

Long Paddock

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*Crossing Intercultural Boundaries:
The Reception of Paul Wenz in Australia and France*

Paul Wenz wrote, mostly in French, about life in the Australian bush. Born in 1869 in Reims, capital of the Champagne region of France, he was the son of a wealthy wool merchant, originally from Württemberg. Wenz knew the French novelist, and fellow Protestant, André Gide at school and maintained a life-long correspondence with him. After working in the offices of Etablissements Wenz in 1890 he travelled in England, then spent 1891 growing grapes in Algeria before coming to Australia in 1892 and finding positions, with the help of the agents of Wenz and Co, as a jackeroo in Victoria and New South Wales. He visited New Caledonia, New Zealand and other Pacific islands, north Queensland, in part to search for a supposed wreck of Lapérouse, and returned to France in 1896 via South America, where the family company had agencies and where he met William Lane. The following year Wenz returned to Australia, purchased a sheep station, Nanima, on the Lachlan River between Cowra and Forbes in 1898 and married Harriet Dunne, daughter of a grazier. The Wenzes travelled widely within Australia and made at least six voyages back to Europe, taking in Southeast Asia, China, Japan, the Trans-Siberian Railway, the Pacific, the Caribbean, Africa, India, and North and South America, including a voyage up the Amazon. They spent the First World War in France and England working with the Red Cross and supporting Australian soldiers in London. Wenz knew and corresponded with the Australian literary figures Christopher Brennan, Miles Franklin, Nettie Palmer and others. The Wenzes made their last voyage to France in 1938, before Paul died at Forbes in 1939 (Wenz, *Diary* 5–16 and 176–197).

This brief account of Wenz's life offers a glimpse of his adventurous spirit and the cosmopolitanism of his family's business interests, which were not constrained by the political boundaries between the British and French colonial empires. The publication of Wenz's work in Paris reveals not only the level of French interest in, even admiration for, English exploits and achievements, but also reveals stronger similarities between the English- and French-speaking worlds than the usual representations of them as rivals allow for. The imperial travel and adventure writing that imagined landscapes fit to be ruled by the white man supported not only their own but each other's projects of global economic dominance.

Wenz's first stories appeared in the magazine *L'illustration* in the 1890s. He had two volumes of short stories published before the First World War that deal mostly with life in the Australian bush, but also with Australian characters in the South Pacific. The first was *A l'autre bout du monde: aventures et mœurs australiennes* (*At the Other End of the Earth: Australian Adventures and Manners*), Paris, La Librairie Universelle, 1905. The second collection, *Sous la croix du sud: contes australiens* (*Under the Southern Cross: Australian Stories*) was published in Paris by Plon-Nourrit in 1910. Both ran to second editions, confirming that a market existed in France for stories about Australia. Wenz's only work of fiction in English was *Diary of a New Chum*, Melbourne, The Book Lovers' Library, 1908, which recounts the experiences of a young English jackeroo in western

New South Wales and, like Wenz's stories in French, contains all the stock characters and situations of bush literature. *La Revue de Paris* published two novels by Wenz in serial form: *L'Homme du soleil couchant* (*The Sundowner*), 1915, deals with life on the road in the bush and in a gold rush town, and *Le Pays de leurs pères* (*The Land of Their Fathers*), 1918, deals with Australian soldiers at war in France, on leave in England and returning home. The latter was published in full the following year in Paris by Calmann-Lévy, who also published the first novel in full in 1923 and, in 1929, a further novel, *Le Jardin des coraux* (*The Coral Garden*), a tragic love story set in Sydney and on a Queensland tropical island. Two small collections of stories about the First World War, *Bonnes gens de la Grande Guerre* (*Ordinary People in the Great War*) and *Choses d'hier* (*Things of Yesterday*), were published in Paris by Berger-Levrault in 1918 and 1919. Editions de la Vraie France published a set of autobiographical/fictional reminiscences, *Il était une fois un gosse* (*Once Upon A Time There Was A Little Kid*), in 1930 and, in 1931, Wenz's last novel, *L'Echarde* (*A Thorn in the Flesh*) which, set in Adelaide and on the Darling, using the setting of the Dunnes' station, Netley (at the time the largest property in New South Wales), is a tale of unrequited love, obsession and revenge.

The main title of Wenz's first collection of stories, *At the Other End of the Earth*, employs the trope of Australia's distance and isolation to imply the greater the distance the greater the difference from Europe, revealing Wenz's participation in an existing Australian convention. The subtitle, *Australian Adventures and Manners*, indicates Wenz's dual purposes: representing the white man's adventures in an exotic land, and introducing a previously unknown way of life to the French reader. The story, "How Bill Larkins Went to the Paris Exhibition" (Wenz, *Diary* 55), from the first collection and one of the earliest to appear in *L'Illustration*, tells of a simple bush character who wins the lottery and chooses to see the Great Exhibition in Paris. It clearly positions Paris as a cosmopolitan, not just a francophone, centre where the bush Australian would be an exotic exhibit. Bill moves between national and language groups and, as he floats in the transitional space of the voyage, he encounters, but never quite merges with, the urbane members of high society. He loses his money on the voyage and reverts to the penniless bushman who, on arrival in European waters, cannot cross the final boundary and has to resort to working his passage home. Bill, wherever he happens to be, occupies a space that suggests or hints at the existence of another space. In creating such a character Wenz anticipates Emily Apter's terminology "translational zone" (Apter 5). Indeed, Wenz's *œuvre* occupies such a zone regardless of linguistic translation or critical engagement because it amounts to the translation of culture, thereby entering a transnational topography in its own right, and because it contains characters who belong simultaneously to various worlds. British and American versions exist of the trope of the yokel or backwoodsman juxtaposed with urbanity, and other Australian versions include "The Man from Ironbark" and continue with *Crocodile Dundee in Los Angeles*. Wenz, then, adopts the convention of Australians representing themselves in contrast to European high culture, but rather than using it to suggest a race of barbarians he encourages the reader to imagine a new civilisation that eschews all forms of affectation. Clothing illustrates this rejection of affectation as an essential part of the Australian character or, at least, of the Australian view of Australianness, in *Diary of a New Chum*. Here the distaste for affectation in clothing is presented in contrast to perceived fopperies of elegant English dress. Wenz's English newcomer to Sydney says:

Most people seem to guess I am a new arrival. They call me a New Chum. I asked them how they could tell. One said by my gloves and stick, another by my clothes and my face, another by my English; for it appears I have a London "accent" (18).

The convention of contrasting Australians with foppish Englishmen, embraced by writers from Marcus Clarke to Mary Fortune, Rosa Praed and Miles Franklin, not only works for the purposes of Wenz's fiction, but the trope of English dress and manners being out of place in Australia still resonates with the contemporary reader. In David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter*, set just before the First World War, Ashley Crowther, returning from many years in Europe,

might have passed for an English gentleman. He spoke like one; he wore the clothes – he was much addicted to waistcoats and watch-chains, an affectation he might have to give up (8).

The striking similarity between these passages, written seventy-five years apart, indicates that plainness of speech and manner as essentially Australian characteristics continues to be an entrenched assumption. Certainly, Wenz's fiction imagines a landscape where affectation does not belong, allowing his work to fit easily into the genre of bush literature and demonstrating his awareness of how Australians see themselves. Nevertheless, for Wenz the European, the French provincial bourgeois, the simple life was a philosophical question, rather than one of national identity. In a story not published until 1990, "Lone Joe" (Wenz, *Diary* 134), the main character despises all forms of humanity, has sailed the world, claims one port is as good as the next, chooses Adelaide at random as the place to abandon life at sea, and settles down in an isolated prospector's hut in the bush. In describing Joe's lifestyle Wenz alludes explicitly to Diogenes of Sinope, the Cynic philosopher whose asceticism, closely connected with Stoicism, rejected social customs and manners as decadent and promoted an ethical existence through living a simple life in tune with nature, and was associated with the first use of the term "cosmopolitanism", which entailed rejecting as unnatural the assumption that an individual's identity be limited to association with a single state. Diogenes, then, provided Wenz with a philosophical nexus between unaffected manners and cosmopolitanism, and his representation of bush life became the site where this could be written onto the Australian landscape.

Wenz the traveller spent his life passing through boundaries and his work explores the capacity of human-created boundaries to be at once confining and permeable. In *The Coral Garden* two lovers first meet across a garden hedge and fall in love sitting on a sea wall at the edge of a garden bordering Sydney Harbour. On their honeymoon they pass through the heads and sail north, crossing the tropic to a coral island paradise, which is disturbed by an escaped convict from New Caledonia; an intruder speaking a foreign language, who has transgressed the law and escaped his confinement. For Wenz, boundaries both bring people together and tear them apart. In "La Peur" ("Fear") (Wenz, *Choses* 38) a caricature of an aristocratic German officer settles into a well-appointed French château where, surrounded by familiar comforts, he lives as if at home and yet dies from fear of ghosts. He is at home, though imperfectly, on both sides of shifting frontiers. In "A la campagne" ("In the Countryside") (Wenz, *Choses* 55), located in Champagne at the very moment of invasion, when boundaries are at their most fluid, a French Red Cross ambulance driver is forced to work for the invaders. While searching farms for milk for the wounded he finds his own home has been occupied, but the good champagne is safe, and he takes a drunken German prisoner, confined in a stable, within the otherwise enemy-occupied territory. Boundaries exist but they are passable, impermanent and ambiguous. They also demarcate identity, yet Wenz explores the fluidity of and his own ambivalence towards cultural, linguistic and geographical identity. He wrote in Australia in French for French readers. He published under the pseudonym, "Paul Warrego", later reverting to his own name. The pseudonym served

both to establish a connection with Australia and to establish an identity in France as an antipodean writer of exotic fiction. He wrote *Diary of a New Chum* in English which, written by a Frenchman in Australia for an Australian readership, has a first person narrator who is an Englishman, a new chum gaining colonial experience on a sheep station; and beneath these layers of false identity lies a chronicle of the French author's own lived experience as a jackeroo. Wenz was either unclear about where he would find his readership, or he felt that being published in Australia gave him authenticity in France. Whatever the motivation, he tested the water on both sides of cultural, linguistic and geographical boundaries, simultaneously challenging their significance.

The second edition of *Under the Southern Cross* was published as *Australian Stories*, using the original subtitle as the title. Wenz claimed that the original title had already been taken, although the change was probably because the Southern Cross did not identify Australia for French readers. Changing names and titles, and constant travel indicate restlessness and searching for identity. Whatever he felt about his own identity, Wenz sought out adventurers and adventure writers; those who refused to be restricted by boundaries, such as the Antarctic explorer Roald Amundsen, the aviator Lawrence Hargrave and writers such as Jack London and Joseph Conrad. He eventually had his own translation of London's *Love of Life* published, as *L'Amour de la vie*, by Gaston Gallimard, who was, along with Gide, one of the founders of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, which published some of Wenz's early stories, and which, rejecting the decadence of romanticism and symbolism, sought to revitalise French literature, admiring what they regarded as the "masculine" strength of Anglo-Saxon culture.

In order to evaluate how Wenz's work was received in France it will be necessary to determine the standing of his various publishers. Wenz was associated with at least eight publishing houses and periodicals suggesting that his work may not have always been readily publishable in France. Before the First World War *L'Illustration*, which published a dozen of the twenty-eight stories that eventually appeared in Wenz's first two collections, had a circulation of up to 80,000 and, famous for its engravings, was the first French publication to exploit photography. It dealt with political and society events, social and technological change, as well as the exotic and even sensational. Though not exactly a literary magazine, it was a high quality publication with a bourgeois readership, and the technologies of engraving and photography made it relatively expensive. Another indication of Wenz's position in the French publishing market comes from evaluating other writers listed in the back endpapers of his novels advertising other works from the same publishers, and other writers appearing in issues of *La Revue de Paris*. Looking at these lists together, the non-English names are mostly unfamiliar to English-speakers except for Anatole France and Anton Chekov, clearly canonical authors. The literary standing of other authors remains to be established, although a sample of their titles includes: *The Palms of Marrakech*, *Helen in Old Age*, *A Peep Inside the Harem*, and *In the Garden of Feminism* (which may not live up to its title by today's standards), and confirms that Wenz was positioned with writers of exotic adventure. An article on "public and private life" in the United States positions him also with writers on serious topics and, together with works in translation from English by Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling and Oscar Wilde, demonstrates the interest of the French reading public in English-speaking culture.

Wenz's early publications received comments in the *Bulletin* by A. G. Stephens, J. J. Quinn and others, and Nettie Palmer and Miles Franklin later wrote approvingly of his work, clearly accepting him as an authentic Australian writer. Palmer and Franklin promoted the idea of an Australian national literature, insisting that Australians should write about Australian subjects and, paradoxically given Wenz's philosophical position and transnational status, rejecting the accepted view that good literature should be cosmopolitan. Their attitude reflects Johann Herder's claim that a national literature is

essential for a national identity. Although Pascale Casanova argues that the rise of nationalism was a direct challenge to the position of France as the leader in matters of aesthetics, the attitude of Palmer and Franklin suggests an assumption that France nevertheless retained something of its pre-Herderian prestige after being deposed by the rhizomic proliferation of national literatures, so that literary attention by a Frenchman was taken by them as a compliment towards an emerging national literature, which they considered bush literature to be. Certainly, commentaries by Australians on works in French signal the reviewers' transcultural credentials and knowledge of the prestigious French language, admittedly more widespread in earlier times but nevertheless a sign of education and culture. In their correspondence with Wenz, Australians explicitly defer to France as a place of superior culture, conforming to Australian conventions of situating themselves at the inferior end of the cultural spectrum. This seems to explain why, even though Wenz's English was perfect, Australian writers and academics often used French when writing to him. A. R. Chisholm's French was fastidiously correct, if convoluted, Brennan's was almost faultless and Franklin peppered her letters with *monsieur* and *madame* (see selected correspondence in Wenz, *Diary*). Palmer commented in the *Bulletin* in 1929 that in reading Wenz Australians can discover how the French see them but, as John West-Sooby points out, most Australians cannot discover this from a book in French (65–75). Clearly, then, Wenz's significance lay not in Australians discovering what the French thought of them, but in delighting that a Frenchman thought of Australians at all.

Wenz met Brennan in Sydney in September 1912 at a dinner with the bohemian circle of writers and artists, the Casuals, and described him to Gide as "a small, comical, ugly Irishman who knows all that is being written in France" and who had read virtually all of Gide's works (Wenz, *Diary* 151). In 1931 Brennan wrote to Wenz from Potts Point offering him a book of poems, regretting that he could not afford to present him with one as a gift, but proposing a range of deals:

(a) signed copy: one guinea

(b) signed copy with owner's name written in, and corrections (two letters misprinted and two verses omitted by oversight in copy sent to press): one guinea & a half.

(c) same as (b) but containing an autographed unpublished poem, (a different one in each, which limits the number of copies saleable, as there are very few *inédits* in such a state – at present – as to satisfy the author): two guineas (167).

Wenz chose the deluxe version, which is now in the Mitchell Library, and contains the handwritten poem, "You the one woman who could have me all". Chisholm lists it in *The Verse of Christopher Brennan*, under "Poems hitherto uncollected". The versions are all but identical. In his notes Chisholm comments:

The text here used, dated November 1925, was kindly communicated by Dr Mackaness. J.J.Q[uinn] maintained that the poem had already been sent to Brereton about July of the same year. Published in *New Triad*, 1st April 1928 (272).

It seems, therefore, that Wenz may not quite have got his money's worth out of Brennan, although his motivation was no doubt altruistic as he often supported writers in financial difficulties.

In 1948 one of the first two PhDs awarded in Australia, and the first awarded to a woman, was by Melbourne University for a thesis on Paul Wenz by Erica Woolf, which has a historical perspective and, curiously, treats Wenz's fiction as primary source material. Certainly, Wenz draws on his lived experience for his narratives, particularly in *Diary of a New Chum*, but *Il était une fois un gosse*, which Woolf reads as reliable fact, is an almost postmodern slippery pastiche of autobiography, fiction, fairytale and meditation on the nature of memory. Nevertheless, she draws from it the entirely plausible conclusion that Wenz's extreme height (six feet seven inches) caused his excessive shyness and accounts for his abandoning the affectations of French bourgeois society for the quiet life of the bush.

In 1990 Angus and Robertson published an edition of Wenz's 1908 novella as *Diary of a New Chum and Other Lost Stories*, edited and with an introduction by Maurice Blackman with the participation of French scholar Jean-Paul Delamotte, a preface by Frank Moorhouse, and translations, by Margaret Whitlam and others, of several short stories. Blackman has published articles on Wenz and his writing, as have John West-Sooby and Bruce Bennett. Blackman notes that Wenz "spoke with an Australian voice" (Wenz, *Diary* 150), speaking as "someone who is simultaneously at home and yet 'alien'" (151), emphasising the transcultural aspect of his writing. Frank Moorhouse notes that

even though Wenz was from another culture he seems to have been inescapably enfolded in the Australian bush mythology. His stories and characters are so familiar because they are fully within the conventions of the bush story. It showed me how strong the conventions were – how they determined what literature could "see" and what was not seen, the boundaries of perception (3–4).

Not only has Wenz, a Frenchman, been able to embrace the conventions of Australian bush literature, but he has come under the spell of all that has influenced that literature, from the historical and social conditions to literary influences, and become a full participant in the workings of Australian culture and the construction of Australian identity.

Wenz's work demonstrates that cultures other than English contributed to Australian literature long before the acknowledgment of multiculturalism became official policy. Blackman suggests that "he could be seen as an early example of what is now called a multicultural writer (151)." However, his work is not multicultural in the sense that the term is used today because it is not in the representation of his own native culture, or of the experiences of French people, in an Australian context that Wenz's contribution is significant, but in his representation of a central icon of Anglo-Australian culture: the bush. That a Frenchman should so perfectly embrace the style of writing from the period that many Anglo-Australians regard as the cradle of their culture unsettles received notions of identity and suggests that there may not necessarily be anything particularly Anglo or unique about the characteristics that came to be thought of as essentially Australian.

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