

The *Palmes Académiques* in Australia

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Introduction

Napoléon Bonaparte, as First Consul, wished to institute a social hierarchy that would be accessible to everyone, based on merit.¹ This desire led to the founding of the Order of the Legion of Honour in 1802. He then turned his attention to education; the Convention had wanted to give free primary education to the lower classes and secondary instruction to the middle classes. However, this had not materialised, in part due to the parlous state of the country's finances. Napoléon thought that he could create a body of teachers which, without being celibate, would bring to the education of the young, the same application and ongoing vocation as had the clergy in the past. In 1806 Napoléon received the Fourcroy² report which stressed the prime importance of the establishment and organisation of an educational body, with strict rules and regulations, to help stabilise the political State, saying:

Il n'y aura pas d'État politique fixe, s'il n'y a pas de corps enseignant avec des principes fixes [...] il [l'état] sera constamment exposé aux désordres et aux changements [...] l'établissement d'un corps enseignant est encore le seul moyen de sauver l'instruction publique elle-même d'une ruine totale.³

¹ Émile Foëx, *De la double palme de l'Université impériale à l'Ordre des palmes académiques*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1978, pp. 4, 48.

² Antoine François, comte de Fourcroy (1755–1809)

³ 'There will be no solid political State, if there is no teaching body with sound principles [...] it (the State) will be constantly subject to disorder and change [...] the establishment of a body of teachers is still the only way to save public education itself from total ruin.' Émile Foëx, p. 17

Napoléon accepted this advice and established the University (*l'Université*) to provide a special education for men destined for the teaching profession.⁴ The logical extension of this initiative was the development of a special mark or distinguishing feature.

This led to Napoléon Bonaparte instituting, on 17 March 1808, what were, in essence, three honorific titles, the insignia of which were embroidered on the left shoulder of the wearer's academic gown⁵ both to indicate academic position and also to reward services rendered to teaching. The senior rank was the *haut titulaire*,⁶ with a double palm embroidered in gold thread; the middle rank was *officier de l'Université*, with the double palm embroidered in silver thread; and the lowest rank was *officier d'Académie*, designated by the double palm embroidered in blue and white silk. Although initially restricted to members of the University, these awards were later extended to teachers in secondary schools (*lycées*). The position of the recipient in the university world determined which rank would apply: *haut titulaire* was awarded to university chancellors, among others, while *officier de l'Université* was awarded to rectors, deans and university professors. The lowest rank, *officier d'Académie*, was awarded to headmasters and secondary school teachers.⁷ During the presidency of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte a decree dated 9 December 1850 reduced the ranks to two, that of *haut titulaire* being abolished while the title of *officier de l'Université* was replaced by that of *officier de l'Instruction publique*;⁸ the rank of *officier d'Académie* was retained.

It is not clear why '*palmes*' were chosen as insignia. In the *Décret impérial* of 17 March 1808, it says:

The costume common to all members of the University will be a black coat with a palm embroidered on the left part of the chest. The palm will be embroidered in blue silk for ordinary members, in blue and white silk for officers of the academies, in silver for officers of the university, in gold for the titulars.⁹

⁴ Émile Foëx, pp.14–5.

⁵ <http://www.amopa.asso.fr/historique.htm>. Accessed 4 April 2017.

⁶ Émile Foëx, p. 51. This later became '*haut titulaire de l'Université*'.

⁷ <http://www.amopa.asso.fr/historique.htm>. Accessed 4 April 2017.

⁸ Émile Foëx, p. 51.

⁹ Émile Foëx, p. 36. '*Le costume commun à tous les membres de l'université sera l'habit noir avec une palme brodée sur la partie gauche de la poitrine. La palme sera brodée en soie bleue pour les simples membres, en soie bleue et blanche pour les officiers des académies, en argent pour les officiers de l'université, en or pour les titulaires.*'

On 7 April 1866, Napoléon III, on the initiative of his Minister, Victor Duruy, made the *Palmes académiques* an official decoration.¹⁰ Finally, the decree of 4 October 1955, signed by President René Coty, instituted the *Ordre des Palmes académiques*, with three grades: *chevalier*, *officier*, and *commandeur*.¹¹ The embroidered palms were then replaced by metal insignia.¹² One of the reasons for the change from embroidered *palmes* to metal insignia was that an official dress did not exist for public servants or teachers to which embroidered *palmes* could be attached, whereas metal insignia were easily pinned to street coats.¹³

Today the awards are made by the Prime Minister on the advice of the Minister of National Education. There is a fixed annual contingent of 7570 *chevaliers*, 3785 *officiers*, and 280 *commandeurs*. Ten years' service at least is required for the grade of *chevalier*, five years' in the rank of *chevalier* to be promoted to *officier*, and at least three years as *officier* to be promoted to *commandeur*. Foreigners can be admitted to the Order directly without conditions of seniority, depending upon their history and services rendered. Such awards are not counted in the annual contingent. The awards are made for 'eminent services to education' and to those who have actively contributed to the extension of French culture throughout the world.¹⁴

The insignia is enamelled violet, and is a double palm in silver for *chevaliers*, and in gold for *officiers*; these are 35 mm in diameter. For *commandeurs*, the palms are almost twice the size of the first two grades (60 mm) and, in addition, are suspended from a 'crown' made of six olives, also enamelled violet. The insignia is suspended from a violet moiré ribbon 32 mm wide, which includes a 22 mm diameter rosette for *officiers*. For *commandeurs*, the insignia is suspended from a 60 mm wide cravat.¹⁵ Nominations and promotions are made by the French Prime Minister, on the proposal of the Minister of National Education, twice yearly, on 1 January and 14 July.¹⁶

¹⁰ <http://www.amopa.asso.fr/historique.htm>. Accessed 5 April 2017.

¹¹ <http://www.amopa.asso.fr/historique.htm>. Accessed 5 April 2017.

¹² Jean Battini & Witold Zaniewicki, *Guide pratique des décorations françaises actuelles*, Paris, Lavauzelle, 2015, p. 136.

¹³ Émile Foëx, quoting from a report by Monsieur V. Duruy, Minister of Public Instruction, p. 68.

¹⁴ <http://www.amopa.asso.fr/ordre.htm>. Accessed 4 April 2017.

¹⁵ André Damien, *Les ordres de chevalerie et les décorations*, Paris, Éditions Mémoire et Documents, 2002, pp. 96–99.

¹⁶ <http://www.amopa.asso.fr/ordre.htm>. Accessed 5 April 2017



*Palmes académiques awards, from left: chevalier, officier and commandeur**

Officiers d'Académie, Officiers de l'Instruction Publique

The first mention of these awards to Australians seems to have been in relation to the Paris Exhibition of 1889: 'Dr T. Aubrey Bowen¹⁷ (Victoria) and Messrs Huybers (Victoria) and Kennaway have received gold palms.'¹⁸ The colony association of Mr Kennaway was not given and has not been found.

Reference is also made to the pianist, Monsieur Henri Kowalski, who became the conductor of the Sydney Philharmonic Society in 1885. He was 'created *Officier de l'Académie* [sic] in recognition by the French Government of the services he has rendered to the cause of music in general and of French art in particular.'¹⁹ However, no confirmation or date of the award has been found.

¹⁷ In *The Tasmanian* of 30 November 1889, there is a note saying that Bowen was 'to receive the decoration of a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour instead of the appointment of an officer of public instruction'.

¹⁸ *The Australasian*, Melbourne, 9 November 1889, p. 15. In the *Sydney Morning Herald* 4 November 1889, they are described as 'gold palms as officers of the Order of Public Instruction', p. 7.

¹⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 September 1896, p. 4.

*Images by Saga 70, Ordensherre and Fdutil, respectively, via Wikimedia Commons.

Auguste Wiégand,²⁰ the City Organist of Sydney, was appointed *officier d'Académie* in 1898. At a concert in Sydney at which Monsieur Briard d'Aunet, Consul General of France, presented the insignia of the *Ordre d'Officier d'Académie* to Wiégand, he said that:

*les palmes académiques sont simplement un ordre [...] pour récompenser toute personne ayant contribué à l'avancement des sciences, de la littérature ou des beaux-arts. Dans le début, cet ordre était exclusivement réservé à des Français, mais depuis quelques années on l'a accordé à de rares étrangers.*²¹

In 1900, Wiégand was made *Chevalier de l'Ordre Royal de Mérite de Léopold (Belgium)* [sic].²² He died in Oswego, New York in July 1904.²³

In 1903, Madame Marie, 'for many years a French teacher of renown in Sydney had the honour from her native land of the title *Officier de l'Académie* being bestowed upon her by Monsieur Biard d'Aunet.'²⁴ Also in 1903, Mlle Irena Dreyfus was made an *Officier de l'Instruction Publique*. She was a successful teacher of French in Melbourne for many years, delivering lectures on French literature, before returning to Paris.²⁵ There do not appear to have been further Australian awards until that to Miss Gladys Marks, of the University of Sydney, who received the *Officier d'Académie* in 1934.²⁶

²⁰ *The South Australian Register*, 20 July 1892, Wiégand was born in Belgium to a German father.

²¹ *Le Courrier Australien*, 16 July 1898.

²² This should read *Ordre de Léopold*.

²³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 July 1904, p. 5.

²⁴ *The Newsletter*, Sydney, 19 September 1903, p. 13.

²⁵ *The Critic*, Adelaide, 3 October 1903, p. 27.

²⁶ The following is a personal communication from Professor Kenneth R. Dutton AM, dated 6 March 2017: 'The first appearance of the title *Officier d'Académie* after the name of Gladys Marks in the Calendar [of the University of Sydney] occurs in 1934. The titles *Officier d'Académie* and *Officier de l'Instruction Publique* had been created in 1808, and under the 1921 Presidential decree were conferred by the Ministère de l'Instruction Publique et des Beaux-Arts. The titles were conferred on those *étrangers et Français résidant à l'étranger qui contribuent activement à l'expansion intellectuelle, scientifique et artistique de la France dans le monde*, on the recommendation of the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères. They existed until 1955, when (under René Coty's Presidency) the Ordre des Palmes académiques supplanted the older system.' (Foëx, 1978, 138–140, 153–155)

It is clear that, although the *Ordre des Palmes académiques* was founded in 1955, it was not until 20 years later that a significant number of awards was made to Australians. These awards were almost entirely to academics in university French departments, although some French teachers, especially in various Alliances Françaises, were honoured. Several members of non-French university departments have also been honoured, e.g. Prof. John Funder AC, Professor of Medicine, Monash University, and Prof. David Tunley, Professor of Music, University of Western Australia.

Section Australie, Association des Membres de l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques (AMOPA)

In the issue of *Le Courrier Australien* of 10 April 1993 there is an account of the setting up of the *Section Australie* of the *Association des Membres de l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques (AMOPA)* in Sydney on 26 February 1993. The parent organisation had been founded in Paris on 30 October 1962.

Initially, the Australian branch aimed to establish friendly relations and meetings between members and also intended to publish an information bulletin. From a cultural point of view, it wished to encourage schools and universities teaching French to take part in competitions, to defend and illustrate the French language, to restore writing to favour, as well as giving a prize for a short story written by a young person. The competitions, organised in Paris, were provided with valuable prizes.

The Honorary President was H. E. Monsieur Philippe Baude, *Ambassadeur de France en Australie*. The first President was Vladimir Perm, a Sydney architect; the Vice-President was Bruce Pratt, of the University of Western Australia, Perth; the Secretary/Treasurer was Philippe Tabuteau, a historian, of Gosford. Following the departure of Vladimir Perm, Catherine Alla, wife of Pierre Alla, a well-known Sydney businessman, became President in 2001. It is not clear from the literature how long Mme Alla remained President nor indeed how long the branch lasted.

The organisation in Australia seems to have lasted only a short time before disappearing, although Associate Professor Ross Steele AM tried to revive it in the early years of this century, without success. The parent Paris association still continues. Its headquarters are at 30, avenue Félix-Faure, 75015, Paris.

In researching this article, I compiled a list of Australian recipients of the *Palmes académiques*, drawing on a number of sources, including a list supplied by the French Embassy, Canberra, various newspaper reports, particularly *Le Courrier Australien*, and personal contacts. Reports in *Le Courrier Australien* often give the date of the bestowal ceremony (the *remise*) of the award, rather than the date of the award decree, as in France the award becomes 'official' only after it has been presented. However, for foreigners this is not the case. There is sometimes a considerable delay between the date of the award decree and the actual presentation ceremony. The provisional list indicates some 166 awardees from 1957 to 2016. Of these, nine have received the highest award of *commandeur*.

The list can be consulted on the ISFAR website at www.isfar.org.au under 'Resources'. Apologies are offered for errors of commission or omission. Please report errors to the editors of the *French Australian Review* so that the list may be updated (french.australian.review@gmail.com).

Sydney

References

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