

# David Hawkes

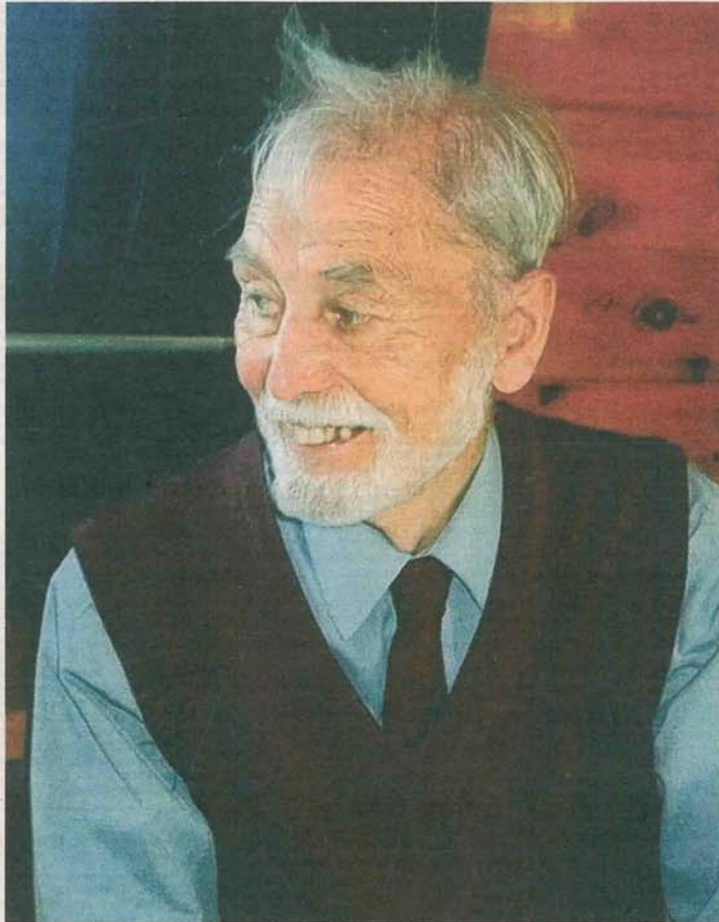
Scholar whose superb translation of the lyrical Chinese novel *The Story of the Stone* is regarded as a masterpiece in its own right

David Hawkes was one of the greatest translators from the Chinese of his time. He will be best and longest remembered for two highly important works: the first and earliest, his superb version of the hauntingly lyrical (and extremely difficult) early anthology of shamanistic poetry, *The Songs of the South*; the second, his extraordinarily rich, versatile and loving re-creation of the first three volumes of the great 18th-century novel *The Story of the Stone*.

This, a supreme example of the translator's art, was, when it first appeared, hailed in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* as "one of the best translations into English of our time", and has since been the subject of numerous critical studies. It set entirely new standards for the translation of Chinese fiction. "David of all people", wrote his contemporary and friend Cyril Birch, "had the learning, the wit, and the command of the aristocratic culture to meet the challenge."

*The Stone* was his crowning achievement, his own favourite project. Into it he poured all of his scholarship and creative passion and invention. He had dreamt of working on it ever since his student days in Peking in the 1940s. His identification with the work and its author was so complete that when, in 1970, he finally decided to translate it in full, he resigned from his chair at Oxford to dedicate himself totally to the task. As he wrote, this was a novel "written and rewritten by a great artist with his very lifeblood".

The same can be said of the translation itself. Hawkes brought to bear such a wide range of rhetorical skills, such penetrating insight into character, such finely honed dialogue, such superbly crafted versification; but more than anything, such a profound sense of humanity, such fun and exhilaration, such melancholy and wisdom. In it he succeeds in grasping to the full, and yet at the same time transcending, the sheer Chineseness of the work, making it into a real novel for reading, revealing it as a true masterpiece of world literature. He did this out of sheer love of the book. "If I can



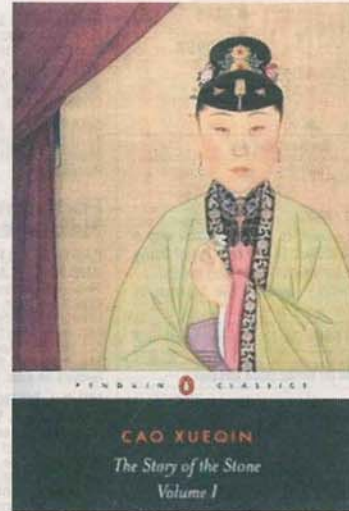
Hawkes: he resigned his Oxford chair to dedicate himself to his translation

convey to the reader even a fraction of the pleasure this Chinese novel has given me," he wrote in 1973, "I shall not have lived in vain."

Many years later it was — to his pleasure and amusement — this very translation that the new Chinese Ambassador to the Court of St James, Mme Fu Ying, chose to present to the Queen on a recent official visit to the Palace.

David Hawkes was born in 1923,

and grew up in East London. In 1942 he went up to Christ Church, Oxford, for a year, to study the abbreviated classical mods, and then spent the remaining war years teaching Japanese to codebreakers. After the war he returned to Oxford, transferring to the new Honours School of Chinese, under the former missionary E. R. Hughes. In 1948 there began what was certainly the most influential period in his life, when he travelled to Peking



(then in the last throes of the civil war) and began to study at the Peking university, attending classes by such legendary older scholars as Yu Pingbo, Luo Changpei, Tang Lan and Lin Geng. In Peking he also joined the circle of William Empson and his wife Hetta.

Empson's intellectual and poetic genius made a lasting impression, and the couple's bohemian lifestyle attracted him. Throughout his career he was always more comfortable among creative people, than with academic pedants. In the newly liberated Peking he married his wife Jean. They finally left the city in 1951. Hawkes never went back to Peking, or to China. But he remembered every detail of the old city, and could find his way around the alleys, or hutongs, in his dreams. Today nearly all of that is gone. The new "Olympic" Beijing of multiple ring roads would have shocked him.

Back in Oxford Hawkes completed his doctoral dissertation on *The Songs of the South*. His work attracted the attention of the pre-eminent Chinese scholar and translator, Arthur Waley, who became his mentor and friend, and named him as his literary executor.

Elected to the chair of Chinese in 1959, he spent a dozen years building

up a fine department, where literary and classical studies flourished, but where modern China was by no means ignored. He rapidly acquired an enormous international reputation as a scholar who was rigorous in his methods, encyclopaedic in his reading and humane in his mode of expression. He was an inspiring teacher, giving scholarly but entertaining lectures that betrayed his early love of the theatre. He resigned from the chair in 1971, and after a brief interval, was made a research Fellow of All Souls, a position which enabled him to complete his three volumes of the *Stone* (1973-80). He was always grateful to the Warden of the college, John Sparrow, for his support at this time.

Hawkes and his wife Jean retired to the Welsh hills in 1984. He thought he would give up Chinese altogether, and donated his fine collection of Chinese books to the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth. He concentrated instead on the study of the Welsh language, and read widely in the history of religion, on which he wrote a brilliant series of essays in the form of letters to a grandchild, *Letters from a Godless Grandfather*, which was published privately in Hong Kong in 2004. He was a biting (and often hilariously funny) critic of the sheer nonsense that so often passes for religion. He was also a passionate opponent of US and British military involvement in the Middle East, raging against Israel's brutal treatment of the Palestinians and joining protest marches.

Hawkes's life and work were both inspired and overshadowed by a strongly melancholic streak. He was a genius, a towering figure in his profession. What he himself wrote in 1966 of Arthur Waley is equally true of him: "Greatness in men is a rare but unmistakable quality. In our small profession it is unlikely we shall see a man of such magnitude again."

Hawkes is survived by his wife, Jean, three daughters and a son.

**David Hawkes, scholar and Chinese translator, was born on July 6, 1923. He died on July 31, 2009, aged 86**