

# Miriam Griffin

1935-2018



by Matthew Leigh

**M**iriam Griffin was one of the most distinguished Roman historians of her generation and a pillar both of the Oxford Classics Faculty and of the Classics School at Somerville College.

Born Miriam Dressler in New York on June 6, 1935, to Leo, a schoolmaster, and Fanny, a stenographer, Miriam was a brilliant student at Erasmus Hall High School. At university she had to choose between Music, Physics, and Classics, and we may count ourselves blessed that she chose the last. Having completed her AB at Barnard College in New York in 1956 and then taken an AM at Radcliffe College in 1957, Miriam came to St Anne's College, Oxford, in the same year to read for a second BA in Classics. At this time it was very common for Classicists coming to Oxford with a BA from another university to take Greats over three years and this continued to be the case until the development of specialist Masters degrees in the 1980s and 1990s. At St Anne's Miriam formed close friendships with such figures as Anne Lonsdale, the distinguished Sinologist and future President of New Hall, Cambridge, and Devaki Jain, the pioneering feminist economist. She also met her husband, Jasper Griffin, Tutor in Classical Languages and Literature at Balliol College from 1963-2004, and a beloved partner for the rest of her life. The extraordinary devotion that Miriam showed to Jasper through the long years of his decline is a story little broadcast because she sought no credit for it. It was simply an act of love. The care taken of her by their beloved daughters, Julia, Miranda and Tamara, through her own illness was no less remarkable. She doted on her granddaughter, Zuzana, whose visits from New York gave her great joy.

Miriam graduated from St Anne's with a First Class degree in 1960. Her scholarship was greatly prized by the formidable Margaret Hubbard and she was soon elected to a Junior Research Fellowship in the same college as she pursued research for her doctorate on the life and works of Seneca the Younger. Miriam also contributed greatly to the teaching of Roman History in St Anne's. In 1967, however, a Tutorial Fellowship in Ancient History at Somerville College became available and Miriam made the short trip across the Woodstock Road to join what would be her academic home for the rest of her life. From 1967 to 2002

Miriam nurtured generations of Ancient History students at both Somerville and latterly Trinity College as well. Her undergraduate and graduate students included such distinguished figures as Tessa Rajak, Gillian Clark, Kathleen Coleman, and Hannah Cotton, and she was treasured by pupils and colleagues alike. For much of her time at Somerville she worked together with Lesley Brown and Nan Dunbar and together they ran a very successful Classics school.

Miriam's scholarly output was remarkable. Perhaps best known are her monographs, *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford, 1976) and *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (London, 1984), but there was so much more. Her enduring engagement with the borderlines between Roman History and Philosophy saw her produce *Seneca on Society* (Oxford, 2013), a guide to the *De Beneficiis*, translations of both this work and Cicero's *De Officiis*, and two volumes co-edited with Jonathan Barnes on Roman Philosophy entitled *Philosophia Togata I* and *II*. From her earliest article on the *De Brevitate Vitae* in the 1962 *Journal of Roman Studies* to her two-part essay on Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide in the 1986 *Greece and Rome*, and right up to her final years, Miriam also produced a series of major contributions to scholarly journals. Shortly before her death she discharged herself from hospital in order to attend a party to celebrate the publication of her collected papers, entitled *Politics and Philosophy at Rome*, which runs to a full 775 pages.

Miriam was also a dedicated servant of our discipline, serving as editor of *Classical Quarterly* from 2002-2007 and of the Clarendon Ancient History Series for OUP. This she did at all times with great tact and kindness. She did not chase after honours but they followed her, particularly towards the close of her career when colleagues began to reflect on quite how significant her contribution had been. She was Langford Family Eminent Scholar at Florida State University in 2008, Todd Memorial Lecturer at the University of Sydney in 2011, and in August 2018 the recipient of a posthumous medal from the British Academy in recognition of her lifetime's scholarly achievement. The publication in 2002 of a Festschrift, *Philosophy and Power in the Graeco-Roman World*, edited by her former pupils, gave her great pleasure.

I knew Miriam from my first week at Balliol, when she and Jasper invited our year group round to dinner, and then from her Honour Moderations lectures on Cicero and Catiline. She was hugely generous to me when, as a doctoral student, I asked her to read through a chapter on the problem of 'clementia' in Lucan. On taking up my post at St Anne's College in 1997, I realised how loyal she remained to the college that had been her home for the first ten years of her life in Oxford, and could always look to her for help as a colleague and a friend. It was lovely to see her come back into St Anne's for lunch with Devaki Jain whenever the latter was visiting, and Devaki and I sat together at Miriam's funeral. She was a brave woman, indomitable, and loving. Like so many others, I remember her with huge affection.

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