

Jacqueline Mayrhofer (1936–2017)

James Grieve

Jacqueline Laure Georgette Lécorcher, known to us of the ANU as Jacqueline Mayrhofer, was born in Troyes in Champagne in 1936 and died there recently. Most of her life had been spent in Australia, decades of it as a teacher of French at ANU.

She first came to the University in 1966 with Colin Mayrhofer, who had been appointed to a senior tutorship in the Department of Classics. They had met in King's College Cambridge in 1963, where Colin was a student and Jacqueline was attending a seminar for foreign teachers of English. Colin says that, when she came to Australia in 1965, she liked Newcastle, which reminded her of Troyes, a terminally industrial run-down city, but with the advantage of its magnificent ocean beaches. There she, who before had drunk only champagne, learned to drink red wine and to eat cheese, which she had abhorred.

Her relationship to ANU, for far too long officially 'casual', was anything but. She must have been one of the most highly qualified casuals ever employed here. An experienced school teacher, trained in the French national system, she had degrees in higher education, some qualifying her to teach at secondary level (*Certificat d'aptitude au professorat de l'enseignement public du second degré*, 1961), others to teach at tertiary level (*Agrégation de langues vivantes*, 1962); *Diplôme d'études approfondies* (Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris III, 1987). For about thirty years, her official status in the French education system was defined as 'on secondment' (*professeur agrégée détachée en Australie*). France's loss was Australia's gain.

The word 'casual' does no justice to her. Unlike today's real casuals, she

was with us all the time, she was of us. Her place among us was materialised in the fact that she had tenure of an office to herself, like any of the rest of us. Though not a member of the Faculty of Arts, she participated in departmental meetings. Sensed as a continuing colleague, with as much attachment to the Department of French and its intellectual disciplines as any of us, she was of immense value. First, as a teacher in oral language classes at all levels, ‘conversation classes’ as they were called. This was the main role then given to native speakers, that of speaking the everyday language with students, while the bulk of the teaching in reading and writing was done by non-native speakers. We were fortunate to have two native speakers, Jacqueline and Viviane Smith.

Jacqueline’s second value to her colleagues, equally practical, lay in her acting as a *locum tenens* for any colleague absent on sabbatical. Such was the Department of French in those good old days that it was composed of seven; and as sabbaticals came round every seven years, there was always one of us who was away and whose place was ably filled for a year by Jacqueline. Like the good all-rounder she was, she had to turn her hand to many a different task usually carried out by someone else with many a different specialism. In this capacity, she also lectured, in French, on aspects of French literary history and came to teach written language classes as well as individual literary texts, setting and marking essays and examinations, work going well beyond the scope of the conversation class and everyone’s notion of ‘casual’.

She was in fact one of the first teachers of French language in Australia to devise a course for beginners at tertiary level. Of the Australian universities only Western Australia had dared this innovation before ANU. At that time, such a development was by no means axiomatic. It had to be argued for. Opponents, of whom there were not a few, had to be convinced. One of their arguments (were there others?) was that the work of teaching such students, hitherto carried out in the early years of high school, would be by definition beneath the dignity of a university. This argument flew in the face of the evidence that other languages, among them Spanish, Russian and Asian languages, had for a long time been taught from scratch at universities. Among the arguments in favour of the idea was the simple existential one: that, at university level, traditional teaching of foreign languages as vehicles of their literatures might well wither on the vine, unless a wholly new cohort of students could be attracted to the study of the subject.

Jacqueline undertook this task of proselytism within the close circle of her colleagues in French. When they had been convinced by her advocacy, the idea was taken to the Faculty. There, too, opposition needed to be overcome. Which it was. And a first year-long course in Introductory French was mounted, Jacqueline being its principal teacher. The numbers of students who enrolled amply bore out the arguments she had mounted in favour of taking such an initiative. Some of these students had to be catered for in the following year, which led to the development of a second year-long course in their level of the subject. Thus was born the A-stream, a set of courses designed to equip students for further study at the higher levels of what came to be styled the B-stream, i.e. the courses deriving from the previous single stream of French Language and Literature I, II and III, designed for those who had studied the subject for six years at secondary level. These two streams are now a thing of the past, as is the academic year of three terms, which accommodated them and gave students so much more time to devote to the study of the language.

One main product of Jacqueline's work in the teaching of what had come to be called *ab initio* students was a publication of text and tapes deriving from her courses, *À vous maintenant* (River Seine, 1984). It was used at other universities in Australia.

Another initiative in the field of spoken French for foreign learners was a socio-linguistic endeavour, a set of interviews which she conducted and videotaped (in the village of Bouilly near Troyes, from which her family hailed) with locals such as the postman, a *gendarme*, the baker's wife, the teacher at the primary school, etc. When she read for her *Diplôme d'études approfondies* in the pedagogy of French as a foreign language, the course was more sociology (the school of Bourdieu) than linguistics, designed as it was for foreign teachers competent in the language; and it promoted the use in teaching of general cultural material rather than only literature in language courses. This coincided with a broader shift happening in the study of French as a foreign language at that time, originating in France itself. Until then, the French that was taught was, by and large, the language spoken by Parisian intellectuals. But now much rediscovery of regional languages and accents, once dismissed with the pejorative misnomer *patois*, was happening. Jacqueline's set of interviews was distributed on CD (single disks) bearing the ANU imprint.

Former students remember Jacqueline with gratitude and affection. One of them says, ‘She arrived with a French idea of how to mark us and it was hard, for me at least, to get over 12/20’—this from a student who was among the very best and who went on to become one of Jacqueline’s teaching colleagues. In which capacity he adds this: ‘She was very particular about students getting exactly the right mark and had us working out tiny fractions for each section rather than lumping them roughly together. She would never throw out a pencil no matter how small the stub’. Unlike some colleagues, Jacqueline took no part in staging or acting in the French plays which, over the years, were a recurring event in the life of the Department. She did, however, gird on her apron, to design and manage the cooking and catering for occasional evenings of *café-théâtre*, performances of sketches by Ionesco and scenes from Molière which we put on at the Alliance Française in Turner and in the old Faculty of Arts common room in what is now the Crisp Building. Another student, who also later taught in the French section, says this: ‘Jacqueline organised all the catering, making *rillettes* and buying lots of Queanbeyan’s Italian bread—the best bread at the time. Then she had us all in teams beforehand to make *poires au vin rouge*. I still have, in her very tiny and neat handwriting (like her, really) the recipe she gave us all so that all our batches of pears (all ingredients supplied by her) would be identical. It commences: “You have 30 pears...”’. A third remembers ‘her lack of pretentiousness, close hair-cut, simplicity of dress, self-deprecating manner of speaking; her sweet singing voice; her hospitality to students and willingness to have it returned’.

My own memories of Jacqueline are mostly of her great generosity, of which the loan of her little Simca for months during my 1968 sabbatical and of the flat in the rue Courtalon for more months in 1989, are only the most salient, and of how much she taught me about her country, her people, her town, her language. As soon as she first turned up in my room in the Haydon-Allen Building, on a gaspingly hot day, in January–February 1966, I took to her; and I think she took to me too from the beginning. Always a good basis for a lasting friendship. As a colleague too, she was the best, always ready to help, to share a laugh or discuss a problem of language or culture, whether French or English. She corrected a mistake in my spoken French one day, with a look of helpless mortification on her face, as though torn between two duties, one irksome, both to friendship.

One of the few things I was able to do for her was when, having had the convenership of French devolve by default upon me, I went to see Richard Campbell in his Dean's office and prevailed upon him to offer her at last a proper, though far too belated, appointment.

Jacqueline formally retired in 1997 in order to be eligible for her French pension, but she continued teaching part-time at ANU until 2002. With Colin, also retired, she then divided her time between France and Australia, until 2010, when the progress of dementia made it desirable for her, with Colin, to settle in France.

Her remains rest in the little village graveyard of Bouilly, with those of her forebears. But the dear bright memory of her is alive among those who had the good fortune to know her.

Australian National University

The editors are grateful for permission to reprint this obituary, first published in Emeritus, the newsletter of the ANU Emeritus Faculty.