
Les Hetherington review of Eric Berti (conceived and introduced) and Ivan Barki (ed.), *French Lives in Australia: A Collection of Biographical Essays*

(North Melbourne, Vic.: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015), 453 pp.,
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One of the challenges of digitised records over hardcopy publications is the ability to search them using a range of criteria. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (*ADB*) and its related databases—all searchable through the People Australia portal (peopleaustralia.anu.edu.au)—are a case in point. For example, for historical and current political reasons, Australia's relationship with France is a topic of high interest today. A search on place of birth through People Australia reveals 66 individuals born in France who made their mark on Australian society. Fifty-three have biographical entries in the *ADB*. This does not include the entries from H. J. Gibbney and Ann G. Smith's *A Biographical Register 1788–1939: Notes from the Name Index of the Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Canberra, 1987), which do not yet appear to be digitised, so the total number is likely to be around 70. The coverage could be broader—this small but influential community has been present consistently through the period of Australia's European settlement. Would there not be more than around 70 individuals born in France who have left their mark on Australian society over the last two and a quarter centuries?

This is, in fact, the case, and it was encouraging to see the recent publication of *French Lives in Australia*, 'a collection of biographical essays' edited by Ivan Barko with assistance from Edward Duyker and William Land, under the inspiration of France's consul-general in Sydney from 2012 to 2015, Eric Berti. This book complements the *ADB* and its associated resources in relation to the French community in this country, expanding where there is overlap, and enabling older *ADB* entries to be updated and new biographies to be added.

In its seven sections, *French Lives in Australia* attempts both to cover the whole history of French contact with Australia, starting with the early explorers and continuing on to the post-World War II era, and to represent the broad range of activities in which the France-born participated. Consequently, like the *ADB*, it is highly selective, the limitations of a single-volume publication, albeit of some 450 pages, restricting the number of people it could cover in appropriate detail. The very useful inclusion of

Eric Berti's contextual introductory essays preceding each section enables a small number of others—musician Horace Poussard and engineer Eugene Nicolle (also in the *ADB*), for example—to be briefly mentioned, but only 24 people are given full treatment. Laudably, only 10 also have entries in the *ADB*, so the book adds 14 lives to the existing biographical corpus. That more than half the subjects in *French Lives*—all worthy inclusions—are not in the *ADB* illustrates the depth of the relatively small French community in Australia, the impact it had in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the wide range of engaged and influential citizens France shared with our developing country. It shows how mere numbers do not best illuminate the presence of communities in Australia during the first century and a half of European settlement. Although fewer than 5,000 strong around 1900, the France-born occupied positions of influence and, as *French Lives* shows, had done since the days of early exploration.

My own interest in Australia's French community encompasses the late-colonial and early Commonwealth period, from around 1880 up to the 1930s, so I was particularly interested in Parts III–VI: the 'founders', business and professional people, artists, diplomats and soldiers of this period. Among the founders and soldiers, the Playoust family are well represented, with both the patriarch, George (whose brief obituary appears on the Obituaries Australia website), and son, Jacques, given chapters that include reference to their wider family in both business and World War I contexts. George, Jacques and family arrived in Australia in 1889 as French demand for wool led to the establishment of permanent wool-buying representation in Melbourne and Sydney. Born in France but growing up in Sydney, Jacques travelled to France on the outbreak of war in 1914 to join the French army, later serving as a liaison officer with the AIF, before returning to re-establish the family in business in Sydney. A brother-in-law, two brothers and a cousin, all Sydney residents at the outbreak of the war, were killed in action. Eric Berti's introduction to the section on the wars mentions research showing 500 Frenchmen and Belgians from Australia fought during World War I, of whom 85 were killed. However, it is not clear if this includes French-born members of the AIF or locally born sons of French parents. Would such men expand the numbers of French-background soldiers even further?

Other biographies show French commercial and business engagement went well beyond wool buying. Another businessman included is Charles Phalempin, who established the French bank the Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris, in Melbourne, bringing about 'a revolution' in banking in that city, according to one regional newspaper.¹ Phalempin's work took him away from Australia on occasions, but he spent the greater part of the 1880s and 1890s here, and briefly returned in the early 1900s, prior to being appointed to a position in London, where he died in 1918.

1 *Gundagai Times and Tumut, Adelong and Murrumbidgee District Advertiser*, 22 November 1881.

Among the artists, writer Céleste de Chabrillan and musician Léon Caron are two whose chapters complement biographies in the *ADB*, both benefiting from having more space available to include greater detail and from the passage of time since their *ADB* entries were first published (1969), taking advantage of further scholarly research undertaken in the meantime. Similarly, the chapter on Augustine Soubeiran provided the author with the opportunity to flesh out considerably the shorter entry from the *ADB* (1990), especially the uncertainty about Soubeiran's early years and her role during World War I in the French–Australian League of Help. Important as her role was during the war years, her career in education, teaching French, establishing Kambala School in Sydney and actively participating in the Alliance Française, would in itself have justified her inclusion.

Mention of de Chabrillan and Soubeiran highlights the relative under-representation of women in the book. Only four of the biographies are of women (although one, on sisters Berthe Mouchette and Marie Lion, is a double entry). Given the absence of any earlier work of this nature and the times it covers, it is perhaps explicable that there would be more men than women in a list of prominent French people in this country. However, other women than those included were not absent or invisible. Among the most prominent in her day and later, through her daughter, was Alice Charbonnet-Kellerman. A pianist, piano teacher and composer, she has been the subject of academic study at Melbourne University. Charbonnet-Kellerman was the mother of the much more famous Annette Kellerman, whose biography can be found in the *ADB*.²

Another high profile member of the French community in her own right was Juliette Henry, the wife of artist Lucien Henry, mentioned in Berti's essay on 'French artists in Australia'. Lucien is the subject of an *ADB* entry (from 1972) in which Juliette is briefly mentioned. But Juliette had led an adventurous life prior to arriving in Sydney in 1874 as Mrs Lopes Rastoul, with her two Lopes children, Jose and Angele. She was then the wife of Dr Rastoul, a Communard she had accompanied to exile in New Caledonia. She had been expelled from that colony following discovery of her husband's secret correspondence. Dr Rastoul drowned in 1875 while attempting to escape from the Isle of Pines. Juliette married Henry, another former Communard who had served out his term of exile and settled in Sydney, in January 1880. Henry left Sydney—and his wife—in 1891 to return to France where he sought to publish and popularise his Australian-influenced designs and art. Afterwards Juliette became a prominent French language teacher and organiser of the Sydney French Literary Circle—which warrants a mention in Berti's biographical chapter on French Consul-

2 For Charbonnet-Kellerman, see J. G. Bong, 'Alice Ellen Charbonnet: A French Musician in Nineteenth-Century Australia' (Masters Research thesis, Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne, 2006); and for Annette Kellerman, see G. P. Walsh, 'Kellerman, Annette Marie Sarah (1866–1975)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kellerman-annette-marie-sarah-6911/text11989, published first in hardcopy 1983, accessed online 3 November 2015.

General in Sydney, Georges Biard d'Aunet—until her death in 1898. By that time she was regarded as a woman of 'high education, graceful presence and charming manners' who had made a significant contribution to the spread of French literature and 'knowledge of the foremost writers of la belle France'.³ This work was resumed after some years break by her daughter, Angele Higinbotham.

Other people who might have been included also come to mind. On the business side, there were two significant developments relating to French representation in Australia in the early 1880s. One was the establishment of the Comptoir National d'Escompte. The other was the commencement of regular services to Australia ports by the French shipping company Messageries Maritimes, which established an office in Sydney in 1882. André Conil oversaw the beginning and first years of operation of the company, from 1882 until 1892, before returning to Japan, where he had been posted prior to his arrival here. In relation to the bank, another subject might be Charles Shard, Phalempin's colleague and brother-in-law, who managed the Comptoir d'Escompte's Sydney office from 1882 until his retirement in 1920. Mentioned briefly in the chapter on Phalempin, Shard, despite his French business association, and his wedding notice in Melbourne's newspapers describing him as the eldest son of Charles Shard 'of Paris', may not meet the basic criterion of being himself French, as he was born in Bath. Significant local businessmen who were France-born include George Fesq, whose wine business, Fesq and Company, is still in family hands today. Indeed it is Fesq and Company's proud boast that it was founded in 1848 and is 'still owned by the family and the fifth and sixth generations work in the business'.⁴ Another, André Leverrier, operated an import business in Sydney for many years in the second half of the nineteenth century. He is mentioned briefly in the *ADB* entry for his son, Francis Hewitt Leverrier.

In the professions, Dr Louis Laure might have been accorded a biography. He is mentioned briefly in the *Biographical Register* and his obituary is on the Obituaries Australia website, but these brief factual accounts do not do justice to his wide engagement in Sydney society. He arrived in Sydney with his family in 1868 and was president of the French Club in the 1880s and of the French Benevolent Society for several years after its establishment in late 1891. A long-time private practitioner, Laure was also associated with St Vincent's Hospital. Outside his work he was an enthusiastic and, from all accounts, capable amateur singer. He departed Australia on retirement in 1901, leaving behind daughters and businessmen sons-in-law to continue the family association with Australia for many more years. The detailed report in *Le Courrier Australien* on 2 November 1900 of a 'banquet d'adieu' given in his honour reflects the high standing Laure had in the Sydney French and wider community.

3 *Evening News*, 26 January 1898, 4.

4 See www.fesq.com.au/.

Dentist Jules Joseph Lachaume might also warrant some notice. After setting up practice in the Hunter Valley north of Sydney in the late 1850s, Lachaume moved to Sydney in 1870 and, having settled into a practice he continued for more than three decades, he devoted himself to community activities in the 1880s and early 1890s through the *Cercle Français*, or French Club, of which he was president and vice-president for some years. From the late 1890s he combined dentistry with ownership and management of the Bondi Aquarium, an amusement and entertainment theme park at Tamarama Beach that was the Luna Park of its time. Among French musicians in Australia in these years, as well as Madame Charbonnet-Kellerman, more might be made of Horace Poussard's life. He is given room in Berti's introductory essay on French artists in Australia, but a more detailed life would reveal more about him and the place of French musicians in Australian cultural life at the time. Henri Kowalski might have been given more attention. Already 'renowned' in 1881,⁵ shortly after his arrival, his impact on music in the Australian colonies, especially in Sydney, was significant, as was his engagement in French community affairs in the late 1880s and early 1890s. His farewells on his departure in 1896—supposedly temporary, but he never returned—almost matched those of Dr Laure a few years later.⁶ Likewise, while Lucien Henry has been the subject of much study, his fellow Commune exile Alfred Tischbauer has been relatively neglected and could warrant mention. Before he left for the United States in 1903, where he worked in theatre and film set design, he contributed not only to painting but also set design for the 1879 International Exhibition in Sydney and for the theatre in Melbourne, and to art education in Sale in Victoria.

These alternatives are not suggested to replace any of the biographies included in *French Lives in Australia* or in the *ADB*. All the current subjects deserve their place and all their biographies are well researched and well written. What the suggestions of additional lives illustrate is that, this admirable book and earlier publications notwithstanding, there is still much to explore before the contribution of the French to Australia and Australian life can be adequately appreciated.⁷ This is an excellent book that complements the *ADB* well. It is a very good introduction to the history of Australia's French community. But perhaps there is room for another volume: *More French Lives in Australia?* Or perhaps this volume could be the inspiration and a starting point for new researchers and scholars to explore more deeply the different

5 *South Bourke and Murrumbidgee Journal*, 29 June 1881.

6 See reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 and 28 September 1896.

7 For example Anny P. L. Stuer, *The French in Australia* (Canberra: Department of Demography, Australian National University, 1982) and 'The French', in *The Australian People: An Encyclopaedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origins*, ed. James Jupp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Patricia Clancy and Jeanne Allen, *The French Consul's Wife* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998); Ann Stephen, ed., *Visions of a Republic: The Work of Lucien Henry* (Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing, 2001); and Stephen Dando-Collins, *Pasteur's Gambit: Louis Pasteur, the Australasian Rabbit Plague and a Ten Million Dollar Prize* (North Sydney: Random House, 2008).

aspects of French lives in, and their contributions to, this country? Room might be found for the publication of such research on the People Australia or Obituaries Australia websites, which are not as limited by space as are hard copy publications.

Given its virtues, it might be churlish to point out two infelicities in the book—one a typographical error and the other an omission. Both relate to the French diplomatic presence in Sydney. The easiest to dispense with seems to be a simple editing error. In the appendix listing French diplomatic representation in Australia, the surname of Consul Henri Léon Verleye has been left out. His name is given as Henri Léon. The other occurs in the footnote on page 158 in which information is provided about three consular staff and one ambassador who died while posted to Australia. In fact, there was a fourth consular official who died *en poste*. Edward, Marquis de Rostaing, vice-consul in Sydney, became ill and later died in the premises of the French Club in Wynyard Square, on 24 August 1888, aged 47 years.⁸

8 *Evening News*, 25 August 1888; NSW Index to Births, Deaths and Marriages, Deaths, 1499/1888.

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