

## INTRODUCTION

COLIN NETTELBECK

The centenary of the Great War has generated a large number of public commemorative activities in Australia, including a spate of new books, numerous conferences and exhibitions, a major renewal of presentations at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, and the national project to create a new multi-million dollar information centre at Villers-Bretonneux in France. This surge of reflection reveals how present World War I remains in the Australian consciousness.

Widely acknowledged as foundational to Australia's nationhood, it is also to a considerable extent an unhealed wound in the collective psyche, for despite the stories of heroism and valour told and retold in the succession of a hundred Anzac Days, the horrors of the death and/or mutilation of so many tens of thousands of volunteers, mostly young men, and the sense of grief at their loss, have not faded with passing time. If anything, they have become more intense, and one of the reasons for this is that recent years have seen a shift, in the attention paid to the First World War, from an almost exclusive focus on Australia's eight-month engagement at Gallipoli in 1915, to a greater concentration on the three years spent in the bloody campaigns of Belgium and France.

*The French Australian Review*, in this special commemorative number, seeks to emphasise less the war experience itself than various ways in which the massive presence of Australians on French soil from 1916 to 1918 (and indeed often well into 1919) contributed to the development of the longer-term relationship between the two countries and peoples. Their status as allies was of course primary, but beyond the commitment to a common cause, more enduring links were created that in many cases remain pertinent today.

The articles and notes gathered here fall into three broad categories illustrating those links. The first concerns the building of a closer Australian-French relationship, and offers several different perspectives on the phenomenon. Leah Riches revisits Fromelles—the disastrous inaugural Australian engagement in France—in order to probe what she calls the 'shifting patterns' of Australia's war memory. Jacqueline Dwyer gives a detailed description and analysis of the large-scale, but little known, French Mission that visited Australia in 1918, planning for peace and the future while

the war in Europe was still going on. My piece examines the astonishing degree of francophilia displayed in a magazine produced by Australian soldiers in Rouen during the period of the long wait to return home after war's end. John Drury recounts the postwar adoption of the village of Dernancourt by Adelaide, and Anne Brassart-Evans offers an insider's reflection on the now well-established, but still very special relationship between the people of Villers-Bretonneux and Australia.

A second category shows how family history can not only lead to larger-scale historical exploration, but can also inflect previously existing narratives and understanding because of the unique perspective adopted. Three of our authors follow the stories of their grandfathers, uncovering along the way little known or forgotten facets of the war experience. Jane Gilmour uses the prism of a Queensland chaplain's diary to reconstruct elements of the Western Front experience. Pauline Georgelin's French-born forebear, who elected to serve in the AIF, leads her to an exploration of the times and places where Australian and French troops fought side by side and fraternised. Both she and Jillian Durance, whose bandsman grandfather developed friendships with French and Belgian civilians, remind us of the importance of the AIF Education Service in the period between the Armistice and the soldiers' return home.

The final category evokes the need and effort to express the experience and memory of the war through art. Leyshon White's drawing *The Homecoming* (p.72) is one example. Another is Andrew Plant's story of how his discovery of Villers-Bretonneux led him to create an illustrated children's book. Elaine Lewis, in her selected bibliography of novels and poems, reminds us of the existence and value of a substantial volume of work too often poorly known.

Many of the pieces presented here open up pathways to further research into Australian French relations. That kind of stimulation has always been a key aim of ISFAR, and while this special number of *The French Australian Review* has been consciously timed to coincide with the wider community's commemoration of the wrenching but formative Australian experience of the First World War, it is also part of the longer task of documenting and analysing the importance of the links between the two countries and their peoples.

*The University of Melbourne*