

Resident's Report: Amaury da Cunha (January – June 2020)

I had never had the opportunity to devote all my time to my work as a writer. When I learned that I had been selected for the Randell Cottage residency I was overjoyed. But such an extraordinary adventure required preparation.

From what I have heard, a writer's residence can in actual fact be a step on the road to depression, and setting out with a vague project can turn out to be disastrous. So I decided to get a head start by making contact with members of the Randell Cottage committee, such as Jean Anderson, who from our first exchanges, proved to be very friendly and who helped me to prepare my writing project. Even at a distance, I was able to begin to work and to dream, two activities that, for me, feed into each other. For example, thanks to the easy access to the archives of the National Library, I consulted contemporary newspaper accounts of my protagonist, Minnie Dean. I was almost there already, already at work.

Also while still in Paris, I selected people from the world of arts and culture that I wanted to meet. Like Lynley Hood, Minnie Dean's biographer. To my great surprise, unlike French artists and writers who are often difficult to contact and little inclined to help out their young colleagues, every time I wrote to a writer or a film-maker (I'm thinking here of Fiona Kidman and Jane Campion), I got a friendly and encouraging response. All the signs were highly positive.

When I arrived in January 2020, I settled in at the Cottage, warmly welcomed by Sarah Dennis and the whole Randell team. The cottage became my workspace and a pleasant living space, a precious retreat high in the hills at the foot of the 'green belt', that I still dream about.

From the very first week, I visited the Archives on a daily basis, while starting to plan my travels in the South Island, where the drama of my book took place: in the south of the South Island, near Invercargill.

During this period of acclimation, the links between the French-speaking community and the Randell Cottage team were close and productive. You could say that a French writer in these supportive conditions is a very lucky man!

In discussion with Stéphane Ré, the cultural and scientific Counsellor at the Embassy, we worked on the arrangements for my travels around the country (to the Alliances françaises in Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin...) to speak about my work. Other meetings were planned with students at Victoria University, through Jean and Yuri Cerqueira dos Anjos. In addition, a former Randell resident based in Paris, Pierre Furlan, kept in touch with me. These arrangements were much appreciated and reassuring. Being a writer is very often a solitary experience. In this

new context, I was discovering the real meaning of community: it energises through providing opportunities for sharing. In France, whenever artists and writers know one another and spend time together, I have always sensed a rather pathetic competitive subtext. There's nothing like that on the other side of the world!

Unfortunately, this utopia came to an abrupt end in March 2020 because of the pandemic. Suddenly I found myself deprived of all these special connections. My only company was reduced to the daily visits of the neighbour's two cats, well-acquainted with the Cottage. But I wasn't abandoned all the same. I thank Sarah Dennis for her regular contact through this strangely solitary time, and her ensuring that I lacked nothing. This situation could have threatened my work. This was not the case. I took advantage of this downtime to write the first chapters of my book, based on the research I had done prior to arriving.

There was still a crucial section to be written, however, based on what I had planned to see. Without my pilgrimage in the South Island, it was impossible to work. I had tried to set out a Plan B, in case I might be stuck until my departure. Minnie Dean's biographer had put me in touch with a painter from Nelson, Janice Gill, who was also passionately interested in this historical character. She had kindly offered to take me to visit the places involved. Since this was now impossible, I asked her to tell me what we should have been able to see together. Janice did this most admirably, writing about what was for me an imaginary tour, a very fine account that I incorporated into my book. Better than nothing, wasn't it?

Fortune eventually smiled on me, a month before my flight home. The health situation, less serious than predicted, allowed a return to normal life. There were only a few weeks left. We had to move fast, to make this car trip through the Otago region, to travel from one island to another, to finally discover the country, with a few months' delay. I was touched by the energy of my French and New Zealand friends, who did all they could to help me make up for lost time. Following this epic adventure in the car (which I describe in my book), thanks to Stéphane Ré and his efficiency, in the space of a few days we travelled to Auckland to take part in a photography festival, to meet members of the Alliance française... So many events after the long weeks of inertia, it brings back the joy, and I discovered, particularly during a discussion about Minnie Dean in a bookshop, that having read English and heard it on a daily basis, I was able to speak freely about my work, without feeling too much stress.

There is so much else to say about this atypical experience; it made me develop considerably, on a literary level of course, but in terms of my outlook as well. This change of perspective on the world (due to being upside down in the antipodes) was conducive to my developing a different way of looking at reality, a gentler way, perhaps, a more patient one, often an admiring, marvelling one. I have some

regrets, of course (all those places I had planned to see, that are still unknown to me!), but I recognise how lucky I was to be in that little house that was so helpful to me: a creative and life-giving place, a crossroads and a meeting place.

Amaury da Cunha
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