

Olive Wykes Mence (1921–2016)

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A concise notice appeared in *The Age* on November 8 2016 announcing the death of Dr Olive (Wykes) Mence OAM (16 September 1921–31 October 2016). It is possible that many students of French-Australian relations missed the significance of this newspaper announcement as Olive Mence took the name of her husband (whom she had married in 1953) only on her retirement from the University of Melbourne at the end of 1983. Before leaving the University she worked and published for over thirty years as Olive Wykes and was notable not only for teaching generations of Diploma of Education students how to teach French, but also for her work in interpreting the French educational system and French cultural history for an Australian readership.

Like Manuel Gelman, *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur*, Olive Wykes taught in the Faculty of Education at a time when the study of a language other than English for at least one year was mandatory for all Arts students and the most common language taken was French. This requirement created a demand for teachers of French. French history was also a popular subject, so that Wykes's research was valuable for students outside both Education and the Department of French.

Olive Mence and her husband Dudley Stuart Mence (1909–2001) travelled frequently between France and Australia, notably from 1966 to 1972, when their journeys (by ship) appear to have been almost annual.¹

¹ <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/ListingReports/PassengerListing.aspx?page=1>.

Olive Wykes's father too was no stranger to France. He served with the third Australian Division of the AIF during World War One, and was awarded the Military Medal for his action on the Somme in 1918.

Although Olive Wykes published in *The Phi Delta Kappan* on 'International Education in France' most of her papers appeared in *Melbourne Studies in Education*, now *Critical Studies in Education*, beginning with 'The Crisis in French Education' in 1957 and finishing with 'Student Revolution in France, 1968' in 1970.² Two surveys also won considerable approval: *Survey of Foreign Language Teaching in the Australian Universities: a report prepared by Olive Wykes, with recommendations by the Sub-Committee on Foreign Languages* was published by the Australian Humanities Research Council in 1966³ and in 1968 she and M. G. King published *Teaching of Foreign Languages in Australia* with the Australian Council for Educational Research.⁴

Her own interest in France had begun early. In 1941 she graduated, with First Class Honours, in French and Latin, taking her DipEd and the Dwight Prize for topping her year in Education the following year. For the next five years she taught at Presbyterian Ladies' College before winning the John and Eric Smyth Travelling Scholarship. This enabled her to spend two years in England and France, during which she took a Diploma in English Educational Thought and Practice from the London University Institute of Education and a short course in French Language and Civilisation at the Sorbonne. On her return to Australia she held a variety of academic positions in the French Department and the Faculty of Education before taking up a Carnegie Fellowship in 1959/60, during which time she travelled to France as well as the United States and led the Australian delegation to the conference of the International Federation of University Women in Helsinki.

Olive Wykes was appointed Reader in 1970 and at her retirement in 1983, was hailed as Australia's leading scholar on education in France

² Olive Wykes, 'Education in France', *The Phi Delta Kappan*. vol. 51, n° 5, International Education, 256–258.

³ Olive Wykes, 1966, *Survey of Foreign Language Teaching in The Australian Universities: a report prepared by Olive Wykes, with recommendations by the Sub-Committee on Foreign Languages*, Australian Humanities Research Council, Canberra.

⁴ Olive Wykes & M. G. King, 1968, *Teaching of Foreign Languages in Australia*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne.

over a quarter of a century.⁵ She was also an energetic member of general and specialised educational organisations including the Australian Universities' Modern Languages Association (AUMLA), of which she was Treasurer and business manager of its journal, Secretary of the Melbourne University Staff Association and foundation member of the Council of the Canberra College of Advanced Education.

Olive Wykes had been a student in Janet Clarke Hall of which she was to become a Fellow, but it is her work on behalf of another College for which she is principally remarkable. She was involved with International House from its very beginning. A May Fair had been held in 1952 to raise funds for its establishment and by 1953 Olive Wykes was one of the three women charged with liaison between the auxiliaries raising money and the central committee. International House was a ground-breaking enterprise: the first co-educational residential college established at any Australian university, it was to house both students from overseas and Australian country areas. It was supported by Rotary International, and as a way of both raising funds and repaying country towns for their support, tours were organised to regional centres of performances by overseas students.

Olive Wykes organised and accompanied these student groups; she commented that the tours frequently provided audiences with their first opportunity of interacting with people from South Asia. The programme of visits to places including Horsham, Hamilton, Camperdown, Kerang, Numurkah, Kyabram and Maryborough was packed. The concert party on occasion performed on Friday morning at the local primary school, in the afternoon at the local high school and on Saturday at the local town hall.

The contribution of Olive Wykes Mence to her alma mater was acknowledged in 2017 with a University of Melbourne Award. These recognise former staff members who have made an outstanding and enduring contribution to the identity and standing of the University. Award recipients are acknowledged with bronze plaques interspersed in the paving on Professors Walk on the Parkville campus.

The University of Melbourne

⁵ Kwong Lee Dow, 7 November, 1983 'Minute of Appreciation: Dr Olive Wykes', Faculty of Education *Minutes*.