Je Suis Australienne
Remarkable Women in France, 1880-1945

Rosemary Lancaster

University of Western Australia Press
First published in 2008 by
University of Western Australia Press
Crawley, Western Australia 6009
www.uwapress.uwa.edu.au

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

Copyright © Rosemary Lancaster 2008
The moral right of the author has been asserted.

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:
Lancaster, Rosemary.
   Je suis australienne : remarkable women in France,
   1880–1945 / author, Rosemary Lancaster.

   Includes index.
   Bibliography.
   ISBN 978 1 921401 13 8 (pbk.)

   Australians–Travel–France.
   Women travelers–France.

910.82

Cover: Jupiterimages
Editor: Linda Martin
Designed by Anna Maley-Fadgyas
Typeset in Goudy Oldstyle by Brown Cow Design
Printed by McPherson's Printing Group
To Charles
Certain people have encouraged and supported me in different ways while I have been writing this book. I am especially grateful to Jenny Gregory of the University of Western Australia for her initial enthusiasm; Kate McLeod of UWA Press for advice and Linda Martin, also of UWA Press, for her meticulous editing; my colleagues in the School of Humanities at the University of Western Australia for several opportunities to give seminars on my work; the Friends of the Library of UWA for inviting me to present a paper; Trea Wiltshire who wrote an interesting article on my research into World War I Australian nurses in Uniview at UWA; and Patricia Clarke, who pointed me to her collected newspaper cuttings regarding Tasma, housed in the National Library of Australia. I am particularly grateful to Professor Marc Serge Rivière of the University of Limerick and Dr Judy White of the University of Sydney for facilitating access to materials relevant to Daisy White. My thanks go to my friends Jean-Claude and Bernadette Plot for taking photographs in Paris and to Roy and Sylvia Swann for inviting me to Boarmans, Beaulieu, and allowing me to photograph their house. April Williams of Auchonvillers was most informative when I visited the Somme while I was planning the chapter on Australian nurses.

The collection of unpublished nurses’ dairies and letters held by the Australian War Memorial is an invaluable resource which I used extensively
in writing the chapter on the nurses. In some cases I have been unable to ascertain the existence of copyright for these. Any holders of copyright of the materials I have cited are invited to contact me so that I can make acknowledgement.

I have acknowledged those organisations which have allowed me to use images from works in their care in the captions to the illustrations and I thank their personnel: the staffs of the Research Centre of the Australian War Memorial; of the Manuscripts Room of the National Library of Australia; of the Battye Library, Perth; of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; and Hudson Doyle of Photolibrary Pty Ltd.

My sons Simon, Julian and Ivan have willingly helped me in preparing the bibliography, maps and images. My husband Charles has given me loyal support throughout, listening to my ideas, offering helpful criticism and reading the manuscript with loving attention.
What heaven to be in Paris, to be young...every day after we’d dunked our brioches in our bowls of chocolate, we sallied down to the foyer [...] then out] to explore Paris. It was not spring, the chestnuts up the Champs-Elysées were bare — but it was still the most beautiful and romantic city in the world and has always remained so to me.¹

These words, spoken by the Australian Eugénie Louise McNeil (née Delarue) in her declining years, recall her first impressions of Paris the day she stepped onto its loveliest avenue in 1902. She was sixteen and was accompanied by her seventeen-year-old sister, Lydia Victorine. They were glad to be escorted across the Channel by the four gallant Canadian officers they had met on the ship during the six-week trip from Sydney to England.² In Paris, they all went directly to Trocadéro, which had so impressed their father during the 1878 World Fair, then on to Les Invalides to inspect Napoleon’s tomb.³ In subsequent days they were whisked off to two cafés chantants by the ‘boys’, where they ‘may well have seen Yvette Guilbert’ (the Belle Epoque’s raunchiest chanteuse),⁴ and they traced out the route Charlotte Corday supposedly took in order to stab the French Revolution’s radical Marat in his bath in 1793.⁵

Eugénie and Lydia had stronger family reasons for visiting France than most of the Australian women travellers this book describes. Their
grandfather was a Frenchman from Normandy who settled in Australia in the 1840s, and their father, though Australian born, was strongly mindful of his origins. Their house was filled with ‘an odd assortment of books and mementos’; six ‘four enormous views of Paris’ in the 1870s, depicting the new boulevards Haussmann had designed; a naughty stereoscopic peep-show their grandfather had pocketed; Perrault’s fairy tales... seven

But in many ways, the Delarue sisters were like most other nineteenth-century middle-class Australian girls. Although they did not attend school in their early years (their mother deemed the nearby state school ‘unsuitable’), they did get a smattering of French from their governesses, one of whom, for all she taught them very little, was a genuine French ‘Mam’selle’. They admired the illustrated French recipes Mrs Beeton included in her Book of Household Management, eight and they were excited when they were invited by friends of the family to be ‘finished’ in a French school in Pau at the foot of the Pyrenees.

While Eugénie came from French stock, the excitement she elicits in going abroad was no less than that of the other young Australian women whose adventures this book records. Like them, she was Australian born and could only imagine through literature and others’ accounts what lay on the other side of the world, hoping to steep herself in a culture she had been brought up to distantly admire. The women whose stories follow travelled for different reasons and came from different backgrounds, each fulfilling her mission in a surprisingly individual way. But all held a vision of France and of Paris well before they left Australian shores. And – like the impressionable, curious Eugénie – all hoped that their foreign encounter would change their lives.

The phenomenon of Australian women’s travel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is unique and has a special place in the history of Australians’ awareness of their identity in the world. Before 1950 and Australia’s encouragement of immigration, first-hand experience of Europe was largely limited to books, magazines and newspapers. Early on, travel was expensive, especially for women, who usually had to be financially supported and were expected to be chaperoned. Many could not travel because of family concern for their safety or a lack of means; unmarried women were typically expected to remain as carers in the parental home. Nevertheless, there are records of women who ventured abroad, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. nine Some went to visit relatives, some to acquire education and refinement and
to improve their marriage prospects on the return home. Others, more intrepid – writers, artists, adventurers – hoped to acquire independence or escape socially restrictive feminine roles. Yet others volunteered to serve their country in war.

In the nineteenth and even the early twentieth century white Australia was a more Eurocentric country than it is today. From its colonial periphery, Europe was looked upon as the site of birth, of ancestry, of friends, of history, of religious identity. One typically referred to Britain and Ireland as ‘Home’ and Europe as ‘the Old World’; it was that desirable, distant ‘other’ to which one hoped to return, if but for a visit, to authenticate one’s roots and to recover the heritage from which one was removed. Women who travelled back to the centre often hoped to lose their Australian accent (as did at least two of the women in this book, Stella Bowen and Christina Stead). 10 Most believed they would benefit socially and intellectually from the experiences their travels would provide. Europe beckoned as the cradle of civilisation, of cultural capital, of origin, of traditional values, of refined habits, of sophisticated societies, of democracy, of political power. While those distinctions were primarily attributed to Britain, even after 1901 when Australia ceased to be a colony of the British Empire, so they were also, to a degree, to France, Europe’s geographical and cultural heartland. Paris, especially, was revered from afar: for its historic sites and graceful buildings, its theatres and concert halls, its fashion houses, the literary giants and thinkers it had produced, the art it continued to spawn. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century the Grand Tour, once a European male prerogative, had become a coveted middle-class ideal.11 France became a major Australian travel destination and Paris the jewel in the crown – what the Australian painter Stella Bowen called the ‘nerve-centre of the arts’ in the 1920s, and the writer Christina Stead, in the 1930s, ‘a pearl of delicacy, brilliance and suavity’ – ‘not so much the French capital as the capital of the modern world’.12

The six chapters of this book look to a sample of extraordinary women who travelled to France at different historical moments and who formulated their impressions – in fiction, diaries, letters, autobiographies – between 1880 and 1945. It was a fecund time in the development of Australian women’s lives. As travellers they were challenged to adapt to new environments in a world of changing attitudes to feminine education, professionalism and sexuality.11 Some found themselves in
the thick of new European artistic developments; others in the theatres of devastating world wars; all bonded irrevocably with the France they visited; some never returned.

Set alongside one another these women’s stories speak worlds. Their personalities, their lives, the fictional characters they created, the personas they constructed, the impressionistic reports they sent home reveal (or conceal) their preconceptions, opinions, mind-sets, intolerances, openness and astonishment vis-à-vis a culture that was not theirs. France, its history, its geography, its art and literature came to be imprinted on their feminine minds. Their stories lead us to the places that inspired their writings and transformed their successive lives: a nineteenth-century Parisian finishing school; the music halls of the Belle Epoque; the decimated landscapes of the Somme in World War I; the picturesque Left Bank studios and cafés of the ‘crazy’ 1920s; the turbulent world of Parisian high finance during the Depression of the 1930s; German-occupied France, which the Resisters of World War II fought to free. Such landscapes, exotic to any foreigner, are invested with fresh significance when recorded by feminine pens. These are narratives that tell us as much about a writer’s quest for identity and the challenges of foreign encounter as they do about France’s cultural worth and historical fame; personally inflected, they register experiences of cultural initiation, discovery, alienation, displacement, misfortune and joy. The chronological arrangement of this book is intended to serve two ends: to preserve the integrity of each woman’s endeavour, located in discrete moments in French time and on French soil; to offer an overall picture from the corpus they comprise of Australian women’s changing sense of self and place, sharpened not in Australia, but, significantly, abroad.
Mlle Grant and I have passed the day at Paris. We shopped a little in the morning, lunched at Chiboust’s and at 12.30 were at the Exhibition. We spent two hours among the pictures. The French pictures are very pretty. There were three splendid Benjamin Constins – two scenes in the harem, and a portrait. I love his painting; the colours are so rich, and warm and harmonious that it gladdens my heart to look at them; he heaps up jewels, oriental stuffs and carpets, marble steps, sunny windows; and amongst all these glowing tints sweet Eastern faces with broad low brows and delicately cut features, rounded arms and jewelled ankles...

... I could live in a picture gallery.

When the Australian Daisy White entered these remarks in her diary she was eighteen and had just spent two unsettled years boarding with her young sister Dorothy at a finishing school in Paris’s outskirts. From what she called her foreign ‘exile’ she missed the friendship of her two older sisters and the familiarity of home. But her words reveal a depth of artistic appreciation she may not have acquired had she not been sent abroad. The exhibition to which she alludes was none other than that of the 1889 World Fair that saw the Eiffel Tower opened to her wonderment
and that of the world; the Paris she discovered on school trips was that of art galleries and museums, of picturesque gardens, of churches and monuments, of theatres, cafés and shops. Whatever reservations Daisy had about her school, and they were many, she reports on the occasion of her eighteenth birthday: ‘These last two years have been the most eventful of my life’. That fact is borne out by the astute self-revelations and social observations her diary accumulates.

Daisy was sixteen and Dorothy fourteen when they left Sydney in 1887. The diary of what followed, covering the years 1887–89, is an historical jewel and rare document: such is the detail, the gusto, the wit and insight with which it is told, it gives us a unique entry into the education, times and mind-set of a nineteenth-century Australian schoolgirl abroad. Full of verve and introspections, of rich perceptions, of adolescent grudges and high hopes, it traces Daisy’s school life as a near-daily unfolding of cultural discovery, tempered by boarding-house ritual and classroom grind. In the two years of her Parisian stay Daisy changed from being a reluctant schoolgirl into an accomplished woman, fluent in French and, in her opinion, rather wiser than when she set sail.

Daisy was born Margaret Isabella White on 22 March 1871 in the Upper Hunter Valley near the town of Denham in New South Wales. Her father, Henry Charles White, a wealthy pastoralist, made his fortune breeding stud cattle and sheep in the area, gradually moving with his wife Isabella and their six children to larger homesteads and estates. They are places Daisy remembers with deep affection in her diary, just as she does her elder sisters, Emily and Cecily, who were not educated abroad. Two years after Daisy’s mother died in childbirth in 1875 Henry Charles married Mary Helen Macmillan, a young woman of ‘twenty and half his age’.6 It was not a match to which Daisy warmed. She felt she and Dorothy had been sent abroad to get them out of the way as Helen’s children were born. On this her diary is unforgiving and her ‘Mama’ is everywhere ungenerously portrayed. Whatever the case, it does seem surprising that while the parents accompanied the girls to Paris, travelling the three-month journey from Australia in the Natal via the Suez Canal, they did not stay to settle them in; nor, it appears, was their stepmother’s correspondence delivered with the kindliness and frequency one might have expected to charges so young and naïve.

In fact, Daisy’s parents’ educational decisions may not have been as selfishly conceived as she supposed. Middle-class families were strongly in
favour of extending their children’s formation by having them ‘polished’ abroad. Desirably, middle-class Australian boys were sent to England; girls to the Continent, preferably, to acquire refinement and poise. In the case of the latter France was considered ideal. Unlike Latin and Greek, French was considered a soft, romantic ‘girls’ language’, and the ability to recite a little French literature was considered a proper accompaniment to ‘feminine’ attributes like being able to play the piano, sing, dance and draw. All the top Australian girls’ academies taught French, notably Sydney’s Ivy League Kambala, Normanhurst and Abbotsleigh.7 On top of this, doing the Grand Tour had huge middle-class appeal. Daisy may have only got to Paris and the chateaux of the Loire during her European stay, but both were high on the agenda of having one’s children initiated in those sights (and sites), which were seen from remote Australia as hallowed by history, tradition and the sheer fashionableness middle-class travel had. Pick up a newspaper or magazine in Australia in Daisy’s time – Weigel’s Journal of Fashion, The Australasian, the Daily Telegraph – and you were bound to read an article on what hat to wear for the season, on a performance at the Opéra, on a play showing at the Théâtre Français.8 Go there with your Baedeker or Cook travel guides in hand and you were ready to be immersed in a manner that was expected to enhance your social status back home, all the more so if you were armed with intriguing stories, concert programs, smart clothes and photographs.9

Daisy, it appears, cared little for the social aspirations of girls of her class and age, but clearly she took advantage of being in Paris, at a school that, despite its emphasis on feminine ‘accomplishment’, enabled her to read, learn and experience great literature and art. When she returned to Australia, as we know she did – though we do not know the exact date – she must have been very different from the ‘girl from the bush’ she was when she left home. We know little of how she put her fresh knowledge to good use. What we do know is that she died of cardiac failure in Queensland, aged thirty-two.

****

Les Ruches, Daisy’s school, situated some fifty-five kilometres from Paris, was typical of the kind of lay private finishing school that thrived in the late nineteenth century in and around the capital in response to popular foreign demand. Founded in 1863, it had moved twice by Daisy’s time
and expanded from a primary to a predominantly secondary school, advertising itself as ‘a boarding school offering high French culture to young foreign girls’, although wealthy girls from the Fontainebleau region could, and did, attend. Moreover, one can surmise the school’s international reputation, given that it attracted students of the calibre of the American Nathalie Barney, the English Dorothy Bussy and the Romanian Elena Vacarescu, all later to become figures of literary renown. Daisy’s document confirms that in her time the clientele was overwhelmingly American – spoilt and brash, in her opinion – and that it included British and European girls. Only one other Australian student appears to have arrived during her stay. The transience of the population of Les Ruches, as young girls came and went, meant, however, that both Daisy and Dorothy made few close friends.

Whatever Daisy’s stepmother’s private motivations, her social ambitions clearly concurred with contemporary opinion about educational priorities and the middle-class girl’s destiny. Daisy confides early in her diary that she fears a brewing lecture from her ‘Ma’ on the need to become a ‘demoiselle’; elsewhere she balks at the thought of being ‘dragged out to balls and pic-nics and tennis parties’ on her return home. ‘I got a letter from Mama yesterday evening’, she notes ruefully as early as 5 October 1887. ‘She gave me a little sermon on the subject of entertaining people and going into society.’ Then, at the thought of the outcome: ‘I shall be hawked and vended from one place to another, to be sold at last to some rich old man, like a horse in the market with a halter round his neck’. Daisy’s social expectations, peppering the narrative, not without the prick of adolescent fervour, consistently run against the contemporary grain.

Information on Daisy’s Australian education is scant indeed. Little exists outside what her diary tells us, except for a few details, though enough can be gleaned from the latter to suggest a privileged educational background that would have been complemented rather than transformed abroad. Besides, the sheer eloquence of Daisy’s writing, apart from her hearty schoolgirl relish for a little provocative slang, betrays a competent mastery of English, as well as an intelligent knowledge of music, painting and the English literary canon. Reference is made to an Australian private school run by a Miss Macauley; moreover, she appears to have boarded young, for she pities Les Ruches’s ‘two poor little Merriams’, especially the younger, aged nine: ‘just my age when first I went to school’, she
recalls. More specifically, Daisy remarks upon the lessons she learnt and liked at Shirley School, where physical geography, physics and chemistry, and nature ‘under all forms’ were, in her opinion, ‘some of the most delightful studies ever to charm a student’, unlike, she adds, their boring equivalent in Les Ruches’s program. There, arithmetic is dismissed as ‘simply insupportable’, chemistry as ‘a little more bearable’, and physics as ‘simply beastly, drier than bone-dust, and pretty hard to understand’, though further into the diary she praises a new chemistry teacher, who proves to be engaging and great fun. ‘Ah!’, she proclaims with a nostalgia that may have coloured her point of view, ‘for the change “twixt now and then” as the poet saith’. In contrast, Daisy’s early love of the arts was to be markedly enhanced overseas.

Feminine ‘finish’ in nineteenth-century Australia was not only attainable through travel and schooling abroad. It was entrenched in a middle-class educational system based on ideological principles imported from Britain as early as settlement, and grounded in longstanding notions of a woman’s intellectual inferiority, domestic duty and moral role. The perceived distinction between male and female societal purpose in Anglo-Saxon thinking had been deeply influenced by eighteenth-century French Enlightenment theories that, while opening up debate on human liberties, nonetheless propounded male social and intellectual superiority. Rousseau’s Émile (1762), a vehicle for rationalist liberal thought and revisionist educational theory, cast men as society’s leaders and shapers, and women – deemed physically weak and intellectually inferior – as a husband’s submissive and supportive helpmate. Such ideas, widely circulated in Europe, were espoused by the Church (both Protestant and Catholic) in so far as they resonated with its patriarchal teachings and moral codes. For the Church a woman’s place was unquestionably in the home. She was her husband’s property, the selfless custodian of his family and the moral guarantor of his children’s welfare: pious, chaste and modest in character; dutiful in the exercise of her marital and maternal responsibilities; confined in her activities and interests to the private domain. It was inevitable that such ideals would be transmitted into girls’ education, initially predominantly run by church bodies, then later – still within a morally hidebound Victorian society – by the private venture school.

For Marjorie Theobald, the extent to which nineteenth-century Australian girls’ education was moulded by the Victorian legacy was
embodied in the moral opinions of Bishop Charles Perry, one of its hard-line spokesmen. Perry, she argues, may have missed his opportunity to oppose the entrance of women into the University of Melbourne in 1872, but his vituperative defence of his position in the Argus (21 June 1872) summed up a prevailing nineteenth-century view that women, by biological determination, did not have the means to match the intellectual rigour, creativity and inductive reasoning powers of men. Their brain and body, smaller, weaker, more delicate in structure, were seemingly differently ordained. On these premisses he posited the sort of intellectual subjects women might adequately and happily pursue: history, the languages, literature, a little algebra and geography, the arts – but not, for fear of wearying them – the intellectually demanding languages (Greek and Latin), nor pure mathematics, politics, the sciences, indeed anything requiring critical scholarship, philosophical speculation or cognitive flexibility. While Perry avoided alluding to feminine inferiority, speaking, rather, in terms of the sexes’ ‘complementarity’, insofar as his ideas reflected those of much early Victorian thinking, their implications in relation to the elaboration of girls’ education must be considered huge.

Of course, the Victorian middle-class, beyond any religious ideals it upheld, fostered other ingrained notions of what women should properly do. From within a burgeoning capitalist society, economically and politically governed by men, it not only deepened the divide between gendered roles (a man’s place was at work and in the public sphere, a woman’s destiny, non-professional and non-political, was in the home); it reinforced the principle that a woman’s duty was to complement, rather than compete with his role. She was to give him a private legitimacy and provide an appropriate and personal reflection of his degree of respectability, wealth and standing. In this, women’s so-called ‘accomplishments’ came to be well defined: she should adorn her home with suitable evidence of her husband’s gentility and claim to that great marker of social position: cultivation. Refinement and grace had to be seen. The accomplished woman could sing, play the piano, entertain around the table, engage in polite conversation, exhibit her good taste in dress, manners, reading matter, home decoration and physical mien. These ideals were coveted in middle-class Australia, even in outback locations, where the better homestead possessed proper middle class accoutrements (a piano, good furniture, a well-stocked kitchen...) with, desirably, domestic help and a
governess to hand; women aspired to refinement in the management of their children and the home. Education, albeit tailored to gendered societal expectations, was of strong parental concern and in this respect it is not surprising that Daisy’s family took effective, one might argue undue, measures to have her well schooled at home and abroad.

The ambition of middle-class Australian families to turn out well-groomed girls was strongly reflected in the educational institutes they patronised and in the educational programs they esteemed. By the middle of the nineteenth century educating one’s children at home was no longer the only option. As the century proceeded, religious and private schools suitable for the formation of ‘young ladies’ burgeoned and prospered, and at the time of Daisy’s departure for France they were well established in Australia, especially in New South Wales. Even with the passing of the *Public Instruction Act* of 1880, which denied state aid to church schools and heralded the long-awaited opening up of state-funded schools for girls, wealthy families favoured the private girls’ seminary for its elitist reputation, though it was increasingly expected to offer greater intellectual curriculum content as time went on.

The educational philosophy and curriculum of Les Ruches, as far as can be gauged from Daisy’s comments (and copious they are indeed), show much in common with those of the Australian private school and, as such, suggest it would have been a natural extension of the educational matter and feminine training to which one gathers she had previously been exposed. The instruction Australian girls received (as opposed to the academically ‘superior’ instruction given to boys) broadly encompassed two areas of knowledge, each intended to meet different social and educational ends: on the one hand those subjects said to offer a ‘sound’ education (English, literature, composition and grammar, elementary mathematics, history and geography, even elocution and calligraphy); on the other, the accomplishments (music, drawing, and modern languages – of which French was thought the most refined). To these might be added a range of peripheral subjects of accomplishment design: dancing, which Daisy appears to have studied in Australia, needlework, callisthenics, even, to cite more curious examples, the crafts of ornamental painting on glass, crystal baskets and artificial fruits. That Daisy was introduced to the sciences in Australia is a sign of how progressive her school was, for by the 1880s, girls’ education was evolving, with many academies introducing the
‘harder’ sciences, as well as algebra, geometry and Latin.28 In this respect, it will be argued, Les Ruches, based on the British educational system – as were most European finishing schools – was abreast of the times, although in other ways it remained firmly committed to accomplishment ideals.29

If Les Ruches was sympathetic to the educational background and aspirations of its mainly foreign students, in many ways it operated like any other chic private Parisian school, privileged in its proximity to the capital and the curriculum possibilities that offered, yet traditional enough in school governance to reflect standard practice in the organisation of boarding girls. All Les Ruches’s live-in teachers were women – unmarried, as far as we can tell from Daisy’s diary, but for one. And most, it appears, were young. When Daisy arrived the school was run by a Mlle Catherine Dussaut, a qualified primary school teacher, who died in mysterious circumstances in June 1887 (the anniversary of her death, involving the visit of students and teachers to her grave-side, is mentioned in two diary entries of June 1888 and 1889). Her replacement, a Mlle Gertude Jones, considered by Daisy as ‘almost a girl...and too young and inexperienced to be looked up to as the directress’,30 may have been the official headmistress, but in practice it was the older Mme Geisler and the short-tempered, sharper Mlle Lainé who took command. Teachers of English, German and Italian were all native speakers, recruited from their countries of origin, although all other subjects were conducted in French, an arrangement within which Daisy, given her excellent results, appears to have thrived.31 All visiting teachers were men who came from Paris, contracted, as was French practice, as specialists in their field – at least one Daisy mentions had his licence en droit (Bachelor of Law); another was sitting his agrégation, the highest diploma for secondary teaching available at the time to men.32 It is unlikely that the mistresses themselves were as well qualified.33 The training of women teachers remained poor in France until the 1880s. At most they would have had a licence de Sèvres, which led to a simplified version of the men’s agrégation, or else have passed through the prestigious women’s Ecole de Sèvres, opened in 1881. Quite likely many only had a certificat d’institutrice (primary school teaching certificate) or a standard brevet d’aptitude (aptitude diploma). Some may have had little more than the baccalauréat, perhaps no official teaching qualification at all.34 The school itself was not large, boarding some thirty students on Daisy’s count on 5 January 1889,35 although this
would have been a variable number, given the tendency for students to come and go.

Like many private schools, Les Ruches exuded an aura of prosperity appropriate to the social standing of its clientele, though, if Daisy is right in considering it ‘pretty hard up for tin’, it may have begun to feel the pinch of competition as private schools proliferated towards the end of the century – a fact that probably precipitated its closure in 1914. By Daisy’s time the school was well located on what is now the Avenue Franklin Roosevelt in Avon, a commune adjoining Fontainebleau. The building itself, still standing today, bears all the marks of a well-to-do French mansion with its large brick exterior, classically decorated windows, steeply gabled roofs, ample garden and high-grilled gate and walls. Within, it was very likely furnished in the manner of other finishing schools. The prospectus of the contemporaneous Holy Child Jesus academy at Neuilly-sur-Seine depicts a gracious building externally almost identical to Les Ruches with, additionally, photos of its pleasant winter garden, elegant dining-room, panelled library and students’ ‘salon’, all furnished in the style of a stately home. Daisy refers to Les Ruches’s well-stocked library, to its salle d’étude, used for concerts, reunions and plays, to lavish dinners held on festive occasions, to a fine garden and croquet lawn. Spartan and cold her bedroom may have been, but each girl had her own:

I have a little room alone in the second storey, the third room from the end on the right-hand side, looking out onto the street. There is a huge ward-robe in the wall with sliding brown wood panels, a little marble-topped wash-stand with a big draw [sic] and a looking-glass above it, a bed, a three-shelved shelf, a pedestal, and a chest of drawers with six drawers: there is lots of room for me and all my belongings; the wall-paper is pretty, big pale pink squares with a green dado four feet high.

Bedrooms were strictly not to be entered by others, and, architecturally, Les Ruches strikes as having been built to keep girls safely within its confines.

Although it initially lagged behind the English system in achieving pedagogic innovation, secondary girls’ education in France bore much in common with its Anglo-Saxon counterpart by the 1880s and beyond. On the other hand, reform in France was slow and often vigorously resisted,
largely because girls’ schooling, until the latter years of the century, was predominantly the domain of the Catholic Church, and convent schools maintained conservative attitudes to a girl’s destiny, ideally to be piously centred and domestically contained. Concomitant with such notions, France shared with England, and indeed with Europe, the belief in women’s intellectual inferiority and the importance of men’s education for societal progress and cohesion. Well into the century the French curriculum for girls, even more than its Anglo-Saxon counterpart, was typically made up of elementary academic subjects and the *arts d’agréments* (accomplishments).

Educational reform in French girls’ secondary schooling, if only gradually implemented, was much boosted by the Republican laws of the 1880s. Committed to the secularisation of the state, Republicanism sought to wrest educational control from the Church and to redefine women’s societal role: ideally it was to transform them into active members of society and rightful (if belatedly served) recipients of the Napoleonic *Code civil*, while educating them to be ‘the intellectual companions of their husbands’. Instantaneous the materialisation of such ideals was not, but their effects on girls’ educational curricula were translated, if not into the educational institutes of poorer communities, which could rarely attract the requisite municipal funding, then certainly into those of the wealthier regions (like Paris), and in the privately funded school. In this, Daisy’s school, with its remarkably heavy and varied program, not only bears the mark of the English system, but also that of France’s more educationally progressive girls’ schools. Besides the usual ‘feminine’ subjects, Les Ruches taught Greek and Roman history (though not Greek language and Latin), chemistry, physics and astronomy. When one considers the addition of the accomplishments, notably drawing, dancing and gymnastics, one is hardly surprised at Daisy’s weary response of 13 October 1887: ‘I am overwhelmed with lessons, having only one hour free during school-time the whole of the week’, to which she adds, concerning the 8.30 pm book-reading: ‘As I... am always very tired, I go to sleep as soon as every one is settled, and slumber profoundly till I go to bed’. Lessons, of which she remarks elsewhere ‘I have a tremendous amount’, filled Saturday mornings, and class play-acting typically led to evening performances and extended school hours.

The French content of much of Daisy’s learning, as well as the
Daisy White: An Accomplished Schoolgirl

discipline required to master it, indicate that, even within the framework of a ‘finishing’ environment, she gained knowledge in areas she would not have encountered in Australia, and that she probably returned home a more accomplished woman than her parents could have dreamt. In the space of just two years she was to become familiar with most of France’s literary giants: Racine, Montaigne, Corneille, La Fontaine, Voltaire, Hugo – standard fare, granted, for the nineteenth-century French schoolgirl, long reared on expurgated versions of the classics, but for a young Australian surely material of unexpected cultural variety and wealth. To her credit, her appreciation appears to have been immense and charitably extends to those teachers (by no means all) who brought their subjects to life. Of M Peyre, the ebullient French literature master, she fondly records:

I’ve just washed my head and have nearly died of laughing (not at my head, be it understood); M. Peyre has been reading us Molière’s Scappin, and seriously speaking, it is enough to provoke a laugh under the ribs of death: I never heard anyone read half as well as he: he is a méridional [from the south of France], very witty, continually making puns, fearfully absent-minded, and the kindest-hearted, most generous gentleman you could wish to see. He gesticulates splendidly, and talks so well with his hands and expression (above all, his eyes), that it is almost as good as seeing the piece [sic] played: he changes his voice and tone of reading in a wonderful way for each character: we have all laughed at him till our jaws ache.

Small wonder she came to say of the theatre: ‘[It] is for me what champagne is for most people. It goes to my head and excites me like a heady wine’.

There is no doubt that the rhythms of French learning at Les Ruches were at times arduous and dull. Like any schoolgirl, Daisy bitterly complains about being overworked, too heavily judged in a class performance, too rushed for a response; a teacher is found too tough or pedantic, an assignment too unfairly assessed. This may have been all the more burdensome in an educative system that placed great store on extensive reading and writing and copious doses of recitation, stylistic imitation and the rote learning of facts. One is indeed struck by the sheer quantity of topics Daisy covered (though we do not know in what
depth): the Punic wars, the *Iliad*, the Peloponnesian War, Richelieu, women in Racine, heroism in Corneille, féodality, Homer, Malherbe. The list is long. Yet the educative system as such is not questioned by Daisy, and academically she rose to the occasion with diligence and flair, a measure of her ability, certainly, but also of the interest she found in subjects whose intrinsic value we, in another century and country, might too readily dismiss. Her conscientiousness is everywhere evident and she repeatedly scored the highest marks in class. When exams loomed she did her best:

We have been having the exams with M. Benoist to-day – French history, Greek history, *Géographie*, and Greek literature. He gave us the questions for each class, and I have passed more than a fortnight over them, never getting up later than 5.30, and going to bed towards eleven p.m. In French history I didn’t want Louis XVI and Turgot: M. Benoist put all the lots into his ‘beau chapeau gris’ [fine, grey hat], and looked round on us offering it, none of the others would draw; so I boldly grabbed the first paper in the hat (with my heart beating double-quick march ‘*dans mon estomac*’ [in my stomach]), and drew – Louis XVI! Those things never happen to anybody else. However, he was very nice, and helped us all most mercifully.53

For Daisy, these exams put M Benoist in ‘a beaming temper’ as they ‘had passed off well’. ‘I had 10 on 10 for the three first questions, and Margot and I had 9 on 10 for the literature’, she adds.54

If Daisy reports on the daily grind of Les Ruches life, where compositions, class presentations and exams inexorably came and went (her diary mapping out, with detailed regularity, a profile of how a school week was arranged), she is quick to point to high moments of pleasure, of school cohesion, of teacher recognition, of scholastic success, betraying not a little of her competitive spirit and the high standards she set herself. One of the pinnacles of achievement at Les Ruches (literally ‘The Beehives’) was to earn the *abeille* [bee] badge,55 awarded not only for academic performance but also for personal effort – in effect, the secular equivalent of the Catholic *croix d’honneur* pinned to the exemplary convent girl’s shoulder to reward progress or good conduct.56 Daisy’s account of her moment of glory registers her excitement, though she writes of other occasions when she felt excluded.
from such overt expressions of feminine solidarity and effusiveness:

To-day is a red letter day in my existence. Mademoiselle Jones gave me the bee this evening. We had some *tableaux vivants* after dinner, then we began dancing, and when I was resting after an infernal tarantella with Olga, all of a sudden I saw Mlle. Jones coming towards me with something in her hand, and I guessed what it was; she fastened it on my breast, and I just flung my arms round her neck and hugged her; the girls all began clapping, and then kissing me all round; I didn’t know who I was kissing or where I was or what I was doing, till I worked my way over to Mme. Geisler and Mlle. Lainé and got settled a bit; then I began dancing again, and we went on like a lot of mad things till Mlle. Jones and Marion began singing a lovely little german operette, and we got up to bed at last at about eleven o’clock. I can hardly believe now that I have got it, my own dear bee.57

Descriptions of school calendar highlights abound in Daisy’s diary and offer rich glimpses of the more privileged aspects of boarding in France. High on the agenda were frequent chaperoned excursions to Paris, undertaken not only because of the city’s convenient location, a mere train ride away from Les Ruches, but also because of the excellent chances it afforded to extend accomplishment. The finishing school was never a replacement for something as educationally ambitious and extravagantly executed as the nineteenth-century Grand Tour, but it typically sought to expose students to the kind of cultural phenomena the Tour prized. In this respect, Les Ruches would have amply satisfied the most exigent parents’ wishes that their daughters’ opportunities for cultural immersion be suitably fulfilled. Daisy’s diary is filled with records of galleries scoured, of monuments viewed, of theatres frequented, of parks, boulevards, shops and gardens toured. An early response to Paris, recorded on 23 September 1887, some five months after she had settled in at school, evokes over four dense pages her whirlwind initiation into the capital’s cultural gems: the Louvre, the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, the Sainte Chapelle, the Panthéon, Napoleon’s tomb at Les Invalides. The entry, remarkable for its attention to detail, is one of many that, together, elicit her unbounded awe at the spectacle of Paris: its historic majesty; its visually pretty appeal. Again, eight months later, on a leafy summer’s day:
Paris is splendid; I never saw the town so lovely before: all along the quais the limes and aspens are in leaf: the boulevards are shaded by beeches and planes, and the Champs-Elysées – well, they beggar all description! Just one great forest of magnificent chestnuts in full bloom, all the way on either side of that lovely drive, right away down to the Arc de Triomphe. The Parisians may well be proud of their city; she sits like the queen of nations on the winding Seine, girt with green woods and fair meadows. It is a joy to be alive in such delicious weather. Where’s the fool who prefers winter, that I may pound him? And to think that we have nearly six months of leaves and life, and no snow!  

Whatever Daisy’s reservations about boarding life (and they are many), Les Ruches provided an introduction to Paris that was by no means culturally slight. She did get to see some of France’s best-loved plays (Ruy Blas, Le Cid, Polyeucte, L’Avare...), and some of Paris’s best actors (Mounet-Sully, Feraudy, Saumary...), and she did take delight in what she saw, registering occasions when, during a performance, she laughed until the tears rolled down her cheeks or tears flowed at the pathos of some tragic figure’s plight. On 8 January 1888:

I did enjoy myself yesterday: We went to the Théâtre Français, the best got-up in Paris, they say, where they speak the purist French and act the best. It was Le Barbier de Séville, by Beaumarchais, and Molière’s Malade imaginaire: this last was the more amusing of the two, and we nearly died laughing at Thomas Diaforus, the doctor’s son and at little Toinette, the sweetest little maid you could imagine. The Barbier was as pretty a piece [sic] as you could wish to see.

If Les Ruches’s agenda was expected to deliver refinement, in Daisy’s case it patently did. Her unfolding diary is a testament of artistic maturation, of a growing pleasure in paintings of various epochs and styles, of the desire to linger over a single portrait, to consider the angle and light of a church corner, to ponder the message of a play – though, apart from the considerable advantage of being in a place where cultural saturation could be had so easily, one is conscious that her evolving appreciation blossomed from talents that were intrinsically hers: an intelligent mind, a sensitive spirit, a receptiveness to beauty, a thirst for knowledge, a curiosity for the new. There is something decidedly genuine and refreshingly spontaneous,
yet seriously aesthetically engaged in her first response to the Vénus de Milo at the Louvre. She had obviously seen it in replication, but her account conveys the excitement of witness and the sensation of roving at leisure over its form; the ability, too, to forge a sudden link between a classical masterpiece and a fragment of English romantic verse:

Of course everyone who respects himself has seen a cast or an engraving of that Venus; but it takes you aback after all: she is divine; that graceful, perfect form, those sloping shoulders, that queenly little head carried as never woman carried it before!

‘A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,
And most divinely fair’

I could have stayed for hours before her: her grace and power are indolent; naturel [sic], she is a lovely lazy, goddess-like creature, and when you watch her lips you half expect to see them open and to hear a deep, musical voice speak to you slowly.

Entertainment at Les Ruches was no less informed by the educational philosophy it embraced. Extra-curricular activities, held in style, thanks, one imagines, to parental largesse (musical soirées, dramatic performances, birthday parties, the celebration of annual festive events), were as much a solid part of the girls’ overall social training as they were a provision for out-of-class amusement and frivolity. Parlour sociability was, after all, a much-prized nineteenth-century middle-class art. The Victorian drawing-room, no less than its European equivalent, was always the 'best' room in the house, furnished to display its finest belongings and to graciously receive and impress guests. Daisy doesn’t describe the salon at Les Ruches in detail, but she gives examples of its use. Here they held their theatricals and concerts with a sense of occasion confirmed by an evening’s ritual unfolding: changing after dinner, putting on costumes, performing, dancing, going to bed late. The play reading, the piano recital, the costumed drama, however amateurishly attacked (some, Daisy notes, were flops!) were in essence dress rehearsals for the social performances of adulthood.

Of course, parlour activities provided girls with moments of real enjoyment and mirth. They were seen and socially sanctioned as occasions when a woman could let down the decorous guard expected of her in a public place. Laughter, self-expression, in fact any form of overt feminine
behaviour, judged unladylike by polite society unless privately expressed, could be given free rein in the right drawing-room circumstance. In this, Victorian England was no different from conservative France. Daisy’s entry of 6 March 1888 is a compelling case in point, for it elicits the pleasure Les Ruches girls took in salon exuberance, and how, accordingly, staff formalities were expressly generously relaxed:

We enjoyed ourselves famously yesterday evening...[After the performance] we danced a farandole, and then began hopping on our own account. In the course of the evening eight of the girls danced a hunting-quadrille, and two of the little ones came forward and sang a little woman duet. We had supper at midnight, and then Pierrot and Pierrette sang the Revue des Ruches, wherein everyone’s little peculiarities were taken off. Dis donc, hein? Incontestablement. Du tout, du tout, du tout – Notez-bien etc. etc. Mlle. Jones gave the materials, and M. Pavie put the[m] into verse and arranged the said verse to the tune of Au clair de la lune. We danced cotillons till half-past two, and then went up to bed. I got up towards nine o’clock this morning, and the result is that I’m half dead. It seems that my costume was a success.

Perhaps no salon activity allowed for more latitude in blurring, while paradoxically preserving, the distinction between diversion and accomplishment than tableaux vivants. Of French origin, but hugely popular with the Victorian middle class, they offered endless opportunities for displaying the ‘arts’ drawing-room society loved best: charm, drama, humour, elegance, grace, style, wit. The recipe was simple, the social function complex. A suitably dressed individual or group would ‘freeze’ in a pose intended to capture the essence of a mood (sadness, joy...), or a scene or identity (historical, mythological, Biblical, the choice was vast), in a manner that both arrested and enchanted an audience. The intention might be moral, decorative, instructive or slight, but, essentially, the whole had to be aesthetically agreeable to watch (all the more so for male viewers, one imagines, when the adorned female body was what was on show).

Judging by Daisy’s account of one such event, artistry may have erred on the side of artlessness, but one cannot deny the merriment it produced:

We have been having tableaux vivants this evening; they weren’t so pretty as those we had for the Carnival. The little ones acted the
Sleeping Beauty first: it was very pretty: Then they had a taking of the veil, not a great success. It appears that I was to have taken part in it, but I didn’t know, and no one told me, and so stayed behind, not to my great grief. After that we had the Six Burghers of Calais: to my mind it was the success of the evening. Marguerite Young was Edward III, Olga Queen Philippa (by the way Olga acted a great deal, and had all the best men’s parts; why I don’t know, as she is by far the plainest girl in the house) and four of us in night dresses, with ropes round our necks, and bare-footed, represented the ‘bourgeois’.69 We were of course blacked up: everyone laughed very much: Mlle. Jones called out: ‘Oh le beau bourgeois que Daisy!’ [‘What a handsome burgher Daisy is!’]. The others looked so ridiculous, and we all burst out laughing: when I was half-way up-stairs, my slippers in hand, they called me down to be reviewed in the salon: oh dear me! How we all laughed over those burghers. We had the Seasons, and I was autumn, in my grey dress, ornamented with vines. They say it was a very pretty group. After that they had a charade, ‘Cléopâtre’, danced a little, and came off to bed.70

But such descriptions, innocent enough, invite reflections of more far-reaching sociological import for middle-class drawing-room entertainment, whatever comportments it could and did permit, was subtly determined by more than the mere rules of etiquette. Confined to an inner circle – typically that of family, friends and guests – it ensured that girls remained sequestered from the intrusions of public life. It kept them safe, secure and off the streets. In many respects the little Les Ruches community was a closed universe. Girls never left its grounds unsupervised. Informal encounters with the outside world were all but impossible to initiate. At no point does Daisy describe having met people independently, let alone members of the opposite sex. On occasions such conditions pushed her to resent her femininely ordered life: ‘I feel capable sometimes of carrying the world on my shoulders without weariness’, she sighs on 5 January 1889, ‘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!’71

The ideals of accomplishment and the late nineteenth-century opinion that exercise was important to a girl’s health appear to have been accommodated at Les Ruches and establish it as a moderately
progressive school – though one cannot doubt that activities like dancing and croquet were encouraged for their social rather than physical worth. Even by the middle of the century, when notions of feminine physical delicacy remained unchallenged and undue exercise for girls after puberty was considered potentially medically hazardous, physical recreation was deemed important in relaxing the brain (not to be over-exerted) and in refining the body’s form and grace. By the 1880s many secondary girls’ schools had moved into a transitional phase, with new sports (cycling, horse riding, tennis...) added to their curricula, while other less strenuous and more seemly activities (dancing, gymnastics, callisthenics) retained their social appeal and educative status. We know that Daisy delighted in being permitted horse riding, though she detested gymnastics, and rejoiced when the older girls were exempted in the summer of 1888. Walking, strongly advised for girls throughout the century, was available, though chaperoned, two or three times a week. On the other hand, choice in physical education and sport at Les Ruches hardly compares with what girls would be offered a few decades later in England, Australia and France. Certainly, team games and the attendant philosophy that they encouraged competition, cooperation, even a sense of citizenry, desirable skills in the work place, had no place in the educative thinking and practice of Les Ruches. Unlike the more reformist girls’ academies of the end of the century, it was not a school that fostered the notion that its students might later seek jobs.

It was walking that gave the Les Ruches girls their most regular opportunity to leave the school grounds and get out of doors. Their destination was generally the forest of Fontainebleau, where they typically set off for three or more hours, sometimes covering ten to sixteen miles in a day. Daisy loved these occasions, rising with the most eager when the chance was there to tramp through the forest between 5.30 am and breakfast-time. The stout boots she purchased in Paris were probably bought with such rambles in mind. Traipsing though the forest, mind, was not a complete wilderness experience, although it is the forest’s pristine beauty that Daisy repeatedly extols. By the middle of the century it was a thoroughly fashionable activity upon which the school, given its location, evidently capitalised. By the 1880s the whole area had been well and truly opened up for public use by the then legendary François Denecourt, a free-spirited if shrewd man of the woods, who charted its breadth and length to sizeable financial advantage, carving it up into
paths and avenues, adding touches here and there to nature (a grotto, a cleared dell, a horse trail, a viewing tower, border access to cafés and shops). Over this bit of commodified utopia, what Simon Schama calls a bourgeois ‘arcadia’ of ‘designed excitement’, Daisy and her friends zealously trod, visiting its well sign posted landmarks, often in the freezing cold. But Daisy seems to have found deep personal contentment in its more secluded corners, and the peace of the forest may well have provided compensation for living daily at close quarters with others within the claustrophobic bounds of Les Ruches. In autumn, 1887:

You cannot think how lovely the effect of that golden light is on those old round grey trunks where dark green mosses grow, and twined about here and there with ivies. The heather is all in blossom now; it flowers more thickly out on the open hill-sides, where it spreads in sheets of fragrant purple blossom round the sandstone boulders; there is always a faint smell of honey hanging about it, and an indistinct sound of humming bees. There are a lot of people about here, now, sportsmen, since the hunting began some weeks ago; their wives and relations, artists, and invalids, come for the fresh forest air and the ‘grape-cure’ (Mark Twain’s grape-cure, no doubt). I hate meeting these bands of tourists in our walks, they break the silence and picturesqueness of the scenery; the only thing that reconciles me to them is the musical jingle of the horses’ bells, which you can hear long before they arrive, and whose echo the wind carries back to you long after they are gone.

Les Ruches’s educative program must have seemed exotic to a foreigner like Daisy, as it does to anyone privy to her account today. But her descriptions of how it was daily put into practice point to the multiple inadequacies of the system, itself the product of ideological inconsistencies in what accomplishment was and how it ought to be conferred. Daisy’s opinions as a recipient rather than an administrator of an educational ethos may be those of any super-critical teenager – hyper-sensitive, highly subjective, deeply impassioned as they are – but they provide remarkable insight into what it felt like to be subjected to an educative regimen of what might now seem fraught values and narrowly implemented ideals. Her many negative assessments of Les Ruches highlight matters of internal management that may have eluded parental notice and better public judgement, but they strike at the heart of educational policies that
pervaded nineteenth-century private schooling in England, Australia and France. Nowhere is this more manifest than in her evaluations of teacher and peer relationships.

While Daisy may not have been fully aware of it, however telling her remarks, Les Ruches bore the hallmarks – in size, in curricular choices, in governance – of the so-called ‘homely’ French and British boarding school: it was committed to ‘family’ values, that were to be disseminated in a sheltered environment like that to which its charges were presumed to be used. The Bryce Commission’s landmark Report of Schools Inquiry Commission, conducted across England in 1867–68, confirmed the trend, upheld by the Protestant nation, certainly, but equally pertinent to, and practised by, Catholic France.81 Thus, according to Bryce, the middle-class preference for ‘smaller schools’, that could be ‘conducted more like private families’, to allow a ‘more personal influence’, in ‘the production and confirmation of gentle and feminine characteristics’; thus, too, the perceived desirability of having a Lady Proprietor as the school figurehead, ostensibly able to guide her pupils in an atmosphere of affection, dependence, moral rectitude, seclusion, discipline and vigilance.82 In the ‘small school’, it was felt, one could more naturally mimic the domestic rituals and rhythms of the well-run home.

In fact, such ideals were not easily met. What was the ‘best’ environment in which to nurture adolescent girls? And who were the ‘best’ teachers to oversee the task? Daisy discerns problems at Les Ruches that reputedly infiltrated elitist establishments. Its teaching force, mainly female and unmarried, was young and inexperienced and its cloistered environment strikingly inbred. In her almost daily accounts, Daisy accumulates details on the less agreeable aspects of boarding-house rule: friction among staff, leading to nasty disputes; departures and dismissals; the ‘falling out’ of individuals; overt ‘palling up’; gossip and slander; erratically extended favouritism that split student and teacher allegiances alike. ‘One day they are bosom friends’, Daisy remarks about two of her superiors, ‘and the next there is war to the knife between them’.83 Elsewhere: ‘I never saw such people for fighting; I believe they’ll tear each other to ribbons one of these days’.84 ‘A mistress has no right to have her pupils’, she judges. ‘Miss Stretch is a very evil-minded young woman... she goes about seeking whom she may devour amongst these lamb-like pupils... sapping their innocent minds.’85

Discipline at Les Ruches was not unduly harsh. By the late nineteenth