The Culture and Politics of Frenchness in Australia (1890–1914): Reflections on a Research Project

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Two days before Christmas in 1915, the very francophile Premier of New South Wales, W. A. Holman, spoke at the Australia Hotel to a crowd of French and Australian patriots about the impressive fundraising work of the recently founded French-Australian League of Help. The Premier expressed his conviction that a single sentiment of comradeship and mutual understanding existed between Australia and what he called her 'gallant' ally in the war, France.[1] In under three years, by 1917, the League of Help would collect a staggering amount of £215,607, or almost eight million Australian dollars today—an extraordinary testament to Australian support for France and the deep emotional links forged between the two countries in their fight against a common enemy (Brown & Dwyer 2014, p. 39; Nettelbeck 2015; Donohoo 2016).

In these years of intense, heightened, state-sponsored commemoration, it is easy to look to the Great War as the genesis of a positive shared Franco-Australian history. Names such as Fromelles and Villers-Bretonneux now sound notably familiar in a shared commemorative landscape between the 'Hexagon' and the island-continent. And it is a shared history that goes back much further in time. The indelible inscription of Baudin's passage on Kangaroo Island (1800–1804), carved in the appositely named 'Frenchman's rock', anchors that narrative in a much longer history going back at least to the early voyages of discovery of the eighteenth century.

[1] *Le Courrier Australien*, 1 January 1915, p. 4.

For a century now, both beginnings of that shared history have attracted and continue to attract sustained interest from historians; this shows no signs of abating.[2]

Yet in 1907, a few years before Holman's enthusiastic speech at the Australia Hotel, the Victorian Premier, Sir Thomas Bent, found himself in the midst of a small diplomatic incident when he unintentionally castigated one of his political opponents for 'shooting in the back like a Frenchman'. The episode was soon forgotten as Bent apologised profusely to what he, like Holman, called the 'gallant' French nation.[3] Can a gallant country be populated by devious cowards? And if Bent did not mean what he said, why had he said it?

My doctoral thesis was concerned with (sometimes seemingly anodyne) incidents like the quickly recanted blunder of the Victorian Premier. Following theorist Homi Bhabha's invitation for scholars to 'focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences' to understand 'society itself', the lived-in world, my work sought to elucidate the many meanings attached to France and French culture in Australia in the late-nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth (Bhabha 2004, p. 9). I was concerned with the plural meanings attached to the idea of Frenchness and the people for whom it held a particular significance, and why. The work examined how representations of France and the French have informed personal identities and social strategies in Australia. In so doing, it recreated a world that did not entirely exist 'out there', but which influenced the lives of many and contributed to the shaping of modern Australian culture by bringing to light some of the global and transnational processes constitutive of its history. Along the way, this approach allowed me to retrieve the life stories of many French and francophones who had made Australia their home (Bergantz 2016a).

But if it is anything, research is a humbling process. As any researcher would guess, the final shape of my project was not the one I started with. In what follows I will not provide a detailed historiographical account of French-Australian research, which can be accessed elsewhere, nor dwell for too long on my theoretical framework (Nettelbeck 2014; Bergantz 2016a, 1–15).

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[2] See, for instance, the list of publications from the ARC- and FNRS-funded Baudin Legacy Project: http://sydney.edu.au/arts/research/baudin/project/index.shtml. Accessed 28 May 2017.

[3] *The Age*, 29 August 1907, p. 6.

Rather, this article presents a reflection on the evolution of my research project between the beginning in mid-2011 and late 2015 when it was submitted for examination. Over time it changed considerably, as I tried to overcome intellectual roadblocks, got myself lost (and found) in the archives and dealt with the familiar setbacks that come with research. The project thus changed from one first concerned with migration, to one situated firmly within a transnational frame in order to go beyond the tradition of contribution and assimilation history through which a lot of migrant histories have been written in Australia since the 1970s–80s. Because I am mainly concerned here with showing how my research sought to avoid the trap of ethnic or contribution history, I will also focus on my effort to entangle the history of 'the French presence'—the geopolitical presence of the French nation-state in the Pacific and the presence and movement of French migrants and ideas about France—within Australian historiography. I conclude with some relatively broad open-ended questions and suggestions which I hope can invigorate further research, partly based on my recent experience with underexploited French archives (Bergantz 2016b).

Intellectual peregrinations

I first started considering this topic during my masters thesis at the University of Sydney in 2009. At the time I was interested in race relations in New Caledonia in the nineteenth century and started following a few individuals who moved from the French island to Australia. Following their paper trail out of sheer interest I became increasingly aware of two bodies of research being produced in Australia that were not really talking to each other. On the one hand I had what could be broadly called contribution or 'ethnic' history, and on the other hand contemporary Australian history. The genre of contribution history, as historian Hsu-Ming Teo tells us, has rather awkwardly co-existed with mainstream Australian history since the 1970s, following policy changes that sought to reinvent Australia as a multicultural nation (Teo 2003). The aim was to write Australia's migrant populations back into the national Anglo-Celtic story; it is in this context that Anny Stuer wrote her seminal study on *The French in Australia* (Stuer 1982). Laudable as the initiative was, in practice such histories tended to be relatively formulaic and celebrate the 'contribution' of migrant groups to a 'core' culture that was never challenged or questioned. Such histories (still) tend to 'hover at the margins of mainstream Australian history' rather than contribute to it (Teo 2003, 143; Fischer 2009).

Generally, in the decade following the first ethnic histories, more volumes followed on the many cultural, political and social aspects of the Franco-Australian connection; these came out of Australian French studies departments but they remained largely ignored by historians of Australia (Nisbet & Blackman 1984; Blackman 1988).

So this isolationism problem was being replicated in Australian history. Indeed, as I was becoming more familiar with recent Australian historiography it became clear that despite a recent reorientation of research towards transnational and global history, migrant studies still tended to be closed off within their own niche contribution paradigm: what was being done in the former was ignored by the latter and vice versa. Articles published under the aegis of ISFAR in *Explorations* and then *The French Australian Review* proved salutary in bridging that gap, particularly with respect to the nineteenth century, in the work of Ivan Barko, Colin Thornton-Smith and Wallace Kirsop, to name just a few (Barko 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2010, Barko & Berti, 2015, Thornton-Smith 1998, 1997, Kirsop 1991, 1996, 2002). Conversely, it is also quite clear in hindsight that part of the reason these two bodies of work rarely talked to each other is simply because of institutional divisions within universities between different schools and departments. On a more personal level, having at the time myself been in Australia for a handful of years and with no intention of leaving, the fact that those two strands of history had little interaction did not give me a clear genealogy in which to inscribe myself culturally in Australia, and that has bothered me both intellectually and emotionally.

My task was then to somehow pull these two strands together, to embed studies of the French presence more firmly into Australian history. It was for me a matter of visiting some of the important questions at the heart of cultural history: questions about identity formation, collective and individual subjectivity, about the power structures that defined and were defined by the interactions of French, Australian and British cultures, and between the French and Australians (Hunt 2014).

Initially, I started thinking about my project in terms of migration history and some of my original questions were quite simple: who were the French in Australia, where did they live, what did they do. It turned out that a large number of them were cooks, hairdressers, language teachers; there were a few prominent wealthy families, particularly wool buyers, and there were some key individuals who played important roles in setting up francophone societies.

Most of these questions were answered quickly by Anny Stuer's seminal book. One must bear in mind that the wealth of material now held in Nantes—the 'consul's treasure'[4]—was still lost at the time Stuer researched her book *The French in Australia*; this fact also highlighted to me the dearth of material, particularly official records, that would have allowed for a social history of French migration to Australia. Indeed, the book was intended as a demographic study but Stuer had to have recourse to numerous primary documents that fell well beyond the intended scope of research, so that the final shape of it, to the author's credit, ended up being a much broader social and cultural history than was initially planned (Stuer 1982; Nettelbeck 1988; Bergantz 2016b). As I explain below, during my research that dearth of material was filled by the holdings of the *Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes* (CADN), which hosts the archives of the Sydney and Melbourne consulates. In the concluding remarks of this article, I suggest that the remaining documents held in Nantes could open the door to more research on French-Australian history, and could potentially allow us to revisit some aspects of Stuer's work, particularly for the past century, up until 1997 (Bergantz 2016b).

It also became clear very quickly that the French themselves had little to do with perceptions and representations of France and French culture in Australia—certainly they could be ambassadors of culture, but had they not come here it would have made little difference to the way Australians looked to France. There is no need to expand here on the importance of French culture as a disembodied global culture (particularly as a class marker) in the world in the nineteenth century; the literature is vast on the subject. But the endurance and power of that idea of prestige associated with French culture needs to be stressed from the outset. That *je ne sais quoi,* that intangible idea about taste and higher taste is the running thread of my work. Even if socio-political changes in France could affect the way France was seen as a nation, even if the constant flow of unwanted French convicts from New Caledonia could hurt the French in Australia in their prestige and their self-esteem, even if the French themselves in Australia tended to be more lowly cooks and hairdressers, the social power attached to ideas about French civilisation and culture remained a critically important part of the mental fabric, the systems of thought,

[4] Bergantz, A. 2016–2017, 'Mapping the Consul's Treasure: A Discussion and Guide to French Consular Archives', *The French Australian Review* nº 61, pp. 40–45.

of what would then have been known as a greater 'Anglo-Saxon' world (Demolins 1897). But this disconnect was a problem, for if the French were not crucial in writing about French culture in Australia, how could I write a cultural history of their lives embedded in a significant way within Australian historiography? The danger here was that I could be reproducing the schism that had existed for so long between contribution history and mainstream Australian history, with the French on the one hand, and Australian cultural history on the other.

Encounters in the archives

It was my trip to the French archives that helped me not so much resolve that tension, but accommodate it in a fruitful way. In Australia I had examined numerous repositories, private and public, material published and unpublished, but it was my encounter with the archives in France that was a turning point. As I have noted in a previous issue of *The French Australian Review*, the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE) previously held at the Quai d'Orsay and now housed at La Courneuve in Paris have been used extensively to look at French diplomatic history in the Pacific and French-Australian political and economic relations, particularly by Robert Aldrich in the early 1990s (Bergantz 2016b; Aldrich 1990). However the 'second' site of the MAE, which has been profoundly neglected by researchers, hosts the archives of French overseas representation, not just the correspondence between the consulates and Paris but the archives of the consulates themselves (and more). For me, this was a goldmine as it allowed me to encounter the French communities of Sydney and Melbourne at a more intimate level than through an aggregate migrant picture derived from statistical analysis. Sifting through those hardly catalogued dozens of boxes, I realised that I now had enough material about the everyday life of some French migrants and other francophones and francophiles not only to incorporate French nationals in my work but to ask comparative questions about their own place, their own perceived place, in Australian society, not as contributing migrants or significant individuals, but as existing bodies navigating the same but also a different cultural landscape as their Anglo-Celtic or Australian hosts; the tension that had been nagging at me since the beginning became the key to my work. If I was asking what ideas about France meant to Australians and for Australia, then I could now finally ask what they meant to the French in Australia. But I still needed to explicitly

anchor that history in Australian historiography and think of a framework through which to ask those questions in a coherent and meaningful way.

Finding a way into Australian historiography

My work starts chronologically in the 1890s with Russel Ward's Australian 'legend' and ends with the First World War. The Great War stood out as an obvious end point because it so drastically changed the world order and the bilateral relationship between France and Australia. Germany by then had long supplanted France as the rival to Great Britain (Moses & Kennedy 1977). Diggers gained new, first-hand, experience of France during the war, some marrying French women, and France and Australia entered into a new and more direct economic and cultural relationship (Dwyer 1998, 2015). My starting date is more fluid, but represents, primarily, an explicitly historiographical choice. The 1890s correspond to what would come to be known retrospectively as *La Belle Époque* in France, a time of perceived prosperity in both the economic and cultural domains. More significantly, however, the 1890s were a pivotal period in Australian national history. While the larger scope of my thesis inscribes it firmly in a *longue durée* perspective, in order to connect French-Australian history to the rest of the world following recent developments in transnational and world history (Conrad 2016), the two and a half decades directly preceding the Great War are my focal point because of their significance in Australian national historiography (Palmer 1983).

In his now classic study of national character, *The Australian Legend*, Russel Ward drew on the Turner thesis of the frontier[5] to identify the location and moment when the essence of what it means to be Australian coalesced. He sought to chart the birth of what he interchangeably, and rather vaguely, called the national 'ethos', 'legend' or 'mystique' (Ward 1966). According to Ward, the essentially Australian values of egalitarianism, mateship, irreverence for authority and anti-imperial patriotism were fostered in the particular conditions found in the Australian bush in the 1890s, predominantly amongst Irish and English ex-convicts. From its first publication in 1958, Ward's study initiated an ongoing debate, in and out of academia, about Australia's sense of itself.

[5] American historian Frederick Turner argued in 1893 that ideas of American democracy and identity were formed by the opening up of the American frontier by the pioneers.

The *Legend* has itself become legend, a *lieu de mémoire* from which most discussions continue to stem. Critics have been vociferous of course, arguing, for instance, that Ward's thesis overlooked the roles played by women, Aboriginal people, migrants and urban values in the creation of an Australian culture, and that the bush mythology became pervasive largely through the role played by the urban intelligentsia of the Sydney *Bulletin* who saw in it a natural national canvas on which to paint their own masculine, bohemian and urban values (Ward 1978; Lake 1986; Carroll 1992; Stewart 1996, 2–26).

My own work is, amongst other things, another stage in the ongoing quest to deconstruct some of the assumptions made by Ward and the radical nationalist historians whose works continue to be prominent in the articulation of contemporary discussions about Australianness. As John Docker has pointed out, some of the opponents of the Australian 'legend' did not simply displace Ward's conception of a distinct Australian 'spirit of the age'. They replaced it with different ones, more suited to their own social and political inclinations (Docker 1991, 1996). I did not seek to rewrite French or francophone people into Australian history as mere adjuncts of that history, or to celebrate their contribution to a monolithic idea of national culture. Rather, agreeing with Docker that historical periods do not possess 'a single true spirit, a single dominating character, a single ideology or discourse' but are 'contradictory, heterogeneous, diverse, fragmented', my work set out, in its own modest way, to contribute to the displacement of a uniform—often overwhelmingly 'British'—conception of national culture in a multi-racial settler-colonial society, one whose 'quest for identity' has produced, it seems to the eyes of this outsider, its own bitter and divisive mythology of belonging (Docker 1996, 130; Anderson 2013). The Australia I sought to depict, built on the dispossession of its original inhabitants, was made up of colonial Australians from various places as well as French and francophone migrants and their children. It resembled a more contested, complex, more global and decisively more cosmopolitan, impressionist painting.

Framing distinctions

The literature on Franco-British history is vast, but a great deal of it is focused on representations of the perennial 'sweet enemy' (Tombs & Tombs 2006), which, particularly when considered through the press, tend to oscillate between moments of francophilia and francophobia, depending on

the international situation (the Dreyfus affair, the Fashoda incident in the Sudan, etc.); or it can also be seen as a class divide between a francophile cultivated elite and a francophobe—or at least apathetic—popular opinion, again most often gauged through the press (Bensimon 2011, 149). As I found myself with a multitude of personal stories, a multiplicity of cultural viewpoints and moments of cross-cultural (mis)understandings, I became concerned with going beyond the history of representations to examine how a general discourse about Frenchness in Australia was deployed in social life, by whom and why. I decided to focus rather on more enduring images and ideas in order to relate them to social life (for instance the association of French culture with high culture or the widespread view in the Anglo-Celtic world that French culture was a feminine culture, best left to women).

Some of Pierre Bourdieu's theories on cultural capital seemed apt to provide an analytical framework. In *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu particularly argues that systems of domination permeate all cultural practices and interpersonal exchanges. Symbolic power is present in all aspects of social life, whether it be in choices of dress, the books we read, or more generally how we express our taste (Bourdieu 1977, 1984). Through this theory I was able to decentre attention away from 'the French' by examining the deployment of Frenchness in order to go beyond the reifying category of national identity and use it instead to study the social processes at play in the mobilisation of culture. Thus Frenchness is not something the French inherently possess (though they might think they do) but it is rather a manifestation of social power used to achieve certain goals (maintaining social hierarchies, for instance) and deployed through a variety of signs charged with meaning (language, belonging to cultural institutions, or sporting a moustache).

France played an important, if contested, role in the development of Australian culture in the nineteenth century. As a gauge of taste and refinement, France could be seen as both a repository of tradition and the fountainhead of modernity. Some saw it as a warning of the excesses of the century and heralding moral decline: this could be seen in the declining birth rate as much as in the innovations in modern literature of the likes of Zola and Maupassant. These ideas mattered a great deal to Australians at a time of national self-definition. Likewise, France's presence in the Pacific, in particular in New Caledonia, played an important role in the definition of Australian political life, whether because it thwarted Australian jingoistic

aspirations in the Pacific Ocean, or because the slow but constant trickle of French *bagnards* to the island-continent uncomfortably reminded Australia of its own convict past.

Frenchness, within that context, was a contested but powerful idea as it could be imbued with different meanings for different people. It is a useful analytical lens for it allows for the inclusion of French migrants not simply as adjuncts to a broader Australian national story but also as illuminating broader dynamics in Australian history; it allows for a framework inclusive of various bodies fighting over the definition of a disembodied and global culture. French, francophone and francophile migrants and Australians thus *used* Frenchness in a variety of ways. It could represent the ideals of the Republic, or it could reference older notions of social prestige, either idea serving as markers of class and taste.

Social theory and an explicit point of entry into Australian historiography allowed me to (re)place (some) French people within a more global history of Australia, unbound from the limitations of the contribution genre that has tended to marginalise migrants from a broader national story. At the same time it allowed me to gain some insight into Australia's perceived place in the world in the nineteenth century by situating the story of the building of a national identity at the time of Federation beyond the bilateral relationship between the British metropole and the colony. Yet this same theory also forced me to make difficult—if logical—choices about whom to include and whom to exclude. The French nationals and other francophones or francophiles in my work are not included because they were French or unequivocally loved France, but because for them the idea of Frenchness was important as a marker of identity or a tool for social mobility. The vagaries of archival survival result in Melbourne being slightly more represented than Sydney—only one box of material for Sydney has found its way back to France, compared with over seventy for Melbourne for the period I covered. I have tried to compensate for this imbalance in my choice of case studies and through my use of Australian archives (particularly focusing on the Mitchell Library and the New South Wales State records). Still, the abundance of sources from both countries meant making hard choices, and the direction I have taken with them was ultimately determined by my methodological framework.

Conclusion and research desiderata

My doctoral thesis was focused on the mobilisation of culture by people and, to an extent, on how some ideas were used in the development of Australian national identity. I was intent on not assuming that 'British' culture was simply transferred to Australia without being reinvented to fit local circumstances by historical actors (Waterhouse 2003). Yet this is an area that could be explored much further. How did Australia's and Australians' engagement with France, particularly in matters of art and literature, differ from Great Britain's? What does this tell us about Australia and about France? Considering the rampant francophilia in the nineteenth century (real or affected) it should not be difficult to pin-point case studies in Australia where we could examine the actual modalities of that cultural reinvention and its effects. Richard White, Peter Kirkpatrick, Andrew McCann and Tony Moore have pointed to the fact that, for instance, turn-of-the-century Australian bohemians looked to France as an alternative cultural model partly in reaction *against* a British or, perhaps more accurately, Victorian moral order they found oppressive (White 1981; Kirkpatrick 1992; McCann 2004; Moore 2012). But how precisely did this cultural appropriation manifest itself in Australian art and literature? And did the same thing occur in other periods and for other people? How, then, have these cultural transfers and appropriations and the ways they operate and why they exist changed over time, over decades and perhaps over two hundred years, and what caused them to change, if they did? And finally, did Australian readings of France and French culture impact on global perceptions of France? Does the local feed back into the global? I wrote above that I specifically sought to write a history that was not limited to the history of representations, but this was in part because I had access to rich sources that allowed me to do so. Though I was attuned, I hope, to local and national differences, my focus does leave some questions hanging: within the history of representations, and particularly at times of international conflict, did Australian views of France (and the world) differ from those of Great Britain? If they did, how so, and more importantly, why?

For my framework to work and allow me to isolate individuals and link their life stories to Australian historiography, I needed to think of a way not to confine them to their national identity and this is when Frenchness as a 'doing' came into play. But considering the sources available now in Nantes (up to 1997) and the digitisation of newspapers in France and Australia

through *Gallica* and *Trove*, could a social and cultural history of French migration (to Australia, maybe New Zealand, maybe the Pacific) emerge? Could the story of *The French in Australia* first sketched out by Stuer in 1982, be taken beyond the scope of demography—especially if we consider migration from the French empire as well—to ask important questions in immigration scholarship, about gendered and racialised global labour markets, about citizenship and cultural belonging (Green 2002; Harzig & Hoerder 2013)?

The history of the French in Australia cannot be written; the idea of a definitive history of anything remains a hangover from a bygone form of positivism. Any honest history can only pretend to the indefinite article; it can only ever be *a* history. With this in mind, the preceding reflections do not constitute a prescriptive agenda. I do hope, however, that they, along with my own attempt at broadening the scope of research on the French presence in Australia, can open new avenues, both conceptual and archival, for further research.

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