

The French Review

From the Editor's Desk

It is a real pity that the dollar was so weak against the euro in the summer of 2008. This sorry state of affairs was especially devastating for language teachers, whose life's blood is traveling to countries where they can converse with native speakers and be immersed in the culture of that country. The weaker dollar meant that many hopes for professional development and renewal were dashed and that there was a lower than expected turnout for the eighty-first annual meeting of the AATF held in Liège from 16-19 July 2008. For the four hundred of us who did attend, our first ever meeting in Belgium was a true delight and a moveable feast because of the close proximity of Spa, Bruxelles, and most of the beautiful cities and countryside of this troubled, yet extraordinary country. In Liège Bastille Day is a huge celebration because of the large French community there. There was a stunning fireworks display on the Meuse that reminded me of our meeting in Lyon in 1996. There was also a sumptuous banquet held in the Palais des congrès, and the Consul-Général de France, Patrick Fers, gave a moving speech about his attachment to Liège and Belgium as he prepares to leave for a new post at the Quai d'Orsay as "Veilleur de nuit" after eight years in this lovely and proud provincial capital on the Meuse that runs through it. He said that the French had much to learn from the Belgians, particularly in the area of treatment for the handicapped. I was fortunate to meet Consul Fers's father, a man of ninety-five who fought in the battle for France and spent five years in a German prisoner of war camp before being liberated by the Americans. I was humbled by his emotional thanks to the Americans who freed him. It was as though the Liberation had just taken place and he was thanking me personally as he stood almost to attention while wearing his Légion d'honneur, the Croix de Guerre, and l'Ordre du mérite. It was also moving to hear the talk of Fernande Davis, a Belgian woman of eighty-five who had served in the Belgian resistance (Liège was the center of the resistance in Belgium and has been officially recognized for its crucial role). As a sixteen-year old, Fernande Keufgens delivered false identity papers by bicycle to members of the Belgian resistance. I was also fortunate to attend a ceremony in honor of Belgian independence (commemorating the Revolution of 1830) in Colfontaine on July 21. It was good to find some of my own roots in Belgium.

There were many other highlights of the convention. These included the keynote address by Roger Dehaybe on francophonie, Alain Braun's overview of Belgian history, the annual dictée organized by Marie-Simone Pavlovich, a host of papers on Belgian cinema, art, literature, and culture. Jacques Brel, Tintin, the Frères Dardenne, Magritte, and Rubens were all the topics of special sessions. There were also many sessions on other francophone countries and regions including Quebec, Louisiana, Algeria, Congo, and Guadeloupe.

It was only a twenty-minute walk along the Meuse to the center of Liège and its historic center featuring the Perron. The impressive Musée d'Art Moderne was right next to the hotel. It sufficed to walk across a park to get there and appreciate its fine collection of paintings and prints. The editors of the *French Review* celebrated the meeting and special issue on Belgium at the Café Lequet, a much frequented café on the banks of the Meuse, which dates from the nineteenth century when it was the most popular eating place and watering hole in the old market district. I was reminded a bit of Le Chien qui fume and Au Pied du Cochon in the old halles of Paris. Boulettes/frites were the order of the day. Those of us

who attended will not soon forget the warm welcome we received in Liège and the excitement and sense of discovery for those of us who had never visited Belgium.

In closing let me urge you to bring Belgium into your classroom, something I have done through the visit of a young Belgian woman at my university. Let me also say "félicitations!" to all of you who participated in the ninth annual Semaine du Français. Je vous souhaite de très bonnes vacances et une excellente nouvelle année 2009!

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