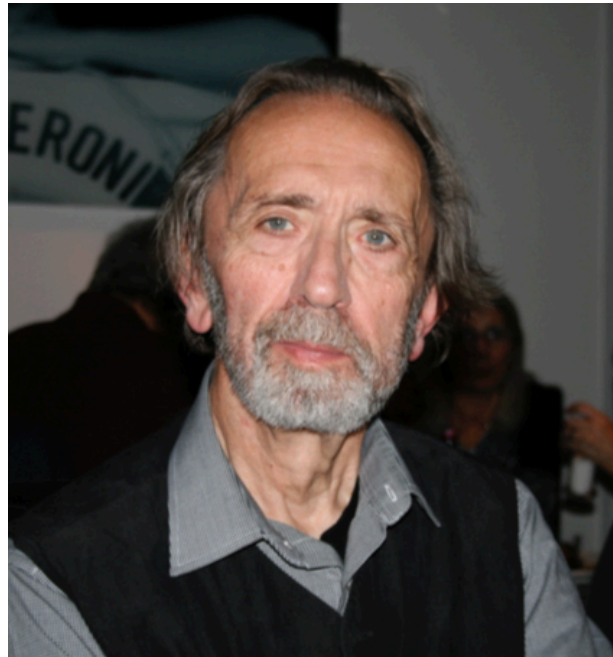


Jonathan Foster

1938-2020



by **Bruce Gibson**

Colleagues, former students and friends were grieved earlier this year to learn of the death of Jonathan Foster on 21st May, after a long period of ill health.

Jonathan studied first at the University of Aberdeen, where he was taught by W.S. Watt. Though Watt had taught him the *Georgics*, the *Aeneid* did not feature on the Aberdeen syllabus at all, but Jonathan then won a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, where he relished the chance to study Virgil with Gordon Williams and to attend the legendary seminars of Fraenkel. After Oxford, Roland Austin appointed Jonathan to a post in what was then the Department of Latin at the University of Liverpool in 1962, where he would teach for the next forty years until finally retiring from teaching in 2003. Jonathan's review in *PVS* 26 (2008) of John Henderson's '*Oxford Reds*' (London 2006) is a wonderful memoir of Jonathan's own formative years, showing his characteristic good humour and acuteness of insight, as he recalled his experiences of working with Austin in Liverpool and his encounters with leading classical scholars of the day. Civilized values and urbanity, combined

robustly with deeply-felt beliefs and a sense of right and wrong, shine through that review, as they did in all his conversation.

In looking back on his early years in Liverpool, Jonathan wrote of how it was his calling to be a teacher. That was certainly the view of generations of students in Liverpool who enjoyed and benefited immensely from Jonathan's passion for teaching. When I posted the announcement to the Classicists e-mail list of Jonathan's passing, students who had lost contact with him from decades before (he took to e-mail only late, and with a certain sense of understandable caution) wrote to me to express their admiration for his teaching and his character and their keen sense of loss. One could not imagine a teacher more loyal to his students, always ready to be of help in any way, and utterly uninterested in hierarchy or ceremony. These qualities sat alongside an endearing yet ferocious contempt for the onset of academic bureaucracy and 'line managers' as they came to loom larger in British universities in the latter part of his career. To work alongside him in Liverpool as a colleague even for only few years was a rare privilege. There was also, on occasions, a magnificent quirkiness: a Liverpool colleague recalls invigilating with him in a now long-demolished church. A sudden flutter of pigeons, disturbed in the roof, prompted some vigorous and loud Latin quotation from Jonathan, to the astonishment of those sitting the exam.

Jonathan's unshakeable enthusiasm for the subject inspired publications on texts ranging from Roman comedy to Catullus, Horace, Virgil and Petrarch. Jonathan was also thrilled to develop a long-enduring link with colleagues at the Charles University in Prague, where he delighted to give lectures on Classics in Czech.

Jonathan was a cherished member of the Virgil Society, and he cherished the Society and its members and meetings, even when unwell in his later years. He served as Editor of the *Proceedings of the Virgil Society* over many years, from PVS 22 (1996) to PVS 26 (2008), a role for which he was perfectly suited. His gift for inviting speakers whom the members would enjoy hearing was matched by his love of friendly discussion and questions after the papers. As an Editor, he combined acuity with wisdom, patience and tact. PVS includes a number of contributions of Jonathan's own, such as the splendid article on 'Some Devices of Drama used in *Aeneid* 1-4' in PVS 13 (1973), published at a time when the influence of drama on the *Aeneid* was often ignored, or his piece on the end of *Georgics* 3 in PVS 19 (1988).

One of the joys of PVS is that some of its articles are very close even in final written form to the spoken word of the paper's first delivery. The article on *Georgics* 3 certainly gives a sense of what it was like to hear Jonathan speaking, with pithy and erudite coinages, such as Jonathan's comment on the location of the Noric plague ('I am tempted to call it Habsburg country'), or the personal anecdote, placing Virgil's plague in the context of his own experience of looking out in awe at Gruinard Island on the west coast of Scotland, which had been deliberately infected with anthrax as an experiment by the authorities during World War 2 and thereafter abandoned. In Jonathan's case, all his writings give an impression of what it was like to hear him speak: they are a memorial to be treasured.

Devoted to his family, and (in the best sense) proud of all their achievements in so many spheres, Jonathan is survived by his wife, the Revd. Joan Foster, their two sons Ben and Nick, and two grandchildren. The funeral service conducted by Joan in

early June gave a powerful sense, even to those of us only able to be present online, of his greatness of spirit, and his love of music (especially Haydn) and his family.

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