



Francis J West FAHA

1927 – 2025



Francis West (1927–2025) was one of the cohort of relatively young British scholars attracted to migrate to contribute to the expansion of Australian universities, an eclectic scholar who occupied significant positions in the formative years of several universities and who became a Foundation Fellow of the Academy.

Born in 1927 in Holmpton, East Yorkshire, the son of George (a naval officer turned builder) and Florence (née Selby), he was educated at Hymers College, though evacuated from Hull in wartime. He completed degrees at the University of Leeds (1944–47) and a doctorate at Trinity College, Cambridge (1949–52), becoming the first Research Fellow appointed to the Research School of Pacific Studies (RSPacS) at the Australian National University (ANU) in 1952. In 1955 West then joined Victoria University, Wellington, gaining teaching experience as Senior Lecturer in History, returning to ANU and RSPacS as a Senior Research Fellow in 1959.

‘I became a medievalist as a consequence of the war’, he explained, crucially because the commanding officer of his Leeds University Officers’ Training Corps unit had been the charismatic Cambridge medieval scholar David Charles Douglas, who was memorably brandishing a revolver when West first encountered him. West’s main contribution in this field was *The Justiciarship in England 1066–1232*, a study of the most important office under the crown in Norman England. The book was published by Cambridge University Press in 1966.

Unlikely as it sounds, medieval studies led him to Canberra, a decision derided by some of his Cambridge friends as 'academic beachcombing'. His research on Anglo-Norman governance persuaded him that the Normans should be seen as a hostile occupying power. In finding academics to staff the newly-founded ANU, which sought scholars able to adapt to meet its remit to understand the Pacific, the imperial historian Jack Gallagher at Trinity and the expatriate Australian Keith Hancock speculated that a medievalist who saw the Normans as occupiers rather than as the natural rulers of England might readily adapt to study the Pacific's occupation by European powers. Over sherry, Gallagher and Hancock (who had himself switched from the *risorgimento* to Commonwealth economic history) persuaded West that the change would be justified. The move, from British austerity to what West saw as 'Bali Hai'i' (the musical *South Pacific*, then popular, propagated an idyllic vision of the Pacific), brought what he recalled as 'fairly adventurous field work' in Melanesia and Polynesia. A cultural fellowship awarded by the South East Asia Treaty Organization, concerned at the instability of former colonial territories, assisted West's extensive field research. His *Political Advancement in the South Pacific: A Comparative Study of Colonial Practice in Fiji, Tahiti and American Samoa* was published by Oxford University Press in 1961.

West was publicly reticent about his personal life. His first unpublished professional memoir, 'Testifying to a Past', does not mention his marriages or children at all, 'mainly', he explained to a friend, 'to avoid hurting the feelings of my ex-wives and my children'. When he arrived in Canberra West was married, to Liv Rokne (1927-84), a Norwegian teacher, with a daughter, Karin, born in 1953 in Canberra. Liv and Karin returned to Norway in 1959 and she and West divorced in 1963. In that year, West married Katharine Holgate, née White (1937-2023), an ANU political scientist and influential commentator and they had a daughter Caroline, in 1969. She became an academic, and observed that 'despite his apparent conservatism he was a free thinker and very supportive of women in academia, at a time when many were not'.

West's research on Papua on the verge of independence led him to write a biography of the Australian colonial administrator, *Hubert Murray: The Australian Pro-Consul*, and the *Selected letters of Hubert Murray*, published by Oxford University Press in 1968 and 1970 respectively. He was able to undertake this research because his then father-in-law, the

National Librarian, Harold White, had collected Murray's private correspondence, and the Liberal politician and scholar Sir Paul Hasluck arranged for him to use the family's papers. The historian Arnold Toynbee, executor of Hubert's brother, the classical scholar, Gilbert, (and his father-in-law) then asked West to write a biography, published in 1984 as *Gilbert Murray: A Life*.

Unusually at ANU (split between the Research Schools of the Institute of Advanced Studies and the School of General Studies) in the early 1960s, West was asked to lecture in the History Department in a Modern History course covering a great sweep of the past, on 'World history from the beginning of the Christian era to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648'. (That he had served as the Institute's representative on a committee formed in 1960 to implement the amalgamation of the two probably explains his willingness to bridge the gap.) He had a distinctive style of lecturing, as a student recalled, 'looking at his thumb nail as if it held a microchip of all the important information'. His evening lectures were well timed, partly because he had to get back to dinner at University House, where he lived. His one idiosyncrasy seemed to be to drive a red Austin Healey sports car. His contemporaries at ANU included Oskar Spate, Sir John Crawford, Sir David Hay, A. Dale Trendall, Sir Keith Hancock, Colin Plowman and Manning Clark (who had enticed him to lecture), placing him within significant personal and academic networks in ANU's formative decades. Though he was a relatively junior member of staff, he certainly encountered them through his active membership of University House.

A profile in the *Canberra Times* soon after his fortieth birthday described West as 'thin and tall with greying hair brushed straight back ... and a prominent, thin nose'. 'He looks very much the don', journalist Bruce Juddery wrote, wearing jacket-collar-and-tie as his ANU colleagues adopted more casual attire. He was described as speaking slowly, even hesitantly and with a distinct English accent (Clark ridiculed his pronunciation of 'Ors-tralian'), his conversation 'not untouched with cynicism' – other colleagues recalled that he had a biting tongue in debate.

West became a public intellectual, contributing art reviews to the *Canberra Times* in the early '60s, broadcasts to the ABC's 'Notes on the News' between 1969 and 1982 and

appeared on television in, among other 'current affairs' programs, the ABC's *4 Corners*. He gave lectures to Foreign Affairs staff on Papua New Guinea on the eve of independence and in the 1980s was invited to lecture at the Australian Staff College at Queenscliff. His *Political Advancement in the South Pacific* was praised in American official circles, who sponsored its distribution to State Department foreign service officers wishing to understand colonialism and decolonisation.

Describing himself 'a radical conservative', at ANU West became a figure of contention. In the 1968 profile, Bruce Juddery noted that 'lots of Francis West's colleagues ... do not talk to him any more', because his view of academic life was at odds with its prevailing ethos of political engagement. West deprecated 'political radicals' in universities, in 1970 writing that 'the only values a university teacher needs to hold ... is the passionless pursuit of passionless truth', a phrase that enraged academic adversaries. Sceptical colleagues deprecated what one (the visiting Canadian scholar Bruce Hodgins) called an 'ideology of non-ideology'. Juddery noted that while West abjured politics, he had benefited from both family and political connections to obtain Hubert Murray's papers. His advocacy of value-free scholarship in 1970 caused a further flurry of correspondence in the *Canberra Times*, as one critic noted, 'mostly against him'.

In 1964 West had become Professor of Comparative Government at the University of Adelaide at Bedford Park, later Flinders University. He resigned the following year, when the university declined to appoint his wife, Katharine, as a lecturer. He returned again to ANU as a Professorial Fellow in RSPacS, though spending months in Britain as Pro-Principal, Dean of Arts and Social Studies at the University of Buckingham, a private institution founded in 1973. Although thought by some to be constitutionally conservative, West came to believe that social and technological changes warranted new modes of university education, notably espousing what became known as 'distance education'.

Experience at Buckingham and as the 'Academic Assistant' to Sir John Crawford, the influential Chairman of the Board of the Institute of Advanced Studies, gave West insights into and possibly a taste for academic management. He had already said that 'if you want to change a system you have to do it from within', and in the 1970s he seized further

opportunities to implement changes in academic culture in new universities. In 1976 (the year he and Katharine divorced), supposedly having been confused with a scientist namesake, West met Frederic (Fred) Jevons, first vice-chancellor of Deakin University from 1973. Jevons was attracted to West's enthusiasm for the 'Open University style objective', then being tried by several newer universities. At Jevons's invitation, he joined another newly established university, becoming Professor of History and Government at Deakin University, Geelong, the institution on which he made the greatest impact. His Deakin contemporaries included its formidable librarian (vital to distance education), Margaret Cameron, the anthropologist Malcolm Crick, the historian Bill Rubinstein and the philosopher Max Charlesworth (his counterpart in the School of Humanities).

For his first four years West was 'Planning Dean' in the School of Social Sciences, reflecting his role in introducing the interdisciplinary courses and collaborative teaching which Deakin pioneered. West led (and often appointed) anthropologists, economists, historians and political scientists in examining imperialism and de-colonisation, especially in the Pacific, and the study of armed conflict and industrial societies, often teaching collaboratively at a distance on the 'open university' model Deakin championed. West, often described as a seemingly old-fashioned Oxbridge scholar, adapted to a very different academic environment, one which welcomed students often lacking the traditional educational prerequisites or social backgrounds found in conventional universities. He had a commitment to ensuring that the 'study guides' essential to distance courses were of the highest quality, a manifestation of his commitment to empirical scholarship, and strove to ensure that imperialism especially was studied in its own terms, not through theoretical or ideological lenses. While Deakin's small School of Social Sciences was busy and impressively productive, its staff was sometimes stressed by the demands of intense teaching and by sometimes difficult relationships between colleagues. From 1986 to 1990 he became Pro-Vice Chancellor, Research and Development, responsible for promoting the university's wider contributions and relevance as academic productivity became increasingly competitive. West's legacy at Deakin may still be seen in its continuing commitment to research and teaching on the Pacific and Australia's relationship with the region.

West married again in 1982, to the German scholar and historian of ideas, Margaret Anne Rose, also elected a Fellow of the Academy (1985), this marriage long and described as 'extremely happy'.



Figure 1: Dr Margaret Rose FAHA and Emeritus Professor Francis West, in their home in 2024. Supplied.

He became a Fellow of the Australian Humanities Research Council and a Foundation Fellow of the Academy and also a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1966, after his 1961 study of Pacific colonial regimes but before he had published his major works on the Murray brothers. He delivered the Academy's annual lecture in 1973, 'Biography as History'. He served as the Academy's acting Honorary Secretary from 1967-1970, Editor in 1971, and then Honorary Secretary from 1973-1974 and headed the History Section from 1984-1987. He produced further books, though, as an academic manager, unable to write much of substance, but including a history-cum-memoir *University House: Portrait of an Institution* (1980, of which he had served as Steward 1963-64 and 1974-76), and *From Alamein to Scarlet Beach* (1989), a history of the 2/4th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment. He had not served in the regiment, but a wartime former commanding officer who had become Minister of Education in Victoria asked him to write it. West had his Deakin students, who often lived far from Geelong, conduct interviews with veterans of the regiment, and it was published by the university's press.

A decade at Deakin saw West's vision for the university confirmed but also challenged by changes in policies toward universities. A close friend observed that 'the Buckingham experiment' and even more the years as a senior academic manager at Deakin had imposed 'back-breaking administrative and political burdens'. Following West's retirement, in 1990, as he later explained 'when university administration became disagreeable because of frequently changing Australian government policies', he returned to Cambridge, where he had also recently been an Overseas Fellow at Churchill College, 1984-85, while Margaret was a Visiting Associate (later Life Member) at Clare Hall's College for post-graduates and visiting scholars. (He chose Churchill College, Cambridge, and not his old college, Trinity, he claimed, perhaps tongue in cheek, because Churchill's plumbing was superior). For at least the first three decades of his long retirement (nearly a third of his life) up to the Covid pandemic of 2020, West entered into the life of a 'research-oriented community', as a friend called it, wearing (like others) his Cambridge gown for High Table and formal College and University meetings and listening to choral song and lectures as well as attending seminars and working in the University Library. (The gown he sometimes wore at Churchill, which was sometimes lent to other visiting Australian scholars, 'had a unique history, having belonged to the Australian physicist Sir Mark Oliphant, a friend of the first Master of Churchill College, Sir John Cockcroft, and had also been worn by the first woman to be awarded a Ph.D in science.')

Soon after retirement, he donated a large collection of his papers to the National Library of Australia, documenting his involvement in research, university management and as a public intellectual. He retained lively and eclectic interests: a flyer for a talk he gave to the Cambridge Antiquarian Society after his return described him as having 'worked on Norman Rule in England, and in the Pacific on the anthropology of alien European rule' and that he was 'working on a book on ... Anthropology in Cambridge in the early 20th century and its relationship to alien rule'. His papers show him interested in everything from, as a correspondent put it in 2009, 'Peregrinations from Pipe Rolls to Papua' and he enjoyed reading detective fiction. Because of the range of his interests, a friend observed, 'the disadvantage was that people tended to know only one aspect of his work'.

West remained intellectually active through his long retirement in Cambridge and completed long entries for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and other publications. The book remained unfinished, though it was much discussed with Cambridge friends such as the Anglo-Australian social anthropologist John Arundel Barnes, and provided some material for his further memoir, 'Errant Historian', which a reader thought 'made clear just how intellectually adventurous Francis was'.

Francis West died on 2 February 2025. He was cremated and his ashes were scattered at the Rose Garden of the Cambridge Crematorium on 25 February.

Prof. Peter Stanley FAHA

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