FREDERICK MAY

"I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat."

—MILTON.

FEW professors have made such a strong impression on the public within so short a time of their arrival in Australia as Professor Frederick May. You can look through a Who's Who in Australia as recently as 1962 without seeing a mention of him. In fact he has only been here two and a half years. But already he is a familiar figure at peace rallies where his speeches have excited remark for their quiet fervor and their originality of thought and expression.

At the height of the Knopfelmacher controversy at Sydney University he was the man whose letters in the press and whose TV appearances caught the public eye and ear as perhaps the leading opponent in academic circles of Knopfelmacher's brand of ironclad prejudices.

In the book censorship controversy again he has taken a central place in the arena by the passionate hatred of restriction in any form which stands out in everything he says.

To see him jousting on TV with a bevy of Roman Catholics on this question—not a whit discommoded by the difficulty of saying that nothing at all should be suppressed at any time—was to recognise that here we have a born crusader, a man who, like Karl Marx, finds it his greatest joy in life to struggle for a worthy cause.

In Who's Who he lists opposing censorship as one of his "recreations"!

Naturally such a man wouldn't wait two and a half years before taking up a challenge to his basic beliefs or joining in a
battle he found going on near him. He would hardly wait two minutes. Not that he is a Don Quixote who rushes blindly into the fray without finding out first what it is all about. He might have done that once, but has now had experience. The peace struggle in Australia is not the first he has taken up.

When I interviewed him at his rooms in the Italian Department at Sydney University (while Herbert McClintock drew him) my aim was to find out what, basically, he thought, and what in his past career had led him to that position.

My first question, as to whether he followed any general trend or school of thought or whether he considered himself a complete individualist, was the only one he seemed to have any trouble in answering. But he said that after a discussion with his wife they had both written themselves down in the recent census as humanists.

But they recognised that there was much still to attract them in Christianity. They have an attachment to certain forms of it and they retain a strong admiration for the Friends with whom Professor May did some of his wartime hospital service in England. He was a conscientious objector, as was also his wife when her call-up came.

It seemed that Professor May is still arguing with himself about what he really is, or should be. "I tend to be individualistic," he said. "I ask myself 'Is pacifism practical? How far is it selfish—self-indulgent?'" It should not be hard to reassure him on that point. The militant faith he professes has not led him to a life of ease but into more battles than most academics would care to take on in a lifetime.

His affection for his old church is likely to remain all his life because it was from the church, or churchmen, that he derived his basic views on peace. He was trained for confirmation by Archdeacon E. F. Carpenter, a "gentle radical", even a socialist, who was then curate of Holy Trinity church, St. Marylebone.

It was here, probably, that he reached the conviction that, as he says now, "a church founded on the Image of Christ cannot support war".

"I can die for a cause, but I cannot kill for it." That was his stand as a boy of 19 and that remains his position today. When he was 19 the year was 1940. A Londoner, such a decision taken at that time did not mean that he avoided war. He saw plenty of it. As an orderly at Middlesex Hospital
he had to deal with some of the worst casualties, military and civilian, particularly when the flying bombs came over. (The bombs were no respecters of persons. Soldiers and civilians, young and old, people of all views were among those whose broken bodies Orderly May helped to care for.)

His hatred of war did not date from that experience, but the experience certainly strengthened it. Perhaps, too, some of his anti-war convictions are derived from his father who was buried alive, but not quite killed, in the Somme battle of 50 years ago.

His father was a builder's laborer, a fact which goes far towards explaining Professor May's mental make-up today. For part of the hungry thirties his father was out of work and the whole family depended on the allowance young Frederick was drawing to help him through grammar school.

When outstanding school results showed that he must proceed to university it was natural that he should go to the famous Birkbeck College. (Dr. George Birkbeck, an English physician, was pioneer in the foundation of classes for working men in Glasgow and London. In 1823 he was the main founder of the London Mechanics' Institute of which he was president till his death in 1841. He bequeathed it £3,700. Later it was renamed Birkbeck College and recognised as a school of the
University of London for evening and part-time students, a model for similar colleges all over Britain.)

"It is a rule that students must study while maintaining themselves in a job while doing their course," Professor May said. He fulfilled this condition by working as a hospital orderly often from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. At the same time it is equally firm college tradition that its students do the same syllabus as the rest of the university. Professor May complied with this rule also, winning the highest honors.

Brought up with a family of Italian opera singers, he has been bi-lingual since he was three years old and this also, of course, helped determine his main interest at school and university. It was natural that after the war he should find himself in Italy as a representative of British students' organisations helping Italian students reorganise their democratic activity after the long night of fascism.

Mixing with students of all political views he deepened his acquaintance with leftist views already made during the student discussions of the thirties in London over the Spanish Civil War and the Left Book Club publications. Italy is a country, says Professor May, where one can move among and speak with communists as a matter of course. He is a great admirer of the early Italian marxist writer Antonio Gramsci and reads Marx himself in Italian, French and English (but not in the original German).

Of the older Italian writers Professor May has an obvious liking for Giordano Bruno on whom he lectured recently to the Rationalist Society in Sydney. "A remarkable man," he said.

He keeps in touch with Italian developments today. There was a file of a Rome daily paper and a local Italian language newspaper on his shelves. He has hopes of progressive developments in Italian politics—a further "opening to the left". "There can be no going back from the position established by John XXIII" said Professor May and went on to talk of the "rebellious priesthood" in the south and the work in Sicily of Danilo Dolci.

He follows developments in other countries including the U.S.S.R. where he is in touch with the main libraries in Moscow and Leningrad. He mentioned the upsurge in student thinking there and in Poland and Czechoslovakia as showing "flexibility and strength" in Russian society.
Professor May obviously admires modern youth; he also feels apologetic towards it: “We are responsible for the sort of world we’ve given them.” Speaking as parent of four sons as well as a teacher, Professor May said he thought today’s young people had an even stricter moral code than their elders and were “more honest about it.” Their independent, non-servile attitude to their elders is something Professor May not only praises but has practised in his time. “My father used to say that no man was worthy of being called ‘sir’ ” he said. And Professor May, without ever being rude, managed to get through school and university without once using the word except as a form of address to the presiding officer at a meeting.

What brought such a man to Australia, a scholar with a wide reputation who might have had the choice of appointments just as high in other parts of the world? Obviously it was the chance to tread new ground—to build up something new. “At Leeds I had got as far as I could. I wanted to develop practical drama. Despite my being supported by Professor G. Wilson Knight, Senate decided against the idea. I’m still a firm advocate of drama as a university subject.” (At Leeds he was Senior Lecturer and head of the Italian Department.)

The invitation to occupy the first Chair of Italian at Sydney had proved irresistible. Already, in only two years, results are showing in the form of bigger classes in Italian and more postgraduate students, three of whom are now studying in Italy.

“And what do you think of Australia?” This was his chance, if he’d felt like it, to say something polite, perhaps about the weather or the beaches or democracy. He didn’t say anything like that. Mental climates only are what interest him and Professor May’s outstanding impression was of Australia’s “childish censorship.” This, he said was not just attributable to “Canberra” but was based on a fundamental trend in the community, both Protestant and Catholic. He wouldn’t call it Puritanism because the essence of Puritanism was “a refusal to see injustice done.”

And so we came at last to the reality of what I believe Professor May is—a Puritan, a man whose ancestors, as he told us, were on the Parliamentary side in the civil war. He thrives on battle, despite his shyness. He won’t lightly enter a battle. But when he does, he will not lay aside the broadsword until King Charles’ head is well and truly off.
Although we have no monarchy here, we have quite a few royalists in various realms of academic and governmental life. We must hope Professor May stays here to help deal with them. We may hope he meets some of our own builders' laborers, warms to our Australian sun and makes an even closer acquaintance with the Australian character which, as he knows by now, is basically as hostile to restrictions on thought and expression as he himself is. We can be sure he will not be put off by Dr. Knopfelmacher and the pro-censorship churchmen. In Australia he is not on enemy territory. He is among friends.

After reading the foregoing, written for ALR by W. A. Wood, the Editors felt moved to make a specific request to Professor May to explain precisely why he opposed censorship under all and any conditions. He sent along the following:

1. Everyone should have access to the material
2. He should judge for himself
3. He cannot honestly abrogate this right/duty
4. If we accept censorship in universities (either as institutions or individuals) we distort the transmission of learning, techniques, and intellectual probity
5. Censorship promotes expediency in bringing up children (both in the home and at school)
6. A good home and school—where all material is freely discussed—rids us of the need of censorship
7. There is no proof that material banned leads to crime
8. Comment that it does, comes only from police and magistrates and professional fundamentalists
9. It requires an act of will to take part in "pornography"
10. Shouldn't we be free to join in or stay out?
11. There is no man I trust to make this kind of decision for me—hence no belief in censors
12. Certainly, no qualities in the censors—that—are would induce me to forego my present views
13. Censorship retards natural growth of literature
14. Literature tends to be ahead of public opinion: it needs to be
15. We (as a society) need the arguments of the runners-ahead
16. We need more discussion of "taboo" subjects, not less
17. Politicians make the final censorship decisions: What fits them for this? Nothing
18 They are, in fact, quite unfitted for the task—they read too little, too seldom
19 The higher the politician's rank, the less in touch he is
20 There is no subject we may not discuss—Why should there be?
21 Censorship is an aspect of the authoritarian personality
22 We cannot consent to yield to such power-gathering
23 Often the appeal is to some supernatural authority for such interference in our lives
24 This is as dangerous as the attitude of the soothing politician, who, trading on general apathy, offers his "subjects" expedient censorship
25 Censorship goes with a lack of tough education
26 It goes with making literature and drama dull by refusing to look at the adult elements in them
27 It goes with our prevailing lack of adult education
28 It goes with our corruptingly low-standard popular entertainment
29 It goes with the current persuasion (politically invaluable) that it's better to have more and more material things and less and less mental activity
30 It reinforces the absurd Australian lingering anti-intellectualism
31 (It's absurd because more and more working-class children are ready for university work, and must be given the chance to do it)
32 (It's absurd because more and more families have a relative already engaged in higher education)
33 I object to censorship because it diminishes the individual. When a man freely gives to another, he gains in stature. Censorship, the arbitrary mutilation of the possible enrichment of his mind, degrades him. Worse, for he has his dignity still, it degrades utterly the censor. Sick already, he becomes so ill as to be a social problem

Professor May added this postscript:

"It has just occurred to me (as a result of writing the notes on censorship) that one of my chief reasons in making translations (I've put over 50 Italian works into English) is my opposition to people's being deprived of what I see as belonging to everyone."