



Dr Laurie Wilson

1926-2020

by Paula James



Laurie celebrating her PhD

It is a real honour for me to commemorate Laurie Wilson who died in July just a couple of weeks before her 94th birthday.

Laurie was always a bundle of energy physically and intellectually although a stroke many years ago confined her to a chair in the small flint stone cottage she owned at St Cross, Winchester. There were roses around the door and she could look out over the road to the allotments and water meadows.

Her modest home was familiar to me over the years. Laurie managed somehow to host several Southampton Classics Department gatherings there in the late Seventies. We were a lively bunch and a few of us mature students looked to Laurie as our leader. She had boldly given up her long career in social work to join, at age 50, the first cohort of the Hellenic and Roman Studies degree pioneered at Southampton by Professor David Rankin, in 1976.

I took up a full time Latin degree the next year but had already encountered the remarkable Laurie at Adult Education classes locally.

Laurie never suffered fools gladly and was the original WYSIWYG. Gaining a first class Honours' degree she went on to complete a PhD on the Syrian princesses. It was typical of Laurie to choose a research topic foregrounding strong and significant women. She would wax lyrical about Theodora and we used to compare notes about our doctoral dissertations.

As Laurie was a touch typist (of course!) she converted my scrawled drafts on Apuleius to the finished submission in 1985 with my racing down to her cottage at lunchtimes with proofs (I was working part time on archives in the Hampshire Record Office at that time) and Laurie serving up what she described as 'windy soup' for sustenance.

She had many sides and as a devout Quaker spearheaded the purchase of a house and grounds in Winchester where lost souls could be cared for and set on a positive path in life. It was in their gardens that my sister Karen, another Wintonian, and I enjoyed Laurie's 90th Birthday tea on a sunny summer afternoon. I had a gift for Laurie, a recent publication on the empresses of Antioch because I knew her interest in the period was still sharp and critical.

Laurie with her strong sense of self irony would chuckle at the thought of being celebrated as an inspiring cultural and social symbol but she represents not just warmth and friendship but also a key moment in the history of Classics. When first introduced the Hellenic and Roman Studies qualification focusing upon texts in translation short-sightedly came under fire within and beyond the academic world as lacking in linguistic rigour.

In the 21st century we as classical scholars increasingly co-operate across our own and other disciplines pooling our skills to bring Antiquity to a wider audience and to students, scholars and life long learners (Laurie was a beacon in this respect too!). We are part of a rich tapestry of creative human experience whether our interest in the past has been prompted by varying degrees of exposure at school and in HE or by ancient myth and history in books and on screen. All of these manifestations of our subject deserve serious scrutiny alongside the original texts we rightly continue to pore over and interpret. Laurie would approve.

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