Je Suis Australienne

Remarkable Women in France, 1880-1945

Rosemary Lancaster

Revised edition, 2020
© Rosemary Lancaster

(First published 2008 by University of Western Australia Press)

Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1
Daisy White: an Accomplished Schoolgirl in France, 1887-1889

Chapter 2
Trouble in Bohemia: the Belle Epoque Novels of Tasma, 1891 and 1895

Chapter 3
Digger Nurses on the Western Front, 1916-1919

Chapter 4
Stella Bowen's 'education of another sort': the Paris Years, 1922-1933

Chapter 5
'All That Glitters': Illusory Worlds in Christina Stead's *The Beauties and Furies* (1936) and *House of All Nation*s (1938)

Chapter 6
'No Time to be Frail': Nancy Wake, Resistance Heroine, 1940-1944

Bibliography

Introduction

> What heaven to be in Paris, to be young…every day after we'd dunked our brioches in our bowls of chocolate, we sallied down to the foyer […then out] to explore Paris. It was not spring, the chestnuts up the Champs-Elysées were bare—but it was still the most beautiful and romantic city in the world and has always remained so to me.[1]

These words, spoken by the Australian Eugénie Louise McNeil (née Delarue) in her declining years, recall her first impressions of Paris the day she stepped onto its loveliest avenue in 1902. She was sixteen and was accompanied by her seventeen-year-old sister, Lydia Victorine. They were glad to be escorted across the Channel by the four gallant Canadian officers they had met on the ship during the six-week trip from Sydney to England.[2] In Paris, they all went directly to Trocadéro, which had so impressed their father during the 1878 World Fair, then on to Les Invalides to inspect Napoleon's Tomb.[3] In subsequent days they were whisked off to two *cafés chantants* by the 'boys', where they 'may well have seen Yvette Guilbert' (the Belle Epoque's raunchiest *chanteuse*),[4] and they traced out the route Charlotte Corday supposedly took in order to stab the French Revolution's radical Marat in his bath in 1793.[5]

Eugénie and Lydia had stronger family reasons for visiting France than most of the Australian women travellers this book describes. Their grandfather was a Frenchman from Normandy who settled in Australia in the 1840s, and their father, though Australian born, was strongly mindful of his origins. Their house was filled with 'an odd assortment of books and mementos':[6] 'four enormous views of Paris' in the 1870s, depicting the new boulevards Haussmann had designed; a naughty stereoscopic peep-show their grandfather had pocketed; Perrault's fairy tales…[7]

---

[1] Crawford, Eugenie, 'Ladies Didn't' in *A Bunyip Close Behind Me & Ladies Didn't: The Recollections of Eugénie McNeil retold by her daughter Eugénie Crawford.* Penguin Books, 1990, p. 125. *A Bunyip Close Behind Me* was first published in 1972 by The Hawthorn Press, and *Ladies Didn't* in 1984 by Penguin Books Australia. McNeil was born in Bankstown, New South Wales in 1886 and died in 1983.

[2] Eugénie explains that they had just served in the Boer War.

[3] At that time the Eiffel Tower had not been constructed. It was officially opened at the Paris Exposition of 1889. When Eugénie visited Trocadéro, she was impressed by 'this giant piece of meccano on the Champ de Mars', *Ladies Didn't,* p. 126.

[4] ibid., p. 129. A *café chantant* is a cabaret that offers drinks and a live musical spectacle. Guilbert, famously painted by Toulouse-Lautrec, was a singer and star attraction at the Moulin Rouge in the 1890s and early 1900s.

[5] Jean-Paul Marat (1743–1793), a fiery activist of the French Revolution, launched the 'Reign of Terror'. Corday belonged to the Girondists, who wished to depose the monarchy but by less anarchic measures than those the 'Terror' carried out.

[6] *Ladies Didn't*, p. 10.

[7] ibid. Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809–1891) redesigned Paris between 1830 and 1870, replacing many of its narrow streets with leafy boulevards, standardising the height of the city's buildings and creating more open public space in the form of parks and squares. Some Parisians regretted the loss of their medieval heritage and architectural past. Charles Perrault (1628–1703), born in Paris, established fairy tales as a new literary genre. Many of his tales were adapted in the nineteenth century by the Brothers Grimm.

But in many ways, the Delarue sisters were like other nineteenth-century middle-class Australian girls. Although they did not attend school in their early years (their mother deemed the nearby state school 'unsuitable'), they did get a smattering of French from their governesses, one of whom, for all she taught them very little, was a genuine French 'Mam'selle'; they admired the illustrated French recipes Mrs Beeton included in her *Book of Household Management*;[8] they were excited when they were invited by friends of the family to be 'finished' in a French school in Pau at the foot of the Pyrenees.

While Eugénie came from French stock, the excitement she elicits in going abroad was no less than that of the other young Australian women whose adventures this book records. She, like them, was Australian born, and could only imagine through literature and others' accounts what lay on the other side of the world, hoping to steep herself in a culture she had been brought up to distantly admire. The women whose stories follow travelled for different reasons and came from different backgrounds~~,~~ each fulfilling her mission in a surprisingly individual way. But all held a vision of France and of Paris well before they left Australian shores. And—like the impressionable, curious Eugénie—all hoped that their foreign encounter would change their lives.

The phenomenon of Australian women's travel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is unique and has a special place in the history of Australians' awareness of their identity in the world. Before 1950 and Australia's encouragement of immigration, first-hand experience of Europe was largely limited to books, magazines and newspapers. Early on, travel was expensive, especially for women, who usually had to be financially supported and were expected to be chaperoned. Many could not travel because of family concern for their safety or a lack of means; unmarried women were typically expected to remain as carers in the parental home. Nevertheless, there are records of women who ventured abroad, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.[9] Some went to visit relatives; some to acquire education and refinement and to improve their marriage prospects on the return home. Others, more intrepid—writers, artists, adventurers—hoped to acquire independence or escape socially restrictive feminine roles. Yet others volunteered to serve their country in war.

In the nineteenth and even the early twentieth century white Australia was a more Eurocentric country than it is today. From its colonial periphery, Europe was looked upon as the site of birth, of ancestry, of friends, of history, of religious identity. One typically referred to Britain and Ireland, as 'Home' and Europe as 'the Old World'; it was that desirable, distant 'other' to which one hoped to return, if but for a visit, to authenticate one's roots and to recover the heritage from which one was removed. Women who travelled back to the centre often hoped to lose their Australian accent (as did at least two of the women in this book, Stella Bowen and Christina Stead).[10] Most believed they would benefit socially and intellectually from the experiences their travels would provide. Europe beckoned as the cradle of civilisation, of cultural capital, of origin, of traditional values, of refined habits, of sophisticated societies, of democracy, of political power. While those distinctions were primarily attributed to Britain, even after 1901 when Australia ceased to be a colony of the British Empire, so they were also, to a degree, to France, Europe's geographical and cultural heartland. Paris, especially, was revered from afar: for its historic sites and graceful buildings, its theatres and concert halls, its fashion houses, the literary giants and thinkers it had produced, the art it continued to spawn. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century the Grand Tour, once a European male prerogative, had become a coveted middle-class ideal.[11] France became a major Australian travel destination and Paris the jewel in the crown—what the Australian painter Stella Bowen called the 'nerve-centre of the arts' in the 1920s, and the writer Christina Stead, in the 1930s, 'a pearl of delicacy, brilliance and suavity'—'not so much the French capital as the capital of the modern world'.[12]

---

[8] Isabella Mary Beeton (1836–1865) is Britain's most famous cookery writer. Her *Book of Household Management,* published in 1861, was far more than a cookbook. In addition to over 900 recipes, it contained extensive information on running a Victorian household.

[9] The introduction of a steamship run between Australia and Europe in the 1850s via the Canal shortened the overall sea voyage from three months to just over one.

[10] Bowen notes: 'Going to England was called 'going home', even by people who had never been there and whose fathers had never been. We all talked with varying degrees of Australian accent, of which we were ashamed when we became aware of it. We regarded a real English accent with positive reverence', *Drawn from Life* (with a new introduction by Julia Loewe), Virago, London, 1984, p. 6. It is why Stella Bowen had elocution lessons when she arrived in London, ibid., p. 50. The Australian writer Nettie Palmer, with whom

The six chapters of this book look to a sample of extraordinary women who travelled to France at different historical moments and who formulated their impressions—in fiction, diaries, letters, autobiographies—between 1880 and 1945. It was a fecund time in the development of Australian women's lives. As travellers they were challenged to adapt to new environments in a world of changing attitudes to feminine education, professionalism and sexuality.[13] Some found themselves in the thick of new European artistic developments; others in the theatres of devastating world wars; all bonded irrevocably with the France they visited; some never returned.

Set alongside one another these women's stories speak worlds. Their personalities, their lives, the fictional characters they created, the personas they constructed, the impressionistic reports they sent home reveal (or conceal) their preconceptions, opinions, mind-sets, intolerances, openness and astonishment vis-à-vis a culture that was not theirs. France, its history, its geography, its art and literature came to be imprinted on their feminine minds. Their stories lead us to the places that inspired their writings and transformed their successive lives: a nineteenth-century Parisian finishing school; the music halls of the Belle Epoque; the decimated landscapes of the Somme in World War I; the picturesque Left Bank studios and cafés of the 'crazy' 1920s; the turbulent world of Parisian high finance during the Depression of the 1930s; German-occupied France, which the Resisters of World War II fought to free. Such landscapes, exotic to any foreigner, are invested with fresh significance when recorded by feminine pens. These are narratives that tell us as much about a writer's quest for identity and the challenges of

---

Stead was acquainted, found that the latter's voice was 'without accent', and 'slightly coloured by pan-European years', *Nettie Palmer: Her PrivateJjournal 'Fourteen Years', Poems, Reviews and Literary Essays* ed. Vivian Smith, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988, p. 156 (diary entry of 21 June 1935).

[11] On the evolution and democratization of the Grand Tour, see James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to 'Culture'1800–1918*, pp, 97–104, 109–10 and 120–22.

[12] Stella Bowen, *Drawn from Life*, p. 135; Christina Stead, letter to Nellie Molyneux, 1 March, 1929, in *A Web of Friendship: Selected Letters (1928–1973): Christina Stead*, preface and annotations by R. G. Geering, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1992, p. 12.

[13] For an excellent overview of the history of Australian women travellers, see Ros Pesman, *Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad,* Oxford University Press, 1996.

foreign encounter as they do about France's cultural worth and historical fame; personally inflected, they register experiences of cultural initiation, discovery, alienation, displacement, misfortune and joy. The chronological arrangement of this study is intended to serve two ends: to preserve the integrity of each woman's endeavour, located in discrete moments in French time and on French soil; to offer an overall picture from the corpus they comprise of Australian women's changing sense of self and place, sharpened not in Australia, but, significantly, abroad.

1

Daisy White: an Accomplished Schoolgirl in France: 1887–1889[1]

> Mlle Grant and I have passed the day at Paris. We shopped a little in the morning, lunched at Chiboust's and at 12.30 were at the Exhibition. We spent two hours among the pictures. The French pictures are very pretty. There were three splendid Benjamin Constins—two scenes in the harem, and a portrait.[2] I love his painting; the colours are so rich, and warm and harmonious that it gladdens my heart to look at them; he heaps up jewels, oriental stuffs and carpets, marble steps, sunny windows; and amongst all these glowing tints sweet Eastern faces with broad low brows and delicately cut features, rounded arms and jewelled ankles…[3]
>
> … I could live in a picture gallery.[4]

When the Australian Daisy White entered these remarks in her diary she was eighteen and had just spent two unsettled years boarding with her young sister Dorothy at a finishing school in Paris's outskirts. From what she called her foreign 'exile' she missed the friendship of her two older sisters and the familiarity of home. But her words reveal a depth of artistic appreciation she may not have acquired had she not been sent abroad. The exhibition to which she alludes was none other than that of the 1889 World Fair that saw the Eiffel Tower opened to her wonderment and that of the world; the Paris she discovered on school trips was that of art galleries and museums, of picturesque gardens, of churches and monuments, of theatres, cafés and shops. Whatever reservations Daisy had about her school, and they were many, she reports on the occasion of her eighteenth birthday: 'These last two years have been the most eventful of my life'.[5] That fact is born out by the astute self-revelations and social observations her diary accumulates.

Daisy was sixteen and Dorothy fourteen when they left Sydney in 1887. The diary of what followed, covering the years 1887-89, is an historical jewel and rare document: such is the detail, the gusto, the wit and insight with which it is told, it gives us a unique entry into the education, times and mind-set of a nineteenth-century Australian schoolgirl abroad. Full of verve and introspections, of rich perceptions, of adolescent grudges and high hopes, it traces Daisy's school life as a near-daily unfolding of cultural discovery, tempered by boarding-house ritual and classroom grind. In the two years of her Parisian stay Daisy changed from being a reluctant schoolgirl into an accomplished woman, fluent in French and, in her opinion, rather wiser than when she set sail.

---

[1] In this chapter quotes from Daisy White's diary (and corresponding page numbers) refer to Marc Serge Rivière's annotated edition, *Daisy in Exile: The Diary of an Australian Schoolgirl in France 1887–1889,* National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2003. These are indicated as *Diary*. Daisy's Gallicisms, French phrases and spellings have been preserved. Where the sense demands it, French phrases have been translated into English. Only occasionally does Daisy incur a spelling mistake, indicated by me by 'sic'. The original manuscript is housed in the National Library of Australia, MS 9247. Daisy's diary, covering the years 1887–1889, was brought to the attention of Professor Rivière in 2001 by an NLA archivist and subsequently published by him with extensive annotations, a preface and a prologue.

[2] Daisy is mistaken. She is referring to the French painter and printmaker Jean-Joseph Benjamin Constant (1845–1902).

[3] *Diary*, p. 170.

[4] *Diary*, p. 168.

[5] *Diary*, p. 160.

Daisy was born Margaret Isabella White on 22 March 1871 in the Upper Hunter Valley near the town of Denman in New South Wales. Her father, Henry Charles White, a wealthy pastoralist, made his fortune breeding stud cattle and sheep in the area, gradually moving with his wife Isabella and their six children to larger homesteads and estates. They are places Daisy remembers with deep affection in her diary, just as she does her elder sisters, Emily and Cecily, who were not educated abroad. Two years after Daisy's mother died in childbirth in 1875 Henry Charles married Mary Helen Macmillan, a young woman of twenty and half his age.[6] It was not a match to which Daisy warmed. She felt she and Dorothy had been sent abroad to get them out of the way as Helen's children were born. On this her diary is unforgiving and her 'Mama' is everywhere ungenerously portrayed. Whatever the case, it does seem surprising that while the parents accompanied the girls to Paris, travelling the three-month journey from Australia on the *Natal* via the Suez Canal, they did not stay to settle them in; nor, it appears, was their step-mother's correspondence delivered with the kindliness and frequency one might have expected to charges so young and naïve.

In fact, Daisy's parents' educational decisions may not have been as selfishly conceived as she supposed. Middle-class families were strongly in favour of extending their children's formation by having them 'polished' abroad. Desirably, middle-class Australian boys were sent to England; girls to the Continent, preferably, to acquire refinement and poise. In the case of the latter France was considered ideal. Unlike Latin and Greek, French was considered a soft, romantic 'girls' language', and the ability to recite a little French literature was considered a proper accompaniment to 'feminine' attributes like being able to play the piano, sing, dance and draw. All the top Australian girls' academies taught French, notably Sydney's 'Ivy League' Kambala, Normanhurst and Abbotsleigh.[7] On top of this, doing the Grand Tour had huge middle-class appeal. Daisy may have only got to Paris and the chateaux of the Loire during her European stay, but both were high on the agenda of having one's children initiated in those sights (and sites), which were seen from remote Australia as hallowed by history, tradition, and the sheer fashionableness middle-class travel had. Pick up a newspaper or magazine in Australia in Daisy's time—*Weigel's Journal of Fashion*, *The Australasian*, the *Daily Telegraph*—and you were bound to read an article on what hat to wear for the season, on a performance at the Opéra, on a play showing at the Théâtre Français.[8] Go there with your Baedeker or Cook travel guides in hand and you were ready to be immersed in a manner that was expected to enhance your social status back home, all the more so if you were armed with intriguing stories, concert programmes, smart clothes and photographs.[9]

---

[6] For details on Daisy's family history, see Rivière, *Daisy in Exile*, Introduction, pp. 7–29.

[7] Opened in 1884, 1882 and 1885 respectively.

[8] Weigel's *Journal*, Australia's first fashion magazine, was founded in Melbourne in 1880, Melbourne's *Australasian* in 1864 and Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* in 1879.

[9] The first edition in English of the *Paris* Baedecker appeared in 1865. Cook was conducting tours to Europe as early as 1841.

Daisy, it appears, cared little for the social aspirations of girls of her class and age, but clearly she took advantage of being in Paris, at a school that, despite its emphasis on feminine ‘accomplishment’, enabled her to read, learn and experience great literature and art. When she returned to Australia, as we know she did—though we do not know the exact date—she must have been very different from the ‘girl from the bush’ she was when she left home. We know little of how she put her fresh knowledge to good use. What we do know is that she died of cardiac failure in Queensland, aged thirty-two.

****

Les Ruches, Daisy’s school, situated some fifty-five kilometres from Paris, was typical of the kind of lay private finishing school that thrived in the late nineteenth century in and around the capital in response to popular foreign demand. Founded in 1863, it had moved twice by Daisy’s time and expanded from a primary to a predominately secondary school, advertising itself as ‘a boarding school offering high French culture to young foreign girls’, although wealthy girls from the Fontainebleau region could, and did, attend.[10] Moreover, one can surmise the school’s international reputation, given that it attracted students of the calibre of the American Nathalie Barney, the English Dorothy Bussy and the Romanian Elena Vacarescu, all later to become figures of literary renown.[11] Daisy’s document confirms that in her time the clientele was overwhelmingly American—spoilt and brash, in her opinion—and that it included British and European girls. Only one other Australian student appears to have arrived during her stay. The transience of the population of Les Ruches, as young girls came and went, meant, however, that both Daisy and Dorothy made few close friends.

Whatever Daisy’s stepmother’s private motivations, her social ambitions clearly concurred with contemporary opinion about educational priorities and the middle-class girl’s destiny. Daisy confides early in her diary that she fears a brewing lecture from her ‘Ma’ on the need to become a ‘*demoiselle*’;[12] elsewhere she balks at the thought of being ‘dragged out to balls and pic-nics and tennis parties’ on her return home.[13] ‘I got a letter from Mama yesterday evening’, she ruefully notes ruefully as early as 5 October 1887. ‘She gave me a little sermon on the subject of entertaining people and going into society.’ Then, at the thought of the outcome: ‘I shall be hawked and vended from one place to another, to be sold at last to some rich old man, like a horse in the market with a halter round his neck’.[14] Daisy’s social expectations, peppering the narrative, not without the prick of adolescent fervour, consistently run against the contemporary grain.

---

[10] ‘Un pensionnat de haute culture pour jeunes filles étrangères’. The remark is made in an historical newspaper review of the school, ‘Quand Les Ruches abritaient abeilles et amazones’, *République*, 9 January 1959, translated in Rivière, *Daisy in Exile*, p 34.

[11] The American Nathalie Clifford Barney became a poet, essayist and memoirist, who held salon in the Latin Quarter for over sixty years, while conducting a colourful life in its lesbian circles. The English Dorothy Bussy became a writer and critic. Her fictional work *Olivia*, a story of adolescent infatuation and erotic fantasy, draws on her experience at Les Ruches. Elena Vacarescu became a poet. For her translations of Romanian poets into French she was made a member of the French Academy in 1925. On Les Ruches’s student community and these three women, see Rivière, *Daisy in Exile*, pp. 34–35.

[12] *Diary*, p. 59.

[13] *Diary*, p. 70.

[14] *Diary*, p. 57.

Information on Daisy's Australian education is scant indeed. Little exists outside what her diary tells us, except for a few details, though enough can be gleaned from the latter to suggest a privileged educational background that would have been complemented rather than transformed abroad. Besides, the sheer eloquence of Daisy's writing, apart from her hearty schoolgirl relish for a little provocative slang, betrays a competent mastery of English, as well as an intelligent knowledge of music, painting and the English literary canon. Reference is made to an Australian private school run by a Miss Macauley; moreover, she appears to have boarded young, for she pities Les Ruches's 'two poor little Merriams', especially the younger, aged nine: 'just my age when first I went to school', she recalls.[15] More specifically, Daisy remarks upon the lessons she learnt and liked at Shirley School,[16] where physical geography, physics and chemistry and nature 'under all forms' were, in her opinion, 'some of the most delightful studies ever to charm a student', unlike, she adds, their boring equivalent in Les Ruches's programme.[17] There, arithmetic is dismissed as 'simply insupportable', chemistry as 'a little more bearable', and physics as 'simply beastly, drier than bone-dust, and pretty hard to understand',[18] though further into the diary she praises a new chemistry teacher, who proves to be engaging and great fun. 'Ah!', she proclaims with a nostalgia that may have coloured her point of view, 'for the change "twixt now and then" as the poet saith'.[19] In contrast, Daisy's early love of the arts was to be markedly enhanced overseas.

Feminine 'finish' in nineteenth-century Australia was not only attainable through travel and schooling abroad. It was entrenched in a middle-class educational system based on ideological principles imported from Britain as early as settlement and grounded in longstanding notions of a woman's intellectual inferiority, domestic duty, and moral role. The perceived distinction between male and female societal purpose in Anglo-Saxon thinking had been deeply influenced by eighteenth-century French Enlightenment theories that, while opening up debate on human liberties, nonetheless propounded male social and intellectual superiority. Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), a vehicle for rationalist liberal thought and revisionist educational theory, cast men as society's leaders and shapers, and women—deemed physically weak and intellectually inferior—as a husband's submissive and supportive helpmate.[20] Such ideas, widely circulated in Europe, were espoused by the Church (both Protestant and Catholic) in so far as they resonated with its patriarchal teachings and moral codes. For the Church a woman's place was unquestionably in the home. She was her husband's property, the selfless custodian of his family and the moral guarantor of his children's welfare: pious, chaste and modest in character; dutiful in the exercise of her marital and maternal responsibilities; confined in her activities and interests to the private domain. It was inevitable that such ideals would be transmitted into girls' education, initially predominately run by church bodies, then later—still within a morally hidebound Victorian society—by the private venture school.[21]

---

[15] *Diary*, p. 55.

[16] Evidently not Sydney's famous progressive Shirley School, established in 1900.

[17] *Diary*, p. 63.

[18] ibid.

[19] ibid. Daisy is quoting from Coleridge's poem 'Youth and Age' of 1828 (later expanded and re-published in 1834).

[20] The issues of the novel, much debated in the nineteenth century, polarised those who argued for feminine emancipation and those who believed that the subordination of women was both natural and right.

For Marjorie Theobald, the extent to which nineteenth-century Australian girls' education was moulded by the Victorian legacy was embodied in the moral opinions of Bishop Charles Perry, one of its hardline spokesmen. Perry, she argues, may have missed his opportunity to oppose the entrance of women into the University of Melbourne in 1872, but his vituperative defence of his position in the *Argus* (21 June 1872) summed up a prevailing nineteenth-century view that women, by biological determination, did not have the means to match the intellectual rigour, creativity and inductive reasoning powers of men. Their brain and body, smaller, weaker, more delicate in structure, were seemingly differently ordained.[22] On these premisses he posited the sort of intellectual subjects women might adequately and happily pursue: history, the languages, literature, a little algebra and geography, the arts—but not, for fear of wearying them—the intellectually demanding languages (Greek and Latin), nor pure mathematics, politics, the sciences, indeed anything requiring critical scholarship, philosophical speculation or cognitive flexibility. While Perry avoided alluding to feminine inferiority, speaking, rather, in terms of the sexes' 'complementarity', in so far as his ideas reflected those of much early Victorian thinking, their implications in relation to the elaboration of girls' education must be considered huge.[23]

Of course, the Victorian middle-class, beyond any religious ideals it upheld, fostered other ingrained notions of what women should properly do. From within a burgeoning capitalist society, economically and politically governed by men, it not only deepened the divide between gendered roles (a man's place was at work and in the public sphere, a woman's destiny, non-professional and non-political, was in the home); it reinforced the principle that a woman's duty was to complement, rather than compete with his role. She was to give him a private legitimacy and provide an appropriate and personal reflection of his degree of respectability, wealth and standing. In this, women's so-called 'accomplishments' came to be well defined: she should adorn her home with suitable evidence of her husband's gentility and claim to that great marker of social position: cultivation. Refinement and grace had to be seen. The accomplished woman could sing, play the piano, entertain around the table, engage in polite conversation, exhibit her good taste in dress, manners, reading matter, home decoration and physical mien. These ideals were coveted in middle-class Australia, even in outback locations, where the better homestead possessed proper middle-class accoutrements (a piano, good furniture, a well-stocked kitchen…) with, desirably, domestic help and a governess to hand; women aspired to refinement in the management of their children and the home.[24] Education, albeit tailored to gendered societal expectations, was of strong parental concern and in this respect it is not surprising that Daisy's family took effective, one might argue undue measures to have her well schooled at home and abroad.

---

[21] On the origin of the accomplishment curriculum, see Noeline Kyle, *Her Natural Destiny: The Education of Women in New South Wales*, New South Wales University Press, 1986, pp. 1–8; also Marjorie Theobald, *Knowing Women: Origins of Women's Education in Nineteenth-century Australia*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, ch. 1, pp. 9–28.

[22] The debate emanated from England and was hotly argued. Matters were not helped by the early reception of Darwin's evolutionary theories, especially those of *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), which claimed that males, physically stronger, were society's naturally dominant and mentally more vigorous members. One of the most outspoken proponents of gender distinction and feminine intellectual inferiority was the prominent psychiatrist, Dr Henry Maudsley (see especially 'Sex in Mind and in Education', *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 15, 1874). Only later were Darwin's theories reinterpreted and the case posited that all creatures had the potential to evolve, that they were not biologically fixed and determined. Those who argued that nurture, not nature, determined mental development included John Stuart Mill (*The Subjection of Women,* 1869) and women educationalist reformists like Emily Davies ('Is There any Specific Distinction Between Male and Female Intellect?', *Englishwoman's Review*, no. 8, 1868) and Elizabeth Garret Anderson ('Sex in Mind and Education: A Reply [to Dr Maudsley]', *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 15, 1874). The debates of Maudsley, Davies and Garret Anderson are reproduced in *Gender and Science: Late Nineteenth-century Debates on the Female Mind and Body*, ed. and introduced by Katharina Rowold, Thoemmes Press, Bristol, 1996.

[23] Theobald, *Knowing Women,* pp. 10–12.

The ambition of middle-class Australian families to turn out well-groomed girls was strongly reflected in the educational institutes they patronised and in the educational programmes they esteemed.[25] By the middle of the nineteenth-century educating one's children at home was no longer the only option. As the century proceeded, religious and private schools suitable for the formation of 'young ladies' burgeoned and prospered, and at the time of Daisy's departure for France they were well established in Australia, especially in New South Wales. Even with the passing of the Public Instruction Act of 1880, which denied state aid to church schools and heralded the long-awaited opening up of state-funded schools for girls, wealthy families favoured the private girls' seminary for its elitist reputation, though it was increasingly expected to offer greater intellectual curricula content as time went on.[26]

The educational philosophy and curriculum of Les Ruches*,* as far as can be gauged from Daisy's comments (and copious they are indeed), show much in common with those of the Australian private school and, as such, suggest it would have been a natural extension of the educational matter and feminine training to which one gathers she had previously been exposed. The instruction Australian girls received (as opposed to the academically 'superior' instruction given to boys) broadly encompassed two areas of knowledge, each intended to meet different social and educational ends: on the one hand those subjects said to offer a 'sound' education (English, literature, composition and grammar, elementary mathematics, history and geography, even elocution and calligraphy); on the other, the accomplishments (music, drawing, and modern languages, of which French was thought the most refined...). To these might be added a range of peripheral subjects of accomplishment design: dancing, which Daisy appears to have studied in Australia,[27] needlework, callisthenics, even, to cite more curious examples, the crafts of ornamental painting on glass, crystal baskets, and artificial fruits. That Daisy was introduced to the sciences in Australia is a sign of how progressive her school was, for by the 1880s, girls' education was evolving, with many academies introducing the 'harder' sciences, as well as algebra, geometry and Latin.[28] In this respect, it will be argued, Les Ruches, based on the British educational system—as were most European finishing schools—was abreast of the times, although in other ways it remained firmly committed to accomplishment ideals.[29]

---

[24] On the accoutrements of the middle-class Australian and British home as indicators of gentility, see Linda Young, *Middle-Class Culture in Nineteenth-century America, Australia, and Britain,* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York, 2003, ch. 6, 'Correct Taste: the Material Conditions of Gentility', especially pp. 173–185.

[25] Notably in Catholic and Protestant girls' schools. On their history see Kyle, *Her Natural Destiny*, chs. 5 and 6, pp. 69–82 and 83–99.

[26] ibid., p. 102.

[27] *Diary*, p. 61.

If Les Ruches was sympathetic to the educational background and aspirations of its mainly foreign students, in many ways it operated like any other chic private Parisian school, privileged in its proximity to the capital and the curricula possibilities that offered, yet traditional enough in school governance to reflect standard practice in the organisation of boarding girls. All Les Ruches's live-in teachers were women—unmarried, as far as we can tell from Daisy's diary, but for one. And most, it appears, were young. When Daisy arrived the school was run by a Mlle. Catherine Dussaut, a qualified primary school teacher, who died in mysterious circumstances in June 1887 (the anniversary of her death, involving the visit of students and teachers to her grave-side, is mentioned in two dairy entries of June 1888 and 1889). Her replacement, a Mlle. Gertude Jones, considered by Daisy as 'almost a girl…and too young and inexperienced to be looked up to as the directress',[30] may have been the official headmistress, but in practice it was the older Mme. Geisler and the short-tempered, sharper Mlle. Lainé who took command. Teachers of English, German and Italian were all native speakers, recruited from their countries of origin, although all other subjects were conducted in French, an arrangement within which Daisy, given her excellent results, appears to have thrived.[31] All visiting teachers were men who came from Paris, contracted, as was French practice, as specialists in their field—at least one Daisy mentions had his *licence en droit* (Bachelor of Law); another was sitting his *agrégation*, the highest diploma for secondary teaching available at the time to men.[32] It is unlikely that the mistresses themselves were as well qualified.[33] The training of women teachers remained poor in France until the 1880s. At most they would have had a *licence de Sèvres,* which lead to a simplified version of the men's *agrégation*, or else have passed through the prestigious women's Ecole de Sèvres, opened in 1881. Quite likely many only had a *certificat d'institutrice* (primary school teaching certificate) or a standard *brevet d'aptitude* (aptitude diploma). Some may have had little more than the *baccalauréat,* perhaps no official teaching qualification at all.[34] The school itself was not large, boarding some thirty students on

---

[28] The earliest progressive examples include Mary Ann Flower's Sydney Ladies' College (established 1854), Cambridge School (c.1867) and Argyle School (1874).

[29] *République*, 9 January 1969: 'In [Les Ruches] American and European young ladies were brought up according to the more liberal methods imported from across the English Channel', tr. Rivière, *Daisy in Exile*, p. 37.

[30] *Diary*, p. 75.

[31] Just as Anglo-Saxon girls' academies favoured French as a second language, French academies favoured English, then Italian; Latin was considered unrefined, Isabelle Bricard, *Saintes ou pouliches: L'éducation des jeunes filles au XIXe siècle,* Albin Michel, Paris, 1985, pp. 99–100.

[32] *Diary*, p. 116.

[33] On moral grounds girls of private academies were substantially taught by women, but men, generally better qualified, were 'imported' to teach the more demanding subjects. This was particularly the case with the wealthier schools in the Paris region which had a body of suitable male teachers on whom to call. Mature, married men were preferred, Bricard, *Saintes ou pouliches*, pp. 249–250.

[34] Françoise Mayeur, *Histoire de l'enseignement et de l'éducation en France,* Tome III: *De la Révolution à l'Ecole républicaine, 1789–1930*, Perrin, Paris, 1981, p. 152.

Daisy's count on 5 January 1889,[35] although this would have been a variable number, given the tendency for students to come and go.

Like many private schools Les Ruches exuded an aura of prosperity appropriate to the social standing of its clientele, though, if Daisy is right in considering it 'pretty hard up for tin',[36] it may have begun to feel the pinch of competition as private schools proliferated towards the end of the century—a fact that probably precipitated its closure in 1914. By Daisy's time the school was well located on what is now the Avenue Franklin Roosevelt in Avon, a commune adjoining Fontainebleau. The building itself, still standing today, bears all the marks of a well-to-do French mansion with its large, brick exterior, classically decorated windows, steeply gabled roofs, ample garden and high-grilled gate and walls. Within, it was very likely furnished in the manner of other finishing schools. The prospectus of the contemporaneous Holy Child Jesus academy at Neuilly-sur-Seine depicts a gracious building externally almost identical to Les Ruches, with, additionally, photos of its pleasant winter garden, elegant dining-room, panelled library and students' 'salon', all furnished in the style of a stately home.[37] Daisy refers to Les Ruches's well-stocked library, to its *salle d'étude*, used for concerts, reunions, and plays, to lavish dinners held on festive occasions, to a fine garden and croquet lawn. Spartan and cold her bedroom may have been, but each girl had her own:

> I have a little room alone in the second storey, the third room from the end on the right-hand side, looking out onto the street. There is a huge ward-robe in the wall with sliding brown wood panels, a little marble-topped wash-stand with a big draw [sic] and a looking-glass above it, a bed, a three-shelfed shelf, a pedestal, and a chest of drawers with six drawers: there is lots of room for me and all my belongings; the wall-paper is pretty, big pale pink squares with a green dado four feet high.[38]

Bedrooms were strictly not to be entered by others,[39] and, architecturally, Les Ruches strikes as having been built to keep girls safely within its confines.

Although it initially lagged behind the English system in achieving pedagogic innovation, secondary girls' education in France bore much in common with its Anglo-Saxon counterpart by the 1880s and beyond. On the other hand, reform in France was slow and often vigorously resisted, largely because girls' schooling, until the latter years of the century, was predominantly the domain of the Catholic Church, and convent schools maintained conservative attitudes to a girl's destiny, ideally to be piously centred and domestically contained.[40] Concomitant with such notions, France shared with England, and indeed with Europe, the belief in a woman's intellectual inferiority and the importance of men's education for societal progress and cohesion. Well into the century the French curriculum for girls, even more than its Anglo-Saxon counterpart, was typically made up of elementary academic subjects and the *arts d'agréments*, (accomplishments).[41]

---

[35] *Diary,* p. 147.

[36] *Diary,* p. 93.

[37] Prospectus of the Finishing School of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus (47 rue Perronet), Mairie de Neuilly archives, 96 Avenue Achille Peretti, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Paris, MS 2Z 195 (undated).

[38] *Diary,* p. 52.

[39] *Diary,* p. 105.

[40] Mayeur, *Histoire de L'Enseignement,* p. 118 and p. 123.

Educational reform in French girls' secondary schooling, if only gradually implemented, was much boosted by the Republican laws of the 1880s.[42] Committed to the secularisation of the state, Republicanism sought to wrest educational control from the Church and to redefine women's societal role: ideally it was to transform them into active members of society and rightful (if belatedly served) recipients of the Napoleonic *Code civil*, while educating them to be 'the intellectual companions of their husbands'.[43] Instantaneous the materialisation of such ideals was not, but their effects on girls' educational curricula were translated, if not into the educational institutes of poorer communities, who could rarely attract the requisite municipal funding, then certainly into those of the wealthier regions (like Paris), and in the privately funded school.[44] In this, Daisy's school, with its remarkably heavy and varied programme, not only bears the mark of the English system, but also that of France's more educationally progressive girls' schools. Besides the usual 'feminine' subjects Les Ruches taught Greek and Roman history (though not Greek language and Latin), chemistry, physics and astronomy. When one considers the addition of the accomplishments, notably drawing, dancing and gymnastics, one is hardly surprised at Daisy's weary response of 13 October 1887: 'I am overwhelmed with lessons, having only one hour free during school-time the whole of the week', to which she adds, concerning the 8.30 pm book-reading: 'As I…am always very tired, I go to sleep as soon as every one is settled, and slumber profoundly till I go to bed'.[45] Lessons, of which she remarks elsewhere 'I have a tremendous amount',[46] filled Saturday mornings, and class play-acting typically led to evening performances and extended school hours.

The French content of much of Daisy's learning, as well as the discipline required to master it, indicate that, even within the framework of a 'finishing' environment, she gained knowledge in areas she would not have encountered in Australia, and that she probably returned home a more accomplished woman than her parents could have dreamt. In the space of just two years she was to become familiar with most of France's literary giants: Racine, Montaigne, Corneille, La Fontaine, Voltaire, Hugo—standard fare, granted, for the nineteenth-century French schoolgirl, long reared on expurgated versions of the classics,[47] but for a young Australian surely material of unexpected cultural variety and wealth. To her credit, her appreciation appears to have been immense and charitably extends to those teachers (by no means all) who brought their subject to life. Of M. Peyre, the ebullient French literature master, she fondly records:

---

[41] ibid., p. 135.

[42] The first major laws, introduced by Jules Ferry, Republican politician and minister of education, were enacted between 1879 and 1885.

[43] The words of Jules Simon, statesmen of the Second Empire and one of France's earliest reformers of girls' education in France, spoken in the Corps Législatif, 1867: 'Girls, even in the best boarding schools, receive a useless and incomplete education, entirely made up of accomplishments…We want to turn them into their husbands' intellectual companions' ('Les filles, même dans les pensionnats les plus élevés, reçoivent une éducation futile, incomplète, toute d'arts d'agrément…Nous voulons faire des femmes les compagnes intellectuelles de leur mari.'), in Françoise Mayeur, *Histoire de l'enseignement et de l'éducation en France,* p. 141 (my translation).

[44] ibid., p. 157.

[45] *Diary,* p. 57.

[46] *Diary,* p. 56.

[47] Bricard, *Saintes ou pouliches,* p. 96.

> I've just washed my head and have nearly died of laughing (not at my head, be it understood); M. Peyre has been reading us Molière's *Scappin*, and seriously speaking, it is enough to provoke a laugh under the ribs of death:[48] I never heard anyone read half as well as he: he is a *méridional* [from the south of France], very witty, continually making puns, fearfully absent-minded, and the kindest-hearted, most generous gentleman you could wish to see. He gesticulates splendidly, and talks so well with his hands and expression (above all, his eyes), that it is almost as good as seeing the *piece* [sic][49] played: he changes his voice and tone of reading in a wonderful way for each character: we have all laughed at him till our jaws ache.[50]

Small wonder she came to say of the theatre: '[It] is for me what champagne is for most people. It goes to my head and excites me like a heady wine'[51]

There is no doubt that the rhythms of French learning at Les Ruches were at times arduous and dull. Like any schoolgirl, Daisy bitterly complains about being overworked, too heavily judged in a class performance, too rushed for a response; a teacher is found too tough or pedantic, an assignment too unfairly assessed. This may have been all the more burdensome in an educative system that placed great store on extensive reading and writing and copious doses of recitation, stylistic imitation and the rote learning of facts.[52] One is indeed struck by the sheer quantity of topics Daisy covered (though we do not know in what depth): the Punic wars, the *Iliad*, the Peloponnesian War, Richelieu, women in Racine, heroism in Corneille, feodality, Homer, Malherbe. The list is long. Yet the educative system as such is not questioned by Daisy, and academically she rose to the occasion with diligence and flair, a measure of her ability, certainly, but also of the interest she found in subjects whose intrinsic value we, in another century and country, might too readily dismiss. Her conscientiousness is everywhere evident and she repeatedly scored the highest marks in class. When exams loomed she did her best:

> We have been having the exams with M. Benoist to-day—French history, Greek history, *Géographie,* and Greek literature. He gave us the questions for each class, and I have passed more than a fort-night over them, never getting up later than 5.30, and going to bed towards eleven p. m. In French history I didn't want Louis XVI and Turgot: M. Benoist put all the lots into his '*beau chapeau gris*' [fine, grey hat], and looked round on us offering it, none of the others would draw; so I boldly grabbed the first paper in the hat (with my heart beating double-quick march '*dans mon estomac'* [in my stomach], and drew—Louis XVI! Those things never happen to anybody else. However, he was very nice, and helped us all most mercifully.[53]

---

[48] Daisy is referring to *Les Fourberies de Scapin,* first performed in Paris on 14 May 1671.

[49] Daisy meant *pièce*, play.

[50] *Diary,* p. 68.

[51] *Diary,* p. 161.

[52] Bricard, *Saintes ou pouliches*, pp. 88–89.

[53] *Diary,* p. 116.

For Daisy, these exams put M. Benoist in 'a beaming temper' as they 'had passed off well.' 'I had 10 on 10 for the three first questions, and Margot and I had 9 on 10 for the literature', she adds.[54]

If Daisy reports on the daily grind of Les Ruches life, where compositions, class presentations and exams inexorably came and went (her diary mapping out, with detailed regularity, a profile of how a school week was arranged), she is quick to point to high moments of pleasure, of school cohesion, of teacher recognition, of scholastic success, betraying not a little of her competitive spirit and the high standards she set herself. One of the pinnacles of achievement at Les Ruches (literally 'The Beehives') was to earn the *abeille* [bee] badge,[55] awarded not only for academic performance but also for personal effort—in effect, the secular equivalent of the Catholic *croix d'honneur* pinned to the exemplary convent girl's shoulder to reward progress or good conduct.[56] Daisy's account of her moment of glory registers her excitement, though she writes of other occasions when she felt excluded from such overt expressions of feminine solidarity and effusiveness:

> To-day is a red letter day in my existence. Mademoiselle Jones gave me the bee this evening. We had some *tableaux vivants* after dinner, then we began dancing, and when I was resting after an infernal tarantella with Olga, all of a sudden I saw Mlle. Jones coming towards me with something in her hand, and I guessed what it was; she fastened it on my breast, and I just flung my arms round her neck and hugged her; the girls all began clapping, and then kissing me all round; I didn't know who I was kissing or where I was or what I was doing, till I worked my way over to Mme. Geisler and Mlle. Lainé and got settled a bit; then I began dancing again, and we went on like a lot of mad things till Mlle. Jones and Marion began singing a lovely little german operette, and we got up to bed at last at about eleven o'clock. I can hardly believe now that I have got it, my own dear bee.[57]

Descriptions of school calendar highlights abound in Daisy's diary and offer rich glimpses of the more privileged aspects of boarding in France. High on the agenda were frequent chaperoned excursions to Paris, undertaken not only because of the city's convenient location, a mere train ride away from Les Ruches, but also because of the excellent chances it afforded to extend accomplishment. The finishing school was never a replacement for something as educationally ambitious and extravagantly executed as the nineteenth-century Grand Tour, but it typically sought to expose students to the kind of cultural phenomena the Tour prized. In this respect, Les Ruches would have amply satisfied the most exigent parents' wishes that their daughters' opportunities for cultural immersion be suitably fulfilled. Daisy's diary is filled with records of galleries scoured, of monuments viewed, of theatres frequented, of parks, boulevards, shops and gardens toured. An early response to Paris, recorded on 23 September 1887, some five months after she had settled in at school, evokes over four dense pages her whirlwind initiation into the capital's cultural gems: the Louvre, the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, the Sainte

---

[54] ibid.

[55] The emblem, which has a long tradition in France, going back to the Carolingian and Merovingian kings, was chosen by Napoleon to replace the fleur-de-lys and figures on much of the furniture, hangings and decorations of the Fontainebleau palace. It was adopted by Napoleon III during the Second Empire, and subsequently became a much-used motif in the town of Fontainebleau.

[56] Bricard, *Saintes ou pouliches*, p. 137.

[57] *Diary*, pp. 136–137.

Chapelle, the Panthéon, Napoleon's tomb at Les Invalides… The entry, remarkable for its attention to detail, is one of many that, together, elicit her unbounded awe at the spectacle of Paris: its historic majesty; its visually pretty appeal. Again, eight months later, on a leafy summer's day:

> Paris is splendid; I never saw the town so lovely before: all along the *quais* the limes and aspens are in leaf: the boulevards are shaded by beeches and planes, and the Champs-Elysées—well, they beggar all description! Just one great forest of magnificent chestnuts in full bloom, all the way on either side of that lovely drive, right away down to the Arc de Triomphe. The Parisians may well be proud of their city; she sits like the queen of nations on the winding Seine, girt with green woods and fair meadows. It is a joy to be alive in such delicious weather. Where's the fool who prefers winter, that I may pound him? And to think that we have nearly six months of leaves and life, and no snow![58]

Whatever Daisy's reservations about boarding life (and they are many), Les Ruches provided an introduction to Paris that was by no means culturally slight. She *did* get to see some of France's best-loved plays (*Ruy Blas, Le Cid, Polyeucte, L'Avare…*), and some of Paris's best actors (Mounet-Sully, Feraudy, Saumary…), and she *did* take delight in what she saw, registering occasions when, during a performance, she laughed until the tears rolled down her cheeks or tears flowed at the pathos of some tragic figure's plight. On 8 January 1888:

> I did enjoy myself yesterday…We went to the Théâtre Français, the best got-up in Paris, they say, where they speak the purist French and act the best. It was *Le Barbier de Séville*, by Beaumarchais, and Molière's *Malade imaginaire*: this last was the more amusing of the two, and we nearly died laughing at Thomas Diaforus, the doctor's son and at little Toinette, the sweetest little maid you could imagine.[59] The *Barbier* was as pretty a *piece* [sic] as you could wish to see.[60]

If Les Ruches's agenda was expected to deliver refinement, in Daisy's case it patently did. Her unfolding diary is a testament of artistic maturation, of a growing pleasure in paintings of various epochs and styles, of the desire to linger over a single portrait, to consider the angle and light of a church corner, to ponder the message of a play—though, apart from the considerable advantage of being in a place where cultural saturation could be had so easily, one is conscious that her evolving appreciation blossomed from talents that were intrinsically hers: an intelligent mind, a sensitive spirit, a receptiveness to beauty, a thirst for knowledge, a curiosity for the new. There is something decidedly genuine and refreshingly spontaneous, yet seriously aesthetically engaged in her first response to the *Vénus de Milo* at the Louvre. She had obviously seen it in replication, but her account conveys the excitement of witness and the sensation of roving at leisure over its form; the ability, too, to forge a sudden link between a classical masterpiece and a fragment of English romantic verse:

---

[58] *Diary,* p. 104.
[59] Daisy means Diafoirus.
[60] *Diary,* pp. 79–80.

> Of course everyone who respects himself has seen a cast or an engraving of that Venus; but it takes you aback after all: she is divine; that graceful, perfect form, those sloping shoulders, that queenly little head carried as never woman carried it before!
>
> ‘A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,
> And most divinely fair’ [61]
>
> I could have stayed for hours before her: her grace and power are indolent; naturel [sic], she is a lovely lazy, goddess-like creature, and when you watch her lips you half expect to see them open and to hear a deep, musical voice speak to you slowly.[62]

Entertainment at Les Ruches was no less informed by the educational philosophy it embraced. Extra-curricula activities, held in style, thanks, one imagines, to parental largesse (musical soirées, dramatic performances, birthday parties, the celebration of annual festive events) were as much a solid part of the girls’ overall social training as they were a provision for out-of-class amusement and frivolity. Parlour sociability was, after all, a much-prized nineteenth-century middle-class art.[63] The Victorian drawing-room, no less than its European equivalent, was always the ‘best’ room in the house, furnished to display its finest belongings and to graciously receive and impress guests.[64] Daisy doesn’t describe the *salon* at Les Ruches in detail, but she gives examples of its use. Here they held their theatricals and concerts with a sense of occasion confirmed by an evening’s ritual unfolding: changing after dinner, putting on costumes, performing, dancing, going to bed late. The play reading, the piano recital, the costumed drama, however amateurishly attacked (some, Daisy notes, were flops!) were in essence dress rehearsals for the social performances of adulthood.

Of course, parlour activities provided girls with moments of real enjoyment and mirth. They were seen and socially sanctioned as occasions when a woman could let down the decorous guard expected of her in a public place. Laughter, self-expression, in fact any form of overt feminine behaviour, judged unladylike by polite society unless privately expressed, could be given free reign in the right drawing-room circumstance.[65] In this, Victorian England was no different from conservative France. Daisy’s entry of 6 March 1888 is a compelling case in point, for it elicits the pleasure Les Ruches girls took in *salon* exuberance, and how, accordingly, staff formalities were expressly generously relaxed:

> We enjoyed ourselves famously yesterday evening… [After the performance] we danced a *farandol*, and then began hopping on our own account. In the course of the evening eight of the girls danced a hunting-quadrille, and two of the little ones came forward and sang a little woman duet. We had supper at midnight, and then Pierrot and Pierrette sang the *Revue des Ruches*, wherein everyone’s little peculiarities were taken off. *Dis donc, hein?*

---

[61] Daisy is quoting Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem ‘A Dream of Fair Women’ (1832).

[62] *Diary,* p. 136.

[63] Robert Lewis, ‘Domestic Theatre: Parlor Entertainment as Spectacle, 1840–1880’, *Ceremonies and Spectacles: Performing American Culture*, ed. Teresa Alves, Teresa Cid, Heinz Ickstadt, VU University Press, Amsterdam, 2000, pp. 48–62. While Lewis is referring to American practice it must be remembered that parlour games were a British legacy, and, moreover, that a large proportion of Les Ruches’s students were Americans of wealthy middle-class parents.

[64] Linda Young, *Middle-Class Culture,* pp. 176–179.

[65] Lewis, *Ceremonies and Spectacles*, pp. 48–49.

> *Incontestablement. Du tout, du tout, du tout—Notez-bien etc. etc*.[66] Mlle. Jones gave the materials, and M. Pavie put the[m] into verse and arranged the said verse to the tune of *Au clair de la lune*. We danced *cotillons* till half-past two, and then went up to bed. I got up towards nine o'clock this morning, and the result is that I'm half dead. It seems that my costume was a success.[67]

Perhaps no salon activity allowed for more latitude in blurring, while paradoxically preserving, the distinction between diversion and accomplishment than *tableaux vivants*. Of French origin, but hugely popular with the Victorian middle-class, they offered endless opportunities for displaying the 'arts' drawing-room society loved best: charm, drama, humour, elegance, grace, style, wit. The recipe was simple, the social function complex. A suitably dressed individual or group would 'freeze' in a pose intended to capture the essence of a mood (sadness, joy…), or a scene or identity (historical, mythological, Biblical, the choice was vast), in a manner that both arrested and enchanted an audience. The intention might be moral, decorative, instructive or slight, but, essentially, the whole had to be aesthetically agreeable to watch (all the more so for male viewers, one imagines, when the adorned female body was what was on show).[68] Judging by Daisy's account of one such event, artistry may have erred on the side of artlessness, but one cannot deny the merriment it produced:

> We have been having *tableaux vivants* this evening; they weren't so pretty as those we had for the Carnival. The little ones acted the *Sleeping Beauty* first: it was very pretty: Then they had a taking of the veil, not a great success. It appears that I was to have taken part in it, but I didn't know, and no one told me, and so stayed behind, not to my great grief. After that we had the *Six Burghers of Calais:* to my mind it was the success of the evening. Marguerite Young was Edward III, Olga Queen Philippa (by the way Olga acted a great deal, and had all the best men's parts; why I don't know, as she is by far the plainest girl in the house) and four of us in night dresses, with ropes round our necks, and bare-footed, represented the 'bourgeois'.[69] We were of course blacked up: everyone laughed very much: Mlle. Jones called out: '*Oh le beau bourgeois que Daisy!'* ['What a handsome burgher Daisy is!']. The others looked so ridiculous, and we all burst out laughing: when I was half-way up-stairs, my slippers in hand, they called me down to be reviewed in the salon: oh dear me! How we all laughed over those burghers. We had the *Seasons*, and I was autumn, in my grey dress, ornamented with vines.

---

[66] 'You don't say, mm? Absolutely. *Not* at all–Take note, etc. etc.', expressions evidently habitually used by different members of staff.

[67] *Diary*, pp. 157–158. The *farandol* and the *cotillion* are both lively French provincial dances, variously executed in line, in reels or in the round.

[68] Instruction books on presenting *tableaux vivants* (also called 'living statues') abounded in nineteenth-century England. Exemplary are those of Oliver Wenlandt (*Tableaux Vivants. How to Produce and Manage them Successfully and Economically,* and *Living Statuary: How It May Be Successfully Produced by Amateurs*, both published by Pitman, Heywood, London and Manchester, 1896); and Charles Harrison (*Theatricals and tableaux vivants for amateurs*, L. Upcott Gill, London, 1882).

[69] The story of the burghers dates back to the fourteenth century and was chronicled by Jean Froissart in 1369. When King Edward III of England laid siege to Calais in the Hundred Years War, the burghers, it is said, offered themselves up as hostages in exchange for the inhabitants' freedom. The king ordered them to bring him the keys of the city, dressed in poor clothes with nooses around their necks. Their lives were spared by the intervention of the king's wife, Queen Philippa. Though it is not mentioned by Daisy, Rodin famously sculpted the event between 1884 and 1886.

> They say it was a very pretty group. After that they had a charade, '*Cléopâtre'*, danced a little, and came off to bed.[70]

But such descriptions, innocent enough, invite reflections of more far-reaching sociological import for middle-class drawing-room entertainment, whatever comportments it could and did permit, was subtly determined by more than the mere rules of etiquette. Confined to an inner circle—typically that of family, friends and guests—it ensured that girls remained sequestered from the intrusions of public life. It kept them safe, secure and off the streets. In many respects the little Les Ruches community was a closed universe. Girls never left its grounds unsupervised. Informal encounters with the outside world were all but impossible to initiate. At no point does Daisy describe having met people independently, let alone members of the opposite sex. On occasions such conditions pushed her to resent her femininely ordered life: 'I feel capable sometimes of carrying the world on my shoulders without weariness', she sighs on 5 January 1889, 'and there is nothing to vent all that on but French compositions and 30 little school girls! How I detest them, to be sure, and what wouldn't I give to be a man!'.[71]

The ideals of accomplishment and the late nineteenth-century opinion that exercise was important to a girl's health appear to have been accommodated at Les Ruches and establish it as a moderately progressive school—though one cannot doubt that activities like dancing and croquet were encouraged for their social rather than physical worth. Even by the middle of the century, when notions of feminine physical delicacy remained unchallenged, and undue exercise for girls after puberty was considered potentially medically hazardous,[72] physical recreation was deemed important in relaxing the brain (not to be over-exerted) and in refining the body's form and grace.[73] By the 1880s many secondary girls' schools had moved into a transitional phase, with new sports (cycling, horse-riding, tennis…) added to their curricula, while other less strenuous and more seemly activities (dancing, gymnastics, callisthenics) retained their social appeal and educative status.[74] We know that Daisy delighted in being permitted horse-riding, though she detested gymnastics, and rejoiced when the older girls were exempted in the summer of 1888.[75] Walking, strongly advised for girls throughout the century, was available, though chaperoned, two or three times a week.[76] On the other hand, choice in physical education and sport at Les Ruches hardly compares with what girls would be offered a few decades later in England, Australia and France. Certainly, team games and the attendant philosophy that they encouraged competition, cooperation, even a sense of citizenry, desirable skills in the work-place, had no place in the educative thinking and practice of Les Ruches.[77] Unlike the more reformist girls' academies of the end of the century, it was not a school that fostered the notion that its students might later seek jobs.

---

[70] *Diary,* pp. 114–115.

[71] *Diary,* p. 147.

[72] In England the belief that undue exercise was dangerous for adolescent girls was medically propagated by the influential Dr Maudsley, 'Sex in Mind and in Education', reproduced in Rowold, Gender and Science, pp.54-71. In his article he argued that women were at the mercy of the 'tyranny of their organization' (i.e. their biological structure and reproductive organs), and that too much mental exercise would weaken their constitution, particularly at moments of extreme nutritive loss, like menstruation and childbirth. Conversely, he believed too much exercise would put extra stress on the feminine mind, leaving it prone to a variety of nervous disorders. In other words mind and sex were considered inseparable. Opinions like Maudsley's informed educational policy and the place of exercise in girls' schools in colonial Australia (Ray Crawford, 'Sport for Young Ladies: The Victorian Independent Schools, 1875–1925', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 1, issue 1, Nov. 1984, p. 62). Similar though evolving attitudes prevailed in the education of girls in the mid- to late nineteenth century (Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, Croom Helm, London, 1982, ch. 5, 'A Healthy Mind in a Healthy Body: Victorian Advice about the Management of Puberty', pp. 85–99, notably pp. 87 and 91). For the case in France, see Bricard, *Saintes ou pouliches*, p. 265.

[73] The idea was strongly developed in England by the late century's major women educationalists. See especially Dorothea Beale, Lucy H. M. Soulsby and Jane Frances Dove, *Work and Play in Girls' Schools, by Three Head Mistresses,* Longmans, Green and Co., London, New York and Bombay, 1898, Section III, 'The Cultivation of the Body', pp. 396–398, p. 410 and p. 414. In Australia the British model prevailed and dancing, gymnastics and callisthenics were the major forms of exercise for schoolgirls throughout the late nineteenth century (Ray Crawford, 'Sport for Young Ladies', *Sporting Traditions*, p. 69 and pp. 74–75).

It was walking that gave the Les Ruches girls their most regular opportunity to leave the school grounds and get out of doors. Their destination was generally the forest of Fontainebleau, where they typically set off for three or more hours, sometimes covering ten to sixteen miles in a day. Daisy loved these occasions, rising with the most eager when the chance was there to tramp through the forest between 5.30 am and breakfast-time. The stout boots she purchased in Paris were probably bought with such rambles in mind. Traipsing though the forest, mind, was not a complete wilderness experience, although it is the forest's pristine beauty that Daisy repeatedly extols. By the middle of the century it was a thoroughly fashionable activity, upon which the school, given its location, evidently capitalised. By the 1880s the whole area had been well and truly opened up for public use by the then legendary François Denecourt, a free-spirited if shrewd man of the woods, who charted its breadth and length to sizeable financial advantage, carving it up into paths and avenues, adding touches here and there to nature (a grotto, a cleared dell, a horse trail, a viewing tower, border access to cafés and shops).[78] Over this bit of commodified utopia, what Simon Schama calls a bourgeois 'arcadia' of 'designed excitement', Daisy and her friends zealously trod, visiting its well sign-posted landmarks, often in the freezing cold.[79] But Daisy seems to have found deep personal contentment in its more secluded corners, and the peace of the forest may well have provided compensation for living daily at close quarters with others within the claustrophobic bounds of Les Ruches. In autumn, 1887:

> You cannot think how lovely the effect of that golden light is on those old round grey trunks where dark green mosses grow, and twined about here and there with ivies. The heather is all in blossom now; it flowers more thickly out on the open hill-sides, where it spreads in sheets of fragrant purple blossom round the sandstone boulders; there is always a faint smell of honey hanging about it, and an indistinct sound of humming bees. There are a lot of people about here, now, sportsmen, since the hunting began some weeks ago; their wives and relations, artists, and invalids, come for the fresh forest air and the 'grape-cure' (Mark Twain's

---

[74] These were all recommended by Dove, ibid., pp. 397–398, p. 400 and pp. 408–410.

[75] *Diary*, p. 106.

[76] On walking for girls, see Gorham, *The Victorian Girl*, p. 94. On the comparable place of callisthenics, gymnastics and walking in girls' schools in France see Bricard, *Saintes ou pouliches*, pp. 196–201.

[77] The merits of team sports are discussed in Dove, *Work and Play in Girls' Schools*, pp. 400–402 and pp. 404–408. Following the British model, sports for schoolgirls in Australia were not seriously introduced until the early twentieth century, Ray Crawford, 'Sport for Young Ladies', *Sporting Traditions*, pp. 61–82.

[78] Denecourt's legacy is discussed in Simon Schama, 'Arcadia Redesigned', *Landscape and Memory*, Vintage Books, New York, 1995, pp. 546–560.

[79] ibid., pp. 559–560.

> grape-cure, no doubt). I hate meeting these bands of tourists in our walks, they break the silence and picturesqueness of the scenery; the only thing that reconciles me to them is the musical jingle of the horses' bells, which you can hear long before they arrive, and whose echo the wind carries back to you long after they are gone.[80]

Les Ruches's educative programme must have seemed exotic to a foreigner like Daisy, as it does to anyone privy to her account today. But her descriptions of how it was daily put into practice point to the multiple inadequacies of the system, itself the product of ideological inconsistencies in what accomplishment was and how it ought to be conferred. Daisy' s opinions as a recipient rather than an administrator of an educational ethos may be those of any super-critical teenager—hyper-sensitive, highly subjective, deeply impassioned as they are—but they provide remarkable insight into what it felt like to be subjected to an educative regimen of what might now seem fraught values and narrowly implemented ideals. Her many negative assessments of Les Ruches highlight matters of internal management that may have eluded parental notice and better public judgment, but they strike at the heart of educational policies that pervaded nineteenth-century private schooling in England, Australia and France. Nowhere is this more manifest than in her evaluations of teacher and peer relationships.

While Daisy may not have been fully aware of it, however telling her remarks, Les Ruches bore the hallmarks—in size, in curricula choices, in governance—of the so-called 'homely' French and British boarding school: it was committed to 'family' values, that were to be disseminated in a sheltered environment like that to which its charges were presumed to be used. Bryce's landmark *Report of Schools Inquiry Commission*, conducted across England in 1867–68, confirmed the trend, upheld by the Protestant nation, certainly, but equally pertinent to, and practised by, Catholic France.[81] Thus, according to Bryce, the middle-class preference for 'smaller schools', that could be 'conducted more like private families', to allow a 'more personal influence', in 'the production and confirmation of gentle and feminine characteristics'; thus, too, the perceived desirability of having a Lady Proprietor as the school figurehead, ostensibly able to guide her pupils in an atmosphere of affection, dependence, moral rectitude, seclusion, discipline and vigilance.[82] In the 'small school', it was felt, one could more naturally mimic the domestic rituals and rhythms of the well-run home.

In fact, such ideals were not easily met. What *was* the 'best' environment in which to nurture adolescent girls? And who *were* the 'best' teachers to oversee the task? Daisy discerns problems at Les Ruches that reputedly infiltrated elitist establishments. Its teaching force, mainly female and unmarried, was young and inexperienced and its cloistered environment strikingly inbred. In her almost daily accounts, Daisy accumulates details on the less agreeable aspects of boarding house rule: friction amongst staff, leading to nasty disputes, departures and dismissals; the 'falling out' of individuals; overt 'palling up'; gossip and slander; erratically extended favouritism that split student and teacher allegiances alike. 'One day they are bosom friends', Daisy remarks about two of her superiors, ‘and the next there is war to the knife between them’.[83] Elsewhere: ‘I never saw such people for fighting; I believe they’ ll tear each other to ribbons one of these days’.[84] ‘A mistress has no right to have her pupils’, she judges. ‘Miss Stretch is a very evil-minded young woman…she goes about seeking whom she may devour amongst these lamb-like pupils…sapping their innocent minds’.[85]

---

[80] *Diary*, p. 45.

[81] The report came to wide public attention when partly reprinted by the educational reformist Dorothea Beale, *Book of Extracts from the School Inquiry Commission*, David Nutt, London, 1870.

[82] Vol. XXVIII, ch. VI, discussed by Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Boston and Henley, 1981, pp. 46–47, cf. Bricard, *Saintes ou pouliches*, pp. 69–71.

Discipline at Les Ruches was not unduly harsh. By the late nineteenth century corporal punishment had all but disappeared from the elitist girls’ school in Britain and France.[86] But it was, at best, ill-defined and open to misuse, reflecting the sort of role-confusion with which late nineteenth-century female teachers grappled in seeking to match the dignity and authority of their public position with that, ideally, of a motherly friend.[87] Judging from Daisy’s remarks, affection and kisses from teachers were freely bestowed. On the other hand the girls were subjected to sudden grillings in the head’s office and constant public ‘twittings’ over issues that, to her mind, ought to have been privately voiced, like eating badly, not being hygienic or telling an untruth. Tiny details of a girl’s life were scrutinized; the sending and receiving of letters was closely watched; former pupils, used as ‘bad’ examples, were openly criticised. ‘Mme. Geisler had been scolding me’, Daisy once notes, ‘at least, sermonizing me, as she does every Tuesday evening, about my character and my disposition, and goodness knows what not: can’t think why she always hits upon Tuesday but certain it is that that Tuesday sermon is “réglé comme des petits pâtés”’.[88]

Daisy evidently kept her head down during most moments of internal conflict. Yet in her diary we get a running commentary of her thoughts: her dislike of teacher pettiness, of displays of bitchiness, of injustice, of fickleness, of unfaithfulness. When feeling really wronged, she claims she spoke up, but it seems it was largely by writing that she got matters off her chest and reckoned with what she saw to be right. When her little sister’s diligence is overlooked, she fitfully and defensively writes: ‘If I ever get a chance of giving a piece of my mind to the authorities here, I’ll just let off some steam. I don’t care half a straw what I say to these bosses, because I don’t respect them a bit, and I can’t get into blacker books than I am in with everyone at present’.[89] But there is little evidence she challenged her teachers to the degree she privately wished. On a teacher’s quest for followers, she confides: ‘If I choose to be perverted, I’m not going to be stopped by any little governess…I take a great deal from the people I love, but when anyone else comes hectoring it over me, they don’t find a very meek young woman to deal with. I’m quite capable of taking care of myself’.[90] Hot-headed Daisy was—there were times when ‘the hairs on [her] body prickle[d] with aversion’,[91] when she thrust a window open or made a brusque exit; but rarely does she appear to have set out to hurt. It is indeed the honesty of her text, the staunch way she holds to considered opinions or expresses regret for having acted too hastily, too wilfully, too out of place, that mark her out as a teenager of considerable sincerity and candidness. Not a model of virtue, not the demure young lady finishing schools were meant to produce, she nonetheless appears to have striven to act in good faith over principles she cared about.

---

[83] *Diary*, p. 83.
[84] *Diary*, p. 97.
[85] *Diary*, p. 83.
[86] Gorham, *The Victorian Girl*, pp. 76–77; Bricard, *Saintes ou pouliches*, p. 132.
[87] Gorham, *The Victorian Girl*, pp. 70–72.
[88] A colloquial expression, meaning ‘with inevitable regularity’. *Diary*, p. 82.
[89] *Diary*, p. 92.
[90] *Diary*, p. 84.
[91] *Diary*, p. 127.

Of more complicated personal consequence to Daisy was her long infatuation with a Mlle. Rollet, who well after her departure, noted in the entry of March 1887, occupies a key place in the diary as a kind of fantasy figure—subliminal lover, surrogate mother, absent friend—the mere memory of whom appears to have provided compensation for the perceived hardships of school life. In fact, the true nature of the relationship is difficult to assess. Perhaps Mlle. Rollet did lavish attention upon her with the physical demonstrativeness Daisy so amply recounts. Perhaps, in seeking her teacher's approval and help, she mistook her intent. Perhaps, in an educative environment in which one-to-one friendships between girls were discouraged as potentially corruptive (though rarely articulated as such), the school feared the relationship to be too intimate to permit.[92] What is beyond speculation is the depth of Daisy's sentiment, for she evidently missed her teacher, and felt unjustly persecuted when the school intervened in the affair's aftermath: her correspondence with the departed teacher was watched and her family was alerted, prompting letters of strong step-maternal and sisterly advice that persuaded her to abandon the attachment.[93] 'I know I loved her "not wisely, but too well"',[94] Daisy comes to ruefully admit.[95] But the affair sheds light not only on teacher-student relationships at Les Ruches, where affections were coveted and adolescent emotions highly pitched, but also on a society in which sexual instruction for maturing girls was grossly inadequate and matters of a delicate nature typically ambiguously or evasively addressed.[96] If Daisy was 'sermonized' over the affair by the school head, she evidently construed the intrusion as unfair discrimination against one whose regard she had cherished and wished to keep.

Given the student turnover at Les Ruches, establishing solid friendships must have been difficult. Being 'finished' typically lasted a year, sometimes just a few months. On Daisy's account, girls attended and left the school with such regularity one has the impression she and Dorothy were two of its most longstanding (and family neglected) residents, and while it may have been the case that some of the girls she privately berates were too shallow and spoilt to like, sent at the behest of socially ambitious and wealthy parents rather than out of choice, she was not without the ability and need to show warmth. Her sisterly devotion, borne out in the hours she spent in Dorothy's sick room keeping her company and watching over her health, is recorded at length. On other occasions when she found a true soul mate, when a happy and close relationship was struck, her delight is obvious. Of a pleasant moment with Edith Saunderson, who briefly attended Les Ruches, she remarks:

---

[92] On the monitoring of schoolgirl friendships see Gorham, *The Victorian Girl*, pp. 113–114.

[93] Even late into the century girls were advised not to correspond with others without their mother's sanction, ibid., p. 114.

[94] *Diary,* p. 134.

[95] Daisy is quoting Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act V, Scene 2, ll. 346–347.

[96] On the sexual education of girls in England, see Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, pp. 20–23; in France, see Bricard, *Saintes ou pouliches*, pp. 265–266. The adolescent ardour of student-teacher infatuation at Les Ruches was the inspiration for Dorothy Bussy's scandalous *Olivia* (1949) though it impossible to know how much imaginative licence Bussy took. On the other hand, the book does lend credence to the theory that nineteenth-century girls' schools were at risk of being femininely inbred.

> This evening it has been deliciously fresh and balmy in the garden: we two went off as is our wont, after dinner, walking about arm in arm, talking…then we sat under the maples for a bit till we got cold, and when we were tired of walking again we went to the bench under the chestnut; there we discussed friendship, activity, Parisian life, occupations, careers, acting, women, Edith's character and inclinations, a little of mine, and a great many other things.[97]

Elsewhere Daisy is less giving, less tolerant. Intelligent, curious, highly motivated to excel at her work, she found it hard to accept lazy attitudes, bad class manners, carelessness and inattentiveness, confiding her feelings to her diary in moments of adolescent pique:

> Ai! Ai! Ai! How stupid these girls are!!! Marguerite Veil, Marie-Anne Pavie, Olga Morgan and I are the only ones who seem to have any glimmer of intelligence in us; the others are, for the most part, profoundly, and unqualifiedly, and densely, hopelessly stupid: if they have any wit or memory by nature, they exert it in getting out of as many lessons as possible…It is really deplorable, such ignorance and such idleness.[98]

Her heart often goes out to the teacher:

> M. de Beriot didn't come this evening to Mlle. Jones' great vexation. It must be an awful bother to come down here to give four or five lessons to very middling pupils, when he has so many good ones at Paris. I quite understand that he is not very ardent about coming, it is the second time quite lately that he has missed his day.[99]

Of the American students she is unforgiving, finding them variously 'fast and vulgar',[100] 'as thick as thieves, always together, whispering apart in each others' rooms, talking English, doing, in short, everything that is forbidden'.[101] 'I never saw girls of seventeen or eighteen behave so stupidly',[102] she laments; 'they exasperate me with their twang and drawl and general "loudness"'.[103] But Daisy is aware of her uncompromising personality and its cost, expressing contriteness for being too reserved, too 'cold' and 'haughty' to be popular,[104] and striving, always, to make a fresh start. 'I never knew how obstinate I was till I came here', she admits. '"Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control, these three alone lead life to sovereign power." Oh, if only I could possess one of these rare qualities! I think I would choose self-knowledge, the two others would follow more easily and naturally when once one had that in perfection'.[105]

For Daisy and Dorothy, the holiday periods at Les Ruches cut them off more than usual from companionship. While most girls went home or travelled in Europe, the latter a popular middle-class annual family event, they were left to fill in their days as best they could:[106] covering and arranging books, reading, walking, drawing, sewing, reading to a sick child, stalking currants in the kitchen. Granted, trips to Paris and concerts were plentiful, one could study, draw and give private lessons, teachers were kind, discipline was relaxed, but Daisy bemoans her lack of self-motivation and the resolutions she failed to meet. 'Alas for good intentions!...I have done next door to nothing',[107] she remarks after Easter, 1888, and again, some months later, with the September annual holidays at an end: 'I'm not sorry of it. For this continued inaction of thought and monotony of life weighs on me like lead'.[108] Only once did Daisy's stepmother visit, in January 1888, stocked with presents, certainly, but staying but a day, if her diary is right.

---

[97] *Diary*, pp. 123–124.
[98] *Diary*, p. 90.
[99] *Diary*, p. 105.
[100] *Diary*, p. 135.
[101] *Diary*, p. 146.
[102] *Diary*, p. 164.
[103] *Diary*, p. 135.
[104] *Diary*, p. 64.
[105] *Diary*, p. 65. The quote, another measure of Daisy's erudition, is from Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem 'Œnome' of 1832.

Homesickness was the heavy price Daisy paid for being 'finished' in France. Social adjustment, geographical isolation, distance from loved ones, years of exile seemingly stretching ahead are issues that traverse her text, set down, here, as a longing to rejoin her sisters, there, as submission to yet another bout of crying alone at night. Letters from home, long awaited, appear to have brought comfort. Even when sent with a scolding, those from her father were greeted as 'angels' visits';[109] those from her older sisters, 'darling old Em'[110] and 'dear old Cecily',[111] as lifelines to matters of family interest: domestic crises, looming weddings, budding careers, moving house. It is indeed the small confidences of Daisy's story, her 'behind the scenes' record of boarding life, that point up the underside of overseas schooling for girls of tender age and temperament. 'I have cried as long and as violently as I can pretty nearly every night since I moved into this room', she writes in October 1887;[112] then, at a school concert, later in the month: 'I howled plentifully in my little corner this evening. So many of these sonatas M. de Beriot plays are ones that I know so well from hearing them at home'.[113] 1 January 1889 brings fresh resolve: 'Another year begun. I hope it will be better and happier for me than this last one has been…Not that I am unhappy here, but although I'd be loathe to leave Dorothy, sometimes the longing to see all those dear home faces grow [sic] so strong I can hardly bear it'.[114]

If Daisy pined for her family, so, too, she did for the land of her birth. Loneliness brought with it sharp reappraisals of the country she missed. Strewn through her narrative—not overly, but with enough sentiment to strike—brief evocations of Australia conjure up a world of natural difference, at times rapturously, sensuously grasped. A year into her trip, her description of Sydney—afforded the kind of textual space and attention she elsewhere reserved for an artefact (a painting, a sculpture) loved for its depth, colour and space—forms a picture of post-card type, an encapsulation, a visual essence and evidence of what for her is intrinsically Australian and distinctively un-French. Setting down the date of her departure triggers a meditation of disjunction between what 'is' before her and what, behind the ‘bar’, is so palpably its opposite. On Sunday, 19 February 1888:

---

[106] On school holiday practices in France, see Bricard, *Saintes ou pouliches*, ch. VI ('Les vacances'), pp. 142–156.
[107] *Diary*, p. 102.
[108] *Diary*, p. 132.
[109] *Diary*, p. 99.
[110] *Diary*, p. 122.
[111] *Diary*, p. 167.
[112] *Diary*, p. 57.
[113] *Diary*, p. 60.
[114] *Diary*, p. 146.

> It’s just a year since we’ve ‘sailed out over bar’. Often now that the snow is lying in drifts about the house, and covers all the pines, when the house is all quiet in the grey morning twilight, I sit and stare into the cone fire till the flames all fade away, the blue dancing ripples of Sydney Harbour rise up round me, and I can see the dusky hills sloping down to the sunlit water, and the white houses gleaming among the gardens on North shore, and the glancing sails of the yachts and pleasure-boats, just as we saw them a year ago. There can’t be anything more perfectly beautiful, more satisfying to the eyes, to all the senses, in its graceful sweeping lines, and glorious colour than that harbour.[115]

Such shifts in content and contexts recur in Daisy’s account, signs of the pervasiveness of memory and the inviolability of one’s roots and one’s past. In moments of sudden awareness, cast as they fleetingly and involuntarily come to pass, she captures the feeling, the mood, the strangeness of traversing two worlds, two realities, perceived as irreconcilably different: the one close but unfamiliar, the other remote but intensely sensed. Writing in the seclusion of the school garden in September 1888, she remarks:

> The summer is finished; the days are chilly in the morning and evening, mild and grey from ten a.m. till five p.m.; to-day everything looks not dead, nor asleep, but in a kind of trance or swoon, not a breath of air stirring, the faint chirp of a bird from time to time, coming across the stillness. The brown and yellow leaves flutter down silently, one by one, till the paths and seats are all strewn with them. It is a deathly afternoon…This strange repose is so different from the lonliness [sic] of the bush; there the silence and the pauses seem like the momentary rest of some Titanic power, of which every quiver and simultaneous wave of the forest is the breathing; you can feel the mighty heart beating beneath the repose; here it looks like a weary nature, fainting beneath the labour of summer days, falling, sinking into an everlasting slumber; it makes me feel weird.[116]

However, to pass Daisy over as a fretful teenager—ever regretting the present and languishing over the past—would be to gravely misjudge the creditable effort she made to profit from her overseas trip. Her desire to learn, change and move on in life is overwhelmingly apparent in her account. At times self-indulgently introspective, as a diary invariably is, it is nonetheless a moving testament of human resourcefulness, perseverance, intellectual endeavour, good cheer and hope. While sharp judgments are made of others and the Les Ruches system held to account, praise is freely given where deemed merited, and adult approval—of actions, intentions, and hard work—keenly sought. Besides, Daisy in no way saw herself as without fault; she repeatedly upbraids herself for her mistakes: errors of judgment, misunderstandings, bad conduct, poor performance, unwillingness to cooperate. Shot through with witty self-deprecations and wry self-admonishments, hers is no bland chronicling of schoolgirl life, but rather, quite analytically, of how well or not she fared within it, and how better or worse she might have coped. With a sense of drama, a love of the droll, and the gift of insight, she brings to her portrait of self the spark of adolescent spirit: radicalism, unconventionality, gumption, passion, playfulness, a love of life.

---

[115] *Diary,* pp. 88–89.

[116] *Diary,* p. 133.

Self-observation is in turn evidence of personal growth and confirms the diary's function as a document of deep confessional and psychological worth. Through it Daisy was able to plot, arrange, gauge and weigh up the very real hardships of her experience and to conclude that she had come through, despite the challenges she met. Half-way through her two recorded years (31 December 1887) she was able to comment: 'I don't fancy I shall cry much this year, I have pretty nearly run dry, and there will probably be a drought. I have done little good to myself or anyone else since we left home'.[117] Then, feeling she had overcome the pain of Mlle. Rollet's absence: 'Now I feel that I am beginning to wake up, and change back to something like what I was before, only graver, and sterner, and firmer. I think my character is a good deal older and more formed than it was a while ago: let's hope so'.[118] If victory over personal anguishes and frustrations was procured at a cost, by 28 September 1888 fresh resolve indicates a notable maturation of thought and intent: 'I must walk my own road alone, and rely on my own individual strength, and pick myself up when I am down. I can't even help Dorothy, for we are so differently made that I can't understand the secret springs of her character. She is soft and I am hard; there is all the difference'.[119]

Little is known of Daisy's movements after her last extant diary entry of 1 August 1889. Did she spend time in Europe before returning to Australia? When did she come back? What was her much anticipated homecoming like, given so much had changed during her time at Les Ruches? 'Woodlands', her early childhood home, was sold in 1888. 'I should so have loved to go back there, and see the dear old house', she rues;[120] 'Havilah', where she lived before going to France, increasingly became her stepmother and father's family's base; her beloved Emily left home to go nursing in Sydney in 1888; 'sweet and patient' Cecily,[121] engaged the same year, married in 1891. 'How it will all be changed when we come back', she muses on 5 August 1888: 'Em gone, Cecily grown older, Roy no longer a baby, Mab as old as I was when we first left Hobart, Nea almost a big girl'.[122] Did Daisy see those relatives and half-relatives grow up? While the records state she travelled to Adelaide, there is no confirmation of why or what she did. In January 1903, she contracted enteric fever in Sydney, and died of cardiac failure in a private hospital on 22 February.[123] She was just thirty-two years old, and 'not married', according to her father's report of the event.[124]

Considering Daisy's strong-mindedness, her dislike of intellectual mediocrity, her resistance to social ritual and maternal, albeit step-maternal, direction, undesirable traits in the obedient, accomplished girl, one is tempted to speculate on what she might have become had she been born some twenty years later into a different educative system and a world of evolved feminine opportunities and social roles. In comparison with the private venture schools of the Australian states, modelled throughout the century on the English grammar school, those in New South Wales, while by no means abandoning accomplishment practice, were quick to introduce reform. The so-called Ivy League schools that sprang up in the 1880s in competition with new elitist state high schools, like Sydney Girls' High (1883), were all to modify and expand their curricula in the next two decades in response to changing educative pressures and popular parental demand. Abbotlseigh, Normanhurst, Redlands, Claremont, strongly committed to academic success, were schools that a student of the intellectual calibre of Daisy could profitably have attended and enjoyed, and while it would be an exaggeration to claim that their courses matched those of middle-class boys, they were sufficiently innovatively revised to allow the ambitious and clever student to pursue subjects of improved standards—like mathematics and the sciences—and potential vocational worth.[125] Within this changing environment and the economic boom period the colonies experienced towards the century's end, qualifications for jobs assumed new importance and were increasingly sought by girls. The Junior and Senior exams, officially introduced in 1871, if initially eschewed by the small ladies' academies, were progressively encouraged and valued as the century advanced, especially by the growing larger private establishments. It is unlikely, though not impossible, that Daisy would have achieved either of these certificates during her life, given the timing of her schooling in France, although she would have been an eminently suitable candidate, who would doubtlessly have passed. She was not to know of the Intermediate and Leaving exams, established in 1911, after her death.

---

[117] *Diary*, p. 78.
[118] ibid.
[119] *Diary*, p. 134.
[120] *Diary*, p. 155.
[121] *Diary*, p. 167.
[122] *Diary*, p. 122. Roy Mordaunt was Daisy*s half-brother and Gwendolen Mab and Nea were her half-sisters. On Daisy's extended family see Rivière, *Daisy in Exile*, p. 15–16.
[123] New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, registration no. 1903/000250.
[124] 23 February 1903.

One can only wonder whether the unmarried Daisy put her considerable skills to good use and whether she enjoyed an active and satisfying life. By 1900 work prospects for women were opening up and although it remained unusual for middle-class women to seek employment other than nursing or teaching, increasingly they trained, not without societal resistance, for professional status and a social calling beyond or instead of that conferred by marriage and/or motherhood. Office work, after 1900, rapidly became a major feminine occupational choice, reflected in the private business college and the introduction in the 'new' schools of the commercial class, but, because it was initially considered a working-class or lower-middle class job, it is unlikely Daisy would have found it vocationally or socially apt.[126]

Taking Daisy's not insignificant educational strengths into account, her most likely professional destination within Australia would have been that of a private teacher or governess. For these she had the right credentials and social standing, and as any contemporary advertisement for a 'lady' teacher will attest: accomplishment, a broad education, travel experience in Europe (highly rated) and an excellent command of French,[127] the latter subtly betrayed in her diary's ample recourse to French phrases, Gallicisms, grammatical 'borrowings' and literary quotes. It would not necessarily have mattered if she had not had a university degree, although by 1900 this had become professionally desirable, and, in some cases, requisite.[128] If Daisy had pursued this avenue would she have been as independent as she had wished? Perhaps not, perhaps yes. She had after all left the family home, as she said in her diary she would. She had moved states. But private teaching paid poorly, despite the middle-class prestige it held, and governessing, except of the nursery kind, equally poorly paid, had all but disappeared by 1900.[129] The large private school and state school had nudged the small academy out of history.[130] Daisy's nineteenth-century world had passed. The Les Ruches style of education was almost a thing of the past. One wonders, then, whether her adolescent whim to return to the bush, recorded in the last extant page of her account, occurred or not, and whether such an outcome would not have been for the best for one who had felt geographically isolated abroad and desirous to be reunited with those she loved most. 'I'm sick and tired of school-girls', she said on 1 August 1889, her exams over and a new year looming ahead. 'When I go home I'll ride about with Father and look after the station. It's a man's work, and will rest me from the French finnikineries that one has to put up with here'.[131]

---

[125] Kyle, *Her Natural Destiny*, pp. 104–110 and p. 117. Shirley School (established 1900) would lead the way in the new century, ibid., p.109.

[126] On the training of women teachers see ibid., chs. 8 and 9 (pp. 131–176). On the introduction of business studies in girls' schools, p. 23, pp. 121–122 and pp. 196–199.

[127] ibid., pp. 158–159.

---

[128] ibid., pp. 162–164.

[129] On governesses in New South Wales, see ibid., pp. 164–169. On the difficulties of the profession see Patricia Clarke's study of British women governesses in Australia, *The Governesses: Letters from the Colonies, 1862–1882*, Hutchinson, Melbourne, 1985.

[130] Kyle, *Her Natural Destiny*, p. 109.

[131] *Diary*, p. 175. I have been informed by a related descendant of Daisy's family that there is speculation she may have become a medical doctor in Queensland.

2

Trouble in Bohemia: the Belle Epoque Novels of Tasma, 1891 and 1895

In 1873 Jessie Couvreur, later to assume the name Tasma, travelled to Paris with her mother and seven siblings in search of a France of which they had long dreamt. It was a journey she was to repeat twice, thanks to a mother who felt deep affection for the Europe of her ancestry and who had inculcated her children in all things French from birth. They were not tourists in the mother's opinion, but pilgrims going back to their roots.[1] Those early experiences were to mark Tasma deeply and inform her writing career, begun in 1871. Nowhere is this more the case than in her two Paris-centred novels: *The Penance of Portia James* (1891) and *Not Counting the Cost* (1895). Their Australian heroines, Portia James in the first and Eila Clare in the second, are driven by the exigencies of living in France, whether willingly, wittingly or not.[2]

Tasma was born Jessie Catherine Huybers in Highgate, north of London on 29 October 1848. Her mother, Charlotte, of English and French origin, was partly educated in Paris, and appears to have taught as a teacher or governess in England until her marriage in 1845 to James Alfred Huybers, originally of Antwerp. In 1852 Charlotte and James migrated to Tasmania where James, a wine merchant by trade, developed a thriving business. Charlotte, however, found Tasmania a remote and culturally impoverished colonial outpost.

The years 1873–1881, which included the young Huybers' trips to France, were formative ones for Tasma. Not only did she get to visit Paris's art galleries, museums and monuments—experiences recorded with youthful freshness in her sister Edith's diary in 1875[3]—but as the eldest sister she took a firm hand in managing her siblings' affairs and education with a devotion she never forwent. At the same time, she took stock of her own life. Her marriage in 1867 in Melbourne to Charles Forbes Fraser, of good background but given to gambling and drink, ended in divorce in Victoria in 1883. The matter undoubtedly caused a stir in the conservative colonial society she had already intermittently left. Not only would her long absences from her wayward husband have surprised, but also the divorce itself, granted at a time when it was unusual for a woman to initiate proceedings, and when it still bore the stigma of feminine blame.

Tasma relished the return of her freedom and embarked on a life of writing which she maintained until her death in 1897. Her first novel, *Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill* (1889), set in suburban Sydney, was acclaimed a masterpiece, and was followed in time by articles, short stories and full-length fictional works.[4] In 1885 she settled in Europe after marrying Auguste Couvreur in a London registry office. Couvreur, a distinguished Belgian statesman and political journalist, resided in Belgium, and it is there that Tasma wrote her last works. In addition, she latterly worked with her husband in the Brussels office of the London *Times,* assuming his post after his death in 1894.[5]

---

[1] For a detailed biography of Tasma, see Patricia Clarke, *Tasma: The Life of Jessie Couvreur*, Allen and Unwin, New South Wales, 1994.

[2] Quotes from *The Penance of Portia James,* (William Heinemann, London, 1891) are henceforth indicated by the abbreviation PJ and from *Not Counting the Cost* (D. Appleton and Company, New York, 1895) by NCC.

[3] *Tasma's Diaries: The Diaries of Jessie Couvreur with Another by her Young Sister Edith Huybers,* ed. Patricia Clarke, Canberra, Mulini Press, 1995.

In her lifetime Tasma achieved remarkable professional heights, lecturing in France on Australian and European issues to professional and public fora, like Paris's Commercial Geography Society, with reported aplomb and grace.[6] Her contributions to French culture and education were duly recognized when she was made an Officier d'Académie of the Légion d'Honneur.[7] In her string of accomplishments one must include her journalistic articles on Paris, intermittently sent to the *Australasian* newspaper to provide Australians with up-to-date information on French fashion, politics and the arts. If, then, her fiction was only briefly popular, passing into near oblivion after her death, it warrants review as the work of a well-informed woman who brought to her work her views on travel, gender and class. It is the blend of these matters that makes *The Penance of Portia James* (1891) and *Not Counting the Cost* unique social and literary documents.

Tasma's Paris novels and their respective heroines' adventures are cast in the French Belle Epoque period that straddled the years 1880–1914. It was a time of deep political instability as the country's Third Republic lurched from crisis to crisis, not the least of which was the divisive Dreyfus Case. But while political parties splintered and Church and State haggled over human rights, the disillusioned danced their cares away with the do-or-die gusto for which the period became renowned. Music halls like the Moulin Rouge and the Folies-Bergère proliferated at an unprecedented rate, offering themselves as dens of tolerated hedonism or merely havens from daily uncertainties and hardships; there the rich and poor rubbed shoulders; cheap drink flowed; waiters donned extravagant garb; dandies paraded; dancers pulled up their petticoats for the can-can; prostitutes seduced willing clients. Toulouse-Lautrec, at the time a struggling artist, alcoholic and seeker of music hall solace, captured the spirit of the times with his sketches of singers, dancers, profligates, aristocrats and down-and-outs. Over the channel English Victorians and Edwardians raised their eyebrows, though not without interest. France's capital was "gay Paree", an alluring "other"—promiscuous, yes, but free, it seemed, from Protestant stuffiness. When the British George du Maurier published *Trilby* in 1894 it was an overnight success.[8] Although partly set in Paris of the 1850s, it drew inspiration from French fin-de-siècle decadence.

****

When Portia James's timid English suitor walks down the steps of Paris's Jardin du Luxembourg his gaze encompasses what his male companion describes as "a page out of the *Vie de Bohème*".[9] In effect, as his eye alights upon the moving spectacle of one of the late nineteenth-century's most frequented parks, so the reader is invited to imaginatively stop and look. This is Tasma's descriptive writing at its evocative best as she maps the trajectory of her character's viewing through unfolding images of playing fountains, regal statues, passing promenaders and leafy paths. What is ultimately rendered is a showcasing of Belle Epoque public space, much as it is depicted in the *plein air* paintings of the period's impressionists. Here the garden's itinerant visitors, a veritable passing parade of Parisian types, are fleetingly caught: mothers, nannies, maids, children, students, male oglers, small groups of daintily dressed *blanchisseuses* and *grisettes*.[10] The whole cultural ritual of Parisian *flânerie*, normal to the city's residents, strange to Tasma's foreign protagonists, has been exoticised, localised, particularised as a kind of encapsulation, here anodyne enough, of the alien territory in which the novel's Australian heroine is progressively immersed.[11] The apparent innocuousness of Tasma's landscape, "a stately pleasure dome"[12] for leisurely pursuits, nonetheless signals the city as a site of anonymity and transience.

---

[4] On its publication in London *Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill* was acclaimed "the book of the season", "Tasma: Mme. Auguste Couvreur", *Queen,* 13 January 1894.

[5] On her Brussels years, see Tasma's diary of 1889–~~18~~91, Clarke, *Tasma's Diaries*, pp. 46–79.

[6] On Tasma's career as a public lecturer and journalist, see Clark, *Tasma*, ch. 7, pp. 68–81.

[7] The exact date on which this award was conferred is unknown, but according to Clarke it was probably between 1885 and 1887, *Tasma,* endnote 41, p. 178.

[8] It reputedly inspired Gaston Leroux's novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (1909), translated as *The Phantom of the Opera* in 1911 (and later made into musicals and films).

The bohemian ambience of the Latin Quarter, well established by the end of the nineteenth century, is complexly pertinent in the telling of *Portia James* and *Not Counting the Cost*. If myth, as well as fact, has always shaped the Left Bank's vibrant history, it was all the more defined at the time of Tasma's writing, when the *quartier* expanded as a traditional place for university learning into one of the *lieux de plaisir* that flanked the city's heart.[13] Much of the district's character had in fact been determined by the construction of the Fiscal Wall of 1784 that had divided the city into inner and outer parts, the first highly taxed, the other providing cheap goods and entertainments. By Tasma's time the Latin Quarter's double urban identity as a place of popular pleasure and high cultural activity was decidedly cast, with cafés, music halls and affordable hotels spreading along its borders and fanning out from Montparnasse. Like Nicholas Hewitt, one can speak of the *quartier*'s end-of-the-century cultural geography and social mobility that blossomed into a locus for marginal bohemian activity and intellectualism, attracting on the one hand aspiring students and political *émigrés*, on the other, eager visitors, rich and poor alike.[14]

In Tasma's Paris we are unmistakably on foreign soil as her Australian heroines negotiate a way not only through unpredictable situations, but also through the city as geographical maze. Most of their adventures lead them into the hub of bohemia in, but also beyond, the well-trodden routes of the Grand Tour. Through their experiences Tasma records the dangers, the vices and pleasures of a Paris whose reputation had filtered from Britain to colonial Australia as fin-de-siècle excesses gathered momentum (and notoriety) before the sobering onset of World War I. Building on the city's then legendary reputation as a site of freedom and decadence, Tasma constructs an anti-Antipodean world, about as remote from Australia as one could have imagined in her time—awesome, unsettling for her ingenuous heroines, but also lively, morally unfettered and open to lifestyles women of their colonial kind were unlikely to have led. Leading her heroines through pockets of Parisian exotica, she penetrates the city's social and physical heart. But for Portia, in *Portia James*, Paris proves to be a *terra incognita*[15], and for Eila of *Not Counting the Cost*, a deceptive myth.

---

[9] PJ, p. 221. Henri Murger (1822–1861) famously evoked the Latin Quarter in his autobiographically-inspired novel *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* (1846).

[10] *blanchisseuses*, laundresses; *grisettes*, dressmakers (or milliners). In the nineteenth century the *grisette* was considered a girl of easy virtue.

[11] *flânerie*, strolling.

[12] PJ, p. 220. Tasma is quoting Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan", published in 1816.

[13] *lieux de plaisir*, pleasure grounds.

[14] Nicholas Hewitt, "Shifting Cultural Centres in Twentieth-century France", in Michael Sheringham (ed), *Parisian Fields*, Reaktion Books, London, 1996, pp. 30–45.

When Portia enters the city in a cab, she does so by a serpentine route that takes her from the elegant centre in which she had once shopped for her wedding hat, along the fashionable Rues de Richelieu and St. Honoré, past the thick foliage of the Tuileries and adjacent Champs-Elysées, into the Rue de Rennes and the racket and dust of the Left Bank. As familiarity is relinquished and the memory of a pretty place is lost, the city becomes unfathomable, a wilderness of dirty facades, thundering omnibuses, bawling vendors and crowded footpaths. Alternatively it is the panorama of the city, the city laid out in large vistas made up of imposing monuments, sweeping boulevards and lofty apartments that renders it unintelligible and remote. When Eila looks down upon the Latin Quarter from her sparely furnished fourth-storey apartment what she sees is not detail but surface, broad, silhouetted space. Her gaze, undirected, travels across the horizon, taking in, above, the mighty dome of the Panthéon and airy spire of the Sainte Chapelle, below, the Seine, cut at intervals by bridges and traced out by river lights. What she feels from her solitary night post is not union, communion with the Paris she had imagined from her bush homestead, but loneliness. In the soft gloom of dusk, the panoramic city is devoid of life. It is a sense of "otherness", the outsider's view of Paris~~,~~ glimpsed as if from the edge, that these passages evoke. As the narrative focus moves *through* the metropolis—across the manicured Right Bank to the Left—so it moves, implicitly, *from* Australia to Paris, the former that anti-urban other, nature's idyll, whose familiarity the heroines never entirely forget.

Portia James and *Not Counting the Cost* are not "bush" narratives in the strict sense, but their heroines' attachment to the land confirms their sense of roots. Portia, we learn, is a child of nature, a "bush maiden"[16], used at an early age to "tearing down the paddock with the kangaroo dogs at [her] heels"[17] or "gallop[ing] her own pony barebacked through the scrub, mounted for the most part *à califourchon* like a Sioux chief".[18] Wise in the ways of the bush, naïve in the ways of the world, she is bound, in a sense, to falter when challenged by unexpected circumstances abroad. Her memories of the outback that flood in as her life in Europe becomes increasingly difficult, are of a far-off world of simple pleasures and Arcadian calm:

> She had known in olden times the joys of camping-out in the Australian bush…upon a mustering expedition…She knew the exhilaration of waking in the cool morning, with the vast blue dome of the far-reaching Australian sky for her only canopy, and the wondrous chant of the native magpie, mild and sweet as the bush itself.[19]

---

[15] PJ, p. 163.

[16] PJ, p. 82.

[17] PJ, p. 204.

[18] PJ, p. 47; *à califourchon,* astride.

[19] PJ, p. 152.

Such depictions of Australianness, the hallmark of Tasma's work, fill the opening pages of *Not Counting the Cost* and reveal her easy identification with what, for the European reader, must have seemed distant lifestyles and landscapes. The sense of the gap between cultures—France's and Australia's—owes much indeed to these early scenes that echo strangely when the story shifts its focus and dramatic impetus to Paris's music halls and back streets. The wide-angled view of the book's *incipit* of Tasmania's Mt Wellington, rising behind Hobart, takes in a "great paddock, full of scattered haycocks", a "rough mountain road" leading to the city's outskirts, the distant "shining, sparkling waters of a broad blue harbour", the backdrop of "purple mountains", a harsh Antipodean afternoon light.[20] Within that setting, on a "rambling property", Eila watches her siblings, a noisy "tribe of juvenile gipsies",[21] roll themselves in hay and tumble down precipitous hillsides. Tasma returns only occasionally to such evocations of rural abandon, but they hang over the story as a reminder of the scale of the distance and difference between the Old World and the Great South.

According to Fiona Giles Australian romance fiction (largely authored by women) has always been a fringe genre, but never more so than at the end of the nineteenth century when the realist novel (largely authored by men) replaced it, eclipsing it in popularity by the time of Federation in 1901.[22] Such was the impact of a burgeoning Australian spirit of nationalism, embedded in the culture of the bush, the latter deemed the true territory of Australia and the realm of true men. But Giles argues that Australian romance literature has, and did have, much to recommend it as a socially significant genre. At a time when women protagonists were either absent or only marginally present in male narratives, and feminine issues were largely of incidental importance, the romance, she reckons, reinstated them in literature and gave them an individual voice. It tackled problems putatively not crucial to the operation of a patriarchal society, but high on the wish list of women's quest for recognition.[23] As such we might forgive some of its more formulaic manifestations, for it gave a sympathetic, often impassioned voice to those female members of society whose lives were very much governed by domestic matters and driven by impulses other than those of taming the land. Embracing the so-called "Woman Question", it elicited contemporary attitudes to marriage, love, the family, the home. Moreover, the fact that it appealed widely to nineteenth-century middle-class women readers was proof that, however inconspicuously they were publicly represented, they made up a substantial chunk of the society of the day. In this, the period romance has bequeathed a legacy of social commentary whose imaginatively articulated fundamentals we might fruitfully critically re-excavate.

The fact that *Portia James* and *Not Counting the Cost* are travel-centred novels complicates the feminist issues typically broached in the romance as a genre. The heroines are not only embroiled in the value system of a colonial periphery, sorting out problems engendered by the society in which they have been raised, but also brought from the periphery to the Old World, where new challenges loom. That their eventual destination is foreign Belle Epoque France (rather than, say, imperial Britain) gives Tasma's stories an unusual narrative edge: doubly removed from their heritage, her heroines are doubly vulnerable to the exigencies of moralities and behaviours they cannot readily adopt. But whatever the obstacles they encounter, their leaving home proffers the chance that, as Portia puts it, "things may still come right in the end".[24] While she and Eila embark on trips for different reasons, they do so to resolve the perceived limitations of their lives. Their journeys, in which they are sorely tested, are single-mindedly conceived. If the seductions of the city turn sour, their actions are driven by reserves of feminine pluck that may not have surfaced had they remained domestically put.

---

[20] NCC, p. 1.

[21] NCC, pp. 1–2.

[22] Fiona Giles, *Too Far Everywhere: The Romantic Heroine in Nineteenth-century Australia,* University of Queensland Press, 1998~~,~~ pp. 3–23.

[23] ibid ("Some Paramount Passage: 'The Penance of Portia James', by Tasma"), pp. 117–138. Giles looks to the author's sense of roots and colonial heritage. This study looks to her colonial representation of France.

The thematic threads of *Portia James* are finely meshed. Much depends on coincidence, but so it does on social expectations that determine the choices the heroine makes. After a year of living comfortably in London with her bourgeois stepbrother and his German wife, Portia, is beset by issues she cannot reconcile: while attracted to the charming young English painter, Harry Tolhurst, whose flattering attentions she decorously permits, she finds herself confronted by John Morrison, a wealthy Australian silver mine owner to whom she was haplessly betrothed as a child. The wedding takes place despite her hatred of the man.

A previous trip to the Royal Academy with Harry had left her puzzled. His painting of the Madonna and child had seemed hauntingly recognisable without her understanding why. The matter is resolved when Portia is visited just after the wedding by a Mary Willett (the daughter of her pastoralist father's station hand). Mary reveals that she and her babe are not only Harry's models, but that she had been Morrison's mistress in Australia and that the child is his. Having fled first to America, then to England, where she reads in the newspaper of her lover's marriage, Mary comes to alert Portia and to avow herself abandoned, penniless and deceived. In a moment of rash shock and spurred by her desire to be released from a man she loathes, Portia gives the destitute mother money and hurriedly departs to seek refuge with an eccentric artist-acquaintance, Anna Ross, who resides in Paris's Left Bank. From then on the action of the novel is entirely set in Paris, apart from occasional flashbacks to Portia's childhood and the final sequence in which Portia returns to England bound for home. Within those last narrative parameters much occurs: in Paris she re-encounters the smitten Harry, but is called to London to be by the dying Mary's side. As Mary wishes it, she accepts to remain with Morrison and adopt her child. Her fate, almost averted, is irrevocably sealed.

In the early chapters of *Portia James* bohemia beckons (where later it threatens). The Right Bank is not the Left. Portia's lodgings in her brother's smart Belgravia house contrast with Anna's make-do studio; staid London dinners hardly match those she shares with Anna's convivial friends; her London wedding breakfast is vulgar; the food of Anna's favourite *gargote* is cheap and nutritious, the atmosphere bright.[25] Victorian stolidity, gastronomic or social, is everywhere negatively cast. The food before which Portia's wedding guests are seated smacks of middle-class parade and bad taste: a nouveau riche miscellany of curry, chicken mayonnaise, pâté and a hideously decorated cake; the wedding speeches are dull; Portia's husband runs out of words no sooner than he has begun—all a far cry from Anna's talkative friends who sit down to discuss literature over soup, veal's head and beans. But Tasma's food thematic, metaphorically inverted, redefines who has more and who has less, and is underscored when Portia's narrator, commenting on her Latin Quarter induction, notes on her behalf: "Her mental pabulum hitherto had been of the milk-for-babes quality, and the kind she was assimilating now would have been pungent fare even to seasoned palates".[26] There is, then, a world of difference between ~~b~~ohemian sociability and Victorian dining-room comportment, summed up by Portia's musings on her new environment: "There was something in the utter freedom of all these [Latin Quarter] people around her that was beginning to exercise its fascination upon her. Each one evidently did as he pleased, went where he pleased, and lived as he pleased".[27]

---

[24] PJ, p. 139.

[25] *Gargote*, a low-cost restaurant whose service and food are typically poor.

The Latin Quarter's freedoms *Portia James* liberally evokes bespeak Tasma's familiarity with the area, compounded at the time of her family's participation in its vibrant art world. In 1879 the Huybers lived frugally in a building overlooking the Observatoire gardens, close to the Jardin du Luxembourg.[28] In her comprehensive biography of Tasma, Patricia Clarke remarks upon how her struggling family became part of the *quartier*'s bohemian world, "joining in the high spirited groups that descended on the nearby wine shops to eat, drink and talk."[29] Four of Tasma's siblings studied art in Paris and two, Edith and Koozie, became accomplished art critics, the first marrying the brilliant Portuguese painter, Arthur Louriero, whom she met at Chabanal's *atelier*, and the second, the French sculptor and woodcarver Jean Reverdy.[30] The Huybers, then, indulged very earnestly in the attraction of Paris as a destination for artistic instruction that by the end of the nineteenth century was attracting hopeful women artists, notably Americans, to its schools in droves. In her fictional representation of the Latin Quarter, Tasma draws on its real reputation as a haven for the foreign artistically keen or adept. Into this kind of fluid society the fictional Portia ignominiously merges, hoping for anonymity, lodging and release from family censure and marital bonds.

Portia James is not purely autobiographically inspired, but Tasma infuses it with some of the New Woman spirit of independence that drove her in life.[31] The "Woman Question" that swept England and Europe from Scandinavia, where it was fuelled by influential writers and thinkers like Collet, Bremer and Ibsen, addressed the injustice of sexual and marital roles in societies that had historically favoured men.[32] At the same time it split social opinion and allegiances. Tasma was clearly abreast of the issue: her reference in *Portia James* points to the "*pour*" and "*contre*" ["pros" and "cons"] of the contemporaneous Mrs Linton and Mona Caird debate.[33] Caird had aroused heated discussion in England with the publication of her anti-"Marriage" article in the *Westminster Review* in 1888, a diatribe that precipitated some 27,000 conflicting responses, mostly from women, in a three-month running column in the *Daily*

---

[26] PJ, p. 192.
[27] PJ, p. 193.
[28] Clarke, *Tasma,* p. 70.
[29] ibid.
[30] ibid.
[31] The term, attached to the movement and the fiction it inspired (discussed below), was coined in 1894.
[32] Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) and Camilla Collet (1813–1895) were Norwegian and Frederika Bremer (1801–1865) was Swedish. The most provocative works of these writers concerning marital issues was Ibsen's play *The Doll's House,* first performed in Copenhagen in 1879.
[33] PJ, p. 92.

Telegraph.[34] On the other hand, Mrs Linton, who rallied to the anti-reformist cause in defense of conventional marriage and the dutiful role of wives, attracted comparable contention in her articles on "The Wild Women", published in 1891.[35] In the light of such rampant controversies, Tasma's work, for all it was hardly radical (though far from sociologically slight) is ideologically inflected with just enough of the spirit of the "Woman Question" to align it with the more abrasive "New Woman" fiction the debate inspired.[36] The freedoms of Paris may prove elusive to the fictional Portia but it does not exempt her from desiring them, enough to push her to actions girls of their time rarely took.

Portia James is not a feminist book of the recusant sort, but much of its interest resides in wondering whether Portia will yield to patriarchy or take stock of her lot. (That she does *not* distinguishes the novel from those feminist works the next century copiously produced.) But Portia's prevarications contrast with the resolution of Anna Ross, who is a representative—if high-handed—reminder that there *were* alternatives for women to the kind of life Portia inherits (and ultimately fails to escape). She is everything that Portia is not: professionally accomplished, unmarried, self-supporting and free of family influence. Her letter to Portia in London, urging her to put off marriage until she is older and wiser is Tasma "à la Caird", and her remarks resound throughout the book as a challenge to the Victorian endorsement of male domination and privilege. She exhorts:

> Marriage, as it is at present understood, is the most foolish and suicidal step a woman can take. Why should we bind ourselves to belie for the remainder of our natural lives our real natures, our real selves, as expressed in the new instincts, promptings, or desires we may feel? Why, in short, should the union of a man and woman, which is meaningless and worth nothing without mutual inclination, be made the occasion of vows and oaths, and so-called binding ceremonies, which are not binding at all when the inclination has gone? The entire system upon which marriage is based is an outrage to common sense. It is one of the few contracts that must necessarily be entered into in the dark, and, at the same time, the one of all others that is the hardest to cancel. If, at least, the law which regulated marriage had allowed for the laws which govern our being, and had made of it an engagement of a specified duration renewable at pleasure, there might be something said in mitigation of it. As it stands at present, I hold it in abhorrence, as one of the cumbersome contrivances by which man, who has systematised war and rapine, and oppression and persecution, has further burdened our existence upon earth.[37]

Such radical expostulations run counter to the proprieties of the middle-class. In Paris Portia grapples with matters from which she had previously been sheltered or too meek to confront: ending her marriage, living independently, paying her way. (Anna gets her to stay on as an artist's model, trusting she will not return to a husband she does not love.) The fact that convention is not flouted, that Portia returns to the world she left, are narrative developments that are later discussed at length. Suffice it to point out that Tasma gives credence here to the not unwarranted contemporary Anglo-Saxon perception that morals over the Channel were more liberal, and class distinctions more laxly blurred. Portia's flight to Paris repositions the early issues of the book. Will Portia's entrance into ~~b~~ohemia save her? Can she shed her married status? Will she choose Harry or her husband? Will heart or hearth prevail? Is physical translation from one culture to another any guarantee that moral inculcation can be easily shrugged off? Those were kind of dilemmas New Woman fiction typically broached.

---

[34] Extracts from these are included in Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Wife*, Harper Collins, New York, 2001, pp. 263–279.

[35] "The Wild Women as Politicians" and "The Wild Women as Social Insurgents" (1891) were followed by "The Partisans of the So-Called 'Wild Women'" in 1892.

[36] Noteworthy are Olive Shreiner's seminal *Story of an African Farm* (1883), Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), George Egerton's *Keynotes* (1893), Sidney Grundy's satirical West End hit *The New Woman* (1894), and Grant Allen's best-seller *The Woman Who Did* (1895). Equally inflammatory for its indictment of Victorian marriage was Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895). For a survey of New Women fiction see Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, Virago Press, London, 1992, pp. 38–58.

[37] PJ, pp .90–1.

In *Not Counting the Cost* the "marriage question" is differently addressed, though its headstrong heroine has reasons as strong as the demure Portia for extricating herself from a problematic life. Eila Clare sets sail with her poor but affectionate family to seek a lost inheritance—a ruby—believed to be held by a long-lost cousin, Hubert de Merle. To that end she leaves behind her crazed and institutionalized husband, and a gentle would-be suitor, the neighbourly Reginald Acton. But her unexpected encounter with the cunning, deformed de Merle (he is a hunchback), who fortuitously rescues her from a compromising beauty contest, leaves her in his debt. Matters worsen when, after his identity is revealed to the Clares, he rescues them from near penury but bargains that Eila become his mistress. Only when the faithful Acton hastens to France with money and an offer of marriage (possible because Eila's husband has died) are her fortunes reversed. Such are the improbable—if formulaically predictable—twists and turns of the plot. But Tasma's novel, beyond its depictions of love (and hate) between men and women, is a story of wanderlust. Therein lie its charm and freshness. Eila's family's fascination with Paris is a longing, built up through imagination, through literature, through visions of wealth and acculturation, that render it magical well before they leave the home shore. Their love of the land in which they have been raised cannot stem their resolve not only to recover their legacy but also to realise their long-shared dream: "To shake the dust of Hobart off their feet and see the strange, enchanted regions [their mother] had described to them…was the one hope and desire of their lives".[38] "Home", Eila explains to the mystified Acton, is "Home with a capital 'H', of course. England—Europe, that is to say".[39]

Indeed, in *Not Counting the Cost* Tasma makes much of the mystique of Paris which fired the nineteenth-century Australian imagination and encouraged travellers to see for themselves the wonders it housed. Deservedly, Paris was a major destination of the era's middle-class patroni~~s~~ed Grand Tour. Tasma's family was no exception, nor, in her literary universe, is it so for the Clares. The latter's experience, however fantastical, contains and transforms Tasma's own. It is her rendition, matched by her sister's diary's account, of the cultural wealth of a city she had been brought up to venerate. The talented, knowledgeable, inquisitive and imaginative Clare children relish the Louvre, the Champs-Elysées and Notre Dame with the same enthusiasm as did the well-educated Huybers. Their itinerary may be more incredibly inflected, but Tasma plots it geographically much as her sister does their own.[40] The Clares have been brought up on a diet of art, literature and history, European politics and philosophy, and Eila is fluent in French, as was Tasma. She may not have shared her heroine's misadventures (there she takes fictional liberties; she thrived in Paris, Eila near but fails) but her story echoes her restlessness for the Europe with which her mother had imbued her and the inordinate importance French culture played in her and her siblings lives.[41] It is probable, too, that while Tasma let her imagination run wild in her novel in following the fictional Clares' fraught search for their cousin with only the vaguest of leads, she drew upon the reality of some of her mother's long-held dreams: to rediscover her European origins; to bathe in a civilisation she had long reconstructed, through memory and literature, from afar. *Not Counting the Cost* recasts matters, then, that were of legendary value in Tasma's home: identification with a Europe prized both for its culture and as the site of an ancestry of which they had long been vicariously proud. They, like their fictional avatars—and like many Australian colonial dreamers—looked to "that 'better land' which the 'eye of man hath not seen, nor his imagination conceived'".[42]

---

[38] NCC, p. 89.

[39] NCC, p. 27.

Portia James and *Not Counting the Cost* are novels of anticipation and dismay. The high hopes the protagonists place in a distant "other" are either shakily founded or inaptly idealised. The encounter with bohemia proves unexpectedly daunting; its culture neither salutary nor supportive; its representatives too removed from imported personal predicaments to matter (as Portia discovers), or too collusively involved in its underworld (as Eila finds when duped by the nefarious de Merle). In that respect the novels fall neatly into "before" and "after" halves: all that precedes the heroines' arrivals in terms of the imaginary place they had construed—Paris, site of free living; Paris, cultural capital of the world—is progressively undermined from when they set foot in France. Their downward experiential spiral, only reversed at the novels' ends, is set in motion by their intrusion into alien, even potentially corruptive lifestyles: Portia becomes uneasy about the feisty Anna's feminist designs for her future; Eila compromises all (morality, sexual safety) to save her family from ruin. That possible outcome, the risk that bohemia will contaminate pure motives, is nowhere more ominously foreshadowed than in both books' central music hall episodes. There the heroines are so at sea in a world whose libertine manners threaten their propriety, any further venture into bohemia they might (and do) make is doomed to fail.

The music hall interludes would have fascinated Tasma's Victorian readers, who were as notoriously curious about the practices of foreign lands as they were distantly wary of the societies they bred. In England, the music hall phenomenon hardly matched that of fin-de-siècle France. Yes, they existed in numbers in England, yes, Tasma more than likely knew of London's largest and grandest, notably the Alhambra and the Oxford.[43] Over decades the music hall had been the subject of British advertising, press reports and religious concern, until, by the 1890s, after scrutiny from temperance groups, church bodies, even managers who wished to retain a respectable middle-class clientele, they were reformed and rationalised.[44] Nothing was further from the case in France. The Third Republic's commitment to egalitarianism—the legacy of Napoleon's revolutionary ideals—produced a new heterogeneous society and a more equitable distribution of class wealth. To the music hall came all and sundry: they could afford to, the programmes were uncensored and they expected to mix, irrespective of their class. But the music hall was also an escape from a nation racked at the time by political uncertainties that culminated in the highly divisive Dreyfus affair.[45] The so-called "dance-on-the-top-of-a-volcano" society of the epoch was as much a frenzied manifestation of political disenchantment as it was a sign of social equality, and so it remained throughout the 1890s, when Tasma was writing, until World War I. By then Paris had earned the reputation of the most dissolute metropolis in the world.[46] In *Portia James* and *Not Counting the Cost* that fin-de-siècle phenomenon—fleetingly captured in the former, substantially developed in the latter—is critically and harshly judged.

---

[40] Clarke, *Tasma's Diaries*, pp. 28–44.

[41] Based on the *Catalogue of the Library of A. Huybers, Esq*. (sold by Roberts & Co., Hobart, 19 August 1887), Patricia Clarke deduces that the family library included more than 300 volumes in French of the works of France's greatest novelists, dramatists and philosophers, the great English authors from Shakespeare to George Eliot, and books on history and painting, *Tasma*, p. 8.

[42] NCC, p. 89.

[43] Established respectively in 1864 and 1861.

Extant records of Tasma's life do not reveal whether or not she visited a music hall. If she did, one wonders whether it was from curiosity or to gather material for books that are undeniably culturally set (and beset). At all events, she would not have failed to notice the prominent music hall presence on French soil: by the 1890s Paris touted more than two hundred, including Montmartre's famous Folies-Bergère, Chat Noir and Moulin Rouge;[47] moreover the Latin Quarter's Gaîté-Montparnasse,[48] to which the fictional Portia is taken by her liberated friend, was in reality but a stone's throw from the place de l'Observatoire and nearby rue des Feuillantines, where, on separate occasions, the Huybers formatively lived.[49]

The account of the mile-long walk to the Gaîté in *Portia James* marks a narrative shift: it is the point where Portia confides her situation to Harry, whom she has unexpectedly met again in Paris and who has been invited to join Anna's party as it sets out for a vaudeville night out. But the whole sequence pushes the action to the Latin Quarter's edge, away from the Luxembourg precinct, still more from environments to which Portia is used. This is *terra incognita* of a more forbidding kind. While divulging her secret to the eager Harry, now able to anticipate a love that might be returned, Portia is jostled by the type of rough society the *boulevard extérieur* contemporaneously bred:[50] rowdy workers, bellowing street vendors, the occasional drunk, a "stifling crowd".[51] Local colour of the sort an Anna Ross can tolerate is, it seems, no place for a lady, let alone for lovers' trysts. What meets Portia's averted gaze is a "a line of cheap shops and stalls, whence the acrid odours of *pommes frites* hissing in rancid fat, of slopped-over counters at the *marchands de vin*, mingled with fumes of cigars at two for a sou, filled the air".[52] Bohemia has lost its charm.

---

[44] Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830–1885*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, University of Toronto Press, London; University of Texas Press, Buffalo, 1978, ch. 7 ("Rational Recreation and the Entertainment Industry: The Case of the Victorian Music Halls"), pp. 147–168.

[45] The affair, which involved the wrongful conviction of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish army officer, created a political scandal in the 1890s and early 1900s. Emile Zola's inflammatory article "J'accuse", published in the Paris daily *L'Aurore* on 13 January 1898, accused the French government of anti-Semitism over the case, sparking a national debate of unprecedented divisiveness and intensity. On the political upheavals of the period, see Johannes Willms, *Paris, Capital of Europe: from the Revolution to the Belle Epoque*, Holmes and Meier, New York, 1997, pp. 334–39.

[46] ibid., p. 338.

[47] Established respectively in 1869, 1881 and 1889.

[48] Established in 1868.

[49] Clarke, *Tasma*, p. 70.

[50] Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque: Entertainment and Festivity in Turn-of-the-Century France*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985, p. 96; Nicholas Hewitt, "Shifting Cultural Centres in Twentieth-century France", *Parisian Fields,* pp. 38–39.

The disintegration of the Paris myth is integral to Tasma's portrait of foreignness. Bohemia's comportments weigh uneasily as the "Paris" books' narratives progress. One feels it in *Portia James'*s music hall event, which is almost solely recorded from her and Harry's prudish viewpoint. What Portia remarks through the "glare of the gas" and the "haze of the tobacco-smoke" is "*very* more than *rather* awful", a small theatre of "shabby appointments", as unattractive, in her opinion, as its working-class clientele.[53] The venue, she finds, is tatty; the consumables are modest and cheap; the seating arrangement is wooden and cramped; the spectators are a motley lot. If the well-aligned tiers remind her prim person of church pews, it is puritanically registered as a degraded congregational space, all the more foreign (and French) when one reflects that by the end of the century the sale of intoxicant drinks in the English music hall auditorium had all but been phased out:[54]

> The spectators were on a par with the theatre—not that they were shabby, but they were dressed for the most part in the garments in which they earned their livelihood by the "sweat of their brow"; and the fact was patent to more than one of her senses. Some were ambulant vendors of oranges, *crevettes*, and other street delicacies. Others—the aristocracy these—belonged to the *petit bourgeois* order, and were mostly habitués of the Gaité [sic]. Sometimes their wives accompanied them; more frequently the wife remained away to mind the shop. There was a scattered contingent of *grisettes*—not unaccompanied—and a sprinkling of students and artists, with or without the latter. The seats that Anna found were a little behind the orchestra, and, having a broad ledge in front of them, conveyed a grotesque suggestion to Portia's mind of pews in a church. There were no prayer-books, however, only *consommations* of divers kinds—bocks, *mazagrans*, and *petits verres* ranged thereupon.[55]

Good behaviour prevails in what ensues. The music hall, that classic repository of the classless that evolved from the Third Republic's "social levelling" programme, is not for Portia's kind. She and bohemia cannot meet. The Gaîté's repertoire, as indiscriminately mixed as its clientele with its medley of buffoonish acts, wink-and-nudge ditties and in-jokes, proves too common for one of her decency and Harry's better taste. What he finds "*scabreux*",[56] and she guesses to be crude, is posited as French entertainment of the lowest sort: a rehash of sexual gags whose butts are, predictably, "papa", priest and the Empress Josephine. Such double entendres, Tasma intimates, only go as far as mass taste wants. Portia's exclusion from the complicit claps and guffaws the Gaîté's patter excites marks her out as one who does not belong to its milieu, nor, indeed, to that of the liberal-minded Anna Ross. When Harry leads her out, as he believes he must, he assumes the moral high ground he thence unswervingly commands. From this point in the narrative there is no road back to the freedoms Portia impetuously sought. The narrator's conclusion on the matter, if indulgent, prefigures what eventuates:

---

[51] PJ, p. 250.

[52] ibid; *pommes frites,* potato chips; *marchands de vin,* wine merchants.

[53] PJ, p. 254.

[54] Bailey*, Leisure and Class in Victorian England,* p. 166.

[55] PJ, pp. 254–55; *crevettes,* prawns; *mazagran*, a coffee mixed with brandy or rum; *un petit verre*, an alcoholic drink or liqueur not consumed with a meal.

[56] PJ, p. 256; *scabreux,* scabrous or indecent.

> Allowance must be made for Harry if he exaggerated the situation in his mind. He had worshipped this woman next to him, as the incarnation of a dream of innocent purity, and it hurt and angered him beyond endurance to see the white wings of his divinity smirched by contact with the gross things of the earth.[57]

From then on Tasma's luckless hero becomes the heroine's implacable mentor and the book's moral conscience.

The Folies-Fantassin of *Not Counting the Cost* presents as an uglier, more insalubrious establishment than the Gaîté-Montparnasse: an ultimate fin-de-siècle den of iniquity whose covert function as a pick-up joint for prostitutes the resourceful but unworldly Eila fails at first to grasp. Tasma probably based it on the Folies-Bergère, as well as the more disreputable music halls that sprang up in the sleazier districts of the capital. Its location she gives as at the Montmartre end of the Boulevard Richelieu in what resembles one of those pockets of relative squalor that escaped Haussmann's reorganization of the city around radiating thoroughfares and parks.[58] Seen through the eyes of de Merle, there at the whim of his lively business partner Jack, the Fantassin presents as a run-down affair, a "second-rate Eden", large, grubby, tacky, visually sumptuous, pretentiously bold:[59] in addition to the garish costumes of its performers, its furnishings, imitation Moorish, are of the exotic but artificially fantastic kind to which Belle Epoque music hall patrons flocked.

As much narrative space is afforded to explaining why Eila submits to the indignity of entering the Fantassin's beauty contest as to portraying her unease in its midst. Her reasons, it emerges, are well-intentioned—enough, presumably, to excuse her rashness: with her family near destitute as their travel money runs out, and her mother ill and requiring good food and medicaments to recuperate, she jumps at the chance to win some money, albeit on the basis of a sly advertisement and an uncomfortable meeting in the Fantassin manager's grimy theatrette. In essence, Eila is prepared to forgo her modesty (therein the "cost") for the sake of her family (therein the good cause). Accordingly, an abundance of religious imagery—Eila is described as the martyred "Sainte Blandine",[60] a "Joan of Arc",[61] the "fair and legendary Eve"[62] before her fall from grace—draws attention to the nobleness of what one chapter title calls her "ordeal" and another her "sacrifice".

Fin-de-siècle pleasure gets tough coverage in *Not Counting the Cost*. Eila's contest costume is a ghastly summation of Belle Epoque excess: the garment is an ill-assorted if cleverly contrived sartorial mishmash that discloses as much flesh as it seductively covers up—a none-too-subtle attempt on the wily manager's part to transform the lovely Eila into part gypsy woman (a "Mignon") and part Greek wonder (a Bacchus priestess).[63] Yet no amount of adverse detail disguises the fact of Eila's natural beauty, thanks to Tasma's ample listing of her attributes: the "marble whiteness" of her "polished arm and shoulder", her sculptured body, her sun-streaked hair... So she is placed rather higher than on the pedestal-cum-fake-rock upon which she poses on stage. She comes through her "ordeal" unblemished just when she risks becoming the tainted opposite: goods on view, to be betted on by the Fantassin's ogling clients:

---

[57] PJ, p. 257.

[58] See Introduction, endnote 7.

[59] NCC, p. 261.

[60] NCC, p. 221.

[61] NCC, p. 265.

[62] NCC, p. 266.

> An imitation leopard-skin, with properly jagged edges, though exquisitely supple in texture, was girded round her body to below the knee, leaving disclosed, as in the dress of Mignon at the opera, ostensibly bare feet, modelled like those of a Greek statue. The neck and the whole of one polished arm and shoulder were bared in their marble whiteness. A mass of half-curling, half-waving dark hair, streaked with warm gleams of gold, streamed over her back and hips. The head was crowned with red-splashed vine-leaves that formed a narrow circlet round the temples, while a pendant tendril mingled its tiny sprouts with the coils of loosened hair. In her right hand she held an antique cup half filled with a red liquid, which she had been instructed to hold aloft invitingly at a specified bar from the waltz from "Faust".[64]

To which the narrator tellingly adds:

> Faithful to tradition as her pose and attire might appear, Eila's expression was powerless to render the true Bacchante suggestion. Her look was rather that of a person whose mind has soared to some far-away region, and is no longer in touch with its material surroundings.[65]

The rest of the episode turns upon that quintessential fin-de-siècle pastime: the art of looking and the art of being looked at, though—in an inversion of expectations—the gaze of bohemia is here confounded by its unwilling object. Eila's strange composure, the "far-away" stare she adopts, the fascinated stir her trance-like state inspires, distinguish her from the other "brazen" look-alike contestants, and the beholders from the beheld.[66] Two kinds of looking, then, occur but do not meet, the one voyeuristic and curious, the other averted, a rejection of bohemian lust. Only when the baffled but charmed onlookers clamour on stage to place their bets, is Eila overwhelmed: in a moment of high Victorian melodrama "she had swooned away into unreachable, infinite night".[67]

What follows verges on the incredible, pushing *Not Counting the Cost* into the realm of fairytale: de Merle rescues the distressed Eila, who confesses the motives for her recklessness; bewitched himself, he secretly pays the manager to have her believe she has won the contest; the card he leaves with her when he delivers her home identifies him as the cousin the Clares had sought; the money is duly delivered; the family ingenuously revels in their new wealth; de Merle returns and, his kinship revealed, is welcomed into the Clare fold. But those events, that might have brought the story to a satisfactory end, are complicated by plot twists that see Eila obliged (and ready) to take decisions that plunge her into a darker bohemia than the one *Portia James* evokes. Moreover, her continuing incaution denies her the distinction of pure Victorian womanhood that Portia bravely regains.

---

[63] Ambroise Thomas's three-act opera *Mignon*, first performed in Paris in 1866, tells the story of Mignon, kidnapped and reared by gypsies as a child. *Bacchantes* or *Bacantes* (Bacchae) honoured Bacchus with their wild and lascivious dances or *Bacchanales* (Bacchanalia).

[64] NCC, p. 264.

[65] ibid.

[66] NCC, p. 265.

[67] NCC, p. 266.

The narrative outcomes of *Portia James* and *Not Counting the Cost* inspired lively debate in the press, and as such disclose what readers of the time had expected and what they felt they got. Certainly, they saw the later novel as bolder than the first. Had Tasma evolved? What notions of femininity do the novels differently espouse? What do they tell us about extant attitudes—Tasma's, her epoch's—to womanly conduct? As novels of feminine displacement, how far do their heroines morally (and not just geographically) err?

In an introductory survey of the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman, Esther Kleinbord Labovitz remarks on the paucity of heroines in the genre; where they do exist, she argues, they are differently represented than are heroes, and not subject to the same life forces that supposedly shape men. If the hero-centred (and usually male-authored) novel of initiation—of education and apprenticeship—sees its protagonists moulded via testing experiences into fully-fledged adults, heroines, she reckons, rarely achieve comparable levels of self-realisation and independence.[68] The case, she argues, is especially true of female-authored works, whose heroines typically strive towards maturity but are "halted" at the end. This tells us as much, of course, about the "limitations", "constraints" and "restrictions" of nineteenth-century feminine endeavor as it does about authorial optique.[69] The feminist critic Elaine Showalter presses the point. She notes that nineteenth-century heroines, even of the most radical sort, typically "reach the brink of self-discovery, only to fall back", any attempt at adopting the new life-styles they sought being finally overturned; that while the quest for feminine liberation is crucial, it is consistently hampered by moral considerations that had not lost the fastness of their societal grip.[70] In this respect, says Showalter, New Woman fiction is both exemplary and unique: after flirtations with adventure, its radical heroines generally return to husband and house; despite willing spirits, they do not easily throw off the shackles of the past.[71] Rarely do they forgo their virtue and marriage turns out to be inviolate. *Portia James* is a case in point and merits attention, all the more so that the narrative solutions it brings to the "Woman Question" resemble but also differ from those of *Not Counting the Cost.*

In *Portia James* we are in no doubt of the importance of moral issues and male right. They pervade the book, even as the author delivers her heroine into environments that could putatively save her from male deceit. Tasma returns repeatedly to the question of feminine obedience and dutifulness (the most used words in the book), finally rejecting the possibility that true love is an alternative her protagonist can expect. In fact, the cards for bliss are stacked against Portia at the novel's outset, despite her impulsive flight from

---

[68] E. K. Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century: Dorothy Richardson*~~.~~*, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Christa Wolf*, Peter Lang, New York, 1986, pp. 1–8. In the body of her book Labovitz goes on to differentiate twentieth-century heroines from their nineteenth-century fictional precursors.

[69] ibid., p. 5.

[70] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N. J., 1977, republished Virago, London, 1978, p. 180.

[71] See also Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel*, Macmillan, London, 1978, pp.20, 154

London and the persuasions of the revolutionary Anna Ross. The letter the disloyal John Morrison sends her via her maid to Paris may appeal for forgiveness but is masculine rhetoric of the most high-handed sort: he reckons he "never cared a straw" for the unfortunate Mary Willett or her "brat".[72] Money, in his opinion, ought to have absolved him, since he claims to have provided for his illicit family (although they did not receive his support). Moreover, he argues, he must be understood. He is, after all, a man, doing what men can't help. Such are the facts that inform Tasma's representation of Victorian life, facts that Portia honourably swallows when matters of moral obligation raise their importunate head.

Patriarchal intervention is paramount in the narrative tidying up of Portia's plight. Harry Tolhurst, her would-be lover, who languishes by her side in Paris, quashes any thoughts she might have had of escaping her lot. Tasma, then, places moral rectitude above personal desire and sexual fulfiment, the latter barely envisaged as a choice in the book. Harry is a hard spokesman in deciding Portia's fate. Before she receives the dying Mary Willet's call to return to England, but in the knowledge of her legal marital state, he advises her to honour her station, presuming neither to pursue his love for her nor challenge the indissolubility of matrimony as a holy sacrament. The last sequences of the story are largely filled with the two chaste lovers' long debate on what course of action for Portia is right. There Harry dismisses the "free love doctrine" of the bohemian Anna as the path to perdition and claims his own code of "honour", "duty" and "self-control" as the only way of ensuring his loved-one will retain her self-respect:[73]

> I care for you for *yourself*, my dear. That means, that I set too great a value upon your peace of mind, and your reputation, to ever want you to fling them away for me. There are things that count for more than love.[74]

Self-sacrifice, as opposed to self-indulgence, lies at the centre of Tasma's book, positing the near impossibility for the respectable married Victorian woman to step outside the moral boundaries her position dictates. Portia runs away but she pays the price. Reading backwards from her compassionate decision to stay with Morrison and rear Mary's babe, one is conscious she is acting with the goodness her character consistently exhibits. From the outset of the narrative Tasma insists on her purity of heart, and in a sense her last gesture is an acceptance of a kind of virginal motherhood: she usurps the role of Madonna previously occupied by Mary as the model for Harry's portrait. In the end Portia accepts the cross she must bear, responding to the religious imperative Harry presents: "I believe in a future, too. I think we are called upon most often to climb the steep and thorny path to Heaven".[75] The phrase returns when Portia, taking teary leave of Harry before she and her new family depart, whispers: "Do you remember what you said…about climbing the steep and thorny path to Heaven? But then, *you* are sure at least that it does lead to Heaven—But see?".[76] But the question goes unanswered when her husband's presence interrupts. Portia is set upon the high seas with what the modern reader might think small consolation, but which befits nineteenth-century social fact. The story, then, takes us on a circular path. The heroine's journey to possible freedom does not change her early fate.

---

[72] PJ, pp. 201–202.

[73] PJ, p. 273.

[74] PJ, pp. 272–273.

[75] PJ, p. 274.

[76] PJ, p. 292.

The sorts of moral impasses that accrue in *Portia James*, relevant to a world ruled by men, are compounded by Tasma's evocations of a Paris that provides neither answers to Portia's predicament nor the power to persuade her to abandon her ingrained beliefs. The experience of bohemia barely leaves its mark. Paris is no place for her social type. The unease she feels in Anna and her entourage's presence is but symptomatic of the general dilemma she faces in ignoring moral standards with which she had been imbued since birth. She is the victim of Victorian scruples strong enough not to be evaded by mere physical transplantation to another culture and another place.

Revealingly, contemporary critical appraisal of *Portia James* focussed upon the moral issues of the book, and, conspicuously, not on its literary worth; evidently that is what concerned its readers most. But there, too, opinion was divided, indicating that the matters it raised were neither trite nor clear-cut. Apart from muted differences about the (un)seemliness of the setting—while *The Belgium News* found the book offered "amusing sketches of French studio life", *Lady's Pictorial* considered Portia had entered into a "risky life style" with "her queer friend Anna Ross"—views on Portia's actions and their consequences were varied though not harsh.[77] *Literary Opinion* thought she was "honourable and upright" and "tender, womanly and lovable";[78] *Pictorial World* that she was "strong, womanly and heroic, reminiscent of Romola and full of enthusiasm and sacrifice";[79] *Lady's Pictorial* that she was a personage of "innate refinement", "more bohemian", it excuses, "in theory than in practice."[80] Others pitied her for the stance she took. Despite the story being considered "unpleasant" because of its "New Woman episodes", *The Anti-Jacobin* found her penance "indeed severe" for an "innocent", and *The Times* reckoned the end was rather "a tribute to convention than the solution our sympathies demand."[81] *Literary Opinion*, after prevaricating, deemed that despite Portia's uprightness "one would like to have thought that the fulfilment of her 'penance' of wifely duty brought its own reward".[82] Would that we could "catch a glimpse of the end of Portia's penance, and…feel sure it would one day be really over", was *The Belgium News*'s judgment.[83] All in all, Portia was pronounced good and brave, but unfortunate.

Tasma's position at the end of her story is itself ambivalent, for the last paragraph opens upon questions that cast doubt on whether what happened was for the best. There Harry's musings are tinged with regret as he broods on what might have been, instead of what came to pass. He who had been so bold as to have sealed Portia's destiny (and his) lastly thinks:

> If he could have put on the Town Councillor's magic shoes that Hans Anderson writes about, if he could have gone back to the day he sat with Portia under the shadow of the stone queen in the Luxembourg gardens, would he have given her the same advice as he had given her

---

[77] *Belgium News and Continental Advertiser*, 12 December 1891; *Lady's Pictorial*, 19 December 1891.

[78] *Literary Opinion*, December 1891.

[79] *Pictorial World*, December 1891. The reference is to the virtuous heroine of George Eliot's novel *Romola* of 1863.

[80] *Lady's Pictorial*, 19 December 1891.

[81] *Anti-Jacobin*, December 1891; *The Times*, 26 December 1891.

[82] *Literary Opinion*, December 1891.

[83] *Belgium News,* 12 December 1891.

> then? Would he have upheld the selfsame standard and essayed, as he had also done, to act up to it himself? He tried to think he had answered both these questions in the affirmative as he went back to his self-imposed career of work and solitude.[84]

In essence, and with misgivings contemporary readers empathetically shared, Portia is necessarily sacrificed.

Despite its happy conclusion much is at moral stake in *Not Counting the Cost*. Unlike Portia, Eila risks near perdition not just to save her family from penury but also to give them the wealth of which they had dreamt, increasingly courting danger, and throwing moral caution to the wind. From the point at which she meets de Merle new complications unfold. Fortunes rise and fall (and rise again). Characters are the willing accomplices to or victims of strange coincidences and drastic acts. Changes of circumstance oblige them to adopt new strategies and roles. De Merle proves to be a cruel schemer; Eila money-driven and unwise; her young brother risks being swallowed up by de Merle's murky world; the Clares are happy to live off the fortunes that auspiciously fall in their laps. Those matters (and others) intervolve so tightly they require the niftiest of narrative measures to resolve them, and considerable readership suspension of belief to accept the result. Published after *Portia James*, *Not Counting the Cost* is more ambitious, more morally audacious, though in the end the same Victorian principles count. As such, it polarised opinion and earned Tasma both criticism and praise, for, while it was judged one of those "strong" books in which New Woman fiction excelled, in the end all unsavoury events are smoothed over and order is reestablished.[85] Eila's honour is restored, the good are rewarded, and the evil cast out. The narrative events that lead to those conclusions are nonetheless extraordinary enough to distinguish the book from *Portia James*. The corruptions of bohemia that fill its latter chapters prompt the resourceful Eila to decisions of a kind the passive but worthy Portia and Harry never (nor could) take.

Resolute action marks the way Eila and de Merle tackle their unlikely match. De Merle, who delivers Eila from the music hall's clutches, quickly evolves into a monster who takes charge of the Clares' affairs. The fortuitous discovery not long after the event that he is their cousin~~,~~ and that he has the means to absolve their monetary worries, gives him bargaining strength. No ruby emerges, but Eila, unbeknown to all others, must become his mistress or forfeit the money he showers upon her and her family group. The matter is brought to a head when Eila's brother Dick goes missing and de Merle, aware of his whereabouts, threatens not to return him unless Eila agrees to his request. In fact, the lad had "borrowed" the money from his cousin to help a poor woman (in truth a prostitute), promising to repay de Merle in due course. While cognisant of the facts, de Merle deceives Eila, warning her that unless she cooperates, he will report her brother's "theft". "Not counting the cost", then, amounts to Eila accepting de Merle's threat and prodigality or bringing the family to ruin and into disrepute. But Eila uses her own cunning by asking de Merle that she be given time to reflect upon the transaction while he is briefly abroad. In fact, it gives her the opportunity to confess her predicament by letter to the noble Reginald Acton, who immediately leaves Australia to rescue her and convey the news of her husband's death.

---

[84] PJ, p. 293.

[85] *Manchester Guardian*, 2 October 1895.

De Merle, the book’s villain, figures as the kind of decadent the fin de siècle (and its literature) remarkably produced. In a couple of key chapters devoted to his ugly appearance and his background (he is half English and half French), he emerges as a piteous being, who has sought to overcome his physical disability by reclusive living, an austere manner and hard work. All those traits Tasma presents and discusses at length according to the Victorian principle that our bodies are both a reflection and a cause of the personality we develop, and while Eila is good enough at the outset to ignore her cousin’s defect, much is narratively made of the notion that he is a destroyed man trapped in a ravaged shell. To boot, de Merle has a chequered past: once a rebel in the Paris Commune of 1871, rumour has it he was caught and deported to a New Caledonian jail. Whatever the circumstances, his move to Australia, where he lived off the land, made him a fortune when his property was found to bear a silver streak. Having accumulated fabulous wealth with his partner, Jack Wilton (later to marry Eila’s sister), he is able to travel grandly with the latter, through whom he vicariously enjoys the life of the handsome and young. But his encounter with Eila in Paris is, for him, a propitious event for it allows him to glimpse love (or possession) and to hatch his devious plot. In that respect, he looms as a quasi-Gothic figure whose machinations give the novel a not unexciting, fantastical edge. It is a plot extravagance, not inappropriate to the subject, which has no equal or place in the staidly-framed *Portia James*.

The extravagance of *Not Counting the Cost*’s characters is quite literally born out in the role money plays in the execution of their various exploits. It drives Eila’s ambitions as it does her relationships. It is posited as the cure for all ills, and the fact that it comes to the Clares’ rescue whenever they find themselves penniless affirms its importance in their lives. The Clares set out to make their fortune, and so they do, despite the difficulties they meet. Eila is jubilant when she “wins” the contest, and, once de Merle has delivered the contest money (really his) to her address, she revels in the thrill of being able to afford her family new treats. In a reunion scene, the family clusters around her as she dispenses the coins her little victory has reaped:

> Eila took the gold pieces up separately one by one, and dropped them into her mother’s palm until the gold overflowed and the napoleons fell upon the polished floor…As the process of counting went on from twenty to thirty, from thirty to fifty, from fifty up to a hundred, an expression more akin to fear and awe than to pure joy was painted upon each countenance…A hundred times did they together and separately count and finger each piece of gold.[86]

From the point where de Merle’s identity is declared and the Clares’ fortunes are reversed, money is an issue that pushes the plot along at a sparkling pace. The “gold pieces” that flow from de Merle’s purse “like a stream of Pactolus”[87] are used to buy Eila’s favour; Eila’s reward is that her family is not just nourished, but entertained in Paris’s most exclusive hotels and restaurants. The “unholy contract”[88] de Merle draws up is a blackmail that exacts a “price”:[89] the Clares either enjoy de Merle’s “bounty”[90] or forfeit their newly acquired wealth. But fortune returns when all seems lost. On receipt of

---

[86] NCC, pp.289–290.

[87] NCC, p. 316. Pactolus was a small river in ancient Lydia, famous for the gold washed from its sands.

[88] NCC, p. 358.

[89] NCC, p. 318.

[90] NCC, p. 325.

Eila's letter, Acton forwards a telegram informing her that "plenty" of money has been sent,[91] opportunely because during his absence abroad de Merle had temporally withdrawn his financial support. In the meantime, Wilton, who has fallen in love with Eila's sister, declares his sizeable fortune on their wedding day, and his intention to support the family and pay their fare home. Just afterwards, Eila accepts Acton's marriage proposal, despite his offer of a modest life. But profit and loss are ironically unevenly apportioned at the book's close: while the Clares rejoice, the unlucky de Merle vanishes, to be expunged forever, one imagines, from their lives and thoughts.

In broader cultural terms *Not Counting the Cost* pushes further into French bohemia than does *Portia James*. Paris is not all "enchanted soil".[92] The "leprous-hued" Fantassin[93] and its frequenters are delineated just enough through Eila's unworldly eyes to pick out the city's shadier representatives: pimps, prostitutes and lecherous men. The contest advertisement's knowing call for "*les demoiselles honorables*"[94] duly delivers "Fatimas", "Sultanas" and "Gitanas" of the cheap, mass-produced "cigar-box" kind.[95] Such is the world into which the naïve Dick is in danger of slipping at de Merle's hand. The "fallen" lady to whom the latter introduces him absconds with the funds he had hoped would reform her life. Elsewhere, while never resorting to explicit terms, Tasma makes passing references to female street walkers and leering passers-by, conjuring up the shadowy underworld that notoriously operated behind the façades of nineteenth-century Paris's decorative shop windows, fine hotels and graceful apartments. That "other" world that fascinated and repelled Victorians and whose fame had passed over the Channel via Zola's tales of social corruption, Huysman's of dandyesque profligacy and Lorrain's of sexual deviance, seemingly epitomised fin-de-siècle decadence.[96] So Tasma turns just enough to a sullied Europe to warrant having the heroine and those she loves removed from the harm it can inflict. At the book's end bohemia is rejected, the wholesomeness of Australia recovered and the heroine assured a happy life.

As was the case with *Portia James*, *Not Counting the Cost*'s critics unanimously took issue with moral questions it raised (though some appraised its verve and thematic breadth).[97] And it was not just de Merle they took to task. Reviewers worried about Eila's obsession with money and the way she worked her way in and out of bohemia and her unwanted suitor's clutches with a skilfulness (dare one say rapaciousness) of a Becky Sharp. Some agreed she did what she did for the good of her family; some felt she let her head rule before her heart; but even the undecided found her unwarrantedly artful in getting the results she did. While *The Standard* found her "a woman full of kindness and generosity", with "a great capacity for self-sacrifice", she was, it added, "entirely free from normal scruples", "too compromising in the scene in which her cousin asks her to be his mistress" and "too ready to take any money that chance or good put within her reach".[98] *The Spectator,* which found her a "woman of pure and wholesome instincts", regretted that she "[woos a] deformed creature for whom she has no feeling even approximating love";[99] If *The Morning Post* thought her "full of contradictions, yet always sympathetic", *The Queen* and *The Globe* were unequivocally severe. The second believed her "Socialist attitude to others' property too exaggerated, as is her devotion to the family"; the third that her "cold-bloodied calculations rob her sacrifice of any dignity and nobility".[100] She may be "devoid of prejudices", *The Scotsman* reckoned, but because she is "devoid of moral principles" she simply "disgusts".[101] Nor is the Clare family's fancifulness excused. "In Paris", *The Pioneer Mail* argued, "they demean themselves like true Innocents."[102] Summing up, *The Scotsman* judged that the "brightness and promise" of the novel is "spoiled by a lowness of ideal".[103] In brief, the critics liked the book's verbal colour and imaginativeness, but few its too-clever protagonist.

---

[91] NCC, p. 389.

[92] NCC, p. 359.

[93] NCC, p. 227.

[94] NCC, p. 193.

[95] NCC, p. 265; "Fatima", "Sultana" and "Gitana" were cigarette and cigar brands of the time. Tasma is suggesting that, save for Eila, the beauty contestants all looked the same.

[96] Emile Zola (1840–1902) was famous for his set of twenty novels *Les Rougon-Macquart*, which traces a family's descent into violence, alcoholism and prostitution; Joris Karl Huysmans (1848–1907), leader of the decadent movement in France and a biting chronicler of the social mores of his epoch, achieved international fame with his novel *A Rebours* (*Against Nature*), published in 1884; Jean Lorrain (1855–1906), a disciple of dandyism and an open homosexual, wrote scandalously decadent novels and short stories, notably *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901) and *Histoire des Masques* (1900).

[97] *Daily Chronicle* found it "the best story of Tasma's that has so far come to our notice" (September 1895), *The Daily Telegraph*, "brilliantly imaginative" and "subtly introspective" (September 1895), *The Standard*, "clever and entertaining", though "long-winded" and "woolly" (October 1895).

Did Tasma misread the mood of her times? Or was she balancing contemporary matters that were difficult to tackle, let alone fictionally integrate? In fact, the negative public opinion she earned may have surprised her, for she placed great store on familial duty and bonds. Her Brussels diary of 1889–1891 is filled with concerns for her mother and siblings, whose lives she closely followed and whose financial problems she assiduously distantly addressed.[104] Family, of course, counted for Victorian women above other matters (the public arena, politics, sexual gratification), and to a degree Portia's sacrifice of love for maternal and wifely responsibility is an echo of Eila's option for the material comfort of those in her charge. Feminine responsibility, built into the "Paris" novels, was fundamental to the society from which Tasma sprang. What the early critics appear to have disliked in Eila, besides her meretriciousness, was her forwardness, independence, enterprise and zeal. She sits more uncomfortably as a nineteenth-century feminine model than the demure Portia James. She is more emancipated, more ruthless, more "masculine" (for her time) in her ways. When the *The Scotsman* concluded that "Tasma has produced a story which would be pleasant and palatable enough but for the taint of 'New Womanishness' which she chooses to infuse into it", it placed the book at an odd literary crossroads.[105] Not morally circumspect, even feisty in its feminist stance, it nonetheless hallows Victorian "family solidarity"[106] and filial ties.

---

[98] *Standard*, 8 October 1895.

[99] *Spectator*, September 1895.

[100] *Morning Post*, 30 September 1895; *The Queen*, *The Lady's Newspaper & Court Chronicle*, 12 October 1895; *The Globe*, September 1895.

[101] *Scotsman*, August 1895.

[102] *Pioneer Mail,* October 1895.

[103] *Scotsman*, August 1895.

[104] Clarke, *Tasma's Diaries*, pp. 46–79.

[105] *Scotsman*, August 1895.

[106] NCC, p.352.

Like much romance fiction, Tasma's books fell from popularity as they were superseded by more overtly subversive feminine genres: the suffrage novel;[107] the emancipatory works of the 1900s and the 1910s;[108] the sexually frank works of the American and British expatriate writers of Paris's 1920s Left Bank.[109] By then independent travel for women was less unusual and the continent a feminine tourist and educational destination that was no longer viewed as out of unchaperoned bounds. Women, too, had changed. In Australia they were given the right to vote in 1902, and in Britain, after long struggles from the suffragettes, in 1928. They were not free of domestic commitment, but not so bound to it that they might not envisage, indeed lead, independent or professional lives. Have those phenomena pushed Tasma's writings into irrevocable oblivion?

Nicola Diane Thompson, writing in 1999, urges caution in selectively passing over early popular or non-canonical women's writings, arguing that their merit and interest has been obscured not only because of the critical attention afforded great authors like Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, but also because, in the evolution of feminist criticism, period romance literature came to be viewed as ideologically too tame and ambiguous to match the hardline critical agendas of the full-blown feminist work.[110] Yet, she argues, it is simplistic to brand such nineteenth-century women's writings as either feminist or non-feminist and that it is, indeed, the blurring of divisions, the contradictions and nuances within which the moral order is cast, that make them "melting-pots" of ideological conflict.[111] Tasma's stories, we can venture, are of sociological and literary worth just because of what their moral hesitations and ambiguities convey: a fraught social order, remarkably in flux, in which women are variously, often simultaneously represented as repressed and liberated, conservative and radical, weak and strong.

Within that broad literary frame, Tasma's stories have a special Australian place. Even from the pen of one as seasoned a traveller as she, she points up the enormity of women changing cultures, filtering her point of view through heroines for whom traversing countries uproots their lives and challenges their sense of self: unequivocally, the travel experience is portrayed as disruptive, foreignness as perplexing, the gap between Victorian society and nineteenth-century continental lifestyles as vast. More specifically, her "Paris" stories opened up the boundaries of Australian colonial literature, pushing it into the wider context of a remote Europe, of cross-national distinctions and of a feminine condition that was being tested not just beyond the bush but beyond homeland and house.

---

[107] Most belonged to the Women Writers Suffrage League (W.W.S.L). The most influential work was Elizabeth Robins's play *Votes for Women* (1907), rewritten as a novel, *The Convert*, in the same year. Other works include G. Colmore's *Suffragette Sally* (c.1911), Charlotte Despard and Mabel Collins's *Outlawed: a Novel on the Woman Suffrage Question* (1908) and Cicely Hamilton's play *How the Vote Was Won* (1909). Elaine Showalter argues that such literature was not without its contemporary detractors, *A Literature of Their Own,* ch. VIII, pp. 216–239.

[108] Emancipatory writers who looked to free love and the equality of the sexes without the feminist intransigence of the suffrage writers include those of the Fabian society, who contributed to modernist periodicals like *Freewoman* (later *New Freewoman*, later still the *Egoist*), notably *Freewoman*'s founding editor, Dora Marsden, and Harriet Weaver.

[109] Especially the lesbian writers Djuna Barnes, Nathalie Barney, Winifred Bryher and Renée Vivien; the bisexuals Nancy Cunard and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.); and the heterosexuals Jean Rhys and Anaïs Nin.

[110] "Responding to the woman questions: rereading non-canonical Victorian women novels", *Victorian Women Writers and The Woman Question* (ed. Nicola Diane Thompson), Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 1–23.

[111] ibid., p.4.

3

Digger Nurses on the Western Front: 1916–1919

The Belle Epoque, that period in France when music halls burgeoned in frenzied response to the political uncertainties of the day, came to an abrupt end when Germany attacked France on 4 August 1914. The party was over; the world was to change; within weeks England and her dominions were rushing to France's aid. So began four years of bitter fighting that would claim an estimated twenty million lives across the globe. Nowhere was the slaughter more dreadfully enacted than on the Western Front and the Somme, to the extent that its boundary, stretching from Belgium to Switzerland, has become synonymous with what was initially optimistically called 'the war to end all wars'. On its blood-soaked ground, a crisscross of trenches and battle fields, Australian men and women came to serve with legendary commitment and patriotic zeal.[1]

Australia's contribution to the Allies' success, declared on 11 November 1918, was significant in the Somme, enough to earn its description as the nation's 'finest hour'. But the cost was enormous as the war lurched into its latter years. By the end of 1916 40,000 Australian Diggers had died in the boggy terrains of Belgium and Northern France. In 1917 there were a further 77,000 casualties, nearly three times those incurred in the disastrous Gallipoli campaign. In the Somme thousands are interred in the region's 140 Commonwealth cemeteries, 11,000 of whom are unnamed.[2]

If the rank and file soldiers of the Somme constitute a force of largely unsung heroes, so too do those who inconspicuously tended the sick behind the battle lines. Of the Australian nurses recruited by the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) during the Great War, 1,716 served overseas, its numbers greatly boosted by civilian nursing volunteers.[3] The first contingent of nurses left Western Australia on 1 November 1914.

---

[1] Reference works on the First World War, and on the battles of the Western Front are too many to list here. A select few have been useful to this chapter: for official documentation on medical services on the Western Front, A. G. Butler, *The Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914–1918*, vol. II, *The Western Front*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1940; for historical surveys of nursing, including nursing services on the Western Front, Rupert Goodman, *Our War Nurses: The History of the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps 1902–1988*, Boolarong Publications, Queensland, 1988*;* Marianne Barker, *Nightingales in the Mud: The Digger Sisters of the Great War 1914–1918*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989; Jan Bassett, *Guns and Brooches: Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War*, Oxford University Press, 1997..

[2] The AIF (Australian Infantry Force) arrived in the Western Front with 180,000 men. The number who perished represents a huge percentage of the military's total: 60,000 dead and 156,000 wounded, gassed or taken prisoner.

[3] Australian nurses' involvement in war service dates from 1899. They first served in the Boer War (1898–1903). The Australian Army Nursing Service Reserve (AANS), representing all Australian states, was founded in 1903 and formed part of the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC). Australian female doctors were not permitted to join the AAMC overseas medical service in the First World War as they were considered too delicate for the job. Some, however, like Dr Elsie Dalyell, from Sydney, worked in voluntary hospitals, including Royaumont in France, and Melbourne-born Dr Helen Sexton set up her own small Field Hospital, the Hôpital Australien, at Auteuil. Of the 2,139 nurses who served in the war 423

By the end of 1916, some 127 were attached to British units in Belgium and the Somme. First working for the British Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC) eventually operated independently, but its nurses could never count on where they might be sent as the wounded poured off the battlefields. English and Scottish soldiers ('Tommies' and 'Jocks') comprised a large percentage of those in their care. In addition a handful of Australian volunteer nurses were sponsored by the Red Cross, many latterly serving, like their army sisters, in Belgium and the Somme.[4] Others joined foreign medical bodies; yet others the QAIMNS, Britain's military nursing corps.[5] By the war's end some seventy Base and Stationary Allied Hospitals were operating in north France's 'British' sector alone, manned not only by doctors and nurses, but also by Voluntary Aid Detachment workers (VADs).[6] But the AANS nurses were the only women officially involved in the Australian army during the war.

The war took Australian women travellers abroad by surprise. Upon its advent those in Europe, especially, were encouraged to head for home or the safety of English shores. But many ignored official advice or their loved ones' appeals. Artists such as Jessie Traill, Bessie Davidson, Margaret Preston and Louise Riggall variously served the war cause; others like Hilda Rix Nicholas and Iso Rae painted what they knew or saw, the latter staying on in Etaples in Normandy, where she was residing, as an artistic recorder of military activity and as a VAD.[7] This chapter looks to the contribution of an exemplary few: Australian nurses who made the journey to France and who testified to their personal experiences in letters, diaries or books. Some characters emerge via strong voices: the redoubtable Nellie Crommelin and the efficient Matron Ethel Grey; others via compassionate commentaries: the vivacious Elsie Tranter, the gentle Daisy Richmond, the hard-working Edna Nichols, the saddened Queenie Avenell. Their testimonies, together with others addressed in the pages that ensue, largely lie in war archives, lost from public attention but ready to be reviewed. Other nurses, like Rosa Kirkcaldie, May Tilton and Anne Donnell, wrote books now out of print yet remarkable for their chronological compilation of events. Together these women's stories bespeak the courage required of those who quietly attended to the behind-the-scenes havoc of the theatres of war.

****

---

served at home, 388 were decorated and 25 died. 130 worked as part of the British services. For tables, see Rupert Goodman*, Our War Nurses,* p. 99 and p. 113.

[4] The Australian Red Cross Society (ARCS) was inaugurated in August 1914.

[5] The QAIMNS, named after Queen Alexandra, was formed in 1902 as part of the British army.

[6] The VAD, a voluntary organization, was established in Britain in 1909 by the Red Cross and Order of St. Omer. A VAD was a nursing orderly who assisted medical staff, helping with patient comfort, domestic work and letter-writing. By 1914, there were 74,000 in British service, two-thirds of whom were women. Initially Australian VADs were not permitted to work overseas. As a result many travelled independently to Europe and joined British services. Australia's policy was changed in 1916, and later that year the first Australian contingent of VADs set sail.

[7] On Iso Rae's participation in the painting school of Etaples and subsequent war paintings, see Jean-Claude Lesage (companion translation by Pauline le Borgne*), Peintres australiens à Etaples*, amis du Musée de la Marine, Etaples-sur-mer (AMME editions), 2000. Etaples, home to *plein air* artists, became a vast military base during the war.

> Today I had to assist at ten (10) amputations one after another. It is frightfully nerve racking work. I seem to hear that wretched saw at work whenever I try to sleep. We see the most ghastly wounds and are all day long inhaling the odour of gas gangrene. How these boys suffer! This war is absolute hell. We see and hear all day and everyday the results of its frightfulness. We can hear the guns quite plainly here. Dame nature is treating us to a feast of beauty in the outside world. Flowers are everywhere. Never have I seen such gorgeous tulips all shades, brown, gold, red and such perfect blooms.[8]

So wrote Staff Nurse Elsie Tranter, at Wimereux, in a hospital on the Picardy coastline of France at the height of World War I. She was twenty-nine, from Victoria in Australia, and had never been to Europe before. Hers is indeed a glimpse of a topsy-turvy world, in which the tragedy of human sacrifice stands at odds with a resilient nature that survived in pockets beyond the hospital ward and the battlefield. In the event, it was her own resilience that was to steer her through three years of nursing service on the doorstep of some of the war's most bloody engagements and humanly costly affairs.

Like Elsie Tranter, the nurses recruited for service abroad in the war could not have imagined what was to come. They did not know their destination on departure, nor could they have anticipated the type of nursing they would have to do. While their reports bear witness to their commitment to the Allied cause, their initial sentiments were of adventure too. The two-month boat trip was exciting and crash language courses were eagerly pursued. In fact, their lives abroad were to be arduous and fearfully insecure as they typically contended with trying climates, rushes of wounded soldiers and inadequate medical supplies. Nowhere was this more the case than for those who followed the Australian military contingents to the Western Front after the establishment of Kitchener's 'New Army' in mid-1915.[9] There they were repeatedly uprooted as hospitals proliferated behind and along the lines or were relocated as the sites of reprisals moved; they were ill-prepared for the severity of northern winters that turned the trenches and battle grounds to mud and made hospitals, generally tented or in huts, difficult to operate and warm; trench warfare itself generated illnesses of an unexpected kind: trench foot (from the sodden conditions), lice-born trench fever and typhus, dysentery, pneumonia and wounds infected by northern France's heavily contaminated manured soil. Along with the severely bodily wounded, the shell-shocked and the gassed arrived in droves.[10] 'Everything is so different here', wrote Elsie Tranter again, this time from Etaples on 25 May 1917. 'At home I used to see the long casualty lists, but did not realise one thousandth part of the full meaning of them. There is no doubt in our minds now.' In one week of that month she averaged twenty operations a day, while being on call night and day.

By the time significant numbers of Australian nurses began to arrive in France, in response to the relocation of the Australian infantry to the Western Front and growing Allied resistance to the creeping German advance, the phenomenon of what Fussell has called the ‘troglodyte war’ was well in train.[11] The initial phase of movement and manoeuvre, propelled by Germany’s ‘race to the sea’, had settled down in 1915 to a period of relative stagnation and uneasy calm as opposing sides dug into facing trenches, fortified villages, set down wire entanglements and constructed roads and communication lines. When the Germans surprised the French at Verdun in February 1916, the Western Front, running from Nieuport in Belgium to Belfort in Switzerland, covered some 800 kilometres. Eventually the combined forces’ trenches made up an estimated 40,000 kilometres of intersecting and parallel lines, equal in length to the globe’s circumference. The ‘quiet time’ that ensued, although disrupted by bouts of sniping and minor conflicts, allowed time for the construction of the first major British Base Hospitals, with the largest located on the coast to facilitate the evacuation of the severely injured to England: Dieppe, Wimereux, Boulogne, Le Tréport. But events escalated in 1916 when the Germans launched their first major offensive, the ‘Battle of the Somme’, on I July, to rage for four and a half months before it petered out in mid-November in the mud and the rain. Of Australia’s 90,000 troops brought to the Somme on 16 April 23,000 would become casualties in a single mile of front, the war’s most concentrated Digger sacrifice. When the Germans, depleted and exhausted, retreated in February 1917 to the Hindenburg Line, a million men had died.[12] The British advance had been twelve kilometres and the French a mere eight, a precarious advantage, as proved by the disastrous Battle of Arras (April–May 1917) and the costly and hard fought victories of Messines (June–July 1917) and Ypres (Passchendaele) in Belgium (July–October 1917).

---

[8] Elsie May Tranter (Staff Nurse), diary, photocopy held in the Australian War Memorial (AWM), 3 DRL/4081 (A). Entry, 2 May 1917. Small grammatical errors in the nurses' accounts have been preserved. On occasions I have used 'sic' (usually where a proper noun is incorrect) or added a bracketed explanation.

[9] Initially a volunteer army, it was formed in the United Kingdom at the outbreak of war by Field Marshall (Lord) Kitchener. The first recruits arrived in France in 1916.

[10] Only three percent of combat deaths in World War I were due to gas, but it was painful and debilitating, especially mustard gas, introduced by the Germans in September 1917.

Coordination between hospitals was important in the war; each one’s function was determined by its relative proximity to the front. Basically, the procedure was to treat and evacuate patients according to hurried assessments of their medical status and degree of harm. After the wounded had been collected from the field, then bandaged or sedated in the forward Dressing Stations (in which nurses were not permitted to work), they were moved by ambulance or lorry to a Casualty Clearing Station (CCS), where the dire cases were given surgery or palliative care and the lightly wounded ‘patched up’ and returned to the front. The rest, often very sick, were cleaned and moved back by train to a General or Stationary Hospital where they were further treated, or, in the case of the transportable long-term ill, evacuated to England. Within what became an enormous medical industry, Australia played a pivotal role. Three Australian General Hospitals (AGHs) were established at Rouen, Wimereux and Abbeville between April 1916 and May 1917, eventually holding 1,300, 1,900, and 1,900 beds respectively. Australian Casualty Clearing Stations (ACCSs) were established at Estaire, Trois Arbres and Gezaincourt in 1916, though all were re-sited, sometimes often, as the battle zones changed. But nurses were rarely assigned to one hospital for long, nor could they predict the kinds of injured they would receive. Typically, they had to adapt their skills, working at breakneck speed on illnesses of varyingly devastating kinds.

While Australian nurses may have been unprepared for the horror of war nursing, they were well trained, most having passed through the Nightingale system, which demanded professionalism, good character and strong nursing skills.[13] On enlistment in the army they had to abide by the army's rules for active service: they had to be single or widowed (and prepared to resign upon marriage) and be between the ages of twenty and forty-five; they also had to have trained in an approved hospital for three years.[14] In fact, half of the nurses recruited were under thirty, hence remarkably young for the demanding care they gave.

---

[11] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford University Press, 1975, reprinted 2000, p. 36.

[12] The Hindenburg or ‘Siegfried’ Line was the southern part of the vast defensive line built by the Germans in the winter of 1916–1917. It ran 160 kilometres across north-eastern France.

[13] Described in Goodman, *Our War Nurses*, pp. 16–18.

Faced with men who needed immediate attention, the nurses were always learning new skills on the job, and one can argue that by the end of the war most had been exposed to leading edge medical procedures and to medical conditions that were new or had previously been less understood. Treatments were often time-consuming and tedious with wounds having to be frequently dressed or irrigated with antiseptic solution (the Carrel-Dakin method);[15] Sinclairs swing beds ensured easy patient lifting and handling; the possibility of gangrene and haemorrhaging demanded that a tourniquet be placed at the foot of each soldier's bed. On 9 June 1917 Sister Daisy Richmond's ward was putting through 'about four hundred gas cases'. She adds, 'Oxygen is the first thing applied if a case is severe, camphor oil as a stimulant, brandy too often helps.'[16] Elsie Tranter, for her part, was one of six Australians who completed a two-month anaesthetics course, administering it 227 times before, to her intense disappointment, the 'Pow-Wows of the AIF' decided it was inappropriate work for women.[17] On treating the shell-shocked, Sister Elsie Steadman poignantly remarks:

> It was very interesting work, some of course could not move, others could not speak, some had lost their memory, did not know their names, others again had very bad jerks and twitchings. Very careful handling these poor lads needed for supposing a man was just finding his voice, to be spoken to in any way that was not gentle and quiet the man was done, and you would have to start all over again to teach him to talk. The same thing applied to walking, they must be allowed to take their time. The MO in charge here was the superintendent of a large mental asylum in civil life and treated these cases more by mental suggestion than anything else. Of course many had to have a lot of sedation and the results were good.[18]

Her experience was different from the electric shock treatment given in some of the home hospitals to less fortunate men.

While the nurses' records reveal their dedication in ensuring the comfort and care of their patients, whose tales of the horrors of the trenches they heard first-hand, their own lives were hard and borne at great cost to personal convenience, a matter they appear to have shouldered strikingly well. The record cold of the winter of late 1916 and early 1917 and the bitter conditions of late 1917, in which men froze to death or suffered from frostbite and exacerbated gangrene, meant that hospital thermometers, medicines and lotions turned solid, tents flooded, pipes froze and hot water bottles never stayed warm for long. Eggs and milk could cut be with a knife. Coal shortages throughout France required that heating by stoves was kept to a minimum. For Nellie Crommelin, apart from the difficulty of obtaining gas, frozen because mixed with water 'for economy's sake', simply getting dressed 'in a room with thick icicles on the window panes' was an ordeal. 'The jugs fully solid ice towels and such stiff as boards!!!', she notes 30 January 1917. 'My feet are covered with awful chilblains & to my horror I find my dear old soft house shoes have "bust" at the side. I cannot spare for repairs!!'[19] In a subsequent letter of 4 February she writes in pencil, the ink having frozen in her pen. 'It's been raining incessantly for 6 days and nights, we are puddling around in gum boots like pigs in a pigsty', bemoans Sister Anne Donnell in a letter from 3 AGH on 5 July 1917.[20] And again, in September, at 38 BSH (British Stationary Hospital), recounting, with matter-of-factness, a struggle with two of her fellow nurses to secure their bell tent in a storm:

---

[14] ibid., pp. 13–14. For an extract from the Standing Orders, Syllabus of Qualification, see p. 15.

[15] Developed by the French Alexis Carrel and American Henry Dakin in America during the war.

[16] Daisy Donaldson Richmond (Sister), diary, AWM, 3DRL/0783.

[17] Tranter, 25 May 1918.

[18] Elsie Louise Steadman (Staff Nurse), AWM, PR 86/302, undated handwritten report, made on request for official files. Initially 'shell shock' was misunderstood and many soldiers were charged with cowardice, some even shot. Arthur Hurst, working at Seale Hayne Neurological Hospital in England, recognised it as a post-traumatic stress disorder and was largely responsible for revolutionising its treatment using humane and sympathetic therapies.

> Little Dora is so light she is nearly blown into the vegetable garden. Wak's slippers come off and with bare feet squelching in the mud and in and out of the ropes…Soon all the outhouses are lying flat on the ground. Then sheets of iron are blowing about like paper in the wind. The Orderlies mess tent is down and when the Sergeants went to have their breakfast found theirs floating in the Canal. An Orderly when carrying over 14 dinners meets a sudden gust and over he goes with the dinners in the mud.[21]

Nonetheless fair weather brought with it other fears and trials. On a full moon evening, Anne Donnell writes, 'Yes the night is glorious, but it is being marred, with hearing these words all around: "It's a beautiful night for Fritz".' [22] Indeed, an air-raid ensued.

If accommodating the wounded meant packing the wards to the hilt, with stretchers often laid down in a 'rush' on every inch of tent space, even in rows in the fields outside, nurses, too, had to make do. If they were lucky, they might be billeted in a nearby village; usually they were lodged four to six in a tent, or in a hut for up to twelve in curtained cubicles. Of the 'hopeless chaos' of her hut, Sister Rosa Kirkcaldie humorously acknowledged: 'It looked like a cross between the old log cabin in the dell, and a jumble sale. There was no room to move. Our baggage claimed all the floor space and the things most urgently required were invariably in the most inaccessible corner.'[23] Daisy Richmond's converted convent room at 2 AGH, Wimereux was 'minus everything', but with 'a red cross box as washstand, a few nails in the walls for our clothes over which we place[d] a curtain', and the 'beds made up', she settled in.[24] Privacy was difficult, as was sleeping by day. 'The road between the hospital and our quarters is the one used by the military', Elsie Tranter writes, 'and there is the continual tramp of khaki boys all day'.[25]

Ensuring proper hygiene in the hospital was a nurse's prime concern. The spread of disease was a constant threat and sepsis a real danger, with ninety percent of patients developing it within seven days of admission. Since there were no antibiotics, wounds had to be frequently cleaned. Men who walked in or were brought in generally came in their blood-soaked and mud-caked uniforms. To be made warm and clean was what often prompted a soldier's most heartfelt gratitude. But the nurses, too, needed to attend to their personal cleanliness, and one marvels that they kept their grey and scarlet uniforms and themselves in the condition they did. Washing, indeed, posed a problem, especially when, as for May Tilton at Dieppe, 'the water supply was rationed, one bucket daily being allowed for our individual use.'[26] Ingenious in this respect was Elsie Tranter's strange but femininely satisfying solution to having her hair washed on an off-duty day in the little village of Doullens. Noticing a shop with toilet requisites she boldly went in:

---

[19] Nellie Crommelin (Sister), letters, AWM, PR OO65, 30 January 1917.

[20] Anne Donnell, letters, National Library of Australia (NLA), MS 3962. Letter dated 5 July 1917.

[21] ibid., 9 September 1917.

[22] ibid.

[23] R.A Kirkcaldie, *In Gray and Scarlet* (memoir), Alexander McCubbin, Melbourne, 1922, p. 152.

[24] Richmond, 10 March 1917

[25] Tranter, 3 April 1917.

> I made my request in the best French I could. Madam [sic] assured me she had never in her life shampooed anyone's hair. After a little persuasion she agreed to do her best and led me through to her kitchen. Operation was soon in full swing and when washing and rinsing were finished Madam became greatly distressed as to how to get my hair dry. Then she was possessed of a brilliant idea. Opening the oven door and placing a cushion on the floor in front of it she bad me sit down and put my head in the oven to dry. A novel way no doubt but one that answered the purpose. Then she got a large book it seemed of the important events of the family history and in the centre of a clear page she wrote: 'Aujourd'hui j'ai lavé la tête de l'Australienne' ['Today I washed the Australian woman's hair'].[27]

Small wonder Red Cross parcels were such a boon, not just for the men. 'In mine was a bath towel', Elsie relished, 'a pair of stockings, tooth brush, tooth powder, toilet powder and some hairpins.'[28]

Deprivations wrought from distance were what made home parcels and letters singularly prized. The nurses disseminated them to the patients; they wrote back to the families of those who couldn't hold a pen; they scoured the shops for little delicacies to tempt their appetite; they shared the food parcels their loved ones had sent them. But they looked for their own mail with anticipation too, especially as, as May Tilton remarks, it was often two months in the coming, 'then, suddenly, every day for two weeks', if it came at all.[29] 'Isn't it a shame—so many letters that you have written lately have found a watery grave—and we feel we want them so badly', wrote Anne Donnell to her family, from Calais, in July 1917.[30] 'We read and read our letters till we can almost repeat them parrot fashion', said Elsie Tranter, while convalescing in Le Touquet in 1917.[31] Letters were a lifeline between the past and the present, and no doubt an affirmation of peace and order beyond the disorder and confusion they confronted day by day.

Delivering mail to the nurses was hampered by the fact that they moved around so much. The Casualty Clearing Station nurse especially could rarely predict where and when she would be sent. Not only was a station subject to constant relocation as it followed military progress; she might be ordered to leave at short notice when events became unduly dangerous (this earning her the nickname of a 'refugee'). Carrying one's kit, scant in items, but bulky and heavy to transport, was one of the more bothersome facts of the Western Front nurse's life: 'In France, baggage was always a considerable item', recalls Rosa Kirkcaldie. 'Everything, from bed and bath to stove and blankets, had to be carried and once lost was seldom recovered.'[32] Elsie Tranter, for her part, claimed that waiting to be evacuated after the wounded had been sent on had left her with 'two pictures in my memory':

---

[26] May Tilton, *The Grey Battalion* (memoir), Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1934, p. 211; first published 1922.

[27] Tranter, 14 April 1918.

[28] ibid., 9 August 1917.

[29] Tilton, *The Grey Battalion*, p. 209.

[30] Donnell, 5 July 1917.

[31] Tranter, 7 March 1917.

> The first, of the sitting-room we had thought so pretty and cosy only a few days ago now dismantled and with Sisters all weary and sleepy—some sitting about, some lying on the floor with a gas mask for a pillow trying to snatch a few minute's sleep; the other of the same party of Sisters sitting on the roadside—waiting for transport often hats at various and unbecoming angles, pockets bulging and all wondering 'What next'? [33]

Events in 1917 and 1918 put enormous pressure on hospitals, with many augmenting their staff and expanding their size and bed capacity. In practice many Base Hospitals functioned as Casualty Clearing Stations as the war worsened, with the wounded, dirty and bedraggled, brought in straight from the battlefield. In addition, increased German U-boat activity at the beginning of 1917 hindered Allied shipping, and the decision to keep casualties in France as much as possible saw patient numbers soar and staff loads strained. If a relative lull in military conflict marked the winter of 1917–1918, it was over by March 1918 when the Germans initiated a new offensive, rapidly moving westwards, and recapturing in ten days all the territory they had previously held. So they hoped to strike south towards Paris via Amiens. In what became known as the 'Second Battle of the Somme', Allied counter-offensives, begun in April, intensified in August and September, notably at Albert, Péronne and Montbrehain, resulting in enormous casualties on both sides, but effectively precipitating the war's end. Within the long period of the final struggle Australian soldiers distinguished themselves at Villers-Bretonneux in April, then later at Le Hamel (July) and Péronne (September). In the most successful period of the Western Front (April–October 1918) the Australian Army Corps's five Infantry Divisions were less than ten percent of the Allied forces, but captured over twenty-five percent of prisoners and twenty-one percent of the ground.

In the war's last two years General Hospitals, built to carry between 250 and 1,000 patients, were typically accommodating twice their early numbers, with nursing staffs growing from around twenty-five to up to 125. Between July 1916 and its closure in February 1919 2 AGH catered for 90,000 patients, and by June 1918 had about ninety nurses working long and demanding hours. Perched on cliffs, overlooking the Channel, it was a mere ten minutes' tram ride from the embarkation facilities of Boulogne, and many were the nurses who recorded looking down on the ships plying back and forth on choppy seas from England or observing the local women searching for cockles off the rocky shores below. But, since the unit largely served the Ypres sector, the peacefulness of the surroundings was something the nurses rarely had time to enjoy.

The diary of Matron Ethel Gray, who was assigned to 2 AGH in December 1916, offers a vivid portrait of a General Hospital, and especially of the way it was run. Hers is by no means a dispassionate story (indeed one wonders how she found the time to 'write a few lines' to the soldiers' relations in off-duty time, usually around 2 a.m.), but it does convey the sheer magnitude of organisational matters from which nurses, otherwise occupied, were necessarily spared.[34] The control of the arrival and departure of patients was a major responsibility, and she knew when she took up the job she had 'very stiff work ahead',[35] something of an under-statement, judging from her report of 9 April 1917:

---

[32] Kirkcaldie, *In Gray and Scarlet*, p. 148. Amongst the items nurses had to transport were a small oil stove and kettle, portable camp bedstead, pillow and mattress, rug, tripod washstand, bucket, candle lantern, gum boots, mackintosh, flat iron, clothes, toiletries and eating utensils, kit equipment, itemised by Tranter, 23 February 1917.

[33] Tranter, 23 March 1918.

> Before the 11th the wounded were streaming in, on one night we took in as many as 525 patients, amongst them 300 German prisoners. The greatest number of patients were Canadians, who did so splendidly in the taking of Vimy Ridge, a very difficult piece of work. The first casualties who came were what we call 'Walking Cases'. Some with gunshot wounds in the arms, hands, or even some shrapnel about the body. Many of them came down straight from the lines, and came in their steel helmets: then the more serious cases began to arrive, and before the Friday we were full to overflowing. The day we had the German prisoners we had 1700 patients in hospital, which really was a big number. Convoys kept coming all the time and many times a convoy and an evacuation would come at the same time. In these rushes we go on operating right up to midnight, we did as many as 57 cases in one day, so you must know the work was steady & heavy…We had nearly forty cases on the 'dangerously ill' list at a time…the Canadians were so brave and plucky. So are our own [Australian] boys. So many of the laddies are only 19 and 20: so young to have gone through so much.[36]

To which she adds a little further on:

> During the month of April we admitted 8091 patients, and did over 660 operations, so there was some work got through.[37]

Ethel Gray was thirty-eight when she enlisted in the AANS on 9 February 1915. She had previously held a two-year post as a matron, firstly at Perth Public Hospital in Western Australia, then, on joining the army, 1 AAH (Australian Auxiliary Hospital), Harefield Park, England.[38] She came to France, then, with considerable maturity and experience, as is strikingly evident in the sheer wealth of duties her diary details. Not only did she oversee the growth of the hospital, as new huts were erected and, surprisingly, gardens laid out (including a kangaroo-sculpted lawn!); she was its official representative, expected to attend formal functions, receive distinguished guests and liaise with senior military personnel. In addition, she appears to have worked tirelessly in organising Christmas celebrations and concerts for the patients, as well as attending to the daily running of the hospital both as a streamlined business and a medical base of an increasingly sophisticated kind. Her dedication appears to have been exemplary and her energy boundless, a fact recognised after the war when she was awarded the French Médaille de la Reconnaissance Française and a British CBE.[39] Of a visit in July 1917 by the Queen, whose attendance and tour of the wards they had expected—though not at what turned out to be short notice—she recalls:

---

[34] Ethel Gray (Matron), diary, AWM, 2DRL/1326, 6 April 1917 – 28 May 1917.

[35] ibid., 1 December 1916 – 17 December 1916.

[36] ibid., 6 April 1917 – 28 May 1917.

[37] ibid.

[38] *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

[39] In 1920 and 1919 respectively.

> We were all very delighted at the Surprise visit and appreciated it Greatly. When it was all over I found to my dismay that I had on my Gum boots, which are none too elegant, I can assure you: one of the patients was very funny, when I was telling them about the gum boots he said 'well Matron, I am sure the Queen would think to herself, there's a sensible practical Matron"'. Was it not nice & comforting of him? [40]

But for the most part Ethel's preoccupations, while pressing and essential to hospital governance, were mundane: communicating with the village laundry women in regrettably poor French, overseeing staff, supervising twenty-two wards, writing up unit reports.[41] Obtaining food, scarce and rationed, was a perpetual worry, and required constant surveillance. In October 1918, referring to the staff's allowance:

> Meat is not to be had, though sugar and tea are very short. The sugar we have to portion out to each individual, in a little box, otherwise all do not get a fair share…all carry their sugar with them wherever they go...I have had to ration each individual Sister, each little box has to be filled each morning and placed on a tray. That is their allowance for the day. It was the only way to manage it.

In fact food shortages were wide-spread, and equally affected the local population, as Ethel observes on one of her occasional (and much deserved) off-duty trips to town:

> In some places they cannot allow any bread for lunch…One cannot buy many cakes now in the French Shops, if you go in for tea and cakes they prefer you to eat the cakes standing up then they think you will not eat so many. You cannot get any milk in your tea—and no tea is served between 12 and 4.30p.m. unless you are having a real lunch, and paying a certain amount.[42]

Elsie Tranter, who worked in various general and stationary hospitals as a theatre and ward nurse between 1917 and 1919, gives a very different picture of the rhythm of hospital life at the height of the war. Hers was a job of daily contact with the patients, those she sweetly called her 'baby soldiers' (in the case of the young ones) or just her 'boys' (who called her their 'diggeress' in return). Many are her anecdotes of bedside repartee, ward comradeship and sisterly cheer. But while Elsie appears to have been blessed with a loving nature, a sense of humour, high spirits and the ability to take a little mild flirting from the men with grace and aplomb, there is no denying that her days were filled with what at times seemed to be a relentless stream of tasks, irrespective of the time of night or day, often blurred as casualties poured in. On 26 March 1917 at 26 BGH (British General Hospital), Etaples:

---

[40] Gray, 1 – 9 July 1917. The visit was from England's Queen Mary and King George V.

[41] The difficulty of getting laundry help is described by Sister May Ashton: 'This morning we went looking for a "laundry lady" (Sunday!) it is quite a deserted village & about a doz. inhabitants left, but heaps of men, resting, etc. We managed to find one, but had to provide soap, starch & blue. We had a little of the last 2 with us, but the soap we had to ferret around for, found a canteen & got some Sunlight 3 Frcs a box (2/6). So not too bad considering. She has promised to let us have them in 2 days time, so we are glad', letter, 18 August 1918, Sister May Ashton file, AWM, PR 88/025.

[42] Gray, 1 December 1917 – 31 January 1918.

> I am having very busy nights—but the boys are so appreciative of anything we do—it makes it all worth while…As soon as the evacuation is over we have to fly round and get the beds ready for the convoy of wounded coming in. Sometimes there is a convoy during the day and a convoy at night…sometimes both events happen in the night. The boys...are wonderfully bright and brave. They come to us in pain, cold and tired after their journey and yet they never complain. We just get them off the stretchers on to the beds and give them a hot drink then beginning with the most urgent cases we fix them up one after the other. [43]

In this kind of frenzy a ward nonetheless had a necessary routine. Mornings, Elsie records, were much taken up with syringing (‘There are hundreds of tubes to be syringed 2 hrly. One Australian boy here has 22 tubes’),[44] plus ‘dressings…sundry foments…every minute is more than full’;[45] in the afternoons came bed-making (‘a very back wearying performance. The lads are so helpless and need careful lifting’).[46] On 14 May 1917 she put in a ‘tremendous day’ from 7 a.m. to 2 a.m., after which she was up twice on 15th to attend to haemorrhages between 2 and 7 a.m. In the three days that followed, spent in theatre, she totted up sixty operations. But it was night duty of which she was particularly fond. ‘Hurrah!’, she exclaims later in May, ‘I am on night duty once more…It is delightful to be with the boys again. In the theatre we do not get to know them and I have missed them.’[47] Christmas Day, 1917, was especially busy, but ‘each boy on waking [in the] morning found a well-filled sock at the foot of his bed—containing smokes, sweets, nuts and various odds and ends’.[48]

As the war proceeded and the front moved westwards, General Hospitals were as vulnerable to air-raids as were Casualty Clearing Stations, and, given their size, at risk of losing vast numbers of men and personnel. Patients had to be moved in haste to dugouts, or helped to shelter as best as could be arranged, although if an operation was in progress, theatre staff typically worked on. Ethel Gray’s entry of 2 August 1918 records such an incident, in which, by good fortune, none of her charges was harmed:

> Last night though not particularly bright, was made hideous by a very bad Air Raid. About 10.30 p.m. the lights went out, which is always our warning signal, as well as the firing of the guns. Very shortly afterwards, guns could be heard in the distance and the search-lights began to play…Soon the firing from Anticraft [sic] guns became rapid. Shrapnel began falling everywhere, bombs falling, shells bursting, two flares in the sky showed clearly, showing something definite hit. The crashing of glass could be distinctly heard...The patients were splendid for I always think it must be dreadful to feel oneself helpless when danger may be near, however, they are wonderfully brave, one little soldier, with an amputated arm, called his night nurse and said to her, ‘Sister, you go down to the dug-out, we’re alright here’, it was so unselfish of him—in the midst of everything thinking of the Sister’s Safety. Of course no Sister who was on duty would leave her post…This evening as I sat at the head of the table I could but feel thankful there was no empty chair.

---

[43] Tranter, 26 March 1917.
[44] ibid., 3 February 1917.
[45] ibid.
[46] ibid.
[47] ibid., 26 May 1917.
[48] ibid. The items would have been provided by the Red Cross.

The feeling of safety in numbers in moments of danger is commonly reported in war memoirs. The mateship of Australian soldiers in the trenches, now legendary, was a phenomenon of which the nurses were fully aware. Their tales of shared heroism in shocking situations filtered back into the wards, and their suffering, which they bore together, engendered a trust, a 'we're alright, Sister' attitude which Ethel Gray, for one, evidently admired. But the nurses, too, sought support from one another when circumstances demanded extra courage, nowhere more than in an air-raid. In such instances companionship was important and friendships were poignantly forged. 'What a great comfort human sympathy is', writes Anne Donnell, recounting the time she and a fellow nurse had pushed their beds together on a night blitz in September 1917. 'We held each other's hand. After a silence when I was keenly listening, Mary said: "Anne—say the 23rd psalm. It's so nice."'[49] The raid continued, narrowly missing the hospital by forty yards. Later, convalescing on the Riviera, Anne would recall the occasion of another raid. She had been attending an opera off-duty in a local music hall, when suddenly the lights went out and, for a moment, general panic prevailed. Then…

> …the Orchestra struck up La Marseillaise. That saved the situation—All stood up—the performers came forward and I have never heard anything quite so wonderful as the singing of that when all those hundreds of people relieved their pent up feelings with Soul, heart and voice.[50]

In essence, Anne's experience, a transcendence of fear, was one of solidarity and a fervent commitment to the common cause.

If General Hospitals were erratically frantically busy, it was the usual lot of Casualty Clearing Stations, operating at the edge of battlefields, and prone to bombardments that required frequent patient and staff evacuation to safer soil. Indeed, so dangerous were they deemed by the Australian military that its nurses were not permitted to work in them until events left no alternative. Sister O'Dwyer, in her narrative reconstruction of a CCS after the war, conjures up the kind of sight a nurse encountered on arrival at a fresh site:

> Equipment was dumped everywhere. Tents were being pitched and staff were everywhere. Shell holes [from a previous battle] were being filled, and duck-boards being laid to aid movement at once…[The nurses'] sleeping tents had been erected with floor boards (a luxury to start with), and in what seemed only a few minutes, they were having tea in a combined mess for sisters and officers, there not being time to erect two. [51]

In setting up the wards, inventiveness, it seems, was the key. 'Cupboards and shelves were improvised out of Red Cross packing cases, and ammunition boxes were converted into useful bed-side lockers', recalls Rosa Kirkcaldie at No 8 CSS, Arras in March 1917.[52] 'Pillows', she adds, were 'Red Cross cushions, bolsters and even sacks filled with shavings and paper'.[53] So, in haste, a Casualty Clearing Station was miraculously raised.

---

[49] Donnell, 6 September 1917.

[50] ibid., 1 February 1918.

[51] Lindley A. Deacon, *Beyond the Call: the Story of Australia's First World War Nurses*, Regal Press, Launceston, 2000, p. 27. Sister O Dwyer's account is reproduced in full in chapter 4.

[52] Kirkcaldie, *In Gray and Scarlet*, p. 155.

[53] ibid., pp. 160–161.

By 1915 a Casualty Clearing Station was open twenty-four hours a day, typically admitting one day and evacuating to Base Hospitals the next. Sometimes nearby hospitals would work in tandem, the one receiving, the other sending men on, and while nursing staff increased from between seven to twenty to over thirty, notably after the 1917 Battle of Ypres, it was rarely sufficient to handle a rush. After admission and assessment, critical cases were sent to appropriate specialist tents, where priority treatment was given to the most severe. So a man, depending on his injury, might find himself in 'acute surgical', 'leg', 'head', 'abdominal', 'gas'… Sister Kirkcaldie, again at Arras, relates:

> My ward was allotted to penetrating chest wounds and spine cases…On the morning of the attack…there were about a half-a-dozen such cases…Soon…the twenty-six beds were filled, and still more came. These had to be left lying on their stretchers, and the stretchers were squeezed in wherever there was floor space…till, in order to move about at all, we had to step over them…That little ward of agony stands clearly before me now. The beds were filled with men coughing, struggling, and gasping for breath.[54]

Surgery on those not able to travel was one of a Casualty Clearing Station's most important roles. As at a Base Hospital, theatre staff generally comprised a doctor, an anaesthetist, an orderly and a nurse, with sometimes six, even twelve tables operating at once in up to sixteen-hour shifts. But it was the 'resuscitation' (or 'moribund') ward that nurses found the saddest and hardest to tend. Here the goal was to recover men who had a spark of life and ease the pain of those for whom it was too late. 'One thing', wrote Anne Donnell, in a letter sent home in May 1918, 'I was free to use my own discretion in giving morphia or stimulants, and you may be sure I was ever ready with either, when I thought it was the least bit necessary.'[55] Of one English Corporal by whose calm manner she was particularly touched, Rosa Kirkcaldie notes:

> He came to us one afternoon, mud-stained, blood-stained, and obviously dying. I made him as comfortable as possible in bed. I washed his face and hands, removing from them the congealed mud and blood of the five days he had spent in a shell hole. 'Thank you, Sister,' came in the unmistakable tones of an English gentleman. 'That's as near to heaven as I'll ever reach in this old world.' And to the doctor: 'Don't waste your valuable time over me. Help some of the fellows you can do something for'.[56]

Thus did a nurse witness the gallantry of a man's last words.

Evacuation because of danger, a situation from which rear-positioned hospitals were spared, was the major hazard of CCS life, all the more so that it meant moving severely ill men in haste. Tents and medical supplies had to be quickly packed, patients brought to the rail siding, nurses sent on to safety by lorry or ambulance. Night-time was often the favoured time for the operation, when hospital activity was least liable to be noticed by the enemy and its buildings attacked. In her astonishing account of one such incident, at Méricourt, near Amiens, on March 1916, at 38 CCS, Sister Edna Nicholls offers a vivid picture not only of her own duties, seemingly endless as she plied between patient and tent, but also of the sheer havoc of receiving men who streamed in as fast as they were being moved out and on. Her very style, a tumble of broken sentences, in which facts, figures and emotions indiscriminately merge, evokes so intensely the memory of the headlong pace at which events occurred one cannot but construe the momentousness of their first impact:

---

[54] ibid., p. 160.

[55] Anne Donnell, *Letters of an Australian Army Sister* (memoir), Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1920, p. 214. Donnell's memoir is based on the letters she wrote, held at the NLA.

[56] Kirkcaldie, *In Gray and Scarlet*, pp. 166–167.

> By 9.0 a.m. hut full again. 8 Patients had not had their injection of ATS given, so proceeded with the needle after giving them Tea and some bread and butter. By this time the guns were getting closer to us—civilians passing with their carts of furniture; big guns and lorries going towards Corbie—Water scarcity—two water carts went for water but did not return—Patients thirsty, dressing scarce, food scarce—patients walking in; 6.0 p.m. train expected, all evacuating cases put on stretchers which were to be as few as possible so as to allow more patients for evacuation. Officers came in very depressed saying the Hun would be on us before morning. Evacuated 38 Officers all but one who was haemorraging [sic] from mouth, shot through jaw. Put him on bed and made pads for him to wipe his mouth. Stampede for train which could not stop as the Hun was on the watch for it. In less than 40 minutes evacuated 600 patients, over 200 came back on account of no room—poor disappointed Tommies. 8.00 p.m. an explosion—Dump at Peronne [sic] blown up patients pouring in—several chest and abdominals came in—field dressing tied on wound with Khaki tie—put them on the bed and covered them up—gave them tea. Stayed on duty until 12 p.m. allowing the Orderly to have one hour's rest—the first for five days and nights. During night heavy firing getting closer—wounded coming in walking—no dressings, no food, no water, previously had packed all baggage for evacuation of Sisters at a minute's notice. Laid on bed with covering of a blanket. 4.45 a.m. had word to get ready to leave as two motor Ambulances had arrived to take us to Abbeville. Left with a suit case each, 17 Sisters by two motors, feeling very sad. Passed bits of stray Regiments, old men, civilians with blankets wrapped around them, women leading a stray cow, wounded boys walking, all retreating from Peronne. Colonel Low and 11 other M.O.s besides 70 N.C.O.s and men left to look after 1500 wounded boys, all anxiously waiting for news of a train to evacuate the patients. We passed lorries, huge guns and soldiers all retreating, and who were going to camp 5 miles from Mericourt [sic].[57]

As a Red Cross nurse, assigned to French hospitals in the French sector, Nellie Crommelin, writing home between 1916 and 1919, offers a very different picture of Western Front nursing than that elicited in the records of AANS nurses serving in the 'British' north. Hers was not always a happy or easy experience as she grappled with the subtleties of the French language and with hospital procedures to which, at times, she strongly objected in the name of the high nursing standards to which she was accustomed. Her sometimes hefty criticisms of hospital hierarchies and procedures, which give her account a feisty edge, must be weighed, however, against the singularity of her situation, working—unlike her AANS sisters—in foreign hospitals, surrounded by people whose very land, culture and existence were under siege. To this she was by no means unsympathetic, and her story, as far as it can pieced together from the fragile bundle of faded letters her family has passed down, is one of courage and dedication. Indeed, it is a moving experience to follow her mental and emotional progress via her record, which, as the war deepened, increasingly made mention of her patients as 'ours' and of France as 'her land'. To her family, for whom the letters were intended, she often proudly (and revealingly) signed off as 'Your soldier, Nell.'

---

[57] Edna C. Nicholls (Sister), diary, AWM, 2 DRL/0654. Entry of 28 March, 1918.

Nellie appears to have worked in five French hospitals during her service in France, all close to the line of enemy fire. Initially at Les Andelys in the Eure, she moved to Revigny, south of battle-torn Verdun, in March 1917, then to Villers-Cotterêts, close to the French Army headquarters at Compiègne, and finally, after a spell in Senlis, to Courcelles par Presles (Seine and Oise), where she remained after the war, caring for Spanish influenza patients, and women and children wounded by the live shells that had become embedded in the villages and the fields they farmed. She was, then, closely connected to events that affected the French, and took an interest in the political implications of the war's progress in a manner less sharply evident in most nurses' records. Indeed, her deep convictions about the rights of the French people present her as profoundly committed to the democratic principles of the Allied cause, and she placed her life at considerable risk when, at the war's end, she nursed the casualties of the decisive and bitter Battle of the Aisne.

It is obvious that Nellie's letter writing was important to her: it allowed her to share her frustrations and grievances with those she loved at home. But, viewed today, it also testifies to the hidden difficulties of a role that may have overwhelmed one less steadfast and professionally concerned. Speaking and comprehending French precipitated problems that led, at least in one instance, to a 'most distressing breach' with a fellow nurse (in fact an English one), and to moments when she could not follow what was going on.[58] The eight weeks of French tuition given on the voyage to Europe she judged inadequate and although she was coached by a kind Algerian patient (a former teacher), and found herself using French words 'unconsciously' in time, she ruefully remarked at the end of 1916, 'oh it is still a dreadful struggle to make ourselves understood and to understand.'[59] Matters were hardly helped by the isolation she felt in the hospital ward with little English company, no frivolity (like the concerts and dances British hospitals mounted), and no equivalent to the hard-working VAD.

Nellie's criticisms of French hospital management are many, though it is well to remember that they were matters entrusted to her family and not meant to be publicly aired. Only once did she see fit to speak out officially, writing to the Red Cross in defense of a crazed soldier, arrested and removed for being drunk in the wards. Repeatedly she decries the inefficiency and inadequacies of the hospital system: lazy orderlies, uncompassionate doctors, delayed operations, careless dressings, dirty wards, using words such as 'deplorable', 'awful', 'unspeakable' to vent her dismay. But if in this she evinces strong traits of character—she was not one to shirk duty or mince words—her intention appears to have been to give her patients the 'square deal' she felt they deserved.[60] 'T'would be impossible to find another Dr. so absolutely negligent & unpatriotic in the treatment of the soldiers of France,' she complained home, from Les Andelys.[61] And again: 'Sometimes when new men come in I cannot see their wounds thro' my tears—for it breaks my heart to see them suffering so simply from neglect—yards of dressings plastered on in any kind of fashion & underneath filthy hands or feet & nails which have never been cleaned out.'[62]

---

[58] ibid., 6 October 1916.

[59] ibid., 17 November 1916.

[60] ibid.

[61] ibid., 19 March 1917.

[62] ibid., 26 December 1916.

If Nellie is intransigent on matters of hospital hygiene and medical attention, she is liberal in her praises of the men for whom she cared. ‘If you could only feel the splendid confidence of these wonderful French men’, she writes from Villers-Cotterêts, ‘their spirit which nothing can shake, their calm acceptance of each fresh horror with a shrug of their shoulders & “Oh it will pass”…’[63] Through them, she appears to have found inspiration and a patriotism for France that AANS nurses, elsewhere, did not have the same occasion to acquire and uphold. ‘I believe if I were given my chance even now’, she muses two years into her stay, ‘I would refuse to leave…for this is our place—now especially.’[64] Of reports of the German’s long range cannons, poised to be launched on Paris, seventy miles away, ‘right over our heads [because] we are in a direct line from Anizy-le-Château’, she exclaims, ‘Just think what an appalling thing it is. Beautiful, beautiful Paris!!’[65] ‘If I shall die’, she remarks, in an emotional letter of June 1918, ‘it is for the sake of beautiful France & her suffering soldiers & the honour of our dear Australia.’, to which she signs off: ‘God bless you & keep you safe and well. Long live Australia & Vive la France. Your own Nell.’[66]

As one might expect, Nellie’s letters are full of hospital-related news. But her observations of the effect of war upon the lives of ordinary French citizens points up her receptiveness to her surroundings and her concern for others besides those confined to hospital wards. In a striking passage in her correspondence she recounts her attendance with nursing staff and patients at a memorial service on All Saints’ Day at the cemetery of Les Andelys. Her heart goes out to the village folk, gathered to mourn their dead, along with soldiers from the two nearby military colleges, five of them ‘poor young boys’ due to go to the front in the next few days. The occasion, led by a ‘dear old General with a wooden leg & Legion of Honneur’, had a dignity and colour by which she was intensely moved:

> The uniforms of the officers with their scarlet & gold & black caps & long capes. The black robes of the priests & scarlet trousers & long blue capes of the college boys, in the foreground & at the back all our patients who could possibly get to the ceremony with bandages very much to the fore & crutches & slings, standing bareheaded, all formed a most unusual and interesting picture such as I shall never forget, and it was inexpressively sad.[67]

Of the decimation of the landscape, both on the battlefield and beyond, she was painfully aware, as she was of the social upheavals such havoc incurred. Consider the images that struck her during her train transference to Revigny, duly recorded in a letter to her mother on 7 April 1917:

> Then we began to notice signs of real War, roofless houses, churches without any towers, a wall with rows of empty windows, a chimney amidst a pile of bricks & a cottage here & there constructed from the heaps of ruins. Then into the fields beyond where aged men drove horses behind ploughs & women worked side by side with them, sometimes doing the ploughing themselves & in the little patches untouched by the plough we saw tiny little wooden crosses

---

[63] ibid., 22 March 1918.
[64] ibid.
[65] ibid.
[66] ibid., 18 June 1918.
[67] ibid., 7 November 1916.

> to mark where many brave soldiers had paid their debt of honour. With blurred eyes we watched these little evidences of war passing quickly behind us & realised we were passing thro the country where the battle of the Marne commenced.

The letters of 3 and 7 April 1918, at Villers-Cotterêts, show her more perturbed. With France bracing itself for the second German 'push', and French reinforcements proceeding to the front to hold the line, she fears the 'terrible carnage' that is about to come. But her particular concern is for those who will be rendered homeless when the bombardments intensify. As she writes, families are on the move, and she cites the pathetic picture of one little group struggling along the dusty road, a woman trudging along with a wheelbarrow, another, 'an old man bent nearly double with a little bundle in a red handkerchief slung on the end of a stick & a long staff in his hand.'[68] So she appeals to her family readers, so far away, to spare a thought for the (for them) invisible casualties of the war:

> They [the present travelling homeless] will go back to their homes when the invasion is finished. They will find nothing left a heap of stones perhaps. They must commence again all their lives—to build up afresh in their declining years their homes & on what No money no homes, no furniture & no prospects, & the only one young man of the family either killed or disabled in the majority of cases. Isn't it awful when you think of the thousands of families who are in this terrible predicament? Poor, brave suffering France. What a history she has had & how wonderfully enduring are her people—& her soldiers!! I cannot say enough about them.[69]

Perhaps the ultimate personal test of Nellie's French service came with the bombardment in which she was involved at Villers-Cotterêts on 23–24 May 1918—not recorded until some months later, since circumstances had then been considered so perilous by the French military she had not been permitted to divulge her location in her mail. Her letter, dated 10 September 1918, long and detailed, takes in the chaos of the Germans' abortive assault on Compiègne: the obliteration of Villers-Cotterêts, the influx of wounded into the hospital, her billet house collapsing upon her when she returned to collect her belongings, her own near death as she returned to the hospital, dodging crumbling walls and falling debris. She describes the scene outside the hospital, a converted chateau, from which they were forced to flee:

> Presently there was an enormous blaze, great flames higher than the chateau itself & a light as clear as day. Immediately the bombs began to rain again a few seconds later and we knew a train of ammunition had been hit. I couldn't describe the inferno—it is beyond pen & now I can only wonder if all this really did happen or if it was some terrible dream.[70]

In fact, with the arrival of the French planes the next morning, she and her evacuated patients were fortuitously saved.

Considering the nurses had to cope with much of the end result of military aggression, it is not surprising that, at times, they were given to question the course in which history had gone. 'It seems so awful that this butchery goes on', lamented Matron Grace Wilson, at Abbeville as early as May 1916. 'And one can't see an end to it all.'[71] In the circumstances, homesickness for the nurse, as much as for the Digger, was inevitable and profound. On occasions, Australia could seem very remote, and France a dismal land. 'It's very depressing in France', Sister Edith ('Queenie') Avenell wrote to her mother from Boulogne. 'We all get down to zero…I don't know what will become of it all. I want to get back to Aust. the moment it is all over. Not a bit anxious to see England altho' on clear days, Dover is seen quite easily from here.'[72] Anne Donnell wondered if those at home, so distantly placed, could understand the 'the depression I feel'. She explains:

---

[68] ibid., 7 April 1918.
[69] ibid.
[70] ibid.

> You see, in France we see the acutest work and the havoc the war plays on our precious human lives. It's very sad to see and while we are doing our level best to restore life—there in the distance (and especially at night) is the continual boom boom booming from the great guns which bring more suffering and sadness…I dream of the peaceful lives we lived before the war—and wonder if Australia is the same peaceful land—of course I know it must be changed with all the sorrow.[73]

Elsie Tranter's opinion sums up what many nurses found. 'If we did not have to work hard all the time', she confesses, 'we could not stand the strain of the awfulness of it all.'[74]

If the nurses occasionally felt overwhelmed by the job, it was a rule of thumb that one never showed it to be so to the men. While good cheer amongst the patients is something upon which the nurses commonly remarked, it was fundamental to their professional mien. In effect, the Nightingale method had turned nursing around by placing great store on compassion, and a smile, a joke, a gesture of kindness were deemed important in the recovery not just of a wracked body but also of a distressed mind. The nurses spoilt their charges, the men looked to them for relief from the grimness of their situation, although the nurses complained that regrettably individual attention was often compromised because of the sheer volume of work involved.

Within the context of their pastoral duties, Australian nurses capitalised on their national identity, of which they were proud. They loved nursing Australian soldiers especially, though Elise Tranter concluded, 'When I think of all the wounded ones and all the ones who work with us, stretcher bearers and orderlies, bless my soul I believe I love them all'.[75] In effect, the Australian touches that inform her record reveal a selfless nature and a gift for easing a man's pain. Of one instance when she gave a listless Digger, a 'spine' boy, her fruit cake, sent to her from home, because he could not eat 'French tuck', and only fancied a 'dinkum Aussie cake' or nothing at all, she recalls:

---

[71] Grace Wilson (Matron), diary, transcribed Jan. 1989, AWM, PR 01870. Entry of 31 May 1916.

[72] Edith Florence ('Queenie') Avenell (Staff Nurse), letters compiled by her nephew, Pat Richardson, AWM, PR 85/111. Avenell was a matron in Queensland before she left for the Front. Letter dated 14 May 1916.

[73] Donnell, 5 July 1917.

[74] Tranter, 3 April 1917.

[75] ibid., 14 April 1918.

> It was good to be able to give him just what he wanted. A sprig of wattle came in the parcel too, so I put that on the plate beside the cake. The digger was more pleased with the wattle than the cake and kept it all day on his pillow.[76]

Differently, Nellie Crommelin brought delight to her French patients with pictures of her homeland. Asking her family to send postcards and booklets of Sydney in February 1918—'the Harbour, the Shops because they have no idea what big ones we have, The University, Cathedrals, Colleges...any of the country scenes caves etc you can find'—she was thrilled to receive them in September, although she had moved on:[77]

> The men just simply loved them and were wonderfully interested in the birds, animals, etc. Ever so many of them have the vaguest ideas of what Australia is & very few know where. Some think we are Americans who live in a settlement kind of place!!…Of Tasmania and New Zealand they know nothing and yet they can tell you all about the Anzacs or the Australian troops where they have been fighting…And don't they admire our boys too![78]

While relaxing the patients was important for their rehabilitation, so it was considered essential that the nurses had time off to unwind. Officially, members of the AANS were entitled to one day off a week, and two weeks' leave every six months, though, depending on the amount of work to be done, this was often necessarily and voluntarily curtailed or foregone.[79] Matron Ethel Gray was adamant on the issue, as she confirmed in a report given to the Assistant Collator of Medical History in July 1919: 'The rush of work in those early days of 1917 was very great, but everyone stood the strain splendidly…I had quite an effort to make the Sisters leave their work for the needful time for rest and meals but through all the work I always insisted on every Sister having one day off a week'—except in the 'heavy stunts', she notes, when all staff had to be on hand.[80] This said, good behaviour off-duty, especially beyond the hospital grounds, was expected to be properly maintained. A non-fraternisation policy prohibited AANS nurses (of honorary officer rank) from mixing socially with other ranks and NCOs (though the rules were frequently relaxed or broken), nor were they allowed to enter places of public amusement without permission, or to dine or go driving with officers, whether patients or friends.[81] In general, then, nurses went on their off-duty 'jaunts' with other nurses, not alone—by regulation—but usually in twos or threes.

One is mindful that many of the nurses were young and energetic, hence much inclined, on occasions, to a little skittish good fun. Elsie Tranter notes from 26 BGH in June 1917: 'We [the nurses] are always fairly weary when we come off duty in the mornings—but always manage to have a little fun before going to bed. We frequently have little parties in different huts, borrow a gramophone and sing and talk till we are sleepy.'[82] The morning of 20 June finds her having 'quite a little kipsie [tent or hut] party' with four Australians and two English friends: 'We all joined lustily in singing

---

[76] ibid., 10 October 1918.

[77] Crommelin, 7 February 1918.

[78] ibid., 10 September 1918.

[79] Goodman, *Our War Nurses*, pp. 29–30.

[80] Gray, document addressed to the Assistant Collator, Medical History, London, dated 1 July 1919, included in Gray file.

[81] On rank and conditions see Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, pp. 55–56.

[82] 15 June 1917.

“Australia will be there”’, she says. Again, on 2 July, she had ‘great fun’. She and six fellow sisters ‘boiled the kettle for tea on the Baby Burner stove’ at a tent party that ‘lasted from 10am to 11.45’. Again, on 2 July, ‘Peg as usual was the fun of the party. Sally did Peg’s hair in great style & put some cornflowers in it. Our kipsie was looking quite pretty with roses and sweet peas.’ But the seating accommodation was problematic. ‘We [had] to use trunks and kit bags for chairs’, she said.

When the nurses left Australia they were excited at the prospect of seeing the France of which they had heard and read. Most had never seen snow or tulips before, nor set foot in an ancient cathedral, a chateau or a ruin, let alone visited a place as opulent and fashionable as Monte Carlo or as historic and famous as Paris, the Opera, the Louvre and the Palace of Versailles. Just the chance of seeing a European landscape—a forest, a wood, a dell—seemed exotic, and they hoped that on their nursing mission they might also discover the Europe they had imagined on the other side of the world. Off-duty time and leave offered precious moments when such expectations might be fulfilled, and they frequently walked miles in a single free day to take pleasure in the countryside or seek out the history of a local village, church or town. Their diaries and letters are traversed by descriptions of all they found on their rambles and travels to be decidedly and satisfyingly French, including—for then they were tourists—souvenirs to keep or send home.

The eagerness with which the nurses responded to the beauty of nature around them at a time when much of the landscape was scarred by battle and pitted by shells is touching, and one marvels at their sometimes childlike wonder as they contemplated those elements of the landscape that, miraculously, had survived the war unscathed. In an entry of late May–early June 1917 Ethel Gray enthusiastically records:

> Everything is looking beautiful and green, the trees are out, blossoms are on the trees, flowers are coming…so the earth is putting on quite a different coat from that which she wore for so many months. The little birds are beautiful…The ones I most love and enjoy listening to are the larks, and the skylarks, they are so very lovely, very often, one will see them soar up from the ground, rising in the air, Singing the whole time until he becomes just a tiny Speck amongst the clouds, and then he disappears altogether, and yet you can still hear his Song. I so well remember Father telling us of the Skylark. The boys from the front tell us that even when a bombardment is on, the little lark Sings just the same, the Guns do not frighten him at all, which is really wonderful.[83]

For Nellie Crommelin it was the common blackbird that enthralled: ‘The blackbirds sing until quite late in the evening & they are so beautiful. I much prefer him to a nightingale.’[84]

Simple walks calmed the nurses, and allowed them to enter into what must have seemed like a fantasy world. The River Somme Elsie Tranter witnessed at Dieppe on a day off seemed very different from that of bloodied war fame:

> Here [by the Somme] there is a lovely avenue of trees casting a cool shade over the sloping grassy banks. We sat down on the grass to rest and dream—to dream of all the future held for us and of what was happening further along this same ‘Somme’. The barges coming down so

---

[83] Gray, 29 May 1917 – 3 June 1917.
[84] Crommelin, 12 May 1918.

> slowly and peacefully called to our imagination, no picture of a war but rather of a dream world where all is peaceful and beautiful.[85]

Anne Donnell, for her part, delighted (and indulged) in her stroll to Epagne:

> I have not enjoyed anything so much for a long time. We walked by the lovely Somme the whole way. Great poplar trees border it all the way and theres the loveliest field flowers and reeds—and here and there an unexpected picturesque little scene appears in the shape of a Chateau or Church. On arrival there I revelled in what I have longed for since leaving Australia—a fruit garden—really. Can you imagine it I ate & ate cherries until I felt I couldnt eat any more—then I went to the lovely red currant bushes and picked and ate until I began to think I ought to be a bit ashamed of my appetite…The walk back through the wheat fields was beautiful.[86]

Sometimes a visit to a village was enough to provide a glimpse of a French custom or local craft of which they had not previously known. Ethel Gray was glad to discover a café that sold pewter pots, 'quite renowned in France', and she and her companion each purchased a pewter tray, after which they ordered tea and pancakes in the snow-covered garden at the shop's rear.[87] Such moments brought joy and relief from their work. Anne Donnell and a fellow sister were pleased when they happened across a 'beautiful hand-worked lace shop' run by a French mother and daughter and were able to stock up on Christmas presents for all at home. 'We do enjoy [such outings]', she confided in a letter, 'and it helps us forget for the time being' (although she could not but notice that several nearby shops had been burnt down).[88] On another trip it was the local cemetery that surprised:

> The French people's idea of decorating their graves are [sic] very different to ours——they go in chiefly for artificial wreaths and sprays made of beads fine purple—green & white beads—and on top of the grave is built a little room with these hanging around it. The children's graves are quaint—there's the same little room with shelves covered with lace and all sorts of vases and nick-nacks [sic] about—and always one ornament of Our Saviour and the Virgin Mary.[89]

Nurses were inveterate and imaginative tourists. As well as walking and shopping, they went boating, hiking, even skating in winter on the ice-bound Somme. But it was perhaps their 'lorry hopping' that showed them at their most venturesome. The procedure was simple, though risky, since it typically took them through war-torn areas and on roads clogged with military vehicles and marching men. 'That is the way to see the country here', noted Elsie Tranter, much given to a little good sport. 'There are always hundreds of wagons and lorries up and down these roads, going to and from the line and we just hop on for a joy ride whenever a chance occurs. Of course it is against the rules but that is half the fun.'[90] One occasion, in which she and her companions set out from 3

---

[85] Tranter, 15 July 1917.

[86] Donnell, 5 July 1917.

[87] Gray, 1–16 January 1917.

[88] Donnell, 9 September 1917.

[89] ibid.

[90] Tranter, 2 April 1918.

AGH, Abbeville to visit Amiens, brought unexpected results, although they did manage to get a lift back to their hospital unnoticed and in the nick of time:

> Presently from the distance we heard a very promising sound and looking backwards saw something coming—but what that something was we could not decide. It looked like a long line of wheels and in the front ever so high in the air with the driver swaying as the something advanced. When we were overtaken we still could not make out what it was. A very cheery Corporal was driving. When we told him we wanted to get back to Abbeville he said he would gladly take us if we could manage to get up. Then he explained what the strange looking affair was. The same morning five one time London buses were standing on the roadside at Peronne [sic]. Some Tommies crossing to them accidentally tripped on a wire that had been left by the Hun—this strain of the wire detonated a mine, the boys were killed and the bodies of the buses completely destroyed. The one we were travelling in was the only one that had even the driver's seat left.[91]

Nurses were typically curious about their surroundings and many were keen to broaden their knowledge of the history of France. So, they hoped, the history books of their school education would find cultural pertinence and geographic tangibility. This is patently the case of Sister Daisy Richmond, whose writings reveal the zeal with which she grasped any chance to steep herself in the heritage of the regions in which she served. Daisy's diary is a charming record of an inquisitive and clever mind, balanced by an even temper, friendly manner and spiritually searching soul. A devout Christian, who received Holy Communion ('H.C.') every Sunday when possible, she always sought out the church or cathedral on arrival in a new town. Ecclesiastic history, church decoration and religious paintings she particularly loved. Galleries, museums and old buildings, too, were favourite destinations and her good command of French no doubt helped her savour the vast historical information she picked up (and wrote down). While in St. Omer, a border town near Belgium and the site of some of the war's bloodiest engagements, it was to the history of St. Omer she chose to look into in her spare time. Perhaps, in discovering the durable vestiges of France's and England's past, she was able to momentarily transcend the transient horrors of the times. In May 1917 she writes:

> I went to a lecture on St Omer [a monk] given by a clergyman. In his history he took us back to 600 A.D. and told us how in the time of Alfred the Great of England St Omer was a place of great learning and many learned men were sent from France to England many coming from this township…The Church of St Bertin and the Cathedral…date back to the thirteenth [century]. The former was destroyed at the time of the French Revolution as were many other famous things of the town.[92]

Even between hospitals Daisy was on the lookout for links to the past. On her way to No 3 AGH, Abbeville in July, she found interest in what has been described by others as a flat and dull terrain. It was not just the red poppies that caught her attention, but the historical significance of the place. 'One thing specially I noticed all about Boulogne and Calais', she remarks, 'were the beautiful golden fields of wild mustard, one can well imagine how gorgeous "The Field of the Cloth of Gold" must have been if held at that time of the year.'[93] Later, she delighted in seeing 'a house in which William the Conqueror was supposed to have dwelt.' She records: '…it is from there to Abbeville where his fleet lined the Somme on his way to conquer England for he was driven in to take refuge from the storm which raged in the Channel': a distant Somme indeed.[94]

---

[91] ibid., 29 September 1918.

[92] Richmond, 23 May 1917.

Daisy had a remarkable eye for detail, and lingered on the intricacies of art and artefact as she travelled around. At the fifteenth-century church of St. Riquier, in Vauchelles (near Abbeville) she thought the masonry inside 'very fine', especially the carved wooden doors and choir seats, the lectern on its marble pedestal, and a 'very fine statue of Joan of Arc' (she had earlier visited a dungeon in which Joan had been detained).[95] At the cathedral of Amiens, sandbagged at the entrance, it was, rather, the pulpit, altar and paintings to which she was drawn. 'The central altar, in particular, she found 'most marvellous in effect most beautiful figures of angels in the sky and standing out from it all a golden dove just below the incense.'[96] Her religious faith must have been strengthened and enlivened by such sights. When she picked up a piece of the bombed cathedral of Albert, as she wandered amongst bits of its wall and mosaic remains in 1918 perhaps she thought of her souvenir as a relic, come from sacred ground.

Nurses were allotted ten days' leave every six months and an annual short leave to Paris or the South of France.[97] Sick nurses were also accommodated in the leave locations to convalesce. These were magical occasions during which the nurses felt unusually privileged and spoilt. Recuperating from fatigue on the Riviera in February 1918, Anne Donnell, fresh from service near the front, felt she had been 'lifted out of the depths of hell to the Garden of Paradise',[98] while Ethel Gray, on leave in March in the coastal town of Menton, could not believe her luck when, on the first evening, she wrote in the 'beautiful library', then 'had a lovely hot bath and retired to bed in a lovely room [with a] soft real bed.'[99]

Ethel Gray's forty-page account of her Mediterranean break, bestrewn with superlatives of admiration and disbelief, is no mean testament of the pleasure she took in discovering the France of which she had read and dreamt. At the nurses' villa, lent to the British Government by a wealthy English captain and his wife, words of praise 'fail[ed]' her. 'How shall I describe this house, and these grounds, they seem almost beyond description…I can scarcely yet believe I am really here', she wrote.[100] Nonetheless, her descriptions are copious and evocatively rich, setting down not just her impressions of her lodgings (the terraced gardens, balconies, Japanese garden, with, in the distance, the ruins of a Roman amphitheatre and the Alps), but also of her itinerary that took her along the prime locations of the Côte d'Azur and inland Provence. So she toured indefatigably to Nice, Sospel, Castellan, La Turbie, Grasse, the Gorges du Loup…

For Ethel, as for most nurses, Monte Carlo was a major highlight, and she writes at length about the Casino, with its 'perfectly green' lawns and 'large spreading palms' on the outside, and, within, the large hall ('gorgeously decorated' with 'gilt everywhere') and the gaming room (though, being in uniform, she and her companions could only peep through the glass doors at the players—'some with strained eager faces, others simply going in and coming out as a matter of course').[101] Ethel took advantage of the Casino's cultural events and cites two occasions she particularly liked: the one, a matinée ballet ('the whole effect was quite the most wonderful I have seen'); the other a performance of *Rigoletto*, at which she was much struck by the emotionalism of the largely French audience:

---

[93] ibid., 12 July 1917.
[94] ibid., 6 December 1917.
[95] ibid., 16 August 1917.
[96] ibid., 21 August 1917.
[97] Goodman, *Our War Nurses*, p. 29.
[98] Donnell, 1 February 1918.
[99] Gray, 1 December 1917 – 31 January 1918.
[100] ibid.

> … at one place the audience were so charmed that they stood up and waved their handkerchiefs, and called out 'Bravo, Bravo', bowed to the performers, and were most enthusiastic. Of course you must remember it was a French audience, not an English one, and the French are much more demonstrative than the staid, quiet English, though not more appreciative, for not always voice or show speak [sic] the deepest feelings.[102]

After Armistice, when AANS nurses were given the option of returning home immediately, or remaining temporarily to travel or nurse in France, many did what others had done on leave, and Paris and Monte Carlo retained their popularity as the places they most wanted to see. Surprisingly, some ignored the well-trodden tourist routes, choosing, rather, to pick their way through ruined villages and empty battlefields, visiting here and there a cemetery or dismantled camp. No doubt they felt the historic importance of what they had done, and perhaps they saw their tour as a lap of honour, by which, in a manner, they could connect with the living and pay their last respects to the dead. 'Poor Compiègne!', lamented Nellie Crommelin of the town than had been the French Army Headquarters during the last Battle of the Aisne, 'Its railway station has been bombarded out of all recognition & its beautiful buildings are dreadful wrecks'.[103] Travelling south by train on 29 January 1919, Elsie Tranter wandered through the ruins of Arras. 'It must have been a beautiful city in Peace times but now all is waste', she noted. '…These ruins are to be left as war memorials…The cemetery has lines of trenches through it and the onetime vaults have been converted into dugouts.'[104] In little time 410 cemeteries would dot the Somme landscape. Amazingly, only two of the twenty-five Australian nurses who lost their lives in the war died in France.[105]

Heroically, nurses like Daisy Richmond, Ethel Gray, Elsie Tranter and Nellie Crommelin, stayed on in various hospitals, nursing the very sick. The Spanish influenza pandemic, rampant in 1917 and 1918, would claim over fifty million human lives. Many of its victims were the weakened soldiers of the Somme. As a result army hospitals like 3 AGH continued to operate until the crisis had passed. 'We are a sad family here today', Elise Tranter remarked on 18 February 1919. 'The pneumonic influenza epidemic seems to have renewed its vigour. We have had several boys admitted today…I am afraid three of my darling diggers are going to die before morning.' Two did.

Armistice was a jubilant occasion, and the Western Front nurses felt privileged to witness it in France, both as observers and participants. Elsie Tranter notes the festive atmosphere at Abbeville at the very moment it was officially announced:

---

[101] ibid.

[102] ibid.

[103] Crommelin, 26 January 1919.

[104] Tranter, 12 February 1919.

[105] For a table of nursing staff deaths, see Goodman, *Our War Nurses*, p. 99.

> At 11am Church bells pealed out, bugles were blown, guns boomed and France went almost mad with joy…the joy of the people was beyond bounds. Little children and adults too were singing and dancing in the streets, flags were flying from all the windows, both soldiers and civilians joined wholeheartedly in the cheering and singing, The French children were well provided with crackers and other fireworks and the adults were so excited they danced around kissing almost everyone they met first on one cheek then on the other.[106]

For herself, it was the dinner celebration put on by the 34th Battalion at Francourt that touched:

> The boys there were just the very nicest and made us feel very much at home straight away. There were so few sisters and so many boys that they had drawn lots for places. At the table they had Angel 1, Angel 2 and so on at our places…then when we were going out the boys formed an arch with their lighted cigarettes and sang to us 'For they are jolly good fellows' and 'good-bye.ee'. They gave us all the flowers from the tables for our mess. [107]

The return home after such momentous years was met by the nurses with mixed responses as they left their unusual posts behind them and set out to rebuild their lives. Some would return to civilian nursing. Many, tired and eager for a settled home life, would not. May Tilton, in her memoir, reflects upon how glad she had been to go back: 'Our own homeland is always best…but the thought struck me forcibly how little the people realized what was happening in Europe and what the war has done to us. One hardly realized the uselessness of it all, until we returned to civil life.'[108] For Grace Wilson, contemplating departure in 1918 after a parade and tea in a chateau, it was, rather, the thought of leaving a responsible career and fulfilling life: 'I wonder if, after the war, numbers of us will come a bump when we find we are not the most important people present at these things', she mused.[109] With the demobilisation of the Australian units following Armistice she envisaged the loss of purpose and comradeship she and others might face:

> It seems quite sad to see our own AIF units break up. It would have been good—had it been possible for them to have gone back in units—But that could not be—so many come in to say 'Au revoir' on their way to England and home. They want to go home and yet saying good-bye to so many good friends is not good. As troops are mobilised, units split up. Australia seems so big and one feels we will be scattered and lost in it. So many have lived as comrades for 3 or 4 years—who will after the return be separated in different states—thousands of miles apart. I know for my part, I have met many people I want to see often. Yet I feel that, as like as not, I never will—and yet I know them better and like them more than people I have known all my life.[110]

For Elsie Tranter on the day of her return (17 May 1919), 'Australia [was] the strongest call of all.' But she, like others, felt the significance of what had been achieved.

---

[106] Tranter, 11 November 1918.
[107] Tranter, 27 November 1918.
[108] Tilton *The Grey Battalion*, p. 309.
[109] Wilson, November 1918.
[110] ibid., 22 March 1919.

‘Tonight seems the end of so much’, she reflected. ‘Thoughts of the varied experiences we have passed through here crowd close tonight—experiences—some pleasant, some ghastly—all worthwhile.’ So the nurses had contributed to the united struggle of two distant worlds: the one an historic Europe, the cradle of democracy, that had been preserved; the other, the homeland they had represented abroad. Nellie Crommelin undoubtedly spoke on behalf of many, when, with particular fervour, she wrote down these words on New Year’s Eve 1918:

> We are entering our third year in France & I am so proud & glad of my service here. I do not regret any of the time here. I shall remember it all my days as the most wonderful time of my life…What of danger & hardships we have had to share with the French have only helped to draw us together to strengthen the bond between the splendid ancient Nation and the New and equally promising country which I am proud to belong to.

4

Stella Bowen's 'education of another sort': the Paris Years, 1922-1933[1]

> I love and adore Paris. I love the way its quick and brilliant life runs openly on the surface for all to see. Every face in the street, every voice, every shape, is hard at it, telling its story, living its life, producing itself…In Paris you will never feel shut out, starved for human contacts, and denied your bit of life…Paris is the Heaven of all shy and lonely people who want life to come to them of its own accord. I suppose it is because the French are never ashamed to live…they are determined to get their bit of fun and bit of decoration on the way, so they bring their life out with them into the boulevards and cafés, and it gets into the air, and is soaked up into the houses and into the soil of the Luxembourg Gardens.[2]

> Paris is good for me, because I am a sluggard and can do with a great deal of stimulus.[3]

Stella Bowen left her Adelaide home in Australia in 1914. She was twenty-one and eager to paint and forge a life of her own. Painting had long been a love of hers, cherished since childhood, then nurtured in her teenage years in a private art school. She could not have known when she set out that she would come to mix with some of Paris's most avant-garde artists and writers, nor that she would acquire a painting style now recognized as distinctly her own. From modest beginnings she embarked on a nomadic life, especially in Paris, with her partner Ford Madox Ford. Humble dwellings were to be her lot wherever she settled or moved, but her paintings, painstakingly executed, were her constant companions and eventually her livelihood. When she became an official Australian war artist in Britain in the Second World War she reached a pinnacle of achievement borne of long years of artistic purpose previously much thwarted by Ford's departure and the resulting responsibility of rearing their child on her own. Those experiences are largely recorded in her memoir, *Drawn from Life*, published in 1941. They were to be nuanced when her correspondence with Ford was published in 1993, well after both had died.

In fact the journey that took Bowen from Australia, to London, to France, then to England again was not an entirely unusual measure for women artists of talent and ambition of the time. The exodus of Australian women artists to France and Europe was well in train when Bowen resolved to leave for England after the death of her mother in 1913. Painters like Hilda Rix Nicholas, Grace Crowley, Kathleen O'Connor, and Dorrit Black, to name but a handful, all made the journey, though few—notably Anne Dangar and Bowen herself—did not return.[4] Such women, many of whom were to become the female leaders of Australian modernism, saw 'the overseas trip' as a chance to imbibe the artistic modes that flourished in the wake of French impressionism and post-impressionism, and to break free of their felt (and actual) exclusion from the male-dominated pastoralist Heidelberg school.[5] Nonetheless Bowen and her sister artists belonged to an era when, as her memoir points out, 'Boys did leave home. Girls didn't'[6], and her eventual decision to remain abroad was more the exception than the norm. Independent women travellers were typically perceived as a little bohemian, none more than those with a brush and palette in hand.

---

[1] 'I left school at seventeen and have remained to this day a disgracefully uneducated person in any academic sense. This book is about an education of another sort' Stella Bowen, *Drawn from Life*, introduction by Julia Loewe, Picador Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1999 (first published by Collins Publishers Limited, 1941, then by Virago Press, 1984), pp.15-16. Subsequent page references are to the Pan Macmillan edition, indicated by DL.

[2] DL, pp.97-99.

[3] DL, p.98.

Bowen's memoir is a precious volume. It reports both the joys and hardships of living abroad. Many were those women of the early twentieth century who saw Paris as a mecca for witnessing art in the making while improving their artistic skills. But few have so meticulously brought personal endeavour and historic and social circumstance into vivid narrative synchrony. Bowen betrays the difficulty women artists of her era had in making art their career, even as they exulted in the freedoms they found abroad. More specifically, she relates the private journey of one who sought to reconcile artistic success, domestic duty and personal integrity.

''''

Bowen's lasting love affair with Paris began in 1922 at the height of that expatriate migration to the Left Bank that began as a trickle at the turn of the century, then exploded after the Great War to become one of history's most intense and fertile literary eras, duly dubbed 'the crazy years' ('les années folles'). Bowen was there with the Hemingways[7] and the Pounds,[8] with James Joyce,[9] with Djuna Barnes, Sylvia Beach and the formidable Gertrude Stein.[10] She was there, too, with her partner, Ford Madox Ford,[11] by then a respected modernist forefather, critic and author of some renown. Alongside them she would party, relish the intellectual and social freedoms of Left Bank life, discuss art, tend her family and mix in milieux she could not have imagined before her departure from Australia in 1914. Only in the wake of the spectacular Wall Street Crash and worsening world political conditions did she join the mass expatriate exodus from France as its once favourable exchange rate fell. By then it was 1933, she was forty, a near-penniless single mother, but she had become a diligent and modestly ambitious painter. 'Playtime was clearly over' she reflected of the time, 'But what a good playtime it had been!'[12] Yet, if a singular chapter of her life had closed when she left for England, it was to open up in new and unexpected ways before her untimely death in 1947.

---

[4] Alongside male artists like Rupert Bunny and Charles Conder (to name but two) and estimated sixty serious Australian women artists were studying art in Europe between 1880 and 1914; statistics deduced by Ros Pesman, *Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad*, Oxford University Press, 1996, endnote 20, p. 230. On Australian women artists in France and Europe in the twentieth century see Helen Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists 1900–1940*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1996, and Jane Hylton, *Modern Australian Women: Paintings and Prints, 1925–1945*, Art Gallery of South Australia, 2000.

[5] The School, at its height in the late 1890s and early 1890s, was named after a rural area outside Melbourne, where its members—notably Conder, Streeton, McCubbin and Roberts— famously painted *en plein air*.

[6] DL, p.19.

[7] Hemingway was in Paris during 1921–1928.

[8] Ezra Pound, a well-established imagist poet by the end of World War I, lived in Paris from 1920–1924.

[9] In Paris from 1920–1940.

[10] All three women were participants in the largely American expatriate lesbian literary circles that flourished in 1920s Left Bank Paris, and of which Gertrude Stein was considered the matriarch.

[11] Ford came to France in 1922 with Bowen and left Paris permanently in 1928, when their relationship ended.

When Bowen and Ford arrived in Paris they must have cut an unusual figure as a couple. She was twenty-nine, beautiful (judging from a black-and-white photograph of the period), dark-eyed, with short hair slicked back straight from her face in the style of the new 'modern woman'; he was twenty years her senior, large, dishevelled, sandy-haired with pale eyes and a drooping mouth, an appearance she faithfully rendered in portraits now acclaimed for having captured his shabby grandeur and gentlemanly bohemian mien.[13] Together they were to become key identities in what became known as 'The Quarter', an area, popularised and much populated by a 1920s flood of artistic pilgrims, that ran north of the old Latin Quarter and spread out from the Boulevard du Montparnasse, the Boulevard Raspail and the church of St. Germain. To this well-defined piece of early twentieth-century Parisian geography, Ford and Bowen came in search of art, fair weather and friends.

Estelle Gwendolyn Bowen was born on 16 May 1893 in Adelaide of a middle-class low-church Anglican family. She remembers her mother, widowed when she was three, as a 'gentle and loving saint', strait-laced in habit, pious, proper and well-intentioned.[14] She herself, she recalls, was 'a stodgy and law-abiding little girl [with a] straight fringe and long dark ringlets, artificially induced', and always 'dressed in white or cream'.[15] Her early life, led in the stuffy circles of a parochial colonial city, was, if safe and carefree, also ordered and staid. Her childhood, she remembers, was marked out by church teas, 'decorous games'[16] and Sunday night hymn singing, and her adolescence by the Wednesday and Saturday tennis party, the respectable weekend dance and the occasional ball. 'I wish I knew the truth about that strangely dim and distant life…before the war', she mused in 1941…

> …I have reconstructed it in my memory as a queer little backwater of intellectual timidity—a kind of hangover of Victorian provincialism, isolated by three immense oceans and a great desert, and stricken by recurrent waves of paralysing heat. It lies shimmering on a plain encircled by soft blue hills, prettyish, banal, and filled to the brim with an anguish of boredom.[17]

---

[12] DL, p.213.

[13] Notably those of c.1924 (*Ford in a Bow-Tie* and *Ford in an Open Collar*), and of 1927 (*Ford Playing Solitaire*).

[14] DL, p.7.

[15] DL, p.10.

[16] DL, p.9.

[17] DL, p.4

With Bowen's unhurried upbringing came an education that bore the hallmark limitations of Victorian feminine instruction and the formation of the feminine mind: small preparation, she later lamented, for the intellectually daunting literary circles to which she would eventually belong. 'I…have remained to this day a disgracefully uneducated person in any academic sense',[18] she rues in the memoir (which nonetheless draws attention to her love of reading and gift for art). Her schooling, indeed, seems to have been conservative and dull. In her final two years in 'a quite unselect' institute, following her attendance at a private ladies' school, she was introduced to science (such as girls then learnt it), as well as algebra (to which she admits having been 'blind'), and geometry (liked for its 'visual' dimension), and at seventeen she sat and passed South Australia's Senior Public Examination.[19] At the same time she was given the usual bourgeois opportunity to evolve into a suitably accomplished and potentially marriageable young woman. Dancing classes, which she commenced when she was about nine, were conducted in the Governor's 'vaguely' Georgian-furnished residence, with the 'mamas' seated on 'pale blue tufted satin chairs',[20] watching proudly on; then there was piano, for which she claimed 'no gift' and found 'a dreadful bore', all the more so that it demanded two hours' daily practice on the semi-grand Bechstein in the family's dark and cluttered drawing-room;[21] finally there was art, for which she did have a gift, and was allowed to study at the Adelaide School of Design until her final exams loomed. 'There', she says, 'I learnt to draw cubes, cones, pots, scrolls, and plant-life, and later to paint (in *water-colour*, if you can believe it) still-life groups'.[22] Her subjects were slippers, beads, vases of satin-bowed peacock feathers and fans. In Paris, on the other side of the world, Picasso, Braque and abstract art reigned.

In fact Bowen's love of art grew in her adolescence. With her mother's permission, she attended an art school run by Rose MacPherson (later to become Margaret Preston) 'a red-headed little firebrand of a woman' and 'an excellent painter', her memoir recalls, who had returned 'fresh from Paris', and was probably 'the only person in South Australia to employ a nude model', albeit 'a little girl of fourteen'.[23] MacPherson, who had not then developed the painting style for which she would become famous, and taught by methods Bowen later chose to reject, nonetheless motivated her and was largely instrumental in inspiring her to study further afield. 'Going up the stairs of that [MacPherson's] studio were the happiest moments of my life', she remembers, 'All sorts of new aesthetic sensibilities began sprouting in my spirit like mushrooms'.[24] Once in London and keen to improve her painting skills, Bowen enrolled in Walter Sickert's classes in the internationally recognised Westminster School.[25]

---

[18] DL, pp.15-16.

[19] DL, p.15.

[20] DL, p.20.

[21] DL, p.12.

[22] DL, p.13.

[23] DL, p.18; Preston studied in Europe and Paris between 1904 and 1907 and exhibited in the Paris Salon in 1905 and 1906. She returned to Adelaide, but left for Europe again in 1912 and was in Paris and Brittany between 1913 and 1914.

[24] ibid.

[25] Sickert (1860–1942) was a French-influenced English impressionist painter who championed the avant-garde before World War I. He taught at Westminster School between 1908 and 1910, then fortnightly as a visiting master (see DL, p. 47).

Bowen's encounter with Ford was the result of chance rather than design. Shortly after her arrival in England she moved from her pre-arranged lodgings with a puritanical Pimlico family to a hostel, then a studio shared with a drama student friend. It was in those years, she reckoned, that her 'adult life may be said to have begun'.[26] Indubitably it did. Within three years she had not only rubbed shoulders with a medley of London's wartime pacifists and fringe political reformists in the random way in which students excel; she had also met the imposing self-exiled American poet, Ezra Pound, who, after attending one of the girls' free-spirited parties, resolved on a whim to take them under his intellectual wing. The inferiority Bowen remembers having felt upon her inclusion in Pound's 'precious and exclusive' milieu (it included T. S. Eliot, Arthur Waley, P. Wyndham Lewis, James Joyce and Ford)[27] may have stemmed in part from a measure of colonial 'cultural cringe', but, given the reputation of such up-and-coming notables, her cause for awe was probably neither unfounded nor unreasonable.[28] At all events, she judged that in their presence her 'education proceeded by leaps and bounds'.[29]

Ford was introduced to Bowen in October 1917 when he was on sick leave from the British army and still the notorious lover of the Edwardian femme fatale and author, Violet Hunt (later to write a vituperative account of their affair).[30] At the time, thanks to Pound's vigilance, Bowen was well acquainted with Ford's writings: his novels *Ladies Whose Bright Eyes* (1911) and *The Good Soldier* (1915), which had earned him popular recognition, were by then, she records, 'two of the best-thumbed books on [her and her flatmate's] shelves'.[31] Ford probably was as impressive as Bowen's memoir recalls. He was the grandson of the artist Ford Madox Brown, and had mixed since childhood with such artistic luminaries as Turgenev, Swindon and the Pre-Raphaelite Rossettis (to whom he was related), and in early adulthood with Conrad, Henry James and H. G. Wells. To boot, he was fluent in French and German and was a brilliant and witty conversationalist, however complex and messy his private and emotional life was early on (and proved to remain).[32] Bowen immediately took to his erudition, 'mellow voice', 'conventional, omniscient manner' and 'tragic vulnerability',[33] and even from the retrospective point of view of the memoir, which describes a demanding companion and an eventually unfaithful lover, she admits having first found him 'the most enthralling person [she] had ever met' and 'the wise man' whom she 'had come across the world to find'.[34]

---

[26] DL, p.46.

[27] DL, p.53.

[28] All these intellectuals contributed to the short-lived Vorticist journal *Blast* (1914–1915), edited by Wyndham Lewis and co-edited by Ezra Pound, and/or to the avant-garde *The Little Review*, edited by Pound between 1917 and 1918.

[29] DL, p.63.

[30] Hunt was then an established British writer, mainly of supernatural fiction.

[31] DL, p.67.

[32] His first breakdown was in 1904, and his first marriage, a prelude to an estimated twenty relationships, ended in 1908, though he never divorced. Recent biographies on Ford include A. Judd, *Ford Madox Ford* (Harvard University Press, 1990); Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1996); Joseph J. Wiesenfarth, *Ford Madox Ford and the Regiment of Women: Violet Hunt, Jean Rhys, Stella Bowen, Janice Biala*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2005. For a feminist analysis of Bowen and Ford's relationship see Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinsky's Lunch*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 2001 (first published 1999).

[33] DL, p.68.

[34] DL, p.69.

There is good reason to believe that Bowen and Ford were blissfully happy in the early years of their partnership, initially spent, in quick succession, on two rented and muddy farms in Sussex. Experienced farmers they were not, but their correspondence of 1917–1922 reveals the devotion with which they planned their life ahead, and the memoir, for all the bitter-sweet misgivings it accrues, pays a kind of ultimate homage (Ford died in 1939) to the mutual intellectual and physical attraction they first enjoyed.[35] In that latter document the seeds of Bowen's later discontent are unequivocally laid bare: Ford's demands for uninterrupted working time; the 'prodigies of domestic organisation' she had to perform 'to keep things quiet for him'; the sacrifices she made on her painting time[36] (88). But Bowen, the memoirist, is firm about the advantages of having lived with a mind of such imaginative scope and aesthetic breeding and one cannot but wonder how different her life might have been had they not tired of English winters and the drudgery of farming in the rain and not moved to Paris via Provence and a villa in the sun. It was late 1922 when they set sail. With them they brought their two-year-old daughter, Julie,[37] the security of Bowen's Adelaide annual allowance and the prospect of eventual royalties from Ford's latest book, *The Marsden Case* (1923).[38] Bowen's close to the memoir's second chapter reads, in the broadest sense, as closure upon a relationship whose inadequacies, elsewhere detailed, one must judge against the mental good and high hopes she nonetheless reckoned it gave:

> What I got out of it was a remarkable and liberal education, administered in ideal circumstances. I got an emotional education too, of course, but that was easier. One might get that from anyone! But to have the run of a mind of that calibre, with all its inconsistencies, its generosity, its blind spots, its spaciousness, and vision, and its great sense of form and style, was a privilege for which I am still trying to say 'thank you'.[39]

'Paris—the Paris of the gay and glamorous nineteen-twenties—was waiting to engulf us. To me, it meant painters and painting, and to Ford, people to talk to about prose technique'.[40] It was, it did—even if this was to be unequally the case, and the fruits it inspired unequally brought to bear. Bowen was to become, variously, the friend, acquaintance, portraitist and mentor of some of the Left Bank's then most colourful artistic personalities, as well as one of its inspired hopefuls—at once struggling painter, party-thrower and juggler of maternal duties, entranced by France and the freedoms of the Montparnasse lifestyle. As parts of her memoir that traverse the period read like a veritable Left Bank 'Who's Who', as she sets out what have come down in history as telling vignettes of a long past era and of the members of its (not always) illustrious passing parade. So, in recounting the 'exhilaration of being in Paris',[41] she pays homage to the transient many she met and knew: Hemingway of the ‘immense grin and tough-seeming bonhomie’; James Joyce, ‘the most courteous and unassuming of guests’;[42] the ‘lawless and exuberant’ painters, Cedric Morris and Lett Haines;[43] Ford’s American literary agent, ‘the extremely cultivated’ William Bradley;[44] the English essayist and poet Edith Sitwell, a woman of ‘extreme sensitiveness’ and ‘exaggerated courtesy’;[45] Gertrude Stein, writer, fond surrogate aunt to daughter Julie and ‘a very commonsensible person, of a robust and earthy disposition, ever ready with domestic advice’ [46] … ‘I felt that to these folk I must appear as a very ordinary, sentimental bourgeoise’,[47] she remarked of one occasion, with that edge of unworthiness but charitable recognition of others that permeates the memoir. In fact, those of her portraits of such ‘folk’ that have survived constitute a testament to her rare gift for catching a likeness (something at which she herself marvelled),[48] borne out in portraits that are now admired: Ford playing patience (he believed it helped him think); Sisley Huddleston of the iconic broad-brimmed hat, Edith Sitwell of the long, aristocratic face, slender hands and soulful eyes.[49]

---

[35] Part One, *The Correspondence of Ford Madox Ford and Stella Bowen*, ed. Sondra J. Stang and Karen Cochran (with supplementary notes by Julia Madox Loewe), Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1993.

[36] DL, p.88. In her excellent biography of Bowen, *Stravinsky's Lunch*, Drusilla Modjeska claims the title she chose was inspired by the composer's selfish habit of demanding his family be quiet at lunch if he was thinking, p.16.

[37] Esther Julia (called Julie) was born in November 1920.

[38] £20 a month (hence £240 a year), according to the memoir, p.27.

[39] DL, p.70.

[40] DL, p.124.

[41] DL, p.127.

Bowen’s sharp analyses of 1920s Left Bank society elicit her clear understanding of what was at stake for the expatriate literary and artistic community, and why, at least for many, it felt imperative to be there. Paris, she asserts, was then, quite simply, both the ‘nerve-centre of the arts’, and ‘the happy meeting-place’ for throwing off the ‘shackles and prejudices’ of home, evidenced in ‘wage slavery’, an ‘embittered marriage’, or ‘war’.[50] Her remarks, if wrought in part from hard personal experience (she had been a pacifist during the war, and she and Ford—who had acrimoniously left his wife in 1908—were, and would remain, notoriously poor), astutely sum up the general motivations from which the phenomenon of the expatriate transmigration sprang. Escape from the perceived—and real—repressions of their homelands was, indeed, what brought predominantly British and American foreigners to postwar Paris in hordes. The war had bred disillusionment amongst their countries’ conscientious objectors while titillating the fancy of others who had glimpsed the cultural wealth of Europe and France while on military service abroad. They were the malcontents Gertrude Stein has been attributed with calling the ‘Lost Generation’: the postwar’s spiritual casualties who wanted to forget the past and re-begin—or party away—their lives.[51] Of their number Americans made up a large share.[52] Representatively, they not only regretted a war they felt had been futile and over-glorified; they also resented the proscriptions in their own land of a highly moralistic society driven by principles of work, thrift, self-discipline, sexual propriety and regulatory laws. High on the list of their dissatisfactions was the censorship by the United States Post Office of Europe's new, liberal literatures and the Prohibition Act of 1919. France and Europe beckoned as the lands of the socially and intellectually free.

---

[42] ibid.
[43] ibid.
[44] DL, p.147.
[45] DL, p.203.
[46] DL, p.142.
[47] DL, p.128.
[48] DL, p.240.
[49] Huddleston, a British journalist and historian, adopted France as his home and wrote extensively on France. The Latin Quarter society, of which he was part, is evoked in *Bohemian Literary and Social Life in Paris: Salons, Cafés, Studios* (1928). The British poet and critic Edith Sitwell became one of Bowen’s most long-standing friends.
[50] DL, p.135.
[51] Hemingway used the expression as an epigraph for his novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), and in a chapter on Stein in *A Moveable Feast* (‘Une Génération perdue’, posthumous, 1964). The ‘lost generation’ and the flailing American values of the 1920s were the subjects of an inflammatory symposium the American historian Harold Stearns held and edited in 1922: *Civilisation in the United States: An Enquiry by Thirty Americans.*

Of course, Paris was not just a refuge for the foreign disheartened; it was a lure for the artistically talented and inclined, the much-reputed—and much fabled—capital of artistic innovation that by the 1920s was still stunning the world. 'We were alive to all its beauty', remarks Bowen, 'all its excellence of craftsmanship and precision of expression', 'we [wanted] to educate ourselves'.[53] In this, Montparnasse had special appeal. Not only was it close to the vibrant art student community of the Latin Quarter proper that thronged and lived in and around the district's famous art schools; by the early twentieth century it had become the stamping-ground of some of the leaders of Paris's 'new' artistic and literary avant-garde (Picasso, Derain, Modigliani, Chagall, the poet Apollinaire…) who had tired of Montmartre's transformation into a tourist attraction and sought to establish an alternative, more serious locale. The expatriates, who were in fact remarkably insular in social habit and artistic endeavour, typically mixing and exchanging ideas in circles of their own, were nonetheless much taken with the idea of living in Paris's artistic heartland and savouring the delights of Montparnasse's distinctive café life and entertainments with adopted bohemian zeal.

Nowhere did intellectual and social life come more cohesively together in the 'Quarter', than in the cafés and cheap restaurants it popularised and spawned, with the most patronised (notably the Select, the Rotonde and the Dôme) clustered around the intersection of the Boulevard du Montparnasse and the Boulevard Raspail. These were the venues par excellence in which earnest discussion and gossip indiscriminately flowed, where books were written and clients co-mingled, regardless of class, sex or sexual preference, and degrees of wealth, talent and fame. Ford was a regular at the famous Closerie des Lilas and the Deux Magots, and he and Bowen were frequenters of the locality's bars and bistros, whether of the fashionable or the undiscovered back-street kind. Bowen's descriptions of Adelaide Sundays, centred around home and staid church teas, contrast with those of her Left Bank days, ritualistically begun, with no sense of shame, in a bar, after which they 'sall[ied] forth in gaiety', Julie at their side, for a budget lunch at the crowded tables of the local Nègre de Toulouse or the Restaurant Cécile.[54] In France, she recalls:

> …the apéritif before lunch is the real high spot of the day…On Sundays…we would stop first for an apéritif on the terrasse of the Closerie des Lilas, facing the trees which surround the statue of the Maréchal Ney, with the old Bal Bullier opposite and the clipped chestnut avenues of the Petit Luxembourg stretching away in formal perspective to the left…presently we

---

[52] By 1927 the American Chamber of Commerce estimated there were 15,000 Americans residing in Paris, though, since many did not register with the police, it is believed there could have been around 40,000, William Wiser, *The Crazy Years: Paris in the Twenties,* Atheneum, New York,1983, p. 182.

[53] DL, p.183.

[54] DL, p.128.

> would be joined by Hadley and Ernest Hemingway who lived just round the corner in a timber yard.[55]

No such *terrasses* spilled onto the footpaths of her colonial Adelaide, nor would she have had the social licence to frequent them had it been so. Remembering her last days in France and a happy Sunday lunch spent with artist friends in 'fast and friendly talk' over 'a fine salad and a bottle of wine', she posits 'roast beef and Yorkshire pudding', and the 'somnolence of the English Sabbath' as social eons away.[56] Indeed, to the café and the informal meal, repeatedly evoked in the memoir, Bowen attributes much of her social and intellectual maturation, nurtured in tandem in the typical French way. As fast as she acquired what she called a 'palate', so she reckoned, she became 'civilise[d]'. Thanks to her French friend, Jenny Bradley, whom she recalls as 'a 'brilliant wit' and 'the finest conversationalist I have ever known', and to her husband William's 'unparalleled knowledge' of 'how to eat, and where', Bowen claims that the 'confusions' of Montparnasse took on a 'new slant' and that the 'Adelaide prejudices which [had] still fogged the corners of [her] mind' fell way.[57] 'We lived in France', she said, 'because the French understood how to live far better than we did'.[58] By comparison, she judged, 'London conversation', like 'London streets', was 'slack', 'heavy' and 'slow'.[59] To be sure, in Bowen's Paris, the rhythms and codes of daily life were different from those of her colonial days. Sport was no longer life's major interest. It was the café strip—not the 'Oval', Adelaide's 'great centre of social life'—that appealed.[60] 'Proficiency at tennis' was not the ultimate measure of one's 'social popularity', nor playing it the regulator of how one's week was arranged.[61] One no longer had to wait until six on Wednesdays and Saturdays for 'doubles' with brash businessmen or 'pimply young simpleton[s]', one's predictable partners at dances and balls.[62] Instead, when one strolled down the Boulevard du Montparnasse at any time of the night or day, one was more likely to bump into an artist, a poet, a homosexual friend, an eccentric one had met at a party or over a drink and to whom one had instinctively warmed.

Conviviality, conversation and friendships evolved as the mainstay of Bowen's life: they nourished her early relationship with Ford; they helped her survive the pain of their separation; they influenced her interest in portraiture. She liked visiting, and interesting people came to her place in throngs. Her parties, hosted in her studios once a week on a shoe-string, were matched by the private dances she and Ford famously held in the local *bals musettes* and cafés.[63] The shy girl of Adelaide days became 'a reasonably fearless mixer',[64] one, her daughter Julie remembers, who made friends 'wherever she went', the sole requirement being that they be 'neither cruel nor phony', 'nor yet…boring', nor necessarily ‘famous and sophisticated’ (though many were).[65] She had ‘a genius for living’ her friend Keith Hancock, the Australian historian, recalled.[66]

---

[55] DL, pp.128-129.
[56] DL, p.265.
[57] DL, pp.146-148.
[58] DL, p.183.
[59] DL, p.263.
[60] DL, p.21.
[61] DL, p.20.
[62] DL, p.21.
[63] *Correspondence*, transcript notes by Loewe, p. 206.
[64] DL, p.171.

Montparnasse parties, ranging from the outright orgy to the decorous intellectual Friday afternoon teas Nathalie Barney famously gave in the Rue Jacob, were both symptomatic of 1920s abandon and pre-eminently informal affairs. One danced to forget one’s poverty and one’s artistic struggles; one danced to celebrate one’s newly-found social freedoms— consider the graceful Sapphic dances Barney held with her lesbian sisters in the leafy garden of her *pavillon*.[67] Not for Bowen the stiffness of the French ‘drawing-room reception’,[68] nor any unwanted repetition of the stuffy dances of her Adelaide youth, with their none-too-hidden agenda of getting you partnered, hopefully for life. ‘Parties’, she maturely reckoned, ought to be given ‘with no ulterior motive but that of enjoyment’;[69] ‘social ambitions’,[70] she felt, spelt their certain ‘death’.[71] ‘A good party’, she concludes, ‘is a time and a place where people can be a little more than themselves; a little exaggerated, less cautious, and readier to reveal their true spirit than in daily life’,[72] not, then, the kind she had been brought up to expect, where ‘brightness’ was ‘prized’ in a girl, but not boldness, nor being ‘considered fast’.[73] Her unforgettable image of Ford shuffling amiably with the short, plump ‘Miss Barney’ —she ‘dripping [in] white fringes’, neither ‘young’, both ‘stout and gay, and completely unselfconscious’[74]—sits strangely with that of her Adelaide debutante self. ‘I had “come out”’, she recollects, ‘in white net over white satin, trimmed with my mother’s honiton lace which she had heroically had bleached for the occasion, and with a bouquet of white flowers’ (22).[75] ‘I didn’t catch on at all’, she admits, ‘…I became the hostesses’ despair’, when ‘partnerless’[76] (22). Though, once married, she adds, a girl rarely got asked to dance.

The pleasure Bowen found in casual company was enhanced by the intellectual stimulus it provided, all the more so that Paris placed her in proximity to cultural treasures and activities of an abundant and varied kind. In this Bowen was both blessed and a little cursed. Clearly she profited from opportunities for a cultural immersion that some of the more insular expatriates chose to neglect: her correspondence, particularly, bears witness to the enthusiasm with which she visited the theatre, the cinema, and art exhibitions in the company of friends, or with Julie, especially during Ford’s long professional absences abroad.[77] But, her intellectual growth, at least in the early 1920s, was much shaped by Ford's literary endeavours, and those of the circles in which he moved: as fast as she matured, so she gained the desire and impetus to paint. The intellectual freedoms she encountered in Paris both stifled and liberated her as she came to seek her own working time and space. That double bind, her fidelity to Ford (the man and the writer), and her will to develop her own career, are the subject of much of the latter part of *Drawn from Life*, although the destabilising process was long and complicated and, as her correspondence reveals, not always as the memoir publicly claims. It is indeed the composite tensions that unevenly surface in those texts that establish her expatriate experience as one of both struggle and disappointment and of a dogged but inspired determination to realise her artistic ideals.

---

[65] DL, p. vii.

[66] DL, p. xv.

[67] Described in Wiser, *The Crazy Years*, p. 113. At the time Bowen describes Barney was already an established poet and *salonnière*. A lesbian herself, she strongly supported the expatriate lesbian literary circles of the Quarter, while inviting literary notables, such as Valéry and Gide, to her famous ‘afternoons’, as Bowen correctly records (DL, p. 182).

[68] DL, p.145.

[69] DL, p.144.

[70] ibid.

[71] ibid.

[72] ibid.

[73] DL, p.25.

[74] DL, p.182.

[75] DL, p.22. Honiton lace, of which Queen Victoria’s wedding dress was made, thence became fashionable and was popularly used for bridal wear. No doubt Bowen’s had been handed down from her mother’s wedding attire.

[76] ibid.

The open yet closed nature of the expatriate community—it opened Bowen to free thought; as a woman it denied her the same easy path to the kind of creative independence Ford seemingly unquestioningly enjoyed—may not have been expressly responsible for the end of her and Ford's partnership and her subsequent commitment to her art but it was, it appears, a contributing cause. Ford, the memoir attests, had assumed the privilege of long working hours as early as their Sussex days, and, whatever Bowen's retrospective resentments on the matter, such was the domestic arrangement they made—in fact, he thanked her repeatedly in his letters of 1926–1928 for her stalwart support.[78] But, more broadly, male privilege was deeply embedded~~,~~ in the culturally paternalistic heterosexual Montparnasse milieux to which Ford belonged. Literary enterprise within that culture was essentially male-dominated and male-served (consider the intellectual clout at the time of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Pound, Joyce and Ford). Of those heterosexual women moving in the same circles who aspired to be writers and artists as well as lovers or wives, many took on satellite roles in which they put the careers of their partners first, especially where child-rearing was involved. Shari Benstock's lengthy study of Left Bank women writers, 1900–1940, largely refers to those who belonged to its lesbian milieux because they, more than their heterosexual sisters, made a substantial literary mark. This, in her opinion, was partly because their working conditions were on the whole more equitably balanced: their relationships, outside the mainstream culture, encouraged them to look to each other for intellectual sustenance and support, and were, if not necessarily any less prone to emotional complications, then free of parental duty and the social and domestic pressures put upon traditional heterosexual partnerships.[79] Such pressures, it will later be shown, played a part in the collapse of Ford and Bowen's eleven-year affair.

To what extent Ford was culpable of soaking up Bowen's time as he forged ahead with his writing and to what extent she willingly accepted her feminine lot (as many women then did) is a fraught issue. Suffice it to say at this point that the division of professional labour in their early union was decidedly in Ford's favour. The 1920s saw him at his most productive, while Bowen was simultaneously struggling with motherhood and the maintenance of a series of barely affordable studios, as well as guarding the fort when Ford was away. During the 1920s alone he published some eighteen works, including his masterpiece, a tetralogy that appeared in sequence in 1924, 1925, 1926 and 1928.[80] Between 1926 and 1928, as his reputation soared, so he embarked on lengthy trips to New York, where he was feted with press interviews and dinners, while lecturing widely on literary subjects at public functions and private clubs. The year 1924, in particular, made great demands on his and Bowen's life. Ford, then in Paris, launched his literary journal, the *Transatlantic Review*, while having an affair with one of the contributors, the then aspiring novelist, Jean Rhys.[81] The journal itself, although short-lived (it lasted but a year), was a vast and ambitious undertaking, for which he not only sought funds and judged and proof-read the manuscripts (with Hemingway's co-editing help), but to which he himself contributed a swathe of literary reviews.[82] It is no mean proof of Bowen's staunch help and grace that she served the teas at the 'at home' editorial Thursdays and used most her Australian annuity savings to pay expenses, all the while harbouring the near-destitute Rhys in what became an unfortunate if brief *ménage à trois*. In contrast, Bowen's concomitant artistic progress was painfully slow, though, in fairness, it ought to be said that Ford expressed great faith in her artistic abilities (as their correspondence confirms), and that he looked after Julie in 1923 when she took a short trip with the Pounds to Italy and its galleries, an experience she recognised as 'a very big event in [her] artistic life'.[83] (108). During her time in the South of France, Bowen fared better, but Paris of the late 1920s, involving the juggling of nannies and schools for the growing Julie when Ford was in America, where he began another of his 'entanglements', was, her letters stoically relate, emotionally and professionally hard.[84] Not that her time was ill-spent: by 1928 she had executed a spate of portraits including four of Ford and two of herself, tellingly in a painter's smock.[85] As well she finished a masterful triptych of the staff of the Nègre de Toulouse in which the waitresses, clustered like Fra Angelica cherubs on the outer panels, surround the two proprietors, positioned in the centre panel, much as art patrons were in Renaissance works. It may not have come as a surprise to the philandering Ford when she wrote to him in New York in October 1927: '…I would like to ask you not to envisage using your bureau here in the studio in any way for the Review. Since I've been working here hard, regularly, I realise how much I count upon being quiet and alone in the studio.' The letter, as did those that ensued, began 'My dear' (she had dropped her customary 'darling'). In it she praised Ford's last book and recent work, while noting she had 'finished a pretty good new drawing of Bradley', 'got off 8 drawings to the frame makers', 'planned out a picture of a boquet [sic] of flowers in paper', and 'done 5 portraits since you left.'[86]

---

[77] Notably to New York.

[78] His most moving declaration of thanks was written from New York on 20 November 1926, *Correspondence*, p. 230. It was included in the preface of the 1927 edition of his 1915 novel *The Good Soldier*, much to Bowen's delight, *Correspondence,* p. 304.

[79] *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1986, reprinted in paperback 1988, pp. 450–452.

---

[80] *Some Do Not…* (1924), *No More Parades* (1925), *A Man Could Stand Up* (1926), *The Last Post* (1928).

[81] Rhys (1890–1976), a Caribbean novelist, published her first four novels in the 1920s and 1930s, largely thanks to Ford's early financial and literary support. However, it was not until the 1960s that she gained wide recognition.

[82] The review was originally funded by the patrician lawyer John Quinn (who died in 1924) and was administered from Bill Bird's Three Mountain Press on the Ile St. Louis. For a summary of differing opinions on its success, see Wiser, *The Crazy Years*, pp. 59–62. Bowen is discreetly silent in her memoir on the disagreements between Ford and Hemingway on the journal's content and style. Alongside those of Ford's coterie, the review published works by Philippe Soupault, Jean Casson, Paul Valéry 'and many unknowns', as Bowen's memoir correctly records, p. 134.

[83] DL, p.108.

[84] *Correspondence*, p. 294.

[85] *Ford Madox Ford* (1923), *Ford in a Bow-Tie*, *Ford in an Open Collar*, *Ford Playing Solitaire* (1927), *Still Life with Part of Me* (c.1927), *Self-portrait* (c.1928).

It would appear that Bowen and Ford's happiest moments as an enterprising couple and bonded family were those they spent in the South of France: in Cap Ferrat and Tarascon in 1923, and in the winter of 1925 in Toulon.[87] These were occasions, lovingly recorded in the memoir, that seem to have lifted them out of the cycle of domestic issues that dogged them, in the first instance on their unproductive farms in Sussex, in the second in Paris, where the burden of inadequate studios and little money was compounded by the presence of the predatory and unstable Jean Rhys.[88] In Cap Ferrat, where they lived modestly in a borrowed villa, Bowen revelled in the quality of Mediterranean life: the 'richness and savour' of the food in the bustling markets,[89] the sunshine, the view of an ancient fortress from their window, the chance a day's tempo gave to paint. 'Provence', she remarked:

> …is neither sweet nor pretty. It does not greatly resemble the popular paintings that hang in the Salon or that English lady artists bring home. But the life that is lived there is quite alarmingly natural…in Provence life seems to run more freely in its channels than elsewhere…The French…never attain the grim intensity in the south that they do in the north. There is gaiety and leisure wherever you go, and always someone in the café, with whom to pass the time of day.[90]

In Toulon, where they lodged to be near their friends Juan Gris (the Cubist painter) and his wife, it was 'the light, warmth, picturesqueness and social liveliness' she loved.[91]

By the time Bowen and Ford arrived in Cap Ferrat, the Parisian migration to the Riviera was already a seasonal event: there the capital's smart set (Cole Porter, the Fitzgeralds, Coco Chanel, Isadora Duncan…) set out to discover the same little fishing villages, bays and cafés sought by light-hungry artists like Modigliani, Picasso, Matisse and Dufy.[92] But it was the change of intellectual life that captivated Bowen. Of her later stay in Toulon she remarks: 'In Paris I had sat at hundreds of café tables with Ford, listening to talk about literature and "le mot juste" (the apt word). In Toulon, I was able to listen, at last, to talk about painting'.[93] So she hung onto the words of the masters: of Gris, gently self-effacing; of Othon Friesz 'who can paint water so liquid that it would run away out of any picture less well composed than his'; of Francis Carco, art chronicler and literary bohemian, who, with Friesz, 'had plenty to tell of the early struggles of "les fauves"', of their 'young enthusiasm for the Impressionists before the post-impressionist movement was born', of 'their excitement whenever one of their group…made painting history with a new experiment'.[94] 'Besides these giants I was miserably conscious that my notions about painting were extremely embryonic', the mature Bowen self-deprecatingly notes. 'I have always been late with everything I have learned and everything I have become…I am still learning, still "becoming"…It is platitudinous to say so, but being a woman does set you back a good deal'.

---

[86] *Correspondence,* p. 332.
[87] The memoir incorrectly says that she was in Toulon in 1924. See Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, vol. II, ch. 15.
[88] When the affair turned difficult in the summer of 1925 Ford sent Rhys on a ghost-writing assignment on the Riviera, though the affair resumed briefly on her return.
[89] DL, p.108.
[90] DL, pp.116-117.
[91] DL, p.155.
[92] On the Parisian exodus to the south of France, see Wiser, *The Crazy Years*, p. 177.
[93] DL, p.161.

The highlight of Bowen's 1923 stay in Cap Ferrat was undoubtedly her six-week trip to Italy with the Pounds in the spring. It introduced her to a landscape at whose beauty she marvelled and to the great early Italian masters, whose 'formal and pellucid serenity' made an indelible impact on her art.[95] Through the surviving letters of the period (four of Bowen's, twenty-one of Ford's) one can plot her whirlwind path: Florence, Perugia, Assisi, Siena, Cartona. Arezzo: Tuscany and Umbria seized, her letters and memoir reveal, with the painter's insight and the tourist's awe. In her new surroundings Bowen found 'harmony': church, paintings and landscape struck her as inseparably one, each seemingly correspondingly patterned, balanced and sharp-edged.[96] 'I had expected something soft and romantic [in Italy]', her memoir states,

> …and behold! I had seen a hard country where everything had a lovely edge to it, and fell into marvellous formal patterns. Trees in serried rows and rocks in sequence and rivers in the exact position required to compose the picture. Old towns crowning symmetrical hills, with ramparts like a collar round the neck; bridges and towers and churches, their yellow-grey stone almost indistinguishable from the rocks upon which they stood, until a second glance revealed their keen, austere, and unblurred edges.[97]

Bowen's response surprised her as much as she surprised her friends. While she 'had expected to be worried by the crudities' of the early masters, it was 'precisely the formal patterns' of their paintings that enthralled: those of Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca, Botticelli, Martini and Giotto.[98] Fresco itself she admired for its 'narrow tone-scale' and the way it 'eliminated those heavy effects of light and shade', so unlike the 'highlights and anguish' of the fifteenth and sixteenth painters (not for her Titian and Raphael), and the unrealistic moderns whose technique the Pounds adamantly espoused.[99] She admits, in retrospect, how 'narrow' her view was, but touts the advantages narrowness bequeaths: a concentration of 'effort and enthusiasm', unavailable to the teacher or critic, who must understand and impartially expound 'the whole [art] field'; staying with what you know you like, rather than knowing 'all about art'.[100] In this, she distanced herself (and always would) from modernist art. She preferred the way the early masters valued 'convention' and 'ritual' to 'starting from scratch' in the independent, and, to her, publicly confusing manner of the new Paris School.[101] When Bowen wrote to Ford of her discomfort, after having earned the modernist-loving Pounds' contempt, he replied with the understanding of an art critic, and not a little of an early lover's defensiveness: 'As for not going to the Old Fellows—you must go to them!—to the serene ones, like Holbein & Cranach & Simone Martini…Darling: I assure you that you have all the makings of an artist; the only thing you need being a certain self-confidence…even in your work as it is, there is the quality of serenity—of imperturbability.' So he advises her to dismiss 'the clamour of Ezra, the acidulities of [his wife] Dorothy or the tumult of the Prevailing School'.[102] From then on that is what she did.

---

[94] DL, p.162. Othon Friez (1879–1949) was a French painter and friend of Raoul Dufy. The 'Fauves' ('Wild Beasts') used brilliant but arbitrary colours to suggest emotion. Francis Carco (1886–1958) was a poet, novelist, and champion of the avant-garde of his epoch.

[95] DL, p.111.

[96] DL, p.110.

[97] DL, p.109.

[98] DL, p.110.

[99] DL, p.111.

[100] ibid.

[101] DL, p.112.

In Provence—as before her the Cézanne of bright rocks, the Van Gogh of wheat stacks and sunflowers, the Braque of ochre villages tumbling down brown hillsides—Bowen loved its vibrant light. That, in her opinion, was the reason for the 'spell' it cast.[103] When she left for Paris in 1925 she recognised what it had taught her and rued what she had left behind. 'It is something to do with the light', she supposed…

> …the airiness and bareness and frugality of life in the Midi which induces a simplicity of thought, and a kind of whittling to the bone of whatever may be the matter in hand. Sunlight reflected from red tiled floors on to whitewashed walls, closed shutters and open windows and an air so soft that you can live equally in and out of doors, suggest an existence so sweetly simple that you wonder that life ever appeared the tangled, hustling and distracting piece of nonsense you once thought it…Your comforts are the light and warmth provided by nature, and your ornaments are the orange trees outside.[104]

Perhaps it was those very qualities—luminosity, shadowlessness, rawness of structure, that can seemingly filter from the Mediterranean's ambience into a person's sense of the essence of self—that drew her to the austere but relucent Giottos and the refinement of Renaissance art. When she returned from Cap Ferrat in 1923 she found herself 'full of ideas about formal composition and thin paint',[105] enough to spur her to enter four small portraits on wood in Paris's annual Salon d'Automne. 'I don't think they were much good', her memoir states, 'but they marked the beginning of a long phase when I deliberately flattened out shadows and concentrated everything on linear design'.[106] Looking back on her two Provençal sojourns, two years apart, eons in the emotional distance she traversed, the outcome, indeed, reflects good work. In 1923 came landscapes of careful arrangement—of stacked-up houses, bright skies, sepia tones and suffused light: *Cap Ferrat, Villefranche, The Tower by the River, Assisi*; in 1925, a white and pale-brown sun-drenched *Toulon*—all forerunners of the fine-edged, uncluttered realist portraits in which she came to excel.

On the occasions Bowen returned to Paris from the south she faced some of the grimmer realities of living the bohemian's itinerant life. Not only did little money matter while she was trying to raise a child; it also meant unsuitable homes, ill-adapted to family living and—a painter's nightmare—typically cramped and dark. By the summer of 1924

---

[102] *Correspondence*, pp. 196–197. Ford wrote critical works on Rossetti, Holbein and the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood.

[103] DL, p.171.

[104] DL, pp.171-172.

[105] DL, pp.113-114.

[106] She records that they earned her praise as 'aimables petits portraits, fidèles et serrés' ('pleasant, sincere and tightly composed little portraits'), DL, p. 114.

(before the trip to Toulon) she had already installed the family in three furnished and two unfurnished domiciles in twelve months, all without *confort moderne* (this variously meaning no gas or electricity, leaky stoves, no bath and dank walls). Added to her woes was postwar Paris's housing shortage and the subsequent inflation in prices and rents, not helped by the hordes of apartment-seeking foreigners streaming into the capital in the period, some, like the wealthier Americans, offering New York prices for the better place or preferential deal. Some of the glamour of being in Paris that had helped Bowen turn a blind eye to bad quarters early on wore thin. Of the three years when Ford was at his most creatively rewarding (1924–1927) she remembers 'those hopeless journeys in suburban trains, those trampings in the rain from one *agence de location* (real estate agent) to another', haggling with 'the most astute rogues in the world': property managers, concierges and landlords.[107] By the time the *Transatlantic Review* had collapsed and their savings had all but been swallowed up, dreams of buying their own house had gone: 'So', she says. 'I joined that sad army of Paris wives who spent their days following up vague clues of flats to let, and planting pourboires [tips] in the palms of likely concierges, hoping that they would bear fruit—when the next vacancy occurred'.[108] Nonetheless the parties continued, they had roofs over their heads, Julie went to school and Ford wrote.

Bowen's troubles were not helped, on her own admission, by deeply wanting both to be an artist and to establish a proper home. No doubt spurred by the mounting precariousness of her and Ford's union, she became increasingly consumed by the desire to set down roots and achieve the very kind of bourgeois stability on which she had turned her back in 1914. This was her personal demon; it 'overshadowed everything',[109] she recalled in 1941. Not that one could accuse her of acquisitiveness: she never accrued possessions, other than a few loved items (a grandfather clock, a chest, a rustic dresser, Ford's desk…), of sentimental rather than monetary worth. But her repeated wish for 'permanency' (the most frequently used word in the latter chapters of the memoir), evinces the dilemma she faced both as a person who took her maternal role seriously (her letters are full of news to the absent Ford of Julie's schooling, of birthday parties, of mother-and-daughter outings), and as one who intended to paint. Between late 1924 and 1926 that dilemma—how best to meet the exigencies of her private and professional life—was temporarily resolved when she and Ford rented a house outside Paris in Guermantes. There Julie and a nanny stayed during the weekdays, while she and Ford worked in a modest studio in Montparnasse, with the family coming together in the weekends at either abode. On Julie's account such parental arrangements never excluded her from her mother's love, but Bowen's problem was, and remained, a real one, for 'settling down' ran counter to the whole expatriate ethos—that of being freed of family responsibilities, domestic routine and material needs.[110] These she was never prepared to relinquish in the way Ford evidently—one might say, selfishly—did. In fact, as Shari Benstock amply attests, many a heterosexual expatriate union foundered on the basis of such demands.[111]

---

[107] DL, p.130.

[108] DL, p.132.

[109] DL, p.130.

[110] 'I always felt enveloped in her love and care, and always had her total attention when we were together. I suppose, as the sociological jargon puts it, it was "quality time"—but of a very high quality indeed! I was always treated as a person and not simply as a child', DL, preface, p. viii.

[111] Benstock, *The Left Bank*, pp. 450–452.

The matter of Ford's infidelities and failed relationships has become the stuff of legend and a fecund source of critical debate.[112] In a sense, this was destined to be so, considering not just the fame (or notoriety) of the players involved—notably Ford himself—but also the amount of literary reflection upon themselves they (and others) prodigiously produced. Such was, after all, the essence of Montparnasse life, whose expatriate literati mixed, gossiped, and wrote about each other, often with a good deal of factual licence and self-serving zeal. Their colourful lives became the subject of colourful biographies, fictions, memoirs and newspaper reports, variously imaginatively rendered, the more extravagantly so, the more to their readers' delight. Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, while not published until after his death, is there for posterity, a malicious tell-tale review of the pot-pourri of identities who passed through his life—and merciless imagination—in the cafés, studios and salons of the 1920s Left Bank. From its abrasive summations Ford did not emerge unscathed.[113]

Judging from her correspondence with Ford, the web of literary industry and intrigue that invaded Bowen's private life is one that caused her considerable pain, and one can surmise that part of her agenda for writing *Drawn from Life*, beyond earning a little money to alleviate the impecunious circumstances of her later years, was to tell her story on her own terms.[114] In the wake of Violet Hunt's unpleasant indictment of Ford's unchivalrous 'elopement' (with Bowen) in her self-righteous best seller, *I Have This to Say* (1926)[115] came Jean Rhys's *Postures* in 1928 (republished in America as *Quartet*), a fictional version of her affair with Ford that cast both him and a thinly disguised Bowen in a decidedly unflattering light. In turn, came Rhys's follow-up novel, *After Leaving Mr McKenzie* (1931) and Ford's stinging fictional rejoinder, *When The Wicked Man* (1932). Matters could hardly have been helped by Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1927), whose brash and uncouth Mrs Braddocks was clearly a caricature of the colonial Bowen. As Bowen remarked in a letter of commiseration to Ford: 'He [Hemingway] has touched me off rather nastily—rather on Jean's lines.'[116] The so-called 'battle of the books' was in fact an ignoble example of literary tit-for-tat.[117]

However various Bowen's motives may have been for publishing her story (for money, to rebuild her and Ford's damaged identities, to set the record straight…), the fact remains that, unlike her other 'representatives', she opted for magnanimity and an essentially dignified account of events. In the memoir there is no resort to slander (though on matters of principle she is adamant), no overt naming of her rivals in love: Hunt goes unmentioned; Rhys simply occurs as 'Ford's girl';[118] subsequent lovers are passed over, with only 'Janice'—Janice Biala, Ford's last lover—briefly introduced, largely in the context of Ford's death.[119] Of course, no autobiography is innocently conceived; it is inevitably an author's self-invested construction of self, but clearly in hers Bowen had no wish to place herself in the league of her unscrupulous literary predecessors, nor in history as a scurrilous sneak. There is a sensible continuity in the tenor of the memoir, ever discreet, and that of her correspondence, in which she asks of Ford that the public announcement of their separation be made circumspectly and that there be no unnecessary ill-feeling between their private selves. She refused Ford's suggestion that she live 'half and half' with his new lover (the American Rene Wright) in 1928.[120] Instead, she asked that he respect the truth, but with the generous rider that it be told with the least acrimony and fuss:

---

[112] See especially Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinksy's Lunch*; Ros Pesman, 'The Letters of Stella Bowen and Ford Madox Ford', *Overland,* vol. 139, 1995, pp. 19–23; Ros Pesman, 'Autobiography, Biography and Ford Madox Ford's Women', *Women's History Review*, vol. 8, no. 4, Dec. 1999, pp. 655–670; Joseph Wiesenfarth, 'Ford Madox Ford, Violet Hunt, and the Battle of the Books: Sexual/Textual Hostilities', *Ford Madox Ford's Modernity*, ed. Robert Hampson and Max Saunders, Rodopi, Amsterdam/ New York, 2003, pp. 209–220; Ros Pesman, ''Drawn from Life': Stella Bowen and Ford Madox Ford', *Ford Madox Ford's Modernity*, pp. 221–238.

[113] Ch. 9 ('Ford Madox Ford and the Devil's Disciple'), Jonathon Cape, London, 1964 (posthumous publication).

[114] Judging from her correspondence: Bowen to Katherine Lamb, 22 June 1947 (Bowen papers, Kroch Library, Cornell University), Janice Biala to Bowen, 29 June 1940 (Biala papers, Kroch Library, Cornell University), cited in Ros Pesman, ''Drawn from Life': Stella Bowen and Ford Madox Ford', *Ford Madox Ford's Modernity*, pp. 222–223.

[115] Boni & Liveright, New York, 1926. Published in Britain the same year as *The Flurried Years* (Hurst & Blackett, London).

[116] *Correspondence*, p. 316.

[117] Joseph Wiesenfarth, 'Ford Madox Ford, Violet Hunt, and the Battle of the Books: Sexual/Textual Hostilities', *Ford Madox Ford's Modernity*, p, 209.

> I am sure that there must be an absolute and public break between us…I shall therefore tell people, when I get back to Paris, that my absence until after your departure was because we had mutually agreed to separate for good. I cannot make up any tale about having 'chucked you out', nor will I use the word 'divorce'…not because I want to make difficulties for you and R. [Rene Wright], but because it seems to me undignified and ridiculous, when every one knows the truth, and when Violet [Hunt] has so exhausted the topic of her marriage or non-marriage to you. I cannot remain always in a false position. But…if pushed, I might say that your interests seem to have shifted so much to New York, that in any case you do not propose being much in Paris, and that I have asked for my freedom, rather than to continue on the terms you offer. On your side you might represent me as having become impossibly independent, or anything you like.[121]

To which she added, with astonishing forbearance:

> I want not to be the one to begin any scandal about you and R. and in any case I will not say ill of either of you. We have had too good a time together for me to want to malign you now. And I should like you to remember that you said I might always tell people that we remain good friends in spite of it all, and that we keep in touch and will meet from time to time. It will be much better for Julie that this should be so and will do much for my happiness if it may be a real fact.[122]

One can venture that Bowen, who favoured respectability and good conduct, however ignominiously treated by Ford, was singularly at odds with the very Montparnasse society whose artistic and literary circles she had penetrated and in whose midst and mix she productively lived. Its social and intellectual energy she relished, its (im)moralities she adeptly dodged. There is little discernable discrepancy between the persona she projected in her memoir and the person she chose to present to the world. Despite her unmarried status, she was in both literature and life always ‘Mrs Ford’: a devoted mother (as Julie attests), and one who never ‘slept around’ (Ford was the only love of her life). In her unfolding life, good old-fashioned propriety, the kind on which she was raised, appears to have prevailed. Her literary detractors, who found her to be ‘bourgeois’, were, in their own pejorative way, and with their own agendas, not entirely wrong. It seems she did not to indulge in the looser, sometimes despicable behaviours for which Montparnasse’s ‘crazy’ society became famed.

---

[118] DL, p.196.

[119] Biala (1903–2000), was an American painter who lived and worked in America and Europe.

[120] DL, p.379.

[121] *Correspondence*, pp. 379–380.

[122] ibid., p.380.

In her memoir Bowen posits two types of ‘Montparnassian’. There were those she calls the ‘Wild Ones’—the liberated and creative free-spirits who ‘abound[ed]’ in the Quarter, happily sponging off others and living morally ‘messy’ and ‘egotistical’ lives in the name and believed importance of their ‘art’, sufficiently to have made them feel exempt from the codes of ‘respectable society’, and not beholden to those who kept them mentally well and materially afloat; conversely there were the ‘Orderly’ ones, who got ‘grabbed at by the messy ones’, who ‘intermittent[ly]’ longed for respectability: ‘clean linen, paid bills, and regular meals’, exhausting the ‘resources’ of the ‘order-loving’ ones in the process, ‘without [their] getting any benefit’ themselves.[123] Bowen regrets:

> It took me a little while to get used to living amongst people who, on the whole, had replaced all their moral prejudices by aesthetic ones. They did not consider themselves as having any particular duties to society, nor were they interested in world affairs. They were all busy developing their egos and having sensations and producing works of art. It was quite all right to be dirty, drunk, a pervert or a thief or a whore, provided that you had a lively and an honest mind, and the courage of your instincts. What damned you was social snobbery, bourgeois ideology, smugness and carefulness.[124]

Jean Rhys may not be named a ‘Wild One’ in the memoir, but as ‘Ford’s girl’, the one who came to live with them, she is cast as such, just another of those 1920s Montparnasse ‘wrecks’ whom Bowen recalls as invariably ending up in the ‘gutter’ (which, in fact, Rhys, prone to alcoholism and penury, virtually did).[125] There is, then, a moral stance taken by Bowen in her story, with less concessions made to the faulty parties (Ford included) than might first appear to be the case. The ‘girl’’s novel is described as ‘sordid’, if ‘of great sensitiveness and persuasiveness’, and she as a ‘tragic’ destitute: attractive but cynical, dependent, nervy, and without self-respect.[126] Famous Rhys may have become for her stories of feminine male victimisation, trawled up in part from the low-life she led in the sleazy bars and hotels of fringe Montparnasse, but from Bowen’s point of view Rhys ruined her union with Ford. ‘It cut the fundamental tie between [Ford] and me’,[127] she reports on the woman’s presence in her house. ‘I simply hated my role!’,[128] she retrospectively said.

But if Bowen did not adopt the moral latitudes of the Montparnasse society, choosing dutifulness and constancy where many around her chose casual sexual partners or uncommitted conjugal roles, she had no wish, as her life proceeded, that her feminine person be circumscribed by the condition of domestic confinement and feminine availability for which she had been bred; she saw no need for a woman to bear the social stigma of being unattached if that was her fate, nor that she be reared unprepared for a single or self-sufficient life, any more than that she should be denied the prerogatives of vocational independence and of emotional detachment men freely enjoyed. The Bowen of Adelaide days was neither the Bowen of the 1920s, nor the wiser figure who judiciously reviewed her life in 1941. The hard lessons she learnt from the reality of 'falling out of love'[129] were not without the positive result that she came to realise she could lead an independent and professionally fulfilling life. In this, with a sagacity born of experience, she regretted the limitations of the values traditionally instilled in women, speaking out in a strikingly strident section of her memoir for a revision of the passive roles in which they had long been cast:

---

[123] DL, pp.135-136.
[124] DL, pp.136-137.
[125] DL, p.137.
[126] DL, p.195.
[127] ibid.
[128] DL, p.197.

> Why are people allowed—and women encouraged—to stake their lives, careers, economic position, and hopes of happiness on love? Why did not my godfathers and godmothers in my baptism, and my copybooks at school, and my mother when she tried to explain the facts of life, all tell me, 'You must stand alone?' How dare parents encourage their girls to remain in a state of receptive idleness so that they may be ready, at a moment's notice, to follow the dictates of a love affair? How can the nations afford to waste the immense volume of women's energy that is left over after the emotional life has taken its toll? How dare society allow those women who don't find a partner, or who lose one, to rot away as unskilled, unwanted 'superfluous women'. How *dare* they use that phrase?[130]

Within Bowen's tirade, a centrepiece of her generally mild-mannered book, there is a claustrophobically Edwardian feel to her image of 'waiting women' putting their life on hold and moping indoors while men are out and about. 'Women', she says, with a bitter edge…

> …are eating their hearts out, and rotting away right and left, because love and domesticity have been inadequate to fill their lives. They are sobbing on sofas by the thousand, now, at this moment. Men don't. And why? They haven't time. They are needed elsewhere. Their lives are held in shape by the framework of their vocation, and if they sometimes go to pieces inside, it hardly shows.[131]

It was a condition the mature Bowen was not prepared to fall back on when Ford left.

On Bowen's account, she grew tired of being 'on duty twenty-four hours a day'[132] for Ford, 'stage-manag[ing]' his life and putting '[her] poor house in order before getting down to work'.[133] When he kept looking for a 'new object' in his life (as happened with Rene Wright in 1928) she took it as another 'big shove forward' in her 'education'[134]—though not, her letters reveal, without hurt. 'I wanted to belong to myself', she recalls in the memoir. 'I wanted to slip from under the weightiness of Ford's personality and regain my own shape'.[135] So, the 'delicate and important…business' of 'falling out of love' is claimed as being 'as necessary to the attainment of wisdom as the reverse experience'.[136] In an extraordinary show of resilience, no doubt harder to have assumed than her memoir cares to express, she concludes:

---

[129] DL, p.198.
[130] DL, pp.187-188.
[131] DL, pp.188-189.
[132] DL, p.190.
[133] DL, p.191.
[134] DL, p.194.

> I think that the exhilaration of falling out of love is not sufficiently extolled. The escape from the atmosphere of a stuffy room into the fresh night air, with the sky as the limit. The feeling of freedom, of integrity, of being a blissfully unimportant item in an impersonal world, whose vicissitudes are not worth a tear. The feeling of being a queen in your own right! It is a true re-birth.[137]

Here the 'room', that fundamental metaphor—and fact—of feminine seclusion and domestic imprisonment is imaginatively touted as having been exchanged for the liberating (male) 'outdoors'.

Certainly, in the wake of Ford's departure, Bowen did not become the idle kind of woman whose lot she rued. Socially she mixed as remarkably as ever, befriending, amongst others, the poor but talented Russian theatre designer Pavlick Tchelitcheff (later to conquer the London high art scene) and the formidable poet Edith Sitwell, of haughty English charm and wit. Her parties, held in whatever studio she was occupying, retained their lively reputation: being dull she believed was a social crime. Of those who flocked to her place to dance and eat, came the Quarter's usual clever habitués, even, on one occasion, the 'all-Negro' American Black Birds (including the gyrating Snaky Hips), just when they, jazz and black culture were captivating Paris and Josephine Baker was its bespangled primitive dance queen.[138] As well, Bowen made impressionable visits late in the decade to Monte Carlo and Antibes, mingling with the dancers and staff of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Without Ford, she records in her memoir, she felt 'chilly and forlorn at one moment', but 'like a million dollars the next'—proof she was a survivor, or at least that she intended to be remembered as one.[139]

But Bowen's taste for conviviality detracted little from the purpose with which she assumed life alone. Stretched for money in her last years in Paris, she lived frugally and painted industriously. She needed the money, but it was a life choice she enjoyed. 'Working conditions were perfect',[140] she recalled. Indeed, her last abode in Paris, bought at great cost (she was cheated over the lease conditions and the price of the renovations), she termed the 'nicest home we ever had': it was 'lofty and well-lighted', accommodated her and Julie, and boasted a 'gallery' and 'bath tub'.[141] It was here that she turned to her painting with a determination that paid off in later years. Luck prevailed, too, for the

---

[135] DL, p.199.

[136] DL, p.190.

[137] DL, p.198.

[138] It would have been in June 1929. The Black Birds tour and concert at the Moulin Rouge is reported in *The Paris Tribune*, 10 June 1929, 'Black Birds may be Hit of Summer Season in Paris', *The Left Bank Revisited, Selections from the Paris Tribune 1917–1934,* edited with an introduction by Hugh Ford and a foreward by Matthew Josephson, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park and London, 1972, pp. 236–237. The exotic Baker, a black American-born dancer and singer, sprang to fame in Paris in 1925, largely because of her erotic dance routines.

[139] DL, p.199.

[140] DL, p.205.

[141] DL, p.219.

American poet Ramon Guthrie, whose portrait she had painted in Paris in 1928, invited her to America in 1931, just when her finances were depleted and commissions few. It was to be a turning point in her art and her only freelancing tour. In the spring of 1931, not long before she left, she mounted a solo exhibition in Paris in fear and trepidation, but with moderate success for she sold a third of the paintings and earned the 'serious criticisms' of painter friends whose honesty she claimed she valued more than hollow praise.[142] In fact, it was a major step for it heralded her transition into a single-minded professional career.

Bowen's six-month trip to America, which took her to New England, New Jersey and Vermont, marked a period in which her portrait skills came to sudden attention with welcome remunerative rewards. The very conviviality for which she was known paid off well: many of the American friends she had made in France generously lodged and employed her, while passing her on to interested clients and friends. What began as a mission against personal ruin became, she later acknowledged, a 'forcing house'[143] of unexpected worth, for it brought her to the coal-face of working for watchful buyers wanting 'happy' faces, even while she was maintaining the stiff standards of what she thought a 'likeness' should be.[144] It sharpened her aesthetic vision and technique, requiring her to meet 'difficult conditions' with 'stubborn resistance' and integrity.[145] As a consequence certain principles of execution, learnt the hard way, became clear: primarily, that, in her 'kind of painting', getting the 'fleeting expression' and 'dramatic moment' were 'quite wrong'; that it was more important to get 'something representing *all* the moments—something timeless and tranquil', an *inner* likeness, one construes.[146] (If, during her time in England she did the fashionable quick sketch, it was, she confesses, for 'financial security';[147] her preference was always for the 'small, tight and formal painting on panel'[148] practised by her 'first loves',[149] the Italian masters, and magisterially adopted in the premonitory *Nègre de Toulouse*.) In fact, she reflected, it was during her American tour that the real pressures of the 'the murky trade of the portraitist'[150] surfaced and that the delicate questions of professional honesty, customer satisfaction, time distribution and payment most heavily weighed. How did one distract fidgety children? Or submit a likeness with which the customer did not agree? How did one work with others looking over one's shoulder? How many sittings were adequate or fair? Luckily, she says, most clients accepted her 'unflattering' but authentic versions of their offspring 'with a good grace',[151] and she got to 'painting a bit of flesh', which was 'just what [she] liked best to do'.[152] In fact, she found her 'enemies…mostly quite delightful'[153] and she reckoned she learnt a lot in the process about texture, composition and backgrounding despite her deemed lack of maturity and self-confidence.

---

[142] DL, p.224.
[143] DL, p.255.
[144] DL, p.240.
[145] DL, p.255.
[146] DL, pp.256-257.
[147] DL, p.276.
[148] DL, p.275.
[149] DL, p.240.
[150] DL, p.273.
[151] DL, p.243.
[152] ibid.

One thinks of the portraitist as one for whom the human face intrigues. In Bowen's case this was evidently so: much of her work is of those striking artistic and literary identities she encountered and whose faces she saw as profound embodiments of what they had achieved. (Who can look at her depiction of Edith Sitwell's 'quite wonderful but alarming façade' and not see 'the soft and flagrantly human woman whom it conceals'?)[154] Besides, Bowen's gregariousness, fostered in Paris by the convivial Ford and his milieu, clearly inspired her to 'draw from life' those who sat at her table, became her friends, were family, shared her life. Was it such sociability, the pleasure she took in mixing, talking, sharing meals (reports of such occasions abound in the memoir) that encouraged her later, in England, to paint 'conversation pieces' of 'whole families, with little figures of Hogarthian dimensions sitting about in their own homes'?[155] Was this the kind of painting that kept her going in America, away from her darling Julie? Were her family portraits and group settings an extension of the meaningfulness to her of togetherness, thus, in part, a projection of values she herself upheld? One is inclined to believe so. In a quite remarkable canvas, executed in the South of France in 1937 on a painting trip with writer friends in Cagnes-sur-mer, her delight in the company and simple setting in which she found herself is captured in a manner that seemingly encapsulates the things she most valued. The painting is called *Provençal Conversation* and depicts four friends seated around a table in a walled courtyard; the table is set with a bowl of fruit, a bottle of wine and glasses and the people, in relaxed poses, are framed, to the left by a stone fish pond, and all around by four leafy orange trees. Here there is no segregation of the sexes, as Bowen deplored in the staid London party, no stiff formality, as at an Adelaide ball; the people, two men and two women, wearing comfortable, open-necked clothes, are looking at each, apparently engrossed in what is being said. This is the art of intimacy, of engagement, of fellowship, of hospitality: a visual epitomisation of what Bowen elsewhere claimed she most prized: 'the enjoyment of a complicated but illuminating idea' and 'the simple bliss of relaxing in the sun'.[156]

Bowen had much to regret when she left Paris for England in May 1933. 'Alas!', she remarked in the memoir, 'there will never again be anything like the Paris of the nineteen-twenties in our life-time'.[157] She was right. Montparnasse was changed in the wake of the Wall Street Crash and the onset of the Great Depression that swept across the investing world. In October 1929 the speculative frenzy that had gripped America in the preceding months broke. Share prices plummeted, businesses collapsed, small and large investors were ruined, banks closed. America reeled, sending devastating ripples around the financial world. In Paris, many of the American *rentiers* who had been dependent on remittances from home became insolvent and had no choice but to leave.[158] By 1930, the parties, the night frolicking, the carefree lifestyles the Quarterites had so feverishly enjoyed were largely over; the hotels, cafés and bars they had patronised were eerily bare.[159] If the district's indigenous bohemians stayed, its eccentric, creative, pleasure-seeking visitors left in droves. France may have initially resisted the Depression by keeping to the gold standard (unlike America, Britain and Germany), but the general economic decline, exacerbated by the legacy of World War 1, hit the nation in 1932 when tourism bottomed out and export prices fell. For Bowen the overvalued franc became an impossible burden to bear, just as, at the same time, there were the rumbling signs of impending war. On her return to the Rue Boissonnade from a painting trip in August 1931 she remembers: 'I opened my *Herald Tribune* to see in the right hand corner, ₤1 sterling = frs. 103. That sentence had read ₤1 sterling = frs. 125 for months and years, and when it quickly sank to 86, I knew that I was ruined'.[160] Although she hung on bravely in Paris for almost another two years, matters worsened, with portraits (indeed any art) becoming increasingly hard to sell, and expected commissions in America falling through. By the time she was living in England in 1940 and the war was under way, Paris and the world she had lived in 'look[ed] like a remote and unbelievable Heaven'.[161] 'The preoccupations of the nineteen-twenties—love, aesthetics, individualism, and the personal life—got out of focus as they came within the range of the approaching storm', she reflected; '[in England] we [were] all swimming for our lives'.[162] In 1941 the artist, like any other, simply had survival on his or her mind.

---

[153] ibid.

[154] DL, pp.202-203.

[155] DL, p.276.

[156] DL, p.270.

[157] DL, p.182.

[158] *Rentiers*, people of private means.

On 25 July 1933 the columnist Wambly Bald, writing in Paris for the *Chicago Tribune*, famously described the Montparnasse that had waxed and waned so spectacularly in his time as a crumpled handkerchief—a worn-out rag that had become 'so thin, so brittle, so precarious that one more good blow into it by an ambitious beetle—and *pouf*! It will fall into dust.'[163] His image was elaborately woven into what was, in effect, a double-barrelled 'farewell': not only was it the last article of his long-running column *La Vie de Bohème*, a spirited, biting weekly up-date of Montparnasse matters begun in October 1929; it was a damming summation of an era that had lived on the edge, then expended its energies, taking with it, in its death throes, a host of—in his opinion—not so remarkable heroes and heroines. There was, of course, much truth in Bald's last judgment on the Montparnasse phenomenon, however subversively subjective it was—it was a self-styled guru's parting word. Many of those who were its early stars, the worthy and the not so worthy, came to inconspicuous or inopportune ends. Diaghilev died in 1929, his body wasted and ravaged from alcohol; the American poet, Hart Crane, in Paris in 1929, committed suicide in 1932, a dispirited Hemingway, later in 1961; the unstable Zelda Fitzgerald succumbed to depression in 1929; Pound, incarcerated for thirteen years in a federal asylum in America (it saved him from charges of treason over his Fascist persuasions during World War II) was discharged in 1958; lastly residing in Italy, he suffered from bouts of elective mutism and depression that arguably affected the quality of his later work; Ford, overweight and irascible, died of a heart attack in 1939… To boot, the Montparnassian way was littered with broken relationships, including Bowen's own, the latter courteously managed in public, to be sure, but sorely tested in a correspondence that became increasingly strained under the pressure of Ford's nagging suggestions on how Julie should be raised.[164]

---

[159] Wiser, *The Crazy Years,* pp. 227–230.

[160] DL, pp.225-226.

[161] DL, p.183.

[162] DL, p.274.

[163] *Chicago Tribune*, European edition, Tuesday, 25 April 1933, *Wambly Bald: On the Left Bank, 1929–1933*, ed. Benjamin Franklin V, Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio and London, 1987, p. 141.

Bowen's move to England, wrought of necessity, was not easily effected, but one cannot but admire the resolution with which she set up house (indeed, houses) yet again, and the tenacity with which she sought work in economically hard times. Despite the odds, and however meagre the financial returns, she never became one of the Montparnasse wrecks she pitied in her memoir, nor one of its legendary failures, so sweepingly upbraided by the unforgiving Wambly Bald. Initially her jobs in London may have been unsatisfactory, but they came her way by sheer persistence and the help of staunch friends: a little portrait work, a spell as a columnist reviewing London art exhibitions for the *News Chronicle* (for which she had no talent, and from which she was sacked after eighteen months, to her immense relief), two exhibitions in the country, a little exhibiting and teaching of art classes around London during the war. Yet the story of Bowen's last years, despite the struggle they involved, is not a sorry one after all. Perhaps her own generous spirit helped her to find the good in it she wanted and the kind of people who were worthy of her love, many of whom had remembered her from her Paris days. 'In London', she recalled, '…I found…comfort, kindness, uncritical friendship and loyalty—all those English virtues that I had forgotten about in my enthusiasm for France'.[165] It was as one French lady had once told her: ''It was always my English friends who helped me when I got into a hole''.[166]

In 1940, at the height of the war, Bowen, battling to make ends meet in London, moved to a rented cottage near Purleigh in the Essex countryside. It was to be her 'last ditch'[167] before she died, but it also became her most loved domicile: 'the safe spot, the place where one did not have to struggle, or fight, or worry about success',[168] situated, as she modestly wanted, 'in an insignificant little lane in an insignificant little hamlet'.[169] Bought cheaply, because it was on the flight path to London for the German raiders, it nonetheless gave her the kind of domestic stability she had failed to achieve with the roving Ford. '[It] seemed so lovely', she wrote. 'It looked so permanent, so inviting to life and growth and health, so packed with the beauties that money cannot buy and that are therefore not worth man's while to destroy'.[170] It was there, surrounded by the little pieces of furniture she had accrued in France, looking out upon a garden haphazardly plotted with fruit trees, wild berries and country flowers, that she wrote her memoir.

If Bowen found in her English idyll the 'beauty, peace, silence and the tranquil spirit'[171] that had eluded her in her Paris abodes, her professional life there, too, took a lucky and unexpected turn. In 1943 (after *Drawn from Life* had appeared), on the instigation of Louis McCubbin, director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, she was invited to become an official war artist, with the temporary rank of captain, by the Australian High Commission. Her appointment, one of two such in England, was to pictorially record the activities of Australian forces in the UK.[172] So favorably was her work received, her position was extended after the war when she was asked to depict scenes of returning prisoners of war undergoing repatriation at Gowrie House and in convalescent hospitals. Forty-six pieces are now collectively held in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. Her daughter intimates there were many more.[173] Strangely, her life had turned full circle: she, who had left Australia as well as the France she 'adored', suddenly became, in the most worthy of ventures, an historic and artistic representative of both lands. Not only did she transfer across the Channel (and thence to Australia) the hard-earned skills she had acquired abroad (a mastery of portraiture was essential to a war artist's job); she came to depict for posterity a war fought by her compatriots for French (and world) democracy, invariably, as events demanded, on French soil. She was, besides the author of her own memoir, a recorder of her country's participation in the Allied cause. True, she did not return to Australia, as she wished in her last years. Sickness prevailed.[174] But her war paintings came back impressively in her stead.

---

[164] The major bone of contention stemmed from Ford's desire to have Julie brought up and educated as a Catholic (as he had been). To Bowen's dismay, he also gave unkind advice on Julie's adolescent weight gain. See especially Ford's letter to Bowen, 19–23 January 1934, and Bowen's reply, 1 February 1934, *Correspondence*, pp. 431–432 and pp. 433–435.

[165] DL, p.266.

[166] ibid.

[167] DL, p.303.

[168] DL, p.293.

[169] DL, p.294.

[170] DL, p.297.

[171] DL, p.296.

In the most moving of respects, Bowen's war work constituted the crowning point of her career. Her memoir, written prior to her appointment, set down in its closing chapter a dream she had cherished over the years: to get a 'commission…for a large group of people treated as purely formal decoration', and 'to develop the idea I had had for the "Nègre de Toulouse" because I was by now much better at portraiture'.[175] In essence, she hoped to concentrate less on the '"natural" poses' and 'realistic light and shade' of the 'painted to order' portraits of which the Royal Academicians approved, than on something at once symbolic and actual, something that expressed the unifying significance of a group's 'insignia of office', while conveying, through 'facial characteristics', the human differences it comprised; something that honoured the individual, while setting him as ceremoniously as possible in the context of the unit to which he belonged. 'But I could not get my group, plus the appropriate decorations', she lamented, 'without the cooperation of some club, or team, or lodge, or firm'.[176] That dream was realised when her war appointment began. In some of her most memorable war paintings—*Bomber Crew, Halifax Crew, Druffield, A Sunderland Crew Comes Aboard at Pembroke Dock*—it is the harmony of parts that beguiles: the solidarity of uniformed men—soldiers, airmen, sailors—arranged 'in rows or in circles', as she had long desired, cherubs of a Fra Angelica kind; the distinctiveness—of eyes, hair colour, facial contour, complexion—of her subjects, each someone's loved one, each vulnerable and far from home.[177] And all around such men is woven the military paraphernalia that identifies the commonness of their operations and the congruence of their goals: badges, gas masks, caps and gloves, blankets, scrolled names… Bowen's encounter in 1923 with the carefully composed works of the old Italian masters had not been in vain.

---

[172] On Bowen's war art, see 'Stella's War', in *Stella Bowen: Art, Love and War*, catalogue, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 2002, pp. 48–57; Lola Wilkins, 'Stella Bowen. Australian War Artist', *Art and Australia*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1991, pp. 493–497.

[173] *Drawn from Life*, preface, p. xii.

[174] Bowen died of cancer on 30 October 1947. She was 54.

[175] DL, p.276.

[176] DL, pp.276-277.

[177] DL, p.277.

Bowen's self-portrait of 1928, executed in Paris when she was getting her career under way, has become the most loved of her paintings. Perhaps, more than any other, it bespeaks the person and artist she was then becoming and, one feels, wished to be. Presently held by the Art Gallery of South Australia, to whom it was donated by Bowen's niece in 1999, it has habitually toured where her works have toured. It is her icon, a reflection of her spirit and mind, all the more valued now that, in the wake of recent critical attention, she has emerged (and is still emerging) from her early near obscurity.[178] The painting is both modest and brave, a little unsettling yet controlled, conventional, but then not so conventional after all. It presents the artist as a modern woman, but not a radical, a lady in a smock, feminine but unfussy, not a bohemian, but by no means the demure Victorian girl she might have become. The hair is neat and tied back revealing pretty earrings; the cream silk blouse is clasped with a matching brooch; this is proper, dare one say it, bourgeois dress—the dress not of a Montparnasse 'wreck' but of an 'Orderly One'. But the dark draped smock is there, covering the shoulders and, strikingly, almost half of the piece. It is, however, the artist's steady, stern gaze that most arrests. These are eyes that meet the world with the quiet defiance of one whose is unafraid of her modest strengths—dignity, equanimity, frankness, simplicity; the gaze of one who is not to be fooled with, but who, at the same time, will not deceive. When one views this marvellous, strong portrait, one is reminded of one of the confidences of *Drawn from Life*: 'I have always adored carefully tended good looks', Bowen says, 'and I do not care how artificial they are. An appearance of this sort is a work of art, entailing skill, patience, and self-discipline, and it must be carried off by the appropriate manner'.[179] Was it not with the same sense of attention and rigour that she tended her own art over long and steadfast years?

---

[178] A major event was the exhibition *Stella Bowen: Art, Love & War*, which began at the Australian War Memorial in 2002, then toured in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, finishing in 2004. For publication details of the catalogue, see endnote 57.

[179] DL, p.59.

5

‘All that Glitters’: Illusory Worlds in Christina Stead’s *The Beauties and Furies* (1936) and *House of All Nations* (1938) [1]

The end of World War I, marked by the signing of the Armistice on 11 November 1918, was only officially over when the Peace Treaty of Versailles was enacted on 18 January 1919.[2] But the treaty, over whose terms the Allies hotly argued, left Germany embittered, France vengeful, and Britain and the United States occupying different middle ground, the whole enterprise being termed ‘an unhappy compromise’ by the British diplomat, historian and politician Harold Nicolson, and a ‘Carthaginian [or no] peace’ by the economist John Maynard Keynes.[3] Clearly, the punitive territorial, military and economic measures the treaty imposed on Germany fanned national resentments on which Hitler and his Fascist followers capitalised. The 1920s, then, in France, as elsewhere, were uneasy years. At the same time international alarm gathered momentum during the stock market frenzy that grew out of post-war inflation in America and peaked in the world-shattering Wall Street Crash of 1929.[4] The ‘roaring twenties’, what the French called the ‘années folles’, were heady but precarious times. When the Australian Christina Stead stepped onto French soil in 1929 she entered a land of political uncertainties that had been festering for eleven years. That world became the setting for her two ‘Paris’ novels: *The Beauties and Furies* (1936) and *House of All Nations* (1938)—one a counterfoil for exposing western capitalist oppression; the other, the fictional model of a Europe in the throes of economic collapse and political turmoil. In the latter, she made France the example of nations facing financial crises even as Hitler was unnervingly rising to power.

Christina Ellen Stead was born in Sydney on 17 July 1902. Her childhood was not a happy one, or so her writings betray. Her mother died when she was two and her strict though clever naturalist father expected her to nurture her younger half-siblings more than girls in most families did. A distrust of family relationships is everywhere apparent in her oeuvre. On the other hand the young Christina was intelligent, inquiring and articulate, and a wide and discerning reader, largely thanks to her father’s influence and fecund mind. As a teenager she yearned to travel, deepen her understanding of literature, acquire cultivation and see the world. In fact she was to remain a restless spirit, even when she returned to Australia in 1974. By then she was a widow and seventy-two.

---

[1] In this chapter page numbers refer to *The Beauties and Furies* (BF), Virago Press, London, 1982, and *House of All Nations* (HN), Angus & Robertson, London and Sydney, 1974.

[2] Famously negotiated in the ‘Hall of Mirrors’ at Versailles, it was attended by seventy delegates and twenty-six nations from which Germany, Austria, Hungary and Russia were excluded. In a subsequent paring down of the peace participants, the final conditions were negotiated by the ‘Big Three’: United States, France and Great Britain, and ratified by the League of Nations on 10 January 1920.

[3] Harold Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919*, Constable, London, 1933; new edition, Methuen, London, 1964, p. 84; John Meynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, Macmillan, London, 1919, and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1920, vol. 2.

[4] After preliminary bank losses across America, the market spectacularly collapsed on 29 October (‘Black Tuesday’). Although much debated, it is widely believed to have started the Great Depression.

Stead left Australia for England in 1928. On arrival in London she found work with a company of grain merchants, where she met her future life partner and husband, the brilliant economist and writer, William Blake.[5] Their relationship, an emotionally and intellectually enduring one, was to see them live an itinerant working life as they moved between Europe and America, initially on business affairs, later as authors involved in publication and translation and their respective writing careers. Her work, which includes novels, novellas and short stories, draws imaginatively on her and Blake's singularly nomadic existence and notoriously on the wide range of people she met as she moved between countries and abodes. On those grounds she was somewhat spurned as a 'cosmopolitan' writer by her Australian contemporaries,[6] although she never denied her roots and wrote creatively about her homeland abroad.[7] Nonetheless her first novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, in progress when she arrived in Paris in 1929, was received to acclaim when it was published in 1934. It heralded a career that spanned forty-two years, her last book appearing in 1976, seven years before her death in 1983. Today she is recognised as one of its most verbally clever (if intellectually daunting) writers; concomitantly appreciation of her social acuity and stylistic diversity has justifiably soared.[8]

When Blake and Stead moved to Paris he took up a senior post and she a position as a secretary in their merchant company's American Travelers' Bank. They would remain in Paris until 1935, when political uncertainty and Blake's not entirely unwitting role in the bank's dubious affairs obliged them to leave.[9] The events and her job, which inspired *House of All Nations*, gave Stead a firm insight into the running of international banking organisations and the complexity of deals made behind closed office doors. But she and Blake also enjoyed an interesting social life, amicably spent in the cafés and bars bounding the office and their rented rooms. Where Stead was quiet and shy, Blake was gregarious and talkative, but both were insatiably curious, well-read and politically aware; together they befriended numerous Anglo-Saxons in transit, as were they. Itinerancy is, indeed, one of Stead's major literary themes. It is pathetically the case in *The Beauties*, whose English protagonists, more talk than action, waste the chance offered by their travels to emotionally learn and grow.

Judging by her letters, Stead blossomed in Paris under the spell of her ebullient and attentive companion. With his appetite for life, history, food, languages, places and fun, Blake feted her around the city, introducing her to its wonders and charms with the purpose of a teacher and the devotion of one in love.[10] At the time she facetiously wrote to her Sydney friend, Nellie Molyneux:

---

[5] Blake was born Wilhelm Blech of German Jewish parents in 1984 in New York. He anglicised his name in 1937.

[6] Anne Summers, 'The Self-Denied: Australian Women Writers—Their Image of Women', *Refractory Girl*, vol. 2, nos. 9–10, Autumn 1973, p. 10; Elizabeth Hardwick, 'The Neglected Novels of Christina Stead', *A View of My Own: Essays in Literature and Society*, Farrer, Strauss and Cudahy, New York, 1951, pp. 41–48.

[7] Asked if she had wished to escape from Australia, she replied, 'I was not escaping, I liked Sydney. Sydney was fine. And as for the suggestion that I found the culture narrow—that's ridiculous. I was full of Australian culture. I wanted to go abroad', Wetherell, 'Interview', p. 435.

[8] For a review of the evolving critical evaluations of Stead's work see Diana Brydon, *Christina Stead*, Macmillan Education, London, 1987, ch. 8 ('Stead and her Critics'), pp. 159–173.

[9] Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead: A Biography*, Minerva, Port Melbourne, Victoria, 1994, p. 165.

> To be fed, sunned, dressed in grand chic, petted, educated, loved, indulged, taken (intelligently) all over Paris, musiced, champagned, cabareted, zooed, parked, taxied, walked and otherwise ambulated, that I regard as misery of the last order.[11]

Such words reveal much, of course, about the lifestyle Stead led, the activities she enjoyed and the extent of Blake's zeal—infectious, one gathers, judging from a further hyperbolically-phrased comment to her friend:

> I am very unhappy. There are only 5,000 bookstores, artstores, flowershops, little dogs and cafés in Paris: only 40,000 little girls with a grand air and futurist dresses, poets with capes, 3-foot sombreros and sharp faces, waiters, taxi-drivers and petit-rentier bourgeois reading the Bourse quotation, students, Montmartrois and incroyables: only 10,000 beautiful facades, iron balconies, kaleidoscope windows, giant pillars, gold, silver, green and red decors, chaste or abandoned—there is only, in Paris, the most charming, civilised and decorative of cities whose native gaiety is intelligent, sustained and elegant: therefore, I am very miserable here. I am contemplating returning to Darlinghurst, or Murrurundi.[12]

Stead's time in Paris, when governments in Europe were tottering and the stock exchange was volatile, aroused her moral consciousness to levels of intensity she was never to forgo. The Great Depression, capitalist profiteering, the rise of Fascism and the spread of Communism were political realities that deeply concerned her. Blake's Marxist persuasions she quickly and fervently espoused.[13] In June 1935, in Paris, while Hitler was having literature he deemed threatening burned, she attended the Popular Front's First International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture, an anti-Fascist writers' lobby, where she encountered such literary notables as Gide, Aragon and Malraux. There, commonly ideologically bound, the 220 attendees, all leftist in persuasion, most Communist in creed, thrashed out how they might best address the new dictatorships plaguing Europe and the perceived weaknesses of the capitalist paradigm. For her part, she was the British delegation's unofficial secretary and her report on the event, 'The Writers Take Sides', while representing the commitment of the group, positioned her as one who would repeatedly argue against the 'disorders', 'anomalies' and 'decadence' of the 'bourgeois world'.[14] Alternatively, she never saw herself as a propagandist or proletarian writer, but rather as one who offered a picture of what she observed. If Leftist in leaning, she was able to see faults within all political systems and from all points of view. What she could not tolerate was hypocrisy, injustice and dishonesty.[15] She believed what mattered in the getting and practice of wisdom was open-mindedness, debate and healthy incertitude. Equally, she conditionally considered the impact and theoretical contributions of Darwin, Nietzsche and Freud. It is that rich ferment of 1930s events and ideologies that gives *The Beauties* and *House of All Nations* their contemporary edge. Few of their characters come through their adventures unscathed by the worlds that bred them or the societies that challenge their beliefs and ideals.

---

[10] Of Blake she writes: 'I have seen some parts of Paris inside-out, but always under the wing of Mr Blech [Blake], who is a marvellous raconteur, rapporteur—a great memory and ingenuity and enthusiasm—and who will not leave my side for even two hours', letter to Nellie Molyneux, 2 April 1929, Geering, *Selected Letters*, p. 15.

[11] ibid., p. 16.

[12] ibid.

[13] Set down by Blake in *Elements of Marxian Economic Theory and its Criticism: An American Looks at Karl Marx*, Cordon, New York, 1939.

[14] *Left Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, July 1935, pp. 453–462. The article is Stead's only official statement about the political responsibility of writers.

****

In the opening chapter of *The Beauties and Furies* Christina Stead proffers a striking image of a showy 1930s Paris, conjured up in the words of one of her most decadent (and articulate) characters, the malevolent Marpurgo. The significance of his words sharpens, ironically enough, as the novel unfolds. The Paris its naïve but hedonistically motivated English protagonists romantically seek turns out to be a corrupt and tawdry world, though they are content, in the seeking, to indulge in its titillations as their relationship rapidly fails. The 'land of enchantment'[16] Marpurgo hails in his thinly disguised jaded wisdom is a place of ready seductions and glamorous veneer. Paris, he remarks, is the place where

> …there are more false diamonds and false eyelashes than anywhere else, where the gowns are more elegant, the complexions more enamelled, laces finer, shoes smaller, heels higher, the gait more billowy, the fans better painted and the breasts set more to advantage, than in all the world; where that violent liquor love concealed in the heart's smoky hard jewel, is finer strained and thicker distilled, more adulterated and oftener aspersed, the blood flows wilder in passion and revolt, the beds are oftener stained with blood and love and the river oftener thickened with blood and tears: the garden of lovers, joy of youth, nest of revolution, city of thrice-fired blood![17]

There is a warning to be had in Marpurgo's appraisal, if not at the point of its pronouncement to his young love-blinded English listeners, come to Paris to embark on an adulterous affair, then within the larger spectrum of what both 'Paris' novels thematically portray. *House of All Nations*, too, points to a city of low ideals. There the characters are predominantly involved in the type of frenzied banking operations that characterised Paris in the anxious lead-up to World War II. They too, even more than the protagonists of *The* Beauties, look to the transient delights the capital offers, not with any measure or discernment, but with the lust and profligacy that befits the greedy rich and self-serving ambitious and bold.

The Beauties and *House of All Nations* are early examples of that sparkling Stead mix of documentation, satire and fantasy. The Paris she evokes is one she observed and knew well, though the larger-than-life characters that move within in it—visitors, locals, opportunists—are overwhelmingly of the ne'er-do-well, egotistical kind: at once the products and the exploiters of the societies from which they spring. The authorial view, then, is no kindly one. Stead looks upon a 'grab and graft'[18] world, epitomized in the flawed characters of her invention who seek gratification or advancement by taking from others what they can. In *The Beauties* that world is a recognizably not-so-gay post-1920s one, stringently portrayed it all its expatriate (and local) decline: the idle English lovers, drifting habitués of the city's cafés and bars, find little in the course of their adventures to satisfy their dreams. In *House of All Nations*, the focus is, rather, on the city's financial milieux and the kind of risky capitalist enterprises that spectacularly rose and fell in the unstable economic climate that followed the Crash and prevailed in the jittery Europe of pre-World War II. But Stead looks, too, to the literary legacy of Balzac and Maupassant, each a merciless critic of the capital's coveters of money, sex and power.[19] In *House of All Nations*, especially, she constructs a stinging Balzacian 'comédie humaine' of her times.

---

[15] 'I am not puritan nor party, like to know every sort of person; nor political, but on the side of those who have suffered oppression, injustice, coercion, prejudice, and have been harried from birth', Kunitz & Haycroft, *Twentieth Century Authors*, p. 1330.

[16] One of Stead's early titles for *The Beauties and Furies*, letter to Gwen Walker-Smith, *A Web of Friendship: Selected Letters, Christina Stead (1928–1973)*, edited with a preface by R. G. Geering, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1992, p. 33.

[17] BF, p.18.

The Beauties opens with the heroine, Mrs Elvira Western, travelling across the French countryside by train, on her way to Paris to meet her student lover, Oliver Fenton, who has pledged his love and munificent desire to pluck her from her staid marriage and bourgeois home.[20] On her lap lies his letter, calling her to Paris, which she reads while making acquaintance with a fellow traveller, the Italian Marpurgo, later to callously intrude on their lives. But the letter, despite its effusiveness, reveals an elopement that is both escape and escapade: Oliver imagines Elvira 'at home', 'grumping over a meal' with her bourgeois doctor husband, Paul, or seated by the fireside 'contented in habitual melancholy'[21]and reminds her that he has risen from his working-class origins to become a scholar and participant in Paris's revolutionary affairs. 'Wake up', he urges, 'come to life before it is too late: before the thorns interlock and crib you forever…enjoy the youth and young love you never had…I'll breathe my whole life into you'.[22] In the event, Oliver's Prince Charming promises prove short-lived. What follows in the book is but the relation of the affair's inexorable disintegration as the lovers deliberate the pros and cons of a commitment of which they quickly tire.

Stead's characters typically speak in the idiom that betrays their ingrained traits. At times they are given to self-reflexive perspicacity; more often they are oblivious to their flaws. Oliver's letter, pompously composed with its mixture of florid phrasings and banal amorous overtures ('I love you, you love me, we both love each other: you be good to me and I will be good to you'), smacks of infatuation, despite his claim that he is 'not a boy'.[23] Paris he describes with clichéd sentimentality as the land of poetical sighs, whose beauty he conflates with Elvira's even before she steps foot on its soil:

---

[18] HN, p.199.

[19] Stead read French literature avidly in Australia, exploring the holdings of the Sydney Municipal Library in her teenage years (S. J. Kunitz & H. Haycroft, *Twentieth Century Authors*, H. W. Wilson, New York, 1942, p. 1330). In 1980 she confessed to Rodney Wetherell: 'I fell overboard for Balzac…[he] was one of my main discoveries', 'Interview with Christina Stead', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 9, no. 4, October 1980, p. 243.

[20] An early title for the book was *The Lovers in Paris*, letter to Gwen Walker-Smith, 23 September 1930, Geering, *Selected Letters*, p. 33.

[21] BF, p.2.

[22] BF, p.3.

> On moonlight nights, when everyone walks with his shade, I pretend we are here together. You are the moon of beauty and I a moonstruck poet. My little glass of water on the bedroom table, when the moon sails high above the narrow street, shines with one eye, a little moon, and I go out. The skies are starling-dark–your hair; the town and its towers discoloured—your breast; the river, curdled, bubbling—your voice; the glistening brown-buds of the first-sprouters—your eyes.[24]

As for himself, he beguiles, 'How can any woman resist my entreaties…How can any young woman resist Paris in the spring? How can you resist me in the spring?'.[25] If Elvira is beautiful, Paris, he believes, will raise her to new heights of continental charm. Part of his mission is to smarten her up, though, for all he pretends to be her liberator, it is not her character he hopes to alter, but, quite simply her looks. He enjoins:

> A French woman built like you would build up her bosom. I'll take you to a dressmaker who will study your style, and bring out your femininity. You must go, the very first thing, to the Printemps, or to Antoine, and have your hair done too. Oh, you'll spend fortunes on yourself before you've been in Paris long. You'll be quite a different woman…You'll be splendid when you're dressed like a French woman. Everyone will say, How adaptable she is.[26]

In fact, despite what Paris offers—a fresh start, a different appearance, sexual freedom, geographical distance—neither Elvira nor Oliver finds the spirit or will to change. Oliver, a compulsive philanderer, retains the ideal of possessing a 'woman playing in a house', her 'hand wandering over the ivories…a woman, a soft, reluctant voice, music, flowers',[27] the soon pregnant Elvira, after much prevaricating upon whether or not to keep Oliver's child, opts for an abortion, and returns to her husband, her linen and bourgeois ease. The wakers are after all sleepers. The fairy-tale has no substance at all. What Marpurgo cynically calls a 'perfectly modern love-affair'[28] is no more than a shabby holiday fling.

The Beauties is not a novel of events; its characters, despite much puffing and blowing, do not practise what they preach: leopards who do not change their spots, chained to attitudes they barely forsake, touting fuzzy ideals they are too lazy to uphold. As such they are typical Stead representatives of the faint-hearted and aimless, the very opposite of the energetic and purposeful (though no less morally thin) characters of *House of All Nations*, still less of those others of her novels who have the courage to act and reform.[29] In that respect *The Beauties* is a scathing indictment of human self-delusion and lethargy.

---

[23] ibid.

[24] BF, p.2.

[25] BF, pp.1-2.

[26] BF, p.13. Printemps is a large department store in Paris. Stead, a plain woman, reputedly took great care to look good (Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 136). On meeting her in Paris, Nettie Palmer records Stead's intense interest in smart fashion and her 'lightly elegant' appearance', *Nettie Palmer: her private journal Fourteen Years, poems, reviews, and literary essays*, ed. Vivian Smith, University of Queensland Press, 1988, p. 154.

[27] BF, p.22.

[28] BF, p.142.

Much of *The Beauties* is concerned with failed ambitions and unrealistic ideals, no more than in the arena of professional endeavour and political affairs. For the bushy-tailed Oliver, a doctoral student of history, ostensibly in Paris to hone his thesis on the Workers' Movement in France, 1871–1904, the time seems ripe for him to give expression to his professed Leftist ideals. Throughout the novel he engrosses himself in the odd protest meeting, the odd café debate, enough to convince himself he is an activist and the friend of the poor. Of his part in the workers' United Front protest of 27 May 1934, an allusion to France's real response to the wrath unleashed by the Left on the Right in the wake of the Stavisky affair, he grandly recalls:[30]

> He had been called 'camarade' so often during the day, had seen so many red flags and so many 'sinewy arms lifted into the air, had heard the 'Internationale' and 'The Young Guard' so often, that he was no longer himself, a piecemeal student grubbing on collegiate benches, but a glorious foot-soldier in an army millions strong, sure of battery, but sure of victory.[31]

In fact the hollowness of Oliver's professions is everywhere apparent, whether in the form of his 'arm-chair' politicking,[32] or his talent for intellectual expediency. His thesis, conveniently cast in the past is, he reckons, distant enough to make archival research easier, and remote enough from British affairs not to offend English examiners of a conservative or xenophobic mind. In other words, he hopes 'to look like a socialist who knows the amenities'[33] and how to get on in the world. Others, his observers, are hardy fooled. Marpurgo, not one to mince words, pronounces him 'a coward…the summit of well-bred nonentity…an inkpot-valiant', for whom 'Marxism is just the newer label for a smart young man who must be up to date', and attendance at workmen's meetings a means 'to be in the swim'.[34] For Elvira's husband, Paul, who comes to Paris to fetch Elvira home, Oliver is a fence-sitter, 'not a Leninist, or a Stalinist, or a Marxist, and not a Trotskyist either, but some shade of opinion of his own he has worked out…in between cafés and scribbling in…Archives'.[35] Thus is the presumed hallowedness of academia exposed as no less open to abuse than the business of business or any other selfishly spurred human enterprise.

---

[29] Notably Teresa in *For Love Alone* (Harcourt Brace, New York, 1944; Peter Davies, London, 1945; Virago, London, 1978).

[30] Stavisky, a Jewish stockbroker and confidence trickster, was involved in the early 1930s in a series of scandalous financial frauds. After his suspicious death it was revealed that certain members of the incumbent Radical Socialist Party had been associated with his deals. When the government dismissed the rightwing Prefect of police for supporting anti-government demonstrations, the Rightwing revolted and a series of riots, culminating in a mass demonstration on 6 February, ensued. Seventeen people were killed and, although the Third Republic survived, the government duly resigned. But the left supporters of the time had genuinely feared a Rightwing pro-Fascist coup, and the events led to the formation of anti-Fascist leagues and the Popular Front in 1936, detailed in Paul Jankowski, *Stavisky: A Confidence Man in the Republic of Virtue*, Cornell University Press, 2002.

[31] BF, p.138.

[32] BF, p.102.

[33] BF, p.26.

[34] BF, pp.324-325.

[35] BF, p.159.

Political and professional insincerity are key issues in Stead's work. She and Blake were committed to their writing and their Marxist beliefs; materialism she detested; creativity she valued in others and practised with zeal. Oliver emerges as a failure in *The Beauties* not because he is a Marxist but because he cheats the system he pretends to embrace and the proletariat he claims to serve. Over that kind of duplicity Stead casts an unforgiving eye. Whatever the different motivations of pseudo-socialist Oliver, bourgeois Elvira and lip-serving Marxist-cum-capitalist Marpurgo, they exhibit equal measures of hypocrisy. When Marpurgo urges the intelligent Oliver to get into business it is because he recognises in him double standards he shares. He may exude good taste: in food, in books, in liqueurs, in the gentlemanly pursuit of chess, but his little extravagances are paid for because of the success of his employers' dirty work ethic and his own complicity. There is something perversely anomalous in his private obsession with hand-made lacework, collected with the passion of the connoisseur, and his dealings as a lace-buyer for sellers of shoddy garments and marked-up job lots. The myth of Paris, seat of art and learning, is challenged by Stead's gallery of careerist rogues: not only Oliver, master of the intellectual short-cut, but also by Marpurgo and the opportunistic 'depression' and 'post-war' bosses he serves.[36] In *The Beauties*, the 'grab and graft' mentality of the consumer society is seen for the modern canker it is. Stead looks to the nature of lace production as a real and metaphoric measure of how the economic power base lies in the hands of the exploitative few. 'We're not in the candlestick age', argues one of Marpurgo's managers…

> …we don't wear knee-breeches and ruffles…lace is proletarian now…What you want is pretentious, embossed, cheap, washable flowing stuff to put on cheap voile nighties…To-day you've got to be a cheap-jack, a thug, a bastard. You've got to forget art and steal your competitor's best selling design…This is an age of decay—you can plunder…You've got to be a man of your time.[37]

In *The Beauties* Stead develops the 'drama of the person' with attention to psychological detail.[38] While some 126 characters traverse the pages of *House of All Nations*, in the former the three characters of Elvira, Oliver and Marpurgo take centre stage. But individuals in Stead's work are but products of broad class systems that govern their gender and determine their lives. If the system is fallible they may rise above it; more often the strong exploit it and the weak buckle or comply. Not Marxist to the fanatical letter, but Marxist in orientation and sentiment, Stead looks to the never straightforward issue of human effort in the context of the tenets the West has imposed. Capitalism is a prime target; rising Fascism she disquietingly portrays. In *The Beauties* Marpurgo's Marxism barely conceals his capitalist cunning and Oliver, despite his assertions, is but a smug capitalist bourgeois. As for Elvira, Paris in the spring differs little from London in winter, the domestic hearth from the drab Paris hotel rooms in which she and Oliver thrash out the tedious binds of their affair. She is, and will remain, locked into the patriarchal values on which she was raised. If *The Beauties* is a domestic drama (where *House of All Nations* looks to the world of commerce), it is the sexual politics of her era Stead explores. Not a feminist in the strict sense (all human oppression concerned her and women, she thought, could be as conforming or conniving as men), her female characters are nonetheless trapped in established gender roles. For Stead's unbecoming fictitious trio the prevailing system rules.

---

[36] BF, p.47.

[37] BF, pp.41-42.

[38] 'Sometimes I start with a situation, sometimes with a personality. I never question or argue. I'm a psychological writer, and my drama is the drama of the person', Jonah Raskin, 'Christina Stead in Washington Square', *London Magazine*, vol. 9, no. 2, February 1970, p. 75.

Stead makes much of Elvira's beauty. *The Beauties'* title refers, at least in one of its uses, to the physicality of their bodies women have learnt to flaunt (or sell). Elvira knows her attractiveness gets her what she wants, even though it inhibits her from cultivating a deeper than skin-deep self. According to the cynical Marpurgo she is the classic 'enchantress',[39] 'putting out her flowers', 'spread[ing] her charms around', giving men 'the benefit of her eyes', the 'thought of her body'.[40] But for Elvira male approval is enough; the admiration (or love) of others is not returned; rather it feeds her vanity and confirms her belief that her body is the source of her power. One senses it on the occasion when Oliver spies on her as she emerges from her bath. Parading naked before the mirror, she passes her hands over her body, carries her breasts in her hands, kisses her arms, a shoulder, then, clothed in a gown, executes a kind of self-anointment (albeit with the most standard of feminine aids):

> She wandered about the room, giving her body hundreds of small attentions, using ear and nose syringes, sponges, files, scissors, chamois leather, swan's-down puffs, sticks of orange-wood, creams, powders, and the rouge that Oliver had brought her home.[41]

Elvira may resent having been a 'slave of the kitchen and bedroom'[42] and a 'hearthside wife',[43] but what she demands of her lovers effectively keeps her where she is. Love is possession. Life is making, not working towards, love. Men chase women. Women play 'the eternal game of hide-and-seek'.[44] Oliver forges a career. Despite being a Master of Arts, Elvira fritters her days away. Oliver is a 'playmate',[45] sleeping with him is 'an experiment'.[46] Uncommitted and idle, she perpetuates a feminine condition against which she bucks just long enough to persuade her that her old life-style is easier to maintain. But, like most Stead characters, Elvira pays a price for her selfish ways. Apathy brings boredom; changing partners, not convictions, brings satiety; travel is wandering; wandering breeds irresponsibility. Like an Emma Bovary, out for the grand passion, but not the investment of a loving self, Elvira opts for the instant gratifications of the flesh: sex without attachment, marriage (and adultery) without the trouble of motherhood. 'There are lover-women and mother-women', she confesses. 'I am the first sort'.[47] Paris, then, can offer nothing new to one who seeks no newness of self. A hotel room sought as another bed is not a Sleeping Beauty's boudoir. Oliver's choice of 'an old-fashioned hotel, with high, grand, elegant rooms, long brocade curtains',[48] is not received by the jaded Elvira with the same naïve joy. Looking upon 'the yellow-plated bedstead, the wallpaper covered with red palm-leaves', she remarks: 'It's so trite…Think of all the couples who have slept here before us! They make it stale'.[49] Then: 'Life's a pattern, and we're just shuttles rushing in and out' For Elvira, life is mechanical. In it, one can have no creative role.

---

[39] BF, p.28.
[40] BF, pp.28-29.
[41] BF, p.70.
[42] BF, p.131.
[43] BF, p.175.
[44] BF, p.157.
[45] BF, p.80.
[46] BF, p.79.
[47] BF, p.217.

No single character is to blame in *The Beauties*. Rather, together its players construct an untenable world of unworkable ties. The arrival of Elvira's husband in Paris brings about an unsuitable *ménage à trois*. In Paul's wake comes his cousin Sara, hoping to pick up the luckless man on the rebound and get the lover she never had. Hovering in the background is Elvira's cynical brother, accompanying the English cohort, with ready but bad advice. But Paris is also untenable because it is only ever considered a short-term solution to long-term ills. Paul, weak, dull, and indulgent, in Oliver's opinion, a 'big, tender, kind mug',[50] gives up the chase and retreats to England, his surgery and his home. Finally, he generously but foolishly separately finances Elvira and Oliver home. Oliver, fatigued by Elvira's unpredictable changes of heart, finds solace in a French woman, the exotic and buxom Coromandel, potentially a better companion, but, he tells Marpurgo, taken up casually as 'one of those romances of your city of light and love'.[51] For him, conceited and imprudent, infidelity begets infidelity as he sets out to prove his questionable manhood, lurching first into the arms of the unreliable Blanche, Elvira's prostitute café friend, then, while Elvira is recovering from her abortion, into those of a one-night stand. If, as he boasts to Marpurgo, 'The French women bring it out in you',[52] he looks neither far nor deeply to prove his point, and it is unsurprising that the scheming Blanche cheats him out of the money he lends her and that their affair is short-lived.

Elvira's solution, while different from her juvenile paramour's, is comparably selfish and weak. Both 'sell out' to the 'amenities' in the strongest sense of those recurrent Stead terms. For Elvira, the call of possessions is too easy and too great. The bourgeois values of Stead's bourgeois characters are generally too entrenched to be budged, and while she rarely intervenes to moralise, the choices they make and the opinions they offer speak for themselves. Marpurgo, vicious but not blind, is right in observing that Elvira, who 'loves her habits', is a 'pampered girl'.[53] 'Property', her husband recognises, is what she 'loves'.[54] Tired of her grubby hotel room, Elvira soon longs for her cluttered house, packed with the belongings of eight years of married life: 'curtains, silver dressing-table ware, vases [and] doyleys', 'soaps and cleansing materials always in stock',[55] hardly enough to fill the emotional desert she inhabits and the spiritual emptiness she rues. Elvira is at fault in having expected a miraculous make-over in Paris, but so too, Stead implies, is the feminine condition onto which she clings. She is an unwary spokeswoman for the oppressed of her sex when she bemoans:

---

[48] BF, p.12.
[49] BF, p.29.
[50] BF, p.139.
[51] BF, p.229.
[52] BF, p.229.
[53] BF, p.323.
[54] BF, p.206.
[55] BF, p.133.

> I came away with Oliver…but it is not just charm I was looking for, it was—a new life, a bath of the soul. I thought his charm and love would act like cold cream, and his inexperience like an astringent and give me a new skin, take away my mental wrinkles. Well, I find there is no such thing as a spiritual renaissance, at least not for a woman. We are too much nailed to a coffin of flesh, our souls are only plants, they are rooted in an earth of flesh. We need a home, security, comfort for our flesh before the mind can grow.[56]

When Oliver tells her he will look back to 'this great spring all my life' when they 'first joined hands and began to walk along the crazy pavement with flowers and moss coming through all the cracks', she rejoins: 'How suburban…That's what we are, you see: suburban, however wild we run…We are not fire and dew'.[57] It is that lack of vitality, that defeatism, that settling for banality that locks Elvira into her lot. 'Fire and dew', energy and spirit, attributes Stead admired, are not in her command. The melancholy of which Elvira complains is the cost born of willed subservience and pathological inertia.

The Beauties' title assumes its full meaning as the book grinds to its inevitable end. There the characters wind up their continental affairs as egotistically and destructively as each sees fit. Effectively, the 'beauties', (pretty, youthful Oliver and Elvira, clever Marpurpo and Coromandel) become 'furies' just long enough to vent their discontent on others before they slip back into old lives or oblivion. When Marpurgo slyly tells Oliver: 'It's hard to leave Paris, eh? She has many beauties—and furies',[58] he means that Paris provides the seductions one hopes to find. Later, he extrapolates, Oliver's 'three furies' are 'Elvira, Coromandel, the occasional whore'.[59] But each of the book's characters exhibits a 'fury' of his or her vengeful kind. Marpurgo, jealous of Oliver's relationship with Coromandel, maliciously contrives a meeting between her and Elvira to expose Oliver's infidelity. Subsequently he writes to Paul telling him of Oliver's treachery, enough to encourage the cuckolded man to call his wife home. After a final argument with Elvira, Oliver runs off with Coromandel, who inveigles him into the country, giving her time to ruin his chances of reconciliation with his lover and for Elvira to pack up and leave.

The romantic Paris Oliver envisaged as he set out on his amorous quest seems emptied of his presence, when, returning to the city with Coromandel, he looks upon the spectacle of its throng. While he reckons he will always 'mourn' it as 'the country of the heart',[60] it hovers before and above him as a place to which he no longer belongs. The last glimpses of the city before the book's close are ironically his. It is not the Paris he promised Elvira, the Paris of pen and paper, of cliché and dream, but rather the Paris that will continue to hum and thrive well after he has gone:

> The Place de l'Opéra was like quicksands and undertows with regiments of all ages and kinds drifting back and forth across the roads as the circular traffic stayed and went. There stood the solid cavernous sepia Opera-house, and down the Boulevard de la Madeleine the thick old rich Chinese pavilioned and lanterned scene, with the stuff of boughs above. There was Lancel's corner-shop, with a large inverted lily in its glass bed, the first sun on the windows of the

---

[56] BF, p.175.
[57] BF, pp.98-99.
[58] BF, p.226.
[59] BF, p.321.
[60] BF, p.364.

> Grande Maison de Blanc. The people tapped to work…High above the mansards were the thin filaments of night-signs—Fumez-les-Gitanes, Marivaux, Pathé-Polydor, Eversharp, Le-Touquet-Paris-Plage.[61]

Early in *The Beauties* Marpurgo tells his newly-made English friends that of those who embark on spiritual adventures 'some never reach them, lying becalmed off Cytherea':[62] the quest is of no avail. The significance of the remark resounds in the book as the protagonists' ill-conceived plans come undone. Cytherea, the mythical island of love and destination of lovers, famously depicted in Watteau's painting of 1717, is a recurrent Stead metaphor of journeys that fail.[63] In *The Beauties* it melds with the image of sleep: the 'sleep' of romantic fancy, moral capitulation and human unconcern. Towards the end of the book, in one of its more curious episodes, Marpugo takes Oliver to his Somnambulists' Club, the meeting place of crack-pot philosophers and, it appears, an opium den. In it Marpurgo speaks to the drugged Oliver as one who is 'a dead soul':[64] 'You're somnambulists walking in a world of phantoms: you're shadows', he says of Oliver's kind.[65] The warning is compounded when, just before Oliver leaves for home, he dreams of an entombed woman who rallies—terrible, irresistible—then, as he goes to kiss her, sinks back into the earth: 'In an instant she was cold and I was grasping a stone'.[66] The last pages of *The Beauties* see the lovers return to their former lives. Whatever they rued in Paris in small moments of lucidity is over. No sentimental education occurred. Elvira at home, we learn, has another 'young pup';[67] Oliver, journeying back to England by train is seducing another girl with the same old ploys. It will take more heroic characters than those of *The Beauties* to see Stead give expression to her belief that only through struggle, endeavour, enquiry and a willingness to adapt can human beings rise above those social forces that stifle human creativity and independence of action and mind.

House of All Nations, Stead's most historically driven novel, refers outrageously, even fantastically, to the 1930s world in which she moved. A mammoth work of around 800 pages and 104 scenes, it rampages through the lives of its smart but rapacious protagonists, each scrambling for wealth in a toppling world. The time is 1931–1932, the political mood one Stead understood well. Her characters, caught up in the thick of their daily deals, must nonetheless reckon with the web of historical phenomena that impinges on their business lives: the legacy of World War 1 and the precarious world peace it installed; the Depression; the growing threat of German Fascism; the memory of the Russian Revolution; unrest in China and Japan; discontent in Spain; impending war. The book's cavalcade of careerists are ever mindful of the might (or machinations) of the real political leaders of the time: Mussolini, Hitler, Hoover, Roosevelt, Ramsay MacDonald, Churchill. But influencing all their chancy ventures is the Wall Street Crash and the fear that France, hanging on to the gold standard when England had devalued the pound, might itself be forced to devalue the franc and face the kind of Depression that was rampant elsewhere. The volatility of the novel's aptly-named Banque Mercure mimics that of a string of real banks and financial empires—Dawes, Kreuger, Insull, Credit-Anstalt—to which, moreover, its characters nervously allude. In this, her testament to 1930s economic instability, Stead lets fact and fiction calamitously interweave. More discerningly, she posits her characters' wheelings and dealings as evocative of a Europe entering a new and risky political phase. Just as they engage in underhand gambles and swindles, each coveting personal wealth and power, so she envisages a world whose countries, vying for political supremacy, were already set upon paths of clandestine operation and unsure accords. Of that world the Banque Mercure, seat of competing ambitions and dicey pacts, is both an illustrative fictional instance and a complex metaphor.

---

[61] ibid.

[62] BF, p.21.

[63] *The Embarkation for Cytherea*. Some commentators believe the work depicts a departure *from* Cytherea, Venus's birthplace, and, as such, symbolises the brevity of love.

[64] BF, p.331.

[65] BF, p.325.

[66] BF, p.376.

[67] BF, p.374.

Stead knew when she arrived in Paris she had come to the 'capital of the modern world'.[68] It was then the international centre of high finance as much for the big-time investor as for those who controlled economic flow. So it is for the Banque Mercure, run as 'a sort of cosmopolite club for the idle rich and speculators of Paris, Madrid, Rio, Buenos Aires, New York, London, and points farther east and west'.[69] To its doors are welcomed the moneyed of all nations, behind them grand deals are made. Much of the novel's action takes place within its walls: on the lower floors the clients gather to do business with brokers, tellers, secretaries, cashiers; along its corridors rumours are spread and decisions forged; in the upper storeys, inhabited by senior management, the best customers—those most likely to fill the bank's vaults—are received, feted, flattered and deceived. But it is in the office of the charismatic bank manager, Jules Bertillon, that, unbeknown to the many, the rashest schemes are hatched and realised. There, over the course of the narrative, the major characters assemble to thrash out the bank's future and secure their careers: William Bertillon, Jules's stable and practical brother and partner; Richard Plowman, faithful but gullible family retainer; Michel Alphendéry, loyal investments manager and uncomfortable socialist in a capitalist world; Henri Léon, one-time grain merchant, valuable client and ideas man; Count Jean de Guipatin, affable investor; Aristide Raccamond, the wily customers' man who eventually betrays Jules and the firm. When Alphendéry introduces Léon to the kind of 'mercurial money crowd'[70] the bank sets out to lure, he proffers a damning picture of the fast cash contacts men like Jules cynically made:

> South Americans who make money every two or three years in some new mining grab…a few old Spanish land hogs, a few Hollywood skyrockets, a few Eton playboys...consolidated squirearchies…conserved Napoleonic dough, society figures who remember where they came from and how far: not too rusty, not too incautious…People who eat their cake and have it...A few Chicago street walkers with packing-house fortunes, married to phony counts, a few French hereditary bankbooks, a few postwar youngsters, motor-drome and flying aces, born in a bedeviled world, crazy to make a fortune, amoral and playing for big stakes.[71]

---

[68] Letter to Nellie Molyneux, 1 March 1929, Geering, *Selected Letters*, p. 12.

[69] HN, p.19.

[70] HN, p.23.

[71] HN, p.38.

If Jules's bank is a place of dubious morals (ironically, the real 'House of All Nations' was an exclusive 1930s Paris brothel), its more knowing investors, in for the quick return, are happy it is so. Far from being daunted by economic uncertainty, the shrewdest amongst them relish the chance to profit from others' naivety and ruin. Stead is clearly fascinated by the frenzied buoyancy and restless energy of the age. One feels it in the rhythm of the book, in the cinematic succession of scenes, the breakneck progress of narrative event, the cut-throat conversations that unfold. In *House of All Nations* 'mercurial money' begets mercurial activity; risk-taking is all; a *carpe diem* incaution prevails. Jules, 'full of ideas as a hive of bees',[72] plunges from hunch to caprice to act, hoping to 'make real money in a dissolving world';[73] 'every crisis', he reckons, 'is a storm of gold',[74] (HN 18). As Alphendéry maintains in terms that would make Marx, his touted god, turn in his grave:

> This is a new Napoleonic age, a new Commune age. Revolution! Why, it always produces new markets! All new money is made through the shifting of social classes and the dispossession of old classes. Today we have it. Property is changing hands, losing its old owners all the time. This is the time to move in.[75]

Of the mixed reception of her novel in America, Stead claimed, 'it was badly received in Wall Street, because it was so true.'[76] 'Those boys told me everything', she admitted of her Travelers' colleagues.[77] That 'everything', epically transformed, was evidently manna from heaven for one of her social acuity. Early on in their jobs she and Blake realised their American manager, Peter Neidecker, was running a crooked business by fiddling the books, though Blake, in particular, felt caught between moral principle and fidelity to his nonetheless warm and generous superior. Amongst other shady practices, Neidecker was 'bearing' the market. The bank was no more than a 'bucket house', financing speculative stock market deals with the clients' money in order to resell when the market rose—or so they planned. Blake resigned, but the bank limped on until it crashed in July 1935. Neidecker and his two partners (his brothers) absconded with some of the bank's funds, but were subsequently caught in America and later tried—not the fate of Stead's novel's elusive Jules, although the parallels between the fictional and real conmen she hardly disguised.[78]

Stead put her experience to immediate literary advantage, re-contextualising it to proffer a picture of capitalist mayhem at a time when her own Leftist persuasions were firming and the capitalist nations were apprehensively observing changing political and economic trends. The book, which she later agreed was ‘a staggering satire on the capitalist system’, is a kind of negative portrait of her own world view.[79] Indeed, at the time she was involved in Blake’s Marxist circles, borne out in their combined journalistic affiliations with the London-based pro-communist *Left Review*, and the American *New Masses* which Blake had supported in earlier days.[80]

---

[72] HN, p.24.

[73] HN, p.130.

[74] HN, p.18.

[75] ibid.

[76] Wetherell, 'Interview', p. 441.

[77] Ann Whitehead, 'Christina Stead: An Interview', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, May 1974, p. 238.

[78] Initially Blake and Stead worked in the American & Foreign Discount Corporation, associated with the Travelers' Bank, but moved to the Travelers' office, 18 Rue de la Paix, sometime in 1931, Rowley, *Christina Stead*, pp. 109 and 141. On the bank's collapse, see *ibid*., pp. 178–180. According to a letter Stead wrote to her friend Florence James dated 17 October 1935, Neidecker gave her his 'full permission' to write a book based on the bank, though, as Rowley remarks, he no doubt never imagined she knew what she did , *ibid.*, p. 191.

House of All Nations is neither a ‘proletarian’ novel nor a ‘revolutionary’ novel in the strict sense of those genres. It does not focus upon strikes, workers, and unions, nor, other than incidentally, upon revolts and wars. ‘Everyone is still waiting with baited [sic] breath for *the* left novel’, she wrote to her friend Stanley Burnshaw, before the book appeared. ‘It can’t be mine, as there is no member of the lower classes in my bank novel and even—I think this shows the highest moral courage—one of my chief moral heroes is a blueblooded *Count.*’[81] Of course this does not detract from the strength of what it does say. Inspired by the Marxist novelist, literary critic and scholar Ralph Fox—to boot, a loved friend and mentor—she believed a work should be ‘artistic’ rather than ‘propagandist’ and ‘functional’, and that characters who speak for themselves don’t need authors to judge or explain the way they behave.[82] But Stead, like Fox, *did* present character from a Marxist materialist perspective. Unlike the social realist, she believed the private and public self are not separable, that we are not born in ivory towers; that we are defined by the social and economic contexts in which we are immersed. In the deep Lukácsian, sense, her characters are ‘world historical beings’, forged from the social forces at work in their lives.[83] As Diana Brydon remarks, ‘[in Stead] character is politics’, ‘inner and outer realities’ are ‘seamlessly one’. With her, the ‘novel of character’, ideologically and historically riven, is inextricably the ‘novel of ideas’.[84]

In *House of All Nations* Stead focuses upon the West’s ‘sell outs’, those who abuse or exploit the prevailing system, for which, she shows, the capitalist society is ideologically prone. Her characters, or at least those of them who hold public sway, are the rich who rob the poor: Marx’s privileged; the class that has the money to make more money, and the mental acumen (read cunning) to keep it so. Duping the people was always Marx’s great lament; the capitalist strategy, he reckoned, was to keep the worker in the dark, happy, presumably, to have a job rather than none at all. Jules and his entourage give no thought to those under them. ‘I don’t care a hoot for them’,[85] Jules spins off, when asked of their use to mankind. In his universe labour is cleanly divided into those who manage and those who toil. ‘We make it: the smart people’, he tells Alphendéry.[86] And later: ‘I come from a breed of men who have harvested, for generations, what others have sown, or dug, or made'.[87] Fleecing the people is literally how he phrases it in his trade-mark cynical way. 'I'm a sheep shearer', he explains. 'The lambs eat grass and grow wool and I clip it'.[88] He is, he knows, at the profitable end of the production line. It is not lost on his close colleagues, no better than he, that Jules is 'a robber by instinct, [a] sharpshooter of commerce by career…[a] child of his age'.[89] If he shamelessly calls himself a 'gilded pickpocket' and a 'postwar man',[90] to his rich hangers-on, he is, to their benefit, 'Hermes',[91] the Greek god of luck and patron of merchants and thieves.

---

[79] Whitehead, ‘Interview’, p. 238.

[80] The *Masses*, founded in 1911, was renamed the *New Masses* in 1926, and ran as a pro-Communist, anti-Fascist journal until 1948.

[81] Letter to Stanley Burnshaw, 2 October 1936, cited in Hazel Rowley, ‘Christina Stead: Politics and Literature in the Radical Years, 1935–1942’, *Meridian*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1989, p. 151.

[82] Stead met Fox, a Marxist historian and literary critic, in London in 1934. Though not proved, it is thought they may have briefly been lovers before Fox’s untimely death in 1937 in the Spanish Civil War. Stead remained indebted to Fox’s Marxist reflections on novel writing, set down in the posthumously published *The Novel and the People*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1937; Cobbet Press, London, 1944.

[83] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (1938), trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981.

[84] Brydon, *Christina Stead*, p.169.

[85] HN, p.199.

[86] ibid.

Jennifer Gribble's study of money mythomania in *House of All Nations* rightly points out the role of 'gold' in its protagonists' lives.[92] It is their fantasy, their obsession, their poison, their ruin; it is their professional business and the bank's keepings; ultimately, it is the fortune that was never there. In a key scene, entitled 'In Praise of Gold', the narrator conjures up all the word 'gold' has long universally inspired: not merely because of its materiality, its lustre, its 'brightness, softness, purity, rarity', but its 'lifelong association' with 'the idea of ultimate wealth, perennial ease, absolute security'.[93] Gold, real and imagined, governs Stead's main characters' private and public lives. In the novel's opening chapter Léon, tired of a night on the town, thrusts money into the hands of the prostitutes he has been entertaining to get rid of them by paying their next taxi fare. They are but commodities—spoiled goods, to be sure. Alphendéry sends money to his poor mother and unfaithful wife to keep them out of his way. Near the novel's end Jules shows Raccamond a vault of gold, partly borrowed and planted, to trick the man into thinking the bank coffers are full. In between, the Banque Mercure lurches between liquidity and insolvency, sudden loss and shaky gain, until, as Léon puts it, the 'golden opportunity' has demonstrably gone.[94] But beyond the legendary power gold has to purchase what one will, it is, in Marxist terms, that great marker of bourgeois greed. Having it, amassing it, rather than needing it, is what beguiles. 'I've got always to be thinking about money', Jules concedes,[95] 'I like glitter, brilliance…[if I left the bank] I'd be unable to resist the splendor of the façade'.[96] Repeatedly Stead's characters look to money not for its 'use' value, but for the measure of power its quantity confers. 'I want highflying cash, beautiful cash, in platoons…I want it big, rich, and plentiful, and all mine', Jules dreams.[97] Hence his disdain for the 'little man':

> …and what have I got round me? Savers, hoarders, go-gentlies, abacus gentry back in the carpetbags of the Middle Ages, squirrels, ants, census takers, penny-bank campaigners, installment-plan robbers, shilling-a-week shortchangers, Saturday tillshakers, busfare embezzlers, dime defalcators.[98]

---

[87] HN, p.201.
[88] HN, p.200.
[89] HN, p.86.
[90] HN, p.181.
[91] HN, p.164.
[92] Jennifer Gribble, *Christina Stead*, Oxford Australian Writers, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 37–45.
[93] HN, p.135.
[94] HN, p.566.
[95] HN, p.197.
[96] HN, p.592.
[97] HN, p.333.
[98] HN, p.201.

Jules's view that 'if you start little, you remain little'[99] is precisely the capitalist attitude that the rich have the will for betterment and the poor can't help themselves. In fact, the gold in which the Banque Mercure deals is hardly gold at all, but, rather, paper money, stocks and shares that are never realised. For Jules, 'gold isn't wealth: positions in markets is wealth'.[100] 'Brokerage', affirms William, 'is the true gold mine'.[101] 'Gold is a commodity, and we're not into commodities', Jules explains. 'We're in grapples, clinches, blackmails, plunges, lucky breaks, long odds, lowdowns, big gambles'.[102] In essence, gold—on their terms—is the means to advantage, status and power, earned not by manual labour—the lot of the worker—but by professional know-how. In the words of one of Jules's unreliable advisers: 'The greater the "superstructure of graft", the greater the "surplus-value"'. A Marxist opinion indeed, if unwarily mouthed.[103]

The vulnerability of the corporate authority to corruption is a key issue in *House of All Nations* that binds together its multitudinous thematic threads. Concealment of questionable practice in the private organisation, is, in Stead's exposé, too easily had. The modus operandi of the Banque Mercure is neither well known within, nor properly publicly declared, though its more astute and wealthy clients are happy to turn a blind eye to what they understand in the hope that their investments (and complicity) will duly be bounteously returned. As the novel progresses and managerial discussions proliferate, making up much of its volume, so the reader is made privy to the rorts the bank enfolds: antedated contracts, ghost companies, inactive branches abroad, "paper" directors who don't meet, tax avoidance schemes, unpublished balance sheets, tips for the averted, hush money for the alarmed… "A bank is a confidence trick", Jules brags to his acolytes. "If you put up the right signs, the wizards of finance themselves will come in and ask you to take their money".[104] And, again, more cynically, of the Banque Mercure: "This isn't a bank: there's a sign outside saying BANK and when they [the ordinary people] see it they come inside and drop their cash on the counter. If I put up the sign BARBER they'd come in just as automatically looking for a shave".[105] What is meant, of course, it that the capitalist system thrives on human ignorance and gullibility.

Jules's hubris is eventually his downfall, even if, in a rebuff to the comfortable closure of the "goodies and baddies" narrative, he doesn't get what the reader might think he deserves. A series of bad decisions makes him the victim of others' sly plans. When he signs a complex bet with his arch enemy and former rival of schooldays that the pound sterling will not fall below 122 francs, the gamble turns sour. The pound drops and the terms of the agreement are such that he is obliged to pay up large and regular sums unless he can prove the hidden underhand facets of the deal. In addition, the envious Raccamond, keen to assist Jules's rival in the hope of assuming control of the firm, sets out to uncover Jules's frauds. Bribing his way, he accesses two anonymous ledgers held in the bank's Brussels office that reveal the extent of its *contrepartie* deals: Jules had long been illegally short selling his clients; in reality they didn't own the investments they thought they had; transactions were but book entries that concealed bets made on the stock market against their accounts. Rightly indignant over the swindling of his personal clients, but nonetheless bent on serving his own ambitions to rise, Raccamond blackmails Jules into a confession that sets in motion the latter's demise. The clients demand their money. The bank fails. Had Jules swallowed his pride and endorsed an ingenious wheat scheme thought up by the brilliant Léon, he may have earned resources that could have saved the bank and his career.

---

[99] ibid.

[100] HN, p.157.

[101] HN, p.236.

[102] HN, p.158.

[103] The capitalist principles of superstructure and surplus-value were elaborated by Marx in Volume I of *Das Kapital* (1867), notably in Parts 4 and 5. Those principles were further defined in Volume IV (*Theories of Surplus-Value*), published posthumously by Karl Kautsky between 1905 and 1910. Stead's understanding of Marx's theories is born out in *House of All Nations* both in the ambitions of her characters and the overtly Marxist terminologies they use.

[104] HN, p.115.

[105] HN, p.251.

Speaking at a League of American Writers congress in 1939, Stead defended her penchant for the "many-charactered novel" as a "seductive form". The novel, she reckoned, had to be multi-layered, complexly socially inclusive, chaotically diverse, capturing both the disordering energy of political and economic forces and the intensity of human experience. It had to be what she termed the "novel of strife": social panorama recording social flux; social flux complicated by characters who bring to the prevailing order the stamp of their own passions, contradictions, tensions and drives.[106] Hers are frenetic characters caught up in the tangle of their private, social, and professional lives. In that, the Stead novel is never reductive in the way much politically committed literature is, but, rather, subtle, investigative; the relationship between individual and society is everywhere evident, but the integrity of the individual is rarely lost from view. "I write characters, because, really I'm a character writer" she said. "I'm interested, not in plot but what they do with their lives and what their lives do with them."[107] In *House of All Nations* the characters are not all straightforwardly bad; rather, they are complex, unpredictable creatures, capable of warmth and cruelty, loyalty and betrayal, creativeness and destructiveness, imaginativeness and calculation. Within the broad social tableaux she constructs, Stead offers no safe or cut-and-dried picture of how human beings behave.

Jules, despite his intrigues, comes across as strangely likeable: devious but charming, elegant but insouciant, "mercurial and often lethargic",[108] a "harlequin" creature[109] who gives credence to the paradox that "everyone adores a successful thief",[110] that ingenuity, dash, spontaneity and exuberance are preferable to predictability and dullness. Repeatedly Jules is referred to by the narrator, his entourage, his enemies and his clients as Mercury, "a flier, a dancer—a messenger of the gods",[111] flighty, insubstantial, but "full of a fantastic, ingenuous, and disarming charlatanry",[112] "frail", but "brave, full of go and gaiety",[113] reckless (where William is grounded), irrational (where Alphendéry is logical), fitfully generous, unprincipled, dreamy, engaging, playful, perverse.

Riotous characters abound in the Stead novel, but so, too, do the ideologically thwarted and the morally fraught, none more so in *House of All Nations* than the uneasy

---

[106] League of American Writers papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.
[107] Wetherell, 'Interview', p. 444.
[108] HN, p.89.
[109] HN, p.171.
[110] HN, p.144.
[111] HN, p.503.
[112] HN, p.87.
[113] HN, p.88.

Alphendéry, the bank's so-called "mystery man"[114] and "*éminence grise*".[115] Tagged a "scholar", "idealist" and "Utopian" by the bemused Bertillons because of his Marxist beliefs,[116] he nonetheless clings to his job as Jules's faithful servant, chief advisor, and, until Jules unfairly dismisses him, as the steady hand of his sinking ship.[117] But Alphendéry's motives are not entirely unselfish. His altruism is theoretical rather than lived. The bank offers him security, and, although he lives a Spartan life, it enables him to provide for his absent wife and mother without being tied down. He may speak at revolutionary meetings, visit his comrades, spout Marxist rhetoric, but, once relieved of his bank position, he takes up work with the go-ahead capitalist Léon. Just occasionally he yields to pangs of guilt, casting him as a somewhat compromising spokesman for the inequitableness of the distribution of capitalist wealth. In a scene entitled "Façade":

> The more Michel looked at façades, fine furnishings, crystal panes, brass rods, chased mirrors, carved frames, and soft carpets, the more depressed he became, the more was he convinced that he had to leave the bank and find another job. This came not only from his natural penchant for simplicity but also from a constant guilty picture in his mind's eye: a ganger sweating on the permanent way and the subtitle "these stones, grilles, mahoganies came that way." It was too much: it was too good.[118]

In fact, *House of All Nations* accords little narrative space to the opponents of the mad world of high finance it portrays. Only a few isolated characters speak up in the wilderness of their whirligig age: the aptly named Jean Frère and Adam Constant, their small band of country-loving followers (Frère works a rural property) and their not wholly liberated wives—voices for the Marxist faithful, brothers in shared ideals. Where all around them the "grab and graft" mentality is rife, they are those who have opted for frugality, friendship, social reform and simple lives. In a key scene entitled "J'Accuse" (a patent allusion to France's most divisive anti-Semitic court case),[119] Constant, junior teller with the Bertillons, bent on going to China to serve Chiang Kai-shek, lays down with missionary purpose what is one of the novel's most sobering arraignments of the capitalist scourge. "There are no men in [the Banque Mercure]', he regrets…

> …only money galls of one color and another shape: only an infection of monsters with purses at their waists that we wait upon and serve…My dream is, that one day I will get them all down, I will leave them on record. I want to show the waste, the insane freaks of these money men, the cynicism and egotism of their life, the way they gambol amidst plates of gold loaded with fruits and crystal jars of liqueurs, meats pouring out juices, sauces, rare vegetables, fine fancy breads, and know very well what they are doing, brag, in fact, of being more cunning than the others, the poor…'Knowledge, money, real love, power', they say, 'are too good for the people…we must keep them all to ourselves.'[120]

---

[114] HN, p.595.
[115] HN, p.179.
[116] HN, p.253.
[117] When asked if Alphendéry was based on Blake, Stead replied, 'He was Alphendéry', Whitehead, 'Interview', p. 238.
[118] HN, p.530.
[119] See Chapter II, endnote 32.
[120] HN, pp.80-81.

Constant's food thematic, conjuring up capitalist superfluity, recurs in a formidable narrative guise in one of the book's satirical highpoints: "A Stuffed Carp" (Scene 42). For Stead's 1938 editor it was "one of the great comic scenes in English literature";[121] for her first biographer, "an ironic masterpiece";[122] for Don Anderson, one of those "unforgettable [Stead] dinner parties" in which man metaphorically eats man.[123] The character of Raccamond—as blackmailer but victim, too, of others' competitiveness and greed—gathers up in his bulky and gluttonous person the worst traits of the capitalist "fat" people his equally reprehensible host reproves.

Nowhere in *House of All Nations* does Stead bring private and professional ambition into such awful synchrony as in this, her most relentless tableau of bourgeois consumption and display. Extending over forty-two pages, the scene plots the progress of a gargantuan meal, ostensively offered to the Raccamonds by their business acquaintances the Hallers in generous friendship but seized upon by both couples as an opportunity to get out of it what they can: Mme Raccamond, the guiding hand behind her husband's professional ruses, looks to her husband to win Haller to his custom; Haller, a retired investor, hopes to wheedle business information from the crafty Raccamond; Mme Haller, eager for congratulation, thrills to the chance to exhibit her household possessions and culinary skills. Shot through with parodic interpolations that complement the diners' table talk—itself as richly reflective as is the food of the ghastly values they espouse—Stead has constructed a social send-up worthy of a Balzac, but with the gutsy edge and gastronomic innuendo of a Rabelais. As the diners gorge their way through countless dishes, so ingestion becomes satiety and lasting the course (or courses) becomes power play.

Stead delights in group settings, people depicted playing off people, taking advantage of one another, contesting values, exercising authority, exerting control. Mme. Haller's dinner occasion is a chance to show the amazed (but secretly contemptuous) Raccamonds how much she owns and how much she knows. Having given Mme. Raccamond a woman-to-woman glimpse of her vast stores of linen, lace, crystal vases (all hoarded as saleable goods should a revolution occur)—"feel it", she tells the poor woman, as each item is slipped from its chest, fingered and returned —the meal gets underway.[124] Hoping to impress her guests beyond endurance by plying them with food they can barely stomach but are obliged to consume, Mme. Haller's game of domination unfolds. Inexorably, dish after dish arrives; wines and liqueurs are copiously poured; inescapably, the Raccamonds are presented with their large, unwanted serves: chicken livers washed down with liqueurs; sausages and red wine; the "*pièce de résistance*" and pinnacle of the "ordeal"— a "huge, stuffed jellied and nobly decorated carp", accompanied with "roe, jelly, and stuffing, and a small dish of macaroons;[125] breads, cakes, nuts, honey and red-wine tea; finally, "a splendid Doyenne de Comice pear",[126] slyly presented to Raccamond to help him recover from the indigestion that, part way through the event, had caused him to reel. After "a hailstorm of protestations and inquiries, refusals and moral suasions", as the guests plead sufficiency, Sophy Haller "won".[127] Her ritual battle—perversely meant to punish and seduce the flagging customers' man—leaves her remorseful but triumphant: her handiwork (the carp) is sadly demolished, but her effusive hospitality prevails. Raccamond, changing hue over the evening from pasty white to green to mauve, is shown up for what he is: a "great blubber of voracious male".[128]

---

[121] Boxed records, cited in Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 233.

[122] R. G. Geering, *Christina Stead*, Twayne Publishers, New York, 1969, p. 83.

[123] 'Christina Stead's Unforgettable Dinner Parties', *Southerly*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1979, p. 42–5.

[124] Hoarding as a capitalist 'fetish' for possessing—for having the potential to buy without selling, purchasing or selling later—is discussed by Marx in *Das Kapital*, vol. 1, Part I, ch. 3.

[125] HN, p.283.

[126] HN, p.298.

As the diners ply their knives, so the conversation—another challenge—moves to and fro. While Mme Haller prises compliments from her over-fed feasters, assuring them of the purity of her gastronomic medley, they ponder the world's problems, tossing off their opinions, refuting each other's ideas. Haller, an ex-capitalist and converted Leninist, embraces the Russian revolution for the "Fat People" it overthrew: "Lenin saw [the injustice]", he contends, "…the ruling classes in Russia had stuffed themselves to bursting on interest"; financers, he concludes, are the same: "There is something wrong when five per cent of the people stuff and ninety-five per cent have almost nothing to eat and no money to put into interest-bearing bonds at all".[129] Raccamond's feeble defence of the "sound", "hard-working", "saving", "modest" bourgeoisie[130] is deplored as Haller speaks up for social "moderation" as "a wise use of liberty, a wise limitation of plenitude".[131] The chocolates arrive and are consumed. As the exhausted guests head home, Mme. Raccamond resolves that one day she will achieve her highest aspiration and "wash [her] hands in gold coins".[132]

The "Stuffed Carp" scene is quintessential Stead at her wordsmith best. As the guests pontificate on politics and food, and descriptions of the sumptuousness of the meal accrue, the book's major themes collide into view—power, money, social advancement, political expedience, human hypocrisy. After all, the discourses of gastronomical indulgence and of financial amassment share similar vocabularies. In Jules's office, around the Hallers' table, it is "quantity", "gross intake" that counts. The "richness" of Mme. Haller's menu, the "surfeit" of food that makes up the spread, the "stocks" she flaunts, the "large amounts" she serves are transferable Marxist concepts and terms, relevant to Jules's banking ethos and relevant to 1930s greed. Consumption and expansion are fundamental principles of the capitalist credo. Stead's novel, then, is "multi-voiced", "hybrid", in the true Bakhtinian sense: discourses intrude on one another; words are never semantically neutral or naively used.[133] Her characters say what they say, but invariably mean (or hide) more. So too does Stead, inflecting her narrative with parodic overtones, pushing her obsessive characters to the verge of the caricatural, watching them fall into the traps they set, inviting the reader to savour not only their rankled humour, but also that of authorial interjection, sardonic comment, witty aside, social *aperçu*. Stead's is a refracted writing. The metaphoric intention, the satirical edge is always there. Her characters are given autonomy in the way they speak and live, but they are not spared from being exposed. Despite (and because) of themselves, they are revealed for what they are.

---

[127] ibid.

[128] HN, p.284.

[129] HN, p.289.

[130] ibid.

[131] HN, p.296.

[132] HN, p.300.

[133] Mikhail Bakhtin theorised that languages are incapable of neutrality, that words are 'heteroglossic' or multi-layered, and cannot be separated from the social, historic and cultural contexts from which they spring, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1975), ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, Austin and London, 1981.

The imbrication of plot and metaphor and of character and social exposé save *House of All Nations* from being "just" a story or "just" a political treatise: Stead's is indeed the "drama of the person", but the drama evolves from the seething world events in which she, like her characters, was embroiled. Their lives—her invention—point repeatedly to the broad canvas of 1930s crises. The emptiness of the Banque Mercure's vaults at the book's close is both the inevitable outcome of Jules's rashness and a metaphor for France's actual economic insubstantiality. Jules's wealth is illusory, but so, Stead infers, is that of a France dependant on a dangerously fluctuating stock market and precarious monetary schemes. So she gathers up telltale images, even as she lets the narrative unfold. The bank, variously "a hollow jewel",[134] a "phantom bank",[135] a "citadel of invisible gold",[136] is eventually exposed for the shell it is. When Jules vanishes as if in a puff of smoke to another country in his brother's plane—Mercury winging to another land—he leaves behind him destroyed accounts, partial records, falsified documents and insolvent clients. As the law courts settle down to do business on the dust of what remains, the memory of Jules lingers on, some believing in his return with fresh fortunes, others nursing the losses he bequeathed. Their financial baron has become the stuff of myth and his empire an unfulfilled dream.

The collapse of the Banque Mercure foreshadows what Stead, writing after the novel's time frame of 1931–32, knew had occurred in France by 1933. By then the Wall Street Crash legacy had spread. By choosing to stay on the gold standard in 1931, France (unlike England and the United States), had merely stalled what occurred in time: inflation, the Depression, the doubt that the Left, after a sweeping victory in 1932, could restore economic confidence and growth. France, the "house of all nations", seemingly impervious to ruin, proved in fact to be no less vulnerable than any other country to rampant economic disarray. But Stead's world view, filtered through the forebodings on which her characters expound, intimates there was worse to come. The Banque Mercure's disintegration fictionally mimics the "crumbling" of Europe,[137] and the mounting events that Churchill, fearing the worst, had the insight to call "the gathering storm".[138] By 1938, when *House of All Nations* appeared on the shelves, its shadowy predictions were becoming realities. In 1938 Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, the first country to fall victim to his expansionist programme; in 1939 the Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed; in September, following Hitler's invasion of Poland, England declared war on Germany. The Second World War had begun. There is something darkly premonitory in Stead's evocation of the Banque Mercure's frightened clients from across borders lobbying for allies as they tot up the implications of the catastrophe Jules had left behind: "All the clients banded themselves together in national protective associations, and thus the next European war began in little".[139] Even as the novel closes, Stead seemingly looks ahead to the nervous unity that would propel “all nations”, Europe’s especially, beyond the false utopias to which, in the early 1930s, so many had unguardedly clung.

---

[134] HN, p.23.

[135] HN, p.130.

[136] HN, p.240.

[137] HN, p.634.

[138] *The Second World War*, vol. 1, Cassell and the Book Society, Sydney, 1948.

[139] HN, p.767.

6

"No time to be frail": Nancy Wake, Resistance Heroine, 1940-1944[1]

At the height of World War II, with France under German occupation, the New Zealand-born Nancy Wake parachuted into the hilly region of the French Auvergne; it was 29 February 1944; she was thirty-one and a newly-trained British secret agent, about to embark on a life of risk alongside French resisters. That landing, set down in the preface of her autobiography, *The White Mouse* (1985), is recounted with the humour and matter-of-factness with which she faced the trials of war, though in the telling one glimpses the spirit of one who took danger lightly in the resolve to free France of the Nazi stranglehold:

> As the Liberator bomber circled over the dropping zone in France I could see lights flashing and huge bonfires burning. I hoped the field was manned by the Resistance and not by German ambushers. Huddled in the belly of the bomber, airsick and vomiting, I was hardly Hollywood's idea of a glamorous spy. I probably looked grotesque.
> Over civilian clothes, silk-stockinged and high-heeled, I wore overalls, carried revolvers in the pockets, and topped the lot with a bulky camel-haired coat, webbing harness, parachute and tin hat. Even more incongruous was the matronly hand-bag, full of cash and secret instructions for D-day. My ankles were bandaged for support when I hit the ground.
>
> But I'd spent years in France working as an escape courier. I'd walked out across the Pyrenees and joined the Special Operations Executive in England, and I was desperate to return to France and continue working against Hitler. Neither airsickness nor looking like a clumsily wrapped parcel was going to deter me.
>
> The reception field in operation that night was too small for the arrival of two agents. My co-saboteur, Hubert, jumped first. By the time I landed my parachute had drifted over the adjacent field, and I landed in a thick hedge. My parachute was tangled in a tree.
>
> Everything around me was dark and silent. I couldn't see any lights or fires. I quickly detached myself from my parachute, removed the bandages from my ankles, took off my overalls and ran away to crouch behind some bushes.
>
> Then I heard Hubert's voice calling in the distance and someone else said, 'Here's the parachute.' I ran towards them and forced myself through a hedge to find myself face to face with a good-looking young Frenchman. Being typically French he proceeded to make some very gallant remarks: 'I hope all trees in France bear such beautiful fruit this year.' I took this

---

[1] The expression, first used in America in a World War II advertisement for Fleishmann's Yeast during war-time food rationing, became a catchcry for recruiting women into the forces. The original advertisement features a uniformed woman on a motorcycle and the captions "This is no time to be frail!" and "The dainty days are done for the duration".

> with a grain of salt. After all, I had lived in France for ten years, and was married to a Frenchman.[2]

The Wake evoked in these startling passages is hardly the Wake who left Australia in 1924, yet by all reports she was an ebullient and resourceful child.[3] Born Nancy Grace Augusta Wake in Wellington in 1912, but brought up in Sydney, to which her family moved in 1914, her childhood was dogged by poverty, compounded when her father mysteriously left home when she was nine. Nor was life made easier by her mother, who, if pious and well-intentioned, was undemonstrative, strict and dour. But Wake was a survivor, not a malcontent. Determined to make a better life for herself, she ran away at sixteen to train as a country nurse. Only in her late teens did her fortunes unexpectedly change when a fond and free-spirited New Zealand aunt sent her £200, enough to enable her to leave Australia and fulfil her goal to go abroad. That moment, in her estimation, is when her life began. Her autobiography is unequivocal on the point: "This is the story of a naive and rather sensitive young Australasian romantic...[whose] experiences made her the woman who K.O.'d a waiter with her bare fist in a Paris club in 1945", she writes in the memoir's chapter I.[4] Her boldness, she later explains, came from having learnt to manage by herself early on.[5]

The ingloriousness of Wake's arrival, evoked before *The White Mouse* gets under chronological way, belies the effort of what went before. In fact she was no novice to Resistance work in 1944: she had undergone months of strenuous training with the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a British body Churchill had masterminded to provide occupied nations with military and intelligence aid; moreover, she had spent three years as a resister on the French south coast—so elusively the Germans had nicknamed her "the white mouse".[6] Her return, she said, was to a country whose occupation she had witnessed and felt "but by birth" to be hers.[7] In her bag, along with her lipstick, a red satin cushion and two silk nighties, items she treasured throughout the war, were her revolvers and false identity cards. She would have had to hand the standard suicide pill, to be taken should capture or interrogation overwhelm.[8] Armed with the code names, cover stories and addresses she had memorised, her mission was, as Churchill had commanded, "to set Europe ablaze".[9] So, in her way, she did: her success in establishing ammunition and arms caches in rural France in the lead-up to D-Day earned her a cluster of medals and awards that have assured her a place in French history and honoured her as the most decorated servicewoman of World War II. The story that led to that recognition is told in her autobiography with freshness and a personal edge. But it is a story that must be considered against events that rocked the French nation and threatened the stability of the twentieth-century world. To situate the record of the one within the context of the others is to allow history to validate testimony and testimony to give history a human face; it is to appreciate one woman's contribution to what many fought for and endured.

---

[2] *Nancy Wake, the Autobiography of the Woman the Gestapo called The White Mouse*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1985; republished Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1997. Henceforth pages numbers (indicated by WM) refer to the Pan Macmillan edition.

[3] On Wake's early life, see Peter Fitzsimons, *Nancy Wake: a biography of our greatest war* heroin, Harper Collins, Australia, 2001, pp. 5–46. Other biographies include those of Russell Braddon: *Nancy Wake: The Story of a Very Brave Woman*, Cassell & Co. Ltd., London, 1956; *Nancy Wake: SOE's Greatest Heroine*, Cassell, Sutton Publishing Limited, Stroud, UK, 2005 (first published 1956); *Nancy Wake*, Pan Books, London and Sydney, 1958; *Woman in Arms: the Story of Nancy Wake,* Sutton Publishing Ltd., Stroud, UK, 2005 (first published 1956); Michael Jürgs. *Codename Hélène: Churchills Geheimagentin Nancy Wake und ihr Kampf gegen die Gestapo in Frankreich*. (*Codename Hélène: Churchill's secret agent Nancy Wake and her fight against the Gestapo in France*).

[4] WM, p.1.

[5] The incident is described in WM, pp. 160–61. She was dining with an English girlfriend in the British Officers' Club (previously the German Officers' Club) in Paris after its liberation. When her friend struggled over the order, not being fluent in French, the waiter muttered a disparaging remark about preferring to wait on Germans. Wake promptly knocked him out.

[6] SOE, authorized by Churchill on 22 July 1940, was to be a subversive organisation, unlike other British Intelligence bodies, such as Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6), MI5 and MI9. Colonel Maurice Buckmaster was appointed head of SOE's French Section at its inception on 17 March 1941. His reflections on its history are recorded in *Specially Employed*, Batchworth Press, 1952 and *They Fought Alone: The Story of British Agents in France*, Odhams Press, London, 1958.

[7] WM, p.viii.

****

Wake brushes over her childhood in her narrative, choosing to start at the point where she left Australian shores. Even then its opening pages give little detail of what went before she arrived in France: her departure from Sydney; the voyage to Europe via Vancouver and New York; her arrival in London, where she studied to be a reporter at Queen's College of Journalism; her success in securing a trial post as a freelance reporter in the Paris office of Randolph Hearst's American newspaper in 1934. Those events she only detailed late in her life to Peter Fitzsimons, her biographer of 2001. But, whatever matters *The White Mouse* omits, the special effect of Paris on her young person she tellingly admits. That is the point at which her story truly begins. Of her first (and lasting) impressions of the city she recalls:

> There was something magical about living in Paris in those days. Parisians would tell me how wonderful the city had been before and after the Great War—'la Belle Epoque', as they called it—but to me it was the most glorious place in the world and I adored working and living there. I always feel that Paris is a woman's city, full of thrills, intrigues, gaiety, beautiful clothes and beautiful jewellery…In all the years I have known Paris I have never tired of wandering along the boulevards, sometimes window-shopping and frequently discovering something new, perhaps a little side street or an alleyway. This is one of the delights of Paris. It is full of little surprises. Just to sit on the terrace of a café and watch the crowd pass by is in itself an entertainment.[10]

She could not have known in 1934 that she would revisit the city when it was under German occupation, nor that, instead of returning to the calm of her Paris apartment after a night on the town, she would one day be sleeping alongside a host of scruffy Resistance fighters on the forest floor of the Auvergne.

Wake's reporter job and the assignments on which she was sent broadened her understanding of a politically volatile Europe that was nervously emerging from the Depression even as Germany's political might was beginning to grow. Hitler had had himself appointed Germany's Reich Chancellor in 1933 and Wake saw its early effect on France. "Thousands" of German refugees started to arrive in the capital, she remembers, "mostly academics…intellectuals…[and] Jews." Some, whom her circle of journalist colleagues befriended, gave her first-hand information on "life under the Nazis",[11] many were in transit, bound for safer lands and lives. But it was on two successive field trips—to Vienna and Berlin in 1934 and again to Berlin in 1935—that her grasp of events sharpened and her moral stance firmed. On those occasions it was what she saw on the streets that shocked. Of the first visit to Berlin, she records:

---

[8] Called the "L Pill", it was carried by all British spies.

[9] Churchill to Hugh Dalton, Minister of Economic Warfare and first CEO of SOE's London Headquarters, 16 July 1940. The phrase became one of the Allies' most famous war slogans.

[10] WM, p.2.

> The Brownshirts were everywhere. I remember one great fat Stormtrooper strutting around cracking a whip on the side of his long leather boots and alternately screaming and whipping at the Jewish shopkeepers. At the same time some of his colleagues painted the word 'Jew' in red paint on the windows and doors of the shops, and others threw out the contents to create huge bonfires.[12]

Such images, Wake claims, engendered within her a hatred of Nazism that drove her later commitment to the Resistance cause. "When war came to France", she affirms, "…I found it quite natural to take the stand I did".[13] By then, indeed, events had progressed at breakneck speed and Hitler's expansionist programme was underway. In March 1936, dishonouring the post-World War I Treaty of Versailles, he repossessed the Rhineland;[14] in 1938 the Sudentland was annexed and Austria overrun; Czechoslovakia fell in March 1939; when Poland was invaded in September, Britain's policy of appeasement, protractedly advocated by its prime minister, Chamberlain, immediately came to an end; within days Britain and France had declared war on the aggressors. World War II had officially begun.[15] Over its five years some 70 million people would die.

Wake's personal situation transformed with the advent of war, and temporarily shielded her from the first ill-fruit it bore. In November 1939, after a whirlwind romance, she married Henri Fiocca, a wealthy industrialist whom she had met while on assignment in his hometown, Marseille. It gave her security and a lifestyle she had never before enjoyed. She attests to having loved Henri's bright personality and to his having found in her an exuberant and fun-loving match; together, they indulged in the kind of extravagant living to which Henri was used: eating out with friends, touring the Riviera, visiting the Alps. "I missed Paris", she writes,

> …[but] I contented myself by giving our maid the orders for the day, then racing into town where I would meet my girl-friends and gossip over an aperitif or two. Then I'd

---

[11] WM, p.3.

[12] WM, p.4.

[13] ibid.

[14] Under the terms of the treaty the Rhineland was demilitarised, Germany's armed forces were not to exceed 100,000 troops and she was forbidden to rearm.

[15] Documentation on World War II is vast. The sources most relevant to this chapter include MRD Foot and ICB Dear (eds), *Oxford Companion to World War II,* Oxford University Press, 2005; MRD Foot, *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France 1940–1944*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1966 (republished University Publications of America, Maryland, 1984); HR Kedward, *In Search of the Maquis: Rural Resistance in Southern France 1942–1944*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993.

> return home for an extended midday meal with Henri, and then back to town, where my friends and I would do the rounds of dressmakers, hairdressers, and tea salons".[16]

"No woman", she adds, "could have been more useless or frivolous than I was during those winter months".[17] Besides, the war did not proceed with the rapidity people had feared. It seemed possible, the first upheavals over, that tensions might ease. Like others, Wake stockpiled commodities as food prices rose and shortages set in, but she considered one might as well enjoy life while one could.[18] It was the lull before the storm. The "phony war", the period of relative military inactivity that marked the winter of 1939–40, gave little premonition of what was to come, and, despite Anglo-German naval engagements in northern Europe and Norway's fall to Germany in April, many thought Hitler's expansionist ambitions in the south had been diverted, or, should he renew them, might be stemmed.

In fact, events in France deteriorated in a manner that changed Wake's destiny. When Hitler invaded France via Belgium and Holland in the spring of 1940, Britain and France were taken by surprise. Certainly France had not anticipated its sudden defeat. While it had not kept apace with technological advancements in armaments in the interwar years, it had held great faith in the invincibility of its well-fortified Maginot line that ran north-east of the country, whereas, unexpectedly, the Germans largely attacked its ill-protected western and northern fronts. Britain, with Churchill its new Prime Minister, retreated ignominiously, although miraculously the famous evacuation of Dunkirk saved over 300,000 French and British soldiers' lives.[19] Refugees and retreating soldiers left for the south in chaos, most on foot and in droves. Within weeks Paris was overtaken. France surrendered on 14 June 1940 and the French government fled to Bordeaux via Tours, where it was reconstituted under Marshal Philippe Pétain, a distinguished veteran of the Great War. Assuming leadership in the spa town of Vichy, Pétain settled on political compromise, offering himself as the country's hope of a return to civilian calm. His pact with Germany, the Armistice Convention, later to deeply divide the nation on moral and political grounds, was signed on 22 June in the belief that partial surrender was better than a return to the kind of devastation the country had incurred in World War I.

The terms of France's surrender were severe and advantageous to Hitler, who quickly drew on its resources and manpower. Broadly, the country was divided into two zones. The north and west, covering more than half the population and three-fifths of its land, was to be German managed and occupied; the south or "free zone" (the *zone sud*) was to be governed by Pétain, although he would be required to accommodate levels of German control. Travel across the demarcation line was to be strictly patrolled. In addition, France was to pay heavy "occupation" costs, and Germany was to retain just under two million of its prisoners of war. When the then little-known General de Gaulle (later to lead the resisting Free French Forces in exile from London and Algiers) appealed to his compatriots to continue battle in an address on the BBC, few heard him;[20] many may not have responded if they had. In the first flush of defeat and demoralisation the French on the whole were relieved. Full-scale war had been averted; people were hopeful they might resume normal lives. Many patriotically accepted Vichy as the legitimate government; some even believed Pétain might outfox Hitler in time. In fact it became apparent, as the Nazis tightened their grip on France, that he was no more than a puppet figurehead who, to the shame of many, condoned and introduced measures in line with Nazi ideals. Not the least of these was the persecution and expulsion of foreign Jews, first effected in the north, where they were rounded up and sent to labour camps, then, on Pétain's initiative, and as collaboration hardened, in the south. This was to be but a foreshadowing of France's eventual anti-Semitic stand. By October 1940 the majority of French-born Jews, irrespective of where they lived, were stripped of residential status and, but for a small number, of their jobs.[21] Other oppressions ensued. The Gestapo presence, bitterly resented by many, was increased;[22] the *Relève***,** which promised to release one French prisoner for every three skilled French labourers who consented to work in Germany, was revised and harshly enforced;[23] Gaullists—supporters of democracy—were outlawed, as were resisters, political dissenters and refugees; Fascist propaganda was circulated and censorship applied.[24] From such repressions early resistance groups spontaneously sprang up. As disillusionment with Nazi collaboration and Vichy grew, so counter efforts became more extensive and more complex. When the south was German-occupied on 11 November 1942 resistance networks of many political and moral persuasions burgeoned and spread.

---

[16] WM, p.35.

[17] WM, pp.35-36.

[18] Bread and meat were rationed in France in September 1940 and other commodities soon after. Food prices tripled between 1939 and 1942 and eventually became a major hardship for the French.

[19] Churchill became prime minister on 7 May 1940. The evacuation of the 120,000 French and 218,226 British soldiers took place between 26 May and 4 June 1940.

It is not so surprising that Wake joined the Resistance when she did. Upon the invasion of northern France she was a volunteer ambulance driver, transporting wounded civilians and soldiers as they fled south. On humanitarian matters she never wavered; the causes of freedom, she reckons, inspired her to act. When she was informally approached in early 1940 by a Resistance operator and former French Army officer, Commander Busch (code-named Xavier), to deliver an "envelope" to Cannes, she knowingly accepted; soon she was dispatching parcels and radio parts along the Mediterranean coast. Within months she had acquired an alternative false identity and become an active member of Xavier's circuit:[25] in addition to carrying letters—crucial, since posted mail, like telephone communication, was vulnerable to interception—she distributed anti-Vichy pamphlets for a clandestine press on her bike;[26] she also sheltered escapers, mostly

---

[20] On 18 June 1940.

[21] By July 1940 Vichy had barred Jews from administrative posts and from October from professional posts, but for a two per cent cap on those practising medicine, law and teaching. From December 1942 "Jew" was stamped on identity cards, and Jews were persuaded to leave. In time, French as well as foreign Jews were deported to French or German concentration camps.

[22] Various police agencies were operational in France, notably the Abwehr, the Sicherheitsdienst (SD), the Schutzstaffel (SS) and the Geheime Staatspolizei (Gestapo), but the French loosely referred to them all as the Gestapo.

[23] Established in the spring of 1942 by Vichy's Prime Minister, Pierre Laval.

[24] During the Occupation Germany controlled forty-five per cent of Paris papers and subsidised numerous others. Vichy strictly controlled the press in the south.

[25] Her forged identity card registered her as Lucienne Carlier, a secretary to a doctor.

[26] The clandestine press grew from a few papers in 1940 to 100 national and 500 regional and local papers by 1944, with a circulation of 2 million copies, despite a German ordinance of 18 December 1942 which warned that producers or distributors of unauthorized papers would be punished by forced labour, or, in

Jews and *Relève* evaders, harbouring many in the alpine chalet Herni had given her as a wedding present. More perilously, she began to ferry fugitive groups west from Nice to Marseille for a British line. From there she either took them to Canet-Plage, a beach resort, to be picked up at night by an Allied submarine, or else to nearby Perpignan, at the Pyrenees foothills, where they were handed over to "passeurs" (local guides), who were paid to escort them over the mountains to neutral Spain. Individuals could then seek help from the British Consulate and secure a British boat passage from Gibraltar to England. She could not have known then that two years later she would be forced to flee using the same escape line.

The kinds of risks Wake took in the war are belied by the down-to-earth, daredevil manner in which they are told. Rarely does she make mention of her obvious courage (though she is quick to praise others) or admit to feelings of fear (though she felt for those who were understandably scared). Even the interviews she has given in later life reveal an intrepid, spirited woman, little given to self-examination, who reckoned in retrospection that she had merely focussed on the job. Yet the dangers she confronted were real and huge. By 1942 the political situation was bleak and the French variously fearful, resigned and depressed. In the late summer of 1940, Hitler launched his unsuccessful but costly air Blitz on England and London; Yugoslavia and Greece fell in April 1941; in June, ignoring the 1939 Nazi-Soviet non-aggression Pact, Germany embarked on the invasion of Russia (a drawn-out mission that later failed). Even when America joined the Allies after Japan bombed Pearl Harbour in December 1941, matters in France remained grim.[27] The occupation of the south, precipitated by the Allies' successes in North Africa in late 1942 (too close to France for German comfort) brought fresh perils and hardships: food and clothing rations were tightened as Germany milked the country's industries and farms; the police presence was tightened: to the dreaded Gestapo, Pétain added a new French force, the *Milice* (Militia), largely made up of criminals and thugs, whose main task was to root out resisters and unwanted residents.[28]

In her early Resistance years Wake led a dangerous double life posing as the real rich wife of a well-known business man and a fancy-free lady, both ostensibly given to travel and holidays, while, in fact, she was working extensively along the coast clandestinely shuttling fugitives and information from place to place. Her femininity she exploited, knowing—as did other resisters—that attractive young women were less likely to be suspected of covert acts. She capitalized, too, on the public freedom women had: shops, streets, and train stations were places they had always frequented; carrying out errands was one of their accepted domestic tasks.[29] For Wake, such covers were all the easier to maintain that she had a genuine social position to flaunt; she made a point of being noticed as a gadabout and was helped by Henri, who provided her with money, and

---

serious cases, with death. See Margaret L. Rossiter, *Women in the Resistance*, Praeger, New York, 1986, p. 145.

[27] Imperial Japan joined the Axis powers in a Tripartite Act of mutual support with Germany and Italy in September 1940. So it hoped to strengthen its expansion into South-East Asia and inhibit resistance from the United States.

[28] The Militia was created by the Vichy's Prime Minister, Pierre Laval, in January 1943, with the French pro-Nazi Joseph Darnand in command.

[29] On the role of women resisters as valuable guardians of the doorway and circulators of public space see Kedward, *In Search of the Maquis*, pp. 89–90.

supported her use of the chalet as a "safe house" for secreting escapers until they could be moved on.[30]

As the war progressed and trains and stations were subjected to tighter police checks, Wake's role became riskier. Because women couriers were rarely armed (it could jeopardise their cover) they had to rely on a complex of props: false papers, innocuous-looking shopping bags, invented stories of where they were bound and why.[31] When Wake accepted Xavier's request to make a quick undercover trip to Paris, she knew the Germans were looking for "a mysterious woman they called 'The White Mouse'"[32] and, moreover, that police vigilance had increased. "In those days, especially in 1942", she relates, "every angle, every detail, had to be studied. One had to have a feasible explanation ready for every single action".[33] Her own mission was carefully worked out:

> My false identity card would state I was French, born in Grasse [the perfume town] and single, and that official perfume business necessitated the journey…I was to start my journey at Grasse, where I supposedly lived, taking the precaution of keeping my bus ticket in my pocket. If I arrived in Paris without mishap, I would proceed to the apartment where I was expected…Back in Marseille I bamboozled my friends by saying I was going to the Alps to fetch some meat and game…To protect Herni I wrote him a touching letter saying I could not bear life in Marseille any longer and I was leaving him. This was in case I got trapped in Paris.[34]

Wake reached her destination and returned with few impediments. Her caution paid off.

Incidents in which Wake tempted fate abound in her account, and attest to her self-acclaimed audaciousness. It was one of the reasons she later proved to be an excellent secret agent. Outwitting the enemy she evidently relished. One occasion, told with her usual mischievous edge, stands as a prelude to the kind of hair-raising situations in which she later took part. Around late 1942 she had had a pig fattened and slaughtered at Nevache (the location of her alpine chalet), with the plan to smuggle it back to Marseille, despite the fact that, strictly speaking, it was black market goods.[35] She had reckoned the risk was worth it with Christmas not far off. At the time of her departure she had in her charge four French labour evaders whom she had been hiding at the chalet. She knew care was needed, as the word the "White Mouse" was afoot had got out. To boot, the dead pig was heavy, unwieldy and difficult to transport. She relates:

> The four men managed to disguise themselves to look like farmers going to market and caught the bus after it left the village. My suitcases, the pig in one of them, were hidden in the back of

---

[30] By 1941 anyone who sheltered or aided escapers risked deportation or death.

[31] Three cards were required: an identity card, stating one's name, profession, date and place of birth and nationality, as well as a physical description, photograph and thumb print; a work permit, stating one's place of employment; a permit to be in a coastal or frontier zone. Crossing the demarcation line also required a pass.

[32] WM, p.63.

[33] WM, p.64.

[34] WM, pp.64-5.

[35] Infringements of rationing regulations, such as stealing, could lead to imprisonment, but black marketers were often silently tolerated under Vichy as it increasingly became the only means of obtaining staple goods. On rationing, see Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940–1945*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1995, pp. 39–43.

> the bus and I borrowed some skis and joined the bus half-way down the mountain, just past the regular German checkpoint.[36]

Before she got on, the bus *was* inspected but no female passenger found. At Briançon, well down the hill, the group got off and boarded the Grenoble-Marseille express, stowing the pig on the luggage rack. Not far from Marseille a young civilian got on and settled into her compartment. Wake suspected he was German, despite his near perfect French. He admired her ski suit, she flirted with him and he asked her out.~~…~~

> As we pulled into Marseille I accepted his invitation to meet again. The platform was swarming with all kinds of police, including the black-market specialists. When I tried to pull the suitcase down from the racks he was a perfect gentleman and rushed to help me. It was so heavy he almost fell backwards. I took the smaller one and we started to walk towards the railway exit. The only trouble was he was listing heavily to one side. I begged him to carry it as if it was light, miming at the same time the way he should do so. As we reached the exit the police pounced on him, demanding to see his papers and the contents of the suitcase. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a special pass. He was a Gestapo officer. We made arrangements to meet in three days time. I do not know how long he waited.[37]

The meeting never took place.

Not long after Wake had begun working for Xavier she joined a British resistance line, led by a Scottish captain, Ian Garrow, who had fled the north zone after France’s northern defeat.[38] He had been arrested and interned in Marseille, along with other captured British soldiers and airmen, first in Marseille’s central Fort Saint-Jean, then in the more distant Fort Saint-Hippolyte. In accordance with the Geneva Convention, the Saint-Jean men were put on parole and allowed to circulate in the city as long as they returned to the prison at night. Garrow used his free time to create a complex escape line, and successfully extradited many prisoners (including himself). But while they left for England he remained behind, developing the line until he was recaptured and sent to Fort Saint-Nicolas for three months’ solitary confinement, then to Vichy’s remote Meauzac concentration camp. By then the line was being led by a Patrick O’Leary, an escaped Belgian doctor, who, amongst other exploits, had masterminded an ingenious tunnel escape for over forty prisoners from a military prison near Nice.[39] Wake was one who used a chain of safe houses to escort such men (and others) down O’Leary’s line, either to Canet-Plage or Perpignan.

Wake’s involvement in O’Leary’s “Pat” line began simply enough. She met one of the Saint-Jean internees in a Marseille bar, and, feeling sorry for him, took to delivering food, cigarettes and radios to the fort’s inmates. Before long, she was engaged in the more dangerous task of escorting escaped groups. But one of the line’s most perilous missions she executed by herself. Just before Garrow left Fort Saint-Nicolas, she received an imploring letter from him asking for food and support. He was starving and complained that O'Leary had not supplied him with a lawyer to plead his case. Furious with O'Leary's neglect, Wake conjured up the story to the prison authorities that she was his loving "cousin" and, as a result, was allowed, in the first instance to send him food, then to visit. In that time she organised a lawyer, but the case failed and Garrow was sent on to Meauzac. With O'Leary's consent, she hatched a plan for his escape. First, over long months, she made herself known to the prison authorities, visiting regularly and even lodging nearby overnight. By then it was late in 1942 and the south was occupied, making resistance work difficult. She had heard, through a fellow resister, that there was a prison guard who might be bribed to take Garrow a German uniform; the guard duly approached her one evening in a nearby local bar, but demanded steep payment: 500,000 francs (about £250), and an immediate deposit. She urgently telegraphed Henri, the transfer arrived and the guard was paid. But the post office, suspicious of such a large transaction, alerted the prison Commandant and she was called in to the camp. Putting on her usual "wealthy woman" act, she blasted the flabbergasted man for quibbling over a mere trifle and left. Later she sent the local and regional post offices letters of bitter complaint. "This", she writes, "is what an innocent Frenchwoman, wrongly accused, would have done, and I always managed to believe wholeheartedly in the part I was playing".[40] Indeed, the guard dutifully smuggled the uniform into the prison via a lavatory, and on 6 December Garrow marched out at the changing of the guard. In due course he reached the Pyrenees, then England. He was safe.

---

[36] WM, p.68.

[37] WM, pp.68-9.

[38] Garrow served in the 51st Highland division when it was overwhelmed at St. Valéry in 1940.

[39] His real name was Albert-Marie Guérisse. After fleeing Belgium he swam ashore in the south of France, but was caught and imprisoned in Saint-Hippolyte, from which he escaped on 4 July 1941. The Nice escape took place in October 1941 and is recounted by Wake in *Woman’s Day*, 11 June 1951.

By early 1943 Wake realised investigation on her was closing in. When her telephone began clicking, suggesting it was being tapped, and the corner café proprietor, a resister, warned her she was being watched, she knew the time had come for her to leave. She and Henri made an agreement: she would go to London; he would attend to his affairs and follow at a later date. It was, she says, a "traumatic farewell".[41] After sending a trunk of clothes to Madrid, she feigned a simple outing with a "Back soon" to her husband in the street and set out on the Pat line for Spain. It would take her seven attempts and six months to escape. Her work for Xavier and the French-run resistance as well as for O'Leary was over. She did not return until early 1944. She never saw Henri again.

Wake's account of her efforts to leave France reads as an almost unbelievable story of thwarted intent as she settled into life not as an escape line leader, but as one of the led. On the first two assays dreadful weather in the Pyrenees forced her to turn back; on the third she was arrested after her group, led by O'Leary, had to jump train; she was only saved when he, not captured, turned up in time to tell the police he was a *milicien*, her lover, and, incredibly, a friend of Laval, Vichy's Prime Minister (luckily for them then in Berlin). Further attempts were aborted due to heavy German and Militia border patrols, and she was forced to go into hiding, along with others, in the Toulouse safe house of the legendary Françoise Dissard.[42] Her next try was no less fraught. On the train to Perpignan, again with O'Leary in charge, they were warned of a German inspection by a sympathetic railway official and forced to jump and flee to the hills as bullets whizzed overhead. On that occasion she lost her handbag and all her jewellery, including her engagement and eternity rings. They backtracked and eventually reached Dissard's house, having slept for nights in barns and sheep-pens. Wake had caught scabies, had hardly eaten, and was wearing the clothes in which she had set out. Her sixth attempt incurred a further setback: shortly before the arranged departure O'Leary kept a café appointment with a new recruit; it was 3 March 1943; he was swooped on by the Gestapo, arrested, and subsequently sent to Dachau.[43] The "recruit" was an informer, whom they later learned to be the notorious Roger le Neveu.[44] He had infiltrated the Pat line as a resistance guide and had probably been responsible for their previous mishaps.[45]

---

[40] WM, p.62.

[41] WM, p.72.

[42] Marie-Louse Dissard (code-named Françoise) was O'Leary's main assistant in and around Toulouse. She was a safe-house keeper and organiser of the Pat line, though her work frequently took her further afield. She helped some 250 downed Allied airmen flee France. After the war the United States awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom. On Dissard's Resistance activities see Rossiter, *Women in the Resistance*, pp. 31–35.

Wake finally made it to the Pyrenees after a circuitous journey that took her back to Nice, then west. She remembers with gratitude the money Henri gave her before she left and which she stashed in her brassière: it turned out to be indispensable for her and the ever-changing requirements of her group. From Perpignan she and six others hid under the empty sacks of a coal truck and crossed the forbidden twenty-kilometre military zone.[46] There they were handed over to two Spanish guides, who led them over the mountains on a forty-eight hour trek. The climb was arduous: they had to keep to the peaks to avoid alerting the police dogs patrolling the lower slopes, and, despite the freezing cold, were obliged to wear rope sandals to deaden the sound of their tread. Even in Spain there were unexpected hiccups. On their first night they were raided in the barn in which they were sleeping by a group of *carabineros,* who, as ill-luck would have it, were merely looking for contraband goods. Having no entry papers, they were rounded up and gaoled in squalid conditions, first in Besalu, then in Gerona, where, not without some anguishing moments, Wake managed to contact the British Government who had her released at a cost of £1,000. From there she proceeded to Gibraltar, then to Scotland on one of a group of escorted passenger ships; she then caught the train to London, armed with her trunk, which, to the amazement of all, had turned up safely in Madrid. It was 17 June 1943. Ian Garrow took her out to dinner at the classy Quaglino's restaurant. It was he, or perhaps another, she relates, who put her in touch with SOE. At that point, it is estimated, she, along with others, had helped some 1,037 people escape from war-torn France.[47] But her adventures had just commenced.

Considering the kind of life Wake led in the early years of the German occupation, it is not surprising that her aimless life in London soon grated and that she resolved to return to France. Shortly after her arrival, she made an appointment with Colonel Passy, the head of the Bureau Central de Renseignements et d'Action (BCRA)—the secret agency for de Gaulle's Free French Force—unaware of the rivalry that existed between his office and SOE.[48] She knew (and appreciated) that de Gaulle mistrusted the British, especially after the debacle of Mers-el-Kébir,[49] but not that he wished to organise French resistance in accordance with his own political agenda (a sticking point for many French resisters, notably the Communists), and on military rather than co-opted civilian lines. Passy declined her services, and only after did she learn from Britain's Intelligence Service (who knew of her application~~!~~) that Passy believed her to be a British "stooge", spying on their affairs. "It was a great blow", she recalls, "as the loyalty I felt for France was deep and sincere".[50] She could not have predicted that, as the war worsened, BCRA and SOE would see the merits of cooperation and would combine their efforts.[51] But by then she had been sought, selected and trained by SOE, and was supporting French civilian revolutionaries in the depths of France. Her ambitions were never politically driven (she insistently makes the point in *The White Mouse*); she simply believed people had the right to live freely without fear of persecution or in dread.

---

[43] He was freed after the war.

[44] Alias Roger Le Légionnaire, The incident is recounted in Russell Miller, *The Resistance, World War II,* Time-Life Books, Alexandria, Virginia, 1979, p. 113.

[45] After O'Leary's arrest Dissard took over the line, hence known by her code name, Françoise.

[46] Local inhabitants were required to hold residential passes.

[47] Fitzsimons, *Nancy Wake,* p. 172.

[48] Passy was really André Dewavrin, originally of the French Deuxième Bureau (the equivalent of the British Secret Intelligence Service). De Gaulle's Free French Force (or Forces Françaises Libres), known as the FFL or the Resistance of the "exterior", was London-based; the Resistance of the "interior", which included anti-Gaullist bodies like the Communists, was organised within France.

Being a member of SOE's operations meant assuming the goals Churchill had envisaged at its inception on 16 July 1940: it was to be a supportive rather than a controlling body, but, unlike the other British Intelligence organisations, it was to be primarily subversive. On that the official guidelines were clear: it was to prepare the resisting native populations of German-occupied territories for a mooted concerted Allied attack, while providing them with the extra means and staff to effect acts of military intervention and sabotage; concomitantly, it was to keep British intelligence up to date. This meant bringing to the occupied nations military instructors, weapons, explosives, funds and supplies.[52] Churchill was well aware of the need for such aid: the small, individual Resistance networks that had sprung up in Europe were proving inadequate as the Nazis' military and intelligence services mushroomed; moreover, he knew that Britain, precariously isolated, was a prospective target for incorporation in Hitler's already substantial Reich.

One is mindful, then, of how unusual Wake's resistance training and later service was. The inclusion of women in SOE, which placed great store on combative training, was an innovation with which the other British intelligence operations did not at first agree. Certainly, as far as de Gaulle was concerned women had no equivalent place in BCRA, and he accepted few and only in the latter stages of the war. The general perception in 1940s military operational circles was that "war was a man's affair".[53] But SOE believed in the special abilities women might bring to the job: imagination, loyalty, persistence, adaptability, a cool head.[54] In its French serving sectors alone (called Sections F and RF), fifty female secret agents were recruited (thirteen of whom would perish). They would

---

Since there was no legitimate French government in exile, Britain preferred to work directly with Resistance organisations on French soil, which added to de Gaulle's mistrust of the British.

[49] On 3 July 1940, after an ultimatum, the British attacked and destroyed much of the French fleet off the coast of French Algeria (at Mers-el Kébir) to prevent it falling into German hands. As a result 1,297 French sailors were killed. At the time the event was a major German propaganda coup.

[50] WM, p.102.

[51] In March 1944 de Gaulle, mindful of the need for coordination, ordered the amalgamation of all French resistance groups under the single banner of the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur (FFI), with General Marie-Pierre Koenig as its appointed head.

[52] Lieutenant-Colonel SHC Woolrych's opening address to new SOE recruits outlining SOE's objectives is reproduced in Cyril Cunningham, *Beaulieu: The Finishing School for Secret Agents*, Pen and Sword Books, South Yorkshire, 1998, pp. 147–54.

[53] Discussed in Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance*, pp. 147–70.

[54] So they are described in Foot's official history, *SOE in France*, pp. 46–7.

serve, variously, as wireless operators, military officers, couriers and intelligence agents. Nevertheless, over the war their number was only fractionally representative of the 450 agents dispatched to France and only a handful, including Wake, were militantly involved.[55]

If one takes into account the recruitment requirements of SOE, one sees that Wake fitted the bill: by 1943 she had an outstanding field record, firm knowledge of the occupied nation's culture and excellent second language skills. As well, she came with a strong and vibrant personality, and not a little Australian boldness and wicked sense of fun. MRD Foot, Britain's most respected SOE scholar, remarks, in a rare emotive moment, on her "irrepressible, infectious high spirits", which, he reckons, "were a joy to everyone who worked with her."[56] Male risqué jokes and drinking habits she took entirely in her stride. Needless to say, she pulled many a practical joke on her SOE instructors, not the least of which was to pin a condom behind a classroom blackboard, another on an unsuspecting tutor's cap, and yet another on a senior instructor's coat, her revenge, she explains, on a male student who had unadvisedly tricked her by giving her a packet of the items whose use at the time she did not understand. But her exuberance and reputed rippling laughter allowed her to get away with what other did not, and in the long run, it will be argued, it made her an important contributor to group morale and camaraderie.

The course Wake enrolled in took a standard sixteen weeks. In the first instance she and her cohort were taken to Warnborough Manor (near Guildford), the so-called "Mad House", where they undertook an arduous obstacle course, intended to test their stamina and weed out the weak. As well, they were given the newly introduced psychological ink-blot test, a requirement Wake, of a practical bent, told the surprised administering psychiatrist to be "wasting his time and mine".[57] Next, they travelled to Inverie Bay in Scotland for a commando course in weapons and explosive handling, unarmed combat, and demolition and survival techniques. At a later date Wake learned that, to the water-survival instructor's "good-humoured disgust", she had been the only one of his charges ever to have capsized his boat.[58] She notes, "That's definitely one course I didn't pass".[59] But the programme, overall, she found "essential", despite the rain and the mud. "I had never held a revolver in my hand, let alone a Bren gun or a grenade",[60] she recalls, and "although we had to work hard we always found time to relax".[61]

Seven weeks into the training Wake went to Ringway, near Manchester, for pre-parachuting exercises and the execution of the required jumps. Her last, made from a balloon in the pitch-black, concurred with a spell of foul weather, but went ahead as scheduled as time had run out. In fact, she says, it was only because of the team's bribe of a double whisky that she accepted to complete the task. Parachuting in the dark proved not to her taste. “As I glided down I thought I should have stipulated trebles”,[62] she jokes. In fact such exploits forged deep and lasting friendships.

---

[55] Wake was in the British-managed French (F) Section. RF section was created as a liaison section between SOE and BCRA and manned jointly by British and French staff. For a full list of women agents sent to France by SOE see Foot, *SOE in France*, Appendix B, pp. 465–69. In all, over 3,000 men and women trained with SOE; about forty percent of them were caught by the Nazis, and most met terrible deaths, Cunningham, *Beaulieu*, Foreword, p. vii.

[56] *SOE in France*, p. 365.

[57] WM, p.103.

[58] WM, p.105.

[59] ibid.

[60] ibid.

[61] WM, p.104.

Wake’s last three weeks, spent at Lord Montagu’s rambling Beaulieu estate in the New Forest, provided the kind of training that earned the place the nickname “The Finishing School”.[63] Its grand rented houses, scattered about, were requisitioned in early 1941 by SOE, and the school was secretly established (though many locals guessed its purpose).[64] Country sections—of which F Section (Wake’s) and RF comprised students bound for France—were separately housed and independently taught; indeed, the mixing of “countries” was forbidden to preserve the secrecy of the trainees’ identities and the autonomy of the networks to which they would be sent. It was at Beaulieu that they learnt most of their clandestine crafts, and it may or may not surprise that its instructors, branded “some pretty odd fish”, included a couturier (to teach disguises), a convicted safe-breaker (to teach forgery and security), a former game-keeper of Sandringham House (who included poaching in his field survival course), and the later notorious KGB spy, Kim Philby (an expert in codes and espionage).[65] In addition, students were drilled in the “recognition” of German vehicles, uniforms, badges, weapons and rank, and taught to imitate the mannerisms of the peoples whose country they would serve: how to gesticulate, smoke, eat and dress, so they might pass off as authentic citizens should they be watched or caught. Even the fillings of their teeth, tell-tale clues to nationality, were replaced. But it was the practical exercises that Wake appears to have most liked, and it is to her credit that the three-day “schemes”, where students were sent off-campus on life-like missions, confirmed her flair for clandestine work. Whereas trainees on practice were invariably arrested and interrogated by real constabularies (until SOE stepped in to explain), she suffered no such indignity. “Back in London”, she says, recalling her last assignment, “I was delighted to find that the rest of my group had not been so fortunate. They had all been whisked off to the police station”.[66] Shortly after, she left for France. Henceforth she would be “Hélène to London” and “Andrée to the French”.[67]

Wake and her associate, John Farmer (code-named Hubert), were parachuted into France, near Montluçon, in late February 1944. There they were hustled away to Cosne d’Allier and met by a certain Hector, who was to provide them with information and contacts and take them to Gaspard (in fact, Emile Coulaudon), the leader of the then substantially manned Maquis d’Auvergne. But their plans went awry. Hector was unexpectedly arrested and when another resister took them to Gaspard, the latter was unaware of their mission and unwilling to stake his military chances on the help of two unknowns. In addition their wireless operator, Captain Denis Rake (code-named Justin), who had flown in separately, had not arrived. The upshot of such an inauspicious beginning was that they were off-loaded onto a small, associated fighting unit, situated further south in Chaudes-Aigues in the Cantal. In fact, Wake records, she and Farmer came to greatly enjoy working with its leader, Henri Fournier, who, after Rake joined them, was delighted to have their combined SOE support. It was only a matter of time before Gaspard learnt of their considerable talents and called on them to help him in mounting many of the region's attacks.

---

[62] WM, p.107.

[63] (Lord) Edward John Barrington Douglas-Scott-Montagu, third Baron Montagu, died in 2015.

[64] The Germans knew of its existence and function early on and named it “The Gangster School”.

[65] The term “pretty odd fish” was coined by Philby, one of the school’s first instructors, Cunningham, *Beaulieu*, p. 63.

[66] WM, p.113.

[67] ibid.

At the time of Wake's arrival, the Maquis was well established in France and, to the Germans' astonishment, was proving to be a formidable force,[68] although according to Foot this was ironically a phenomenon born of German administration that backfired:[69] the failure of the unpopular *Relève* forced Laval, under German pressure, to create the *Service du Travail Obligatoire* (STO), which made it mandatory for most men (and some women) to work for, or in Germany, as opposed to relying on volunteers, as had been the case in the past;[70] but many men, unwilling to forsake their jobs and families or contribute to Germany's manpower and militant strength, simply took to the hills, forming untrained but highly motivated guerilla-style roving bands. To the Germans they were, of course, evaders (or *réfractaires*), hence subject to punishment if caught: thus the name *maquis*, literally referring to the "scrubby underbrush" in which Corsican outlaws traditionally hid. Yet their action forged a new kind of Resistance that was rural-centred and difficult for the Germans to infiltrate: typically small groups would rise up and surprise or ambush German convoys, then melt back into the unmapped hilly forests and woodlands that only local members could easily negotiate. It was there they took refuge to rearm and hide their stores, camping at night in the open or in deserted cottages and sheds.

While the Maquis initially attracted labour evaders, it quickly drew other recruits to its ranks: first Jews and political dissenters (Communists, Socialists, trade-unionists, those, in effect, Vichy blamed for France's fall); in time, a public increasingly disaffected by the daily burden of food shortages, policing and censorship. In this, the Maquis was essentially a civilian movement, whose effectiveness de Gaulle, a military man, and one opposed to leftist action, initially failed to appreciate. It was only as the Resistance grew in strength and numbers that he saw fit to give it his full support and gather up its forces, united by 1944 into the exiled Free French fold. But the Germans, too, grossly underestimated the commitment of the *maquisards* and the damage they could inflict. Only latterly did de Gaulle send substantial reinforcements to embattled units and they never mastered the lie of the kind of land in which the Maquis typically worked and hid.

Though tough and enthusiastic, Maquis fighters had neither ready access to weapons and explosives, nor the funds to purchase them or even basic items like clothing and food. As such, they were heavily reliant on external bodies like SOE for their survival and for military support.[71] Besides, cut off in remote locations, they depended on wireless communication to register their daily requirements to the support bases and maintain contact with events in the outside world. In Wake's case, the members of her little team came each with special expertise, although in practice and under pressure they would often step into each other's professional shoes. Farmer was the military advisor and instructor; Wake was in charge of finance and the reception and distribution of air-dropped supplies; Rake coded and decoded the messages he received and transmitted, listening in for notice on drop schedules to the BBC's five daily news broadcasts. "After being regarded as a bloody nuisance by Gaspard when I first arrived", Wake recalls, "I now carried a lot of weight".[72] Clearly she was right. Without the air-drops the operations of the Maquis could not have been as effectively carried out.

---

[68] Maquis groups began operating in late 1942. By 1944 there were hundreds of groups, predominantly working in Brittany and the South of France.

[69] *SOE in France,* pp. 135–36.

[70] The STO was introduced in September 1942. Initially able-bodied males between 17 and 50 years of age and single women between 21 and 35 were drafted, but the act was endlessly updated and broadened, and wider age groups and larger numbers increasingly sought.

[71] Between 1942 and 1945 an estimated 40,000 tons of material was parachuted into Europe, J. G. Beevor, *SOE: Recollections and Reflections 1940–1945,* The Bodley Head, London, 1981, p. 29.

One cannot overemphasise the importance of Wake's support. If parachuting supplies to the pinpoint of a relatively undefined piece of land was a second world-war operational innovation that required great navigational skill, it also held the reception committee at the mercy of the hazards it involved. The process was clandestine, nocturnal and dependent on fair weather and the phases of the moon. Typically those on the ground had to wait, then guide the plane with bonfires, torches or bicycle lamps. Wake, for her part, found the plateaux on the top of the mountains around Chaudes-Aigues "ideal": Fournier and his group were able to receive, unpack and distribute the contents of the containers directly on the ground, and, once they had established regular contact with London, they received drops most nights. She explains:

> We manned the fields from ten at night until four in the morning, unless the planes arrived beforehand. We would unpack the containers immediately. The weapons had to be cleaned and all the protective grease removed before we handed them over to the leaders of the individual groups. Every available man assisted. Nevertheless, sometimes it would be noon before we finished and after lunch before we could snatch a few hours' sleep. It was a strenuous time for everyone; we were kept on the go continuously, but it was also rewarding to witness the enthusiasm of Fournier and his Maquis.[73]

But, she relates:

> It was bitterly cold on the plateau and from ten at night the ground would be soaking wet with the heavy dew. We used to soak loaf sugar in *eau de vie* (plum brandy) and suck them to try to keep warm.[74]

Nonetheless, there was always the reward of the special parcels. Wake treasured hers:

> Words cannot describe the thrill it gave me to open mine, stamped all over with 'Personal for Hélène'…[Mine] always contained personal items unobtainable in France during Occupation, plus supplies of Lizzie Arden's [beauty] products, Brooke Bond tea, chocolates or confectionery. Once...I received a letter from [an] old [male] pal…I kissed every page as I read the letter. I still have it—and it's still covered in lipstick.[75]

While Wake's war story is episodic and anecdotal—hers is, after all, a record of personal involvement—it gives a clear picture of the nature of Maquis maneouvres and the human spirit that moved them as the war progressed. This is especially so in the writing that corresponds to the period from around May 1944, when, as war tensions mounted, the Maquis d'Auvergne became more militantly active and Wake's support more in demand. By then Gaspard had encouraged the regional group leaders to work together under his command, bringing the Maquis presence in the area to an unprecedented 6,000 men, mainly positioned around Mont Mouchet, the Plomb de Cantal and Chaudes-Aigues.[76] What followed is legendary, for while Gaspard's victories were precarious, the battles that took place were heroically and hard fought. Several skirmishes in early June led to a significant German offensive on 2 June, and, although casualties all told were many, the Germans were forced to withdraw, lifting French morale. A second attack occurred on 10 June, just after the Allied *débarquement* (6 June), this time involving some 11,000 German troops, pitted against a mere 3,000 lightly-armed French. According to Wake, their side captured two cannons and an armoured car, and, at nightfall, as the Germans retreated, vehicles, food and clothing were removed. A new attack took place at dawn, even as "hundreds of new recruits were streaming into the area, ready to be armed".[77] Concomitantly, operations were stepped up: an extra military instructor (René Dusacq) was flown in; night parachute drops increased; along with arms and ammunitions came footwear, and "every man was fitted with one pair of British boots and two pairs of socks".[78] Wake may not have been involved in the fighting, but she was "in the centre of their mighty battle array", unpacking and assembling weapons and driving them posthaste to the battle sites.[79] "The wonder is that I was not captured or killed", she records.[80]

---

[72] WM, p.119.
[73] WM, p.118.
[74] WM, p.124.
[75] WM, p.119.

By mid-1944, the Maquis (and the French Resistance as a whole) was committed to the British plan of an Allied push in Europe, to begin with the Normandy invasion of D–Day (code-named Operation Overlord). SOE's early and final objectives were integral to the tactics Churchill had in mind. In the pre-invasion phase it was to equip and train oppressed populaces, who might repel the enemy in skirmishes. But the long-range goal was always to prepare combatants far and wide for a last burst of simultaneous attacks that would take Hitler's well-dispersed army by surprise. In this Gaspard literally and figuratively jumped the gun. His 2 June attack, which took place four days before the D-Day landing, pre-empted Churchill's plans, and even his second assault of 10 June was of a magnitude hardly comparable to the kind of small-scale guerrilla warfare the Maquis had come to perfect. In Wake's opinion, one with which Kedward's official account concurs, Gaspard, fired by patriotism and the desire to take matters into his own hand, began to overextend.[81] She and her team felt they were "courting trouble" and that "the numbers of men assembling within the one area was getting completely out of control",[82] all the more so that parachute drops could hardly keep up with demand. With the Germans "becoming concerned"[83] but still in command, another assault was inevitable. Wake was then residing in the near-deserted town of Chaudes-Aigues, but remembers the suddenness of the attack. It was 20 June.

---

[76] The events of the Mont Mouchet offensives are recorded in Kedward, *In Search of the Maquis*, pp. 165–69.

[77] WM, p.123.

[78] WM, p.124.

[79] WM, p.123.

[80] ibid.

[81] WM, pp. 164–65.

[82] WM, p.126.

[83] WM, pp.120-21.

> We came down from the plateau [after receiving air-drops] just before dawn. We were all exhausted and suffering from lack of sleep. Chaudes-Aigues has natural hot water springs so I went over to the public baths and soaked myself before popping into bed to snatch a few hours' sleep. It was not to be. The sound of gun-fire made me leap out of bed. Hurriedly I dressed myself and raced down the hall of the [requisitioned] hotel where we lived.
>
> The Germans were attacking us. Our look-outs came into the village to report. The whole area surrounding the mountains was literally swarming with Germans. When it was all over we learnt they had been 22,000 strong, supported by over 1,000 vehicles, including tanks and armoured cars, trench mortars, artillery to back up the infantry, plus ten planes.[84]

In fact, matters escalated and it took the SOE team a frantic alert to London to get an order back and through to Gaspard to withdraw, though Wake touts having got the latter's consent on the basis of a little ruse of her own. "Knowing how stubborn he could be", she recounts, "I asked Denden [Rake] to sign the message as if coming from Konig [sic)] de Gaulle's General who led the [by then united exiled and mainland] Free French Forces of the Interior. I think the signature of a genuine General did the trick".[85] A retreat ensued, though not, Wake records, without causing alarm. Just after she left Gaspard, his headquarters were bombed, and her car so keenly pursued by an enemy Henschel she could see the pilot's goggles and helmet at close range. Small groups of fifty to a hundred men then set off across difficult terrain, her own led by Fournier, who manoeuvred them across the rushing Truyère river, thanks to stepping-stones disguised by tree trunks previously laid by local *maquisards*. "When the Germans arrived", Wake relates, "there was not a soul left…the entire Maquis had evaporated".[86] They had reverted to the strategy for which they had become famous and seemingly disappeared into thin air.

In historical terms the battles of Mont Mouchet and Chaudes-Aigues were not the tactical and numerical successes Wake reports—French losses were considerable and German reprisals ensued. But they did herald a new phase in the war.[87] The Maquis had proved itself a force to be reckoned with; combative action had emerged as a viable Resistance activity; liberation looked imminent; as their numbers swelled resisters felt (and were) united as never before. On those sites, charged with hope and national emotion, Wake would execute her last duties as a war agent. Small wonder that she remembers with pride the moment when, with the battle over, the patriotic and somewhat aloof Gaspard singled her out for tacit praise:

> I will always remember this meeting with him. He looked at me and said, 'Alors, Andrée', took my arm and walked the rest of the way with me and Bazooka [René Dusacq]. I do not know what he was thinking at that moment but for my part it was something special, as if from then on we would understand each other. He was a man of few words, and I knew from those two that he respected me as a comrade-in-arms.[88]

---

[84] WM, p.126.

[85] WM, p.128. In the complex process that led to the unification of mainland and exiled resistance groups, de Gaulle appointed General Koenig to command the FFI in April 1944. His major role was to help coordinate the Allied D-Day landings under the Supreme Headquarters Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) of General Dwight Eisenhower.

[86] ibid.

[87] Kedward, *In Search of the Maquis*, p. 169.

[88] WM, p.130.

From that point on Wake took greater chances in the name of French democracy than she previously had.

One of the costs of the Mont Mouchet battle involved Wake in an unusually valourous event. It evolved from the fact that, at the height of the attack, Rake had been obliged to bury his radio transmitter and destroy his codes lest they be found or he caught. In Wake's opinion the loss put them "back to square one, out of contact with London and useless to everyone".[89] In effect, it did. While long-range military planning was frequently conducted via diplomatic pouches and couriers, day-to-day planning depended on the kind of immediate transmission only radios could supply. In particular, the operator needed to attend to the BBC's five daily broadcasts in which, of the hundreds of odd phrases transmitted in half-hourly slots, one would have special significance to a particular recipient or group (for example, "The plum pudding is too hot" might alert a group that a forthcoming drop was too perilous to take place). For the Maquis, contact was all but indispensable: itinerant, dispersed and fighting in remote locations, they depended on it to seek help and find out when it would come. When Wake's group's lost that avenue of communication her solution was to set out on a bike to make radio contact and request that a new radio and fresh codes be dropped.

According to Wake, her plan was initially well received. Her group, then about thirty strong, though growing daily, knew of a Free French operator "living just over the adjacent mountain".[90] She duly covered the distance, pushing and carrying her bike over some twenty rugged kilometers, only to find that the man in question, frightened by recent events, had fled. But her second plan, to seek out an operator Rake knew to be working in Châteauroux, two hundred kilometers north of their Saint-Santin camp, staggered her comrades, and even today seems ambitious beyond belief: taking a roundabout route of back roads, small villages and fields in order to be safe, she planned to pass through the hilly towns of Aurillac to Montluçon, close to where she had first parachuted into France. From there she would proceed to Saint-Amand and Issoudun, approaching Châteauroux from the west. The task completed, she would return as quickly as possible to Saint-Santin. She did. Indeed, the journey, in which she covered five hundred kilometers in a mere three days, is, of all her feats, the one that has astonished most. Appropriately, it is highlighted in the citation of the George Medal, awarded after the war in 1945.

Of course, Wake was well aware of the advantages of travelling by bike. Women resisters frequently rode their way through dangerous situations with an assurance male cyclists, more liable to be suspected of being labour evaders, could not.[91] Cars, likely to be bound for longer journeys, were closely checked. But because of the Mont Mouchet assaults Wake was at particular risk. German regulations in the Auvergne had been tightened and road-blocks increased. New identity cards were required in the region and issued at local police stations under German surveillance, a risk she felt she could not take. She was lucky, to say the least. At one German road patrol she was waved on; at others she veered off into the fields, joining the main road beyond the checkpoint. In

---

[89] ibid.

[90] WM, p.131.

[91] As well as Nancy Wake, Collins Weitz cites the example of French women like Geneviève Congy, Marie-Jo Chombart de Laüwe and Denise Vernay, who cycled their way through numerous dangerous resistance situations, *Sisters in the Resistance*, pp. 78–9 and pp. 111–12.

Issoudun, she was even able to ride around looking like a "housewife", thanks to her string-bag, conspicuously crammed with local fruit and vegetables.[92] Role-playing in awkward circumstances was something she accomplished with flair and rare nerve.

Finding an operator in Châteauroux, let alone the one Rake had designated, turned out to be a formidable task. Operators were always elusive resisters. Their equipment, weighing about thirty pounds and carried in a suitcase, forced them to lie low (though many, like Rake, had to work in the open and near battle sites). As well, they were always on the move, for if their messages were not short and their location not frequently changed, they were easy prey to German radio detection vans (RDFs), usually able to trace a source in under thirty minutes. Wake's search met with the kind of hitches one might expect. She found the landmark bistro Rake had described, but when she located the SOE safe house its keepers were mistrustful and refused to help. Fortuitously, while pedalling around, she recognized a resister whom she had met some weeks before. Since he was seeking a Free French operator, the one from his own group having been killed, they agreed to help each other out. But no sooner had they found the right house than they were warned that both its occupant and his callers were being watched. As the town was swarming with Germans the two of them decided to separate, then meet up outside the town—her companion knew of a nearby Maquis camp. Luckily, its leader proved sympathetic. Wake's message was sent to London via the Free French headquarters in Algiers. Only after her return did she find to her immense relief that her mission had been successful: the requested radio arrived from SOE, along with an operator for her personal use. Of the more immediate outcome she recounts:

> [The Maquis] greeted me with open arms and shouts of joy. All I could do was cry. When I got off that damned bike I felt as if I had a fire between my legs and the inside of my thighs were raw. I couldn't stand up, I couldn't sit down, I couldn't walk and I didn't sleep for days…It took me a few days to recover. The doctor from the village had dressed my thighs which were in a horrible state.[93]

But she notes:

> When I'm asked what I'm most proud of doing during the war, I say 'the bike ride'.[94]

By the time Operation Overlord was under way and the Allies were poised for D-Day, SOE had affiliated with BCRA and the United States' Operations Service (OS). By then General Eisenhower was the Supreme Allied Commander and de Gaulle was operating from Algiers: the invasion phase had begun.[95] This was as Churchill had planned: as the Allies arrived on French soil, ready to advance east, so some 1,200 targeted locations scattered over German-occupied France would be simultaneously blasted, throwing Hitler's scattered army off-guard. In the unfolding of this strategy SOE was to play a crucial role. Along with French resistance groups, by then united behind de Gaulle (but for the rebel Communist FTP), its role was to create "mayhem"—by bombardment, road blocks, lighting attacks and sabotage.[96] So it was to frustrate the enemy's capacity to send reinforcements to its western divisions or retreat to Germany via France's north-western Belfort Gap.[97] It would complete and intensify Wake's role. From then until the end of the war she would be engaged in activities of a heightened militant kind. In that respect, however remotely located, she would find herself at the centre of Churchill's push for victory at all costs. When, by the end of June, over a million Allied soldiers had crossed the Channel into France, she and her co-resisters were set upon a path of destruction that involved the whole of France.

---

[92] WM, p.134.
[93] WM, p.135.
[94] ibid.
[95] Eisenhower's appointment was made in January 1944. De Gaulle moved his Headquarters to Algiers in May 1943.

After the Mont Mouchet evacuation Wake moved west, but, finding it difficult to fit in with her group's high-handed new commander (she was never one to accept authoritarianism), she decided to go north to join Tardivat, "the gallant Frenchman"[98] who had rescued her from the bushes when she had landed in France. It proved to be a rewarding experience. In Tardivat she found an "intelligent, disciplined, reliable, honest and very brave" military companion, plus one who shared her sense of fun.[99] Together they set out to blow up bridges, damage vehicles and ambush and retreat. She reflects:

> In suitable terrain we loved using what we called a 'trip wire'. It was attached to a tree on each side of the road and the first vehicle in the convoy would blow up. We liked to be concealed on a nearby hill so we could watch the confusion before withdrawing to a safer spot.[100]

On such missions the daredevil in her was evidently challenged and satisfied.

Tardivat's group, two hundred men, including those Wake brought from Saint-Santin, set up at Ygrande, north of the Auvergne near Montluçon, although theirs was a peripatetic existence since, despite their increased aggressiveness, they remained reliant on "hit and run" tactics. By this time Farmer had moved on to help adjacent groups, making Wake's support all the more sought. Apart from arming and instructing her own group, she continued to receive parachute drops, while assessing and supplying the "dozens and dozens" of forest groups operating in the *départments* of Allier and Puy-de-Dôme.[101] Proportionally her authority increased: first she was given a car and a driver, then a bodyguard after an attempted attack on her life (albeit by a grossly inebriated French resister who resented British aid). Her guards, six Spanish ex-Civil War fighters, were to prove to be the most loyal of companions, escorting her "thousands of kilometers" and hovering over her when she stepped out.[102] Two American weapon instructors were flown in to help. It is not surprising, then, that when she teasingly told Tardivat he would not receive his Bren guns unless he procured a supply bus in which she might also sleep and that she was "heartily sick" of "damp ground",[103] he responded with alacrity: a road-block was set up, an appropriate vehicle chosen and the terrified passengers asked to dismount. She appears to have had no qualms on the matter, though in others she was a stickler for justice. “So”, she writes, “I used to sleep in the back of the bus, on a beautiful soft mattress with nylon parachutes for sheets”.[104] Such was the strange, topsy-turvy world in which she lived and worked.

---

[96] The FTP (Francs-Tireurs et Partisans), the military arm of the Front National, mainly made up of Communist supporters, was a highly active Resistance body, but it was always regarded as a renegade body by de Gaulle, just as it distrusted de Gaulle's political policies and feared his post-war aspirations, Beevor, *SOE: Recollections and Reflections*, pp. 158–59.

[97] Located near the Swiss German border of Alsace, between the Vosges and Jura mountains.

[98] WM, p.136.

[99] WM, p.148.

[100] ibid.

[101] WM, p.144.

[102] WM, p.145.

[103] WM, p.137.

Wake’s service with Tardivat was notably militant. Within days of their arrival at Ygrande, German troops began assembling in the area: their scouts estimated they numbered 6,000, compared with their two hundred (not counting Gaspard’s widely spread groups), the two American instructors and thirty new recruits. Her own involvement in the subsequent skirmishes, in which she was responsible for distributing arms while fighting was underway, put her in their battles’ front lines. As fast as the Americans planted bazookas in the men’s hands, so she translated the instructions from English into French, and although she was only rarely engaged in armed combat, on one occasion she was obliged to assume a commanding role, leading a group within point-blank range of the enemy, opening fire and rescuing two American officers. Her heroism in the affair later earned her recognition in the citations of the British George Medal and the American Medal of Freedom with Bronze Palm.[105] In fact, to Wake’s regret, the incident’s success was marred by loss: twenty of the new recruits disobeyed her order and crossed an open field, upon which seven of their number were slain, but she had them ceremoniously buried in a local cemetery, and judging from her account of the events that followed, the affair clearly earned her the respect of the men. Henceforth she was, in all but name, Tardivat’s second-in-command. Her report of another astonishing event conjures up the combative commitment and spirit they shared:

> The most exciting sortie I ever made with Tardivat was an attack on the German headquarters at Montluçon. He and his men organised this raid from beginning to end. All the weapons and explosives used were hidden in a house near the headquarters, ready to be picked up just after noon when the Germans would be enjoying their pre-lunch drinks. Each one of us had received specific orders. I entered the building by the back door, raced up the stairs, opened the first door along the passage way and threw in my grenades, closed the door and ran like hell back to my car which was ready to make a quick getaway. The headquarters was completely wrecked inside the building, and several dozen Germans did not lunch that day, nor any other day for that matter. The hardest part of the raid was to convince the nearby residents that the Allies had not landed and that they should return immediately to their homes and remain indoors.[106]

Of course, Wake’s Maquis activities beg questions of a pertinent kind. How did she, a woman in the 1940s, become so militantly engaged? And why was it that she was so easily accepted into the midst of French fighting men? Certainly, her case was unusual, as history has confirmed. War, Margaret Collins Weitz relatedly argues, has traditionally been the work and duty of men.[107] De Gaulle, a military man, never warmed to women infiltrating fighting ranks, let alone taking up arms. Even within the Resistance, where gender roles were often overturned, women resisters tended to assume supportive (though not necessarily less dangerous) roles. This was especially the case in the Maquis, which was almost exclusively male-represented, and organised along paramilitary lines. In her study of *partisanes* (full-time gun-carrying women fighters) in Vichy France, Paula Schwartz estimates that they were few, and that those who made up their small number were generally members of the largely Communist organised Francs-Tireurs et Partisans. All told, she concludes, "the presence of women in rural combat groups was considered a blatant contravention of prevailing social mores".[108] In fact, Collins Weitz finds only two cases of French women becoming leaders in the Maquis.[109]

---

[104] ibid.

[105] Awarded in 1945 and 1948 respectively.

[106] WM, p.148.

[107] *Sisters in the Resistance*, pp. 147–48.

No doubt Wake, brought in as an outsider, had an advantage she could exploit. She could pose no lasting threat to gender (im)balance in France, and certainly not to the way its paramilitary was run. But she also came from a position of strength to the extent that even her early leader, Gaspard, at first suspicious of her worth, recognised the benefits she brought: not just in the form of weapons, but also in the provision of boots, clothing and money, which she distributed according to what she deemed a group needed or had militantly earned. In this she was peculiarly femininely empowered, a position she shared with a small number of other SOE women agents, notably Lise de Baissac, an arms instructor, and Pearl Witherington, who became a *chef de maquis* in the *département* of Indres.[110]

But, to her distinct advantage (and credit), Wake also brought to the job her own inimitable personality and style: confidence, abounding energy, enthusiasm, authority, humour and a measure of charm. Her story portrays one who was robust in all respects: she did not shirk duties; she was not squeamish at the sight of blood (as the gun-shy Rake famously was!);[111] she expected few privileges; she was egalitarian—ignoring the hierarchical manner of some of her male superiors, she preferred to eat and mix socially with the men; she was fearless; she hated political posturing, but believed totally in the cause she served. For this, the men evidently admired and trusted her as one of their own. On the other hand, she appears to have exerted a femininely calming effect on the men. In an instance where they had abused three women prisoners, they were strongly chastised. Indeed, in the event fairness prevailed: two of the women she had released; the other, a German infiltrator, was executed—cleanly in her opinion, rather than tortured, a form of punishment she abhorred. Her reflections on the matter are revelatory, and must be quoted as proofs of one both strong and wise: steely in military judgment; temperate in the belief that justice should be properly and swiftly applied—qualities not all her male supporters (let alone the enemy) shared. Of the dispassion with which she watched her German prisoner walk to her death she attempts to explain:

> How had this been possible? How had I become so aggressive? It was simple. I remembered Vienna, Berlin and the Jews. I remembered seeing a poor French woman, seven months pregnant, tied to a stake and bayonetted, criss-cross in the stomach by a German soldier. Her screaming two-year-old held her hand and she was left to die with her unborn child…I

---

[108] Paula L. Schwartz, "*Partisanes* and Gender Politics in Vichy France", *French Historical Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1989, pp. 126–50 (also cited in Collins Weitz, pp. 148–49).

[109] Georgette Gérard and Marie-Madeleine Fourcade, *Sisters of the Resistance*, pp. 149–51 and pp. 65–6. See also Rossiter, *Women in the Resistance*, pp. 181–82 and pp. 126–29.

[110] On de Baissac and Witherington, see Rossiter, ibid., pp. 177–81.

[111] Cunningham, *Beaulieu*, pp. 79–80. Nonetheless, reports of Rake describe him as a fearless operator who took many risks.

> remembered my friend in the escape route network who was beheaded with an axe after he had been captured by the Gestapo. The enemy had made me tough. I had no pity for them nor would I expect any in return.[112]

But she adds:

> War is a calamity. It is destructive and brings great sorrow and loss of life. But at least it is, or should, be a clear-cut manœuvre between two opposing nations fighting each other until one side admits defeat.[113]

Justice she believed in, but not revenge. "There had been nothing violent about my nature before the war yet the years would see a great change", she attests. "But in spite of my virulent attitude to the enemy I could not condone torture and brutality on our part".[114] On that she kept her word.

With fairness of mind came wholeness of heart. As a woman, and a foreigner to boot, Wake was able to stand above the allegiances and vested interests that splintered the Resistance cause. She gave it her full support but had no expectations of benefiting politically or personally at the war's close. What mattered was the task at hand. She says:

> By July 1944 there were so many branches of the Resistance it was difficult to keep track of them. There were right-wingers, left-wingers, red-hot Communists, government officials, civil servants, ex-Vichyites, ex-Miliciens, secret army, regular army and dozens more, besides masses of individuals trying to get on the bandwagon. We kept our distance from the would-be politicians, concentrating on arming the Maquisards as efficiently and rapidly as possible.[115]

Emancipated Wake was (though it is not a word she cares to use). On that fact her story is clear. She asked to be treated like the others in the ranks; she accepted responsibility when it was conferred. Claire Gorrara may argue that women militant resisters were largely treated as "honorary men", but it is not a condition Wake appears to have suffered;[116] certainly she did not perceive it to be thus. Perhaps she was just comfortable with who she was; a woman but a militant, a leader but one of a team. She may have dressed in a shirt and trousers (as photos of her in service confirm), but she affirms, "however mannish I looked by day, I always slept in satin".[117] Those "pretty nighties",[118] "one pink and one blue",[119] may have been "leftovers from another life",[120] but they accompanied her throughout the war. Besides, she considers her sexuality was an advantage in other respects. When the two American instructors took a snap of her getting into her nightwear, she got her revenge: later, when one of their duo was bathing naked in a forest pool, she held him at camera-ransom until he emerged, "blue" from the icy water, after thirty cold minutes of resolve. "We always found time to play jokes on one another and enjoy a good laugh. It became a battle of wits between the sexes",[121] she reflects.

---

[112] WM, pp.142-43.

[113] ibid.

[114] WM, p.142.

[115] WM, p.143.

[116] "Reviewing Gender and the Resistance: the Case of Lucie Aubrac", *The Liberation of France: Image and Event*, ed. HR Kedward and Nancy Wood, Berg Publishers, Oxford and Washington D. C., 1995, p. 145.

[117] WM, p.141.

[118] WM, p.137.

[119] WM, p.141.

[120] WM, p.137.

Like Wake, Tardivat recognised the importance in wartime of engendering good cheer and team spirit. It was one of his attributes she says she respected and liked. Their kindred minds came together when, in the last heady months of war, he organised a group repast to thank the Americans for their contribution and to celebrate Wake's lucky escape from her would-be assassin's assault. On the occasion he took charge of the catering, a local chef was "kidnapped" (to protect him should he be questioned by the Germans or Militia), and Rake rashly installed an elaborate row of lights that could be extinguished if enemy planes passed overhead.[122] For Wake it was a "banquet I shall never forget":[123] in the most unusual of celebrations, the French rose to the occasion with aplomb and gastronomic flair. Her details reveal how close she and her comrades had become in just a few months:

> Our tables consisted of long logs covered by white sheets borrowed from friendly villages. The chef served a magnificent eight-course meal, accompanied by some superb French wines. He hovered round looking impressive wearing his snow-white chef's hat and apron, assisted by several volunteers…Several hundred men attended and every single one had been spending hours trying to make his clothes look as smart as possible. The lighting system was a huge success—our part of the forest looked like a fairyland. Tardivat greeted his guests with typical French formality and the foreign guests responded with great dignity! We toasted everyone and everything. We swore our eternal allegiance to France, Great Britain and the United States of America. When we couldn't think of anyone else to toast we swayed to our feet and toasted the Germans and the Allied Forces for not having interrupted our gala dinner.[124]

The festive mood that reigned on the occasion was also a sign of the times: the tide of events *had* changed and French morale had soared as a result. As victory became a certainty and the Allies advanced, so new resisters flocked to their aid. On 15 August Operation Overland was followed up by Operation Dragoon, for which some 300,000 American and French troops disembarked on the French Mediterranean coast.[125] Wake recounts the veritable speed with which the plans for the mooted "second D-Day" took effect. Her own instruction manual, brought from England in her handbag, designated the kind of "raids" their SOE team was to assist: on bridges, roads, cable lines, railways. Those exploits were to constitute the culmination of her partnership with Tardivat as together they broke down communication lines, even seizing a petrol plant that had supplied the Germans with fuel, and detonating bridges and junctions before cheering crowds of villagers who were no longer afraid to turn up to witness such spectacular events.

---

[121] WM, p.142.

[122] The event was a total breach of the rules of caution that had been instilled into SOE agents at Beaulieu.

[123] WM, p.146.

[124] WM, pp.146-147.

[125] It involved some 200,000 Frenchmen from the French First Army, but numbers swelled to 290,000 as the campaign gathered momentum, Marcel Vigneras, *Rearming the French*, Washington, D. C., Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1957, p. 186.

Wake's account of the last days of Occupation evokes the optimism that ignited the nation in the war's final phase. Villagers, she remembers, were more visible in the streets; the Maquis more reckless and resolved; she was happy to shed the old clandestine ways. Sick of the discomforts of their forest hideaways, her group accepted an offer to move into the dilapidated but to them luxurious château de Fragnes, near Montluçon. Despite the openness of the land, she appropriated its grounds for air-drops. The men chuckled at her boldness. In the last week of August Paris was liberated. There was excitement in the air. The country rejoiced.

Given the circumstances, it is not surprising that her fellow resisters chose to celebrate in style. Wake had guessed by the men's secretive manner the week before that they would honour her birthday, too. But she could not have predicted the kind of tribute they had had in mind. It was to be their parting gift: a gesture of gratitude and comradeship. She records:

> All our colleagues were invited and so was our landlord…Everyone we knew helped us obtain the food and wine. It was amazing to see how many bottles of wine and champagne some farmers had been able to bury in their fields…I was presented with a magnificent bouquet of flowers and told at the same time to be ready to take the salute. That was the surprise they had been planning. I was amazed to see we had so many smart, well-trained men. There were hundreds and hundreds of them. Then suddenly I recognised a man I had already seen marching by. The penny dropped. Once they had marched past our steps they ran like the devil right around the château and rejoined the men ahead. Without doubt they were the finest and fittest body of fighters I have ever had the honour and privilege to salute.[126]

But it was the small tokens of appreciation that especially touched:

> Everyone brought me some little gift. They must have been searching in the villages for ages as at that time everything was in short supply. My Spaniards, who had absolutely no money, had gathered all the wildflowers they could find in the forest and wrapped them in a Spanish flag, and one of the bodyguard had written me a poem.[127]

Whatever sweetness victory brought, Wake, like many she knew, did not emerge from the war unscathed, although her point of reckoning came at an unexpected moment.[128] After the German evacuation of Vichy in September 1944, she travelled north to join in the celebrations of the liberation of the town. "The collaborators seemed to have vanished into thin air", she remembers, "and the crowds in the street went wild with joy".[129] But at the official ceremony at the Cenotaph, at which she laid a wreath as the representative of the Allied team, she was approached by a woman who had been the receptionist at the Marseille hotel in which she and Henri had held their wedding breakfast and often dined or had a drink. Abruptly, she told her Henri had died. Although Wake had had a premonition of his fate in a dream in London, she had "subconsciously put [it] at the back of [her] mind", then "[taken] it for granted that [he] was alive".[130] On her return to

---

[126] WM, p.152.
[127] WM, p.153.
[128] In France alone some 520,000 military and civilians perished, of which an estimated 20,000 were in the Resistance.
[129] WM, p.153.
[130] WM, p.154.

Marseille, after twenty months' absence, she learned the facts: he had been arrested by the Gestapo in May 1943 and imprisoned until his death on 16 October. "It was in the middle of October that I had had that nightmare", she writes. Only months after did she learn he had been tortured. He had been interrogated about her whereabouts and refused to cooperate.

After the liberation of Vichy, and of Paris in August 1944, SOE agents in France were recalled, even though the fighting continued around the country until the German surrender in May 1945.[131] Like others, Wake had to wait in the capital until a seat became available on an Allied transport plane, but she took the opportunity it provided to track down surviving old friends. On 16 October 1944 she arrived in London; it was exactly a year since her husband had died. Before the war's end she returned briefly to France to accompany the head of SOE, Colonel Buckmaster, on a tour of the Allier and the Auvergne, and to tie up her affairs in Marseille. Her father-in-law had never accepted her and blamed her for his son's sacrifice. The money Henri had secured for her when she left for England in 1943, should he be killed, had disappeared during the Occupation. She had no reason to stay.

The events described in the closing chapters of *The White Mouse* reveal a restless Wake, albeit one who happily strove to fill her new life. She found it difficult to settle down, so she seized the chance to travel and work abroad. In January 1946 she attended the presentation to the French Government of a Lysander plane, offered on behalf of the British Government and SOE, then returned to London in June to be part of the victory parade. Other ceremonies ensued, notably in 1948, in Paris, where her American and British honours were conferred. By then she had worked for the British Passport Office in Paris and Prague. In 1949 she moved to Sydney, where she joined the Liberal Party and ran—unsuccessfully—for office. Unhappy with life in Australia, which she found parochial after the excitement of her European days, she returned to England in 1951 and joined the Air Ministry, lecturing on escape, evasion and survival methods, for which she wrote a manual, and preparing the United Nations interrogation reports of POWs who had survived the Korean War. She was appalled to find that its prisoners had been as abominably treated as those in the Second World War. Her time at the Air Ministry entitled her to an "indulgence passage", which she took in the form of a free return flight to Australia. On her return to England she was greeted by John Forward, a former RAF bomber pilot, whose acquaintance she had made after the war, and whom she married in 1957, after fourteen years of widowhood.

While Wake's autobiography stops at 1985, her various interviews record a fulfilled life. She spent many happy years with Forward, first in Malta until 1959, then in Australia, living lastly in Port Macquarie in New South Wales. Unsettled after her husband's death in 1997, she returned to England in 2001, where she lived at the Stafford Hotel, London, financially helped by admirers, not the least of whom was the Prince of Wales. After suffering a stroke in 2003, she moved to a London rest home for ex-service men and women, where she was regularly visited by many of the friends she has made over long and active years.[132]

In the last chapter of her book, Wake discusses with charming frankness the six failed attempts made to film her life between 1956 and 1972. But all was not lost. In 1984

---

[131] SOE was officially disbanded on 15 January 1946. Many of its agents moved to MI6.

[132] Royal Star and Garter House for ex-servicemen, Richmond.

Sydney's Channel 7 set out to produce a television mini-series on her exploits, for which, to her delight, she was invited to work cooperatively.[133] It gave her the opportunity to revisit the Auvergne with the scriptwriters, retrace her footsteps, notably around Chaudes-Aigues, follow the route of her famous bike ride, find the spot where she had been chased on the road by the Henschel plane… Not one to condone the falsification of facts, she did not regret that the early film scripts, full of exaggerations, did not come to commercial fruition. But she did regret the liberties finally taken in the Australian film, as she did the kind of newspaper coverage she began to get. One can only wonder what need there would be to embellish or alter the remarkable events of her life. Her own book, undertaken despite self-doubts about her ability as a writer, was, she felt, an opportunity to set the record straight and debunk the more fanciful myths about her that had appeared in the press. "One article", she writes, with evident amusement…

> …stated that I had led my 8,000 men to victory [in the Auvergne]. I had a mental picture of myself surging ahead (rather in the style of Joan of Arc) followed by the faithful 8,000. The truth is we all worked as a team and any success I had was because I was working in harmony with dedicated French people and close friends. I enjoyed fighting with the men when I got the chance, but so often I was fully occupied travelling from one Maquis group to another, coding my messages with Roger [her personal radio operator], listening for the replies on the BBC and organising reception committees for the parachute drops.[134]

Another article said…

> I had blown up all the targets [in the Auvergne] on D-Day.[135]

Of course, such myths have done nothing to detract from the reality of the risky life she led, recognized after the war in a plethora of awards: the George Medal, the Croix de Guerre with Palm and Bar; the Croix de Guerre with Star; the Médaille de la Résistance, the American Medal of Freedom with Bronze Palm; Chevalier, and later Croix d'Officier, of the Légion d'Honneur; latterly the Companion of the Order of Australia (2004) and New Zealand's RSA Badge in Gold (2006).

In the final pages of the *The White Mouse* Wake reflects upon the events of which she was part, positing her opinions as one who has let the dust settle, but earned the authority to speak out. She does not mince words on those French who did not rise to the challenge when their country needed them, though she sympathises with the humiliation they felt in defeat, capitalised on by Pétain's pretensions that he would salvage the situation and a German propaganda machine that vigorously camouflaged the damage the Nazi Occupation did. There were those who were duped, she admits, but there were those who were weak and those who profited from others' misfortune. Her list of the guilty is long: the Vichyites, the Militia, the fence-sitters, the Jewish persecutors, the black marketers, the "kept women" who "enjoy[ed] the favours of the enemy",[136] the White Russian refugees who turned against France when lured by German promises of the reinstatement of their lands…

---

[133] The mini-series *Nancy Wake* appeared in 1987, starring Noni Hazelhurst.

[134] WM, p.190.

[135] ibid.

[136] WM, p.193.

She does not elaborate on what the historian Henri Rousso later called the post-war "Vichy syndrome"—the difficulty France had in facing the shame of what happened, the "national amnesia" that prevailed in the war's aftermath—but she recognises its existence.[137] Certainly she later applauded the fact that over time, a time of recovery, France attempted to tackle the difficult issue of responsibility and to understand what went wrong. Indeed, in the late 1980s and 1990s, numerous French perpetrators of war crimes were put on trial; some had their previous pardons rescinded; others were condemned for the first time. Notable amongst them were Klaus Barbie (the "Butcher of Lyon"), sentenced to life imprisonment in 1987, and Paul Touvier, head of the intelligence for the Militia in Lyon, similarly sentenced in 1993. The past has been (and is still being) painfully but painstakingly restored, confronted and reviewed.[138]

But Wake judges such fraught matters against her own experience and the kind of people she says she was "fortunate" to have met: the "friends" by whom she was "surrounded" and "who never failed [her] on the occasions [she] appealed for help";[139] the "loyal French citizens" whose effort she witnessed, and who often paid a "heavy penalty" for defending their land.[140] Memory and its importance dominate the telling of her story as it is brought to a close. There she pays homage to those who filled her with "affection" or "admiration";[141] there she sets out to make sense of why she did what she did. "I remember", she says…

> …the wives of the prisoners of war who were left to fend for themselves those long years; the hunger some people suffered; the bitter winters months with no heating; the curfew; the cunning propaganda in the newspapers and on the radio; the forced labour camps; the turmoil the innocent remark of a child could bring; the horror of seeing family and friends rounded up and shot; the burning of the farms and villages and the people within…the generosity of some French families…[`of] people who had very little themselves [but] were willing to share what they had.[142]

As for the Resistance, her sentiments are made clear: she "fervently" believes it "played a major role in the Liberation of France".[143] It is how she sees it as one who worked within its fold—in many guises, in many places, and in the thick of many of its exploits:

> Whatever [the resisters'] shortcomings, they were a permanent thorn in the side of the Germans, thus preventing them from putting all their strength into fighting the Allies during and after D-Day. Furthermore, I have no doubt at all that the Allied offensive would not have progressed as rapidly as they did had the Germans not had to contend with the numerous Maquis groups who attacked them continuously from all sides.[144]

---

[137] Henri Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1991 and 1994, tr. Arthur Goldhammer; *Le Syndrome de Vichy de 1944 à nos jours*, Seuil, Paris, 1987, rev. ed., 1990.

[138] An inflammatory case in point was the revelation of François Mitterand's Occupation activities and ongoing friendships with convicted collaborators. See Pierre Péan, *Une jeunesse française: François Mitterand 1937–1947*, Fayard, Paris, 1994, ch. 12.

[139] WM, p.192.

[140] WM, p.193.

[141] ibid.

[142] WM, pp.193-94.

[143] WM, p.195.

[144] ibid.

For her part, looking back on her youth, on her "high-spirited" character, on her rashness, on the hurts, on the highs and lows, she has no regrets. "If I could relive my life", she asserts, "I would probably do most things all over again…I have never regretted the stand I took against the Nazis…My only regret was the fact that my association with the O'Leary organisation…led to the death of Henri".[145] But she adds, "I realise now that if I hadn't been involved with the escape network, I would eventually have found some other worthwhile [war] cause".[146]
The choice, she reckons, brought rich rewards:

> Perhaps I haven't achieved what I set out to do over fifty years ago but on the whole I have led an interesting life. Certainly it has seldom been boring. One thing I have appreciated more than anything else is that the true friends I made over the years remained true friends and to some of them I owe my life. Perhaps I should dedicate [*The White Mouse*] to all my friends, wherever they may be.[147]

Wake died in 2011, aged 98. As she had requested, her ashes were scattered near Montluçon where she had so bravely fought alongside the *maqiusards*.

---

[145] ibid.
[146] ibid.
[147] WM, p.200.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Books and Articles

Beale, Dorothea, *Book of Extracts from the School Inquiry Commission*, David Nutt, London, 1870.

Beevor, J. G., *SOE: Recollections and Reflections 1940–1945*, The Bodley Head, London, 1981.

Bowen, Stella, *Drawn from Life*, Picador Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1999 (first published 1941).

Butler, A. G., *The Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services in the war of 1914–1918*, vol. II, *The Western Front*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1940.

Clarke, Patricia (editor), *Tasma's Diaries: The Diaries of Jessie Couvreur with another by her young sister Edith Hubyers*, Mulini Press, Canberra, 1995.

Donnell, Anne, *Letters of an Australian Army Sister*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney,1920.

Foot, M. R. D. and Dear, I. C. B. (editors), *Oxford Companion to World War II*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005.

Ford, Hugh (editor) and Josephson, Matthew (foreward), *The Left Bank Revisited, Selections from the Paris Tribune 1917–1934,* with an introduction by Hugh Ford, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park and London, 1972.

Franklin V, Benjamin (editor), *Wambly Bald: On the Left Bank, 1929–1933*, Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio and London, 1987.

Geering. R. G. (editor), *A Web of Friendship: Selected Letters, Christina Stead (1928–1973)*, preface by R. G. Geering, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1992.

Harrison, Charles, *Theatricals and tableaux vivants for amateurs*, L. Upcott Gill, London, 1882.

Hemingway, Ernest, *A Moveable Feast*, Jonathon Cape, London, 1964.

Kirkcaldie, R. A., *In Gray and Scarlet*, Alexander McCubbin, Melbourne, 1922.

McNeil, Eugénie, *A Bunyip Close Behind Me & Ladies Didn't: The Recollections of Eugénie McNeil retold by her daughter Eugénie Crawford,* Penguin Books, 1990 (first published 1972 and 1984, respectively).

Marx, Karl, *Capital*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul, Dent, London; Dutton, New York, 1957. Online, Marx/ Engels Internet Archive, <htpp:www.marxists.org>, viewed 22 May 2007.

Marx, Karl, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1963 Online, Marx/ Engels Internet Archive, <htpp.www.marxists.org>, viewed 22 May, 2007.

Rivière, Marc Serge (annotated edition, with an introduction), *Daisy in Exile: The Diary of an Australian Schoolgirl in France 1887–1889*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2003.

Rowold, Katharina (annotated edition with an introduction), *Gender and Science: Late Nineteenth-century Debates on the Female Mind and Body*, Thoemmes Press, Bristol, 1996.

Smith, Angela K., *Women's Writing of the First World War: An Anthology,* Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 2,000.
Stang, Sondra J. and Cochran Karen (editors), *The Correspondence of Ford Madox Ford and Stella Bowen*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1993.
Stead, Christina, 'The Writers Take Sides', *Left Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, July 1935, pp. 453–62.
Stead, Christina, *House of All Nations*, Angus & Robertson, London and Sydney, 1974.
Stead, Christina, *The Beauties and Furies,* Virago Press, London, 1982.
Tasma, *Not Counting the Cost,* D. Appleton and Company, New York, 1895.
Tasma, *The Penance of Portia James,* William Heinemann, London, 1891.
Tilton, May, *The Grey Battalion*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1934 (first published 1922).
Wake, Nancy, *The White Mouse*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, Australia, 1997 (first published 1985).
Wenlandt Oliver, *Tableaux vivants. How to produce and manage them successfully and economically,* Pitman, Heywood, London and Manchester, 1896.
Wenlandt, Oliver, *Living Statuary: how it may be successfully produced by amateurs*, Pitman, Heywood, London and Manchester, 1896.
Wetherell, Rodney, 'Interview with Christina Stead', *Australian Literary Studies,* vol. 9, no. 4, October 1980, pp. 431–448.
Whitehead, Ann, 'Christina Stead: An Interview', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, May 1974, pp. 230–248.

Reviews (boxed cuttings, National Library of Australia)

Of *The Penance of Portia James* (Tasma): *Belgium News and Continental Advertiser*, 12 December 1891; *Literary Opinion*, December 1891; *Pictorial World*, December 1891; *Lady's Pictorial,* 19 December 1891; *Anti-Jacobin*, December 1891; *Literary Opinion*, December 1891; *Belgium News*, 12 December 1891; *Manchester Guardian*, 2 October 1895.
Of *Not Counting the Cost* (Tasma): *Daily Chronicle*, September 1895; *Daily Telegraph*, September 1895; *Standard*, October 1895; *Standard*, 8 October 1895; *Spectator*, September 1895; *Morning Post*, 30 September 1895; *Queen, The Lady's Newspaper & Court Chronicle,* 12 October 1895; *Globe*, September 1895; *Scotsman*, August 1895; *Pioneer Mail*, October 1895.

Nurses' letters and diaries, Australian War Memorial (AWM) and National Library of Australia (NLA)

Elsie May Tranter diary, AWM, 3 DRL/4081 (A); Daisy Donaldson Richmond diary, AWM, 3DRL/0783; Elsie Louise Steadman report, AWM, PR 86/302; Nellie Crommelin letters, AWM, PR OO65; Anne Donnell letters, NLA, MS 3962; Ethel Gray diary, AWM, 2DRL/1326; May Ashton diary, AWM, PR 88/025; Edna C. Nicholls diary, AWM, 2 DRL/0654; Grace Wilson diary, AWM, PR 01870; Edith Florence Avenell letters, AWM, PR 85/111.

Secondary Sources

Anderson, Don, ‘Christina Stead’s Unforgettable Dinner Parties’, *Southerly,* vol. 39, no. 1, 1979, pp. 28–45.
Bailey, Peter, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830–1885,* Routledge and Kegan Paul, University of Toronto Press, London; University of Texas Press, Buffalo, 1978.
Barker, Marianne, *Nightingales in the Mud: The Digger Sisters of the Great War 1914–1918,* Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989.
Bassett, Jan, *Guns and Brooches: Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997 (first published 1992).
Beale, Dorothea; Soulsby, Lucy H. M.; Dove, Jane Frances, *Work and Play in Girls' Schools, by Three Head Mistresses,* Longmans, Green and Co., London, New York and Bombay, 1898.
Benstock, Shari, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940,* University of Texas Press, Austin, 1988 (first published 1986).
Blake, Ann, *Christina Stead's Politics of Place*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, Western Australia, 1999.
Braddon, Russell, *Nancy Wake*, Pan Books, London and Sydney, 1958.
Braddon, Russell, *Nancy Wake: SOE's Greatest Heroine*, Sutton Publishing Ltd., Stroud, UK, 2005 (first published 1956).
Braddon, Russell, *Nancy Wake: The Story of a Very Brave Woman*, Cassell & Co. Ltd., London, 1956.
Braddon, Russell, *Woman in Arms: The Story of Nancy Wake*, Sutton Publishing Ltd., Stroud UK, 2005 (first published 1956).
Bricard, Isabelle, *Saintes ou pouliches: L'éducation des jeunes filles au XIXe siècle,* Albin Michel, Paris, 1985.
Brydon, Diana, *Christina Stead*, Macmillan Education, London, 1987.
Carpenter, Humphrey, *Geniuses Together: American writers in Paris in the 1920s*, Unwin Hyman, London and Sydney, 1987.
Crawford, Ray, ‘Sport for Young Ladies: The Victorian Independent Schools, 1875–1925’, *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 1, issue 1, Nov. 1984, pp. 61–82.
Cunningham, Cyril, *Beaulieu: The Finishing School for Secret Agents,* Pen and Sword Books, South Yorkshire, 1998.
Cunningham, Gail, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel*, Macmillan, London, 1978.
Deacon, Lindley A., *Beyond the Call: The Story of Australia's First World War Nurses with further chapters relative to the war,* Regal Press, Launceston, 2000.
Diamond, Hannah, *Women and the Second World War 1939–1948: Choices and Constraints,* Longman, Harlow, 1999.
Dyhouse, Carol, *Girls Growing Up in late Victorian and Edwardian England*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Boston and Henley, 1981.
Fitzsimons, Peter, *Nancy Wake: A Biography of our Greatest War Heroine,* Harper Collins, Australia, 2001.
Foot, M. R. D., *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France 1940–1944*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1966; republished University Publications of America, Maryland, 1984.

Fox, Ralph, *The Novel and the People*, Cobbet Press, London, 1944 (first published 1937).

Fussell, Paul, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000 (first published 1975).

Geering, R. G., *Christina Stead*, Twayne Publishers, New York, 1969.

Giles, Fiona, *Too Far Everywhere: The Romantic Heroine in Nineteenth-century Australia*, University of Queensland Press, 1998.

Goodman, Rupert, *Our War Nurses: The History of the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps 1902–1988*, Boolarong Publications, Queensland, 1988.

Gorham, Deborah, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, Croom Helm, London, 1982.

Gorrara, Claire, 'Reviewing Gender and the Resistance: The Case of Lucie Aubrac', *The Liberation of France: Image and Event*, ed. H. R. Kedward and Nancy Wood, Berg Publishers, Oxford and Washington D. C., 1995, pp. 143–53.

Gribble, Jennifer, *Christina Stead*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994.

Hardwick, Elizabeth, 'The Neglected Novels of Christina Stead', *A View of My Own: Essays in Literature and Society*, Farrer, Strauss and Cudahy, NewYork, 1951, pp. 41–48.

Hewitt, Nicholas, 'Shifting Cultural Centres in Twentieth-century France', *Parisian Fields*, ed. Michael Sheringham, Reaktion Books, London, 1996, pp. 30–45.

Kedward, H. R., *In Search of the Maquis: Rural Resistance in Southern France 1942–1944*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993.

Kyle, Noeline, *Her Natural Destiny: The Education of Women in New South Wales*, New South Wales University Press, 1986.

Labovitz, Esther Kleinbord, *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century: Dorothy Richardson, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Christa Wolf*, Peter Lang, New York, 1986.

Lewis, Robert, 'Domestic Theatre: Parlor Entertainment as Spectacle, 1840–1880', *Ceremonies and Spectacles: Performing American Culture*, ed. Teresa Alves, Teresa Cid, Heinz Ickstadt, VU University, Amsterdam, 2000, pp. 48–62.

Lidoff, Joan, *Christina Stead*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., New York, 1982.

Lukács, Georg, *The Historical Novel* (1938), trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981.

Macdonald, Lyn, *The Roses of No Man's Land*, Penguin Books, London, 1993 (first published 1980).

Mayeur, Françoise, *Histoire de l'enseignement et de l'éducation en France*, Tome III: *De la Révolution à l'Ecole républicaine, 1789–1930*, Perrin, Paris, 1981.

Miller, Russell, *The Resistance, World War II*, Time-Life Books, Alexandria, Virginia, 1979.

Modjeska, Drusilla, *Stravinsky's Lunch*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 2001 (first published 1999).

Paula L. Schwartz, '*Partisanes* and Gender Politics in Vichy France', *French Historical Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1989, pp. 126–150.

Pesman, Ros, 'Autobiography, Biography and Ford Madox Ford's Women', *Women's History Review*, vol. 8, no. 4, Dec. 1999, pp. 655–670.

Pesman, Ros, 'The Letters of Stella Bowen and Ford Madox Ford', *Overland,* vol. 139, 1995, pp. 19–23.

Pesman, Ros, *Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996.

Pesman, Ros, '"Drawn From Life": Stella Bowen and Ford Madox Ford', *Ford Madox Ford's Modernity*, ed. Robert Hampson and Max Saunders, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2003, pp. 221–238.

Pizer, Donald, *American Expatriate Writing and the Paris Moment: Modernism and Place*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1996.

Priestly, J. B., *The Edwardians,* Sphere Books Ltd., London, 1970.

Raskin, Jonah, 'Christina Stead in Washington Square', *London Magazine*, vol. 9, no. 2, February 1970, pp. 70–77.

Rearick, Charles, *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque: Entertainment and Festivity in Turn-of-the-Century France,* Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985.

Rossiter, Margaret L., *Women in the Resistance*, Praeger, New York, 1986.

Rousso, Henri, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (tr. Arthur Goldhammer), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1991 and 1994; *Le Syndrome de Vichy de 1944 à nos jours,* Seuil, Paris, 1987, rev. ed., 1990.

Rowley, Hazel, 'Christina Stead: Politics and Literature in the Radical Years, 1935–1942', *Meridian*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1989, pp. 149–159.

Rowley, Hazel, *Christina Stead: A Biography*, Minerva, Port Melbourne, 1994 (first published 1993).

Schama, Simon, *Landscape and Memory,* Vintage Books, New York, 1995.

Showalter, Elaine, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, Virago, London, 1978 (first published 1977).

Showalter, Elaine, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, Virago Press, London, 1992.

Summers, Anne, 'The Self-Denied: Australian Women Writers—Their Image of Women', *Refractory Girl,* vol. 2, nos. 9–10, Autumn 1973, pp. 4–11.

Taylor, Eric, *Wartime Nurse: One Hundred Years from the Crimea to Korea, 1854–1954*, Robert Hale, London, 2001.

Theobald, Marjorie, *Knowing Women: Origins of Women's Education in Nineteenth-century Australia,* Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Thompson, Nicola Diane, 'Responding to the woman questions: rereading noncanonical Victorian women novels', *Victorian Women Writers and The Woman Question* (ed. Nicola Diane Thompson), Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 1–23.

Topliss, Helen, *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists 1900–1940,* Craftsman House, Sydney, 1996.

Vigneras, Marcel, *Rearming the French*, Washington, D. C., Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1957.

Weitz, Margaret Collins, *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940–1945,* John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1995.

Wiesenfarth, Jospeh, 'Ford Madox Ford, Violet Hunt, and the Battle of the Books: Sexual/Textual Hostilities', *Ford Madox Ford's Modernity*, ed. Robert Hampson and Max Saunders, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2003, pp. 209–220.

Wilkins, Lola, 'Stella Bowen. Australian War Artist', *Art and Australia*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1991, pp. 493–497.

Wilkins, Lola, *Stella Bowen: Art, Love and War*, exhibition catalogue, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 2002.
Williams, Chris, *Christina Stead: A Life of Letters*, Virago Press, London, 1989.
Willms, Johannes (tr. Eveline L. Kanes), *Paris, Capital of Europe: from the Revolution to the Belle Epoque*, Holmes and Meier, 1997.
Wiser, William, *The Crazy Years: Paris in the Twenties,* Atheneum, New York, 1983.
Yalom, Marilyn, *A History of the Wife*, Harper Collins, New York, 2001.
Young, Linda, *Middle-Class Culture in Nineteenth-century America, Australia and Britain,* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York, 2003.