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Rosemary Lancaster, *Je Suis Australienne: Remarkable Women in France, 1880-1945*. Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2008. 234 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$26.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-921401-13-8.

Review by Karen Offen, Stanford University.

We do not normally associate Australian women with travel to and residence in France. Most Australian women who traveled long distances went to Britain or Ireland to re-engage with their family roots. In either case, going by ship to Europe was a huge adventure; even after the opening of the Suez Canal, the trip could take as long as three months. And of course, having made the trip, these women stayed abroad for long periods of time. A few never went home again.

This delightful study of Australian “innocents abroad” provides a fresh perspective on a little-known aspect of “cultural encounters” between Anglophone women from “Down Under” and their vision of the sophistication and glamour of French culture. Its author, Rosemary Lancaster, a Francophile literary scholar, tells the tales of a cluster of young women who made their way to France between 1880 and 1940 and left written accounts of their experiences. Some went in search of Culture à la française (or, more pointedly, Parisian culture, with its historic monuments, museums, art galleries, theatre, literary culture, etc.), “a longing, built up through imagination, through literature, through visions of wealth and acculturations, that render it magical well before they leave the home shore” (pp. 40-41). Most sought to acquire cultural capital.

The adventurous *Australiennes* profiled here all left eloquent traces of their life-shaping encounters. They are a disparate lot. One records her memories of schooling in France as a teenager; two become novelists; one is a painter; one becomes a resistance heroine; and one chapter discusses the accounts of a coterie of Australian women who became nurses on the front lines during World War I. It seems telling that none of these women ever seem to “become” fully-integrated Parisiennes—they all write as observers. It’s not even clear that they are desperate to become “French,” à la Alice Kaplan. At least one, though, desperately seeks to shed her Australian accent. Let us examine their fascinating accounts, as told by Lancaster, one by one.

Daisy White was born Margaret Isabella White, in March 1871 on a prosperous ranch in New South Wales.^[1] In 1887, after the death of her mother and when Daisy was sixteen, she and her younger sister Dorothy journeyed to France with her father and his new wife and were dropped off at Les Ruches, a small (thirty pupils) fashionable private “finishing school” for *étrangères* near Fontainebleau, where they spent the next two years perfecting their French, studying their lessons and developing their “accomplishments,” and walking long distances (for exercise and enjoyment) in the forest.^[2] Locked away in the countryside most of the time, Daisy White wrote in considerable detail of her school experiences in diaries that are now held by the National Library of Australia. Isolated from French political life (she apparently had no knowledge of the Boulanger Affair, for example, which threatened to topple the Third Republic), she was by no means isolated from the iconic symbols of Parisian culture. The teachers at Les Ruches took their pupils on field trips by train to Paris, visiting its great

architectural wonders, enjoying museums, plays, and also the exhibitions at the 1889 World's Fair, along with the opening of the Eiffel Tower. Daisy lapped it all up greedily.

Daisy was a good student by all accounts. She sought to excel and was rewarded for it. The curriculum seemed solid, even progressive including chemistry, physics and astronomy, as well as history and several European languages (though, like other French schools, no Latin or Greek for girls). It also focused on "accomplishments" such as music and painting on glass. Lancaster goes to considerable lengths to situate this curriculum with reference to that offered girls of this class in Victorian England, though to a lesser extent in France.

Daisy unremittingly and eloquently described her teachers, her classmates, her activities, and her moods. In one remarkably Bashkirtseffian outburst (5 January 1889),^[3] her inner feminist broke through: "I feel capable sometimes of carrying the world on my shoulders without weariness, and there is nothing to vent all that on but French compositions and 30 little school girls! How I detest them, to be sure, and what wouldn't I give to be a man!" (p. 17). She was impatient with many of the other girls, who, with only a few exceptions, she characterized as "profoundly, and unqualifiedly, and densely, hopelessly stupid." Daisy was particularly annoyed by the American girls "doing everything that is forbidden," such as visiting in each other's rooms, talking loudly and in English. "Marguerite Veil, Marie-Anne Pavie, Olga Morgan and I are the only ones who seem to have any glimmer of intelligence in us." (p. 23). This historian yearns to know more about these other girls.

Even at seventeen, Daisy was a gifted writer, describing landscapes, encounters with art and with the theatre, and capturing her own psychological moods to great effect. Throughout the diary, Lancaster remarks, there is much "evidence of personal growth," from early homesickness to demonstrations of great self-knowledge and desire for betterment. Unfortunately, Daisy's last entry is from early August 1889. In that entry, she remarked: "I'm sick and tired of school-girls. When I go home I'll ride about with Father and look after the station. It's a man's work, and will rest me from the French finnikineries that one has to put up with here." (p. 29). After that little seems to be known of her whereabouts or activities until 1903, the year she died—a single woman—in Sydney, Australia, of enteric fever. How sad! So much talent and promise thwarted by such an early death. Do you suppose that, following her return to Australia, she did look after the station with her father?

This account of Daisy White and her acutely perceptive and revealing diary spurred me, as I think it will you, to seek out a copy of the published diary and read it from cover to cover.

In contrast to Daisy White, the second *Australienne* presented here came from a Francophone family. She arrived in France when she was a young (though evidently estranged) wife, along with her parents and seven younger siblings. Jessie Couvreur (born Jessie Catherine Huybers, 1848 -1897), who became the novelist "Tasma," was nearly a quarter-century older than Daisy White. Her father was originally from Antwerp and her mother's background was French/English. The parents had migrated to Tasmania to pursue the wine business, but Jessie's mother was very unhappy there, so they all returned to the Continent in 1873. In the early 1880s Jessie divorced her first husband, and subsequently, at age thirty-seven, married the Belgian statesman and political journalist Auguste Couvreur, with whom she moved to Brussels. She then began writing and publishing a series of novels, including two romance novels set in Paris, which were published in English in 1891 and 1895.^[4]

Lancaster characterizes them aptly as "novels of anticipation and dismay" (p. 42). In fact, in *The Penance of Portia James* (1891), the heroine Portia, fleeing an unwanted Australian husband, takes refuge in Left-Bank Paris with a bohemian woman artist of her acquaintance. The lure of bohemian freedom to a person stifled by "Victorian stolidity," is initially tempting, but—unlike Ibsen's Nora—in the end Tasma paints Portia as finding Bohemia and its ways repugnant, cheap, and distasteful and returns her to her boring English husband so that she can raise his illegitimate child. This novel reeks of English

wariness of corrupt Paris but it also provides penetrating glimpses into the Paris of the poor and unruly, the sordid and the ugly that lay not far beyond the Luxemburg Garden quarter in which the author's family had long lived. In the second of the Paris novels, *Not Counting the Cost* (1895), the heroine Eila Clare comes from a family not unlike Tasma's own, French-speaking and steeped in French culture. Yet thanks to her family's greedy attempts to retrieve a marvelous jewel that had once been in the family, Eila Clare's misadventures nearly bring her to a bad end. In this novel as in its predecessor, Parisian music halls play an intriguing role.

Lancaster seems sure-footed when she discusses the romance novel as a genre and its literary qualities, as well as the complexities of the fictional travelogue, all of which moves the stories of the *Australiennes* and of Paris to the background. Her efforts to contextualize these two novels historically are less successful; she tries to work in the Dreyfus Affair, but in fact its most dramatic moments, following Zola's "J'accuse!" did not take place until years after the publication of both Tasma's novels.

The third chapter, "Digger Nurses on the Western Front, 1916-1919," offers a collage of Australian nurses' experiences based on diaries, letters and published memoirs—no novels or other imaginative fiction. Located in either the Australian War Memorial or in the National Australian Library, these sources offer problematic evidence of exposure to things French. Collectively considered, these nurses are certainly "in" France (serving in the Somme, near the frontlines) but not "of" France; there is nothing especially striking culturally about their experiences that indicates that they have really engaged with the French people—except for one nurse who served in French hospitals. Here the problem, no doubt, was that these women either spoke poor French or no French at all. Unlike Daisy White and Tasma, their cultural encounters were with the horrors of war and caring for the wounded, about which there is little specifically French. One nurse, however, succeeded in using her halting French to ask a local village woman to wash her hair on her day off. That's about as far as it went.

Only one woman, Nellie Crommelin, a nurse for the Red Cross, served in at least five different French hospitals in the French sector. Her letters reveal "deep convictions about the rights of the French people" and "profoundly committed to the democratic principles of the Allied cause." (p. 76). With only eight weeks of schooling (onboard ship) in French, Nellie found communication difficult. She was appalled by the lack of attention to hygiene that she witnessed in the French field hospitals. She expressed great compassion for the French soldiers and for displaced villagers, and developed a definite relationship with and pride in the French people with whom she came in contact. Other nurses recorded that they did take advantage of off-days, or longer leave, to traipse around the French countryside, visiting villages and churches, and even cemeteries, much as other tourists might have done. One woman religiously probed the history of the French countryside near the places she served. Some used their longer leaves to visit Paris and Monte Carlo. But when the war was over, they went home—surely the experience of wartime service had affected them greatly, but it is less clear how the experience of being in France registered for most.

With Stella Bowen (1893-1947), we re-engage with the experience of an artist who was also a writer, and obviously one of Rosemary Lancaster's favorite "remarkable women." Esther Gwendolyn Bowen, known as Stella, left Adelaide for England in 1914. She was a painter ready to make her mark.^[5] In 1917 she became the partner of the writer Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939), who had founded the *English Review* and was still married to another woman. They lived together, with their daughter Julie (born in 1920) in Paris from 1922 until they split up in 1928; she remained in France until 1933. In the interim the twosome became celebrants of the "moveable feast" of Parisian expatriate artistic and literary life. This chapter is about the Paris years—years of conversation, eating, drinking, dancing (with other expatriate artists and writers such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald), writing, and for Stella, painting less than she might have done without a child and a demanding partner. In her memoir, *Drawn from Life* (1941), Bowen observed that "being a woman does set you back a good deal." (p. 106).

The bohemian life in the Montparnasse area of Paris clearly had many attractions for this expatriate, and Stella reveled in its charms. “We lived in France,” Bowen wrote, “because the French understood how to live far better than we did.” (p. 101). Yet even as she gorged on wine, food, art, literature, and philosophy, she held on to her rather ladylike demeanor and her love of order. She remained something of a *bourgeoise* in bohemian drag.

Lancaster’s account of Stella Bowen’s last years in Paris, after her split from Ford, is deeply moving. During this time Bowen learned to stand, literally, on her own two feet, to become an independent, self-supporting woman, making money from her paintings to support herself and her daughter by Maddox Ford. When the effects of the Great Depression and the expense of the un-devalued franc finally forced her to fall back to London, she rediscovered a degree of helpfulness from English friends there—“comfort, kindness, uncritical friendship and loyalty—all those English virtues that I [Bowen] had forgotten about in my enthusiasm for France.” (p. 120). Yet the French years had made an indelible impression: “Alas!, Bowen wrote in her memoir, “there will never again be anything like the Paris of the nineteen-twenties in our life-time.” (p. 118).

Bowen never returned to France—or to Australia—but ironically, in England during the war, she received a crucial artistic commission from the Australian government “to record the activities of Australian forces in the U.K.” (p. 121). With this set of paintings, which now hang in the Australian War Memorial, she completed the circle, “depict[ing] for posterity a war fought by her compatriots for French (and world) democracy, invariably, as events demanded, on French soil.” (Lancaster, p. 121)

Nine years younger than Stella Bowen, another Australian writer Christina Stead (1902-1983), lived in Paris from 1929 to 1935, thus overlapping those of Bowen. It is unclear from Lancaster’s account whether their paths ever crossed. Like Tasma, Stead wrote two novels set in Paris.^[6] Stead had arrived in England in 1928, and in London she encountered an American of German-Jewish descent William Blech (later changed to Blake), whom she married. They moved to Paris in 1929 where they both worked in a banking enterprise. Both were committed Marxists “in orientation and sentiment,” (p. 133), skeptical about capitalism but also skeptical about the pretensions of the Left.

Stead’s first Paris novel, *The Beauties and Furies* features an adulterous affair between a married English woman, Elvira, and her would-be lover, Oliver, a doctoral student in history who is in Paris writing his thesis—on the workers’ movement in France, 1871 to 1904—and dabbling in political action. But Stead writes of this tryst in Paris with a wicked eye: her characters talk a lot but are shallow and don’t have the gumption to follow through when it comes to taking action. Lancaster describes the student-lover Oliver this way: “throughout the novel he engrosses himself in the odd protest meeting, the odd café debate, enough to convince himself he is an activist and the friend of the poor.” (p.131). What really authenticated him as a Leftist in his own eyes was his participation in the 27 May 1934 United Front protest, following the Stavisky affair. (It seems to me that I met some like this in the Paris police archives when I was working there in the mid-1960s.) And Elvira is portrayed as caught in the trap of the femininity she flaunts to get what she wants, namely property and possessions. For her there was “no miraculous make-over in Paris,” to quote Lancaster (p. 135) and she returned to her boring English husband. Nor was there one for Oliver, who continued to seduce and presumably never finished his thesis.

The second and mammoth (nearly 800 pages) novel, *The House of All Nations* (1938) is set in 1931-32, in Paris, where History is closing in—as historians of France do not have to be told. The “house” in question is the fictional Banque Mercure, in Stead’s words “a sort of cosmopolite club for the idle rich and speculators of Paris, Madrid, Rio, Buenos Aires, New York, London, and points farther east and west.” (p. 138). It was the sort of place that would dream up derivatives and go for quick profits; “risk taking is all.” (p. 139). Having worked in the banking world, Stead knew all too well what went on, and this book was an unremitting exposé of the shady, self-serving practices and cynical attitudes of the

greedy and unscrupulous men in charge and of the equally corrupt women who backed them up. Stead, a great fan of Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine* series, and its exposure of the follies of the human condition, proves to be a faithful disciple and a remarkable innovator as well.

This chapter says little about how Christina Stead and William Blech (Blake) actually experienced France themselves, but it says a great deal about what an astute writer could learn, digest, and convey about her own milieu while living in a city many still then believed to be "the capital of the world."

The exploits of the New Zealand-born, Sydney-raised Nancy Wake (born 1912), an early volunteer in the French resistance and subsequently agent for the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) are the stuff of legend.^[7] She had lived since 1934 in France, had married a wealthy French industrialist from Marseille and had served as a resistance courier before signing up with the SOE and parachuting back into France. Known as "the white mouse," she became a heroine of the French Resistance, 1940-1944, and "the most decorated servicewoman of World War II." (p. 153). So why haven't we heard more about her? Lancaster's chapter addresses Nancy Wake's memoir, and in this chapter provides abundant historical context for understanding the urgency of her actions.

In 1934, age twenty-two, Nancy Wake had fallen in love with Paris, describing it as "the most glorious place in the world," and as "a woman's city" (Wake, as quoted by Lancaster, p. 154). She was there provisionally as a freelance reporter in the Paris office of the Hearst newspapers, after a stint in London. Keenly attuned to European political developments, and outraged during trips to Berlin in 1934 and 1935, where she saw the Brownshirts in action against Jewish shopkeepers, she developed a strong commitment to combating Nazism. With her marriage in 1939 she lived the life of a spoiled, much indulged wife for a short time. But the coming of the Germans quickly changed that. She became active in the resistance movement in 1940, as a courier and distributor of anti-Vichy pamphlets. She hid escapees in her recently-gifted Alpine chalet, and escorted others to night pickups where they might clandestinely leave France over the Pyrenees to Spain. She put her own life on the line many times in the next four years, and her French husband was tortured and executed by the Gestapo for refusing to reveal her whereabouts. At one point Nancy Wake topped the Gestapo's most wanted list. After the war she remarried and returned to Australia, where she ran unsuccessfully for office. Her exploits are recorded in the various biographies and in her own memoir, published in 1985 to set the record straight. According to *Wikipedia* and other internet sources, Wake is currently living in The Star and Garter Home in Richmond, London and will turn ninety-seven in August 2009. This woman is a survivor of the first order! We should all send her flowers!

Of these women, it seems clear that the author's favorites are the two novelists Jessie Couvreur and Christina Stead, and the painter Stella Bowen. But she also has a soft spot for Nancy Wake and for the nurses from World War I. Unfortunately, for the coherence of the book as a series of individual portraits, there was no single Aussie nurse in France that could stand along with the other five; the collage of materials by and about the nurses, while interesting, is the weakest link in what is otherwise a fascinating series of portraits.

As a literary scholar, the author seems relatively innocent (until the final chapter on Nancy Wake) of any acquaintance with English-language scholarship on French women's or gender history, that might have deepened the context for understanding these women's experiences. For example, in contextualizing the diaries of Daisy White, the work of Rebecca Rogers or Christine de Bellaigue on nineteenth-century French girls' education (more recent than that of Bricard, who is cited) could have provided further insights.^[8] A comparison of *Les Ruches* with *Ecouen* or other elegant schools for French girls might have further illuminated the framing of this diary.

Further, Mary Lynn Stewart's work on French women's health and beauty in the later nineteenth-century likewise would have provided insights that go beyond Lancaster's resort to the much-rehearsed

British discussions of Clarke and Maudsley on women's brains. The author could also have made good use of Jo Burr Margadant's collection on *The New Biography*, which features a number of admirable portraits of nineteenth-century French women that might have provided further possibilities for comparison.[8] These quibbles illustrate a point that has upset me for years, which is that all too often literary scholars (and not only of French women) do not seem to notice that there is abundant work being done by historians of women that could substantially enrich their own interpretative work. Literary historians, like economic historians and, often, historians of science, seem engaged in a form of "parallel play," rather than learning from the historians, who seem more open to interdisciplinary interaction. We should do better at learning from one another.

Had this author been a "regular" French historian, or kept up with the literature in French women's and social history, I think she would not have misspelled a number of well-known (to us) names: for example, our recently-deceased colleague Françoise Mayeur becomes Mayer; Charles Rearick becomes Rearock, the last name of François Mitterrand is misspelled with one "r," and the nineteenth-century Swedish feminist Fredrika Bremer becomes Frederika. Small details, indeed, but such small details can be indicative of an inexcusable lack of historical awareness.

Having issued these small complaints, however, I would still highly recommend this stimulating sequence of *Australiennes* to historians of France. The book is informative, well-written, and—with summer in mind—offers an especially good "read." Expanding our knowledge about Australian women who, in one way or another, spent time in France, became devoted (or not so devoted) Francophiles, and wrote about their experiences from such diverse perspectives, is valuable for our own comprehension of why we ourselves, as outsiders, like to visit, live in, and study about France.

NOTES

[1] Daisy White's diary has been published in an annotated edition: *Daisy in Exile: The Diary of an Australian Schoolgirl in France, 1887-1889* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2003). The original diaries are on deposit at the NLA. Lancaster's account is based on this diary. The sophistication and insight of her writing is remarkable for a young woman of her age; that there was a writerly streak in the family is confirmed by the fact that Daisy's cousin's son Patrick White won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973.

[2] Alumnae of Les Ruches include the American Nathalie Clifford Barney, who became a celebrated Parisian *salonnière* and *doyenne* of Paris's lesbian artistic circles, and the Romanian Elena Vacarescu, who became famous for her own poetry as well as translations of Romanian poets into French.

[3] The reference here is to the Russian/Ukrainian artist Marie Bashkirtseff (1860-1884), who had also lived extensively in France. She kept journals which were published in Paris in 1887 and created a huge sensation. Could Daisy White possibly have read Bashkirtseff's published journals and found inspiration for her own?

[4] Lancaster here draws on the biography of Tasma by Patricia Clarke, *Tasma: The Life of Jessie Couvreur* (Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1994) and on her published diaries, *Tasma's Diaries: the diaries of Jessie Couvreur with another by her young sister Edith Huybers*, ed. Patricia Clarke (Canberra: Mulini Press, 1995). The two Paris novels are: *The Penance of Portia James* (London: William Heinemann, 1891), and *Not Counting the Cost* (New York: D. Appleton, 1895). It appears that these novels were never translated into French.

[5] Stella Bowen has told her own story in *Drawn from Life* (Collins Publishers Limited, 1941; reprinted by Virago Press, 1984, and by Picador Pan Macmillan in Sydney, 1999). Another important

source is her correspondence with Ford Madox Ford, edited by Sondra Stang and Karen Cochran, with supplementary notes by Julia Maddox Loewe (the daughter of Bowen and Ford); Part I appeared in 1993, published by Indiana University Press. Drusilla Modjeska's biography of Stella Bowen, *Stravinsky's Lunch*, was published in Sydney in 1999.

[6] Stead's two Paris-based novels are *The Beauties and Furies* (1936) and *House of all Nations* (1938).

[7] See Nancy Wake, *The Autobiography of the Woman the Gestapo Called The White Mouse* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1985; republished Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1997); and a series of biographies, of which the most recent are by Peter Fitzsimons (2001) and Russell Braddon (1956, 2007). It seems peculiar that Nancy Wake's name does not even appear in the index of *Les Femmes dans la Résistance en France* (Paris: Tallandier, 2003). In *Sisters in the Resistance*, by Margaret Collins Weitz (New York: Wiley, 1995), she is accorded just two very brief paragraphs (pp. 78-79).

[8] Of particular relevance, Rebecca Rogers, *Les Demoiselles de la Légion d'honneur* (Paris: Plon, 1992); "Schools, Discipline and Community: Diary-writing and Schoolgirl Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century France," *Women's History Review*, 4:4 (1995), 525-554; *From the Salon to the Schoolroom: Educating Bourgeois Girls in Nineteenth-Century France*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2005; "Learning to be Good Girls and Women: Education, Training and Schools," in *The Routledge History of Women in Europe since 1700*, ed. Deborah Simonton. London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 93-133. And for comparative purposes, concerning a slightly earlier period, see Christina de Bellaigue, *Educating Women: Schooling and Identity in England and France, 1800-1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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