



Australian
Academy of the
Humanities

James Noel Adams CBE FBA

FAHA

1943 – 2021

James Noel (Jim) Adams was born on 24 September 1943 at Royal North Shore Hospital, St Leonard's, Sydney. His father, John George (known as Jack), was a printer and his mother, Beryl (née Chant), had been a secretary prior to her marriage. He was christened in Sydney at St Swithun's Church, Pymble and grew up at Lane Cove on Sydney's Lower North Shore in an unpretentious but comfortable house in a bushland valley.

In his younger days, he did not seem to be interested in his family origins. However, later in life, particularly owing to the fact that most of his adult years were spent in the United Kingdom - he was able to trace his father's ancestry to Dumbarton in Scotland, from where, he learnt, his great grandfather had emigrated aged 14 years to Australia and joined the New South Wales police force. His son, Jim's grandfather, like so many Australians of his generation with roots in the mother country, volunteered to serve in the Great War. He was wounded at the Somme and later married English nurse Louisa Layton, who had nursed him back to health. She emigrated with him to Australia and Jim could recall both grandparents, commenting on his memory of his grandmother's Cockney accent. It has been surmised, though with less detail recalled on his

maternal side, that memories of both his grandparents aroused his later keen philological interest in slang and regional linguistic variation.

Jim was a pupil at the local Lane Cove Public School, where he gained not only an excellent grounding in grammar but also established what would become a lifelong friendship with fellow cricket enthusiast Arthur Emmett. The latter recalls after-school cricket games in the Adams' backyard which were enthusiastically encouraged by Jim's father Jack, himself a keen cricketer. After competitive testing, both Jim and Arthur were among a very small group selected to attend Opportunity Classes at Artarmon School. It was there that he formed other long-lasting friendships, particularly with keen cricketers, including the slightly older Bill Barnes and Jim's contemporary Richard Bosworth. All three of these friends went on to distinguished careers; the former in the Law and the latter two, like Jim, in academia. Cricket, a game in which both he and his father excelled, remained a lifelong passion. He is alleged to have called it 'the key to life' and continued playing regularly until the mid-nineties.

From Artarmon he went on to the selective high school North Sydney Boys' High School. He was rightly and intensely proud of his education, and a vocal supporter of the publicly funded education system. His high school had some excellent and dedicated teachers; among them Colin Bowser, who also coached cricket. His teachers fanned Jim's passion for Latin, which his mother (also the product of the selective school system) had ignited. In the state-wide Leaving Certificate examination of 1960, he topped Latin and so proceeded to the University of Sydney with a view to continuing Latin and starting Greek. Greek was offered at North Sydney but was not an elective he chose at that stage; then preferring History which he also took briefly in his first year of University.

After 1961, his first year at the University of Sydney (where he came first in Latin 1 and Elementary Greek), he concentrated exclusively on Latin and Greek. Greek classes were held daily at 9 am and Latin at 10 am. Though sociable before a class, he would go home immediately afterwards, either

by public transport or collected by his father who had a job involving some travelling. He would proceed to learn a page of Lewis and Short's Latin Dictionary by heart, before spending the day, and quite a bit of the night, reading the prodigious amounts of text required by both departments – Latin, in particular, under the influence of Harry Jocelyn.

The Greek and Latin departments (of that pre-research-assessment-driven era) were staffed by some exceptional scholars and some dedicated teachers. Most influential on Jim, as he would indeed acknowledge in person and later by the focus of his linguistic work, were George Shipp, who lived close to Jim's family in Lane Cove, and Harry Jocelyn.¹ Both, like Jim, were interested in ancient authors' linguistic features rather than literary analysis or historical context. As other obituary writers such as Eleanor Dickey and David Langslow have noted, this absolutely characterised Jim's scholarship.

Though he worked extremely hard as an undergraduate – as did others, such as his brilliant Greek counterpart Bernard Gredley – he socialised with other Classics students of whom there were many in that era. The Classical Society put on Greek or Latin plays annually with staff support. A sense of camaraderie persisted throughout his life with those Classics students, many of whom stayed in touch in early years by letter and more recently electronically.

After gaining the University Medal in Latin in 1964, Jim gained an Australian award to pursue postgraduate studies. This came with a stipend and later a teaching fellowship, and he bought a little yellow VW Beetle which was a great delight to him. In 1967, he won a prestigious British Council Commonwealth scholarship to Oxford. His cohort was fortunate to fly to London, as did the cohort prior. Previously, the ship voyage took over six weeks and had been a rite of passage for many young Australians. As all

¹George Shipp and his colleague Athanasius Treweek were, together with leading mathematicians from Sydney University, among the chief code breakers for Japanese codes during World War 2.

who came to know him are well aware, Jim was horrified by the flight.² Subsequent attempts to persuade him how different it had all become were unsuccessful.

At Brasenose College, Jim was assigned to the supervision of R.M. Ogilvie to work on the language of Tacitus. His original supervisor was to have been his fellow Antipodean, Ronald (later Sir Ronald) Syme. After completing his DPhil (in time, of course), he was awarded a Rouse Fellowship to Christ's College Cambridge, where there were, or had recently been, several of his contemporary Sydney University graduates; among them Bill Barnes, Richard Bosworth, Peter Brennan and John Lee. Bill recalls the drive to Cambridge with all of Jim's possessions in Tony Woodman's car.

After his marriage to Genevieve, he held a tenured position at the University of Manchester, where his teacher, and now colleague, Harry Jocelyn, held the chair of Latin. Coincidentally, the chair of Greek was held by an Australian from Melbourne, George Kerferd. Jim and the beautifully stylish Genevieve were very generous hosts to the many Australian visitors who came to stay. We recall, in my own family, playing cricket games and playing in their garden. Bill Barnes, Peter Brennan, Arthur Emmett, John Lee, Sue Spinks, Emily Matters and many others warmly recalled the Adams' hospitality (and Genevieve's French cheeses).

Jim stayed in Manchester and rarely travelled, even in England (though there were occasional wine-related visits on holiday to Burgundy where Genevieve had her family home). Even going to the Continent, as he was obliged to for a stint working at the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* in Munich, caused him much distress. While never losing his Australian persona and

² He attempted to return to Australia during his Oxford candidature when his mother had a serious stroke but feeling claustrophobic got off the plane to the great annoyance of the pilot and fellow passengers who had to wait while his luggage was unloaded. In fact, she did not regain consciousness.

retaining visceral sporting loyalty to Australian sporting teams - with cricket, of course, to the fore - Jim liked the north of England and continued to keep a residence in or near Manchester while holding posts at Reading and later Oxford. As he grew older, even travelling to Oxford, especially London, became something he worried about.

His career continued upwards after his time at Manchester, where he made several lasting friendships once again among staff and former students. These friendships were well represented among the tributes given at All Souls on 7 May 2022. He left Manchester in 1995 for a chair at Reading after a year as Visiting Senior Research fellow at St. John's College Oxford. In 1998 he was elected to a Senior Research Fellowship at All Souls College Oxford, which he very much appreciated, and once again made friends and was noted for his hospitality to visiting Australians. All Souls was where his most productive academic years were enjoyably spent. Cricket retained nearly as much of his interest as Latin, and he would host regular dinners with Australians studying at Oxford so he could gloat when Australia won the Ashes and berate the 'Poms' when they didn't.

From the early 1990's he gained recognition and academic honour after honour. He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1992 and later awarded the Kenyon Medal in 2009. He retained honorary posts at Manchester between 2013 and 2015 while becoming an Emeritus Fellow of All Souls in 2010. Other honours included being made an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities (2002), Member of the Academia Europaea (2007) and Honorary Fellow of Brasenose College (2012).

A proud moment came in 2015 when he was appointed Commander of the British Empire for services to Latin Scholarship. All of his friends (and probably acquaintances) received a photo of him with the Queen and an account of the conversation between them during the presentation. He kept a photograph of the occasion in his apartment at Knutsford to the

end. Younger Australians will not be aware of the significance of the Queen's visit in 1954 for that generation of school students when she visited the Sydney Showground, but he told Anna Chahoud that he shared this memory with the Queen. Another, though non-academic, occasion that brought him great pleasure was the visit to England of his younger sister Rosemary to whom he remained close in spite of the distance.

On to an academic assessment of his legacy, a task that has been undertaken by more qualified specialists: Eleanor Dickey and David Langslow in particular, though not exclusively. The various speeches at his All Souls memorial were a fitting testimony to his academic legacy and teaching skills. This obituary will not seek to do what others have done better but has nevertheless benefited from a conversation with and input from Trevor Evans. Even listing the titles of his ten books, four edited books and with one more to appear posthumously with G. Pezzini and Anna Chahoud, his closest academic collaborators in recent years, and over one hundred articles is breathtaking. They show the span of his understanding of Latin in its totality. It is not easy to imagine how this will be surpassed.

Jim is still popularly best known for his third book, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (1982), also translated into Italian. Unusually for a classics book, it is a best seller! However, the most ground-breaking set is his Cambridge University Press trilogy dating from his All Souls' days: *Bilingualism and the Latin Language* (2003), *The Regional Diversification of Latin 200 BC-AD 600 and Social Variation and the Latin Language* (2013). These - and his last book, which veers a little into a different aspect of Latin, namely *Asyndeton and its Interpretation in Latin Literature: History, Patterns, Textual Criticism* (2021) - were the product of his close collaboration with Michael Sharp of CUP, a PhD graduate supervised by Alan Bowman, Jim's friend and former Manchester colleague. Each is comprehensive; detailed yet made intelligible by the perceptive conclusions at several points. Taken together, they provide a complete overview of Latin at all levels of society and in all areas that came into

contact with the Romans. Three of his major works benefited from the cooperation and meticulous copyediting of his second wife, Iveta Adams.

One of Jim's legacies will surely be that no one in the future can think that the Latin worth studying stopped with the 'Golden Age', 'Silver Latin' or even Late Antique Latin. Taken overall, we see that, even in the minutiae, Jim demonstrates with precision and learning that Latin was vibrant, varied and adaptable. Even without knowing all the details, we see how it survived in the various Romance languages but was never uniform to start with. While this sounds common-sense, Jim's detailed explorations show us how it happened. He gleans such fine linguistic details from the tiniest everyday fragments.

Supplementary to these seminal books, but all dovetailing and along much the same lines, are the preparatory and side treatments arising from this grand tale.

The Latin Sexual Vocabulary has been mentioned. It was his third book, preceded by *The Text and Language of a Vulgar Chronicle* (Anonymus Valesianus II) (1976) and *The Vulgar Latin of the Letters of Claudius Terentianus* (1977).

The major books had their significant spin-offs. The ninth book, *An Anthology of Informal Latin, 200 BC-AD 900* (2016), is perhaps the closest he came to a textbook and is an accessible guide to his stringent methods. The jointly-edited books flesh out his own studies. In 1999, with R.G. Mayer, he edited *Aspects of the Language of Latin Poetry*; then in 2002, with S.C.R. Swain, *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language Contact and The Written Word*; in 2005, with T. Reinhardt and M. Lapidge, *Aspects of the Language of Latin Prose*; in 2016, with N. Vincent, *Early and Late Latin: Continuity or Change?* His final co-edited volume is in press with CUP and involved a collaboration with Giuseppe Pezzini and Anna Chahoud; a collaboration that was particularly dear to him.

Surprisingly, to those who observed his apparent total dedication to erudite work, teaching was an area to which Jim devoted care, attention and mentoring. His students appreciated his knowledge and criticism, while recognising its benefits; but, above all, they have spoken of his careful preparation.

His corpus does not end with this remarkable output of books, written, edited or co-authored. He was closely involved with his Manchester colleague Alan Bowman and with David Thomas in deciphering the Vindolanda tablets: an exciting venture in which his contribution was valuable.

In addition to the books, he wrote almost one hundred articles, among them based on his doctoral work but covering an even wider range of scholarship than the major books. He was fascinated, among other matters, by veterinary terminology on which he had written a book in 1995. He was rather proud of the drawing of a horse with the labelled body parts, as that was his own creative flourish.

The extraordinary range of articles demonstrates his interest from the start of his career in the totality of Latin, temporal, geographical and sociological. A very early article in *Classical Quarterly* (1972) launched him into the hot question of the time: the authorship of the *Historia Augusta*.

Around the same time, he was publishing, for example, on the language of Tacitus and Livy, as well as Vindolanda, sexual vocabulary and other spin-offs from his book projects. The variety of outlets of his articles across British and European journals, German in particular, is as striking as their abundance. Always conscious of his Australian heritage, he published twice in *Antichthon* (1984 and 1991). Several of these articles were jointly authored but mostly arose from his projects. Interestingly there seems to be only one in an American journal, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* (2015).

After his retirement from All Souls, Jim bought an apartment at Knutsford to house his library, provide a good working space and to cater for his artistic tastes which ranged from antique chairs to icons, to nineteenth-century British and American painting. In his artistic interests and academic work, he was a perfectionist, with a keen and well-informed eye which made him respected by dealers.

His enthusiasm for cricket and his wide range of philological and artistic interests endeared him to a range of friends around the scholarly world. His Australian friends found him unspoiled in his accent and mode of dress (unchanged from his undergraduate days), while his newer friends were not taken in by his sometimes-gruff manner and recognised his genuine gregariousness and enjoyment of their company. His students and younger colleagues benefited greatly from his generous mentorship. His sociability was not limited to his academic contacts. He had a mutually respectful relationship with the college porters, various art and wine dealers, car hire operators, and, towards the end of his life, with the Anglican minister in Knutsford.

As he grew older, he remained close to his sister on the Central Coast of New South Wales and reconnected with his cousin on his father's side, Lyn Camp, whom he had not seen since he left Australia in 1967.

He was married twice, first to Genevieve Baudon and subsequently to Iveta Mednikarova. He left behind two children of whom he was very proud, Nicholas from his first marriage, who is father to Oscar, Jim's only grandchild to date, and Elena from his second.

Alana Nobbs AM³

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