Eric Handley
A personal reminiscence from James Morwood.

I first really got to know Eric Handley, who died in January, at the JACT Greek Summer School at Bryanston when I was a schoolmaster. He was at that time the Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge. His wife Carol, a key figure in the survival of school classics in the second half of the last century, was in those days setting up and administering the summer school and it was perhaps no surprise that Eric was game to join in the enterprise. But in the event, over more than a decade, he did so much more than simply lend support as a regular tutor. His contribution was truly Herculean: he donned the lion skin and took up the club. He really believed in the fundamental importance of the health of school and university Greeks. His academic distinction, his vast range and depth of knowledge and his inspirational qualities as a teacher ensured that it was an unforgettable and life-enhancing experience for his group of 17 or 18 year olds to spend a fortnight under his aegis. He opened up to them new and broad horizons of scholarly ambition. However, his influence was not simply confined to his group. Far from it! Of course there were his wonderful lectures on comedy in which he could give rein to his gift for dialects. He did the police in different voices. And of course the presence of the Cambridge Regius Professor lent a sprinkling of gold dust to the summer school. But this particular Regius Professor was able by a kind of osmosis to communicate to all the troops a vision of what the serious study of Greek could mean.

He had an equally inspirational effect on his fellow tutors. This probably had a lot to do with the fact that a Greek scholar of immense distinction was so clearly alive to the central importance of thorough but lively teaching of the language. He did not view us language teachers as humble Sherpas at the base of Mount Parnassus. Anything but! He believed passionately in teaching and teachers. At the same time he was eager to foster our academic ambitions, taking enormous pains to guide

Maurice Balme (1925-2012)

Maurice Balme, a key figure in the struggle to preserve classics in the school curriculum, has died.

When Oxford and Cambridge dropped Latin as a requirement for entry in 1960, thereby putting paid to the relatively secure place of classics in the school curriculum, Maurice was among those who rose to the challenge, redefining the aims of the subject and its teaching methodology. In the mid-sixties, he and Mark Warman, both masters at Harrow School, produced Aestimanda (Up for discussion). A collection of Greek and Latin passages which were presented as material for literary debate based on the principles advocated by the great Cambridge English scholar J. A. Richards, it sought to elicit responses to classical literature as a conscious part of the educational process. The importance of Aestimanda can scarcely be over-emphasized. Its publication has been the main reason why the appreciation of classical literature, rarely a priority till then, has now become such a welcome feature of everyday classroom teaching.

Of course, for the Aestimanda experiment to prove fully successful, the sclerotic teaching methods that had survived from Victorian times, which by and large took ancient literature to be a corpus of linguistic phenomena, had to be revolutionized. Here too Maurice was a major influence. In the late sixties he sat on the advisory panel for the groundbreaking Cambridge Latin Course: in those early days of the course grammar was supposed more or less to take care of itself through the readings. Working out his own principles of language teaching, he embarked on Athenegy (To Athens), the beginners’ Greek course. He typed out the first – and still the best – edition on an early golf ball typewriter with Greek characters on the ball. This too is a reading course but it has a strong grammatical backbone. It is humanized by a lively narrative which vividly conveys life in the fifth-century BC, as its young hero graduates from back-breaking agricultural labour, through a miniscule cure for his temporary blindness by the god of healing, to involvement in Athenian wartime politics. Later published by the Oxford University Press, it is now the world’s best-selling Greek course.

Two highly attractive Latin readers also appeared, The Millionaire’s Dinner Party and Cupid and Psyche, both still in print. The latter was a collaboration with the present writer, then another Harrow colleague, with whom most of Maurice’s future books would be produced. The major product of this happy partnership was The Oxford Latin Course, like the Cambridge Course based on reading but like Athenegy, insisting on the learning of grammar. Maurice was himself an impressive linguist who wrote delightfully fluent Latin prose as well as having the talent to fling off an ode in the style of Horace. Again, the narrative of the course, Maurice’s inspired concept of the life of that Roman poet, is conducted with a fine empathetic imagination. Students enter the world of the late Roman republic and early empire with their tragic wars, dazzling poetry and perennially relevant human problems.

As Head of Classics at Harrow School, Maurice was the flag-bearer of the most productive department of any school in the world. And almost all his books survive him. Last year OUP New York published a college edition of The Oxford Latin Course and in 2014 it will produce a revision – the first-ever Greek course in full colour – of Athenegy which will aim to bring the course back to Maurice’s original principles. His influence will continue to be felt for many a year.

A fuller version of this obituary appeared on 11th February, 2013, in The Daily Telegraph.

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