In March 1893 visiting author Robert Louis Stevenson said of Sydney’s Cosmopolitan Club, founded in January 1885 as the French Association, and later known as the French Club, or cercle française, that he owed it the expense of the journey to Paris and back. The dinner Stevenson had been given by the club, he said, had satisfied his ‘Samoan dream’ of visiting Paris again ‘to enter a French restaurant, drink good wine, and meet French gentlemen’.

Despite Stevenson’s perception of the Club’s French character, it is not mentioned in accounts of the history of the French community in Sydney, New South Wales, or Australia. A similar club established in Melbourne in 1884 has been described as ‘a very timid start’ to French community organisation in this country. Indeed, the Melbourne club and Australia’s first Alliance Française, founded in Melbourne in 1890, have been identified as ‘the only associations to offer any rendez-vous for the growing French population’ at this time.

Yet from 1885 to 1893 Sydney’s French/Cosmopolitan Club did provide a meeting place for members of the French community – professional men, artists, and businesspeople – similar to that provided in Melbourne. Perhaps also ‘a very timid start’, it attracted, in addition to French members, patronage from diplomatic representatives to New South Wales and Francophile members of the non-French business community and legal and government circles.

This paper seeks to provide an account of the French Club, why it foundered and why, perhaps, it has been overlooked in the history of Sydney’s and Australia’s French community.

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