

ALAN WILLIAM JAMES

1938–2015



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Alan James was a core member of the old Greek Department at the University of Sydney in its heyday, and continued through its later transformations, until his retirement from classics (and ancient history) in 1998 at the end of a 30-year career. He had been trained in classics to a rare level of excellence and within his own chosen field was a formidable scholar. Though his wider influence was somewhat limited, he nevertheless enjoyed a high reputation among his fellow-classicists both in Australia and overseas. His students found that his austere manner could reveal surprising patience and kindness. Many came to feel affection for this strangely reserved and hesitant man, as well as respect for his enormous learning.

James was born in Stanmore, London, in 1938, and after schooling at Harrow County Grammar School and Priory Grammar School, Shrewsbury, went up to King's College, Cambridge. A starred First and the Chancellor's Medal showed what talent he had as a classicist. His PhD was awarded in 1965 for a dissertation on the language of Oppian of Cilicia, which was published in 1970. The field was suggested, not by his supervisor Giuseppe

Giangrande (later of London), as one might have supposed, but by D. L. Page, Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge at the time. From then on Late Epic was to be James' special field. Quintus of Smyrna, the third-century AD Epic poet, was the subject of his final two books. In between were numerous articles on Epic of all periods. It is likely that contact with the renowned Homer scholar G. P. Shipp, who was retired but still in frequent contact with members of the Greek Department at Sydney, fostered and encouraged his interests. He does thank Shipp for reading the proofs of his Oppian book and for saving him 'from a number of errors.'

The Homeric epics were the grounding of the late Epic poets and of James himself. Though he never said so, one gained the impression that Homer was his real love. His mastery of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was legendary. In all Epic he had an enormous and exact, almost frightening expertise. There was no word he did not instantly recognise, no scholiast whose abstruse remarks he could not interpret. This expertise extended to most of the Greek literature of the Classical period, but did not end there. In the 1980s he joined a project to produce a translation, with commentary, on *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, a sixth-century prose work. His contribution was significant and much valued by his Byzantinist colleagues.

The field of late Epic was not a fashionable one. In the preface to his translation of the *Posthomeric* of Quintus (2004), James puts up a calm but strong defence against the dismissive attitude that had tended to prevail. His own translation of the whole epic (2004) and his meticulous commentary on book V of the same (2000) did much to change the scene and revive interest in this poet. In 2006 an international conference on Quintus, the first of its kind, was held in Zurich. James by this time had become the natural choice as keynote speaker.

The commentary on book V of the *Posthomeric* was a collaborative work with the late K. H. Lee, Professor of Classics at Sydney (1993–2001). Lee revived James' interest in Quintus and motivated the project, as James himself acknowledges. But once started, James threw himself into it fully, and the resulting work carries his characteristic stamp. The collaboration must have meant much to both of them. Lee, who left a chair in New Zealand to take up the Sydney post, said to me more than once,

perhaps in moments of despondency, that if the move to Sydney had been worthwhile for nothing else, it had been worthwhile for the chance to meet Alan and get to know him as a trusted colleague and friend. The feelings were reciprocated.

James was not just a translator: he was a poet-translator. His version of Quintus' *Posthomerica* combines accuracy with a flexible verse form of considerable appeal and beauty. Before tackling this, he had worked for some years on a translation of the *Iliad*, at first using a strict form of blank verse. It was not completed (at least by 2004), but James saw it later as 'a necessary training' for the Quintus translation. The composition of Greek (iambic) verse, one of the most demanding of skills, was within his capacity too, but undertaken with typical modesty. Trevor Evans, who joined what was probably the last (informal) class, recalls James saying that when approached to teach such a class 'he wondered whether he would still be able to do it. And of course he was fantastic at it.' In the same vein, Terry Roberts recalls James taking over a Lyric class at short notice, giving apologies for being rusty at Sapphic dialect, 'and then giving a flawless performance.'

But it would be wrong to give the impression that James could only interest himself in the rarer aspects of the classics or his own special field. He taught courses across the subject, as was usual in the department, from beginners to honours. He embraced the teaching of Classical Literature in Translation when such courses were introduced, and gave of his best, to the pleasure of his students. James set high standards for his students. In Homer classes he was inclined to expect them to match him by reading the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, or sometimes both, in a year, as he had done many times over. But his high standards were in tune with the high standards of diligence that he set himself. His standards paid off. Richard Hunter (now Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge) recalls courses with James in Pindar and Hellenistic poetry which gave him a taste for 'hard' poetry; 'he certainly did not let you cut corners.' Peter Lennox (Principal of Redlands) remembers the 'training in clarity of thought and ability to research and reason.' John Vallance (Headmaster of Sydney Grammar School) has said simply, 'He taught me how to concentrate.'

James was appointed to the Department of Greek in 1968, having held fellowships and a College lectureship at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He retired at no higher level than Senior Lecturer, but after retirement was recognised by his election in 2006 as a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. In all his time at Sydney, he never shirked a duty, and drove himself hard in all his teaching and other tasks, at times surely to the detriment of his health. In the university context, a walk of life that has its fair share of the opposite characteristics, James stood out as a man of integrity, kindness, honesty, and

fairness. He never gossiped or criticised and was reluctant to pass judgement. He accepted the duty of Head of Department a number of times; he served the Australian Society for Classical Studies as business manager, and then, for more than 20 years, as treasurer, and was made an honorary life member; he was chair of the Board of Studies Classical Greek Syllabus Committee for years; and there were more such roles, all demanding their share of his time and skill.

It is hard to give a proper impression of the full depth of knowledge of such a man from a catalogue of positions held and duties performed. Those of us who took part in the process of setting unseen translation papers in the Greek Department had a fuller sense of his command of Greek. This process was a communal effort for the higher years up to Greek IV Honours. The participants knew what it was to be put on the spot, to have to reveal one's knowledge – or lack of it. Picture the table in Professor Ritchie's room, with Bill Ritchie, Alan James, Harold Tarrant, and John Lee, sitting around it, reading passages of Greek brought along by each of us as possible choices. They would not be easy passages, and would be 'unseen' to us too, unless they were our own offerings. This was when one really knew how good Alan was and learnt to respect the depth of his knowledge of Greek, as he took in without effort some obscure philosophical argument or high-flown passage of rhetoric. His own passages, which he understood with ease, were mostly extraordinary similes from somewhere in Epic, and needless to say very challenging to the rest of us.

James' English reserve never left him. He came across as hesitant and stiff, even lacking in empathy, but this of course was deceptive. One felt that his manner hid a warm and flexible personality trying to get out. His sense of humour was real but mostly dry. His rejoinder when Trevor Evans wondered if Alan's car would cope with the hills between Armidale and Sydney was: 'This car knows no hills.' And Michael Curran remembers that he would announce, when exam invigilating, that 'liquid refreshment of the most basic variety' was available if wanted. But he was not impervious to Aussie larrikin humour. He once recounted, with obvious relish, how during a public lecture at the university someone who seemed to have wandered in off a park bench suddenly cried out from somewhere in the audience, 'Bullshit!'

James was a lean and fit man. He had been a rower as an undergraduate and all his life enjoyed walks and bushwalking. He loved travelling, had seen most of Europe, and made many trips with his family through outback Australia. Even so, his health was not always good. He was prone to sinus infections and repeated bouts of cellulitis, not diagnosed until later in life. He pushed himself to keep working no matter how he felt. Alan was a devoted family man. It was in Cambridge that he met his wife Theresa Ng, from Singapore, and they had two

sons, Conrad and William. They, with two grandchildren and his sister Stella, survive him.

James never talked to his colleagues about his religious feelings or affiliation. It came as something of a surprise to learn of his journey, from the (Plymouth) Brethren, to which his parents belonged, to the Anglican church, of which he was a devout and active member for many years, and finally to the Roman Catholic church about three years before his death. He compiled an autobiography of his early life, but it was intended for a family readership and has not been published. He amassed a splendid library, starting in his undergraduate days, when, as he remarked, one could buy in Cambridge even sixteenth-century works for a few shillings.

Alan James will be sadly missed by all who knew him; he will also be remembered by all who knew him, for the excellence of his character and his qualities as a scholar and a human being.

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