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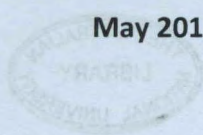
**LES PLAYOUST AU BOUT DU MONDE: A CASE STUDY OF  
TWO FRENCH-AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES**

**PART 1: THESIS**

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**A thesis submitted for the  
Degree of Master of Philosophy of  
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## **ABSTRACT**

My thesis is a case study of two Playoust families between 1889 and the 1920s, between the time of their arrival in Australia to participate in the burgeoning wool trade and the aftermath of World War I in which seven members of the Playoust families had served for France on the Western Front.

The Introduction provides a general background to the French presence in Australia. I discuss contemporary scholarship on the subject and source material for the thesis. I also raise the question of transnationalism that will be considered in the body of the work.

Chapter 1 considers French wool buyers who came to Australia in the late 19th century in order to meet the needs of the thriving textile mills in Northern France. In bypassing the London market, they encouraged the colony's independence from the mother country. I present two such traders, Georges and Joseph Playoust, who arrived in Australia with their families, in 1889 and 1892 respectively, and discuss their early experiences in their new land.

This chapter also describes the education that these two brothers had received in France and compares it with the education they gave to their children in Australia. I outline the public education system that applied in France and Australia respectively at the time. I consider the values with which the Playoust brothers had been imbued in France of the Third Republic in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War. I note that despite their Republicanism, both Playoust brothers sent their children in Australia to private religious schools administered by religious orders that were banned in France.

Chapter 2 describes the families' move to Sydney where the markets were larger. I discuss current concepts of transnationalism in the context of the family. I describe the leading role played by Georges Playoust in Sydney as founding president of the French Chamber of Commerce, and more generally his contribution to Australian society in which he became a public figure. I analyse in detail the speeches he made on the French National Day, both in French and in English.



Chapter 3 is devoted to the contribution of women to the Alliance Française and, after the outbreak of war, to the French-Australian League of Help, an important patriotic fund in 1914-18 where both Playoust families were heavily involved as founders and administrators, together with Australians from the Red Cross and the Benevolent Society.

Chapter 4 examines the letters of the seven young Playoust men who were mobilised by the French army to serve in France, and Jacques Playoust's diary from the savage campaign in Verdun. All these men had been educated in Australia, and wrote in English to each other, but in French to a young Parisian cousin. I analyse the complex web of ideas and sentiments expressed in these writings of French-Australian men in an extreme situation, fighting for their homeland far from 'home'.

The Conclusion returns to themes of patriotism, transnationalism and French-Australian relations. Original letters and speeches and my translations are included in the Appendices.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In undertaking this endeavour I have been encouraged by many acts of kindness, imagination and generosity that I wish to acknowledge.

This thesis had its origin in a meeting at my house initiated by a PhD student, Alexis Bergantz, who wished to interview me concerning my book, *Flanders in Australia*, which covered a period linked to his own studies. His supervisor, Peter Brown, accompanied him. It was a productive few hours, and many ideas were exchanged, the result being my decision to become a student again, with the aim of producing a better-informed second edition of my book, and also to write on French-Australian relations in journals. Peter Brown agreed to become my supervisor, and for more than two years has been a sympathetic and enlightening influence.

Hindered by my primitive understanding of information technology, I was rescued by consistent and informative teaching by my daughter Sophie Dwyer who insisted on meticulous work on recording references from the outset, which have proven their worth at this late stage. This work would not have been possible without her understanding of the project and her technological abilities. Her siblings from different parts of the globe added to this process of education.

An invaluable scholarly influence in the field of French-Australian relations was *The French-Australian Review* (and in particular the writings of Ivan Barko and Edward Duyker). Margaret Sankey and Edward Duyker informed me on their current work, Margaret Barrett, Penny Nash, Catherine de Lorenzo advised on thesis construction. I am also grateful to Professor Nicholas Brown for his kind advice as thesis panel member.

My thanks go to cousins, John, Denise and Paul Playoust, Michelle Kamper, Louise Neville, Sister Yvonne Lamerand for their generosity in sharing photographs. Margot Riley enlisted the help of librarians at the State Library of New South Wales in accessing the family archives and Ismet Kurtovitch, the former director of the New Caledonian Archives, provided very helpful advice.

Kathryne Ford was a friendly and capable guide through the complexities of university administration as were the Information technicians at the Australian National University. Paul de Pierres, George Franki, William Land, Nick Lefebvre, Ross Steele, Barry and Yon Maley were always helpful with information, and there were many others, such as Sr. Marie-Rose Droulers RSCJ, Sr. Monique Flipo RSCJ and the school archivists at Riverview, Xavier, St. Aloysius, Shore, Kincoppal, Genazzano and Santa Sabina.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a case study of two French families from their arrival in colonial Australia in 1889 to the aftermath of the Great War, in the early 1920s. It deals with the evolving relations between the two expatriate families and the new country, which the French considered to be situated *au bout du monde* (at the ends of the earth), where they had chosen to engage in the new Australian wool trade. Whilst this thesis aims to examine their particular situation in French and Australian history, their presence in Australia is part of a long tradition of European exploration and settlement in this land.

A recent exhibition at the National Library, *Mapping our World, Terra Incognita to Australia* attracted much enthusiasm from a wide public for the beauty and imagination of its maps, and equally for the concentrated lesson in Australian history that it conveyed. Particularly striking was an illustrated letter written in 1516 by the merchant explorer Andrea Corsali to his Florentine employer, Giuliano di Lorenzo di Medici which describes his journey down the west coast of Africa, and round the Cape of Good Hope to the Indian Ocean, where he saw and drew the shape of a constellation which is impossible to see from Europe. It was to be called the Southern Cross.<sup>1</sup>

Many such scientific or mercantile voyages to the southern oceans were made by the Spanish, Portuguese and the Dutch, finding for the first time that island nations existed in this part of the world, that were populated by a variety of peoples. They offered great opportunities for trade; territories were claimed, and merchants and missionaries followed. European cartographers renamed many of these nations after their home countries; a great land mass was named New Holland. Whilst maritime conditions prevented the Dutch explorers from travelling further east, they seem to have been observed by the coastal indigenous people, who recorded in their cave art three hatted men in a boat smoking pipes. Closer to our time, the great navigator

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<sup>1</sup> David Pool. *Mapping Our World: Terra Incognita to Australia* (Canberra, ACT: National Library of Australia, 2013), 57.



James Cook, whilst conveying Joseph Banks and a large team of scientists to the southern oceans, charted the long eastern coast line of New Holland. Just beyond its northern tip, he hoisted a flag at what is now Possession Island and claimed the whole eastern coast for King George III.

The sequel was the first European settlement of New South Wales led by Governor Phillip in 1788 in Sydney Cove. This was certainly a very novel foundation of a new nation, for it was to be used as a penal colony, the largest of its kind, as a solution to the overcrowding of British prisons. It was thought by some to provide an element of moral reform of the convicts.

At the time of Phillip's landing in Port Jackson, the French scientific explorer La Pérouse had arrived sixteen miles to the south in Botany Bay and was repairing his ships. La Pérouse was well aware of British plans for Botany Bay, but could not have anticipated their sudden change of location to Port Jackson. There were brief but friendly encounters between members of the French crews and Phillip's. To quote from La Pérouse's log book: "Les Européens sont tous compatriotes à cette distance de leur pays" - Europeans are all compatriots at this distance from their own country.<sup>2</sup> A few French-born convicts formed a minor part of the first penal shipment, so that Franco-Australian relations began very early in the new settlement.<sup>3</sup>

Repairs to La Pérouse's ships were completed and the scientific expedition continued its course across the Pacific towards islands between the Solomons and the New Hebrides, then vanished. Its whereabouts remained a mystery to Europeans for many years, despite French scientific expeditions being sent to search the area, until artefacts were found, and finally an Irish captain, Peter Dillon, confirmed the wreckage of the ships off Vanikoro in 1827.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-François de Galaup La Pérouse and Hélène Minguet. *Voyage Autour Du Monde Sur L'Astrolabe et La Boussole (1785-1788) / Jean-François de Lapérouse ; Choix Des Textes, Introduction et Notes de Hélène Minguet*, Découverte (François Maspero (Firm)) ; 31. (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1987), 396.

<sup>3</sup> Anny Stuer. *The French in Australia* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Edward Duyker. *Père Receveur: Franciscan, Scientist and Voyager with Lapérouse* (Engadine, N.S.W: Dharawal Publications, 2011).



Transportation of convicts was praised as an idealistic concept by certain French prison reformists in the early 19th century, who undertook detailed research on the British social experiment, which they called *Botany-Bay*. Colin Forster, in *France and Botany Bay* (1996) lists many such French publications, and in particular, the first scholarly history of Australia in 1831, *Histoire des Colonies Pénales* by Ernest de Blosseville, which supported the idea of transportation. The numerous French naval expeditions in the Pacific of the period were aware of the government's need for a territory suitable for a French penal settlement, and remained watchful; research committees were formed, there were debates in the National Assembly, and despite strong opposition from people such as Alexis de Tocqueville, known for his reports on American penal systems, penal settlements were established in French Guiana (1852) and New Caledonia (1863), at about the time that the transportation system was being dismantled in the Australian colonies.<sup>5</sup>

Present-day Australian interest in scholarly research on French scientific expeditions in the South Seas is not abating as evidenced by numerous publications over the past twenty years by Edward Duyker, including his most recent publication of a book on the expedition of Dumont d'Urville.<sup>6</sup>

Margaret Sankey is another scholar who has long been active in this field. Her research on the Baudin expedition dates back to the late 1980s. Her work was followed by a Federal Government 5-year grant and is far from being exhausted. She and other members of her team (Fornasiero, West-Sooby and Jangoux) are transcribing and translating all the journals of this expedition.<sup>7</sup> Of the French navigators, Baudin remains the closest link to the early days of the Australian nation owing to his expedition's stay in Sydney Town as the guests of Governor King, from 20 June to 18 November 1802. He and his crew arrived in Port Jackson "in the last stages of scurvy", according to King, and were nursed back to health, then shown remarkable

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<sup>5</sup> Colin Forster. *France and Botany Bay: The Lure of a Penal Colony* (Melbourne, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Edward Duyker. *Dumont D'Urville: Explorer & Polymath* (Dunedin, New Zealand: Otago University Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Sankey. "The Baudin Legacy Project," January 5, 2015, [edu.au/arts/research/Baudin/project](http://edu.au/arts/research/Baudin/project).



inaugurated in Sydney to meet their needs.<sup>13</sup> The buyers did not flock to Hunters Hill, but chose to live in areas closer to the wool exchange, to the south east of Sydney.

### ***Relationship to the Family***

Amongst these wool buyers were two brothers, Georges and Joseph Playoust, who with their families came to Melbourne in the late 19th century and were to take a central part in the French-Australian commerce in wool. On becoming the founding president of the French Chamber of Commerce in 1899, Georges Playoust played a leading role in the world of the wool buyers, and in doing so, held an influential place in French-Australian relations.

Joseph Playoust was eleven years younger, and was to come to the fore in 1914-18 due to his role in the wartime French-Australian League of Help, for which he was awarded the medal of *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur*.

Georges Playoust was my grandfather, and this thesis will explore not only his contribution but also the evolving situation of the extended Playoust family, which, while never losing its French identity, increasingly took on that of the new homeland.

The present thesis evolves out of an earlier work, *Flanders in Australia*. This came about following my realisation that a century on, after the grand days of the wool trade had faded, I considered that there was a need to record this era while some of its participants were still accessible. Little had been written about the wool buyers from France and Belgium who were for half a century a strong social force, as well as partners in creating Australia's wealth. Over a period of several years I interviewed a number of senior French and Belgian born wool buyers in Sydney, and descendants of buyers of an earlier generation. Through the intermediary of David Knight, director of the Australian Council of Wool Exporters, I was able to interview a number of

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<sup>13</sup> Ivan Barko. "The French in Sydney," *Sydney Journal* 1, no. 2 (2008), [http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/epress/journals/index.php/sydney\\_journal/article/viewFile/725/785](http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/epress/journals/index.php/sydney_journal/article/viewFile/725/785).



conscripted from Australia in 1914 to fight in the French army. There was also a diary written by Jacques Playoust, entered daily during several months of the battle of Verdun. As these seven young men, born of French parents, had been educated in Australia, these writings were mostly in English, which, in itself, indicated a generational change in national identity.

To better understand trench warfare, and the writings and reflections of my father and his relatives, I explored the Western Front by car and on foot from Ypres in the west, via Amiens and the Somme, the Marne and Champagne regions and then all the way to the forts of Verdun in the east. I visited the modern war museum built into the old fort of Péronne, and the Museum of the Army in Paris. For information about my father's last year of the war serving as an interpreter with the Australian army, I read the diary of his 13th Field Artillery Brigade at the library of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, which even mentions him by name.

Nobody to my knowledge had written in Australia about Frenchmen who had been conscripted to serve in the French army in 1914. Their story needed to be told. The story of the wool buyers and that of the soldiers coalesced into my book, *Flanders in Australia*, which was published in 1998.<sup>19</sup>

Some years after this publication, much more information became accessible when the National Library of Australia published newspapers online, in a searchable form, *Trove*, which brought to light a wealth of information. It was too immediate for these individuals to be of interest to historians, but detailed particulars were at least now readily available. The Playoust family had a significant public profile, so that newspapers became a frequent source for following their activities, and this compensated for the paucity of material available in libraries about the people participating in the flourishing wool trade.

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<sup>19</sup> Jacqueline Dwyer. *Flanders in Australia: A Personal History of Wool and War*, 1 vol. (Kangaroo Press, 1998).



It seemed timely to attempt a revised edition of *Flanders in Australia*, now out of print, but to do justice to this rich new source material, I preferred to begin by attempting a higher degree by research. With a more rigorous discipline and a privileged access to new sources and insights, I hoped to present a less personal history and shed more light on the 23 people in the two Playoust families over a period from 1889 to the 1920s. A different story of ancestry came to the fore in the post-bicentenary Australia in which new questions of identity arose.

### ***Aims of this study***

In a case study of these two families, this work will view the adaptation of two generations to a transnational way of life in the new nation that was to become their land, if not their only home as they also continued to criss-cross the seas at least between Australia and Europe every two years. The thesis will examine what they, along with other such wool traders, had contributed to this land, as it evolved from a group of separate colonies to become the Commonwealth of Australia, now grown wealthy by the commerce of wool. It will consider the role of the wool buyers, who early on, in bypassing the London wool market, had encouraged the development of Australia's global trade, as it began to shed dependence on the mother country. The buyers then contributed directly to Australia's economy by their work, as well as indirectly in a way that would constitute perhaps a more significant and permanent legacy, by living and raising their children here.

This study will thus focus on French - Australian relations, grown closer through the wool trade and good personal relations between the wool buyers and government officials, and on how French and Australians fought literally side by side in 1914-18. Its prime focus, however, will be on certain individual people, and in doing so hopes that it will make the case for the recognition by historians of the wool traders in general as a force which helped create modern Australia.

The case study explores identity, and in particular what the notion of patriotism meant to different generations. It provides the opportunity to apply concepts of



French nationals at the French consulate, and so acquired two official national identities. Professional and family interests combined to ensure, not only that the Playousts would maintain their 'clanic' identity and French language and culture in Australia, but that they would also maintain regular connections with their motherland. They were expatriates rather than immigrants.

Their family was able to flourish by extending its identity to embrace a new land, without ever losing touch with their former home, which remained very present in their minds. As is sometimes the case with immigrants, however, women who are not in the workforce are more likely to feel exiled. One of the factors in this sentiment was certainly the slowness of the mail, for it took nearly three months to receive an answer to a letter. The feeling of exile will be returned to in the course of this work.

The second part of this first chapter explores education from a comparative perspective. The parents sought an educational system resembling what the two men had experienced in the strongly Catholic north of France, in particular their ancient Collège de Tourcoing where their father was a class master; they were now living in the antipodes but were still *bound by ties of allegiance* to the school of their childhood, with its family and Catholic traditions.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, the women were relieved to find religious schools that replicated those they had left behind. They volunteered to help in parish charities; their religious practices now had an Irish overlay.

At the same time, ideas on public instruction held by both French and Australian governments were undergoing rapid change, each country seeking to implement a system that would be compulsory, secular and free, an idea of the French Revolution. Australia took the lead when the Education Act was passed in Victoria in 1872,<sup>22</sup> creating free government schools and removing the state funding of non-government schools, a decade before the Jules Ferry Law of 1882 was passed in France, using the

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<sup>21</sup> Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Transnational Ties: Australian Lives in the World*, ANU Lives (Canberra ACT: ANU e-press, 2008), <http://press.anu.edu.au/?p=20951>.

<sup>22</sup> "Education Act 1872" (Parliament of Victoria, 1872), <http://foundingdocs.gov.au/item-sdid-25.html>.



Other sources were newspapers, especially the *Courrier Australien*, a Sydney based French language weekly paper that was, for a time, the official journal of the French Chamber of Commerce. The *Courrier Australien* was published from 1892 to 2011 and its archive was only accessible then on microfilm at the State Library of New South Wales.<sup>26</sup> Edited English versions of French speeches were reported in Sydney daily newspapers, principally the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

I analyse these speeches through the prism of French-Australian relations of the time, and of the international situation as the nations of Europe drifted towards conflict. I particularly observe here the patriotism displayed towards France by Georges Playoust, together with his admiration for Australia. For this reason I consider these speeches, together with letters and diaries written from the Western Front by his sons that I treat in chapter 4, to be the principal sources for my thesis.

Georges Playoust became better known after 1899, when he was elected founding President of the newly established French Chamber of Commerce.<sup>27</sup> This came at an important time in trade and commercial relations between Australia and France in which Georges was to play a key role. This is shown by the fact that the founding banquet celebration was held in the presence of the Premier of NSW, George Reid, an event that I describe in some detail.

It is through his National Day speeches in 1902, 1908, 1909, 1911, and 1913, that his patriotism can best be assessed. They express increasing esteem and affection for his host country, and display his patriotism alongside his respect for civic virtues, at a time when nationalism was growing and hastening the slide into the Great War.

Over the years Georges Playoust came to perceive that elements of his country and culture might, through his family and compatriots, form part of this new country. In this way perhaps he foreshadowed the contribution that non-Anglo Saxons, and

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<sup>26</sup> The *Courrier Australien* has now been digitised.



indeed non-Europeans could make in the second half of the century that was just beginning. Already this modern Australia was indicating that it was more than a mere reproduction of Britain.

Two National Day speeches are given special attention in this chapter. That of the 14th July 1902 is the most complex, and is the most thoroughly dissected for evidence of his thoughts, while that of 1909, in the English tongue, and liberated from the classical allusions of old Europe, the most quoted and loved by journalists.

The First World War put an end to Georges' career when he and his wife Marie-Thérèse made the momentous decision to relocate to Paris, to provide a base for their five sons and two nephews fighting in the French Army, and to look after the Paris affairs of the French-Australian League of Help, where Georges acted as treasurer. This is a subject to which I devote my attention in the next chapter.

In the third chapter entitled "The Social Contribution of Women", attention is given firstly to the participation of Playoust women in the social activities of the Sydney branch of the Alliance Française and its influence on the culture of the city. This was the legendary *Belle Epoque* in France, when Paris was a beacon for artists, musicians and poets from the whole of Europe and even the New World. French residents in Sydney were proud to share this culture with Australians, perhaps another shade of their patriotism.

As sources I drew from the writings of Ivan Barko and Colin Nettelbeck for the teaching achievements of the Alliance, seeking to understand the role of women, French and Australian, who were associated with the Sydney Alliance Française in its early years.

In addition to the yearly examinations and the prize-giving activities of the Alliance, the committee sought to encourage more social interaction. In 1904 a *Comité des Dames* was constituted by the Alliance committee to implement a series of cultural 'soirées', musical or theatrical, followed by supper and dancing where hostesses would be responsible for introducing guests to each other, speaking to them in French. This



resulted in a decade of lively evenings, leading up to 1914 and the declaration of war. A number of highly educated and prominent Australian men and women were attracted to participate.

Both Marie-Thérèse Playoust and her son took part in these events, she as a social committee member, her son Jacques in play-readings, surely a transnational activity, in "*establishing a social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders*".<sup>28</sup>

In 1911 she displayed her dominant personality by giving an 'at home' (sic) at the Hotel Australia on the occasion of the presentation of the Grand Medal of the Alliance Française to Augustine Soubeiran at which many prominent French and Australians attended.

A clear pattern emerges from recording the names of those who worked together to organise these social evenings that, at the outbreak of the Great War, these individuals coalesced to become the active founders and administrators of an important charity called the French-Australian League of Help. It is a continuous stream, as it was again a number of these same women who were dominant in the effort to rescue the enfeebled Sydney Alliance Française at the end of the war. Little attention has been paid hitherto to their achievement.

The second section of Chapter 3 concerns the social contribution of women in the formation of the French-Australian League of Help. It dwells on the part played by the Playoust women in this patriotic charity, which fully engaged them for the four long years of war as their sons went off to the Western Front. Blanche Playoust, as president, was responsible for the fortnightly dispatch of clothing made by volunteers in multiple workshops, town and country. Joseph Playoust took a very responsible part in this activity.

Few sources exist to research the founding and the achievements of this charity, but in 1916 a small but significant donation was made to the Mitchell Library, State Library of

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<sup>28</sup> Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton. "Towards a Definition of Transnationalism," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 645, no. 1 (July 1, 1992): ix.



New South Wales, by the co-secretary, Augustine Soubeiran, which repays close attention.<sup>29</sup> This small printed booklet is entitled "*French-Australian League of Help, Complete Resumé of the League's Work*"; its cover naming the office-bearers is reproduced in Appendix 4.

Mlle Soubeiran also donated to the library a box of letters from such famous people as General Foch and many other recipients of gifts from the League, distributed by her at the end of the war, as well as her own letter to the library.<sup>30</sup>

Despite my best efforts, I was unable to find any more official sources on the subject other than city and regional newspapers' frequent published reports of this Sydney charity's activities, from which it was possible to trace its development into one of the largest patriotic funds of the period. Newspaper sources yielded several as yet unrecorded facts that are discussed in this chapter.<sup>31</sup>

Regional newspapers proved their value by producing the only known description of the final meeting of the League in a comprehensive letter from Mr. Mayman who had attended this meeting in Paris. The letter was sent to the *Sydney Telegraph*, which holds no archives, but it was fortunately copied in the *Morning Bulletin* of Rockhampton.<sup>32</sup> It is wholly reproduced in Appendix 4.

My fourth chapter is an account of World War 1 as experienced by the seven Playoust men in the French army on the western front. They were referred to as '*poilus*' in the vernacular of the period.

The Great War was a tragedy that hit this family severely, as it also hit countless Australian and French families. It begins with the German invasion of Belgium and

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<sup>29</sup> *French-Australian League of Help. Complete Resume of League's Work December 1914 to September 1916* (Sydney: State Library NSW, n.d.).

<sup>30</sup> A. Soubeiran and Maréchal Foch. "French-Australian League Records, 1917-1921" (Textual Records, Graphic Materials, State Library of New South Wales, 1921).

<sup>31</sup> For a fuller discussion of the FALH, see the article by Peter Brown and Jacqueline Dwyer, *The French-Australian League of Help. Restoring the Record* French-Australian Review No. 56, 2014, pp.26-54.

<sup>32</sup> "French-Australian League Last Meeting in Paris", *Morning Bulletin*, January 28, 1920, 6.



France, in 1914, when the French laws on compulsory conscription immediately took effect. All French men of military age were mobilised, meaning that they were to report to their assigned regiments immediately. Seven of the sons of the two Playoust families left Sydney to become soldiers in the French infantry from the year they turned twenty, but as the war progressed they were recruited at an earlier age.

My primary sources for this chapter are the family archives, reproduced in appendix 3 to serve as a reference. They consist of letters written during the Great War, mostly by Jacques Playoust in English to his brothers and sisters in Australia, as well as others to a young cousin in Paris, written in French, together with a diary where, each day, he entered details of his part in the savage battle of Verdun, in English. These papers are a striking example of patriotism in action as well as other sentiments such as stoicism, humanity, desire for contact with others, living a normal life, order over chaos, meaning over madness. I situate these letters as part of a narrative, and a reflection on the civilisation that produced them.

They are examined to gain a greater understanding of what were the sentiments of these very individual new recruits, raised in Australia and speaking English to each other, who had travelled across the world to defend France, fighting in French regiments. Though medals were won, and lives were lost, these profoundly moving letters are written in matter-of fact plain, descriptive English, spelling mistakes included, with few if any of the patriotic utterances of civilian speakers, as they describe the horrific conditions of trench warfare.

This chapter ends with the death of Georges Playoust, the Armistice and an aftermath, followed by a reflection on the identity of the returning soldiers, and that of the older generation, leading to the Conclusion.



## CHAPTER 1: EARLY DAYS

During the 1880s, the wool trade was taking over from gold as the chief source of Australia's wealth. The newly industrialized mills of northern England, northern France, Belgium and Germany needed large supplies of wool, and through selective breeding, Australia was producing it in ever improving quality.

Melbourne and Sydney markets were beginning to mature, gradually reducing the need to pass through London agents; European and British buyers could now buy at a better rate directly from Australian colonies as they gradually loosened their commercial dependence on the Mother Country. The journey from Europe to Australia had been shortened by the construction of the Suez Canal linking the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Early wool traders arrived from France by sailing ship in the 1870s. In the very first wave of buyers was Edmond Delvas, travelling on the same ship, *RMS Tanjore* 799 tons, as the Belgian trader Jules Renard who had already founded his own company in Melbourne. Together with another northern Frenchman called Derville (or Dervillée), Delvas visited Australia, Victoria and New South Wales.<sup>33</sup> Both made a second journey the following year, this time by steamship. Delvas was then offered steady employment based in Australia by his employer in Tourcoing, but refused, as his wife, no doubt fearing the unknown, stated that she did not want to live in what she called a *pays de sauvages* [a land peopled by savages]. However their daughter, some forty years on, was to marry another wool trader, Jacques Playoust, and to make her home in Sydney.

Coal-burning steam ships could now travel much more swiftly than sailing ships from Marseilles to Melbourne, where rapid communications with clients in Europe were now possible by telegraphic cable.

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<sup>33</sup> "Arrival of the English Mail", *The Argus*, October 4, 1878, 5.



## Arrival

Georges Playoust was one of the early French buyers to set up a more permanent enterprise, arriving in Melbourne in 1889 with his wife and the first six of his children by the Messageries Maritimes ship *Sydney* to represent and manage a Melbourne office for a Tourcoing firm of traders, Caulliez and Co.<sup>34</sup> His brother Joseph Playoust was to follow two years later. The firm's letterhead bore the name "Henri Caulliez Laines (wool) Tourcoing, London, Sydney, Melbourne, Buenos Ayres and Montevideo".<sup>35</sup> Georges may have attended wool sales in London or even South America before coming to Australia, but it is not recorded. By the age of 39 he would have acquired the necessary skills to appraise the quality of the wools required by the textile mills. Australia, where six separate British colonies were planning to unite as a federation of states was now the magnet for wool traders. It was another New World in the making.

Like many of *négociants* (traders) beginning to arrive from France to buy the splendid wool now being produced in Australia, the two brothers came from Tourcoing, an ancient town in French Flanders immediately adjoining the Belgian border. During the 19th century this area was transformed by the rapid development of the textile industry, made possible by advanced steam power technology. Large mills and workers' housing now filled the landscape as the populations had doubled and tripled in a few decades. Tourcoing and its neighbouring town of Roubaix became absorbed into the conurbation surrounding the city of Lille.<sup>36</sup> Accompanying this development was a rapid gentrification of the newly enriched.

Georges and Joseph were not from an industrial background. Their father, Henri Playoust, was the son of a doctor in a small commune in the Department of le Nord and had graduated *Bachelier ès Lettres* (Bachelor of Letters) from the Academy of Arts

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<sup>34</sup> State Government of Victoria. "Inward Overseas Passenger Lists (Foreign Ports) Vessel: Sydney, 5 September 1889" (Microfiche Copy of VPRS 947, Melbourne, Vic., n.d.).

<sup>35</sup> Alain Patrick Hautrive. "Chronique Familiale: Histoire de la Famille Hautrive, 1 ère partie: de 1614 à 1920" (Personal document (via personal communication), n.d.). Accessed 8 July 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Bonte. *Patrons Textiles: Un siècle de conduite des entreprises textiles à Roubaix-Tourcoing 1900-2000* (Lille: La Voix Du Nord, 2002), 32–36.



English, being the daughter of an Irish woman from Dublin who had taken on marriage across international borders, to a mill owner from Tourcoing. This family brought up their children bilingually and to retain links with their Irish relatives.

Marie-Thérèse wrote letters in both languages and her facility with English was to ease her adjustment to an anglophone society. This showed the outward-looking nature of this couple, which in both commerce and disposition was prepared for an international, not to say cosmopolitan life. It added to a broader sense of Irish relocation to this land than that associated with the convict past or famine due to crop failure.

Marie-Thérèse's father, Emile Leplat, owned a mill that spun wool and cotton, and was himself a child of the Industrial Revolution. His life was recounted in detail in a speech he delivered on his 80th birthday in 1912, which describes his own father's mill whose looms were powered by horses. The mill burnt down in 1840 and the looms were replaced by new steam-powered machinery, and this family business prospered through several generations before finally closing in the 1980s.<sup>38</sup>

Georges and Marie-Thérèse's initial journey to Australia would have enlightened them on Australia's place in the South Pacific. One of the 27 other passengers who travelled in saloon class on the Messageries Maritimes steamer *Sydney* was a General Godin, travelling with his aide Captain Bernady, who had both embarked at Mahé in the Seychelles.<sup>39</sup> The General's task was to perform the annual inspection of troops in New Caledonia, then to take another ship to Tonquin (Tonkin).<sup>40</sup>

The long days and evenings at sea provided opportunities for illuminating conversations with the military men about the sensitive relations between the eastern coast of the Australian continent and the neighbouring French colonies in the south Pacific.

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<sup>38</sup> Personal testimony.

<sup>39</sup> State Government of Victoria. "Inward Overseas Passenger Lists (Foreign Ports) Vessel: Sydney, 5 September 1889."

<sup>40</sup> "Arrival of the M.M.S. Sydney at Albany. (By Telegraph)", *The Argus*, September 2, 1889, 6.



## **Melbourne Affairs**

The couple settled with their family in Melbourne, capital of the colony of Victoria in 1889, renting a house in Sackville Street, Kew, where several more children were born.

Georges' years of military service in which he had reached the rank of Captain in the Reserve showed the leadership quality he brought to a new and modern nation in the making.<sup>41</sup> He was a patriot and was marked by the defeat of France in 1870, yet was also receptive to the new influences to be felt in a country creating its own identity in the South Seas.

Melbourne was at the time the financial capital of Australia, and new companies such as BHP had moved their headquarters there. However, a more recent economic overview of Sydney and Melbourne describes the deep depression now existing in Melbourne in the 1890s as a reaction to the property boom of the previous decade.<sup>42</sup>

After making the acquaintance of his colleagues in the wool stores, Georges used his first year in Australia to explore the trading possibilities in this new land. Newspaper information was rich in information about several of his lengthy journeys. One, by coastal steamer, took Georges to Cooktown in Far North Queensland, when on the return journey his ship was stranded outside Brisbane in Moreton Bay during the historic maritime strike of 1890. He also made several journeys as a 'boudoir' passenger on the inter-colonial express to wool sales in Adelaide.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ministère de la Guerre. "Class de 1875: Georges Playoust," *Registres Numérisés Des Matricules Militaires, Subdivision de Lille*, 1978–3064, accessed October 1, 2012, <http://www.archivesdepartementales.cg59.fr/?id=503>.

<sup>42</sup> John Wilkinson. "Sydney and Melbourne, An Economic Overview" NSW Parliamentary Research Service 20.

<sup>43</sup> "Intercolonial Railway Passenger Traffic Ballarat, October 27", *South Australian Register*, October 28, 1890.



Association. There was much to discuss at the meeting in December 1891 at the Menzies Hotel, which included resolution of difficulties with different selling wool-selling brokers and the need for a central saleroom in Melbourne. Dalgety and Co. was also to be informed of the desirability of a central saleroom in Geelong.<sup>47</sup>

This new colony's society was one of rapid change and much innovation. In 1891, the population of Melbourne was 473,000.<sup>48</sup> Workers had achieved far better conditions than existed in Europe; the eight-hour day without loss of pay had been won in Melbourne in 1856. However, in the early 1890s there were serious problems in the economy of the colony of Victoria, when the spectacular building boom following the gold rush came to a halt. By 1893, certain banks failed, there was a decline in commodity prices, and so began one of the worst depressions in Australian history, in which Victoria suffered the most.<sup>49</sup>

Georges became familiar at this stage with the restive Labour movement following two significant events: the shearers' strike which threatened the supply of wool, and the maritime strike which he experienced at first hand, if only as an onlooker. In August 1890, he made a journey by coastal steamer to look into opportunities in the far north of the colony of Queensland. His name appears on the passenger list of *S.S. Maranoa*, which plied the east coast of the Australian continent from Melbourne to Cooktown in Far North Queensland, and back on a regular basis. On this occasion it sailed south from Cooktown, stopping at ports like Port Douglas, Townsville, Rockhampton then Brisbane. Here the ship was not allowed to berth because of the nationwide waterfront strike, and remained anchored in Moreton Bay. Provisions in shops were running short, 1000 bales of wool were lying on the wharves and the situation was becoming desperate until ships were unloaded by volunteer non-union labour, some of who "received very rough usage".<sup>50</sup> These newspaper reports describe the waterfront strike vividly but apart from personal inconvenience, Georges Playoust's

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<sup>47</sup> "The Woolbuyer's Strike. Satisfactory Settlement", *The Mercury*, December 3, 1891, 3.

<sup>48</sup> John Wilkinson. *Sydney and Melbourne: An Economic Overview*, Briefing Paper (Sydney, NSW: NSW Parliamentary Library Research Service, August 2010), 3.

<sup>49</sup> Cannon, Michael. *The Land Boomers*. Melbourne, MUP, 1966

<sup>50</sup> "Summary for Europe. Review of the Week", *The Brisbane Courier*, August 29, 1890, 2.



experience of it could only have been as a passive observer. This strike, however, had huge political implications, which were later to bring down both the NSW and Victorian governments.

Playoust reached home safely for the following month it was reported that he was a *boudoir* passenger on the inter-colonial express train to Adelaide, which had a vigorous wool market.<sup>51</sup> He returned to Melbourne a fortnight later, and then repeated the journey in November. He continued his exploration of distant sheep country in the colony of Queensland, this time by train. At the border station of Wallangarra, one had to change onto trains on lines of a different gauge, and names of arrivals were telegraphed onwards to the Brisbane newspapers. It was a tedious journey from Melbourne, but faster than by ship. A great deal of wool was being grown in Queensland, and Georges, by his active participation, encouraged the setting up of wool auctions in Brisbane.

It is not recorded how much Georges Playoust and Marie-Thérèse participated in French affairs when they first arrived in Melbourne, but they may have known of a banquet of the French Society to celebrate the French National Day, chaired by the French Consul M. Dejardin.<sup>52</sup> Over seventy unnamed gentlemen attended this dinner as well as two Victorian Government ministers. It is quite possible that Georges Playoust was present. If so, this would have heightened his awareness of France's place in the South Pacific in relation to Australia.

Mr Patterson, the Minister for Trade and Customs, made a lengthy speech in which he urged the representative gentlemen of France who were present to give their support to a matter that has attracted the serious attention of our best statesmen:

*Some years ago these shores were made the depot for the refuse and offscouring of the British nation, and by the adoption of that course by the British government the very life of this community was endangered (...) Following the British example the French have made a prison for thousands of the worst criminals of the Continent. We have already had a large number of*

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<sup>51</sup> "Overland Express Passengers [By Telegraph] Melbourne, September 23", *The Advertiser*, September 24, 1890, 4.

<sup>52</sup> "Dinner French Club", *The Argus Melbourne*, July 15, 1890, 6.



*these persons escape to Australia. It is therefore with feelings of considerable alarm that we have heard the report that it is the intention of the French Government to continue and increase the shipment of criminals to New Caledonia.*

*I am sure, gentlemen, that you will feel for us under these circumstances, and that we will have our sympathies in endeavouring to alter the determination of your government on this point.*

The speech was greeted by cheers.

This malaise had existed in French-Australian relations since the claiming of New Caledonia (1853) as a colony of France, and more so because New Caledonia was to be used as a penal colony as the British had done in Botany Bay.<sup>53</sup>

Stuer in *The French in Australia* has amply covered this subject, but is referred to in this context due to the audience's reaction to the minister's speech, as well as the obvious shame the minister had expressed about the colony's criminal origins, its 'birth-stain'.<sup>54</sup>

The chronology of events in *Visions of a Republic - The work of Lucien Henry* states that the artist Lucien Henry had arrived in Sydney from New Caledonia in 1879, after the political prisoners had been granted amnesty, and since then he had practiced as an artist in Sydney, and even exhibited in Melbourne in 1889.<sup>55</sup> A more famous Communarde, the feminist leader Louise Michel, stayed with the Henry couple after her release from prison, before her return to France.<sup>56</sup> The fact that these political prisoners were people who had been exiled after the attempted Communard rebellion in Paris made them doubly suspect, as they were perceived by Australians as dangerous communists. As many as 247 escaped ex-convicts would have arrived in Australia from New Caledonia in the previous decade, mostly to the neighbouring Queensland coastline.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Colin Forster. *France and Botany Bay* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>54</sup> Stuer. *The French in Australia*, 132.

<sup>55</sup> Ann Stephen. *Visions of a Republic: The Work of Lucien Henry* (Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing, 2001), 8.

<sup>56</sup> Ann Stephen. *Visions of a Republic*.

<sup>57</sup> Jill Donohoo. Australian Reactions to the French Penal Colony, *Explorations* 54 Winter 2013.



Australian family. These Australian-born children were granted British citizenship, almost immigration by stealth, but were also 'declared' as French nationals at the French Consulate.

From these two fruitful marriages, 19 children were born. There is a large discrepancy in ages between the eldest child, born in 1882 and the youngest, born in 1906; they were practically from different generations. The older children had more exposure to France before the crucial year of 1914.

### ***Education of Georges and Joseph***

#### **Collège de Tourcoing**

Both Georges and Joseph Playoust had been educated at the Collège de Tourcoing. The extraordinary permutations of this school, which mirrored the rapid changes of regimes in France, would have had a profound effect on their ideas regarding education and politics which they carried to Australia, a country in which ideas on public instruction were also undergoing rapid change. For this reason it seems important to dwell on the school's history and permit the comparison between educational systems between France and the Australian colonies.

The Collège de Tourcoing was the oldest school of Tourcoing, and well famed. It dated back to 1666, a period when Flanders was under the domination of Spain. It was created by the Pères Récollets, a religious order, with permission from Philip IV, King of Spain and Lord of Tourcoing, and it was only in 1667 that this southern part of Flanders became part of France. The history of the Collège de Tourcoing is a parallel exemplar of education in other regions of France under a succession of regimes. The establishment was closed in 1790 during the French Revolution, but in 1802, the First Consul, Napoleon Bonaparte, allowed the Pères Récollets to return to Tourcoing.

The school was administered and rebuilt by the Headmaster-Priest, Albert Lecomte. It remained a communal college until 1st November 1881 when the new Public



Now grown up, and across the world in Melbourne, these French expatriates gave much attention to their children's schooling. The parents sought a system resembling what they had known in the strongly Catholic north of France, before the French government had begun to regulate religious schools.

The new Republican government elected in France after the fall of Napoleon III's Empire aimed to consolidate the Republic. It emphasized the role of teachers in training their pupils in patriotism and respect for republican values, freed from the authority of the Church that had supported Royalty. Jules Ferry, who had administered Paris during the siege, became Minister for Public Instruction from 1879-1883, as well as *Président du Conseil* for two brief periods.<sup>64</sup> The anti-clerical sentiments, which had simmered ever since the Revolution, now came to the surface.

With this in mind Ferry initiated laws in 1881-82 making primary education *gratuite, laïque, et obligatoire* - free, non-clerical and compulsory - for boys and girls. Priests and nuns should no longer teach in State schools. Many religious orders were prevented from teaching in France and this initiated a diaspora of teaching nuns and priests. Large numbers of religious schools were closed, 249 in the Department of le Nord alone.<sup>65</sup>

### ***Melbourne Schooling for the Children***

The last decades of the 19th century had brought a parallel evolution of ideas on public instruction in Australia, to Sydney and Melbourne. In fact, the Education Act of 1872 by which the Victorian Government would provide 'free, secular and compulsory' education preceded the Ferry Act by ten years.<sup>66</sup> Subsequently in 1880 Sir Henry Parkes implemented a similar Public Instruction Act in the Parliament of New South Wales, assuming government responsibility for a system based on similar principles

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<sup>64</sup> "LE SENAT SOUS L'EMPIRE DE NAPOLEON III", *Sénat: Un site au Service des Citoyens*, accessed September 10, 2013, <http://www.senat.fr/evenement/archives/D28/Page1.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Bonte. *Patron Textiles*.

<sup>66</sup> "Education Act 1872."



and using the same trilogy of terms.<sup>67</sup>

It was an idealistic but very costly exercise and led to strong differences of opinion on the withdrawal of State Aid to denominational schools, which continued to resound through generations in both France and Australia.

The immediate effect in Australia was a massive effort by Catholic Church authorities to build new schools and to staff them with religious orders of priests, religious brothers and nuns brought in from other countries, mainly Ireland. An exception to the Irish model was the international order of 'The Faithful Companions of Jesus' who responded to the new Education Act in France by leaving the country. Nuns from this order arrived in Melbourne in 1882 at the invitation of the parish priest of Richmond and, on pasture land at Kew, they built a school they named Genazzano, imbued with their old traditions, their spirituality "animated by the spirit of St. Ignatius Loyola".<sup>68</sup>

Genazzano was an obvious choice for the Playoust girls. Georges and Marie-Thérèse's two eldest girls were enrolled in 1893 as well as 'Stephanie', who was really Stéphane, aged 5, in 1894. Presumably the school took boys in the primary classes. Joseph and Blanche's eldest girl, Maria, was briefly enrolled in 1896 before the transition to Sydney.

As for Georges and Marie-Thérèse's sons, the obvious choice was Xavier, the newly established Jesuit College in Kew. The Jesuits were a highly respected teaching order in northern France but had been banned from teaching by the new republican government in certain years, before being fully dissolved in 1890, and their novitiate in Amiens closed. The order reacted quickly and moved it over the permeable border into

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<sup>67</sup> A. W. Martin. "Parkes, Sir Henry (1815–1896)", in *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Canberra: National Centre of Biography, Australian National University), accessed September 15, 2012, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/parkes-sir-henry-4366>.

<sup>68</sup> "Genazzano FCJ College: Inspiring Young Women", *Genazzano FCJ College: Inspiring Young Women*, accessed September 15, 2012, <http://www.genazzano.vic.edu.au>.



Belgium, just as they had already done with some of their boarding schools.<sup>69</sup>

The two eldest boys, Georges (8 years) and Jacques (7 years) were enrolled at Xavier between 1891 and 1895. As these children went to school in Australia they came to speak English with each other, but with their parents they always spoke French.

There was, however, another facet to their education. Formal education was interrupted as the families travelled 'home' almost every year in their early Australian years, bringing the children with them.

Shipboard travel was an integral part of their lives. The shipping lists showed that the usual pattern was a journey back to France at least every other year, leaving after the wool sales ended about March, returning about September. The sea journey took over a month each way which, when added to the months of their visit, meant a sizeable part of the year, but it was usually a pleasant way to spend time, and an effective educational tool for the younger children.

Parents went to some effort to compensate for the disruption in schooling by periods of directed schoolwork on deck. Their school marks did not seem to suffer too much, though it must be said that the disruption to primary schooling left some of them with considerable difficulties in spelling that became evident in their wartime letters.

Old and young became very knowledgeable, even infatuated with ships, particularly those of the Messageries Maritimes through which much of their wool was shipped. The children loved shipboard life and came to know these vessels in detail, observing how freight was hoisted then lowered by cranes into the hold, paying great attention being paid to the balance of weights. They learnt the responsibilities of different members of the crew, the importance of the Chief Engineer in the engine room and the Captain on the bridge. Each ship had its own personality, some more stable than others, some more luxurious. It was an interest that they retained all their lives, but

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<sup>69</sup> "Les Jésuites À L'origine Du Centre Spirituel", *Nord Eclair*, accessed October 18, 2012, <http://www.nordeclair.fr/Locales/Tourcoing/Environs/2011/07/23/les-jesuites-a-l-origine-du-centre-spiri.shtml>.



accepted.<sup>70</sup> They sent a community of five English speaking nuns who founded a boarding school for young ladies in Rose Bay, Sydney in 1882, and with the direction of church authorities and the help of Sydney philanthropists, built an impressive towered stone convent in the gothic revival style, overlooking Sydney Harbour. The nuns received in later years several treasures from their former Paris chapel, carved timber choir stalls, a pulpit and a fine organ, quickly saved from State despoliation.

A stream of French nuns followed for many years, teaching the girls French forms of politeness such as the curtsy, addressing the nuns as *mère* and grading the classes in the French way from the top down, the top class being number 1. This French form of grading persisted till the mid-20th century (Archives Kincoppal-Rose Bay). Their vocabulary was enlarged by French words such as *cache* for a game of hide and seek, *économe* for bursar, *goûter* for afternoon tea. French was the decreed language for certain meals.

Not far from this convent, an Anglican girls' boarding school, Kambala, then at Bellevue Hill, had similar customs. Mlle Soubeiran, the co-principal, had established the rule that at dinner time, French was to be spoken at the top table, and that "good manners were so accented that no girl should have to ask for anything to be passed to her".<sup>71</sup>

Joseph and Blanche sent their daughters, Maria, Blanche, Marie-Antoinette (Toinette), Gabrielle and Marthe, after a period at St. Brigid's Randwick, to Santa Sabina, close to their home in Strathfield. This was a recently founded convent school run by nuns of the Dominican order. Apart from public music examinations published in the newspapers, there are no records of their school studies. At the age of 17, Toinette was at school in France and during the rapid German invasion in 1914 was trapped behind enemy lines for two years. Gabrielle went on to Sydney University and was one of the few women graduating in Medicine in the 1920s.

The links of the order with France were more tenuous but the tradition was there, for

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<sup>70</sup> Leila Barlow. *Living Stones* (Sydney, N.S.W: Kincoppal Rose Bay School, 1982).

<sup>71</sup> Fifi Hawthorne. *Kambala - A History* (Sydney, NSW: The Wentworth Press, 1972).



the Dominican order of nuns was founded near Toulouse, in France by St. Dominic Guzman, the founder of the Order of Preachers. The eight nuns who first came to Australia were from the Irish branch and were invited in 1866 to found a school by the Archbishop of Maitland NSW, a very large country diocese. The letter said "you must come and put an end to this business", referring to the bitterness surrounding the new *Public Education Act*.<sup>72</sup> The Dominican order then spread to Sydney and to the other colonies of Australia.

It is interesting that even here in sunny Australia there had been some contention after the passing of the Public Education Act. In both countries several generations later the bitterness has diminished, and quite a few concessions have been made to the desires of parents.

The order's official texts state

*Religious and moral training both in theory and practice must always be the primary object of Dominican education*

and

*The sisters' function is to stimulate the child's God-given intelligence to aid her to acquire and assimilate knowledge (...) to prepare her for independent life, not only by ensuring possession of suitable knowledge but leading her to an intelligent use of liberty.*

For the older boys no choice was necessary; they simply continued with the Jesuit order which had taught them at Xavier. In fact, there was a rotation of masters through the Jesuit colleges.

Georges and Marie-Thérèse two eldest boys Georges jun. (14 years) and Jacques (13 years) were enrolled at St. Ignatius College, Riverview in the first term of 1896. It was an entirely boarding school at the time, housed in a large new stone building in the baroque style, which the French call '*style jésuite*', set in enormous grounds overlooking the Lane Cove river. Classical and modern languages were taught, along with History, Mathematics and Natural Sciences. Students were prepared for the

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<sup>72</sup> Harold Campbell. *The Diocese of Maitland 1866-1966* (Maitland, NSW: Diocese of Maitland, 1966), 61.



*The enthusiasm of Australians for Sport was foreign to the French Superiors and tension only abated when Australian superiors took their place.*<sup>73</sup>

Jacques was then enrolled as a dayboy at St. Aloysius College, a Jesuit day school, still in Bourke Street, Darlinghurst. In 1900, he studied English Literature, (placed 2nd) Latin (2nd) French Literature (2nd) Mathematics (3rd) Christian Doctrine (3rd) Aggregate (2nd).<sup>74</sup> Jacques liked to take on a role in amateur theatre, even in his school days. At the end of the year prize giving, a Molière play was produced with French schoolboys, Jacques Playoust and M. Pelletier taking on several roles. Jacques was to retain his interest in amateur theatrics well into middle age.<sup>75</sup> He won the Gold Medal for debating in 1901 and 1902 (aged 17 and 18). The report of the Prefect of Studies of St. Aloysius College stated:

*We would like some of our young debaters to pay more attention to the polish and elegance which has secured for Jacques Playoust the gold medal in this subject.*<sup>76</sup>

Despite this he remained an erratic speller.

Marcel first entered St. Aloysius at the age of 9 when the College was in Darlinghurst. He was Dux of 3rd Class and again Dux in 1906. His lasting friend Austin Gardner won the Latin Prize. He went on to Riverview for three years from 1907-9 and passed his Junior Exams with honours in Latin, Arithmetic and A's in French, Latin and Greek.<sup>77 78</sup>

In the senior examination he qualified for matriculation with passes in English, Greek and Algebra and Plane Trigonometry but a Silver Medal in French.<sup>79</sup> He played cricket for the school and belonged to the cadets where he was "quite a handy rifle shot".<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Br. Michael Naughtin. *A Century of Striving. St. Joseph's College Hunter's Hill 1881-1981*, 1 vols. (Hunter's Hill: St. Joseph's College, 1981).

<sup>74</sup> "Annual Report of the Prefect of Studies' in Annual Distribution of Prizes" (St. Aloysius College, December 14, 1900).

<sup>75</sup> "St. Aloysius College", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 12, 1898, 4.

<sup>76</sup> Copy of program held by author (J. Dwyer).

<sup>77</sup> "St. Aloysius College", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 6, 1902, 6.

<sup>78</sup> "St. Aloysius College. Distribution of Prizes", *Freeman's Journal*, December 8, 1906, 17.

<sup>79</sup> "Senior University Examinations. Catholic School Successes. The Blue Riband of the Year", *Freeman's Journal*, December 23, 1909, 26.

<sup>80</sup> James Rodgers. *To Give and Not Count the Cost* (Saint Ignatius College, Riverview, 2009).



CHAPTER 2: THE SPECIES OF GEORGES PLYOUST

There followed one more year at St. Aloysius College in 1919. From school Marcel retained an ease of writing, which showed in his wartime article in a school magazine. Only three years later he was beginning his compulsory military service in New Caledonia.

The younger children were given primary education in local schools, then a stream of younger brothers and cousins followed at St. Aloysius College when the College moved to a harbourside site at Milson's Point in 1903, now a safer place, as bubonic plague was rife in inner Sydney. There was Stéphane, René, Maurice and Roger, and the cousins, after a few years in primary school at Waverley College near their home, Jean, Fernand, Charles and Paul. When Jean went to school, he liked to be called John, which was not a girl's name. René took an independent path and asked to be transferred to Hawkesbury Agricultural College where he spent three and a half years until war broke out. Unfortunately there is little in the St. Aloysius archives concerning their school results, and it is only from programmes or newspaper accounts that some could be retrieved.

It had been customary for these children to speak to their parents in French, but they spoke to each other in English, as they did with their school friends. Some of them had problems in pronouncing the English 'r' which they tended to roll gutturally. They called the Centennial Park house 'Murrrrulla'. They later lived in 'Rrrryrrrie Strrreet'. The children relished the emphasis on sport in Australian schools, but the Australian educational system did not include philosophy, which so marks French personalities.



*The emergence of a social process in which migrants establish social fields that cross geographic cultural and political borders.*<sup>86</sup>

This term became so widespread across several disciplines that Steven Vertovec went beyond a crisp definition. He offered instead to review what his colleagues were writing in the form of a list of several categories in which this term could be conceived; some were applicable to the activities of the Playousts:<sup>87</sup>

- 1) *Social morphology, social formation spanning borders* - such as friends and family across the world.
- 2) *A type of consciousness, particularly relating to the common consciousness of those within diasporas* - The wool trade could not be considered a diaspora, but there existed a sizeable group of compatriots at work.
- 3) *A mode of cultural reproduction, cultural experiences crossing borders, particularly as a result of exchange through media, communications and the arts.* - This could include the Alliance Française.
- 4) *Economic relations across borders, ranging from corporations operating across the globe to the individual transfer of funds to relatives in their country of origin (remittances).* The first of these is directly applicable to their business, but not the second.

Transnationalism is further defined in another article by Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Stanton` describing a 'new kind of migrating population, whose networks, activities and patterns of life encompass both their host and home societies- The wool trade meant the participation of buyer and seller.

*Transmigrants develop and maintain multiple relations - familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political that span borders [...]  
Transmigrants take actions, make decisions, and feel concerns, and develop*

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<sup>86</sup> Basch, Blanc-Stanton Schiller. "Towards a Definition of Transnationalism", *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 645 (May 1990).

<sup>87</sup> Steven Vertovec. "Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no. 2 (January 1, 1999): 447-62, doi:10.1080/014198799329558.



*identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously.*<sup>88</sup>

Glick Schiller et al. write that limiting the focus to concepts such as tribe, ethnic group, nation, society, or culture can narrow the understanding of transnationalism. These individuals, now to be referred to as 'transmigrants', would be linked to developments in global commerce and trade. Transnationalism is grounded in the everyday life and social relationships:

*Transmigrants' lives are complex, requiring them to 'rework' the individual notion of identity.*

This new concept can be related more easily to the experience of French families in the case study who one hundred years earlier had arrived in Melbourne to launch their planned careers in the wool trade between two nations.

Also easy to relate is Patricia Clavin's article "Defining Transnationalism" which looked back to the period between the two world wars, arguing that:

*Transnationalism is best understood not as fostering bounded networks, but as creating honeycombs, a structure that sustains and gives shapes to the identities of nation states, international and local institutions, and particular social and geographic spaces.*<sup>89</sup>

Clavin stresses that transnationalism is "primarily about people and the social space here they live, the networks they form, and the ideas they exchange", all well illustrated by the second chapter of this thesis

In examining the extent to which these concepts of transnationalism were applicable to the Playoust family, only a few seemed directly relevant. One was the question of 'return migration' to the place of origin, after the transmigrant retired, explained by

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<sup>88</sup> Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton. "Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration", *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 645, no. 1 (July 1, 1992): 1–2.

<sup>89</sup> Patricia Clavin. "Defining Transnationalism", *Contemporary European History* 14, no. 4 (November 1, 2005): 421–39.



The Playoust families did not come from France as a result of any diaspora, but instead from a well-planned commercial enterprise. Possibly reassured by the family's size and cohesion, and being in constant touch with France in brief coded messages by telegraphic cable during the wool season, the Playoust men could not feel dislocated. This was less applicable to the women who were not in the work force.

This case study provides the opportunity to further examine transnationalism by considering the contribution to their transnational experience of business relations, and ties forged by war, and associated charitable works.

### ***The French National Day***

The French National Day celebrating the fall of the Bastille was an innovation of the Third Republic; the law creating a national holiday on 14th July had been made official in 1880. It was seen as a way of unifying a divided people, who had in this nineteenth century lived through three kingdoms, two empires, two republics, a commune and multiple periods of conflict. It should therefore be celebrated lavishly.

In Paris and regional cities, these national days were often associated with military parades and music, always popular with the public, and in Germany enlarged by the acquisition of Alsace-Lorraine, Kaiser Wilhelm 1 continued the practice of his Prussian forebears in inspecting his army corps throughout the country each summer, a colourful spectacle, to which the public was invited. The rise of 'folkloric militarism' was not necessarily indoctrination from the top, as the broader public found simple enjoyment of these days as a social occasion involving music, eating and drinking together.<sup>92</sup>

In New South Wales 'Foundation Day' had been established long before this, in 1838, when the colony's fiftieth anniversary was marked by a display of fireworks. This day celebrated the arrival of the First Fleet and the foundation of the convict colony; in

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<sup>92</sup> J. Vogel. "Military, Folklore, Eigensinn: Folkloric Militarism in Germany and France, 1871-1914," *Central European History* 33, no. 4 (2000): 488, doi:10.1163/156916100746437.



Georges Playoust was extending his interest to the wool market in the colony of Queensland; he endured the long overnight train journeys to attend the wool sales in Brisbane. The wool market had become vital to the developing Queensland economy and Playoust played an active part in promoting the establishment of the Brisbane wool exchange. He attended the inaugural winter wool sales in 1899 where wool reached record prices.<sup>95</sup> *The Queenslander* reported:

*The inauguration of the winter [wool] sales is due largely to the wish expressed after the last sales by a great number of buyers who, knowing that Queensland's climatic conditions allow her to have wool forward when other colonies had not, were anxious to fill in the time in what could be called the off-season, as far as the southern markets were concerned.*<sup>96</sup>

### ***Le Socialisme Sans Doctrines and l'Aurore Australe***

The French National Day in 1899 began with the customary official reception at the French consulate, which Georges and Joseph Playoust attended.<sup>97</sup> It is not known whether they met one of the other guests, Professor Albert Métin, who occupied the chair of Economics at the University of Paris. He was on an 18-month journey funded by the University to investigate labour laws in Australasia and the United States. Just as Royal, or Napoleonic or Imperial France had watched the Botany-Bay convict settlement, the new Third Republic was keeping an eye on advances in social reform in the young Australian colonies.

Métin was in Australia and New Zealand from 27 April to 3 October 1899, visiting the colonies of South Australia, 'New Wales' as he preferred to call it, Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland.

Métin's visit is touched on in this work because his book '*Le Socialisme sans Doctrines*' is an important reflection on social conditions at this crucial time in Australia's

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<sup>95</sup> "Brisbane Wool Sales. First Winter Series. Large Attendance of Buyers. Record Prices.", *The Brisbane Courier*, May 17, 1899, 7.

<sup>96</sup> "Brisbane Wool Sales", *The Queenslander*, May 20, 1899, 948.

<sup>97</sup> "The French National Day Celebration in Sydney", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 15, 1899, 14.



on issues such as Free Trade or Protection were now becoming very obvious.

On the front page of the *Courrier Australien* in the issue of 14th January 1899, an AVIS (Notice) from the French Consul-General appeared, inviting those who were interested in Import or Export business to meet on 30th January at 10am at the Wool Exchange in Macquarie Place, with a view to constitute a Committee of French Commerce in Sydney.

It should be noted that many of the following events took place in a very small geographic area: Round the corner from the Wool Exchange was No. 2 Bond Street, which housed the Consulate-General, the French Benevolent Society, the *Courrier Australien* and the Alliance Française, the latter institution recently initiated by the Consul-General of the time, Georges Biard d'Aunet. Communications between those involved in these French institutions were very quick and easy, seldom more a five-minute stroll from the Wool Exchange; in this eventful decade this was extremely helpful.

A series of meetings under the presidency of the Consul-General were held at the office of the French Benevolent Society to draw up the statutes of a new Chamber of Commerce, to gather in more members, then to elect the office-bearers.

Mr G. Playoust was elected president. The election would have been unanimous except for two votes. This appears to be a popular choice, taking into account the custom of not voting for oneself. One can only guess at the other dissenter.<sup>102</sup>

Mr F.W. Learoyd (wool buyer for Wenz and Co.) was then elected vice-president, Mr C. Hauret (importer of devotional articles) as Secretary and Treasurer. Members of the Chamber were varied, such as Gaston Liévain the owner of the fine restaurant "Paris House", A. Wunderlich the provider of the roofing materials which were transforming the colour of Sydney's skyline, directors of the 'Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris' (French Bank), the French shipping line *Messageries Maritimes*, and representatives of

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<sup>102</sup> "Chambre De Commerce Française de Sydney", *Le Courrier Australien*, May 20, 1899, 4.



*regard to the commercial relations of France, which was a protectionist country, and of New South Wales, which was a free trade country. The staple export of this country- wool - was admitted to France every year to the extent of about £1,500,000 sterling free of customs, taxes and even of bond duty. But France's staple exports to this country, clarets, champagne and liqueurs were heavily taxed here.*<sup>107</sup>

Wool was the state's chief export and France was a most important client, second only to Great Britain. This on-going situation was highly favourable to New South Wales and could soften the attitude of its businessmen towards the existing differences of opinion in foreign affairs.

Mr Reid, who was born in Scotland and was the son of a Presbyterian minister, responded in British after-dinner style, beginning with an element of humour. He then praised the consul. He said that during the time M. Biard d'Aunet had resided in Australia, "the government had derived the greatest pleasure from the intercourse which it had had with him, as the representative of France". The *Courrier Australien's* English version (not included in the Herald's) added rather tactlessly:

*French people while remaining very attached to the memory of their country and feeling of brotherhood amongst themselves [...] and developed comradeship with the people of Australia more than have foreigners of other races.*

The idea of war in the Transvaal was very much on people's minds, but the Premier was more positive:

*In the midst of the terrible armaments which each nation prepared for the dreadful contingencies of war there was the silent and powerful restraining influence, the influence of Commerce [...] the conviction that it did not pay to go to war.*<sup>108</sup>

This evening, local events were to displace those in Africa, and the binding effect of the wool trade, which was so much to the advantage of New South Wales, softened any potential hostile sentiments.

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<sup>107</sup> "Sydney French Chamber of Commerce. Inaugural Dinner. Speech by the Premier. The Ministry and the Opposition.", 4.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.



One of the first commissions of the new Chamber was to look into the modification of the itinerary of Messageries Maritimes ships in order to stimulate commerce between Sydney and Noumea. The *Courrier Australien* would now bear, under its front page, the title of *Organe de la Chambre de Commerce et du Comité de l'Alliance Française de Sydney*.

"The question of tariffs is the order of the day," stated the *Courrier Australien* of 28 October 1899.<sup>111</sup> The Chamber appointed a commission to study the Free Trade interests in Sydney and the Protectionists in Melbourne. These opposing principles were to involve Georges Playoust consistently till 1914. During the rest of his time in Australia the question of Free Trade as opposed to Protection remained the most contentious issue to be fought out in the new Federal Parliament between George Reid and Alfred Deakin. Deakin's views were to prevail and Australia continued to support high levels of protective tariffs for most of the twentieth century.<sup>112</sup> From the point of view of the French chamber, this made the importation of French goods very difficult.

The new Chamber installed its office in 2 Bond Street, in the same building as the French Consulate, the French Benevolent Association, the *Courrier Australien* and the Alliance Française. A reference library with statistical and commercial information for the public was opened. The Secretariat and Library would be open on Tuesdays and Saturdays from 9am till 12pm.<sup>113</sup>

Georges Playoust was absent from the 14th July celebrations in 1900. He visited instead the great Universal Exposition in Paris with his family, as well as attending a meeting there of the French *Conseil Supérieur du Commerce*. He and M. Biard d'Aunet were to furnish this body with the information needed concerning the creation of a new shipping line between Australia and the ports of northern France. There had been a large increase in trade in 1899 between New South Wales and France, and this of course would have been aided by the shipments of wool to northern France and

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<sup>111</sup> "Chambre De Commerce Française de Sydney", *Le Courrier Australien*, October 28, 1899, 4.

<sup>112</sup> Paul Kelly. *The End of Certainty* (Sydney, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1992).

<sup>113</sup> "Advertising", *Le Courrier Australien*, July 19, 1902, 1.



## 1902 National Feast Day speech

Georges and Marie-Thérèse travelled back to France in 1901, this time accompanied by only three children, and were absent for the National Day that year, so that it was not till 1902 that Georges made his initial National Day speech, which the *Courrier Australien* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 15 July covered very fully. It is reproduced in Appendix 2.<sup>116 117</sup>

If the 19th century French style of grand phrases and rhetorical questions sat uneasily in Australian newspapers, the *Herald* nevertheless respected the sentiments expressed in its neat summary of the speeches without any comment on the wording. I give particular attention to this very complex speech, seeking to dissect Playoust's notions on patriotism.

As this thesis proposes to give special attention to the nature of patriotism it would be appropriate to begin by defining the term. The Oxford Dictionary defines a patriot as

*...a person who vigorously supports their country and is prepared to defend it against enemies or detractors.*<sup>118</sup>

The Collins Dictionary, however, presents 'Nationalist' as a synonym of patriot, yet the term 'Nationalist' can mean believing in the "*superiority of their nation over all others*"<sup>119</sup> and further "*believing that their nation's interest should be considered more important than those of other nations*".<sup>120</sup> Seeking something more exact, on turning to Georges Playoust's own speeches to define his own terms, it was pleasing to see that the word 'Nationalist' was not in his vocabulary.

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<sup>116</sup> "Fête Nationale Française", *Le Courrier Australien*, July 19, 1902, 2.

<sup>117</sup> "French National Fete. Reception at the Consulate. Picnic at Cabarita. Speeches by State Ministers.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 15, 1902, 6.

<sup>118</sup> "Patriot - Definition of Patriot in English from the Oxford Dictionary," *OxfordDictionaries.com*, accessed April 23, 2015, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/patriot>.

<sup>119</sup> "Nationalism - Definition of Nationalism in English from the Oxford Dictionary," *OxfordDictionaries.com*, accessed April 23, 2015, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/nationalism>.

<sup>120</sup> "Collins English Dictionary -Definition of 'nationalism.'" *Collins English Dictionary*, accessed April 23, 2015, <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/nationalist?showCookiePolicy=true>.



The *Courrier Australien* describes a bitter cold day, sometimes raining, for the now traditional 'picnic' in the gardens at Cabarita, following the official reception at the Consulate. About 250 guests were brought by a ferry, obligingly lent by the Joubert Company, and three government yachts. There were many ladies. The force behind these increasing fund-raising activities was the committee of the French Benevolent Fund, of which Georges and Joseph Playoust were members, and as always the event was undertaken with French consular influence. Official guests included the Premier, Sir John See, the Minister for Public Works, Mr Sullivan, who came with his family, and the Lord Mayor of Sydney and Mrs. Hughes.

These eminent guests were greeted by the sounds of the Marseillaise and God Save the King, before lunch was served in the pavilion. It was decorated with flags of all nations with prominence given to the French *Tricolore* and a long white pennant bearing the words "France welcomes Australian Commonwealth".

The Consul-General, Biard D'Aunet acted as chairman and host. There was yet no ambassador to the newly federated Commonwealth of Australia, which meant that he had a political role to play, extending his role further than that of responsibility to French citizens. This diplomat had over the years trodden very tactfully and carefully through the uneasy days of these near confrontations between Britain and France, mostly over claims for 'protectorates' in Africa. The new King, Edward VII was helping smooth the path by personally encouraging the signing of an *Entente Cordiale*.

The Consul-General honoured the distinguished guests, and particularly so by delivering the greater part of his speech in English, a lesson which Georges Playoust had still to learn. The Premier, Sir John See, who was English born, said in reply

*Living as closely as they did to the shores of France with so many mutual interests it would be a calamity of the worst description if a misunderstanding arose and involved Great Britain and France in war.*



oath in court, re-establishing divorce, ideas which some religious people did not accept.<sup>122</sup>

Georges Playoust would have learnt the quality of discretion from his boyhood under the autocratic regime of Napoleon III's empire, when dissenters were exiled or even imprisoned. Even under the Third Republic, Emile Zola found it wise to live secretly for a while in London when the Army sued him for libel.<sup>123</sup>

Under the Third Republic Georges had also observed how supple were certain local institutions in dealing with the rigidity of the early laws on secularising education, just as they had adapted under the changing regimes of the 19th century. He saw how his own ancient Collège de Tourcoing, when its existence was threatened by the withdrawal of state subsidies, had been rescued by private interests and turned into a private school almost overnight in order to provide the religious teaching certain people desired for their children.<sup>124</sup> Varied adjustments were made in a number of other religious schools in the region, for this Christian society felt the need to defend church and family from what they perceived as hostile values, but in the Département du Nord alone, 249 religious schools were closed.<sup>125</sup>

Georges Playoust appears as a convinced Republican who would have shared the original ideals of the Revolution. There was no strong feeling for royalty or for the aristocracy in the industrial north. On the National Day it was important to display unity. Playoust, despite his own beliefs, would have been expected on this official occasion to avoid the subject of religion altogether, yet he did not quite skirt round the subject. Perhaps his mention of the dawn of Christianity, of the early Christian King Clovis, then Saint Louis, who was also a King, though cloaked in the mantle of 'chivalry' may have been considered in Paris a bit close to the edge for a festive day celebrating the Revolution.

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<sup>122</sup> "Patrimoine Tourcoing Gustave Dron, Un homme une époque."

<sup>123</sup> "Transpontine: South London French Exiles (2): Emile Zola," *Transpontine*, January 15, 2010, <http://transpontine.blogspot.com.au/2010/01/south-london-french-exiles-2-emile-zola.html>.

<sup>124</sup> Anon. Patrimoine de Tourcoing Dossiers 'Ecole, écoliers'.

<sup>125</sup> Bonte. *Patron Textiles*, 48.



As for his claim of *défaut d'érudition*, (lack of erudition), this probably is false modesty, as a gentle way of opening a discourse, a technique possibly learnt at school. It seems that he had no tertiary education as he was recruited to the army at the age of 18 years, his profession listed as *commis négociant* - working in the office of a trading company. However, as he had grown up in a schoolmaster's household, books would have surrounded him, and he also completed his schooling at the respected Collège de Tourcoing, where his father taught. His schooling is described in the web site 'Archives de Tourcoing - Le Collège Communal'.<sup>127</sup> This speech given in Australia more than thirty years after leaving school appears as a direct exemplar of this system of education, complete with classical allusion.

This is possibly the most thoughtful of Georges Playoust's speeches, and has been given special attention as his expression of patriotism is far from the nationalism of sentiments expressed by others. His patriotic values as shown in this speech are closer to social justice and civic responsibility, together with nostalgia for his birthplace. Curiously, in this year of 1902, Edward Elgar composed the stirring music and the poet A.C. Benson composed the well-known words for *Land of Hope and Glory* played at the coronation of Edward VII the following month:

*Wider still and wider  
May thy bounds be set  
God who made thee mighty  
Make thee mightier yet*

These were far from Playoust's ideas on patriotism.

### **Military Service**

Georges Playoust remained intensely loyal to the Army, which was never far from his mind, particularly now as his sons were reaching the age where military service was required, and he would have been well aware of the risk of conflict ahead between European monarchies. At this stage his sons were granted 'sursis' (*deferral*) as they

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<sup>127</sup> Anon. 'Dossiers: Ecoles, écoliers: Collèges et lycées Le collège communal', *Dossiers Ecoles Ecoliers*, accessed 18 September 2013, <http://www.ville-tourcoing.fr/patrimoine/ecoles/communales.htm>.



of active service was reduced to 2 years. However on 7th August 1913, due to the growing menace from Germany, France extended the duration of active service to three years, to which Georges referred in a speech that year.

The young Georges Playoust was recruited in Lille in 1873 aged 18 under the Loi Cissey. This was the year in which German occupation after the Franco-Prussian war ended, though of course, Alsace and part of Lorraine remained under Germany's rule. He had been 15 years old during the Prussian invasion and occupation, an age when events such as these leave an enduring memory.

Georges and Joseph's personal particulars and military careers are described in detail in their *Fiches Militaires* which are available on the Internet, and referred to in Chapter 1.<sup>129</sup>

Georges was fortunate in his ballot result, only one year of active service instead of five, which enabled him to build up a worthwhile career. Businesses were accustomed to interruptions in their employees' availability and the young men could well have welcomed this physical break from office work, in this era without paid holidays. Hilaire Belloc, the Anglo-French writer, who performed his military service fifteen years after Georges Playoust, recalled "so much laughter and heavy work and pride of arms".<sup>130</sup>

Georges certainly was later to refer with nostalgia in his speeches about his time with the Regiment. During this time he married in August 1881, and six children were born before his first journey to Australia.

Amendments were made to recruitment laws in successive years, depending on the military situation in Europe, and for a time reducing their severity. On 21st March 1905, the year of the strict enactment of the separation of Church and State, the law eliminated 'tirage au sort', balloting, as an unequal selection method, and put an end to exemption for seminarists and students of the *grandes écoles*. This was a more

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<sup>129</sup> Further research is needed on individual *Carnets Militaires* for those who fell in 1914-18, as more information is gradually being released by the site *Mémoire des Hommes*.

<sup>130</sup> Hilaire Belloc. *The Path to Rome* (Project Gutenberg, 2009), 18, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/7373/7373-h/7373-h.htm>.



egalitarian idea of a citizen's army, sharing the responsibility of defending the country. At the same time it reduced the initial period service to three years.

However on 7th August 1913, due to the growing menace from Germany, France extended the duration of active service to three years, to which Georges referred in a speech that year. The principle of Conscription for Military service remained very alien to Australians, as evidenced by the defeat of a Referendum on Conscription at the very height of World War 1 in 1917.

### **1903**

Georges and Marie-Thérèse travelled to Marseille on the *FMS Polynésien* with two children, possibly the two youngest, Maurice and Roger, and a nurse.<sup>131</sup> Both of these boys would have been registered at the consulate like their brothers as French citizens, part of the census for military service at the appropriate age. They also had the benefit of being British Subjects as they were born in Australia. Could this be classified as immigration by stealth?

They returned to Australia on the *Ville de la Ciotat* together with "a contingent of French buyers who annually visit Australia for the wool sales".<sup>132</sup> Georges Playoust, who often acted as spokesman for his colleagues, gave an interview in Adelaide saying that all would be in Adelaide for the sales in a month's time.

*At least half a dozen other buyers would be out with the next steamer, and that the firms represented could take 100,000 bales of wool each season if it were procurable and so far as he gathered during his stay in France, the purchasing power of buyers there had not diminished.*

This was also reported in the Melbourne *Argus* on the 10th September 1903 and the *Sydney Morning Herald* of the same date. It would have been music to the ears of woolgrowers and far more appreciated than speeches about patriotism. These were indeed the golden years of the French-Australian wool trade, and the wool buyers were now a strong social and economic force in the cities. In 1905 Georges displayed

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<sup>131</sup> "Passengers by the F.M.S. Polynésien", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 16, 1903, 8.

<sup>132</sup> "South Australia, Adelaide, September 10", *The Mercury Hobart*, September 16, 1903, 3.



his confidence in the new nation by founding his own wool-buying firm to create a future for his sons. The direction of Henri Caulliez was left in the capable hands of his brother Joseph. In this move both men correctly prophesied a future for several of their sons in Australia. In the words of Gluck Schiller et al, at a later time, they have become transmigrants, in that they are linked to developments in global commerce and trade.<sup>133</sup>

Georges continued to be a large operator on the Sydney Wool Exchange, breaking the routine with train or ship journeys interstate. With his wide perspective, he involved himself usefully in wool trade committees.

*He played a big part in building up our market. He has done much to further the interests of our wool industry and has taken his share of labour in the legislative councils of our trade.*<sup>134</sup>

### **1905 Valedictory Banquet Biard D'Aunet**

The Consul-General of the time, Biard d'Aunet, appears at all these official occasions as an accomplished diplomat, well liked on the whole by Australian officials. The Consul was to leave Australia early in 1905 and was given a valedictory banquet by the French residents of Sydney at Paris House, the celebrated French restaurant in Phillip Street.<sup>135</sup>

Guests of honour included Mr G.H. Reid, now Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia, Commandant Barbie of the visiting French gunboat *Meurthe*, the ex- Lord Mayor of Sydney, Sir Thomas Hughes, and Sir William McMillan. Mr Reid's coalition government, still supporting the principle of Free Trade against much dissension from Victoria, was defeated by Alfred Deakin's motion of censure the following July.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton. "Transnationalism," 8.

<sup>134</sup> "M. Georges Playoust. Death in France. A French Patriot.", *The Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, November 8, 1918, 16.

<sup>135</sup> "Le Départ De M. Biard D'Aunet", *Le Courrier Australien*, February 4, 1905, 2-3.

<sup>136</sup> W.H. McMinn. "Australian Dictionary of Biography G.H. Reid" (adb.anu.edu.au, 1988), Vol. 11.



Georges Playoust was chairman, and with the serving of champagne, and accompanied by the Prime Minister, proposed the toast of His Majesty the King of England, and of M. Loubet, President of the French Republic (See Appendix 2).

This laudatory speech dealt with a safer subject than what was happening at the French National Assembly, where the anti-clerical movement was at its strongest point. In 1905, the Church was totally excluded from government by the Act of Separation enacted the Cabinet of Emile Combes - strict to the extent of banishing nursing nuns from hospitals.<sup>137</sup> This was followed by Church edifices being claimed as the property of the State, reverting to an ancient edict of the French Revolution.<sup>138</sup> From 1906 churches were subject to 'inventories', official searches for valuable religious objects, even if this required breaking open the tabernacles. Parishioners barricaded the portals of their churches to prevent this sacrilege, and violent clashes took place in different parts of France. Crowds gathered, some singing hymns, others the *Internationale*.<sup>139</sup> While certain wise priests and bishops had advised calm and restraint, there were many incidents in different regions of France including the predominantly Roman Catholic department of Le Nord. The law was enforced by the police or even the Army.<sup>140</sup>

Playoust could only have been deeply concerned by the local application of some of these laws when he visited Tourcoing and would have felt some conflict of loyalties. In his public speeches he felt it necessary, like the consul, to "*manoeuvre across the shoals of national sensitivities*". It was ironic that, as chairman of the official banquet, he toasted the health of the King of England and of the President of France, Emile Loubet, seconded by the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr Reid. Emile Loubet was of the radical-left and had been responsible for the appointment of Combes as Premier, and the ensuing affair of the inventories. However, Combes had signed the *Entente*

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<sup>137</sup> 'Patrimoine Tourcoing Gustave Dron, Un homme une époque'.

<sup>138</sup> "Encyclopédie Larousse En Ligne - Émile Combes", accessed April 18, 2015, [http://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/personnage/Émile\\_Combes/114192](http://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/personnage/Émile_Combes/114192).

<sup>139</sup> "Patrimoine Tourcoing Gustave Dron, Un homme une époque."

<sup>140</sup> Jean-Marie Mayeur. "Géographie de la résistance aux inventaires février-mars 1906" (Annales Economies Sociétés, 1966), [http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/ahess\\_0395-2649](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/ahess_0395-2649).



*Cordiale* the previous April, which made the champagne more acceptable to Ployoust.<sup>141</sup>

In Tourcoing not all the demonstrations had been in support of the Church. Some socialist factory workers had observed packets of wool and cotton protecting the church doors against the inventories, and blamed the textile manufacturers. They then ran riot through the streets, smashing windows in their factories and houses.

The climax was the death of a man in a small town near Lille, which caused a strong enough shock to bring down the government. These incidents so marked the French psyche that the word 'inventaires' itself is now immediately related to them. For example, *Le Petit Larousse, Dictionnaire Encyclopédique* 1980 defines the word 'inventaires' in the plural, as a historical term, and gives an account of these events.<sup>142</sup>

Even the army was affected during the episode of the *fiches de délation* - a card index system which identified those officers who were thought to have hostile opinions, even those seen attending Sunday mass, which could endanger their chances of promotion.<sup>143</sup> Unfortunately the reputation of the army had been sullied by the forged documents presented at the Dreyfus trial and blame was being cast everywhere. This issue was to bring down the Combes Government shortly before the enactment of the law of Separation of Church and State of December 1905.

A new moderate face appeared as Minister for the Interior, later to be a famous name in the Great War, Georges Clemenceau. Though he was a committed anti-clerical, he

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<sup>141</sup> "Britain and France Sign Entente Cordiale - History.com This Day in History - 4/8/1904." *History.com*, accessed October 23, 2013, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/britain-and-france-sign-entente-cordiale>.

<sup>142</sup> "Inventaire." in *Le Petit Larousse, Dictionnaire Encyclopédique* (Librairie Larousse, 1980), 498.

<sup>143</sup> Vincent Bernaudeau. "Justice, Politique et Franc-Maçonnerie sous la Troisième République: un conseiller à la Cour d'appel d'Angers, Victor Jeanvrot", *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle. Société d'histoire de la révolution de 1848 et des révolutions du XIXe siècle*, no. 26-27 (December 1, 2003): 201-26, doi:10.4000/rh19.745.



Mr Georges Playoust then took the floor, again speaking in French. See Appendix 2  
The key words in this speech were "*Alsace Lorraine with our beautiful dreams of revenge, alas unrealisable*", which may have been uppermost in this man's mind when he began his obligatory military service, only a few years after he had as a child endured the invasion and occupation of northern France by the Prussians.

Georges Playoust was now 55 years old, and possibly the succeeding generation was reviewing its ideas. He is resigned to the idea that there could be no real revenge without engaging in battle, and he did not promote this.

Alsace and parts of Lorraine had been annexed by the newly unified Germany, and those Alsatians who wanted to keep French nationality were exiled. These refugees brought back to France accounts of how the German language was being imposed, sometimes brutally, on those remaining. Bitterness on this issue of linguistic nationalism remained in France till 1914. Alsatians were also obliged to perform German military service and the resentment was such that in the Great War the German Government made sure Alsatians were sent to fight on the Eastern Front.

This had been a sombre and backward-looking speech, once again delivered to a group of men, and without the leavening of any Australian guests, but December brought an event which appeared to alter Georges Playoust's perspective: a joyous double wedding which was fulsomely described in the press.<sup>150 151</sup>

His eldest daughter, also Marie-Thérèse, but called Marie, married an Australian, Ernest Polin, and her younger sister Marguerite married a French wool buyer called Alfred Decouvelaere. There were ostrich feathers, voluminous bouquets, top hats and many people. The wedding took place at the parish church near their house in Milford Street, Randwick, which was crowded with guests and onlookers.

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<sup>150</sup> "Un Double Mariage a Sydney", *Le Courier Australien*, January 15, 1909, 4.

<sup>151</sup> "Social Notes", *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, January 5, 1909, 2.



The Paris House proprietor Gaston Liévain prepared a sumptuous wedding breakfast at St. James Hall where toasts were drunk to the two young couples. The Hon. John Hughes, Minister and representative of the government in the Upper House, and the brother of Thomas, the former Lord Mayor, proposed the toast of Mr and Mrs. Playoust, and Mr Playoust replied with a "moving little speech pronounced in beautifully turned English".

Perhaps this was the long awaited catalyst which gave Georges Playoust the confidence to forget the diffidence he felt about his French accent and to speak publicly in the English tongue, and so he was able to excel at the next 14th July National Feast Day.

### **1909 This Fairyland**

This is possibly the year in which Georges Playoust won the most friends for France by his rhetoric, for at last he spoke in English. The newspapers gave his speech their full attention, from the *Sydney Morning Herald* with the title of "This Fairyland", to the *Lismore Northern Star* and four different papers in Tasmania.<sup>152</sup> To quote the *Zeehan and Dundas Herald*:

*We sometimes think that we can put a pretty sentiment prettily. And then we hear a Frenchman speak, and know that we are just blundering Anglo-Saxons after all...*<sup>153</sup>

The occasion was the French National Day 'picnic' organized by the French Benevolent Society, which was for the first time held at Clifton Gardens, as it so happened, following the example of the German nationals. This was another of the 'pleasure gardens' lining the foreshores of Sydney Harbour but this site required a shorter ferry ride than Cabarita. About 300 people attended and the invited guests included the

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<sup>152</sup> "'This Fairyland.' Frenchmen in Australia. A Remarkable Speech.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 15, 1909, 6.

<sup>153</sup> "Untitled", *Zeehan and Dundas Herald*, July 23, 1909, 4.



His allusion to Alma and Inkerman was highly significant to people of his generation but he did not state that Russia was no longer the common enemy, as the *Triple Entente* between Russia, Britain and France was now in vigour.

The allusion to Australia as a 'fairyland', picked up by the sub-editors of the newspapers, was probably inspired by the name of 'Fairyland' given to the Clifton Gardens pleasure ground developed in 1883 by the owner of the 'Fairy Bower', a pleasure ground in Manly.<sup>154</sup>

Along with his accent, two small details would have shown the speaker to be French born:

- 'Arts, Literature, Sciences' where an English speaker would not have used the plural for 'Science'
- 'to show ourselves good citizens' is a French turn of phrase, translated literally from 'se montrer bon citoyens'
- 'French colony' with hindsight seems an inappropriate term, but the French among themselves commonly used it.

These small details did not detract from the wave of harmony conveyed by 'the final toast' to "the prosperity of France and Australia together, united by the cordial ties of friendships and sympathy."

### ***1909 Letter on the Wool Brokers Dispute***

It was twenty years since Georges Playoust had first arrived in Australia and he had now well and truly slipped into the Sydney business scene. In October the newspapers reported a 'Wool Deadlock', being a seemingly intractable quarrel between the Sydney wool brokers and the Sydney buyers. The dispute was serious enough to threaten postponing the wool sales throughout the country. The clip was a heavy one, wool

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<sup>154</sup> Godden Mackay Logan Consultants. "Clifton Gardens Reserve; Interpretation Plan and Design Study: Report Prepared for Mosman Municipal Council" (Mosman Municipal Council, November 2005), 11.



## **1911 National Day Speech**

The National Feast Day took place again at Clifton Gardens, which remained a popular venue, and this year there was the added stimulation of the presence of Mr W.A. Holman, Attorney General and acting Premier of NSW. He was known to be warmly disposed towards France, and had shown his interest by mastering the French language. Brigadier-General Gordon, Military Commandant of NSW, who was actively promoting the training of military cadets in the schools, was the other honoured guest. The population of Sydney was estimated as 629,503 by the 1911 census.

After the Acting-consul general's welcoming speech, Georges Playoust spoke to the gathering, again in English.<sup>157</sup> A full transcript is provided in Appendix 2.

In this speech, Georges foreshadows the impending war. Mr Holman responded and praised the *Entente Cordiale* of two great nations bound together, not for aggression but to maintain peace. General Gordon also praised the *Entente Cordiale*, and hoped for peace and prosperity. Both these men were demonstrating their anxiety about the closeness of War, as was Georges Playoust in alluding to "sacrifices needed to maintain the greatness of the Empire" which is almost a rallying cry. His remark about "the supply running short" was an unconscious foreboding of the future. His own sons were already performing their military training in New Caledonia.

It was the beginning of an important association between Georges Playoust and this Premier, who was later to give strong personal support to the wartime French-Australian League of Help, which Georges Playoust and his wife helped to found. There appeared to be no political dissension between the businessman and the Labour Party politician, nor did their ideas on society clash.

Like most of the Australian leaders whom Georges Playoust was now meeting, William Holman was born in England. He was the son of actors who emigrated to Australia, at

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<sup>157</sup> "Fête Nationale Française", *Le Courier Australien*, July 21, 1911, 2.



first living in precarious financial conditions, when young William was apprenticed to a cabinetmaker.

From humble beginnings his sharp intelligence and voracious reading led to a career in the law and politics, beginning as a radical socialist, then contributing the growing importance of the Labor party. His biographer, Bede Nairn, describes Holman in terms such as gregarious, emotional, compassionate, a skilled orator, a master of the French language and appreciative of French wines, all qualities which Georges Playoust would have found endearing.<sup>158</sup>

### **1912 Presentation to the Pioneers Club**

Georges Playoust and his family were now well settled into Sydney life, and his Australian friends extended his interests. He became a member of the New South Wales Club (anecdotal), a gentlemen's club who took a certain proportion of 'strangers'. This club merged in the mid-20th century with the Australian Club and the records of its early days were lost. These clubs, which were founded in the English tradition, were very much part of Sydney's social life at the time, and they facilitated men's social and business dealings.

According to its official Web site, The Australasian Pioneers Club was founded in May 1910 by Douglas Hope Johnston, a descendant of Lieutenant-Colonel George Johnston, the first officer ashore at Sydney Cove on 26th January 1788. Their aim was to foster mutual help and friendship amongst descendants of the pioneers, to foster the pioneering spirit in Australasia and to promote the study of history. It sponsors a History Prize at the University of Sydney and publishes a journal called *The Pioneer*.

By early 1911, the club had 300 members and their premises in Hunter Street were being considerably expanded, particularly as the qualification for membership was

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<sup>158</sup> Bede Nairn. "Holman, William Arthur (1871–1934)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Canberra: National Centre of Biography, Australian National University), accessed April 17, 2015, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/holman-william-arthur-6713>.



extended to include gentlemen descended from pioneers in the female line.<sup>159</sup> The club's unique collection of pioneers' portraits was being increased and the founding president hoped "*that it would become the national historical portrait collection of Australasia*".

The President of this newly founded club, Mr D. Hope Johnston, suggested to a member of the Pioneers Club, Mr J. Currie, who had many friends amongst the French residents, that he would appreciate a portrait of the French navigator, La Perouse, to be hung in the club's gallery alongside portraits of Australian pioneers (the scientific expedition of Jean-Francois de Galaup de La Pérouse and its tragic loss was recounted in the Introduction). Mr Currie Elles conferred with Mr Playoust who responded immediately, and gathered up a team of friends to contribute to the portrait.

The finished portrait, draped in the tricolour of France and suitably inscribed, was handed over ceremonially by this group, Messrs La Marand (Lamérand), Segur, Buissez, and Shard who were introduced by Sir Matthew Harris and Mr J. Currie Elles to the President of the club and a gathering of members. Georges Playoust spoke for the group and the newspaper reported his speech.<sup>160</sup> He expressed the thanks of the French residents of Sydney for the honour the club had done to them by including their great compatriot among the men who had done much to found this magnificent country.

He thought that La Pérouse was worthy of the honour they had paid him, for had fortune been less cruel, and had he been better supported, he might have achieved results not unworthy of England's great Captain Cook. Perhaps if La Pérouse had had more of the spirit of men like Drake, Raleigh and Cook and less of the sentiments of a savant and courtier of the old French nobility, a larger portion of the lands of the southern seas might have been theirs today. He paid a compliment to the colonizing

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<sup>159</sup> "Pioneers' Club. A Rapid Growth. More Historical Portraits.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 1, 1912, 3.

<sup>160</sup> "La Perouse Honoured. Presentation of a Portrait.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 5, 1912, 11.



genius of the British race, as evidenced by the splendid overseas dominions of India and Canada for the possession of which his country had made a bold bid.

Georges Playoust now gives the impression of being very relaxed in speaking English. He shows support for the ideas of the Third Republic on aristocracy. He praises Britain's colonising genius, though in his other speeches Britain is seldom mentioned.

He also uses the words "*to found this magnificent country*", and though this wording would be frowned on nowadays, it may also have reflected the attitudes on colonialism of his audience of pioneers, all admiring the colonisers, and ignoring the indigenous inhabitants.

It was certainly reflecting the ideas on colonialism of Jules Ferry, when Prime Minister of France during Third Republic. Ferry had defended his country's right as a superior race to establish colonies in the lands of inferior races, an idea contested by certain other republicans such as Georges Clemenceau who was faithful to the principle of the Declaration of Human Rights of 1789. Since then, ideas on Colonies have moved on. Such an exchange of ideas with influential citizens of a foreign country indicates growing transnationalism on Playoust's part.

Mr Hope Johnston in reply thanked the gentlemen for their gift, He felt strongly that La Perouse was fully entitled to a place among the great naval explorers of Australasia, Flinders and Bass, and by paying him this tribute they had honoured themselves.

The Pioneers Club nowadays does not have its own premises but shares the facilities and has reciprocity with the Union Club, an ancient gentleman's club founded in 1851, which at the time of writing, has merged with the University and Schools Club. The portraits are in storage.

### **1913 National Day Speech**



more relaxed and friendly, even intimate. He was realizing now that the grandiloquent phrases of the 19th century were no longer suitable to this audience, many of whom he knew personally.

Georges Playoust is working hard at his language and only small shades of difference with English are now perceptible, for example "*We have not been left to ourselves*" rather than 'by ourselves', then the use of the word '*forcibly*' in a place where a Frenchman would commonly use '*forcément*', and where an Australian would chose '*necessarily*'.

He uses "*self-love*" to mean 'amour-propre', not seeming to understand it has a different shade of meaning to 'self-respect'.

Now that he is speaking in English, he has resolved the difficulty of translating 'la mère patrie' which he now calls simply 'the motherland'.

The total number of French who were naturalized between 1892 and 1914 was 879 (Stuer). In the previous year, 1912, 59 French people had taken out naturalization papers according to Australian Bureau of Statistics. The Playousts had not become Australian citizens, but all the children born in Australia, once registered with the French consulate, acquired French citizenship, as well as being born as 'British subjects'.

He spoke now not only of France's proficiency in the arts, but alludes also to the brave aviators losing their lives. Pioneer aviators were greatly admired in France since the Frenchman Louis Blériot had been the first to cross the English Channel in 1909. The Playoust boys were keen followers and photographers of the numerous European air shows. Blériot developed his own aircraft. In Australia, in 1914 a Blériot monoplane was to be piloted by a French pilot, Maurice Guillaux, to carry the first airmail of some 2,000 specially printed post cards from Melbourne to Sydney.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Nelson Eustis. *50 Years of Australian Air Mails* / H.N. Eustis (Australia: [H.N. Eustis], 1964).



The "*unexpected military burdens*" referred to were the proposal to modify the French recruitment laws, which had been reduced to two years military service in 1905, were now to be extended to three years in 1913, in response to new threats from a greater Germany.

Georges Playoust is now seeing the problem through the perspective of his sons. Marcel turned twenty this year and had begun his military training in New Caledonia as Stéphane had done from 1909 to 1911. Maurice, still a schoolboy, marched through the streets of Sydney with his school cadets.

Georges Playoust's love for Australia is palpable in the closing paragraphs of this text, a country which made it possible to achieve friendship and success as a foreigner, after arriving in the country without any particular rank or privilege, and being able to live and educate his children well, in a sunnier and more cheerful climate than he had ever known. He also makes his political views apparent, not using 'democratic to the core' to imply 'socialist' as had Albert Métin, but rather describing his ideal system where 'every citizen can rise through the ranks' and 'Labour and Capital are not forcibly antagonistic'.

These views did not represent any later difficulties in relating to the Labor Premier, William Holman, who continued to give extraordinary support to the French cause. In fact in 1917 Holman was to be expelled from the Labor party with 17 other Labor Party members, mainly over the issue of Conscription, and he formed a new National Party and remained Premier till 1920.<sup>166</sup>

His spontaneity fades only in this paragraph:

*...a wave of patriotism swept over the whole territory. Numerous voices were heard through the medium of the press [...] voices of young men on the threshold of life [...] we don't like to spend the three best of our youth in military barracks, but if it is needed for the good and safety of the Fatherland..."*

The Germanic-sounding term 'Fatherland' almost implies that he is echoing here the grand words of the military leaders in all the countries of the several alliances, ideas he had heard

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<sup>166</sup> Nairn. "Holman, William Arthur (1871–1934)."



expounded in his military training and no doubt followed dutifully, but it is inconceivable that there should be no grumbling in the *caserne* [barracks] when an extra year of service was imposed. He found that the term *mère Patrie* used in the first part of his speech was not suitable in this context.

This three-year military service law proposed by the moderate Barthou ministry had been heatedly debated by the radical socialists, but was passed by the Chamber of Deputies on 19th July 1913 in the name of 'National Defence', not aggression.

### **1914 14th July National Day**

It was the very eve of War, but still the traditional picnic was held in Clifton Gardens. Georges Playoust was not present as he was crossing the Atlantic with his wife Marie-Thérèse and their son Stéphane on their way back to Australia.

Mr Holman, the Premier, was present with his wife, and his speech was reported<sup>167</sup> (See Appendix 2). Georges and Marie-Thérèse did not arrive back in Sydney till 16 September, to find the declaration of war had already scattered their household, as related in the following chapter.

### **1915 Speech for officers of the *Zélée* and the *Kersaint***

Georges returned to Sydney alone from Paris on 1 May 1915 by the *Mooltan* for a brief visit. The outward journey via Gibraltar took six weeks, taking the route least threatened by German submarines.<sup>168</sup>

He made his last speech in Australia at a dinner given to the officers of two French gunboats who were returning to France.<sup>169</sup> He proposed the toast of the French and

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<sup>167</sup> "Fete Day of France", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 15, 1914, 8.

<sup>168</sup> Letter from Jacques, 1 April 1915.

<sup>169</sup> "Dîner En L'honneur Des Officiers Français", *Le Courrier Australien*, May 21, 1915, 4.



Allied forces, using words, which were highly patriotic and very emotional for all. Mr Holman, the Premier, was a dinner guest, and at the time the Anzacs were fighting in the Dardanelles, as were the French.

The Great War had extended very quickly to the Pacific Ocean. These two small and ancient gunboats had been playing cat and mouse with ships of the Imperial German Navy, which were homeless and desperate since their former naval base of Tsing Tao on mainland China had fallen into Allied (Japanese) possession.

A detachment of 50 bluejackets from the man-o'-war *Kersaint* had recently headed a parade through Sydney streets of some 5,000 recruits to the Australian Imperial Expeditionary Forces. The Governor-General took the salute from a base in Macquarie Street, and conversed with the Premier on the apparent efficiency of the forces.<sup>170</sup>

The Consul-General, Mr Chayet, presided at the dinner and proposed the loyal toasts, followed by Georges Playoust who spoke entirely subjectively, displaying his own personal feelings. See Appendix 2. Playoust concludes in this way:

*Privileged we are tonight to be able to acclaim this double toast on the hospitable soil of New South Wales in the presence of the Premier, still under the warm impression of the glorious exploits of his children on the banks of the Dardanelles. To France, to the Allies, to Victory!*

Mr Holman was to give an address "Our debt to France" to the Sydney University Union on 24th September.<sup>171</sup> There are no more of Georges Playoust's speeches reported in Australia.

His language may seem very emotional to later generations, but he was a man of his own time and place. The British art of understatement would not have been understood by a French audience, or by himself. He was not exaggerating when he spoke of the sufferings of his own part of France, now under harsh German military occupation. His recent brief visit to Paris had given him a realistic idea of conditions in

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<sup>170</sup> "Military March and Parade. A Brilliant Pageant.", *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, April 27, 1915, 5.

<sup>171</sup> "Our Debt to France. Address by the Premier.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 25, 1915, 18.



the trenches, and from his own regimental experience he was well aware of what was ahead for his sons.

Before leaving Sydney Georges Playoust was invited to watch the huge procession opening Australia Day from its base in Macquarie Street, to where the Governor-General took the salute. This procession took 40 minutes to pass, and it encouraged the people of NSW to donate £300,000 in one day to provide comforts for Australian troops.<sup>172</sup>

Relations between France and Australia have never been closer than at this time, and Georges Playoust in his Sydney years had played an important part in establishing this harmony. Had the war and illness not intervened, he may well have spent his last days in Australia, where he had been welcomed so warmly, and where his children were happy to live. Playoust returned safely to Paris by the *Persia* on 7th August, saying he hoped to be back by Christmas.<sup>173</sup> The *Persia* was sunk the following year by a Turkish torpedo.

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<sup>172</sup> "The Base. Governor Takes the Salute.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 31, 1915, 13.

<sup>173</sup> "Personal", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 4, 1915, 12.



The early history of the Alliance Française in Paris, Melbourne and Sydney has been comprehensively researched and recounted by Ivan Barko<sup>174</sup> and Colin Nettelbeck<sup>175</sup> from whose works I have drawn, adding details from recently digitised newspapers.

Rather than recounting the pedagogic achievements of the Alliance as they did, I have taken a close focus view at the role of women, French and Australian, who were associated with the Alliance Française in its early years, and who participated then mostly in its social activities. A clear pattern emerges that a group of women, who shared common interests, worked together in the Sydney Alliance Française in the decade preceding World War 1, and then were to coalesce to become the active founders and administrators of an important charity formed in the early months of the Great War, the French-Australian League of Help. It is a continuous story, as it was again these same women who were dominant in the effort to rescue the enfeebled Sydney Alliance Française after the war.

The Sydney branch took off in the form of a library in 1896 and most of its books came from the Alliance headquarters in Paris.<sup>176</sup> This library, however, had been preceded by a private lending library of French books kept by Mme Juliette Henry, whose intriguing story can be pieced together from a detailed chronology in *Visions of a Republic*, a fine volume published to accompany a major exhibition on the art of Lucien Henry at the Sydney Powerhouse Museum.<sup>177</sup>

Born Juliette Lebeau, in France, Juliette Henry was exiled to the penal colony of New Caledonia as a political prisoner for her role in the Paris Commune. After her release she settled in Sydney, where she married Lucien Henry, an artist much her junior. Henry had also been a *Communard*, who had been freed after seven years of penal servitude in New Caledonia. After his arrival in Sydney, he established himself as an

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<sup>174</sup> Ivan Barko. "The Foundation and Early History of the Alliance Française of Sydney - Part 1," *Explorations*, no. 26 (April 29, 2010): 3.

<sup>175</sup> Colin Nettelbeck, ed., *The Alliance Française in Australia 1890-1990: An Historical Perspective* (Federation des Alliances Française en Australie inc., n.d.).

<sup>176</sup> Barko. "The Foundation and Early History of the Alliance Française of Sydney - Part 1," 8.

<sup>177</sup> Stephen. *Visions of a Republic*. 9.



Oral examinations were inaugurated for school children to test their ability to speak the language, and the help of French residents was enlisted. Prizes to be presented to the most successful students were displayed to the public in the library of the Consulate-General for France.<sup>182</sup>

An announcement was made that examinations for proficiency in writing and speaking, for people who wished to teach the French language in schools and universities, would be initiated under the authority and direct supervision of the Alliance Française.

Examinations would be held at the French Chamber of Commerce on November 1st 1900. This was in Bond Street Chambers, in the same building as the consulate. The Committee of the Alliance would nominate the examiners.<sup>183</sup>

The examinations would be in two degrees, open to male and female students. The first degree tested reading and translating elementary texts, the second tested superior knowledge of French literature, which would be required for teaching in schools. The examining committee consisted of a group of French residents including Dr. Emile Rougier, (formerly director of the Sydney Pasteur Institute), M. Brasier de Thuy, chief of the French shipping line, M. Aegenheyster, dealer of musical instruments, and M. Ségur. Meetings would be chaired by the Consul-General, M. Biard d'Aunet, who was keeping a tight rein on the management of these proceedings, and it was clear that he favoured a pedagogic rather than a cultural and social approach to the development of the Alliance in Sydney.

The results of the primary examinations were announced a few days later.<sup>184</sup>

Three candidates successfully passed the oral examinations, and one particular candidate received the mention *bien*.

Similar examinations were held in 1902 and were reported the following year in a comprehensive article headed "A Useful Institution - Encouragement to the Study of French" by M. L. Nettement, a consul *suppléant* (deputy), who had acted as secretary

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<sup>182</sup> "L'Alliance Française", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 24, 1900, 9.

<sup>183</sup> "The French Language and Literature", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 26, 1901, 9.

<sup>184</sup> "Alliance Française of Sydney", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 8, 1901, 7.



present, but without Lady Rawson, the *Présidente d'Honneur* of the ball, who was indisposed. There was a Cotillion 'danced in the Continental style' and a formal set of Lancers, the group dances of the time, in which His Excellency danced with the Lady Mayoress, M. Biard d'Aunet danced with Miss Rawson, M. Nettement danced with Mlle Soubeiran. The newspapers described in detail what all the ladies were wearing, how the hall was decorated, and who was there.<sup>193</sup>

In 1904 a significant meeting of the Alliance Française committee took place on 22 June, presided by M. Biard d'Aunet, the Consul-General. He had been what Georges Playoust, at M. d'Aunet's farewell dinner, had called "the soul and the zealous propagator" of the Alliance, but after 8 years he felt it was time for him to make way for others. He resigned as active President but would remain in the less dominant role of *Président d'Honneur* for the remaining six months of his time in Australia.<sup>194</sup>

M. Louis Nettement, the Consul *suppléant* (deputy), now took over as President of the Alliance Française, then gave an account of the requests which had been made to several ladies, suggesting that they organise social gatherings destined to facilitate the practice of conversing informally in French, and also to make the work of the Alliance better known. Accordingly, a *Comité de Dames* was constituted, at his request, to take the responsibility of organising several French soirées.<sup>195</sup>

This was a turning point for the Sydney branch of the Alliance. The following decade saw its social activities develop in the hands of this new ladies committee of French and Australian women, to be elected annually. Over the years this committee, as it evolved, became known as the *Comité des Soirées*, sometimes including men, and was quite distinct from that of the Alliance Française itself, which continued to provide a library and undertake examinations.

This initial social committee consisted of Lady McMillan, Mrs Aegenheyster, Mme Brasier de Thuy, Mrs T. Hughes, Mrs F. Learoyd, Mrs Alfred Lee, Mme Leverrier, Mme

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<sup>193</sup> "Alliance Française Ball", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 7, 1903.

<sup>194</sup> "Comité de L'Alliance Française de Sydney", *Le Courrier Australien*, July 2, 1904.

<sup>195</sup> "Soirée Française", *Le Courrier Australien*, July 23, 1904, 4.



Marie, Mme Rougier, Mme Ségur Mrs McCallum, Mrs Ashburton Thompson, Mme Georges Playoust, Mrs. Shard, Mme Paul Durand, and Mdllles [sic] Egan, McDonald and Soubeiran.

The names of these people are specified, as ten years later, in 1914, seven of these were to play a major part in the founding of the French-Australian League of Help, a large wartime charity which was to assume great importance in bilateral relations.<sup>196</sup> In the succeeding years, at least eight others from the Alliance social committee went on to become office bearers in the FALH in 1914-18.<sup>197</sup>

The first of these informal evenings on 15th July 1904 was convened by the new 'Ladies Committee', who, together with members of the Alliance Française, invited the public to an "Entertainment", to be given at Baumann's new rooms in Pitt Street.<sup>198</sup> "*Causerie et Musique*" [Conversation and Music] was inscribed on the invitation cards. Mlle. Yvonne Leverrier, who had recently returned from her European musical training, would give a piano recital, to be followed by recitations. Two committee members were given responsibility for the evening, and their role was to welcome guests in the ballroom and speak to them in either language, adding warmth to the ambience of the gathering of about 200 people.

In this pre-war decade the Sydney newspapers reported a series of less formal functions in their social pages, describing varied programmes and listing names within the amicable Franco-Australian groups that were forming. Far less formal than the inaugural Ball, these evenings were welcoming and friendly, open to all who would buy a ticket. Members were admitted free, or tickets could easily be bought in various places in the city. According to the 1901 census the population of Sydney and suburbs had been just under 500,000, but by the next census in 1911 it had grown to well over 600,000.

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<sup>196</sup> Brazier de Thuy, Learoyd, Lee, Leverrier, Playoust, Soubeiran, Ségur.

<sup>197</sup> Gurney, Jewett, Lamérand, Randal Carey, Holman, Mayman, Pognon, McMillan.

<sup>198</sup> "Social. Alliance Entertainment.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 16, 1904, 9.



An advertisement was placed in the *Sydney Morning Herald* setting out the conditions of membership that could be obtained via the Consulate for France, 2 Bond Street, also stating the costs:<sup>199</sup>

*The annual subscription of £1 covers:*

1. *Membership of the Alliance Française*
2. *Use of the Lending Library of 2,000 volumes*
3. *Use of the library reading room*
4. *Admission to the soirées and lectures Free, with the privilege of introducing friends for 2/6d per ticket.*

These were very welcoming words to those who hesitated to become members, perhaps intimidated by a frequent vice-regal presence or by that of other prominent people. This was not a desirable reputation for the Alliance to acquire, and later articles were to stress the welcome that guests could expect from the hostesses.

### **Entente Cordiale**

Running parallel with the social events were the regular examinations and prize-givings established by the Alliance Française, which encouraged teaching of the French language. French residents offered help in undertaking oral examinations. In itself this encouraged better understanding between two nations, now more compatible in their political views since the signing of the *Entente Cordiale* in 1904.

The executive committee of the Alliance Française (not the social committee) met on 17th March 1910 and elected a new executive with a strong input from women. Mlle Soubeiran was elected president and Lady McMillan as vice-president with the Consul-general M. Frandin acting as *Président d'Honneur*.<sup>200</sup>

This *Entente* was celebrated at a *soirée artistique et littéraire* presided by the French Consul-General, M. Pinard, held now at St. James' Hall before an audience of about

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<sup>199</sup> "Alliance Française Sydney Branch", *The Sydney Morning Herald* November 17, 1906, 2.

<sup>200</sup> Barko. "The Foundation and Early History of the Alliance Française of Sydney - Part 1," 19.



The soirées were now taking a theatrical bent and it appeared that Pierre Durieux, later to become President of the Alliance, had a genuine flair for the stage. The plays were sometimes the fashionable farces of the period, though partial versions of more serious works were also produced. The actors were often Australians. These were generally light-hearted evenings, ending in music and dancing, and so attracted a number of young people, fulfilling a real need in these pre-cinema and television times.

Another soirée attended by about 400 people at St. James' Hall presented the first act of a recent play by Edmond Rostand, "*Les Romanesques*" based on a thirteenth century musical fable telling the story of Aucassin and Nicolette. It was "brightly and well given by Mlle. Ruse, Mr Cedric Cohen, M. S. Stiles and M. Jacques Playoust."<sup>205</sup>

One of the succeeding Alliance events which included fencing foreshadowed the coming war, when. Dr Roth, Messrs A. Wunderlich and Wright gave an excellent "*assaut d'armes*" which the audience followed with "rapt attention". Dr Roth was the victor.<sup>206</sup> Dr Roth, otherwise Lieut. Colonel Roth DSO had the advantage as a swordsman of being the Chief Military Health Officer for New South Wales.

Mademoiselle Soubeiran was to receive one more honour, which was celebrated by a large French-Australian group:

*A pleasant gathering took place at the Australia Hotel yesterday afternoon when Madame Georges Playoust gave an enjoyable 'at home' [sic] and invited a large number of friends to be present on the occasion of the presentation of the grand medal of the Alliance Française, Paris to Mlle Soubeiran. Madame Playoust received her guests in the large drawing room and standing by her side was the guest of the afternoon who was warmly congratulated.*<sup>207</sup>

In his speech M. Armand said how much pleasure he had in presenting the highest honour they could confer on anyone. Pr David, Mr Playoust, and Mr Weigall paid high

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<sup>205</sup> "Social", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 18, 1910, 8.

<sup>206</sup> "Alliance Française de Sydney", *Le Courrier Australien*, July 5, 1912, 4.

<sup>207</sup> "Social", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 24, 1911, 4.



tribute and extolled not only the great work she had done for the Alliance, but also her great personal worth and charm. There was a song recital and a harp solo to add to the enjoyment.

This gathering was also recorded in the history of Kambala.<sup>208</sup>

In 1913 at the annual meeting of the *Comité des Soirées*, the following were elected:

*President*            *Madame Georges Playoust.*  
*Vice Presidents*   *Lady McMillan, Mrs Shard, Mr Alfred Lee, Mrs Reichenbach*  
*Hon Treasurer*   *Mrs Randal Carey*  
*Hon Secretary*   *Mrs Arthur Jewett*

Mme Playoust, Mrs Jewett, Mrs Lee and Mrs Shard were to be elected to perform exactly the same roles as office bearers within the French-Australian League of Help after its establishment the following year. Mrs. Randal Carey was to be appointed a member the FALH Committee and Mr Reichenbach and Lady McMillan on the 1917 France's Day Appeal.

The members of the Alliance Française gave their first soirée of the season on Monday 21<sup>st</sup> April and the audience was larger than ever before. A great deal of French was spoken. The audience included a number of wool buyers, as well as the familiar names of Learoyd, Jewett, Miss Gurney and Mlle Soubeiran.<sup>209</sup> Mr and Mrs. Neville Mayman were among the guests.<sup>210</sup> Mr Mayman, had been appointed president of the Benevolent Society of New South Wales in March 1913.<sup>211</sup> He was later to bring his considerable expertise to the FALH.

Such was the tight little group of Australians and French then helping to keep the Alliance alive. There were several more Alliance soirées but the participants went into quieter mode as world events took over. While contributing to the success of the

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<sup>208</sup> Hawthorne. *Kambala - A History*.

<sup>209</sup> "Social", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 26, 1913, 6.

<sup>210</sup> "St. James Hall First Soiree", *Sunday Times*, May 4, 1913, 27.

<sup>211</sup> "The Home Circle", *Sunday Times*, March 2, 1913, 21.



After the declaration of war, the British Red Cross encouraged a movement creating sewing circles in Australia, to send clothing to the victims of the German invasion of Belgium and France. Sewing circles soon became the norm in all the Australian state capitals as well as country towns. This was an age when most women were skilled in needlecraft and accustomed to helping out in emergencies, so they responded with enthusiasm to various Red Cross appeals to participate in workshops.

Belgium suffered very rapidly from the attack, when villages were burnt as the Germans speedily advanced. Moves to send aid were made early in Sydney by the Belgian Honorary Consul, J. Balthazar, a wool buyer associated with a French firm, Wenz and Co. Belgian buyers in French firms were not unusual as the borders between the two nations were rather blurred, particularly in the wool trade. He had assembled a quantity of clothing, packed in his office to send to Belgian civilians who were now homeless. People associated with the wool trade rallied immediately to co-operate, sending money and gifts in kind to the Belgian Clothing and Relief Fund. The rooms of the Belgian consulate served to establish a sewing circle, manufacturing garments from donated bales of grey flannel.

By September Paris was in danger, only saved by a battle checking the enemy north of the Marne River. Further to the north, the enemy was almost at the gates of Lille, the great conurbation now encompassing the industrial towns of Roubaix and Tourcoing, home to many of the wool buyers. The great Gothic Cathedral of Rheims had been bombarded by the Germans, lighting a fire that caused great damage.<sup>213</sup> The military casualty lists were such, that help to newly widowed with their orphaned children was urgently required and funds were now needed.

A concert to raise money for the French Red Cross was held at the Town Hall on 17 October 1914, almost an extension of the Alliance Française soirées of the past, for it was arranged by men and women with the now familiar names. The audience included the Premier, Mr Holman, the Governor's daughters, the French and Belgian consuls, and schoolgirls from Kambala. There were *tableaux vivants*, representing England and

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<sup>213</sup> "Un des Plus Grands Crimes de L'Histoire", *L'Illustration*, July 26, 1914.



the Allies. A Pageant of Nations passed down the centre aisle to the stage where Mr Malcolm McEacharn sang the *Marseillaise* and *Rule Britannia*.<sup>214</sup> During the interval Georges Playoust used his talents of oratory to stimulate the audience's participation in an auction. Inspired by this fervent appeal the audience responded by paying £670 to buy flags and photos, helping to reach a fund-raising record. At the final meeting of the French Red Cross Committee it was decided to cable £1,600 to the President of the French Red Cross Society at no cost, through the good offices of the French Bank.<sup>215</sup> Patriotism was its very height throughout the community.

A useful Australian idea to clothe soldiers in the trenches in the coming winter was to make warm sleeveless vests from shorn sheepskins, and meetings were held in the country to ask graziers to donate skins. Arrangements had been made with Dalgety and Co. to forward these to the War Office. Appeals were made for money to buy vests to be sent to the British Red Cross. Mlle Soubeiran ordered 50 vests to be sent to the French Red Cross in London.<sup>216</sup>

Mme Brasier de Thuy, now living in London, was now to act as honorary distributing agent for the French Red Cross, together with her husband.<sup>217</sup> They had lived for many years in Sydney when he represented the Messageries Maritimes, through which French buyers shipped their wool. Six shipments of clothing were sent directly to the French Red Cross as it was already functioning near the front.

### **Establishing the League**

The two Playoust families were deeply involved in the French patriotic fund from the outset, working alongside French and Australian friends. As their sons had responded immediately to their military summons, the women expressed their patriotism in a

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<sup>214</sup> "Vive la France! Last Night's Patriotic Concert." *Sunday Times*, October 18, 1914, 13.

<sup>215</sup> "French Red Cross Society", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 4, 1914, 12.

<sup>216</sup> "Sheepskin Clothing for Troops", *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, November 7, 1914, 4.

<sup>217</sup> Soubeiran Augustine. *Complete Resumé French-Australian League of Help Resumé 1914 to September 1916* (Mitchell Library State Library NSW, 1916).



a) A small printed and published report of 7 pages named ' French-Australian League of Help, Complete Résumé of League's Work December 1914-September 1916'.<sup>220</sup>

b) *French-Australian League records, 1917-1921*, which were the personal papers of Augustine Soubeiran.<sup>221</sup>

The 'Résumé' rewards careful examination, as it appears to be the only existing document concerning the first seven months of this charitable institution. Its cover is reproduced in Appendix 4.

The printed address is 113 Pitt Street, Sydney, amended in pencil to 321 Pitt St. It lists office bearers on the front page. Among the Patrons is the name of Mme G. Playoust, who was the initial co-President in Sydney with Mr Holman till Mme J. Playoust (Blanche) replaced her.

In the margin of page 2, in pencil, is added "17.10.16 don. Sec". This can only be Mrs Jewett or Mlle Soubeiran, listed as such with other office-bearers on the cover pages. There are also pencilled amendments to the number of bales of garments sent in handwriting that resembles Mlle Soubeiran's.

The text begins with:

*"The story of the founding of the F.A.L. of H. is too well known to need repeating. Enough to say that those at the initial meeting worded a constitution which put no limit on the Society's power."<sup>222</sup>*

It continues with a message from the French Red Cross in London concerning gifts from the League, and a list of the organisations to which gifts had been sent, followed by a description of the workshops in town and country that provided the gifts. Four small printed pages describe the four major charitable agencies in France through which the

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<sup>220</sup> Soubeiran Augustine. *Complete Resumé*.

<sup>221</sup> Soubeiran and Foch. "French-Australian League Records, 1917-1921."

<sup>222</sup> Soubeiran Augustine. *Complete Resumé*, 7.



FALH distributed its donations before September 1916, more than a year before their recruitment to a newly formed Paris Committee of the FALH.

The text ends with an acknowledgement of the work performed by M. and Mme Brasier de Thuy "who have from the very first day have seen to the safe arrival in London of the bales, and the forwarding of our bales to their different destinations." On page 6 and 7 is a letter from Paris to Mlle Soubeiran in Sydney dated June 1915, the previous year, from Madame la Générale Michel, President of the Society of Help for Mothers and Orphans. The opening lines read:

*I have just had the great pleasure of seeing Madame G. Playoust, and she strongly advises me to write to you in the hope of interesting you and the members of your Committee in the cause dearest to my hearts than any other just now - the saving of our children.*

Augustine Soubeiran's second donation to the State Library of New South Wales was a box of her personal papers concerning the response to her final distributions of the proceeds of the two France's Day appeals.<sup>223</sup> This includes a number of letters of thanks from such people as General Joffre and the Archbishop of Rheims. Her own letter to the library offering the gift is included, and is an illustration of her handwriting.

Almost the only other available sources of information for the early days of this patriotic fund are articles in abundance from newspapers such as the *Courrier Australien*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Sunday Times*, various regional papers, and 'Punch', Melbourne,<sup>224</sup> all well-supplied with information resulting from Mlle Soubeiran's skills in public relations. Classifying and analysing these small but multiple sources were to reveal a strong input from the Australian committee of the Red Cross and the NSW Benevolent Society. The whole history of the League depends on a tapestry of miniscule threads.

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<sup>223</sup> Soubeiran and Foch. "French-Australian League Records, 1917-1921."

<sup>224</sup> A Melbourne magazine based on the British 'Punch'.



A strong committee was appointed with power to add to the number: Mesdames Moreau, J.J. Rouse, Mackinnon, Villeval, King-Salter, L. Dodds, Kirkland, Millner, V. Haigh, G. Antill, G. Marshall, Kendall, Roth, Learoyd, Mesdemoiselles Chautard, de Baillou, Randal Carey, Pognon, Walker, Pickard and Leverrier, and Mr du Boisé.<sup>227</sup>

Mr Holman remained Premier of New South Wales throughout the war and he and his government gave consistent support to this cause. Significantly, both he and Mr Braddon were also associated with the board of the long established Australian Benevolent Society and offered to the League their experience and skill in managing charitable funds. Their participation in the League's affairs underpinned the whole enterprise.

Georges and Joseph Playoust held great influence in the wool trade, and both men and their wives, Marie-Thérèse and Blanche, continued to work for this Fund till its conclusion.

Mrs Alfred Lee was now a prominent member of the Red Cross Society and the head of the Lady Mayoress's Sewing Guild, directing its 2,000 workers. Mrs Walker, usually known as Mrs C. Le Maistre Walker, was a notable charity worker.<sup>228</sup> Miss Gurney and Mlle. Soubeiran, the founding co-principals of Kambala were invaluable recruits to the team, being experienced in management and accustomed to dealing with official institutions, as well as the press.

Many of these men and women had worked together in the past for the Alliance Française, but this was to become a much more intense commitment for the next four years. Cheques were received within days of this meeting and the donors were acknowledged, often bearing the same names as the guest lists of the old Alliance Française soirées.

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<sup>227</sup> "French-Australian League of Help", *Le Courrier Australien*, January 1, 1915, 4.

<sup>228</sup> "Mrs E.G. Le Maistre Walker", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 7, 1935, 22.



there) they were advised to put the movement on an official basis. This, with the aid of Mr C.A. Le M. Walker, has been done. A public meeting was arranged at the Hotel Australia on Dec. 22, at which Monsieur Chayet, Mr W.A. Holman, and Mr H.Y. Braddon, and Mrs McKinnon made brilliant speeches, launching the movement successfully [...] Depots will be opened on Monday, Jan 4, at the offices of Monsieur Joe Playoust, 33 Pitt Street, and 321 Pitt Street, second floor) for the receiving of new clothing.<sup>232</sup>

This careful piecing together of newspaper reports proved its worth in observing the influence of responsible charitable institutions, such as the NSW Benevolent Fund and the Red Cross in administering the League, but sometimes there are errors. During one of Mlle Soubeiran's fund-raising tours of New South Wales, the *Tamworth Daily Observer*, of the 29<sup>th</sup> November 1916, referred to her as "the original founder of the League".<sup>233</sup> Metropolitan newspapers passed on this error so that in time this erroneous notion travelled as far as Mlle Soubeiran's obituary and her entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.<sup>234</sup> The events related in the preceding pages make it clear that the League was founded by a group, and not by any one person.

It must be emphasised that Mlle Soubeiran played an essential part in the success of this remarkable patriotic fund.

### 1915 The Workrooms

The activities of the new League began on a positive note:

*A central Depot has been opened at 321 Pitt Street, Sydney in charge of Mrs Le Maistre Walker and a staff of French ladies who will receive and give outwork there daily from 10 to 4. Material ready for making various articles of clothing can be obtained on application. Workers are invited.*<sup>235</sup>

and

*Two depots are open for work. One at the War Chest Office, Macdonnell House, Pitt Street is open daily. The depot at M. J. Playoust's at 33 Pitt Street is open twice weekly. M. Boggio is arranging for country depots.*<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> "Patriotic Funds French-Australian League of Help", *Sunday Times*, January 3, 1915, 7.

<sup>233</sup> "Leaves from a Week's Diary", *The Tamworth Daily Observer*, November 29, 1916, 4.

<sup>234</sup> G. E. Sherington. "Soubeiran, Augustine (1858-1933)", in *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Canberra: National Centre of Biography, Australian National University), accessed April 2, 2015, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/soubeiran-augustine-8586>.

<sup>235</sup> "French-Australian League of Help", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 9, 1915, 14.

<sup>236</sup> "The Newest League of Help", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 6, 1915, 5.



*The league has despatched eight large bales of clothing by the steamer Mooltan.*<sup>239</sup>

and

*A shipment, comprising 2000 warm garments of various descriptions, was made from the depot of Madame J. Playoust per R.M.S. Moldavia this week. Included in the shipment were a large number of boys' trousers and warm shirts, for which there is a great demand.*<sup>240</sup>

and

*Two large consignments are leaving this week by the R.M.S. Egypt, one addressed to the French Red Cross, London, and the other to the Mayor, of Vauxbuin (near Soissons) for his distressed villagers. This latter comprises over twelve hundred articles of clothing now being packed by Madame Joseph Playoust and a number of willing helpers, and will prove of the utmost use for the relief of the unfortunate villagers.*<sup>241</sup>

Other workshops staffed by volunteers were also set up in different parts of Sydney and the movement spread to country towns. With greater skills, the quality of the clothes improved, and they were shipped fortnightly by P & O in ever increasing quantities till the last year of the war. Care was always taken to ensure by each individual label that each gift came from "friends in Australia".

### **Fundraising**

The League's workshops soon took on industrial dimensions, and funds were badly needed to purchase more fabrics. The wool trade milieu found an original way to help financially. A bale of wool was donated to the League by a Mr P. McWilliam and then sold by auction in an incident that made interstate headlines.

*A bale of wool scoured by Mr P. McWilliam, of Botany, was sold this afternoon at the wool sales, and realised over £500, on account of the French-Australian Patriotic League. The bale was sold 28 times, prices ranging from £10 to £26. After this it was purchased by the Sydney woollen mills at 18 1/2 pence per lb.*<sup>242</sup>

Further, as translated from the report, in French, in *Le Courrier Australien*

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<sup>239</sup> "French-Australian League", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 25, 1915, 10.

<sup>240</sup> "French-Australian League of Help", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 6, 1915, 16.

<sup>241</sup> "French-Australian League", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 19, 1915, 8.

<sup>242</sup> "Patriotic Wool Buyers. Bale of Wool Realises £500.", *The Tamworth Daily Observer*, February 23, 1915, 2.



*After having paid for three ambulances and their outfitting and having reserved £1,000 for the winter season, the society had, thanks to generous gifts including the magnificent present of the wool buyers, a sufficient sum available to pursue its work and to dispatch a large amount of clothing for the soldiers, the women and children.*<sup>243</sup>

Old friends in the wool trade never flagged in their support of the League. A letter had appeared in the *Sydney Wool and Stock Journal*, a paper favoured by graziers, from Harry Austin, a leading wool buyer, stating that the FALH was short of funds and needed support from the journal's columns to *bring* the matter before the growers by opening a subscription list. He had launched the one year appeal very early with his own donation of £50 on 13 August 1915, which was followed over time by many others. Australians were reminded that in the last 10 wool seasons before the war, France had been her chief customer no less than six times.<sup>244</sup> Very large donations followed, particularly from the Wool Buyers Association, the Wool Brokers and the Bank of New South Wales.

The date of July 14th, the French National Day of the following year of 1916, was chosen for the presentation in a grand ceremony in the stepped rows of seats at the Wool Exchange. Mr Giles, Chairman of the Wool buyers Association spoke grandiloquently in the vein of Georges Playoust to an audience largely of supporters of the FALH and of senior wool buyers and brokers beyond the age of military service. These men were still in employment as appraisers of the entire wool clip, which had been taken over by the government. Mr Giles presented a cheque for £3,224 to Madame Joseph Playoust, President of the FALH.<sup>245</sup>

Blanche asked Mlle. Soubeiran to respond on her behalf. She spoke at length, also looking ahead to the aftermath of the war, and asking for further understanding of France's lasting problems from this war, fought largely on her own territory.

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<sup>243</sup> "French-Australian League of Help", *Le Courier Australien*, March 5, 1915, 4.

<sup>244</sup> "The Franco-Australian League. To the Editor of the Sydney Wool and Stock Journal.", *The Sydney Wool and Stock Journal*, August 13, 1915, 5.

<sup>245</sup> "French-Australian League of Help. Handing Over the Wool Trade Cheque.", *The Sydney Wool and Stock Journal*, July 21, 1916, 8.



It remains surprising that Blanche Playoust did not respond herself to the generous tribute from Mr Giles and to Mr Moore's affectionate references to her family. This indicates the reality of her problem in public speaking in English, though she had been in Australia for most of the last 25 years. Her Strathfield household was a large one to manage, with six of her nine children still at home, but the thought of her two sons at the front remained an incentive for her consistent diligence in the physical activities of the workshops. She continued to preside at their meetings till the final days of the charity.

Mlle Soubeiran's considerable talents now came to the fore. She was a prolific letter writer and had found a new way of attracting donations from a wider cross-section of the public, that of contributing the equivalent of a loaf of bread, which could be bought for 4 pence. Four pence in those days was the equivalent of 3.33 cents in today's decimal currency, which makes a telling contrast with the cost of a loaf today. For a more valid way of calculating, see the footnote.<sup>246</sup>

Mlle Soubeiran wrote a forceful letter of thanks to the President of the Red Cross Society in Goulburn which merited reprinting in full in that city's newspaper, and helped establish its writer as the public face of the League:

*25 March*

*I would call your attention to our Loaf Fund, which was really suggested by a little Australian girl - so distressed that she had only one to give. It is a marvellous thing which just 4 pence may do when it represents a loaf of good bread and little short of magic to think that the money we cabled today may even now be feeding the hungry children in northern France - even one penny helps, and who with peace and a good time, cannot spare it. I recommend the fund to your Goulburn children's care.<sup>247</sup>*

Much interest and good will was generated by the Loaf Fund, which was reported in

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<sup>246</sup> The Retail Price Index Numbers Table is used to calculate past money values in terms of today's dollar: [http://inflationdata.com/Inflation/ConsumerPrice\\_Index/HistoricalCPI.aspx?reloaded=true](http://inflationdata.com/Inflation/ConsumerPrice_Index/HistoricalCPI.aspx?reloaded=true). The index number of the current or latest year is divided by index number of year in question. Before 1966 10 shillings (1/2 £) = \$1 (the 2014 index was not available at the time of writing). See <http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/ecocom/giblinfaq.html>.

<sup>247</sup> "French-Australian League Loaf Fund", *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, March 25, 1915, 3.



the press, using this wholesome and quasi biblical metaphor of a loaf of bread for small donations.

### **Fund-raising 'Days'**

After the Anzacs had landed in the Dardanelles, the casualty lists were such that Australians now preferred to contribute to the many existing Australian patriotic funds. It was wiser for the funds to co-operate rather than compete. Mindful of this, the FALH agreed to follow Mr Holman's advice and forego its effort on July 14th, the National Day, and join in the 'Australia Day' appeal. From this time, a succession of fund-raising 'Days' were held in which the various patriotic funds co-operated.

A meeting of the French-Australian League of Help committee was held in September 1915 to discuss plans for 'Allies Day' in which the League would play a prominent part. Madame Playoust was in the chair, and two speakers, Mr Neville Mayman and Mr Percy Hunter, spoke of the work involved.<sup>248</sup> Mr Mayman's name is now appearing in the press in association with the League. He was yet another of those who had attended Alliance Française soirées in 1913. He was in the future to offer sound advice to the League, based on his experience with the Sydney Benevolent Society.

The League's role in 'Allies Day' was to create and man a stall in Martin Place, which was highly profitable and the benefits were also to include the League. Though most military activity ceased in the French winter, the trenches in the Front were still manned despite the cold, the mud and the rats. Many civilians had been made homeless by the fighting and their need for clothing was endless.

### **1916 Distributions in Paris**

From Paris, Marie-Thérèse Playoust remained in touch with the League in Sydney, and sent a collection of war trophies, crosses, rings, and brooches etc. made out of German shells, and glass from the windows of Rheims Cathedral. They were made by the

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<sup>248</sup> "Allies' Day. French-Australian League's Help.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 14, 1915, 8.



soldiers in the trenches or wounded in hospitals. Messrs Flavelle Bros. in Sydney offered to sell them for the League.<sup>249</sup>

Several societies listed in the *Résumé* supported the many new orphans created by the casualties in the battles of the Somme and Verdun. Mme Frank Puaux, President of the '*Enfants Victimes de la Guerre*' in Paris, wrote to the League, painting a vivid picture of the sufferings of children near the front, asking directly for a gift of £500 for a house adjoining an existing orphanage, which would be called '*Australie*' in remembrance of the League's generosity. '*Australie*' was duly bought and it flourished, aided by grants from the League into the 1920s.<sup>250</sup> Madame Puaux later wrote:

*As I write to you, I have visited Australia House, seen its rows of white beds and in them rows of little fair and dark heads resting after a day on the shore in the sun. I gathered the children round me on the sands and told them of the Australian friends to whom they owe this beautiful home.*<sup>251</sup>

Madame Puaux was recruited to become a member of the League's Paris committee of distribution in 1917.

## Nurses

A group of twenty Australian trained nurses, who had volunteered to work for the Australian army in France were welcomed and honoured in the League's rooms on the day of their departure, together with a number of guests. Each of the nurses was called forward to be presented with a practical kit bag of leather and a cordial handshake from Madame Playoust and Mlle Soubeiran. Mlle. Soubeiran delivered a graceful speech.

Though Blanche Playoust was reluctant to speak publicly in English, this time she succeeded, saying that they could do so little in Australia to compensate France for her suffering, but they could cordially appreciate the work of those who were going to help. The League hoped that they would have a happy voyage, and that they would

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<sup>249</sup> "Woman's Page", *Freeman's Journal*, January 20, 1916, 26.

<sup>250</sup> "French-Australian League of Help", *Sunday Times*, May 9, 1915, 7.

<sup>251</sup> "French-Australian League of Help", *Morning Bulletin*, February 14, 1917, 7.



frequently hear from them and of their work in France. They hoped that their services would not be required for long and that it would be only a few months before they were back again.

### **France's Day 1917**

It was now the FALH's turn to be assigned a dedicated 'Day'. A crowded meeting was held in the vestibule of the Town Hall to plan for this important event for the League, which would be called 'France's Day' to be held on 14 July, the French National Day.

Augustine Soubeiran spoke of the aims of the League:

*We are appealing for the little children who place flowers on the graves of Australian soldiers as they do on the graves of their own fathers; these children are the hope not only of France but of the world.<sup>252</sup>*

This was to be a very grand occasion, for which the patronage of the Prime Minister and the Governor was granted.

The committee for France's Day was to consist of:

President d'Honneur, The Consul-General M. Chayet

President Mr Neville Mayman

Secretaries: Mrs Arthur Jewett, Messrs Joseph Playoust, Sant

Treasurers: Miss Gurney, Messrs Braddon, Shard

Executive Committee: Lady Mayoress, Mme Playoust, Lady McMillan,

Mesdames Durieux, Fombertaux, Higinbotham, Learoyd, Lamerand, Moreau, du Boise, Eadith Walker, Lee.

Mr Mayman as President was to prove a valuable asset to the League, particularly for his experience in the wise disbursement of money. Since 1913 he had been a President of the Benevolent Society, Australia's oldest charity, a non-sectarian group that had opened the Renwick Hospital for Infants. He had shown a special interest in public health in relation to children. He was sent to New Zealand as a Commissioner by the government of New South Wales to enquire into the methods used by the government and other private organisations for the reduction of infant mortality.

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<sup>252</sup> "France's Day. The Debt We Owe.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 15, 1917, 6.



The Premier, Mr Holman, had been closely involved with the Benevolent Society himself, and knowing Mr Mayman's qualities, may well have recruited his help for the League. Efforts were made immediately to extend the appeal beyond Sydney. A France-Queensland league was formed to solicit the cooperation of public bodies in Queensland to participate in France's Day and an article in the *Brisbane Courier* gave them good publicity.<sup>253</sup>

It was announced that Mlle Soubeiran and Mrs A.M. Robertson of Lismore would tour country centres of northern NSW to promote France's Day.<sup>254</sup> Several towns such as Tamworth and Lismore, even Rockhampton in Queensland opened branches of the League. Mlle. Soubeiran gave many addresses to their meetings, and was now understandably celebrated around the state as the recognizable face of the League.

In Sydney and its suburbs many patriotic Funds rallied to participate in France's Day. The Fairfax press helped generously with an initial large donation, followed by substantial publicity. On 14th July 1917, stalls decorated in the tricolour transformed Sydney and its suburbs, selling an assortment of goods. The listing of stalls in Elizabeth Street, Castlereagh Street to Circular Quay took up most of the page of that day's *Sydney Morning Herald*. Martin Place and Moore Street (the old name for part of Martin Place) were the centre of attention. Miss and Mrs. Fairfax ran no 1 stall at the corner of Martin Place and George Street. Along Martin Place was the French-Australian League's stall run by Madame (Blanche) Playoust, Madame Higinbotham, Mdlle Soubeiran, Madame Boggio and others. It was a grand day indeed and showed remarkable co-operation between many groups and a generous response by the public.

The League made an announcement stating that receipts for all goods and money were filed at the rooms of FALH. It specified the variety of agencies in Paris to which contributions of money and clothing were being sent, which included:

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<sup>253</sup> "France's Day", *The Brisbane Courier*, June 12, 1917, 7.

<sup>254</sup> "France's Day Appeal. Put Your Money in God's Own Bank.", *The Shoalhaven News and South Coast Districts Advertiser*, June 16, 1917, 3.



- The French government
- The Society for the Succour of Orphans at Etretat, Nice
- Madame Michel, Maternity Homes
- Relief of Victims of War, Mme Puaux, Duchesse d'Uzès
- Mme Siegfried, refugees from Alsace.<sup>255</sup>

Three of these names, Mme Siegfried, Madame Puaux and Mme Michel, were already familiar to the League's helpers in Sydney. Several of these people later joined the Paris committee of the FALH, which was formed to distribute the considerable funds raised by France's Day. It is likely that Georges and Marie-Thérèse Playoust had been dealing with these charitable agencies at a personal level since their arrival in Paris.

France's Day was a resounding success. A cheque for £100,000, being the first instalment of the money subscribed to the France's Day fund was handed over by the acting Premier, Mr G.W. Fuller, to Madame Playoust, president of the FALH, at a ceremony the Tivoli Theatre. A similar sum was to follow. Still too shy to speak publicly in English, she delegated the response to Augustine Soubeiran.<sup>256</sup> The final total was £215,607, 18 shillings and seven pence. Using the historic CPI index and going to the nearest pound (£), this was the equivalent of approximately \$7,348,030 in today's currency.

Later in the month the FALH was able to reciprocate the generosity of the other patriotic funds by mounting a stall in Moore Street on 'War Chest Day,' managed by Blanche Playoust and her daughters.<sup>257</sup> There were yet to be more of such 'Days' in which they participated.

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<sup>255</sup> "France's Day", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 23, 1917, 13.

<sup>256</sup> "Cheque for £100,000 Gift to France. Memorable Presentation.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 31, 1917, 6.

<sup>257</sup> "Heart of the Fair", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 14, 1917, 14.



## Mlle Soubeiran to Paris

Several weeks later it was announced that the FALH had decided to send Mdlle Soubeiran to Paris, to assist and supervise the task of distributing the considerable funds raised on France's Day. It was intended to form a committee of distribution and it was probable that the committee would consist of M. Maurice Barrès, M. Georges Playoust, Mesdames Brasier de Thuy, Michel, Puaux and Siegfried, and Mdlle (sic) Soubeiran. Mdlle Soubeiran would probably act as joint secretary with Mme Brasier de Thuy.

The newspaper reported that the League had wished to defray all Mdlle's expenses, including the passage money. Mdlle Soubeiran not only handed in her own cheque for the amount of the passage money, but also insisted on defraying her own personal expenses in connection with the fund in Paris.<sup>258</sup> Mlle. Soubeiran arrived safely in Paris by November and was forming a committee, which effectively became a branch of the League for the distribution of money collected for victims of the war.<sup>259</sup>

In Sydney, the final meeting of the France's Day Committee was held in the presence of the French Consul-General. The President, Mr Mayman announced a result of £215,617, in excess of the original estimate of £200,000.<sup>260</sup>

## 1918 Les Rapatriés

The year in France began with an unusually severe winter so that not only the soldiers in the trenches suffered, but civilians as well, from cold and lack of food. Tuberculosis was prevalent. The resources of the FALH like those of other patriotic funds were stressed by the length of the war but the arrival of large numbers of well-equipped Americans gave new hope to the Allies. It took some time for them to be trained to fight but their presence was influencing morale on both sides.

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<sup>258</sup> "French-Australian League. Farewell to Mdlle. Soubeiran.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 4, 1917, 6.

<sup>259</sup> "In the Winter Garden", *Freeman's Journal*, December 6, 1917, 22.

<sup>260</sup> "£215,607 for France. Final 'France's Day' Meeting.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 27, 1917, 6.



The Germans made a strategic retreat, ravaging the land as they left, exploding houses and roads, poisoning wells, chopping fruit trees. Trapped behind the lines were huge numbers of homeless, or sick and frail French civilians who had become an embarrassment to the Germans.<sup>261</sup> They had been allowed to leave in small numbers during the occupation but policy of 'repatriating' larger number people was now implemented, subsidised by the International Red Cross and a great deal of American money.

It was only in October that the Germans finally left the North after their four-year occupation, and the '*rapatriés*' who had been sent to Geneva were now to complete their repatriation to what had been their home. When 'the North' is spoken of, it often means the administrative Département called Le Nord, similar to the Pas de Calais or the Somme.

Evelyne Delvas, who was to marry Jacques Ployoust the following year, later described the ordeal of the slow and crowded three-day train journey she had undertaken as a young Red Cross nurse. She accompanied a contingent of these people from Tourcoing through Germany, and neutral Switzerland to Evian, a French city on the lake of Geneva. It was estimated that more than 2,000,000 French civilians had lived under German domination and had been totally separated from the rest of the world. The young and vigorous were sent into forced labour in Germany, but the frail were discarded.

Mlle Soubeiran wrote a long personal letter from Paris to Mr Mayman, chairman of the France's Day committee, describing her first days setting up the Paris Committee of Distribution. Her letter gave more details than cablegrams would allow and shows her eagerness to begin work. She wrote firstly of the repatriated people:

*I have now been here for 13 busy days and though far from mastering the fullness of the needs around me, I have a general idea of things. Thanks to your splendid organising efforts we shall be able to relieve much suffering. [...] You*

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<sup>261</sup> Phillipe Nivet. *La France Occupée 1914-1918* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), 303–312.



*will realise the immensity of the task when you hear that over 1,500 refugees reach Evian every day of the week and people need everything. I went to Evian to judge for myself what was most required so as not to waste any of our help and saw four convoys of rapatriés arrive.*

*Some of our clothes found their way there as I was told by the superintendent who, hearing I came from Australia, told me some garments had come through her hands labelled as from Australian friends....*

*I shall write details as soon as our committee is formed - and has discussed the matter. All are willing to act but Mr. Maurice Barrès writes charming notes and is not to be pinned down. He is so busy writing articles - he is ill. But I shall have him yet....*

*Madame Brasier de Thuy, Mme Playoust [(Marie-Thérèse)] and myself have talked things over. The tuberculous must be helped - you hear this on every side - and the Red Cross money shall do that work especially. The blind with families will also have priority. It is impossible to speak too much of the work done for us for so long by Mme Brasier de Thuy. I have of course seen Mme Siegfried, Mme Puaux, and Madame Michel, and all are delighted and grateful for the help given.<sup>262</sup>*

### **The Paris Distributing Committee**

The following were appointed to the Paris Distributing Committee of the League:

Mr Maurice Barrès president

Mr Georges Playoust treasurer

Madame Brasier de Thuy

Madame Frank Puaux

Madame la Générale Michel

Madame Jules Siegfried

Mlle Soubeiran.

When the names of the Committee were announced, some of the names were familiar and it is not known how much they had in common except for their strong dedication to their country.

M. Maurice Barrès, born in 1862 and President of the Committee, was renowned as a general leader writer for *l'Echo de Paris*, deputy, novelist, and member of the Académie Française.

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<sup>262</sup> "The Rapatriés. Sad Story from France. Mdlle. Soubeiran's Mission.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 4, 1918, 6.



Georges Playoust was well known in Sydney as a leading wool buyer, had acted as Treasurer of FALH affairs in Paris throughout the war.

Madame Brasier de Thuy's name was very familiar to Australians, as she had lived in Australia for some years when her husband represented the *Messageries Maritimes*, the French shipping line. Mlle Soubeiran sang her praises in her last paragraph of the FALH résumé. Mme Brasier de Thuy's husband, who when toasting his health at an official dinner in Sydney had referred to Georges Playoust as "our veritable doyen in every way" and they were well acquainted.<sup>263</sup>

Madame Jules Siegfried was formerly Julie Puaux, daughter of an eminent Protestant pastor. She was renowned feminist and President of the National Council of Women, as well as President of the Auxiliary committee of the *Union Internationale des Amis de la Jeune Fille*. She had been engaged in valuable works on the education of women and supported women's suffrage, which did not yet exist in France. She bore an illustrious name. The Siegfried family were Protestants who had left Alsace as a result of the German occupation in 1871, and Jules Siegfried had founded an important international cotton trading firm based in Le Havre. He combined his wealth with a strong social conscience, and interested himself in providing social housing and public amenities such as wash-houses (laundries) and public baths. He had written a book on poverty called *La Misère*, served as Mayor of Le Havre, and was elected to the National Assembly, becoming Minister for Commerce and Industry. André Siegfried, who came to Australia with the Pau Mission later that year, was their son, and explained the relationship on that occasion.

Madame Frank Puaux, was Julie Siegfried's brother's wife, and had written "To reconcile hygiene and Economy" which was published in 1912. It was she who had first written to the League earlier in the War, asking for their help in buying the house on the Normandy coast, which was now the orphanage '*Australie*'. She was the president of the Society for the Protection of Children, Victims of the War and was now assigned by the committee to look after the blind.

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<sup>263</sup> "Le Depart De M. Biard D'Aunet", 2.



Madame Michel was President of the Society of Help for Mothers and Infants who had been advised by Marie-Thérèse to appeal to the FALH in 1915. Her husband, Général Michel had been the military governor of Paris preceding General Galliéni, but little is known of her outside her care for widows and orphans from the beginning of the war.

### Distributions

Augustine Soubeiran and Mme Brasier de Thuy were also acquainted and seemed to work well together. This committee was unified now in the desire to use this extraordinary gift from the people of New South Wales in the most constructive manner.

Australian newspapers were informed of the Paris distributions, which began quickly. They reported various aspects of the gifts, but these lean snippets of information did not convey the nuances of personal letters. Another such letter from Mlle Soubeiran was sent to unnamed Sydney friends "under the date of Christmas 1917":

*The first meeting of the administrative committee has just been held and made allocations and absorbing about £30,000. We voted about £10,000 for the relief of the North. That includes the soldiers, prisoners of war, widows, orphans, refugees and rapatriés of the unfortunate regions. Monsieur (Georges) and Madame Playoust will have a preponderant voice in the division. They and their friends know more about it than anyone.<sup>264</sup>*

This was confirmed by a letter which was sent to the FALH in Sydney from Eugène Wattine, member of one of the leading industrial families of the North and a former important client in the Australian wool trade. After referring to the generous work on behalf of the League carried out by Mlle Soubeiran, Mr Wattine wrote:

*Guided by a committee of which M. and Mme Playoust form a part, two people who have lived long in Australia, the FALH with a most generous hand has given clothes and money to be distributed to our societies for the relief of the North. Every fortnight they have received important sums of money and hundreds of garments for evacuees, More than 10,000 people have been helped in this way.<sup>265</sup>*

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<sup>264</sup> "Distress in France - How Australian Money Helps", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 25, 1918, 8.

<sup>265</sup> "France and Australia", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 19, 1918, 10.



A more tangible memento is a bronze plaque framing a medal, in the family's possession, bearing an inscription reading: "L'Union d'Oeuvres de Guerre de Roubaix-Tourcoing à sa dévouée collaboratrice et bienfaitrice Madame Georges Playoust 1er Octobre 1919".

Meanwhile in Australia the shared fund-raising continued, for 'Red Cross Day' in April, and 'AIF Day' in August when in Sydney stalls were set up from Circular Quay to Central Station. Blanche Playoust manned a stall in Martin Place.<sup>266</sup> This was followed by 'Jack's Day' for the naval forces in October.

During this time, Joseph and Blanche were bereaved themselves when a cable announced that their eldest son Jean had been killed in a German advance in the Aisne sector. They had no choice but to continue their busy and responsible lives.

### ***The French Mission to Australia 1918***

In September, Sydney then other Australian cities were taken over by the enthusiastic state welcome given to the popularly called 'Pau Mission' in the closing weeks of the war. This subject, while not directly relevant to the FALH, became so when Mlle Soubeiran was invited at the last minute by the French Foreign Office to join the group.

This group of eminent Frenchmen led by General Pau, had the aim thanking Australia for her military effort in France, and of looking into the revival of cultural and business ties with Australia after the war. The Mission was asked to give particular thanks to the people of New South Wales for their recent contribution to France's Day.

These members of the Mission, most of whom had served in the trenches themselves, represented agriculture, wool, silk, metallurgy and trade unions and came to discuss the economic problems caused by the war, and to renew trade relations when the war was over.

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<sup>266</sup> "A.I.F. Day. The Stalls.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 2, 1918, 8.



They were a varied and interesting group of people, some of whom had previous links with Australia. André Siegfried had visited Australia and New Zealand as a young man and his research resulted in a doctoral thesis, as related in Chapter 2. He was a writer and had been elected member of the *Académie Française*. His mother was now a member of the League's Paris committee.

The group was initially led by Albert Métin, Minister for Labour, who had as a young man visited Australia and New Zealand before writing his significant book, *'Socialism without Doctrine, as described in Chapter 2*. Unfortunately he died on the way to Australia. It was decided after much discussion to continue the tour, now under the leadership of the veteran one-armed General Pau. He spoke little English but would be helped by André Siegfried whose English was fluent, acting as secretary.

Another member of the mission was M. Leclerc Motte, a large woollen textile manufacturer from the North who had possibly been Australia's largest customer before the war, and was keen to renew commercial relations, but his factories were still in German hands. Mr Georges Bader had worked in the French Bank in Melbourne before moving to Sydney to work with a wool firm, Wenz and Co.

The Sydney Morning Herald of 11<sup>th</sup> September 1918 gave a whole page to report on this Mission's arrival and state receptions, including a whole column to a long interview with Mlle Soubeiran.<sup>267</sup> She was particularly proud that she was asked by the French Foreign Office to join the French Mission as it was felt that she would be of the greatest assistance in her knowledge of the country where she had lived.<sup>268</sup>

As the Mission went on to visit to other cities in Australia and New Zealand, Mlle Soubeiran undertook a tour of country districts of New South Wales, with the company and support of Mr Mayman and Miss Gurney. General Pau had paid tribute to her

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<sup>267</sup> "Victory Is Certain Civic Reception. Fine Speech by General Pau. Great Enthusiasm.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 11, 1918, 11.

<sup>268</sup> "Mlle. Soubeiran Tells the Story How Australia Helped the Distressed", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 11, 1918, 12.



"untiring energy and splendid organizing powers" and she now exerted herself to thank the donors to 'France's Day' and to demonstrate how their generous gifts were being administered. Public lectures were arranged to illustrate their value through her personal experiences.

In Lismore the group was given a public mayoral reception where lantern slides were shown, and speeches delivered in which Mlle Soubeiran talked of peace, but wanted "*to take the claws out of the monster that had been teasing and biting them*".<sup>269</sup>

In Goulburn there was a Mayoral Reception. She spoke to children at Empire Theatre, and gave a lecture to adults at night at the Majestic Theatre.<sup>270</sup> There much adulation for her as "*the life and soul of the French-Australian League and indeed in many respects the French community of this city itself*".<sup>271</sup> She continued her travels round New South Wales with Miss Gurney and Mr Mayman, visiting Tamworth, Parkes, Dubbo, Singleton and Albury, as the war drew painfully to its end.

About his time, the death of Georges Playoust was announced by cable and reported by Sydney and interstate papers, referring to his role with the FALH in Paris acting in the capacity of treasurer. His death will be recounted later in this work. Mlle Soubeiran left on the *Ventura* by the American route to France to continue her work with the Paris committee. Mr Mayman left for England intending to work in connection with Infant Hospitals and Infant Welfare.<sup>272</sup>

## 1919

A letter from Mlle Soubeiran after her return to Paris said:

*"the sudden coming of the armistice is drying up the sources of much benevolence. The whole country north of Paris roads, villages, farms and fields are devastated and empty. Houses are destroyed beyond repair. There are three*

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<sup>269</sup> "Mdlle. Soubeiran's Visit. Interesting Address.", *Northern Star*, October 29, 1918, 3.

<sup>270</sup> "Visit of Mdlle. Soubeiran", *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, November 21, 1918, 2.

<sup>271</sup> "Mdlle. Soubeiran's Visit. Lecture at Majestic Theatre.", *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, November 26, 1918, 2.

<sup>272</sup> "From Near and Far", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 3, 1919, 4.



*million people to be reinstated in the north, more than a million orphans. No shelter, no food, no work, but sowing time is near.*<sup>273</sup>

The League acknowledged a letter from M. Alexandre Millerand, former Minister for War to thank them for funds for an agricultural school for 'réformés', soldiers retired through ill health from the army.<sup>274</sup>

### **Another 'France's Day'**

The war was over, but the League's work was not yet done. The three orphanages, *Australie*, *Mimosa* and *Waratah* created by the League were functioning, but needed help with maintenance. Many people wished to keep the orphanages alive a little longer, for the massive military casualty lists had made human life all the more precious, yet it was a sensitive time to be raising still more funds as all the participants in the war were examining their own human and economic casualties.

Miss Gurney presided at a meeting of the League to discuss whether a further appeal could be undertaken, and the meeting decided to accept the conditions of the Repatriation Department to conduct an appeal during July and that a cable be sent to Paris asking for permission to hold it.<sup>275</sup>

This venture was launched at a meeting at the Town Hall and it attracted support of many very influential people, beginning with the new Governor, Sir Walter Davidson, a known francophile, together with Mr Holman, the Premier.<sup>276</sup>

The Governor spoke first, mentioning his association with France in previous years, and proposed a motion that the citizens of NSW pledge themselves to assist in raising a further sum to be known as "France's Day Fund 1919". Mr Holman seconded the motion, listing a figure of 1 million orphans in France. Mr J.O. Fairfax, newspaper

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<sup>273</sup> "Devastated France. A Vivid Picture. Misery and Desolation.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 7, 1919, 12.

<sup>274</sup> "France's Thanks. Australian Help Appreciated. Care of the Children.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 8, 1919, 8.

<sup>275</sup> "For Women. Social and Other News.", *Evening News*, May 17, 1919, 8.

<sup>276</sup> "For France. Forthcoming Appeal.", *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 6, 1919, 7.



proprietor and NSW chairman of the Red Cross, also spoke in support, having the previous year been one of a delegation of newspaper editors who had visited the front at the invitation of the British government and had witnessed the devastation. He had also visited several of the organisations entrusted with the spending of the money raised by the League.<sup>277</sup>

A formidable Committee was assembled:

Patrons: The Governor and Lady Davidson, two Archbishops, Mr Holman, the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, heading a long list of others

President: M. Campana, the consul-general

Treasurers: Miss Gurney, Hugh Massie, A.L. Blythe

Hon secretaries: Mrs Jewett, E.S. Marks

The Executive Committee: Madame Joseph Playoust, Mrs Higinbotham, Mrs Harry Austin, Messrs. Rouse, Moreau, Boggio, Segur, Lee, Puech, Lamerand, Du Boise, Alfred Wunderlich, members of the FALH with the significant addition of Mr J.O. Fairfax and Miss Fairfax.

E.S. Marks, the co-secretary was closely involved in the New South Wales Red Cross. He was also the principal of a firm of wool exporters, and a famous name in amateur athletics.<sup>278</sup>

The Fairfax influence was visible in a moving article published ten days later in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

*In asking for a repetition of the generosity shown in 1917, the French-Australian League of Help is activated by the laudable desire to maintain for at least another year the three orphanages mainly established by the proceeds of the last appeal. To allow them to lapse now would be to deprive France of the most helpful means of recuperating her energies in the future generation. At present the burden is too heavy for France to carry herself. It must be shared by the people who love her and have fought beside her, and who know how deeply the*

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<sup>277</sup> Gavin Souter. *Company of Heralds* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1981), 122.

<sup>278</sup> "End to Noted Career. Alderman Marks.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 4, 1947, 4.



*presence and influence of France will be needed in the new world now taking shape.*<sup>279</sup>

Unfortunately France's Day had to be postponed to July 25th because of influenza, part of the great pandemic, but it did not prevent two advertisements appealing for a fund-raising concert at the Town Hall,<sup>280</sup> and another at the Conservatorium of Music.<sup>281</sup>

The object at this stage was to send money rather than clothing to the French Red Cross, and so the clothing workshops were now being wound down. There was a little ceremony held at the Queen's Club honouring Mr Molloy of the Master Carriers Association where Madame Playoust on behalf of the Committee presented him with a framed address thanking him for the four and a half years during which he carried hundreds of goods free of charge for the league "*which benefited not only the Society but France*".<sup>282</sup>

The *Sydney Morning Herald* gave great space to the information on the location of stalls all over Sydney, which were managed by many charitable groups. An eloquent statement from the professorial board of the University of Sydney headed an article saying "*The cause of France is the cause of the human race*".<sup>283</sup>

The Governor opened France's Day in Martin Place at noon, with Lady Davidson and their children. He said

*I stand here today for France, the centre of civilisation, the nerve centre of history, whose troops have fought alongside our men.*

Mme Playoust held a stall with Mrs Holman in a central position at the corner of the GPO and George Street. Mr Holman was confident enough to expect the assent of

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<sup>279</sup> "France's Burden. Further Help from New South Wales.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 21, 1919, 9.

<sup>280</sup> "Advertising", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 9, 1919, 4.

<sup>281</sup> "Amusements. Conservatorium of Music.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 9, 1919, 13.

<sup>282</sup> "For Women Social and Other News", *Evening News*, July 9, 1919, 9.

<sup>283</sup> "France's Day", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 23, 1919, 12.



Parliament to encourage the appeal by subsidising by 5 shillings in the £ the first £20,000 collected. Fine weather and generous co-operation made the day a success.<sup>284</sup> It was an overwhelming gesture of goodwill on the part of the government and the people of New South Wales towards France.

### **Final days of the League.**

M. and Mme Joseph Playoust left by the *Ormonde* in August 1919 to return to France for family and business reasons and planned to attend the last meeting of the League's Paris Committee in October.<sup>285</sup> Shortly afterwards, Madame Georges Playoust, one of the founders of the League, arrived back in Sydney by the *Ventura*. In her interview she alluded to her own work in the distribution of goods and funds from the League:

*Before M. and Mme Playoust left they helped to found the French-Australian League of Help, and during her stay in Paris Mme Playoust assisted with the distributions of the funds and goods in France. She is anxious to assure the people of N.S.W. of the wonderful good their generous giving has done among France's war victims and she would like them to know of Mlle Soubeiran's latest practical scheme for assuring permanently good results. At present the New South Wales contribution is being used for destitute widows with large families. The widow and children farm the little plot and so are gradually becoming self-supporting and independent.<sup>286</sup>*

A letter was received from Mme Puaux of the Paris committee concerning the orphanage called 'Waratah' where they planned to create a little training farm for their boys. It was fortunate that the women of this committee had advanced ideas on child welfare and sought to give them training for their future.

The FALH announced the cessation of its activities in October 1919 acknowledging the extensive support received from the people of New South Wales. During the first two and a half years it transmitted to France clothing and money to the value of over

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<sup>284</sup> "France's Day. City Collection. Satisfactory Result.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 26, 1919, 12.

<sup>285</sup> "M. Joseph Playoust to Visit Europe", *Sunday Times*, August 24, 1919, 2.

<sup>286</sup> "The Battlefields of France - Already Invaded by Tourists.", *Sunday Times*, September 7, 1919, 13.



£270,000 and divided its help between well-established and trusted societies working for French soldiers and their dependents.<sup>287</sup>

The total receipts for the second 'France's Day' were £17,709, after adding the promised subsidy of 5 shillings in the £ from the government of New South Wales.<sup>288</sup>

From this fund a first instalment was cabled to General Pau as President of the French Red Cross and others to the three League orphanages.<sup>289</sup> £750 was handed in to the French Benevolent Society in Sydney to continue the work that had been performed by the League amongst French soldiers and their dependents in or passing through Sydney on their way to Noumea.

The last meeting of the Paris distribution committee took place in a small office at 372 Rue St. Honoré on Thursday 16th October. Maurice Barrès presided and Madame Jules Siegfried and Mlle Soubeiran were present. M. Prenat had replaced Georges Playoust as treasurer after his death in the last week of the war. M. and Mme Joseph Playoust were present, as well as Messrs Moreau and Shard. Wisely, Mlle Soubeiran had invited Mr Neville Mayman to come from London to the meeting, and he wrote a detailed letter to the *Telegraph* of the 30th December. The *Telegraph* leaves no archives to consult, but this long letter was fortunately fully reproduced in the *Morning Bulletin* of Rockhampton (See Appendix 4).

The final meeting vested 200,000 francs for distribution among small, devastated villages in the Ardennes, behind Rheims, one of which attached the name of Sydney to its own, becoming Poilcourt-Sydney as a transnational gesture of gratitude.

Mr Mayman's seven-year experience as president of the Benevolent Society equipped him to assess the FALH's disbursements perceptively. It seemed that he had everything

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<sup>287</sup> "French-Australian League. Popular Fund Closed.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 15, 1919, 10.

<sup>288</sup> "France's Days. Total £298,000. Consul-General's Tribute.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 7, 1920, 14.

<sup>289</sup> "Patriotic Women the French-Australian League of Help Closed. Red Cross Fund Still Open.", *The Farmer and Settler*, October 24, 1919, 12.



in common with this disparate group of people of good will except their language, and his ideas on the meeting were summed up in this way:

*I have closely studied the Committee's records [...] the giving has been sympathetic but never impulsive [...] The committee saw the needs of the situation with penetrating and interpreting vision. It met those needs in a broad, humane and affectionate manner that added largely to the value of the gifts.*

*The committee has systematised sympathy and ignored all religions and political differences. Having no prejudices, it has stood the test of time for straight methods and the square deal, which we in Australia admire so much. Australia's offerings have brought sunlight into dark places and banished the grim spectacle of starvation from the homes of thousands of our French brothers and sisters.<sup>290</sup>*

Several of the women, who had been so active in wartime, then transferred their energies into reviving the ailing Alliance Française. In 1914 a seamless transition of Alliance members towards FALH had taken place, but now the direction was reversed as they returned to their old ways, but changed and strengthened by their wartime experiences, which had been a shining example of joint French and Australian patriotism.

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<sup>290</sup> "French-Australian League Last Meeting in Paris," 6.



## CHAPTER 4: SEVEN AUSTRALIAN *POILUS*

The previous chapter relates the history of the French-Australian League of Help, and the committed roles senior members of both Playoust families assumed in the creation and administration of this patriotic fund. Following now is a parallel account of these same four wartime years spent by their seven sons, who demonstrated their patriotism more directly, by crossing the world to defend France as '*poilus*'. This term, meaning hairy or unkempt, went into common parlance as an infantry man of the 1914-18 war, virtually imprisoned in his trenches in all seasons, with few facilities for cleaning up and shaving.

Beyond these global events, I proposed to analyse the evolving language and sentiments of these bilingual soldiers, mostly through the prism of Jacques' Verdun diary, and letters to his family, which are my chief sources. These papers are in now the possession of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales and are being digitised. The letters are reproduced verbatim, despite erratic spelling and syntax, as a source in Appendix 3, while following the narrative in this chapter.

The military documents of those men who died in battle in the French army are now accessible on the Internet, giving details of their service, wounds, etc. and also revealing a great deal about the French compulsory military service, which was unknown to Australians.

The French weekly paper, *L'Illustration*, whose 1914-1918 issues were reprinted and rebound in the 1920s in a fine quality edition was an invaluable chronological and geographical reference.

*L'Illustration* which ceased publishing in 1956, was founded in 1843, being the first newspaper to use the new French art of photography.<sup>291</sup> It gave a visual representation

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<sup>291</sup> "L'illustration et La Famille Baschet", *Bienvenue Sur Le Site Officiel Du Journal L'illustration, de Son Fonds Documentaire et de Ses Archives Historiques*, accessed March 28, 2015, [http://www.lillustration.com/L-Illustration-et-la-famille-Baschet\\_a19.html](http://www.lillustration.com/L-Illustration-et-la-famille-Baschet_a19.html).



Great War. Australians were citizens of a great Empire to which they were intensely loyal, many still referring to Britain as 'home', yet they saw these happenings from a different perspective, as Europe for most people was still very distant and unfamiliar.

For private news from Great Britain people were mostly dependent on sea mail, which took about five weeks to reach the eastern seaboard from London. Commercial 'wireless' (radio) in the home was still to come, though there were some amateur enthusiasts who gleaned global news through crackling short wave radio. Telephones were rare and used mostly locally, though Melbourne and Sydney were now connected by trunk line.

Communications from Europe were still sparse. Telegraphic cables were accessible to government and businesses but only for brief messages. Newspapers subscribed to cable agencies such as Reuters for much of their foreign news, which was reprinted in a single column on the front page otherwise replete with classified advertising, whilst longer analytical articles on less recent events filled its middle pages. The cables, however, were subject to censorship.<sup>293</sup> From the declaration of war, however, citizens rallied to the flag, men to enlist as volunteers in the Army and Navy, women to the nursing services.

Entry requirements at first were very strict. Recruits were limited to those aged between 18 and 35, with a minimum height of 5 foot 6.<sup>294</sup> Photographers advertised special rates for soldiers, sailors and volunteers. The Australian War Memorial lists their mixed motives for enlisting, firstly the patriotic duty to the King and the Empire, followed by the understandable interest in travelling 'home'. Another strong motive was to earn the respect of their peers, as those who did not volunteer were called 'shirkers'.

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<sup>293</sup> Souter, *Company of Heralds*, 116.

<sup>294</sup> State Library of Victoria, "The Rush to Enlist," *Ergo*, accessed August 11, 2014, <http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/australia-wwi/home-wwi/rush-enlist>.



Recruits were to be paid six shillings a day, more than three times the wage paid to British forces.<sup>295</sup> The French *poilu* was paid a negligible amount, a sou (9.5 centimes) a day with a small allowance for wife and children.

Compulsory Military Service, also known as 'Conscription' was at the time an alien concept in Australia, as Great Britain had remained the only country in Europe not to have to have enacted these laws, but several days earlier, an announcement, long expected by French expatriates, had been made by the French consulate, then reproduced in the *Courrier Australien* from 7 August:<sup>296</sup>

*Mobilisation has been decreed by the French Government and takes effect on the 2 August.*

*All Frenchmen capable of serving must consequently join at their own expense their assigned military corps as quickly as possible.*

*Those who have not the means to do so should deposit a written declaration to this effect.*

*The next departure for Marseilles will be the 29th of this month, and for Noumea on the 10th of this month.*

*Sydney, 2 August 1914*

*Consul General*

*A. Chayet*

It was now the younger generation's lives that were to dominate the two Playoust families. The situation of their sons in relation to military service was instantly changed by war.

What did this mean to Frenchmen in Australia? The first emotion would have been one of shock, then fear that their homeland was being overrun, their families in danger. Many of the residents were wool buyers from the northern border departments of France, where older people could still remember the Prussian invasion of 1870. The treaty of Frankfurt in 1871 ending this Franco-Prussian War had ceded Alsace and part of Lorraine to the newly united Germany.<sup>297</sup> This new invasion came from as closer

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> "Avis", *Le Courrier Australien*, August 7, 1914, 2.

<sup>297</sup> "Grands Traités de Paix." *Digithèque MJP*, 2006, <http://mjp.univ-perp.fr/traites/1871francfort.htm>.



vessel *Elsass* however, left Sydney Harbour less quietly as, in its hurry, it crashed into the Domain Baths, causing considerable damage.<sup>298</sup>

In Victoria, the port authorities were quicker to capture enemy vessels. The wireless message announcing that Britain was at war with Germany had just been received during the night at Fort Nepean, which guarded the Heads of Port Phillip Bay. The German NDL merchant ship *Pfalz*, with a good provision of newly laden coal, was on its way out of Port Phillip Bay heading for South America. The Fort signalled the captain not to proceed, but the Captain ignored the order. A shot was fired quickly across the wake of the ship's stern discouraged the attempted escape.<sup>299</sup>

P & O had advertised the departure of the 10,000-ton *Malwa*, sailing on 22nd August for Marseilles, Plymouth and London. It had electric ventilators and reading lights installed in all the cabins, and the ship was equipped with wireless. The price of the passage to London ranged from £41.16s to £82.10s. Jacques Playoust knew his ships and chose this one. The *Malwa* sailed as planned with probably the first French contingent to leave Sydney for Marseilles. It was a group of 21 French reservists, many of them wool buyers, some of their wives, and one Belgian. They included Guy de Pierres, J. Flipo, M. Paroissien, R. Puech, G. Wauquiez, A. Derousseaux, whose names will reappear in later pages.<sup>300</sup>

Two weeks later the *Courrier Australien* reported the departure of the French ship *Sydney* from the Messageries Maritimes wharf near Circular Quay.<sup>301</sup> This old timer, which had first carried Georges Playoust and his family to Melbourne in 1889, now took on 51 reservists from Sydney, and possibly from Noumea. They included Marguerite's husband Alfred Decouvelaere and many more wool-buying colleagues, some with their families. As the ship rounded Miller's Point, the crowd farewelled them by singing the Marseillaise. In Melbourne and Adelaide the ship was to pick up

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<sup>298</sup> "German Steamers. Elsass Hurries Out. Smashes into Domain Baths.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 5, 1914.

<sup>299</sup> "Australia's First Shot. German Steamer Fired At.", *Bairnsdale Advertiser and Tambo and Omeo Chronicle*, August 7, 1914, 2.

<sup>300</sup> Paul de Pierres. *Allies Forever* (Wyalkatchem, WA: Paul de Pierres, 2014).

<sup>301</sup> "Le Depart Des Réservistes", *Le Courrier Australien*, September 4, 1914, 4.



more reservists and no doubt their accommodation would have been very crowded. They were to have an adventurous journey in their fully blacked out ship, fearing the *Emden* and other German raiders, or from mines copiously laid by the enemy.

Few of them could have known much about what lay ahead. Their arrivals in Marseilles were followed by train journeys to reach their army depot, and as the original depot in Cambrai for these Frenchmen from the north had fallen into German hands, they now had to report to a camp outside Limoges, the new base for the northern regiments. Their welcome on arrival had been frigid, even menacing, as no one could understand why any journey would have taken so long.

They were to undergo a period of training in camps in this area and issued with uniforms in the traditional colours, red kepi, deep blue great-coat, rose-madder trousers, black ankle boots and leggings, before being sent to the Front. These colours proved impractical in trench warfare and in the following year the army changed its uniform to a more neutral *bleu horizon* for all ranks. This became the uniform for the soldiers of successive contingents that arrived from Australia and the French Pacific colonies.

Both Playoust families had particular problems in August 1914. Joseph and Blanche were well settled at 'Woodside', in Strathfield, a suburb of Sydney. They now had nine children, all educated in Sydney except for their daughter Marie-Antoinette [Toinette], aged 17, who was at school in Paris. She had visited relatives in the north but, in refusing to go back to school in Paris, was trapped by the rapid German advance. This soon caused great anxiety.

Their eldest son, Jean, was almost of military age, due to turn twenty the following year. His military papers have not been found. Fernand was not to turn twenty until 1919, but as the war progressed, recruitment was speeded up and by 1917 he left school to join the French army.



Georges and Marie-Thérèse were crossing the Atlantic on the first stage of their journey back from France to Sydney by the western route, with their son Stéphane. By the time they reached Montreal, *Mobilisation Générale* had been announced. Stéphane turned back, and was the first of the family to report to his depot for military duty on 21 August 1914. Stéphane was no novice as he had already undergone two years of military training in New Caledonia.

His parents continued their journey to Australia, crossing the USA by train, and the Pacific by ship. The arrival in Auckland of this couple "*about whom there has been much anxiety*" was noted.<sup>302</sup> The anxiety was caused by their diagonal itinerary across the Pacific, which was taking into account the aggressive movements of the German navy in this area, but they reached Sydney a few days later.

A certain Mr Ployoust, a 'wool broker' [sic] was reported as arriving in Sydney from New Zealand. He showed awareness of the present dangers of the Pacific Ocean and described an incident where a large German steamer, the *Walküre* was captured by the French gunboat *Zélée*:

*When it was first boarded, the captain refused to obey, but a revolver pointed at his head made him change his mind.*<sup>303</sup>

The ancient French gunboat, *Zélée*, a visitor to Sydney naval dockyards in the past, could only manage 10 knots, but it brought the larger commercial vessel back to Papeete under cover of its guns. It was a little later to play a leading role in the town's defence against a bombardment by two German cruisers. *Zelée's* crew were later repatriated, and honoured as they passed through Sydney on their way home.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> "Social News and Gossip", *The Catholic Press*, September 17, 1914, 38.

<sup>303</sup> "Obeying Orders Captain Changed His Mind. Sydney, Thursday.", *The Ballarat Courier*, September 18, 1914, 4.

<sup>304</sup> "Military March and Parade. A Brilliant Pageant." 5.



The Playoust couple's diagonal route across the Pacific from San Francisco to Auckland may well have passed very close to Makatea in the Tuamotu Islands, where this incident took place.<sup>305</sup>

They did not arrive in Sydney till well after their son Jacques, and son-in-law Alfred Decouvelaere, had responded to the call and sailed away. They found an augmented household at 'Murrulla', their family house near Centennial Park, as their two daughters, now bereft of their soldier husbands, had moved in with their five small children. Marie's husband, Ernest Polin had volunteered for the Australian army. These two women undertook the responsibility of looking after their younger brothers, Maurice and Roger who were still at school, and their sister Eugénie, "Ninie".

Georges junior, aged 32, had been declared *réformé* (medically unfit for military service) because of his severe arm weakness, but was recruited by the French government to serve in procuring wool. His whereabouts at this stage are not known, but he married in the United States and came back with his wife to Australia on 30 June 1915. These wartime years could not have been easy for the elder brother of five soldiers, who was rejected for military service himself.

Marcel, aged 22, had been undergoing military training in New Caledonia since October 1912, returning occasionally to Sydney on home leave. The shipping list of the *Pacifique* arriving in Sydney from Noumea on 4 September 1914, soon after the declaration of war, describes him as a 'French soldier'.<sup>306</sup> He remained in Noumea till 1915.

Maurice, aged 18 years, was to report for duty in 1916. Roger, aged 14 years, was to arrive in France in 1918, just too late to enlist, as the war had come to an end.

René, aged 19 years, took an independent line, as he had already done in choosing to be educated at Hawkesbury Agricultural College. He was to turn twenty the following

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<sup>305</sup> Emile Vedel. "La Guerre à Tahiti (1914)", *L'illustration*, May 26, 1918, 511.

<sup>306</sup> "Pacifique Sept 9 1914" (Series 1901-1926, NSW State Records, n.d.), Index to Vessels Arrived, 1837-1925.



month and should have reported to the Consulate, but instead, without informing Jacques or his family but in solidarity with his friends at his College, he volunteered for the Australian Army in the Light Horse Field Ambulance. He was examined medically the very afternoon Jacques left Sydney on the *Malwa*. He was accepted by the Army the next day, and had himself photographed in his new Australian uniform, possibly unaware that this was contravening French law.

This news was telegraphed to Jacques, who responded from Melbourne, expressing his displeasure in the first of his letters to his family, dated 22 August 1914, and written very carefully in English on the ship's writing paper in his neat and characteristic sloping hand (See Appendix 3). Unfortunately René left no correspondence behind to enable a comparison with his brother's version of the events.

In reference to his brother in law, Alfred Decouvelaere, Jacques wrote: "There is an exceedingly good chance that he will not go to the front & if he does there is only a very small percentage of them that get hurt." These comforting words to his sister were far from the reality, which no novice soldier could have predicted.

Jacques was to write many more letters from France, which were preserved, but none as formal as this first one. His spelling did not improve, nor did he bother much about accents in French, but the story is always told clearly and directly, almost all written in English with an occasional addition of a useful French expression. He wrote with few of the grand phrases his father used in his patriotic speeches. As the months and years in France passed, a little less ease in his written English could be observed, but he would also have appreciated the privacy provided by a foreign language. There was every reason to fear René's classification as a deserter. The Military Act of 1872 had stated:

*Every man inscribed on the Matriculation Register to whose domicile has been officially sent a Route Paper and who has not arrived at his destination on the day fixed by this order, and after a month's delay except in the case of force majeure will be punished as 'insoumis' [refractory], imprisonment for 1 month to a year in peace time, or 2-5 years in wartime.<sup>307</sup>*

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<sup>307</sup> Claretie. "La Loi Militaire 27 Juillet 1872."



Some French-Australians had chosen to enlist with the Australians and had appeared to overcome such a problem with French military authorities. Possibly they had taken out naturalisation papers and obtained Australian citizenship, thereby renouncing their French nationality, but these significant details are difficult to obtain. Australian Archives list twenty French-born recruits for the 1st AIF, and de Pierres also lists several, but in neither case is it stated whether they were naturalised.<sup>308</sup>

René's Australian enlistment was stamped "CANCELLED", and obediently René complied by joining the French Army later in the year, though he did at least enjoy a moment of acclaim as an Australian soldier. René participated in a 'public send-off' in Richmond:

*The 6.30 train from Sydney was met by a large crowd, and a procession was formed, headed by the mayor, which marched to the School of Arts. The ladies prepared a substantial dinner, the men took their seats on the stage and listened to speeches. Colonel Guest spoke, in the language of the day, that "Hawkesbury had sent men before to the Soudan and South Africa, and that they would return with honour or not at all."<sup>309</sup>*

### **Arrival in France**

Jacques reached France regimental depot in safety now established southwest to a camp near Limoges. Those of the Tourcoing family remaining in the north, were isolated from the rest of France by the instant clamp imposed by the Germans on movement and communications, whether by mail or telephone, even carrier pigeon.<sup>310</sup>

Jacques' parents were still in Australia, and he had no idea of his brother Stéphane's whereabouts. Jacques wrote anxiously to his aunt Mathilde in Paris on an undated post-card bearing a photo of himself in his new uniform. She would have overlooked his grammatical slips; she and her sixteen-year-old daughter Marie were to look after him very kindly throughout the war. Civilians were strongly encouraged to write to soldiers in the trenches to help their morale, and Jacques and Marie became pen friends. She kept all his letters (See Appendix 3). His letter to Tante Mathilde ended

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<sup>308</sup> de Pierres. *Allies Forever*.

<sup>309</sup> "Richmond. Patriotic Meeting.", *Windsor and Richmond Gazette*, September 11, 1914, 6.

<sup>310</sup> Nivet. *La France Occupée 1914-1918*, 15.



Jacques' brother Marcel, according to his *Carnet Militaire*, had arrived at the Corps in New Caledonia to begin his training on 10 October 1912, aged 21. In his two years in Noumea he made friends and was a member of 'Le Tennis Club du Mont Coffyn'.<sup>312</sup> He passed into the reserve of the active army on 1 October 1914, after the declaration of war.

For the next six months Marcel's movements are difficult to trace, though separate passenger lists recorded at least one visit to Sydney during that time. He was recorded as a passenger arriving in Sydney from Noumea on the *Pacifique* on the 6 March 1915.<sup>313</sup> He returned to Noumea in April on the *Sontay*, which was to leave shortly afterwards to convey the next contingent to France, via Sydney. Perhaps by this stage he identified himself with his New Caledonian fellow soldiers rather than the Australians or the French.

His father, Georges, arrived in Sydney alone from Paris on 1st May by the *Mooltan*.<sup>314</sup> He had planned a short stay to see his Sydney children settled, and to tidy up his financial affairs, as wool exports had come to a halt. His own journey from France had taken 8 weeks rather than 5, as direct shipping routes were avoided, but he was able to post a long letter from Gibraltar to his son Jacques in Paris saying that he had "*given German submarines the slip*". This letter no longer exists, but it would surely have been written in French. Mother and Father were always referred to as *Mère* and *Père* by their children and spoken to in the French language.

Georges gave a long morale-building interview to the Sydney press.

*"There is a firm resoluteness on the part of everyone in France and a feeling of absolute confidence in Paris that the Allies would be victorious."*<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Philippe Godard. *Le Mémorial Calédonien* / [par Philippe Godard ... [et Al.]] ([Nouméa]: Nouméa Diffusion, 1975), 177.

<sup>313</sup> "Pacifique Sept 9 1914."

<sup>314</sup> "'Allies Must Win.' French Major Confident. M. Playoust's Return.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 1, 1915, 14.

<sup>315</sup> "A Bitter War. No Respite and No Quarter. M. Playoust's Estimate.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 3, 1915, 10.



A fellow passenger, one Major Durand, a French officer, was on his way to Noumea to organise and drill the next New Caledonian contingent for the Front. This may explain the reason for Marcel Playoust's long wait to be sent to the Front; New Caledonia appeared to be the collection point for recruits from the French Pacific colonies, to be trained then sent off in progressive contingents by the usual Messageries Maritimes route via Sydney, and Marcel could have been involved with their training.

Whether by chance, or good planning, Georges Playoust's ship had arrived in Sydney just in time for him to farewell his son, Marcel, whose troop ship, the *Sontay*, was berthing for several days in Sydney Harbour on its way to France. This detachment consisted of 533 men from classes of 1907 to 1915, and from diverse French colonies, to which should be added 30 men living in the New Hebrides and those from Australia, and 50 *anciens* [veteran] soldiers from France.<sup>316</sup> During this time the contingent was feted by the authorities in Sydney and in particular by the French-Australian League of Help.

A Noumean friend, Louis Hagen, described the adventurous journey to Marseilles, quoted in Appendix 3 under "*Hagen Letters*". Marcel is not mentioned.<sup>317</sup> In those days of ship travel, Australia was very much part of Oceania. The links between Australia and New Caledonia, already geographically and commercially very close, thanks to the regular Messageries Maritimes shipping service, were now strengthened by the common cause in which both countries were engaged. On arrival in Marseilles Marcel sent a post card to his mother with a photograph of his motley group on the front, and a laconic message in English announcing his arrival on the back. He wrote more fulsomely to his school magazine, still retaining a little of the arrogance of a fit young sportsman (See Appendix 3, "Soldat Marcel Playoust" under *School Publications*).

He now indicates a growing understanding of the country he was now defending.

*The men are so splendid, so different from what they seem to be in peace time, so manly, so quiet over their exploits.*

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<sup>316</sup> "Le Contingent Neo-Caledonien", *Le Courrier Australien*, April 16, 1915, 4.

<sup>317</sup> Hagen, Gilberte. "Louis Victor Hagen Letters" (Gilberte Hagen, 1998).



Marcel's regiment was to participate in the battle in the Champagne sector in September.

### **1915 The Champagne Offensive**

Jacques' next letter dated 21 August 1915 (See Appendix 3) to his sister Marguerite Decouvelaere was written on notepaper from a hotel in Bourgneuf, a small town near his army depot at Aubusson, where his unit appears to be on furlough, giving him more time to convalesce from his health problems in April.

The seemingly detached recounting of the casualties amongst three of his former travelling companions was his own way of keeping calm when communicating with his sister, both of them knowing full well the risks facing her husband in the coming battles.

His brother Stéphane was now being lauded for his promotion on the battlefield on 10 June to the rank of sergeant, during the liberation of Neuville Saint Vaast in May according to his *carnet militaire*. This village had a strategic position dominating the road from Arras to Béthune. The 'battle-field' was in fact a house-by-house eviction of German troops who had fortified the cellars, tunnelled in the chalk to run into each other. The village was liberated at high cost; it was totally destroyed.<sup>318</sup>

A great offensive with 800,000 British and French troops was launched on 25th September around Arras and in the Champagne sector. Stéphane, Jacques, and Alfred Decouvelaere took part in this campaign in their various regiments, which included Marcel in his Colonial regiment.<sup>319</sup> The gains proved illusory and Allied casualties were high; the lack of human resources was making itself felt. Stéphane's *Carnet Militaire* states that he was wounded by three bullets in the thigh, the elbow and the left shoulder at Maison Champagne on 30 September 1915 which put him out of action for some time.

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<sup>318</sup> "Les Combats de Neuville-Saint-Vaast", *L'illustration*, May 22, 1915.

<sup>319</sup> "From France. Sydney Woolbuyer's War Experiences." 7.



It was in Champagne that Marguerite's husband, Alfred Decouvelaere lost his life, earning the *Croix de Guerre* and the *Médaille Militaire*, leaving his wife in Sydney with three children to raise alone.

Jacques remained in this sector for the rest of the year. He was now writing less cheerfully to Australia and his English was becoming a little rusty. On 13 November 1915 he wrote to his sister 'Ninie' ending cheerlessly with the thought of a long war of attrition in the snow (See Appendix 3).

*Winter has started. It is cold and it snowed all the morning.*

On the 7 January 1916, Jacques wrote to Marie, about the loss of Alfred Decouvelaere with an almost despairing ending:

*...let us not think. It's better.*

It includes an underlined sentence:

*...since one must have courage, we will try to have some.*

Marie gave this letter to Jacques' daughter some seventy years later, showing her this sentence that she had often called to mind, when in need of courage herself. He then responded to a letter from Marguerite, a sister to whom he was especially close, with a card from a small village in Champagne, rather awkwardly sharing his thoughts on religion with her, and ending with "*It doesn't make doesn't make me love you any the less*" (See Appendix 3 21 January 1916).

### **1916 Verdun**

Towards the end of winter, the newly founded joint Allied War Council planned an offensive to be launched on the French, Russian and Italian Fronts. The main offensive in France would be in Picardy, north and south of the river Somme. The British did not participate in the battle of Verdun, being too far east.

It began with a hellish bombardment of hitherto unknown intensity, by the largest pieces from Krupp, along a front of 24 kilometres, which was then followed by tear



gas. The German Chief of Staff, General von Falkenhayn aimed to take the Fortress of Verdun, dominating the road to Paris, and by massive artillery fire to 'bleed white' the French army and thus win the war by attrition. These principles were endured and well understood by Jacques Playoust, as evidenced by his diary and letters.

The ferocious bombardment began on 21 February at 7.15am, and by the afternoon German soldiers advanced through the first lines, which had been levelled.<sup>320</sup> General Philippe Pétain was ordered to the area with his Second Army of which Jacques' 162nd regiment was part, to defend both sides of the Meuse River. Pétain, a dour northerner from the Pas de Calais region of Flanders, was an efficient organiser whose care for the common soldier earned the respect of the troops.<sup>321</sup>

### ***The Diary***

Jacques kept a humble diary of his Verdun experience, written in pen or sometimes in pencil on squared paper in a small cardboard covered notebook from 25th February 1916 till the beginning of August. It was often written under severe stress, mostly in English, possibly for reasons of privacy, but with occasional bursts of French. Entries in the diary are reproduced, retaining the uncertain spelling of their original form, which strangely adds to their force. On the front of the note book he wrote the Morse code alphabet and codes for signals, for his task, as a now hardened *poilu* was to transmit signals which often required him to go 'over the top' to repair telephone wires. Excerpts of the diary are reproduced in Appendix 3.

The diary begins with his journey to the Verdun sector on 25 February after a shortened leave in Paris. A train brought the battalion from Paris to Chalons-sur-Marne, but the rest of the journey was made on foot. He marched eastwards in the snow, and the journey took about two weeks. Their battalion reached their division

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<sup>320</sup> Ardouin-Dumazet. "La Bataille de Verdun", *L'Illustration*, March 25, 1916.

<sup>321</sup> Alistair Horne. *The Price of Glory - Verdun 1916* (Penguin, 1962), 148–154.



fighting firstly on the right bank of the Meuse, then on the slopes of the Mort Homme Hill back across the river. 'Hold at all costs' was the order of the day.<sup>322</sup>

It was necessary to hold on in these trenches, enduring intensive bombardment, as described by diary entries, till relieved three weeks later. He recounted these episodes in a letter to Sydney in his neat sloping hand on squared paper dated the 18 April, during a rest period, and seemed to derive comfort in sharing these same experiences with his family.

He noted that Joseph Flipo, his wool buyer friend who had sailed with him from Sydney on the *Malwa* and now held the rank of Captain would also 'have had a rough time'. In fact, Joseph was wounded in the head and the right hand during the Mort Homme battle, and was awarded the Croix de Guerre avec Palme and the Légion d'Honneur.<sup>323</sup>

A diary entry during a rest period depicts Jacques in a mood of resigned calm: For the next 17 days he took part in the relentless battle for the Mort Homme hill on the left bank of the Meuse. While behind the lines Jacques also found time to send a '*carte en Franchise - Correspondance des Armées de la République*' to Marie, his young cousin in Paris. Normally he would spare her some of the horrors of his daily diary. This time, really shaken by being buried for 4 hours in his dug-out, he felt the need to talk and told her everything, phrased in rather erratic grammar. He is now starting to believe in his own good luck (See Appendix 3, 19 May 1916).

Jacques' regiment was now moved away from Verdun to a quieter sector in Lorraine, near Lunéville. Jacques now he had more leisure time to write to Australia, giving a clear picture of the now established trench culture, which is beginning to resemble that of underground towns. In his letter of 14 June 1916, he appears to have remained in touch with other Australians and their letters reminded of what he had left behind (See Appendix 3).

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<sup>322</sup> "From France. Sydney Woolbuyer's War Experiences."

<sup>323</sup> Personal Communication, Sister Monique Flipo RSCG.



Mona du Boisé, the widow of Arthur du Boisé, who celebrated her 102nd birthday in 1998 confirmed this story to me in a personal conversation. Her husband was an Australian of French descent and a grandson of Jules Joubert, of the family who had developed the 'French village' of Hunters Hill in Sydney. At the outbreak of war he wanted to join the newly formed Flying Corps, but could only do so by travelling to England to enlist. On the way his ship, which carried a number of military personnel in mufti, was sunk, not by the *Emden* but by the raider *Moeve*.

The German Captain seems to have behaved in a gentlemanly way. As his ship was overcrowded by prisoners from several ships, he gave them the choice either of being sent to Germany as POWs or being freed, provided they signed a promise not to fight against Germany.

Arthur du Boisé chose the latter course, and was disembarked in international waters off Tenerife. He made his way to London and told his story to the War Office, who would not allow him to break his word by enlisting, but suggested that he perform some useful non-combative activity behind the lines. Being very enthusiastic about motorcars, then a relatively new invention, he decided to drive an ambulance.

Jacques seemed very elated by this meeting, but another letter to Australia on 16 June 1916 (See Appendix 3) was less cheerful, except for the phrase "what do you think of the lucky brothers who were all able to meet in Paris?" 'Mother' at this stage was the central exchange for family meetings and communications. When she was not occupied with the French-Australian League responsibilities, she was constantly knitting for her soldiers with wool of beautiful quality she imported from Australia. Louis Hagen in his letters to Noumea wrote of a friend called Freyvogel dining at the Playousts' near the Champs-Élysées in June 1916 where Stéphane was staying while on leave.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Hagen, Gilberte. "Louis Victor Hagen Letters."



A card was sent to Marie on the French National Day, 14 July 1916 from a sector which was no longer quiet. On 16th and 27th July Jacques also wrote to Australia (See Appendix 3):

The final entry in his diary was made on 2nd August and reads:

*Very strong & well founded rumours that we are leaving for more active regions during the month. Will my turn of furlough arrive in time?*

### **1916 The Somme**

While Jacques was in this quiet area in Lorraine, 1 July had seen the launching of the long-planned Anglo-French offensive on each side of the Somme, opposite Amiens. After months of meticulous preparation, the attack was heralded by several days of intense bombardment in which two Australian siege batteries took part.<sup>325</sup>

On the north bank of the Somme were 15 divisions of *Britannique* troops led by General Haig. These included Dominion troops from Canada, India, South Africa and ANZAC; it took a while before *L'Illustration* learnt to differentiate between them. Facing them on a higher ridges were the now heavily fortified enemy positions, held since the first year of the war. The Germans' considerable building skills had been used to delve into the chalk to build tunnels and complex trench networks up to 12 metres in depth, to equip deep shelters lined with reinforced concrete. They had built railway lines to ensure supplies of building requirements as well as food and munitions, and constructed look-out posts which enabled them to overlook Allied preparations further below. Their approaches were lined with bands of barbed wire. A week's bombardment by the Allies failed to destroy these positions, but instead signalled the overture.

On the first day, 1 July, of the attack, 11 British Divisions advanced in dense formation up the slope across no-man's-land, heading in the direction of the high ground of Thiepval and eventually, Bapaume. Many were largely the idealistic volunteers who

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<sup>325</sup> C.E.W Bean. *Anzac to Amiens*. Revised (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1946), 219.



had responded to Kitchener's call, 'Your country needs you'. Far too heavily laden and still inexperienced, they followed strict instructions and proceeded at a walking pace into a holocaust. There was no element of surprise; German machine gunners were ready, and mowed them down in their orderly rows so that by night there were 60,000 casualties, of whom nearly 20,000 were dead, for only slight gains in ground.<sup>326</sup>

Thiepval was not to fall till the end of September.

Despite the ongoing process of 'bleeding white' at Verdun, the French army was still able to provide five divisions for the battle of the Somme. At least three of Jacques' brothers were already in this area in their French regiments, Marcel, René and possibly their cousin from Strathfield, Jean Playoust, as they were in the same unit.

*René and John are also on the Somme front, but as yet have not attacked. After twelve months fighting in Alsace they underwent three months' training in offensive work. They are near the Australians, and have been able to see a few of their pals in khaki.*<sup>327</sup>

Had René encountered his old pals from the Hawkesbury Agricultural College with whom he had impulsively joined the Australian army in the first week of the war, it would have been a satisfying and transnational reunion.

Two corps, the 1st Colonial Corps and the XX advanced so quickly that the German command withdrew to a line closer to Péronne. This could well have included Marcel.<sup>328</sup>

It is a valuable exercise to assess *L'Illustration* accounts of the first days of battle, trying to disengage facts from censorship and propaganda. Sometimes the reports were specific on measurements. The *L'Illustration* of 15 July 1916 reported on the English [sic] front:

*Our Allies met before them an intense resistance taking place on the edge of the Ancre River aiming towards Thiepval. [...] the strongly fortified Leipzig redoubt*

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<sup>326</sup> "Somme Offensive: 01 July 1916 - 13 November 1916.", *Australian War Memorial*, accessed August 10, 2014, [https://www.awm.gov.au/units/event\\_158.asp](https://www.awm.gov.au/units/event_158.asp).

<sup>327</sup> Anon. "Old Boys at the War", *St. Aloysius College Monthly*, November 1, 1916.

<sup>328</sup> Bean. *Anzac to Amiens*, 220.



*was the prize of a superb assault. They won a network of trenches 1800 metres wide to a depth of 800 metres and two small woods.*<sup>329</sup>

An authorised report appeared on 22 July in *L'illustration* concerning the actions of French regiments south of the Somme in liaison with the *Britannique* troops:

*In less than a fortnight the French troops on a 16 kilometre front and a maximum depth of 10 km, were able seize 80 square metres from the Germans.*<sup>330</sup>

There was no mention of casualties in either report, with the exceptions of the numbers of captured Germans, yet 100 years later "The Somme" has become a term synonymous with mass slaughter.

*L'illustration* of 29 July 1916 reported that the Germans had fortified the village of Pozières so strongly that it did not fall to solid bombing, but at midnight on 23 July a British and Australian assault managed to penetrate the defences and enter the town. The houses had to be taken one by one and the Australians captured 150 prisoners and two cannons. The Germans were not driven out of the town till 26 July. From this high position, the British troops headed west towards Thiepval.<sup>331</sup>

Once again casualties were not mentioned, but for the newly arrived Australians, Pozières remained one of their bloodiest encounters on the Western Front. The battle continued for some 4 months on a 48-kilometre front and again became one of attrition. As intended, it had the effect of relieving the pressure on Verdun, allowing the French to make several counter-attacks.

Jacques was still in Lorraine but was now to undergo a period of rest and training before being transferred to the Somme.

On 23rd August he wrote to Australia, seemingly displeased at having to leave his fine trench and his six telephone lines. He had hoped in vain for his furlough and was well

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<sup>329</sup> "Thiepval April July 15 1916", *L'illustration*, July 15, 1916, 5.

<sup>330</sup> "Dix Jours de Bataille sur la Somme", *L'illustration*, July 22, 1916, 72.

<sup>331</sup> "De le Somme a la Meuse", *L'illustration*, July 29, 1916, 113.



aware of what awaited him in his next sector, not fearing to express his despair. He still writes in English, but with more idiomatic French expressions. It is surprising that the negative sentiments he expressed managed to pass the censor (See Appendix 3). On 7th September he again wrote to Australia, this time in calmer mode. He was now calmly accepting the task ahead of him, which was to fight on in the Somme, endorsing his loyalty towards his fellow soldiers, and his sentiment of belonging.

There is a three-month gap until Jacques' next letter, but his movements can be traced as *L'Illustration* continued to describe the battle of the Somme in detail in its army reports every week.<sup>332</sup> If rumours had been right, Jacques would have left his camp on Sunday 9 September to 'entraîner' for the long journey west to Picardy where the Allied forces were continuing their advance each side of the Somme, trench by trench.

On certain occasions British and French forces worked *en liaison*, particularly in the capturing of Combles.<sup>333</sup> The British forces, moving forwards from Pozières, combined with the French army in an encircling movement to attack the now heavily fortified village and ruined chateau of Combles. Jacques was present at the taking of Combles as the British fought towards Thiepval, and possibly his facility in the English tongue was useful during these advances.<sup>334</sup> Germans had fortified Combles as a centre of resistance in the northern part of the Somme, and it now contained telephone networks, stores of ammunition, etc. The French then set up a first-aid post in the vaulted cellars of the ruined chateau, much admired by the photographers of *L'Illustration*.<sup>335</sup>

During this period Jacques earned his Croix de Guerre; the citation (on now damaged paper) is reproduced in Appendix 3.

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<sup>332</sup> "Dix Jours de Bataille sur la Somme," 72.

<sup>333</sup> "Les Deux Grands Succès de Combles et de Thiepval", *L'Illustration*, September 30, 1916, 317.

<sup>334</sup> "From France. Sydney Woolbuyer's War Experiences", 7.

<sup>335</sup> "Les Souterrains de L'Ancien Château de Combles", *L'Illustration*, October 7, 1916, 323.



### **Marcel in the Somme**

Jacques' brother Marcel had been participating in the battle from the beginning, on the southern bank with his colonial regiment, aiming to win back the city of Péronne from the Germans.

L'illustration of 22 July 1916 in its authorised report on the first ten days of the battle said:

*The colonial troops had thrown themselves forward with their customary ardour yet this ardour had been thoughtful and methodical, everywhere contained by the foresight of the leaders.*<sup>336</sup>

There is a document extract, written in careful copperplate, from the chief accountant for the 5th Regiment of Colonial Infantry in Lyon and addressed to the municipal authorities of the 8th arrondissement in Paris which announced Marcel's disappearance (See Appendix 3). The municipal authorities were very busy in those years delivering such messages, and the clerks using pen and ink must have found it difficult to cope with the endless lists of casualties of the battle of the Somme.

In a similar vein, on the 14<sup>th</sup> September 1916 Louis Hagen, wrote in English to his mother in Noumea:

*We had to attack the strongest hold held by the "huns". It was terrible, the Champagne affair was nothing like this. The Caledonians during the last affair behaved most wonderfully. They were the first to leap into the trenches and rush the German lines [...] No news of Marcel Ployout.*<sup>337</sup>

This news had not yet reached Jacques when he had written in his letter of 7 September:

*Marcel is having a rough time and even more than me he does not like the game.*

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<sup>336</sup> "Dix Jours de Bataille sur la Somme", 72.

<sup>337</sup> Hagen, Gilberte. "Louis Victor Hagen Letters."



In succeeding weeks there were more attacks and counter attacks. November came with rain and fog, and the British won Beaumont Hamel, with mud to their thighs. Snowfalls ended the great battle of the Somme, leaving the Allies still short of Bapaume, which had been one of the objectives on the first day of battle on 1 July. In 4 months the British front line had advanced about 12 kilometres. The French did not obtain their goal, the watery fortress of Péronne, until the tactical German retreat several months later.

The armies now holed up in their icy trenches to endure the winter, to rebuild their dugouts, to line their floors, to remake communications and fight the rats. The Allied General Staffs were again convened by Joffre at Chantilly to plan the following year's campaign. Joffre stated that France could only maintain its strength for one more battle, and thereafter an insufficient number of men of military age would remain to replace the losses.

His younger brother Maurice, who had turned 20 had now arrived to serve in France. The St. Aloysius Journal (undated) described his departure from Sydney (See Appendix 3). Maurice was assigned to the 3e Régiment du Génie (Engineers) based in Rouen. He was to serve in 1916 as a despatch rider in a quiet area between the Somme and Verdun.

His brother Stéphane (Faf), newly appointed to the rank of sous -lieutenant after his officers training school wrote to him in English with Christmas greetings. The front of this prophetic postcard pictured a laughing soldier leading a charge calling the celebrated battle cry of Verdun 'On les aura!' (We'll get them!).

### ***1917 Chemin des Dames***

The year began with an unusually severe winter; the Seine froze over so that the barges bringing in fresh supplies to Paris were immobilised. The cold was felt all the more by civilians as there was a shortage of wood and coal. As for life in the trenches, for weeks on end photos show men huddling in the snow. No attacks could be made



until Spring. The balance of power was altered on the 6th April by the United States of America's declaration of war on Germany. It was to be a long time before American manpower could be of any help at the Front, but the psychological effect on both Germans and Allies was considerable.

Less encouraging events were taking place in Russia. Strikes, riots and mutinies in Petrograd in March set the scene for revolution both in the capital and in army ranks. This later allowed Germany to withdraw her forces from the Eastern Front to send them to the West.

In spring, Stéphane and Jacques were both transferred to the Aisne sector, where the Nivelle offensive was being prepared. In France, public opinion had turned against Joffre's strategy of attrition, and on 12 December he was replaced as supreme commander by General Nivelle, responsible for the last successful battles at Verdun, and author of the celebrated words "*Ils ne passeront pas*" (They shall not pass). Nivelle had an ambitious plan to end the war once and for all, and it had the support of the British Prime Minister Lloyd George.

The main Nivelle thrust by two French armies, with a third in reserve, was to be launched several days later from the flat land north of the Aisne River on a front of 40 kilometres. It aimed to capture the redoubtable Chemin des Dames ridge, which had been held by the enemy since the first year of the war. During this time the Germans had had the opportunity to strengthen this natural fortress by their skilled constructions, machine gun posts and heavy artillery. Interconnecting tunnels had been dug and strengthened with reinforced concrete. They contained magazines, hospitals and a network of facilities, as well as observation posts on higher ground, from which could be clearly seen and photographed, the cities of Soissons and Rheims. Their guns had been bombarding these cities relentlessly, causing much damage to their mediaeval treasures. Another French attack was to be made simultaneously in a sector east of Rheims.



The following is a remarkably cheerful letter of 12 March 1917 (see Appendix 3) from Jacques describing his period in an aviation centre, amongst the new aeroplanes which had been his passion in earlier days. Better still, was the chance encounter with his brother Stéphane (Faf): Jacques had identified himself with the Australians after his game of cards with his brother, which made the idea of leave all the more attractive, particularly as the period allowed at home had been extended to three weeks for those from other countries instead of the 3 to 7 days allowed for those living in France.<sup>338</sup>

Another more serious, undated message quickly followed this letter, in which Jacques predicted that it would only be a matter of days before the offensive began.

Jacques' cousin John, sometimes called Jean, depending on the mood of the speaker, was indeed returning to Australia on leave. He was to accompany one of his young Australian-born sisters, 'Toinette', who at the age of 16 was trapped behind German lines. After about eighteen months she 'escaped' to Paris by methods that were never divulged. Here she stayed with her aunt, Marie-Thérèse Playoust where she 'did her bit' caring for the sick and helping to feed and clothe the widows, orphans and refugees.<sup>339</sup> She then decided to return to Australia with her brother. They left Marseilles by the Messageries Maritimes ship *Gange* on 31st March. On board was a contingent of New Caledonian soldiers, also on home leave, including two members of the Hagen family whom they probably knew. The ship was torpedoed off the coast of Tunisia, but there were no casualties amongst the Caledonians and Louis Hagen took a photograph of the ship as it was sinking.

Jean and Toinette found a ship in Marseilles, the *Somali*, to bring them back to Sydney on 15 July, but the 238 Caledonians returning on leave on the *El Kantara*, including Louis and Roy Hagen, took much longer to arrive.

Jean remained several weeks in Sydney and was photographed with a group at 'Woodside' on 8 July in civilian clothes. 'Mr Jean Playoust' was reported as attending a

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> "Social News and Gossip", *The Catholic Press*, June 21, 1917, 36.



matinée at the Tivoli theatre in aid of France's Day with his parents, his sister Miss Marie-Antoinette Playoust, two other sisters, and a large and fashionable audience.<sup>340</sup>

The shipping list of the *Tanui* which sailed from Wellington and arrived in London on the 30th September showed the name of a French soldier, Playoust, 21, in the second saloon, indicating that Jean did not linger long in Sydney before returning to the front. Some months later Toinette, who had remained in Sydney, was able to greet some of her friends who had shared her adventures. In October Sydney welcomed a group of French soldiers on their way home to New Caledonia from active service in France. They were feted by the Red Cross and the French-Australian League and among the people meeting them at the wharf were Joseph and Blanche Playoust with their daughter 'Toinette'.<sup>341</sup>

Meanwhile, General Nivelle's attack began as planned on 16 April after prolonged artillery fire. There was accordingly no element of surprise, particularly as the Germans had discovered the plans of the attack on a captured French soldier, and placed their machine guns strategically to decimate the infantry as they progressed uphill. Jacques' and Stéphane's regiments took part in this operation, starting from the plain a little north-west of Rheims, aiming to reach the heights of Craonne, the easternmost point of the Chemin des Dames ridge. For a while they advanced, but a tank attack failed, the Air Force was outnumbered, and much of this ground was later lost. The infantry was halted on the plateau of Craonne.

On the very first day of the offensive, near Juvincourt, Stéphane earned the Légion d'Honneur, the Croix de Guerre and lost his life. His citation (translated) reads:

*Officer of ardent bravery. On the 16th April he supported his section under a violent curtain fire, encouraging it by word and by example. Some moments later leapt on to the parapet, and drawing on his men with an irresistible movement was mortally hit.*

He was 28 years old.

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<sup>340</sup> "Tivoli Patriotic Matinee", *Sunday Times*, July 1, 1917, 21.

<sup>341</sup> "Soldiers of France. Welcome in Sydney.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 15, 1917, 8.



The battle dragged on along the Chemin des Dames, costly in human life but with little result visible to Jacques as he departed from the Front a few weeks later. Fortunately he was spared the mutinies that followed this campaign. He was able to visit his parents in Paris and share their grief before leaving them to embark on a large P&O liner, the *SS Mongolia*, in Marseilles for his long-desired furlough in Australia. It was noticeable that he did not refer to Australia as 'home' in his letters, but unlike his cousin, John, his parents were not living in Sydney. Whether the authorities were aware of this when he applied for leave is not stated, but Jacques knew where he wanted to go.

On 2 June 1917 he wrote on P&O writing paper to his cousin Marie, thanking her for her kindness during his "difficult moments", and expecting to reach Port Said the next day (See Appendix 3).

The *Mongolia* sailed through the Suez Canal and set course for India. Just off the Indian coast the ship struck a double mine and sank in 20 minutes. Jacques' *veine de pendu* (good luck) held. His wallet was full of money because when the ship struck the mine, he had been ready to pay his bar bill, as was required half way through the voyage, and thus found himself close to the life-boats. He rowed for 24 hours before reaching land, sharing a lifeboat with a former acquaintance from Mount Macedon holidays, the amateur tennis champion and Australian Davis Cup player Norman (later Sir Norman) Brookes.

While waiting for another ship in Bombay he sent this postcard to Marie fronted by a photo of the palatial new Taj Mahal Hotel where P&O had housed him. Jacques may have mistakenly dated it 27 July 1917 instead of 27 June 1917 (See Appendix 3).

All the *Mongolia's* passengers were safe. Those who suffered most were the engineers in the hold. A Dutch ship brought the Australians home.<sup>342</sup> Among the passengers were

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<sup>342</sup> "Australian Passengers Safe", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 29, 1917, 7.



twenty French soldiers and sailors bound for Noumea, possibly also on home leave.<sup>343</sup> No doubt the military authorities in France had not considered the length of time the promised three weeks furlough for all would take in certain cases. Was shipwreck considered a probability?

Jacques was interviewed at length about his war experiences.<sup>344</sup> Photo albums record family festivities in which the cousins also celebrated Toinette's return after her own shipwreck, but Jean had already left to report back for duty in France. A grand dinner was given in August at 'Paris House', Sydney's finest restaurant of the period, for Jacques and another *poilu*, Edgar Puech, who had sailed to France with Jacques in the first contingent on the *Malwa* in 1914. Puech had been the first of the Australian wool buyers to earn the Croix de Guerre.

As his furlough drew to an end, Jacques took the *Australien* back to France, the same ship that had brought him to Melbourne as a child in 1889. He wrote to his brothers and sister on 21 November and 14 December 1917 (See Appendix 3). Jacques' writing has slipped back into English mode, in particular his spelling of Marseille. He hoped to see the 'old people' on his way through Paris, and was resigned to the thought of hearing the cannon again by the end of the next week.

A sizeable contingent of Playousts was now in France. Jean had now returned to the Front, in the same heavy cavalry regiment as René, the 12th Cuirassiers. Jean's younger brother, Fernand, only a schoolboy the previous year, was now in a French field artillery regiment. Boys crowding the college verandas at Milson's Point to wave as the ship sailed out of the harbour marked his farewell from his friends at St. Aloysius. Fernand wrote to his former teachers that he met his cousin Maurice when he visited his uncle Georges and aunt Marie-Thérèse in Paris. He also witnessed a 14th July parade of soldiers returning from the Front. Jean appears to have shared Jacques' difficulties with spelling when he wrote in English to greet his young brother, Fernand

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<sup>343</sup> "Sinking of the Mongolia. Battling with the Waves.", *The Brisbane Courier*, July 23, 1917, 6.

<sup>344</sup> "From France. Sydney Woolbuyer's War Experiences.", 7.



(See Appendix 3 14th December 1917). There was no question, however, that they should communicate in French; their identities were firmly set in this pattern.

### ***1918 Interpreter with the Australians***

With the New Year Jacques' military career took a new direction. Feeling that he was now entitled to a 'cushy job', he applied for a post as interpreter with the French military mission attached to the British Army. In fact his English was so good that a bemused examiner then tested his French. He was accepted and was appointed to the 13th Australian Field Artillery Brigade, 5th Australian Division on 21 January 1918. No documentation exists concerning this appointment, only an official identity card. He remained with this unit for the last year of the war, sharing in their early near-defeats, then in their last victorious thrust under Monash. His knowledge of French and German, as well as his experience in signals, were useful to the Australians, with whom he had a great sense of belonging, and his viewpoint now became that of an artilleryman rather than the *piou-piou* (footslogger), which he had been for so long. He was now dressed in a smart new interpreter's uniform.

Back in a familiar atmosphere, Jacques enjoyed his dealings with the Australians, whom he appreciated for their good sense of fun. In later years he loved to recount a tale of his early days with them, when they tried to take a rise out of "Turps", the new little "Froggie" interpreter. On one occasion he was brought a huge thoroughbred to ride, and when he was mounted, they gave it an almighty whack on the rump; of course the horse bolted. Fortunately Jacques was an experienced horseman, and not only brought it under control but returned to hurl a string of good Aussie oaths at the startled soldiers.

The 13th Field Artillery Brigade had been enjoying a rest period away from the Front near Etaples in the Pas de Calais. The strength of the brigade was 28 officers, 785 other ranks, 453 horses and 144 mules. According to the brigade diary it was a cheerful time with football matches and a grand concert given by the 5th Division Concert Party and



attended by the Corps Commander, General Sir W. R. Birdwood together with the Divisional Commander, Sir J. T. Hobbs. "*It was a good show*".<sup>345</sup>

The 13th Field Artillery brigade was occupied in constructing gas-proof doors to dug-outs. Their duty was to cover the 15th Australian Infantry Brigade. Orders had been given to prepare for the inevitable spring attack but throughout February there were only small patrol raids and sporadic exchanges of artillery fire.<sup>346</sup>

The following letter was written in pencil to his siblings describing some Diggers' pranks and saying "*the German offensive is not starting. I think it is bluff*" (See Appendix 3, 13 March 1918).

### ***The Ludendorff Offensive***

It was by no means 'bluff'. Barely a week later General Ludendorff launched his long-planned Spring Offensive, aimed at annihilating the Allies before a large-scale American landing of men and material could be effected. Germany was no longer at war with Russia and Romania, which meant that trains carrying 44 newly freed German divisions began rolling westwards, dangerously reducing the numerical advantage of the Allies, who as yet lacked unity of command when compared to the Germans.

The Ludendorff plan consisted of successive attacks on three sectors of the Western Front, the Somme, another further north in Flanders, and the third was further south east in the Aisne area, menacing Paris. This new offensive in the Somme had as its target the vulnerable junction of the British and French forces. The important rail and road network of Amiens was to be taken, and the British lines were to be separated from the French alongside and to be pushed back to the Channel. Between St. Quentin and Cambrai, sixty-two German divisions were to drive forward on a 75 kilometre front. This was later called the battle of Amiens, in which Dominion troops were to play a major part.

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<sup>345</sup> Anon. *War Diary 13th Field Artillery Brigade 5th Division*. Microfilm, Australian Imperial Force Unit War Diaries, 1914-18 War (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, n.d.).

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*



The Germans emerged from the safety of the Hindenburg Line at dawn on 21 March. The mist was thickened by smoke, the air poisoned by gas, so that for more than 12 hours the soldiers had to endure their suffocating masks. An extensive creeping barrage obliged both British and French to cede ground, with a resulting breakdown in communications. Four days later the enemy had reached the old 1917 trenches; Péronne and Bapaume were re-taken, and Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria's troops were pushing west along the Somme Valley towards Amiens.

The situation was now extremely hazardous, with Amiens in danger, and an urgent call for reinforcements was made. Among those who were sent was the Fifth Australian Division, including Jacques' 13th Field Artillery Brigade, who left their Flemish trenches and, after a day's march and another day's tortuous train journey, arrived at Amiens. By 5 April the whole 5th Division was in line, filling a gap north and south of the Somme between the British Fifth Army and the northern flank of the French sector, thus protecting the vital French liaison with the British.

Prince Rupprecht's troops were now facing them astride the Somme and were sustaining their massive advance towards Amiens, only about 10 kilometres away. The village of Hamel fell to them and remained in German hands till the Australians recaptured it in July, but overall the Allied line held. The Germans did not win Amiens.

There was now a period of comparative quiet, and in the Australian sector there took place a certain fraternising between the Diggers and their French *poilu* neighbours. Digger humour favoured bilingual puns such as a trench named 'Roo de Kanga', just as in the battle for Pozières they had transformed the strategic position of 'Mouquet Farm' into 'Moo-cow Farm'.<sup>347</sup> Of interest to a linguist, a bizarre 'franglais' pidgin evolved to meet the men's immediate needs. Some such terms were:

'plonk' for vin blanc (white wine)

'no compree' for pas compris (I do not understand)

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<sup>347</sup> Walter Hubert Downing. *Digger Dialects: A Collection of Slang Phrases Used by the Australian Soldiers on Active Duty* (Lothian Book Publishing Company, 1919).



- ‘tray beans’ for très bien (very good)
- ‘delloo’ for de l’eau (water)
- ‘finny’ for fini (finished)
- ‘mungy’ for manger (a meal)
- ‘alley’ for allez (go)
- ‘alley man’ for allemand (German)
- ‘toot sweet’ for tout de suite (straight away).

If the shopkeeper had no chocolate he may have said that there was none left, ‘*Il n’y en a plus*’, which was quickly corrupted to ‘na poo’; the ruined Ypres was then ‘na poo’. Its meaning was extended to ‘nothing doing’ or any negative reply. This pidgin was also picked up by shopkeepers and farmers behind the lines, and *Le Figaro* related an incident where a farmer’s wife, angered by artillery being hauled across her crop, shouted ‘you no bonne, compree dat?’ to which the gunner replied innocently ‘No, me no compree’ and, smilingly, ‘Say la guerre’ (that’s war).<sup>348</sup>

This period of calm on the Somme was broken on 24 April by an intense bombardment followed by an infantry attack on the southern flank of the 5th Australian Division. The Division held firm, but Villers-Bretonneux was temporarily lost to the enemy in a cloud of gas, while the French further south lost Hangard. Jacques’ 13th Field Artillery brigade diary records this tersely: ‘Villers-Bretonneux on our left fell to the enemy but was recaptured shortly after’.<sup>349</sup> Monash wrote more colourfully:

*When the sun rose on the third anniversary of Anzac Day it looked down on the Australians in full possession of the whole town, and standing on our original lines of 24 hours before with nearly 1000 German prisoners to their credit.*<sup>350</sup>

Hangard was recaptured and the line was re-established.

<sup>348</sup> “Le Français Tel Qu’on Le Parle”, *Le Courrier Australien*, June 29, 1917, 3.

<sup>349</sup> Anon. *War Diary 13th Field Artillery Brigade 5th Division*.

<sup>350</sup> Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash. *The Australian Victories in France in 1918*, Second Revised (Melbourne: Lothian Book Publishing Co., 1923), 40.



Lt. General John Monash was appointed to succeed General Birdwood as the commander of the Australian Army Corps, which was now for the first time a separate entity and commanded by an Australian. A civil engineer by training, and well experienced in planning large projects, Monash had a clear, disciplined mind and was to weld his officers and men into a super-efficient fighting unit.

For the eastern part of Ludendorff's plan of attack, he chose a broad front in the Aisne sector just north of Soissons and Rheims, near the scene of General Nivelle's disastrous Spring Offensive in 1917 where Jacques' brother Stéphane lost his life. Ludendorff was successful in surprising the Allies, but the area presented serious geographical difficulties. About five kilometres south of the Ailette River, by a railway line, lay the small village of Epagny. It was in this vicinity that Jacques' tall cousin Jean, 'Little John', from Strathfield was stationed in a regiment of heavy cavalry' met his death.

*Volunteers were asked for to form a patrol to find out the Germans' whereabouts. Jean offered his services, but soon after the patrol left the lines, it was partially surrounded. In attempting to obtain reinforcements, Jean was wounded in three places, nevertheless he managed to reach his destination and gasp out 'reinforcements' before finally succumbing to his injuries. R.I.P.<sup>351</sup>*

Jean [John] was posthumously awarded the *Croix de Guerre* and the *Médaille Militaire*. Joseph and Blanche, his parents in Sydney received the news by cable, which arrived weeks before the pressed violets he had picked in the trenches and mailed to them.

Jean's death was communicated to Jacques. Jacques' unit had been recently called back into line early from their rest area near Abbeville in order to join in the complex and secret preparations for the coming battle to retake the Hamel bulge, in which the 13th Field Artillery Brigade was to be involved.<sup>352</sup>

A sad letter was written on a small piece of brown paper in pencil two days before the attack. 2 July 1918 (See Appendix 3). Emile was Sous-lieutenant Emile Foüan, one of Jacques's Tourcoing cousins who, was killed in the Aisne like Jean, and awarded the

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<sup>351</sup> Gerri Nicholas. *Men for Others: St Aloysius' College Roll of Honour Boer War to Vietnam War* (Sydney, N.S.W: St. Aloysius College, 2002), 57.

<sup>352</sup> Anon. *War Diary 13th Field Artillery Brigade 5th Division*.



Croix de Guerre and the Légion d'Honneur. 'Little John' was a tall character in the childhood tales of Robin Hood. As for René, he could already have been suffering from the diabetes that carried him away four years later. In 1916 he had fought in the Somme. It is not known whether he was still with Jean in this last battle, though they had been together for most of the war. Eighty years later their cousin Marie described René as good looking but shy and *sauvage* (unsociable), speaking very little. He wrote long letters to her in very small writing, but unfortunately none remain.

Jacques was now granted leave in Paris, where he visited his family. His young cousin Marie had now become a good friend, and delighted in sharing his visits to the theatre. Jacques returned to his Field Artillery Brigade in time to help in preparation for the massive combined offensive, which was to commence 11 days later. He wrote to Marie to announce his safe arrival (See Appendix 3: 28 July 1918).

As many of the German reserves had been transferred to the Aisne-Champagne area, the Allied Generals chose to launch an immense Franco-British attack in the Somme with the aim of emptying the pocket remaining from Ludendorff's April advance.

The British General Rawlinson convened a conference of his Corps Commanders on 21 July, and later fixed the date of 8 August for the action to begin. In all, some 100,000 Allied soldiers, British, French, Canadian, New Zealand and Australian were to participate, protected by 500 tanks and 800 aircraft. For the first time all five of the Australian divisions would fight together, now known as the Australia Corps, and were under the command of Monash. The Australian Corps, together with the Canadian Corps, would spearhead the attack as both now were perceived as shock troops.

Monash describes the precision and secrecy of the preparations for the coming battle. Several conferences were convened at the chateau of Bertangles where Monash took many hours to organise his subordinates, basing his tactics on his previous Hamel success. Much emphasis was placed on concealment and surprise.



Monash planned to use the tactic of 'leapfrogging' of divisions, one fresh division overtaking the other at a given time to speed up the advance. This required meticulous preparation and coordination, and precise support from the mobile artillery. Each infantry brigade was protected by a brigade of field artillery steadily moving forward its horse-drawn guns and wagons in the 'creeping barrage' used so successfully at Hamel. In the days preceding the attack guns were accurately calibrated using a new technology to eliminate errors in range or line. Monash, the practical civil engineer, aimed to protect the infantry as far as possible by employing existing technical resources such as tanks, aircraft and artillery to prevent the carnage he had observed in earlier battles at Pozières, Bullecourt 'and other bloody fields'.<sup>353</sup>

Jacques' 13th Field Artillery Brigade was to cover the 8th Australian Infantry Brigade in this attack. The attack on 8 August achieved its purpose, and the brigade diary sums up the day's actions (See Appendix 3, 8 August 1918). On that day the Australians and Canadians in the centre of the attack had moved forward some 12 kilometres, capturing thousands of prisoners, many large and small guns, useful stores, horses and ammunition. On each side the French and British also advanced, though not quite as rapidly. At last the Allies could begin to scent victory. General Ludendorff was later to write that:

*August 8th was the black day for the German army in the history of the war. [...] The war must be ended.*<sup>354</sup>

The Allied advance continued in the next few days, but against stiffening German resistance. As for the 13th Field Artillery Brigade and Jacques, the operation had begun on 8 August with infantry fighting their way east, supported by a creeping barrage. It then continued for five more weary days, with casualties for both men and horses, before they were given any relief. Orders were issued for a two-day spell that the men enjoyed. That day, at the Chateau of Bertangles, King George V knighted Sir John Monash.

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<sup>353</sup> Monash. *The Australian Victories in France in 1918*.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*



Jacques now found time to depict his exhilarating experience of the battle and its aftermath to his cousin Marie in his next letter, which emphasises the speed of the Allied advance and gives a vivid description of the creeping barrage, the light artillery arriving at full gallop to get into action in the field (See Appendix 3: 22 August 1918).

The enthusiasm of this letter points to a real fellow feeling with his Australian brigade. By 'the north' Jacques was referring to his and Marie's fathers' birthplace in Tourcoing, which had now been under German occupation for nearly four years. Despite Jacques' cautious prediction, it was to be liberated in less than three months.

Jacques found more to do than his official role of sending an account to the mission of the state of liberated villages for which he was awarded the, the Distinguished Conduct Medal for "rescuing civilians under heavy shell fire and taking them to places of safety." The citation is reproduced in Appendix 3. When questioned about this feat in later years, he made light of it, saying it was small fry after the *Croix de Guerre*.

Consecutive Allied attacks were being made all along the Front, turning back the enemy advance in Flanders, the Aisne and the Argonne. From the inception of the great attack of 8 August, Monash's Australians, together with British, French, Canadians and New Zealand units, were in pursuit of the enemy north and south of the Somme, capturing prisoners and enthusiastically gathering material abandoned in the rout. Later in the month, however, resistance stiffened.

The day after Jacques' last letter, the 13th Field Artillery brigade covered the 1st Australian Infantry Brigade by a creeping barrage in a significant operation resulting in the capture of the villages of Chuignolles and Chuignes, close to each other on low hills south of the river. As well as the strategic gain to the Australians in their advance east along the Somme Valley, this battle furnished them with abundant booty, dumps of engineering material, two complete trains and, best of all, the largest gun yet captured from the enemy in the whole war. It was a masterpiece from Krupp, a 280 mm calibre naval gun, even larger than the railway gun they had seized on 8 August. It was taken complete with its 4 wagons. From its shelter in Arcy Wood near Chuignes it had been



systematically bombarding Amiens from some 30 kilometres away. It had been conveyed there by a specially built railway line and mounted on a platform over concrete foundations in its hiding place in the wood. As the enemy troops retreated they exploded its breech to render it useless to the Allies.

The full front cover of *L'Illustration* of 24 August 1918 displayed a photograph taken in Amiens railway station of this huge gun being examined by M. Clemenceau (the Premier), Field-Marshal Haig, and also Maréchal Foch. Foch had clambered high up on to its platform, trying to manoeuvre the breech. On the side of the camouflaged gun carriage was painted "Captured by the Australians".<sup>355</sup>

The gun was then wheeled to Paris, without its wagons, to be displayed to the public on the Champ de Mars. A large photograph of the crowds visiting it appeared in *L'Illustration*.<sup>356</sup> It may be the smaller gun taken on 8 August that is now displayed outside the Australian War Museum in Canberra, though the Australian War Museum site gives conflicting evidence. A couple of days later the Brigade marched through Fay and Asservillers past old, disused trenches to take up positions in an area near Barleux where Marcel Playoust had lost his life in 1916, just south of the almost right-angled bend in the Somme near Péronne. Here the Somme, at some distance from the sea, was a series of ponds and marshes which acted as a natural north-south barrier to the Australian Corps' advance east, particularly as the enemy had destroyed the bridges.

Monash's original and daring attack on the Mount St. Quentin, key position to the taking of Péronne, was well reported by *L'Illustration*:

*Mount St. Quentin was captured by the Australians in the course of an audacious operation executed with magnificent dash [...]. From then, the entry of the Allies into Péronne was only a matter of hours. It took place on the 1st September at dawn, and immediately the Australians leapt on to the heights to the east of the town. Simultaneously the troops from London fighting on their left crossed the Bapaume road. [...] German resistance was rather lively in the sector and our allies harvested 2,000 prisoners.*<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> "Un Canon Allemand de 280 Qui Tirait Sur Amiens", *L'Illustration*, August 24, 1918, 177.

<sup>356</sup> "Au Champs de Mars", *L'Illustration*, August 31, 1918, 219.

<sup>357</sup> "La Manoeuvre Franco-Britannique", *L'Illustration*, no. 3940 (September 7, 1918), 26.



The 13th field artillery Brigade with whom Jacques was serving protected the 14th Infantry Brigade as it attacked the ramparted town of Péronne. The town was 'mopped up' the next day. The brigade was then involved in the crossing of the St. Quentin canal and the taking of Beurevoir Hill, thus piercing the Hindenburg Line, despite still unrelenting German rearguard action. Although there were no more large scale battles, the killing went on through October and into November as the Allies fought their way forward.

### **Armistice**

An announcement was signalled to all Allied armies that "Hostilities will cease at 11 hours today, November 11th". The 13th Field Artillery Brigade diaries noted the news they had been waiting for:

11th November ... While on the road unofficial intimation was received to the effect that an armistice with GERMANY has been concluded. Whistles and bells were heard in the distance, and cheering passed down the column. The weather was fine and warm.

Newspapers were now giving prominence to *la grippe*, the Spanish Flu, a virulent strain of influenza that was ravaging soldiers and civilians on both sides of the line. It had a short incubation period and was highly contagious, later to become a pandemic that reached Australia.

For the Playoust family life had taken a sudden change. Just as the storming of the Hindenburg line was developing, the youngest son, Roger, now of military age, sailed from Australia to report for duty. His sister Eugénie, [Ninie] who wished to join her parents in Paris, sailed with him. Events overtook them both - the war ended before their ship arrived, and their father, Georges, had died of pneumonia, possibly from this sinister 'flu, just 11 days before the Armistice.

Jacques had been given compassionate leave, which allowed him to spend time with his bereaved mother and family in Paris. Father, who had left home and work to be in closer touch with his fighting sons, was dead. For Jacques the war was over, but at the



cost of two brothers, one brother-in-law, and a cherished cousin, as well as numerous friends and relatives. His early idealism had given way to a matter-of-fact resignation, but he had the advantage of a resilient, extroverted personality to help him overcome the horrors of the last four years. Despite his sadness he was able to find pleasure in one of the passions of his youth, aviation, which had greatly advanced in the war years (See Appendix 3: 16 November 1918).

This is the last of the family letters from the Front. Jacques' brigade, still south of Péronne, was in a state of limbo for several months, as the men could not be discharged till shipping could be arranged back to Australia, and the detailed care of both men and horses attended to. Jacques remained several more months with them, and his interpreting skills would have been useful in communicating with the newly liberated civilians.

The brigade diaries reported football matches, a few cases of influenza, sporting results and educational courses in French and German conducted by Interpreter Playoust. Jacques' fellow feeling with Australians could only have intensified in these months of idleness and close proximity.

### ***Aftermath***

The two military graves of Stéphane and Jean show due respect, Stéphane at Berry au Bac, Jean near Soissons. The site of Marcel's grave is still unclear. Official records of French War Graves (*Mémoire des Hommes*) can now only suggest that given the savagery of this battle, his mortal remains might repose as 'an unknown soldier' in one of the ossuaries of the French necropolis of Villers Carbonnel (Somme). A monument near Péronne is his shared tribute.

The four surviving soldiers of the two families all returned to Australia at various times after the Armistice, and may already have made the decision to stay permanently. Perhaps the question was not even asked; perhaps they were simply coming home.



Ten months after the armistice, and the death of her husband, Georges, Marie-Thérèse returned to Australia in 1919 with her daughter, 'Ninie', and her ailing son, René, telling journalists that she had visited the battlefields, the fertile farming land now devastated and torn apart by shell holes, with perhaps a wall still standing to show what was once a prosperous village. Her visit to the battlefields was a pilgrimage to visit her sons' graves, for visits from tourists were not tolerated by those who considered the ground hallowed by the blood of their fallen comrades. She spoke of her admiration of the valour and initiative of the Australian troops, stating that that the Australians and Canadians were given all the hard tasks to do. She felt that:

*Whenever there was a tight corner, the Australian soldiers were sent up, and never once did they fail, and I think the whole world should know of their wonderful deed.<sup>358</sup>*

It is interesting to note that this article referred to Marie-Thérèse as 'returning home', for there remained many decisions to be made.

### ***Effect of the War on National Identity***

#### **Returning Soldiers**

What now was the sense of belonging felt by the men returning to Australia from their years of military service in France?

After years of trench warfare, it is understandable that they might now seek a more stable life. After their return, their subsequent careers and choice of partners expressed what they now felt was their true national identity. They were at ease in both France and Australia, and were accepted as such by the society in which they lived.

**René** had already demonstrated his affinity with Australia by joining the Australian army at the outbreak of war, months before he was of an age to serve in the French army, but had been persuaded by his family to wait instead for his French call-up for fear of being classified as a deserter. He then served dutifully with his French regiment

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<sup>358</sup> "The Battlefields of France - Already Invaded by Tourists", 13.



throughout the war. He returned to Australia already ill from diabetes, a disease for which medicine had not yet found a cure. He sought work in the Australian countryside, but was defeated by his disease in 1923.

**Fernand**, recuperating from the effects of poison gas, returned to his parents' house at Strathfield. He worked for a while as a jackaroo, and then became a wool buyer like his father, Joseph. He married an Australian, and they raised their son, whom they called John after Fernand's lost brother, in an English-speaking household. Fernand's work in the wool trade, however, kept him in touch with other Frenchmen, but his wife was Australian, and French was not spoken at home.

Included in this group of returning soldiers is Marie-Thérèse's youngest son **Roger**, who was almost a soldier as he had arrived in France to join his regiment in 1918, but was refused because the war had ended. He resumed his medical studies and married an Australian, and they had two sons.

When World War II broke out twenty years later, he was amongst the very first to volunteer for the Australian army as a medical officer, now manifesting his patriotism towards Australia. The Germans were the victors in the campaigns of Greece and Crete, and Roger remained with the wounded in the retreat from Crete, and consequently was confined as a prisoner of war in Germany. His 'Oflag' held a number of French prisoners, with whom he enjoyed communicating in French. For an unexplained reason, he was transferred to the prison fortress of Colditz, where he did not learn to enjoy German civilisation.

When Roger came home, he talked readily about the German gaolers and the French prisoners to his brother Jacques, who had once studied wool technology in Leipzig, and, in different circumstances, had learnt the language and enjoyed the culture. Roger's health was now damaged but he resumed his career as a general practitioner.



The language Roger spoke at home was entirely English, and he seemed greatly relieved to be back.<sup>359</sup>

After his discharge from the French army **Maurice** stayed on with Jacques in France to revive their father's wool buying firm. He returned to Australia and married "Nin" Lamérand, the daughter of another long-established French wool buyer in 1926. They continued to speak French or English, had French and Australian friends and worked diligently in parish affairs.

**Jacques** appeared in his letters to have been affected by his comparatively gentle year in 1918 as an interpreter with the Australian Army after surviving typhoid fever, Verdun, the Somme and a shipwreck. His fellow feeling with Australians could only have intensified after the Armistice, in their months of post-war idleness and close proximity before the brigade disbanded. His date of discharge is not known, but he did not return to Australia till 1922, remaining in Northern France with his brother Maurice to revive their father's business, which would be based in Sydney and called 'Playoust Fils' (sons).

Jacques was smitten on meeting Evelyne Delvas, the daughter of one of the very earliest Frenchmen to visit Australia by sailing ship to buy wool, and who had become Georges Playoust's French agent. He proposed marriage, and it was a wise choice, for Evelyne [Zine] had learnt to speak English as a girl after a year in an English school, and had an outgoing personality, easing her adaptation to a friendly English-speaking society. Because of the wool trade, the name of Australia was not unfamiliar to her.

The old pre-war life resumed, except that Jacques now walked with a pronounced limp, and needed a stick. They bought a house in Sydney, symbolically installing a spacious wine cellar. Jacques and Zine both interested themselves in the revived Alliance Française, and both participated in amateur theatre with Henri Segært, the Belgian Consul-General, whose troupe raised money for the Alliance and other good causes. In the 1922 elections for office bearers of the Alliance, Jacques Playoust was

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<sup>359</sup> Personal testimony.



vice-president and the committee consisted mostly of wool buyers and names from the pre-war committee.<sup>360</sup> He was to become president of the Alliance in 1943. Jacques attended meetings of the French Chamber of Commerce, and was reported as being present at the 14 July reception in 1923 at the French consulate.<sup>361</sup>

As for Jacques' identity, it appears from this to have settled into that of a chameleon French- and -Australian as he and his brothers had been before the war. After their trans-national childhood and their years in the French army, they could never feel only French, or only Australian, despite the affectionate sentiments they felt for both. At this time of intense friendship between Australia and France, did it matter? This state of mind is best described by Ivan Barko:

*These families became thoroughly bi-lingual, and their loyalties were shared rather than divided between France and Australia.*<sup>362</sup>

### **The Older Generation**

For the older generation, the question of identity resolved itself by their decisions where to spend their remaining years.

Marie-Thérèse, now a widow, adjusted to a different way of life when her daughters moved to their own houses. Marie-Thérèse bought a house in Mosman, to be closer to her daughters' families. She picked up threads of her pre-war life by helping to revive the Alliance Française as it was now experiencing financial difficulties. Mlle Soubeiran had been elected co president in January 1921 with the wool buyer Emile Doucet. Dame Margaret Davidson, the wife of the governor, gave her patronage.<sup>363</sup>

A public meeting was held at Government house, where Dame Margaret presided and made a speech. Blanche and Marie-Thérèse Playoust were present in a group of about

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<sup>360</sup> "Alliance Française", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 23, 1922, 9.

<sup>361</sup> "France's Day. Mr. Bavin's Tribute. Example to the Nations. Bond with Britain.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 16, 1923, 10.

<sup>362</sup> Barko. "The French in Sydney", 2.

<sup>363</sup> Ivan Barko. "The Alliance Française of Sydney between the Two World Wars", *Explorations*, no. 55 (Summer -2014 2013): 3-28.



150 people.<sup>364</sup> Characteristically, Marie-Thérèse gave a ladies' tea party at the Australia Hotel to demonstrate her support, inviting many of the old pre-war Alliance members such as Mlle Soubeiran, Lady McMillan, Miss Gurney, and Blanche Playoust, and introducing several new ones.<sup>365</sup> This was almost a replica of her 'at home' in 1911 to honour Mlle Soubeiran's receipt of a medal. Life must go on as before. In her grief after her wartime losses, Marie-Thérèse may have found comfort in picking up the old threads and the old friendships that had persisted despite her long absence. It was also a firm statement of her present social group identity as a woman within this French-Australian society, aided by her facility in English.

The crucial decision had yet to be made as to where she wished to live in her old age, a decision common to many other expatriates. A lengthy journey to France in 1922 to visit her husband and sons' graves settled the matter and she made the decision to stay in Australia.

Joseph Playoust was reaching the end of a very successful career. He was esteemed for his contribution to the French-Australian League of Help, for which he was awarded the medal of Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur. Joseph and Blanche made a very different and heart-rending choice to that of Marie-Thérèse, when Joseph retired in 1929. He and Blanche left Australia, a country where they had lived for over thirty years, to settle permanently in France. They were accompanied by their four unmarried daughters, Maria, Blanche jun., Toinette and Marthe. This resulted in splitting their family, for not all members were happy with this move. Their son Fernand had married an Australian and remained in Sydney. In the 1930's, Blanche jun. chose to return to live and work in Australia, where she spent her last years. Paul performed his obligatory French military service and after a period in South America, returned to Australia, in the 1930s where he married an Australian. Charles came back to a transnational life as a wool buyer in Melbourne, but his French wife could not adapt to a life in exile and they separated. Their children were brought up in France, while Charles continued to work in the wool trade in Melbourne and Adelaide.

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<sup>364</sup> "For France. Reviving the Alliance Française. Link with Australia. Meeting at Government House.", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 20, 1921, 10.

<sup>365</sup> "Near and Far", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 8, 1921, 6.



One of their descendants is now living in Queensland.

The parents' reason for returning to France was not divulged, but a factor was surely Blanche's difficulty in speaking English. There must have been many embarrassing moments for her when she needed to thank Australians for their generous gifts to the FALH, but had to rely on Mlle Soubeiran to be her mouthpiece. One wonders if she had not felt exiled during her Australian years. Another factor was the marriage in France of her daughter Gabrielle to a Belgian wool buyer, who had worked in Sydney. This couple was to settle in the Belgian wool centre of Verviers, Gabrielle, one of the early women to graduate from medicine at Sydney University, had numerous progeny, and in time was to hold a central position in the family.

Unfortunately, this family suffered severe deprivations during the Nazi occupation of Northern France and Belgium in World War II, and may well have regretted their life in Sydney.

Of the 23 people in two generations of the two families, three lost their lives on the Western Front, eight died in France or Belgium and 12 died in Australia.



## CONCLUSION

Over the course of this work we have seen two generations of these two families adapt to a new itinerant way of life at the ends of the earth, and in another language. This study has tried to shed some light on others who shared similar adventures, in participating in the wool trade which helped build this nation. When Georges Playoust died in France in the last week of the war, the news was cabled to Australia. Several Australian interstate newspapers reported his death, but the warmest eulogy of any was from *The Stock and Station Journal* of 8 November 1918, a newspaper favoured by the pastoralists who grew the wool that he had bought. The headline chosen for this obituary was "A French Patriot".

As shown in Chapter 2, the standard English dictionary definitions of patriotism do not adequately describe the situation of Georges Playoust, and even less now than before, given that the meaning of the word has evolved in various directions. It is for that reason that in order to understand the man in his historical and geographical context, I turned to Chapter 2 to his own use of those terms in his reported speeches, where it is clear that the word 'nationalist' was not part of the vocabulary of this 'patriot'.

Georges Playoust's 1902 speech was a case in point, as we have seen:

*Patriotism is a religion of an entirely intimate realm; it is manifested by acts and not by words. It does not suffer oratory [...].*

He ends this speech demonstrating his respect for his host country:

*Do not forget that you have French blood in your veins [...] You will have a duty to perform, that of making France loved while making yourselves loved, while showing yourselves to be citizens respectful of the laws of the country, in knowing how to devote yourselves to public affairs, following the example of your elders who were able to win the esteem and the friendship of the nation from whom they have asked hospitality, by honesty in business, by sincerity and cordiality in social relations by the practice of civic virtues.*



As noted earlier, Playoust sought always to participate in causes cherished by his host country, such as chairing a committee to decorate the 'French Avenue' in Sydney to celebrate the proclamation of Federation. This is how he toasted France on another national day in 1909, in terms that did not display any territorial triumphalism:

*May she always be happy and prosperous, powerful and respected, in the first rank of literature, arts and sciences, in the avant-garde of all the great ideas, of all the discoveries of what can benefit mankind. As for us, let us remain proud and worthy children.*<sup>366</sup>

By the French National Day of 1909, Playoust had the confidence to speak to his audience in the English tongue, in which the grand phrases and classical allusions of his 19th century youth no longer sounded appropriate; he spoke in simpler language, where his affection for Australia was palpable. The effect was dramatic, and this speech was reported in newspapers around eastern Australia, including four papers in Tasmania.

Georges Playoust's ideas on patriotism and civic virtues would have influenced his audiences and set an example to his children, as their own war records testified. With his genial personality he established personal friendships with government representatives who attended these occasions, which strengthened the ties between the two countries. He was now progressing in his 'transnationalism', a word to appear much later in the century, with a similar facility to that of Julius Bonn in dealing in international relations, as described by Clavin:

*It was precisely his ability to operate within and without political office, and in a number of countries that gave him the opportunity to make a contribution.*<sup>367</sup>

By the 21st century the Playousts could justly be referred to by anthropologists and sociologists as a 'transnational immigrants' or 'transmigrants' as they "forged and

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<sup>366</sup> "Fête Nationale Française", *Le Courier Australien*, July 23, 1909, 2.

<sup>367</sup> Clavin. "Defining Transnationalism," 422.



sustained multi-stranded social relations that link immigrants, their societies of origin and settlement",<sup>368</sup> a concept which was pursued in this thesis.

### ***Patriotism and the Great War***

Chapter 3 focused on patriotism of the women who gave four years of their lives to work for a large wartime charity, the 'French-Australian League of Help', sewing in workshops to make clothes to send to victims of the war, newly widowed or orphaned by the huge casualties of trench warfare. They worked with zeal, cutting, sewing, knitting and packing clothes into bales, which were shipped fortnightly to France. Those women who had sons or relatives at the front felt they were sharing the burden with them, as did Blanche Playoust, whose son died in battle in the last months of the war.

In Chapter 4 we saw how the *Poilus* demonstrated their patriotism individually. Stéphane, the first of the Playoust brothers to report to his regiment in France, left only this letter, written to a twelve year old cousin, in the manner of an ardent patriot.

*I left on the 2nd January and am now fighting for my 'chère Patrie' which I love.*

*[...]*

*I fear neither bullets nor shells. I only want to do a dozen times my share and then happen what may.*

Unfortunately, no other letters of Stéphane's have survived the war except for one brief post card, so it is not known if there was an evolution in his patriotic sentiments, as in the cases of Jacques and Marcel.

As our analysis has shown, within Jacques' frequent letters one discerns a hardening and distancing of himself from the way of life he had known. The noble language of his father's rehearsed speeches would have been inadequate to describe truly the horrific

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<sup>368</sup> Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton. "Towards a Definition of Transnationalism." ix.



conditions of trench warfare. In moments of despair, Jacques wrote: "*Let's not think, it's better!*" While this may suggest a questioning of his duty, he did not at any point fail in this respect. His request for letters from his family indicates their very real support. His altruistic conduct on the battlefield of the Somme, repairing the vital telephone wires, sometimes in no man's land, showed exceptional courage, for which he was awarded the Croix de Guerre. This could surely be described as patriotic, but the language in which Jacques related the event remained very low key.

He wrote "*Father is more proud of my Croix than I*", indicating a certain generational shift, in that after his experience at Verdun, he was reassessing patriotic fervour. This recalls his father's words on patriotism in 1902:

*It manifests itself in acts and not by words.*<sup>369</sup>

This extremely complex situation makes one wonder which words the father and son found for each other when Jacques was on leave in Paris.

On another occasion Jacques wrote of his brother Marcel, saying "*Marcel is having a rough time & perhaps even more than me he does not like the game*". Marcel expressed admiration of his fellow soldiers but did not speak of 'patrie', nor did Jacques, yet in neither brother could their patriotism be questioned, as their actions confirmed it.

'Home' or 'motherland' is probably the truer word for 'patrie.' For this younger generation, possibly the word 'patrie' had a different resonance, not having experienced the Prussian invasion in 1870, nor having been educated in the centuries-old history of France and its *patrimoine*. This is very favourite word in France, usually associated with pride in one's sacred heritage, whether physical or cultural. The English word 'patrimony' is seldom heard, and 'heritage' has a different nuance. In any case, our work has shown there has been a generational shift between the language of

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<sup>369</sup> "Fête Nationale Française", 2.



these two men, Marcel and Jacques, who had endured 'the game', and the language of their father. Four years of trench life, where they lived as nomads, fortunate if they could find a stable to sleep in, could have extinguished any sense of 'home' in France.

They were men of their time. Whilst it might be said that Diggers returning from the front preferred not to talk about the war at all, Jacques was questioning values, not just trying to forget his experiences.

### ***French-Australian Relations***

When the war was over, the first French National Day picnic was held in Clifton Gardens after a ten year gap since Mr Holman spoke in 1914, Mr Bavin, the Attorney-General, addressed the gathering, saying that:

*The French people had added to the community a number of citizens who had brought with them commerce, and what was even more important in Australia, a new and possibly a greater standard of art and cultivation to that generally found in young countries.*<sup>370</sup>

This was confirmed by Peter Curtis, former Ambassador for Australia to France and Belgium in his foreword to *Flanders in Australia*:

*Some (buyers from Flanders) settled permanently in Australia, bringing with them a francophone culture which must be among the richest influences that have gone to make up modern Australia [...] they were always within and contributors to a community of shared values, values that were and remain today of more lasting significance for the nation than the commercial fruits of their profession.*<sup>371</sup>

It was the Great War that sealed the strongest tie between France and Australia, when French regiments, including a number of Australian-born French soldiers, fought literally side by side with Australian regiments on the Western front. This had been experienced at an intimate level in the Somme in 1916 by René and Jean Playoust,

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<sup>370</sup> "France's Day. Mr. Bavin's Tribute. Example to the Nations. Bond with Britain.", 10.

<sup>371</sup> Dwyer. *Flanders in Australia*, 5–6.



whose French unit was fighting “near the Australians, and have been able to see a few of their pals in khaki.”<sup>372</sup>

In the battle of Amiens in the last year of the war, Anzac regiments provided the able defence of the vulnerable link in the front line of trenches between the French and the British. They were truly comrades in arms, fighting side by side, a concept far larger than the social fields normally considered by writers on transnationalism.

This was foreseen in Georges Playoust's National Day speech in 1909 that presaged the Great War:

*If some enemy threatened the shores of this fairyland, I am sure that the blood of those who, fifty five years ago, fought side by side with the English on the banks of the Alma and at Inkerman, will run just as good, just as valorous in the veins of their progeny.*<sup>373</sup>

The sympathetic ties between the two countries are now exemplified by Australia's connection with the small town of Villers-Bretonneux in Picardy. Many Australian lives were lost during the Germans' rapid advance threatening Amiens in 1918. The school was entirely destroyed. It was rebuilt after the war, paid for by a sum collected in pennies by Victorian school children, and now houses a museum, acknowledging this gift with gratitude.

This gesture was reciprocated 95 years later when the school-children of Villers-Bretonneux raised funds in the town of to rebuild the school of Strathewen in Victoria which had been burnt down in the Black Saturday bushfires. This is an example of the civic virtues combined with patriotism so encouraged by Georges Playoust. The Anzac Day commemoration service at the Villers-Bretonneux memorial has become an annual ritual.

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<sup>372</sup> St. Aloysius College Monthly, 1 November 1916

<sup>373</sup> “Fête Nationale Française”, 2.



In what might seem a postscript to my thesis but which in fact goes to the heart of it, this perspective has recently been brought into sharp focus by outside events. On 18 January 2012 a joint declaration was signed in Paris by the then Australian Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd, and the then French Foreign Minister, Alain Juppé. It concerned a strategic partnership between France and Australia, covering political, defence, and security co-operation. It also includes co-operation on shared memory of the First World War of 1914-18, preparing a programme of commemorative events through relevant institutions and organisations in each country for the four years of war. Among other initiatives, the Commonwealth government announced that it will contribute over \$2,000,000 to a major refurbishment of the Franco-Australian Museum in Villers-Bretonneux, to be opened in 2016. This planned museum refurbishment has been superseded by the Australian government's announcement of \$100 million for the construction of the new Sir John Monash Centre at Villers-Bretonneux.<sup>374</sup>

In the centenary year of 2014 various ceremonies of remembrance were held in France and Australia. In 2014 the mayor of the village of Pozières in the Somme, where so many Australians lost their lives, visited several Australian war memorials to lay commemorative wreaths. For the first time a French President came to Australia and attended a ceremony at the Australian War Memorial, following the G20 Summit. A colloquium was held in the French city of Amiens on the role of *Océaniens* in the First World War attended by the Australian ambassador, at which I read a paper on the seven men of the Playoust family who fought in the French army. The French ambassador to Australia and the French Consul-General have been very involved in similar events in Australia.

### **Wool Buyers**

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<sup>374</sup> See Miller, N. Tony Abbott unveils plan for the new Sir John Monash Centre in France. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 April 2015.



Throughout most of this thesis we have been enclosed in the little world of the traders who came to Australia to participate in Australia's burgeoning wool sales. Whilst some of my family were active participants in this world, this is far more than a personal matter. My research has shown me the importance of having these people and their work in the wool trade recognised by historians for the role they played in Australia's development, both from a commercial and cultural perspective. As Georges Playoust had said in 1904 at a banquet to farewell the consul Biard d'Aunet:

*Our little French colony has not the advantage of numbers, but cohesion and solidarity exists amongst us. In unity lies strength.*<sup>375</sup>

The members of the little French colony in Australia had been keen to succeed, and acted together to support the institutions they perceived as necessary to enjoy a civil way of life so far from home. For the needs of those who had fallen on hard times, there was the French Benevolent Society to be sustained, and for the needs of commerce, the collective action of a Chamber of Commerce was required. Many became members of the Alliance Française and served on their committees.

The French wool buyers' influential presence in Australia had become noticeable from the last decade of the 19th century, and the Playoust families stood at a central part of this cluster, as seen in the early part of this study. Though not large in numbers, the buyers were a cohesive group, seeing a great deal of each other because of the separate nature of their daily work during the wool season.

They appeared in the wool stores early each morning in shirt sleeves using their hands and their eyes to assess the suitability of the wool, returned to their offices to check the cables for their clients' orders, then appeared formally dressed at the Wool Exchange auctions in the afternoon to bid against buyers from Britain, Belgium, Germany, Italy and Japan. In all the years before the Great War, France was the chief buyer after Britain.

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<sup>375</sup> "Le Départ De M. Biard D'Aunet", 2.



For several decades in the 20th century the buyers were to hold a prominent place in the committees of the Alliance Française. They helped found and then support the French-Australian League of Help in 1914. As recounted earlier, on the 14th July 1916 senior buyers, French, Belgian and Australian, held a grand ceremony in the stepped rows of the sale room of the Sydney Wool Exchange to donate a cheque of £3,224 to Blanche Playoust in support of the League.

The wool trade was then at the core of the Australian economy. At first, the buyers saw themselves as expatriate businessmen rather than immigrants, but over the years as their ties to Australia strengthened and their children had integrated, the question arose about where they would choose to live after the men's retirement. They held an established place in society. Had some undergone a change in their national identity but not others? As we have seen, whilst the widowed Marie-Thérèse chose to live in Australia, as did all her children, Joseph and Blanche Playoust responded to a strong pull back to their birthplace, but four of their children chose to live in Australia.

A growing body of research on the phenomenon of return migration to the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Italy, Greece, Malta and North Africa is being undertaken in the present century. The extensive surveys undertaken in Norway by Carling and Petterson on 'Return migration' can only hint at this particular anachronistic situation. In measuring integration, they assessed language skills but the scholars also admitted to a methodological and even existential fault, "*they had missed out on complex intra family dynamics*".<sup>376</sup> I hope that this current case study may in its way make a modest contribution to elucidating some of the complexities of this question.

Certainly, the wool buyers' stimulation of the Australian wool auctions brought considerable economic benefits to the new nation at a time when the balance of trade was very much in Australia's favour, and wool was Australia's chief export, a point well recognised by the nation's leaders. Furthermore, the buyers' very presence, raising and

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<sup>376</sup> Carling and Petterson. "Return Migration Intentions in the Integration-Transnationalism Matrix," 20, 28.



educating large families in Australian cities could only be a stimulus to the local economy.

In Chapter 3 of this work, passing mention was made of the French Mission that visited Australia in the last months of the war in 1918. They came at the invitation of the Australian Government to discuss the economic problems caused by the war, and to renew trade relations when the war was over. The mission stayed from September to December in 1918 and produced a 116 page commercial report of their visit.<sup>377</sup>

An official of the French department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, had referred to Australia in 1917 as "*cette démocratie puissante et riche*" (this powerful and wealthy democracy).<sup>378</sup> This wealth was primarily earned by the wool trade. A member of the Mission delegation was the owner of the largest mill in Roubaix, indicating that one of the particular aims of the mission was to renew the wool trade which had ceased in wartime.

The Franco-Australian wool trade was indeed to be revived, but with less of the sparkle of the early 20th century. It lasted through the great Depression, a second world war, a boom and then a gradual fading along with the textile industry of the north of France in the 1960s. The transnational world of the wool buyers gradually and nostalgically disappeared as the men blended into the society around them, but their children retained their transnational heritage, as do their children's children.

Georges Playoust already foresaw this in his way in his 1909 speech referred to above. His vision of the following generations blending the traditions of one homeland that they had inherited, with their civic and emotional attachments to another, is no doubt

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<sup>377</sup> *Economic Relations between France and Australia: Report of the French Mission to Australia, September - December 1918.*

<sup>378</sup> Robert Aldrich. "La Mission Française en Australie de 1918. L'Australie et Les Relations Franco-Australiennes au Lendemain de la Guerre.", in *Les Français Et L'Australie. Voyages de Découvertes Et Missions Scientifiques De 1756 à Nous Jours* (Nanterre: Université de Paris X, 1989), 295.



a fitting way to conclude this thesis devoted to the families that he and his brother founded:

*No doubt, some of us will end our days in Australia and, when the time comes, lie down for the eternal rest, but better than our bones, we will give you our children, children of our own flesh and blood, whom we have taught to believe in God, to obey the laws of the country, to fulfil all their obligations and duties to society; we will leave behind our boys and girls, who may, for love is universal and knows no special Fatherland, who may marry your girls and boys and shall, if they follow traditions, prove good husbands and wives.*

*Therefore I trust that in years sure to come, when Australia has become the great nation she promises to be, I trust that on the list of celebrated citizens, in that list that should be written in golden letters to be transmitted as an example to posterity, will be found some French-spelling names of which people will say: "they belonged to the grandsons of those Frenchmen whom our fathers years ago welcomed in our midst".*



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