In Memoriam

Frederic Wakeman, Jr., 1937–2006

Mark C. Elliott

Frederic Wakeman Jr., pre-eminent historian of modern China and Haas Professor of Asian Studies emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, died of cancer on 14 September 2006 in Lake Oswego, Oregon, at the age of 68. He is survived by his wife, He Lea Wakeman, his sister, Sue Farquhar, three children, Frederic III, Matthew and Sarah, and two grandchildren.

Wakeman, best known in the field simply as "Fred," was for decades one of the leading figures in Chinese studies in the United States. An indefatigable researcher, consummate storyteller, and inspiring teacher who nurtured generations of students at the University of California, Berkeley, where he had taught since 1966, Wakeman was a major contributor both to the intellectual growth of the China field and to its institutional development, most notably in guiding the reopening of academic relations between American and Chinese scholars in the 1970s and 1980s. Elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1986 and the recipient of a Guggenheim and numerous other prestigious grants and fellowships, Wakeman was past president of the Social Science Research Council (1986–1989) and the American Historical Association (1992), and served for 11 years as director of Berkeley's Institute of East Asian Studies, from 1990 to 2001. When he retired in May 2006, the University honoured him with its highest award, the Berkeley Citation, a fitting conclusion to a career filled with honours. His broad historical scope, penetrating analytic capacity, and gift for clearly articulating complex issues – not to mention his great good humour and personal charisma – meant that he was always in great demand as a writer, commentator, consultant and speaker. Everyone wanted a piece of him, and most of us could not get enough.

Frederic Evans Wakeman, Jr., was born on 12 December 1937 in Kansas City, Missouri – the very day, he would later note, that the Japanese invaded Nanjing. From his mother, Margaret, who hailed from a well-to-do Kansas family, he inherited his modest stature and love of a good joke; from his father, Frederic Sr., an advertising executive-turned-novelist/screenwriter, he acquired a love of literature, history and cinema, along with a keen competitive edge. Until the age of ten his upbringing was fairly conventional, split between Kansas City and Manhattan. The family's fortunes were dramatically altered when Wakeman Sr. (who, as a Navy airman, had been shot down in the Pacific and had returned to the US to recover) published two successful books, *Shore Leave* (1943) and *The Hucksters* (1946). The latter, a much-ballyhooed exposé of the New York advertising industry, became a bestseller and was made into a major studio

© The China Quarterly, 2007 doi:10.1017/S0305741006000932

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000932 Published online by Cambridge University Press

movie starring Clark Gable. These hits made Wakeman Sr. a rich man and swept the family onto a new trajectory that took them out of New York and around the world. Thus began Fred Jr.'s unorthodox and highly cosmopolitan education in such diverse locales as Mexico, Cuba, Bermuda, France and Spain, experiences that engendered in him an appetite for adventure and an unending wanderlust. Even when, at age 61, a back injury forced him to use a wheelchair – one could hardly say he was "confined" to it – he was constantly on the road and remained an active figure in international academic circles.

His peripatetic youth fostered in him as well a great love of foreign languages, at which he excelled. By the time he completed preparatory school in Fort Lauderdale, Wakeman knew Spanish, French and German, along with a smattering of Latin, Italian and Portuguese. In college he added Russian; later, of course, came Chinese and Japanese. Throughout his too short life, Wakeman was a voracious reader, but hardly a bookworm. He swam, sailed competitively, and was an excellent skier, pursuits he later shared with his friends and children. When a young teen he also learned martial arts, for (as I recall him once telling me) as a *gringo* of rather slight build he had frequent need to defend himself while attending a military academy in Havana in the late 1940s.

As the foregoing suggests, Wakeman seems to have started out "living large," as the expression goes. No doubt the single greatest adventure of his youth was the year he spent sailing with his father in the West Indies, retracing the route of Columbus, an episode that Wakeman vividly recounted in an address, "Voyages," to a packed ballroom in Washington, DC in January 1993 at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, of which he was then president (only the second time a historian of China had been elected to this position). Less exotic, but also revealing, are the reminiscences of one of Wakeman's high school friends, who noted that Fred tooled the sun-drenched boulevards of Fort Lauderdale in a Lincoln Continental convertible, and could frequently be seen sporting a pair of perfectly faded Levi's – this just at the time such attire was becoming fashionable. He was the school's top celebrity, yet – not surprisingly to those of us who would know him much later in life – was universally liked and admired, as he treated everyone equally and without prejudice.

Wakeman was admitted to Harvard College as a National Scholar, and began his studies there in 1955. By then he had already determined to prepare for a possible career in academia, if only because it would allow him a steady way to pursue what he really loved most, which was writing. At a gathering at the 2006 AAS to honour him before his impending retirement, it was noted that, upon his matriculation at Harvard in 1955, Wakeman was quoted as saying, "My greatest wish is, like my father, to become a novelist. But I plan to get a PhD in history so that I will have something to fall back on." He focused his studies on European history and literature, subjects with which he was already very familiar, their importance having been regularly stressed to him by his father, who would quiz him about Herodotus, Gibbon and Carlyle at the dinner table. A scene from *17*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000932 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Royal Palms Drive, a *roman à clef* that Wakeman published under a pseudonym while still an undergraduate (he claimed it sold more copies than any of his scholarly books), captures something of the rigorous intellectual expectations of Wakeman, Sr.:

> "Say, Dad. Uh … Could I drive you over to the Arnolds' tonight and then use the car myself for awhile?"
> "Aren't you going out tomorrow night?"
> "Yes, but …"
> "Maybe you'd better stay home tonight and read a little Plato."

The discipline thus drilled into him never left Wakeman; even when swamped with administrative responsibilities later in his career, he routinely awoke early and wrote for a few hours every morning, and he often worked late into the night as well.

Graduating from Harvard with honours in 1959, he went on a Tower Fellowship for a stint at the Institut d'Études Politiques at the Sorbonne, where he planned to study Soviet politics. Once in Paris, however, he found himself drawn to the study of French Indochina and, through that door, entered Chinese studies. Rather than returning to Harvard (in his senior year, a chance conversation with Paul Cohen, a graduate student at the time, had alerted him to the possibilities in this field under John K. Fairbank), Wakeman decided instead to work under one of Fairbank's earliest students, Joseph Levenson, who had recently published the first book in his landmark trilogy, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*. In fall 1960 he moved with his first wife, Nancy (whom he had married in 1957, during his junior year in college) to Berkeley. Ever the prodigy, Wakeman finished his PhD in five years. He himself summed up his activities in those years in a report he wrote to Harvard classmates in early 1965:

> I took an MA in modern Chinese history [at Berkeley] in early 1962 and moved on to the PhD program. During the course of that period, I had a child, wrote and published a novel, and began to invest in local real estate. In the spring of 1963, I passed my PhD exams with distinction and moved with my family to Taipei, Taiwan, where – on a Ford Foundation grant – I continued studying Chinese while researching my dissertation. This last September we left Formosa on an extended world trip: Japan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, India, Europe, and now London, where I am finishing up my PhD thesis for presentation this June. As of July, we shall be back in Berkeley where I'll take up a post as an assistant professor in the history department.

The thesis, of course, was *Strangers at the Gate: Social Disorder in South China*, which became Wakeman's first work of history, published in 1966 by the University of California Press. In a recent interview, he explained that he wrote it in Florida during the summer "as a fully conceived work," referring, perhaps, to its novelistic, even cinematic quality. It was immediately hailed as a classic.

In 1965 Wakeman joined the Department of History at U.C. Berkeley, which remained his home for the rest of his life. But he never stopped his peregrinations for long. From 1967 to 1968 he relocated with his family to Taiwan, where for a year he assumed the directorship of the Inter-University

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000932 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Program for Chinese Language Studies at National Taiwan University. During that time he improved his knowledge both of modern Chinese, which he spoke quite well, and, under the tutelage of Liu Yu-yun, familiarly known as "the Prince," of classical texts as well. Soon after returning to Berkeley from Taiwan, Wakeman unexpectedly assumed the helm of the department's Chinese history programme after a tragic drowning accident claimed the life of his teacher in 1969. He rose to this task with aplomb. It was in large measure owing to his energy and talents – and, it should be added, those of his long-time colleagues in and out of the department, especially Wolfram Eberhard, Franz Schurmann, Robert Scalapino and David Keightley – that Berkeley grew into a major centre for the training of China historians in the US, attracting students from around the world.

Wakeman's scope and daring as a historian was breathtaking. Surely few could have predicted that he would follow up a study of local society falling apart under the pressures of the mid-19th century with a work of intellectual history. *History and Will*, which examines the philosophical origins of the thought of Mao Zedong, was perhaps not Wakeman's most popular book, but it demonstrated his breadth (spanning both European and Chinese traditions), an intrepid engagement with the political crises faced by contemporary China, and a refusal to pursue the safe path. From the 20th century, Wakeman then leaped back to the Qing period, producing a number of landmark articles. One of my personal favourites remains "The Price of Autonomy," which traces the unhappy relegation to political irrelevance of the once-almighty Chinese literatus. It is difficult to resist seeing reflected in this article (published in a 1972 issue of *Daedalus*) the dilemma that Wakeman and many other American academics confronted at the time. In 1975, he co-edited with Carolyn Grant (his second wife, whom he married in 1974) an influential volume of collected essays, *Conflict and Control in Imperial China*, which came out of a landmark ACLS conference on local elites, social order, and the state. Around the same time, he also finished a textbook, *The Fall of Imperial China*, essentially an introduction to Qing history. Wakeman recounted that, facing a deadline from his publisher, he had written the book in the space of a summer in Greece, where he had taken his family on vacation, and that he had worked from memory, without books. Asked about the dedication – "To Freddie, who kept Koula away" – he explained that his habit was to write outside, on the terrace, and that he came out one day after lunch to find the family goat itself lunching on the typescript he had left on the table. To prevent such a disaster from recurring and to stay on schedule, he assigned his son the job of warding off Koula.

The peregrinations continued. A year's stay at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in 1976–1977, and two years in China as a visiting scholar at Beijing University in 1980–1982 afforded him the chance to move forward on the project that he had set his sights on ten years before, a full narration of the Manchu conquest. When it appeared in 1985, the 1,300 pages of *The Great Enterprise* (originally titled *On A Darkling Plain*, after Matthew Arnold) required two

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000932 Published online by Cambridge University Press

volumes, specially boxed. With its epochal movement back and forth across the Great Wall and an enormous cast of characters – many, such as Dorgon, brought to life in English for the first time – there is probably no greater testament to Wakeman's narrative skills than this work, which, appropriately, won the Levenson Prize of the Association for Asian Studies. *The Great Enterprise* not only opened the door to new research in early Qing history but, in its remarkable first chapter, also presaged a turn toward the integration of China into world history.

Though he never left the Qing behind entirely (he had long promised a book on the 18th century and delivered an absorbing paper on the subject of corruption in the Qianlong reign at Harvard in 2001), Wakeman spent most of the rest of his career exploring the world of early 20th-century crime, espionage, and corruption. In a marvellously detailed trilogy – *Policing Shanghai* (1995), *The Shanghai Badlands* (1996), and *Spymaster* (2003) – he reworked in the modernizing setting of Republican Shanghai the same themes of political struggle, lust for power, and individual weakness that he had taken on in *The Great Enterprise*. No one who heard him speak about the research that went into these volumes could doubt his love affair with the secret police archives he had found in Washington and Shanghai. Nor could the reader come away unpersuaded that Wakeman possessed a sure grasp of what drove Chinese politics and of the terrible power coiled within the fear of "chaos" (*luan*). Just before his death, Wakeman completed a draft of *Red Star Over Shanghai*, a volume that will take the story of security work in Shanghai through the last years of Nationalist rule into the early years of the People's Republic.

Along with Jonathan Spence and Philip Kuhn, Wakeman was one of a trio of US China historians whose teaching careers followed roughly similar trajectories and whose books and articles – carefully researched, finely crafted, and trenchantly argued – exerted a powerful and formative influence upon the field as it matured. His contributions to Republican history, for example, were vital in the building of an area of research that barely existed as an independent focus of academic work a generation ago. On hearing of Wakeman's passing, Yale University's Jonathan Spence wrote:

> "Fred to me was always an enchanting mixture of troubadour and secret agent. He chose, like the novelist he really wanted to be, stories that split into different currents, and swept the reader along, into and out of long action-packed footnotes, into which he tucked whole subplots as glosses on his main text. He was also a profound romantic, who saw the pathos at the heart of past lives. Early twentieth-century Shanghai was perfect for him, with its labor battles and criminal syndicates and opium and beautiful women and coded espionage messages; but he loved the seventeenth century too, as the conquering Manchu troops swept aside the opposition, and doomed Chinese scholars strummed on their lutes while the enemy bivouacked outside their city walls. To me, Fred was quite simply the best modern Chinese historian of the last thirty years."

Wakeman certainly had his romantic side, but in debate he could also be ferocious. Ideas mattered greatly to him, as any of us who witnessed the debate

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000932 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that arose in the early 1990s concerning the application of Jurgen Habermas's concept of the "public sphere" to China can attest. In reflecting on Wakeman's career, Harvard professor Philip Kuhn – who first met Wakeman in 1964, when as graduate students both shared an interest in the 19th-century origins of rebellion and revolution – had this comment: "Fred was one of the few who insisted on seeing the fields of late-imperial and modern history as a whole. He refused to be locked into a narrow specialty and disdained any question that wasn't part of a larger question. His expansive perspective and intellectual versatility were a great example to all of us. There was nothing trivial about anything he wrote or did."

Indeed, Wakeman seems to have had an instinctive grasp of the political implications of everything he studied. His own political convictions evolved in interesting ways. As a young man, Wakeman started out with conservative views. In entering the China field, he imagined himself as taking up the fight against Communism (his beloved Cuba having by then come under Castro's domination), and he at least flirted with the idea of joining the CIA. By the time he finished his Berkeley degree, however, campus debates and his experiences in Taiwan, where he witnessed first-hand the deployments of US servicemen to Vietnam, had led him to oppose American involvement there and to espouse a much more tempered position on the Cold War. As he told one interviewer in 1997, "Although I was a Young Republican in college, I have voted Democratic all my life." His liberal politics brought him an important behind-the-scenes role in the development of U.S.-China relations in the late 1970s, and he was one of the negotiators of the agreements signed by Jimmy Carter and Deng Xiaoping that initiated academic exchanges between the two countries in 1979. Wakeman also served in various capacities on the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the PRC and belonged to many boards. A longstanding member of the Council on Foreign Relations and of the Asia Society, he frequently testified before government committees on contemporary China. Yet he was never truly a "company" man, and relished his role as an independent public intellectual, as witnessed by his frequent contributions to the *New York Review of Books* in the 1970s and 1980s.

Of all the many hats he wore, the one that fit him most naturally was that of teacher. Apart from his inimitable talents as raconteur, Wakeman greatest gift in this regard was as an enthusiastic and attentive listener. He demonstrated sincere respect for the intellectual integrity of each student and had the ability to inspire self-confidence in students, undergraduate and graduate alike. He depended symbiotically upon his students to keep him up-to-date on new scholarly trends, enjoyed their company and their criticism, and conscientiously recorded his debts to them in his books. When being around Wakeman, if you stopped to think about how smart he was and what a prodigious memory he had, it was easy to be intimidated. But he wore his erudition lightly. For myself, I never stopped being impressed by the way that such an amazingly talented man was able to remain so human and warm, no matter whom he was with. This quality

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000932 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was regularly and vividly displayed at the receptions held by the Berkeley Center for Chinese Studies at the annual Association for Asian Studies meetings, when on Saturday night Wakeman starred at the "Smoker," drawing scores of friends, students, and admirers around him in a huge knot. He was also a superb correspondent. No doubt there are many in the field who possess, as I do, a fat stack of letters from Fred, in each of which can be heard his distinctive voice, as though he were speaking to you in the same room. (Perhaps this owed to his habit of using a tape recorder to dictate reading notes, memos, and letters that would later be transcribed by the assistants upon whose faithful service he long depended.)

That so many students looked to him as a mentor has raised the question whether there is a "Wakeman school" of Chinese history. At first glance, given the very wide range of dissertations he directed, it would seem that the answer must be in the negative. Closer investigation, however, suggests that some things do appear to unite Wakeman students: a deep familiarity with the archive; an uncommon respect for the importance of narrative; and a willingness to challenge standard explanations. Whether Wakeman bred this into us, or whether we were drawn to him because this is what we found in his work, it is difficult to say. In any case, *Strangers at the Gate*, with its gripping inside look at the effects of British imperialism on village society in Guangdong, was the first book of Wakeman's I read. The forceful impression it made – of real virtuosity in handling historical sources and careful weaving of minute detail and macro-level analysis – brought many students, myself among them, to wait in the line outside his door.

In all his work, the scholarly standard Wakeman set was a high one. In no small part because of that high standard, the field of Chinese history and Chinese studies generally in the West made enormous progress during his lifetime. Especially during the last two decades, the translations of many of his books and articles also brought him a respect and standing in Chinese academic circles bestowed upon very few foreigners. His premature death deprives us all of one of our leading lights. Who will tell us stories now?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741006000932 Published online by Cambridge University Press