1885, but Louisa Gurney continued teaching and in 1887 opened her own school. When Mademoiselle came back to Sydney she joined Miss Gurney's School as a teacher of French, and in 1891 she became co-principal when the school was named Kambala.

Mademoiselle, as she was known with affection and respect by her pupils, was one of the first members of the Alliance Française in Sydney, which was established by a few French residents in 1895. There were no premises and meetings were held in members' homes. By 1901, the Alliance had initiated a French recitation competition and an examination which were held at the French consulate. Kambala pupils had excellent results. Mademoiselle also taught part-time at Ascham where she was remembered by one of her pupils as being much beloved by everyone: "Delightful French books we read with her and the lessons were a joy".. Some of her Kambala pupils went on to university where they gained honours in French. Her pupils found her personality and scholarship an inspiration throughout their lives: "We will always remember the influence that radiated from her gracious presence", they said in an In Memoriam to her in 1933.

Something of her personality and the close relationship she had with the girls may be seen in a poem she wrote in response to an invitation to a motor-party given by her final year pupils in 1912; the reply had to rhyme:

Vous me croyez donc bien habile!
Vous demandez une chanson
Qui rime avec auto-mobile!!
Mais... je ne suis pas un pinson.
Pourtant... voici ma mélodie.

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Je viendrai mardi, sans manquer.
En votre bonne compagnie
Je suis sûre de m'amuser.
Nous verrons les bois que j'adore,
Les eaux, le vent qui à travers
Les feuilles chantera encore,
Le soleil couchant ... l'Univers.
Je porterai simple toilette —
Un grand chapeau sur mes cheveux,
Et ma plus épaisse voilette
Pour les chemins si poussiéreux.
Adieu Français, latin, science —
Rien que du bonheur dans vos yeux
A bientôt je meurs d'impatience
D'entendre vos rires joyeux!

In 1911, Augustine Soubeiran was awarded the Grand Medal of the Alliance Française by the Paris Committee for her work in Sydney. The medal was presented by Monsieur Armand, the French Consul, at a special function at the Hotel Australia. In the same year she was created Officier de l'Instruction Publique by the French Government.

During 1914, she became ill and both she and Louisa Gurney retired. At the same time, war broke out and Mademoiselle was the initiator of the French-Australian League of Help, an organization which raised funds to assist the homeless and hungry in France. She had experienced as a child the famine which occurred during the Siege of Paris in the Franco-Prussian War, 1870-1, and she had spoken to the girls at Kambala of how short of food they had been and so near starvation that they ate rats. Now she spoke throughout Sydney and New South Wales, calling for funds and inspiring patriotic fervour. Although retired, she kept in touch with her old school and made sure the girls attended the French Red Cross Patriotic Concert in the Sydney Town Hall where the flags of the allies were unfurled for sale by auction. The school weekly collection went to the League of Help, and Dattilo Rubbo, who was the school's art master from 1898 to 1935, sketched the students and offered the sketches for sale to aid the fund. On France's Day in Sydney, 100,000 pounds were raised to go to French aid. In 1917, Mademoiselle went to France to distribute the funds. She wrote back to the children of New South Wales:

My dear children, yesterday I was asked to go to a home in Paris to see 140 children just arrived from Dunkirk where German shells are falling night and day. All who could afford to get away from that town have gone, but the very poor have no money to travel and nowhere to go, so they stay and live in

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cellars. The little ones I saw had not undressed for months; that is, they always slept in their clothes, so as to be ready to run away at any time. Their talk was all of shells and aeroplanes. A child of eleven was looking after three little brothers and sisters. When I tell you that the fountains of Paris have to-day long icicles you will be sorry for these poor little things.

A good meal and a piece of chocolate afterwards did much to cheer them. They are going to be dressed from head to toe in nice clean things, and many of those petticoats and dresses come from New South Wales schools. Are you not glad, and was it not worth while? Those children are going to small farmers and other people till they can go back to their parents. My letter would have no end if I told you of all the people I have seen wearing the clothes you have made. Everyone here loves your soldiers who are so brave and cheerful! And those mothers whose children you have kept so clean and warm will never forget the name of Australia.

The people of New South Wales continued to send money to Mademoiselle in France, and in 1919, her efforts were written of in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

Mlle Soubeiran, founder and one of the joint honorary secretaries of the French-Australia League of Help, who is at present in France superintending the disbursement of the money raised in NSW for the relief of distress in her native country, writes a very interesting account of her work in France. She says the sudden coming of the armistice dried up the source of much benevolence as unthinking people did not realize the gigantic task facing France in the work of reconstruction. She writes: "I dread seeing so much misery and yet I want to see it with my own eyes so as to be sure my imagination is not leading me astray... I have just returned from the devastated parts. The immensity of the damage done is so appalling that hopelessness takes possession of one's soul. Can these dry bones live? France has weathered many storms, yet none like this, and if she wins through it will be after we are no more".

At the end of 1920, Mademoiselle returned to Sydney and spoke at Kambala, giving an account of her work in France and the winding-up of the French-Australian League. She lived at Double Bay until 1922 when she retired, with Louisa Gurney, to Bowral after a farewell party at the Carlton, given by members of the Alliance Française and the French-Australian League. She died

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in Sydney in 1933. Her death was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* with her photograph, showing a handsome and distinguished woman:

Mademoiselle Soubeiran, a French-Australian whose educational and patriotic endeavours spread over nearly half a century had made her a well-known personality throughout New South Wales, died in Sydney yesterday. The daughter of noted French educationists, she came to Sydney when a very young woman, and shortly afterwards joined Miss Gurney in establishing Kambala which is now one of the leading schools in the state. Some of the best-known women in NSW were one-time pupils of that school.

The teaching of the young and the fostering of cordial relations between the French and Australian peoples were her principal interests. The initiation of the war-time organization known as the French-Australian League of Help was her idea. In the early days of the war she and a small group of French residents held a meeting to discuss means of alleviating the sufferings of their fellow countrymen in France, and from that small private undertaking developed one of the largest patriotic organizations of the war period. Mlle Soubeiran was joint honorary secretary of the league, and as a result of a great effort on behalf of the France's Day Fund, large sums were raised on behalf of the French victims of the war.

To the league was entrusted the duty of disbursing the money and it was decided to send Mlle Soubeiran to France to supervise the distribution of the fund. It was characteristic of her that although the league wished to defray all her expenses she not only handed in her own cheque for the amount of the passage money, but insisted upon defraying her personal expenses in managing the fund in Paris. Her departure from Sydney towards the end of 1917 was the occasion for a great public meeting, at which her devotion to duty and her self-sacrifice were warmly praised. She returned to Australia as a member of the French mission to Australia which was headed by General Pau, and remained here for several months. Upon her return to France, she devoted herself to patriotic efforts in the devastated regions, and to closing the relief work which had been made possible by the fund.

Augustine Soubeiran was awarded posthumously the Légion d'honneur in recognition of her services to the French people. Of this decoration, the old

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girls of her school wrote: "She performed an equally great service to the Australians, for she showed them a living example of fine French womanhood".

Notes

Material from: Fifi Hawthorne, *Kambala*, Sydney, The Wentworth Press, 1972; *The Kambala Chronicle*; *The Sydney Morning Herald*.