

French–Australian Shared Histories

2018 Symposium

Imagination | Exploration | Memory



France and Australia in the Imperial Globalisation Process (19th and 20th centuries)

Franco-Australian trade relations on the front page of the National Archives resources

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For 200 years, relations between France and Australia have focused mainly on trade. Therefore, anybody working in the area of diplomatic relations between these two countries situated on opposite sides of the world, and operating in very distinct circuits, should make the history of such trade known.

However, archival resources used to analyse and describe their trade relations, are often difficult to locate. The same goes for the National Archives. In fact, researchers will not find one single source on this topic; on the contrary, they will have to dig for information spread amongst files that are scattered in the resources held by this institution. The first mission of the National Archives of France is to preserve, communicate and enhance the public archives produced by the state's central administrations and by the operators providing public service on behalf of the state, except for the Ministry of Armed Forces, the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance. It would be reasonable to think that diplomatic history resources would be found first and foremost among Foreign Affairs material or Finance resources within the Customs section. The National Archives, however, hold significant additional sources in the Franco–Australian trade history, although often lacking chronological continuity, and, as indicated above, fragmented within a vast array of resources. After these initial warnings, an overview will be found below.

The relevant resources at the National Archives may be found essentially, in two ministerial sub-series of the classification framework, namely the F/10 sub-series for the Ministry of Agriculture and in particular, the F/12 sub-series for the Ministry of Trade. Researchers will find correspondence from French consulates and vice-consulates in Australia, which is often accompanied by a wealth of associated documents.¹ This correspondence provides a lot of raw data, such as Customs tariffs in force at the time. Most of these documents came from the Australian authorities, and had been provided to the French diplomatic missions. They could also come from France itself, such as reports from the chambers of commerce established in Australia. Such documents allow a follow-up of both tariffs by type of goods, with a more precise nomenclature, as well as quantities imported and exported per category. Statistics and figures can be drawn from them, which give an indication of France's place in the Australian economy and the way in which it fitted into a British trade or not. We thus have the details of the exchanges which put France, at the beginning of the 20th century, in the seventh place amongst the countries exporting to Australia and at the forefront of its importers: France then had a threefold deficit trade balance with Australia. These same documents also help quantify the differences in customs tariffs for what was marketed within the British Empire and for what went into or out of it.

¹ Beyond these, some additional sources may be found, of course, for example, in resources relating to livestock or universal exhibitions.

These documents are at times very generic, and at times focused on a very precise subject, such as the results of the wool seasons. They allow, if necessary, the practice of 'micro-history', for example with the French champagne houses or car brands. Some of these documents were sent periodically, sometimes monthly, to the metropolitan administration, which makes it possible to follow variations in trade relations. Finally, it should be noted that these resources may relate to either Australia as a whole or to one of its states.

In addition to these trade reports and statements, for which the data is delivered 'as is', National Archives records include correspondence or reports with real added value in their information: situation analysis by the consul, contextualisation of the data. For example, the wool campaign of 1934–35, which had been very disappointing, resulted in a detailed review comparing it with previous years and analysing the causes of such a mishap: particularly bad weather for herds and wool, international tensions, currency rates, the British constitutional crisis. These considerations are, of course, most valuable to the historian in that they illustrate, in their own way, all the interactions that take place in international as well as domestic trade. In response to events and circumstances, consulate officials take an interest in political developments and their economic consequences: elections, decisions of Parliament, ministries, Australian chambers of commerce, etc. The connections between Australia and the British Crown were also closely monitored, as were the weather, strikes, public opinion, population growth, and the English blockade during World War II, as well as the transition to the metric system and decimal currency, that is, any element likely to influence the evolution of a commercial sector or trade in general. In addition, it is interesting to find documents relating to tariff negotiations conducted by Foreign Affairs under the close watch of the ministries of Trade and Agriculture. Naturally, the evolution of legislation and regulations is examined in detail, as is the economic rivalry at the beginning of the 20th century between Sydney and Melbourne for example, where port tariffs were not the same.

Which goods were followed by the chargé d'affaires? We were, of course, thinking first and foremost of wool, with which Australia was flooding the world, including France, which had failed to secure its self-sufficiency in the matter in the early 19th century. Yet this topic, though constantly scrutinised, is not so ubiquitous in the documents as one might think. Food is at the heart of most concerns. This is the case for fruit, apples and pears for the most part, but also for butter, because France exports these to England but is unable to match the prices and quantities of Australia. The subject of wines and spirits often crops up, because the southern hemisphere was a great commercial outlet for France. This created a major problem when, in the 1930s, Australia banned the importation of brandy. There are several documents containing files relating to watered-down cognacs, as well as to the evolution of Australian vines and viticulture and, of course, to the matter of the designations of origin so dear to the French who jealously protect the brand implications of their place names. Finally, in the agricultural and food sector, the export of frozen meat was closely monitored and, in this process, maintenance of the cold chain was tracked. Another well studied sector is the chain of raw materials like gold and coal, as well as that of the industrial products that Australia imported: weapons or cars for example. For the latter, France was largely competing with the British and Americans, because its cars, although of very good reputation, were too expensive and therefore uncompetitive in the Australian market. Finally, there are more cross-cutting issues including the taxation of complex products, such as cars whose components may be manufactured in various countries before assembly, or even food labelling. All these topics may show the evolution of the Australian economy, even if it means having to cross-reference data among various documents.

Probably the greatest interest of these resources lies in what the administration does with the information provided: what strategy to adopt in the face of these developments? What position or revised position to adopt in the face of a given market? The reports of certain consuls are therefore very enlightening – let's take a few examples. In 1906, Australia experienced a deep wine crisis. However, many French winemakers, including those established in Algeria, had settled in Australia until then, using their know-how to produce quality wines. The French consul in Melbourne advised his authorities in France to implement means to divert other French people from trying their luck in Australia, because they would not find any outlet for their production and would be ruined. That same year, our sales representatives noticed the development of a protectionist view in Australia. This trend favoured the development of an Australian industry to avoid having to import foreign manufactured products. The ministries were soon informed of this real trade danger for France, which exported many such items to Australia. In 1904, the weather had spoiled the raspberry crop in England, which had to buy raspberry pulp in Australia for its jams. What seems anecdotal today, however, represented – according to our consulates – a real opportunity for France to place its southern and Algerian farmers to take advantage of this unexpected market outlet. Through these few examples, it is clear that the analysis and processing of trade data is one of the significant interests of these resources; however, in general, there is a lot of information on competition and how the country should position itself in trading.

And so, the archival resources preserved in the National Archives, although incomplete in their topics and chronology, reveal multifaceted Franco-Australian trade relations which, far from only dealing with wool and mining products, were fluctuating and complex. They highlight feedback mechanisms derived from the sharp knowledge of sensitive commercial ground, which must be used for decision-making at the highest state levels. In this respect, despite their limitations and relatively distant Franco–Australian relations, these resources prove to be a great field of exploration and research for international relations and economy historians.

Annexures

A. Example of Customs tariff for 1906

[Extract from *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, No. 57, dated 20th October, 1906.]

Commonwealth of Australia.
Department of Trade and Customs,
Melbourne, 16th October, 1906.

TARIFF DECISIONS.

THE following approved decisions relating to the Customs Tariff are published for general information and the guidance of officers.

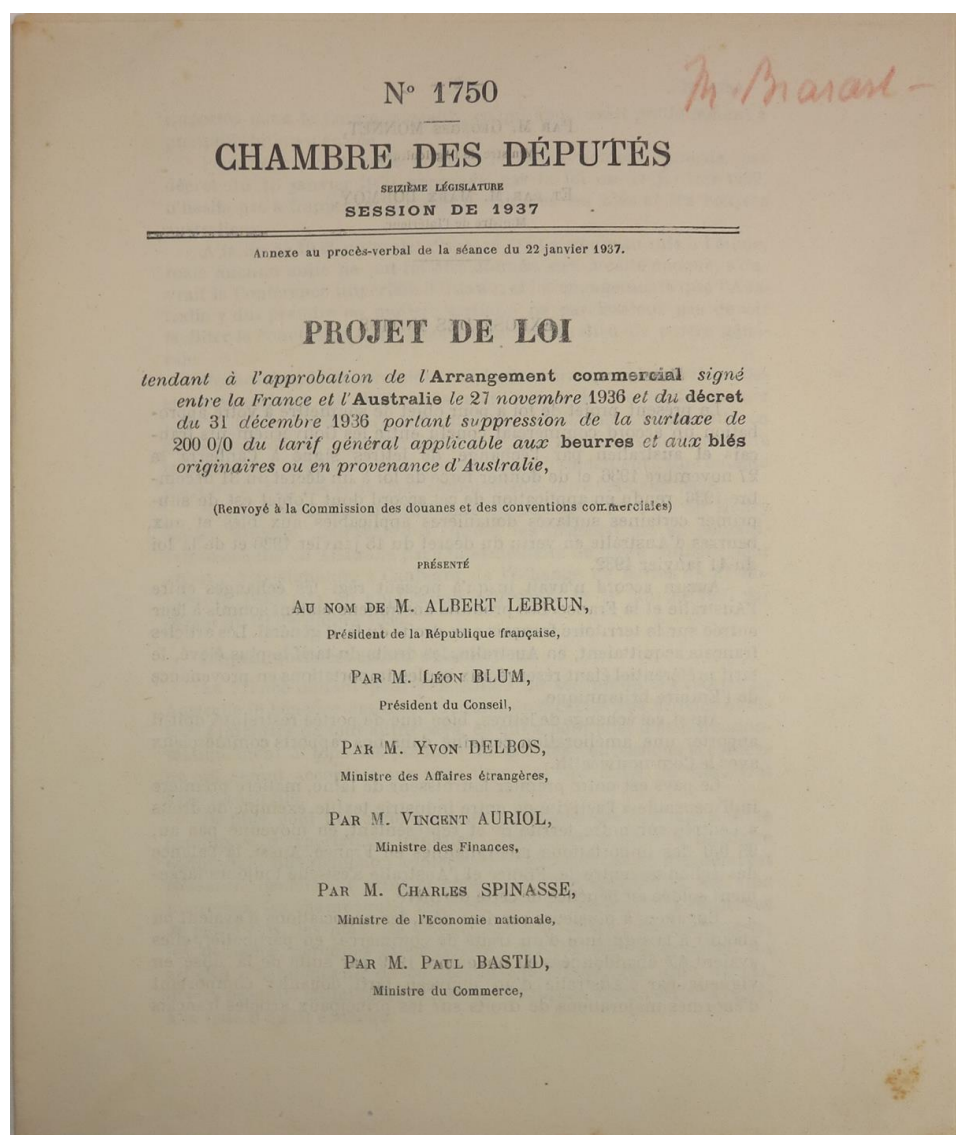
WILLIAM JOHN LYNE,
Minister for Trade and Customs.

CUSTOMS TARIFF GUIDE.
SUPPLEMENT No. 78.

Goods.	Duty.	Item.	No. of Class.	Classification.	Quantity.
AETHER ACETIC, containing less than 2 per cent. proof spirit (see Drugs, Chemicals, and Medicines).					
AETHER, ANHYDROUS, containing spirit (see Drugs, Chemicals, and Medicines).					
ALBOLENE (see Oils).					
BOTTLES, Chloroform, Drop (see Surgical and Dental Instruments).					
CAUSTIC POTASH (see Oilmen's Stores).					
CEMENT— "Astral," used by dentists as a filling ..	20 per cent.	98	210	Glue, Gelatine, n.e.i., and Cements, n.e.i.	
CLOCK WORK, Mechanical Window Attractions (see Fancy Goods).					
COILS, "Angold" balancing (see Electrical Machinery and Appliances).					
COMPOUND, P. B. Electrical (see Varnishes).					
DAMHOLD (see Drugs, Chemicals, and Medicines).					
DRUGS, CHEMICALS, AND MEDICINES— Aether Acetic, containing less than 2 per cent. proof spirit	Free	* ...	146	Drugs (free)	
Aether Anhydrous, containing up to and including 5 per cent. proof spirit	Free	...	146	Drugs (free)	
Damhold	Free	...	146	Drugs (free)	
Hydrosulphite of Soda, a mixture of zinc oxide and hyposulphite of soda	Free	...	146	Drugs (free)	
Liquozone (non-spirituous)	15 per cent.	105	338	Medicines	
Potassium Titanium Oxalate	Free	...	146	Drugs (free)	
Powders, for cure of opium habit, containing morphia	30s. per lb. as opium (see 139 Customs Act 1901)	4	393	Opium	lb.

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B. Bill for the approval of a Franco–Australian trade agreement. Paris,
2 January 1937



France, National Archives, F/10/2075. © Arch. nat. / Image Centre

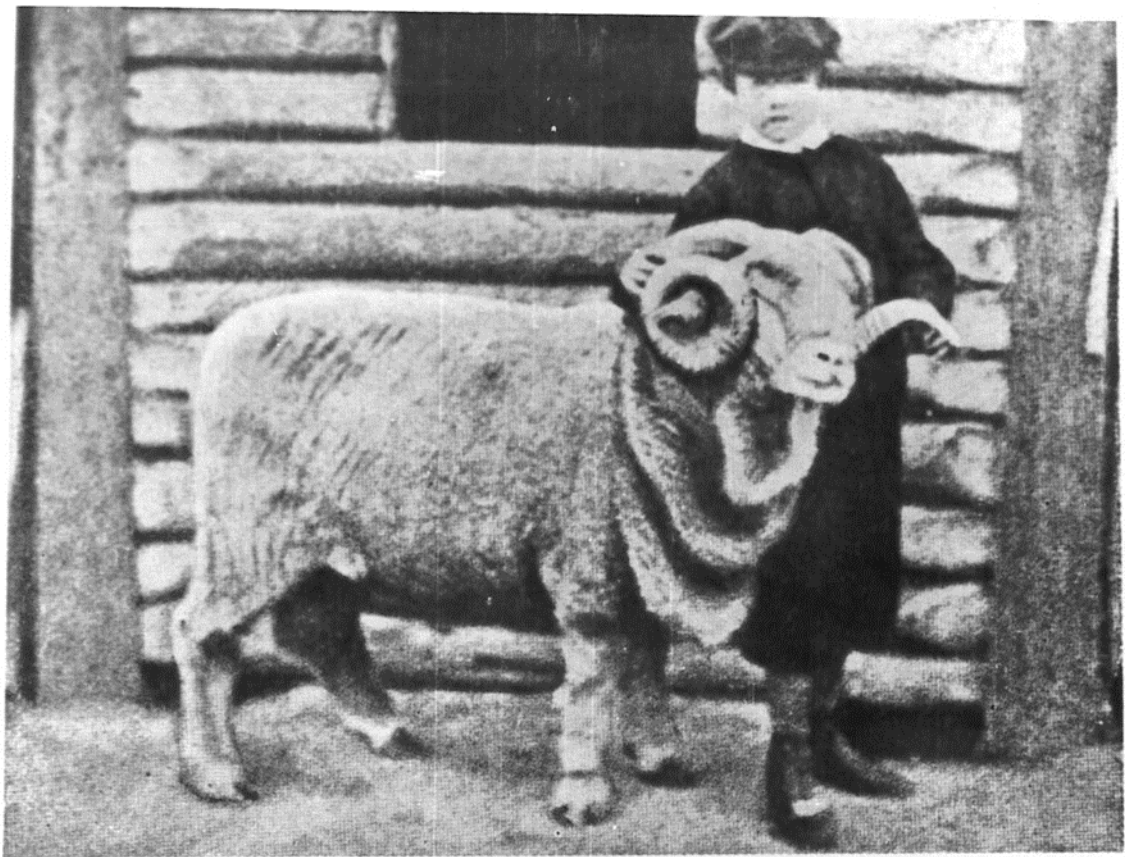
C. Extract of the note from the French commercial attaché in Australia reporting on the 1936–37 wool season, Sydney, July 1937

“[...] In short, a satisfactory 1936-37 wool season whose highlights include:

- Japan's abstention until January;
 - the British constitutional crisis during December, which produced indecision on the market;
 - the first devaluation of the Franc in December;
 - the considerable increase in American purchases;
 - the Coronation [of King George VI] festivities which resulted in no sales during the month of May;
 - the second devaluation of the Franc during the last sales in Brisbane.
- [...]”

Source: France, Archives nationales, F/10/2075.

D. Photograph of a Rambouillet Merino ram, “Emperor” sold in Australia in 1865



EMPEROR
A RAMBOUILLET RAM, IMPORTED IN 1865

France, National Archives, 20160285/NC. © Arch. nat. / Image Centre

E. Stereoscopic photograph by M. Léon and J. Levy, of the New South Wales stand at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1867

France, National Archives, CP/F/12/11893. © Arch. nat. / Image Centre

