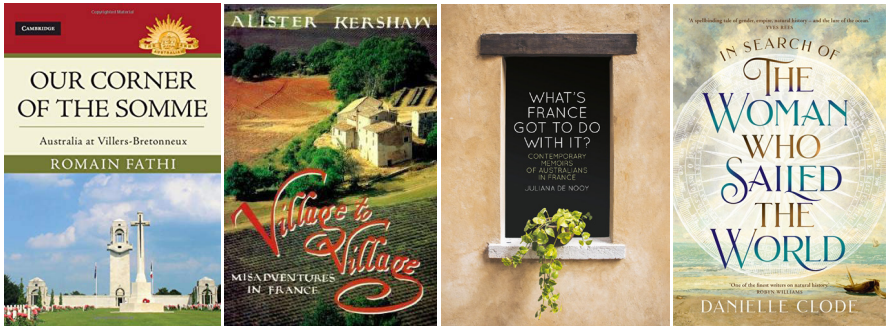


Book Reviews



Romain Fathi, *Our Corner of the Somme: Australia at Villers-Bretonneux*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, April 2019, 228 pp., rrp AU\$ 59.95, ISBN 978-1-10855-888-4.

‘Memory performed is at the heart of collective memory’ (Winter 2010, 11).

The aim of Romain Fathi’s *Our Corner of the Somme* is to study ‘the assembly, projection and performance of an aspect of Australia’s national identity through the prism of Australian war memorialisation at Villers-Bretonneux’ (2). Drawing on the metaphor of the theatre also explored by Jay Winter (2010), Fathi writes of Villers-Bretonneux as a stage on which has been performed, over the century since the First World War, the drama of the construction of Australian identity. Key to Fathi’s use of this running metaphor is his argument that, in fostering the collaboration of the townspeople and officials in local commemorations, Australia sought an audience and above all a foreign audience, able to reflect back to the nation a flattering image of itself: ‘a constructed and imagined international gaze validating its existence and, in doing so, reinforcing it’ (84). Fathi argues that this image has been forged by Australia via its government agencies, with the collaboration of French local and occasionally national figures, who had agendas of their own. Moreover, as the town is situated, unlike Gallipoli, in the territory of a friendly nation, the site allowed Australia greater commemorative scope. On occasion, it also proved useful as the stage on which to celebrate relations between the two countries, an illustration of Matthew Graves’s concept of ‘memorial diplomacy’ (2014).

This rigorous study is notable for the extent and depth of the research undertaken, the variety of materials drawn on—including comments in visitors' books at military cemeteries and museums, local bulletins and newspapers and French and Australian government archives—and the varied quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches adopted to analyse this range of material.

The book opens with a re-examination of military history by situating the fighting at Villers-Bretonneux in the context of the wider battles across the Western Front. Fathi challenges the exclusive focus on the role of Australian troops in 'saving' the town, an account that was fostered at the time in propaganda designed to encourage flagging recruitment and has persisted since. Subsequent chapters trace the relations between Villers-Bretonneux and Australian Federal, State and City organisms, as the latter developed forms of commemoration, memorials and museums to perpetuate this representation of history. It is impossible to recount here the many aspects of this century-long commemorative project that Fathi explores. A prominent theme concerns what Fathi sees as a series of misconceptions: the tendency for France to view the First World War as a futile bloodbath while Australia wishes to focus on the qualities of its soldiers; another that in the early postwar decades there was a tendency by the French to subsume Australia under the ranks of imperial troops; and that Australians tend to generalise from the attention they receive in Villers-Bretonneux to the assumption that this reflects the views of the French as a whole.

The study traces in detail the waxing and waning of the commemorative agenda at Villers-Bretonneux, paralleling the broader fate of the Anzac legend in national life. Fathi pays particular attention to the years since the 1980s when first Bob Hawke and then John Howard led a revival of interest in Gallipoli. While both historians and military officers have, especially over the last decade, queried the prominent role that Gallipoli has acquired in our national life—see Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, Bruce Scates and James Brown, amongst others—Fathi brings this critique up to date through his focus on the upsurge in commemoration at Villers-Bretonneux, a site that, he points out, offers the advantage of marking a victory rather than a defeat. The book closes with an extended analysis of the new Sir John Monash Centre which, Fathi argues, continues the exclusive focus on the role of Australian troops that characterised the first accounts by Charles Bean.

Romain Fathi's Villers-Bretonneux is a microcosm from which wider conclusions can be drawn concerning the extensive commemorative efforts undertaken overseas by successive Australian governments to construct a cohesive national memory. Perhaps more acknowledgement could have been made of the existence of critical voices that contested this project and sought to keep alive the 'counter memories' of the horrors of war. One of the most famous was that of the Challis Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney, John Anderson, whose attacks on war memorials as 'merely fetishes for the purposes of blocking discussion ... about the character and conditions of the last war and thus about war and social relations in general' sparked the Freethought controversy of 1931 (quoted in Parsons 2009, 20). Anderson's intervention garnered support from a wide range of left-leaning organisations and unions, politicians and some veterans and their families.

The reader is left with some questions that Fathi also raises but cannot answer within the scope of the book. Since relatively few Australians (and almost no French) visit the Western Front, can the colossal expenditure incurred in erecting and maintaining the various memorials and museums, now integrated into the two hundred kilometre long Australian Remembrance Trail, be justified? And what is the relevance of this 'narrow and national approach to Australian military history' (203), centred on World War One, to today's multicultural Australia? We find an echo of these questions in the debates currently taking place over the proposed expenditure of half a billion dollars on the renovation and expansion of the Australian War Memorial.

If one wanted to draw a lesson from this study it might be that there exist many areas of overlapping interests and collaboration between France and Australia, in culture, science and technology, that point to the future rather than the past. At a time when the two countries are seeking to establish closer relations in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, it is surely these areas that should be highlighted and supported, rather than the expenditure of national treasure on distant monuments that risk becoming irrelevant, particularly in the era of Covid-19 and the resulting collapse in international travel for an indeterminate future.

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Elizabeth Rechniewski

The University of Sydney

Alister Kershaw, *Village to Village: Misadventures in France*, Sydney, ETT Imprint, 2020, 176 pp., rrp AU\$ 28.50, ISBN 978-1-92238-416-4.

Alister Kershaw's *Village to Village* is unique in the genre of memoirs by Australians and other Anglophones who spent most of their lives in France. It is not surprising that this is the third reprint since it was first published in 1993. Alister Kershaw arrived penniless in Paris in 1948 and immediately fell in love with the city. It would be difficult to find another writer who has not only observed but actually worked at such a variety of jobs and lived in so many different areas of Paris, from the lowest to the highest. He made friends wherever he was, joining in the life around him and becoming accepted as one of the locals. Kershaw seems to have had a lively, engaging personality, always open to new experiences. In Australia he had been an avant-garde poet and satirist, promoted by Max Harris. In good Australian style, he could and would turn his hand to almost anything and was up for any 'misadventure'. He casually mentions that his periodic spells as an odd-job man with the butchers in Les Halles earned him 'a high distinction in market circles', that of being made an honorary member of the confraternity of wholesale butchers. At the other end of the spectrum, he became friends with the mysterious, fabulously rich John who, when in Paris, would take him to the most expensive restaurants.

The early years, when Kershaw was genuinely down and out, are the most interesting and entertaining. He lived in what he called his rabbit hutch—‘a sort of plywood cabin above a coal-shed’—in the courtyard of a big house, accessed only by ladder. He was told that a ‘*Monsieur Poonde*’ had lived in rooms there. *Monsieur Poonde* turned out to be Ezra Pound! As time went on, his accommodation improved; from rented room to flat and, finally, to a house in the country.

Kershaw gives a lively description of café life, especially in La Coupole where one could sit for hours over a cup of coffee, and where he spent a great deal of time trying to write. This made him a figure of consequence, instantly welcome to join in whatever discussion was going on in that corner of the famous café. He was no admirer of Sartre or Genet, who were among the famous patrons of La Coupole.

After a series of uncertain jobs, Kershaw managed to land a handsomely-paid position as a writer with an American organisation, USRAT. This enabled him to live in the luxurious sixteenth arrondissement and experience a very different life from the one he had led until then. He still managed to run out of money at the end of the month, but his methods of getting credit had to change in his new wealthy milieu. Now he frequented Le Grand Véfour as well as La Coupole. The job left him time to finish a book, do some journalism and begin reporting on Paris for the ABC. Unsure of French politics, he based his predictions on the opinions of Jacques, the owner of the bistro next door, which turned out to be very accurate. Some (very much) older readers may remember his broadcasts, something in the style of Alistair Cooke’s *Letters from America*.

When USRAT eventually folded, Kershaw settled in a flat in an old-fashioned street on rue de Charonne in the eleventh arrondissement, where Kershaw was the only foreigner. By this time, he had been in Paris for twenty years. Sadly, this ideal life could not last forever. Paris was changing in ways that he eventually found intolerable: cars dominated the streets, the influx of tourists and foreign inhabitants brought permanent changes to the life and culture of the neighbourhood and, above all, the new architecture irrevocably changed ‘le vieux Paris’. All this finally drove Kershaw to his last village, Sury-en Vaux, in the Berry, and a very modest house in a hamlet of five. The inhabitants were traditional Sancerre winegrowers. It took a while, and you had to be a good drinker to be accepted, but they formed

lasting friendships. There also he witnessed modernisation and increased wealth as Sancerre wines became much more appreciated. The people, however, remained the same and Kershaw lived there until he died in 1995.

Alister Kershaw is very strictly focused in his memoir. There are some intriguing omissions. It is almost by the way that Kershaw mentions that he had married again and had two children when he moved to the country. He does not tell us that it was for UNESCO he edited and translated for more than ten years or that he became the secretary of the writer Richard Aldington in Sancerre. He hardly mentions the books he has written. Obviously, his interest is his personal relationship with so many aspects of French life and the extraordinary variety of people he had known over forty-five years. Kershaw's book is written with wit and a youthful enthusiasm that makes *Village to Village* a pleasure to read.

Patricia Clancy

Melbourne

Juliana de Nooy, *What's France got to do with it? Contemporary Memoirs of Australians in France*, Acton, ANU Press, July 2020, 204 pp., rrp AU\$ 50.00, ISBN 978-1-76046-363-2.

In her recently-published book, *What's France got to do with it? Contemporary Memoirs of Australians in France*, Juliana de Nooy explores what she describes as a 'contemporary publishing phenomenon: the proliferation since the year 2000 of memoirs by Australians about their experience of living in France and the seemingly insatiable demand for them'. While only one memoir was published in the 1990s, forty-four had been published in the period from 2000 to 2017.

What could be the reasons for such a proliferation? Both de Nooy's professional and personal background as well as her experience render her well-placed to consider this question. Having completed a doctorate in literary theory at the Université de Paris 7 and currently a Senior Lecturer in French in the School of Languages and Cultures at the University of Queensland, her research interests include intercultural communication, intercultural narratives and travel literature. She has also spent many years living and working in France and is married to a Frenchman.

Structured in nine chapters (plus an introduction and conclusion) whose themes mirror the question format of the book's title, and drawing on insights from a wide range of academic research, de Nooy examines and analyses a range of factors—the role of travel, the impact of living in France (even if only for a relatively short period), love and romance, social class and demographics, culture, language, gender, and the role played by Australia and its 'masculinist national culture'. Ultimately, de Nooy concludes that while the marketing of the memoirs suggests that they are 'about France', these books are less about France itself, or the French people, language and culture, and more about the role France plays as a backdrop to a project of self-renewal by their authors: 'Rather, the strongest thread bringing these books and their readers together is the idea of self-transformation, with France seen as the destination where women can best achieve it.'

This quotation draws attention to what is, for me, one of the key insights of the book—the role of gender and how this is refracted through the differing national cultures of France and Australia. De Nooy notes that, of the forty-four memoirs published since 2000, only six of the authors are male, and none of the men's books have as their focus the theme of constructing a new self or identity which predominates in the women's memoirs.

What is it that makes France so congenial a place, whether actual or ideal, for allowing these Australian women to imagine a new life for themselves? Drawing on research on Australian gender constructions, De Nooy suggests that Australia's historical male-biased culture allowed for a very limited role for Australian women in the construction of Australian national identity. In contrast, 'far from relegating the feminine to the fringes of national myths, France has elevated traditionally feminine domestic arts into the venerated domains of *haute couture*, *haute cuisine* and *les arts décoratifs*, making them central to the country's self-branding over four centuries'. In other words, women's roles and activities have been central to the construction of French national identity, and this is reinforced by the existence of female figures such as Marianne and Joan of Arc acting as key symbols of the French nation, and by the 'diverse range of illustrious French women, past and present, whose fame stretches to Anglophone cultures'. For de Nooy, this analysis provides 'a basis for understanding why Australian women of Australian heritage feeling dissatisfied with their identity may not find Australia the most conducive site for exploring alternatives' and an

explanation for ‘the continued appeal of France as a pole of identification for Australian women’.

For those readers who may not have written memoirs about their time in France, but who have nevertheless fantasised about living in France or have focused their professional, intellectual or academic interests on all things French, de Nooy’s well-written and engaging book offers an insightful way of thinking about the fascination which France continues to have for many Australians. It will also provide an interesting basis against which to read and analyse any future such memoirs by Australian writers.

Robyn Stern

Melbourne

Danielle Clode, *In Search of the Woman Who Sailed the World*, Picador, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, September 2020, 335 pp., rrp AU\$ 34.99. ISBN 978-1-76078-495-9.

Trained as a biologist, Danielle Clode in her previous nine books has proved herself to be a natural history writer of great originality and talent, crossing the genre divide(s) between natural and cultural history, social science and autobiographical writing. In her latest book, *In Search of the Woman Who Sailed the World*, she sets out to discover more about the notorious but elusive Jeanne Barret, the first Frenchwoman to circumnavigate the globe, travelling on Louis-Antoine de Bougainville’s voyage from 1766–1768 as the naturalist Philibert Commerson’s assistant and servant.

Clode is the ideal person from many points of view to tackle such a subject. We learn at the outset that the sea and everything associated with it have been a focus for her since her early childhood when her mother and father, a boat builder in Port Lincoln in South Australia, spent several years building a boat and then taking the family to sea in it, travelling around the Australian coastline as far as North Queensland.

Clode recounts her voracious childhood reading of maritime adventures, where she was disappointed to find that the heroes were always male and the women occupied only secondary roles in places in which ‘they were not supposed to be’. ‘I must have wanted a place for women in these stories, a place for myself’, she says. She tells how she became aware of the number of

women who participated in early French sea voyages while researching her earlier award-winning book *Voyages to the South Seas: In Search of Terres Australes* in which she writes of the French scientific voyages to Australia and the Pacific in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Bougainville's voyage preceded these and was the first French scientific voyage to the southern hemisphere, inspired by the Enlightenment quest for knowledge. In spite of her important role as Commerson's assistant, Jeanne Barret left no written record except her signature, Barret, which Clode adopts as the correct spelling of her name and which is variously spelt as Baré and Baret by others. In her book, Clode pays tribute to Barret's achievements as she accompanies her on her journey. From her own experiences and knowledge, she tries to experience and see the world through Barret's eyes, conjuring up that eighteenth-century world where Jeanne was doubly invisible, both as a woman and as a servant.

Building on the work of Henriette Dussourd (*Jeanne Barret (1740–1816) : première femme autour du monde*, Imprimerie Pottier, Moulins, 1987) Clode describes Barret's modest peasant origins and background in Burgundy and furthers Dussourd's research by delving into the historical records to discover more about her family. She visits the places mentioned in the records and follows Barret to her meeting with newly-widowed naturalist, Commerson, for whom she becomes both assistant and live-in housekeeper. She had been recommended to him by Commerson's brother-in-law, Father Beau, priest at the church in Toulon-sur-Arroux where Barret was living and working at the time. When Barret becomes pregnant to Commerson, the pair move to Paris where Jeanne gives birth to a child who is placed in the foundling home. Later, a second child is born and the same procedure is followed.

When Commerson is appointed as naturalist for the Bougainville expedition Jeanne Barret disappears, only to reappear shortly afterwards at the port of Nantes, dressed as a man, Jean Barret, where he/she is taken on as Commerson's secretary. During the voyage, Barret proves herself to be an invaluable support to Commerson in his scientific work, as well as doubling as his personal servant and caring for him during his various illnesses. She accompanies him on his shore excursions in South America and the Pacific Islands, carrying his equipment and collecting and processing specimens.

There is little mention of Barret in the journals of the other participants in the voyage, even in that of Commerson, although he refers to her indirectly and later on, in an unpublished manuscript note in Latin, pays tribute to her by naming a plant after her—*Baretia bonafidia*. Throughout the voyage, Barret manages most of the time to pass under the radar avoiding attracting attention to herself while dealing with all the difficult circumstances in which she finds herself. Money changes hands when Commerson smoothes over the difficult moment of the crossing of the line. Although some of the French crew members may have had their suspicions, the question of Barret's sex is not revealed until the voyagers arrive in Tahiti where the Tahitian men immediately identify her as a woman. Thanks to Bougainville's diplomatic handling of the situation, Barret continues to carry out her duties without hindrance as before. As a member of the lower orders and as a woman, Barret continues to be invisible.

Arriving at the Île-de-France, Commerson and Barret part ways with the Bougainville expedition and both remain there, although their working association appears to have ended. Commerson continues to pursue his natural history interests in Madagascar and the Île-de-France where he dies in 1773. Barret, on the other hand, remains in the Île-de-France for two more years, proving herself to be an astute businesswoman, amassing property and wealth. She eventually marries Jean Dubernat, an army drum-major in the Royal-Comtois regiment, before returning to France with him in 1775 and settling in Burgundy. She appears to have led a comfortable bourgeois existence there among her family until her death at the age of sixty-seven.

Through painstaking archival research, Clode has brought to light much new information about the historical details of Barret's life, both before and after the voyage with Bougainville. As distinct from Glynis Ridley's largely fictional account of Barret's life (*The Discovery of Jeanne Baret: A Story of Science, the High Seas, and the First Woman to Circumnavigate the Globe*, 2011, Penguin Random House), Clode is scrupulously careful to make clear what is speculation and what is known fact about Barret. Her narration, built on the traces of Barret's remarkable life gives her a presence, if not a voice, at the same time paradoxically highlighting Barret's ultimate unknowability.

Clode, on the other hand, is ever-present in the book as she unfolds her own life to the reader, doubling two and a half centuries later the life of

the adventurous eighteenth-century woman and interweaving her own story with that of Barret. Through her imagination and empathy, and through her intimate knowledge of the sea, Clode creates a vivid and fascinating backdrop to the shadowy Barret's story. Clode does not seek to circumscribe her subject and leaves loose ends to pursue. What, for example, happened to Barret's collection of shells mentioned by Commerson in his tribute to her? Clode, an avid shell collector herself, follows several trails, including the Museum of Natural History in Paris, but has little success—maybe they were among the shells from the Bougainville expedition purchased by the nineteenth-century private collector, Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville, who published pictures of them, some of which Clode uses to illustrate her book. But then the trail runs cold.

In Search of the Woman Who Sailed the World is a beautifully written book, full of interesting facts and insights, both scientific and historical. It is a luminous and illuminating tribute to Jeanne Barret, to be enjoyed by the specialist and general reader alike.

Margaret Sankey

University of Sydney