

# A COOPÉRANT'S EXPERIENCES IN MELBOURNE

FRANÇOIS FONTAINE

August 1977, Tullamarine Airport.

After collecting my suitcase, I walk through the gate behind which I am going to find Melbourne. I'll be here for two years; that's the normal duration of a *coopérant's* contract. One year in the army in France or two years overseas as a civilian.

Any questions? Yes, where is the plane?

That plane had taken me to Australia and the job consisted in assisting the Director of Studies at the Alliance Française in Melbourne.

"Mostly teaching", I had been told, "but it will also involve a variety of activities for which your experience in handling a movie projector and taking part in amateur theatrical productions could prove helpful . . . One last thing: You are the first *coopérant* to be sent to the Alliance Française in Melbourne. You will see, the Director, Mr Jezequel is a charming man."

The man who greets me behind the exit gate is not charming. He is shortish with a funny kind of beard and asks me cautiously in English: "Are you Mr Fontaine?" I answer "Yes" to show that the English language has no secrets for me, as mentioned on the C.V. which—no doubt—has preceded me to this town.

Mr Jezequel takes me to a Fiat 127 which has seen better days and kindly tells me that the door by which I stand is the driver's door. Right hand drive, of course. Yes, I've seen cars like this one before in James Bond movies. He actually drives like James Bond and although I fancied myself as a rather fast driver, by the time we arrive at the Alliance Française premises in Flemington Road, I have the feeling that I shall learn a lot from this man. During this short trip I've learnt that the eucalyptus is the national tree, that the trams are vicious and spurt out passengers in front of your bonnet just when you'd think the best time to overtake them has come, but you cannot trust the Melbourne weather and that the Alliance does not only run French classes but also a library, exams for secondary school students, outside tuition, cinema evenings, luncheons and talks and does its own printing for the monthly magazine and any other necessary brochure, programme or leaflet. The building is oldish and its style must have a name but the two names I'll remember from the short time we spent in the building then are Bernadette, the secretary with a computer-like memory, and Annick, the librarian with a smile that could push me to read the complete works of Balzac. The four of us celebrate my arrival in the

back room in the company of an imposing Offset printing machine which, unlike any member of the public who could walk unannounced into the library or the front office, will never tell anyone how much beer or whisky we drank on that or any other day. Our next stop was to the Graduate House, around the corner, where a room had been reserved for me until I could find a flat or a unit to rent.

The matron welcomes me with politeness and an accent which, for the first minutes of our meeting, I am tempted to diagnose as a speech impediment. All I understand is that the meals are taken in the dining room downstairs, that dinner is served between six and seven and that I shall have to wear a toy, which Mr Jezequel translates into "tie" with a discreet gesture towards his own. This also reassures me as until then I could have sworn that the lady had told me earlier with a big smile that I was expected "to die". I now have good reason to believe that she meant "to day"!

I leave Graduate House rather panicked though: I'm never hungry between six and seven, I don't own a tie and . . . I don't understand English!

Mr Jezequel saves me from starvation or embarrassment by inviting me for dinner at his place and we cross what I think to be the other half of Melbourne before reaching South Yarra. In doing so we break the speed record we established between Tullamarine and Flemington Road. I have a fairly good idea now: Melbourne is big. So big that it has even swallowed the river which one can hardly see unless crossing it.

Dinner at the Jezequel's has a soothing effect on the fresh wound of culture shock. The man is indeed charming, so are his wife Yvette and their kids. Over the Australian lamb roast, Mr Jezequel turns into Yannick and I, into François.

Work at the Alliance Française in Melbourne is an experience like no other. For the first two or three days, my mission is to get acquainted with the city: wander around, work out the tram system, get wet for venturing in the open during what promised to be a sunny afternoon, almost get run over by a Holden Kingswood for looking towards the left before crossing the road and . . . listen hard to the conversations around me, sacrificing in doing so the most basic principle of my upbringing for the sake of improving my understanding of English.

On the Alliance front, I have started to learn to use the Offset machine: a paper hungry monster with a mind of its own that can swallow your fingers for the price of an A4 sheet or sentence you to a full afternoon of hard labour in black ink and spare parts for not keeping a close eye on it. I have also discovered two other key characters in the life of the Alliance: Malcolm Crowe, the Treasurer who can add hours of tuition with books and exam fees, multiply the result by membership fees, subtract teachers' income and

monthly rents as well as other charges and come up with an impeccable balance sheet which even I can read. The second character is even more of a phenomenon. Josephine Moss, the President of the Committee, is a cross between a cosmopolitan highly cultured lady and a female version of Gavroche. Petite, brunette, voluble and so radiant that you can feel the temperature rise in the room as soon as she walks in. She had enough energy to stop or push start an army tank, whichever was going to help the cause of the Alliance, and no matter how formal the occasion, you'd be assured to be greeted with a deafening kiss on both cheeks if you were a Zozo, a pet name that she gave to me as well as to herself and a few others.

With the beginning of the new class term, Yannick introduces me to the art of organising the class time table. No classes for adults from Friday afternoon to Monday morning: the week end is a holy institution that a self-respecting Director of Studies should never ignore in Australia. Besides, it gives us two and a half days to work on the non-teaching aspect of the job if necessary. Almost apologetically, Yannick tells me that he is going to "load" me. The reason is simple enough to understand: he and I are the only two teachers that the Alliance does not have to pay. The more we teach, the more we save. The quicker we save, the sooner we shall be able to move into new and bigger premises. "Load" me, boss, for I don't know what teaching Australian adults is about but it sounds fun. "Load" me, boss, for if I were not here, I'd be running around a dirt track wearing army fatigues. Five seconds before my first class, Yannick catches me on the stair landing and says: "the word is confidence".

It is the best piece of advice he could give me because I have to admit to feeling a bit weak in the knees before entering the arena. My whole teaching experience consists of 18 months of teaching primary school pupils in France. These children spoke French and I had to teach them funny, easy things such as: Our ancestors were strong and courageous and were called the Gauls, a cat has four legs and if you want to buy a croissant worth 3 francs with only 2 francs in your pocket, you won't be given any change back, nor will you get the croissant.

Here, it's different: the students are older than me and they don't speak French. My job is precisely to teach them my language and I have discovered that I cannot trust my command of theirs.

Two hours later, though, I leave the class and I feel fantastic. They asked me more questions about myself than about French grammar, but we still managed to cover a fair bit of ground and above all, we had a lot of fun. Had it been a private tuition with one student only, I would have drawn the conclusion that I was just lucky and scored an easy-going type of student. But I had 12 or 15 in that class and they were all jovial, easy-

going, fun-loving and genuinely interested in learning French. Furthermore, although I expected to have some difficulties in asserting myself in order to make up for my obvious lack of experience—after all, I'm only 23 and it shows on my face—I did not catch one glance, one smile or one remark that could have meant: "We are being shortchanged: they are giving us a kid for the price of a teacher." They all call me François and insist that I should call them by their given names as well. The more classes I'll teach, the more I'll realize that these first students are no exceptions and I'll adopt the habit of using Christian names at first sight willingly. I'll also discover that Australians seem to spend a lot of time socialising and tend to invite you for a drink or a meal at their home at the drop of a hat. As a result, I spend very few of my evenings at Graduate House: just enough to learn how to get thrashed at snooker.

There seems to always be a party going on somewhere and, if not, Prince Alfred Hotel, just across the road, is still open when I come out of class and provides me with an excellent terrain for aural comprehension practice. I spend a fair amount of time there, for the sake of improving my English, of course, and in the meantime, I learn to appreciate the local beers and to master a couple of tricks that the snooker players at Graduate House do not know or did not want to show me.

As I get more familiar with the Australian accent, I also realize that my own accent is more a plus than a handicap. People—mostly women, as I'll soon discover—simply love it. And there must not be a huge lot of my fellow citizens in Melbourne because French is definitely an exotic flavour around here and people seem to become friendlier and more interested as soon as they hear that I come from France. It is, however, a bit frightening, because the more I measure the magnitude of the reputation that the French enjoy here, the less assured I feel that it is deserved.

I have met quite a few people through teaching at the Alliance, but I'm now getting to know more and befriend some through drinking and playing snooker at Prince Alfred's. The first invitation extended to me at "P.A.'s" by a young couple is for tea at their place. I just cannot believe it! These people whom I have met only 15 minutes before have actually invited me to their home! When you think how long it can take before French people invite one another to their homes, the mind boggles. These two know nothing of me apart from my name and my nationality and they are going to let me through their front door. Unthinkable! The due day arrives. Though 6.30 p.m. sounds like a funny hour for a cup of tea, "when in Rome . . ." By the time I get back to Graduate House from their place, it'll be too late to be served dinner so I'll have something to eat before meeting my new friends. A hamburger with two serves of chips on my way and . . . I'm just in time

to learn that in Australia, tea also means a four course meal!

Everytime I see a new taxi driver, he looks fatter than the previous one. These guys must be getting fat at my expense! The tram is fun but can't take you everywhere, so it's time to buy a car. That is when I realize that if you want to buy a second hand car in Melbourne, you need one to do it. The first one I find in the classified section of the *Age* (a newspaper about as thick as the phone book) is 35 kilometres away! I eventually end up with a gem of a car, the absolute bargain: a Morris 1100 with new duco and shining black tyres for \$600. Just within my price range. Now that I am well and truly mobile, Yannick gives me the real job he had in mind for me: looking after the classes at the second Alliance building in Armadale, and manning the office there four days a week. On Fridays, I'll be back in the North Melbourne main office to do some printing or help Yannick with whatever is on the day's menu.

Armadale will become very quickly a second home for me. I've found a small unit off Toorak road for a reasonable rent, but it is merely a place to sleep since I leave fairly early in the morning, come back late at night and spend most of my weekends out, meeting people. I haunt Armadale from Monday to Thursday; classes in the morning, classes in the afternoon and classes in the evening. Because of its location, this branch of the Alliance draws about as many students as the North Melbourne building and when we are close to the beginning of a new term, the phone is red hot with calls for enquiries prior to enrolment in the classes. But apart from being very much my own boss there, the Armadale house is special. It is the house that the Alliance owns. North Melbourne is rented and, believe me, you would not want to own this one! Forget to switch on the pump before the week-end and on Monday morning, you need scuba diving gear to venture in the basement. Armadale is lovely, on the small side, but lovely with a homely atmosphere to it. Small garden at the front and the back, and five rooms which have been turned into three classrooms, the office-cum-library and a fully equipped kitchen in which are given cooking demonstrations and morning teas. That's why Armadale feels like home. Apart from the students coming for their classes, the house comes alive thanks to a group of ladies who run a sub-committee of the Alliance called "La Maison de France". They organise fund raising activities which have been and are still so successful that the house has been bought largely thanks to the money they gathered over the years. The "Maison de France" mornings or lunches not only give me a chance to chat at length with Zozo and her acolytes, it also fills the place with a joyful buzz and my stomach with cakes or full meals which are religiously kept aside for me if I happen to be teaching in the classroom next door while the food is being served.

But beyond the culinary aspect, the good thing about working at the Alliance is that no matter what you do, you cannot get bored with it. It keeps changing. I can wear up to half a dozen caps in a single day: gardener, secretary, librarian, teacher, printer operator, guest speaker, carpenter, courier, movie projectionist or public relations officer. It all comes under the line of duty and it makes the days go like hours.

Another great aspect about work is that Yannick and I get on like a house on fire. Working together on Fridays at North Melbourne is certainly not the average employer-employee relationship. We have actually discussed the matter together and he has confessed to me that he was a bit apprehensive before I arrived—hence his cautiousness when greeting me at the airport—having been told by some official in the French embassy: “Do not rejoice too early about getting this *coopérant* you have been asking for at last. It can be a fantastic help, it can be an absolute disaster.” On my side, it was somewhat the same story. I knew that I had to stay at the Alliance in Melbourne for two years, love it or hate it. The Alliance at large had been described to me as a very conservative institution frequented mostly by narrow-minded dinosaurs. And Australia: a country on the wrong side of the world with only one woman for seven men! I have, since my arrival, discovered that the Alliance is in fact very much what people make it and Yannick, Joséphine-zozo and the others are neither dinosaurs nor narrow-minded people. As far as Australia is concerned, I’m starting to believe seriously that a sunset on the wrong side of the world has no match and if there is really only one woman for seven men here, it looks to me as if she were bored and waiting for something to happen while the seven men are enjoying themselves in a pub. So much for statistics!

Anyhow, Yannick and I obviously like working together and he, like myself, hates to leave a job unfinished so our working hours are, to say the least, flexible and extensible. He has also introduced me to something entirely new but which I am getting to enjoy enormously: broadcasting in French on Radio 3EA every week. It is a totally new experience for me and it is yet another occasion to meet people with whom I share a view or two about fun, culture promotion and extensible working hours. Working late into the night for the pre-recording of our radio programmes and zipping through town in Yannick’s Fiat to catch a French visiting personality for an interview soon make us such a terrible pair that some people must be wondering who exactly we are and what we are doing: teachers doing a journalist’s job and behaving like hit men.

But our forte as a duet remains the “long distance examination calls”. Each year, secondary students in Melbourne and its surrounding areas sit for the Alliance Française examination. In some towns too far away, the

candidates cannot travel to the main exam centre so . . . we bring it to them in the Fiat! Geelong is easy; but the really good ones are in places such as Wodonga, 300 km both ways. Yannick and I have developed the technique and, dare I say, turned what most people persist in calling "hard work" into an enjoyable day. That is, once you have come to terms with the prospect of getting up at 5.00 a.m. on a Saturday, specially when the night before was a cinema evening at the Alliance and you had to close "the shop" after the screening. You also remembered about the water pump in the basement as you were already half way home!

Our technique is simple and . . . very French. If you look at the gear we take along for these exams, you really start wondering whether we are two teachers on our way to work or a pair of lunatics on the loose: one cardboard box contains the exam papers, the tapes for the aural comprehension tests, the marking sheets and a bunch of spare ball-point pens. The second one is filled with two baguettes, a bottle of red wine, half a pound of butter, a thermos of coffee and a hefty quantity of pâté, home-made rillettes, ham and camembert. This is completed by two fishing rods, a drop net and two pairs of Wellington boots together with a complete change of clothes. Leaving at five thirty in the morning is generally painful but it is the best possible way to get there at 9.00 a.m. for the beginning of the exam session. We have our reward on the way, though, because if the sunsets are superb in this part of the world, sunrise in the country is absolutely magical. So much so that on several occasions we feel the urge to stop the car and toast the beginning of a new day with coffee on the roadside.

The examinations are usually over around 12 noon and by then, the coffee being well and truly finished, we can have lunch with red wine and . . . a clear conscience. The way back to Melbourne is a lot less of a race than the morning trip. The name of the game becomes: find a river and try your luck at fishing. I don't remember that we ever caught any fish on these occasions but some yabbies of the suicidal type made it worth our while.

I have added a new cap to my collection. The one of Tutor in French at Methodist Ladies College. This place is quite something. I think I know what a boarding school can be, having spent my secondary school years in one myself. Wrong again! In my lycée, I saw four different headmasters in the seven years it took me to reach and pass the Baccalauréat. M.L.C. is saying farewell to its third headmaster in over 100 years! I expected to find something of an austere convent and I was a bit concerned about trying to blend my atheist upbringing with the religious ethos of this respectable institution. The building is indeed austere, but the "novices" would look every bit like the girls with whom I sat through my Terminale year in France, if it were not for the uniform. Wearing a uniform is, to me, a

concept which disappeared even before I started in secondary school. It is very much a reality and a must here. It obliterates any physical identity and tries its hardest to turn these young ladies into a flock of non-sexed individuals. They wear it a bit like a constant practical joke which no longer amuses anyone but is part of the ritual. These girls are preparing for the HSC French Examination and I spend one hour a week with them, providing them with conversation practice and a few tricks which will, no doubt, impress their oral examiner when the day comes.

I still do not know whether it is the quality of my teaching or the fact that young male tutors are a rare breed in M.L.C. but the girls hardly ever miss their tuition. Teaching in a college or visiting secondary schools to give a short lecture to the students on subjects as varied as "Christmas in France", "meaning of Bastille Day" and "the French do not only feed on garden snails and frog legs" is a very valuable experience. Teaching only adults, one would be tempted to believe that the average Australian student is highly motivated and constantly keen to increase his or her general knowledge. In secondary schools, the students are no more, no less motivated than the students in French schools. Some love studying French and are positively brilliant at it. So much so that every now and then, while I am listening to the candidates reciting their poem for the Alliance Française examination, one of them will turn up with a little note in his or her hand and a shy smile on his or her face. The note, in the handwriting of Yannick says: "I just gave full marks to this one, ask him / her to recite it again for you, it is superb!" I do myself return the favour everytime I come across such a case. There is nothing like "une fourmi de 18 mètres" delivered by a tiny 11 year old girl trying to make it fit into a four metre wide examination room and keeping you—the examiner—attentive as a tennis umpire.

Yannick's contract with the Alliance in Melbourne has come to an end and he has left for Colombia where he has been appointed Délégué Général in Bogota. I am sad to see my friend go but I know that we shall meet again, in Bogota or Paris or elsewhere some day. His replacement will not arrive before another month or two and in the meantime, Bernadette, Annick and I will run the Alliance quite happily with the help of the other teachers and the newly elected President: Colin Nettelbeck, another phenomenon of the like of Joséphine-zozo.

Again, the rapport between Colin and me is not going to be complicated by the fact that I am a mere *coopérant*. We know each other very well and the more time we spend together, discussing Alliance business or any other subject—since we have discovered that we both enjoy enormously arguing about the validity of our respective faith and atheism and in doing so inevitably find ourselves drawn into an endless philosophical debate in which



cultural, religious and age differences become irrelevant—the closer we feel towards each other. Working in such an environment of mutual friendship and trust which has been my blessing since I arrived in Melbourne, I have the feeling that one can only give one's best and come out richer.

Bernard Milluy, the new Director of Studies, is no exception. A different personality, a different history, a different man but yet . . . the same immediate enthusiasm and dedication to his work and the same willingness to meet and know people. The thirst for "rubbing one's brain against others", first described as a vital necessity in French sixteenth-century literature, seems to be a running "disease" in the Alliance Française. Through these two years working in North Melbourne or Armadale, I have met an impressive number of people, mostly students—since the *coopérant's* task, although covering a wide range of activities remains before anything else a teacher's job—but also visitors who would call in for a variety of reasons. All invariably showed the same stimulating eagerness to learn. One can argue that when you spend your time behind the walls of the Alliance Française, the Australians whom you are bound to meet are automatically selected amongst a limited bracket of the population. They have to belong to a minority which already shares an interest in foreign languages and French culture at large. They are therefore more likely to be receptive to something new even before they walk across the threshold of the Alliance. It is probably true and it has made my work all the more enjoyable. As for those who never entered the walls of the Alliance Française, I have been equally impressed by their tolerance and acceptance of the foreigner. Not only was I accepted but I was treated at all times in a way which could only make me feel at home.

Melbourne does feel like home now and the Yarra banks or the sidewalks of Carlton look as familiar to me as "les quais de la Seine" or "les trottoirs du Boul'Mich". I am a lucky man in a friendly city, lucky in the sense that I can see now how the Alliance Française answers a real need and I feel privileged to be part of it. The Alliance is now getting ready to move from North Melbourne to Richmond and it will soon be time for me to catch the plane home.

July 1979, Tullamarine airport. If the rule for excess luggage applied to what you carry in your head, I would be in trouble, let alone bankrupt! I came here because I had to give one year of my life to the army and I preferred to spend two years trying to do something which was more in line with my philosophical convictions and my tertiary education training. I certainly had no great expectations, just the hope that it would not be a mistake and that the experience would be at least a bit enriching. I am so sure now that I made the right choice, I can almost physically sense it.

I have discovered a continent, a world in which I have become bilingual—which in itself is invaluable—and learnt a new job while making some of my very best friends. I have seen my home country and my culture from the outside and learnt to appreciate them even more while adopting and being adopted by a new country and culture. I know a lot more about mankind and what I learnt is both stimulating and heartening, even if I still cannot tell who is ranked the higher between a lieutenant and a captain. July 1979 is not an end but a beginning and Melbourne is a city in which I spent two years and did not feel bored for five minutes. I'll let it be known.

*Singapore*