

IGOR DE RACHEWILTZ KNIGHT OF THE ORDER OF MERIT OF THE ITALIAN REPUBLIC FAHA

1929–2016

FELLOW · ELECTED 1972

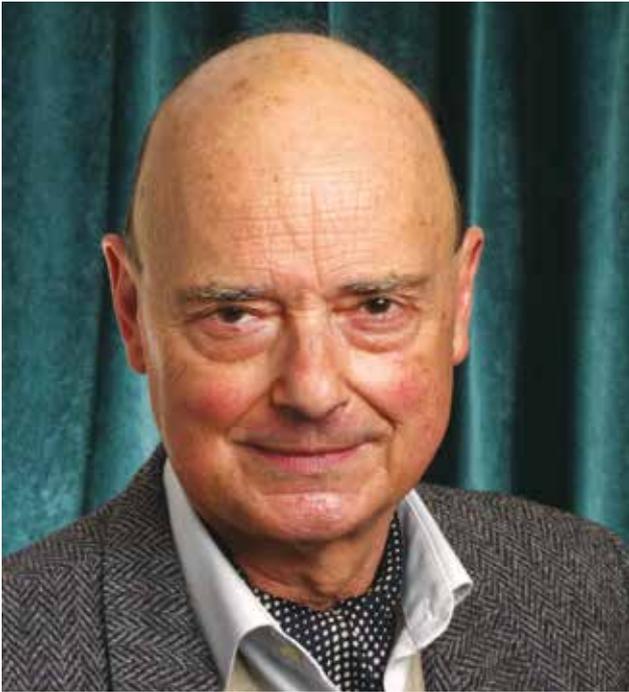


PHOTO: CLAUDIA DE RACHEWILTZ

Igor de Rachewiltz was a visionary and meticulous pioneer, above all in Mongol history and the scholarly exploration of Cinggis Qan, his preferred rendering of Chingis or Genghiz Khan. He was also a pioneer of Asian Studies in Australia, as one of the Australian National University's first PhD students in that field, a pioneer teacher of Asian Civilizations, and one of the first Asianists elected to the Australian Academy of the Humanities (1972). He served a term on Council, 1975–78.

ANU's beginnings were aided by a number of talented Europeans whose 'normal' career path was disrupted by the war and its messy aftermath. Igor was born in Rome in 1929, from a well-placed family with a touch of mystery about it. His mother was a Russian Italian born in St Petersburg, though with some Tartar ancestry that played well in Mongolia. She gave Russian names to her three children – Boris, Igor and Vera. His father Bruno added more resonant names from the family ancestry – degli Arodij, de Barattis, Rubei, de Rachewiltz, di Baviera, Toscana e Lorena.

The adult, unassuming Igor never used anything but Igor de Rachewiltz, unlike elder brother Boris, son-in-law of Ezra Pound and later a prolific Egyptologist.

Nevertheless he was not averse when pressed to tracing an illustrious ancestry back to a 7th Century Lombard king and a de Rachewiltz title conferred in the 13th century by the Emperor Frederick II. He did share with Ezra Pound an interest in Chinese poetry, judging that the American's translations often found the elusive spirit of a Chinese verse even when pedantic Sinologists faulted his accuracy. The two began a learned exchange of letters after the poet's 1958 release from detention (as a World War II 'traitor') in a Washington mental hospital.

Igor's interest in Asian languages and scripts was precocious. As a wartime teenager, in 1943, he joined the children of Japanese diplomats in his neighbourhood in grappling with *kanji*. This began his interest in philology and especially the possibilities of exotic scripts. Japanese led him to Chinese, and to the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente. Its Director, Giuseppe Tucci, who had led many photographic expeditions to Tibet and the Himalayas, accepted him into a Chinese class even before he was out of school uniform. He traced his life-long interest in Chingis Khan and the Mongols to reading a German book on the subject by Michael Prawdin in 1948. It contained a reproduction of a letter, with its fascinating vertical script, his grandson Guyug Khan had sent to the Pope. From that moment, he remembered, he was 'hooked' on Mongolian. He revelled in the challenge of tackling a third Asian language, and resolved to spend his life, as he put it, 'with one foot in China and one in Mongolia'. He found a Mongolian in Rome to teach him, and a written Mongolian text of the Gospels to work on.

In between studying Chinese in Naples, Law in Rome and Mongolian privately, young Igor supported himself by working at Cinecittà film studios, where American money was flowing into the war-stricken capital to create the 'Hollywood on the Tiber' era. Igor made himself useful in making arrangements for the filming of *Quo Vadis* (1951) and later *Roman Holiday* (1953), when he remembered breakfasts with Audrey Hepburn. By the time he met his future wife Ines Brasch in 1952 he had moved to a more secure job at FAO's Rome headquarters, but he was still able to introduce her to the cinema world. She too found her languages useful at Cinecittà, working on the set of what she called 'a terrible film', *Helen of Troy* (1956), directed by Robert Wise with a young Brigitte Bardot in a supporting role. Ines was German-Australian, her

family having migrated to Melbourne from Alexandria in 1939. After obtaining her degree from the University of Melbourne she took the obligatory trip to England, but was bowled over by the delights of Rome and of Igor. She had to return to Melbourne in 1954, but there she learned of the ANU's generous PhD scholarships and opening to Asia through Patrick Fitzgerald's new Department of Far Eastern History (FEH).

Igor sent in his application. Though he still had no degree, his many languages were attractive to the Research School of Pacific Studies, as was his idea to work between Chinese and Mongolian sources. Fitzgerald had himself been appointed Foundation Head of the Department without any degree. In those days they could take a chance. Igor and Ines were united again at Canberra's University House in 1956, and married soon after. They moved out to an apartment in 1960, and their daughter Claudia was born in 1962. The heroic leap from cosmopolitan Rome to a small Anglophone bush capital turned out surprisingly well. Igor loved the new life of University House, exchanging Latin verses with Professor Trendal and home-brewed vodka with the graduate students.

Igor remained an Italian citizen, treasured his chats with the few Italian friends that Canberra afforded, and loved returning to Rome, old friends and sister Vera's family. Yet he made the cultural transition to Canberra with astonishing success. Igor published only in English thereafter, and relaxed with Sherlock Homes, P.G. Wodehouse, Lewis Carroll and Anglo-American detective stories. Even more than the Canberra bush, he learned to love the South Coast. Patrick Fitzgerald's invitations to Guerrilla Bay gave the family many happy summer days. As his daughter wrote, 'It was there that he completely lost himself in sand, sea and fish leaving behind his demanding research. I can still picture him in his favourite rock pool floating on his favourite Lilo or gathering oysters to accompany a glass of chilled wine.'

In 1960 Igor produced a dissertation: 'Sino-Mongolian Culture Contacts in the XIII Century: A Study on Yeh-lu Ch'u-ts'ai' [In today's Pinyin *Yēlù Chūcái*]. This was a biographical study of a Chinese scholar-official who became a kind of Chinese secretary for Chingis Khan. Always attracted to the textual sources, he never published this as a book, but instead focussed on producing a definitive edition of the travelogue of its central character, Yelu. His facsimile text, translation and erudite discussion of Yelu's *Hsi-Yu Lu* or 'Account of a Journey to the West' appeared in the *Journal of Oriental Studies* in 1962. This first major publication earned him an international reputation for orientalist scholarship of a high order. It positioned him well to join the foundation staff of ANU's brand new Faculty of

Oriental Studies, where he taught Asian Civilizations for the period 1961–65.

In 1965 Patrick Fitzgerald brought Igor back to the Research School as a research-only tenured Fellow in FEH, where he would remain until retirement in 1995. Fitzgerald immediately encouraged Igor to use his skills with Italian, Latin, French and Russian (and Ines' German) to investigate the background to that letter from Chingis Khan to the Pope. This made possible a productive year (1966–67) researching Papal envoys to the Mongols in Vatican archives and libraries. The result, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans*, in the 'Great Travellers' Series of Stanford University Press and Faber & Faber in 1971 became his most popular and highly cited publication. Uncharacteristic in its absence of footnotes, the book nevertheless ended with a new translation of the Persian version (in Vatican archives) of Guyug's reply to these envoys. The great Khan demanded that the Pope and other Christian kings heed God's manifest will by submitting to him as God's appointed agent. A related fruit of this stimulating research into European Mediaeval sources was a 1972 George Morrison lecture on 'Prester John and Europe's Discovery of East Asia'.

The thesis research had already alerted Igor to the importance of the 'Secret History of the Mongols', and an early article in the *Journal of Oriental Studies*, (1965) drew attention to problems in dating it. The project that was to consume most of his remaining time was already in mind. First, however, came the launching by FEH in 1968 of a Yuan Biographical Project, on which Igor would labour for many years with his Chinese-speaker Research Assistant May Wang, a windfall to Canberra of the recruiting by the National Library in 1964 of her husband Sing-wu (Sidney) Wang, and various other collaborators. Indices of names began to appear from 1970, and the project culminated with a collection of biographies under the title, *In the Service of the Khan: Eminent Personalities of the Early Mongol Period (1200–1300)* (1993).

Igor is rightly best-known for work on the 'Secret History of the Mongols', only brought to fruition in a busy retirement. He had known since his Rome days that this valuable source, apparently first written only a few months after the death of Chingis Khan in 1227, deserved a good modern edition in English (there were earlier German and French versions) by someone who knew both Mongolian and Chinese. The only known text was a Chinese one of much later date, which provided both a phonetic rendering of the Mongolian and a Chinese translation. Igor was already working on this in the 1960s, and along the way became aware of a slightly different Mongolian version of the same original. This had all to be collated and compared for an adequate translation. Igor began publishing his results in the Department's *Papers*

on *Far Eastern History* in 1970. Harvard meanwhile produced a full English translation by Cleaves in 1982, but it was in a cumbrous archaic language and lacked the erudition of Igor's work, for which there remained a high demand. Brill published Igor's heavily annotated text in three volumes between 2004 and 2013, and a revised paperback edition in 2006. Finally an updated version without the footnotes, but requiring a lot more of Igor's time, appeared as an open-access online publication in 2015.

When he had begun this labour, it appeared to be classic orientalism without a great deal of relevance to contemporary concerns. But in 1990 Mongolia freed itself from Soviet domination and began a revival of Mongol nationalism. Chingis Khan switched from feudal oppressor to national hero, and Mongolians could not hear enough about him. A massive gold-plated edition of the 'Secret History' was produced with great fanfare, and Igor began to be invited to Ulan Bator and honoured as a great foreign friend. In August 1997 he was able to join a Mongolian-funded expedition on horseback to the sacred mountain of Burkhan Khaldun, and to identify it definitively as the site of Chingis Khan's memorial tomb. His services were honoured, appropriately, with the 'Polar Star Medal of the Mongolian Republic' in 2007. Other honours followed from around the world, including an honorary doctorate from La Sapienza University in Rome, and the Australian Centenary Medal.

Igor will be remembered as a warm and helpful colleague, tactful, erudite and amusing in conversation, with some learned insight to bring to every conversation. As a scholar he was meticulous and thorough, leaving no stone unturned to get at the truth. His fascination with language extended to a pioneer publication on *Altaic Philology: Turkic, Mongolian, Manchu* (2010). Only in defence of what he held to be correct usage could he be less than generous. Geremie Barmé as editor of *Papers on Far Eastern History* remembered a moment when he had failed to observe all the diacritics correctly in one of Igor's articles. 'Igor's characteristic Mediterranean affability melted away and, in a mood of polite but pointed high dudgeon, he resigned from the editorial board of the journal and refused to publish with us until he felt that I had spent a suitable period in a 'cold palace'.'

He was working right up to the end, collaborating with Li Narangoa on a translation of the 1716 text of the Mongolian epic of Geser Khan, happily sent to ANU Press only months before his death. He had suffered a heart attack in the 1980s, with a triple bypass operation that damaged his kidneys, and a stroke more recently. None of this appeared to stop his work or his agreeable demeanour, although he knew he was on borrowed time. He died on 30 July 2016, mourned by family, friends, and a great circle of scholars in Canberra and around the world.

ANTHONY REID FAHA