



MARCEL AUROUSSEAU 1891-1983

Marcel Auroousseau was born in Sydney on 19 April 1891 and died there ninety-two years later on 22 August 1983. In between he had wandered far. His was a career of remarkable versatility; he was emphatically a man for whom the 'Two Cultures' dichotomy hardly existed. Trained as a geologist under Edgeworth David at Sydney, he graduated with the University Medal in 1914; the war took him to Egypt, France, and Britain and brought him the Military Cross and the Croix de Guerre. An almost casual look at two 1:100,000 maps, which brought out the difference in settlement pattern on the chalk uplands of the Somme and on the Flanders plain, led him to a new line, as a human geographer.

In the twenties he played an innovative role in the development of settlement and population geography. While he was employed in the Geophysical Laboratory at Washington, Isaiah Bowman, a man of more than academic power, sponsored him, and he seemed set for a distinguished university career as a professional geographer. The American Establishment, however, could not satisfy his individualist yearning for new experience.

In 1926 he published a minor travel classic, *Highway into Spain*, vividly recounting a 1600 km walk from Paris to Madrid. In 1923 he had joined the American Geographical Society's staff, working on the great 1:1,000,000 map of Hispanic America and on urban geography. He came back to Australia for a year in 1924-25 and was then engaged in fieldwork in Western Europe: a fallow period. In 1933 he entered the service of the Royal Geographical Society, and three years later became Secretary to its Permanent Committee on Geographical Names. Toponymy is a very tricky subject, and it may seem strange that Auroousseau, who had found American academic geography, in its lively youthful phase, unduly restrictive, should have settled down for nine years to what was seemingly a task of detail and routine. But it appealed to another facet of his make-up, an intense meticulousness, a delight in getting things exactly right.

His work for the PCGN, establishing a firm systematic basis for what had often been an empirical and *ad hoc* method, may well stand as his most positive achievement. He 'retired' to his own country in 1956, but his passion for exactness, his love (even if by proxy) of travel, and his essential humanity found worthy expression in the three volumes of *The Letters of F. W. Ludwig Leichhardt* published by the Hakluyt Society in 1968, when Auroousseau was seventy-seven. It was not only an edition in the great Hakluyt tradition, it was also a vindication of Leichhardt from the too-ready slighting of a man who did not fit into the popular image of the Australian explorer.

It may seem that Auroousseau did not altogether fulfil the promise of the twenties; his two main works, *The Rendering of Geographical Names* (1957) and the Leichhardt volumes, are not so much creative in themselves but foundations, both necessary and sufficient, for others to build upon: no small praise. But this is an outsider view; he certainly found fulfilment in them, and no-one who had heard him lecture on Leichhardt for over two hours, holding his audience, could doubt the verve and enjoyment with which he handled his chosen task. Nor did he go unrecognised: the Victoria Medal of the Royal Geographical Society, a highly prestigious award, and an Honorary D.Litt.- from the University of Newcastle, while in 1972 this Academy honoured itself as well as Auroousseau by making him an Honorary Fellow.

All in all, a full life indeed: he wore no man's collar but brought to his chosen tasks a rare continuing enthusiasm. Scientist and humanist, in both a great Australian, Marcel Auroousseau was one whom the Academy may be proud to have counted among its Fellowship.

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[Note: I am indebted for some of the facts in this notice to the Royal Geographical Society, London, and to R. Freestone, 'Marcel Auroousseau and the True Tint of Geography', *Australian Geographer* 15, 1981, 1-7. Opinions expressed are my own.]