

**French-Australian Encounters Number 5:
An Australian Traveller Meets the French
Translator of Classic Australian Novel,
*The Little Black Princess***

Janet Lilley

Jeannie Gunn, *Bett-bett : Petite princesse australienne (The Little Black Princess: a True Tale of Life in the Never-Never Land)*, translated by Pâquerette Feissel, Paris, Éditeur Magnard, 1990, 142 pp., ISBN 978-2-21099-208-5.

In her fifties, ‘Totte’ Feissel (1915–2002) began the translation work which became her passionate interest. Regretful that she had not embarked on it earlier, she threw herself into translating Alan Davidson’s *Mediterranean Seafood*, first published in 1972, and one of Penguin’s seminal cookbooks that introduced the Anglo-Saxon world to European cuisine. Later, her translation of Jeannie Gunn’s 1905 Australian classic, *The Little Black Princess: a True Tale of Life in the Never-Never Land*, reflected her lifelong interest in Australia, where she had cousins in Sydney and Melbourne.

As luck would have it, I met one of those cousins in early May 1971, four weeks before I was to leave Australia to visit France for the first time. Since my first French lesson at a country High School, I had always hoped to go to France and eventually speak fluently. So, as soon as I finished my BA/ Dip. Social Studies I left on the cargo ship *Le Tahitien*, naively expecting I would find a job in Paris, make friends and settle in.

Pâquerette Feissel's cousin was René Crivelli, the third son of French-born Dr Marcel Crivelli and his wife Charlotte, who was 'a major contributor to the strengthening of friendly relations between Australia and France, particularly during the crucial years of the First World War, but for thirty years beyond that as well'.¹ On hearing that I was to arrive in Marseille where I knew no one, René kindly offered to write to his cousin Pâquerette Feissel, known as 'Totte', who lived with her husband Jacques near Notre Dame de la Garde, overlooking Marseille. René would ask her to support me when I arrived in mid-July.



I remember well my first sight of the Feissels in the ship's crowded reception area and Jacques assertively asking for me. Their warm, friendly manner put me at ease immediately and before I knew it we were whizzing through the city, stopping to visit the final day of the annual Foire à l'ail on La Canebière (the historic high street in the old quarter of Marseille), and then turning up a steep hill in the direction of their home. It was hot and perfect weather for sailing, Jacques told me. Would I like to join them on their boat and sail across to a rocky island for lunch?

¹ Ivan Barko & Eric Berti eds, *French Lives in Australia* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, 2015), 351.

Once back in her charming home, Totte came into her own, chatting to me as she prepared a picnic lunch in her tiny, well-appointed Provençal kitchen. A baguette bought on the way home was now out of the way, slapped onto a nail on the wall, practicality a priority. A quiche for dinner on the terrace later in the day was in the oven, our picnic lunch in a basket. Totte plied me with questions about her Melbourne cousin and his family, and affectionately acknowledged her passionate interest in Australia. As an unsophisticated 23-year-old Australian girl arriving at the other end of the world, you can imagine how grateful I felt to be welcomed in this way.



Jacques Feissel, Janet Lilley, Pâquerette (*Totte*) Feissel, photo supplied by Janet Lilley

The house at 39 Rue des Colonies, later renamed Rue Pablo Picasso, was built on three levels into a steep hillside. The staircase leading to the attic where I slept was so steep that there were ropes to assist with the climb. The attic walls were lined with books—the Feissels were readers. At street level, a wide south-facing terrace with a panoramic view was the setting for

most meals that summer, weekend breakfasts often lasting till late morning while ideas, books and travel were discussed, wit and laughter part of the mix. It was there I learnt the meaning of *se laisser vivre*. Inside, a light-filled, informal living room featured a huge fireplace where a chicken would sometimes be roasted for lunch, even in mid-summer. Downstairs two more bedrooms opened onto a wide terrace overhung with the branches of a mature fig tree laden with delicious fruit. On summer mornings I would pick a ripe fig before walking down a rocky path to the *bassin* for a swim. This little paradise exceeded all.

Totte in particular took me under her wing, creating endless opportunities to improve and enrich my French. In the six weeks I spent with her and Jacques, I made good progress thanks to her strict oversight—making the same mistake twice was out of the question—and my knowledge of French history and culture expanded under their tutelage. Songs of the great French singers, Piaf, Trenet, Montand and Brassens, were played on the family’s record player in the living room while Totte and Jacques nostalgically sang along. It was all so different from the songs of John Denver and Cat Stevens I had left behind. Fifty years later, those same songs are being enjoyed by my French classes.

Totte had great charm. Open-minded, with a keen intellect and interest in people, I think of her dressed in a long, gathered skirt and a feminine blouse, her arms adorned with multi-coloured bracelets to match her clothes. Tall and pretty with a ready laugh, she was a serious listener and delightful company. She and Jacques were left-wing Parisian intellectuals who in 1945 had chosen to settle with their four young children in Marseille after spending the German Occupation hiding in the countryside in Eastern France, at risk because Jacques’s father was Jewish. During the six weeks I spent with them, an endless stream of Parisian friends passing through Marseille and local friends visited, always welcomed with characteristic warmth and humour. I was privy to passionate debate on issues of the day, as much as of the past, and to personal talk about friends and family.

The family’s enormous generosity and kindness introduced me to the richness and diversity of French life and culture. Without the Feissels’ kindness and support—their eldest daughter, Martine, an astronomer at L’Observatoire in Paris, found me a position in a family as an au-pair—

I have wondered how life might have unfolded for me. I often returned to Marseille while living in Paris in the early 1970s and in the years that followed my return to Melbourne in 1973. The Feissel's was a second home for me and time spent with Totte is central to my memories of France and how they have shaped me over the years.

Melbourne

Eds: *Bett-bett is now out-of-print but there are a few second-hand copies available online. We of the Never Never and The Little Black Princess are autobiographical novels by Jeannie Gunn. Although published as novels, they relate the author's experiences in 1902 at Elsey Station near Mataranka, Northern Territory. She changed the names of people to obscure their identities. Jeannie Gunn published We of the Never Never under the pen name Mrs Aeneas Gunn.*