



Laurence Fitzhardinge

LAURENCE FITZHARDINGE

1908-1993

LAURIE FITZHARDINGE, a pioneer of the Australian National University, died on 31 October 1993, aged 85. He thought of himself as a scholar, a teacher, a researcher and a writer, in that order. His original, and lifelong interest was in the classics, Greek and Latin. His formal education, at Sydney Church of England Grammar School, Sydney University and Oxford centred on Greece and Rome – the languages and the culture. As he said recently, ancient history is always, at least in the Oxford tradition, very strongly embedded in the wider discipline of classics, along with literature and archaeology and art and everything else.

The European classics were the background to his intellectual life, being in the foreground only for a short period. He taught Greek and Latin at Sydney University from 1945 to 1950 and after he retired from ANU he published a book on the Spartans.

Most of his professional life was devoted to the study of Australia. For ten years from 1934 he was Research Officer at the Australian National Library, where he immersed himself in the primary documents of Australian history – this at a time when there was little interest in Australian studies. He first taught Australian History in 1943 to a class of mature students at the newly established School of Diplomatic Studies, within the Canberra University College. He believed that the students, products of universities which were European oriented, would regard Australian History as a not quite reputable subject. One of them, at least, appears to have been converted, and went on to make a significant contribution to Australian History and culture. Donald Horne speaks kindly of the teacher, and captured the flavour of the man, in a cameo sketch.

Laurie Fitzhardinge . . . was a scholar of gentle temperament, for whose eccentricities – his unworldliness in dress and manner, his beard, and above all his unquenchable desire to talk – we developed a protective tolerance: in his lectures ‘Fitz’ might go on for twice the allotted hour, or even longer, and then follow us out to the bus or bar.

All of us who knew him have our own stories about how we tried to quench the ‘unquenchable desire’. But of course, even though excessive, it was not small talk – it came from a full and rich mind.

In 1951 Laurie became Reader in the Sources of Australian History, a key position in Sir Keith Hancock’s plan for the Research School of Social Sciences. He was to provide information for the whole school, but it did not work out that way. Hancock did not take up the position of Director and

Professor of History until 1957 and in the meantime Fitzhardinge's role had changed. He became effective Head of a small but creative history department. He was proud of his department and in particular of his first students, Allan Martin, Eric Fry and Russel Ward, who have all had distinguished careers as teachers and writers of history.

With the arrival of Hancock, Laurie's position changed again. He was no longer head of a department, and the role of expert on the sources was not as relevant as it was when originally conceived. So he became Reader in Australian History, a position he retained until his retirement in 1973. He continued to play a major part in the supervision of post-graduate students. He kept his hand in with the classics by teaching a course in ancient history at the School of General Studies. He worked on his biography of William Morris Hughes. The two-volume work was a long time coming out but when it arrived it was one of the best of its kind. He was elected to the Fellowship in 1983.

In his later years, Laurie reflected on his life, and wondered what he had achieved. He had a title for the autobiography he had no intention of writing: *Master of None* with the subtitle *Jack of all Trades*. It is probably true that his material achievements would have been greater if he had confined himself to a narrower field of study. But his friends do not regret the course he took. They knew him as a unique individual. He lived a life of warm concern for others and a never-ending interest in the world of ideas – a truly civilised man.

Robin Gollan