

The Bouquinistes: Reflections for Australia Day, 2004.

*By Dr. Roger Kennedy Abbott Allen
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Sunday afternoon
The bleak chill winter wind
Stings lips cracked, blue-bruised,
Seeking refuge
In a warm scarf of grey Cashmere
And my nose runs.

My wife now warm
In her hotel bed
Too tired and cold for more
Weary cobblestones
Uneven on women's boots
And the brain-numbing,
Unfamiliar, un-Australian, cold..

We just "did" the Roman ruins
Of Cluny and its baths,
Its ageless tapestries
La Dame à la Licorne,
(The Lady with the unicorn),
The sixth sense and unsolved mysteries.

Bouquinistes along the quays,
In polyester parkas,
Or well-worn, woollen overcoats;
Backs to the east wind like dumb cows,
Warmth interrupted only for a sale.

The sun comes out....
Paints cold buildings on the north ba
With fresh-yellow, but with weak warmth,
Enlightening stone,
And the numb faces of passers-by
Revelling in its transience.

I cross the Quai des Grands Augustins,
At the Pont Neuf where Pierre Curie died,
Not from radium... but off his bike.
This bridge whose half-covered cobbles,
Mock the dull moan of rubber tyres
And the honking of impatient cars,
And once knew the "diligence",



High steel-banded carriages,
And felt their hard wheeled crunch,
Muffled by the sarcasm of horses,
And wet mouldy hay.

Where once our troops,
Fresh-faced boys with slouch hats-
-All volunteers-
Bought postcards with strange coins,
Before the ignominy of a dismembered death,
By shell-bursts that shattered a generation.



Then Victory's irony,
Jack-booted Germans in feldgri coats,
Loaded Mausers on shoulders slung,
The Wehrmacht guards the crossings of the Seine.

This muddy Seine,
Now khaki-coloured, fast flowing,
Bridge piers of aged stone,
Cut-waters defiant against the flow,
Deep grooved eddies and white water,
Lapping banks,
Submerged seats of stone,
Once love's idyll,
Or a solitary suicide
Pondering a deep Anon.



This gravid winter rain
Runs impatient to La Manche,
Now mixed with the meandering Marne.
These rivers' well-worn furrows,
Of ancient boatmen from old Lutèce,
Oft plundered by the blue-eyes of feared longships.

My grandfather walked here in 1903,
From the Empire of the unsetting sun.
From another world,
Where in our cold months,
The still-warm sun
Sits high in the northern sky,
And bright Scorpio guards above
The crisp night of a million dangling stars.

He was born from the broad Fitzroy

On whose muddy banks
Black men once fished with net and spear,
And bark canoes to the lost stories of the Dreamtime,
Long before Caesar quelled unwilling Gauls
Or Vikings hauled up their boats on marshy banks.
Capricorn's line runs through that spot
A million miles from Paris
And these charming quays.

It was Paris of "La Belle Époque";
The age of Elegance blind
To the cold greyness of fellow men.
For him, a brief respite,
From his student-life;
Stone cloisters, wet ink,
The scratch of steel nibs on fresh paper,
Dulled yellow by late lamplight,
His adopted home for years,
The Kings Inn, Trinity College,
That strange English bastion,
In a Catholic sea.



These cobbled quays he knew,
In the age of horse and men,
Long before the sooty streaks of jets
Etched the winter sky,
And before seagulls
And tussocked sand hills,
First watched men fly.

My father too, a francophone,
Walked these self-same stones,
He from the Fitzroy too,
Like his Irish grandfather,
Who left his name on Allentown,
And then to the Brisbane River,
On whose sandy, unstained shores
Once played piccaninnies and men with nets
Full of flapping fish and unwilling turtles,
Oblivious of the white guillotine
That would despatch their race to a memory
And muddy these strands for evermore.

Both men chatted with the bouquinistes,
Fingers flicking,
Through endless rows
Of aging book and magazines,

Fragile like men,
With the yellowing of the years.
Books kept safe in cellophane,
Some old before Napoleon's
Bee stung a bloated continent,
When his imperial "N"
Stamped and sealed on Pont St Michel
By a modern Caesar,
Or when Victor Hugo's muffled roar
From Guernsey grappled with men's souls,
Or when Hemmingway and Sartre
Wrote with black coffee, cigarettes and wine,
About the dark eddies of human life.

And now my turn has come.
The same bouquinistes,
The fast-flowing Seine,
The winter wind,
Buildings and quays;
Immutable, indifferent.
The same music of this tongue,
History's millefeuille
Of time...and blood... and men.
The black-forged face of Poseidon
Looks at me...perhaps a smile?..
From wrought iron lamp posts,
Elegant in mute rows,
Across the Pont Neuf.
Glimmerings of night-lights at Even-song,
The distant bells, sharp in the winter air,
Testimony of the light of life,
And our final crossing of the Seine.

