

Becoming Australian: The Droulers Family in Australia

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In the years before World War I, the textile industry in the north of France needed wool from Australia and my grandfather, Jean Charles Droulers, was one of those who was sent out to buy it. He first arrived in 1912 as a junior buyer with Masurel Fils, the company that he would stay with for the remainder of his long working life.

1912: From Fourmies, northern France to Sydney, Australia

Born in Fourmies, (Nord) in 1888, Jean was sent by his devout Catholic parents to finish his schooling in Bradford, England. This was because religious schools in France had closed, following the 1905 law on the Separation of the Churches and the State. Bradford was chosen because, due to its textile industry, the town had a historical connection with the textile towns in the north of France. Fourmies, one of these towns, was the principal centre of the woollen textile industry in France in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In its heyday Fourmies, close to the border of Belgium, had as many as thirty-seven mills making cotton and woollen clothing and other goods. Jean's father, Edmond Droulers, owned one of these textile mills. He and his wife Marie-Rose, née Hecquet, had six children and Jean was the third of four sons. The family manufacturing business could only employ the oldest one.

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While the second son chose farming as a career, Jean, who had studied wool-classing in Bradford, became a wool buyer and set out for Sydney in 1912. He was the first of his family to leave France and he expected to be away for a couple of years. Jean soon became part of the French wool-buying community—when the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on a football match between French and English wool buyers in August 1913, Jean Droulers was on the winning team. ‘Won by the French team, 2 goals to 0.’



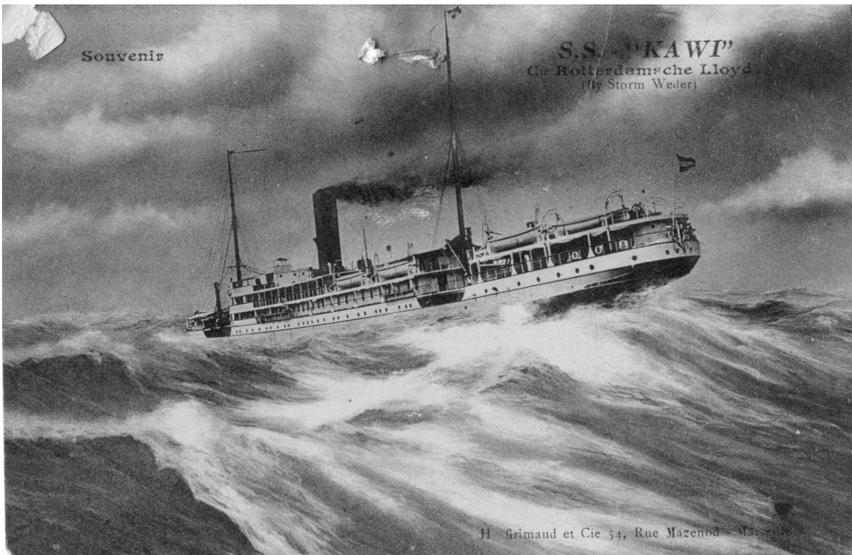
Musée du textile et de la vie sociale at Fourmies

Marriage and World War 11 in France

On a return trip home in 1914 Jean, who had decided to go out to Sydney once more, went in search of a wife. He was introduced to the young and good-looking Pauline Narrat by a local parish priest at nearby Avesnes-sur-Helpe. The two liked each other—Pauline had been a governess in Totnes, Devon, for a few months, had studied early childhood education and had some notions of English. Pauline’s father, Albert Narrat, was a customs officer, her mother, Marie-Hélène, was the daughter of a customs officer. Pauline was the youngest of five sisters, the eldest of whom was already a nun and the other three were unmarried. She also had one older brother,

Georges, to whom she wrote asking his opinion about the marriage which would take her to the other side of the world. A lawyer, Georges set out what he understood to be the facts and left the decision to his little sister. The young couple agreed to marry and to go out to Australia together for a few years. Pauline was not quite twenty. On June 30, 1914, they were married in a double wedding at St Nicholas Church in Avesnes, together with Pauline's sister Marie-Thérèse (Maïthé) and her husband Alfred Saglio. The two couples travelled by boat together from Marseille to Genoa in Italy, where they sadly parted company.

During their voyage to Australia, the *Roon*, which happened to be a German ship, abruptly changed course near the coast of Western Australia, steaming north towards Java. Jean and Pauline learned that war had been declared. Once in Java they made the decision to return to France on a Dutch boat, the *Kawi*, a costly but necessary decision.



A postcard of the *Kawi* on which Jean and Pauline Droulers returned to France after declaration of WWI

Upon his return to France, Jean enlisted in the French army. He acted as an interpreter to the British troops while based at Desvres, Pas-de-Calais, in northern France. Pauline went to live with her mother in law, Marie-Rose,

who had relocated to Neuilly outside Paris with her youngest daughter, Marie. Fourmies and Avesnes were both occupied by invading German troops and Pauline's family were forced to share their home with German officers. Two of Pauline's sisters, Gabrielle and Andrée Narrat, wrote an account of this time including the month they spent in prison for refusing to salute German officers in the street.¹ As the war went on their only brother Georges Narrat was wounded in battle in 1916 at Souain and died within days. He left a young widow and a little son.

Return to Australia in 1920

Jean and Pauline Droulers set out a second time for Australia in 1920, by which time they had two children, Lynette and Georges. They did not realise it then, but they were to make their life in Sydney. They would have six further children in the following decade, among them my mother Bernadette, who was the third daughter and the fifth of eight children. Masurel Fils, like other French wool buying companies in Sydney, would send the whole family home by boat every three years, which allowed them to keep in direct contact with close relatives and gave an opportunity to maintain the children's mother tongue.

Some of the family's comings and goings were recorded in Sydney newspapers, e.g., on passenger lists for Messageries Maritimes ships such as the *Ville de Verdun* in 1923 and the *Ville d'Amiens* in 1932. The childhood trips, often undertaken with other French wool buying families such as the Playousts, were vividly recalled by Droulers family members later on. Details of journeys, and of family encounters in the north of France feature in the memoir written by Françoise Gilroy, née Droulers.²

The family eventually settled in Willoughby, where they had a big house at 202 Mowbray Road, with room for a vegetable garden and a tennis court. In the early years Jean and Pauline employed a maid from France to live in and help with the work of the large family; later there was a maid from Newcastle NSW, called Daisy, who remained with the Droulers family for decades.

¹ Deffins, Gabrielle, *Andrée Narrat : En Pays envahi*, (Rennes: L'Ouest Clair, 1933, self-published).

² Françoise Gilroy, née Droulers, *Mon Histoire. Memoirs of a French Australian* (Adelaide: Griffin Press, 2008.)

The Droulers children were all educated in Catholic schools in Sydney, the four sons at St Aloysius Jesuit College in Milson's Point and the four daughters mostly at Loreto Convent, Kirribilli, or at Sacré Coeur Convent, Rose Bay. Conservative Catholics from the North of France, Jean and Pauline Droulers were staunch churchgoers and patriots, who would remain life-long French citizens, even as their children learned to become young Australians.

Jean Droulers in Australia

Jean was a sociable man who enjoyed his work classing wool and bidding for it at auction for Masurel Fils. There were regular train trips to interstate wool sales in the company of fellow wool buyers, many of them French. The men would take along hampers of home-made pâté, cheese, wine and, of course, bread. Jean grew vegetables and herbs at home and liked to cook for the family at the weekend. Family was close to his heart. He was involved in the life of the Alliance Française in Sydney, playing the occasional role in theatre productions such as *English as it is Spoken*. This was described in a newspaper of the time as 'a farce in French, which caused many laughs last night among the audience at the Alliance Française's Soirée at the Ambassadors'.³ Jean served on the committee of the Alliance Française in NSW for a number of years.

Jean Droulers gradually took on leadership roles within the French community in Sydney. He was Australian Director for Masurel Fils, Councillor for the French Chamber of Commerce in NSW, and President of the Administrative Council of *Le Courrier Australien*. He was, for many years, president of the Société de Bienfaisance (French Benevolent Society, NSW), whose goal was to collect donations from more prosperous members of the French community in Sydney and provide financial support for compatriots fallen on hard times. He was also active in the St Vincent de Paul Society.

In 1954, Jean Droulers was awarded Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur and in 1967, a year before his death at the age of eighty, the French government made him Officier de l'Ordre national du Mérite.

³ *Daily Pictorial*, April 25, 1930, 16.

Pauline Droulers in Australia

Pauline was an energetic woman, devoted to her husband and many children. She loved swimming at Balmoral and walking in the Lane Cove National Park, often conscripting a bunch of the children to take the bus with her and join in swimming lessons and hikes. She wrote frequently to her mother and to her sisters in France, particularly Maïthé. Partly because she spoke English with a strong French accent, she experienced some difficulty communicating with teachers and other parents at her children's schools. She also found it difficult to accept the casual style of her children's friends after a more formal upbringing in France. 'They didn't even say Bonjour!' Her social life through that first decade or two in Australia was mostly within the small circle of wool buyers and their families from France and Belgium. Her particular friends included Evelyne Playoust (the mother of Jacqueline Dwyer), Alice Brenac and Madeleine Flipo. Life in Sydney was, in any case, joyfully interrupted every three years by the long voyage to Marseille, the stay with family in the north of France, and the return journey to Australia. On one of those trips Jean and Pauline's first child, Lynette, met her husband to be, Paul Fischer, and she was to marry him in Paris in 1936. Pauline Droulers died in 1973 at the age of 78.

World War 11

On the eve of World War II there was a reception at the French Consulate in Sydney to celebrate French National Day, July 14, 1939. Photographed at the same event were the host, the controversial French consul Jean Trémoulet,⁴ with the consul for the US, together with French community leaders in Sydney, including Jean Droulers, there in his role as President of the French Benevolent Society.

Just over six weeks later war was declared in Europe. There was confusion in Australia about what was happening in France. The news in Australian newspapers, including *Le Courrier Australien* (in French) and on BBC radio, was avidly devoured.

After the fall of France in May 1940 there was a division in Australia between the supporters of Charles de Gaulle, then in England, and those of

4 Margaret Barrett, 'Jean Trémoulet: The Unloved Consul-General', *The French Australian Review* 51 (2011): 15–32.

the octogenarian Philippe Pétain, leading the German puppet government in Vichy. Like many of his countrymen who had served in World War I, Jean Droulers remembered Marshal Pétain as the hero of Verdun. He and Pauline initially supported Pétain's Vichy government, believing that cooperation with the German occupying forces was France's only option. In this they differed greatly from some of their best friends, the Playoust, Flipo and Brenac families, who supported Charles de Gaulle and the Free French from the start.

It seems that Jean Droulers came to accept de Gaulle, since his enthusiasm for Pétain was not mentioned in his obituary some twenty years after the war; rather, he was described as a supporter of the Free French (*Le Courier Australien*, 1968). This sensitive topic was scarcely discussed in the family and my own generation learned about it in the decades after my grandparents' deaths.



Guests at the reception held at the French consulate in honour of France's National Day in 1939, Mr A. M. Doyle, Consul for the United States (left) meeting M. J. Trémoulet, Consul-General

The suspension of the wool trade during the war years meant financial restraint for the Droulers family and a lack of contact with France. Daughter Lynette and family fled Paris when the Germans occupied the city in 1940, but later returned there to sit out the war.



Reception guests, l.to r. M. R. Auffray, manager of the French Bank, M. T. Desmarchellier, French woolbuyer and M. J. Droulers, President of the French Benevolent Society, Sydney, Sydney Morning Herald, July 15, 1939, 20

Jean and Pauline Droulers' children

The two older sons, George and John, completed studies in dentistry and medicine at Sydney University in 1943 and 1944, while Marie-Rose qualified as a nurse at St Vincent's Hospital in 1944. Bernadette, who would have liked to study Social Studies at university, went to Macquarie Business College after school and worked as a clerk, then as receptionist for the Red Cross in Sydney from 1942 through to the end of the war. After finishing school during the war years, Françoise qualified as a physiotherapist (1946) and Dominique as a dentist (1951), both at Sydney University. In 1949 the youngest child, Xavier, travelled to Roubaix in northern France to train in the same field as his father and took up a position as wool buyer for a French firm in New Zealand.

Of the eight children of Jean and Pauline Droulers, only the oldest daughter Lynette made her life in France as an adult, though she and her family members all eventually moved back to Australia. Six of the siblings

remained in Australia, with Xavier, mentioned above, moving to New Zealand. Lynette and Xavier were also the only ones to marry French speakers. Of the remaining six, five married English-speaking Australians, while the second daughter, Marie-Rose, joined the French religious order, the RSCJ (Religieuses du Sacré Coeur de Jésus).

All the siblings made journeys back to France at different times in their lives and maintained their French language to varying degrees. Each of them has maintained a strong French-Australian identity, including the two who survive into their nineties in Sydney, Françoise Gilroy, née Droulers and Dominique Droulers.



The 50th Wedding Anniversary of Jean and Pauline Droulers at Rose Bay in 1964, back row l. to r. George, Jean-Paul, Dominique and Xavier Droulers, front row l. to r. Françoise Gilroy, Bernadette Jensen, Marie-Rose Droulers RSCJ, Jean and Pauline Droulers, Lynette Fischer

The Droulers family, one hundred years on (2012)

One hundred years after Jean and Pauline Droulers first made their home in Australia, their descendants now number over one hundred individuals.

Among their thirty grandchildren the number of health care professionals is noticeable; more than one in three. These include a dietitian, physiotherapist, nurses in a range of fields, a naturopath/acupuncturist, two counsellors, two general practitioners and one infectious diseases specialist. Other grandchildren are or have been artists, chefs, taxi drivers, educators, administrators, along with a farmer, an environmentalist and a former union organiser/bookshop owner.

The generation who became adults in the 1970s–1980s is largely secular, with relatively few Droulers descendants still religiously observant, apart from several practising Catholics, a Jewish branch and one Buddhist monk. The emerging generation (sixty or more individuals) includes a huge array of further interests and occupational directions. Connections among members of the extended family survive and there are occasional reunions. The largest get-together in recent years was in 2012, when there was a celebration at Willoughby to mark the centenary of the arrival of Jean Droulers, ‘Papa’ to his children and his grandchildren. A 200-page book, *History of the Droulers Family in Australia*, was written for the occasion.⁵

French-Australian identity

What does it mean for this French family to have become Australian? Jean and Pauline Droulers each had close ties to families established in northern France for centuries and they shared not only their French language, but their religious and family values. They could not have guessed the social changes their descendants would experience. Only one thing is sure: French-Australian identity means different things to each individual descendant. All of the third generation are native speakers of English, having varying degrees of fluency in French language and varying awareness of French history and culture. Many of the third and fourth generation have travelled to France and to French speaking places such as New Caledonia, Tahiti, Île de la Réunion, Québec. Many from the third and fourth generations have met relatives in France and around the world, particularly those who descend from Edmond and Marie-Rose Droulers in Fourmies, and many maintain contact, for example, via social media. Few descendants of Jean and Pauline

⁵ Marie-Thérèse Jensen and Elizabeth Dalton, *A History of the Droulers Family in Australia* (Cromer, NSW: self-published, 2012).

Droulers have partnered with French speakers; there is a pattern of marriage to English speakers, many of them first generation from England, Ireland or Scotland, or Australians of other European ancestries.

One surviving commonality among the French-Australian descendants is the importance of food and cooking! *Une bonne soupe, une bonne salade, un verre de vin rouge, un bon petit café!* Droulers of vegetarian, vegan or carnivorous inclinations all recognise each other at table in a love of food. Those grandchildren lucky enough to be taken to lunch by Papa and Maman at various Sydney restaurants in the 1960s, treasure the memory of our kind and generous grandparents.

The French community in Sydney in the twentieth century was significant in its contribution to French-Australian trade and social connections. Jean and Pauline Droulers and their family were integral to that community and it is my hope that they will be so remembered.

Melbourne

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