



HELP FROM AFAR: THE ADOPTION OF DERNANCOURT BY ADELAIDE AFTER WORLD WAR I

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After World War I, the Great War, Northern France was a scene of utter desolation. Thirteen *départements* and about half of Belgium were reduced to a wilderness (*Register* 12.8.1920, 4e.) Battlefields in France covered an area of nearly 10,000,000 acres, 400 villages had been destroyed and 20,000 factories were in ruins. In important manufacturing areas hardly one stone had been left on another; machinery had been removed, factories dismantled and 75% of the coal-mines had been flooded; roads, railways, canals had suffered badly.¹ These are sobering statistics.

The Western Front stretched for 750 kilometres from the Belgian coast, through Northern France to the Swiss border. Over 330,000 Australians, mostly volunteers, served in this part of Europe and almost 60,000 died in the fighting. The majority of Australian deaths, around 45,000, occurred in the mud and slush of trenches on the Western Front where the battles were fought and neither side made much progress. Many soldiers were wounded, around 124,000, and a large number of these never regained their health, were disfigured or permanently incapacitated (*Australians on the Western Front*).

Australians who died in France and Belgium are now interred and remembered in over 500 cemeteries and memorials that stand in farmlands on the outskirts of the villages where they fought. There are about 11,000 unknown Australians buried in these cemeteries. One of these, named VC Corner Cemetery, contains the remains of 400 unidentified Australians who died in the Battle of Fromelles which was described as ‘the worst 24 hours of Australia’s entire history’. A total of 1299 names are etched on plaques set in the walls of the cemetery which is unique as only Australians are buried here (*Australians on the Western Front*).

The areas of land had been so churned up by artillery that half a million acres would not be able to be used for farming again, and about a million acres could only be used after great expense to reclaim them. An enormous number of acres of forest were completely annihilated and it was a

¹ Handbill published by the British League of Help to illustrate the scale of wartime devastation in France.





vast landscape of devastation. Cottages and buildings were destroyed, farms were ruined, only piles of stones showed where houses had been. The French displayed great fortitude during the war and that attitude now resurfaced as they started to rebuild their towns.

The signing of the Armistice after the surrender of the German Armies on 11 November 1918 ended the war, but this was just the start of the struggles people had on both sides of the Channel with personal grief and the loss of many thousands of young men. Many people in Britain believed the French should be grateful to the British for halting the Germans, but others believed the British owed a huge debt to France. The intense fighting on French battlefields and the ultimate defeat of the German armies meant that Britain was never invaded and subjected to German domination. The French Government had decided that if the advance of the Germans in 1918 could not be contained, they would make an enormous sacrifice and flood the entire Pas-de-Calais region and destroy the ports of Calais, Boulogne and Dunkerque to prevent them being used as submarine bases from which to launch an attack on England (White 2002).

A group of people in Britain who believed that a debt of gratitude was owed to France formed the British League of Help for the Devastated Areas of France (League of Help) in June 1920. The prime mover was Lady Bathurst who had inherited the *Morning Post* newspaper from her father and took a strong interest in it, working closely with the editor. The French correspondent for the *Morning Post*, Gordon Knox, had brought to Lady Bathurst's attention the situation in two villages in the Oise region, Passel and Ville, where she had been before the war. Money was raised, and with goods donated, was sent to the Union des Femmes de France for distribution.

Another important factor in the formation of the League of Help came from Marcel Braibant, Conseiller Général of the Ardennes. He made the suggestion that British towns should adopt French communities to give them aid and encouragement as a 'godparent would confer on a godchild'. Devastation in the Ardennes area had been further caused by the malice of the retreating German forces as well as the action of the war. The League had a committee of patrons including Winston Churchill MP, the Prime Minister Lloyd George, and the French Ambassador, Paul Cambon. The Central Committee set up a London office and local committees were formed in towns and villages that participated in the scheme. Late in 1920, the idea of adopting a village





spread to Australia and was embraced by a number of cities (White 2002): Sydney adopted Poilcourt, Melbourne Villers-Bretonneux, and Adelaide Dernancourt.

The Villers-Bretonneux story is now well known.² Those of Poilcourt (which changed its name to Poilcourt-Sydney in 1920³) and Dernancourt have received much less attention. This article will concentrate on Dernancourt, drawing principally on archival materials and contemporary press reports to provide a detailed account of the adoption process and its practical outcomes. It is unlikely that the Adelaide-Dernancourt connection will ever have the impact of Villers-Bretonneux, which, with its grand Memorial and the promise of a new large-scale Information Centre, has become an emblem of Australia's Western Front war, but Dernancourt deserves a place in the Australian memory, and it is hoped this article will contribute to cementing that.

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In August 1920 the Editor of the *South Australian Register* in Adelaide suggested that 'in view of the magnificent part played by Australian divisions on the Western Front, and the intimate ties which link the Commonwealth peoples to that region and its heroic populations, it is highly desirable that Australians should follow the lead of their kindred in the Motherland and render appreciable assistance to our heroic allies' (*Register* 12.8.1920, 4e).

A letter was sent to Marie Lion⁴ on 9 October by the Lord Mayor of Adelaide, F. B. Moulden:

I am in receipt of your favor [sic] of the 9th inst. with respect to the adoption of a French town by this City. I note that you have already seen Lady Weigall [wife of the Governor of South Australia, Sir Archibald Weigall], in reference to this matter, and that she suggests that you should arrange for a committee to take up the matter. Before I can do so I must write to Sydney (to the

² See for example Corfield and Blankfield 1994. Also the more recent Wade 2006.

³ See the *Sunday Times* 29.8.1920, p. 13, for a colourful description of the 'Christening'.

⁴ See Drury 2015.





Consul-General) and get the details. I think that it will be found rather difficult to create a great interest in an object of this kind, and I prefer to be more fully informed on the subject before I could agree to take any part therein [...]⁵

A meeting of the Société d'Assistance Maternelle et Infantile⁶ was held in the Adelaide Town Hall in October 1920, and a proposal was put forward that Adelaide should adopt one of the French towns which Australians had fought so hard to save. By adoption of a village, funds could be raised to provide the means for farmers to reclaim their land, and provide clothes, and money for furniture, farm animals and farm implements when the villagers returned. Two French women, Berthe Mouchette and Marie Lion (Drury 2015), were the prime movers and they accepted the task of starting the fundraising, with a strong hope that influential people within the community would become involved. It was proposed to form a provisional committee to start the work before the State became fully involved. The towns of Bapaume, Dernancourt and Moriancourt were suggested, with Hamel and Neuville added in case the others were already adopted.

The Lord Mayor (F. B. Moulden), who presided, urged that before putting the matter to the public, it would be wise to find out exactly what the responsibilities of such an adoption were. He advised the society to approach the French Government through the Consul-General in Sydney, and find out what 'adoption' really meant, and, having done so, to ask for a certain town, and then start the procedure. During the year the Société d'Assistance had forwarded about £600 and 18 boxes of garments to France for charitable work.

The names of the proposed towns were sent to General Pau, formerly commander of the French army in Alsace. He had toured Australia in September 1918 with a French Trade Mission (*Register* 15.10.1920, 6f).⁷

⁵ Letter from Lord Mayor of Adelaide to Madame M. Lion, 9 October 1920, Adelaide City Council Archives.

⁶ This French society, led in Paris by Mme la Générale Michel, wife of the Chancellor of the Legion of Honour, was represented in Australia by Charlotte Crivelli, an old friend of Marie Lion and Berthe Mouchette from their Melbourne days. See Nettelbeck 2015.

⁷ See also Jacqueline Dwyer's article on the 1918 French Economic Mission in the





Berthe Mouchette had founded the Alliance Française in Melbourne, the first in Australia. The inaugural meeting was held on 6 June 1890,⁸ at her school Oberwyl in St Kilda, which she operated with her sister Marie Lion. The sisters came to Australia from France in 1881 with Berthe's husband, Nicolas Emile Mouchette, who became Chancellor at the French Consulate. Berthe Mouchette opened a studio in Collins Street and taught painting to the young ladies of Melbourne. Her husband died in 1884, and Berthe purchased Oberwyl School the following year. In 1892 Victoria was in deep depression, with the result that she had to sell the school and the sisters moved to Adelaide.

After the outbreak of the war, Berthe Mouchette and Marie Lion sailed to Paris in 1915 to nurse wounded French soldiers in hospitals there. Unfortunately Marie became ill and they had to return to Adelaide where they helped with the war effort. Berthe Mouchette taught basic French to soldiers preparing to travel overseas to fight in France, to help them better communicate with the French people (Drury 2015).

The provisional committee was formed in Adelaide and a private meeting was organised with the Lord Mayor on 12 November to discuss further the idea of adoption.⁹ At the meeting the Lord Mayor asked the committee to provide about 200 names of people who would be invited to a meeting he would convene to discuss the matter.¹⁰ The names were supplied and a circular letter was sent out by the Lord Mayor, inviting people to attend a meeting on Friday 10 December to discuss the proposition that Adelaide, following the precedent set up by the City of Melbourne and English centres of population, should adopt a French village in the area of the late war.¹¹

Apologies were received from some of the notable residents of Adelaide.¹² A very strong letter was sent from Laidlaw & Co, Stock and

current issue.

⁸ Copies of the minutes of the inaugural meeting are in the author's possession.

⁹ Letter from Mrs Roubel d'Arenberg to the Lord Mayor of Adelaide, 9 November 1920, Adelaide City Council Archives.

¹⁰ Memo initialled ASD reporting of the meeting of the provisional committee with the Lord Mayor, 12 November 1920, Adelaide City Council Archives.

¹¹ Circular letter from Lord Mayor of Adelaide, 2 December 1920, Adelaide City Council Archives.

¹² Letter from Mary L. Hawker to the Lord Mayor of Adelaide, 8 December 1920,





Sharebrokers, in which L. H. Laidlaw expressed the opinion that, having travelled to France recently, and with his knowledge of the conditions existing there, the proposal was 'simply arrant rubbish'. He stated that, individually the French were well off financially and he found 'a very bitter feeling towards Great Britain. Instead of gratitude there is a feeling of distrust and dislike'¹³. This letter was at odds with the feelings of many people in Adelaide, and certainly many of the Australian soldiers who had fought in France and been tenderly cared for by residents of towns where they were located. The *Adelaide Advertiser* reported the initial meeting:

About 150 invitations had been issued and the gathering, which was held in the Lord Mayor's parlour on Friday afternoon, was attended by about 30 people. The Lord Mayor said he had written to the French Consul-General for information and had received a reply stating that in a number of instances towns or villages had been adopted. [...] Miss McDonald who had recently returned from France stated the distress in many of the villages was appalling, and any funds raised could well be devoted to helping the children and old people with clothing, in providing much needed household utensils, mattresses and bedding, articles of furniture, and implements for the peasants. It is not expected that they should attempt to give assistance in rebuilding the ruined houses or buying stock. Madame Mouchette said they could specify what they wanted done, and the money could be sent to some controlling authority or society which would see that it was used in the manner directed [...]. (*Advertiser* 11.12.1920, 11e)

Unfortunately Marie Lion could not attend the meeting as she was seriously ill, with no hope of a cure, and her doctor had forbidden her to leave the house.¹⁴ A committee was formed, and Mrs F. A. d'Arenberg was appointed convenor in her absence. The Lord Mayor stated that he would leave the

Adelaide City Council Archives.

¹³ Letter from L. H. Laidlaw of Laidlaw & Co Stock and Share Brokers, to the Lord Mayor of Adelaide, 8 December 1920, Adelaide City Council Archives.

¹⁴ Letter from Marie Lion to Frank Moulden, Lord Mayor of Adelaide, 9 December 1920, Adelaide City Council Archives.





matter in her hands.¹⁵ A letter was sent by the Lord Mayor, who was also the Consular Agent for France in Adelaide, to C. R. Campana, Consul-General for France in Sydney in February 1921, outlining the history of the formation of the Committee for adoption of a French village. He stated that 'as a result of a communication received by Mme Mouchette from General Pau, the village towards which assistance is to be rendered is Dernancourt, and this village has been designated the 'godchild' of South Australia'.¹⁶

The Adelaide committee proposed to collect funds and send the money to the Mayor of Dernancourt, Fernand Bélison, who would distribute it among needy villagers. In a letter to the committee, the Mayor praised the courage and morale of Australian troops. In thanks, the municipal council, when planning the reconstruction of the ruined village, gave the name of Rue d'Australie to the street formerly called Rue La Fontaine, 'a simple but sincere expression of our gratitude, expressive to the Australians of our sentiments of admiration for their heroism'.

Dernancourt, with only a little over 330 inhabitants, was six kilometres behind the lines and had become a rest haven for the Australian troops during the war. The Australian soldiers offered their assistance to the farmers, who had very few men to help as they were away fighting. Soldiers, previously in the trenches, could now be seen helping with the work in the fields, sowing, planting, reaping and carting with enjoyment, almost as though they were working on their own properties (*Register* 4.3.1921, 8).

However, the disastrous events of March and April 1918 were yet to come. The German army shelled the village, and forced the residents to flee. If they could break through the allied front line, they could reach the vital railway centre at Amiens. The German forces occupied the village and dug into the railway embankment on its eastern side just outside the town. On 5 April the Germans attacked and the Australians had to withdraw. The Australian forces launched a counter attack which was described by C. E. W. Bean, the official Australian war historian, as 'one of the finest ever carried out by Australian troops' (Bean 1937, 404). The battle ended in a bayonet charge and hand-to-hand fighting, and by 18.30 the Germans were in full

¹⁵ Letter from Lord Mayor to Mrs D'Arenberg, 13 December 1920, Adelaide City Council Archives.

¹⁶ Letter from Lord Mayor to C. R. Campana, Consul-General of France in Sydney, 2 February 1921, Adelaide City Council Archives.





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retreat. The Australians suffered 1,233 casualties and were awarded the Battle Honour, 'Ancre 1918' (Walsh 2008). Dernancourt was in ruins: of the 110 houses in the town, only three were left standing, and it was not until May 1919 that some of the inhabitants came back. By 1921 more of the residents had returned and were living in huts made from material scavenged from ruins and the trenches.



Australian soldiers building a haystack near Corbie (AWM EO 3928)

* * *

Fundraising in Adelaide took many forms:

For the purpose of obtaining additional funds for South Australia's 'godchild' in France, Dernancourt, a ball was given at the Osborne Hall, Gouger Street, on Monday evening. A large and fashionable gathering was present [...]. (*Register* 10.5.1921, 6d)





By June 1921 the sum of £200 and a donation of clothing had been forwarded to Dernancourt and the fundraising continued. Towards the end of 1921 there was some concern about the whereabouts of a box of Christmas presents dispatched to Dernancourt which had been confiscated by French customs authorities, subject to payment of duty. However, due to the efforts of the Mayor of Dernancourt, protests by the press and the Minister of Reconstruction, the gifts were finally forwarded without any payment. The Mayor, Fernand Bélison, wrote to Mme Mouchette:

After many vicissitudes we received on 3 January the box and basket containing the presents collected by you, Mrs A. J. McLachlan, Mrs Gaynor and many other benefactresses of Adelaide. The distribution was made yesterday to our 63 children, including 16 girls, by the Municipal Council and the ladies of the school committee, it was a great success.

The Mayor also spoke of a forthcoming fete where, in the morning a solemn commemoration service would be held in honour of the Australian soldiers. 'In the afternoon every Dernancourt family will go in a procession, and will bring flowers and wreaths to be placed on the graves of the soldiers from the antipodes' (*Register* 18.2.1922, 6). In the war cemetery on the outskirts of the town are 2,162 graves beautifully maintained by the villagers. Of these, 177 are graves of unknown Australians (Walsh 2008).

Some country towns out of Adelaide helped in the fundraising and in March 1922 a letter was received by Mrs E. W. Hawker of 'Calcania', Clare, from the Mayor of Dernancourt:

Clare is very far from us; too far for our liking, but not far enough, however, to prevent coming to us on the wings of the wind and the waves of the briny ocean, the echo of the splendid fete organised at Clare [...] and where the generosity of the people poured out copiously.

How can I express to you effectively and completely our gratitude [...] We owe to Australia an immense sacred debt for the blood that she shed in coming to our help, and you have increased, still further, the debt in aiding us towards the restoration of our ruins [...]. (*Register* 22.3.1922, 6)





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Samuel Lunn, a prolific fundraiser during the Great War, visited the Mayor in Dernancourt in August 1921 to review progress of the rebuilding of the town (*Advertiser* 19.1.1922, 8d).

In June 1922 Mme Mouchette reported to the local newspapers on Adelaide's adopted village:

During 1921 as the results of efforts in the city, £192 was forwarded to the communal authorities and a bazaar and fete at Clare produced £103. In a letter received the Dernancourt authorities said what was now needed was a threshing machine to enable the villagers to harvest their crop. They have been able to cultivate and sow about 1,600 acres but have no implements to take off the crop. As the harvest occurs around the middle of August we have no time to lose if we are to assist them. This need for haste precludes the idea of raising money by the usual methods of sales, fetes, amusements etc., so it is decided to make a direct appeal. Most of the inhabitants of Dernancourt are living in huts made from materials scavenged from the trenches. As the population is entirely agricultural they depend on their crops for their livelihood. The desired sum for the equipment is between £150 and £200.

The Editor of the *Adelaide Register* lent his support to the appeal and urged former members of battalions that had fought in France, and sympathisers, to raise money by small contributions which could be cabled to Dernancourt in time to purchase the 'needy equipment before the harvest is ready' (*Register* 10.6.1922, 8).

A copy of a French newspaper, *La Gazette de Péronne*, was sent to Berthe Mouchette giving a report of a fete held on 16 June 1922:

Dernancourt, the little village in the valley of the Ancre, which was completely razed to the ground in 1918, but which has already begun to rise from the ruins, organized on 16 June, a manifestation of gratitude in honour of its Australian godmother, Adelaide. Favoured with beautiful weather, the fete attracted visitors from miles around who were both pleased and astonished at the successful efforts of the inhabitants to conceal ruins with foliage and flowers, every building, broken or whole, was gay with colour,





the French and Australian flags everywhere floated in the breeze, and all helped to render Dernancourt worthy of the occasion.

On 3 May 1922 Marie Lion succumbed to the infection she had contracted in Paris when she was nursing during the war and died of bronchopneumonia. In September of that year, Berthe Mouchette, now aged 76, decided to return to France and embarked on the ship RMS *Narkunda* (*Register* 9.9.1922, 19). The ship docked in Bombay en route and Mme Mouchette wrote to a friend in Adelaide:

During the stay at Bombay I took advantage of the embarkation there of Dame Nellie Melba at the end of her Indian tour, by enlisting her practical sympathy in the organisation of a concert for the benefit of Dernancourt. Nothing could have been more auspicious than the presence of the diva, and most willingly and graciously she entered whole-heartedly into the arrangements for an entertainment which produced a surprisingly good result for Dernancourt.

The concert was ably presented by the manager of Mr Charles Workman's Australian D'Oyley Carte Opera Company and a most attractive programme arranged. Dame Melba who had kindly consented to collect funds, was so pleased with the amount raised, that to stimulate still greater contribution, graciously sang four songs — 'Chanson Triste' (Duparc), 'Papillons' (Chausson), 'Adieu' (from *La Bohème*) and 'Home Sweet Home'. The marvellous vocalisation of Melba was a revelation to some who had not heard her before. Dame Melba took up the collection, plate in hand, and she was most ably seconded by the chief officer. They were able to hand one hundred pounds to me, a sum to help increase the amount still wanted for Dernancourt's new tractor. (*Register* 4.11.1922, 8)

This fortuitous French-Australian encounter in India is a piquant example of the good feeling and good will shared between the two peoples during those early post-war years. It is not yet known whether the tractor was eventually purchased.





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Villagers in Dernancourt celebrate at a fete held on 16 June 1922, to honour the village's Australian 'Godmother,' the City of Adelaide.

From this time, nothing further appeared in the newspapers, and it must be assumed that Berthe Mouchette's return to France was a finale to the 'adoption' of Dernancourt. As we have seen, other towns had been adopted by Australian cities. In May 1922 a letter was sent from the Town Clerk of the City of Brisbane to the Town Clerk of the City of Adelaide seeking advice about the process of adoption of a town in France. They had received a communication from the Department of the Prime Minister, Melbourne, suggesting that the village of Pozières in France might be adopted by the City of Brisbane.¹⁷ The Town Clerk replied from Adelaide with details of what had transpired to date in that city regarding the adoption of Dernancourt.¹⁸

¹⁷ Letter Town Clerk, City of Brisbane to Town Clerk, City of Adelaide, 31 May 1922, Adelaide City Council Archives.

¹⁸ Letter Town Clerk, City of Adelaide to Town Clerk, City of Brisbane, 7 June 1922, Adelaide City Council Archives.





For reasons that still need to be researched, Brisbane did not proceed on the adoption path.¹⁹

Berthe Mouchette arrived back in Paris after spending over forty years in Australia. She later moved to a retirement home in Breteuil-sur-Iton in Normandy and died there on 20 June 1928 at the age of 82. She had been very active in Australia, through the Alliance Française, through her salons and school, and through her art. The French Government had awarded her the *Palmes Académiques* in Melbourne in 1889 for her work in education both in France and in Australia (Drury 2015). Her final contribution to the development of French-Australian relations—in working so diligently and effectively for the adoption of Dernancourt by Adelaide, and in providing so much to help the residents of Dernancourt restore their town and their lives—was typical of her spirit.

In 1923 a suburb was created by Richard Arthur Hobby in Adelaide, on his own land, named Dernancourt in recognition of their adopted French village. Today it thrives, a village in its own right, 10 km north-east of central Adelaide. In 2009 the Mayor of Dernancourt, Lionel Lamotte, visited Adelaide and spoke at the Lord Mayoral reception. Here is the *Advertiser's* report:

The Mayor wept as he thanked Adelaide for its human sacrifice in World War I. Dernancourt—where the Royal South Australian Regiment was stationed for the Western Front—was flattened by the German army on April 4, 1918, and 450 of our South Australian fighting Men were killed.

Struggling to hold in his emotions and with limited English skills, Mr Lamotte picked words carefully to describe how grateful his French community was to the women of Adelaide whose post-war fundraising had raised enough money to rebuild their village.

Mr Lamotte had sought permission from the Australian Ambassador to France to visit Adelaide to thank our city and pay respects to our fallen soldiers on Anzac Day.

On Monday night, he told a civic reception at the Adelaide Town Hall that his village has never forgotten our soldier's ultimate sacrifice—and that the school bears the name Pavillion Adelaide

¹⁹ See Jane Gilmour's article in the current issue.





[...]. One of the five winners of the 2008 Premier's ANZAC Spirit Prize was Immanuel College student, Richard Hayman, who visited Dernancourt, and said how awed he was at Pavillion Adelaide. 'On the top of every blackboard, in every classroom, is written in French, 'N'oublions pas les Australiens'—'Never forget the Australians' [...]'²⁰

Minister for the City of Adelaide Jane Lomax-Smith is hosting the Mayor of Dernancourt's Adelaide visit and she recalls how '*Les grande [sic] dames d'Adelaide*' led by Frenchwoman Madame Mouchette and the Queen Adelaide Club had raised 'several hundred pounds' to rebuild Dernancourt [...]. (*Advertiser* 22.4.2009, 21).

The sons of Australia who died defending and liberating the villages in France were adopted by France and their graves are tenderly cared for by local residents. It is only right that some Australian cities, in return, adopted these villages where so many of our men lie. The memory of the Australian soldiers is perpetuated by the villagers today. Perhaps it is fitting to close this commemorative chronicle with a poem that appeared in the Adelaide press in 1921:

The Children of Dernancourt From 'One of the Crowd'

The little gardens bright with flowers,
We played in thro' the sunny hours,
Are gone! Poor Dernancourt! They say,
How it was pretty and so gay—
Before They Came!

²⁰ We can note how close this is to the motto of the École Victoria in Villers-Bretonneux: 'Never Forget Australia'.





They came—they shelled our little town,
And all the houses tumbled down—
Our little homes, they were not there;
And we could only stand and stare,
At Dernancourt!
But now they say (our mothers say),
That in a land that's far away,
Kind people think of us, and send
Money, to help us try to mrrnd
Our broken Dernancourt!

Our father's gone! Our brothers too—
They died for France! What else to do?—
But France lives! France! What joy to give
To that dear land. And we shall live
Again in Dernancourt.

(*Register* 17.5.1921, 6)

Melbourne

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