

French-Australian Encounters Number 4: At the Age of Twelve John Presley Explores France and his French ‘Heritage’ for the First Time

John Presley

I was born in Melbourne and was named Jean-Pierre Presle. My father, Claude Presle was born in Paris, in the 20th arrondissement, on 3 November, 1933. His education came to a stop at the time of the German occupation of Paris so he spent much of his time helping his mother Lucienne Presle in her market stall selling cheese. Trading was a challenge due to the occupation. I know very little of my French grandfather except that he was mostly absent during Claude’s childhood.

When he was seventeen and a half years old, Claude, his mother Lucienne and sister Ginette left France for Australia. Claude was sent off first by himself; his mother and sister followed shortly thereafter. None of them spoke English. Claude managed to find employment doing all sorts of jobs: fixing bikes, collecting eggs, building tray trucks, driving trucks, collecting manure, car detailing. His ‘best’ job was as chauffeur for a man who lived in Toorak for four and a half years, driving a Bentley and other cars, ‘Ça, c’est la vie’.

My mother, Maureen Richardson, was born in Cheshire in England on 9 September, 1939. Her education also was interrupted from time to time due to the war.

A chance meeting between my father, Claude, with Peter Richardson on a tram led to Claude being invited for dinner that evening. Peter lived in Carlton with his wife Kathleen and eight kids. It was then that my father met my mother, Maureen. On the way to Peter’s home Claude bought a small bottle of Cointreau to celebrate France! Maureen and Claude dated, frequenting Pellegrini’s in the city—the place to be seen in 1959.

After they married, my parents moved to Wattle Glen, which was very remote in the early 1960s. As they had no car and it was a long walk to the railway station my mother rarely travelled anywhere. Claude enjoyed wine, women and song, and betting on horses; things started to unravel. The vast gulf between French and English cultures did not help. The French cook ‘al dente’ and the English ‘boil the veggies to buggery’ was how my father explained it. It was no wonder my parents parted company when I was twelve months old.

I was brought up by my great grandmother Annie. Born in England in 1889 and very Victorian in outlook, she never drove a car nor had a driver’s licence. She loved milky tea with a shot of eau de vie (or French brandy) in it. Annie looked after me while my mother went to work to support us. The poor pay she received as a secretary meant we just survived, thanks to Annie’s pension and part war-pension. I was one year old, Mother twenty-two years old and Annie seventy years old. This was my direct family.

I had no contact with my French father, as my mother and her family were fearful of what they thought was the French law that, in such a situation, the father would have custody of any male children.

As I grew up I knew little of my French background, just that my father was French. I spoke not a word of French. I enrolled in school as John Presle but as the teacher and fellow students could not pronounce my name, my mother added a ‘y’ and I was now John Presley. My mother also thought that this would make it harder for my father to track me down and take me to France.

In fact, the major French influence on my life came from my maternal grandfather, Peter. He was English but had trained as a French chef and had worked at the Savoy in London. He had left school at an early age and he went to London where it was de rigueur to speak French in the kitchen. He was a mad keen cyclist and would work till midnight and then hop on his bike to ride to Cheshire overnight so that he could have breakfast with his family.

Peter and his bike travelled to France, to the South of France in particular. He enjoyed the French way of life—ratatouille, lots of Rosé du Var garlic, fresh baguettes, beautiful cheeses, local markets and fresh salads. ‘C’est la vie’! Peter cycled to Switzerland and heard that WW2 had broken out and

rode his bike back to England where he joined a Scottish Regiment because his ancestors were Scottish.

Landing at the wrong Arromanches beach and weighed down by thick wet quilted clothing, the troops were mown down by the Germans. Peter and a doctor were at the back, as they were 'force multipliers'; they put their hands up, and that was the end of the war for them. After being captured they had to walk thirty miles a day on one slice of German bread; whenever a horse dropped dead, they could have some horse meat. What a treat that was. He spent five years in a POW camp.

He returned to the UK after the war. He had had enough of war—'sheer madness and stupidity' was what he thought. He took up cycling again and became a vegetarian after his fellow vegetarian cyclists kept beating him on the road, and then became a '£10 Pom' and came to Rockhampton, Australia. There were no French restaurants there and he found a job as the chef for army generals. It was time to go south. Peter helped set up Smacka's Restaurant, a jazz dining venue. Smacka played the music and Peter did the cooking. He later worked at Lamplighter and then for eight years at Balzac in East Melbourne, the first French restaurant in Melbourne, owned by Georges and Mirka Mora. Their children used to play with Peter's children. Kathleen, Peter's wife, was an aspiring artist and Mirka gave her some drawings which the family still has to this day.

Peter and Kathleen decided, when I was twelve years old, that I needed to understand my fifty per cent French heritage—my unacknowledged identity. In November 1974, my mother went to Caulfield Grammar, where I was a scholarship student, to speak to the head master who said 'Let him go overseas. He will learn more overseas in one year than three years here.' So my family (mother and great grandmother) let me go and Peter and I and two of his children, both of whom were around my age, boarded the *Galileo Galilei*, an Italian liner at Port Melbourne. Much to my surprise, my father came to see us off.

The boat took five weeks, via the Panama Canal, to reach Genoa in northern Italy. Peter drilled my ten-year-old aunty Yvonne, me at twelve years of age, and my fourteen-year-old uncle André with French verbs and vocabulary. What an eye opener. Genders, conjugation, sacré bleu. Note the French names given to his children! Peter showed me a world map and I did not even know where we were going? Europe? Where was that?

From Genoa, we took the train into the south of France to a small seaside town called Bandol and there we met my father's only sister Ginette, her husband Raymond and their three children, Véronique (Véro), Christian and Chantal. Kisses on both cheeks, what is going on here? Raymond had met Ginette in Melbourne in 1955. He was twenty-five years old and Ginette only seventeen when, with special permission, they married. Véro and Christian are Australian and speak good English as they were born in Melbourne and spent a few years there before going to France.

It was decided that I would spend half the week with my French relatives eating 'toutes les choses françaises'—birds, snails, rabbit, horse, etc. and the other half of the week with my grandparents and Yvonne and André, who were vegetarian. What a contrast! The school I attended was between Sanary-sur-Mer and Six-Fours-les-Plages, east of Bandol; there I learnt poems like *Chanson d'automne*, with its first line, 'Les sanglots longs des violons de l'automne...' I struggled. The girls teased me on the first day, by saying, 'Voulez-vous couchez avec moi ce soir?' I was confused as I did not know the verb to sleep. I went to my grandparents that night and they burst into laughter. Peter gave me a French/English dictionary for the next day and my French language skills took off!

Peter worked at a local café in Bandol and one Saturday afternoon I was asked to be the 'plongeur'. I thought I was being invited to take a plunge in the swimming pool. 'Non', I was to be the dishwasher! I enjoyed ratatouille, tons of garlic, fresh bread, olives, wine 10% and water 90%—what a contrast to Australia! After three months Peter got a job in Lisieux at the Hôtel de Normandie as the head chef. I think Peter was a born gipsy and cared even less for possessions due to his war experience. Lots of German tourists visited the town to see the church and Peter and his staff had to feed many busloads in a thirty-minute turn around, so all hands were on deck to produce omelettes and salad. To this day I enjoy an omelette—baveuse, bien sûr (runny, of course)! With a good salad with vinaigrette. We used to pick watercress on the outskirts of Lisieux, fresh from the streams and make watercress soup with lots of cream and fresh bread. Délicieux, finished off with crêpes, black coffee, wine, and I was just thirteen years old. Gee, the French do it well, I thought. I now enrolled myself in school en français at the local state school and my first class was an English class. The local French students found it all a bit 'difficile'.

DE MELBOURNE A LISIEUX : *UNE ROUE DE BICYCLETTE*



La jeune section de cyclotourisme du V.C.L., si l'on peut dire, marche comme sur des roulettes.

Nos jeunes à chaque nouveau championnat établissent des performances fort remarquables. La dernière en date est la belle victoire de Roger Beucher à la finale régionale du critérium du jeune cyclotouriste qui se déroulait il y a quinze jours à Thury-Harcourt.

La notoriété de nos cyclotouristes ne s'arrête pas à la frontière du Pays d'Auge.

En effet, un jeune Australien.

Jean-Pierre Presle, âgé de 13 ans, est arrivé en France, il y a deux semaines. Installé à Lisieux, il compte rester dans notre cité jusqu'à Noël pour parfaire son français.

Son premier réflexe a été de prendre une licence de cyclotouriste au V.C.L. Fervent amateur de ce sport à Melbourne, où il habite, il n'a guère voulu arrêter son entraînement.

C'est en lisant le « Pays d'Auge » que Jean-Pierre a fait connaissance avec le V.C.L. et de fil en aiguille...

On the weekends, we would have picnics around Le Havre, Honfleur, Arromanches beach, and the war cemeteries. Peter cried when he saw the graves of his fallen war friends, declaring 'War is stupid. Keep away from it!'. This immediate brutal exposure to the futility of war changes your perceptions forever. Sheer madness, I thought.

In Dinard, we visited a distant relative and tasted buckwheat galettes cooked on an open fire and served with fresh cider. My relationship with food, wine and a raw (unpasteurised) cheese was one of total 'amour'.

Why can't we make natural cheese like this in Australia, instead of processed plastic-tasting cheese slices? I could then understand why Raymond and Ginette had longed to return to France where there was real cheese.

I spent one month in Paris staying at the home of my French grandmother, Lucienne, and visiting her in hospital where she was dying of cancer. She is buried in Père Lachaise cemetery, just a few metres from where Edith Piaf is buried. We used to buy raw horse meat for her on her death bed, which was rather confronting for me. We would wander around Paris looking for a horse's head over the shop front awning to denote a horse butcher.

Salade niçoise, pastries, the Tour Eiffel, Montmartre, bateaux mouches—this is a very sophisticated culture. I had spent six months in France and now six months in the UK awaited me. The weather was cold, the food uninteresting and the local school students struggled to accept me. They thought I was from Austria; where was Australia? The countryside around Shaftesbury was picturesque but I longed for Paris, Lisieux or Bandol where the sign saying '320 jours de soleil par an' on the side of the road beckoned.

I flew back to Australia by myself via Bahrain. I had been away for thirteen months, exploring two different cultures; it had given me a new understanding of fifty per cent of my genes and the French father I hardly knew...

I have remained John Presley throughout my life. But I do wonder about who I really am. Does a name matter? Over the years, I have seen little of my father. I returned to France only once, for five weeks, in 2016. It was a very different experience from when I went as a thirteen-year-old. My father's sister, Ginette, had died but I was able to catch up with cousins and re-connect in some way with my French heritage. Perhaps, because of the influence of my grandfather and my occasional interactions with my father, my 'French-ness' has always revolved around food. Maybe that is why I am now a commercial garlic grower.

John Presley

Melbourne