

The French Influence on the Life of Denis Cunningham AM

1 Secondary School and Inspiration (1964-1969)

Enrolled at Albury High School, I had the good fortune to have Mme Edith Jacino as my French teacher. An inspiration!

It was years later (in 2020) that I learned of the sad but rich life of Mme Jacino. Born in Latvia in 1911, languages were important from an early date, her father ruling that all conversation at home be in English, French or German, a week at a time. She was sent to a Russian private school, adding a fifth language. She went on to study at Riga University, majoring in languages. She married Brontislav Jacino in 1939 just before WWII. Brontislav was conscripted into the Nazi German army and killed on the eastern front. He would never see his daughter, born in a cellar in Hamburg in August 1942. Edith Jacino sought a safer alternative, as did many others from the Baltics at the time, and eventually arrived in Australia, spent time in the migrant centre in Bonegilla, worked off her (agreed) bond and found herself teaching French at Albury HS around 1955. She retired in 1970 and died prematurely in a car accident in 1975.

Abandoned at the age of eleven by my parents, I found myself living with a Lithuanian family, as the Baltic connections began and grew. The parents of my guardian's family, escaping their country at the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917, could not speak English, so communication in the kitchen (and elsewhere) was a polyglot approach: Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, German, English and French. This, I suspect, planted in me a subconscious realisation that languages mattered, were important and should be learned for many reasons. Thanks to Mme Jacino, I added French to the other language on offer at Albury HS – Latin, taught by the mother of a classmate, Enid Munro.

2 The Tertiary Years (1971-1978)

Enrolled in a B.A. at Monash University, I chose French, further inspired by Professor Ivan Barko (Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Palmes académiques), Colin Nettelbeck (Officier dans l'Ordre des Palmes académiques and Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur), Terry Quinn and others, to complete a double major, before commencing an M.A. I also studied English, German and Latin. For my Dip.Ed., I had Jim Wheeler (to whose obituary I contributed in 2019) and Denis Taffe, who provided further impetus and the desire to not only complete a B.Ed. in languages education, but to become a teacher of English and French. My M.A. thesis study on Louis-Ferdinand Céline with Colin Nettelbeck would continue for another five years.

3 Teaching (1976-1988)

French would be the major subject taught at Maroondah HS – where I introduced the French *assistante* – before a year in France and a return to Ringwood HS (1980), Maroondah HS (1981) and Croydon HS (1982-1988). As a language assistant in France, I completed a *stage* at the Sorbonne in Paris, before commencing at the Lycée Champollion in Grenoble. I immersed myself in the role, forming lasting friendships

with colleagues and students. I also completed a Diplôme Supérieur d’Aptitude à l’Enseignement du Français Langue Etrangère at the Université Stendhal in Grenoble.

4 Consultancy (1981-1992)

Head-hunted by the languages inspectors, Ian Adams, Keith Corcoran and Geoff Adams, upon my return from France in 1980, I was appointed as a part-time consultant for languages in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne (as the department and its regions changed their names over the years). I worked with the other consultants state-wide and the language advisers for French and German. As a result, I would invite them for tours to schools in the eastern suburbs, thus doing daytrips successively with François Vanot, Aline Radenkovic, Marie-Rose Prévôt (and Heinz Hildel for German), to visit up to six schools as I introduced them to teachers of French. I arrived too late to do similarly for Pierre Plays and François Weiss (whom I would meet in Québec in 1984) and Daniel Rignault arrived later. In 1982, I was asked to be an HSC French oral examiner and to teach an HSC French class at Box Hill Evening School. Both tasks lasted for several years. I was also asked to chair the panel to interview prospective teachers of primary French from 1989. As a part of my role, I created networks for teachers of languages locally and across the state, also participating in the roll-out of the new VCE in 1989/1990. When I organised a workshop in Wodonga, I invited the French teacher from Albury HS, Belinda Hulstrom, who has become a friend. In 1990, Ian Adams invited me to be the Executive Officer of a committee he formed to explore the possibility of establishing a French binational/bilingual school in Victoria. While the binational component was not realised, Camberwell PS became the location for the French bilingual school, a vibrant success thirty years later.

5 Middle Management and Principal Class (1993-2006)

Appointed as an area manager in the renascent Victorian School of Languages in 1993, I became assistant principal in 1996 with responsibility for the 800+ staff involved in the teaching of 44 languages to 16000+ students in 730 classes in 40 centres and distance education state-wide. At that time, 235 VSL students scored forty or more in their VCE language of choice.

6 Associative Roles: Languages Teacher Associations

6.1 The State Level: Modern Language Teachers Association of Victoria (MLTAV) (1976-1994)

Good fortune persisted as I had Terry Quinn for an M.A. unit at Monash University. He was also involved with the MLTAV (committee) and was editor of the national journal, *Babel*. He nominated me to the MLTAV committee in my first year of teaching. I would remain on the committee for eighteen years, becoming editor of the *MLTAV Newsletter* for some time before ending my time as President in 1994. During my presidency, I was invited to the event when Mannie Gelman was awarded the Légion d’Honneur by the French Ambassador, Philippe Baud in 1992. I would compose and publish Mannie’s obituary soon afterwards. I also joined the fledgeling Association of French Teachers & Students (AFTS), and joined the committee, as it metamorphosed into the Association of French Teachers of Victoria (AFTV) in 1988, resigning in 1994.

6.2 The National Level: Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations (AFMLTA) (1982-1997)

Keith Corcoran, as MLTAV Secretary, offered to nominate me for the position of AFMLTA Secretary in 1982. I was elected and worked closely with the President, David Ingram AM until 1996, also taking over the redaction of the national journal, *Babel*, in 1984.

6.3 The International Level: Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes (FIPLV) (1993-2015)

David Ingram AM suggested that I be nominated for the position of FIPLV Secretary-General in 1992. Surprisingly, I was elected to this prestigious post (1993-1997), the beginning of 23 years on the FIPLV Executive – more than any other. I became President (1998-2006), before ending as Secretary-General again (2007-2015). During that time, I would oversee the publication of several volumes devoted to the FIPLV as well as translating the early history (1931-1982) from the French of Josef Hendrich and contributing a chapter for the period of 1993-2006. It was also during this time and in this context that I was invited by the French authorities in 1998 to participate in an international conference in Tel-Aviv to investigate the situation of French and plot strategies to improve its status in Israel. It has been in the context of FIPLV that horizons further expanded in working with Josef Hendrich (Czech Republic), György Szépe (Hungary), Ted Batley (UK), Reinhold Freudenstein (FRG/Germany), Bengt Henningsson (Sweden), Michel Candelier (France), Francisco Gomes de Matos (Brazil), Paolo Balboni (Italy), Eynar Leupold (Germany) and the Russians, Ludmila Baranova and Svetlana Ter-Minasova, among others. When I left the FIPLV Executive as an FIPLV Honorary Counsellor in 2015, it had several hundred thousand members from all continents across the globe.

7 Networking at the National & International Levels

It was inevitable that the above positions, whether paid or voluntary, would lead to other invitations and challenges for languages, or French specifically.

7.1 Centre d'Etudes et d'Echanges Francophones en Australie (CEEFA)

Alain Monteil had arrived as the new *attaché linguistique* at the French Embassy in Canberra, working closely with the *Conseiller culturel*, Jean-Claude Redonnet. They created CEEFA in 1983 and, following the endorsement of David Ingram AM, invited me to be the Australian representative on CEEFA. As they had a mandate to promote French culture and language in Australia, I was willingly conscripted to attend biannual meetings at the French Embassy and assist. The biannual meetings would include the *Attaché culturel*, Francis Joseph, and *attachés linguistiques* – Bertrand Calmy (WA), Patrice Le Blanc (SA), Daniel Merour & Marie-Josée Trassaert (NSW), François Vanot (V), Daniel Vever (Q) and others, initially, the identities changing as existing *attachés linguistiques* moved on, replaced by others.

I became active in the national French sticker and poster competition in 1983, the initiative of Alain Monteil. We judged the best entries nationally, these being used by

Alain Monteil to have printed sheets of four (stereotypically, of a roo and frog) or nine stickers. Representing AFMLTA, I was supported at the local level by François Vanot and Nada Perkovic. I agreed to respond to demand and be the distribution point for sales of the stickers (and other resources collected and accumulated), as the national “promotion of French campaign” was underway, ending in 1997. It was also this campaign which assisted in germinating the AFMLTA program of national languages competitions and a national languages week, adopted in the late 1980s by Norma Jillett before she was followed by Tony Papapavlou. It still exists...

During this period, Joe Lo Bianco AM – who had produced the *National Language Policy* (1984) and the *National Policy on Languages* (1987) – was collaborating with representatives of the “languages for wider teaching” he had identified. French was one of these languages. Thus, he collaborated with Alain Monteil to publish the French volume, *French in Australia: New Prospects* in 1990. In addition to contributing to the volume, I was asked to organise the function for the launch by new French *Conseiller culturel*, Georges Zask, at Monash University (7 June 1990). Marie-Rose Prévôt, who had replaced Aline Radenkovic and François Vanot as the *attaché linguistique* in Victoria, assisted me. When the “promotion of French campaign” ended with my resignation as AFMLTA Secretary in 1997, I handed over the proceeds of the campaign – in excess of \$20,000 – to the AFMLTA for the *bona fide* use for French.

7.2 Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Français (FIPF)

I was identified by CEEFA and the AFMLTA to be one of two Australian delegates to the FIPF World Congress in Québec in 1984, joined by Jane Zemiro (Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes académiques). There, I would meet not only the FIPLV President, Ted Batley, but also the leaders of FIPF – Pierre Alexandre, Henri Besse, Emile Bessette, Jean-Claude Gagnon – and François Weiss. These connections would assist me a couple of years later when I was asked by AFMLTA in 1987 to undertake a global tour (funded by Qantas) to promote the next FIPLV World Congress to take place in Canberra in January 1988, as I included a presentation (26 June) in French at the FIPF *Assemblée Générale* at their head office at the Centre Internationale des Etudes Pédagogiques (CIEP) in Sèvres on the outskirts of Paris. I would attend the next FIPF World Congress in Thessaloniki in 1988, identified as the FIPLV delegate, giving two presentations in French. Friendships with FIPF leaders firmed, as I caught up with Pierre Alexandre, François Weiss and others.

As I joined the FIPLV Executive (1993) and returned regularly to Paris for meetings at UNESCO, I also tried to visit the FIPF Head Office in Sèvres, before it became more central, to meet with a succession of FIPF Secretaries-General: Jean Souillat, Annie Monnerie-Goarin, Martine Defontaine, Madeleine Rolle-Boumlic and Fabienne Lallement. I was also able to assist FIPF to be affiliated to UNESCO with consultative status, initiated in discussions with Annie Monnerie, around the time that Dario Pagel, another friend, was President. The final FIPF World Congress I attended was in Paris in 2000.

7.3 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

It was through FIPLV that meetings began with UNESCO in 1993, to work on projects for the International Year of Tolerance (1995), but more specifically on the UNESCO project of Linguapax: (teaching) languages for peace – established at the meeting in Kiev in 1987. At the FIPLV World Congress in Pécs in 1991, I was further inspired by Albert Raasch, who had organised Linguapax III in Germany. Through Joseph Poth at UNESCO and Félix Marti at the Linguapax Centre in Barcelona, UNESCO would ask me to organise the fifth Linguapax International Workshop in Melbourne in 1995, after which I edited and published the proceedings with FIPLV President, Michel Candelier. I would also collaborate closely with the head of the languages section at UNESCO, Joseph Poth, before his retirement, his off-sider, Anna Maria Majlöf, and the Assistant Director-General for Education, Dr Colin Power, another Australian. It may have been that I pointed out that the UNESCO languages policy was fifty years old, that the head of the languages section at UNESCO at the time, Linda King, took action. I was invited to be a member of the ‘expert panel’ to peruse successive drafts before she invited me to Paris for a two-day meeting with around 25 other ‘experts’ to discuss and produce the new policy, *Education in a Multilingual World* (2003), in the six official languages of UNESCO. I represented Australasia & Oceania. It was also in this context that I met the UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Languages, Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, former President of Iceland (1980-1996). We would also collaborate closely and become firm friends.

7.4 Presentations and Publications

After Edith Jacino, I have been enriched by the input, inspiration and friendship of many visionary colleagues – Ian Adams, Ivan Barko, Ted Batley, Michel Boiron, Michael Buckby OBE, Michel Candelier, Michael Clyne, Keith Corcoran, Reinhold Freudenstein, June Gassin, Mannie Gelman (Légion d’Honneur), Sir James Gobbo AC, Josef Hendrich (Czech Republic), David Ingram AM, Kwong Lee Dow AO, Joe Lo Bianco AM, Colin Nettelbeck, Marcel Noest, Terry Quinn, Albert Raasch (Germany), Wilga Rivers, György Szépe (Hungary), Denis Taffe, Jim Wheeler, those of the FIPLV domain and – culminating in David Crystal OBE and Vigdis Finnbogadóttir. Also inspired by other keynote speakers at conferences – Christopher Brumfit & Denis Girard (1985), Peter Medgyes (1991), Steve Krashen (1994) and, more recently, Michel Boiron – and participants at over 200 languages conferences I have attended, I have given 220 presentations (often as the main, plenary or keynote speaker) and published 315 items, from articles, obituaries, reports, responses, reviews and submissions to (contributing to or editing) monographs in over thirty different countries. Some of these have been in French, solicited by others, several appearing in the journal of FIPF, *Dialogues et Cultures*. One of the most enjoyable was an article requested by Professor Emerita Wilga Rivers (of Harvard University), on the French influence on the Australian wine industry (published in France in 1992). It was one of the most enjoyable articles I have had to research...

It has been the cause of languages, especially for AFMLTA, FIPLV, FIPF, UNESCO and Linguapax that I have been to 120 countries. For obvious reasons (listed above), I continue to return to the Baltics as an affinity has formed.

7.5 Sponsorship

I have often been asked to be a referee for colleagues and others, such as Françoise Reddan and Thérèse Mercader (Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes académiques) in Victoria, but some requests were more unpredictable. I was asked (indirectly) by the Ministre du Bicentenaire, Jack Lang, to assist two French journalists in their visit to Australia and their quest to locate the Tasmanian tiger... As a result, I was offered tickets to the *défilé* on 14 July 1989, present to join in the celebrations of the bicentenary of the French Revolution. I took Wilga Rivers, also in Paris for the annual convention of the American Association of Teachers of French (AATF). When leading the *stage de Montpellier* in 1982, I was invited back to Grenoble to meet with the family of a former student at the Lycée Champollion. I agreed to sponsor Agnès Devenyi and the Herrmann family to emigrate to Australia, Peter Herrmann becoming the coach of the Australian judo team.

8 Endnote

I am of a generation which did not ask automatically “what’s in it for me?” I was inspired initially by Mme Edith Jacino to embrace a passion for French, French language and culture, fuelled further by several amazing luminaries I have had the privilege to meet along the way. They have ensured that I have made French and other languages a priority in my life, promoting their learning – irrespective of background, colour, country, creed, gender or persuasion – celebrating their teaching and learning for the noble reasons for which we do this.

Asked to reflect and reminisce, languages have been a *leitmotif* of my life, my career and my journeys. A major focus, it has been languages, especially French, which have dominated my existence in work and voluntary associations, enriching at every stage, and the reason that I was identified for my contribution at the national and international levels.

I hope that I have contributed more to the cause of French (and other languages) than they have to me...

Denis Cunningham AM FACE
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