



Patrick FitzGerald

CHARLES PATRICK FITZGERALD

1902 - 1992

Patrick FitzGerald 'discovered' China through following the news in England during the middle of the First World War. He was only 15. He was determined to study in China but did not get there until he was 21. After that, he lived in or travelled around as much as he could over a period of twenty years until he finally left China in 1950. He then continued to write about China until the very last years of his life. It was an absorbing love affair, sometimes passionate, sometimes distant and critical, but it led to distinguished writing which was inevitably filtered through a sharp eye and an endearing wisdom.

He was a Foundation Fellow of the Academy, the first to hold the Chair of Far Eastern History at the Australian National University from which he retired in 1967. He was appointed to that Chair without ever receiving a degree himself. This was rectified when ANU conferred on him his first degree, an Honorary doctorate, in 1968.

His best-known book is undoubtedly *China, A Short Cultural History*. This was first published in 1935, reprinted and revised several times, an authoritative introduction to China and a popular and successful textbook as well. Remarkably, it is still in print. Even more remarkable is the fact that it was written by a young man of thirty-three. Together with his first book published two years earlier, a biography of the founder of the Tang dynasty, it gained him scholarly acclaim. But he was never a conventional scholar-historian. His desire to know China could not be satisfied by poring through the classical sources. He had arrived in China in 1923, a turbulent time of decay and revolution accompanied by desperate efforts at national revival. This experience coloured and deepened his curiosity about, and his concern for, all those engaged in defining a Chinese identity. Thus, two major themes of Chinese history remained dear to his heart to the end of his life.

The first was the Chinese Revolution. He first saw it when it was in total disarray, overwhelmed by warlords within and manipulated by foreign powers without. He saw the revolution saved only by the Allies during the long-drawn war against Japan. But he saw, at close hand after the war, in Nanjing and Beijing as the representative of the British Council, how the dying Guomindang revolution was overtaken by the militant second revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party.

Two books appeared in 1952 which launched Patrick FitzGerald in his second career as a scholar-commentator of

contemporary China. They were *Revolution in China* and *Flood Tide in China*. By that time, he had joined the Australian National University. No one before him had brought to Australia the depth of feeling and understanding about China and the Chinese that he had. In fact, his was the essential fresh voice that the country needed to hear if it were to erase the deep-rooted fears of the Chinese which had contributed to the tragic White Australia policy. What he had to say about the Chinese revolution was not always what most Australians wanted to hear. Only his colleagues, some journalists and a few diplomats appreciated that his was that rare phenomenon, an authentic and authoritative view. Fortunately, *Revolution in China* (later revised and published in a Pelican edition as *The Birth of Communist China*), earned him international fame. This ensured that he was eventually listened to more carefully across Australia.

The second major theme in his writings derived from the beautiful South-west provinces bordering on South-east Asia. He had chosen to return to China in 1930 via Haiphong (then French Indo-China) and Kunming and saw a part of the country relatively untouched by the mandarin culture he had himself so admired. And he returned to Yunnan a few years later on a Leverhulme Fellowship. He has given us a vivid account of his travels through the south-western provinces in his memoirs. What he saw alerted him to the boundaries of Chinese civilisation which enriched his understanding of China from the periphery.

Two scholarly books came out of his studies of this region which have not received the attention they deserve. The earlier ethnographic study was *The Tower of Five Glories, a Study of the Min Chia of Ta Li, Yunnan*, which he published in 1941. These 'Min Chia' who lived around the beautiful Ta Li Lake in Western Yunnan were descended from one of the core peoples of the kingdoms of Nan Chao and Ta Li which preserved their independence in the face of the great Tang and Song empires. Seven hundred years after the fall of Ta Li to the Mongols, the people remain still distinct in speech, dress and customs, but they have become marginally Chinese. This book provides valuable data for the study of people who have been described as 'not yet Chinese'.

Patrick FitzGerald never lost his love for the Yunnan region. Towards the end of his formal career, he returned to ponder on the failure of the various minority peoples of the province to form their own states independent of China, whereas only their neighbours in Vietnam succeeded in doing so. This led to his thoughtful study, *The*

Southern Expansion of the Chinese People: 'Southern Fields and Southern Ocean'. This was published in 1972, in the midst of the Vietnam War. Even in his historical quest for an answer to the question, 'How did Vietnam become independent?', he could not avoid the contemporary ramifications of China's involvement across the land borders to its south.

Patrick FitzGerald was much loved by his friends, colleagues and students. They all continued to seek him out and hear him tell his stories of China. They encouraged him to write his memoirs and finally he obliged and decided to answer their most frequent question, Why China? Thus appeared his last book, using that question as its title and published in 1985 when he was 83. No one who knew him can read that book without hearing his voice telling us how dearly he cared for the world he 'discovered' at the age of 15. I last saw him in August 1991. He moved slowly, but his mind was clear and he still had new stories to tell. I was sorry I was unable to join his family and friends who gathered to hear him once again at a special 90th birthday party. A few weeks after his birthday, he died, on 13 April 1992.

Wang Gungwu