

# THE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE OF SYDNEY BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS A STUDY IN LEADERSHIP<sup>1</sup>

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## Antecedents

The Alliance Française of Sydney was founded in the 1890's.<sup>2</sup> A lending library had been formed in 1896 by the then Consul General for France, Georges Biard d'Aunet, and run by him with the sole support of the consular staff. A fully-fledged Alliance Française was eventually established in June 1899, and not in 1895, as a flawed tradition would have it.<sup>3</sup> The Consul General retained full control until a few months before his retirement to France six years later.

The Committee comprised only Frenchmen, with just one member with an English name, the manager of the French Bank in Sydney, and no women. Under Biard d'Aunet's presidency the Alliance had no social ambitions, and apart from the library its only other focus was pedagogical. The contrast with

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<sup>1</sup> The opening section ('Antecedents') of this article is based on the author's 1999 essay (Barko 1999). The main source of both the 1999 study and the present history of the interwar period is the holdings of the French-language weekly *Le Courier australien*. From 1899 until 1937 the *Courrier australien* described itself as the 'organ of the Committee of the Alliance Française and the Chamber of Commerce'. Whether this official status gives it greater credibility than it would otherwise have, the accuracy of its reporting on the Alliance has always been confirmed in the (admittedly rare) cases where alternative sources, such as correspondence or articles in the local English-language press, were available. In contrast to the Melbourne Alliance, no archives of the Sydney Alliance (either local, including Australian libraries, or at the Paris headquarters) have survived for the period under consideration.

<sup>2</sup> The Alliance Française of Paris was officially established in 1884. The first Australian branch was the Melbourne Alliance, founded in 1890.

<sup>3</sup> The transformation of the lending library into a fully fledged Alliance Française is documented in the 17 June 1899 issue of the *Courrier australien*, henceforth *CA*.

the beginnings of the Melbourne Alliance is striking: no input was sought from the Sydney establishment. Biard d'Aunet, the founder of the Sydney Alliance, deliberately followed the more austere model established by the Paris Alliance at its foundation fifteen years earlier. The first three or four years of the life of the Sydney Alliance were dominated by debates on the teaching of French in the secondary schools of New South Wales and at the University, with some attention paid to the development of the library.

The Consul General's control began to relax late in 1903 when the Alliance held its first social function, a so-called 'Bal-Conversation', at the Paddington Town Hall, with a woman (the Lady Mayoress, Mrs T. Hughes) as its patron, and in the presence of the Governor and his daughter Miss Rawson. The process of change accelerated in mid-1904 when Biard d'Aunet stepped down from the presidency, and then again in February 1905 when he retired to France.

During Albert Pinard's term as consul general (1905–1909) there was no 'strong' president. Biard d'Aunet's two immediate successors in the presidency, consular official (and subsequently, two decades later, consul general) Louis Nettement, and Dr Émile Rougier, a former director of the Pasteur Institute of Australia (which closed down in 1898), made little mark on the institution: the true impetus and inspiration came from the Consul General. The implementation of Pinard's initiatives was left to a group of enthusiasts, making use of the goodwill of the local French community, both men and women. It was a period of collective leadership, and 1907 and 1908 in particular were outstanding years for the Alliance. The committee organised social gatherings, lectures, conversation evenings, concerts and dances, and it involved Australians not only as beneficiaries of its activities but as equal participants.

Albert Pinard's untimely death in office in January 1909 broke the pattern and enthusiasm waned. A slowing down of activities followed, during a long two-year transitional period. Neither Hippolyte Frandin's short term as consul general nor Augustine Soubeiran's even shorter tenure of the presidency made any lasting impact on the Alliance.

After two years of lack of direction and instability, Pierre Durieux, already referred to as a *boute-en-train*<sup>4</sup> during the Pinard years, took over both

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<sup>4</sup> Driving force, initiator of activities.

the position of president and the effective leadership of the Alliance. Under his energetic guidance cultural activities (especially the Alliance ‘soirées’) flourished, membership grew and more and more Australians became involved. In affluent pre-war Australia these were excellent years for the Alliance, reminiscent of the best of the Pinard period.

Less than a year after Pierre Durieux’s accession to the presidency the Alliance library’s eviction from the premises of the Consulate General (where Georges Biard d’Aunet had installed it over fifteen years earlier) came as a warning of threats to come. The eviction coincided with the arrival of the new Consul General, Alexandre Chayet. Pierre Durieux remained president until January 1915, but in the last year of his term there were clear signs of a decline. Whether this was due to the worsening international situation and the outbreak of World War I, economic pressures, or the otherwise excellent Consul General’s negative attitude<sup>5</sup> towards the Alliance, is difficult to assess. Durieux finally stood down, discouraged by the turn of events.

The following four years (1915–1918) saw the Alliance Française of Sydney regress to its original incarnation solely as a lending library (1896–1899), except that, cast out of the Consulate General and no longer able to pay a rent in independent premises, it was now a war refugee in Mlle Boggio’s ‘Modern School of Languages’ in Moore Street, which later became part of Martin Place. Its other roles were taken over by the Consul General’s ‘Société des conférences en langues étrangères’ (1913), his ‘Institut de conversation Française’ (1915) and his ‘French Music Society’ (1916), all encroaching on traditional Alliance territory.

Whether the absence overseas of French Australians enlisted in either the French or the Australian army, and the energy and time required by some war-time activities such as the work of the French-Australian League of Help, had affected the contribution of the Alliance’s traditional supporters is difficult to determine. The fact remains that while most French activities proliferated and flourished in wartime Sydney, the Alliance faced a severe fall in membership and financial ruin, as well as a loss of morale, during that same period. The two

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<sup>5</sup> The reasons for this hostility are difficult to fathom. The most favourable interpretation of this anti-Alliance Française stance is that Chayet saw the Alliance as an elitist institution: it cannot be a coincidence that the replacement organisations he set up to take over the traditional functions of the Alliance were open to all and offered their services free of charge.

war-time presidents after Pierre Durieux, E. de Baillou (1915-1916), Agent Principal des Messageries Maritimes, and, after his death on 16 January 1917, wool buyer Paul Lamérand (1917–1918), were unable to reverse the trend.

## The immediate post-war period

The last Annual General Meeting of the Sydney Alliance Française presided over by the outgoing Consul General Alexandre Chayet was held on 22 March 1918. Membership was down to 97 (from 165 before the war) and the Alliance engaged in no activities except for its lending library. In his report the Secretary-Treasurer, E. Guiot, suggested that access to books alone may not completely satisfy the expectations of members who would also like to enjoy the experience of learning a living language through listening, not just reading.<sup>6</sup> From early 1918 the *Courrier* carried the following announcement: ‘As soon as circumstances permit, the Society will resume its lectures and concerts, to which members are entitled by their subscriptions.’<sup>7</sup>

A month after Alexandre Chayet’s seven-year term ended in July 1918, he was replaced by César Rizio Campana who was much more favourably inclined towards the Alliance.

Paul Lamérand’s presidency, which began in the first half of 1917, continued until the Annual General Meeting of 1921. He was supported by a committee with a strong representation from members of the Sydney wool buyer community. A similar pattern prevailed in all the other French organisations such as the Union Française de la Nouvelle Galles-du-Sud (the Sydney expatriates’ association), the French Benevolent Society and the Association of the shareholders of the *Courrier australien*: the influence of the wool buyers in the Sydney French community could be seen everywhere.

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Il serait judicieux d’émettre une opinion suggérée par la nature même et le but de notre société, c’est que l’usage seul de nos livres ne satisfait peut-être pas les besoins ou l’attente de nos nouveaux adhérents australiens et que, pour parfaire l’éducation par la lecture, ils seraient heureux de pouvoir y ajouter l’audition de notre langue.’ *CA* 5.4.1918.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Dès que les circonstances le permettent, la Société reprendra ses conférences et concerts, auxquels la susdite cotisation donne droit.’ *CA* 8.2.1918 and subsequent issues.

In December 1919 the Alliance advertised for a part-time female librarian ('Française de préférence'), the first sign of its progress towards recovery. The library had recently received 250 new books from the Alliance's Paris headquarters, to be added to its established holdings of approximately 3,000 volumes. However, despite a few encouraging developments Alexander Chayet's legacy lingered for some time and the Alliance needed a new incentive to recover its lost territories, educational, cultural and social, and to regain its former dynamism.

### The revival of the Alliance 1921–1922

This impetus for revival was provided on 21 January 1921 when, at the Annual General Meeting held on the premises of the Consulate General at 217 George Street, Augustine Soubeiran and Sydney wool buyer Émile Doucet became joint presidents of the Alliance. The reasons for the adoption of this dual presidency are not recorded but Émile Doucet offered business expertise which complemented Mlle Soubeiran's cultural and educational experience. It is also possible that Mlle Soubeiran, remembering her personal problems during her earlier (1910) term as president, wanted to ensure that she had all the backup she might require.<sup>8</sup>

The new leadership obtained the patronage of Dame Margaret Davidson, wife of the Governor of New South Wales, Sir Walter Davidson, and the full and active support of Consul General Campana. A public meeting was called for Tuesday 19 April 1921 at Government House, with the sole purpose of restoring the Alliance to its former state and ensuring a return to the full range of its traditional activities.<sup>9</sup> The meeting was chaired by Dame Margaret herself in the presence of the Consul General for France, the Consul for Belgium (Henri Segart), Major General Sir Charles Rosenthal, E. G. Waterhouse and Christopher Brennan from the Teachers' College and the

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<sup>8</sup> Mlle Soubeiran had just returned from France from duties for the French-Australian League of Help when she was elected joint president of the Alliance. A former co-principal of Kambala Girls' School, she first held the presidency of the Alliance in 1910. The special circumstances of her incumbency in that year are discussed in *Explorations* 26, pp. 19–20.

<sup>9</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20.4.1921. See also *CA* 29.4.1921.

University of Sydney respectively, and approximately 150 members of the public. In Dame Margaret's words, the meeting discussed plans to 'revive the Alliance Française which had been dormant during the war'. A *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial referred to this occasion as the 'resuscitation' of the Sydney Alliance.

Mlle Soubeiran outlined the new committee's ambitious programme, which included lectures, theatrical performances and social gatherings, as well as the further growth of the library. Mlle Soubeiran also deplored the inadequate accommodation of the Alliance in premises not under its own control. In 1921 the Alliance was still housed in Mlle Boggio's 'Modern School of Languages', 4<sup>th</sup> floor, Citizens' Chambers, on the corner of Martin Place and Castlereagh Street. Mlle Soubeiran hoped that one day the Alliance would have its own 'home, with the sign "Alliance Française" over the door. It will be the French-Australian House. In it we will have a library, a restaurant, a meeting room.' Her vision was not to be realised until the last quarter of the twentieth century, although the Alliance would move into its own rented premises in 1926, ten years after losing its home at the Consulate General.

Mlle Soubeiran's plans were enthusiastically endorsed by E. G. Waterhouse, who commented on the special needs of the University where 140 students of French were taught by only two lecturers: these students needed more exposure to the spoken language as well as improved access to a larger supply of books.

This statement was slightly misleading. At that time major changes were afoot at the University with G. G. Nicholson's imminent elevation to the newly created McCaughey Chair of French and the forthcoming arrival early in 1922 of the first native speaker French *lecteur*<sup>10</sup> Robert Andraud. For many decades from then on the University's French Department would have a French *lecteur* on its staff, in principle each appointee serving for a period of no more than three years. Closer cooperation evolved, with the University offering premises at University Chambers in Phillip Street for meetings of the Alliance.

Over the following months several of Mlle Soubeiran's suggestions were gradually implemented. Within a few weeks Alexandre Chayet's Institut

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<sup>10</sup> Literally 'reader' but the job description corresponds to that of foreign-language assistant.

de conversation française was placed under the control of the Alliance, an event of symbolic significance, given the former Consul General's hostility to the Alliance. On 30 May the first lecture in the new series was delivered by Consul General Campana himself. Throughout the Soubeiran-Doucet period 'Monday lectures' became highlights of Alliance activities. The French National Day was celebrated at a 'soirée' held at the Paddington Town Hall: the programme included some musical items and a short French play, followed by dancing. Two further cultural functions were held in October and November 1921 at St James Hall in Phillip Street.

No Annual General Meeting was held until December 1922, with the 1921 pattern of activities (Monday lectures, social and cultural gatherings, dramatic performances and film evenings) carried over to the second year of the term of the committee elected in January 1921. In 1922 French oral examinations for high school students were re-introduced with the co-operation of the University and the Teachers' College. This marked a return to the full range of activities of the pre-war Alliance. Most of the inspiration appears to have been provided by Mlle Soubeiran.

However, the unusual two-year term of the committee elected to resurrect the Alliance was soon to end. On 16 August 1922 members of the Alliance and those of the French-Australian League of Help held a combined party at the Carlton Hotel to farewell Mlle Soubeiran and her long-time friend and associate Miss Gurney (former co-principal of Kambala and also an outgoing member of the 1921 Alliance committee), who were preparing to leave Sydney to make their home at Bowral in the Southern Highlands.

This was not to be the end of Mlle Soubeiran's association with the Alliance. She was soon made an Honorary President (an accolade shared with Consul General Campana), and she continued to attend some of the more important functions.

### **Another transition period: 1923–1925**

After the Annual General Meeting of 22 December 1922 E. G. Waterhouse of the Sydney Teachers College (within the University) became president.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Three years later he succeeded Christopher Brennan as the University's McCaughey Associate Professor of German, but in the eyes of the general public he

The enlarged committee included a number of members of the Sydney French business community, especially wool buyers, among them retiring co-president Émile Doucet, as well as two female members who were to become influential and long-term contributors to the life of the Alliance, Lady McMillan<sup>12</sup> and Mme Jewett.

The Waterhouse presidency only lasted fifteen months. It was unremarkable in itself except for the fact that E. G. Waterhouse was the first Australian-born president of the Sydney Alliance. The next General Meeting was held on 14 March 1924, the last one presided over by Consul General Campana, who was about to leave Australia to take up his new appointment as consul general in London. E. G. Waterhouse was replaced by M. de Champmorin, general manager for Australasia of the French shipping line Messageries Maritimes. There is every indication that M. de Champmorin accepted this post as a transitional arrangement and as a matter of duty. Another General Meeting was scheduled as early as 28 November: it was held in the Senate Room of University Chambers, Phillip Street, and M. de Champmorin was re-elected for another year.

During this transitional period the lectures, dramatic performances, film evenings, cultural ‘soirées’, social gatherings and oral examinations introduced by the two previous committees continued, with an increased input from the University, often under the auspices of its Extension Board, and frequently with the participation of Robert Andraud, the University’s first French *lecteur*. New venues for lectures and meetings now included the Conservatorium of Music and the Feminist Club in Culwulla Chambers on the corner of King Street and Castlereagh Street in the City. The old competition between different organising bodies had given way to peaceful coexistence between the various

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owed his lasting celebrity to his creation of the famous Eryldene camellia gardens at Gordon.

<sup>12</sup>Lady McMillan née Helen Maria Gibson was of English descent but received some of her education in France. She came to Australia with her first husband, medical practitioner Archibald O’Reilly. After his death she married Irish-born businessman Sir William McMillan who became a NSW and subsequently federal politician. Lady McMillan was active in a number of organisations, especially women’s organisations — she was president of the National Council of Women, NSW, in 1918–1919 — as well as the Alliance Française. See *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, vol. 10, 1986 and vol. 15, 2000.

French associations. Eventually, in May 1925, the Alliance Committee and the Committee of the Union Française de la Nouvelle Galles-du-Sud (the local French expatriates' society) agreed that, whenever possible, duplication would be avoided and joint functions would be held (*CA* 15.5.1925).

### **The Bonnet presidency (1926–1928): a new momentum and organisational initiatives**

Signs of another potential revival appeared in 1925 with the arrival in Sydney of Paul Bonnet, the University's second French *lecteur*, who immediately showed an active interest in the Alliance and the other local organisations promoting French culture. He gave a first public lecture in March 1925 (*CA* 6.3.1925) and in August of the same year he put on a student theatrical evening sponsored by both the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Mungo McCallum, and the French Consul General, Louis Nettement (*CA* 21.8.1925). This show, consisting of plays by Courteline and Labiche, was repeated in October (*CA* 25.9.1925). Produced by Bonnet himself, it starred two senior students who happened to be rivals both at the University of Sydney and during their subsequent academic careers. They were Alan Carey-Taylor<sup>13</sup>, later Professor of French at Birbeck College, University of London, and Ian Henning, future McCaughey Professor of French at the University of Sydney (Dutton 2002).

At the next Annual General Meeting, on 23 December 1925 (*SMH* 24.12.1925), a new committee was elected and on 22 January 1926 Paul Bonnet became president of the Alliance (*CA* 29.1.1926), a position he retained for over two and a half years. One of the first tasks of the new committee was the re-organisation of the library: an inventory was carried out and a catalogue produced.<sup>14</sup> At its first meeting the committee also decided to create a social sub-committee chaired by the vice-president, Lady McMillan (*CA* 5.2.1026).

Bonnet was re-elected for 1927 and again for 1928 (AGM of 17 December 1926, see *CA* 2.1.1927, and AGM on 16 December 1927, see *CA* 30.12.1927).

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<sup>13</sup> Between 1938 and 1948 Dr Carey-Taylor was a senior member of A. R. Chisholm's French Department at the University of Melbourne.

<sup>14</sup> This catalogue, just as the Alliance's administrative archives, has not come down to us.

At the beginning of his second term he undertook the re-structuring of the committee, with a special emphasis on the need to reduce conflicts and tensions between its members.<sup>15</sup> He set up a series of sub-committees to undertake specific tasks: a Library sub-committee, a Functions sub-committee, a Press sub-committee and a Donations sub-committee. The Committee also delegated one of its members to be in charge of the archives of the Alliance. This farsighted innovation was never mentioned again: we can therefore assume that it was allowed to lapse under subsequent committees—hence the absence of historical archives for the Alliance Française of Sydney (in contrast, among others, to the Melbourne Alliance).

Under Paul Bonnet's presidency the traditional activities of the Alliance (oral examinations, lectures, social gatherings, balls and theatrical productions) were pursued with increased vigour and the membership grew markedly: 116 new members during Bonnet's first year as president (*CA* 24.12.1926) and another 76 in his second year (*CA* 30.12.1927). More importantly some new initiatives distinguished Bonnet's presidency from those before and after him.

Taking advantage of the availability of new technologies, Bonnet obtained the donation of a typewriter from a business sector committee member and he re-launched the French language radio broadcasts sponsored by Farmers, the department store. The 1926 inaugural talk in this series was given by Paul Bonnet himself on the origin and aims of the Alliance Française.

During the 1926 Easter break, after a ten-year exile, the Alliance and its library moved into new premises on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of Fraser House, 42 Bridge Street (*CA* 2.4.1925). This major event reflected both the improved financial situation of the Alliance and the Committee's confidence in its future. It remained at that address throughout the interwar period.

In the early months of its first term the Bonnet committee re-visited the pre-war (1910) constitution of the Alliance and re-instated a number of provisions forgotten or abolished during the war and the early post-war years. One of these provisions was the reduction of the annual membership fee from two guineas to one, but with the proviso that attendance at social gatherings, balls and other functions would incur a charge (*CA* 9.4.1926). The income from the first theatrical event of the year (a production of *La belle aventure* by

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<sup>15</sup> 'Notre vitalité [...] eût été plus sensible [...] si l'unité de vues avait régné parmi les membres du comité sortant' (*CA* 7.1.1927).

de Flers, Caillavet and Rey) performed by members of the local francophone community led by the popular Consul for Belgium, Henri Segart, a theatre enthusiast, was donated to the Alliance. This was, according to the report of the *Courrier australien* (19.3.1926), ‘une des plus brillantes soirées de l’Alliance’.

Paul Bonnet’s most important contribution was unquantifiable: his enthusiasm for and his belief in the mission of the Alliance. From 1926 onwards he was the public face of the Alliance and his presence could not be missed. He took every opportunity to assert that presence on the Sydney scene. Bonnet might have been on the staff of the University—and we have no reason to believe that he neglected his professional duties—but his major personal interest, his passion, was the Alliance. This meant a new emphasis on public relations and a constant involvement with the local French community and the powers that be on behalf of the Alliance. While for many presidents the Alliance was an extra burden taken on in addition to their professional duties, Bonnet saw the Alliance as the central focus of his life and his true calling.

He also took every opportunity to remind Sydneysiders of the Alliance’s objectives, putting the emphasis on its vocation as a French-Australian venture, not a French expatriates’ club. He liked to refer to the Sydney Alliance as the Sydney branch of a broader international network with Paris as its headquarters. Far from this being a weakness in the organisation’s structure, he considered it to be an additional strength, guaranteeing the coherence of its action, its purposefulness and its accountability.

Bonnet thought that although Sydney was one of the centres in the British Empire where French culture was most highly prized, its branch of the Alliance was comparatively underdeveloped and lacking in vitality. Despite the efforts of some of his predecessors, especially Augustine Soubeiran, this was probably an accurate diagnosis, given the legacy of Consul General Alexandre Chayet’s antagonistic attitude to the Alliance from 1912 to 1918.

During his two-and-a-half year term as president Paul Bonnet did his utmost to restore the fortunes of the Alliance: he ensured that the Alliance had a high public profile. The French Consul General, Louis Nettement (1924–1932), depended on him for a variety of activities: Nettement himself had been the president of the Sydney Alliance for a short time during his first posting to Australia in the early years of the century when deputy to the then Consul General Georges Biard d’Aunet. He filled the presidency for less than a year, from July 1904 to May 1905, when Biard d’Aunet was preparing to return to

France. After a further two decades in the consular service Nettement came back to Sydney as consul general in July 1924. In the second year of his second stay in Sydney on 28 November 1925 he married Mlle Suzanne Herchuelz at St Patrick's Church (CA 5.12.1925). Nettement was the first French consul in Australia to get married during his term of office: his example was followed in 1985 by Melbourne French Consul Bernard Ledun who married Mlle Francine Gerraty.

Nettement's confidence in Paul Bonnet was demonstrated in the latter's appointment as chair of the organising committee for the 1927 and the 1928 14<sup>th</sup> July celebrations. In 1928 he was also actively involved in welcoming the French national tennis team led by Jean Borotra, 'the bounding Basque', as well as in the reception of French novelist and academician Pierre Benoît, later in the same year.

Paul Bonnet's public relations skills also extended to the University's administration. He was able to interest the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Mungo McCallum, in his work. Sir Mungo, together with the Deans of Arts and Science, attended one of his student dramatic productions (CA 15.7.1927). More importantly Bonnet seemed to enjoy the support of his head of department: Professor G. G. Nicholson was a strong believer in the usefulness of the Alliance Française as an agent for the promotion of the French language and French culture in the community and also as an auxiliary for the teaching of French in the State's secondary schools. The *lecteurs* who succeeded Paul Bonnet did not follow in his footsteps: Professor Nicholson might have decided that Bonnet devoted too much time and energy to the Alliance.

Bonnet's three-year appointment as *lecteur* in the French Department expired at the end of 1927, and a farewell party was held for him at the University early in 1928. However he extended his stay in Sydney and his presidency of the Alliance beyond that date and a second farewell party was organised by the Alliance in August, shortly before his departure for the US where he took up an appointment at the University of California in Los Angeles at the beginning of the Northern hemisphere academic year. Paul Bonnet was to spend the rest of his career in the US.

## The Wunderlich presidency 1929–1935: the *président à tout faire*

An Extraordinary General Meeting was called for 28 September 1928 to elect a new committee after Paul Bonnet's departure. At its first meeting the committee appointed Alfred Wunderlich as president. He was to hold the presidency for seven consecutive years.

Alfred Wunderlich was the youngest of the three Wunderlich brothers responsible for the establishment of the Wunderlich company, probably best known as importers and subsequently manufacturers of roof tiles, although they were also pioneers in the production of asbestos sheets. Born in Great Britain, the brothers were educated at Vevey in French-speaking Switzerland, and came to Australia in the eighteen-eighties. Alfred did not take over from his elder brother Ernest as chairman of Wunderlich Ltd until after World War II. He had broad business and community interests as well as a commitment to French culture and a love of art and music (he was an accomplished singer), and he was also a sportsman and a sport lover.

Alfred Wunderlich was a devoted president who did not shirk a hands-on approach to his role. He had joined the Alliance at its beginnings at the turn of the century and served on several committees before becoming president. After stepping down from the presidency he continued with other Alliance work. He was not the stereotypical businessman-president. The depth and intensity of his involvement were unusual, complemented by a genuine personal interest in French literature, theatre and music. He occasionally lectured on literary topics (such as a talk on Molière's *Tartuffe*). In mid-1935, in the final year of his seven-year term, he assumed the routine task of the practical organisation of the Alliance's annual examinations.

His first year as president was somewhat disappointing. Paul Bonnet was a difficult act to follow and his successor needed time to acquire experience. In the very first months of his term as president he played the title role in Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* in a performance attended by the Governor, Sir Dudley de Chair, and Lady de Chair. One of his early initiatives was the introduction of Alliance Française tennis tournaments: men's singles, ladies' singles and mixed doubles. This was in the wake of Jean Boroira's 1928 visit, although interest in the tournaments eventually faded: by 1933 they had lost their popularity. During this period Alliance social functions tended to be

held at the White City Tennis Club in the Eastern suburbs, although by late September 1929 the Committee, probably aware of a lack of balance and an over-emphasis on functions for French expatriates and Sydney's fashionable society, announced some 'soirées populaires' followed by half an hour of French conversation.

The next Annual General Meeting was held on 20 December 1929. In January 1930 the new committee decided to meet monthly and also revived Paul Bonnet's structure with sub-committees for Functions, Library, Sport, Ladies, Examinations. In 1930 and 1931 theatrical productions were among the more memorable activities of the Alliance, largely thanks to the leadership of Henri Segart, by now promoted to Consul General for Belgium. Performances took place at the Playbox Theatre in Crown Street, Surry Hills. Social functions, including meetings for bridge players, were held in the Forum Club's spacious premises in the St James Building, Elizabeth Street, City.

In 1929 Paul Bonnet's absence was felt not only at the Alliance but also in the wider French community. In the previous two years Louis Nettement was only too happy to rely on Bonnet for the organisation of the 14th July celebrations. In its 5 July 1929 issue the *Courrier australien* reported that apart from the Consul General's traditional reception no other arrangements seemed to have been made by the various French organisations for the celebration of France's National Day. A week later, on 12 July, the *Courrier* again voiced the complaints of French citizens that nothing was organised for the 14th of July. At the last minute the presidents of the Alliance and the French Chamber of Commerce improvised a lunch at Romano's (the Consul General sent his apologies), and Alfred Wunderlich announced that a 14th July ball would be held in September on the occasion of the visit to Sydney of the French cruiser *Tourville*.

The following year the Alliance joined forces with the French Chamber of Commerce and organised an ambitious 14<sup>th</sup> July function at the Hordern Brothers' Restaurant in George Street, featuring the performance of a Labiche play, dancing till 1 am with liquor and supper being served, and facilities for bridge. The Alliance and the Chamber co-operated in other areas as well, sharing rented premises in late 1932 and of course for thirty-eight years, from 1899 to 1937, the *Courrier australien* described itself as the 'organ of the Committee of the Alliance Française and the Chamber of Commerce'. The Alliance/Chamber of Commerce ball at the Hordern Brothers' Restaurant

became a regular feature of the celebration of the French National Day in Sydney.

The following Annual General Meetings were held on 9 January and 18 December 1931 respectively. The second of these meetings marked the end of Alfred Wunderlich's three-year apprenticeship as president. In an unusually frank speech (*CA* 25.12.1931) he admitted that the committee's record was disappointing: 'actuellement nous vivotons à grande peine' [sic]. Despite the frequent meetings of the Committee and the dedication of its members, membership numbers and income had declined, partly due to the world depression, but also because of the perceived inadequacy of what the Alliance had to offer. The President suggested that the committee and indeed the whole French community make a major effort in 1932 to redress the situation. Recruitment of new members was essential. Co-operation with the University and the major schools had a high priority and an influential and dynamic Ladies' Sub-committee was called for. He proposed that conversation evenings and all other functions, with the exception of balls and dramatic performances, be free to members.

The following four years (1932–1935) were among the best the Sydney Alliance was to experience. This must primarily be attributed to Alfred Wunderlich's committed leadership. Another crucial factor in this success was the outstanding support French culture enjoyed in Sydney during the term of Louis Nettement's successor. With an *École des Langues Orientales* background, Edgar Dussap arrived in May 1932. He was accompanied by Mme Dussap, an author using the pseudonym Guy Chantepleure. During a term of just under three years (1932–1934), Dussap obtained substantial subsidies for the Alliance from the French government, 'putting it on a sound financial basis' (*CA* 22.3.1935): 'ce fut l'âge d'or', wrote Jacques Playoust, president of the Alliance in 1943, looking back on Dussap's term in Sydney.<sup>16</sup>

Edgar Dussap, 'the best consul general ever'<sup>17</sup> in Professor G. G. Nicholson's words at one of Dussap's many farewell functions in 1935, also secured a number of much prized privileges for the staff and students of Sydney University's French Department, readily sharing his time with them.

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<sup>16</sup> The French government subsidies varied between 5,000 francs (1934) and 10,000 francs (1933 and 1935). See Playoust 1943.

<sup>17</sup> 'Le meilleur consul général qui ait jamais été'.

The Dussaps did a great deal for local French institutions—Mme Dussap made a valuable contribution as chair of the Ladies Sub-committee of the Alliance. They were a highly appreciated couple who formed many long-lasting friendships.

At the beginning of 1934, approximately half-way through the Dussaps' stay in Sydney, there were celebrations on the occasion of the award of the *Légion d'honneur* to both Alfred Wunderlich and Professor Nicholson, and Edgar Dussap's promotion to Officer in the same order. Several other decorations were presented to members of the Sydney French community on this festive occasion.

Edgar Dussap took a special interest in the French conversation sessions and indicated that the government subsidy should support these weekly classes run by a specially appointed local French teacher, Mlle Pognon (Mme Marr-Thompson after her marriage to the *Sydney Morning Herald's* drama and music critic). Arguably these meetings, generally held on Wednesday nights in the Alliance premises in Fraser House, Bridge Street, were the first instance of the Sydney Alliance taking on a teaching role. More than once Edgar Dussap himself attended the conversation sessions, and Alfred Wunderlich was also a frequent participant.

During the early and mid-thirties the traditional activities of the Alliance (lectures, social meetings, balls, theatrical performances, examinations for schools) continued. The local French community and the local Francophiles also had the opportunity of watching films about France and listening to French broadcasts on local radio, and also benefited from an unusually large number of visits by French-speaking celebrities.

A distinguishing feature of the Dussaps' term was the support they received from two vice-consular couples. M. and Mme Zarzecki and their successors (from mid-1934), M. and Mme Meyer, enjoyed a much higher exposure than any of their predecessors. Albert Zarzecki also starred in the role of Abner in the summer outdoor performance of Racine's *Athalie* at the Balmoral Amphitheatre in January 1933.

The Dussaps left Australia in March 1935. It was their last posting before retiring to Paris. Edmond Meyer became Acting Consul General for an unusually long interregnum. He represented France at the many functions organised for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victor Hugo's death. Supported by his very active wife, he held memorable receptions at the couple's fashionable

Point Piper residence, including a welcoming party for the incoming Consul General, Paul Suzor, and his family.

These were also Alfred Wunderlich's final months as president of the Sydney Alliance. Shortly after the Dussaps' departure he indicated that he would not stand again at the Annual General Meeting in December 1935. Although his apprenticeship lasted longer than expected (three years, from 1929 to 1931), the following four years of his presidency were among the most successful in the annals of the Alliance Française of Sydney. In his farewell speech the outgoing president described the library, together with the conversation classes, as the most valuable facility offered by the Alliance to its members: 'irremplaçable', 'hors de prix' (CA 27.12.1935). Émile Doucet memorably described Alfred Wunderlich as 'un vrai militant de la langue française' (CA 25.12.1936).

Despite the world-wide depression and the consequent period of general financial restraint, France's consular representatives in Sydney were able to act as generous hosts in their elegant homes. After the Dussaps and the Meyers, the Suzors held official receptions in their spacious Darling Point residence 'Eastbourne'. These years, with their brilliant social entertaining, were much valued by the local French community and by Sydney's Francophiles, and were also a buoyant period for the Sydney Alliance.

### **Problems on the horizon: the Poynter presidency (1936–1940)<sup>18</sup>**

The Sydney French scene was less glittering in the second half of the 'thirties and signs of instability began to appear. Neither the incoming president of the Alliance, Sir Hugh Poynter, nor the next consul general, Jean Trémoulet (1937–1941), were of the same calibre as their predecessors, although Sir

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<sup>18</sup> This study only covers the period between the two wars. The Poynter presidency continued until the end of 1940. At the Annual General Meeting of 6 December 1940 the resignations of both Sir Hugh Poynter as president and Mrs T. H. Kelly as vice-president were accepted. At the beginning of 1941 Émile Doucet, who was not new to the presidency, succeeded Sir Hugh. It fell to Émile Doucet to advise Maréchal Pétain why Consul General Jean Trémoulet was deprived of his status as *président d'honneur* of the Alliance. His *déchéance* had been decided at the same meeting in December 1940 (CA 20.12.1940).

Hugh enjoyed a very high social standing and Jean Trémoulet was described by one of his fiercest critics as ‘exceedingly intelligent’ and ‘deeply cultured’ (Barrett 2011, 15).

The Suzors left Australia in the middle of 1937, after only eighteen months in the country. It was Paul Suzor’s last posting prior to retirement. He was a well-liked consul general, generously supporting the Alliance and the local francophone and francophile communities, but as his major personal interest was big game hunting, Australia was not an ideal posting for him.<sup>19</sup>

Nor was it for his successor, Jean Trémoulet, a bachelor, although not a confirmed one,<sup>20</sup> who respected neither the government he represented nor the country in which he represented it: a situation not conducive to strengthening the links between France and Australia. In addition to the disadvantage of his marital status, it is more than likely that, the *Front populaire* being in power in Paris, the Consul General’s entertainment allowance was reduced. The contrast with the style of his predecessors could not have been greater.

One of the challenges in discussing Trémoulet’s performance in Australia is to refrain from judging the first three years of his term in the light of subsequent happenings, namely the fall of France in 1940, his advocacy of the Vichy régime and eventually his forced departure from Australia. These events have been well documented in Margaret Barrett’s article, ‘Jean Trémoulet, the Unloved Consul-General’ (Barrett 2011). It would seem however that his half-hearted commitment to his new posting was very quickly noted by the local French community. According to Émile Doucet, Sir Hugh’s successor as president of the Alliance, writing to Maréchal Pétain to explain why the December 1940 Annual General Meeting deprived the Consul General of his honorary presidency of the Alliance, ‘from the moment of his arrival in Australia M. Trémoulet alienated the sympathies of the oldest and most respected French residents of Sydney by treating their best intentioned advances with rudeness’.<sup>21</sup> This judgement was subsequently confirmed by Roger Loubère,

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<sup>19</sup> Shortly before his arrival in Sydney, he published *Gros Gibier — Siam et Laos, Cordillère des Andes, Afrique du Sud*, Paris, Stock, 1936.

<sup>20</sup> During his term in Sydney Trémoulet acquired an Australian girlfriend, Cynthia Powell. He promised to marry her but, according to Roger Loubère, his one-time associate at the Consulate General, did not intend to, as she was ‘very sweet and charming—but dumb’ (Barrett 2011, 29).

<sup>21</sup> Letter of 20 January 1941, quoted in Barrett 2011, 21.

who had initially served Trémoulet as a loyal associate: ‘tactless, overbearing, always ready to hurt people, never to help them, always advertising his intense dislike of Australia and its people’ (Barrett 2011, 20).

Before the outbreak of the war only faint echoes of this unfortunate state of affairs could be detected in the *Courrier australien*: Trémoulet’s frequent absences from ceremonies and meetings were faithfully reported, as was his last-minute withdrawal from functions he had ‘graciously’ committed himself to attend. One of the very few consular receptions he gave, other than those for the 14<sup>th</sup> July, was described in the *Courrier* as ‘brillante quoique intime’ (CA 4.8.1938). In 1939, at the 14<sup>th</sup> July reception held in the renovated premises of the Consulate General (where the Consul General’s luxuriously decorated personal quarters were the object of special comment), Jean Trémoulet conferred the insignia of *chevalier* of the *Légion d’honneur* on Sir Hugh Poynter (CA 21.7.1939).

Sir Hugh was elected to the Alliance committee in December 1935 and at its first meeting succeeded Alfred Wunderlich as president. One of his early initiatives was the publication of an article in the *Courrier australien* of 17 January 1936, a kind of word self-portrait in which he described his French connections, as if to justify his qualifications for his new position—since he was a comparative newcomer to the Alliance. The younger son of Sir Edward Poynter, artist, Professor of Fine Art, Director of the National Gallery of London and President of the Royal Academy, Sir Hugh inherited his father’s baronetcy on the death of his brother in 1923. Because he had no offspring, the title was extinguished when he died in 1968. In World War I he served as an officer in the British army and the *Courrier* article describes his experiences in France and his contacts with French officers from the Saint-Cyr Military School during the post-war period. In the article he also highlighted his Hu-guenot ancestry, his mastery of the French language and his understanding of French ways. Sir Hugh came to Australia in 1927 representing a family business, Baldwin’s Steel, which had a connection with the relatives of the then British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin. The British establishment connection remained strong during Sir Hugh’s Australian career: at one of the Alliance functions in the late thirties he was described as the living embodiment of the Entente Cordiale. This became directly relevant when World War II broke out in September 1939: he was well placed to help steer the Alliance towards the Free French Movement and away from the Vichy régime.

Sir Hugh's most distinctive contribution to the Alliance was the creation of links with the higher echelons of Australian society, a phenomenon not unfamiliar to the Melbourne Alliance in its first decades but one not in the tradition of the Sydney Alliance. His second wife and her two daughters from a previous marriage often graced the social pages of the Sydney press. The third Lady Poynter, Irene Williams, was probably closer to ordinary Australians as well as to the Alliance itself, since she was the librarian of the Alliance for a few months from February to October 1939 prior to her marriage.

Sir Hugh was not a hands-on president in the Alfred Wunderlich mould. The everyday life of the Alliance during his presidency depended on the contribution of a group of dedicated committee members. Apart from the still active Alfred Wunderlich, two women, Mrs Ivy Moore and Mrs T. H. Kelly<sup>22</sup>, were indefatigable workers organising the activities of the Alliance.

Ivy Moore (Irene Williams' predecessor as librarian) was an enthusiastic lecturer, author and poet devoted to French-Australian links. In 1938 she published an eighty-page diary, *Logbook of the Good Ship Alliance Française* (Moore 1938), of her life as the librarian-secretary of the Alliance. It covers the period from April to November 1937 and the very beginning of 1938. Although it contains no factual information unavailable elsewhere, it gives a lively idea of the everyday life of the pre-war Alliance, and Ivy Moore's role in it. Her apparent fondness of, and admiration for, the 'Commander in Chief', Sir Hugh Poynter, must have made the experience of her resignation a few months later and her replacement by Sir Hugh's future third wife even more bitter.

Mrs Kelly served as vice-president during the Poynter period and often took on duties normally carried out by the president. A number of functions, especially musical evenings, were initiated by Mrs Kelly with the active input of her husband. In one of the strange ways of those gendered times, although Mrs Kelly was an elected vice-president of the Alliance, when it came to formal functions such as official dinners, she had to rely on her husband to

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<sup>22</sup> Canadian-born Mrs T. H. Kelly (née Ethel Knight Mollison) came to Australia in 1903 as an actress, performing with J. C. Williamson. In the same year she married Thomas Herbert Kelly, a prominent businessman and chamber music enthusiast and practitioner. Mrs Kelly was an author and an active participant in Sydney's social and cultural life. During World War II she was president of the French-Australian League of Help. See *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, vol. 9, 1983.

speak on her behalf, since it was not considered appropriate for women to make speeches.

One of the highlights of the Poynter presidency was the visit to Sydney in December 1937 of celebrated author Jean Giraudoux in his capacity as Inspector General of Diplomatic and Consular Services. The regular activities of the Alliance during the Poynter years included the oral examinations, the 14th July ball arranged jointly with the French Chamber of Commerce and the much appreciated Wednesday night 'Soirées de conversation' under Mrs Marr-Thompson's supervision. In 1939 she was replaced by her former helpers Mme Henri, who taught French at the Conservatorium of Music, and Cécile Prévost.

Despite healthy membership numbers (316 at the end of 1938), the budget had been in deficit since the abolition of the French Government subsidy secured by Consul General Dussap. The cost of professionally run 'Soirées de conversation' exacerbated the deficit, but to the credit of the President and his successive committees, the Alliance remained committed to what it saw as its main language teaching activity. At the end of 1939 Mlle Prévost and Mme Henri offered to forego some of their fees to ensure the survival of the 'Soirées'.

Apart from these three core strands in the activities of the Alliance (the library, the oral examinations and the 'Soirées de conversation'), the number of social and cultural functions and lectures declined during this period. Performances and readings of plays became rare, partly because of the departure of their prime mover, Henri Segart, the Belgian Consul General. Mrs T. H. Kelly, the vice-president, initiated a few musical and theatrical functions which were artistic and financial successes.

The status of the Alliance during the Poynter period was affected by the emergence of three rival institutions, a development reminiscent of the organisations set up by Consul General Alexander Chayet during World War I in competition to the Alliance.

The advent of the first of these institutions, 'Amitiés Françaises', is particularly intriguing. Although closely connected with the University, 'Amitiés Françaises' was first chaired by Consul General Suzor and only subsequently by Professor G. G. Nicholson, after the arrival of Paul Suzor's successor, Jean Trémoulet. Apparently established in 1936, its membership was limited to thirty and admission was subject to the committee's approval. 'Amitiés Françaises' held exclusive dinners for its members and also put on

‘gala soirées’, lectures and theatrical performances for a broader audience, all activities traditionally in the domain of the Alliance (CA 29.5.1936, 19.6.1936, 17.11.1936). As there is no documented record of a conflict between the University and the Alliance, the emergence of ‘Amitiés Françaises’ shortly after Sir Hugh Poynter’s election as president of the Alliance is an enigma. Although the articles of ‘Amitiés Françaises’<sup>23</sup> provide for the president of the Alliance Française of Sydney to be an *ex-officio* member, Sir Hugh’s name is absent from the association’s records (as is that of Consul General Suzor’s successor, Jean Trémoulet, who, according to the same articles, should have *ex officio* assumed the presidency of the organisation). Was there an incompatibility between the two English-born Francophiles, Professor Nicholson and Sir Hugh? It would seem so, although one would have expected them to be of similar minds and similar predispositions.

The reason for the establishment of the second of these institutions, ‘Les Amis de la France’, is much less ambiguous: at the end of 1938 Mrs Ivy Moore resigned her post of librarian of the Alliance and a few weeks later Irene Williams, the future Lady Poynter, succeeded her. Simultaneously Ivy Moore began to advertise her new ‘social club’, ‘Les Amis de la France’, offering ‘French lessons and conversation classes’ in Room 508 of Fraser House, 42 Bridge Street, on the same floor as the premises of the Alliance (CA 10.2.1939). Although Ivy Moore was reported to have been coopted to the Committee shortly after her resignation from the post of librarian, her name does not appear in the Alliance announcements in 1939 or among the outgoing members of the Alliance committee (CA 31.1.1939, 12.1.1940).

There had already been another competitor, ‘M. P. Raymond Blondel de Paris [...] supported by several French persons’, offering ‘Soirées françaises’ every Wednesday night (manifestly chosen to clash with those of the Alliance) at 219 Elizabeth Street, to members of the public wishing to learn French and improve their pronunciation (CA 15.7.1938).

This proliferation of competing enterprises on the eve of World War II seems to point to some instability within the Alliance. This hypothesis is further strengthened by the resignation in early 1939 of Mrs Marr-Thompson,

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<sup>23</sup> See Henning Archive, P.155, Box 5, in the University of Sydney Archives. Ian Henning was treasurer of ‘Amitiés Françaises’ in 1936–1937.

formerly Mlle Pognon, the long-term organiser of the Alliance's own 'Soirées de conversation' (*CA* 7.4.1939).

Were these changes of personnel brought about by the President, or were they an unwanted consequence of his style of leadership? We will probably never know, but the increasing instability of the institution was a reality.

## **On the eve of World War II**

Homeless from 1916 to 1926, the Alliance Française of Sydney was installed in rented premises on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of Fraser House, 42 Bridge Street, by its then president Paul Bonnet, and it remained there throughout the inter-war period.

It took three years for the Alliance to begin to recover from the parlous state it fell into during World War I. It had some very good years between the two wars and some indifferent ones. The highs were due to the leadership of committed presidents, especially when they were supported by keen and capable consuls general. The importance of that support is not surprising for an institution created by a consul general and run by him during its early years.

The first peak between the two wars occurred in 1921–1922, due to the efforts of Augustine Soubeiran, a former co-principal of Kambala, and to the active support of Consul General Rizzo Campana. The next high came about thanks to the passion and single-mindedness of Paul Bonnet, a staff member of the University's French Department, who was president from early 1926 to mid-1928. The contribution of this temporary resident of Australia was all the more remarkable as Consul General Louis Nettement's support was steady rather than enthusiastic. The third and longest peak took place between 1932 and 1935, the later years of Alfred Wunderlich's presidency. This dedicated and cultured businessman's efforts and achievements were supported by a benevolent consul general, Edgar Dussap.

The most successful presidents came from either the teaching profession or the business sector, but a strong sense of solidarity with the local French-Australian community was an essential pre-requisite. Presidents from the teaching profession needed to have some organisational ability, while an active interest in the arts, language and culture was of special benefit to presidents from the business world. The conjunction of these qualities explains the remarkable success of francophone Australian Alfred Wunderlich (1929–

1935) who combined the experience of a successful businessman with a passion for French literature and language, music and the arts, taking on a practising role in several of these areas.

While social and cultural functions were organised with varying frequency between the two wars, the most important achievements were the re-organisation and the strengthening of the library, the consolidation of the oral examinations and the development of the professionally run ‘Soirées de conversation’ as the Alliance’s main teaching activity. By the nineteen-thirties these three areas had become the core activities of the Alliance, foreshadowing the much broader and more diversified teaching role the Alliance assumed later in the twentieth century and beyond.

After the outbreak of World War II in September 1939 a radically new situation emerged and once more the very survival of the Alliance Française of Sydney was at stake.

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