

# THE WIZARD OF OZ

PROFESSOR JOHN FRODSHAM MAY WELL BE THE MAN WHO "REALLY DOES KNOW EVERYTHING."

BY JUDY BANKS

As an eight-year-old, I once introduced myself to new classmates as Priscilla Presley's cousin. A couple of years later, I posted a marriage proposal to David Cassidy, c/o Hollywood, America, enclosing a self-addressed envelope to ensure his response didn't go astray. David didn't reply; he won't be getting a second chance.

Nowadays, considerably older and arguably somewhat wiser, I've no interest in anyone whose hairstyle and clothing set fashion trends around the world, or whose nose and cheekbones are replicated by thousands wealthy enough to afford them. Instead, I store my admiration in its original air-tight container, reserving it for glam-and-glitz-free heroes who can walk unrecognised through K-Mart. It's dished out to individuals whose accomplishments are beyond the norm, whose influences linger, who once met are not forgotten.

A recipient is Professor John Frodsham, a Founding Father of Perth's Murdoch University. As he approaches his eightieth birthday, there is talk of the Professor retiring after more than fifty years as an educator. Hopefully, it will remain just talk.

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In 2007, my third year at Murdoch, one study option was a Poetry Unit run by Professor Frodsham. I questioned several of his contemporaries as well as former students before making any enrolment decisions and heard both accolades and warnings.

The Prof's lectures were supposedly 'out of this world' though undergrads had best be moderately literate if they signed up for his units. One youngster declared eternal love for the Professor whilst another, an English Major, complained her literature assignment had been returned with grammar and spelling corrections. I discovered that Frodsham, deemed a radical in 1981, is considered old-fashioned by some of his present day colleagues. Nonetheless, I was urged by fan and foe, student and academic alike, to snatch the opportunity to learn from this knowledgeable man.

My sleuthing continued and the biographical info I unearthed is pretty remarkable.

John Frodsham completed his Bachelor of Arts in 1953, graduating from Cambridge University with First Class Honours. He'd set a Cambridge record having earned five Firsts in English and Oriental Languages in the course of his degree. In '62 he was awarded a PhD in Classical Chinese from the Australian National University.

His teaching career began at the University of Baghdad and continued at universities in Sydney, Malaya, Athens, New York (Cornell), Adelaide, Hawaii, Singapore, Dar-es-Salaam and Perth. He's taught English and Comparative Literature, Chinese, Chinese Literature, History, and Oriental Studies.

Frodsham was appointed Foundation Professor of Literature and Dean of the School of Human Communication at the new Murdoch University in 1973. His appointment is described in, *It had better be a good one: the first ten years of Murdoch University*, written in 1985 by historian and fellow founder, Professor Geoffrey Bolton:

The most eloquent of all the foundation professors, [John Frodsham] was credited with understanding seventeen languages and enjoyed a profound scholarly reputation in classical Chinese studies.

In '83, Frodsham served as President of the Professors' World Peace Academy and for the last twenty years he's been President of the Australasian Society of Psychical Research.

In 2001, for his services to Australian Society and the humanities in Asian Studies, he received the Australian Centenary Medal. The profile of FRODSHAM, John David, MA, PhD, FAHA, CM, which includes a list of his publications, takes up a noteworthy amount of space in the pages of *The International Who's Who*.



Poetry could be taught in a mere three months.

Considering the time constraints, Prof Frodsham did an outstanding job - and students learned more than they'd anticipated. Each lecture was a lesson in geography, history and philosophy, in literature and mathematics, in the physical and social sciences, in past and present politics. Enthralled students listened to recitations in Italian, Greek, French, German, Chinese and Welsh. In Week 4, one young man announced he had no further use for the course texts: no book offered what he could gain from lectures.

For a couple of weeks, until seating arrangements for a larger than expected tutorial class were sorted out, youngsters were content to sit on the floor, lining the walls and blocking the doorway. Along with poetry, assorted dead poets came to life in the Murdoch classroom. We voiced our frustration at Pope, chastised Byron for his profligate lifestyle, wished Yeats a happy eternity with Maude, and invited Keats home for a healthy stew.

The classes revealed our teacher's sense of humour and his skill in the dramatic arts; one Monday morning, during a discussion on wartime propaganda, he gave a commendable demonstration of the goose-step, singing a German marching song and striding across the room with his right arm held high.

Our journey through history led to discussions on every ism I'd heard of and many I hadn't. In Singapore in 1989, as a guest of the Institute of East Asian Philosophies, Frodsham delivered a paper condemning the poo-hooing of tradition and the execution of Traditional Wisdom in our post modern world:

'The offspring of materialism, scepticism, scientism, relativism and emotivism,' he said, 'is nihilism.' (*The Crisis of the Modern World and Traditional Wisdom*)

At ground level, imagine this:

The fruit of your loins reach a certain stage of 'development'. The little peaches demand the latest gizmos; they dispute everything you say, dismissing your experience; they sneer at your love and concern insisting it be proved to their satisfaction; they're full of

excuses and expect special treatment for unacceptable behaviour; they wave away house rules with a sigh and a sarcastic, 'Whatever.'

If they're pandered to, the result - the 'offspring' - is domestic anarchy.

In the global context, modern societies are the fruit: little peaches that have shaken themselves from the Tree of Traditional Knowledge and are on the verge of rotting. Our world moves along but we discard traditional values and wisdom at our peril.

Not everyone agrees, and Frodsham is faulted by some for such opinions, and for his criticism of fashionable theory. In an environment that encourages independent thinking, this teacher should rather be lauded as a non-conformist, his rebellious views and maverick qualities treasured in the nursery of tomorrow's philosophers, historians, anthropologists and politicians.

The Prof's not concerned. 'Theorists,' he claims, 'have no sense of humour whatever (or they'd laugh at themselves).'

He's not against students stepping outside the square. He's against letting the door bang shut behind them.

Of course, John Frodsham is more than a breathing encyclopaedia available in several languages. As one young girl confided, 'When I'm around him, I know I've missed out on something but I'm not sure what it is.'

For myself, I'd already identified that missing something.

In my alter-reality, the Professor, a cape across his shoulders, treads the stone-arched

Whew! Impressed, I enrolled, though wondered how seven hundred years of English

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walkways of a centuries-old academy. Long-trousered students, their faces hidden by armloads of classical texts, stumble along behind him dropping pencils and repeating his words in chant-like whispers. The ghosts of great scholars murmur in the overhead echo-space.

'Think Hogwarts,' I told her.

The girl's thoughts were practically visible.

'Dumbledore?' I guessed.

She giggled.

With a little wizardry, the principles of a rare gentleman permeated the mindsets of young people who might ordinarily find their role models in *Big Brother* or *Entertainment Tonight*. Unbidden, normally barefoot students appeared in class wearing shoes. Gum and four letter words were disposed of at the door. Young men removed jewellery that attached a nostril to an eyebrow, and girls in short skirts sat at their desks with ankles crossed and knees together. Hands were raised before speaking and the Prof was never routinely addressed by his first name.

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Seemed like magic to me, and if it falls under the heading of old-fashioned - well - those of a generation that carried cell phones in primary school loved him for it. A web search brings up the myspace page of a youngster who lists Charles Darwin and Prof John Frodsham as his heroes and describes the lit lecturer as an 'amazing dude'. I doubt there are many near-octogenarians who could include such a character reference in their curriculum vitae.

At the end of semester, students handed over a thank-you card - an uncommon occurrence. We all signed our names and afraid of appearing star-struck, restrained our enthusiasm and wrote a few polite words. One teenager was less inhibited and her comment summed it up for everyone:

'I've finally met somebody who really DOES know everything.'

You'd think the person who really does know everything would justifiably feel he spent his life surrounded by idiots, but there is a soft and charming side to this man. Along with two former classmates, I'm fortunate to have an ongoing association with the Prof who calls us 'The Holy Trinity' or 'The Troika' (rather than Moe, Larry and Curly). We meet him for coffee every few months. In a university where teaching staff with heavy-metal t-shirts, ponytails and earrings warrant nary a glance, the Professor's dark suit, buffed shoes, collar and tie make his arrival hard to miss. He's invariably accompanied by Prema, a ten-year-old Bichon Frise, who toddles along beside him, greets a few patrons then settles at his owner's feet, only rising to have his head scratched.

The Prof never fails to notice and admire a new haircut, to ask after family members, to listen uncritically as his normally articulate disciples knot their tongues and take turns in appearing stupid. He seems unaware of our level of ignorance, occasionally beginning a sentence with, 'As you know...' More often than not, we don't. We kick each other under the table and nod furiously.

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We're in good company; I have it on reliable authority that a number of his colleagues act similarly in the same situation.

Our continuing education at these informal meets slips us into the Prof's personal territory. We get glimpses of past times, faraway places and unfamiliar cultures: images of a different world. We hear anecdotes of his childhood, grandchildren and former students. We discover what it is that frustrates, astounds, saddens or amuses the man. Affection is now firmly cemented to our respect.

In turn, the Prof has become our champion, defending us against criticism and panel-beating the dings that self-confidence and ego inevitably sustain on the road to a university degree. When they arise, he shows genuine pleasure at our successes: 'Outstandingly brilliant!' and 'Not too surprised!' he's said.

Such praise and support is not only extended to students. An experienced, seemingly

unflappable Murdoch lecturer told me he had once, in Frodsham's presence, delivered a lecture and tutorial on Greek Theatre. In light of the Prof's warehouse of knowledge, the lecturer admitted it was one of the most nerve-wracking experiences of his career. The Professor's compliments at the end of the tutorial restored his equanimity.

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Truth be told, despite all evidence to the contrary, the Prof doesn't actually know everything. For example, he's no idea that his comments on my assignments hung on my kitchen doorframe for almost two years: motivation in times of *Why the hell am I doing this?*

Additionally, none of his three devotees will, save for digital amputation (or pieces of silver) divulge the secrets we share when Our Froddie - a possessive term that would undoubtedly amuse him - is the subject of discussion. Our discretion arises from fear of



being escorted by polite young men in white jackets to a place with shaded lawns, flowerbeds, newly painted benches and a name like Pleasant Valley Care.

With ten fingers intact but an unexpected five dollars in my pocket, I've agreed to confess and betray.

For my part, I'm convinced the man is semi-machine. Unlimited RAM enables his CPU to access vast amounts of information in a trice; if Ctrl+P were possible, the data printed from his internal drive would fill a small public library.

One fellow follower considers Frodsham a Martial Arts Master of the Intellect who teaches black belt courses for the mind.

The other, herself destined for greatness, maintains he is 'not actually a member of the human race, but a visiting alien.' She believes the Prof should be cloned and put in charge of the world.

Yes, Our Froddie, Murdoch's Dumbledore, is an extraordinary man worthy of admiration. His life experiences, teaching expertise and profound knowledge have influenced and benefited students around the world and across three generations, for his pupils today could well be the grandchildren of those he first taught.

His retirement, may it be many years away, will be a sad loss to the student body of Murdoch University.

In 1974, Frodsham urged Murdoch founders to view themselves as 'critics of society and prophets pointing the way to the future.' He wrote, 'The human race is growing so fast that it threatens the stability of the biosphere itself.' (Bolton)

Fifteen years later, he stated, 'Spiritually, morally, and ecologically, our civilisation is dying.' (*Crisis of the Modern World*)

In 2009, does he believe it's time for the last rites? I'll ask him and let you know.

*Judy banks lives in Perth, Western Australia*

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