

# STUDYING FRENCH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE (1945–1949)

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In 1945, at the age of seventeen, I embarked on a Joint Honours course at the University of Melbourne in English and French.

In 2010 I was asked by staff of the present French department whether I would rack my brains and write a piece about French in the second half of the 1940s. Alas! A lot of what and how it was, socially and academically, is now ‘du temps perdu’ but I shall see what comes from my ‘recherche’.

To try to write a chronological account would be futile, except for a few incidents. For example, in August 1945, I was sitting in the library, which occupied the whole northern side of the Old Quad, deeply involved in reading Balzac’s *César Birotteau*, when someone burst through the library door shouting, ‘The war’s over! The Japanese have surrendered!’ The ensuing excitement can be imagined, after almost six years of war, over three of them against the Japanese. Somehow in our ignorance of what it was really like, we welcomed the atomic bomb as a kind of magic. The librarians decided to close the library and asked us to leave, but I wanted to get on with my Balzac. The book was a set text, so it could not be taken out. Never mind, I thought, I’ll come back tomorrow and get on with it, which I did.

The fact that I was reading Balzac means that we must have been studying the nineteenth-century novel in Year 1. If so, other novels I can remember are Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris* and *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, George Sand’s *La Mare au diable*, Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot*, Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and his *Trois contes*.

In addition to the novel in general, we had at some stage a special study of regional writers, presumably to make us aware of the rich variety in France of language, accent and culture. These included Pierre Loti’s *Pêcheur d’Islande*, which I found particularly moving and preferred to Hugo’s similar, weightier work, Daudet’s *Lettres de mon moulin*, Pagnol’s *Marius*, Pérochon’s *La Parcelle 32*, and a few writers of *nouvelles*, including Prosper Mérimée and Maupassant.

Another study was of writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Madame de Rambouillet and her salon, Madame de Sévigné, Montesquieu's delightful *Lettres persanes*, le duc de La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes*—great fun, La Bruyère (*Caractères*), La Fontaine (*Fables*), L'Abbé Prévost (*Manon Lescaut*), Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (*Paul et Virginie*), Choderlos de Laclos (*Les Liaisons dangereuses*), Diderot (*La Religieuse*), le duc de Saint-Simon (*Mémoires*) and Voltaire (*Le Siècle de Louis XIV*).

Poetry received considerable attention, ranging from Villon and Ronsard to Mallarmé (which famously was the province of Professor A.R. Chisholm) but not very much later than that. The poets were pretty obvious: poor André Chénier, Chateaubriand (on whose grave I once placed a flower), Hugo (hélas!), Alfred de Musset, Alfred de Vigny, Alphonse de Lamartine, Théophile Gautier, Baudelaire, Leconte de Lisle, Paul Verlaine and his lover Rimbaud—he of the *Bateau ivre*.

As for drama, we started with Corneille, cruised through the other great dramatists, Racine, Molière and Marivaux (*Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard* and *L'Île des esclaves*) and then Beaumarchais, *Hernani* of Hugo, and Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

Professor Chisholm was in charge of the French School. He was a wonderful man who seemed to be aware of everything happening in the School. In Year 1 he taught us all to speak French, using an almost anatomical system. His own accent had a touch of Australianism, but he certainly knew how all the sounds of the French language were physically made. We slogged away at the letters 't' and 'r', at 'lu', 'puis', 'lui', etc. etc., so that most of us ended up with pretty convincing accents.

The other staff I can remember were Dr Alan Carey-Taylor and his wife Yvonne Le Gal Taylor (who did the oral exams), Dr Sussex, who taught inter alia the course on the regional novel, and Karagheusian<sup>1</sup> (no-one seemed to know whether he was Mr or Dr or what) who won the hearts of the eight or so Honours students with his weekly 2-hour session in his room, where there were few chairs but lots of big cushions, on which we lolled, speaking nothing but French while he made Turkish/Armenian coffee in a genuine copper pot. Our French improved and the coffee was delicious.

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<sup>1</sup> See Stan Scott, 'The Incomparable "Kara" (1898-1968)', in *Explorations*, 4, March 1987, pp. 3–10.

Dr Carey-Taylor eventually went to London to become Professor of French at Birkbeck College (University of London), Dr Sussex went to New Zealand for a professorship there, and Karagheusian bought a small aeroplane at the end of the war in order to fly to France, but the authorities would not let him do so.

The French we learned was correct and very proper, containing almost no demotic language or slang. For example, it was not until about 1958 in London that I found out that the word ‘torchon’ meant tea-towel. At about that time, a concierge in Paris praised the quality of my French, which she called ‘le français scolaire’. She was right, and even now I may be able to discuss politics, philosophy and literature, but am totally lost when confronted by young people speaking street French or slang. I do know that ‘terrible’ means ‘marvellous’ but that’s about all.

The degree was got by essays and other course work, with examinations at the end of each year, in my case for English as well as French. The most rigorous exam was a two-hour one in the Finals which had only one question on anything from French literature. In my final Honours year we were asked to write a critical comparison of the *Mémoires* of the duc de Saint-Simon and Voltaire’s *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, to be written in French. By luck, I got to the University that morning with time to spare, aware that Saint-Simon was the only author I had not studied. I rushed to the library, found the book and had about 20 minutes to get something into my head about the duke. Phew! I do remember that most of what I wrote was historiography, comparing the ‘Great Man’ theory of history (Voltaire) with the personal, intimate, contemporary memoirs of the duke.

Soon after enrolling, I was pleased to find that those of us who had chosen French automatically became members of the famous French Club, which had been founded in the nineteenth century, not long after French started to be taught at the University. We quickly found that this was not just a formality, for the club was full of life and offered theatre, talks, films, music and even trips to the countryside for several days.

The Committee was a mixture of staff and students, which we accepted as normal in those days. The student newspaper *Farrago* published the committee for 1948: Professor Chisholm (president), Dr Sussex, M. Karagheusian and a number of students representing different years.

In addition to membership of the Club, we were talked into joining the Alliance Française which we found worked closely with the University, providing an extra source of library books, talks, play-readings, theatre and oral French. I think we had to pay a small fee (5 shillings?) for our membership.

We had access to the library in Little Collins Street and there were meetings with speakers as well as play-readings and full-play productions, in which students like me and members of the smallish French colony of Melbourne took part. My own acting career began when I was asked to speak one line in *La Poudre aux yeux* (Labiche and Martin): ‘Je suis le domestique du premier’, thus naively betraying a girl’s father who, anxious to impress the visiting family come with a view to a possible marriage, borrowed my character from the neighbours upstairs. To put minds at rest, the play ends happily for the simple reason that the boy and the girl really do love each other. My first reading of a play was one by Sacha Guitry, in which I was a man committing adultery (what else?) and the opening line was, looking at my watch: ‘Huit heures! Sacré nom de dieu de nom de dieu!’ The blasphemy of this seemed to devastate the row of Catholic French ladies and I heard a loud in-drawing of breath. Then Madame Cockerton, the director, said ‘Trop vite!’ so I had to start again, which must have nearly finished off the front row. On another occasion at a performance of *Le Voyage de Monsieur Perrichon* (again Labiche and Martin) the windows of the hall were only covered with pale blinds, so that there was plenty of light for the audience of school children. The kids all had the same edition of the play, so that our acting was loudly punctuated by the turning of all the pages at the same time. In the interval, someone gave a half-full bottle of sherry to the caretaker who sipped it and said ‘Nice bit of vinn rooge’. Other plays included *Les Jours heureux* (Claude André Puget) and *Gringalet* (Paul Vandenberghe), originally a Parisian play, then in 1946 a film. I played the father of the dreadful teenager nicknamed Gringalet (a bit of a tummy, lines on the face and silver dust in the hair to age me). I remember that every time there was another outrage from the boy, I had to look perturbed and say ‘Ah, bah!’ It got a laugh every time.

Under the aegis of the Alliance Française one Saturday we took a play by Rostand, *Le Souper blanc*, to Ballarat for the school children and others who had enough French to get by. The play was in the tradition of the *commedia dell’arte* and the other student, his sister and I all had flowing white Pierrot costumes. It seemed to go down quite well. I remember we went there



Cast of *Pattes de mouche* (May 1947)

BACK ROW: Pamela Meare, Sigmond van Dantzich, Mary Wheaton, Patrick Singleton, Lyell Harris

FRONT ROW: Donald Walker, Sylvia Lane, Ken Mackay, Ailsa Thompson, Lesley Hogg, Richard Gunter



Cast of *Crispin, rival de son maître* (June 1948)

BACK ROW: Lyell Harris, Richard Gunter

MIDDLE ROW: Donald Walker, Pamela Meare, Sylvia Lane

BOTTOM ROW: Ray Casey, Pauline Charlston, Sigmond van Dantzich

in Professor Chisholm's huge American car. Being not very tall, he was unable to see over the bonnet when we came to hills, which were not as smoothed out on roads as they are now. His solution was to half-stand at each hill, hanging on to the steering wheel with his foot on the accelerator and not too far from the brake. I sat beside him and was fascinated.

Again under the ægis of the Alliance we read *Les Pattes de mouche* (Victorien Sardou) at the Melbourne Boys High School. Other plays were fuller productions directed by Madame Cockerton of the Alliance, one of the small group of French women who had married Australian servicemen in or after the First World War. We often rehearsed these plays on Sundays in her splendid house in South Yarra. Plays performed included *Crispin rival de son maître* (Alain-René Lesage 1707), *Les Romanesques* (Rostand), all for schools, *Le Malade imaginaire* and *Les Femmes savantes* (Molière) and scenes from Hugo's *Hernani*.

## Al'Universite de Melbourne La Marine Française au Cercle des Etudiants.

Il faut croire que le système des compensations fonctionne parfois, car nous possédons en première année dans la section française de l'Université de Melbourne, des sujets vraiment remarquables à beaucoup de points de vue.

La semaine dernière, mardi soir, devant un auditoire de choix, un groupe d'étudiants de première année lisait quelques scènes d'*Hernani*. Les costumes et le maquillage étaient des plus pittoresques, mais il y avait peu à redire quant à l'accent français et au sens dramatique. Ce qui est remarquable, c'est que ces jeunes gens, dont le plus âgé n'a que dix-sept ans, sont tellement enthousiastes qu'ils passent chaque jeudi l'heure du déjeuner

## A l'Université de Melbourne.

(Suite de la page 9.)

dans le bureau du Dr. et de Mme Taylor à répéter et à lire tout en grignotant, (ou plutôt après avoir fini de grignoter leurs sandwiches. Il y a même des fois où l'un d'eux oublie complètement d'apporter à manger et alors on partage en frères. C'est une vraie démocratie!)

C'est le résultat de ce labeur que nous produisons ce mardi et, comme nous le disions plus haut, l'auditoire était à la fois distingué et fourni. De très bonne heure le Dr. Singleton, professeur de géologie à l'Université, et Mrs. Singleton, étaient confortablement installés dans leurs fauteuils et attendaient avec impatience de voir paraître Hernani qui n'était autre que le jeune Pat Singleton. Nous avons cru reconnaître Mrs. Rodgers, femme d'un de nos collègues de physiques et mère de Sally Rodgers, alias Dona Sol, mais juste au moment où nous allions nous diriger vers elle, on est venu nous dire que d'étranges silhouettes se dessinaient dans le vestibule du rez-de-chaussée et nous nous sommes précipités pour accueillir... la marine française en la personne de Mlle de Saint-Quentin et de MM. Déniel et Ozoux (qu'on nous pardonne les fautes d'orthographe!), bientôt suivis du Capitaine Froidefond.

M. le professeur Chisholm, le Dr. et Mrs. Sussex qui avaient pour une fois abandonné Bébé Roland dans son berceau, et toute une troupe d'étudiants de première année, et même de deuxième et troisième année, et aussi plusieurs anciens étudiants de français dont certains en uniforme (probablement pour la dernière fois!), avaient tenu à venir faire honneur à nos jeunes. Nous ne pensons pas que personne ait regretté sa soirée.

Ce qui nous donne grand espoir pour l'année prochaine c'est que ce groupe d'acteurs ne représente à la vérité qu'une partie de notre potentiel de talent. Il a été vraiment embarrassant de choisir les interprètes de ces scènes.

Comme nous avions pensé qu'il serait difficile de jouer Hernani dans l'esprit de son époque, il avait été entendu qu'on prendrait quelques libertés avec l'atmosphère plutôt tendue de ce drame. Le duc (joué par M. Gunter) avait donc dessiné lui-même les portraits de ses ancêtres, et l'auditoire ne savait pas ce qu'il fallait admirer le plus de son assurance et de sa dignité comme duc ou de son talent et de son imagination comme caricaturiste. Le roi (M. Mackie) avait vraiment bien du mérite à ne pas éclater de rire, mais peut-être ne voyait-il rien, avec sa plume qui lui balayait le bout du nez!

La soirée s'est terminée par des charades sous la direction de nos marins qui nous ont promis de revenir. It's a date!...—Y.T.

On a departmental production of Victor Hugo's *Hernani*, by Yvonne Taylor, in *Courrier australien*

No later than early 1946, as some of the audience were in uniform, a headline in the *Courrier Australien* reads: 'À l'Université de Melbourne—La Marine Française au Cercle des Étudiants'. There followed a full account of students reading *Hernani* and dignitaries in the audience. The costumes and makeup were described quite ambiguously as 'pittoresques'. Our accents and our sense of theatre were praised. The *Marine Française* arrived in the form of one woman, two sailors and Captain Froidefond. French staff from the University and plenty of students were in the audience, and the mariners finished off the evening with French charades.

While I was Secretary of the French Club, we decided that it would be fun to put on a revue in Freshers' Week, which we did and named it, in somewhat dubious French, 'Les Folies Freshères' (imitating its almost namesake in Paris). There were two of these (1947 and 1948) and they took place in the relaxed ambience of one of the lounges upstairs in the Union building, with songs, sketches, recitations and the like. Most of the French staff were there, as well as students of French and other disciplines. In 1948 we even went so far as to have can-can girls doing their act to Offenbach (of course). The critic of *Farrago* commented that 'the girls enjoyed themselves as much as the audience'. One student read a French poem about a cat and then sang 'Valentine', with the audience joining in to great applause. A young

FARRAGO, MAY 4th, 1948

### French Club

Our revue, "Folies Freshères," went off with a bang on the night of April 22 in the Men's Lounge. It conformed to all that it had been cracked up to be: gay, witty, intoxicating and "hotter than the Kinsey report." With one blow it established the French Club as the most flourishing language club in Melbourne University.

The reason for this success may be found in the fact that all those engaged in the revue had considerable stage experience and were thus well qualified to adapt their ideas to the small space available in the Men's Lounge.

Production was polished and finished throughout, thanks to the efforts of Miss Leslie Hogg and Miss Ailsa Thornton. Costumes were excellent, especially those of the can-can girls, while the ladies' frocks were most becoming.

There was only one fault, namely, the inclusion of extracts from Dumas fils' "La dame aux camélias," the subtleties of which were thrown away on the audience, and proved rather trying. The choice of programme was otherwise felicitous, the frivolous tone of the can-can being sustained all through the show.

We must congratulate the can-can girls for their courage in tackling this most arduous dance, yet so typically French. It is only fair to say that the girls enjoyed themselves as much as the audience.

Mr. Anton Bowler made a most charming and witty comper, and his spirited recital of the poem about the cat, and his rendering of "Valentine" mark him as a budding artist. Miss M. Reed per-

formed a dance to Ravel's "Bolero." Thanks to her imaginative costume and sinuous movements, one could almost imagine the cracking of the whip at an Eastern slave-market. Mr. B. Roller distinguished himself by singing "J'attendrai," which was encored amid loud acclaim from the audience; Mr. J. Fitchett, by his sketch, and Miss B. Kauffmann by the ease and poise which characterised her performance in the three different love sketches.

Mr. Benn gave a sensitive performance of Chopin and Debussy on a bad piano.

May we remind you that on May 6 there will be a talk by Mr. Karageusian, of the staff, who has recently come back from his trip to Paris. His comments on the situation there should be of great interest to students. During the last week of this term we will perform extracts from Moliere's "Les Femmes Savantes," which will be accompanied by 17th and 18th Century French music. All interested are invited to attend.

On *Folies Freshères*, the French Club's review, by Sigmund van Dantzych, in *Farrago*, 4 May 1948

lady only partially dressed did a sinuous dance to Ravel's 'Boléro'. Someone sang 'J'attendrai' and a student called Benn played Chopin and Debussy on a badly tuned piano. In the previous year we had done similar things, except that I had the idea of emulating Dr Taylor's pronunciation and mannerisms in reading part of *La Chanson de Roland* in Old French. Dr Taylor was there and had the grace to laugh, as I gobbled the poetry and commented on the story, which involved the fleeing Moorish army and, on the left, a dead archbishop.

I have little documentation of talks, film and music. Firstly, M. Karageusian gave a riveting talk about Paris, which we thought he longed to go back to. A French student gave us 'Un jeune Français découvre l'Australie' and one evening in September 1948 the French Consul (Roger Loubère) brought along the world famous and much vaunted violinist, Ginette Neveu. This last was not a great success. She seemed reticent and the conversation was stilted. She played a short piece on her Stradivarius and the Consul and she left early. With hindsight, she may have expected a big reception with the Vice-Chancellor, the Dean of Music and various dignitaries and not just a smallish group of students. In October of the following year, we were all saddened to learn that she had been killed in an air crash brought on by fog in the Azores on the way to America. All 48 people



on board were killed, including her brother, who was her pianist, and Marcel Cerdan, the middleweight champion boxer whose death devastated so much the woman he loved, Edith Piaf.

In the second term vacations, someone organised two camping trips and up to seventeen students came. ‘Camping’ was a misnomer, because we always had lodgings in inexpensive boarding houses. At least one member of staff came with us, which we were happy about, as they kept order (not really necessary), organised hikes and other activities and tried to make sure we spoke French at least most of the time.

We found the French Consul extremely helpful. In conjunction with the Alliance and our lecturers, he gave us ideas and supported us in various ways. He even invited us (perhaps only the Honours students) to his cocktail party at the then Menzies Hotel. Together we were a formidable force.

Even after I had my MA (early 1949) and was working with the Official Historians of World War II, I found time to come back and act in plays for the Alliance. There were several and the last one was *Dr Knock* (Jules Romains) in 1954.

Many years later, when I was head of department in a state-owned London college, we had prepared all the documentation for a new course in English literature, with subsidiaries in French, German and Spanish. A delegation came to examine the staff and the course, one of its members being an extremely grand, elderly professor of French from, I think, Edinburgh. During the discussion of the French subsidiary, he asked me where I had learned my ‘excellent French’ (which it was, then). I, in cultural cringe mode, said, ‘in Melbourne, Australia, actually’, expecting some derisive reply, instead of which he said, ‘Good Lord! You weren’t there in the days of the great A.R. Chisholm, were you?’ I told him I most certainly had been and he went on: ‘That school of French was famous; and Chisholm’s books on French symbolist poetry are still the standard works.’ I was delighted. To cap it all, we did succeed and the course started the following academic year, the first full-time Honours English course in the UK (perhaps the world) outside the University system.

That was three decades after the end of that busy, bright world of students, staff and French theatre that I had loved so much.