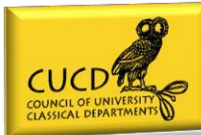


John Bramble (1944–2023)



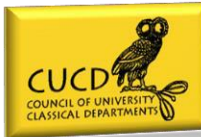
by Philip Hardie

John Clifton Bramble, who has died at the age of 78, was one of a group of young Latinists who, between the late 1960s and the 1980s, invigorated the study of their texts through the application of literary-critical approaches new to the classical establishment. He was a restless intellectual explorer, who in later life voyaged through strange seas in modernist culture and, most recently, in alternative late-antique histories. A man of pronounced likes and dislikes, and obsessive in whatever was absorbing him at the time, he formed strong bonds with those in whom he detected similar interests, but he did not suffer fools gladly, and hated pretension.



John Bramble was born in Salford on 5th September 1944, to Louisa (née Murray), an administrator with the Cooperative Wholesale Society, and Clifton Bramble, who, after war service at Bletchley Park, worked as a finance manager for the Manchester Corporation Transport Department. John was educated at Manchester Grammar School. There he formed an enduring friendship with his contemporary, Alan Bowman, who remembers that, apart from winning all the prizes, he had outstanding artistic talent. In 1962 he went up to St John's College, Cambridge, where he was taught by the scholar-poet Guy Lee and the precise ancient historian John Crook, taking firsts in both parts of the Classical Tripos. In 1965-6, pursuing his wider interests in literary studies, he read for Part II of the English Tripos, securing another first. He then moved on to graduate work, supervised by Ted Kenney and Bob Coleman, on the Roman poet Lucan's hyperbolic and extravagantly pessimistic epic on the civil war between Pompey the Great and Julius Caesar. At a time when literary performances of this sort were generally felt to be in bad taste, John was able to see through to the deeper sources and significance of Lucan's poem, partly perhaps through an almost personal sympathy with that angry young man of the Neronian period. In 1967 he was elected to a junior research fellowship at Peterhouse. In 1970 he migrated from Cambridge to Oxford, to a tutorial fellowship in Classics at Corpus Christi College, taking over from the previous tutor in Latin, Robin Nisbet, on the latter's elevation to the Corpus Chair of Latin.

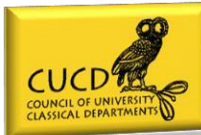
Those were the days when appointment at a young age to an Oxford or Cambridge fellowship removed the need to complete a doctorate for career advancement. John never finished his work on Lucan, but he went on to publish a powerful sample of his thinking on the poet in the Latin volume of the *Cambridge History of Classical Literature* (1982). The list of John's publications is not long, but includes a much-cited article 'Structure and ambiguity in Catullus 64' (*PCPS* 16 (1970) 22-41), a classic example of a New-Critical reading of a Latin poem. John also contributed an essay, 'Cui non dictus Hylas puer?: Propertius 1.20', to *Quality and Pleasure in Latin Poetry* (Cambridge 1974), the first of the volumes edited by Tony Woodman and David West, a series which pioneered literary-critical approaches to Latin. Another fruit of research started in Cambridge was the book-length study of the notoriously difficult Neronian



satirist Persius, still one of the best monographs on that author, *Persius and the Programmatic Satire. A Study in Form and Imagery* (Cambridge 1974). ‘Persius was not a wanton obscurantist’, the book begins, launching the reader on a subtle and enlightening study of the way in which Persius activates physical metaphors of literary criticism, in an analysis of the causes of what Persius perceives as contemporary literary decadence.

John’s arrival in Oxford in 1970 followed shortly after the reform of Greats (the second part of the BA in Classics) which allowed for an option in Greek and Roman literature, broadening the previously exclusive diet of ancient history and philosophy. Prior to that it was felt that after reading all of Homer and Virgil, the speeches of Demosthenes and Cicero, and a range of other texts for Mods (the first five terms of the degree) there was no need to spend more time on the less serious business of literature. Together with Oliver Lyne, a contemporary and close friend of John’s in Cambridge, who arrived at Balliol in 1971, John introduced to Oxford excitingly fresh ways of thinking about Latin literature. John gave of his best as a teacher in those early years at Corpus, inspiring students with his own enthusiasms, in unconventional tutorials where looking at a Latin poem might alternate with listening to a bit of Jimi Hendrix, in order to explore how the latter’s reworking of ‘The Star-spangled Banner’ might cast light on Horace’s performance as an Augustan propagandist.

Meanwhile, John was developing wider interests in antiquity, in the fields of cultural history and the history of religion. In 1980 he enlisted the help of a small group of Corpus graduate classicists in starting up the Corpus Classical Seminar, a forum over the coming years for papers on a wide range of topics, from paradoxography to the Gospels, from political iconography to the late antique holy man. Forty plus years on, and through various metamorphoses, the Corpus Christi Classical Seminar Series continues to flourish. During his last decade at Corpus John was working on a boldly conceived study of man’s attitude to the natural world in antiquity. Those who remember him from those years will have a vivid image of the ever-growing piles of paper covered with notes and drafts in his distinctive hand. Sadly, this was to remain a *rudis indigestaque moles*.

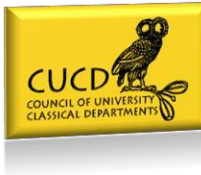


John's other passions included motorbikes, elegant interiors, and gardening. In his role as Garden Master, he was instrumental in appointing as college gardener David Leake (the unintended humour of the pairing of 'Bramble and Leake' did not go unnoticed). Encouraged by John, David created one of the least conventional of college gardens, a genre more often noted for its carefully ordered planting. The towering bamboos and scrolloping marrows in the Corpus front quad, David Leake's 'study in calculated neglect' (as a gardening columnist once put it), might almost stand as a physical metaphor for the free-flowing fertility of John's own mind.

John took early retirement from his Corpus fellowship, on health grounds, in December 1986. By coincidence, this was just at the time when universities were being forced to defend government funding for research against Thatcherite criticisms, leading to the introduction of research assessment (1987), which gradually took on a life of its own. The burdens of Quality Assurance were not yet visible in 1986, and John was spared the indignities of inspection by the TQA or the even greater insult of the transformation of students from collaborators in a learning process into consumers whose annual feedback could make or break the reputation of individuals and institutions.

The respect in which John was held, and the regret at his premature retirement, found expression in *Homo Viator* (Bristol Classical Press), a volume of classical essays presented to him in 1987 by a number of his colleagues, students and friends.

John's ability to function had become increasingly impaired by alcohol dependence, an affliction that he shared with a close friend in Corpus, the senior fellow Trevor Aston, who was driven to suicide in October 1985. With remarkable willpower, and with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous, John succeeded in pulling himself out of the downward spiral. He felt keenly that, had things been different, he might have been able to help Trevor to the surface as well. After leaving Oxford, John was to have many years of active retirement, creating fine gardens in his various homes, pursuing his intellectual interests, and making new friends, in a succession of different places, as restless in body as in mind. 'Man and the natural world in antiquity' was replaced by another vast topic, the reception of oriental religion and mysticism in the modern world, and more



piles of (now word-processed) notes and drafts accumulated. To educate himself further in modernity, he took an MA in Historical Studies at Oxford Brookes University. There he was taught by Roger Griffin, who observes of John that 'he was an extraordinary "one off", too big and leftfield in his academic passions for an Oxford college or faculty, barely supervisable but an eccentric genius in his way.' For a series edited by himself, Roger Griffin succeeded in drawing out from John a manuscript of manageable size and shape, a remarkable study of *Modernism and the Occult* (Palgrave Macmillan 2015).

John's intellectual intensity only increased as he grew older, as did his attraction to the alternative. When he lived in Hay on Wye, he became friends with the self-proclaimed 'king of Hay on Wye', the bookseller Richard Booth. He formed a spiritual attachment to Tibetan Buddhism, spending time on retreat at the Kagyu Samye Ling monastery in southern Scotland. In his last home, Totnes, he was a regular visitor to the Golden Buddha Centre, where his life will be celebrated by a gathering of family and friends later this year.

In 1983 he married Pascale Gaitet, but the marriage did not last. He had a series of intense, but short-lived, relationships with other gifted women.

He is survived by his sister, Christine Bolton.



John Bramble's Graduation at St John's, Cambridge in 1965. John is on the left in profile. Photo courtesy of Linda Lyne.