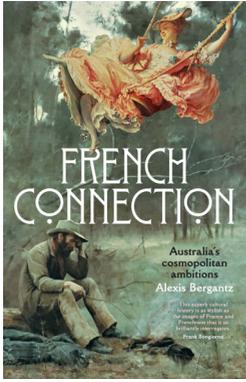


Book Review

Alexis Bergantz, *French Connection: Australia's Cosmopolitan Ambitions*, Sydney, NewSouth, July 2021, 208 pp., rrp AU\$ 34.99, ISBN 978-1-74223-709-1.



For many, the notion of international connections in nineteenth-century Australia will evoke images of British colonists, convicts and early migrants from neighbouring countries such as Ireland. It will rightly recall the violence of colonialism inflicted by these groups on the land's Aboriginal custodians. However, before the modern Australian nation was federated, and before it evolved into a multicultural migrant country in the twentieth century, Britain was not the only European power shaping the colonies' tastes, practices and ambitions.

From viticulturalists to language teachers, from wool buyers to former convicts, from upper-class consuls to destitute gold diggers, the French were a small but influential subcommunity in nineteenth-century Australia. These new arrivals—and the products and social mores they brought with them—contributed to the economy and society. But perhaps more importantly, the notion of 'Frenchness', whether authentic or imagined, was a significant source of cultural inspiration for early settlers. The sophistication of French fashions, the leisure of Parisian café culture, even the perceived decadence of French attitudes to sexuality, appealed to Melbournians and Sydneysiders aspiring to a certain cosmopolitanism. Frenchness presented itself as temptingly European, yet distinct from the supposedly staid Britishness many hoped to shrug off as they differentiated themselves from their origins.

Alexis Bergantz's *French Connection: Australia's Cosmopolitan Ambitions* reveals the diversity of the French presence in nineteenth-century Australia. It explores the ways in which Frenchness was interpreted, used and reimagined in the service of defining an Australian identity. Though the French remained a tiny migrant population by comparison with the

significant Greek, Italian, Chinese and other diasporas to arrive in the twentieth century, the story of the French in nineteenth-century Australia is rich and complex. Elegantly presented and deeply researched, Bergantz's book weaves between histories of labour, fashion, migration, commerce and diplomacy, revealing the minor but influential 'French connection' which contributed to shaping settler Australian culture between 1850 and 1914. This is a history of migration, of people circulating between France and Australia and back again, but it is also a history of the passage of ideas, feeding into perceptions of what it means to be 'French'; or indeed, 'Australian'.

French Connection begins with a chapter on the cultural practices and motifs imported from France which spoke to nineteenth-century Australians: café culture, beauty products and virility aids, but also a social and sexual liberty that may or may not have remained authentically 'French' as it was filtered into this new context. This latter theme guides the following chapter, a fascinating history of the in-fighting and cultural clashes which accompanied the establishment of the Alliance Française de Melbourne. More than a localised tiff, the competing priorities of the Alliance's founders reveal a broader take-up of a universalised Francophilia that was adopted and transmuted into the particularities of the new Australian bourgeoisie. Later chapters focus on varied stories of French people in Australia, including of second or third-generation migrants, who confronted their bicultural heritage by looking back to France.

A particularly compelling chapter tells the tale of the unknown numbers of French convicts who either escaped the neighbouring *bagne* in New Caledonia, or travelled to Australia after completing their sentences. France had colonised Kanaky in the South Pacific and established New Caledonia as a penal colony in the 1850s, inspired by Britain's use of Australia for the same purpose. However, by the time French convicts began arriving in Australia, the latter was proud to have ended transportation and was eager to redefine its international reputation (a process that proved unexpectedly difficult). The new influx of former convicts complicated this project.

France—or rather, the idea of 'Frenchness'—served as a kind of mirror to settler Australians, as the idea of 'Australianness' was percolating, and gradually distinguishing itself from 'Britishness'. Whether purveyors of luxury goods, pseudo-aristocratic bureaucrats or the criminal 'scum of

France', the French who made their way to Australia in the nineteenth century often reflected back to the forming Australian nation what it imagined itself to be, and what it aspired to become. However, as these middle chapters show, that mirror did not always reveal an image of which Australians were proud. The French convicts who arrived in Australia from New Caledonia in the late 1800s were an uncomfortable reminder of Australia's convict past—and the challenge of surmounting it.

In its analyses of hard labour migrants, merchants, convicts and bourgeois diplomats alike, *French Connection* provides a novel insight into how the French-Australian relationship intersected with class. I found myself curious to know more about the racial dimensions of 'Frenchness' in Australia; its allure as a slightly exotic but nonetheless white culture from which to draw inspiration, and how the Francophilia of settler Australians may have impacted connections with non-white migrant populations, as well as Aboriginal Australians. However, this is not intended as a criticism of the book, whose purview is already vast, but evidence of the richness of this study and the further questions it provokes.

French Connection wisely ends its time frame around the First World War, when the connections between Australia and France deepened and proliferated in ways that have been the focus of much recent centennial research. The final chapter touches on the importance of the Western Front for the creation of the iconic figure of the ANZAC digger, so linked with myths of Australian nationhood. Yet the book is unique in its focus on the decades before this more famous period for French-Australian relationship-building, and shows how the interlacing of French and Australian identities is longer, more varied and more complicated than many might assume.

Written in an easy style and infused with Bergantz' personal experiences of Frenchness and migration, this is an accessible book that will appeal to a broad readership within and beyond the academy. It is difficult to imagine a reader of the *French Australian Review* who would not be enthralled by this cultural history of the French in Australia.

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