

# French–Australian Shared Histories

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## **France and Australia in the process of imperial globalisation: from asymmetrical roles to converging questioning**

### **(From the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century)**

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Geographically speaking, France and Australia could hardly be further apart, or so it seems. But an economic historian could argue that, for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at least, Australia could be discovered just a few miles off the coasts of France, beyond the tip of Brittany. Indeed, from the lighthouse of the Île de Sein, one may have seen, decade after decade, hundreds of sailboats, then thousands of steamers, northbound full of wool, southbound full of migrants, on the great maritime route that linked Britain to Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Hobart<sup>1</sup>.

The reverse was not so true: far behind English-speaking crews, French sailors were barely seen along the coasts of Australia, except for the service of the tiny colony of New Caledonia. If a few elite merino sheep traveled from the Bergerie nationale de Rambouillet to the southern hemisphere, and were to meet a glorious progeny in the Australian Outback, they were not accompanied by any French shepherd. Among all Europeans, French people, even the poorest of them, declined to migrate out of their own territory – for a migration of more than 100 kilometres was considered an unbearable uprooting. And as French women were among the very first to learn the secrets of birth control, this country never had a surplus of children to people even its own empire. So there never was a Rudyard Kipling in France to chant ‘Big Steamers’ – only ‘The Glory of the Garden’<sup>2</sup>.

Looking for archives on the subject of the economic relationship between France and Australia in the age of empires is thus a difficult task. Of course, data can be extracted from port customs, and embassies and consulates always produce a lot of papers, even on a light matter. But apart from a few French adventurers stepping in the great maritime road from Liverpool to Sydney, one can hardly find any direct witness of true relationship between the globalisation of French entrepreneurship and the rise of Australia in world trade. One exception would be Pierre Leroy-Beaulieu in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one of the rare French economists and travelers who knew something about Oceania and did not consider with contempt the new nations of the southern hemisphere. On the contrary, he was an accurate witness of the diversification of Australian exports at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a paper published in 1896, he argued as follows on the importance of Australian wool in shaping the place of Oceania in the global geography of trade<sup>3</sup>.

La laine a été longtemps le seul produit d'exportation que les colonies australiennes aient tiré de leurs troupeaux. Le voyage sur mer était trop long entre elles et les grands marchés d'Europe pour permettre d'y expédier du bétail sur pied. La fabrication du suif et

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1 Andrew Porter, *Atlas of British Overseas Expansion*, London, Routledge, 1991.

2 Poems by Rudyard Kipling, both published in 1911.

3 Pierre Leroy-Beaulieu, « L'Australie et la Nouvelle-Zélande », in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 4<sup>e</sup> période, vol. 137, 1896 (p. 409-442).

de quelques viandes salées, dont le débouché était forcément restreint, n'ajoutait que bien peu de chose aux bénéfices que procurait aux éleveurs la vente de la laine. Depuis quelques années, l'exportation des viandes gelées a ouvert au contraire des horizons tout nouveaux et singulièrement vastes à l'industrie pastorale.

La révolution économique produite par les applications du froid, dont nous ne voyons encore que les débuts, promet de rivaliser d'importance avec celle qu'a amenée, il y a un demi-siècle, l'établissement des moyens de transport à grande vitesse et à grande capacité. Les chemins de fer et les bateaux à vapeur ont permis aux grains, aux textiles, aux minéraux, à toutes les denrées de conservation facile de venir des pays les plus éloignés lutter sur les grands marchés, dans les grands centres de consommation et d'industrie du vieux monde, avec les denrées similaires produites dans le voisinage. Mais les viandes, les fruits, le beurre, toute cette catégorie si importante des produits alimentaires autres que les grains, incapables de se conserver plus de quelques jours, n'avaient pu profiter du perfectionnement des transports.

L'application industrielle du froid a étendu aux perishable goods, aux « denrées périssables », les bienfaits que celle de la vapeur avait procurés aux autres : grâce à elle, les viandes, les beurres, le fromage, les fruits, le miel, les œufs même peuvent supporter un voyage en mer de plus de quarante jours et arriver en parfait état de conservation d'Australie et de Nouvelle-Zélande dans les ports du Royaume-Uni.

[Wool has long been the only export product that Australian colonies have benefited from their herds. The sea voyage was too long between the colonies and the large markets of Europe to allow cattle to be shipped over there. The manufacturing of tallow and some salted meats, for which the market was quite restricted, added very little to the profits which the breeders obtained from the sale of wool. In recent years, however, the export of frozen meats has opened up entirely new and particularly vast horizons for the pastoral industry.]

The economic revolution produced by the application of the cold, for which we still only see the beginning, promises to compete with the importance brought about half a century ago by the establishment of high-speed and high capacity means of transport.. Railways and steamboats have allowed grains, textiles, minerals, all easy-to-eat commodities to come from the most distant countries to face the major market, in the large centers of consumption and industry of the old world, with similar foods produced in the neighborhood. But the meat, the fruits, the butter, all this important category of food products other than grains, could not be preserved for more than a few days and did not benefit from the improvement of transport.

The industrial application of the cold has extended to "the perishable goods ", the benefits that the steam had procured to the others: thanks to it, meats, butter, cheese, fruits, honey, even eggs can withstand a sea voyage of more than forty days and arrive in perfect state of conservation from Australia and New Zealand in the ports of the United Kingdom.]

Symmetrically, Australian pioneers may have been surprised to learn how many luxury and semi-luxury items of French origin, and especially food and wines, were to be found in the houses of the wealthy all around the world. For the seven seas were then engaged in an unprecedented process of economic interconnection<sup>4</sup>, linking the old world, its colonial offsprings and satellite areas with fast growing flows of migrants, commodities and capital – what the French historian Patrick Verley called 'the rise to the scale of the world', in his major book published in 1997<sup>5</sup>. He would allow me to add

4 John R. McNeill and Kenneth Pomeranz [ed.], *The Cambridge World History, vol. 7.2 : Production, Destruction and Connection, 1750-Present. Shared Transformations ?*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

5 Patrick Verley, *L'échelle du monde. Essai sur l'industrialisation de l'Occident*, Gallimard, 1997.

that this process of globalisation was essentially a globalisation of *bioresources* – from raw materials to elaborate food and beverages – and of energy resources – coal and oil – mainly used in the rational shaping as well as in the commodification of nature.

In the case of Australia, the tremendous success of sheep breeding during the 19<sup>th</sup> century has not only converted half a continent into grazing land, it has also modified the whole geography of textile industry in the world – leading to the early renouncement of continental Europe to massive production of wool for its own fine clothes industry. Which does not mean that Europe found itself deprived of any role: it just had to develop its own assets, the specific assets of old agrarian countries, set on quite small territories, but benefiting from centuries of vernacular know-how, recently reinforced by the rise of scientific agronomy and animal sciences.

This leads me to the main idea I would like to share, and that, I think, provides the best reasons to develop crossed studies on the archives of the development of bioresources markets and food security issues in the late modern period. One must decidedly go beyond the evidence of poor direct relationship, and consider that France, as an old European country, and Australia, as a new nation, were both major players in the same game. With different cards in hand, and barely exchanging them directly, they nonetheless both influenced the global evolution of the game, and learned how to understand it quite gradually until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. France was led to consider that its future would not be the one of an adversary of the British Empire, but the one of a distinct partner of its external trades, and a full partner in commonly establishing the rule of law and of fair trade practices in world affairs in troubled times.

Australia, on its side, rose as a developed nation in the nest of the British Empire, the impressive ‘thalassocracy’ of the Victorian age, a sufficient reason indeed to explain an indirect and cautious relationship with France, at least before World War I. But this is not my point here. What I wish to emphasise is the unseen complementarity of the roles played by France and Australia in the process of globalisation of bioresources, both exemplifying the economy of quality on the one hand, and of quantity on the other hand, before being led to mix them to produce a sustainable model in the long run.

First, they were both winning players, whatever harshness or failures they may have experienced in this or that trade. It is true that France lost its hopes on the development of merino breeding after the 1830s. It is true again that South Australia did not succeed as quickly as hoped in the development of wine production. But it confirms my point: complementary players cannot play the same cards, and the ‘theft’ of merinos, experienced by many a country after the decline of Spain at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was to succeed in the new worlds of the southern hemisphere, not in old European countrysides<sup>6</sup>. On the contrary, Australians discovered that one needed something other than buying vine plants, waiting for the sun to do the job and giving fancy names to their product to call themselves ‘wine makers’. Pierre Leroy-Beaulieu is to be quoted once more here<sup>7</sup>:

Aux environs d'Adélaïde, les vignes sont très nombreuses : j'y visitai un domaine dirigé par l'un des très rares Français que j'aie rencontrés aux antipodes, un Bourguignon, établi là depuis douze ans. Des coteaux où se trouvait la propriété, la vue était charmante sur la plaine bien cultivée, coupée de champs, de vergers, de vignobles, parsemée de bouquets d'eucalyptus, et limitée par la mer à l'horizon du couchant. La netteté des

6 Giovanni Luigi Fontana and Gérard Gayot [ed.], *Wool : Products and Markets (13th – 20th Century)*, Padova, CLEUP, 2004.

7 Pierre Leroy-Beaulieu, « L'Australie et la Nouvelle-Zélande », *op.cit.*

contours, le bleu profond du ciel, la blancheur éclatante des routes poussiéreuses, la chaleur qui faisait monter le thermomètre à 30° en cette journée d'octobre, l'avril de l'hémisphère sud, me rappelaient l'Afrique du Nord plus encore que l'Europe méditerranéenne.

Les sarments des vignes qu'on laisse courir sur le sol, entre les ceps plantés à grande distance, comme dans le midi de la France, étaient plus vigoureux qu'ils ne le sont au début de juin en Languedoc ou en Provence. Le régisseur français se plaignait vivement de la diversité des cépages plantés avant son arrivée, mélangés au hasard, et sans tenir compte ni de l'exposition, ni de la nature du sol ; on avait de plus, disait-il, abîmé les plants par des tailles maladroitement, et ils s'en étaient longtemps ressentis. Aujourd'hui tout le vignoble était en bon état, et les 58 hectares produisaient 1 800 à 2 000 hectolitres de vin, soit 30 à 35 à l'hectare. Les trois quarts de cette récolte étaient formés de claret ou imitation de bordeaux, vin rouge en réalité un peu plus corsé que son prototype. Le reste comprenait les vins les plus variés : chaque grand producteur de vin, me disait mon hôte, a en ville un bureau où ses clients s'adressent pour lui faire leurs commandes sur échantillons. Ils s'attendent à y trouver tous les vins qu'ils peuvent avoir fantaisie de boire, rouges et blancs, secs, doux et mousseux, tout comme ils se procurent chez un pâtissier toute espèce de gâteaux. Cela complique absurdement la besogne du vigneron et l'installation de sa cave ; mais c'est une condition nécessaire. (...) On éprouve en Australie, sauf en quelques districts favorisés de Victoria, les mêmes difficultés qu'en Algérie à produire du vin susceptible d'une longue conservation ; la cause en est la même : la grande chaleur qui règne au moment de la vendange (...). L'inexpérience des vignerons vient aggraver les mauvaises conditions climatologiques".

[In the vicinity of Adelaide, the vineyards are in large numbers: I visited a domain run by one of the very few French I met in the antipodes, a Burgundian, established there for twelve years. From the slopes where the property stood, the view was charming on the well-cultivated plain, cut off from fields, orchards, vineyards, dotted with bunches of eucalyptus, and limited by the sea to the horizon of the sunset. The sharpness of the contours, the deep blue of the sky, the dazzling whiteness of the dusty roads, the heat that made the thermometer rise to 30 ° C on this October day, April of the southern hemisphere, reminded me of North Africa more than Mediterranean Europe.

The branches of the vines which are allowed to run on the ground, between the vines planted at great distances, as in the South of France, were more vigorous than they are at the beginning of June in Languedoc or Provence. The French manager complained vividly of the variety of grape varieties planted before his arrival, mixed at random, and without taking into account either of the exposure or the nature of the soil; besides, he said, the plants had been damaged by clumsy cutting, and they felt it for a long time. Today the whole vineyard was in good condition, and the 58 hectares produced 1,800 to 2,000 hectoliters of wine, or 30 to 35 per hectare. Three quarters of this harvest was claret or imitation Bordeaux, red wine actually a little more full-bodied than its prototype. The rest included the most varied wines: every major wine producer, my host tells me, has an office in the city where his customers come to order their samples. They expect to find all the wines they can have a chance to drink, reds and whites, dry, sweet and sparkling, just as they can get hold of any kind of cake from a pastry cook. This absurdly complicates the work of the winemaker and the installation of his cellar; but it is a necessary condition. (...) In Australia, except in a few favoured districts of Victoria, the same difficulties are experienced in producing long-life wine as in Algeria; the cause is the same: the great heat prevailing at the time of the harvest (...). The inexperience of the winemakers aggravates the bad weather conditions.]

Cultural differences are evident here. But one can see the preconditions for a successful encounter too, with a learning process at work, and an efficient one. Started as a mining economy, plundering both the biosphere and the lithosphere, Australia was beginning to move upmarket at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while France, with its colony Algeria, was trying to develop a more industrial way of making wines – and developing tensions with its traditional wine makers, settled on tiny vineyards and selling more

their craft than their croft. It is all very well to promote your idiosyncrasies on the global market, but you have to make sure that there is a demand for it, and that there are buyers for the price you ask. Globalisation, be it in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or today, is not a blank slate where everybody writes what they fancy. It is a much constrained game, where rationality and passions mix into opportunities and disasters, in a system that leaves no player immune from the actions of the others.

This remark leads me to the second, maybe the most important, point I wanted to raise: the fact that both France and Australia were led, all along the process of globalisation and somehow against their politically expressed will, to seek convergent kinds of economic equilibrium between internal and external markets, as well as between capitalistic profit and territorial development, although starting from opposite positions. For France was mostly an inward market, at the scale of country-town relationships for many centuries, with a tendency to prefer quality and handcrafted production, while Australia began its economic history as a dependency of British capital and industries, providing only raw materials, on the asset of a never-tilled continent. France was the perfect example of the old agrarian civilisation of continental Europe (which Britain was not), whereas Australia was a striking case of a new-found land developed in a few decades from an ecosystem barely modified by human occupation, except for large fauna, to the rank of a top level player in the field of commodities trade.

Of course, trade practices are strongly tied to social order. Post-revolution France pretended to develop a new political and social model, liberal in its way. But it remained an old nation state, with a strong link to its finely tilled soil and well-bred livestock, seeking to open up itself to the new opportunities of the industrial age, but with very cautious moves, especially with Great Britain and Germany in the neighbourhood. Most of French society was made of autonomous rural communities, not deprived of market culture and open to proto-industrial development, but far from any form of consumerism.

Australia, then, was a modest migrant society, engaged in a difficult plural nation-building process, involving the difficult task to set up the status of land; to decide between convict, indentured and free labour; and to gain from the mother country, not without some kind of resentment, the tools of self-government, first for each colony, then for their federation<sup>8</sup>. In Australia thus, there was nothing like village microeconomy, nothing like local markets, nothing like food and sustenance autonomy before very late, the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the oldest settlements<sup>9</sup>, the inter-war period in the rest. However there was a vague, but altogether strong, aspiration for it, in the hearts of migrants who had, for a large proportion of them, a traumatic memory of the ruthlessness of the Victorian social order and a nostalgia for pre-industrial European landscapes.

How to open up an agrarian society? How to give agrarian foundations to a nation of migrants and miners? No easy task on either side, indeed. And the rules of global markets were not helping any, forcing each player to take chances, to enter into competition, to face unexpected highs and lows. One could say that France had much difficulty in accepting the principles of free-trade; conversely, Australia found it hard to develop small-scale exchanges and to think of its own territory not only as a set of

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8 Beverley Kingston, *The Oxford History of Australia*, vol. 3 : 1860-1900, *Glad, Confident Morning*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988 ; Jan Kociumbas, *The Oxford History of Australia*. Vol. 2, 1770-1860 : *Possessions*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992.

9 Philip McMichael, *Settlers and the agrarian question. Foundations of capitalism in colonial Australia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984 ; Sharon Morgan, *Land settlement in early Tasmania. Creating an antipodean England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, 214 p.

resources and assets, but as a motherland that had to be taken care of. France hesitated up to the aftermath of World War II on the question of what to do with its peasantry – and somehow, it now tends to regret the way modernisation occurred in the decades of high growth following the Marshall Plan of 1947. Australia, on its side, was too often troubled, if not plagued, by the delusions of an untamed wilderness, the scarcity of labour, and the vices of land speculation. Settling is easy to say, hard to achieve.

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, shaped by great conflicts and crisis, can be considered as a period of rapprochement between France and Australia, the two countries belonging to the same alliances, and both engaged in the defence of liberal values. Once again, this is not a completely separate matter from socio-economic realities. Freedom, entrepreneurship and nature stewardship are linked in complex ways and tend to produce similar models in both hemispheres.

However, the destruction of the European order in the crisis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century built new barriers to maritime trade and reshaped regional trade systems, putting France and Australia on different paths of modernisation, France refocusing on continental trade, while Australia got involved both in eastern Asian and in transpacific trade, becoming an important partner for minerals and energy. But one could say that both countries experienced the difficulty of balancing out internal and external factors of development – France relying too much on the former, Australia too much on the latter. Both longed for a better regulated world trade system that would allow them to consolidate their own models while maintaining the sting of innovation that was to replace the spirit of conquest of the age of empires after 1945.

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Considering the rise of the trade of major commodities throughout this period, as well as the strength of the process of rationalisation of nature by scientific methods, parallel evolutions took shape in both hemispheres, and incite us to reconsider the classical analysis of the French–British relationship in a broader and richer perspective, including Australia as far more than a peripheral agent: an increasingly autonomous actor of global growth and a laboratory of modernity applied to the management of land, work and trade, as Pierre Leroy-Beaulieu clearly understood at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Historians should try to get the most out of this comparative perspective, especially French historians who tend to consider things at small scales mostly, and for whom Australian history might indeed prove an excellent way of broadening one's mind. Australian researchers should also be interested in the specific aspects of the agrarian question in continental Europe, especially in the history of agrarian and food systems, including cattle breeding and its byproducts, a field of research that is renewed by the unfolding of multidisciplinary methods, involving geographers, economists and agronomists, in a comparative and fertile way.

From today's point of view, it is quite striking to consider how the French and the Australian trajectories, started from opposite situations – both literally and metaphorically – developed unexpected affinities and a common sense of responsibility for the sustainability of economic development and land management. France now knows the vulnerability of its agrosystems, but has developed a genuine sense of globalisation. Australia, on its side, and after long decades of utter neglect, has strongly reassessed the value of cultivable soils, water and biodiversity since the millennium.

There are still merino sheep in the Bergerie nationale de Rambouillet. They are considered as heritage – one could say that everything tends to become heritage in

France, but it is like this France conquered the global markets of wine, fine food, luxury and cultural tourism. There are still merinos too in the Australian Outback. In well modernised farms, and still bred for profit on the global market, but representing a kind of heritage as well. Merinos in South Wales and in Victoria testify that a nation was born here out of hard work and economic wit, far from the commanding centres of world economy, but close indeed to their impulses. Quality, sustainability, and still profitability, are now common questions, both local and global, crucial to the preservation of bioresources. Our archives tell us how they became so in both hemispheres: let us value and share them.