French–Australian Shared Histories

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Beyond the Sheep's Back: World War I and its aftermath in the development of an economic relationship between Australia and France

Colin Nettelbeck

Abstract

Although the second half of the 19th century saw some examples of direct trade between the Australian colonies and France – notably, but not only, in wool – it was not until World War I that attempts arose to forge a more consistent set of policies. Strongly affected by the Australian military contribution on the Western Front, and driven by the dynamic – but headstrong and often contested – Prime Minister William (Billy) Hughes, Australia's relations with France entered a period of greater intensity. This led to the major and much-publicised French Economic Mission of 1918 to Australia, and to the appointment, by each country, of a Trade Representative. For various and complex reasons, this embryonic partnership failed to develop as smoothly or promptly as hoped. This study uses the career of the long-serving but now largely forgotten Australian Trade Representative in Paris, Clive Voss, as a prism for examining Australia's economic relations with France as it sought to combine its position in the British Empire with its emergence as an independent nation.

Background

Despite the prominence of the French–Australian economic relationship in my title, this study makes no claim to be economic history. I am not an economist or an economic historian. Rather, the approach is that of a cultural history that focuses on bilateral trade as its major theme, but within the context of the evolution of the broader historical relationship between the two countries and communities. My sources include existing studies as well as my own research: the role of archival materials in this work is considerable, especially the collections in the National Archives in both Australia and France.

It is safe to say that France, with its long history of universalist thought and its global presence, was always alert to the possibilities of creating an economic relationship with the British colonies of Australia. Commercial goals can be considered as a constant of French foreign policy and diplomacy. And as Robert Aldrich – Australia's seminal historian of France in the Pacific – points out: in the 19th century 'The real links between France and Australia were not so much in the settlement of migrants or the statements of diplomats and politicians as in the commercial ties between the two countries and in their rivalry in the South Pacific Islands' (Aldrich 1990, 202). The Australian colonies, for their part, were also keenly interested in promoting their international profile, and Victoria and New South Wales were frequent participants at the various international exhibitions held across the world from 1851, not least those held in Paris (1855, 1867, 1878, 1889, 1900; see Douglas 2008). At the 1880 Melbourne Exhibition, the first officially recognised one to be held in the Southern Hemisphere, France ensured it was a major participant.

Beyond such expressions of policy and desire, the centrepiece of actual commerce between Australia and France at the beginning of the 20th century was wool, of which the Australian production, in both quantity and quality, had increased steadily over the course of the 19th century, creating great local wealth and influence, as well as an export market that progressively became more independent of British management. By 1900, France was importing more wool directly from Australia than through Britain (Aldrich 1990). Wool was not

the only product involved in Australian trade with France. France was also interested in Australian gold and, in the other direction, Australians were good customers for French books (Kirsop 1995) and especially for French wines and spirits, so that firms like the prominent Bordeaux house of Curcier and Adet found it advantageous to set up branches in Melbourne (1853) and Sydney (1860) – in order to avoid the British middleman agents (SLV documents). It was however around the wool industry that direct French–Australian trade became most organised, and an infrastructural framework to support and facilitate this trade included consular offices in Sydney (from 1842) and Melbourne (1854), banking (the Comptoir national d'escompte, from 1881), shipping (Ballande, from the 1850s, and the Messageries Maritimes, from 1882), a French-language newspaper (*Le Courrier australien*, from 1892), branches of the Alliance Française (Melbourne 1890, Sydney 1899), and a French-Australian Chamber of Commerce (1899). We should register the diversity of this array of French presences: the score or so of wool traders included family businesses and larger firms (see for example Dwyer 2017), examples of private enterprise in competition with each other but collaborating when it suited their common interests, including working with government; the shipping companies were also private-sector owned, but state-subsidised; the bank was state-founded, but operated free of state control; the newspaper, Chamber of Commerce, and Alliance Française were private, but very much within the sphere of influence of the consulates. These complexities notwithstanding, on the eve of Australia's Federation, the French appeared to be ready for business.

Perhaps not quite as ready as the French Consul-General in Sydney, Georges Biard d'Aunet, would have liked. Biard d'Aunet was active in promoting the creation of the Alliance Française and the French Chamber of Commerce in Sydney (Barko 1999). In his memorandum (Biard d'Aunet 1898) to his Foreign Affairs Minister (Théophile Delcassé) about the probable effects of Federation, he forcefully expressed the view that Australia would most likely develop ambitions to expand its regional influence, which could pose threats to France's interests in the Pacific. While he did not at that time have much respect for the young Australian people, whom he saw as inexperienced, vain, poorly educated and unfavourable towards France, he felt that they could learn, and that France could, and should, play an effective role in that process as Australia's sense of independent nationhood began to grow (Nettelbeck 1995). His recommendations were several. To counter Australian imperialist ambition, he proposed a speeding up of the establishment of the French–British condominium in the New Hebrides and a greater deployment of naval force. To allay Australian criticism of France, he proposed the urgent dismantling of the New Caledonian penal colony. But his main thrust was towards increased direct trade relations between France and Australia, on the grounds that peoples who trade together are less likely to be drawn into conflict. To this end, he posited a more systematic use of the Catholic missionary network to teach the French language – his role in creating the Alliance Française in Sydney can be seen as similarly motivated. In a more practical mode, he also sought a further increase in French commercial shipping.

Three French explorers[1]

Another element in what we might describe as the exploratory phase of more direct Australian–French commercial arrangements is the research and reporting done by three reputable and high-level French analysts, Ferdinand Journet, Louis Vigouroux and Albert

[1] A more complete account of the explorers would include the work of Pierre Leroy-Beaulieu (1901), more judgmental and negative than the others.

Métin. These social investigators 'mapped' the contours of Australian society in accurate and conscientious ways, analogous to those with which the Baudins and d'Entrecasteaux had mapped the coastline a century earlier. Journet (1849–1902), representative of the French Minister of Public Works at the Melbourne Exhibition of 1880, conducted an extensive survey over several months of all the Australian colonies (albeit with a much longer period in Victoria than elsewhere), which resulted in an ambitious book. As its unwieldy title (*L'Australie: description du pays, colons et natifs, gouvernement, institutions, productions, travaux publics, mines*) showed, it purported to give its readers full coverage of the country: its peoples – colonists and Indigenous – its government and institutions, its products, public works and mining activity (Journet 1885). Journet shared some of the negative impressions that Biart d'Aunet would later express about Australians, notably the dominant interest in material wealth and the mediocre quality of education, but he admired some of the public buildings and the high level of journalism in the major newspapers. From his many conversations with ranking Australian officials, he was convinced that the colonies were actively interested in a more independent trade relationship with France, and that greater French investment in Australia would be welcome. He also saw, however, that Australian hopes for greater industrial development faced the impediments of a stifling tariff regime (including tariffs between the colonies) and the high cost of labour. These factors, as we shall see, would remain an enduring concern for another half-century.

Vigouroux (1866–1956), an economist and future parliamentarian, deputy for the Haute-Loire from 1900 to 1910 (Jolly 1960–77), together with Maurice Lémonon, was on a mission from the Paris Musée social, which at that point was in one of its most dynamic phases. It was transforming itself into a semi-official national think-tank, and gathering through its emissaries to all corners of the globe a wealth of information about labour conditions, social organisation and projects for social development or reform (Horne 2002). Vigouroux had been in the United States and South Africa before reaching Australasia, and his trajectory raises an obvious but important point that needs to be kept in mind when tracking the evolution of the specific relationship between France and Australia: namely that the interest in Australia was not at all unique, but rather part of a wider exploration, by the Musée social, of nation-building activities in the newer countries of the English-speaking world. Still in its early years, the French Republic itself was in a period of social and political transformation and turmoil so profound that it could be described as existential. At home, rural decline and the intensifying of urban class struggle and religious/ideological conflict produced ongoing economic and political instability. Abroad, if France continued to promote its colonial power and its global 'civilising mission', it was also still shaken by the Prussian defeat of 1870 and by a sense of continuing to lose influence in comparison to Britain and the rest of the Anglo-Saxon world. Works like those of Edmond Demolins (1897) on Anglo-Saxon superiority were widely read and commented on. Paradoxically, Belle Epoque France, the France of the marvellous explosion of artistic, scientific, educational, technological and philosophical invention, was also a country riven by internal division and self-doubt. Witness, for example, the entanglements of the Dreyfus Affair, the founding and success of the Action Française, the bitterness surrounding the enactment of the laws of separation of church and state.

L'évolution sociale en Australasie, as its title suggests, is concerned more with examining societal issues than economic opportunity, and it includes New Zealand in a collection of British colonies often treated as a single entity. Based on an impressive array of sources – existing accounts, large numbers of official reports, dozens of interviews with prominent residents (both Australasian and French), direct personal experiences over several months – the book offers a remarkably comprehensive and accurate history of the development of the different colonies, and of the moves towards Federation in Australia. It also contains highly detailed analysis of the social, political, economic and cultural dimensions of contemporary Australia and New Zealand: urban development, land use, Indigenous affairs, labour relations, women's suffrage, infrastructure, communications, primary industries,

manufacturing, tariff regimes, parliamentary functioning, racial prejudice, education, sport, museums, libraries and galleries. So that, while it does not address the French Australian trade issue directly, it does provide a fund of contextual knowledge, together with strong advice to the French authorities that they cannot, with the rapidly increasing economic and strategic importance of the Pacific region, continue to ignore the realities of Australasian growth and ambition (Vigouroux 1902, 429-30).

Vigouroux refers several times to the work of Albert Métin (1871–1918)[2], our third major French commentator on 1900 Australia. For the most part, this is to stress his agreement with Métin on most matters (they both belonged to the political left), though he cannot hide his irritation that, although he had arrived in Australia some weeks before his younger compatriot, it was the latter who managed to publish a book version of his findings first. Like Vigouroux, Métin spent several months in Australasia (principally in Australia) as part of a larger study of the Anglophone world. His book, *Le socialisme sans doctrines* (1901), covers very much the same ground as Vigouroux, and in very much the same order, albeit in less detail (his text is about half the length of Vigouroux's). It, too, is the result of painstaking documentation, gathered from existing studies, official reports, the testimony of significant players and his own observations. Like Vigouroux, Métin intended to contribute to French reflection on social conditions and reform and, again like Vigouroux, although he had no explicit mission to explore commercial possibilities, he does provide valuable contextual information – and furthermore deposited his careful and extensive collection of relevant documents in the library and archives of the French Ministry for Trade. Métin developed friendships with various people in high places, including Australian Founding Father Justice Andrew Clark[3] and future New South Wales Premier William Holman[4]: he comes through as an affable, chatty and down-to-earth person, as much at ease with workers as with the many dignitaries he encountered. His energy was to be translated into a prodigious output as a writer of text books and essays and as a translator, and his political career was more dynamic than that of Vigouroux. He represented his constituency of Le Doubs from 1909 to 1918 (Jolly 1960–77), but he had already been chief of staff in the Ministère du Travail et de la Prévoyance sociale when it was created by Clemenceau in 1906, and had served on many commissions before being twice appointed Minister in 1913 and again in 1915.

The French Economic Mission to Australia, 10 September 1918 to 1 March 1919

Métin's experience, expertise and enthusiasm for Australia made him a natural choice for the leadership of the high-level French Economic Mission that, at the Australian Government's request, toured the nation for five months from September 1918. Aldrich (1989), basing his work essentially on the archives of the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs, gives excellent accounts of the setting up of the mission, of its reports, and of its ultimate failure to improve trading links. Dwyer (2015–16), using Australian archives and a wide range of press sources through Trove[5], adds understanding and colour through her concentration on the passionate reception of the mission by Australian authorities at all levels and by the general public. This was indeed a grand historical occasion, full of ceremony and momentous discourse, and it is rich enough to serve as a symbol for the change in relationship between France and Australia that the shared experience of the Great

[2] For a more detailed account of Métin, see Nettelbeck 2018.

[3] Letters from Métin to Clark have been preserved in the University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Materials Collection.

[4] See Holman's homage to Métin, *National Times*, 18 August 1918, 2.

[5] Trove is the search engine of the National Library of Australia that gives access to thousands of digitised newpapers and other materials.

War provoked. Or perhaps we should say, rather, the *desired* change, for although both sides wanted closer ties, these would come much more slowly than hoped for, and more painfully.

In my opinion, neither Aldrich nor Dwyer give sufficient weight in this process to the role of Prime Minister Billy Hughes[6], who from the time of his becoming Prime Minister in 1915 was on a passionate crusade to demonstrate that Australia's contribution to the war effort had earned the nation a greater place not only in the affairs of the British Empire but in the affairs of the world: hence the role he contrived to play at the Paris Economic conference in 1916, when he cultivated relationships with a number of significant French figures, including Clemenceau and Herriot, building a profile that would allow him to rise again to prominence during the Versailles Peace Talks. Hughes embodied paradox: always a controversial figure at home, often vilified in the press but adulated by the nation's soldiers (Fitzhardinge 1979), he was something of a Francophile (Hughes 1865–1958) but, above all, he was a nationalist who saw in closer relations with the French a lever for furthering Australia's own interests. At Versailles, he would support the French hard-line position on reparations from Germany, and confront Wilson over the United States President's attempts to dictate the terms of peace or the constitution of the League of Nations, hoping to gain in return Australian governance of former German colonies in the Pacific as well as a resolution of the New Hebrides question and security from Japanese expansionism. His fellow countryman and staff member, Frederic Eggleston, believed that Hughes the would-be diplomat was out of his depth and that he was being used by the very people he thought were supporting him: 'Hughes has of course been popular in France because of his stand over New Guinea but I do not think he knows anything about French politics or the men with whom he has to deal' (Eggleston Diary 15 February 1919, cited in Hudson 1974, 118). That is an assessment that deserves a study in its own right: what I wish to stress here is Hughes' importance in the setting up of the French Economic Mission to Australia, which was in itself a positive outcome of the Prime Minister's efforts to refashion bilateral relations for the postwar era.

In the letter of 20 July 1918 that Clemenceau wrote to Hughes to introduce Métin,[7] the French Prime Minister laid out the broad underlying factors of a possible Franco–Australian understanding. Having praised the valour of the Australian troops and Australia's 'generous enthusiasm' towards the cause of Right and Liberty, he continued:

> Les deux peuples savent bien que leur idéal est le même, que leurs aspirations sont communes et créent entre eux une ardente fraternité. L'amour de la civilisation, la haine de la tyrannie, le respect de la dignité humaine inspirent à vos soldats, comme aux nôtres, le même héroïsme sur les champs de bataille, dans cette guerre juste dont l'enjeu est la liberté du Monde.
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> [Both peoples know that their ideal is the same, that they have common aspirations which create a strong sense of fraternity between them. The love of civilisation, the hatred of tyranny, and the respect of human dignity inspire in your soldiers, as in ours, the same heroism on the battlefield, in this just war on which the freedom of the world depends.]

[6] Aldrich rightly points out that the formal request to France came from the Australian High Commissioner in London, Andrew Fisher, but many of the mission's purposes – which, as well as an increase in bilateral trade, included a stimulation to further recruitment of soldiers, the resolution of the future of former German colonies, particularly New Guinea, the issue of the French presence in the Pacific (especially the New Hebrides) – reflected central concerns of Hughes himself in his self-appointed role as the man who began leading Australia onto the world stage via the 1916 Economic Conference and who was determined to continue the part in the Peace Conference (see Hudson 1974, Bridge and Attard 2000).

[7] NAA: CP222/1, 1

The explicit identification of a fraternity forged in a deadly struggle to defend and uphold shared values shows Clemenceau's discourse aligned with that of his Australian counterpart. It became the mantra of the economic mission, and of the Australian authorities who welcomed its members. In November 1918, Acting Prime Minister Watt wrote to President Poincaré and to Clemenceau in the following terms:

> I beg to offer you the thanks of the Commonwealth for the great and memorable services rendered by your country in the cause of humanity, and to express not only the hope but the profound conviction that the mutual knowledge and esteem which will result from the visit of the French Mission will increase and develop fraternal relations between the citizens of your great Republic and the people of the Commonwealth of Australia.[8]

It is tempting, but ultimately futile, to speculate about how the mission would have fared had Métin not died in San Francisco en route to Sydney, leading to his replacement by André Siegfried, with General Pau as figurehead. As Aldrich (1989) points out, the goals of the mission included military and political dimensions, as well as economic ones. The French wanted a continuation of Australia's contribution to the war effort and hoped for assistance in reconstruction; they also wanted to discuss the future of their role in the Pacific, especially in the New Hebrides. Economically, they were interested in displacing Germany as an Australian trading partner, and of redressing a balance of trade that was grossly in Australia's favour.

In a general sense, we can say that they got considerable satisfaction on the first point, and very little on the second and the third. Australian support for the war effort, both military and civilian, continued to flow strongly during the first two months of the mission's presence in the country, and there can be little doubt that the goodwill that surrounded the mission in its journeys throughout the nation contributed to the ongoing generosity of Australian civilian donors. On 12 October, the Australian branch of the French Red Cross conspicuously presented General Pau with a cheque for £100, 000[9] (the equivalent of several million dollars today), and it is more than plausible that the momentum created by the mission played into the post-Armistice enthusiasm in Australia for supporting French reconstruction, including the adoption by Australian cities of the French towns of Poilcourt (Sydney), Dernancourt (Adelaide) and Villers-Bretonneux (Melbourne).

In the socio-political and economic domains, the Mission reiterated the interest shown earlier by Vigouroux and Métin in Australia's progressive labour laws, but also identified Australia as a country whose prosperity was almost completely dependent on its exportation of primary industry production and on a tariff regime that was grossly unfavourable for countries outside the British Empire. Isolationist sentiment in relation to Asia expressly articulated in the White Australia Policy, and in particular an obsessional fear of Japan, posed serious obstacles to Franco–Australian understanding in the Pacific, where France routinely used Japanese labour and did business with Japanese companies.

Germany was eliminated as a colonial power in the Pacific, and Australia got its desired mandate to govern New Guinea. Against the arrangement whereby all Australian wool, in the postwar period, would go to Britain, the mission did succeed in getting a large special shipment of stockpiled wool to help rebuild its own textile industry; indeed, in the 1920s and 1930s France once again became a major purchaser of Australian wool, and often enough

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[8] NAA: A2 1918_122148118 Part 1

[9] This very public event was widely reported in the press across the nation. See e.g. *The Herald*, 12 October 1918, 16; *The Mercury*, 14 October 1918, 7; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 October 1918, 6; *The Western Australian*, October 14, 4; *Punch*, 17 October 1918, 18; *The Leader* Sat. 19 October, 24.

the major purchaser. But in the absence of increased French exports to Australia, this only further skewed the balance of trade in Australia's direction. All in all, the grand gesture of the economic mission, and the grand rhetoric surrounding it, had few practical outcomes. Dwyer (2015–16, 53) believes that the presence in the mission's report of such projected cultural projects as university staff and student exchanges, which became common in the late 20th century, are indicators that the mission's vision was simply ahead of its time. In fact, there were many difficult times and many discontinuities to be overcome before such ideas could resurface and be brought to fruition.

One concrete proposal of the mission that did eventuate was the appointment, by each country, of a Trade Representative. The Australians named Clive Voss (1888–1959), who took up his position in 1919. The French named Georges Bader (1878–1960) who took up his in 1921. While neither can claim great significance as shapers of events, their long service (over 20 years for Voss, 17 for Bader) offers a useful prism for examining the often quite difficult economic relations between Australia and France in the interwar period. I shall not deal here with Bader, but will mention in passing that on one level, he has elements in common with Voss. Before the war, Bader had already resided for years in Australia, which was one of the reasons for his being chosen as one of the delegates of the French mission. Having served in the French Army, he wanted to return to Australia in any case. Similarly, Voss had been living in France, had married a French woman and, after serving in the British army, wished to continue his life in France.

From an Australian perspective, that Voss was the first Australian official 'diplomatic' appointee to France should have some symbolic value, but the fact is that he has been almost completely – and unjustly – forgotten[10], despite voluminous files held on him in the Australian National Archives. In the light of the momentous upheavals of the interwar years – the rise of totalitarian ideologies and of militarism in Europe and Asia, the Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War, the Sino–Japanese War – it may seem trivial to resurrect the life and work of a minor Australian official. In the context of the development of French–Australian relations, however, which became quite vexed during this period (and for reasons connected in various direct and indirect ways to the wider turbulence), I would argue that the Voss contribution, while not at all what was originally intended or expected, is worthy of serious attention. It is, of course, the preservation of the Voss archives that makes it possible to revisit the man and his times. My detailed analysis of those archives shows, I argue, that his activities deserve greater acknowledgement than they have received. At the same time, I hope that it will demonstrate that the kind of micro-history involved, through its emphasis on the human dimension, can enrich our sense of how Australia and France interacted during this period.

Australia's forgotten man in France: Clive H Voss

It was Prime Minister Billy Hughes who personally ordered that Voss be appointed as Australian Commercial Agent in Paris. To understand the import of this move, we must remind ourselves that from Federation until World War II, Australia's foreign policy was largely defined by Britain, and ongoing diplomatic representation abroad existed only in London and New York. Schedvin (2008, 17–19) outlines the embryonic and stuttering Australian attempts to establish a federal trade commissioner service[11], which almost

[10] Schedvin (2008) discusses him, but mainly to emphasise what he sees as Voss's ineffectuality.

[11] Schevin's analysis of the obstacles to the establishment of the federal service – significantly objections from the states, which had been independently running their own services – reveals an important facet of the weakness of federation at this point. A national trade commissioner service was achieved only in the 1930s.

happened at the time of the French mission (but then didn't until two decades later), and those favourable winds would have been a factor in Hughes' decision to appoint Voss; but so was Hughes' determination to push for stronger Australian links with France. As we have seen, this was the motivation for the French Economic Mission initiative, and it was the major theme of the speech he delivered, in French[12], at the 1921 Foire de Lyon:

> Messieurs, dans la tâche immense qui nous confronte tous, j'espère que nous pourrons nous aider les uns les autres. De même que la France et l'Australie ont combattu côte à côte, de même que le sang de nos fils a coulé et s'est mêlée (sic) sur ce sol sacré de France, pour la Liberté de même nous pouvons et devons commercer les uns avec les autres. L'Australie désire entrer en relations commerciales avec la France. Elle désire commercer avec Lyon. Nos deux nations ne trouveront que des avantages à ces échanges commerciaux. (Hughes 1865–1958, 1538/25/1528-1533)

> [Gentlemen, in the immense task which faces us all, I am hoping that we can help one another. Just as France and Australia have fought side by side, and just as the blood of our sons has become mixed on this sacred French soil, for Liberty, so we can and must trade with each other. Australia wishes to enter into commercial relations with France. It wishes to trade with Lyon. Our two nations will find only advantages in these commercial exchanges.]

Grand policy designs (or aspirations) notwithstanding, the choice of Clive Voss as Commercial Agent remains curious, and was probably the result of a typical Hughes improvisation. Who was Voss? He was the son of a rural New South Wales bank manager. As a schoolboy, he had shown talent in local cricket and football teams, and was expected to follow in his father's footsteps, and did so, as an accountant.[13] In his early twenties, he left Australia for France, in order to follow a dream of training as an aircraft pilot: he was the first Australian to gain a French pilot's licence (30 November 1912), which was immediately accredited in Britain.[14] It was through a joy ride over Versailles that he met his future (French) wife Georgette.[15] Later, Georgette gave the press a slightly different version of these events, but also played up her husband's career and experience, claiming 18 months as a real estate mogul in Canada, a role as the Daimler representative in Paris, and the rank of captain in the British Army.[16]

It is unknown how Hughes met Voss, though it could have been as a driver during the Paris Peace Conference, for that was what 2/Lt (never Captain) Voss was doing following his service in the Transport Division of the British Army, in which he had enlisted in 1915. On 8 July 1919, Hughes wrote to High Commissioner Fisher announcing that he had appointed 'representatives of the Commonwealth in the U. K. and France for the purpose of dealing with contracts which have been the subject of long negotiations between myself and the French and Italian governments, and of generally promoting trade interests of Australia' (NAA A 2910 442/21/8 Part 2). The arrangement was to be temporary and to be revisited after Hughes returned to Australia. The representatives named in London, Henry Braddon

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[12] Hughes biographers and commentators have noted the existence of this speech in French, but as if it were simply a novelty performance. It contains in fact key indications of Hughes's worldview and policies and merits more attention, and not just for the context in which it was given.

[13] Details of Voss' early life are gleaned from local newspaper reports consulted via the National Library of Australia's search engine Trove. Voss worked at the Dulwich Hill and Hornsby branches of the Bank of NSW: see *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate*, May 6, 1911, 6.

[14] I am grateful to Bill Land for supplying documentation relating to Voss's airplane training and war service.

[15] See *The Bathurst Times*, Tuesday 23 September 1913, 1.

[16] *Arrow* (Sydney), Friday 28 October 1932, 24. A 1948 Pension Application does show that Voss and his wife married in Canada in April 1913. (NAA A2910 442/21/8 Part 6)

and Walter Leitch, were in every way more qualified, being already major figures in the agricultural and manufacturing industries respectively, and they lost no time in informing Hughes what they thought of his appointment of Voss. A long letter of 17 July 1919 contained a little faint praise, and much frank damnation:

> …while Lieut. Voss appears to be reliable and to be possessed of some commonsense, it is abundantly clear that his experience does not really fit him for anything in the nature of independent and responsible work – especially the interviewing of high-class officials about finance, etc. – nor has he any special knowledge of the intricacies of advertising. … Having regard to his experience, which only reached the stage of an accountant at a small suburban branch of a Bank, plus a little work as cashier and bookkeeper in Paris, you will understand that he has neither the knowledge, nor the experience, nor the personal status for really responsible work. To be fair to himself, he does not appear to have ever contemplated anything in the nature of an onerous senior position – but rather that of something in the nature of a secretary to an experienced senior.
> (NAA: A461, O323/1/7 Part 1)

Hughes' letter of appointment had given Voss both huge responsibilities and great freedom of action. His efforts were not to be confined to France but extended to Belgium, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Norway: 'in short to any part of Europe where opportunities present themselves' (NAA A461 O323/1/7 Part 1, Hughes to Voss 8 July 1919). The discrepancy between Hughes' judgement about Voss and that of his London advisors could hardly be starker. Who was right? I shall return to that question shortly, but it is first worth noting that over the following decade, Voss's position was more or less constantly a battleground between those civil servants and politicians who wished to abolish it, and Billy Hughes who, despite a few moments of hesitation, stuck by his man. Voss himself was by no means a passive element in this conflict: he fought hard, and as time passed, more and more effectively, for the maintenance of an official Australian presence in Paris, and for his own role.

Voss' office was set up in the premises of the British Chamber of Commerce in rue Halévy, a prestigious location just off the Place de l'Opéra. Australia was already paying £500 per annum to the Chamber to represent Australian interests, and Voss' appointment (at £350 a year) came with an understanding that he would receive the use of an office, the full-time use of a bilingual secretary, and a telephone. This was not a big financial outlay. However, the first major assault – and the closest Voss came to actual dismissal – occurred in July 1920. Voss had originally been appointed for three months: he took up his position in October 1919 but had been given two short extensions. It is not clear what precipitated Braddon's recommendation that Voss be terminated on 31 August 1920, but the recommendation was approved by Hughes. Voss at first seemed to accept this verdict, but made a plea that the office itself should be maintained, and that Australia's presence in France not revert to representation by the British, with a local Frenchman designated to represent Australia's interests.[17] But at the same time, Voss had decided to appeal to Hughes himself, which he did by telegram, first on 30 July, and again on 25 August, claiming 'greatly increased reciprocal trade relations between Australia and French houses'. While Voss could point to few significant contracts for which he had been directly responsible, Hughes considered he was learning quickly enough, and was achieving enough for the post to be continued for the time being.

In November 1923, the question was raised again by the Comptroller General of the Department of Trade and Customs, which led to the new Prime Minister, Stanley Bruce,

[17] The documentation on this episode is in the dossier NAA: A461, O323/1/7 Part 1. The Frenchman in question is unnamed, but was clearly a *bête noire* for Voss: see Voss to Col. George B. Hogben 30 July 1920.

conducting a personal inspection of Voss' work in the Paris office. At a Board of Trade meeting of 11 April 1924, Bruce delivered a scathing assessment: Voss' office was 'merely a kind of "Cook's Agency" in Paris for Australians, and the value of any commercial work done by Mr. Voss was practically nil' (NAA: A461, O323/1/7 Part 1 Department of Trade Memo 2 May 1924). However Bruce, in noting how inexpensive the Paris office was, and giving grudging assent to the value of the customs information provided by Voss and his general assistance to Australians, recommended that the office and Voss, be retained.

There were many more ups and downs in the course of the 1920s and it was only at the beginning of the 1930s that the future of the Paris office was more or less assured, and even then, in 1931, in line with with 1931 *Financial Emergency Act* – the government's response to the Great Depression – Voss' salary, which had never been raised, was cut by 20 per cent. This was of extreme financial embarrassment for Voss. Over the next several years, he could barely make ends meet, and was reduced to begging his London masters for small amounts of money to pay for attending official functions, keep up subscriptions to trade journals, and even pay the concierge the traditional annual gratuity.

It is time now to to examine what his achievements were, and how they reflect the development of relations, economic and otherwise, between the Australians and French in the interwar period. Voss' earliest reports (from November 1919)[18] do not reveal much strategic reflection about bilateral trade between nations, but they show not only enormous goodwill and energy, but very considerable communicative and networking skills, and a very sound understanding of the French governmental and regulatory practices. In relation to trade, Voss organised scores of individual link-ups between French and Australian business concerns, and provided responses to a constant flow of questions about Australian customs regulations.

Voss quickly learned what the impediments were to increased commercial relations between France and Australia: in particular, the huge balance of trade discrepancy in Australia's favour, and Australia's reluctance to give France any kind of preferential tariff status. He was initially optimistic about the opportunities. In his March 1920 report, he concluded: 'Australian prestige stands very high in this country at present and it appears to me to be a fatal mistake to jeopardise the future commercial relations with FRANCE by failing to keep Australian interests prominently before the French Public'. He constantly urged the need for advertising, for dissemination of information, for the provision of samples of Australian goods. But he also noted the commercial relationship developing between France and Canada, and implied that Australia should be reconsidering its current customs arrangements. A constant theme in the following years is his repeated advice that Australia should be signing a trade agreement with France. As we know, this did not happen until late 1936[19] and, during the greater part of the early 1930s, the two countries were engaged in a veritable trade war (see Schedvin 2008, 25), which resulted in a dramatic decrease in overall trade between them. Voss kept track of this, lamented it, and drew attention to it: in a letter of 1934, he pointed out that Japan had overtaken France as a purchaser of Australian wool, and defended France as 'one of Australia's most faithful clients over a number of years' (NAA: A981, TRAD 50 PART 1, Voss to Prime Minister's Dept, August 14, 1934). In April 1935, he wrote again, to show how, over the previous year, French imports from Australia had fallen by 25 per cent, and Australian imports from France by a third. The balance of

[18] These reports (November 1919 to June 1920) can be found in NAA A2 1920/2849, except from May 1920, which is in A461 0323/1/7 Part 1.

[19] The Agreement was signed on 27 November 1936, and gazetted on 17 December to take affect on 1 January 1937 (*Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, nº 106, 17 Dec. 1936, 2283)

payments remained in Australia's favour by four to five-fold (NAA: A981, TRAD 50 PART 1, Voss to Prime Minister's Dept, April 3, 1935).

It cannot be ascertained how instrumental Voss' views were in the eventual change in Australian attitudes towards a trade agreement with France. There were other voices clamouring in the same direction, not least from the French community in Australia. Voss' counterpart in Sydney, Georges Bader, had gone public with his belief that blame for the trade collapse lay squarely with Australia (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 1933, 9; ibid. 20 April 1934, 11) and in March 1934 a formal delegation of the French Chamber of Commerce in Australia, led by its president Maurice Pelletier, was received by Prime Minister Lyons. It made the same point about the balance of trade, but stressed that the unfairness of the situation was filtering through the public opinion in France, and that deeper relations between the two countries were in peril. Lyons' response was brief and non-committal, other than to say that 'the Commonwealth Government must, of course, protect Australian industries" (NAA CP30/3 21 Personal Papers of Prime Minister Lyons). Schedvin (2008) is undoubtedly right in affirming that Voss played no part in the negotiations that led to the agreement that was finally signed, although it seems doubtful that his frequent warnings and urgings to Canberra were entirely without impact.

It is clear that Voss, through his careful and caring networking with French business and political figures, and his knowledge of, and sensitivity to, French ways of doing things, was respected by the French as a worthy and reliable interlocutor. Romain Fathi (2015) has documented, from the Somme Departmental Archives, the correspondence between Voss and the local Préfet, as well as the mayor of Villers-Bretonneux, during the complex process of Australian war memory construction and Australian-aided French reconstruction during the 1920s; I have no doubt that a search of other archives in France would further verify the extent of Voss's connections. The National Archives of Australia's Voss files contain ample evidence – including several glowing testimonials – of the help given by Voss to visiting Australian businessmen of all levels.

To sum up Voss' contribution in the economic area, it was neither the motor of the major change that Hughes had imagined, but nor was it as negligible as his detractors implied. Voss believed in Hughes' vision for a greatly increased commercial relationship between Australia and France, and for 20 years he did everything he could, as a one-man-plus-typist show, to keep that dream alive through the work of the Paris office. Against him, he had the clinging reputation formed by his London colleagues, that he was not competent for the job; against him, too, he had the inertia of the long-standing Australian economic policy of 'protection plus preference' [preference for Great Britain and the Empire](Coleman 2015), and the smugness of Australian politicians and officials more than content with a favourable balance of trade, and blinkered by their confidence that the 'sheep's back' would guarantee the nation's prosperity for the foreseeable future.

Beyond commerce, there are two additional factors that add to the reasons why Voss should not be forgotten. Firstly, the archives show that he worked tirelessly to facilitate the travels of hundreds of Australian visitors to France – he was in fact the official representative of the Australian National Travel Association (NAA: A2910, 442/21/8 Part 4 Voss to High Commission, 18 August 1938). Among these people from 'every walk of life' would have been many on the painful pilgrimage to the grave sites of the Western Front, and what is striking in Voss' method is that he always prioritised personal contact and personal relationship over purely abstract structural links. For his London masters, this was a sign of his limitations but, in terms of developing relations between the Australian and French peoples, it was surely a strength. The second factor is more symbolic, but none the less pertinent: by virtue of the length of his time in Paris, he helped establish the idea of a distinct Australian official representation in France as a norm. However tenuous, the notion of an

Australian–French relationship was given a tangible and enduring basis, which could very well not have been the case had Voss not fought so persistently to demonstrate its value.

Early in World War II, when Paris fell, Voss escaped to Britain, where he was incorporated into the Commonwealth Intelligence Branch. He spent most of the war in Liverpool, managing (with what was recognised as great diplomacy and skill) the waterside and stevedoring activities needed to keep Australian wartime shipping running smoothly. Well before war's end, he anticipated that Australia would be setting up a full embassy in Paris, and made it known that he would like to be part of it. It was a close thing. Canberra had decided to appoint a 'proper' Commercial Counsellor (H Sullivan) within a large-scale legation structure, and determined that Voss would not be needed. But in the end, in an unusually compassionate gesture, the High Commission in London felt that, because of his previous service and since he was due for retirement in three years, he had to be given *something*, and so he was offered a clerkship in Paris, which he hastened to accept.[20]

The last item in the Voss archives is a letter from the Australian Ambassador to the Resident Minister in London. In it, Keith Officer states that Voss 'is a most valuable member of the staff for, among other reasons, his readiness to help everyone in need of advice and assistance' (NAA: A2910, 442/21/8 Part 6 Officer to Eric Harrison, 2 February 1951). This is a somewhat understated appreciation of a man whose career had spanned 11 Australian prime ministers and governments of every political persuasion, and who had toiled for over 30 years to keep Australia in the French consciousness. But Voss, always modest, would have been happy with it, the more so in that he was honoured both by the French (with the Légion d'Honneur – [Schedvin 2008, 26]) and by the Queen, with an MBE of which the citation read: 'For services in connection with the development of commercial relations between Australia and France'.[21] Having thus been remembered, he was promptly consigned to oblivion, and remained there for half a century.

I hope I have shown that Voss deserves a more prominent place in the Australian national narrative and, above all, in the story of French–Australian relations, both economic and more general. Voss himself never forgot his debt to Billy Hughes. On one occasion, in 1944, he sent Hughes a long article from the London Resistance review *La France Libre*, about Hughes' old friend Edouard Herriot (at that point interned by the Vichy Government) accompanied by a letter written in French, addressing Hughes as 'Cher Maître' [Dear Master], and signing off as 'Votre serviteur' [Your servant] (NLA Hughes Papers 1538/1/6374). Voss had had his own grief to face: his older son Michel, having joined the RAF, was killed in a training accident in Canada in early 1943. I do not know if he left any memoirs. In any case, his legacy, as we can reconstruct it from the archives, is in the long and constantly reaffirmed commitment to the service of building understanding and exchange between Australia and France and between French and Australian people. That the particular expression of that exchange was economic in nature seems, in retrospect, to be almost accidental, and certainly not the only dimension that Voss devoted himself to.

In the end, the figure of Voss the public servant symbolises for me a difficult, and perhaps doomed attempt to straddle the still poorly charted space between an Australian officialdom that was still profoundly identified with Britain and the Empire, and an Australian people who, through the vast and incomprehensible losses of so many of its own, had begun, in large numbers, to turn towards France and the French as a different way of finding meaning for what had happened. It was after all, on French soil that most of their loved ones had died or

[20] The information recounted here is derived from NAA: A2910, 442/21/8 Part 5 Staff – Mr Clive Harold Voss. Voss managed to get his title changed to 'Commercial Attaché' – which would, he said, be better understood by the French.

[21] 9 June 1955: see https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/40498/supplement/3299/data.pdf

been maimed and wounded, and for some, it had perhaps been as much for the French people that they had fought, rather than for the King and the Empire.

Conclusion

If Australia undoubtedly emerged from World War I with an increased sense of national self-awareness, the Voss story shows that, notwithstanding the efforts of Prime Minister Billy Hughes, who strutted the world stage with boisterous and reckless enthusiasm, the nation was not yet ready for planned and sustained trading relations with France, or indeed with any other country outside the Anglosphere. The Trade Agreement that took effect in 1937 marked a way forward, but there was little time for links to be cemented before the world again exploded into war.

What followed World War II was a global geopolitical revolution which is still in train. That revolution is the context for what would be the development of the next chapter in Australia's relations with France. There would be continuities: the memory of common sacrifice for shared values during World War I would not be forgotten, and tensions over the Pacific would still require attention. But there would also be ruptures, some of which related directly to the different experiences of World War II itself. Australia had reached a higher level of maturity and independence in relation to Britain when, against strong British pressure, it withdrew its forces from the Middle East in order to face the Japanese threat closer to home. France, for its part, lost its Great Power status and suffered deep internal conflict. Perhaps the most tragic point in the history of the relationship between France and Australia occurred when French and Australians fought each other during the brief but savage campaign in Syria in 1941 (De Wailly 2006, James 2017). And yet, closer to home, as early as August 1940, Australia had supported the *ralliement* in New Caledonia, appointing diplomatic representation (Bertram Ballard) and organising a prime ministerial visit. Australia also trained, clothed and armed the French Bataillon du Pacifique that would provide distinguished service in the Middle East. These are matters addressed by Anita Butler-Planchon's study. Let me just emphasise that it was Australia's policy, from 1944 at least, that France and its empire be restored after the war, and that fulsome relations between the two countries be re-established. The archival evidence of this is incontrovertible: see for example NAA: A 989, 44/735/515, A5954 647/6.

Reaffirmation of the shared values underpinning the friendship between our democracies has become a common trope of official pronouncements over recent decades, and the memory of the shared experience of World War I has naturally become especially prominent during these years of centenary commemoration. These are the fundamental underpinnings of the Joint Strategic Partnership Agreement first signed in 2012 and re-affirmed by the Joint Statement of Enhanced Strategic Partnership of 2017. In terms of trade, the biggest change that has occurred is that the balance, until World War II heavily in Australia's favour, is now strongly weighted towards France (DFAT 2017). But we need to remember that neither country, for the other, is a really major trading partner. The percentages of total trade for each country in the bilateral trade are tiny: under 0.5 per cent for France, and barely over 1 per cent for Australia. Clearly, the friendly bilateral relationship is more strategic than strictly economic, and even more today than between the wars, when Australia's dependence on the sheep's back was crucial to the nation's prosperity. As for people-to-people relations of the sort that Clive Voss was so successful in promoting, there is broad evidence that they are thriving, but this is a field that has its own history to be researched and written. It is a history that will probably depend on the stories of individuals and families as much as on what can be found in governmental archival sources, but, as I believe the story of Clive Voss has shown, those two dimensions interact in surprising ways.

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