OBITUARY

Wilfrid O'Neill
1944-2013

Will, a proud Yorkshireman, spent his entire life in his native Leeds. Born with glaucoma resulting from his mother’s rubella during pregnancy, he faced the problems of very poor vision with amazing fortitude. Special arrangements were made for him at junior school, but he remained in mainstream education, proceeding to St. Michael’s College and Leeds University where he gained a First in Classics and a P.G.C.E. teaching qualification under the aegis of William Thompson who became a great friend and inspiration to him.

After a year each at Hipperholme Grammar School, Halifax and Leeds Grammar School, for over thirty years Will taught Latin and Classical Civilization at Ossett Comprehensive School. He championed the cause of Classics in a state school, refusing to concede when one headteacher after another tried (unsuccessfully!) to erode the subject from the timetable. Although unable even to read hard copy, his tremendous services to education were justly recognised by the award of an M.B.E. in 2002.

Will’s active involvement with the Association for Latin Teaching (ARLT) spanned four decades during which he served as President, Summer School Director, Secretary of Teaching Resources and producer of an extensive audio-visual library, offices which he performed conscientiously and with distinction. With customary tact and shrewd rhetoric, as president he guided the ARLT through a period of somewhat strained relations with the Joint Association of Classical Teachers, and was instrumental in effecting the entente cordiale between both associations still enjoyed today. He will be remembered for running many Summer School option groups on Latin pronunciation. Young teachers were especially grateful for his help and encouragement with accurate reading, for his own Latin was faultless. In earlier years when his sight permitted it, Wilf gave talks on ‘Classics in the environment’, illustrated by a fascinating collection of slides of, inter alia, architecture, branded goods and place names, all showing some linguistic or cultural link with the ancient world. His loyalty to, and affection for, the ARLT is shown in that 2013 would have been his fortieth consecutive Summer School.

Wilf’s classical interests extended to an active part played in the Leeds Classical Association where he masteredminded the annual Reading Competition, selecting judges and the categories of prizewinner, and to the job of Cambridge Latin Course e-tutor which he undertook with much enjoyment after retirement. For some years he was also the JACT representative for Yorkshire schools.

His personal life had had its vicissitudes: a broken engagement in the mid-eighties balanced by a whirlwind romance with Margaret whom he married in 1997 less than three months after they became acquainted. Wilf showed his dry sense of humour when, on being congratulated for his engagement, added, a fortnight after it was announced, ‘I got married on Saturday!’ He took great delight in the story that Margaret, who was working as a classroom assistant at his school, had signed in on the Friday under her own name and on the following Monday as Margaret O’Neill, thus astounding all Wilf’s colleagues who had been deliberately kept in the dark about the impending wedding.

Their marriage was an immensely happy one and for Wilf it provided the freedom and security to travel while Margaret drove their car. He was, for example, at last able to buy a holiday cottage in France. Very sadly, Margaret died just three years later. With considerable magnanimity Wilf opened his home to Talia, Margaret’s daughter and brought up Alex, her son, as his own grandson. Alex often accompanied Wilf to Summer Schools where the bond of affection between them was very much apparent. Wilf had the pleasure of introducing him to the delights of Greece, France and Germany on an extended holiday last summer.

Wilf, a devout Catholic, served his parish church loyally from its opening in 1958. Liberal with his time and financially, he trained altar servers for many years and, far beyond the scope of generosity, bought a new organ for the church. He was proud to receive the Papal Award for loyal service to the Catholic Church.

A life member of CAMRA (The Campaign for Real Ale), he travelled frequently to beer festivals to share his knowledge and love of good food and drink. His other major interest was music. He regularly attended organ recitals in Leeds and Halifax, as well as arranging several in his own church. An accomplished organist himself, he was President of Halifax and District Organists’ Association in 2012.

To have limited vision is at best restrictive. Wilf’s character and achievements can be more fully understood in reference to his later optical traumas. The day after 9/11 the retina of his left (good) eye detached – a horrifying experience’, as he described it. There followed five operations within three months, two of them failures, but requiring him to recline with his head at an angle of 45 degrees for six weeks! The third operation was a five-hour marathon, including a corneal graft and the removal of a cataract. On one occasion the surgeon even began his incision before any anaesthetic had been administered! Wilf, typically, was able to see the funny side of this. Latterly, he also developed the more serious form of macular degeneration.

Diagnosed with cancer in January, he died exactly six weeks later; mercifully his suffering was short-lived. His life was a triumph of courage and faith amidst adversity. The ARLT owes him a great debt of gratitude.