



## INTRODUCTION

# The scholar and administrator: personal reflections on Francis Robinson

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It is a privilege to be asked to contribute to this celebration of Francis's career and I am pleased to contribute a few comments beyond those concerned with his immense contributions to his field of study and to pay tribute to him as a major player in the intellectual and social life of Royal Holloway, University of London.

When I joined Royal Holloway in 1990, it was still suffering from the merger of Royal Holloway College and Bedford College that had happened five years earlier. The challenges that this move had created were financial as well as personal. Although colleagues from the two Colleges would have known each other as members of the wider University of London community, that is a different matter to amalgamating with another College or to welcoming new colleagues into your department. How lucky we were to have Francis as head of history, a role that he took on just as I joined! Each of the merging departments was in pretty good shape but it would take sensitive and imaginative leadership to meld them. While he already commanded great respect as a leader in his field of study, he now showed his qualities as a leader of a department. His shrewd judgement saw what was needed to strengthen this reconfigured History Department yet further. He recognised that financial problems necessitated a clear-eyed approach to the curriculum and to teaching methods if there was to be enough headroom to bring in new young members.

Knowing what was needed was one thing but implementing it another. There must have been day-to-day crises—academic departments are not known to be peaceful and trouble free. But Francis understood that an academic department thrives when it has its own sense of community and belonging—a characterising *élan*. This he achieved through his personal qualities—not just his commitment to excellence but also his mischievous sense of humour, his appreciation of the good things in life, his sense of the importance of community, and, of course, the respect he commanded through his own academic standing.

Francis showed that to lead an academic department you need not only to expect the highest academic standards from your colleagues but to support, encourage, and challenge them. The role of a department's leadership is to enable all its members. It is to lay on good parties to celebrate achievements but also to help through difficult patches. When a department is a rewarding and enjoyable place to work, with a reputation for academic excellence, the news spreads through the informal network and it becomes a magnet for postgraduates and academic applications. This was apparent when Francis and I shared appointment committees when agonising choices had to be made from among strong fields of candidates.

Underlying all this was Francis's clear understanding of what a university is about. Universities can be the home of the eccentric, the difficult, and the perfectly normal. What they should share is a commitment to their subject, an awareness of new priorities, and an ability to distinguish between the fashionable and the fundamental—or at least genuinely interesting. Good leadership both encourages this and helps develop a coherent and distinctive community of scholars and students in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Even when he had assumed the most onerous administrative responsibilities, Francis remained devoted to teaching. He was always a gifted instructor and in great demand as a graduate supervisor. To be a good teacher it is not enough to be in command of your subject and be able to pass it on—you have to be in love with it and share that enthusiasm with your students. This love affair will flourish all the more if it is not static but is open to fresh ideas, new approaches, revised priorities. Students will benefit by seeing that the subject is a living thing whose development they too may be able to influence. It is a minority of students who will enter an academic career, but this spirit of enquiry, of how to frame a question, of how get to the essence of the matter is one way a university can help students to take their place in and contribute to a healthy society.

Francis's engagement went beyond the History Department to the College as a whole, and so his leadership style was an example to us all. Even after the merger we were a relatively small college, so it was all the more important to gain a reputation as a good place to be a part of if we were to attract good young staff. Here a strong collegiate sense helped, socially and academically, which created a convivial atmosphere, supportive and stimulating. We were able to turn around the problems caused by the small size of the College and use our size to our advantage. Francis encouraged all to be part of a team and set an example by playing major roles in College events and encouraging other heads of department to do so too. Heads could then see their own issues in the context of problems and opportunities across the College. As the College got onto a sounder financial footing, we were able to make many academic appointments. How lucky we were to have Francis join many of the appointment committees! His experience and judgement were always invaluable, especially in cases when in strong fields, hiring decisions rested on fine margins.

I was so happy therefore when Francis became a vice-principal. This was a time, now sadly unfashionable, when vice-principals were appointed from among the academic community for a defined period of time, after which they returned to their full-time academic roles. For Francis to take this on when he was enjoying great academic success pays tribute to his commitment to the College at large. By doing so, he demonstrated the strength of the system—that decisions at the institutional level are being guided by 'one of us' who commands respect and understands the day-to-day context in which colleagues work. That Francis and I agreed that university leadership is not about managing but enabling made it a particular delight to work with him. In weekly meetings, he shared his vision on the issues of concern, from immediate problems to long-term strategy. He did so with lightness of touch and great sensitivity. His contribution to the running of Royal Holloway was immense.

Francis's role as vice-principal was to take the lead on Research and External Relations. This meant that he masterminded preparations for the upcoming national Research Assessment Exercise, judging the research performance of every university in the United Kingdom. This was a resounding success—various league tables ranked the College between tenth and twelfth, depending on methods of ranking. It was a tribute not only to his hard work and attention to detail but diplomacy in sometimes persuading heads of department to reformulate their submissions to demonstrate strengths more clearly. He would not have been able to achieve this without the respect in which he was held across the College and his constructive, non-aggressive engagement.

The External Relations part of his portfolio was less focused because it had previously taken second place to other priorities and so had little precedent. But this soon showed signs of Francis's attention. Relations with alumni were put on a sound footing, the local community was listened to and brought closer into College activities, local and county administrations were cultivated—their concerns acknowledged, and our concerns put on the agenda. That this was appreciated is evident from the fact that he was accorded the honour of Deputy Lieutenant of the county to add to the CBE awarded for his services to history in general and Islamic studies in particular.

After my retirement my life has been enriched by being able to count Francis as a friend. The occasional lunches have reminded me of Francis the bon-viveur and memorable sharing of bottles that we should not really have been able to afford. Always enlivened with College gossip delivered with that twinkle in the eye that we know so well. With Francis now retired I look forward to more of these get-togethers.

More intimidating is his annual email after his regular summer sojourn in the south of France. This is a record of his August reading. Not just a list but short reviews of each book. I am always amazed at how he could have got through so many titles. The volume and range are extraordinary. I respond with an account of my latest that these days is dominated by rereading from my own collection. But I do occasionally rise to the challenge by picking a few from his list and I am always grateful for finding titles I might well not have read otherwise. His list shows not only the breadth of his interests but what makes him such a good teacher—a restlessness of intellectual enquiry that must be an inspiration to students—as well as jolting this particular retired friend out of his slumber!

Will Francis slow down now that he is retired? Probably not, although I may have to take cover if his summer reading expands further. It has been a privilege to have had Francis as a colleague and friend. He has helped me through difficult times, been a model for what a member of a university should be, and made life much more fun.