

‘The fighting in France’: French-Australians Report from the Front¹

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Introduction

The First World War is a pivotal period for the historical ties between France and Australia and the relationship is commonly framed through the lens of the AIF’s (Australian Imperial Force’s) participation on the Western Front. In more recent times commemorative practices have focused on the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux and on the town itself, which has come to symbolise the tragedy of the young lives lost and the post-war relationship. The symbolic meaning attached to Villers-Bretonneux has evolved in the intervening century and has acted as a stage on which Australian national identity is projected.² Regular commemorations of Australia’s war dead are also held at other sites in France, such as Fromelles and Bullecourt, places where the Australians suffered enormous losses.

This article approaches the French-Australian relationship forged through the First World War via a different point of connection, beyond the Villers-Bretonneux paradigm, by extending the focus laterally rather

¹ ‘The Fighting in France’, *Age*, 27 May, 1917, 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article155073982>. ‘The Fighting in France’ is the title of one of the letters examined in this article and was a frequently used newspaper headline for reports from the front.

² Romain Fathi, *Our Corner of the Somme: Australia at Villers-Bretonneux* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

than chronologically. It does so by examining the profiles of several French-Australian soldiers from different backgrounds who were mobilised into the French army, considering how they functioned as vectors of a connection between France and Australia. The article will focus on one of the ways in which this link was articulated and made visible to the Australian public, when letters sent to family and friends in Australia from these French-Australian soldiers were published in the press. The reports of their experiences in the French army had two important effects. Firstly, they cemented feelings of connectedness between the Australian home front and the French fighting front, strengthening feelings of comradeship with the French ally. Secondly, the letter writers exemplified popular conceptions of French identity and corroborated the Australian perception of the French as heroic defenders of their country. The heroic images of France aligned with the broader pro-French discourse and therefore underpinned support for the war.

The soldiers' letters can be contextualised within the larger practice of the publishing of first-hand accounts by French-Australians describing their experiences in France. The personal nature of the accounts, sent by French people who had lived in Australia, gave their testimony a greater weight and value than accounts from British war correspondents sent via a news wire service. The individuals presented in this study constitute a necessarily limited sample. An element common to most of them was that they were well-known enough, and literate enough, for their stories to be published. The information gleaned from their letters provides an insight into some of the different life trajectories, occupations and backgrounds of the French population of Australia during the war, as we learn of their pre-war lives and the identities of those in Australia to whom they wrote.

The reports in the press by and about the French-Australians cover a range of different war-time experiences, civilian and military. In this article's focus on the military aspect, it is noteworthy that the French-Australian soldiers whose letters are examined here all fought at Verdun. The experiences they recount include some which were generic to all soldiers on the Western Front, while others related specifically to the French army. The personal accounts from the perspective of the French soldiers reinforced the Australian public's awareness of iconic events during the war, such as the battle of Verdun and aerial fighting, and provided a sense of connection for Australians to these events in France.

The experiences of the French-Australian soldiers are often referred to as ‘thrilling’; they were clearly intended to entertain and inspire the readers, as well as inform them. Yet the letters also contain clear references to the horrors of war.

Background: French-Australian identity

According to the 1911 Australian Commonwealth census data, approximately 3,000 French-born people lived in Australia at the outbreak of the conflict.³ Most of them lived in Sydney or Melbourne, although there were French-born people scattered throughout the rest of the country, in both rural and urban areas. They were engaged in a wide range of professions, from trade and commerce to agriculture, labouring, and service industries. Of these around 900 were men of military age and, according to French law, they were subject to French military service obligations. French diplomatic representatives Consul-General Chayet in Sydney and Vice-Consul Homery in Melbourne oversaw their mobilisation. Approximately 170 French-born men joined the AIF rather than comply with French mobilisation orders while others chose not to enlist.⁴ The French-born members of the AIF are searchable through the AIF attestation papers which are available online at the National Archives of Australia.⁵ However, as French citizenship was conferred via one’s father, Australian-born French citizens were also subject

³ ‘Birthplaces. Australian Bureau of Statistics’, Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, April 1911, vol. 2, <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/2112.01911?OpenDocument>.

New South Wales had the highest number of French-born residents, 1,347, and Victoria the second highest with 734. Figures for the other states are Queensland, 333; South Australia, 166; Western Australia, 254; Tasmania, 38 and Northern Territory 4.

⁴ Pauline Georgelin, ‘Frenchmen in the AIF: French-Australian Identities during the First World War’, *French Cultural Studies* 30, no. 4 (November 2019): 294–306; and Pauline Georgelin, “‘For Noble and Valiant France’: French-Australian Identities, French-Australian Connections during the First World War”, PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, submitted for examination November 2020.

⁵ ‘B2455 First Australian Imperial Force Personnel Dossiers, 1914–1920’, National Archives of Australia (NAA), <https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/series-info/b2455/>, accessed 20 November 2020.

to French military service obligations. Therefore, just as French-born men served in the AIF, Australian-born men served in the French army, indicating that French nationality and identity in Australia during the First World War could be a complex notion.

The Melbourne consular archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs which contains correspondence regarding the mobilisation, is a useful source for identifying those called up from Melbourne.⁶ There are no corresponding archives for the Sydney Consulate-General for this period; however, the stories of many of the French army soldiers from Sydney are available to us from reports in the Sydney-based French-language newspaper, the *Courrier Australien*. Trade and commerce helped define French-Australian connections in Sydney, with its tightly-knit wool buying community, the establishment of the French Chamber of Commerce in 1899, and an agency of the French shipping company *Messageries Maritimes*.

Jacqueline Dwyer's work on the history of her ancestors, the Playoust family, told this First World War shared history from the perspective of Sydney's French wool buying community, and includes the war experiences of her father Jacques Playoust.⁷ Although in both Sydney and Melbourne networks of French people formed communities based around shared linguistic, cultural and economic ties, many other French settlers came to Australia as individuals, rather than defining themselves as part of a migrant group.⁸ The individualistic nature of French migration to Australia during the pre-war period means that it is difficult to affix generalised labels to the French-Australians. In fact, it is their variety which defines them.

Commenting on the links between Anzac Day and Australian national identity Jay Winter described soldiers of the British Empire's dominions

⁶ Alexis Bergantz, 'Mapping the Consul's Treasure: A Discussion and Guide to the French Consular Archives', *The French Australian Review*, no. 61 (Australian Summer 2017): 40–45; and Colin Nettelbeck, 'The Consul's Treasure', *Explorations*, no. 7 (1988): 19–23.

⁷ Jacqueline Dwyer, *Flanders in Australia: A Personal History of Wool and War* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2017).

⁸ Anny P. L. Stuer, *The French in Australia* (Canberra: Department of Demography, Institute of Advanced Studies, ANU, 1982).

as ‘standing on a middle ground, between two worlds’, belonging to both the Empire and their own countries.⁹ In the same way, the French-Australian soldiers can be considered to inhabit a middle ground between two countries. For some French-Australians this duality of identity was challenging, while others had no doubts under which country’s flag they would respond to the war.

Although French-born people made up a small proportion of Australia’s population, they helped inform and influence public discourse about the French. Throughout the conflict, transnational connections between France and Australia were mobilised to strengthen support for the war. French-Australians joined with francophiles and prominent members of society to establish French fundraising organisations which channelled aid directly to France: in New South Wales, the French Australian League of Help and in Melbourne, the Victorian Branch of the French Red Cross.¹⁰ Fundraising for French war charities, including the French Red Cross as well as charities for French mothers and babies was a widespread and popular element of Australian wartime philanthropy.¹¹ The Victorian Branch of the French Red Cross raised £250,000 during the war, while the French Australian League of Help raised over £300,000.¹²

⁹ J. M. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 158.

¹⁰ Peter Brown and Jacqueline Dwyer, ‘The French-Australian League of Help: Restoring the Record’, *The French Australian Review*, no. 56 (Winter 2014) 26–50; Colin Nettelbeck, ‘Charlotte Crivelli (1868–1956) Patriot and Fund-Raiser’, *French Lives in Australia*, ed. Eric Berti & Ivan Barko (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015), 338–352; and Peter Brown, ‘Augustine Soubeiran (1858–1933), Innovative Educator and Dynamic Secretary of the French-Australian League of Help’, *French Lives in Australia*, ed. Eric Berti & Ivan Barko (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015), 319–337.

¹¹ Colin Nettelbeck and Pauline Georgelin, ‘Links across the World: World War I French Soldiers and Melbourne’s “Busy Bees”’, *History Australia* 15, no. 4 (December 2018): 657–73.

¹² ‘French Red Cross Fund Closed’, *Argus*, April 25, 1919, 6, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article1460971>; and *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 15, 1919, 10, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article15852117>.

First-hand accounts of iconic war images and atrocities

The eye-witness accounts from French soldiers can be situated within a widespread practice of publishing first-hand reports from the front in the Australian press. Two examples of this can be seen in the account by Paul Wenz of the bombing of Rheims, and a published report of the death of Charles Deschars, killed in Belgium in late August 1914. Deschars' death was conveyed to Australians by the French Consulate-General and was widely reported in the press. The news inspired sympathy and grief as Deschars had been well-known in Australia. He had been Deputy-Consul in Sydney for several years and had made many friends. Prior to the war he was commercial attaché at the French Embassy in Berlin. He was wounded while serving as an interpreter with the French army, and the following day he had been 'parleying' with German soldiers for the protection of the ambulance, but was shot and killed.¹³ The Australian public had read reports of German atrocities in Belgium, but the story of an atrocity inflicted on a well-known Frenchman made the stories seem more real. Indeed, the *Farmer and Settler* labelled it 'an authentic case', implying a need to stress the veracity of atrocity reports.¹⁴

The bombing of Rheims and, in particular, the shelling and burning of the cathedral was an iconic symbol of destruction in the early part of the war. It unleashed passionate anger on the part of the French—Catholic and non-Catholic—and was used in propaganda as proof of German godlessness.¹⁵ French-Australian writer and grazier Paul Wenz and his Australian wife Hettie were on holiday in Europe when the war broke out and were staying at the Wenz family home in Rheims.¹⁶ Wenz was well-known in Australia through the successful family-owned wool trading company Wenz and Co.¹⁷

¹³ 'German Treachery, Murder of a Wounded Officer', *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 5, 1915, 9, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/15564594>.

¹⁴ 'An Authentic Case', *Farmer and Settler*, February 9, 1915, 1, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/116723904>.

¹⁵ Annette Becker, *War and Faith, The Religious Imagination in France, 1914–1930* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), 15.

¹⁶ Marie Ramsland, 'War, Writing and the Wenz Family', *The French Australian Review*, no. 56 (Winter 2014), 51–64.

¹⁷ Maurice Blackman, 'Paul Wenz (1869–1939), French-Australian Writer and Grazier', *French Lives in Australia*, ed. Eric Berti & Ivan Barko (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015), 272–287.

Wenz’s accounts of his experiences in Rheims during the brief German occupation of the town and the subsequent shelling of the cathedral appeared in the monthly magazine *Lone Hand* as well as in daily newspapers.¹⁸ His letters were more extensively published in the local press at Forbes where the Wenz sheep station was located. These firsthand accounts of atrocities were among the many which proliferated in the press; telling the events as they were experienced by people who were well-known in Australia conferred legitimacy upon the stories.

The many letters published in the press from French-Australian soldiers reporting on life at the front also conferred a sense of realism and connection. Their accounts put a name and sometimes a face to the French ally. A common motif in the letters from French-Australian soldiers is Verdun. The battle of Verdun, which was not one battle but a series of battles, took place between February and December 1916. Verdun was not a French national symbol prior to the war but attained great symbolic status during the first days of the German offensive.¹⁹ Antoine Prost argues that by mid-1916, the battle had achieved a special status, yet the public’s perception of Verdun was different to that experienced by the soldiers who were engaged there. The full extent of the horror was concealed from the public, and newspapers such as *L’Illustration* presented an idealised version of events, ‘a reader of *L’Illustration* would never have known that anyone died at Verdun’.²⁰ In September 1916 President Poincaré declared that Verdun was ‘synonymous with patriotism, bravery and generosity’.²¹

Most of the French army was stationed at Verdun at some point, so it is not surprising that the French-Australians who served under the *tricolore* were there too. Men from Melbourne and Sydney related their experiences for an Australian readership. Their letters mention iconic moments and iconic battles, and include many references to sacrifice and heroism at Verdun. In addition to the letters, the Australian press carried many reports of French-Australian soldiers killed or wounded, and their awards for bravery.

¹⁸ Paul Wenz, ‘Rheims During the Bombardment’, *Lone Hand*, March 1915, 250–251.

¹⁹ Antoine Prost, ‘Verdun’, *Realms of Memory Volume III: Symbols*, ed. Pierre Nora & David P. Jordan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 379.

²⁰ Prost, ‘Verdun’, 380.

²¹ Prost, ‘Verdun’, 381.

Newspapers, censorship and propaganda

Censors wielded firm control over Australia's newspapers and this only strengthened after 1917. Censorship aimed to shield the public from tragic news. Nonetheless, in addition to the officially sanctioned reports in the press provided by approved war correspondents and government news agencies, other news did trickle through to Australians via letters. Peter Stanley argues that the Australian public could have built up a picture of the battles in which their men were fighting by combining the information in letters they and their friends received. Given that both letters and journalism were subject to censorship, most items in the press were there because they had been approved.²² Most studies of propaganda in First World War Australia have explored how it functioned by demonising the enemy, presenting Germans as cruel and barbaric.²³ Operating in parallel was the propaganda discourse which focussed on praise for the allies and valorised the bravery of Australian, British, French and other allied soldiers.

In France, the dissemination of news about the war followed a discernible pattern of unrealistic optimism in the early stages and misinformation provided by journalists with patriotic motives but lacking in facts was common. Official government agencies soon took control, journalists and newsagencies required accreditation, and all mail was censored.²⁴

²² John Connor, Peter Stanley and Peter Yule, *The War at Home Vol. 4: The Centenary History of Australia and the Great War* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²³ Connor, Stanley, and Yule, *The War at Home Vol. 4*, 169–171 and 190–192; Emily Robertson, 'Propaganda and "Manufactured Hatred": A Reappraisal of the Ethics of First World War British and Australian Atrocity Propaganda', *Public Relations Inquiry* 3, no. 2 (May 1, 2014): 245–266, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X14542958>; Emily Robertson, 'Propaganda at Home (Australia)', *1914–1918 Online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, February 17, 2015, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/propaganda_at_home_australia/2015-02-17; and Peter Putnis and Kerry McCallum, 'Reuters, Propaganda-Inspired News, and the Australian Press During the First World War', *Media History* 19, no. 3 (August 1 2013): 284–304, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2013.817836>.

²⁴ Christian Delporte, 'Journalistes et Correspondants de Guerre', *Encyclopédie de La Grande Guerre* (Paris: Bayard Édition, 2013); and Olivier Forcade, 'Information, censure et propagande', *Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre 1914–1918* (Paris: Bayard Édition, 2013).

The French government’s censorship of news from the front imposed a positive and optimistic tone to reports, which the French soldiers referred to as *bourrage de crâne* or ‘eyewash’. Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau argued that in France propaganda was not only imposed ‘from above’ by governments and officials but that there existed in parallel a widespread decentralised propaganda from below, which sprang spontaneously from people’s prevailing ideas about the war.²⁵

As part of wartime propaganda in Australia, stereotypes were projected through deliberate, official policy, in a ‘top-down’ direction.²⁶ The valorisation of the ally was an important part of public discourse and stereotypical images of France and French people abounded. The French soldier was presented as heroic, as were the Australian and British soldiers. French people were praised for their fortitude and determination in the face of the invader and French women were described as stoic and resourceful in their adversity. The individuals who supplied the letters and reports to the press helped to repeat and reinforce this message and the letters from French-Australians at Verdun can therefore be seen as a form of spontaneous propaganda from below.

News from the French front as well as letters from French army soldiers would have been subject to both French and British controls before they reached Australia. One can conclude therefore that letters which were approved for publication sat within the permitted frame of ‘being in the public’s best interest’ and serving morale in general. Following on from this, the French-Australians’ newspaper letters can be interpreted as part of the wider strategy of mobilising French culture to strengthen support for the war.²⁷ In Australia, pro-French propaganda messages were disseminated by both official and unofficial means. The projection of French identity and of the heroism of Verdun which these examples present can be framed within the widespread pro-French discourse which aimed to strengthen positive public opinion about the war.

²⁵ Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *14–18 Understanding the Great War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 108–9.

²⁶ John Connor, Peter Stanley, and Peter Yule, *The War at Home, vol. 4, The Centenary History of Australia and the Great War* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2015), 191.

²⁷ This theme is explored in the author’s PhD thesis.

The concept of ‘Australia’s debt to France’ was a common element in patriotic rhetoric, referencing France as the birthplace of democracy and the pinnacle of culture. Francophile Premier of New South Wales William Holman contributed to this with his speech to the Sydney University Union in September 1915.²⁸ The speech was repeated in the press, and copies were printed for widespread dissemination.²⁹ The concept of Australia’s debt to France from the military perspective told that France, because of its ability to hold firm at Verdun, saved Britain and by extension Australia, from being invaded by Germany. In March 1916 a large public meeting in Melbourne expressed Australia’s appreciation of French ‘gallantry’ at Verdun.³⁰ Emotive speeches by prominent citizens eulogised France, which ‘stood right in the forefront of everything that was worth living for in civilisation’, and concluded that the force of France’s ‘75’ guns would silence those critics who thought of France as a decadent country.³¹

The letters fit within this widespread narrative of the heroic French soldier who saves civilisation from the German invader. At the same time, they personalise the message, providing the reader with lived examples of the horror of war from the French perspective.

French-Australians report from the front

The Crivellis

Among the many French army soldiers from Australia whose letters were published for an Australian readership were those of the Crivelli brothers from Melbourne. The Crivelli family were eminent and influential members of Australian society and were fiercely patriotic French citizens. Charlotte Crivelli had founded the Victorian Committee of the French Red Cross in 1915. Doctor Marcel Crivelli was the high-profile doctor to Melbourne’s

²⁸ Jill Donohoo, ‘NSW Premier William Holman and the “Inexhaustible Interest of French Affairs”’, *The French Australian Review*, no. 61 (Australian Summer 2017), 3–18.

²⁹ Holman, W. A., ‘Our debt to France: an address to the Sydney University Union on Friday, 24th September, 1915’, Government Printer, 1915.

³⁰ ‘France’s Fiery Trial: Appreciation of Gallantry’, *Argus*, March 7, 1916, 7, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2093617>.

³¹ ‘France’s Fiery Trial: Appreciation of Gallantry’, 7.

French community and counted government ministers among his patients.³² The four eldest Crivelli sons served in the French army. Louis (b. 1888) and Georges (b. 1890), the two eldest, had left Australia in 1913 to undertake their French military service, so they were already in France when mobilisation was declared. Graduates of Melbourne University, Georges Crivelli obtained a degree in Agricultural Science and Louis studied Medicine. René Crivelli (b. 1894) was still at university completing his engineering degree in 1914 and left for France in 1915. All three received the highest honour for bravery, the *Croix de Guerre*. Fourth son Marcel junior (b. 1899) left Australia in 1918 in time to join a French artillery unit, and served as an interpreter after the Armistice.³³ Georges and Louis were both posted to the 44th Artillery Regiment when war broke out. An early letter from Georges described his mobilisation and first days of the war as ‘calm, enthusiastic and organised’.³⁴

In March 1915, Victorians read of Georges and Louis’ experiences during desperate fighting in Belgium. Their unit had come under heavy fire when ambushed by Germans.³⁵ In heavy fog, they had gone too close to the German lines. Georges ‘kept a cool head’ when the shells were falling. From Belgium, the unit took part in the retreat towards Paris and then participated in battles of the Aisne, the Marne and the Somme. In another letter Georges described being under fire from German artillery and sheltering in the cellar of a bombed farmhouse. ‘I got nearer the explosion of an eight-inch German shell than I ever did before. I escaped by half a coat of paint’, he wrote.³⁶

³² Colin Nettelbeck, ‘Charlotte Crivelli (1868–1956) Patriot and Fund-Raiser’, *French Australian Dictionary of Biography*, October 2018, <https://www.isfar.org.au/bio/crivelli-charlotte-1863-1956/>; and Colin Nettelbeck, ‘Marcel Crivelli (1859–1948)’, *French Australian Dictionary of Biography*, November 2019, <https://www.isfar.org.au/bio/crivelli-marcel-1859-1948/>.

³³ Marcel Jehan Crivelli, *Registre Matricule*, Archives départementales de la Seine-Maritime/Le Havre/1919/1R3472, <http://archivesdepartementales76.net/>. Accessed 17 February 2020.

³⁴ ‘Victorians with French, Aeroplane versus Zeppelin’, *Argus*, October 26, 1914, 8, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article10813656>.

³⁵ ‘A Melbourne Doctor’s Sons: Their War Experiences in some hot places’, *Bendigo Independent*, March 8, 1915, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article75172704>.

³⁶ ‘French-Australian Shelled in Cellar’, *Herald*, April 21, 1915, 1, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article242364615>.

In August 1915 Georges Crivelli was transferred from the artillery to the newly formed *aérostiers* unit—fixed observation balloons which relayed information to artillery units below. In another article he wrote of sitting above the clouds at his observation post and being the target of an unsuccessful attack by a German aviator.³⁷ In September 1916 he described the experience of floating above the town of Verdun. ‘One side of the town was levelled to the ground, on the other a few walls remained ... it resembled a cold, dead tomb.’³⁸

In addition to his lively tales of front-line fighting, Georges used his platform for the ‘betterment’ of his fellow Australians. At one point he chastised those who would be benevolent towards German-Australians (the largest group of non-British immigrants to Australia), seeing kindness towards them as unpatriotic. In 1918 Georges sent his own translation of the war memoirs of French author and poet Léo Larguier, which was published in the *Leader*.³⁹ Larguier’s memoir is an informative if not unique account of his experiences—mobilisation in 1914, fighting on the Somme and Picardie fronts, and then at Verdun. In June 1918 Georges Crivelli was transferred to Los Angeles where he established the programme to train Americans in the use of aerial observation balloons.

René Crivelli studied Engineering at Melbourne University and was mobilised in 1915 and posted to an artillery unit where he also learned telephone skills. In September 1915, he was wounded during the battle of Champagne and spent part of his recovery in Doctor Helen Sexton’s Australian Hospital in Paris.⁴⁰ In 1916 René and Louis Crivelli were both serving in the 26th Field Artillery Regiment at Verdun. They were both there when Douaumont was recaptured by the French on 24 October 1916.

³⁷ ‘War in the Air’, *Weekly Times*, November 20, 1915, 8, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article132710082>.

³⁸ ‘Verdun: Albert Park Resident’s Description’, *Emerald Hill Record*, September 9, 1916, 2, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article75012783>.

³⁹ ‘An Epic of the War’, *Leader*, June 1, 1918, 50, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article89785358>.

⁴⁰ Hannah Steel, ‘Dr Helen Sexton’s Hôpital Australien de Paris, July–December 1915’, *French Australian Review*, no. 68 (Australian Winter, 2020), 28–52.

Louis Crivelli, serving as the unit’s doctor, wrote: ‘Yesterday we recaptured the fort of Douaumont... it was a magnificent victory’.⁴¹ René’s war diary tells of freezing cold and lack of sleep from the constant noise of unrelenting bombardments, moving from shell hole to shell hole repositioning the gun he had charge of. While resting in the remains of a trench he was partly buried when a shell landed nearby.⁴² Louis wrote that he saw René ‘this morning he came here plastered with mud from head to foot, thinned down to a shadow, dying of hunger, and just dog tired’.⁴³

In 1918, René Crivelli told of his experiences at Verdun during the previous August and September.⁴⁴ With his artillery battery stationed near the fort of Douaumont, he experienced ‘asphyxiating gas’ during attacks and counter-attacks in which officers were killed and he took charge of the battery. Although the headline refers to his ‘thrilling’ experience, his description of death, exhaustion, air which is poisoned and ground which is spongy from putrefaction, and ‘unmentionable things’ was, he declared, ‘enough to break any spirit’.⁴⁵ In the context of recruitment drives in the face of ever decreasing enlistments in 1918, René’s description hardly seems worded to inspire more recruits, rather it conveys some of the horrors of war which, by then, were becoming more widely known.

Louis Foulet, an artistic young Frenchman

Louis Foulet was an artist who had lived in Australia for a mere two years prior to returning to France to fight. Foulet’s exhibition of paintings in July 1914 attracted the attention of the Melbourne social scene. Lady Helen Munro Ferguson attended the opening, and remarked in French that ‘it took an artist from Paris to show Melbourne how picturesque its streets are’.⁴⁶

⁴¹ ‘Taking Douaumont, Miracle of Modern War’, *Weekly Times*, December 23, 1916, 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article132719501> .

⁴² René Crivelli War Diary, Michael Crivelli private collection.

⁴³ ‘Taking Douaumont’, *Weekly Times*, December 23, 1916, 4.

⁴⁴ ‘Soldier’s Letter, Verdun Described’, *Ballarat Courier*, January 14, 1918, 3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article75172704> .

⁴⁵ ‘Soldier’s Letter, Verdun Described’, 4.

⁴⁶ ‘Woman’s Miscellany’, *Warrnambool Standard*, July 24, 1914, 5, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article73576328> .

Punch noted: 'Foulet is the first French artist who has paid Australia the compliment of coming out to study her light and scenery'.⁴⁷ Foulet had been granted a deferral of his military service in 1912 and this was renewed by Vice-Consul Homery in 1914.⁴⁸ Homery argued that Foulet's career as an artist would suffer were he to return to France. Foulet claimed to have studied painting under the impressionist masters Pissarro and Monet.⁴⁹ This author's research has shown this not to be the case and *The Age* commented that 'his work is lacking entirely in atmospheric suggestion'.⁵⁰ Foulet was able to capitalise on the stereotypical image of the artistic Frenchman to embellish his life story for an Australian audience. However, he did make many friends during his short stay in Australia. While in Melbourne Foulet lived at the home of Pierre Bellew, an active participant in the Melbourne French community and whose mother had been a French actress.

When Foulet sailed away for the front on the French ship *Dumbéa*, he 'promised to return to Australia, if spared, with pictures and sketches that should prove of great interest to the admirers of his work'.⁵¹ However, despite being naturalised shortly before his mobilisation, he never returned to Melbourne. During the war he regularly sent back stories of his experiences which were reported in the press for his admiring public. He was remembered as a competitive swimmer as well as an artist.⁵² The story of his romance and marriage in July 1915 to an Alsatian girl whom he met in hospital while recovering from wounds even included a photo.⁵³ His new wife was 'youthful, charming and possessed of all the chic natural to the daughters of France'.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ *Punch*, July 2, 1914, 33, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article121084134>.

⁴⁸ Certificate dated July 28, 1914, MAE 428PO/1/48.

⁴⁹ 'Exhibition of Paintings', *Age*, July 8, 1914, 14, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article198638102>.

⁵⁰ 'Exhibition of Paintings', 14.

⁵¹ 'In the Public Eye', *Herald*, October 9, 1914, 12, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article242296242>.

⁵² 'Sendoff Tendered to Soldier Swimmers', *Sporting Judge*, October 2, 1915, 1, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article154814236>. Foulet featured in this article about the members of the Melbourne Swimming club who had enlisted.

⁵³ 'Honeymoon in War', *Herald*, October 2, 1915, 14, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article242397073>.

⁵⁴ *Ballarat Star*, 6 February, 1919, 2, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article213868883>.

In 1916, news was relayed via his Melbourne friends that he had been wounded for a second time and awarded the Croix de Guerre.⁵⁵ His military record includes his citation for bravery after being wounded by a shell at St. Thomas en Argonne and noted: ‘Has always distinguished himself by his cool headedness and his audacity; on 25 September 1915 he moved forward courageously and sustained eight wounds.’⁵⁶ Foulet’s public persona conformed with stereotypical images of the inherently artistic Frenchman. On a personal level it contributed to his popularity while also contributing to the wider public narrative regarding French culture.

French-Australians from the cinema industry.

Another French cultural contribution to Australian society is evident in the examples of Frenchmen involved in the early days of cinema. They included René Tournouer of Ballarat, and Roger Puech and Henri Hérault of Sydney.



René Tournouer. <https://greatwarballarat.wordpress.com/blog-feed/>.

⁵⁵ *Argus*, 30 May, 1916, 6, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2092023>.

⁵⁶ ‘Cité à l’ordre du jour no. 21 du 15 février 1916 s’est toujours fait remarquer par son sang froid et son audace ; le 25 septembre 1915 s’est porté résolument en avant et a reçu 8 blessures’. Registre Matricule, Archives Départementales de l’Allier, <https://archives.allier.fr>.

A group of about twenty French residents of Australia who were liable for military service left Sydney on the *Malwa* in August 1914.⁵⁷ The Melbourne *Argus* noted that the immediate response to the call to arms proved the French residents' loyalty, adding, 'Their number is not very great, consisting mostly of representatives of the great wool-buying firms'.⁵⁸ Among the group were Henri Hérault, a cinematographer and the Australian manager of Pathé Frères, and Roger Puech, who was a Sydney manager for Pathé Frères. Hérault was the brother-in-law of Roger and Edgard Puech, members of a prominent French Sydney wool buying family. They were born in Mazamet, a French town linked to Australia because it was the centre for the production of sheepskins.

Before managing a cinema in Sydney, Roger Puech had managed the Ballarat Pathé cinema.⁵⁹ He was replaced in this role by another Frenchman, René Tournouer. Tournouer was popular and well-liked in Ballarat. He was also community-minded. In the early days of the war, he had staged a cinema fundraising event in aid of the Lord Mayor's comfort fund, presenting a program which included the latest war pictures.⁶⁰ When he left for France in September 1914 he was accorded an official farewell, with many wishes for his safe return.⁶¹ During 1915 and 1916 a steady stream of letters from René Tournouer was published in Victorian newspapers. An early letter telling of his journey to France and his mobilisation included many references to atrocities against civilians—maimed children, and civilians crucified on doors. They included the ubiquitous '*mains coupées*' stories which were rife at the time. The story of a lad of seventeen who had both his hands cut off was 'not mere hearsay, it is an absolute fact', he wrote.⁶²

⁵⁷ 'French in Australia, Departure for the Front', *Argus*, August 26, 1914, 10, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page377194>.

⁵⁸ 'French in Australia, Departure for the Front', 10.

⁵⁹ 'A Picture Film Suit', *Age*, August 13, 1913, 12, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article197483292>.

⁶⁰ 'Soldiers' Comforts, Pathé's Appeal', *Evening Echo*, August 19, 1914, 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article241770450>.

⁶¹ 'Events of the Day, Valedictory' *Evening Echo*, September 8, 1914, 2, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article241772434>.

⁶² 'Making for the Front', *Ballarat Star*, February 6, 1915, 2, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article154585621>.

The stories of German atrocities proliferated from the beginning of the conflict and, while the severing of children’s hands was an exaggeration, it seems the myths were inspired by reality. As John Horne and Alan Kramer argued, the violence against civilians did occur, and it was the blending of fact with exaggerated fictional accounts which led to the experiences of civilians being discounted in the postwar period.⁶³ However, during the war, accounts such as René Tournouer’s would have strengthened the Australian public’s will to believe in the barbaric nature of the enemy.

René Tournouer continued to write to Australian friends relating his experiences at Verdun fighting with the 2nd Zouaves regiment. He declared he was proud to be an adopted Australian although, he confessed, he sometimes forgot his English. He was wounded early in 1916 and from hospital wrote a long and graphic account of the fighting.⁶⁴ After returning to the front he was killed at Fleury near Verdun on July 19, 1916.⁶⁵ Adding to the list of French-Australians killed at Verdun, the death of Roger Puech was also reported in several newspapers.⁶⁶

René Joubert

Australian readers also read the detailed and thrilling accounts of Frenchman René Joubert’s experiences as a French infantry soldier and, subsequently, an aviator before he was shot down. Although he was not from Australia his connections to Australia and the reasons his firsthand accounts were published are worth considering here. René was the cousin of George and Alfred Joubert, proprietors of the Joubert and Joubert import, export

⁶³ Alan Kramer, ‘Combatants and Noncombatants: Atrocities, Massacres, and War Crimes’, *Companion to World War I*, ed. John Horne (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2010); and John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial* (Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁶⁴ ‘The Fighting in France’, *Age*, 27 May, 1916, 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article155073982>.

⁶⁵ ‘Casualties in France’, *Argus*, September 21, 1916, 7, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article1598583>; <https://www.memoiredeshommes.sga.defense.gouv.fr/fr/ark:/40699/m00523a02746bef1/5242c0aaed263>. Accessed 8 November 2020.

⁶⁶ ‘M. Roger Puech’, *Courrier Australien*, April 28, 1916, 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article164072613>; and ‘A Verdun Hero’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 22, 1916, 16, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article15648770>.

and trading company in Melbourne. George and Alfred were the nephews of pioneering businessman and land developer Didier Joubert who developed the French village at Hunters Hill in Sydney.⁶⁷

René Joubert worked for French brandy merchants Joubert and Company of Cognac and it is possible that his Melbourne cousins, who imported foodstuffs from France, also imported cognac from their French family connections. By publishing the reports of René's exploits they were adding to the narratives of other well-known French-Australians at Verdun, but the reports must have also generated good publicity for their trading company. Joubert's extensive report on the fighting at Verdun recounted his experiences with an infantry unit in the trenches north of Verdun in February 1916 as the great battle began.⁶⁸ Joubert described eight days on the frontline, under bombardment—days without sleep and very little food. Expressing resoluteness and exhaustion, he wrote: 'we have struggled bravely, and we have done our duty, but our sacrifice will be in vain. We are lost, we will be killed here.' His feelings mirrored the despair expressed in the *Chanson de Craonne*. The tale ends with his unit's replacement by reinforcements.

A later report in 1916 included some quite bloodthirsty sentiments and vivid accounts of battle.⁶⁹ The account by Joubert of 'frightful slaughter' is located alongside an account by AIF troops of their first days in France and their warm welcome by French civilians, juxtaposing the desperation of the French with optimism about Australia's contribution. Joubert also commented that the reader could have absolute faith in the official communiqués—which is at odds with the more prevalent narrative that soldiers at the front thought civilians had no idea what the soldiers were going through, or wilfully ignored it.

⁶⁷ Roslyn Maguire, 'Didier Numa Joubert (1816–1881): the Pioneer of French Interests in Hunters Hill', *French Lives in Australia*, ed. Eric Berti & Ivan Barko (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015), 103–113.

⁶⁸ 'Foe's Blind Fury Resisted', *Herald*, August 5, 1916, 1, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article242377797>.

⁶⁹ 'Verdun's Battling Vividly Described', *Bendigo Independent*, June 5, 1916, 7, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article220915136>.

René Joubert was awarded the Croix de Guerre, after having been wounded twice.⁷⁰ At this point the *Herald* stated that ‘his account of the great battle of Verdun is probably the most vivid and complete that has been published in Australia’, and noted that Joubert was planning to join the Aviation Corps. His descriptions of aerial combat were also relayed to his Australian readers. Reports of his death appeared in April 1918. He had been taking photographs over the line when he was attacked by five German planes.⁷¹ Joubert was already dead when his final report, in which his ‘first thrills’ in the air were ‘graphically related’, was published in July 1918.⁷²

Religious ceremonies honouring the soldiers at Verdun

The heroism of Verdun was commemorated at St. Patrick’s Catholic Cathedral, Melbourne, in March 1917, in a ceremony which also evoked links between Australia and France that had been strengthened by the war.⁷³ The press announced that the executive committee of the Victorian Branch of the French Red Cross had arranged an intercessory service to pay tribute to French soldiers who had lost their lives in the defence of Verdun.⁷⁴ On that day many churches across the city, both Protestant and Catholic, also made mention of Verdun. The St. Patrick’s Cathedral event was attended by many dignitaries, most notably the Governor General Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson and Lady Helen Munro Ferguson. Lady Helen, as President of the Australian Red Cross, was a committed and energetic philanthropist and patron of Charlotte Crivelli’s fundraising efforts for French causes. A catafalque in the Cathedral was decorated with the French flag and the accoutrements of a French soldier. Father Hearn, who had just returned from spending two

⁷⁰ ‘Willing, Fearless’, *Herald*, May 25, 1917, 1, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article242681233>.

⁷¹ ‘Fearless French Airman makes supreme sacrifice’, *Herald*, April 18, 1918, 12, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article242515074>.

⁷² ‘Emotions in the Air’, *Herald*, July 27, 1918, 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article242732583>.

⁷³ ‘Patriotic Efforts’, *Age*, March 13, 1917, 8, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article155196057>.

⁷⁴ ‘Heroes of Verdun’, *Argus*, March 17, 1917, 18, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article1604402>.

years as chaplain to Australian troops, spoke of French and Australian blood co-mingled on the shores of Gallipoli and on the battlefields of France.⁷⁵

Complicated homecomings

In some cases, the duality of French-Australian identity created a complicated war experience for French-Australian soldiers who were part of two worlds. Although Melbourne brothers Emile and Albert d'Assonville had both fought in the French army at Verdun and both been awarded the Croix de Guerre, their postwar experience is indicative of the difficulties and complexities of the homecoming and demobilisation process. Born in Melbourne, they had inherited French citizenship through their French father; each gave his profession as 'garçon d'hôtel' before being mobilised into the French army in 1916.⁷⁶ In France they were posted to infantry units. Emile was serving with the 264th Infantry Regiment when he was awarded the Croix de Guerre in May 1918. On 27 May he was wounded, and then taken prisoner by the Germans. The brothers returned to Melbourne in May 1919.⁷⁷ The French Consul in Melbourne, Henri Fliche, wrote to the Minister for Repatriation intervening on Emile's behalf.⁷⁸ Fliche explained that the d'Assonvilles had initially tried to volunteer for the AIF in 1914 but had been rejected as unfit so had then joined the French army. Because of the injury to his right hand Emile was unable to work. Would the Australian government provide him with some temporary financial assistance and perhaps some retraining to allow him to get back on his feet? As 'an Australian who has fought in the common allied cause' d'Assonville deserved to be helped, Fliche argued. But the Australian authorities would not accept any responsibility. The Australian Government's reluctance to extend repatriation support to veterans of foreign armies was no doubt founded on practical considerations. It avoided setting a precedent which could have opened the floodgates to other claims. The d'Assonvilles' story

⁷⁵ 'Intercessory Service at the Cathedral', *Advocate*, March 24, 1917, 24, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article152192297>.

⁷⁶ 'French army mobilisation papers', January 1915, MAE 428PO/1/48.

⁷⁷ 'About People', *Age*, May 19, 1919, 7, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article155214165>.

⁷⁸ Fliche to Department of Defence, 2 June 1919, Department of Defence to Fliche, 3 June 1919, 'Eligibility Enquiry, French Consul', 2 June 1919, NAA: A2487, 1919/6377.

illustrates the difficulties which could arise from dual citizenship, the contradiction between the rhetoric and hard reality, and Emile’s private suffering contrasts with the public stereotype of French soldiers’ glory.

Conclusion

The experiences of French army soldiers from Australia provides an alternative prism through which to view French-Australian relations during the First World War. The many reports from French-Australians constitute one element of the daily reports from the Front, in addition to those from Australians in the AIF and from Australians fighting with British units. The letters illuminate the universal experiences of soldiers on the Western Front: life in the trenches, being under bombardment, exhaustion, hunger, injury and death were shared by all. Despite censorship’s aim to minimise public distress, the letters do reveal the suffering of war. The letters also relate distinctly French experiences, and thereby reveal the role of individuals in shaping the wider narrative of French-Australian connections. France as the gallant ally was a recurrent theme in pro-war discourse, and the graphic tales of suffering and endurance at Verdun which are conveyed in these letters help to concretise this image. The personally experienced detail of these accounts brought the events in France closer to Australian readers. In addition, the stories of the individuals whose letters were published help to paint a more complete picture of the French-Australian community at the time of the First World War. The letters are a window into the lives of both the senders and the recipients. This article has surveyed just a small sample, yet it illustrates that French-Australians were a diverse group: ranging from the elite and university-educated Crivellis, to the humble *garçon d’hotel* Emile d’Assonville, the French-Australians in the cinema industry, and the artist Louis Foulet who exemplified the cliché of the cultured Frenchman. The letters, and also the circumstances under which they were sent and to whom they were sent, provide us with another perspective on French-Australian wartime connections.

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