

April 2016: A Special Moment in Australian-French Relations

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The last week of April 2016 saw the convergence of a number of events which demonstrated the closeness of relations between Australia and France in the twenty-first century. This convergence was all the more remarkable in that it occurred at a time when France was still in an official state of emergency, following the terrorist attacks of November 2015. Heightened security measures were in force throughout the country.

A central event was the first ever Australian State Visit to France; around it, though not because of it, three other significant events occurred: the signing of an exchange agreement between the Australian National Archives and the *Archives nationales de France*; the launch, at the Australian Embassy in Paris, of an exhibition, *L'oeil et la main*, featuring artwork from the 1800–1804 Baudin Expedition to Australia; and the announcement that Australia had selected the French company DCNS to build its future fleet of submarines.

The state visit by our Governor-General, Sir Peter Cosgrove, reciprocated the visit—also a first—made to Australia by the French President, François Hollande, in late 2014. The Governor-General was in France from 23 to 27 April, officiating at the Anzac Day commemorations at Villers-Bretonneux, meeting with dignitaries including the President and the Mayor of Paris (Anne Hidalgo), and participating in various festivities, including a banquet at the Élysée Palace. For France such visits are not uncommon, and in 2016 the presidents of South Africa, Kenya, and South Korea all received similar invitations, as did the Dutch Royal family. It's probably fair to say that most ordinary French people take little or no notice of these occasions; and the same is probably true for most Australians.

Nonetheless, they do serve to mark explicitly, at the highest level, positions of friendship and collaboration; and, even with a dose of scepticism about jingoistic nationalism, it was heart-warming to see the Australian and French flags flying side by side the whole length of the Champs-Élysées, at the Élysée Palace, outside the Foreign Ministry on the Quai d'Orsay and over the Assemblée Nationale.

In his address at the Dawn Service, after paying homage to the engagement, courage and sacrifice of the Australian soldiers when they joined the Western Front battles in 1916, the Governor-General drew attention to the links formed, at that time, between the Australian and French peoples:

Of course thankfully, gloriously, we Australians found some respite, comfort and another family behind the lines—the French. The locals knew only too well the pain and price of this war: the familiar black dresses of grieving widows, the mantelpiece photos of men gazing out into living rooms to which they would never return. Brought together by circumstance—the lives of soldiers and their hosts quickly became intertwined. Maybe they were drawn together by the common experience, a shared sense of humanity, a mutual respect. We will never really know for sure.

I suspect such things can't be—and aren't even meant to be—fully understood. But I do know Australians fought for and re-took this town with all they had—and then a little more. And I know the friendship shown to those soldiers was a precious gift in a time of lives forsaken. Almost 100 years have now past [sic] and on this lovingly tended land, these fallen friends and allies rest in peace—together. And we come to this place, this special place, on this special day, to remember them and to share our admiration and respect—just as in the coming months we will return to mark a century since battles at other places like Fromelles and Pozières. Because theirs was a triumph: of liberty, equality and fraternity; of camaraderie, freedom and a fair go. A triumph between people from opposite sides of the world who—surrounded by war—found joie de vivre and the beauty of life together.

Let us never forget each other and what truly binds us.

On behalf of all Australians: Thank you, merci beaucoup. Nous ne les oublions pas. Lest we forget.

(For a complete version of the speech, see gg.gov.au April 2016. Accessed 4 September 2016.)

Back in Paris, on 26 April, Sir Peter attended the signing of an agreement between the National Archives of Australia (NAA) and the *Archives Nationales de France*. During the French State visit in 2014, President Hollande had been to Telopea Park School (TPS), Canberra, and had met students at work on a joint NAA/TPS Centenary of Anzac project drawing on the National Archives website *Discovering Anzacs*. It was therefore judged appropriate to introduce an archival element to the visit of the Governor-General to France. As Louise Doyle, Assistant Director-General Access and Communications at the NAA has put it:

France and Australia each hold [sic] a strong place in the imagination of the other, and there have been many points of connection between our histories. Our people have explored new worlds and forged lasting bonds based around culture, trade and commerce, science and the arts. We have made homes for each other and, in times of war, have fought and mourned our dead together.¹

The project is called ‘Imagination, exploration, memory: French-Australian shared histories’, and the April event was initially to have included a seminar at Pierrefitte-sur-Seine with Australian and French participants, but for various reasons, the seminar dimension had to be postponed—it is now being planned for 2017. Instead, a single gathering was held in the magnificent reception rooms at the Ministry for Culture at the Palais Royal. On display were some rare items from the vaults of the French Archives, including Nicolas Baudin’s original diary, open at the pages where he describes his meeting with Matthew Flinders at what was to become known as Encounter Bay.

The French hosts were the Minister for Culture, Audrey Azoulay, and Hervé Lemoine, the Director of the French National Archives. Mme Azoulay formally decorated David Fricker, Director-General of the NAA, and President of the International Council on Archives, with the Order of Arts and Letters (which had been awarded in 2015). David Fricker’s reply speech, a powerful defence of the importance of historical awareness, was delivered in impeccable and elegant French. He and Hervé Lemoine then signed the agreement. (For more details see <http://www.naa.gov.au/about-us/partnerships/int-partners/index.aspx>. Accessed 11 September 2016.)

¹ Private email, 20 May 2016.

The following morning, 27 April, was beautiful and sunny, and Paris was resplendent. Once again the Australian and French flags were fluttering together over the Quai d'Orsay. In the taxi on the way to the Australian Embassy for the opening of the exhibition *L'oeil et la main*, the radio announced the continuation of French moroseness about life in general: 73% of respondents had answered 'NO' to a poll question asking if they felt things were going better. Clearly the mood of the population at large had not been substantially lifted by the announcement, the previous day, about the Australian decision to award its contract for twelve new submarines to the French. Across the press and on television, this was the top news story, with the coverage emphasizing two main elements: firstly, the enormous economic benefit of the deal for both countries, with thousands of jobs being created in both places and secondly, the quality of the French offer—especially the technical excellence of the vessels themselves. The Élysée Palace put out an announcement stressing the 'historic nature of Australia's choice and the length of the partnership': 'it marks a decisive advance in the strategic partnership between the two countries'. The Defence Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, went further: speaking on Europe 1 of the 'long experience of cooperation with Australia', he went on to declare that the submarine contract meant a 50-year 'marriage' between Australia and France.

It cannot be doubted that there was an element of surprise in the outcome of the bidding process. When I had left Australia only a week before, the local press did not have the French among the front-runners. The US had pressed the Japanese case, but worries had been expressed that to choose Japan might be seen as provocative by China, Australia's most important trading partner. The wind seemed to be favouring the German offer. Knowledge of the French win had created a definite buzz around the ceremony at the Ministry for Culture, and that continued as people gathered at the Australian Embassy in the rue Jean Rey for the opening of the Baudin exhibition. The Australian Ambassador, Patrick Brady, launched the exhibition, with a fulsome speech about the depth and longevity of France's relationship with Australia. The occasion also served as an opportunity for the Governor-General to present Tina Arena with the Order of Australia that had been awarded in the January Australia Day Honours. (This, too, was something of an Australian-French event, in that Tina Arena, much loved in France, had been decorated in the *Ordre du Mérite* in 2009.)

The exhibition itself is splendid. The result of thorough planning and long-term collaborations between Australian researchers and Le Havre's Natural History Museum, it contains a wealth of maps, artefacts, manuscripts and illustrations from one of the largest and most ambitious scientific expeditions ever undertaken to that point. Intended from the outset as a travelling exhibition, it went from Paris to Adelaide in July 2016 and is to remain in Australia (Launceston, Hobart, Sydney, Canberra, Fremantle) until the end of 2018, under the title 'The Art of Science: Nicolas Baudin's Voyagers 1800-1804'.² The exhibition catalogue is in fact a beautifully illustrated book, with a series of fine and insightful essays: it is in my view a veritable collector's item.³ One of the most valuable contributions of this particular project will be its emphasis on the integration and interdependence of art and science—a much needed reminder, I would argue, in today's Australia.

Acts of friendship and solidarity, celebrating common memory and ongoing shared values, as well as opening onto collaborative purposes for the future, the events described above are surely worthy of note.

Coda

On 2 and 3 May 2016, my wife Carol and I visited Villers-Bretonneux. We did not spend long in the Franco-Australian Museum at the Victoria Primary School: the current display, in temporary accommodation, is rather minimal. In the playground, over which the sign NEVER FORGET AUSTRALIA still dominates, the children were at recess, running about and shouting. A couple of them came over as we were walking out, and asked if we knew any French. Thus began a conversation in which they took pleasure in practising their English; a few others joined in, and we discovered that they had two one-hour sessions of English a week. I wondered if they had music lessons, and when they replied that they did, I asked if they had something they could sing for us. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised, but after a few exchanged glances, the little group burst into *Waltzing Matilda*.

² For the nation-wide schedule, see <http://maritime.history.sa.gov.au/events/2016/art-science-baudins-voyagers-1800-1804>, accessed 9 September, 2016. See also the excellent article by Christine Judith Nicholls and Dany Breelle in *The Conversation*, 28 July 2016, <http://maritime.history.sa.gov.au/events/2016/art-science-baudins-voyagers-1800-1804>. Accessed 9 September 2016.

³ Jean Fornasiero, Lindl Lawton and John West-Sooby (eds), 2016, *The Art of Science: Nicolas Baudin's Voyagers 1800–1804*, Adelaide, Wakefield Press.

We joined in too, and before they were through to the chorus, half the children in the schoolyard had come over to be part of it. From the initial two, we had a group of fifteen or twenty before us. They only knew the first verse, and I suppose it was fresh in their minds because of the recent Anzac ceremonies, but what a joy it was.

And then the pain. The Australian Memorial is 2.7 km out of town. We were the only ones there among the endless rows of graves, apart from an old gardener tending the immaculate lawns on his ride-on mower. There can be no feeling of triumphalist pride in that place: there are too many hundreds of headstones over the remains of too many young men, of whom large numbers remain unidentified, 'known (only) to God'. There are not only Australians and New Zealanders of course, but also many English, Scottish, Canadians. Sometimes the bitterness of those left behind is etched into the stone, as with a 24 year-old Sydney printer killed in action in August 1918: 'Another life lost: Hearts broken for what'. The wreaths from the Dawn Service were still strewn around the entry to the shrine... Lest we forget: but it's hard to work out what and whom to remember, and for what reasons. One comes away with a heavy heart and a mind full of questions.

Immediately behind the Memorial, large earth-moving equipment was grinding away at the hillside. These were preparations for the John Monash Centre, a huge, digitally-enhanced information centre that is due to open for Anzac Day 2018, the exact centenary of the Australian engagement at Villers-Bretonneux. We didn't feel up to debating the controversies associated with the project: rather, we went back into town to meet Evelyne Petitjean, the English teacher at the Collège Jacques Brel, who for more than a dozen years has been the driving force behind the Club Australia.

The entry hall to the College is brightly decorated with Australian motifs—a map, Aboriginal designs and representations of Aboriginal life, and a large banner, green on gold, inscribed with a timely message: 'AUSTRALIA-VILLERS-BRETONNEUX: ALLIES IN THE PAST, FRIENDS IN THE PRESENT'. Mme Petitjean told us of her work in keeping the contact alive and meaningful for her pupils. Exchange trips for students, concerts, projects involving the students in research and publication, such as the beautifully produced *Journal d'un poilu* (2013/14) which, among other things recounts the meeting of a local French soldier with the Australian troops who arrived in the area in 1916 and his admiration for them.

This work has also produced DVDs with titles like *'Friends Forever'*, *'Voyage au pays des kangourous'*, *'Never forget Australia'*. These productions deserve an account in their own right.

We admired Mme Petitjean's enthusiasm and the persistence with which, from her own conviction, she was passing on to successive generations of students memories and knowledge of a shared history. Of course we were aware that the tiny town of Villers-Bretonneux could not reasonably be claimed to represent general French attitudes towards Australia: how many French have even heard of Villers-Bretonneux or would be able to find it on a map?

Our meeting with Mme Petitjean reminded us how enriching traditions can be, but also how fragile. Their transmission depends on people, who in turn depend on supportive structures, without which even the most carefully sustained set of memories and connections can quickly fall away. By the same token, structures are not in themselves sufficient to guarantee continuity or endurance: without ongoing people-to-people links and common projects to give texture and meaning, grand events and monuments are not likely to fulfil their intended purpose.

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