

## THE INCOMPARABLE "KARA" (1898-1968)

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The French Department of the University of Melbourne was identified, over a long and important part of its history, with Alan Rowland Chisholm and his French associate Nazar Karagheusian, or "Chis" and "Kara", as students affectionately called them. They were in many ways oddly contrasting and complementary figures. Whereas Chis was diminutive and self-effacing, Kara, by no means tall, had – at any rate by the forties – the portly figure of a *bon vivant* and a formidable aquiline silhouette. His booming voice, which easily filled the lecture theatres of the Old Arts building, generously overflowed into the corridors, and one is bound to record that, for those of us just up from school, it was at first bewildering to encounter a man so conspicuously larger than life.

By a conscious decision, perhaps unfortunate for posterity, Chisholm's published memoirs (*Men Were My Milestones, The Familiar Presence*) were exclusively of friends no longer living at the time he wrote them. Hence, Kara, his closest friend and colleague for almost half a century and one of the University's great eccentrics, was never written up by the only pen that could have done him justice.<sup>1</sup> The present lines are of a former student and colleague, but a comparative late-comer to the scene Kara so amply occupied.

Vahram Nazareth Tacvor Karagheusian – "Nazar" to his closest friends only – was Parisian by birth (1898) and Armenian by descent. To those privy to the etymology of his surname the descriptive "black-eye" seemed wonderfully apt. He learnt Armenian in the family circle and English from an English governess. He graduated from the Parisian Lycée de Sully in Latin, philosophy and science, prepared the entrance exam to the Ecole Normale Supérieure at the famous Lycée Louis-le-Grand, and embarked on a degree in English at the Sorbonne. He also completed a year of law. But Kara's youth was a restless one, as those who knew him later will readily believe, and these studies were never completed. In a subsequent short period of travel he acquired some teaching experience in Switzerland and Constantinople.

There had also been a couple of youthful frustrations, such as a love affair not approved by his family and an attempted enlistment in 1914, which was refused on the grounds of his youth. The decision to come to Australia seems to have been an impulsive *coup de tête*. He agreed to accompany his friend Aslan-gul, a distinguished international tennis-player of the time, and stayed on adventurously hoping to find an antipodean outlet for his family's commercial flair. Unfortunately, however, his timber business in Melbourne Flinders Lane, which extended from fencing palings to imported French tennis rackets, was not a great success.

It was apparently this setback that prompted his mother's emigration from

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Paris to Melbourne. Madame Marie Karagheusian (1876-1943), by contrast, became a very successful business woman between the two wars, in fact a colourful and much loved character of the local ragtrade, purveying at her exclusive "Rue de la Paix" Parisian gowns and accessories of quality and elegance. She eventually built a three-storey pink and cream building (125 Collins Street, but now sadly demolished) in a classical style somewhat reminiscent of the Place des Vosges in Paris. If Madame Karagheusian did not pass on her relentless business drive to her son, he certainly acquired her volubility and charm. A legend grew up among students concerning the blue and white Parisian street name-plate, which decorated the entrance to their shop; but Kara denied that it had been acquired by other than legitimate means!

Kara's appointment at the University of Melbourne involved a happy element of chance. When Théophile Rouel decided to return home to France after two years with the French department, his assistant lectureship was advertised in France but drew little interest. Back in Sydney for the summer of 1922, Chisholm was reminded by the French consul of a young man whom he had apparently already met a couple of years previously. Kara had in fact been in Melbourne for over a year teaching at the Pelman Institute. With Ernest Scott's and Chisholm's support, Kara officially applied in January 1923 and was appointed to take up duties in March. He was promoted to senior lecturer in 1928.

The choice was in fact a happy one for all concerned. Kara thus found his niche at last, and he turned out to be, if no conventional academic yet a tireless emissary and embodiment of French life and culture, an impressive if unorthodox teacher and, from the start, a source of animation throughout the faculty, which was a more closely knit world then than we can imagine now.

The students' French Club was a context in which Karagheusian's natural sociability quickly burgeoned. Activities included talks, games, singing, debates and the like. Evenings summoned audiences of up to two hundred, bringing school groups and various Melbourne francophiles together in what was clearly often a social event. Accounts in *Farrago* invariably acknowledged Karagheusian's "indefatigable good humour", merriment and drollery, recalling how he broke an epidiascope at the "psychological" moment of some boring lecture, upstaged all on another occasion by appearing in a large black feather boa, and enlivened many a gathering with his amiable antics and eccentricities. He organized films and games and talked on everything from French translations of *Hamlet*, the city of Paris, and Bovarysme to the role of the café in the intellectual life of France. In perusing the records of these years one is touched by their special quality of innocent recreation, which only barely survived the war years.

Kara was likewise a familiar performer at the Alliance Française during the twenties and thirties, whether as guest speaker (e.g. "Les Sports en France",

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**Nazar Karagheusian and A.R. Chisholm photographed in Collins Street, Melbourne in the 1940s.**

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soirée of 1923) or as amateur actor, playing usually minor roles in *Le Voyage de Monsieur Perrichon* or splendidly cast as the grand Mufti in *Le Bourgeois gentil-homme*. All this, of course, with relish and panache.

Kara's biggest impact was indeed extra-curricular. Under his inspiration French Club activities overflowed inevitably into Tuesday lunches, Thursday meetings of the reading circle and various house-parties. And since a tutorial was often adjourned, even transferred, to a nearby Carlton restaurant, many students owed him their initiation into the fine arts of eating and drinking, all to the accompaniment of the most voluble French they had ever heard.

Post-war students were not aware that Kara had been a pretty fair rugby player in his youth and that he had pursued the sport for a while in Australia. But all will recall the frequent and often quite athletic rambles – only later called hikes – around Healesville, the Dandenongs and Kinglake, which Kara particularly favoured. Although these were invariably well planned, as witness the compass, the handsome *boussole à primes* acquired for the purpose in the thirties and proudly displayed, Kara clearly preferred to conceal all mundane signs of their organization under his tireless sense of fun, dispensed of course in French, which was naturally *de rigueur* at all times.

It would be wrong, however, to oversimplify Kara as the complete extrovert. Even his warm, ready smile could have a touch of irony about it, while his character had an elusive quality, perhaps inconsistencies, which could never finally be pinned down. At times extremely formal, he was more usually spontaneous and very informal. He was never familiar, however, and any student who reacted to him with undue casualness was likely to receive a sharp lesson in good manners. He had his susceptibilities, of course, and reservations about colleagues were neither flaunted nor denied.

Whenever you met Kara, whether on or off the university grounds, he seemed characteristically to have a book in his hand. He was in fact prodigiously well read in both French and English. His translation classes revealed a staggering range of picturesque vocabulary in both languages and some of his renderings (e.g. *toiser quelqu'un* "give someone the once-over twice") are still treasured in the recollections of former students.

His absent-mindedness was proverbial and his mother once commented that, luckily, he never married, for any wife would have risked being overlooked or mislaid! Certainly his lectures began and ended with only a very approximate regard for the official timetable, and how scathing he could be about any students unprepared to sit out a mere half-hour or forty minute delay! The lectures themselves ranged over a large part of the course, including dictations, often from difficult verse, unseens from even more difficult verse, and "proses" (to be put into French) from every style of English. Many an overconfident fresher felt miserably cut down to size when called upon to render into tolerable

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French a passage of Eliot's *The Waste Land* or something equally intractable.

His methods of marking these exercises and computing the results were likewise mysterious and deflating, but, confronted with Kara's own felicitous versions, you knew that justice had been done.

Kara's literary teaching, always in French of course, ranged over the years from Jansenism, the *Encyclopédie*, Chateaubriand and nineteenth-century poetry to the contemporary novel. The lectures themselves were remarkable – never for any rehearsal of essential facts, which you were simply expected to dig out for yourself – but for their colourful incidentals, anecdotes, by-ways, all recounted with gusto and enthusiasm. The performance flattered our inadequate French but proved most beneficial in the long term: note-taking at lectures in Paris, some years later, was simply child's play by comparison!

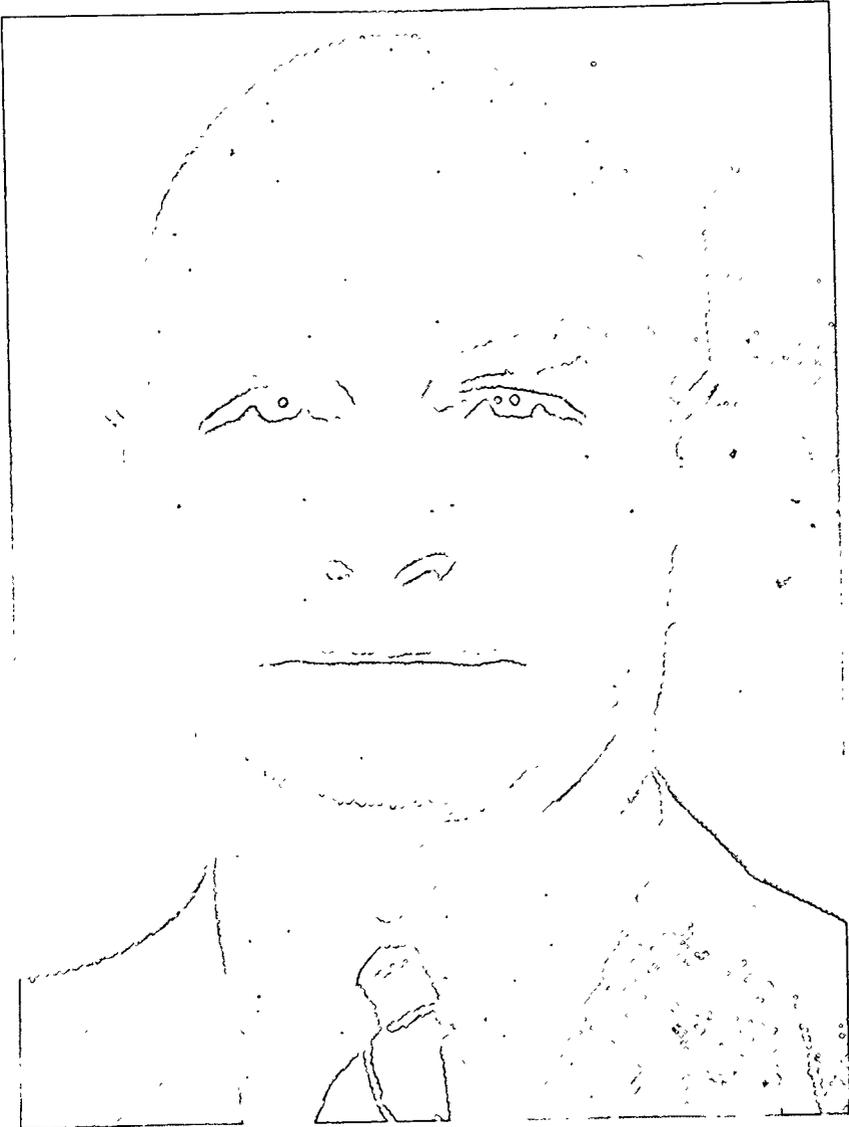
Already hostile to "stylistics" in the fifties, Kara had little time for conventional literary scholarship and was openly cynical about its changing modes, deeming some of them to be an insult to literature and dismissing all of them as irrelevant. His was the robust attitude of the cultivated *honnête homme*. The text was always the thing, the all-important encounter with great thoughts, great emotions, great actions, great language. He instilled no method, founded no critical school – he happily left all that to Chis – but he nonetheless set us students an unforgettable example.

Kara's library, long since dispersed, was extremely miscellaneous, with solemn classics and copious Parisiana alongside the most incredible ephemera. But he made occasional concessions to mere scholarship, such as Boissier's classic *Fin du Paganisme*, and had an eye for rarities, among them an eighteenth-century Molière and a fine 1610 edition of Gregory of Tours' *Historia Francorum*, which he unearthed for Chisholm on one of his many return trips to Paris.

Kara was among the first members of the university to enlist with the A.I.F. in December 1939. He saw service in the Middle East (1940-1943) and New Guinea (1943). His consulship for El Salvador, which had added considerably to his aura since 1921, was temporarily taken over by the French consul Vanderkelen. Naturally the luxury trade of "Rue de la Paix" suffered badly during the war years and Kara, on service leave from the university, was granted compassionate half pay. In 1944 he reluctantly applied for discharge, as his age and the condition of his heart left him unfit for the commando service planned for his unit. He formally resumed his university appointment from 1 July and began teaching again at the start of 1945.

Despite a few setbacks, Kara eventually acquired the means to match his natural generosity. After the war, the latter included quite substantial travel grants for most graduate students embarking for France. These were nominally from the Marie Aghassian fund, which he had established in 1947 in memory of his mother, and in her maiden name to avoid the immediate asso-

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Nazar Karagheusian from a photograph in Aramais Mirzaian, *Armenians in Australia and New Zealand* Sydney, Armenian Apostolic Church, 1966, p. 119.

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ciation with himself. They were a boon to students whose scholarships were otherwise consumed by the French inflation.

Kara's generosity and loyalty naturally extended to the Armenian community. He was influential, for example, in altering government policy on Armenian immigration, and he made liberal benefactions to the establishment of an Armenian church, first in Sydney and then in Melbourne, partly perhaps from a renewal of his inherited faith, but more especially, one suspects, out of a sense of family and national origins.

Kara's deep loyalty to Chis took many forms. If ever the latter's kindness risked being put upon – "Il a le courage mais pas la fermeté", he once commented – Kara, who suffered fools less gladly and had no tolerance for petty ambitions, was quick to react with a well chosen epithet or an acid pen. It was an open secret in the mid-fifties that his attachment to the *patron* would preclude staying on in the French department after Chis retired. Kara belonged to the heroic age of the department and sought no place in its later development. Thus, after some leave with full pay, Karagheusian's duties officially ceased on 31 July 1957.

As a parting gift Kara first thought of founding a prize in Italian to honour the memory of Omero Schiassi – another great university eccentric! – but later chose, jointly with his sister Elza Ispénian, to endow the university with a splendid nineteenth-century reproduction of a Renaissance dining-room, comprising both furniture and wall panelling and now sumptuously incorporated into the Old Physics building.

Kara's retirement meant no loosening of his ties with Australia, though he occasionally spent our winter at his small flat in the Rue du Commandant-Pilot in the Paris suburb of Neuilly. This meant first and foremost reunions with his sister Elza, but also endless convivial gatherings of students, colleagues, and various friends and acquaintances – he never seemed to lose track of anybody. But his generous heart had long been physically weak, and our fierce summer of 1967-68 dealt the final blow. Karagheusian died on 20 February 1968. His private funeral service, at which Chisholm pronounced the eulogy, was conducted three days later at his residence in Kew by clerics of the Armenian church.

His university colleagues probably remember Kara best as one of the great raconteurs, filling a room with his personality, telling endless stories, stories within stories like Chinese boxes, with an infectious sense of fun that turned many a chance encounter into a gala occasion. Past students will recall his spirited readings from French authors who naturally varied according to his enthusiasms. Corneille and the *Grand Siècle*, however, were among his constant devotions and, in retrospect, those last lectures of his on the complex ethical-aesthetic notion of *gloire* – honour expressed dramatically in magnanimous

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actions – seem to have embodied an essential part of himself.

*Croydon*

### Notes

1. There is, however, a moving obituary by A.R. Chisholm in the *University of Melbourne Gazette*, April 1968. Other sources for the present notes are documents supplied by the Australian Archives (Canberra), the Central Army Records Office (Melbourne), and the Central Registry and Information Office of the University of Melbourne, as well as valuable personal recollections of Colette Reddin, Bibs Miller, J.N. Kancachian and others.