

Mapping the Consul's Treasure: a Discussion and Guide to French Consular Archives

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In 1987, eight tea-chests containing the lost archives of the Sydney and Melbourne consulates were found in a Melbourne garage. The time-worn boxes held bundles of papers and documents covering the period from the beginning of French diplomatic representation in Australia to the 1940s, although some periods were represented more than others. Immediately after the serendipitous discovery, Patricia Clancy, Colin Thornton-Smith, Colin Nettelbeck and Wallace Kirsop set out to compile a list of documents in the little time they had before the archives found their way back to France to the *Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères* (MAE). It was Nettelbeck's article, *The Consul's Treasure* (*Explorations* 7, December 1988), retelling that first encounter with the archives that set me on a course to explore the lost treasure. Two visits during the 2012 European winter allowed me to sift and comb through the first few decades of the material now cosily housed in the Nantes site of the French diplomatic archives—thankfully *sans* the rodent droppings mentioned in the above article.

The timing of the discovery and the time it took for the material to be repatriated in the late 1980s, partly restored, catalogued and made available to the public meant that neither Robert Aldrich nor Anny Stuer had access to it when they wrote their respective books, which have remained for decades the most important reference works in the broad field of French-Australian relations and of the history of the French in Australia (Aldrich 1990, 1993; Stuer 1982). Several articles have appeared in the pages of the *French Australian Review* (formerly *Explorations*), using some of the material that was copied before the archives were sent back to France, such as

Thornton-Smith's work on Paul Maistre's time in Australia, and on the reform of the Alliance Française of Victoria in the 1890s (Thornton-Smith 2010, 1997). My own PhD built on the MAE archives until the First World War, which I combined with Australian sources (memoirs, official state records, etc.) to write a cultural history of ideas about France and the French in Australia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It explores the links between representations of France, and of the French, and the ways in which different groups of individuals, whether they were French migrants or Australian colonists, mobilised these representations in social life, how they did it, and why (Bergantz 2016). I have examined in depth the archives in Nantes and La Courneuve for the years from the beginning of French consular representation to the early years of the twentieth century (roughly to the period 1914 to 1920), but not beyond.

The content hosted in Nantes after the onset of the First World War still remains elusive and awaits its historians; in all, the archives represent a treasure trove that has not yet been systematically exploited and that still holds tantalising promises for researchers on many aspects of French-Australian diplomatic, social and cultural relations, from the mid-nineteenth century to the last years of the twentieth. So it is in the hope of encouraging further research in the field—almost thirty years after the unexpected find—that I set out here to map the consul's treasure.

The inventories of the consulates are not available online and can only be accessed physically in Nantes, or requested via email—if you know what you are looking for. With the kind permission of the *Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes* (CADN), the inventories of the Sydney and Melbourne consulates, those of the French Embassy in London (from which the consulates depended until the creation of a French Embassy in Canberra) are reproduced on the ISFAR website.¹ Unfortunately, these are very uneven in their content description. In what follows I situate them in the broader context of the MAE service, and expand on what can be expected to be found.

Les archives diplomatiques du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères

The *Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères* (MAE) are divided between two locations. One is at La Courneuve in Seine Saint-Denis.

¹ See 'Resources' at <http://www.isfar.org.au/>

This site—the main site—opened in 2009 and hosts the archives formerly kept at the Quai d'Orsay. It hosts the correspondence of French representatives (letters, reports and personal files) sent directly to the Ministry. The second, less known site and which is of particular interest to us, is in the centre of Nantes, not far from the Château des ducs de Bretagne. There are many duplicate documents between La Courneuve and the *Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes* (CADN), but the latter, which opened in 1987, hosts the archives of *les services extérieurs*. Here are located the archives of consulates, embassies, French institutes and cultural organisations, French representations to international organisations, etc. These archives offer a wealth of material for historians of French-Australian relations, and of the French communities of Australia and the Pacific.

In Nantes

1. Sydney

There are two separate inventories for the French consulate in Sydney. The first covers the period 1879 to 1950 but the material is contained in only seven boxes. Documents on the early decades of the consulate up until the Great War are unfortunately very scarce and are contained in just two boxes, while the third box contains what is left of the Brisbane archives of the time. Four more boxes cover the period from the war until the fifties. These last boxes and the second series (71 boxes for the years 1910–1978) are divided into thirteen thematic sections: *Organisation et fonctionnement du poste*; *Protocole*; *Colonie française*; *Chancellerie*; *Affaires militaires*; *Affaires maritimes*; *Questions culturelles*; *Questions économiques*; *Relations extérieures*; *Information et presse*; *Aviation*; *Questions politiques*; *Personnel consulaire*.

2. Melbourne

The Melbourne archives are, as a result of the 1988 repatriation, far more substantial than those of Sydney. As such they deserve a general introduction, as well as more detailed commentary to expand on the enticingly mysterious content descriptions.

To date, there have been three repatriations. The first in 1988, another in 1997 and another one in 2003; together, they cover the period 1854 to 1997. Although they are part of the same series, the documents are organised in different ways for different time periods:

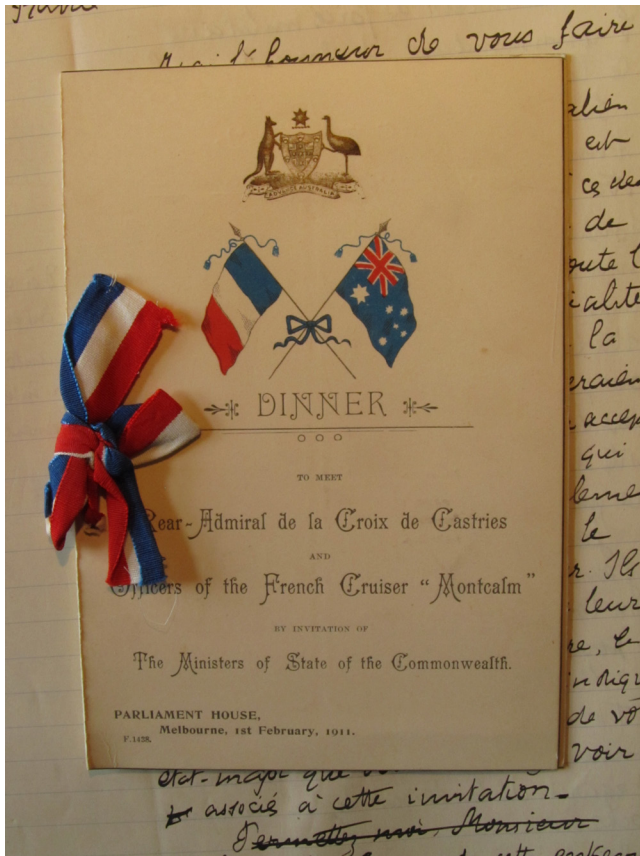
- From the beginning of the consulate until 1914 files are catalogued chronologically. (I will expand on this below.)
- From 1918 to 1939 they are organised thematically (with large gaps for 1931–1939). However, the themes here can be as broad as “*correspondance générale*” and still appear in roughly chronological order. Themes of immediate interest for researchers relate to the Great War, the *Croix Rouge*, the *Société de Bienfaisance*, University French Club (1926–1930) and the papers of the French Book Club (1921–1930).
- From 1940 to 1988, files are organised along clearer administrative themes: *Fonctionnement et activité du poste*; *Protocole (corps consulaire, national celebrations etc.)*, *Chancellerie*, *Affaires culturelles* (teaching of French, cultural exchange, etc.); *Questions économiques*; *Questions politiques* (the French presence in the Pacific, French nuclear testing).
- The years 1989 to 1996 (including 1967 [sic]) are organised around similar categories: *Activités générales du poste*; *Organisation et fonctionnement du poste*; *Protocole*; *Chancellerie*; *Affaires économiques et financières*; *Affaires culturelles*; *Information et Presse*; *Registres d'Enregistrement du courrier*.

While the first period is organised chronologically, the lack of adequate descriptions makes it impossible to look for anything specific, which applies also to a certain extent to the following period (1918–1939). After going through the first 69 boxes of the Melbourne and Sydney consulates I organised the material into broader categories. These reflect my own needs within the scope of my research, but they might be of interest to future researchers as an indication of what might be found in the broad administrative categories of the later inventories. These are: The French Pacific (New Hebrides and New Caledonia); Trade and shipping; International exhibitions and national celebrations; Immigration to Australia, Missing persons; French clubs, Alliance Française, Literature and language; Arts and international exchange; International relations, France and Australia, Rapport with Germany; French community in Australia, People and events; Religion; French associations (*Croix Rouge*, *Chambre de Commerce* etc.).

The importance of the consul's treasure will be evident to anyone researching one or more aspects of the complex relationship that has linked France and Australia over the past two centuries, its peoples and the transnational circulation of bodies and ideas. To indulge my French need for symmetry, I will follow Colin Nettelbeck's lead and leave you with another

copy of a document found in the archives: the menu of a dinner thrown in honour of the officers of a passing French cruiser, the 'Montcalm', given at Parliament House, Melbourne in 1911.

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