

‘JE SUIS EN AUSTRALIE’: A PERSONAL MEMOIR  
OF VILLERS-BRETONNEUX

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‘I am in Australia!’ Those were the words we screamed as children when stepping with delight on the thick lawn of the Australian cemetery in Villers-Bretonneux. Under the vast sky, blue or grey, here was ‘Australia’, here was immensity, here was freedom. On the soft green turf, we could run and run, first to the centre of the lawn where the tall stone cross stood, supporting an impressively big sword, point down. We would climb the very high steps leading to the foot of the cross and then we would go on as far as the majestic tower dominating the Memorial. It was a race to see who would reach it first. But we never went inside. It had been damaged during the last war (1939–1945), and was unsafe. Behind the tower, at the far end of what was for us ‘Australia’, there were no tombs but big bushes which were ideal for playing hide and seek or other games that did not require anything but running and sometimes singing. Lots of delighted children’s laughter rose to the sky!

We knew that the *Mémorial* was a burial place for the Australian soldiers, and also some from Canada and New Zealand, but because it looked more like a park, and was not at all a sad place, we did not think of it as a cemetery. The vastness of it, especially for small children, and the open fields all around it, sloping gently down to the valley of the Somme, gave us an exciting feeling of liberty. And because we had walked from our house for what seemed a long time to this place—very isolated in those days—my mother pushing the pram of the last born (we became a family of six in Villers-Bretonneux), we felt very far from home. The immense lawn surrounded with flowers and standing slabs of stone felt like another world, at a great distance from our French village. We might well have been on the other side of the Earth. Each tombstone corresponded to one soldier. Thousands of them, and France had given this piece of land to Australia for ever so that they should be at home in their graves. It was no longer France for us, it *was* ‘Australia’.

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<sup>1</sup> Recollections by Annie Brassart, (now Anne Brassart-Evans) former inhabitant of Villers-Bretonneux and president of the Franco-Australian Association of that village from 2007 to 2009.

We were not allowed to play close to the graves but once my mother made me decipher names engraved on the tombstones, and she had a sad face when saying the age of the dead men. For a child of four or five, the age of twenty or even nineteen is unthinkable old. It was not death nor the young age of the victims that could make an impression on the very little girl I was. It was the expression of sorrow on my mother's face. Often she would make us admire the flowers along the rows of tombs, and how well the cemetery was looked after.

When we, the older three, were old enough to ride a bicycle, she started taking us to the swimming-pool in Corbie, with her last born in a basket on her own bicycle. The swimming pool was then a primitive place with cold dark green water directly from the river Somme. I did not like it at all, but the reward for me was that we would stop on the way back for a rest at the Memorial and have a good run on the grass. Once she must have cycled there with my father who took a photograph of her sitting on the low wall on the side of the large stairs at the entrance of the cemetery, nursing her last born baby. A peaceful scene of a young French woman in a flowery dress, breastfeeding her son where thousands of Australian women's sons had been killed less than thirty years before—young strangers now resting in the soil of Picardie. Many years later, as a mature woman visiting Gallipoli for the first time, I was reminded of this moment of my mother's life when I read the extract of Mustapha Kemal's speech in homage to the soldiers killed in that most disastrous of battles: 'You the mothers who sent their sons from far away countries wipe away your tears. Your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well.'

I wish I had anecdotes to tell about an Australian who stayed on in 1918 after the end of the First World War, but that was too long ago, and reference to the Second World War prevailed in my childhood, the First World War being encapsulated within it. Even though I was not old enough to be aware of it at the time, it should be said that above all, after 1945 the people of France wanted to start a normal life again, to rebuild once more what had been destroyed and to live in peace, without fear. War had to be put behind.

This is what the Right Honourable H. V. Evatt missed when he wrote in the 1950s: 'What seems just as urgent (as repairing the Memorial) is some means of renewing the bonds that link Melbourne with the village school. There is a pathetic cardboard notice "Never forget Australia" but



there is absolutely nothing in recent years to keep alive the tradition of the AIF in the minds of the new generation of France'.<sup>2</sup> 'In recent years', France had been occupied by the Germans and all signs of gratefulness to the Australians for having beaten them in Villers-Bretonneux and everywhere were forbidden and had to be destroyed. 'The village school' he is referring to is what was then known as 'l'école des garçons', the boys' school, named *École Victoria* after its reconstruction by the Australians and its inauguration in 1927. Until the 1960s, girls and boys went to separate schools. The girls' school of Villers-Bretonneux, a large 19<sup>th</sup> century brick building, was one of the rare structures not to be totally destroyed in April 1918 during the battle to recapture the village from the Germans. It was briefly used as a war hospital, then became again the girls' school. I was a pupil there with my sister in the 1950s. I have only one memory of hearing about Australia in class: one teacher showed us where it was, with a knitting needle piercing an orange diagonally. It went in through what represented France and came out on the other side where Australia was marked. 'You cannot go any further. As soon as you leave Australia, you start coming back, whichever side you go,' That fact was particularly intriguing for me. We all knew that very strange animals lived there, carrying their babies in their front pocket. But we did not know much else from school at that time.

My brothers went to the other school, the 'école des garçons'. Were they aware that their school had been rebuilt by the Australians? The elder one told me that he knew it, but not from the teachers. He heard it mentioned, as I did too, in conversations at home between my parents and family or friends. He vaguely remembers a panel bearing the word 'Australia' under the playground shelter (*le préau*), probably the same one mentioned by Dr Evatt. My brother remembers better the strange animals carved at the top of the wood panelling in the assembly hall. The teachers did call the attention of the children to them, and they knew they were animals that really existed in a remote country called Australia. He also remembers the long walks with the school to the Memorial for a ceremony with military music, and to the French War Monument in the centre of the village, the 'Monument aux Morts'. In France we do not erect monuments to War, but to all the Dead who perished

<sup>2</sup> Allan Blankfield and Robin S. Corfield, *Never forget Australia, n'oublions jamais l'Australie—Australia and Villers-Bretonneux (1918–1993)*, Melbourne, The Villers-Bretonneux 75th Anniversary Pilgrimage Project Committee, 1993.



in the war. To this day, I feel the shiver that went through me when the single trumpet of the village band, in the total silence, would play the few tragic notes of 'L'appel aux Morts', the call to the Dead.

That same brother remembers the visit of a group of strangers in his classroom, accompanied by 'Monsieur Rinet'. He knew him well because Léon Rinet was a friend of my parents, owner of a weaving factory and town councillor, just like my father. But he does not remember being told that these visitors were Australians. He only guessed it because we knew, in the family, that Monsieur Rinet, a tall handsome man, intelligent and forward-looking and his wife, a very nice woman called Louissette, always smiling and generous, were involved with the Australians, but no *Waltzing Mathilda* was sung then, nothing was explained to the pupils, neither about the visitors nor the reason for their visit in their class. Or perhaps they did not pay much attention, too busy to enjoy their little boys' lives.

One day our parents told us that an orphan girl was going to stay with us for a holiday in Villers-Bretonneux. She was thirteen, very old for us, as we were far from being teenagers yet, and her name was Gudrun, which made my young brothers giggle enormously. They also explained that she would be coming to France with a group of children who would stay with other families in the village. They were German children whose families had been killed during the war. Church charities were looking after them in Germany. My parents were members of a Catholic association of young married couples who were seeking to live by the Gospel's difficult demand to love and forgive one another, even enemies. They were modest precursors of the forgiveness and promise of peace that de Gaulle and Adenauer solemnly sealed in Rheims cathedral on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July 1962 in the name of their two countries.

Thus we learned, with Gudrun's visit, that *les Boches* were not only the dreadful enemy, but that they also had children who had suffered because of the madness of war. In the late 1950s my father's work took us away from Villers-Bretonneux, or just 'Villers' as we usually call our village. Another life began for the family.

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It was only after a long life in various parts of France and several other countries that destiny brought me back to Villers, my childhood village, only to leave it again in 2012, this time married to an Australian. From 2004 to

2009, as I was alone then and had some free time, I became very involved in the Franco-Australian Association of Villers-Bretonneux. In 2007 after the death of the President, the dedicated Monsieur Thierry (Jean-Pierre, as the Australians always called him), I accepted to be elected President of the Association only to give the members of the committee time to find someone else. I could not commit myself to taking over the responsibility for long, as I was about to leave France again to work abroad.

During those few years back in Villers I had the pleasure of discovering in depth the whole magnificent story linked with my dear childhood impressions of the Australian Memorial. The First World War took a shape of its own, as the first part of the bloody tragedy that culminated into the Second World War, with its gruesome French experience of defeat, partition of the country, German occupation, civil war between the Vichy French and the Free French, deportation of Frenchmen to work in Germany and the horrors of concentration camps to eliminate Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, *Résistants* and all those brave French people who had tried to help them. Compared to that, the First World War appeared to me like the last of the old-time wars.

Concerning Villers-Bretonneux, I learned of the bravery of the Australian brigades sent in April 1918 to that weak point in the Western Front, between the allied armies, British to the north and French to the south. The Germans had taken advantage of this weakness to capture the village and intended to push on to Longueau, and its important railway junction, a few kilometres away from Amiens. It is important to note that the population of the village had been evacuated as soon as the German advance was known in March 1918. My grandparents, then young parents of my father born in 1914, and my aunt in 1916, went to Boves, not very far south, but on the other side of the battle line. Reminiscing in her old age, my aunt told me of that miniature exodus and of her awareness of the difficulties for everyday survival in Boves. And when they were allowed to go back to Villers, they found only ruins. *Plus rien!* she said with emphasis. My grandfather's wool weaving factory (one of the many *bonneteries* that were the wealth of Villers in those days), the house, everything in that area including the boys' school and the church were nothing but rubble on the ground. And everyone was more or less in the same catastrophic situation that many inhabitants had known already in 1871 after the ferocious invasion by Prussians. But that is another older story of war.

I became familiar with the names of the two exceptional Brigadiers-General who led their men to victory, William Glasgow and Pompey Elliott—and also Sadler and Stokes—the bravest of the brave. But I am no strategic expert. I could not go into details of this important battle. The new visitors centre with an interpretation centre which is being built this year (2015) at the Memorial will no doubt do it very well. As brilliantly and efficiently led as the battle was, more than one thousand young men lost their lives that night—and many more, counting the dead Germans—that great night of victory corresponding to the date of the defeat in Gallipoli three years earlier. They were buried as best as possible in this destroyed village, a temporary cemetery in a field, with rough crosses made of wood taken from the ruins of the village, and names painted on them, with dates of the deceased if they were known.

For me, the most moving photograph of those times of mourning can be seen in the Museum in Victoria School, the original being at the War Memorial in Canberra. It is a simple scene of girls of Villers-Bretonneux laying flowers on the fresh tombs of the dead soldiers. The vases look like old jam jars, as makeshift as the crosses. From the girls' appearance one can guess at the poor circumstances of their lives but they *are* alive and young, and showing gratitude and respect to the dead strangers buried in the chalky soil of their destroyed but liberated village.

I became aware of one marvellous fact that I always liked to emphasise to the visitors of the Museum. Long before creating their National Memorial (pictured next page) that stands splendidly on the hill outside the village, the Australians helped to rebuild Villers-Bretonneux and, most significantly, the boys' school that had been completely demolished in 1918. The living children taken care of before the Dead, as brave and respected as they were! The school was inaugurated on ANZAC Day 1927 whereas the inauguration of the Memorial by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth took place only on the 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1938, shortly before the start of the Second World War. The school benefitted from a special treatment as it was entirely 'Australian made', from the architect's drawings to the importation of the wood for the floors and panelling of the walls in the hall that we call the 'Salle Victoria'. That hall is, in itself, an exception in France because we do not have assembly halls as they had originally a religious purpose. The only place where you can gather all the pupils of one French school would be, typically enough, the dining-hall! Nowadays, it is called the *salle polyvalente*.



Family members walk to the Villers–Bretonneux Australian National Memorial which dominates the skyline and is the entrance to the War cemetery

The strange carved animals that my brother remembered from his school days were the creation of the Australian sculptor John Grant and his students from the Daylesford Technical College in Victoria. They represent fauna and flora indigenous to Australia, completely exotic for the French. On ANZAC Day 2008, I had the pleasure of welcoming the sculptor's grand-daughter to Villers-Bretonneux. She donated a painting done by her grandfather to the Museum.

That same day I was pleased to meet a very old lady who was visiting for the first time 'the school that I gave a penny to for its reconstruction'. It is a lovely way to put it, as the story is told, romanticised a little for pedagogical purposes. Why not? The people of Australia, especially the state of Victoria responded with great generosity to the Government's appeal for funds to help the reconstruction of France. Villers-Bretonneux was 'adopted' by Melbourne.

Returning to the Villers of my childhood, I rediscovered its reality and I understood gradually how the Australian connection 'sadly ignored by the new generation of France', according to Dr Evatt in the 1950s, had been resurrected in more recent years. It started in 1950 when a group of friends, Léon Rinet and Marcel Pillon among them, decided to put together a number of items that they had collected from the last wars. So much was left on the battlefields—munitions, arms, everyday life objects from the trenches,



all sorts of things which were just unwanted reminders of war at first, but gradually took on a historical value for those who were collectors at heart. They were given the use of the little entrance room on the upper floor of the Victoria School, a 45 square metre space with a large window. Later, it became the 'accueil', the reception place, of the museum. At that time, after the interruption of the Second World War, Australians, mostly veterans, started coming back to Villers-Bretonneux to visit the battlefields and the Memorial. It had been damaged during the last war, but was still the place where their old comrades or men of their families were buried. Naturally they went to the Town Hall for information. This is how Monsieur Rinet met a group of old disabled Australians, so helpless after their long journey that he realised the necessity to create a structure to welcome such visitors. With his friend Marcel Pillon and the full support of the Mayor, Pierre Tranchard, he created in 1959 the 'Comité d'accueil Franco-Australien'. The Australian Ambassador was fully involved in this creation. They were on very friendly terms. The Embassy in Paris was far from being the important building and important post it has become nowadays. Léon Rinet and his wife Louise would receive the Ambassador and his wife in their own home, as did the families Tranchard and Pillon. Official representatives of the Commonwealth would come from London and there were ceremonies and receptions. The most memorable of them was the Agent-General of Victoria, William Leggatt. He held his post in London from 1956 to 1964. He had personal memories of fighting in this part of Picardie during the First World War. He had taken part in the battles of Villers-Bretonneux and had survived. He was a great support to the Welcome Committee.

Some old inhabitants of Villers-Bretonneux remember that the Committee was felt to be a little too exclusive by the rest of the population. However, it achieved what was needed at the time: to arouse their curiosity about the Australian link with their village. The collection of war memorabilia in the attic of the boys' school was sorted out so that only the First World War items were presented and particularly the Australian ones. Gradually the attic was transformed and the informal collections were turned into a proper Museum. It was officially inaugurated in 1975 and named after Sir William Leggatt. This event was the occasion to refurbish the school in general, to paint a fresh 'DO NOT FORGET AUSTRALIA' on the *préau* of the playground in big yellow letters on a dark green background, and to place new inscriptions above the blackboards in the classrooms. They are in French



and say: 'N'oublions jamais l'Australie'. The original inscriptions on wood panels were put up in 1927 at the creation of the school. They had to be taken down and hidden away thirteen years later under German rule. One of them has been preserved and can be seen in the hall of the Victoria School.

As always, some personalities can make a difference to how things evolve. Those who were instrumental in renewing the interest of the inhabitants for their Australian link after the tragic gap due to the Second World War had been Léon Rinet, Marcel Pillon, Pierre Tranchard and a few others in the 1950s. Then came Jean-Pierre Thierry in 1975, [see <http://theatrum-belli.org/la-somme-90-ans-apres-la-grande-bataille/>] the President with whom I worked for a while before his death in 2007, and Hubert Lelieur, the mayor. Those were the leaders for innovations like the *jumelage* between Villers-Bretonneux and Robinvale in Victoria. They were declared 'twin towns' in 1984 and their *jumelage* has continued ever since, with ups and downs and a few inconsistencies in the long term, due to conflicts of personalities. This aspect of things is not specific to a particular place. I have seen it happen everywhere, village, town, big or small, any country, any time, for any reason. As for the life of associations, I have come across situations of conflict and clash of personalities everywhere. Villers-Bretonneux is no different.

Sometimes it has positive effects, like the creation by the Municipality of the *semaine australienne*, the Australian Week, which includes the 25<sup>th</sup> of April and the ANZAC ceremonies, a very good initiative, but causing some competition with the *Comité de jumelage* that was not included at first. However, after a few years, a sensible agreement prevailed, and more activities were organised in that week, including a reception for the visitors from Robinvale: lectures, concerts, parades, battlefield visits, on foot or by road or by small planes from the nearby small airfield of Glisy near Amiens, and also an Australian (AFL) football match in the fields. A few shopkeepers make an effort to put up an Australian décor in their shop-windows. Since the first 'Dawn service' in 2008 (there had always been official ceremonies with the Australian Ambassador and other personalities on 25<sup>th</sup> of April but not at dawn) the number of Australian and British visitors has considerably increased and the villagers can hardly ignore that something important is happening. Many respond positively to the appeal of the *Comité de jumelage* to offer hospitality to the Australian visitors as there is no hotel or guest-house in Villers-Bretonneux since I closed my unofficial one in 2009.

My observation about the importance of individuals in making things happen and live on also applies to the school and its teachers. There are no specific instructions to them concerning the unique status of the Victoria School and its historic link with Australia. It is up to the personal interest and initiative of individual teachers. Many are appointed to that school knowing nothing of First World War events in Villers-Bretonneux and they will not try to find out. Some can see that it is a great way of teaching history and geography to their pupils, and also important values such as gratitude, fidelity, respect and honour. Some will start teaching English to them, making a connection with schoolchildren in Australia, and starting a correspondence. Much depends too on the headmaster or headmistress. He or she might facilitate the teachers' initiatives, or make it difficult for them for all sorts of reasons, sometimes just not to be involved in more than the basic school curriculum. In the few years that I was involved in the Museum inside the school, I was happy to witness some excellent work done by several teachers: Chantal Macret, who taught for many years at the Victoria School, was particularly dedicated. She had personal friends in Australia and transmitted her love of that country to her pupils. The rare times when Australian visitors heard *Waltzing Matilda* in a classroom were in hers. This was the start of a legend that all the school children of Villers-Bretonneux could sing *Waltzing Matilda*! But Chantal Macret retired in June 2009 and as far as I know, no one really took over from her, at least for a few years. The new headmistress had to apply strict instructions from the Education Department to keep visitors out. It is no longer possible to wander into the playground and have a photograph taken under the famous sign 'Do not forget Australia', except with special permission.

Pupils leaving the primary school do their secondary education at the Collège Jacques Brel in Villers-Bretonneux, from age 11 or 12 to 14 or 15, and then on to the lycée mostly in Amiens. Again, depending on the personality and interest of the college principal and some of the teachers, the culture of celebrating the Franco-Australian relationship is continued or not. During my years in Villers-Bretonneux, I witnessed and supported the excellent work of one of the English teachers, Madame Petitjean, also member of the Franco-Australian Association. She had succeeded in involving a few colleagues in cultivating interest in the Australian link and passing it on to their pupils. Those pupils who had been taught by Chantal Macret in primary school were already well informed, as were their parents who had to

approve and accept that their children be involved in various events during the *Semaine australienne* and for some other occasional events organised in the village or by the College. A lot of initiative and hard work and donations make it possible for Madame Petitjean to organise school trips every two years to Australia itself: a fantastic journey, always very well prepared and pedagogically exploited on their return, with high quality reporting presented to the public in the Victoria School assembly hall by the pupils themselves. She and her class, in the name of the College, received the Sadlier-Stokes Prize in 2008.<sup>3</sup>

The Collège Jacques Brel responded well to the fund-raising appeal made by the Franco-Australian Association to help the rebuilding of an Australian school (in Strathewen) destroyed by fire in the dramatic ‘black Saturday’ bush fires of 2009 in the State of Victoria. Pupils and teachers did their share of collecting money, as did the primary schools and all other institutions in the village. ‘They helped us in our time of need; it now is our turn to help them’.

That touching story moved the heart and mind of an Australian artist, Andrew Plant, when he heard of it and he decided to make it known to Australian children by means of an illustrated book.<sup>4</sup> I was no longer involved officially in the Franco-Australian Association then, except as an ordinary member, but I was asked by Lorraine and Mélanie, hostesses and secretaries of the Museum who received his email, to give him information and support. Contacts were made, and in September 2011 I had the pleasure of gathering in my house in Villers-Bretonneux some representatives of the various entities involved in the continuation of the pledge of remembrance with Australia. Invited by Madame Petitjean, we also went to the College where we were welcomed by an enthusiastic Principal, for whom the Australian link was so important that he was trying to obtain a change of name for his College. There are many schools in France called ‘Jacques Brel’. For Villers-Bretonneux, he wanted a name specifically related to Australia and the First World War. He

<sup>3</sup> Sergeant Stokes and Lieutenant Clifford Sadlier VC received awards for their bravery and leadership during the battle to liberate Villers-Bretonneux in 1918—a battle that was instrumental in turning the tide of the war. Sergeant Stokes was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal and Lieutenant Sadlier the Victoria Cross. On his return to Australia Stokes named his farm ‘Villers’.

<sup>4</sup> See Andrew Plant’s own testimony in this issue (Ed.).

wanted to have it renamed ‘John Monash’ after the great Australian general, who stated that ‘There is no spot on the whole of the tortured soil of France which is more associated with Australian history and the triumph of Australian soldiers than Villers-Bretonneux.’<sup>5</sup>

But the Principal had to obtain permission from the education authorities as high up as the Ministry. So far, I have not heard that he has been successful. In fact, the name Monash might well be attributed to the new Visitors Centre planned at the Memorial long before the College can obtain it (see Editor’s Notes at the end of this article). Andrew Plant made other visits to Villers-Bretonneux, trying to understand the complexities of this modest French village where the old inhabitants are still wary of strangers after so many war tragedies throughout the centuries, and the new ones are hardly aware of that history. His charming book *The Poppy* was published in 2014. It might well play a role in transmitting the story of the Australians at Villers-Bretonneux to the younger generations, in Australia and in France, together with more and more children’s publications on the subject.<sup>6</sup>

Significant changes have now started at the Memorial and at the Museum. When related by the media, the Australian public may have the impression that this is all new. It is not new, of course. Over the years the people of Villers-Bretonneux became *blasés* if not sarcastic or highly amused whenever big plans for the Memorial were discussed between Embassy, municipal and local authorities and the Franco-Australian Association. I must point out here that they have become so used to having visits from very important officials from Australia, the last one being the then Prime Minister himself, on ANZAC Day 2014, that they have ceased to marvel and even to pay much attention. This very down to earth population takes it all in its stride and goes on minding its own business while ‘Ché z’ Australiens’ (a Picard way of saying ‘les Australiens’) go about theirs. After all, the Memorial belongs to

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Allan Blankfield and Robin S. Corfield, *Never forget Australia, n’oublions jamais l’Australie—Australia and Villers-Bretonneux (1918–1993)*, Melbourne, The Villers-Bretonneux 75th Anniversary Pilgrimage Project Committee, 1993, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Derek Guille’s bi-lingual *The Promise: the town that never forgets/ N’oublions jamais l’Australie*, Illustrated by Kaff-eine, translated by Anne-Sophie Biguet, Melbourne, One Day Hill, 2013.

the Australians. It is ‘a corner of Australia in France’ as is written on the road sign at the entrance of the village by the Amiens road.

When I became involved with the Museum and the Association in 2004, there had already been many projects and programmes, with budgets approved in the preceding years; more projects and studies were done during the following years, only to be put aside at every change of the Australian government. This time, with the approach of the various centenaries of the major events of the First World War, there is an urgency in finalising the chosen project. This time, it may well happen. Already work has started both on the site of the Memorial and at the Museum in the Victoria School. I would like to point out that, as distinct from other participants, the members of the Franco-Australian Association who were asked to take part in the preparatory meetings gave their time and their work free of charge. They were doing it as the Museum and the Association have always been run, on a volunteer basis, with a sense of duty and sincere gratitude to those young men who gave their lives on the soil of Picardie so long ago.

With the growing numbers of visitors and the pressure of increased mail since the arrival of the internet, the volunteers could no longer respond to the demand. Therefore, one and then two posts had to be created for the day-to-day running of the Museum (in 1999 and 2008 respectively), welcoming the visitors and selling the entrance tickets, the only independent source of revenue for the Association, which has to pay the staff from its own resources. As for me, I have made only a passing contribution of a few years, but in recent years I have witnessed with deep admiration men like Jean-Pierre Tranchard, son of the mayor of the 1950s, Pierre Tranchard, Yves Taté (also responsible for the *jumelage* and the ‘Villers-Mémoire’<sup>7</sup> projects) and Étienne Denys giving much time and energy so that the Association and the Museum could continue to serve their purpose. I could name many others that I have known over my decade in Villers-Bretonneux—like Chantal Macret, Évelyne Petitjean, and Émile and Françoise Duquennoy who must be the oldest members of them all. I was particularly impressed by the regularity of Étienne Denys’s presence at the Museum and by his efficiency in solving all the practical problems of the upkeep of the place, as well as his knowledge

<sup>7</sup> This association, presided by Yves Taté, groups researchers, collectors and historians to preserve and transmit the memory of Villers-Bretonneux. See [villersmemoire.monsite-orange.fr](http://villersmemoire.monsite-orange.fr).

of the events of 1918 on the battlefield in Villers-Bretonneux. He was a good modest man who genuinely felt for the bravery and death of so many young soldiers from far away; when I listened to him, it was as if he had known them personally and that it all happened only yesterday. Together with his friend Bernard Vaquez, member of the Franco-Australian Association, he made the miniature model of the famous German tank Mephisto, the task demanding 750 hours' work from each of them. This skilfully crafted object is now part of the Museum collection. As president of the Franco-Australian Association, I formally recommended to David Ritchie, the Australian Ambassador, that M. Denys be awarded the Order of Australia. I heard some two years later that he had received the Order of Australia medal, a just reward for a good man totally dedicated to the Franco-Australian friendship.

Maybe someone, one day, will conduct proper research into how the Franco-Australian Association of Villers-Bretonneux came to exist, how it evolved, how it helped to keep the pledge of gratefulness alive. It had to face constant changes since the 1950s, with ups and downs due to local and Australian politics and personalities. Most of those members who had a link with the founders are dead or affected by the ills of old age. As far as I know, the old guard seems pleased that the Villers-Bretonneux sites have been given enough finance and support from Australia to keep the story alive. The Museum in the school attic will be renovated, made more secure and accessible, including provision of facilities for the disabled. But will visitors still come to the School and its Museum in the centre of the village? Will the tour operators not be content with taking their visitors to the enlarged *Mémorial* with its interpretation centre and will they skip the other aspect of the story to be seen in town? Huge transformations are going on at the Memorial and due recognition of the role of Australians on the Western Front is on the way. The story of so many victories won there by the AIF and the ANZACs may at last counterbalance the fascination for the defeat of the ANZACs at Gallipoli, which for many of us, in Villers, always seemed bizarre.

In all this huge interest and promotion for the Centenary of the First World War in their village, the old guard of the Franco-Australian Association have had to adjust to radical changes. From its modest beginnings it had been for them and their predecessors a non-commercial historic pledge and I was



proud to be part of it when living in Villers. We all understand the need for funds to make something big happen, yet we fear that by turning the sites into money-making tourist attractions something will be lost on the way.

But maybe not! My hope is well illustrated by one of the sculptures on the façade of Amiens Cathedral: above the central portal, in the centre of the representation of the Last Judgement, Archangel Michael is holding the scales to weigh the good and evil of each soul. On one side the Devil is trying hard to make Evil weigh heavier, but, the Angel holding the scales with his left hand is pressing down on the other side with his right hand to make Good weigh more, so that the soul can enter Paradise. Good will prevail, in the end. That is the teaching of what Ruskin called ‘the Bible of Amiens’. Amiens cathedral, the World Heritage 13<sup>th</sup> century cathedral and several times survivor of major wars, is well worth a visit. Australians will find inside on a pillar close to the portal of the Golden Virgin (la Vierge dorée) a plaque dedicated to the ANZACs for their great contribution in saving the cathedral, thanks to their brave fighting on the Western Front and notably at the battles of Amiens and Villers-Bretonneux.

*Montbazin, France*



**EDITOR'S NOTES:****The Australian National Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux**

On 26<sup>th</sup> April 2015 former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott unveiled plans for the new Sir John Monash Centre, to be constructed at the Australian National Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux. When complete, the Sir John Monash Centre aims to educate a new audience about Australia's early role in international affairs, reshape patterns of visitation of the battlefields and, in so doing, provide a lasting legacy from the Centenary of Anzac. The Sir John Monash Centre is set to open to visitors by Anzac Day 2018.

**The Franco-Australian Museum, Villers-Bretonneux**

The Australian Government is contributing approximately A\$ 2.1 million to a major refurbishment of the Franco-Australian Museum. The Museum closed in November 2014 and will reopen in April 2016. A temporary exhibition opened to the public in January 2015 for the duration of the closure. It is housed in the Victoria Hall at the Victoria School in Villers-Bretonneux.

**Jean-Pierre Thierry**

Jean-Pierre Thierry arrived in Villers-Bretonneux in 1975 and was for many years president of the Franco-Australian Association of that village. He guided many Australians through the Franco-Australian Museum and was awarded the Order of Australia (OAM) for his years of service in memory of Australian soldiers who died at Villers-Bretonneux and on the battlefields of the Western Front.