

Of Bishops and Pasties¹ Etiennette Fennell

Adelaide

The arrival in Adelaide on a cold and wet August morning was disastrous, especially for my mother. The sun, which we had been told shone most of the year, should have been out and about that day; it may have helped her to cope and smile a little. She must have felt very alone then, so far from her home, without a word of English in her vocabulary, the head of six children and a husband who made up the seventh and the worst. She had just been through thirty-three days of seasickness and had lost a great deal of weight, but while my father was farewelling all the ladies he had courted during the crossing, she had to pack the luggage for eight people! I do not remember how the trunks that were in the hold of the ship arrived. They were probably delivered later. I did not know what they contained, or rather what they did not contain. This was going to come later and I was to bear my parents a grudge for a long time.

On the wharf, a woman of about forty, Miss F., was waiting for us to disembark. She made huge efforts to use some long forgotten school French. We were huddled into a small truck which was great fun for us, but not for my poor mother. Miss F., unaware of my mother's weak state, took what I know now to be the longest way home so we could admire Adelaide's high spot, Anzac Highway. Waste of time! We knew the Champs-Élysées and were in no way impressed. In any case, we were far too preoccupied by the arctic cold wind blowing inside the truck.

We finally arrived at what was to be our home and discovered that the house we had seen in photos, and which was to be ours, had been sold. This house had four bedrooms, lounge, dining room, and large kitchen, and was surrounded by a large garden, back and front. It would have been ideal for our family. Instead we were given a much smaller one next door. It had only two bedrooms for eight people! The lounge became my parents' bedroom. A corridor sleep-out running along the side of the house must have been built during our trip because its walls were still damp. It was to be my room, shared with my brother. Its louvre windows did not shut properly and on cold, windy winter nights, it was perishing in there. There were two camping beds where there was room for only one and, of course, no heating. There was no heating in the whole house except for a useless fireplace in the one windowless room which became the hub of our family, next to the kitchen. There we ate, sat, did our homework, wrote to our grandmother and listened to the old radio.

The Australians in Paris had told us that the climate was so wonderful that people lit a fire only once a year, maybe at Christmas, just for fun. It is true that the Australians at the time had no idea of comfort and were satisfied with a small 500-watt radiator which would follow them from one room to the next in the evenings only. There was no heating during the day and doors and windows were often left wide open. They would undress and go to bed in an icy bedroom: not very conducive to lovemaking in winter. This may have accounted for the very small population at the time, a proportion of which were immigrants! They were toughies, real pioneers. We

¹ This is an extract from Etiennette Fennell's memoir *So Far Away*, published by Table One in October 2009.

had been told not to load ourselves with cumbersome blankets. These would be provided. There were some blankets, but far too few, and we were freezing in our sleep-out with only one blanket each, so we piled all our clothes on the beds. As good Parisians, we were accustomed to central heating and thought that the country singularly lacked comfort. However, one has to admit that the cold was nothing in comparison with that of a European winter. But it was cold nonetheless.

Our neighbours

And so we began a new life. Not everyone had a car then and we certainly did not. We walked a couple of kilometres to Mass on Sundays, of which there were two in our parish of St Peters, one at 7am and the other at 9am. We were far from the eleven o'clock High Mass of Saint-Sulpice and Marcel Dupré at the organ! In Paris we would go to Mass out of pure pleasure, certain of a concert of improvisations on the magnificent instrument so beautifully handled by the resident organists. In Australia, it was a soulless half hour job, in and out, and it is still out of duty or out of pure love for the Lord that one goes to Mass, for there is nothing edifying about either the treatment of the liturgy or the music.

The first time we went to the early Mass, our neighbours across the road, who had a car, stopped to ask us if we were going to Mass. Only Catholics would get up and go to church at 7am on a Sunday. Of course, we did not understand them but I was carrying my missal and that was the answer. They picked us up and took us there. They were a childless couple of about fifty, who seemed very old to us. The first few times we could say nothing to them except 'thank you'. They found out we were French and became very nice to us. They were extremely kind people. They had sponsored a couple of single Dutch men, who lived with them and who were treated as their own sons. Outside his work in the government administration, the man, Mr. S., worked for the charitable institution of Saint Vincent de Paul. When they found out we were cold, we were provided with blankets within the week – and yet we were not refugees.

The country was at the peak of its intake of refugees and welcomed people from almost everywhere, provided they were white. The Australians were ready to help and did so generously. Apart from that, we found that being French seemed to open all doors. Everyone wanted to know us, meet us, and be friendly. A French family: that had never been seen before! The girls chased after my thirteen-year-old brother because French men had the reputation of being great romantic lovers. It seems that in Australia, rightly or wrongly, French people still have the reputation of being masters of style and sophistication.

The Australian school

Four of us were of school-going age. We were sent there one week after our arrival. How I dreaded the first day! It is said that children are adaptable and it is true, but at a price. A child adapts by force, out of the necessity to survive. Everything seems to go well on the surface; there seem to be no ill effects from such a drastic change, but everyone does not react in the same manner. Certain more timid types can suffer ill effects. It is difficult to generalise and to say that such and such an individual is reacting in this way because of his or her difficult upbringing but, speaking personally, I can say that coming from an erratic family, to say the least, the experience of dreading an event or a happening was not unknown to me. This latest

experience unfortunately was one which left me rather tentative, with a sort of anxiety. I have always felt that I did not belong, that I was not part of whatever was going on, that I did not measure up to what was expected of me. At the time I felt as though I was wrapped in a layer of cotton wool. Everything was so different, it felt unreal! I watched, I listened, I followed the movements of the other students like an automaton, without taking part, as if my true substance was outside of me. Yet I can say that everyone was extremely kind to me, even if it was difficult for the children to understand the problem of incomprehension on the part of another child. In this very monolingual country, particularly at that time, most children had never come across another child with whom they could not communicate verbally. Try as they might to speak to me, if I did not understand their sign language, they laughed – not at me, but at the situation. Often, they would walk away from the problem, moving on to other games, other things, other friends, but they did not hold it against me. They simply lost patience and I felt very alone then.

I do not have any strong memories of those early years, except that I had friends who invited me to their homes for parties or who took me to the pictures. The first film I saw in English was *The Great Caruso*, a film which triggered my love for opera. I even remember the young girl who took me there.

In Paris, I went to an all-girls school. In Australia, there were boys in the Catholic primary school we attended. We were about forty children in one class of mixed upper primary levels, with one old nun of the order of St Joseph to teach us. How well this poor woman deserved her heaven for being in hell on earth! Yet, she kept all those feral boys in order with an iron but kind and understanding hand and she was very respected by her students.

Before I could even begin to take part in the lessons, I had to learn English. This truly holy nun must have wondered what she had done to offend the good Lord for Him to send her not only another student but a needy one at that! She must have noticed my willingness to learn and believed that I was deserving of her dedication because, whenever she could, she would give up her rest time at morning recess or lunch time and call me back into the classroom. A well-deserved cup of tea in hand, she proceeded to teach me English. While we worked, she would drink her tea and I my half-pint of milk out of the glass bottle that each Australian child received daily from the government. Whenever there was some milk left over, she would make me drink another bottle. It seems to me that seeing so many migrants arrive from all parts of Europe, the Australians realised what life must have been like during the war. We were very pale compared to the robust Australian children accustomed to playing outside. As a typical pedagogue, she began by using something I already knew in my own language: how to tell the time. She was teaching me with a large clock. I learned that very quickly. Then, she proceeded to teach me phrases I needed to know in the school context. She was brilliant, and so very patient. I owe her a great deal. I am only sorry that in my thoughtless youth I did not thank her enough, did not show sufficient appreciation although I am sure I was polite enough to say thank you after each lesson. She deserved more than that. When I left that school sixteen months later, I never saw her again.

We soon learned to eat sandwiches for lunch, outside in all weathers and in the school shed on wet days. We also learned to eat more for breakfast than the French breakfasts we were accustomed to which usually consisted of milk or hot chocolate and bread and jam. In France this would be followed by the main meal of the day at

lunch time. Not so in our new country, so we had to adapt.

First thing each morning, a monitor chosen on a roster basis would collect the lunch orders, paper bags on which the students would write their name and chosen lunch and put money inside the bag which would be folded and given up to the monitor. One could order all sorts of sandwiches, pies and pasties, and buns of all kinds.

In the morning, before entering the classroom, the students would line up for the 'saluting the flag' ceremony, after which they would march in step into class, where they would kneel for morning prayers. Students would take it in turns to take the framed prayers and read them.

Bishops and Past...

About two months after my arrival, it must have been my turn to read the prayers. A boy, perhaps eager for a good laugh or merely seeing that it was my turn, placed the frame in my hands. I never knew what his intention was but it cannot have been nasty for the students were all well-intentioned towards me. I do not think he had even wondered whether I was able to read those prayers. I did not play with the boys and except for two or three, I never spoke to them. This boy therefore did not know my level of English. All the children knew that on my arrival I could not say a word, but after that, did they even think about it? I was an obedient little girl and, thinking the nun knew about it, I said to myself, shaking in my boots, that there was no going back, I had to go through with it! I was fairly good, I think until I got to the passage that asked God to bless our 'bishops and pastors'. I did not know these words in English and did not understand what I was reading except that the word 'pastors' triggered some latent knowledge in my head and while wondering what the lunch word 'pasties' had to do with prayers, I must have asked God to bless our pies and pasties. And why not? Did we not ask Him to bless our food when we said grace? The whole class burst out laughing in the middle of the solemn prayer: a moment hardly conducive to meditation in a class of forty or so boisterous children! Until then, the nun had left us to our prayers while she sorted out a problem in another part of the room and did not know what was going on until she came in on my 'pasties' and realised immediately what had happened. To my utmost mortification, she took the frame from my hands and finished the prayers herself. Until then, I had never tasted these pasties. Our home-made sandwiches contained jam which my mother bought in large tins. It was cheap and we ate lots of it. It would have been a luxury for us to buy our lunch and to taste these pasties.

There were several things I did like about my new life. Firstly, I liked wearing the uniform which removed the problem of what to wear every day and which put everyone on the same level. There was no way students, especially girls, could boast their riches through expensive clothes. In those days the uniform was much more rigorously worn than it is today. Girls had to wear thick lisle stockings, lace-up shoes, hats and gloves. Even the boys had to wear caps and certain upper class private schools required a boater in summer. I also liked the freedom of being able to run about, to throw myself into mounds of dead leaves – which was forbidden in Paris. I could stay back after school and play basketball and I often took part in Saturday afternoon matches. At half-time, we sucked on sweet and juicy orange segments such as I had never had before. What delight it was to feel the juice trickling down my gullet! To this day I swear this is the only way to eat an orange. Gone were the hard

Paris war days of queuing for half an orange per child once a week.

Learning English

I do not remember suffering too much from the lack of English because by the time I became used to my new life, I already had enough English to communicate with my friends. But there were some rather funny situations which can exist between two people who do not understand each other.

One day, when one of my sisters and I were walking in our street, we met a man we often saw walk past our place. Until then, we had only ever greeted him over the fence, but that day, he began to speak to us, asking questions which we tried to answer. We behaved as many people do when they do not understand a question and said 'yes' in order not to appear stupid – a silly but understandable behaviour which can lead to rather difficult situations. That is exactly what I did that day. A few weeks later I understood what I had said 'yes' to when, on a Sunday morning, that man came to pick us up to take us to church, except that we had already been that morning. He was coming to take us to the Methodist Church because I had answered in the affirmative to his question 'are you Methodist?' I certainly had not understood the word 'Methodist'. I had never heard of it! For me, there were Catholics and the others who remained nameless. In France we did not have this bother. In those days, nearly everyone was of the same religion whether people practised it or not.

On another occasion when a lady was asking me a question I did not understand, instead of repeating the question more slowly or using different, simpler words, she repeated exactly the same sentence only louder at each repetition as if I was deaf, until we both burst out laughing, her laughter somewhat loaded with a patronising expression as if to say: 'How stupid this child is; she understands nothing!' Many times have I noticed that people can react this way if they have not experienced the frustration of learning to speak another language. They are unable to deal with incomprehension on the part of their interlocutor.

If I did not suffer from our new linguistic circumstances, one of my sisters did. She was five and was so perturbed that she completely stopped speaking either language. We others were progressing so well that after six months of life in Australia, we were able to go up to the next grade at the beginning of the new academic year the following February. Of course we kept up our French at home. This has meant that my little brother who was one year old when we arrived, is able to speak French. He makes a few mistakes but he has never studied it formally.

Hiding to read

As for me, I was happy enough but I was unable to express what I was lacking except through this anxiety and unexplained morosity I have already mentioned. While I accepted my new life (I had little choice) I felt cut off from everything that had been my life till then. Days after our arrival I found out what was missing from those trunks.

Eight people travelling meant a great deal of luggage. My parents, having had to make choices as to what to take with us, left all our children's books behind. I had always been an avid reader and owned many books. Whenever I was sick, I would get a book and that would make me feel so much better. From one day to the next I was without books in French. Suddenly I was severed from all that had made up a very important part of my life. I had no points of reference with my culture and was far

from being able to read in English. Australia, through its geographical position, was totally isolated from the rest of the world. Coming to Australia in the fifties meant cutting oneself off completely from the rest of the globe. There were no foreign bookshops. The mail from Europe took about three weeks to get here, telephone calls were exorbitantly expensive and the lines very bad, and there was absolutely no point trying to listen to overseas radio. At certain times one could hear the BBC, but distantly, with the sound of waves interfering.

I have always enjoyed speaking English and toying with its vocabulary and grammar. If my father did one good thing for us, albeit unwittingly, it is to have given us the chance to learn this great language in the most natural way possible.

In a quiet country where nothing much happened in those early years, our arrival had not gone unnoticed by the community. Few Australians had ever seen French people. We were the flavour of the year and this gave us a certain identity we would never have had in France. This was not lost on my parents and both of them, understandably, felt a great need to mix with French people and francophones. Therefore, they joined the Alliance Française which allowed them to borrow books from its library. Unfortunately, this library did not have any children's books. Who would have read them? There were no French children about, except us. My mother took out books which were not for the reading of a twelve-year-old and which were forbidden me, but these adult books became my secret reading. Thus I became adept at hiding to read and to read fast. I may not have understood all the innuendos but it was a great pleasure for me to be able to read at all.

Years later, during one of my many trips to France, imagine my delight at finding the books of my youth and although I had long passed the stage of reading children's books, I bought quite a few of them, just to re-read them and have them with me at home. I also found song books such as those a French family might keep in the car so as to sing together during long car trips or at family or friendly gatherings around a camp fire. My whole childhood was enclosed within those pages. I had not heard those songs for twenty years!