

ELLIOTT CHRISTOPHER FORSYTH

1924-2012



PHOTO: COURTESY OF IVAN BARKO

Elliott Forsyth was one of the most respected French scholars of his generation. To his academic virtues he added those of a man of thorough decency and profound humanity. His death occurred a few days before Christmas 2012, the second in an unprecedented series of deaths within a few weeks of French scholars in the Australian academic community, and one which deprived the Australian Academy of the Humanities of one of its long-standing Fellows.

Elliott Christopher Forsyth was born on 1 February 1924 at Mt Gambier, South Australia, the son of the Northern Irish-born Reverend Samuel Forsyth OBE and Australian-born Ida Muriel née Brummitt, both prominent personalities in their State and both renowned for their contribution to humanitarian causes.

In 1929 Elliott's parents went to the UK for a year and the five-year old was left in the care of his mother's family, including his uncle Elliott. With two Elliotts in the household, Elliott Junior chose to be known as Christopher, after Christopher Robin, his then favourite literary character. Christopher was then abbreviated to

Christie and that was the name by which Elliott was known within the extended family from then on.

Elliott was educated at Prince Alfred College in Adelaide. The seeds of his Christian faith were sown during his upbringing in a Methodist manse, surrounded by a culture of caring and humanitarian concern. These values were subsequently nurtured and fortified by his involvement during his university years in the Australian Student Christian Movement. It was here that he was exposed to ardent discussions on religious matters. He owed both the blossoming of his faith and the development of his critical faculties to these debates. His inclusive and generous approach to Christianity was an integral part of both his private life and his academic interests: an important proportion, although not all, of his research was to be on topics connected with Christianity and biblical themes.

A student of the charismatic J.G. Cornell, foundation professor of French at the University of Adelaide, himself a disciple of Melbourne's A. R. Chisholm, Elliott Forsyth was awarded the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honours in French in 1947. He completed his teacher training at the same time, although the Diploma of Education was not conferred until 1950. A teacher by vocation, he chose to move to Hobart where he was attracted by the progressive educational philosophy of the Friends' School, under headmaster Bill Oates' leadership. His three years in Tasmania marked him profoundly, introducing him to a deeper understanding of the environment and encouraging him to engage in a variety of activities which would stand him in good stead for the rest of his life: botany, the love of Australian plants, bushwalking, photography and further involvement and indeed leadership roles in the Australian Student Christian Movement and the Methodist Church. He also continued to pursue his long-standing interest in music (he sang and played both the piano and the organ) which would enrich his life to the end. During his years in Tasmania, Elliott was known to send his family and friends duplicated Christmas circulars addressed to 'Dear Mainlanders', containing an account of his activities during the year: he was a pioneering forerunner of a custom that has spread widely since the introduction of desktop printers.

After Hobart and a short period in Adelaide, Elliott Forsyth embarked for postgraduate studies in France. He spent the early 'fifties in Paris as a holder of a French Government postgraduate scholarship. During his years in France, he continued to nurture his church connections, including an involvement in the Reformed Church in Passy where he sat at the feet of one of the great men of the French Reformed Church, Pastor Marc Boegner. At the Sorbonne, his mentors were the eminent Renaissance scholars Raymond Lebègue and V. L. Saulnier. His doctoral research, devoted to the study of French Revenge Tragedy in the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries, led to the award in 1954 of a doctorate of the University of Paris, with the very high grade of 'mention très honorable, avec les félicitations du jury'. In 1962, a completely recast version of this thesis appeared in book form: *La Tragédie française de Jodelle à Corneille (1553-1640): le thème de la vengeance*, Paris, Nizet. This was a major 516-page contribution to French literary history by a young master of the art, rather than the outcome of a research training exercise, as so many doctoral theses are. A monument of scholarship, it has become a standard reference work, as was demonstrated by the publication of a second, updated, edition of the book by another distinguished Paris publishing house, Honoré Champion, in 1994.

Elliott Forsyth's 1968 critical edition of two sixteenth-century biblical tragedies (*Saül le furieux* and *La Famine ou les Gabeonites*) by Huguenot author Jean de La Taille would also be reprinted thirty years later, when it was selected as a set text for the French *Agrégation des Lettres*, a national competitive examination. A similar distinction would befall his 1975 article on Ronsard's poetic inspiration ('Le Concept de l'inspiration poétique chez Ronsard', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*), reprinted in 1997 in a volume of collected essays on Ronsard's *Les Amours*.

In the meantime, Elliott Forsyth was appointed to a lectureship in French – and later promoted to a senior lectureship – at the University of Adelaide (1955–66), although he spent some of this period (1963–65) at the University of Wisconsin in the US, thus broadening his academic experience. During the same Adelaide period, he undertook an impressive number of professional duties in the South Australian educational system, as well as other cultural activities such as the presidency of the Alliance Française in South Australia, an ideal preparation for his future professorial responsibilities.

Elliott Forsyth was appointed to the Foundation Chair of French at La Trobe University in 1966, the year before the first students enrolled. He was one of the pioneering founders of a new university, and took an active role in shaping its future.

It was in the second year of his tenure of the La Trobe Chair, in May 1967, that Elliott Forsyth, then aged forty-three, married. His wife Rona Lynette née Williams was an Educational Psychologist who later specialised in teaching English as a second language. This professional involvement in education was just one of the many interests Rona and Elliott shared during a long and harmonious life: these included music, international travel, bushwalking, hiking and mountaineering. One of their common passions was the creation of a wonderful architect-designed house on the banks of the Yarra at Eltham (the celebrated bush suburb), complete with holes in the roof for the trees to grow through, surrounded by two acres of gum trees and wattles. Elliott's love of native plants went with them to their following residence in North Balwyn, where family legend has it that some South African proteas planted by Rona were 'accidentally' left to die as they failed to meet Elliott's criterion of 'nothing but Australian flora'...

Elliott and Rona started a family in the early seventies. Their two daughters, Alison and Fiona, shared with their parents the enriching experience of travel and study leave, mainly in France. Both now live in Melbourne with their families. Elliott's love of teaching extended to the family context where he became heavily involved in nurturing his daughters' musical and academic pursuits. Alison and Fiona remember with affection not only their father's wonderful personal and scholarly qualities but also his idiosyncrasies, such as his long explanations during family meals, his obsession with complicated cameras and lenses, and his unending preparations to catch the perfect light to take the perfect photo.

Elliott Forsyth held the La Trobe Chair with distinction for over two decades, from 1966 to 1987, a period during which he was actively engaged not only in teaching and research but also in university building and in the fostering of the teaching of French both nationally and in the State of Victoria. Already decorated by the French Government with the insignia of Officer of the Order of the Academic Palms (1971) and subsequently promoted Commander in the same order (1983), he was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1973 and was Convenor of the Academy's Committee on Foreign Languages from 1974 to 1991, also serving as Vice-President of the Academy from 1975 to 1977. A Fellow of the Australian College of Education from 1977, he was awarded the Centenary Medal in 2001.

After his retirement from La Trobe University in 1988, Elliott Forsyth accepted an advisory brief from the University of Melbourne to help run its French Department during a particularly difficult period. This included a term as a Visiting Professor, and subsequently, in 1999, he was appointed an Honorary Professorial Fellow.

This happy and mutually beneficial association continued to the end of his life.

In retirement Elliott Forsyth's love of teaching found a ready expression in his courses on French culture at the Centre for Adult Education, Melbourne, and, later, at the University of the Third Age. He also conducted a series of cultural tours of different regions of France for the Centre for Adult Education, as well as for a private organisation, Bronz Discovery Tours. These tours extended over a decade: they only ceased when Elliott reached the age of eighty and the insurance company would no longer cover him for further international tours. The organisers at the French end had the profoundest admiration for his in-depth knowledge of the great range of topics and regions chosen over the years, and his 'totally infectious' enthusiasm: his tours were always 'thoroughly researched, presented in an extremely lively way, and always appropriately adapted for groups of intelligent people who were curious about everything'.

These comments echo the memories of his former students: they remember Elliott's seriousness of purpose, his total commitment to learning, his intensity, his rigorous standards but also his unfailing courtesy towards his students.

He remained an active researcher during his tenure of the La Trobe Chair, and was particularly productive after his retirement.

In the 1980s, shortly before the Australian Bicentenary, he became involved in a new research area, covering a period two centuries younger than his original interests: French exploration in the Pacific. With Jacqueline Bonnemains of the Museum of Natural History in Le Havre, France, and his colleague from the Academy, Bernard Smith, Elliott Forsyth became the co-author, as well as the coordinating editor and principal translator, of the thoroughly researched and superbly produced *Baudin in Australian Waters: The Artwork of the French Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Lands 1800-1804* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Again the frequently recurring words 'rigorous standards' are associated with his work, in the words of Jacqueline Bonnemains. His daughters recall that during the preparation of *Baudin in Australian Waters* 'he immersed himself in this research so much that as a family we lived and breathed Baudin for about three years. In fact, we invented the term "baudinising", which meant going on long journeys to explore places that had a connection with the French explorer'.

In retirement, Elliott Forsyth's research concentrated once more on the French sixteenth century, or more precisely on the French Reformation. Pursuing his long-standing interest in the poet Agrippa d'Aubigné, and returning to his earlier concordance (1984) of d'Aubigné's religious poem, *Les Tragiques*, he spent several years working on a major study of this poem and its background. This research led to the publication, in Paris, by Honoré Champion, in 2005, of a substantial book (substantial both in content and in length), *La Justice de Dieu: Les Tragiques d'Agrippa d'Aubigné et la Réforme protestante en France au XVIème siècle*. One of the major contributions of this work is the painstaking identification and analysis of d'Aubigné's biblical sources. The book's central theme is divine justice and its interpretation in the light of the persecution of the Protestants in sixteenth-century France. There is no doubt that *La Justice de Dieu* was the crowning of a distinguished research career, bringing together the main threads of Elliott's life and work. This was recognised by his *alma mater*, the University of Adelaide, when in 2006 it awarded him the degree of Doctor of Letters for his publications on the literature of the French Protestant Reformation.

This account of his life would be incomplete without a mention of his deep commitment to the educational aspects of the mission of the Church, as well as to human rights issues and the support of Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers. In the later years of his retirement Elliott spent an extraordinary amount of his time and energy on the promotion of such causes, writing countless letters to editors and members of parliament as well as formal submissions, some listing concrete practical proposals on how to handle the influx of asylum seekers.

Elliott Forsyth never enjoyed good health. He did not inherit his parents' physical robustness and was never interested in competitive sport. He frequently suffered from pneumonia and late in life had a heart condition. However he never gave in to illness, and was known to give classes at home when he was not fit to go to the University. In many ways his frail appearance was misleading: he was an enthusiastic hiker and mountaineer with whom more athletic-looking friends found it difficult to keep up. It was no doubt the triumph of his inner strength, as well as his love of nature and his family, together with his belief in our power to make this world a better place, that sustained him, and allowed him to reach the impressive age of eighty-eight years.

IVAN BARKO FAHA