

JOHN DAVID FRODSHAM

1930–2016

FELLOW · ELECTED 1969

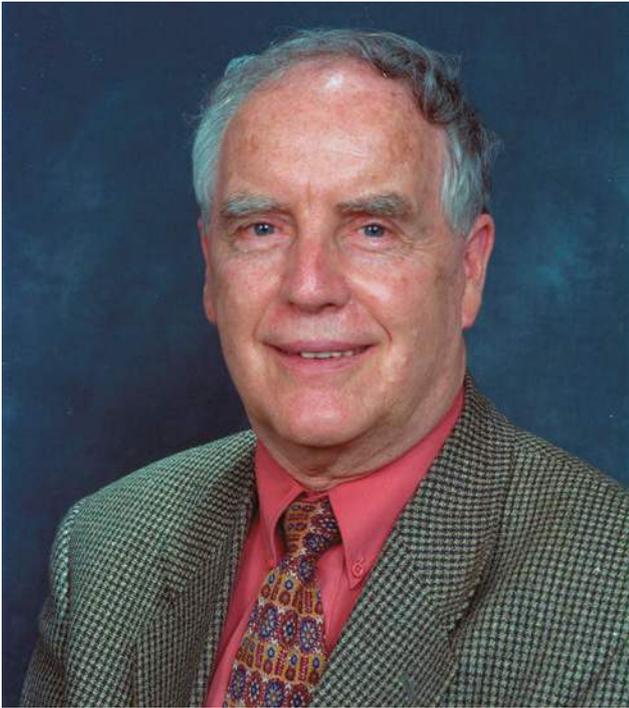


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John Frodsham, who was born on 5 January 1930 in Wales, was proud of his Welsh heraldic crest. He was the eldest child of John Keith Frodsham and Winifred Williams. Family lore has it that, precocious as the young Frodsham was, he mastered Welsh so that he could follow family gossips, especially those between his mother and his adorable aunt Cash. Frodsham's son Stefan noted in his obituary that the ranks of his Welsh family included the likes of the Welsh language poet Robert Williams (aka Trebor Mai), the mid-eighteenth-century Shakespearian actor Bridge Frodsham and the clock and watchmaker father-and-son team of William and Charles Frodsham. Charles Darwin used a Frodsham chronometer during his voyages of scientific discovery (1826–36) and, as Stefan Frodsham notes, 'a Frodsham clock was the first official time piece used by the Royal Observatory in Sydney'. Powerful, distinguished and influential as his Welsh pedigree was, Frodsham was ultimately an Oxbridge thoroughbred, having taken Quintuple Firsts in English and Oriental Languages Triposes at Emmanuel College, a University of Cambridge record.

Before taking up a position at Murdoch University, where Frodsham was Professor of World Literature, I had looked up his publications in the University of Sydney's Fisher Library. He had had a brief stint at Sydney in the Department of Oriental Studies before taking up a position as Lecturer in Far Eastern History at the University of Malaya. He returned to Australia in 1965 to a similar position at the University of Adelaide followed by his election to a Readership in Chinese at the Australian National University (ANU) in 1967. At Sydney I had been unimpressed by the narrow discipline-oriented interests of the English literature staff, their overbearing monolingualism and, needless to say, their Oxford pretentiousness. Against the latter, Frodsham, in my reading of him, stood out like an unusual beacon. He had already made it into *Who's Who* and been elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1969; his books had been published by Clarendon Press (the prestige imprimatur of Oxford University Press). I also read that he spoke some thirteen languages fluently. He interviewed me at a Circular Quay hotel, paid for the coffee and lunch on his American Express Card, and offered me a three-year tutorship. There was nothing untoward nor indeed corrupt about this, as this was a professor's right, a kind of gift, in the old system. The interview was amicable but I remember vividly Professor Frodsham's advice: 'You need to brush up on your theory. Your CV also shows a Macquarie Masters by coursework in Linguistics and a First, primarily in the early English periods, including Middle English. See if you can add Roman Jakobson to your reading list.' It was good advice, even if as a trained linguist I knew my Jakobson well. But what he did give me was an extraordinary gift. He praised me for my own multilingualism and, unlike English literature professors who felt uncomfortable about appointing a non-native speaker of English to a literary studies position, there was no such unease with Frodsham. Without the start he gave me, I doubt if any other Australian university would have taken me seriously, my linguistic competencies (including Old and Middle English as well as Classical Sanskrit) notwithstanding.

Frodsham came to Murdoch in 1973 from the University of Dar-es-Salaam where he had taken up the Chair of Literature on secondment from the ANU.

The Murdoch chair was in world literature and he had been enthusiastically supported by the great Australian poet and ANU Professor of English A. D. Hope when he applied for the position. I suspect Frodsham left the ANU (where he would have soon been appointed professor) because he sensed there was something exciting about this new university, the only one in Australia to be named after a professor of English. As a scholar, among other things, of comparative romantic literature (European and Chinese) he would have remembered the words of the young Wordsworth at the start of the French Revolution: 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,/But to be young was very heaven!' Clearly, he must have found the idea of the new attractive and so was happy to leave a field (classical Chinese poetry) in which he had become a world expert for the exciting multidisciplinary possibilities on offer at this new university in Perth. At Murdoch he was both Professor of World Literature as well as foundation Dean of the yet-to-be-named School of Literary and Cultural Studies. He called it the School of Human Communication, I suspect after a recently published book of that title by a Professor Birdwhistell, an ardent bird-watcher, who had researched the language of bird communication. Frodsham spoke many languages; he was a scholar of classical Chinese, read Greek and Latin and had picked up Malay and some Arabic during academic stints at the Universities of Malaya and Baghdad respectively. He therefore very quickly set about creating three majors in the School of Human Communication: World Literature, Asian Studies and Communication Studies. All three were extensions of his own self as he had deep scholarly passion for each of them. For the World Literature major, in which I was asked to tutor, there were units such as Introduction to World Literature, World Drama, Lyrical Poetry of the World, Literary Theory, Science Fiction and African Literature, followed by Advanced Literary Theory, History of Literary Criticism, Comparative Studies in the Novel, Bertolt Brecht, Masterpieces of European Literature, Great Themes I (the Changing Heroine) and Great Themes II (Faust). To cap it off, the honours year required students to take six courses and write an extended essay. The courses on offer – From Plato to Russian Formalism, Structuralism, Chinese Literary Theory, Phenomenology, Period Study (20th century) and Author Study (Dante Alighieri) – reflected units offered at advanced undergraduate levels in universities such as Chicago, McGill and Heidelberg. Frodsham could teach most of these units, and so well, that hundreds of students from Murdoch consider him the best lecturer to have set foot on this campus. Years later when he ran a compulsory foundation unit and the first year literary studies unit, there would be standing room only in the lecture theatres. That is an unusual legacy, and rare given that the scholar-teacher is no longer valued.

In Australia, literature had been a very staid discipline because it was always 'Eng lit' – a discipline seeking to establish itself as internally coherent and exclusive. It meant that Dante and Goethe and Dostoevsky could not be part of the discipline. Here Frodsham's vision was capacious. After all, he spoke thirteen languages and had a photographic memory. Many years later he told me how, during an exhibition of Chinese calligraphy in Cambridge, he turned his head away from the prints on display and recalled the calligraphic strokes in their totality. He had shifted from English (he was working on a minor nineteenth-century English poet who with a sense of exaggerated enthusiasm had written rather large epics) to classical Chinese and later at the ANU did a doctorate on the classical Chinese nature poet Hsieh Ling-yün. But his unusual capacity for languages meant he believed that, like him, students could also easily master the original language of the text they studied in translation. This presumption posed difficulties and soon many of the units that appeared in the 1976 University Handbook could not be taught. A new paradigm was needed. Frodsham had told me to master Roman Jakobson because structuralism was then on the ascendant but he himself remained very much an empirical literary historian. Encyclopaedic memory of itself could not transform facts and anecdotes into theoretical and organising principles. What was needed was not mastery of languages and texts within a world literature framework, but a comparative literature *modus operandi* which would accept that no one could ever know all the literatures of the world. One could, however, examine how, under different national agencies, the same genre took different forms, or how literature mediated social forms and engaged with ideology. With the help of his new appointees – Horst Ruthrof, Bob Hodge, David George and John Frow among them – world literature (these days a new literary paradigm) was quickly turned into comparative literature and then later into English and comparative literature. Such was John Frodsham's scholarly range that he occupied all three positions during his long career as Professor at Murdoch.

Although later in life our political views diverged considerably – as a Cambridge student still recovering from the Philby-Burgess-Maclean-Blunt spy scandal Frodsham found my left-leaning ideas far too 'Marxist' as he called them – what we never disagreed on was the importance of a 'non-racialised' university culture. On this score he was consistent and exemplary. Towards the end of his career at Murdoch he remarked that after nearly forty years there was no person of colour in the University Chancellery, let alone among the University's Deans. He felt that it was all very well to espouse multiculturalism and equality in universities but when it came to giving people of colour power, the self-

aggrandising post-enlightenment establishment always demurred. It was for this reason he said I should feel a lot more at ease with conservatives than with left-leaning liberals. At least with the conservatives the black feller always knew where he stood.

When John Frodsham died on 5 May 2016, after a brief absence from Murdoch since he had retired only four years before, an era came to an end. In the 1970s he was the world authority on Chinese literature (his translations of the poetry of Li He remains the gold standard of Chinese poetry in translation) and had published a major Clarendon Press book on the diaries of the first Chinese Ambassador to the Court of St James. With that extraordinary expertise, unsurprisingly, he appeared regularly on ABC radio and TV, often advised ministers and diplomats on post-Mao China and was awarded a Centenary Medal in 2001 for his services. Later he experimented with the theoretical foundations of paranormal communication – he was passionate about Jungian synchronicity and had a rare affection for the number ‘5’ – and became a speaker in great demand. He could easily traverse fields and spoke with unusual – indeed, poetic – fluency. A person with an encyclopaedic memory, he was the first source for all information – literary, lexicographical, religious, political, philosophical, and so on – before the age of Wikipedia. Years ago when I was working on Bollywood cinema he alerted me to a Hindi film he had seen in

Malaya called *Sangdil* (‘The Stone-hearted,’ 1952). He was convinced that it was a Hindi version of *Jane Eyre*. And he was correct. His arrival at the University of Western Australia (UWA) where Murdoch had its rudimentary offices before moving to South Street had a tsunami-like effect. The inward-looking and primarily Western Australian-educated UWA English Department found it hard to handle someone who could speak equally comfortably on Wordsworth, Dante and Chinese poetry. Four of UWA’s finest honours students quickly enrolled at Murdoch in 1975 to undertake their postgraduate degrees in world literature. Times, however, changed and very quickly. With university curricula responding to the demands of would-be students, the Frodshams of the old world became relics of the past, dinosaurs whose extinction came, as it had happened to the real ones, with cataclysmic force. But the three disciplines that John Frodsham inaugurated at Murdoch – World Literature, Communication Studies and Asian Studies – though now with postmodern names, have continued to flourish in almost all the universities of Australia. All those years ago it required a person with rare foresight and intellect to have carved disciplines then still in the making.

John Frodsham is survived by his wife Beng Choo and his children Simon, Stefan, Jonathan, Karen and Julia, eleven grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

VIJAY MISHRA FAHA