

French-Australian Encounters Number 5: From Kallista to Villers-Bretonneux

Yvonne DeLacy

The ‘Sunnysiders’ of South Sassafras, as Kallista was then called, have a mythic presence in my life that won’t go away. No doubt it was put there by my father in the fifties when he would point to the remnants of an old omnibus on the embankment above Sassafras Creek Road. ‘That’s where C. J. Dennis finished *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*, thanks to the Sunnysiders.’

In 1910, Roberta Roberts purchased the ten-acre block and her husband, John Garibaldi Roberts, an official of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board, organised the transport of ten obsolete omnibuses, to accommodate guests. Their eldest son Frank gave up his city job to live in the wooden shack on the property and farm berries.

Roberta and John Garibaldi, were part of a network of creative and influential people from both Melbourne and Sydney, who would gather at places such as Fasoli’s literary café in Melbourne, the Roberts’ Hawthorn home and eventually at ‘Sunnyside’ in the Dandenong Ranges .

Known as ‘Garry’ to his friends, J. G. Roberts was a keen student of Australian history. He is renowned for his large collection of books and his ‘home-made encyclopaedia’—approximately 138 scrapbooks—which was donated to the State Library of Victoria in 1940 by Mr Bertrand Roberts and Mrs W. J. Roberts.

The visitors to his Sunnyside property included writers and artists such as C. J. Dennis, Robert Croll, Web Gilbert, Percy Leason and Mrs Aeneas Gunn; they would eventually become known as ‘The Sunnysiders’. Garry was described in the Bulletin as ‘guide, philosopher and friend of stray

artists and inky wayfarers’—at one time he offered financial support to C. J. Dennis while the latter was writing *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* (1915).



Master Bert Roberts, C. J. Dennis, John Shirlow, Mrs Gunn, Dave Wright, J. G. Roberts, Victoria, ca. 1915. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-136395397>

L to R: John Shirlow, Mrs. Aeneas Gunn, Dave Wright, C. J. Dennis, J. G. Roberts, Bert Roberts (in bus)

J. G. Roberts’ son Frank worked on the berry farm and supported his parents and in 1916 he married Ruby Barratt, who lived at Warwick Farm, close to Sunnyside. Frank enlisted in 1917 and never knew his daughter Nancy.



Francis William (Frank) Roberts. Australian Virtual War Memorial. <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/240649>

On my trip to France in 2016, the story again surfaced—this time on the battlefields of World War 1, in Picardie. This was where Frank Roberts was killed in the battle to take Mont Saint-Quentin from the Germans in 1918. With my iPad in hand, I showed our ‘Battlefields’ tour guide the photo of Frank’s bunker grave site, copied from his father’s scrapbooks.

After a short walk up a country lane that looked like Sherbrooke, we were at Mont Saint-Quentin looking through a wire fence where a forest now obscures the remnants of the German position. ‘Their heavy artillery endlessly pounded down on the Australians progressing up the other side of the hill. There were no trenches and very little cover’, the guide told us.

He then insisted that the clump of trees, 100 metres down the hill, on what was now ploughed farmland, was the place where Frank and his mates died. And yes! He would take us to the little cemetery nearby, where they were buried side by side. The cemetery was small by ‘battlefield’ standards, and peacefully part of the rebuilt village of Peronne. Frank’s gravestone had no cross, just an inscription taken from a letter Frank wrote to his father that year:

NOT LONELY WITH THE BOYS
I’M ONE OF THE AUSSIE FAMILY HERE

Hardly believing I’d read these words in Garry’s scrapbooks, I turned my attention to the Australian memorial just ahead, nestled between the neat Peronne houses. The original sculpture, set on a large pedestal, was created by Web Gilbert (a ‘Sunnysider’) in 1925 and depicted an Australian (Frank) about to bayonet a German soldier portrayed as an eagle. There was now the sanitised version of an upright sombre soldier, which was installed after Hitler insisted the first sculpture be demolished during the Second World War.

We then proceeded to the small village of Villers-Bretonneux, where the ‘Victoria School’ was rebuilt with money donated from Victorian Primary School Children. As we walked to the tiny museum in the school grounds, the French children ran up to the wire fence that now divides the tourists from their playground. It was the first museum we’d seen that included artefacts and memorabilia from Australian soldiers, especially those from Victoria.



Sculpture for 2nd Division memorial at Mont St Quentin France. Australian War Memorial image number H15606, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2675821>

There was a photo of Web Gilbert's sculpture, as well a small bronze replica that may have been the one I'd seen in the scrapbooks. C. J. Dennis' book *Ginger Mick* was there, but no sign of *The Sentimental Bloke*. A wooden sign on the wall said in French, N'oublions jamais l'Australie (Never Forget Australia), above it the Victorian coat of arms with the motto, 'Peace and Prosperity'. I left reluctantly, knowing there were more precious links with Melbourne, if not Kallista.

In the face of so much destruction that was the First World War, I thought of the tiny artistic community of Kallista, whose creative influence had reached so far in 1918. Was this our own Camelot?

Kallista

Eds: Further reading

<https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/La-Trobe-Journal-98-Kevin-Molloy-From-Kallista.pdf>