

Jacqueline Dwyer (1925–2020): A Tribute

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Jacqueline Dwyer presenting her book to President Macron, 2 May 2018.

Jacqueline Dwyer was an exceptional person who left us prematurely last month, albeit in her 95th year. She made her mark in a number of different spheres, but it was her work as historian, bringing family history into the public domain, that will be her abiding testimony for those interested in French-Australian relations. Her life embodied that history in an exemplary way.

This life already began, as it were, in the late 19th century when Jacqueline's paternal grandfather Georges Playoust, about whom she wrote at length, came to Australia. The son of a 'demi-bourgeois'¹ school teacher and principal at the Collège de Tourcoing in northern France, he emerged into adulthood in an age of the globalisation of garment manufacturing. The firm of traders for whom he worked, (Henri) Caulliez and Co., had seen the opportunity provided by enhanced international mobility to go directly to the source of the raw material sought—wool—by sending merchants to the producers in Australia to make purchases for the textile factories of Flanders, bypassing the middle-men, and rivals, of northern England.

The Playoust family was thus part of a new and bold industrialisation involving a transnational workforce that embraced Australia at a time of its own 'nation-building', leading to Federation. However, unlike many fellow wool-buyers whose children were sent to boarding schools in Europe—England, France, Germany, Switzerland—the Playousts chose to have their children educated in their adopted land.

Jacqueline Dwyer was able, through her research, to grasp the wider significance of these familial and professional factors, including their social and cultural dimensions beyond the mercantile. Here was a family who was consciously contributing to the development of both its countries—George founded the French-Australian Chamber of Commerce in 1899—and regularly moving between them.

The keen sense of participating in the local while maintaining a broad international perspective remained a fundamental part of Jacqueline's approach to life and to people, devoid of prejudice. This was not the rarefied cosmopolitanism of café culture à la Stefan Zweig, but a practical and

¹ See Dominique Lejeune, 'L'enseignement en France, de 1848 au début des années 1990', p. 46, retrieved from <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/cel-01481692/document> (May 10, 2020).

sensitive nurturing of values and exchange for the benefit of individuals and the social good.

Traversing and connecting worlds was a hallmark of Jacqueline and her family. Jacqueline's paternal grandmother, Marie-Thérèse, was the daughter of Clara Whelan from Dublin. Clara and her husband had been married by Clara's uncle, Paul Cullen, then Archbishop of Dublin, and later Cardinal Cullen, the 'great ultramontane' in the Vatican.² And yet it seemed perfectly natural that in a family steeped in Jesuit and later Marist education one could meet a daughter-in-law who was a granddaughter of Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, such was the prevailing 'oecumenical' spirit and open outlook embodied and fostered by Jacqueline.

From my first meeting with Jacqueline I was able to appreciate her caring and benevolent nature: to welcome interested scholars, and to assist younger people wherever she could. It was Alexis Bergantz, now a member of the ISFAR committee, then embarking on a PhD at The Australian National University, who introduced me to Jacqueline, at the same time as he introduced himself, she having offered to receive him at home one Sunday afternoon in early 2012 to discuss her family history.

It was immediately clear that we were in the presence of someone not only with a storehouse of knowledge, but also with a great eagerness to learn and generous capacity to communicate. At one point in the conversation I said, partly in nervous jest, but really in earnest expectation, that it seemed she had enough material for a thesis. The twinkle in Jacqueline's eye was all the response needed.

There were, of course, some administrative niceties to complete, including the need to submit a transcript of Jacqueline's 'academic record'. The University of Sydney had proudly announced that it had digitalised its records, but the Registrar's office was taken aback when I referred to 1948: they 'had never had such a request' for anyone intending to embark on postgraduate studies who had graduated over six decades earlier. They did,

² Dáire Keogh & Albert McDonnell (eds), 2011, *Paul Cullen and his World*, Dublin, Four Courts Press. Cullen's nephew, Patrick Francis Moran, also a Cardinal, later Archbishop of Sydney (1884–1911). See John N. Moloney, 'Cullen, Paul (1803–1878)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, retrieved from <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cullen-paul-3298> (May 8, 2020).

however, find the relevant document in their archives, and the Australian National University, after some deliberation, ‘having never seen such an application’, approved her entry. In reading again now my supporting statement in support of Jacqueline’s request for admission, I feel vindicated in my view that in other historical circumstances she would have had an illustrious academic career in her own right.³

Once admitted, Jacqueline set about her task with gusto and ingenuity. She had discovered the treasures available through the National Library’s Trove and had become adept in taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by new technologies, with the encouragement of her computer whizz-kid daughter Sophie.⁴ Jacqueline also thoroughly explored the archives of *Le Courrier Australien*,⁵ regretting only that they were not yet all online. Nothing seemed to daunt her. Jacqueline’s unusually alert mind and limitless curiosity meant that she also took on recent theoretical debates about ‘transnationalism’ and other abstract matters relevant to academic dissertations—without ever losing sight of the importance of people to history as well as people in history.

Jacqueline’s father Jacques had left Australia in August 1914 and served at Verdun and other fronts. His wartime diary was one of the documents which featured prominently in her thesis. Jacqueline was able to read between the lines of this moving testimony to courage and compassion. She saw that it was also a questioning of the civilisation that produced the butchery

³ Apart from her writings on French-Australian family history, Jacqueline had also been a ‘research assistant’ and *plume* for her husband Brian (‘Chappie’) in compiling an enlightening history of his pioneering work on rehabilitation at Saint Vincent’s Hospital in Sydney. She had no interest in acquiring an ANU email address to which she was entitled: *chapandjac* were two soulmates united once and forever.

⁴ Professor Sophie Dwyer, like others in Jacqueline’s family, both on the Playoust and Dwyer sides, also has a medical affiliation in public health and service, in her case as Executive Director, Queensland Health.

⁵ In late 2019, the *Courrier Australien Collector Edition*, commemorated the history of the paper launched in 1892. Jacqueline Dwyer was one of the Preface writers, fellow contributors being the Governor-General of Australia, David Hurley, and the French Secretary of State for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne.

it was his daily lot to endure. Post-war, he met and married a young woman from Flanders, Evelyne (Nine), née Delvas, but it was in the trenches that this multilingual humanist—fluent also in German after spending two years studying in Leipzig just a few years before Verdun—came to realise that his future life lay in Australia, without turning his back on his parents' land or the broader culture of Europe.

Jacques's work as a wool merchant meant that every two years the family made an extended voyage back to France. The *Messageries maritimes* were an adventure to which the young Jacqueline and her sister Annette looked forward as extended fun, but they were also an instrument in the development of Jacqueline's view of the world and the possibility for relating places and peoples. Twinning joviality and earnestness was a capacity that Jacqueline retained throughout her life and her reminiscences about these sea-borne experiences and sojourns abroad were far from mere indulgence in nostalgia. She had a sharp eye for character clad in fine, unforced prose.

Jacqueline remained the vital bridge across the ocean for several generations of people, of importance to French-Australian relations through strained and bubbly times alike. Listening to her descriptions of French family gatherings on the beach in Brittany with the visiting *kangourous* was like entering a John Peter Russell painting. The ongoing bi-national connections that Jacqueline fostered have had long-term beneficial consequences. One example among many concerns her son Dr Dominic Dwyer, a leading virologist, and his wife Dr Megan Phelps, who became fluent in French from scratch after coming into the family, who have mutually benefited hospitals in both Paris and Sydney; and Jacqueline, who encouraged her grand-daughter Harriette to go on exchange to Sciences Po in Paris, was delighted that her subsequent employment at the United Nations meant that she would continue to put her French language skills to good public use internationally.

Jacqueline's home in Mosman was the *quartier-général* for wave after wave of young cousins from France out for a visit or a jackerooing trip that she was able to organise for them. One of the more recent guests was Manon Jamez who, having discovered Jacqueline's historical work, rendered into French the first edition of *Flanders in Australia* as part of her Master's degree in Translation at the University of Mons. *La boucle bouclée*. From Flanders to Flanders via Mosman.

For her own research Jacqueline paid a number of return visits to her French roots. She explored all the WWI battlegrounds and cemeteries of northern France and Belgium and gained an intimate knowledge of the terrain, the fighting and the people involved.

In April 2014 Jacqueline stepped in to replace me at short notice when I was unable to attend a conference at the University of Amiens. She was joined by her daughter Julia, an academic architect from London, who served as power point assistant and then as companion on another tour of the sights and sites of Flanders.⁶ Later that year I was grateful to be able to collaborate with her for an article on the French-Australian League of Help and the vital contribution it made during WWI.⁷

Jacqueline's perpetual zest for life was further shown by her participation that same year in a Conference of the Australian Society for French Studies, held in Melbourne. Not only did she present a paper, she was also in the front row at the seminar for research students led by former French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, in Australia following the publication of his book on Napoleon. Jacqueline expressed her heartfelt gratitude for the opportunity. M. Jospin, for his part, told me that he had been stunned not only to have a ninety-year-old among the group of postgraduate students but that she was at times actually leading the discussion. As was the case with many others who met Jacqueline, he had 'never had such an experience'.

In April 2018, Jacqueline was invited by the Director of the new Sir John Monash Interpretation Centre at Villers-Bretonneux, Caroline Bartlett, to speak as a guest of honour at the Centre's inauguration on the eve of Anzac Day, to commemorate the centenary of the liberation of the town by Australian soldiers. She would have been the only non-official on the programme, sharing the platform with Malcolm Turnbull, Édouard Philippe, Prince Charles and others. To the great regret of many, myself included as her intended travelling companion, Jacqueline was not able to make the journey, on medical advice.

⁶ Jacqueline Dwyer Playoust, (ed. Viviane Fayaud), 2018, 'Poilus from Australia or Australian Poilus', in *Pacific Islanders in the Great War. Nation, Nationalism and the Sense of Belonging* Amiens, Encrage Edition, pp.139–154. A French version of this work is forthcoming.

⁷ Peter Brown and Jacqueline Dwyer, 2014, 'The French-Australian League of Help. Restoring the Record', *The French-Australian Review*, n° 56, pp. 26–54.

That trip would also have included a wonderful ‘Flowers of War’ concert at Amiens on 23 April, involving performers from Flanders, Australia, Germany and elsewhere. Jacqueline had been a consultant for the multi-year ‘Flowers of War’ project, led by Chris Latham, a fellow French-Australian similarly bestowed by the French government with the *Ordre National du Mérite*, and she would have felt very much at home that evening, celebrating the future more than the past, peace and reconciliation more than commemorating war. She had already participated, in 2016, in a ‘Flowers of War’ event at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, jointly sponsored by the French and German Embassies, in which she spoke alongside leading Australian WWI historian Joan Beaumont.⁸

On first meeting Jacqueline a couple of years before, Chris Latham declared that he had ‘rarely encountered such an inspiring person’ and had immediately asked his scouts to buy up all the available copies of *Flanders in Australia* so that he could send them to people he knew in France. He was concerned by Jacqueline’s view that there might not be many left in print. I told him not to despair, that Jacqueline was not yet ninety and that once her thesis was completed there would surely be a new enriched edition.

This duly materialised in 2017.⁹ The French Ambassador, Christophe Lecourtier, who wrote the Foreword to the work, told me he was very pleased that this was one of his last gestures as Ambassador to Australia, as the work had deepened his understanding of shared history between the two nations.

Jacqueline was also known in New Caledonia, having exchanged much correspondence with Ismet Kurtovitch, then Director of the Territorial Archives. Jacqueline’s uncle Marcel had spent two years in pre-War military training in Noumea, and Jacqueline delved deep into shipping movements, bivouac arrangements and social developments in her research. As it so happened, Marcel had become friends with Ismet’s grandfather, the mining and shipping magnate John Charles ‘Tibby’ Hagen, and the latter’s daughter Bernadette had known Jacqueline during her schooldays in Sydney—everywhere history seemed to be a family affair for Jacqueline.

⁸ Christopher Latham, 2019, *The Flowers of the Great War*, Canberra, Flowers of War publication.

⁹ Jacqueline Dwyer, 2017, *Flanders in Australia: A Personal History of Wool and War*, Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Publishing.

Jacqueline came to the attention of New Caledonians again in 2018 when she contributed a chapter on wool to a book published in Noumea on Australia.¹⁰ Now approaching ninety-three, she showed that history was a living entity for her, in more ways than one, by concluding her piece with reference to a revival of the Australian fine wool industry due to the rise of the middle class in China.

Jacqueline was a *grande dame*, both sophisticated and simple. A prize-winning chef, she would present succulent meals with ease and seemingly out of nothing. One such memorable occasion was the extended lunch to which French Consul Eric Berti, Ivan Barko and I, together with our respective wives, were invited to celebrate the publication of *French Lives in Australia*, where it felt as if we were living the book as we shared in Jacqueline's hospitality, the warmth of which is captured in the photograph published by *Le Courrier Australien* in its tribute to Jacqueline.¹¹

In one of the last emails I received from Jacqueline she said that after some medical care she looked forward to walking again with my wife Kati and me on our next visit to Mosman. It had always been a pleasure to go on these excursions with Jacqueline, which were not just about physical exercise. A stroll through the park with her could easily become a many-faceted plunge into Australian history. Looking towards the Pavilion and Rotunda by the beach, Jacqueline brought to life the Alliance Française's pre-war theatrical performances. As we walked back past Balmoral Oval where boys were playing cricket she could change tack and speak of sport and her husband Brian, who had represented New South Wales, and of the

¹⁰ Jacqueline Dwyer, 'Laine', in Peter Brown & Jean-Yves Faberon (eds), 2018, *L'Australie [Collection 101 mots pour comprendre]*, Noumea, Centre de documentation pédagogique de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, pp. 124–125.

¹¹ François Vantomme, 'Jacqueline Dwyer, a much-loved and admired member of the ISFAR team', 16 April 2020, retrieved from <https://www.lecourrieraustralien.com/jacqueline-dwyer-much-loved-and-admired-member-of-isfar-team/> (May 4, 2020). This is an aptly-chosen title, as not only did Jacqueline publish several pieces in the ISFAR journal, *Explorations/The French Australian Review*, she also recruited new members for the Association, including Marie-Thérèse Jensen, whose mother Bernadette, née Droulers, was a wool-buyer's daughter and good friend of Jacqueline at Loreto Convent in Kirribilli. I am grateful to Marie-Thérèse Jensen for this information.

fortunes of the Australian XI and related politics when his father had been a selector for the team alongside Donald Bradman.

Jacqueline's funeral notice made the request for no flowers, instead for donations to be given to The State Library of New South Wales Foundation. This was no surprise. Jacqueline had a very fond place for the Library, having donated the Playoust Family Collection of documents to it, and having assisted Margot Riley and Ivan Barko in preparation for an exhibition there on the contribution of French migrants: 'Vive la différence!: the French in NSW' (2004). In 2015, on the eve of her graduation at the Australian National University, Jacqueline spoke about her family history to a packed room at the State Library at the launch of the volume *French Lives in Australia*, to which she had contributed a chapter.¹² A fitting exercise in what had become a second home to her.

The funeral notice was entitled simply and appropriately 'Mother and Historian'. One might think that this remarkable French-Australian lady who had six children and a dozen grandchildren had a yet broader family: she was not only the offspring of historical figures but also the mother of historians. Jacqueline was ageless in life and her passing will not alter that. She will surely soon become the worthy subject of a chapter in the ISFAR project launched by Colin Nettelbeck, the French-Australian Dictionary of Biography.

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¹² Jacqueline Dwyer, 'Georges Playoust (1855–1918), Businessman and Patriot', in Eric Berti & Ivan Barko (eds.), *French Lives in Australia*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015.