

# THE CAREER OF A DISTINGUISHED AUSTRALIAN SCHOLAR OF FRENCH POETRY OVER THREE CONTINENTS

JAMES RONALD LAWLER  
1929–2013

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Although he ceased to be an Australian resident more than four decades ago, Jim Lawler continued to have a close relationship with this country till the end of a life that fell just short of eighty-four years. Apart from family links there was, I think, his consciousness of belonging to a proud Australian tradition in French studies, that of Alan Chisholm's 'Melbourne School'. He was, over a good half-century, one of the most distinguished representatives of a remarkable group of students of French poetry from Baudelaire to Valéry. For this reason alone he deserves to be noticed in the pages of *Explorations*.

Others could write with much more authority about the substantial corpus of critical work running all the way from Baudelaire to René Char. Others again could evoke Jim's years in Melbourne as a student and later as a member of Ron Jackson's Department. However, on this occasion it is left to an outsider to present some brief remarks on an acquaintanceship that lasted from an early AUMLA<sup>1</sup> (not yet AULLA—The Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association) conference in Brisbane in 1955 to a telephone conversation in Paris in June in 2013 only weeks before Jim's death.

The career path was at the beginning one of a kind followed by most Australian *francisants* in the decade or so after the Second World War. From Melbourne Boys' High School Jim moved to the University of Melbourne, graduating as a Bachelor of Arts in 1950 and, already on a scholarship in

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Universities Modern Language Association.

Paris, as a Master of Arts in 1952. Thereafter it was a *doctorat d'université* on Apollinaire supervised by Pierre Moreau and awarded in 1954. This coincided with the moment our universities were starting to expand, so an appointment as a Lecturer in French was achieved at the University of Queensland for the years 1955 and 1956. Among the young academics on display at the 1955 AUMLA conference Jim Lawler was so obviously superior in style and critical acumen that he attracted the interest of Ian Henning, who put out feelers for an eventual move to the University of Sydney. The gesture was all the more noteworthy since the country's senior Department of French (much smaller in numbers than that of the University of Melbourne) had been a closed shop locally for more than fifty years. Jim even paid a brief visit to Sydney a little later before I went off myself on a travelling scholarship to Paris. I was not to see him again until I moved to Monash in 1962, during the last of the six years he spent as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Melbourne.

Jim was a member of the small group led by Roger Laufer that began in the winter of 1962 to plan for the launch of what was to become the *Australian Journal of French Studies*. Subsequently, when he was appointed to the Foundation Chair of French at the University of Western Australia, he withdrew from the *AJFS* team. In due course he set up in Perth the annual publication *Essays in French Literature* (now *Essays in French Literature and Culture*). However, this did not prevent him from contributing to *AJFS* episodically from 1964 until the end of the century. Not surprisingly my main contacts with him during all this time were via correspondence for the journal. Apart from a visit to UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) in April 1974—Jim had moved there to chair the Department of French at the end of 1971—I did not see him at all in situ in the North American years that lasted till 1997 (Dalhousie, 1974–1979, then Chicago, 1979–1997). There were meetings in Melbourne on his rare returns, essentially to see family, and, more often, in Paris, once he decided to settle there permanently after 1997. None of this added up to a really close connection. Jim Lawler was a private and guarded person, skilled at deflecting questions about his current research activities. On the other hand, he was always curious about other people's work and in a more than perfunctory way. He introduced me to a former American colleague who was working in one of my fields of interest, and, late in 2012, he requested and read an offprint of my contribution to the François Moureau Festschrift.

A comprehensive, but none the less provisional, report on Jim Lawler's career can be found in *Essays in French Literature*, n° 39, November 2002, pp. i–x. It does not include the publications that continued over another decade until he suffered a bad fall in 2011, but it gives a more than adequate idea of the reasons for Jim's international reputation. Flanking the West Australian tribute is another—without bibliography—produced in Canada: Paul Perron & Sergio Villani, eds, *Lire Rimbaud : approches critiques. Hommages à James R. Lawler*, Toronto, Canadian Scholars' Press Inc., 2000. Interested readers can seek in these volumes some of the details that cannot be set out here. What does perhaps need to be pointed out is that the critical method based on close reading and on long-practised familiarity with the texts and authors studied exists alongside the semi-mythical 'French theory' so much cried up or decried by English-language commentators.

Three of Jim's honours and distinctions are particularly worthy of mention. Locally he was recognised early by selection to the Australian Humanities Research Council in the mid-1960s and then by installation as a Foundation Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1969. He was one of the last surviving members of that now quite small group and visited Canberra in 2009 for a forty-year reunion. In France he was a *professeur invité* at the Collège de France in 1985, with his lectures being published as *Edgar Poe et les poètes français*, Paris, Julliard, 1988. Worldwide he was President of the Association Internationale des Études Françaises from 1999 to 2002, a post in which he followed two other expatriate Australians: John Orr, 1954–1957, and Lloyd Austin, 1969–1972. Our compatriots are perhaps unaware of the fact that Australian scholars of French and indeed of other foreign languages have made a disproportionately important contribution to their subjects. Let Jim Lawler's example be another reminder of signal Australian achievements over more than a century.

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