

# WAR, WRITING AND THE WENZ FAMILY

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This article explores the close relationship between Australia and France during the First World War that has endured to the present day. Experiences shared on the battlefield and the home front are at its core. Reciprocal friendship was reinforced through images and the written word. For this article, a selection of the writings of the Wenz family of the Champagne region of France—particularly those of French-Australian author Paul, but also Émile, his eldest brother, and his great nephew Denis—are investigated.

After the declaration of war on 4 August 1914, the French Consul-General in Sydney Alexandre Chayet announced in the *Courrier Australien* that the French Government had decreed that all Frenchmen (residing overseas) ‘capable of serving must consequently rejoin at their own expense their assigned military corps as quickly as possible. [...] The next departure [from Sydney] for Marseilles will take place [...] on 29th of this month’.<sup>1</sup> French nationals living in Australia at the time began returning to their native land in the emergency. Several were involved in the lucrative wool trade between Australia and France. Some never came back.

On 6 August 1914, the Secretary of State for the United Kingdom sent a reply telegram to the Australian Government: ‘His Majesty’s Government gratefully accepts offer of your Minister to send force of 20,000 men to this country and would be glad if it could be despatched as soon as possible’.<sup>2</sup> This figure was surpassed in the first batch of eager enlisted men by over ten thousand, with more young men volunteering as the war continued so that nearly every Australian family had or knew someone fighting overseas on Gallipoli and then at the Western Front or elsewhere. There were no conscripted

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<sup>1</sup> *Courrier Australien*, 7.8.1914; Jacqueline Dwyer, *Flanders in Australia: A personal history of wool and war*, East Roseville, Kangaroo Press, 1998, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Telegraph n° 16, *Europe Crisis. Correspondence regarding the Naval and Military Assistance afforded to His Majesty’s Government by His Majesty’s Overseas Dominions*, Imperial Document, NSW Legislative Assembly, 1914, 6; John Ramsland, *Venturing into No Man’s Land. Joseph Maxwell VC World War I Hero*, Melbourne, Brolga Publishing, 2012, pp. 14, 18–19.

Australian soldiers for the duration of the war. Two Federal referenda on the issue were defeated: the first in October 1916 after the devastating losses at Pozzières and Fromelles and the second in December 1917, following the third battle of Ypres. Young men enlisted for various reasons, including a search for adventure, loyalty to the British Empire, being unemployed and/or out of a sense of duty to their country.<sup>3</sup>

Reports from the overseas war zones appeared regularly in Australian newspapers. These were eagerly awaited by readers in country and city anxious to know about events happening so far away and in which they believed they had a vested interest. Such reports—especially when accompanied by graphic images like those published in the weekly *Sydney Mail* which was widely distributed in New South Wales by rail—intensified a feeling of shared peril faced daily by the Australian, French and other Allied troops. Snapshot photographs of those at the Front appeared with increasing frequency.

At the time of the declaration of war against the Central Powers, French-Australian author and respected grazier in Forbes, Paul Wenz, and his Australian-born wife Hettie (née Harriet Dunne) were near the Belgian border on their way to Paul's hometown of Reims in the Champagne region, France. Inveterate travellers, they had spent most of the previous year touring through New Zealand, South America, the West Indies, England and other European countries. They were nearing the end of their extensive tour when they heard rumours that war was imminent. Their plans to return home to their property, 'Nanima'—on Wiradjeri land in the central west of New South Wales between Forbes and Cowra<sup>4</sup>—were consequently postponed until after the war in 1919 although they were 'anxious' to return to their 'moutons'.<sup>5</sup> A few years later,

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Dennis *et al.*, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 176. Some Australians, however, did not hesitate to judge men who did not volunteer as shown by the illustration on the front page of the *Sydney Mail*, 12 January 1916—War Issue n° LXXVI, entitled 'The Shirker'; see also Rachel Ward's *An Accidental Soldier*, televised by ABC 1, 15.9.2013.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Wenz lived here until his death in 1939; he is buried in the Forbes cemetery. He remained with the wool firm Wenz & Co during his lifetime making regular business trips to Sydney and Melbourne. (See Blackman 1990, Delamotte 1998 and articles and notes in *Explorations*, n<sup>os</sup> 23, 24, 42, 48.)

<sup>5</sup> 'March of Victory', as recounted by Paul Wenz, *Forbes Advocate*, 17.10.1919.

Paul published his views on raising sheep in Australia with illustrations by his brother Frédéric.<sup>6</sup>

Too old at forty-five to be mobilised into the French Army, Paul Wenz volunteered his services and his car to the Red Cross. Hettie also worked for the Red Cross. An article written by Paul appeared in the Sydney magazine *Lone Hand*.<sup>7</sup> It recounted what the couple faced once they reached Reims on 2 August 1914: ‘All the young men were leaving, including Paul’s younger brother Alfred, who was assigned to the British General Headquarters as interpreter<sup>8</sup> [...] the town was full of soldiers [...] there was sadness in the women’s faces, many were crying [...]. There was an air of calm and resolution throughout it all.’

In his reliable Hotchkiss, Paul undertook delivery of hospital supplies, from bedding to bandages, and collected butter and eggs from the outlying countryside for the hospitals. He was involved in the removal of the wounded from the hospital to the nearest railway as the Germans approached the city. They entered on 4 September—‘the same day as they [had] entered it in 1870’. There they stayed until the 12<sup>th</sup> only to begin firing on the town the next day from the surrounding hills, wreaking destruction, death and fear.

**Paul:** [...] The shells have started a big fire somewhere—and it’s spreading quickly.

**Hettie:** You’re right Paul... Dear Heavens! It’s the Cathedral!

**Paul:** *Mon Dieu!* And the German prisoners are there! [...] I must hurry!

**Effects: Running Feet, Shouts, Crackle of Flames**

**Paul:** You there, help me! There are men in the Cathedral! We must get them out. The roof is on fire.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Wenz, *L’Élevage du mouton en Australie, décrit en vue de son application dans les colonies françaises*, France, E. Larose, 1925.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Wenz, ‘Rheims During the Bombardment’, *Lone Hand*, March 1915, pp. 250–251. The article contains an image of Wenz, the Protestant Church gutted and his parents’ home with evidence of bombardment; cited in full without the images in ‘At the War’, *Forbes Times*, 23.3.1915.

<sup>8</sup> ‘War Time in France’, *Forbes Advocate*, 7.8.1917, from a letter dated 18.6.1917 and sent from London.

**1<sup>st</sup> Voice:** I don't risk my life for the Boche, *mon ami*. Let them stay there and fry in their own fire!

**Paul:** Boche or not, they're human beings...

**2<sup>nd</sup> Voice:** Not me Monsieur. The German swine can die! Look at our Cathedral! The stained glass windows are broken already and they are irreplaceable! Damn the Boche!

**Paul:** There's no time to argue, and we can't let men burn to their death in there. [...]

**Narrator:** Paul and a few other civilians brought the German prisoners to safety from the burning Cathedral. In the strife-filled years that followed, he risked his life many times, conveying cases of material for hospitals between England and France—on a channel where the sign of the Red Cross did not ensure protection. (Ord 1961, 6.)

In her radio script entitled 'The Master of Nanima', Marion Ord chose this real incident to express her subject's compassion for humankind at the start of his invaluable voluntary contribution to the war effort.

This daunting German attack on the Marne area was the beginning of a series of 'titanic' battles, led by the French Commander-in-Chief Marshal Joseph Joffre, between the French and the British against the Germans who were aiming to take Paris. Within a week of fierce fighting, the Allies succeeded in pushing the Germans back from their objective. The German soldiers retreated beyond the River Marne. Casualties on both sides were in the thousands (Westwell 2009, 36–37).<sup>9</sup>

In March 1915, the *Sydney Mail* published specific images of the effect of the enemy attacks on the offices in Reims of wool merchants Messrs Wenz and Company founded in 1859: 'Mr Émile Wenz and his family, like many other inhabitants of the city, took refuge underground. The large cellars of the champagne houses are capable of accommodating a vast number of people, and there they are safe from the devastating shells which have worked havoc'. Images included Mr Wenz continuing to work and sleep in the cellar. Meals were also prepared there. In a letter to friends in Sydney, Mr Wenz wrote that women were making garments for the 'brave fellows at the front [...] under

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<sup>9</sup> 80,000 French soldiers were killed in the Battle of the Marne (5–10 September 1914).

great difficulties in gloomy cellars, yet with the utmost cheerfulness and fortitude, and in the sure and certain hope of ultimate victory'.<sup>10</sup> The editors of the *Sydney Mail* were aware that the Wenz family were highly respected in the Australian wool industry and well-known to their readers.

Further severe casualties (48,000 French and 60,000 British) resulted from the British/French offensives towards the end of 1915 (*l'année stérile*)—the Second Battle of Champagne and the Third Battle of Artois—resulting in no noticeable gain of territory for the Allies (Westwell 2009, 78–79). It had turned into a stalemate. For the French these battles were mere precursors of the even more destructive, 'bloodiest' and longest battle of the entire war—the Battle of Verdun (21 February to 18 December 1916). Responding to mid-1916 intelligence reports of an impending enemy attack further to the north, away from the River Meuse, Joffre ordered this area a priority. Weapons were removed from the Verdun region despite the ongoing fierce fighting there on both banks of the river.<sup>11</sup> As reinforcements ('nutriment for cannon'<sup>12</sup>) were constantly needed at Verdun, there were fewer French to engage in the Battle of the Somme when the British launched their great Spring Offensive in July that year.

Consequently the British bore the main burden of this battle supported by Australian Commonwealth troops—several seasoned from their harrowing experiences on Gallipoli and many new recruits who had been trained in Egypt. The cover of the 31 May 1916 edition of the *Sydney Mail* proclaimed that Australian soldiers were warmly welcomed in France when they disembarked in Marseilles before travelling by train north to the battlefields of the Western Front.<sup>13</sup> Many Australian soldiers were to testify, in letters and memoirs, to the sincere enthusiasm of the French wherever they went, especially while on leave from the Front.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* of 17 April 1916 announced the death at Verdun of French expatriate Paul Wattel, woolman of Mosman in Sydney, husband and father of six-year-old Jacques. As a 'well-known wool buyer

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<sup>10</sup> 'Bombardment of Reims'.

<sup>11</sup> *Petit Larousse illustré*; Westwell 2009, 122–123; 128–129.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Keneally, *Daughters of Mars*, North Sydney, Virago, 2012, p. 345.

<sup>13</sup> The image portrays an Australian soldier shaking hands with a French soldier, both smiling, in front of a damaged town. Beneath the soldiers are two shields, one labelled ANZAC with the Australian flag, the other VERDUN with the French *tricolore*.

and ex-vice-chairman' of the Sydney and Brisbane Woolbuyers' Association, Wattel would have known the Wenz family, especially Émile and Paul who had been involved in their father's business since the early 1880s. Six months later, Paul's nephew Jean, only son of his brother Émile, died after being wounded twice on active service. The news report stated that he had been promoted and attached as interpreter to the headquarters of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Australian Brigade.<sup>14</sup> Jean had spent 1910–1911 in Australia.

Émile Wenz had visited Australia—'the wool country *par excellence*'—while on a ten-month sea journey begun early June 1884, specifically to gain knowledge of how to undertake business transactions (Wenz 1886, 83–132). In his account published after the voyage, he appeals to the reader to forgive him for treating sheep in Australia as '*personnages*': 'They are Australia's wealth' (Wenz 1886, 93). In describing the process of raising sheep and the treatment of wool, he uses precise Australian terminology to record, detail and instruct. From the end of August to mid-November 1884, he visited relevant parts of the colonies of New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria and he acknowledges the help received from friends living in the country and whom he had not seen for several years. The wealthy Émile senior had given each of his sons the opportunity to travel the world before settling down into their chosen careers. Frédéric had declined, choosing to remain in Paris to continue his art. Like Émile and Paul, the youngest son Alfred chose to join their family enterprise. Paul decided on his trip to settle in Australia, to carry out business for his father while, at the same time, running his own sheep station. He would return to Europe and the family home every two or three years, visiting different countries *en route*.

In 1916 Paul Wenz was transferred to the London headquarters of the Red Cross as a liaison officer with the French Committee of the Red Cross. His knowledge of French and English was invaluable for his work as an interpreter. As he worked in St Dunstan's Hospital in London's Regent Park—established in the home of American Banker Otto Kahn by Arthur Pearson for soldiers blinded in the field at the start of the war—Paul became familiar with the difficulties sight-impaired men had to overcome. (By the end of 1918, the

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<sup>14</sup> 'Death of M. Jean Wenz', *Sydney Wool and Stock Journal*, 27.10.1916.

hospital had trained, was training or rehabilitating 1,500 blinded soldiers.<sup>15</sup>) Hettie had been helping in London since the previous year, preparing comfort parcels and working in the Australian canteen.

From then until the end of the war, Paul crossed the English Channel some fifty-three times (Delamotte 1998, 22) deeply aware of both the physical and emotional devastation caused by the bitter battles, especially those in his region. The Champagne area and the city of Reims had been heavily bombarded. Many important historical structures in the town were damaged, some destroyed completely. An eye witness described the bombing: ‘Over your head an invisible express train swept through space; in front of you a house disappeared’.<sup>16</sup> There were more than 5,000 civilian victims from this one region alone. Paul Wenz had been in the family home when it was destroyed by a series of bombings: ‘It was like hell let loose’.<sup>17</sup> Initially, refuge was sought in their own underground cellars before they moved into larger ones owned by Krug and Company.

In May 1917 the Wenz family home was shelled again while the concierge and his wife were still living in the cellar. Wenz wrote from London to his property manager in Australia, Walter Gow, praising the ‘faithfulness and pluck of these humble people’: ‘They do not want to desert my father’s house. [...] I think their courage ought to be recognised’. Paul’s family were living in Versailles where he joined them to celebrate his father’s 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday.<sup>18</sup>

These first-hand experiences throughout the war years provided Paul Wenz with material for several short stories that appeared in two volumes in 1919. They contain stories set in France and in England (Wenz 1919). Also published in the same year, with similar themes and based on his experiences with the blind, was *Le Pays de leurs pères*—‘the old country’. The author dedicated this book to the ‘men who came from Australia and New Zealand to fight with us [the French]; in memory of those that French soil will keep—signed P.W.’ (Delamotte 1998). According to Jean-Paul Delamotte in his

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<sup>15</sup> Ord 1961, 7; St Dunstan’s Hospital, <<http://www.blindveterans.org.uk/about-us/history/time-line>>, accessed 9.1.2014.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Bombardment of Reims: Life in the Champagne Cellars’, *Sydney Mail*, 24.3.1915, p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Wenz, ‘At the War’, *Forbes Times*, 23.3.1915.

<sup>18</sup> ‘War Time in France— Letter from Mr Paul Wenz’, dated 18 June, 1917, *Forbes Advocate*, 7.8.1917.

introduction to the book's re-publication, Wenz tried to give his native country a better understanding of his adopted country which had left on French soil during the Great War at least 45,000 dead of the 295,000 Australians who fought in France.<sup>19</sup> Others were to join them in the Second World War, especially Australian bomber and fighter pilots seconded to the RAF.<sup>20</sup>

The novel's storyline is secondary to the authenticity of characters and their actions (Delamotte 1998, 23). *Le Pays de leurs pères* 'presents the reactions of Australians in an English environment' when the two main protagonists are hospitalised in England and recovering from being severely wounded in the battlefield on the Western Front; one is blinded, the other loses an arm. Australians in London and the areas they come from in Australia are well portrayed. The 'transcultural' content of the novel is conveyed in the French language, resulting in a two-way understanding of the 'other'.<sup>21</sup> The story begins in Australia with the country mailman bringing news of a win for the Australian boxer Pat Flannery in Sydney and the declaration of war between England and Germany—news that encourages many to enlist. They are trained and are taken to Egypt, Gallipoli and to the Western Front where they are wounded. But 'thank God, there are others to replace them, to carry on where others have fallen' (Wenz 1996, 87).

At the beginning of the war a group of French citizens and francophile Australians formed the French-Australian League of Help.<sup>22</sup> The League's aim was to raise funds to assist French soldiers and their dependents and to gather 'comforts' to be sent overseas. Prominent among the founders of the League were the well-known wool-buying family, the Playousts (five Playoust sons and two sons-in-law were to fight in the war),<sup>23</sup> the Premier of NSW, William Holman, and the foundation co-principal of Kambala Girls' School, Augustine

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Pedersen with Chris Roberts, *Anzacs on the Western Front*, Australia, John Wiley & Sons, 2012, p. xxiv; Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years. Australian Soldiers of the Great War*, Carlton, Melbourne University Publishing, 2010, p. 289.

<sup>20</sup> According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics *Year Book 1946-47*, 11,544 Australians died, 9 were missing and 10,204 were wounded fighting against Germany during World War 2.

<sup>21</sup> Blackman in *Explorations*, n° 23, December 1997, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> The full story of the League is discussed in an article by Peter Brown and Jacqueline Dwyer in this same issue.

<sup>23</sup> Playoust Family papers, MLMSS 6586/1, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

Soubeiran. Marie-Thérèse Playoust and Premier Holman became foundation presidents, and Mrs Jewett and Mlle Soubeiran honorary secretaries. Thanks to her social and speaking skills, Mlle Soubeiran was often seen as the public face of the League.

By September 1916, 114,000 garments had been sent to various French societies, hospitals, schools, women's groups, orphans, refugees, prisoners, disabled soldiers and so on. The most successful fund-raising event organised by the League was an appeal called 'France's Day' held on 14 July 1917. 'France's Day' 1917 raised £215,607, 18 shillings and seven pence, over 7 million dollars in today's money.

Letters of appreciation for Australia's contributions for assistance during and immediately after the war came from different parts of France including the Champagne and Ardennes regions,<sup>24</sup> areas familiar to Paul Wenz and vividly evoked in his semi-documentary, partly auto-biographical, semi-romantic stories.

In 'Le Rachat d'Étienne Muffot', one of the stories in *Bonnes Gens* (Wenz 1919, 24–35), the protagonist, like Wenz himself, too old to be called up, makes a living as a carrier. When he finds out that his vehicle will end up in the hands of the German invaders, he hides it. He becomes one of the 200 refugees forced to take shelter in the cellars 'seven metres below the earth'. A lover of good wine, he finds the atmosphere of his new home to be '*délicieuse*'. Life there carried on as usual—cooking, chatting, sewing, children playing invented games—while subject to the constant '*musique infernale des mitrailleuses*' (31). Étienne's redemption begins when he accepts Nurse Marie's urgent request for him to use his handcart to retrieve people and their belongings from bombed homes and bring them to safety in the cellars. In so doing, he contributes to the war effort, but on one of his many trips he too becomes a casualty. He is presented as a soul having been 'reborn': '*régénéré par cette guerre*' (35).

Another story in the same collection, 'Le Cocher de Reims', has a comparison between an '*omelette surprise*' (cooked with rum in the middle of which is pistachio ice cream) and the inner strength of the French facing

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<sup>24</sup> French-Australian League of Help Records, 1917-1921, MLMSS 717, Mitchell Library, Sydney; *Complete Resumé of League's work, December 1914 to September 1916*, Mitchell Library 361/F.

war. The narrator is taken on a seven-kilometre guided tour of the city with the driver making another comparison:

The war has placed the symbolic palm within reach of the most humble, the frailest and the most disabled: while the trenches are full of heroes, and the battlefields are strewn with them, they are not lacking in the invaded areas and bombed towns (Wenz 1919, 47).

The narrator reads in the local newspaper: ‘*Journée calme ... 372<sup>e</sup> jour de bombardement*’, each day causing death to civilians and destruction and the war was far from over. The driver decided to stay in Reims where his wife was buried. He claims to be one of the ‘*poilus civils*’ since in Reims ‘*on est au front sans y être*’. He predicts that people will be amazed at the statistics of casualties and damage caused by the war and will come as tourists ‘from the four corners of the earth’ to see the city and its cathedral. He puts a time limit of fifty years on this phenomenon—in fact it is still happening today, nearly a century later.

In April 1916, Walter Gow at Nanima received a parcel from Paul Wenz who was ‘assisting the Allies somewhere in France’. It contained a few pieces of 800-year-old glass from the Cathedral in Reims—‘a war relic’.<sup>25</sup>

In *Choses d’hier* Wenz describes similar and other aspects of life in and around Reims during the war years: the destruction caused by enemy weapons, hospital needs, the streams of people along the streets leading to the city, soldiers and refugees. The auto-biographical stories ‘À la campagne’ and ‘La Dernière’ both end with a solitary figure: a German soldier captured in a farmhouse in the Champagne region now labouring for the French in Dieppe, Rouen or Toulouse and an old woman—who did not fear the Germans as she had experienced the 1870 war (27)—shot twelve times, although ‘a mere slap would have sufficed’. The strength of the past is evoked in ‘La Peur’ when a German colonel spends a bitterly cold night alone in a deserted château whose walls are covered with portraits of family members who fought for France over the centuries—the ‘ghosts’ of the past.

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<sup>25</sup> ‘A War Relic’, *Farmer and Settler*, 18.4.1916.

These stories allow the reader to share some of the author's own wartime experiences as well as the reactions of others. Succinct descriptions and fine details evoke the daily existence during those seemingly endless, difficult years. Imbued with a sense of humour the stories reveal aspects of the complexity of human nature. The most bizarre character, perhaps, is the sixty-year-old shepherd, hater of men, who spends a night keeping watch over a 'flock' of fifty dead soldiers strewn across the field. Their souls had escaped through the gaping wounds in their bodies and, for the first time in his life, he appreciates they had 'given their all' for the land where his sheep grazed (12–13).

Another letter from Paul Wenz, dated 7 August 1919 and sent to Walter Gow, tells of the Victory Day celebrations in Paris that year: 'The Allies had all their share of ovations, the Yankies, Belgians, Italians, British, Scots, and French'. He was most impressed with decorations at the Rond Point of the Champs Élysées:

At each side of this place there was a small mountain made of German guns, heaped and dropped anyhow—tails up, mouths up—just as the steam crane let them go. It was just two enormous heaps of scrap iron. On top of one was a huge cock on the defensive, 1914; on the top of the other, another cock crowing '1919'.<sup>26</sup>

An earlier letter from Wenz dated 9 December 1918 recounts the wild behaviour of people in London rejoicing 'like larrikin[s]' on and after 11 November: 'The Strand, Trafalgar Square, Piccadilly were black with a shouting, flag-waving crowd; at night, no car could pass without being invaded by 20 joy riders [...]'. He had heard that in Paris the end of the war was celebrated in a 'more dignified way, because they had seen and felt more suffering than London'.<sup>27</sup>

After the war, for practical and financial reasons, Émile Wenz and his family decided not to return to Reims. Instead, they set up an office in Paris and opened one in London in 1919. In 1923 the company expanded to Perth in Western Australia. Great nephew of Paul Wenz and grandson of his

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<sup>26</sup> 'March of Victory Great Paris Procession. Mr Paul Wenz's Description', *Forbes Advocate*, 17.10.1919.

<sup>27</sup> "'Der Tag". Foch and Clemenceau in London', *Forbes Advocate*, 4.3.1919.

younger brother Alfred, Denis Wenz (1928-2007) continued the traditional family wool business from 1948. Between 1950 until the business closed in 1980, Denis became acquainted with Australia and Australians on his many visits as a representative of the firm. His wife Nicole— whose father had been seriously wounded near Reims in September 1915—accompanied him in 1969 and describes her experience as ‘*un merveilleux voyage*’.<sup>28</sup>

As his ancestors before him, Denis put his hand to writing. He translated his great uncle’s only book written in English, *Diary of a New Chum* (Wenz 1990): it appeared as *Un Australien tout neuf* (Wenz 1989). In the French text, Denis writes that he repeated certain English expressions and words as used by the author. These ‘Australianisms’ are italicised and explained at the back of the publication.

Denis also wrote short stories. *Le Thé* was written after he and his wife Nicole took some Australian friends to the war cemetery at Villers-Bretonneux. It is written in the classical Paul Wenz style. Two major aspects of his ancestor’s life are basic to the story: living in Australia, running a large property and overseeing his family’s wool-buying agencies, and the tragedy of the Great War shared by both the French and the Australians.

The simple narrative style contrasts with the deep emotions the story evokes. Victor and Louise Quesnoy had billeted an Australian couple’s son several times while he was on leave. The parents, Tim and Mary, travelled from their sheep station in Cowra, New South Wales, to find their son’s grave. He had died in 1917 ‘somewhere between Villers-Bretonneux and Corbie in the Somme’. In describing the Australian couple, Denis Wenz captures the challenge of the tragic loss of their only son: ‘They thought of Tim when they got up in the morning and throughout the day. [...] They almost never spoke about him. When they did, it was simple, almost with feigned indifference. Sorrow is an underground river in these parts, and the marks of mourning are scarcely discernible on faces tanned by the sun’.

With the Australian parents in their home, the Quesnoys relive Tim’s presence: ‘there was the coat-peg behind the door where he hung his digger hat; the feed bucket he willingly carried out to the animals, his rolled up sleeves ready to help with the washing up. They even gently mimicked his rudimentary French. To truly welcome her visitors, Louise prepared tea ‘the

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<sup>28</sup> Mme Nicole Wenz to Marie Ramsland, Meudon, 9 April, 7 May and 14 June 2013.

same way she would her usual chicory coffee and the pot stayed for hours on the corner of the stove' resulting in a strong and bitter brew. 'Old Tim and Mary glanced momentarily at one another. But the tea also tasted of appeasement and friendship so they sipped it slowly—like nectar'.<sup>29</sup>

These sentiments were aptly expressed by Philippe Baude, French Ambassador in Australia (1991–1994): 'French and Australians draw upon the same deep and spontaneous fraternity of arms in the defence of shared values. [...We] remember our terrible experiences together. To ignore their lessons in today's dangerous world would be to betray our forefathers'.<sup>30</sup>

Wherever, whenever and however Australians and the French have come into contact, they have often established meaningful and sometimes long-lasting relationships, based on respect and admiration for their cultural differences. Shared events in two World Wars have played a large part in the continuing importance of these connections between the two countries.

Significant contributors to this symbiotic association were members of the Wenz family from the Champagne region in France. Their contributions as visitors to, or permanent residents of, Australia began well before and continued long after the Great War. Published accounts of their impressions of Australia and Australians, together with letters, articles, short stories and novels provide concrete evidence of an appreciation of the country and its inhabitants. Through their writing Paul Wenz and his father Émile gave Australian readers intimate and moving (often illustrated) accounts of the Great War from its onset. While many Australians were working at home in support of the war effort, Paul and his Australian wife 'Hettie' worked tirelessly in France and England as volunteers with the Red Cross Societies throughout the entire war. And from those horrific years, Paul provided French readers with stories dealing with French soldiers and citizens as well as Australian and British soldiers, thus deepening the already existing understanding between two peoples on opposite sides of the world.

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<sup>29</sup> Nicole Wenz to Marie Ramsland, 13 août 2013: 'Il fallait connaître l'importance de ces "rites", le THÉ, pour vous, le CAFÉ dans le Nord de la France (souvent mêlé de CHICORÉE), pour en saisir le sens !'

<sup>30</sup> In Allan Blankfield & Robin S. Corfield, *Never Forget Australia. Australia and Villers-Bretonneux 1918–1993. N'oublions jamais l'Australie*, Villers-Bretonneux 75th Anniversary Pilgrimage Project Committee, Melbourne, 1994, p. 12.

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