

**Micheline Giroux,
Inspirational Teacher of French at the
University of Melbourne
(1928–2017)**

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Micheline Giroux taught French at the University of Melbourne for almost 30 years, from 1960 to her retirement in 1989. Her pedagogical dynamism, fiery personality and academic rigour were legendary and generations of students benefited enduringly from her knowledge, passion and style. She is deservedly remembered as one of the significant contributors to French studies in Melbourne.

Born in Orléans France on 2 August 1928, Micheline Henriette Giroux was the daughter of Lazare Louis Giroux, a French army officer, and his second wife Berthe (née Rolland), a school teacher. Her happy childhood was ended by the outbreak of the Second World War and the Nazi occupation. She continued her secondary schooling during this period, but was not spared the tragedy of war: one of her step-brothers, who had fought in the Resistance, died in a concentration camp in 1945, a loss compounded in that same year by the death of her father from cancer and her other step-brother's fatal car accident. Bereft of the the three most important men in her life at the age of seventeen, Micheline persevered with her studies, following her vocation to become a teacher.

At the University of Rennes she successfully completed her undergraduate degree in English and the *Diplôme d'études supérieures*. Continuing on to the University of Paris, she undertook the state examinations to qualify for upper-level secondary teaching, passing the *CAPES—Certificat d'aptitude au professorat de l'enseignement au second degré*—and the written part of the *Agrégation*. Having secured a permanent position as an employee of the French Ministry of Education, she enrolled for a doctorate at the Sorbonne.

Her thesis topic was the subversive 17th century writer Marie Catherine d’Aulnoy. This thesis would later be abandoned when Micheline decided to stay in Australia, but its subject points to some of her own central qualities: rebellious, confident, adventurous and fiercely assertive of the independence of women.

In 1948–1949, during her university studies, she worked as a French assistant at the prestigious Rothwell Grammar School in England. It was here that her gifts as a teacher first began to shine through. She was regarded as a highly valuable recruit who had immersed herself in the life of the school, well liked by both pupils and colleagues. She also actively cultivated her thespian interests, starring in the staff production. From 1951 to 1960, she pursued her career as an English teacher in French high schools, first in the north at Lens, near the Belgian border, then in the south at Gourdon, overlooking the Mediterranean Riviera.

In 1960 Micheline came to Australia under a scheme whereby teachers from the French National Education System were ‘detached’ from their positions to work—normally for short periods of two years—in Australian university French departments as ‘native speakers’ called *lecteurs*.¹ Micheline was selected by Professor Jackson on the basis of her excellent scholarly career: ‘by far the most suitable of the three candidates whose applications were sent out by the Cultural Relations Department of the French Foreign Office.’ She was appointed as a lecturer, initially for two years, but with the possibility of a renewed contract. Micheline was the first female *lectrice* to join the French Department at the University of Melbourne and may well have been the first woman to hold such a position in Australia. After four years in the position she resolved to remain in Melbourne. She gained permanent residency in 1966.

‘Mlle Giroux’, as she was invariably known by her students, proved to be one of the most valued and celebrated members of the French department. In 1973 she was promoted to Senior Lecturer and Professor Jackson, in his

¹ Originating at the University of Sydney in the 1920s, this scheme was much developed and refined over the years, notably by Professor Ron Jackson at the University of Melbourne in the 1950s and 1960s. Recruitment was done through the French authorities on the basis of criteria provided by the university, which also had the liberty to choose the candidates it preferred from the list of applicants put forward by the French. The French Ministry of Foreign affairs covered the cost of visits back home.

letter of recommendation, noted that while not a research scholar, Mlle Giroux was an outstanding teacher and many graduates who studied French remembered her with gratitude. He emphasised her outstanding contribution to the teaching of French in Victoria, which included work at the Alliance Française and the development of an ABC program of French for Schools. Over the years, she taught a wide variety of courses, at all levels: classical and modern French language as well as French literature and civilization of the 17th, 19th and 20th centuries. She also designed innovative courses on the history of Paris and French regional history. Her impeccably prepared lectures were enriched with items of cultural interest, peppered with extracts of speeches, poetry and music for added authenticity. She would frequently burst into song.



Drama remained a keen interest and, in the seventies, the staging of plays organised by Micheline Giroux was part of the activities of the Melbourne University French department. In 1977 two of her students, Michael Bula and David Gorrie founded the Melbourne French Theatre, no doubt inspired by their theatrical experiences under the direction of Mlle Giroux. Today the Melbourne French Theatre is an established part of Melbourne's vibrant and diverse theatrical life.² Mlle Giroux performed in many productions and also took her acting skills into her classes, bringing her teaching to more vivid life. At times her teaching style could be intimidating: she was a formidable disciplinarian and occasionally flaunted her authority impetuously. One former student remembers how she launched an ashtray at a fellow classmate for being a *truand* (ratbag); this was accompanied by a threatening stare designed to make rebellious students quiver.

² Jana Verhoeven (ed.), Melbourne French Theatre: Thirty-Five Years of History, *Explorations* Special Issue, September 2013.

Classroom theatrics notwithstanding, Micheline's concern and care for her students were consistent and genuine. In 1984 she undertook fieldwork in preparation for a new course for advanced students on the history of Paris. She also carried out research on French regional history, particularly focused on Lyon and Besançon. In her report following the trip she expressed a sense of unease concerning her return to her home country:

Deep changes within me have gradually, (perhaps) insidiously turned the participant I once was into a sort of observer, semi-detached, who however could never become a genuine outsider. Here I was therefore, this time, more acutely than ever before, feeling and witnessing unmistakable signs of anxiety, insecurity, failing hopes in politics, economy, in the future, even, of a country now more and more inclined to indulge in nostalgia, escapism into a glorious past.

She was not alone in her perception of the moral crisis that was beginning to affect French post-colonial identity in the Mitterrand years, but she was conscious of the aspirations eagerly held by her students to live and study in France. She worried about her role as teacher and mentor, deliberating on how much of this cultural dysphoria she should impart to her students: 'I sincerely feel, by now, I should cautiously and caringly prepare them to learn from a past and face the most thought-inducing challenge offered by "France today... and... after."'

Micheline was highly appreciated by fellow staff members and participated fully in university life. One of her colleagues described her as a 'bright spark in every gathering'. She would regularly spend time with colleagues over dinner at University House on Thursdays, following late afternoon or early evening lectures. She affectionately called these weekly gatherings *le beau jeudi*, alluding to the time when children in France had Thursday off from school.

When Micheline retired in 1989, her departure from the University coincided with the French Government Award of *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes académiques* for her distinguished service to the French language and culture. On this occasion Dr. Ann Trindade, head of the French department, paid tribute to her dedication as a teacher, her erudition and wit, her eloquence, modesty and integrity. For students and colleagues alike, she was an authentic embodiment of all they associated with the idea of France:

[She] has done much to combat the advance of creeping bureaucracy. We could never become complete robots with Micheline there to subvert the system, scrambling the record cards, stuffing up the audio-visuals and dismissing the latest rebarbative piece of officialese with a resounding ‘MERDE!’.

After her retirement Micheline remained in close contact with her colleagues and was appointed a Senior Associate in the French Department.

A new phase awaited when she began teaching at the Stonnington University of the Third Age (U3A) when it opened in the early 1990s. From then until the very end of her life she ran a French History lecture series and French conversation classes. The lectures ranged from the classics of the 17th century to the 19th century and the Belle Époque. She taught in the same way she always had, with a vitality and enthusiasm unhindered by age. One of her long-term students stressed her unique talent for describing the personalities of figures in history—their frailties, their appearance—as though she had known them personally. Topics of the conversation classes would vary from France’s culinary exploits to famous French literary figures, and from heated but friendly debates to the personal stories of students themselves. Language enrichment and increased fluency came through her creation of a feeling of engagement. She lived for her teaching and her classes at the U3A, partly because of her close involvement with her students, were the highlights of her week; they were also highlights for the students, who never left her class without a sense of deep benefit from her knowledge, dedication and sheer presence.

Micheline Giroux passed away on 27 February 2017, teaching almost until her last day. A well-attended requiem mass was held at St Mary’s church in St Kilda. Through her tireless, lifelong cultivation of her own knowledge and her gift for sharing it, she opened the minds of a multitude of Australian students to the beauties, intricacies and challenges of another culture and another language—a life and legacy worthy of celebration.

The University of Melbourne