



Alfred French

Alfred French (1916–1997)

I first met Alf French in December 1975 and any apprehension I may have had about taking up my first lecturing position was quickly dispelled. His cheerful irreverence and refusal to take himself, or anyone else, too seriously was at the same time disarming and refreshing. He had no time for pretentiousness, cant or affectation, and had a healthy disrespect for authority. His own unorthodox and eventful career had bred in him a tolerant worldliness which combined with a wicked wit could be devastating. I well remember the occasion when Alf found a class of students waiting helplessly outside a seminar room because their tutor, new to the department, had forgotten to turn up. He promptly let them into the room and conducted the tutorial himself. When the tutor came up to him later and apologised Alf said: 'Don't worry. I did exactly the same thing in my first job'. The tutor looked relieved and asked: 'What happened?' 'I got the sack!' said Alf and doubled up with laughter.

Alf French was born at Wolverhampton in Staffordshire on 12 July 1916. He attended Wolverhampton Grammar School and later took his degree at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He then went to Prague where he took a job teaching English which he quickly lost. His next position was a lectureship at the Caroline University of Prague, an appointment he held until the German invasion in March 1939. During the short time he spent in Prague he met and married his first wife, Lida, although at the time she could speak little English and he could speak little Czech. In 1939 he returned to England with his new wife and in 1940 volunteered to serve in the British Army. By that time his knowledge of Czech had improved and he was sent to North Africa as a liaison officer with the Czech units. In 1943 he was awarded the Czechoslovak Military Medal.

After the war he emigrated to Australia and became a Classics Master at Newington College, Sydney, where he remained from 1946 until 1950 when he became a Senior Lecturer in the Classics Department at the University of Adelaide. Adelaide, which was to be his home for the rest of his life, suited his temperament very well. He loved its mild climate and relaxed lifestyle and he often referred to it, with more than a touch of irony, as 'lotus-land'. He was an active and popular figure at Adelaide University, but his socialising was confined to morning tea and lunch which he enlivened with his uproarious wit. At 5.00 pm every evening he put on his hat and walked off to catch the train home.

Behind his jovial facade was a serious scholarly intellect. Equally at home in the world of Czech literature and Classics he published widely in both spheres. His publications include *A book of Czech verse* (1958), *Sunset Over Atlantis*, translated from Czech (1960), *The Growth of the Athenian Economy* (1964), *The Poets of Prague* (1969), *The Athenian Half Century* (1972), *Czech Poetry, Vol I* (1973), *Czech Writers and Politics* (1984), *The*

Poet's Lamp (1987) and *Czech Avantgardists* (1995). In 1992 he was awarded the Comenius Medal and just before he died he completed a book on the Czech writer, George Mucha.

In 1964 he was promoted to Reader in Classics, but the Personal Chair which he so richly deserved always eluded him. From 1968 to 1969 he was a Visiting Fellow at Wolfson College, Cambridge, and in 1977 he was elected a Fellow of this Academy. At the time of his retirement in 1981 he became a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide and continued writing and teaching in the department during his long retirement. He was preparing a paper for the European History conference at the University of Adelaide before his death.

During his years in Australia he frequently visited Czechoslovakia where he kept in touch with an extensive network of academics and writers. Although he regaled his colleagues with tall stories about the Communist regime he had no illusions about its power and the abuses it could perpetrate. He viewed what had happened to Czechoslovakia since the war with the eyes of a historian and seemed to sense that such a regime could not last. Australia on the other hand was to him an easy-going place where people could develop in freedom. He frequently reminded his colleagues and students how lucky they were to live in such an open society.

He was a popular figure with students of the Classics department, and although his seminars were punctuated with gales of laughter, he could equally easily become totally serious. He was extremely kind and thoughtful to those he cared about, but he did not suffer fools easily. His mischievous sense of humour, his delight in asking the unexpected question and his knack of pricking inflated egos made any occasions at which he was present, even a departmental meeting, a pleasure to be savoured. He was quick to spot absurdity and sometimes he became so convulsed with laughter that he could not finish what he was saying. His audience frequently became so caught up in the joke that soon the whole room became engulfed in laughter.

He died of a cerebral haemorrhage on 6 July, a few days before his 81st birthday. His second wife Alleeta, his son Philip, and his two stepsons Derek and Paul, survive him.

Frank Sear