



Australian  
Academy of the  
Humanities

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# Michael John Osborne FAHA

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1942 – 2024

Michael Osborne was a complex person who defies easy categorisation. A gifted scholar of Greek epigraphy, a committed Sinophile, and Vice Chancellor of La Trobe University (1990–2006), where his career as an academic leader ended in conflict and serious turmoil. Michael was an inveterate traveller (especially to China) where he found that his interest in Chinese civilization seemed to seamlessly link with his other interest – the promotion of La Trobe University internationally. In the end this linkage came to be strongly criticised and was a significant factor in the deterioration of his relationship with staff at La Trobe. When La Trobe recently celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> year of operations, his name was scarcely mentioned in all the festivities.

I came to know Osborne when I was Head of Archaeology shortly after his appointment to La Trobe. Michael was particularly interested in the promotion of archaeology, and especially the archaeology of ancient China. This interest led to the appointment of archaeologist Liu Li to a senior post at the University – then the first such appointment in Australia. It also led to regular travel to the PRC spruiking the University to major Chinese institutions such as the regional directorates of antiquity (particularly those at Shaanxi and Henan), the Institute of Archaeology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and Peking University (Beida). Professor Liu (now at Stanford University) took responsibility for the large number of students who came from China to La Trobe for postgraduate studies and who were to move into senior positions on their return to the PRC.

Osborne lent his support to these activities and hosted many meetings and much travel to archaeological sites and Institutes all over China, followed by long evenings where Michael relaxed and entertained those present with his encyclopaedic knowledge of British television comedy. From *All Gas and Gaiters* to *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*. Michael could be charming, very kind, and was great company in these situations. Nonetheless, he could also make his disapproval

abundantly clear. There was a great deal of hard work alongside this celebration of low comedy, but it was largely hidden from colleagues back in Melbourne.

Over time they came to see a different Osborne, enhanced by his management style that led to frequent conflicts with the Professoriate (especially in Board meetings). Numbers of colleagues came to experience the consequences of a falling out with Michael, which frequently led them being consigned to the freezer, some with no possibility of parole. Many of the senior academic staff shared this fate at some time. Board meetings often seemed to oscillate between conflict and long speeches during which Michael would demonstrate his command of the English language, with colleagues frequently consulting the dictionary for definitions of favourites such as *otiose* and *adumbrate*.

*The Age* of 17 December 2005 in "Uni chief quits over travel row", detailed the end of Osborne's 15-year tenure as Vice Chancellor. Michael had this to say: "I think that it is in the university's best interests to bring an end to the ongoing public attention we are receiving," he writes. "While I have invested significant personal energies in this institution and feel a great deal of sadness in taking this course of action, the university's reputation must come first."

Years later most of us who lived through that turmoil have had cause to wonder why a person of such prodigious intellect could bring himself down. Was it boredom, an unease or contempt for the challenges of managing diverging interests and personalities, or simply that his long attachment to the world of classical antiquity made being in the contemporary world more difficult than he could manage?

Notwithstanding the reality of his fall, Osborne's tenure at La Trobe left a significant legacy ranging from the enhanced role of its regional campuses in the life of the University, through to the establishment of the National Centre for Hellenic Studies and Research, and his building of close ties with the Greek community of Melbourne. Michael's commitment to Hellenism and to the study of Chinese civilization continued for the rest of his life.

## **Life and career**

Michael Osborne was born on January 25, 1942, in Eastbourne, Sussex, England. His parents were Samuel and Olive May Osborne. It was not a wealthy household. A scholarship took him to Christ Church, Oxford where he obtained a BA (1965) and MA (1968) in *Literae Humaniores*. He then obtained a Doctor of Philosophy and Letters, (*summa cum laude*) at the *Katholieke Universiteit te Leuven* (1977).

Osborne's teaching career began as Lecturer in Classics (Bristol 1965–1966); Lecturer in Classics (Lancaster 1966–1978) and senior lecturer – (1982). Professor of Classical Studies, University of Melbourne (1983–1989) and subsequently as Vice-Chancellor of La Trobe University (1990–2006).

Emeritus Professor Chris Mackie (who worked with Michael at the University of Melbourne) has observed: "At Melbourne he was a brilliant and very engaging lecturer, sometimes hilariously funny, although many students missed out on this experience as he became more and more senior in the administration. In many ways his brilliance as a research scholar (and his huge physical frame that dominated most rooms), not to mention his outrageous and politically incorrect sense of humour, marked him out as quite different from most others around him. Everybody had a view on Osborne, whether it was a deep admiration for his positive qualities, or an emphatic hostility to the way he did business. His management style could be forceful and brutal. The old ways of doing things often counted for nothing. At the University of Melbourne, he set about modernising the Classics curriculum, not the least by bringing Archaeology into the same department as Classics. He had the firm (and sensible) view that the material evidence of Greek and Roman antiquity should accompany the study of language and literature. It was a lasting transformation. Archaeology is now a fundamental element in the study of antiquity at the University of Melbourne".

## **Research**

Osborne was a prolific publisher underwritten by research conducted during his long stays in Athens researching naturalized Athenian citizens, primarily in the ancient cemetery of the *Kerameikos*. This has been widely published, with *Naturalization in Athens* (four volumes 1981–1983) being exemplary of his approach to epigraphic analysis. The *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names Vol. II (Attica)*, published in 1994, together with its companion volume *Foreign Residents of Athens* (1996), followed culminating in *Inscriptiones Graecae II – III Attica 300 – 228 BC* (Editio Tertia, 2015) co-authored with Sean Byrne. Osborne's highly fruitful association with Byrne continued with the publication by the Royal Academy of Belgium of *Naturalization in Athens*.

## **Awards and visiting appointments**

Visiting Professor, Maximilians Universität, München (1973); Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven (1975 and 1988); University of Oslo (1976); Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton (1978); Fondation Hardt, Geneva (1981); Alexander S. Onassis Public

Benefit Foundation Research Fellow, Athens (2001); Guest Professor Peking University (from 2003); Hellenic Education and Research Center, Athens (from 2006) ; Beijing Foreign Studies University (from 2008). Honorary Professor: Yunnan University (from 1994), Kunming Medical University (from 1995), Yunnan Normal University (from 1997), Harbin Medical University (from 2001), Sichuan University (from 2001), Nanjing University (2003).

Osborne was made Laureate, Belgian Royal Academy of Sciences, Letters and Fine Arts (1980); Member, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton (1978); Fellow, Australian Academy of Humanities (1985); Corresponding Member, Academy of Athens (1998); Laureate of the Aristotle Award by the Greek State (1998); Honorary Fellow, Hungarian Academy of Engineering (1998); Fellow, Australian Institute of Management (2000); Honorary Member, Greek Epigraphical Society (2012); Honorary Doctor of Letters National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (2001), and La Trobe University (2006).

**Festschrift:**

Tamis, A. M., Mackie, C., & Byrne, S. (2010). *Philathenaios, studies in honour of Michael J Osborne*. Athens, Greece: Greek Epigraphic Society.

**Tim Murray FAHA**

The University of Melbourne