

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Noelene Bloomfield with the assistance of Michael Nash, *Almost a French Australia: French-British Rivalry in the Southern Oceans*, Sydney, Halstead Press, November 2012, 190 p., notes, bibliography, maps, illustrations and index, AU\$ 49.95, ISBN 978-1-92083-195-0.**

Noelene Bloomfield's *Almost a French Australia* is the first overview of French voyages of exploration and colonial ambitions in Australia since the late Leslie Marchant published *France Australe* thirty years ago.

Bloomfield consolidates the scholarship of the past three decades, with earlier work, in a succinct, engaging, well-illustrated, pedagogically useful account. Her book is introduced with a cogent historical assessment of European strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific region by Alan Bloomfield. After examining early European exploration in the Southern Oceans—mercifully cautious with regard to Biot Paulmier de Gonneville's sixteenth-century voyage, or purported voyage, to southern waters—Noelene Bloomfield recounts Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's circumnavigation (which reached the fringes of the Great Barrier Reef), then the voyages of de Surville, Marion Dufresne, Saint-Alouarn (together with the Indian Ocean sub-Antarctic descents of Bouvet de Lozier and Kerguelen), Lapérouse, d'Entrecasteaux, Baudin and Freycinet. In her chapter on Duperrey's *Coquille* expedition and Dumont d'Urville's first *Astrolabe* voyage, she discusses France's failure to establish a penal colony in Australia as a result of pre-emptive British settlements. She concludes her book with a brief survey of French whaling in the nineteenth century and an account of the expeditions of Dupetit-Thouars and Laplace, and d'Urville's final voyage to the Pacific and Antarctic in 1837–1840.

Bloomfield makes much of Saint-Alloüarn's claim of the Western Australian coast for France in 1772. But if we are to treat such colonial pantomimes seriously, both the British and French would have had to defer to seventeenth-century Dutch claims. In the final analysis the fifty thousand year old patrimony of Australia's indigenous inhabitants far outweighs them all.

A few minor details in the book call for comment. It was Dumont d'Urville's mother rather than his father who was arrested during the Terror. When his father died, d'Urville was tutored (rather than raised) for two years by his maternal uncle, the refractory Abbé de Croisilles, but his mother remained an important part of his austere upbringing. I am currently completing a biography of Dumont d'Urville which will have more to say

about his childhood, as well as about his secret orders to search for the site of a French penal colony in Australia.

A couple of the illustrations also warrant comment. The portrait of Bougainville's naturalist Philibert Commerson, which appears on page 42, is a confection. It was first published by Ferdinand Bernard de Montessus as an illustration for his biographical study of Commerson in 1889. We know now that it was created in 1888 or 1889 by the wife of the Parisian painter and lithographer Pierre Pagnier (1849–1908) and a Lieutenant-Colonel Jean-Baptiste 'Théophile' Commerçon. They based it on a portrait of the colonel's grandfather, Jean-Baptiste Commerçon from Cluny, who shared a phonetic rendering of the naturalist's family name and was perhaps related to him (see Jean-Yves Pigot, 'Enquête sur un portrait', *Hommes & Plantes*, n° 24, février 1998, pp. 10–11). The portrait of Baudin's artist Charles-Alexandre Lesueur on page 123 is not by Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) as is stated in the illustration credits on page 186. It is, in fact, an ink sketch by the Russian artist Valerian Gribayedoff (1857–1908), based on Peale's painting (1818) now in the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia.

The endpapers in *Almost a French Australia* bear a map of the continent with a list of the many French names to be found along our coast, mainly on the south, west and north. There are none for Queensland, but one could perhaps make a case for Trebonne, near Ingham. It was coined by the francophone Mauritian sugar planter Léon Burguez (1830–1887) as a contraction of the French *très bonne* [very good] circa 1880. There are only three French toponyms listed for New South Wales, all associated with Lapérouse. However, the Sydney suburb of Canada Bay deserves inclusion. It was named after the 58 Canadian rebel *patriotes* transported in 1838. Bloomfield was probably justified in not including the Sydney coastal suburb of Sans Souci. It was named after Thomas Holt's home, in turn named after Frederick the Great's summer palace *Sanssouci* in Potsdam. Nevertheless, it is French for 'no worries'. Furthermore, Sans Souci has streets named after Napoleon and Fontainebleau, and in the 1940s it was still home to two unmarried great-grandchildren of Peter Dillon who discovered the fate of Lapérouse in September 1827 (see J. W. Davidson, *Peter Dillon of Vanikoro*, MUP, 1975, p. 307). He, too, is mentioned several times in Noelene Bloomfield's attractive and insightful book!

**Viviane Fayaud, *Le Paradis autour de Paul Gauguin*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, Collection Réseau Asie directed by Jean-François Sabouret, November 2011, 278 p., 36 illustrations, rrp 26.60 €, ISBN 978-2-27107-093-7.**

This extremely interesting and comprehensive study by Viviane Fayaud of the evolution of the French vision of Polynesia from myth to history is based on her original research into the vast store of artworks—drawings, sketches, watercolours, illustrated logbooks and journals—that were made by the artists attached to the French expeditions, both scientific and political, to Tahiti, the Marquesas, Easter Island and other archipelagos of Polynesia during the nineteenth century.

As the title implies, this study revolves around the late work of Paul Gauguin, created when he was living in Tahiti and the Marquesas from 1891 to 1893, and from 1895 until his death in 1903. Gauguin had been attracted by the accounts and illustrations of the voyages of exploration to Polynesia, and, in particular, to the stories, drawings and prints by Pierre Loti, such as his novel *Le Mariage de Loti* published in 1880.

Fayaud's starting point is the exhibition, held in the Grand Palais, Paris, in 2003, of Gauguin's paintings from the period of his life spent in French Polynesia. This was in celebration of the centenary of the death of the artist and the first time that his entire œuvre *océanienne* had been exhibited together. Gauguin was a master of Orientalism and Fayaud discusses its influence on a number of his works, particularly in relation to his iconic portrayals of the women of Tahiti—'the icon of the *vahiné*'. She maintains that his vivid, powerful images are so widely known and so closely associated with the 'myth' of Tahiti that they scarcely need to be reproduced. She nonetheless includes one reproduction: '*La femme à l'éventail*', a 1902 work (plate 2). She states that Gauguin was just the last in a series of French artists who travelled to Polynesia and made a vast collection of drawings, sketches, water-colours on site, inspired by the exotic landscape and the indigenous inhabitants.

Her particular research interest is in the works of the artists who preceded Gauguin in Tahiti and the Marquesas during the nineteenth century. She selects four of these travelling artists and writers, from different backgrounds and with different training, who visited Tahiti over periods spaced roughly twenty years apart, from 1823 to 1872.

The artists studied are Jules Lejeune, Max Radiguet, Charles Giraud and Pierre Loti. Two chapters are devoted to a detailed commentary on their works leading up to the question whether they can be considered the predecessors or the precursors of Gauguin.

Fayaud does not include in her study the accounts and artworks of the great French voyages of discovery of the eighteenth century, following Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's famed arrival in Tahiti in 1768. The fated voyage of Lapérouse (1785–1788) and that of d'Entrecasteaux, (1791–1793) are mentioned, as are the early and mid-nineteenth century voyages of Nicolas Baudin and Jules Dumont d'Urville, but they are not discussed here because, as Fayaud explains, the accounts and illustrations of their voyages in the published atlases are already widely known.

However, she does include one illustration of the Easter Island monuments from the Lapérouse expedition, an engraving by Godefroy after the drawing by de Vancy, *Insulaires et monuments de l'île de Pâques* (1788). This image stands in contrast to the drawing of the same subject by Pierre Loti made over a hundred years later in 1898, *Pascuans assis sur des statues géantes renversées* (plate 22). There is an aura of decay and melancholy in the later work.

The first chapter is devoted to a comprehensive study of the history of the 'myth' surrounding the islands of Polynesia and focusses on Tahiti in particular. It was the account of the eighteenth century voyage of exploration to the South Pacific, led by Bougainville in 1768, that 'inflamed the imagination of the Western world', writes Fayaud. Bougainville was the first French navigator to reach Tahiti. On arrival he announced that he thought he had been transported into the Garden of Eden and called it *la Nouvelle Cythère*. With this resonating title, the 'myth' was launched, mutating, with time and further intervention, from the vision of an Arcadia peopled by 'noble savages', an earthly paradise, *la Nouvelle Cythère*, to a land of 'the ignoble savage' and, by the late nineteenth century, a paradise on the way to being lost.

The image selected for the cover of this book is a detail from a painting by William Hodges, the British artist on Captain James Cook's second voyage of discovery, (1772–1775). This *Vue de la baie de Oaitepeha, Tahiti* depicts an Arcadian scene expressing the wonders of *la Nouvelle Cythère*—sublime, exotic landscape, a simple dwelling and light-skinned indigenes in the state of nature, with the foreground figure tattooed and statuesque in classical pose.

Fayaud shows how the myth surrounding Tahiti persisted, even while its Arcadian qualities became tainted by the colonisers and missionaries. It changed with the evolution from the eighteenth century ideas of Enlightenment and the Classical Ideal. In the nineteenth century, the indigenous people became westernised and gave up many of their own beliefs and customs.

She focuses on the history of Tahitian women through images (*la Tahitienne par l'image*), through the primary visual documents made on site by the artists that she has selected for this research. She demonstrates how the theme of the *vahiné* (the Polynesian woman), is the key element in the myth of French Polynesia. It was embellished by the artists of the expeditions of discovery of the eighteenth century, and by the engravers of the artists' drawings for publication in the atlases of the voyages to appeal to Western taste, but the women of Polynesia became the subject of more realistic portrayal in the nineteenth century. She maintains that it is a theme of great importance in the historical studies of Tahiti. She bases her research on the drawings, sketches, and water-colour studies of daily life directly observed by the artists.

The first artist chosen for her research is **Jules Lejeune**. He was a young artist attached to the scientific expedition led by Louis Isidore Duperrey that arrived in Tahiti in 1823. His drawings and watercolours reveal a close interest in the inhabitants—their appearance, their costumes and decorations, their distinctive tattoos and their daily activities such as preparing food and beating tapa cloth (plates 14–18).

The second artist, **Max Radiguet**, was an artist and writer who was appointed as secretary to Admiral Dupetit Thouars, the leader of the expedition of 1841–1844 to the Marquesas and Tahiti. This expedition had a military purpose that was to take possession, for France, of the Marquesas and to declare a Protectorate (plate 23). Radiguet published several articles and illustrated books on his return to France. He also made many drawings and watercolours of Tahiti, the Marquesas and Easter Island during his stay in Polynesia. His studies of the inhabitants, of their daily occupations and the interactions between the chiefs and the French officers are of great historical interest. There are some examples of his colourful watercolours of landscapes, scenes of spiritual ritual, and of intimate family groups included in the illustrations (plates 23–36).

The third artist in Fayaud's research study is not an *artiste d'expédition* but an *artiste voyageur*, **Charles Giraud**, an established French artist and a

world traveller who had studied at the École des Beaux Arts. He stayed in Tahiti from 1843 to 1847. As a professional artist, he was committed to creating a work of art rather than the illustration of a voyage. He was attached to the French colonial staff in the Marquesas as assistant architect. He worked more on portraits than landscapes (plates 3–11). Fayaud writes that his portrait of Chief Hitoti (plate 6) is considered to be one of the most beautiful portraits of a Tahitian chief in the French national collection.

**Pierre Loti** is the fourth artist in the group. *Voyageur artiste*, Loti had a career in the navy. He came to Easter Island, Tahiti, the Marquesas and Moorea in 1872. He was a writer and graphic artist but his literary work is better known than his drawings. His voyage to the islands of Polynesia stimulated his sensitivity and emotions. Fayaud explains that Loti recreated a mythical Polynesia (*Polynésie mythique*) in his works. He published his novel *Le Mariage de Loti*, richly illustrated with his signed prints, in 1880 (plates 19–22).

Fayaud maintains that there has been very little attention paid to the art works of Pierre Loti, so she makes a detailed study and commentary on them. She describes the subjects he chose, such as the sculptures, totems, the variety of styles of costume, flowered head dresses, decorations using the coveted red feathers, accurate recording of tattoos, the various styles of habitats and the Easter Island statues in decay. Unfortunately, only four of the drawings by Loti are included in the illustrations in this book, so the commentary on other works is harder to appreciate.

It is of great interest to learn how the style, points of view and special interests of these four artists differ in their portrayal of French Polynesia during their visits that were spaced over a long period of the nineteenth century from 1823 to 1872. These works lead up to the brilliant Orientalist images created by Gauguin at the end of the century.

In the epilogue Dr Fayaud brings the reader up to date with her continuing research. She says there are still thousands of sketches, drawings and watercolours to be studied, '*un véritable orientalisme océanien français dont Gauguin constitue le célébrissime mais non le seul paragon*' (a true Franco-Pacific Orientalism of which Gauguin represents the most famous but not the sole paragon) (p. 211).

She comments that none of the art works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries really shows the women as they were in everyday society.

Their role, their daily tasks, and their position of power in the social group are still to be researched. She plans to continue her research in pursuit of factual evidence in texts, drawings and photographs.

This book is very well supported by documentation. There is an extensive list of the drawings and prints of each of the artists in the study, giving the title, date, dimensions, technique, the folio or catalogue number and provenance. There is also a full bibliography and a useful *Chronologie succincte* of the period from 1768 to 1903.

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**Derek Guille, illustrated by Kaff-eine, translated by Anne-Sophie Biguet, *The Promise: the Town that Never Forgets/N'oublions jamais l'Australie*, Melbourne, One Day Hill Publishers Australia, April 2013, 37 p., rrp AU\$ 24.99, ISBN 978-0-98731-396-6.**

On 14 July 1921, the Victorian Chief Commissioner of Police, Sir John Gellibrand, presided over the launch of a public appeal to 'adopt' the northern French town of Villers-Bretonneux. £20,000 were to be sought to assist postwar reconstruction 'in memory of the association of French and Australian arms at that critical centre of warfare'. The same evening, the Alliance Française dedicated its Bastille Day ball to the cause. Moneys raised helped, among other things, to rebuild the town school: it was given the name 'Victoria School' which it still bears today. In 1984–1985 Villers-Bretonneux was officially twinned with the Victorian river town of Robinvale, named in memory of Robin Cuttle, an airman who lost his life over Villers-Bretonneux in 1918. Every year, memorial ceremonies are held on Anzac Day, and more strikingly, the school shelter-shed bears the sign DO NOT FORGET AUSTRALIA, a message repeated in French in each classroom. It is hard to find a stronger or more poignant example of the enduring Australian-French links that were generated in the course of the First World War: the savage battles of Villers-Bretonneux, hugely costly in human lives, were a turning-point in the war. Today the town is a key pivot in a carefully sustained intercultural relationship.

Derek Guille learned the story of Villers-Bretonneux almost by accident when he accompanied the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra on its 2007 European tour. He was able to join members of the brass section who went to Villers-Bretonneux to honour the grand-father of one of them, Nelson Ferguson, an artist and musician, who had served in the war as a stretcher-bearer, and had been severely wounded by poison-gas in the battle for Villers-Bretonneux in 1918. Guille weaves the threads of his narrative with great clarity and skill. He conveys the brutal horror of what happened in the war and the starkness of the rows of graves in the cemetery, but he does so with a touch made lighter by his account of the present-day visit of the Melbourne musicians, and of the extraordinarily warm welcome afforded them by the officials, families, and children of the French town.

At the heart of the book is the figure of Nelson Ferguson, who gives us insight into the true nature of heroism, not so much through his war service as through the extraordinary courage with which, after the war, when his eyes and lungs were permanently ruined, he rebuilt his artistic life working with stained glass, inspired by what he had seen in some of France's churches. This focus shows Guille's belief in the ongoing healing powers of art; it also testifies to the value of investigating and setting down the stories of people who have neither sought nor known celebrity, but whose remembered lives can enrich the meaning of our own.

*The Promise* is an educational work in the very best senses of the term. It will be most suitable for young people from late primary to early secondary school levels but will also appeal to adults. It is attractively and pertinently illustrated by Kaff-eine, who has combined some playful pictures with others that are more thought-provoking or tinged with the painful sorrows that infuse parts of the narrative. The publishers at One Day Hill are to be congratulated for making the book bilingual. Anne-Sophie Biguet's translation will ensure that the book is accessible to French readers, and that it will also give Australian French-learners a historically relevant text that can help extend language skills. Above all, the co-existence of the two languages is a reminder that this is a story profoundly shared by two cultures.



**Marie Darrieussecq, *All the Way (Clèves)*, translated by Penny Hueston, Melbourne, Text Publishing, February 2013, 224 p., rrp AU\$ 29.99, ISBN 978-1-92192-273-2.**

Marie Darrieussecq prefaces her eleventh novel with a quotation from Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘Is it possible that we know nothing about girls, who exist nonetheless?’ By the end of her book, there is very little that we don’t know. Darrieussecq sets out to thoroughly explore this vitally important but awkward age for girls through the physical, sexual and social awakening of Solange, whom we first see at about twelve and follow for several years into her teens as she grows up in a Basque village near the sea. The time is very much the early 1980s, its class structures and preoccupations mirrored in that small society.

Various adults flit in and out of the picture but Solange is left much to her own devices. Her depressed mother, who works in a souvenir shop, is preoccupied by divorcing her father, a handsome womanising airline steward. Neither of them is there, physically or emotionally, for their daughter. The one adult constant in her life is the strange Monsieur Bihotz. In the beginning it was his mother who looked after Solange after school and often overnight as well, but when she died her son took over the role of ‘babysitter’. As a result, the girl’s world is almost exclusively connected to school, and what occupies the students’ thoughts there is sex. As Solange herself remarks, they talk of nothing else.

Several of Darrieussecq’s novels leading up to this one dealt with emptiness, absence and loss. With *All the Way* we are firmly brought back to earth, and often have our noses rubbed in it. The book is divided into three sections: ‘Getting It’, ‘Doing It’, ‘Doing It Again’. ‘Getting It’ refers to her period, and it would be difficult to find anywhere such a revealing, intimate account of this passage into adulthood and the surge of hormones that comes with it. Darrieussecq is as frank and provocative as ever in the remaining two parts of the novel featuring the treatment of Solange’s initiation into sex with all its permutations and combinations. She calls a dick a dick, and many times over—in fact Solange often sees men as their genitals, with the rest of them as a vague surrounding presence. Rather than attempting to analyse the girl’s psychological state, Darrieussecq gets us into Solange’s mind, which is filled with a mixture of conscious and unconscious thoughts, words and phrases,

fleeting images both present and past. As she has said previously, the aim of her writing is 'to say what is unspoken'.

Solange cannot wait to lose her virginity, to know what it is, what it feels like, and to be accepted and admired by her friends, but she has no real guidelines, moral or otherwise. Gossip from her friends, phrases from novels, bits of folk wisdom are all she has to go on. Even the dictionary is not much help. Darrieussecq takes a keen interest in common sayings and clichés for the way they can influence attitudes and for the fact that they usually contain a smaller or larger element of truth. One of the most striking aspects of the book is this contrast between Solange's ignorance and naivety on the one hand and her sensuality and sexual experience on the other, somewhat reminiscent of Cécile de Volanges in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. This situation leads to some amusing observations, such as her conclusion that bi-sexual means sex with two people. The résumé on the back cover of the novel calls it 'brilliant and hilarious'. Impressive and original it may be, but for this reader the casual cruelty of the young people it depicts prevents the comic touches reaching the point of hilarity.

Other literary characters inevitably come to mind when reading *All the Way*, in particular Lolita and Mme Bovary. However, one important literary reference inherent in the original title, *Clèves*, is unfortunately missing in this excellent translation. Darrieussecq called her book 'a rewriting in reverse' of the seventeenth century classic, *La Princesse de Clèves*. A paragraph at the beginning of the English edition or a footnote in the text would at least have given some idea of this important layer of significance, although the book certainly stands on its own without it.

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## BOOK NOTE

*Australian Journal of French Studies*, vol. L, n° 1, January-April 2013, special issue 'La Terre australe : History and Myth', 150 p., ISSN 004-9468 (print), ISSN 2046-2913 (online). (Available online from <http://ajfs.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk>.)

The Abbé Paulmier was a seventeenth century French player in the European dreaming of a Great South Land. The *Australian Journal of French Studies* has brought out a special issue, co-edited by Margaret Sankey, that summarises the present state of Paulmier studies and makes further contributions to them.

It is partly based on the 2007 Sorbonne symposium chaired by Professor François Moureau, which was held on the occasion of the publication of Professor Sankey's critical edition of the Abbé Paulmier's 1664 *Mémoires touchant l'établissement d'une mission chrestienne dans [...] La Terre Australe [...]*, Paris, Champion, 2006. It also contains several articles written after the symposium by non-participants. Of the eight pieces in this bilingual issue (five are in English, three in French), one is the text of an oral presentation from the Paris symposium, followed by the transcript of the highly interesting discussion that concluded the session.

In his writings the Abbé Paulmier sought to have his plans for a Christian evangelising mission to *Terra australis* approved and funded by both the Catholic Church in Rome and the King of France. In support of his proposal, he claimed that *Terra australis* had been discovered by an early sixteenth-century French explorer called Gonnevillle—he even included a narrative of the exploration attributed to Gonnevillle. He further claimed that Gonnevillle returned to France from *Terra australis* (or Gonnevillle's Land) with a native by the name of Essomericq and that he (Paulmier) was a descendant of that man.

Although the authenticity of the Abbé Paulmier's proposal for the evangelising mission has generally been accepted, historians have long queried the accuracy of the Gonnevillle story, the very existence of Essomericq and Paulmier's genealogy, principally because the Abbé's claims have not been confirmed in sources unconnected with his own writings.

In a book published in 2000 amateur historian Jacques Lévêque de Pontharouart (*Paulmier de Gonnevillle, son voyage imaginaire*, Beauval-en-Caux) attempted to prove that Paulmier forged both the account of the Gonnevillle expedition and the story of his part-native ancestry.

Following the 2007 Sorbonne symposium, the current Paulmier issue of *AJFS* explores the various aspects of Paulmier's claims and the passionate debates which they have generated. It seeks to shed more light on the principal arguments and counter-arguments. While most papers deal with the historical truth or otherwise of the Gonneville story and diverse aspects of Paulmier's genealogy, others focus on the mission proposal itself and Paulmier's idea of the relationship between colonisation and evangelisation, as well as on actual French missions to the Pacific region.

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