

Eds: The following note is the first of an occasional series in which ISFAR members describe personal French-Australian encounters. As well as entertaining readers these stories will become part of a resource archive for researchers of cross-cultural relations. This series was inspired by the *Joint Statement of Enhanced Strategic Partnership between Australia and France*, signed on 3 March 2017,¹ which concludes with an emphasis on the desirability of ‘cross-cultural exchange and interpersonal links between the two countries’.

French-Australian Encounters

Number 1

Peter Hodges Australian francophile and translator of Boris Vian’s short stories (*If I Say If*)² writes of his meeting with *L’Association Internationale des Amis de Pierre Loti*.³

La Birondie

23 September 2012

La Birondie, near Pomport in south-west France, is the family home of our good friend Laure Reblets, whose grandmother’s immediate neighbour, Madame de Ferrière, gave birth, in 1859, to a daughter, Blanche, who was later to become Madame Pierre Loti.

¹ <http://dfat.gov.au/geo/france/Pages/joint-statement-of-enhanced-strategic-partnership-between-australia-and-france.aspx>

² Freij, Maria & Peter Hodges (translators), Alistair Rolls, John West-Sooby & Jean Fornasiero (eds), 2014, *If I Say If: The Poems and Short Stories of Boris Vian*, University of Adelaide Press.

³ pierreloti.eu

Pierre Loti was a naval officer and author whose career during the second half of the nineteenth century provided the inspiration for the exotic settings of many of his novels. He travelled to and wrote about such places as Tahiti, Senegal, Japan, Turkey, Egypt and India at a time when international travel was not very common. He attracted a cult following, so much so that in 1933 a dedicated group of his followers founded *L'Association Internationale des Amis de Pierre Loti*.

After a relaxing evening spent on the terrace of *La Birondie* watching the sun set across the valley, Laure casually mentioned that a group of up to thirty members of The International Association of the Friends of Pierre Loti would be arriving on Sunday to visit the neighbour's house where Blanche de Ferrière (Madame Pierre Loti) had been born and to rediscover her grave at Lachère. Laure invited my wife Kerry and me to come along to meet some 'new and interesting people' and to provide her with 'moral support'.

Around 10 am the next Sunday morning, we turned off the narrow bitumen road and onto the long driveway that led to *La Birondie*. Fifty metres in front of us a huge coach with a Paris address and telephone number emblazoned across its back was just managing to squeeze between the parallel rows of plane trees. Suspended from the left-hand side windows was a banner bearing the name of the association along with contact details via the website. The image seemed quite out of place in such beautiful surroundings. We parked our car and got out quickly before the door of the bus opened. We walked through the huge wrought iron gates and into the courtyard where Laure and Jim had obviously gone to a lot of trouble to prepare a long table for their guests. There was an interesting assortment of canapés and half full glasses of rich, sweet Monbazillac wine as an *apéritif*.

Unfortunately a stiff breeze had sprung up, causing the edges of the starched linen tablecloth to flap about, upsetting the carefully placed glasses of wine and plates of food. What's more, being September, with the changing of the seasons and lack of rain, the leaves were falling from the trees onto the plates and dust was lining the polished rims of the glasses. Just as the passengers began to disembark, a strong gust of wind swept through the courtyard, sending the tables and chairs flying. Laure's best-laid plans had degenerated into something of a shambles. Completely at a loss, Laure covered her head with both hands and raced inside the house slamming

the door behind her, leaving her husband Jim standing there with a glass of Monbazillac in each hand and a stunned look on his face.

‘Bonjour. I am the President of *L’Association Internationale des Amis de Pierre Loti*’, a tall distinguished man said to me with an outstretched hand, totally ignoring Jim.

‘Bonjour,’ I replied. ‘I am not the owner of the property. I am an Australian who has translated into English some stories by another French author, Boris Vian. My wife and I have been invited along to help our friends. The *apéritif* that is being prepared in your honour is not quite ready’, I added.

‘That’s alright,’ he replied, totally ignoring our “literary connection”. ‘We will first visit the house where Madame Loti was born and maybe everything will be ready when we return.’

I suddenly found myself accompanying a group of literature fanatics to the house of Laure’s current neighbour, Emmanuelle Carrière, one of the hairdressers from Sigoulès. As we walked through the front gate the curtains were quickly drawn. The side door opened and a dishevelled Emmanuelle appeared in a bathrobe.

‘I know why you are here,’ she said wearily, ‘but you can’t come inside. My mother is not well and she cannot be disturbed’.

She went back into the house, obviously unimpressed by the fact that thirty complete strangers were sticking their noses into and photographing every single nook and cranny of her garden and adjoining buildings.

The group returned to the courtyard of *La Birondie* where Kerry, Laure and Jim had been working feverishly to restore some sort of order to the table. The resurrected canapés were devoured within minutes and the rich golden wine consumed without another drop touching the ground.

‘We will look for the grave site now,’ the President informed his colleagues.

Through no fault of my own, I had somehow become the go-to person for the President. ‘According to my research, the site is over there about half way down the hill,’ he said. ‘Can you lead the way?’ ‘Yes,’ I replied, confident in my knowledge of the area.

Off we went in single file, an assortment of individuals united in our determination to let nothing stand in our way. Laure soon caught up to us, hoping to glean some expert information from the President about Pierre Loti and his wife. We walked about a kilometre along a well-trodden path

and then across the field belonging to Laure's other neighbour, Monsieur La Boisserie. We reached an enclosure where a number of horses were grazing. Without hesitation the President unlatched the gate and held it open for everyone to pass through. Thirty Parisians, inappropriately attired for the French countryside, carefully tiptoed through the field, desperately trying to avoid the piles of manure. The small herd of horses scattered as we approached.

The President, visibly excited, untangled the barbed wire latch of a second gate and pushed his way through the rickety structure. The others followed, sensing that their quest for the grave was drawing to an end. Someone pointed to the remains of a low rusty metal fence protruding from a pile of stones overgrown with blackberry bushes.

'There it is!' the President proclaimed.

Thirty pairs of hands made light work of the blackberries and other debris. A headstone bearing the simple inscription was uncovered:

Blanche de Ferrière

1859–1940

In the excitement someone had forgotten to close the gate and as a result the horses had escaped. Monsieur La Boisserie, the owner of the property, visibly distressed, stomped out of his house, across the empty field, through the open gate, and straight up to the President who was so much taller than everyone else.

'What do you think you are doing?' he asked almost angrily.

'We are looking for the grave of Blanche de Ferrière, the wife of Pierre Loti,' the President replied innocently.

'You are on my property,' Monsieur La Boisserie insisted, 'and you have let my horses out.'

'Have you asked for permission to be here?' I inquired.

'No,' the President said.

'The grave is not on any of the official public access paths,' Laure explained. 'You cannot go onto someone's property without permission, especially with a group this size.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't know,' the President said sheepishly.

The owner of the property was gracious. He asked everyone to go quickly about their business so he could round up his horses and rejoin his family celebrating the First Communion of his eldest son.

After taking notes and photographing each other next to the headstone, the members of *The International Association of the Friends of Pierre Loti* trudged back through the field, stopping occasionally to scrape horse droppings from their shoes and to extricate themselves from the blackberry branches that were clinging to their clothes. As they boarded the coach, the President presented Laure with a signed copy of a book he had just written on Pierre Loti as a memento of the occasion and, turning to me, whispered, 'I have to admit that I know very little about Boris Vian, but, after today, I think I would like to learn more'.



'The Friends of Pierre Loti' in front of Blanche's house (*Les Amis de Pierre Loti*)



Peter Hodges, author of the above *rencontre*, has a First Class Honours Degree and Masters Degree in Francophone Literature, a Masters Degree in Applied Linguistics, and most recently a PhD in translation theory and literary translation based on the short stories of the non-conformist author Boris Vian,

For many years now Peter has been dividing his time between the north coast of New South Wales where, with his family, he owns and operates Tilermans, an award-winning French-themed restaurant, and the village of Sigoulès in south-west France, where he is well integrated into the local community. He is an active member of the *Comité des Fêtes* and the *Confrérie*; an ambassador in Australia for *The Confrérie du Raisin d'Or de Sigoulès* and in 2017 was elected to the *Académie des Sciences, des Beaux-Arts et des Belles-Lettres du Périgord-Dordogne* for his ongoing work in the field of literary translation.