

# Alexander Femister Garvie (1934–2024)

by Douglas Cairns<sup>1</sup>



Alexander F. Garvie – known to all as Alex (or ‘Alec’, as we say in Scotland) – died aged 90 on 17 September 2024 after a short illness. He was one of the greatest Hellenists of the past sixty years, a dedicated and inspiring teacher, and a loyal servant of the University of Glasgow throughout his long and distinguished academic career.

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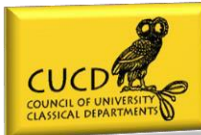
<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Ronald Knox, Vayos Liapis, and members of Alex Garvie’s family for their input to and advice on this obituary. I have drawn occasionally on the tribute by myself and Vayos that appeared as the introduction to the Festschrift, *Dionysalexandros: Essays on Aeschylus and his Fellow Tragedians in Honour of Alexander F. Garvie* (Classical Press of Wales, 2006). Use of that source explains any overlap that sharp-eyed readers may spot between this obituary and Alex’s Wikipedia page, shamelessly plundered from *Dionysalexandros* by hands unknown.



Alex was born in Edinburgh on 29 January 1934 and educated at George Watson's College, where he first encountered ancient Greek in the classes of the legendary John Penman. As Alex would later recall, 'Even by the standards of the late 1940s Penman's teaching methods were probably old-fashioned, but enormously effective — lots of unison chanting of declensions and principal parts, with the right hand indicating the accents (different gestures signified the acute and the circumflex), and with the left hand reserved for the iota subscript.'

He then studied Classics at the University of Edinburgh, graduating with first-class Honours in 1955. A particular influence was the then newly appointed Professor of Greek, A. J. Beattie. It was Beattie who first introduced Alex to foreign travel in general and to the land of Greece in particular, when he led a party of four Classics students on a three-week tour in 1953. At Beattie's suggestion, Alex applied for and won a scholarship to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, but before he could take it up, his studies were interrupted by two years' National Service in the British Army. After an uneventful posting in Germany, he was selected for an intensive language course in modern Greek, before being flown to Cyprus in 1956 as part of a select team of interpreters attached to the British Intelligence Service. These were turbulent times on the island, but Alex looked back fondly on his adventures there, including one particular occasion when he was responsible for escorting a local bride and her trousseau safely through a security cordon.

After moving to Cambridge in 1957 Alex achieved firsts in both parts of the Classical Tripos. He had been particularly inspired by the lectures on Greek textual criticism, based on Aeschylus' *Persians*, of the then Regius Professor of Greek, D. L. (later Sir Denys) Page. Page suggested that Alex embark on a PhD on the dating of the *Suppliants*. In 1960, however, not long after commencing his research, Alex obtained a position as Assistant Lecturer in Greek at the University of Glasgow, one of the first appointments made by the new Professor of Greek, A. W. Gomme's successor, D. J. Allan. The work begun at Cambridge was to bear fruit nine years later in Alex's first book.

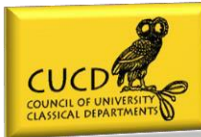


Alex would remain at Glasgow until his retirement as Professor of Greek in 1999, inspiring generations of undergraduates with his lectures on Greek epic, lyric, and tragedy. Students were immediately won over by his obvious love for his subject and by the generosity with which he gave them his time and support. Simultaneously, they would learn that behind his apparently austere Scottish Presbyterian exterior was a man with a mischievous sense of humour, a master storyteller who made every lecture a voyage of discovery and left audiences in rapt anticipation of the next thrilling instalment. In the Honours class of Greek, students had the benefit of the full range of his scholarship. I still have his typed handouts (from 1982) on Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, essentially a line-by-line commentary with full bibliography on every significant interpretative issue in the play. Former Honours and graduate students will confirm Alex's appetite for debate: hours could pass in his study – whether in the old Greek Department in Lilybank Gardens or latterly in what had been the Humanity Side Room in the West Quadrangle of the University's main Gilmorehill building – in one-to-one discussion of texts and their interpretation, always generously fuelled by tea and biscuits and suffused by the smoke from Alex's pipe.

Beyond teaching, Alex served the University as Senior Adviser of Studies and Admissions Officer in the Faculty of Arts and (from 1991 to 1997) as Head of the Department of Classics. He also made significant contributions to the wider Classics community as editor of *Classical Review* and as a long-serving member, including periods as secretary and chair, of the Classical Association Journals Board.

In his 39 years at Glasgow, Alex steadily built an international reputation as a world-leading scholar of ancient Greek tragic and epic poetry. A recurrent observation in reviews of his publications is the excellence of their literary analysis, a product of his deep conviction that the interpretation of Classical literature matters because understanding the life and thought of other civilizations enlarges the life and thought of our own.

His first book, *Aeschylus' Suppliants: Play and Trilogy* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), demonstrated convincingly that in style and structure the play could be placed



comfortably among the surviving works of the playwright's later years. More than half a century later, the work remains unsurpassed as the definitive study of its topic. Alex's greatest academic achievements, however, are his two monumental commentaries on individual Aeschylean tragedies: the first, on the *Choephoroi*, appeared in 1986 and the second, on the *Persians*, in 2009 (both with Oxford University Press). Each demonstrates an unerring ability to combine the closest attention to detail (including technical matters of language, metre, and textual criticism) with an overarching sense of why the detail matters for the overall interpretation of the play. These are landmark works of scholarship that will be standard points of reference for decades to come.

Alex's erudition as a scholar, enhanced by his extensive experience as a teacher, was also evident in two smaller editions with commentary (on Books 6–8 of Homer's *Odyssey* in 1994 and on Sophocles' *Ajax* in 1998) designed for mixed readerships of students and scholars, and in two introductory textbooks for undergraduates, *The Plays of Sophocles* (2005) and *The Plays of Aeschylus* (2010), both published in second editions by Bloomsbury Academic in 2016 and each marked by a rare combination of acumen, concision, and clarity.

Alex's achievements in research and scholarship and his contribution to education in Scotland were recognized in his election to the Fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1995. In 2004, on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, seventeen of his many friends and colleagues came together to produce a collection of essays in his honour, published in 2006 by the Classical Press of Wales as *Dionysalexandros: Essays on Aeschylus and his Fellow Tragedians in Honour of Alexander F. Garvie*.

Away from academia, Alex was an intrepid traveller, especially in his retirement, when he was able to fulfil a boyhood ambition by following heroes such as Scott and Shackleton to both the Arctic and the Antarctic. He was also an enthusiastic walker and a gifted musician — he played violin in the Glasgow University orchestra for more than 40 years — as well as a stalwart and dedicated servant of his local kirk, Cadder Parish Church in Bishopbriggs, where he sang in the choir and served as Sunday school teacher, elder, and session clerk.



Alex was a great Scot, an outstanding product and proponent of a venerable Scots educational tradition which no longer exists. He was a kind and modest man who radiated contentment: it was absolutely perfect that the order of service for his memorial, at Cadder Church, on 18 October 2024 had on its front page a picture of Alex at home, in a comfortable armchair, a broad smile on his face, his pipe in one hand, and a wee dram (actually quite a large dram, by the looks of it) in the other. His contentment derived in particular from the joy he took in family life, as husband, father, and grandfather. He is survived by Jane, whom he married in 1966, by his children, Margaret and David, and by his granddaughters Rebecca, Sarah, Catriona, and Isobel. He will be sorely missed by all his friends and former students, in Scotland and beyond.