

# THE CONSUL'S TREASURE

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Nobody knew that they were lost. Nobody, in fact, had asked any questions at all about them.

Eight tea-chests, found in a Melbourne garage, in early 1988. No, not quite like that. Those eight tea-chests, in the shed, left over from the time when his father was in the removal business, had been kept faithfully. A phone call to the French Consul-General, Dominique Raoux. An inspection visit. The realisation that these were consular archives, some of them very old, all of them hurried into the tea-chests in 1940, and put into storage by the then French Consul, withdrawing as relations between Australia and the Vichy government deteriorated. Dominique Raoux understood immediately the significance of the discovery. He would have liked to keep the documents in Melbourne, as part of local history. Duty required that he write to his Ministry, to inform the French government of what had happened. Eventually, the order, disappointing but understandable, arrived for the tea-chests to be returned to France, for incorporation in the National Archives in Nantes.

In the meantime, Dominique Raoux believed that it was in the interests of history, and of the good continuing understanding between France and Australia, to permit some preliminary work on the find. And so ISFAR, with the help of the Faculty of Arts at Monash University, was able to carry out the research reported below. Those involved in the project were Dr Patricia Clancy and Dr Colin Thornton-Smith of Melbourne University, and Associate Professors Wallace Kirsop and Colin Nettelbeck of Monash University. Since it quickly became apparent that the amount of material was too great for detailed work to be done in the time available, it was decided to concentrate on establishing lists of what each chest contained, so that future researchers would be able to follow up the documents in Nantes. Nonetheless, in the process, it was impossible to contain our curiosity altogether, and a certain number of documents were examined more closely, and in some cases, photocopied.

It transpired that two of the chests contained only official publications of one kind and another, of the sort that would have no particular value in France, being readily available in archives and libraries there. Monsieur Raoux determined that these items could remain in Australia, and in fact made a gift of them to the Monash University Library, where they may now be consulted by researchers. They include: 7 bound volumes of the

*Bulletin des Lois* (1898–1905); 36 bound volumes of the *Annuaire Diplomatique et consulaire* (1883–1937), and 27 volumes of *Documents diplomatiques français* (1871–1914).

It was the other six cases that contained the real treasures. Each chest contained between 15 and 20 packages of documents, usually carefully wrapped in thick brown paper, and tied, with a slip-knot, with thick string. The packages were a little larger than foolscap size, and, with a few notable exceptions, had withstood the passage of time and their storage conditions remarkably well. Most of them were marked, on the outside, with a date indicating the year, or part of year, whose documents they contained. Sometimes, the bundles were labelled for a special purpose, such as the documents concerning the 1888 Exhibition, or those about the First World War. In some instances, too, damage had occurred: water had got into the chest and rotted the paper, and silverfish had made the odd foray. And it was un-nerving to be reading about cases of the bubonic plague in turn-of-century Australia with rodent-droppings so much in evidence . . . Nonetheless, the number of documents destroyed or made illegible through these causes was tiny in comparison to the total, certainly less than 1%. Most were in excellent condition.

The period represented by these archives goes from the beginning of the consulate to just before the Second World War—though the early era is represented only in a patchy fashion, and far from systematically, and records are manifestly much less complete after the late 1920s than before. It would not be unreasonable to hypothesize that until about 1880, records were not as carefully kept as they were later on; and, as far as the 1930s are concerned, either the departing consul took some papers with him, or at some time a tea-chest has been lost.

On the other hand, the forty years from 1880 to 1920 are very thoroughly covered in all the areas of the Consulate's concerns. Researchers in the area of trade and shipping movements will find rich source material, as will those interested in regional and world political history: there is ample documentation, for example, on the French side of the negotiations leading to the New Hebrides condominium arrangement with Britain, and on the French presence in New Caledonia and assessments of Australian reaction; and there is considerable material dealing with the First World War. Significant events and personalities in Australian—particularly Victorian—history are also present; there is interesting correspondence with Dame Nellie Melba, for instance, and a good number of letters from that amazingly prolific diffuser of seeds, Baron von Mueller. Knowledge of the beginnings and development of the Alliance Française in Melbourne will be greatly enriched by very ample documentation, which includes much previously unknown material on

people like Berthe Mouchette and the Crivelli family, as well as on the birth-pains and sometimes very difficult growing-pains of what was to become the city's most durable French-language institution. The teaching of French at Melbourne University was also a significant consular preoccupation, with the fiery and susceptible Maurice-Carton an exceedingly regular correspondent. The Consuls of the day were of course in regular touch with local authorities - with Government House, with the Premier's office, with the Police - about all sorts of matters, and these files offer rich insight into the concerns of the period and its style. There is correspondence, too, with consular offices in Sydney, Adelaide, Perth, and in other countries. (French comments on Federation and its likely impact are very enlightening).

In a subsequent number of *Explorations*, it will be possible to give a more detailed inventory of the Consul's treasure. In the meantime, the items which have been photocopied will be classified and organised in such a way that they can be consulted by Institute members. It is likely that, as in many other institutions, a fee will have to be charged for the reproduction of any documents, but it is hoped to keep this modest. *Explorations* will also, from time to time, publish results of members' research into those parts of the material which we have been able to keep here in photocopied form.

Readers will no doubt enjoy the adjoined facsimile reproduction of a letter by Maurice-Carton, which is both revealing and intriguing, and very much an invitation to the telling of further stories . . .

*ISFAR*

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The University of Melbourne.

Le 13 juillet 1911

Monsieur le Vice Consul,

Monsieur,

Ma visite d'hier  
n'avait rien d'officiel et  
je viens maintenant, à  
l'occasion du 14 juillet, vous  
renouveler l'assurance de  
mon attachement à la France  
et au gouvernement de son  
choix

Je dois, comme vous le  
savez, aller faire une confé-  
rence demain soir à Bendigo  
et je ne serai pas à Melbourne  
de toute la journée. C'est

pourquoi je vous exprime  
par écrit les souhaits les  
plus sincères que je forme  
pour la prospérité de la  
France et la confusion de  
ses ennemis.

A mon avis, notre  
cher pays traverse en  
ce moment une crise  
excessivement sérieuse mais  
j'ai toujours eu foi en son  
Génie et je ne doute pas  
qu'il l'aide à sortir  
victorieux et triomphant  
de cette nouvelle épreuve  
quelle qu'elle soit.

C'est bien dans des  
moments comme ceux-ci  
qu'il faut regretter le  
manque d'union entre  
les Français de Melbourne,  
surtout lorsqu'ils comptent

Sur l'initiative officielle  
pour faire des manifestations  
de leur patriotisme et de  
leur dévouement à la mère-  
patrie. Vous êtes malheureuse-  
ment victime de précédents  
regrettables et qui, loin  
de cimenter l'union entre  
les Français, n'ont réussi  
qu'à la détruire de fond  
en comble.

Veuillez agréer,  
Monsieur le Vice-Consul,  
l'assurance de mes sentiments  
les plus dévoués

F. J. Maurice-Cartou