

THE FRENCH-AUSTRALIAN LEAGUE OF HELP: RESTORING THE RECORD

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Introduction

The importance of the Western Front in World War 1, where nearly 300,000 Australian soldiers saw duty and from which 46,000 never returned, has been growing in Australia's national memory in recent years. France being a respected ally of Britain and the British Empire, Australian troops fought alongside the British and the French, largely on French soil. Four years of relentless fighting in northern France settled into a semi-permanent entrenched 'front' stretching from the Channel almost to the Swiss frontier.

In Fromelles, in the Nord Pas-de-Calais region, whose memorial for Australian soldiers describes the day of 19 July 1916 as the 'worst twenty-four hours in Australian history', inhumation ceremonies have taken place since 2010 involving the remains of soldiers identified thanks to new DNA testing. The village of Villers-Bretonneux, where 11,000 Australians died in its defence, was 'adopted' by Melbourne after the war. Villers-Bretonneux's motto is *N'oublions jamais l'Australie*. This history also remains of diplomatic importance. The 'Joint Statement of Strategic Partnership between Australia and France', signed in January 2012 by the then respective Foreign Ministers of the two countries, Kevin Rudd and Alain Juppé, devotes a whole section to 'Cooperation on shared memory of the First World War'.¹

A less well-known aspect of Australia's contribution to the war effort is the work of the French-Australian League of Help (henceforth the 'League' or the FALH). The League was founded in Sydney in the early months of

¹ http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/france/joint_statement.html

the Great War in response to the German attack on neutral Belgium, followed by the enemy's rapid advance through northern France. The early military casualties were numerous, and the new widows and orphans equally so. The need for relief was urgent. The League was formed by French residents and powerful Australian sympathisers as 'an official body for the purpose of assisting in French Red Cross work and further, to render such assistance as might be deemed urgently necessary to the French soldiers or their dependents or those of their Allies'.² It was to be based in Sydney and its activities were focussed on New South Wales.³

Drawing on previously unused sources, this article will offer an appraisal of the work of the League from its founding in 1914 to its closure in 1919. It will tell the story of the foundation of the League and will critically analyse the representation of the FALH in the press and in subsequent historical writing.

Little has been published on the League, possibly because of the scarcity of information. One source available to researchers is an item held by the Mitchell Library (State Library of New South Wales), under the title *French-Australian League of Help. Complete Resumé [sic]. December 1914 to September 1916* (henceforth *Complete Resumé*).⁴ According to a handwritten annotation on p.1 this privately published booklet was donated to the Library on 17 October 1916 by one of the co-secretaries of the League (Mme Jewett or Mlle Soubeiran). Another annotation on the same page is in handwriting similar to Mlle Soubeiran's. Apart from the fact that the *Complete Resumé* only covers the first two years of the work of the League, and despite containing some useful information on the beginnings of the FALH, it is anything but complete, even on the subject of those early years.⁵ Another item, also a donation and also held by the Mitchell Library, contains Mlle Soubeiran's personal records,

² 'French Citizens League of Help', *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, 23.12.1914.

³ Similar fund-raising efforts were made in Victoria both during and after the war: they involved in particular Charlotte Crivelli. See Linda Wade, 'By Diggers Defended, by Victorians Mended: Mateship at Villers-Bretonneux', *Eras* 8, November 2006, <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/eras>

⁴ Mitchell Library, 361/F.

⁵ After claiming that 'the story of the founding of the FAL of H is too well known to need repeating', the booklet describes the four major charitable agencies through which the FALH distributed its donations before September 1916. Six other societies

in the form of a collection of boxed letters, written towards the end of the war and after the war, by recipients of her distributions, including one from Maréchal Foch, and also her own letter to the Library.⁶

However, the most useful source of information on the history of the French-Australian League of Help is the press. We propose to quote extensively from newspapers, while pointing out the inconsistencies and distortions of their reporting, where appropriate. In addition to the major city papers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the Melbourne *Argus*, the recent digitisation of newspapers has given scholars access to the regional press, religious papers, agricultural papers, etc. Unfortunately the *Courrier Australien* still requires laborious search by microfiche.

Establishment of the League

Marie-Thérèse Playoust, wife of Georges Playoust, a leading Sydney wool buyer and founding president of the French Chamber of Commerce, was the first president of the French-Australian League of Help, together with the Premier of New South Wales, W. A. Holman.⁷ Before the war Marie-Thérèse Playoust had been an active member of the social committee of the Alliance Française of Sydney, as had been several of the main workers of the League.

An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 15 December 1914 announced the formation of the FALH:

were listed including a hospital in Salonika, which was a timely reminder to Australians that the French were also suffering casualties in the Dardanelles.

⁶ A. Soubeiran and Maréchal Foch, 'French-Australian League Records, 1917–1921', Textual Records, Graphic Materials (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales).

⁷ Arguably W. A. Holman was the most francophile political leader in Australia's history. General Pau, when visiting Australia in 1918, described him as a 'faithful and sincere friend of France'. His political career during World War 1 paralleled that of his rival in the Labor movement, W. M. (Billy) Hughes: both championed conscription, Holman at State level, Hughes federally, and both finished by leaving the Labor party. See *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 9, 1983.

A meeting of French Residents in Sydney, both ladies and gentlemen, was held yesterday afternoon at the offices of the War Chest Fund for the purpose of forming a society to assist those at the front, not only through the Red Cross Society, but in other ways. Mme Playoust presided. The society would be formed under the name of the French-Australian League of Help. Mlle Soubeiran was elected Hon. Secretary, and she will receive all gifts for the society, either of money or in kind. Such goods should be addressed to her, care of the War Chest Office. Among those present were Mrs. McKinnon, Mrs. Antill, and Mr. Walker, the remainder of the attendance being composed exclusively of French residents. It was further decided that a public meeting should be held the following Thursday.

The site of this initial meeting at the ‘offices of the War Chest Fund’ indicates the powerful support given to this new initiative by H. Y. Braddon, later Sir Henry, president of the Australian Comforts Fund, otherwise known as the Citizens’ War Chest Committee. From 1914 he was president of the NSW division of the British Red Cross, soon to become the Australian Red Cross.⁸ He was also to be appointed vice-president of the French-Australian League of Help, which was the subject of the day’s discussion.

Mrs Antill, Mrs McKinnon and Mr Walker were also associated with the Citizens’ War Chest Fund. Charles Le Maistre Walker was to become co-Treasurer of the FALH, and both Mrs Antill and Mrs McKinnon were elected to its committee.

A few days later, though not on the following Thursday as originally planned, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that ‘a large and enthusiastic meeting of French citizens of Sydney’ with the generous participation of many Australians, was held at the Australia Hotel.

On 31 December a Melbourne *Punch* report described the Australia Hotel meeting:

The French-Australian League of Help boomed with much éclat at a meeting at the Australia on Tuesday afternoon. H. [sic] Chayet

⁸ See H. McCredie, ‘Braddon, Sir Henry Yule 1863–1955’, *ADB*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1979.

(Consul-General for France) presided, and among the speakers were the Premier (Mr Holman), Mr H. Y. Braddon, M. Georges Playoust, and Mrs. Mackinnon. The object of the League is to establish a department where goods may be sent, and where money will be received from persons wishing to contribute. Mdlle [sic] Soubeiran announced that on the day after the movement was suggested, she had received a cheque for £10 from 'an old Alsatian'. No doubt there are many more who, now they know how to send funds, will gladly send them along too. Mr Braddon moved that the French-Australian League of Help be formed; this was seconded by Mr Playoust, supported by M. Holman in a stirring speech, and carried unanimously.⁹

Of these speakers, William Holman had already displayed his love of France in his speech given on the French national day in July on the eve of the outbreak of the war.¹⁰

As for Henry Braddon, he had forged a strong link with the French participants in the wool trade when he was superintendent of Dalgety's. Mrs McKinnon was foundation honorary secretary of the State Division of the Australian Red Cross, indicating that the NSW Red Cross would be lending its support.¹¹

The following officers were elected:

Patron: M. Chayet, Consul-General for France

Presidents: Madame G. Playoust, Mr W. A. Holman

Vice-presidents: Madame J. Playoust, Mrs. Shard, Mr H. Y. Braddon,

Madames [sic] de Possel, Puech, Houssard, Higinbotham, Segur,

Mrs. Alfred Lee

Hon. treasurers: Miss L. J. Gurney and Mr C. A. le M. Walker

⁹ 'Sydney Social French-Australian League of Help Formation', *Punch*, Melbourne, 31.12.1914, p. 30. Consul-General Chayet's first name was Alexandre.

¹⁰ 'The French and the English have always been the pioneers and supporters of civilisation and it was always when they had worked together that civilisation had advanced most rapidly' (*SMH* 15.7.1914).

¹¹ Jacqueline Abbott, 'Eleanor McKinnon 1871-1936', *ADB*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1986.

Hon. Secretaries Mrs. A. Jewett and Mdlle Soubeiran.¹²

According to the Sydney *Sunday Times*, the League was also ‘honoured with the patronage of Her Excellency Lady Helen Munro-Ferguson, their Excellencies the Governor of N.S.W. and Lady Edeline Strickland, Vice-Admiral Patey and Lady Patey, the Lord Mayor and Mayoress of Sydney, and M. Chayet, the Consul-General for France’ (*Sunday Times* 3.1.1915).

W. A. Holman remained Premier of New South Wales throughout the war, giving consistent support and guidance to this cause. Significantly, both he and H. Y. Braddon were also associated with the board of the long established Australian Benevolent Society and offered to the League their experience and skill in managing charitable funds. The participation of these two men in the League’s affairs underpinned the whole enterprise.

Georges Playoust and his younger brother, Joseph, held great influence in the wool trade, and both men and their respective wives, Marie-Thérèse and Blanche, worked for the League till its conclusion.¹³ Mrs Alfred Lee was now a prominent member of the Red Cross Society and the head of the Lady Mayoress’s Sewing Guild, directing its 2,000 workers. Mrs Walker, also known as Mrs C. Le Maistre Walker, was a prominent charity worker.¹⁴

Miss Gurney and Mlle Soubeiran, the founding co-principals of Kambala Girls’ School, by then both retired, were invaluable recruits to the team, being experienced in management and accustomed to dealing with official institutions, as well as with the press. Augustine Soubeiran was to play a major part in the development of the League. As co-secretary, her main role became one of public relations, at which she excelled, showing a real talent for attracting the co-operation of the newspapers and the interest of the general public. She soon became a well-known and popular figure.

¹² To support the office-bearers a strong committee was appointed with power to add to the number: Mesdames Moreau, J. J. Rouse, Mackinnon, Villeval, King-Salter, L. Dodds, Kirkland, Millner, V. Haigh, G. Antill, G. Marshall, Kendall, Roth, Learoyd, Mesdemoiselles Chautard, de Baillou, Randal Carey, Pognon, Walker, Pickard and Leverrier, and Mr du Boisé (*Courrier Australien*, 1.1.1915).

¹³ When Georges Playoust died in the last month of the war, most of the League’s work had already been accomplished.

¹⁴ ‘Mrs. Edith Gertrude Le Maistre Walker. Obituary’, *SMH*, 7.12.1935.

Many of these people, both French and Australian, had worked together for the lively *comité des soirées* of the Alliance Française of Sydney during the pre-war years, sometimes holding similar positions to those they were to assume in the new organisation.¹⁵ There appeared to be a continuity between the two groups. But the FALH was to become a much more intense commitment for them for the following four years.

Soon after the foundation of the League, Georges and Marie-Thérèse Playoust moved to Paris to set up a base for their sons¹⁶ who had enlisted in the French army. They also undertook to look after the distribution of the League's gifts in France, and did so during the early years of the war. Georges's brother Joseph was now to assume a responsible role in the League in Sydney, and Joseph's wife, Blanche, to take on the role of co-President with Premier Holman, while the Paris-based Marie-Thérèse's position was now changed to that of 'Patron' (*Complete Résumé*).

1915 – 1916

Premier Holman, using his influence in Parliament, was able to announce by the end of December 1914 that the NSW Government had decided to provide assistance to both the Belgian Fund and the French-Australian League of Help:

The government will also make available the sum of £5,000 as an assistance to the funds of the newly-formed French-Australian League of Help feeling that whatever small assistance we are able to give will be repaid a hundred times by the attentions willingly

¹⁵ In 1913 the elected office-bearers of the Alliance Française social committee were Mme Marie-Thérèse Playoust (President), Mrs Shard and Mrs Alfred Lee (Vice-Presidents), Mrs Arthur Jewett (Hon. Secretary) and Mrs Randal Carey (Hon. Treasurer).

¹⁶ Eventually five of their sons fought in France, two of whom died: one at the Somme, the other at the Chemin des Dames. One of the authors, née Playoust, is related to them. One son-in-law also fought in France; another served in the Australian army, albeit not in France. Both survived.

showered on our own troops when they take part—as we anticipate they will shortly— in battles on the shores of France.¹⁷

The collection of gifts (clothing or money) started almost immediately:

Depots will be opened on January 4th for the receipt of contributions of articles of clothing to be forwarded at an early date. One depot will be at the office of M. Georges Playoust, 15 Pitt Street, and the other at MacDonnell [sic] House, 321 Pitt Street. Cash contributions may be addressed to the hon. treasurers at 113 Pitt Street (*SMH* 30.12.1914).

As well as providing a comprehensive and accurate account of the foundation of the League (to which we will return later), the Sydney *Sunday Times* of 3 January 1915 described the work of the FALH in its early days in some detail:

The French-Australian League of Help which is now co-operating with the French Red Cross Society of London, originated in a very simple manner. Madame Geo. Playoust and Mlle. Soubeiran, together with their French and English friends, began by making comforts for the French soldiers. Of late, the number has increased enormously, hundreds of garments having been sent away by the steamers. [...] At the present time the intention is to spend half the amount received on a motor ambulance, which is badly needed at the front for the removal of the suffering. Depots will be opened on Monday, Jan 4, at the offices of Monsieur Joe Playoust, 33 Pitt Street, and 321 Pitt Street, (second floor) for the receiving of new clothing.

The League held a well-attended meeting in the first week of the New Year. It was now presided over by Mme Joseph Playoust (Blanche) and was covered by the press (*SMH* 6.1.1915). This first meeting set the pattern for such occasions in the future, as Blanche Playoust, though handling most meetings herself,

¹⁷ ‘The Belgians. Funds to Be Subsidised’, *SMH*, 1.1.1915. Belgium’s needs became obvious earlier than those of France and received popular support from the Australian public.

largely in French, seemed uneasy about making public addresses in English, preferring a silent role. In addressing those present, Mademoiselle Soubeiran used her own sentimental language, and this striking and vivid style had wide appeal:

A Frenchman loves to be loved, and to know his countrywomen and their friends in far-off Australia are thinking of him, and making garments for the loved ones he has left behind, lightens the heart of the soldier in his trench and nerves his arm to win peace and glory for his country.¹⁸

Many volunteers were recruited, not yet aware that their commitment was to last nearly four more years. They worked together with zeal, cutting, sewing, knitting and packing. Those with relatives at the front felt that this was a way of sharing the war effort with them. These improvised *ouvroirs* (workrooms) were quick to produce results, and the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported regular fortnightly shipments of garments, packed like raw wool into large bales. This fortnightly sequence continued until the end of the war. The League connected with Mme Brasier de Thuy in England who was working with the French Red Cross under the supervision of the French Embassy in London. She was well known in Sydney where her husband had represented the Messageries Maritimes shipping line for many years. The joint wartime work of this couple, ‘having seen to the safe arrival in London and the forwarding of our bales to their different destinations’, was acknowledged in 1916 by the FALH (*Complete Resumé*).

Other workshops staffed by volunteers were set up by Mayoresses in different parts of Sydney, and the movement spread to country towns. With greater skills, the quality of the clothes improved, and they were shipped in ever increasing quantities.

By 1916 the McDonnell (no longer spelt MacDonnell) House rooms had become the heart and the headquarters of the League:

There isn’t much to distinguish the work-room of the French-Australian League of Help from the dozens of busy patriotic work-rooms dotted all over the city now. It is just a long bare

¹⁸ ‘City Chat Letter from Sydney’, *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 9.1.1915, p. 4.

room, as the others are, furnished as plainly as a factory with long trestle tables covered with materials, a table piled with clerical matter, a few sewing machines, a couple of cupboards improvised out of packing cases. And yet there is more, a something that makes its presence felt as soon as you pass the rows of cases at the entrance and have spent a few minutes in the room. There is such a spirit of kindness and loving service among the workers that the very walls seem to have been impregnated with some remnant of it. The helpers don't give you the impression that they are working FOR the soldiers as much as working WITH them and thus imperceptibly the slightest suggestion of charity in it at all is totally eliminated. The motto of the league, worked in with every stitch, is surely Not Yours or Mine, but Ours. (*Sunday Times* 2.7.1916.)

The article continues in the same vein, but now in quotation marks for the remainder of two long columns, indicating authorship by Mlle Soubeiran in her very recognisable style. This was particularly relevant to the women sewing in 1916, the year of the Somme and Verdun campaigns. (On one occasion Mlle Soubeiran wrote for the *Sunday Times* under her own name.)¹⁹

Blanche Playoust involved herself closely in the dispatch of the goods sent to France, aided by her husband. A photograph depicts Joseph Playoust standing by two drays drawn by draught horses carrying about twenty-four bales marked with the address of 'Croix Rouge Brasier de Thuy Bordeaux'. Grateful letters from London demonstrated how effective their shipping methods had become. Yet the carefully packed bales of badly needed clothing did not always reach their destination. When the RMS *Arabia* was sunk by a torpedo in the Mediterranean, all the passengers were fortunately saved, but amongst the cargo were twelve cases of Red Cross goods sent by J. Playoust.²⁰

The League's workshops had by now taken on industrial dimensions, and funds were badly needed to purchase more fabrics. The wool trade milieu found an original way to help financially. A bale of wool was donated to the League and then sold by auction in an initiative that made interstate headlines. Each time it was sold, it was instantly given back for sale, and the bale was

¹⁹ 'Spirit of France's Day, A. Soubeiran's Article', *Sunday Times*, 22.7.1917.

²⁰ 'RMS *Arabia* Sunk by Torpedo', *The Argus*, 9.11.1916.



Clothing for France loaded on wagons, Sydney
(Courtesy State Library of NSW)

sold twenty-eight times, prices ranging from £10 to £26, realising a gift of £500 for the League.

Mlle Soubeiran's considerable talents now came to the fore. She was more than an effective secretary, as she was ever conscious of public relations and now found a new way of attracting donations from a wider cross-section of the public, that of contributing the monetary equivalent of a loaf of bread, which could be bought for 4 pence. In a letter of thanks to the President of the Red Cross in Goulburn she described the origins of the Loaf Fund appeal:

I would call your attention to our Loaf Fund, which was really suggested by a little Australian girl—so distressed that she had only one to give. It is a marvellous thing which just 4 pence may do when it represents a loaf of good bread and little short of magic to think that the money we cabled today may even now be feeding the hungry children in northern France—even one penny helps,

and who with peace and a good time, cannot spare it? I recommend the Fund to your Goulburn children's care.²¹

Much interest and good will was generated by the Loaf Fund, which was reported in the press, using this wholesome and quasi biblical metaphor of a loaf of bread for small donations:

Yesterday [9 May 1916] 10,000 loaves²² were cabled to the large and well managed home established at Étretat, Normandy for the orphans of the war. The next 10,000 are for the children of French and Belgian refugees in Northern France. (*Sunday Times* 9.5.1915.)

In June 1916 Mlle Soubeiran received a letter from Madame la Générale Michel (General Michel's wife), president of the Society of Help of Mothers and Infants.²³

This was the first request for aid from France recorded by the League. The letter begins:

Mademoiselle, I have just had the great pleasure of seeing Madame G. Playoust and she strongly advised me to write to you in the hope of interesting you and the members of your committee in the cause dearer to our hearts than any other just now—the saving of our children (*Complete Resumé*).

This letter suggests that Marie-Thérèse Playoust had not been inactive in Paris. It continues with details of the association founded by Madame Michel which cared for mothers before, during and after the birth of their infants. (In 1917 she was to be appointed to the Paris Committee of the League, entrusted with the distribution of the funds generated by 'France's Day' in Sydney—see below.)

²¹ 'French-Australian League Loaf Fund', *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, 25.3.1915.

²² This was the equivalent of about £166, or about \$7,688 in today's currency. (For the method of conversion of past currency into today's money, see footnote 26.)

²³ According to the *Resumé*.

Other societies in France listed in the *Complete Resumé* include several whose purpose was to support the many new orphans created by the battles of Verdun and the Somme:

Orphelins de Guerre, Quai d'Orléans, Paris, and Étretat, Normandy.

Veuves et Orphelins de la Guerre, 21 Rue des Bons Enfants, Paris.

Enfants Victimes de la Guerre, 4 Boulevard Raspail, Paris.

Mme Frank Piaux, President of this last society, wrote to the League, painting a vivid picture of the sufferings of children near the front. She concluded with a question:

Will you think me over bold? We need space next to one of the houses occupied by our protégés. There is one for immediate sale. It is in every way suitable and stands on its own grounds. It is offered to us at half its value. Could you help us and offer us £500? If you did we would call the home 'Australie' in remembrance of the League's generosity.

Australie was duly bought and it flourished, aided by grants from the League, into the 1920s, and Madame Piaux was recruited to become a member of the League's Paris committee of distribution in 1917.

1917: France's Day in Sydney and the setting up of the Paris Distribution Committee

It was now the FALH's turn to be assigned a dedicated day for fund-raising. A crowded meeting was held in the vestibule of the Sydney Town Hall to plan for this important event which would be called France's Day. Augustine Soubeiran spoke of the aims of the League: 'we are appealing for the little children who place flowers on the graves of Australian soldiers as they do on the graves of their own fathers; these children are the hope not only of France but of the world'. This was to be a very grand occasion for which the patronage of the Prime Minister and the Governor was granted. Neville Mayman was appointed president of this committee.

Neville Mayman's name had been appearing in reports of the League's activities for some time: he was now to play an important part in the final years of the League. Since 1913 he had been a president of the Benevolent

Society, Australia's oldest charity, a non-sectarian group, which had created the Renwick Hospital for infants.²⁴ He had been commissioned to prepare a report for the New South Wales government on the health of mothers and babies in New Zealand, and this interest showed an affinity with the ideas of the various French charities which were being funded by the League. Premier Holman had been closely involved with the Benevolent Society himself, and knowing Neville Mayman's qualities, he may well have been instrumental in recruiting his help for the League.

The Fairfax newspapers helped generously with an initial large donation, followed by substantial free publicity. France's Day on 14 July 1917 was a resounding success. A cheque for £100,000 as a first instalment was handed to Blanche Playoust by the acting Premier at a large concert and ceremony at the Tivoli Theatre, and a similar sum was to follow. Still too shy to speak publicly in English, she delegated the response to Augustine Soubeiran.²⁵ The final total was £215,607, 18 shillings and seven pence. Using the historic CPI index and going to the nearest £, this was the equivalent of approximately \$7,848,030 in today's currency.²⁶

This enormous sum donated by the public of New South Wales needed to be seen to be spent with wisdom and respect. It was therefore decided to send Mlle Soubeiran to Paris to 'assist in and supervise the responsible task of distributing the Fund' (*SMH* 4.9.1917).

Augustine Soubeiran insisted on paying the passage money herself, and, after a farewell meeting in the League's rooms, she left without delay.²⁷

²⁴ This hospital was opened in the Sydney suburb of Summer Hill in 1911 to deal with an epidemic of gastro-enteritis. It is no longer in existence.

²⁵ 'Cheque For £100,000 Gift to France. Memorable Presentation', *SMH*, 31.7.1917.

²⁶ To calculate past money values in terms of today's dollar, use the Retail Price Index Numbers table: http://inflationdata.com/Inflation/ConsumerPrice_Index/HistoricalCPI.aspx?reloaded=true

Take the index number of the current or latest year (the 2014 index was not available at the time of writing) and divide by index number of year in question. Remember that before 1966 10 shillings (½ £) = \$1.

(On the method of calculation outlined above, see:

<http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/ecocom/giblinfaq.html>.)

²⁷ 'French-Australian League Farewell to Mlle. Soubeiran', *Sunday Times*, 9.9.1917.

After her departure from Sydney Neville Mayman took on the role of joint Hon. Secretary as well as co-Treasurer with Miss Gurney.

Augustine Soubeiran arrived in Paris in November and contacted the heads of charities which had already benefited from FALH gifts. A number of these women were appointed to the new Paris committee, as well as Georges Playoust, who had been in Paris since early 1915 and now continued as treasurer. Mlle Soubeiran wrote a long personal letter from Paris to Neville Mayman, chair of the France's Day committee, describing her first days setting up the Paris Committee of Distribution. Her letter gave more details than cablegrams would allow and shows her eagerness to begin work, especially helping displaced people.

In the regions of France under German occupation the healthy would be recruited for forced labour, some being deported to work in German factories. There remained the unproductive such as the very old, the very young and the sick, who would be returned to territories under French control. As Philippe Nivet has written, 'from the beginning of the occupation, women, children and old people were sent back by the Germans to a free part of France'.²⁸ By 1917 massive help was being offered by the International Red Cross to relieve the stress of the displacement of these populations. (After the armistice the process began to repatriate these displaced people to their original homes.)

Mlle Soubeiran felt that the League's assistance should be concentrated on these repatriated persons:

I have now been here for 13 busy days and though far from mastering the fullness of the needs around me, I have a general idea of things. Thanks to your splendid organising efforts we shall be able to relieve much suffering. [...] You will realise the immensity of the task when you hear that over 1,500 refugees reach Evian every day of the week and people need everything. I went to Evian to judge for myself what was most required so as not to waste any of our help and saw four convoys of rapatriés arrive. [...] Some of our clothes found their way there as I was told by the superintendent who, hearing I came from Australia, told me some garments had come through her hands labelled as from Australian friends [...]. I shall write details as soon as

²⁸ Philippe Nivet, *La France occupée 1914–1918*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2011.

our committee is formed—and has discussed the matter. All are willing to act, but Mr. Maurice Barrès writes charming notes and is not to be pinned down. He is so busy writing articles—he is ill. But I shall have him yet [...]. Madame Brasier de Thuy, Mme Playoust [Marie-Thérèse] and myself have talked things over. The tuberculous must be helped—you hear this on every side—and the Red Cross money shall do that work especially. The blind with families will also have priority. It is impossible to speak too much of the work done for us for so long by Mme Brasier de Thuy. I have of course seen Mme Siegfried, Mme Piaux, and Madame Michel, and all are delighted and grateful for the help given. ('The Rapatriés', *SMH* 4.2.1918.)

Another such letter from Mlle Soubeiran was received by an unnamed Sydney recipient:

The first meeting of the administrative committee has just been held and made allocations absorbing about £30,000. We voted about £10,000 for the relief of the North. That includes the soldiers, prisoners of war, widows, orphans, refugees and rapatriés of the unfortunate regions. Monsieur and Madame Playoust will have a preponderant voice in the division. They and their friends know more about it than anyone. ('Distress in France. How Australian Money Helps', *SMH* 25.2.1918.)

Members of the Paris Committee were announced: Mr Maurice Barrès, President; Mr Georges Playoust, Treasurer; Madame Brasier de Thuy, Madame la Générale Michel; Madame Frank Piaux; Madame Jules Siegfried; Mlle Soubeiran.

Maurice Barrès, well known novelist and member of the Académie Française, was a parliamentarian and also general leader writer for *L'Écho de Paris*. Madame Jules Siegfried, formerly Julie Piaux, was a renowned feminist and President of the French National Council of Women. She was the daughter of an eminent Protestant pastor, and mother of political scientist André Siegfried, the secretary of the so called 'Pau Mission' to Australia (see below) the following year ('Women's Column. Lady McMillan's Reception', *SMH* 10.10.1918.). Madame Frank Piaux was from a family of

Protestant historians. She had written a work entitled *Pour concilier l'hygiène et l'économie*²⁹ published in 1912, and was president of the Society for the Protection of Children. There are also tenuous family links to Australia in that a Frank Puaux of a later generation served as Vice-Consul in Australia in World War II, in dramatic circumstances.³⁰

The Committee established a country house called *Mimosa* (French name for Australian wattle) for the education of refugee girls and another house called *Waratah* for tuberculous girls ('Women's Column. Lady McMillan's Reception', *SMH* 10.10.1918).

1918 – 1919

In October 1918, in the closing weeks of the war, at first Sydney and then Melbourne and other Australian cities held enthusiastic official state welcomes for the 'Pau Mission'.³¹ The nine member mission led by General Pau³² had the aim, firstly, of thanking Australia for its contribution to the French war effort during the previous four years, and of re-opening trade links severed by the war. The Mission was asked to give particular thanks to the people of New South Wales for their recent contribution to France's Day. Although Mlle Soubeiran was not formally a member of the Mission, she was invited to accompany it and facilitate its stay in New South Wales. According to the *Sunday Times*, a paper which had on other occasions been Mlle Soubeiran's interpreter:

²⁹ Gabrielle Puaux, *Pour concilier l'hygiène et l'économie*, Paris, Hachette, 1912.

³⁰ See Roger London, 'French-Australian Relations in War time', *Explorations* 10, June 1991, pp. 15–20 and Margaret Barrett, 'Jean Trémoulet, the Unloved Consul-General', *Explorations* 51, December 2011, pp. 15–32.

³¹ The Pau Mission and its aims and outcome would deserve a study in their own right. The Mission's visit to Australia was a significant event in the history of French-Australian relations.

³² The original leader (and ninth member of the mission), Albert Métin, author of *Socialisme sans doctrines. La question agraire et la question ouvrière en Australie et Nouvelle-Zélande*, Paris, Félix Alcan, 1910, died *en route* to the South Pacific in San Francisco.

Mlle Soubeiran [...] found it necessary to return to Australia to consult with her committee over the disbursement of the remainder of the fund, and the French Government requested her to time her journey with that of the French Mission since her intimate knowledge of all parts of New South Wales would help members in their work. (*Sunday Times* 15.9.1918.)

As members of the mission visited other cities in Australia, Mlle Soubeiran undertook a tour of country districts of New South Wales in the company and with the support of Neville Mayman and Miss Gurney, visiting Tamworth, Parkes, Dubbo, Singleton and Albury, as the war drew painfully to its end. Not only did they express their gratitude, but they also lectured, informed and showed photographs, and were received with adulation (*Northern Star*, Lismore, 29.10.1918).

After the departure of the Pau Mission, Mlle Soubeiran left Sydney for France in January 1919, where she continued her work with the Paris committee. Neville Mayman went to England intending to work with Children's Hospitals and Child Welfare. A letter from Mlle Soubeiran after her return to Paris set out the urgency of the task:

the sudden coming of the armistice is drying up the sources of much benevolence. [...] There are three million people to be reinstated in the north, more than a million orphans. No shelter, no food, no work, but sowing time is near. (*SMH* 7.5.1919.)

The war was over, but the League's work was not yet done. The three refuges created by the League, called *Australie*, *Mimosa* and *Waratah*, were functioning but needed help with maintenance. Many people wished to keep the orphanages alive a little longer, for the massive military casualties had made human life all the more precious, yet it was a sensitive time to be raising still more funds, as all the participants in the war were assessing their own human and economic casualties. Influential people in New South Wales came to the rescue. At a large and enthusiastic meeting at the Sydney Town Hall on 10 June 1919 the Lord Mayor announced that there would be another France's Day on behalf of the French Red Cross and the widows and orphans of France ('For France and Her Widows and Orphans', *SMH* 11.6.1919).

The Governor moved:

That the citizens of New South Wales, to show their gratitude and sympathy for the great sacrifices made by her [France] in the war, hereby pledge themselves to assist in raising a further sum to be known as the France's Day Fund 1919.

Premier Holman seconded the motion, alluding to a figure of 1 million orphans in France.

J. O. (later Sir James) Fairfax, newspaper proprietor and NSW chairman of the Red Cross, also spoke in support, having the previous year been one of a delegation of newspaper editors who had visited the front at the invitation of the British government, and had witnessed the devastation. He had also inspected several of the organisations entrusted with the spending of the money raised by the League.³³

A formidable appeal committee included a number of influential Australians. The co-Secretary with Mrs Jewett, E. S. Marks, was closely involved with the NSW Red Cross. He was a wool exporter and a famous name in amateur athletics. The Fairfax influence was again visible in a thoughtful article published ten days later:

In asking for a repetition of the generosity shown in 1917, the French-Australian League of Help is activated by the laudable desire to maintain for at least another year the three orphanages mainly established by the proceeds of the last appeal. To allow them to lapse now would be to deprive France of the most helpful means of recuperating her energies in the future generation. At present the burden is too heavy for France to carry herself. It must be shared by the people who love her and have fought beside her, and who know how deeply the presence and influence of France will be needed in the new world now taking shape. ('France's Day France's Burden', *SMH* 21.6.1919.)

The Governor opened France's Day 1919 at noon on 25 July in Martin Place, with Lady Davidson and their children present. His speech was solemn and emphatic: 'I stand here today for France, the centre of civilisation, the nerve centre of history, whose troops have fought alongside our men'. Blanche

³³ Gavin Souter, *Company of Heralds*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 1981.

Playoust held a stall with Mrs Holman that occupied a central position at the corner of the GPO and George Street. Premier Holman was confident enough to expect the assent of the NSW Parliament to encourage the appeal by promising a subsidy of 5 shillings per pound for the first £20,000 collected. Fine weather and generous cooperation made the day a success ('France's Day City Collection', *SMH* 26.7.1919).

The total receipts for the second France's Day were £17,709, after adding the promised subsidy of five shillings in the pound from the government of New South Wales. This would be the equivalent of about \$476,928 in today's currency. It was another overwhelming gesture of goodwill towards France on the part of the government and the people of New South Wales. A first instalment was cabled to General Pau as President of the French Red Cross for the benefit of the three League orphanages ('Patriotic Women', *The Farmer and Settler* 24.10.1919.)

A letter from Mme Puaux of the Paris committee was received in Sydney concerning the orphanage called *Waratah* where they planned to create a little training farm for their boys. It was fortunate that the women of this committee had advanced ideas on child welfare and sought to give them training for their future.

Joseph and Blanche Playoust left on the *Ormonde* to travel to France and planned to attend the last meeting of the League's Paris Committee in October 1919. Shortly afterwards, Marie-Thérèse Playoust, now widowed, arrived in Sydney by the *Ventura*, and spoke at length to several newspapers:

Before M. and Mme. [Georges] Playoust left, they helped to found the French-Australian League of Help, and during her stay in Paris Mme. Playoust assisted with the distributions of the funds and goods in France. She is anxious to assure the people of N.S.W. of the wonderful good their generous giving has done among France's war victims and she would like them to know of Mlle Soubeiran's latest practical scheme for assuring permanently good results. At present the New South Wales contribution is being used for destitute widows with large families. The widow and children farm the little plot and so are gradually becoming self-supporting and independent. (*Sunday Times* 7.9.1919.)

Closing days of the League

In Sydney, on 15 October 1919, the League issued its last report and the final balance sheet was also published ('French-Australian League. Popular Fund Closed', *SMH* 15.10.1919).

The last meeting of the Paris Distribution Committee took place in a small office at 372 Rue St Honoré on Thursday 16 October. Maurice Barrès presided and Madame Jules Siegfried and Mlle Soubeiran were present. M. Prenat had replaced Georges Playoust as treasurer after his death in the last week of the war. Joseph and Blanche Playoust were present, as well as Messrs Moreau and Shard. Mlle Soubeiran had invited Neville Mayman to come from London to attend the meeting, and he wrote a detailed letter to the *Telegraph* on 30 December, which was reproduced in the *Morning Bulletin* of Rockhampton ('French-Australian League Last Meeting in Paris', *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin* 28.1.1920). This final meeting vested 200,000 francs for distribution among the small, devastated villages in the Ardennes, behind Rheims, one of which attached the name of Sydney to its own, becoming Poilcourt-Sydney as a gesture of gratitude. Miss Gurney joined Mlle Soubeiran in the distributions in this region.

Neville Mayman's seven year experience as president of the Benevolent Society equipped him well to assess the League's achievements perceptively. His summing up of the FALH's work provides an appropriate conclusion to this history of the French-Australian League of Help:

My special object in writing [...] is to assure the special France's Day committee which conducted the big appeal in 1917 and the people of NSW who gave so cordially, that the French-Australian League of Help has proved a most excellent channel for the distribution of their gifts. I have closely studied the Committee's records and methods and am delighted to be able to state that the work has been carried out with complete disregard of the technical apparatus usually associated with conventional charitable organisations. The giving has been sympathetic but never impulsive. [...] The committee saw the needs of the situation with penetrating and interpreting vision. It met those needs in a broad, humane and affectionate manner that added largely to the value of their gifts. [...] The committee has systematised sympathy

and ignored all religious and political differences. Having no prejudices, it has stood the test of time for straight methods and the square deal, which we in Australia admire so much. Australia's offerings have brought sunlight into dark places and banished the grim spectacle of starvation from the homes of thousands of our French brothers and sisters.³⁴

Representations and misrepresentations

It might be illuminating to look back on how the press and later historians perceived the development of the FALH in the four years of war, and more specifically the establishment of the League in 1914.

The late 1914 and early 1915 press reports were consistent in reporting these founding events as they happened, but it becomes interesting to observe how passing months and years could subsequently blur the memories of journalists, then others. Already by 8 August 1915 the Sydney *Sunday Times*, forgetting its very complete and accurate account of the proceedings in its edition of 3 January of the same year, and perhaps confirming Mlle Soubeiran's deftness in dealing with the press, did not hesitate to claim that

Mlle Soubeiran convened a meeting in the Hotel Australia on December 22, 1914, with M. Chayet the Consul-General in the chair. Arrangements were made to establish the French-Australian League in New South Wales.

It was a country newspaper, *The Tamworth Observer*, that possibly first described Mlle Soubeiran herself as 'the original founder of the League' (*Tamworth Daily Observer* 19.11.1916.) This was in November 1916, almost two years after the founding of the FALH. She was on one of her customary visits to Red Cross centres in country towns, informing them and the local journalists of the work of the League. With her attractive and very striking personality, she quickly became what is now called a 'celebrity' and was seen

³⁴ Letter to the *Telegraph*, 30.12.1919, reproduced in the *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*, 28.1.1920.

as the public face of the League. Blanche Playoust's shyness in speaking English aided this perception. More journalists took up the term 'original founder', and it spread rapidly. By 12 February 1918 the *Sydney Morning Herald* that had described the foundation of the League quite accurately four years earlier referred to Mlle Soubeiran as 'the founder' of the League, but this same newspaper of 19 February 1919 rectified its mistake when interviewing Madame Georges Playoust on her return to Australia, and describing Mlle Soubeiran appropriately as 'one of the founders' of the FALH ('Mme Playoust Back from France', *SMH* 3.9.1919).

All this made the task of writing Mlle Soubeiran's obituary for the *Sydney Morning Herald* very difficult when the time came (*SMH* 4.6.1933), and the unnamed obituarist, without citing sources, carried the story even further by stating that 'the initiation of the FALH was her idea'.

Professor E. G. Waterhouse, in his tribute, used notes inspired by Miss Gurney, Augustine Soubeiran's colleague and close friend, and he very accurately reproduced them verbatim in a jagged telegraphic style. Possibly the notes were dictated directly to him, but this is not stated.³⁵ Concerning the League, Miss Gurney stated as follows: 'She formed the French-Australian League. She was secretary; I was treasurer. Collected thousands and thousands of pounds, great quantities of clothes.'

Again blotting out anyone but her friend and herself, this assertion is replete with glaring inaccuracies: erroneous use of the personal pronoun ('she formed the French-Australian League'); omission of the role of Mrs Jewett ('She was secretary'); omission of the role of Mr C. Le Maistre Walker ('I was treasurer').

Moreover, Miss Gurney makes a further unsupported claim when she goes on to give Mlle Soubeiran an absolute role in decisions concerning the disbursement of funds. She refers to the latter's return from France accompanying the respected Pau Mission of experts who had made the journey to Australia to reopen trade relations after the war, in this way: 'Shortly before the Armistice she returned to let us know what was being done, how she had spent the money. She was accompanied by two or three friends.' It is possible

³⁵ E. G. Waterhouse, 'French and English: The Late Soubeiran', *The Sydney Mail*, 14.6.1933. p. 25

that Miss Gurney was confused by the grief of losing her friend, but she cannot be seen here as a reliable witness.

A more accurate wording was used by Fifi Hawthorne, formerly principal of Kambala, in her 1972 history of the school in which she refers to her predecessor and co-founder of Kambala thus: ‘the FALH of which she [Mlle Soubeiran] was a founder and one of the joint hon. secretaries of the league’.³⁶

Unfortunately, however, these distortions and partial truths have influenced subsequent historians. Irene Cunningham, for example, in her article on Augustine Soubeiran, states that ‘Mademoiselle was the initiator of the French-Australian League of Help’.³⁷ This bald assertion (‘the initiator’) follows Miss Gurney’s example of misattribution. Such a misrepresentation of Augustine Soubeiran’s role has even been adopted as orthodoxy by the writer of the entry on her in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, who states:

At the outbreak of World War 1, with Louisa Gurney’s backing, Mlle Soubeiran initiated the French-Australian League of Help; as its secretary she assisted in establishing one of the largest patriotic organisations in Australia.³⁸

The role of the other founders of the League and that of the co-Secretary, Mrs Jewett, were ignored in this entry as well as in many newspaper reports, though Mrs Jewett had worked loyally as co-Secretary at the depot from the League’s inception and for all the war years.

It could be thought that these distortions might have gained wider acceptance by the fact that there seems to be no record of Mlle Soubeiran ever attempting to explicitly rectify the inaccurate claims about the foundation of the League that appeared in the press during her lifetime, notably in the *Sunday Times* with which she seems to have been associated. In the *Complete Resumé*, which was almost certainly the handiwork of Mlle Soubeiran, the reference, or

³⁶ Fifi Hawthorne, *Kambala A History*, Sydney, The Wentworth Press, 1972, p. 53.

³⁷ Irene Cunningham, ‘Mademoiselle Augustine Soubeiran, *Explorations* 4, 1987, pp. 11–15.

³⁸ G. E. Sheringham, ‘Soubeiran, Augustine 1858-1933’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 12, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1990.

rather lack thereof, to the setting up of the League could be seen as enabling the creation of a myth.³⁹

Whatever their source or motivation, such misrepresentations do a disservice not only to the other key players in the FALH but also to Mlle Soubeiran herself, whose tireless efforts over many years, both in Australia and in France on behalf of the League, combined with her vivacious personality and public relations acumen, as well as facility in speaking and writing, were an important part of its success and deserve to be recognised for what they were, and are in no need of embroidery.

In short, through exploring previously under-utilised resources, we hope to have shed some clearer light on the actual circumstances of the F.A.L.H., with regard to the actions of individuals, both public and private, and to broader public sentiment in this remarkable chapter in French-Australian relations.

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³⁹ See footnote 5: 'The story of the founding of the F.A.L. of H. is too well known to need repeating' (*Complete Resumé*).