

PROFESSOR J. L. MOLES

John Moles, born in Belfast in 1949, came from a linguistically gifted family. His father was a headmaster whose hobby was learning new languages; his mother was a modern linguist; his uncle taught Classics at John's School; and his sister taught French at Glasgow University. He attended the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, which was also the *alma mater* of E. Courtney, J. C. McKeown and R. K. Gibson; while there, he twice became Ulster Chess Champion; he was also Irish Champion in 1966 and 1971, and twice a member of the Olympiad Team. He would go on to write *The French Defence Main Line Winawer* (1975), described by Wolfgang Heidenfeld as 'perhaps the best of all chess opening monographs', and *French Winawer: Modern and Auxiliary Lines* (1979, with K. Wicker). He invested the royalties in wine, of which he was a connoisseur. In later years he resisted all attempts at persuading him to return to chess.

After an outstanding school career, John followed his brother to Oxford, winning a scholarship to Corpus Christi College, where he was in the first cohort to be allowed to offer literature for 'Greats' (previously there had been no alternative to philosophy and ancient history). At Corpus he was taught by Ewen Bowie, John Bramble, Frank Lepper and Robin Nisbet; after Firsts in 'Mods' and 'Greats' he wrote *A Commentary on Plutarch's Brutus* for his D.Phil., supervised by both Bowie and Donald Russell. One of his later regrets was that he never seemed to have the time or opportunity to revise his thesis for publication. For a year (1974–5) he held a temporary lectureship at Reading, which was followed by permanent positions at Queen's University, Belfast, and University College of North Wales, Bangor (respectively 1975–9 and 1979–87), where there was a small Department of Classics headed by M. F. Smith.

I first met John more than thirty years ago, in 1983, when he turned up at the 'Past Perspectives' conference on historiography which I had helped to organise in Leeds. He made an immediate impression because of his hair, which in those days stuck out rather wildly on each side of his head; but this was not the reason that we came to be colleagues in Durham, to which I had moved from Leeds in 1984. In the second half of the 80s the Classics Department at Durham, which at the time attracted more students than anywhere else in the country apart from Oxford and Cambridge, found itself in a developing crisis: several colleagues in quick succession departed either through retirement or resignation, but the university refused to replace any of them, with the result that our staff:student ratio was becoming almost insupportable. Since this was a period when the University Grants Committee was encouraging departmental mergers, I suggested to our Vice-Chancellor that, if vacant

positions were not to be filled, we should perhaps try to tempt some other Department of Classics to transfer itself to Durham. When he agreed to this in principle, I made the further suggestion that perhaps we should open negotiations with the small Department in Bangor. I reckoned that its members would be attracted by the prospect of teaching Greek and Latin literature in the original languages to large numbers of students, while we for our part would acquire the desired new colleagues, amongst whom was a brilliant young historian.

The transfer of Bangor Classics to Durham, strongly supported by Professor J. A. Cannon of the UGC, was the first merger of Classics Departments in the country. John arrived in 1987 and immediately made his mark: occupying a large room in the Department, he covered every surface with mounds of files, papers and books, which he then proceeded to impregnate with cigar smoke. The cleaners were forbidden to touch anything, and indeed couldn't have done any cleaning even if they had wanted to. (Nor did they have to face Boris, the legendarily neurotic dog, as had often been the case with their counterparts in Bangor. John was always very fond of dogs.) Although he lived out of town and refused ever to learn to drive a car, he would get the bus back into town in the evening and would spend several hours working in the Department until it was time for the last bus home again. Very often he would come along to my room, slump into the ancient armchair, and test out his latest ideas in collegial conversation, delighted to be in the company of someone who at that time smoked even more cigars than he did. Many of my pleasantest hours in Durham were passed with John in this way, discussing the issues and problems raised by Latin or life.

Before coming to Durham John had already published over twenty articles or book chapters on a wide range of major Greek and Latin authors; the year after he arrived in Durham, he published his only classical book: a translation of, and commentary on, Plutarch's *Life of Cicero* in the Aris & Phillips series. It is unusually good at providing material at all levels: an excellent introduction to Plutarch for beginners, it is also much more quoted than most other volumes in the series because of its contributions to scholarship (his discussion of the concept of 'truth' is especially noteworthy). In his translation he sought to reproduce in English the verbal patterns which articulated the author's meaning: he regarded this as an extremely important function of translation, and his method became a feature of much of his later scholarship, proving especially fruitful in his various analyses of Thucydides. His sensitivity to verbal patterns was also part of what became a larger project, namely his attempt at persuading readers of Greek and Latin literature that many classical texts were filled with puns, plays, and verbal wit of all kinds, especially those relating to proper names. This became one of his particular concerns when, at a later stage, he turned his attention to New Testament texts.

John's move to Durham did nothing to interrupt his productivity, with the result that by the end of the 1990s he had published (often more than once) on Aeschylus, Sophocles, Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Arrian, Aristotle, Livy, Cornelius Nepos, Horace, Virgil, Ovid, Tacitus, Plutarch, and Dio Chrysostom, as well as several studies of Cynicism (on which he would later be interviewed by Melvyn Bragg on the radio). He regarded the interdisciplinary nature of classical scholarship as one of its great glories, and he endeavoured to put it into practice, gratified that his own work crossed the boundaries of literature, history and philosophy. This substantial and remarkably diverse range of scholarship has as its defining and unifying feature John's consistent attempt at arriving at original positions on the texts and authors he discussed. The outstanding quality of his work was such that he was promoted to Reader in 1993 and was awarded a personal Chair in 1996.

The late 1990s saw Durham Classics experience a second crisis a decade after the first. The University was using a financial model which projected that the Department of Classics would be in debt to the tune of £1 million by the year 2000. This was regarded as unsustainable, and the administration in its wisdom proposed to close down the Department. Colleagues were sent a letter by the relevant Pro-Vice-Chancellor (formerly a medieval historian of considerable distinction), suggesting that they take early retirement and threatening redundancy if not. The immediate response to this intimidation was panic, and we naturally looked to our leader to see what should be done. Our leader at the time happened to be John, who was now paying the price for his personal Chair and, rather improbably, was serving his term of office as Head of Department. Over the critical period that followed, John almost single-handedly devised a rescue plan, which, though to some of us it seemed to contain elements of pure fantasy, nevertheless was sufficient to persuade the administration of the viability of our continued existence. Any success that the Department has enjoyed during the past fifteen years is due significantly to John; without his inventive genius there might not now be a Department at all.

It is absolutely characteristic that, while this crisis consumed an enormous amount of John's time and energy, he nevertheless thought it vital to fulfill his more personal responsibilities as Head of Department. He was, for example, painstakingly supportive of his short-term colleagues and junior researchers, for whom he would make time to check if they were happy in his Department, to advise them on all academic matters, and even to organise social events at his own expense. It was also thanks to the trust he inspired and to the confidence in themselves which he helped them develop that they proceeded to their future careers at a time when such a prospect seemed almost impossible. His tenure of the headship is remembered with affection as well as gratitude; and his concern for junior colleagues remained unchanged throughout his career.

John's promotion to Professor coincided also with the birth of *Histos*, whose first issue, under his editorship, came out in 1997. Since John had been an early user of word-processors and computers, in retrospect it was perhaps less surprising that he conceived the striking notion of combining a modern method of communication with what was then, and remains, a hot topic in classical scholarship. At the time, however, an online journal devoted to classical historiography seemed—and indeed was—revolutionary; and, when one looks back at that issue of 1997, one cannot fail to be amazed at the glittering names of the contributors. Each of these scholars—scholars of the distinction of F. W. Walbank and T. P. Wiseman, to give two examples—had contributed either as the result of a direct invitation from John or because of his reputation. As founder and editor, John did everything himself, apart from the technical business of putting the papers and reviews on screen, which was done by our colleague and fellow historiographer David Levene.

Histos brought immense prestige and welcome publicity to the Durham department at a difficult period, but, when the Chair of Latin at Newcastle was advertised in 2000, John felt it was the moment for a new challenge and submitted an application. As it happened, there were several professorial vacancies at the time, and highly eligible applicants for them; but it seemed to me then, as it still does now, that Newcastle were interested only in capturing John, who thus became their fourth Professor of Latin in succession to Jonathan Powell (1992–2001), David West (1969–92) and G. B. A. Fletcher (1946–69, having first joined the Department as Professor of Classics in 1937): a more distinguished line-up is difficult to imagine. When he took up his Chair, John went out of his way to encourage the participation of David West, who was still living locally, in seminars and the like; in just the same way he would make a point each week of socialising with another long-retired Newcastle Latinist, Donald Hill. Although he had a decidedly contrary streak (which came out especially in his wicked sense of humour and love of provocative statements), John always displayed a highly developed sense of responsibility.

John's departure for Newcastle meant a break in the publication of *Histos*, partly because the journal's website remained at Durham; but, thanks to the persistent enthusiasm and effort of John Marincola, there was a new start in 2011 under the joint banners of Florida State and Newcastle universities and under the joint editorship of Professors Marincola and Moles. The new start included a complete re-formatting and up-dating of the earlier issues, with the result that there are now available eight complete issues, all of them utterly professional in appearance, accessibility, and navigability. Some of the papers published in *Histos* have become classics, and the recent appointment of Christopher Krebs to succeed Marincola as co-editor has allowed the latter to start up a supplementary series of monographs, of which three have appeared under his editorship so far. *Histos*, in other words, goes from strength to strength,

all due to John Moles' foresight two decades ago. It was his pride and joy, and rightly so.

For someone who relied so much on computers, John was a strangely reluctant user of email; he much preferred the telephone as a means of communication, and thought nothing of extended long-distance phone-calls to colleagues—sometimes across the Atlantic, and sometimes to scholars scarcely known to him—to satisfy his curiosity about some point in a Latin or Greek text. His phone-calling probably reached its height during his last years in Durham, when he was trying to increase the number of submissions to *Histos*, and it was *Histos* which also accounted for much of his scholarly energy. He was repeatedly dismayed by the standard of submissions in terms of argument or stylistic presentation. He loved the making of a case and would often spend many days trying to improve a single submission, writing comments and corrections or re-writing entire sections. Exactly the same treatment was given to the work of postgraduate students, some of whose first publications owe far more to Moles than to the authors themselves. His role as creative reader and critic of draft papers was not confined to his own department. Not long after I first met him, I sent him the draft of what would eventually become a book chapter on Thucydides, an author in whom John had an intense interest (at one point he planned to co-author a commentary on Book 1). A substantial interval elapsed, as usually happened where John was concerned; but in due course I received many closely typed pages of detailed notes and comments, which were so helpful that I singled him out for special mention in the preface to my book. In the years that followed I would very often take advantage of his generosity and acumen in this way; and I was not alone in so doing, as Christopher Pelling amongst others will testify.

Although one would scarcely describe John as one of Nature's administrators, his research achievements meant that he was a natural choice to chair the departmental Research Committee in Durham for three years in the mid-90s. He was a most effective chairman, encouraging colleagues to write and publish and, as always, offering help where necessary. He also oversaw the departmental research seminar, and, after he had moved to Newcastle, undertook similar roles there. In particular he was responsible for co-ordinating the Newcastle Classics submission for the most recent 'Research Excellence Framework', a task not to be wished on anyone.

The move from Durham to Newcastle saw a dramatic new development in John's scholarly interests, although he saw it more as a natural extension of work on which he had been engaged for many years. While he continued to publish on his favourite classical authors, from the mid-2000s he began research on the New Testament, especially Luke-Acts, on which he became an expert and published extensively. If this latest interest typified his intellectual curiosity and need for challenge, it should not lead us to forget another manifestation of them: for many years he was also a prolific reviewer. In the 80s

and 90s he had reviewed for various journals on a wide variety of topics. His review-discussion of Simon Goldhill's first book created almost as much stir as the book itself, while his review of Joseph Geiger is rightly seen as a classic contribution to the study of political biography. Although he eventually abandoned reviewing as too time-consuming, it was a task which he took extremely seriously, regarding himself as a fearless critic.

John's love of argument meant that he was always on top form in seminars or at conferences, for which he was correspondingly in great demand; and the fertility of his brain allowed him to accept invitations to speak on widely different subjects at many different venues in the United Kingdom and across Europe and the United States. What turned out to be his last conference was in Heidelberg earlier this summer, where he delivered the opening paper on the subject of Seneca and Horace. He 'contributed massively to the discussions', wrote one of the organisers in tribute. 'He was an example of insight, openness, and modesty' (John, though a scholar of firm views, was famously self-deprecating). In advance of the conference, as was usual, he had tested out on me his ideas and insights during the course of numerous weekly meetings over coffee; we held these meetings without fail during my periods at home in England, and they were always extremely enjoyable occasions: it seems impossible to believe that tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, I shall not get one of his phone calls demanding my immediate presence at our regular rendezvous.

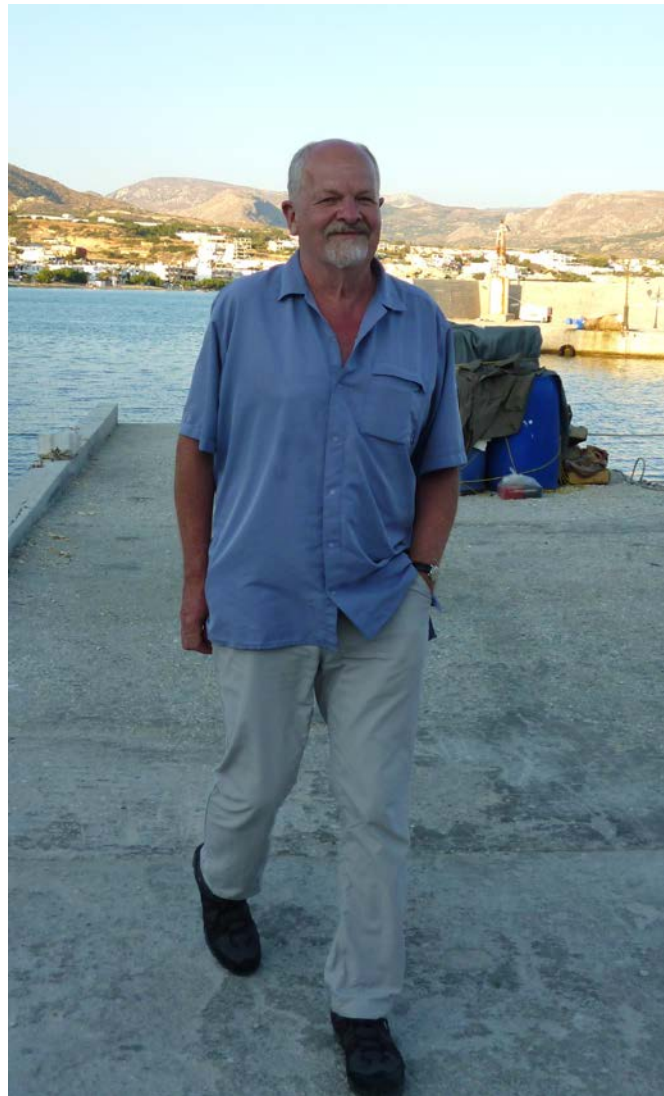
Sociability was very important to him. He loved company, especially if there was good food and drink. He believed that scholarly visitors, whether lecturing or examining, should not only be treated with the respect due to their function but also given a good time, often resorting to his own pocket when limited departmental resources failed. Many visitors to Durham and Newcastle will have pleasure in remembering—or, in some cases, trying to remember—the hospitality to which they were treated when John was master of ceremonies. He had been greatly looking forward to welcoming to Newcastle the new co-editor of *Histos*, Christopher Krebs, whose visit was scheduled for the week after he died: it is beyond sad that he was denied the opportunity of offering the hospitality for which he had made such elaborate and far-sighted arrangements.

John died suddenly in the afternoon of Sunday, 4 October, from heart failure. Although he produced so much brilliant scholarship, he always felt that he could have done more. The fact is that he devoted so much of his time, almost all of it unheralded and unrewarded, to the work of others; in all the tributes that have been paid to him since his death, the most consistent reference has been to his kindness. Although it is perhaps only natural that scholars will never feel satisfied with their work, John leaves as his legacy a body of scholarship which in its range and quantity, imagination and acuity, one finds hard to parallel. It is earnestly to be hoped that one of the great university presses will now see fit to publish his selected papers under a single cover, thus

allowing the classical world to appreciate the full extent of his genius and providing him with the scholarly volume which he never got round to producing in life.¹

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Prof. John Moles, on holiday in Crete 2014

¹ For comments and memories I am most grateful to members of John's family, as well as to Ewen Bowie, Anna Chahoud, John Marincola, Damien Nelis, Christopher Pelling, Elizabeth Pender, Martin Smith, and Rowland Smith.