

Mr Duncan Cloud

1930-2020

by Graham Shipley and Paul Millett



John Duncan Cloud (MA Oxford, B.Litt. Glasgow) was a complete devotee of Classical learning who also sought to make its arcana accessible to both specialists in other areas and non-experts wanting to learn more. He was more amused than dismayed by the times he lived through, but never detached from them. He died on 24 June 2020.

Duncan was a major figure at the University of Leicester, where he worked from 1957, the year in which the institution received its charter, to 1993. He taught mainly Latin literature and Roman history, while his research focused on Roman law, early Roman history, and the Latin satirists. He published many distinguished papers as well as a chapter on Roman law in the *Cambridge Ancient History*.

Duncan grew up in Godalming and attended Stonyhurst College before winning a Postmastership (senior entrance scholarship) to read Literae Humaniores at Merton College, Oxford. After graduation in 1952, he completed three years' National Service in the Royal Army Education Corps with the rank of sergeant, helping service personnel prepare for civilian life. After taking his research degree at Glasgow, Duncan was appointed assistant lecturer in Classics at Leicester, being confirmed as lecturer in 1960 and promoted to senior lecturer in 1974.

Eight years later he became head of the Department of Classics, at a time of growing crisis. The department had shrunk from its dizzying heights of around a dozen staff in the 1970s, eventually declining to five and then four during 1987. This was despite the introduction of popular new degrees, developed by Duncan in collaboration with the Homer expert Norman Postlethwaite and others, which were highly innovative for those times. BA Classical Studies and BA Classical Studies (Ancient History) were taught 'in translation', students not being required to know Latin or Greek, though a paper on the classical languages in context broke new ground in giving students an understanding of the structures of the languages and how

they were used in antiquity. Running alongside existing degrees in Latin, Greek, and Classics, these new programmes were attracting around a hundred applications for the dozen available places by the late 1980s, including many from highly able students.

It was perhaps no coincidence that under Duncan's headship the Department of Classics seemed, if anecdotal evidence is to be believed, to lead the way within the Faculty of Arts in using more of the upper range of marks where justified. In doing so, they were consciously going beyond the rather grudging practice of many universities at that time of regarding marks of 71–2 as strong Firsts and 73–4 as exceptional, which made it almost impossible for a student to reach the required average for First Class Honours across all their papers. Indeed, a fairer, more extended range of marks, recognizing high intellectual quality where it was present, resulted in the award of a number of Firsts in the late 1980s, something the department had not seen before. The last cohort of Classical Studies graduates who passed out in 1991 earned several more Firsts, results that were justified by their achievements in later life.

Despite the quality and popularity of the new degrees, and the fact that around a hundred students a year might choose Classics or Ancient History within BA Combined Studies ('Combined Arts') or as Supplementary Subjects, the funding situation was deemed vulnerable. (Combined and Supplementary students, the latter only in years 1 and 2, usually counted as only 0.33 FTE, as we would now say; there were no joint degree students.) The Barron Report of 1987, set up by the University Grants Commission, recommended the transfer of Classics staff from Leicester, as from several other universities, to larger departments elsewhere. In Leicester's case, however, there was an unusually strong tradition of Ancient History teaching and research, exemplified at that time by the appointment, during Duncan's headship, of Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, a future director of the British School at Rome. The Barron Report, crucially, left the door open for Ancient History to be maintained at Leicester.

At this point, the imaginative decision was taken to merge this aspect of Classics with the equally small Department of Archaeology, under the headship of Graeme Barker, himself at that time director of the BSR, who was appointed as professor with a mandate to build a new combined department. From the moment of Graeme's arrival in 1988, Duncan played an important role in designing the combined unit, drawing upon his considerable standing within the University to elicit support for the new venture.

In 1990 he duly became an enthusiastic founding member of the School of Archaeological Studies, which immediately began to grow with internal transfers of staff, and soon with external appointments in both subjects. The last Classics graduates left in 1991, but Duncan continued to teach Roman history and Roman law until he retired in 1993, by which time the School was beginning to expand and was viewed by the University as of exceptional quality. He remained an active contributor to many areas of the social and intellectual life of the School (renamed School of Archaeology & Ancient History in 2000) for many years, not least in Ph.D. co-supervision. His research flourished, too: nearly half of his forty or so academic papers appeared after retirement.

Duncan's ironic humour, and a gift for the apophthegm, stood him in good stead in difficult times, and he often wondered whether he should write a comic novel of academic life. He would have had a wealth of material, for his memory for incidents, especially the absurd, was phenomenal. A first-rate linguist, he had a marvellous sense of rhythm and timing, once being heard to remark of a colleague elsewhere that they had been appointed to a post during a period of expansion 'when it was almost impossible not to get a lectureship'. Colleagues recall his urbane speeches, particularly his retirement oration, in which he pretended that soon after coming to Leicester and after sharing an office with a certain young lady classicist for a prolonged period, he felt it was only decent to make her an offer.

That young lady was Jean Allison, who became Duncan's wife and co-author of one of his papers.

As head of department he was wise, realistic, and humane. He is remembered by former junior staff and part-time tutors as a supportive and understanding mentor, and by graduates as a generous host, the kindest of tutors, and an engaging lecturer with a particular gift for the unforgettable one-liner. Former students recall the tours of Roman sites in Britain, led by Duncan, as highlights of their degree. Another remembers his asides during lectures, in one of which, after quoting Aristotle, Duncan paused and added, 'I don't think Aristotle had much insight into literature'.

Duncan was an influential figure in the University, commanding wide affection and loyalty, as exemplified by his popularity as Acting Dean for a term in the late 1980s. Staff in other departments and faculties have paid tribute to his intellectual generosity, for example in sharing his compendious knowledge of both Classics and Catholicism as a background to their own researches in History or English. His anecdotes about the Senior Common Room included a memory, from his earliest years here, of puritanical members pushing through a resolution banning alcohol; this was soon rescinded, no doubt facilitating the leading role Duncan would play for many years in the staff Wine Club. Fond of country walks, Duncan and Jean enjoyed introducing younger colleagues to the best pubs around Leicestershire and Rutland.

Beyond the county, he was a well-liked figure at the Institute of Classical Studies in London, to whose library he made regular visits, and had strong academic connections with scholars in Germany. A devout Catholic, he played an active role in the life of the Church, writing letters to the *Tablet* and for many years visiting housebound parishioners. On the professional level, after the inauguration of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), he was invited to make expert contributions to the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, attending meetings in the UK and North America. Sometimes irreverent in private, he would confess to liberal (with a small 'l') leanings, being tolerant of different opinions and lifestyles. He always looked for the best in those around him, something from which the world could learn much today.

Duncan is survived by his wife of sixty years, Jean (née Allison), and their daughters Frances and Elizabeth.

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This is a brief personal addition to Graham's excellent obituary for Duncan, based on my time (five years) in the Leicester Classics Department. I joined the Department in 1978 as a Tutorial Assistant, the approximate equivalent of an assistant lecturer. At the time, I was a very raw graduate student of just two years' standing, with experience only of Cambridge classics. With the departure soon after of Wolf Liebeschuetz to the Chair at Nottingham, Duncan effectively became my mentor. With great kindness and patience he helped me adjust to the needs of a small but very busy Department. The six established members of staff supported the full range of courses in language, literature, history, and philosophy (only archaeology happened elsewhere). Participation by students in the then innovative 'Combined Studies Degree' and by those taking Classics courses as 'Supplementary' to their main subjects meant lecture audiences that regularly topped one hundred, all of them writing their ration of essays. Duncan developed in detail ways of delivering the teaching of Classics courses in translation to engage cohorts of students across a range of disciplines. Other members of the Department were encouraged to do likewise, where possible feeding their research directly into teaching. In Duncan's case, one result deriving from his interest in Roman law was a course, effectively interdisciplinary, on 'Crime and Punishment in Ancient

Rome'. He was also in the forefront of teaching what is now called Reception Studies. Strains of the overture to Monteverdi's *Orfeo* echoing round the Classics corridor heralded the opening of each of Duncan's classes on Greek myth in western culture. His wider interest in music extended into theatre, directing the only performance of *Iphigeneia in Tauris* I have ever seen.

I recollect Duncan exactly as he appears in the photograph, with just a hint of the bohemian in his dress. The distinctive bow tie was not abandoned even on the evening walks he arranged for colleagues around the Leicestershire countryside, ending at a pub. Never quite to be recaptured was the camaraderie of the Leicester Department where, under Duncan's tutelage, I learnt my trade as a university teacher.

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It is hoped to organize a commemorative event in due course. Donations in memory may be made to WaterAid c/o A. J. Adkinson & Son Funeral Directors, 12 London Road, Oadby, Leicestershire, LE2 5DG (tel. 0116 271 2340) or at www.ajadkinsonandson.com.