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Alexis Bergantz, *French Connection: Australia's cosmopolitan ambitions*

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Alexis Bergantz, *French Connection: Australia's cosmopolitan ambitions* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2021), 194pp. Paperback. A\$34.99. ISBN: 978-1-7422-3709-1.

Published only weeks before the Australian government cancelled its contract to purchase French submarines in 2021, Alexis Bergantz' account of Australia's historical French connection was timely. French immigration to Australia has never been high—it is the story of individuals, some colourful identities but many obscure, rather than a large distinctive community like those created by other European groups such as the Irish, Italians, Greeks, or Germans. Nevertheless, Bergantz shows, the French connection has been significant beyond immigration numbers because of, among other things, its association with Australia's cosmopolitan ambitions.

While never paramount, Australia's French connection has mattered. As Bergantz argues, 'for all their strange ways', the French had something that captivated and 'provided a counterpoint to what Britain had to offer' (p. 13). In the period around federation this general fascination with Frenchness also offered possibilities for those seeking distinctiveness in an overwhelmingly British society. They could imagine 'a cosmopolitan nation-in-the-making' (p. 33).

In practical terms, anything French was associated with refinement, something sought after by colonial *nouveau riche* and purchased in the form of French fashion and cultural products or French language classes for their children. On another level, the bohemian communities of Sydney and Melbourne managed to combine varying degrees of Australian nationalism and unconventionality with a reverence for all things imagined as French, Paris being the spiritual home of bohemianism and a place of pilgrimage for figures such as Norman Lindsay.

One of Bergantz' sources is Tasma Couvreur, a successful colonial novelist and *Times* correspondent who was one of the pioneering cultural figures to promote Australia in Europe towards the end of the nineteenth century. Couvreur was a member of the multi-talented Huybers family which, while unusual in colonial Australia in being Francophone and steeped in French culture, was not unique. In Melbourne Couvreur's sister, art critic, and French language teacher Marie Thérèse Loureiro, was part of a small but vibrant cosmopolitan community that supported an interest in French culture which ran deeper than the search for badges of sophistication.

Bergantz' account is populated with a range of interesting figures, such as the Crivellis of Melbourne and French consuls in Sydney and Melbourne, and tells of relations with the wider community and the sometimes-fraught relations between the French themselves as they struggled with how to be French in Australia. He also deals with an episode now largely forgotten by Australians, the French decision to create a Botany Bay style penal colony on New Caledonia. From these Pacific islands, hundreds of former and escaped convicts found their way to Australia in the late nineteenth century. For Australians aspiring to respectable nationhood by this time, it appeared the French were lowering rather than raising the tone of the neighbourhood in this instance.

While the French in Australia did not develop large ethnic groupings, a number of communities did coalesce for a time around individuals or in some locations. In Sydney's Hunters Hill, for example, the Joubert brothers were pioneers of a French community that gave the suburb a French look and atmosphere well into the twentieth century. While Bergantz notes the presence of the Marist Fathers, Marists Sisters, and Marist Brothers at Hunters Hill, he perhaps could have explored

this religious French connection in greater detail. Notwithstanding the way in which French characteristics were quickly subsumed by the dominant Irishness of the Australian Catholic Church or the extent to which practice departed from the ideals of French founder St Marcellin Champagnat, the Marist Brothers, in particular, have had a long and widespread impact within Australia and the Pacific.

This elegantly written reflection on the French and the role of Frenchness in Australia should appeal to a wide readership. Written by a French author who is conscious that 'Frenchness is not straightforward, even for the French' (p. 3), it combines historical overview, intriguing individuals, humour, and sometimes whimsical insight to present what for many will be a fresh perspective on Australian society. Scholars will find well-referenced links to many areas of broader social history, general readers will glimpse a fascinating but often overlooked richness and diversity in Australia's past, and dedicated Francophiles will find much to delight in and affirm.

Incidentally, amidst the strong French reaction to Australia's recent cancellation of its submarine contract, Alexis Bergantz published a short piece where he suggested the Australian government's surprise about French sensitivity showed a poor grasp of history. ([Australia Should Have Seen France's Hurt Coming](https://meanjin.com.au), meanjin.com.au, 21 September 2021)

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