

Freda Newth Wint

Freda, who has died aged 98, was the daughter of Alfred and Mildred Mettam, born on 25th July 1917 in Cawnpore, India.

She is survived by daughter Allegra and son Ben.

Freda's mother had also been born in India, had studied Marathi at London University, returned to India, started the first women's teachers' training college in Baroda, married, moved to Cawnpore where she became a Memsahib and a member of the club, where on one occasion she replied to a Latin quip with a quip in Sanskrit; this turned out to be a mistake, because the whole room fell quiet and people started inching away from her; she never uttered a word of Sanskrit again. She took up bridge and astrology.

When Freda was 7, her mother decided that it was necessary to bring up Freda, and Freda's brother Greg, in England. So she packed up the family and moved them to Bedford. Freda attended the Bedford High School for Girls, not far from the former site of the prison where John Bunyan had written 'The Pilgrim's Progress'. There must have been an inspiring teacher at that school, because Freda won a scholarship to Somerville College in Oxford, where she read English literature. Her encyclopaedic knowledge and exquisite taste in seventeenth century literature became her lifetime companions.

At the outbreak of war in 1939, she was working in the British Council in Istanbul. Feeling that Britain was in great danger and that she must be ready to go down with the ship if necessary, she travelled back to London. This meant travelling through Iraq to Basra where there was shipping. Eventually she arrived in London, and went to work in the Ministry of Information, where one of her colleagues was R. J. Yeatman, the co-author of '1066 And All That'. Yeatman wrote a poem in the style of Jabberwocky about Freda, who was never at her desk and whose Ministry of Information telephone was never answered: "The mini phones were tinkling ...".

Half way through the war she transferred to India, still in the Ministry of Information, where her job concerned broadcasting. In Delhi she narrowly escaped being put on trial for treason, because she and her pals were planning to make an unauthorized broadcast stating that India would be offered independence after the war if Indians would wholeheartedly support Britain in the war. They were saved from doing this by the fact that just before they were going to go ahead with it, the British government made an official statement which, although it did not go so far as that, was along similar lines and was close enough to satisfy their fervour.

She married Guy Wint in July 1947. On the marriage certificate she identified herself as a 'farmer'. This may have referred to her employment as a milkmaid on the farm where she took lodgings after returning from India.

When Freda encountered Buddhism in 1956 she remembered the songs of her Indian nursemaid during the first seven years of her life, and began to practise meditation. Guy, for many years a leader writer on the 'Manchester Guardian' and the 'Observer', was never a Buddhist, and indeed questioned the whole idea of meditation, but he was a friend to many. Freda's and Guy's house in Oxford became a hub for seekers and scholars, hippies and ambassadors.

In his book about the 1960s, 'Memoirs of a Dervish', Robert Irwin writes, "Over the next few years [Freda] worried about me and gave me a long talking-to about not leaving Oxford in order to follow a spiritual path. Devout Buddhist though she was, she was certain that it was better to get a degree before bothering about more mystical matters."

A writer of great experience as well as a man of considerable acuity, Guy died following a stroke in 1969. He had recorded the various physical limitations of life after an earlier stroke in his book 'The Third Killer' - the failure of functions, the elusiveness of words spoken and printed, as well as therapies attempted, from drugs to Oriental acupuncture. However the real interest of the book is in its transcript of shifting moods, boredom, glooms, indifference, irritability, irrelevances and above all withdrawal from the world and from himself.

Guy Wint and Peter Calvocoressi co-authored the book 'Total War', a detailed study of the events that shaped the course of World War II in Europe and the Pacific. But after Guy's death much of the part recounting war in the Pacific was left unfinished. Freda told me that need for income from the book led her to take on the research and finish his work. She told me how she would go to libraries and depend on her feeling being 'led' by Guy to find all that she needed to learn.

In 1965 she went with her friend Jane Browne to visit Ajahn Maha Boowa's monastery in the deeper reaches of north east Thailand where there were no roads, only tracks, travelling only by foot or by bullock cart to Wat Pa Barn Tard to take instruction in meditation from him. About this experience she wrote as follows:

"By the last day of my stay in the Wat, when we foregathered for the evening address, I was in a very different mood from that of previous occasions. I looked across from where we sat towards the Abbot, and wondered how my heart could have borne such grudging resentment towards this skilled teacher and kindly man. At this point he looked benignly in my direction and asked if I had anything to say. Since it was my last evening, I had expected to be asked to make some comment. I had spent the afternoon with a Thai friend from Bangkok, who had come up for the weekend to accompany me back, very kindly, on the journey from the jungle. [This was Khun Ying Sermsri, mentioned later.] We had spent the whole afternoon discussing points of doctrine, and working out with some care, three questions which I wanted to ask about the teaching, which differed in some respects from the Buddhism which I had previously learnt in the West. This Thai friend replied on my behalf that I had some questions, and she was about to ask them, when I interrupted her and said that it would be better to hear the Abbot's sermon first and ask questions afterwards. Then to please the little group of lay-people among whom I sat, and knowing their fancies, I whispered to them that I would ask the questions during the sermon in my heart. Since I was feeling very warmly towards everyone that evening, I also condescendingly decided that, however the address developed I would tell the lay-people later that my doubts had been more or less satisfied.

"The Abbot looked at me again, humorously, and said slowly in English, of which he had learned a little, 'If anyone thinks that I answer their questions, don't be too sure, don't be too sure.' I felt that he was amiably sharing the joke, and we composed ourselves to listen.

"The Abbot went into his customary brief period of meditation before speaking. As the sermon developed, I noticed that my Thai friend - who had previously visited this Wat only a couple of times, and who had not practised under the Abbot - was growing noticeably paler. When the Abbot finished, she translated the talk into English; she had been an official translator for UNESCO, and she knew her job. When she finished, we both looked at each other in utter amazement. The whole talk had been divided into three parts, each woven around one of my three questions, which were answered in great detail.

"I felt overcome, I must confess, and there was quite a stir among the Thai laity, because my UNESCO friend whispered to them that the Abbot had read my thoughts. But the Abbot sat silently for a space of time - then he looked towards the group of lay people and said firmly and slowly in English, 'I do not read people's thoughts. That is foolish talk. I just give talks on the Dhamma'."

In 1974, at a time when the Hampstead Vihara had been closed pending a review of the English Sangha Trust's objectives, it was Freda who led its Chairman, George Sharp, to begin correspondence with Ajahn Paññavaddho so that he seek his advice as to how best to proceed towards establishing the Sangha in England. The subsequent visit to Hampstead of Ajahn Maha Boowa, Ajahn Paññavaddho and Bhikkhu Cherry was also arranged by Freda.

Freda Wint was widely liked, trusted and respected at the highest levels within the Buddhist community both here, in Thailand, and even beyond. Freda seemed to know everybody.

In her many writings a favourite theme was "The Luminous Mind" and on this she wrote four articles for the Buddhist Society's 'Middle Way', but always under a male pseudonym, one of which was John Frederick. Freda explained this, saying "I don't think I would have been taken seriously if I wrote under a woman's name".

George Sharp writes: "For me she proved, by her contacts and letter-writing on my behalf, to be amazingly influential in smoothing my path into the higher echelons of the Thai Sangha. Without Freda I would have been fumbling about not knowing quite what the best move to make next should be. In fact it was on account of her that I found my early forays to bring about the movement of Sangha to England pretty effortless.

"When I first set out to visit Thailand and to see Ajahn Maha Boowa and Ajahn Cha, Freda had already been in touch to the President of the Thai YMCA and had booked a room for me at its Bangkok branch. Coming down for breakfast in the morning I was handed an envelope by reception. It was from Freda's friend Khun Ying Sermsri, a high-born Thai lady who spoke perfect English. The note was headed 'Your Itinerary'. And from then on a magic carpet awaited me. It whisked me into the presence of Somdet Nanasamworn, then the monk in charge of the Sangha's foreign affairs (subsequently to become Sangharaja of Thailand), and there, with Khun Ying Sermsri translating, I explained to him what I wanted to achieve. From then on, I was transported to my destinations without effort or expense on my account. All I had to do was give up and enjoy the ride. And it was all Freda's doing."

In 1978 Freda was invited to join the board of The English Sangha Trust, serving as a Director (who never missed a meeting) until 1992.

She has five grandchildren. One is a doctor, one is a social worker, one defies categorization, one is an astrologer, and one is a Tibetan Buddhist monk. In her later years when she would complain of having lost her marbles, she much enjoyed the rejoinder from her monk grandchild, "but marbles are overrated".

It is hoped that this obituary has helped shed a little light on the long life of this refined, delightfully amusing, and reclusive lady.