

Visit to Australia by Renowned French Archaeologist Gilles Prilaux

Kerry Mullan

ISFAR was delighted to have been involved with the recent visit to Australia by Gilles Prilaux, a leading French archaeologist and specialist of First World War sites. For many years, Mr Prilaux has been working in the battlefields of the Western Front, often amidst the millions of still dangerous unexploded shells that have lain in the ground for over a hundred years. His many discoveries have cast new light on the experience and living conditions of those subjected to the extreme violence of those terrible years of conflict, enriching our historical knowledge and deepening the spirit of respectful commemoration.

In 2014, Prilaux was tasked with dating the underground city that lies thirty meters below the northern French town of Naours (Somme). Rediscovered in the nineteenth century, this huge cave complex had become a much-visited tourist attraction. Popularly believed to date from prehistoric times, it turned out to be, in fact, a seventeenth century construction, born of that era's religious conflicts. In the course of this research, Gilles Prilaux uncovered something completely unexpected: thousands of names and regimental numbers scrawled on the limestone walls by World War I soldiers, a considerable majority of them Australian. From that discovery he conceived a new project, namely to investigate the lives behind the graffitied traces so long hidden in the caverns. What has emerged from his work is not just a wealth of moving and revealing stories, but a new dimension for Australian reflection on this important time of our history.

While in Australia, Mr Prilaux visited Canberra and Melbourne to give three fascinating and well attended talks. This was Mr Prilaux's first visit to Australia and we look forward to welcoming him back soon.

'Beyond Villers-Bretonneux' Conference in Canberra 26–27 April, 2019

ISFAR was proud to be a co-sponsor of the 'Beyond Villers-Bretonneux' conference held on Friday 26th and Saturday 27th April 2019 at the University of New South Wales-Australian Defence Forces Academy (UNSW-ADFA). The conference was organised by eminent military historian Professor Peter Stanley of the Australian Centre for the Study of Armed Conflict and Society (ACSACS), in collaboration with the Mission du Centenaire, the France Australia Centenary Trust, The Embassy of France in Australia, The University of Melbourne French Trust Fund and ISFAR. Scholars and researchers from Australia and France presented papers on political, social, cultural and economic aspects of French Australian relations which have evolved as a result of Australia's participation on the Western Front in World War I. There was much lively discussion and analysis of the past, present and future of the relationship.

The keynote address, 'France and Australia in History', was given by Emeritus Professor Colin Nettelbeck, co-founder and past president of ISFAR. His speech provided fascinating insights into key periods of the France Australia relationship. ISFAR committee members Professor Véronique Duché, Elaine Lewis and Pauline Georgelin also presented papers.

A highlight of the conference was the presentation by Gilles Prilaux, who explained his work researching the identities of the Australian soldiers who visited the underground caves of Naours during the First World War, and who inscribed their names on the walls. At the conclusion of Mr. Prilaux's presentation, he met the families of three of these men for the first time. It was an inspiring and emotional moment, linking past and present.

The full program of talks, together with a video recording of Gilles Prilaux's presentation, can be viewed at:

<https://www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/acsacs/news/beyond-villers-bretonneux>
and conference photos at <http://bit.ly/vbunswcbr>

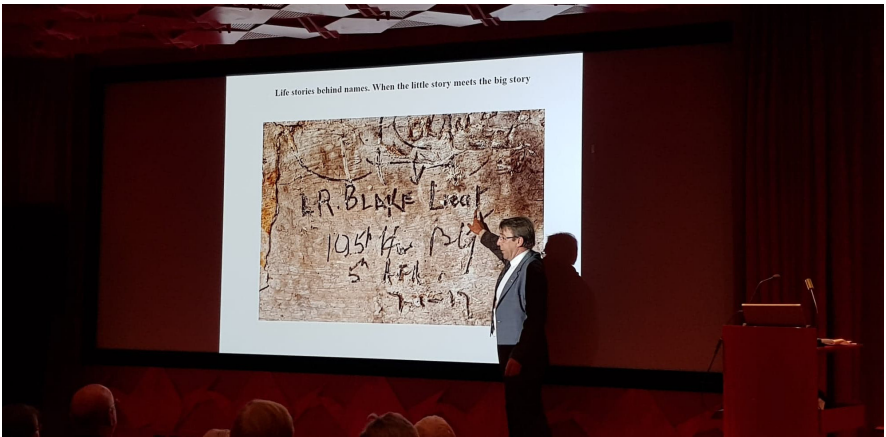
‘The Lives Behind the Names of the Australian Presence in the French Underground Caves of Naours (Somme)’ at the Shrine of Remembrance, 29 April 2019

In this illustrated lecture Gilles Prilaux brought to life the soldiers behind some of the almost 2000 Australian (many of them Victorian) inscriptions on the walls of the caves beneath Naours. Mr Prilaux discussed the history and context of his discovery, the methodology and results of his subsequent work, his collaboration with families and Australian officials, as well as the plans for the preservation of the site. Attendees were treated to a virtual visit of the caves, as well as the unveiling of two paintings by George Petrou of two of the soldiers whose names were on the walls. The talk then concluded with the presentation of a gift by Mr Prilaux to the Shrine of Remembrance, as a symbol of French Australian friendship and of the presence of the Australian soldiers in the underground city of Naours. The gift—a plaque in pewter engraved with a reproduction of an Australian graffiti and a symbolic key to the underground city of Naours—was made in the name of the communes of Northern Picardy, the Naours municipality and the underground city of Naours, and was received by Mr Chris Spence, Chair of the Trustees of the Shrine of Remembrance.

Copies of *The Silent Soldiers of Naours* by Gilles Prilaux, Matthieu Beuvin, Michael Fiechtner and Donna Fiechtner (2017, New Holland Publishing) were on sale at the Shrine bookstore. A news item with photos from the event was published in the *Bleu Blanc Rouge* newsletter of the French Consulate in Melbourne (<http://www.bbrvic.com/fr/diplomatic-news/conference-by-gilles-prilaux-in-melbourne/>).

‘The Archaeology of the Great War (1914–1918): Autopsy, Danger, Discovery’ at The University of Melbourne, 30 April 2019.

At this event Gilles Prilaux presented the audience with a fascinating description of the difficulties and dangers of his work in conducting a veritable autopsy of the First World War battlefields where uncovering traces of mass human death incurs the constant risk of millions of unexploded shells. He also briefly presented some of the ‘underground archives’ left by



soldiers of many nationalities whose names and other inscriptions survive in the caves beneath the Somme.

Biography

Gilles Prilaux completed his studies at the University of Dijon and the University of Artois. He currently works at the Somme Patrimony Centre and is a project head for the Centre for Conservation and Research at Ribemont-sur-Ancre. Some of his work has been published in book form, *L'archéologie de la Grande Guerre*, 2008 (*Great War Archeology*, 2009) and *The Silent Soldiers of Naours: messages from beneath the Somme*, 2017. A forthcoming work will document the lives of more than 350 soldiers who have left their names in the caves.

Acknowledgments

Gilles Prilaux's visit to Australia was initiated by Ms Kus Pandey, Manager of the ACSACS of the University of NSW-ADFA. His visit to Melbourne was supported by The University of Melbourne French Trust Fund, in collaboration with the Honorary French Consulate General in Melbourne, the Institute for the Study of French Australian Relations (ISFAR), and the Shrine of Remembrance.

RMIT University

Further information

Podcast of SBS French Radio interview with Gilles Prilaux on 30 April 2019 'Gilles Prilaux—The Silent Soldiers of Naours':

<https://www.sbs.com.au/yourlanguage/french/en/audiotrack/gilles-prilaux-silent-soldiers-naours>

Article in *Le Courrier Australien*, 8 May 2019 'Gilles Prilaux, à la recherche des vies derrière les graffitis de la Grande Guerre':

<https://www.lecourrieraustralien.com/portrait-gilles-prilaux-a-la-decouverte-des-vies-derriere-les-graffitis-de-la-grande-guerre/>

Conversations with Richard Feidler & Sarah Kanowski (ABC):

<https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/conversations/gilles-prileaux/10473198>