

French

The Early Years to World War II

It is an interesting exercise to speculate on what would have become of Australia and Queensland if Captain Phillip had not reached Botany Bay in 1788 a few days earlier than the French explorer Jean François de La Pérouse. Visions come to mind of a New Caledonia style continent with the 'Marseillaise' as the national anthem, the French language and culture taught in every school, and French cuisine served in every restaurant.

More seriously, it should be pointed out that de La Pérouse, unlike the British explorers, had no orders from his king, Louis XVI, to occupy a newly found land for the mother country. In that de La Pérouse was not alone because the string of French explorers who investigated the Australian shores made scientific discoveries rather than territorial claims.

After the discovery years, immigration began to take root in Australia with some participation by the French in activities such as gold prospecting, wool buying and wine growing. Most of this influx remained limited to the southern colonies since the main ports of entry were Sydney and Melbourne, and the advantages of the Queensland climate and scenery did not carry much weight at that time. A special form of French immigration took place after World War I when a number of Australian soldiers returned from Europe with French war brides. The names of some places in the Stanthorpe area, where land was made available for cultivation by returned soldiers, are reminders of the battlefields in France where French-Australian solidarity was born: Bapaume, Pozières, Amiens.

Postwar Immigration to 1990

At the end of World War II French immigration in Australia gradually increased because of assisted passage schemes made available for the first time in 1947 by the Australian Government. Numerically, French immigration never came anywhere near the numbers of the Italian, Greek, Dutch or Asian migrants, to mention just a few.

One of the reasons is that the French did not have such poor and densely populated areas that existed in some source countries of large postwar immigration groups. Another is the fact that French people were traditionally too attached to their cultural lifestyle to look for different conditions abroad. Once in Australia the French displayed a different migration pattern, in that they avoided concentrating as an ethnic group and preferred to tackle individually the problems met in the new country without group support. This individualistic character is shown also in the settlement pattern of French immigrants, a very dispersed community in Queensland not only in the country but also in Brisbane with its numerous suburbs.

Special mention should be made of French immigrants forced to abandon their homeland, Algeria, when it became independent in 1962. Barely welcome in France, many of these energetic settlers found climatic and other conditions in Queensland more to their liking than those available in metropolitan France and thus made a valuable contribution to multicultural Australia.

In recent times the uncertain political future of New Caledonia has triggered an incipient immigration in Queensland of French people from that Pacific island.

Outstanding Individuals

One outstanding Frenchman who proved to be an impressive asset for Queensland and Australia was Guy Casaril, a native from southwestern France. The former screen director and film-maker who came to Brisbane to enjoy a well earned retirement recognised the potential of CD-ROM technology and established the company Arborescence Australia in 1994. Since then the company has produced a CD-ROM featuring the works of French impressionist painter Claude Monet, poet Paul Verlaine and composer Claude Debussy.

A second title produced by the company is *Matiwe, Aragon and Prokofiev*, which in 1995 won the Australian Interactive Multi-media Associations Award for best production in the arts category as

well as an award for excellence in multimedia at the Queensland IT & T awards.

Another outstanding Frenchman who chose Queensland is François Klaus. François left his native Alsace to ultimately head, at the age of 48, the Queensland Ballet, which in 2000 celebrated its 40th anniversary. After discovering his penchant for dance before turning 10, François went on to dance with the Geneva ballet and the Hamburg ballet and established his own company in Switzerland before accepting the position as the Queensland Ballet artistic director in 1998. He has proven his contribution to culture in Queensland not only by his dynamic program but also by some innovative initiatives such as the establishment in 1998 of a professional year training program for gifted dancers, and a junior extension program to foster talent in promising 11- to 14-year-old dancers.

After completing his service in the French Foreign Legion, José Calvo married in France and with his young family migrated to Australia in 1968. Always ready for a challenge he took up opal prospecting at Coober Pedy in South Australia where he and his family stayed until 1981. From the Australian interior he then moved to Brisbane representing a Spanish firm importing tiles. In 1985 he founded his own company, Catalan Ceramics.

Baker Michel Marteau revolutionised the Queensland bread market by the introduction of his prebaked French bread, now a commodity readily available to Queensland customers.

France-based multinational companies active in Queensland provide employment for the locals as well as for francophone managers and workers. Mention should be made of a company's recent and notable economic contribution to Queensland: the establishment in 1991 of the French-Australian joint venture Société Européenne de Produits Réfractaires (Saint-Gobain), producing industrial ceramics made from Australian raw material zircon sand.

The Community Today

Over the years the integration of French migrants into Australian society has been a fairly smooth process in spite of some initial language and cultural acclimatisation problems that occur when two different cultures meet.

Main factors in this globally successful process are the generally welcoming attitude of the Australian public at large, rooted in the lingering aura of the French Revolution and its values of freedom and democracy, as well as the appreciation of French culture and language; the individualistic character of the French immigrant in general and the determination to make the new country his/her home; and the belief that Australia is a better country for children than crowded France.

Although the French have always been a definite minority group in multicultural Australia and Queensland (today some 3500 France-born persons are estimated to reside in Queensland), French language and culture have had an impact on Queensland society far beyond the numerical strength of the ethnic group concerned.

A rich Latin culture and the prestige of a once prominent language account for the place of French in education at secondary and university levels. This position, especially in secondary education, is steadily being eroded by Asian languages, such as Japanese and Indonesian, partly because of the decline of French as a world language and partly because of growing commercial ties with Australia's Asian neighbours.

A twin-sister relationship between Noumea (New Caledonia) and the Gold Coast continues its active existence. In spite of the suspension in 1998 of the requirement of short-term visas for French nationals, no massive influx of French tourists can be expected in Queensland owing to high air fares and the fact that France itself is a major tourist country. Tourism from neighbouring New Caledonia with only some 45 000 French inhabitants, who are primarily interested in Sydney and Melbourne, lacks potential impact for Queensland.

Community Organisations

Although not interested in congregating as an ethnic group, French migrants remain very attached to their 'Latin' culture. This has resulted not only in a number of associations in Queensland but also the remarkably popular annual celebration of the French national day on 14 July.

The oldest French association is the Alliance Française which was established in 1926. Founding members were three prominent scholars from Europe: Henri Tardent, Charles Schindler

and Count Gontran de Tournouer. The Alliances Françaises established as local independent organisations throughout the world do not aim at creating or strengthening links between the members of the local French communities. The Alliance Française sponsored by the French Government and with its head office in Paris directs its activities at a non-French public wishing to learn French and aims at spreading French culture among the nationals of its countries of establishment.

The multiple means used by the Alliance Française to achieve its aims are French courses, the sale of textbooks, cassettes, dictionaries and 'livres de poches' (paperbacks) to the general public, supplying documentation on France and talks on topics of travel, history, art, literature, winemaking and teaching methodologies. All Alliance activities are announced in its newsletter *La Brioche*. The Alliance Française has branches in Toowoomba, Townsville, Cairns, Atherton and on the Gold Coast as well as in Brisbane.

Officially registered in 1957 as the French-Australia Association, this social club, presently 120 members strong, aims to bring together French immigrants and other members of the Queensland population. The club's activities include a wide range of social gatherings such as dances and barbecues, restaurant meals, wine tastings, picnics, quiz and card evenings, a car rally, bowling sessions etc. Logically the highlight of the association's activities is the organisation of the biggest Bastille Day ball in town commemorating the 14th July, which once a year brings together an impressive mix of people from all cultural backgrounds.

A French Association of a different nature is the Union des Français de l'Étranger (Union of French citizens residing abroad) with a section in Queensland since 1978 and with its head office in Paris. The UFE is not a social club and could be best described as an organisation for French expatriates who wish to retain for practical reasons their links with France, and need information on matters such as pensions, taxation, education, social security etc.

A recent initiative by the UFE was the establishment of a French school for children from four to twelve years of age at kindergarten and primary level. So far some 40 children from French parents, mixed marriages and Australian parents have enrolled in the fledgling school.

As early as 1979, a handful of enthusiastic volunteers from the French community were active in radio broadcasting within the framework of the Brisbane-based community radio station 4EB, transmitting on AM. The programs cover a fairly wide range of subjects, such as news from French-speaking countries, regional reports, French music and linguistics, interviews with French identities, quiz sessions, community announcements etc. Apart from the obvious French audience many Australians of Anglo-Celtic or other ethnic backgrounds tune in to these programs to keep up their knowledge of French or simply for the sound of the language and music.

The Chambre de Commerce et Industrie Franco-Australienne (French-Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry), based at Yungaba, also deserves a mention. This association, registered in Australia, depends on contributions from its members, mainly French or Australian companies interested in French-Australian commercial exchanges.

On 17 June 1999 the Queensland Chamber of Commerce organised a major charity auction in financial support of the fledgling French Benevolent Society of Queensland. This, a recent French contribution to the multicultural spirit of Queensland, is run by volunteers who attempt to assist, either morally, financially or physically, French immigrants in difficulty.

One association in Queensland which within the French immigrant society is the equivalent of the Australian Returned Servicemen's League is the Association des Anciens Combattants Français, Queensland section. Established on 29 November 1981, the section now has 40 members who participate in parades and wreath laying ceremonies on Armistice Day (11 November), the anniversary of the battle of Dunkerque (8 May), and Anzac Day (25 April) etc.

A small but significant group is the Association of Former French Foreign Legionnaires, incorporated in Brisbane and numbering some 20 full and associate members. The members meet every second month and participate actively in the celebrations of 14 July, Anzac Day, Armistice Day and 30 April, the day in 1863 when 64 legionnaires held out for nine hours against 2000 Mexicans in the battle of Camerone.

A less well-known French association in Queensland is a chapter of the Société d'Entraide des Membres de la Légion d'Honneur (Society for

the mutual aid of the Members of the Legion of Honour) established in Brisbane on 30 January 1980, which aims to assist and bring together the members of France's highest distinction, the Legion of Honour, created in 1802 by Napoleon Bonaparte. Recently the French Government decided to confer the prestigious Legion of Honour on the surviving Australian soldiers of the First World War, which takes the number of members of the Queensland chapter to five.

The Queensland climate favours the very popular sport of outdoor bowling. French migrants have introduced their bowling version 'pétanque' (very popular in the south of France and easy to play anywhere), and it is played not only within their own associations but also by other Australians. Three active pétanque clubs, one in the north of Brisbane with a majority of French members, one in south Brisbane with a majority of Australians and a third on the Gold Coast with

mixed membership, have made a sizeable contribution to multicultural pastimes in the Brisbane area. In the year 2000 a team of three players from the Brisbane Pétanque club won the Australian championship by one precious point after which they unsuccessfully tried their luck at the world championships in Portugal.

The Sunshine Coast French Club Inc. is based at Buderim, north of Brisbane, where a small but dedicated group of French migrants and their Australian friends implement a rich social program of French classes, horticultural activities, barbecues, French dinners and pétanque sessions, thus adding a French touch to Queensland's multicultural countryside. A regular newsletter in French and English keeps the local public informed of the activities of the club.

Raphaël Den Haan