

Neil Hopkinson (1957-2021)

by Emma Woolerton



Neil boating on Coniston Water, 2019 Trinity College reading party. Photograph: Christopher Howarth.

In what was likely one of the final things he wrote for publication, Neil Hopkinson (1957-2021) described his first encounter with Liddell and Scott. Reviewing a collection of essays on the lexicon, he told of occasionally sighting the volume gathering dust on a



shelf in his grammar school, which no longer taught Greek, and the thrill of finally using it for the first time after coming across the word ΑΝΑΓΚΗ in Notre-Dame de Paris. It was an encounter that quickly led to more, to the great benefit of all interested in Greek literature, and Hellenistic poetry in particular.

The grammar school in question was near Neil's native Elland, in West Yorkshire. When the teachers there realised his incredible linguistic talents, they quickly arranged classes in Greek and Russian, alongside Latin. Neil went from there to Peterhouse, Cambridge to read Classics, where he was also a junior research fellow, before taking up a fellowship and the directorship of studies at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1983; he remained at Trinity for the rest of his life.

Neil's scholarship was extraordinary. He packed more into a sentence than many can fit in a book. His commentaries were the best of their genre, displaying his combination of astute textual criticism and careful literary judgment. His readings added to the stock of the available reality of many classical texts. His work in the Cambridge "Green and Yellow" series modelled how to combine such elements while writing accessibly enough to assist those whose language skills were still being honed; he was an editor of both the "Green and Yellows" and the Cambridge "Orange" series of commentaries for a number of years before his death.

Neil's own contribution to the "Orange" series, on Callimachus's *Hymn to Demeter*, remains the standard. He edited a book of Nonnus for Budé, and authored two Loeb's (Theocritus, Moschus and Bion, and Quintus of Smyrna). His "Green and Yellows" encompassed both Latin and Greek, with an edition of *Metamorphoses* 13 alongside his *Selections from Lucian, Greek Poetry of the Imperial Period* and *A Hellenistic Anthology*. The latter saw a revised and extended second edition in 2020. As Neil noted in the preface, in the years between the publication of the first and the arrival of the second a huge array of other work had emerged on the poets featured; this was surely in no small part thanks to his own. Perhaps less well known than those works is his analysis of and commentary on the only substantial piece of Latin verse AE Housman published, a dedication of his edition of Manilius to MJ Jackson (*The*



Housman Society Journal 37, 2011: 88-109); the piece makes easily available a discussion of a significant text in the critical understanding of Housman's life and work (both scholarly and poetic), even if, as the Society Chair's introductory note to the issue states, the Greek accents caused the typesetters a few headaches.

Accents were one of the many seemingly complex aspects of the ancient languages that Neil could teach and discuss with eye-descaling clarity. All who were taught by him benefitted from his careful attention to his students' work and the possibilities for its improvement. Having learned Greek at speed himself, he helped others to do so both in his college teaching and for many years as a tutor at the annual JACT Greek Summer School. Though he did not lavish praise, he didn't stint it, either, and with just a few encouraging words in a margin or at the foot of an essay he could give their recipient firmer trust in their abilities and judgment – if Neil thought it was a good idea, it must be, after all. He re-instituted the Victorian concept of the reading party for Trinity students, piling any books requested from the college library into the back of his Land Rover and transporting them alternately to the Lake District and to Yorkshire. The trips not only allowed for a healthy burst of proper thinking interspersed by decent walks, but created many fond memories for all who attended. There were readings from *Dracula* on the viaduct mentioned in the novel, and plenty of tips on how to skim stones. The attempt to find a place where a photocopy could be made of a facsimile of a Sophoclean manuscript led to an afternoon of visions of Neil emerging from petrol station minimarts clutching L to his waxed jacket and shaking his head with regret. In his teaching he treated his students as his fellow scholars, and with such gently expressed high expectations quietly brought out the best in them. His delight in his subject was always clear, and he simply wanted others to share it. The sheer number of his students who have gone on themselves to teach Classics, at both schools and universities, is testament to his success.

Although not sentimental, he saw the value of the seemingly ephemeral. In addition to Piero Sraffa's false teeth – inherited with his Trinity rooms and occasionally produced for deadpan comic effect – he had the late economist's ear defenders from the second world war, and I once found myself trying to navigate the lanes of Dorset on a trip out



from the JACT Greek Summer School using a 1930s Ordnance Survey map that had belonged to ASF Gow. The small stories such objects can tell clearly appealed to him, and he likewise cherished well-chosen mementos from students, keeping a toy Land Rover bought for him at the end of one reading party on display on his desk. He delighted, too, in the absurd, both in the perhaps more conventional meaning – he enjoyed receiving additions to his collection of textual problems caused by poor sub-editing of newspapers – and in the literary sense, admiring Beckett enormously. He once mentioned that he was keen to go to the George Gissing museum on the grounds that it was the least visited museum in the country, but couldn't bring himself to, as doing so might ruin the whole point by bumping up the numbers. He was happy to divert on the way back from a reading party to the Keswick pencil museum when a former student turned fellow tutor expressed a powerful interest in seeing the (then) world's largest pencil.

He was a deeply kind man, ready to offer the back of his Land Rover to save on van hire when friends needed to move house at short notice, unfussily tending to student welfare needs, and always looking out for others. After his death Alan Parker, a former Fellow Commoner of the Creative Arts at Trinity, wrote on Twitter of the “northern nights” instituted to help him feel at home, on which he and Neil would have a beer and some chips and play snooker. Neil was a superb snooker player, and a proper hustler on the pool table, rarely beaten by students when reading party locations had one (and incredibly patient in teaching those less skilled with a cue how to get through a game with our pride intact).

Neil was a model of scholarly and personal integrity. He treated others with kindness and respect, and spoke without cant or fuss. He will be much missed.

*

Trinity College, Cambridge, has set up a fund in Neil's memory, the Neil Hopkinson Memorial Fund, to support students from low-income households in their study of Classics, with a preference for those who have not had the opportunity to study Greek



Bulletin 50 (2021) <https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/bulletin/>

before. Further details can be found at <https://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/alumni/supporting-trinity/priorities/neil-hopkinson-memorial-fund/>