

Donald Russell, FBA

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Donald Russell, who died in February at the age of 99, was both a living link to a bygone age and a vivid presence in the lives of many classicists today. He remembered seminars where participants would cite views once expressed by the great Victorian/Edwardian scholar Ingram Bywater (1840-1914). But he also continued to teach undergraduates until his mid-nineties, educating young people some of whom may live to see the twenty-second century. Over the course of his long life he suffered not the slightest diminution of mental energy or acuity. Rather, he continued to accumulate knowledge, and develop understanding, of Latin and Greek language and literature, and to put that knowledge and understanding to use, especially in supporting the work of others, right up until the final week of his near-century-long life.

Conventional enough to a cursory glance, Donald Russell the scholar was full of paradoxes. As with many academics of his generation, the focus of his scholarly life was never on publication – yet he produced fully thirty books, as well as many articles, chapters, reviews, and other scholarly pieces. He never applied for research funding, never led or participated in a research project – probably never even drew up a *curriculum vitae*. Yet far from being a lone scholar isolated in his library, he worked with colleagues on a succession of major books, a process that only accelerated in retirement. He took up his fellowship at St John's College, Oxford, in 1948 (a position which he would hold for over seven decades), when such positions were distributed by processes arcane by modern standards; yet for any young person beginning a career as an academic classicist today there could be no better model. Since coming up to Oxford in 1939 he remained rooted in that city, a *genius loci* whom it is hard to imagine permanent-



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ly employed at any other institution; but his fame was international, and his collaborators pilgrimaged from across the world to his flat at Belsyre Court. He was, it can scarcely be denied, a traditional classicist; yet his championing from the 1940s onwards of subjects like Plutarch and Greek declamation was at the time anything but traditional, and has had a lasting impact on how the subject is conceptualised and taught. He was no political radical, whether in local or national affairs; but it was his foresight, strategic sense, and persuasive skill that achieved, via a collaboration with Robin Nisbet forged on a steamer trip between Oxford and Goring, a decisive and lasting reform in the degree programme offered by the Oxford Faculty of Literae Humaniores, not an institution addicted to change for its own sake.

Russell was of the generation which had the winning of World War II to attend to before they could pursue their professional careers; so when considering his scholarly output, we must remember that he spent years of his life breaking codes at Bletchley Park, years that later generations could devote to personal rather than national advancement. Even so, it is clear that, in common with his generation as a whole, he was in no hurry to publish. When he was appointed at St John's in 1948, he had published precisely nothing; that is not surprising, given that he had taken finals only the year before. It would take him five years to publish his first review, six years to publish his first note (all of three pages long), twelve years to publish his first article (now eight pages), and sixteen years to publish his first book. That book, an edition with commentary on the treatise *On the Sublime* ascribed to Longinus, appeared in the year that he turned 44. These bare numbers reveal how academia of that era was indeed another country; such a career would scarcely be possible now. Yet looking back from the vantage point of today, we may wonder whether a culture which allowed scholars the chance to read and learn deeply before immortalising their reflections in print might have something in its favour. Certainly in Russell's case, this period where he published little would enrich the harvest of future years. And that is without even attempting to evaluate the deep impact which he was having at St John's College, both as a tutor and as an increasingly influential member of the governing body. Thanks to him and to other inspired appointments (for example, Howard Colvin, who came to St John's in the same year as Russell, and Keith Thomas, who arrived there in 1957), the College was moving from comfortable mediocrity to the forefront of Oxford's intellectual life.

His later career diverged from modern patterns too, and saw him appointed to a University Readership (1978) and then Professorship (1985) without his having applied for either promotion; that was how things worked back then. Of his thirty books, two-thirds were published after his retirement in 1988. These show, as noted above, an increasingly collaborative mode. Of the ten books published before retirement, three are collaborative, co-written with his Oxford col-

leagues Nigel Wilson and Michael Winterbottom; but of the twenty published after retirement, nine (including one collection of essays edited by Russell) are collaborative, and his collaborators are no longer fellow scholars in Oxford but academics from other universities in the UK, from continental Europe, and from North America. Six of these books – 20% of the total – appeared in the last decade of his life, with two volumes published in the year that he turned 96. The seeds planted back in the forties and fifties in time bore their fruit hundredfold.

A hyperlinked list of Russell's publications, together with those reviews that I was able to track down, can be found at this link.¹ Full consideration of their scholarly significance is beyond the scope of this short piece, and I would encourage those interested to read in particular the splendid British Academy obituary² by Christopher Pelling and Michael Winterbottom, an Open Access publication, as well as the moving Address³ delivered by Nicholas Purcell at his funeral. What has not been drawn up (yet?) is a list of all the books in which he is thanked. "Multae autem emendationes praeclarae a Kenio atque Russello praebitae sunt; opere tandem in finem procedente Russelli auxilium consiliumque, summa liberalitate semper datum, mihi maxime profuerunt", remarks J. M. Mingay in the preface to the Oxford Classical Text of Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* (1991); a typical comment across so many volumes. Anyone giving a Latin speech in Oxford, from undergraduate orators at the College's biannual Gaudy dinners to successive University Public Orators, asked for and received his assistance. In an age of specialists, he took pride in being a generalist; and the depth of his linguistic understanding in both Latin and Greek, as well as his sensitivity as a translator and as a writer, ensured that there were few who sought his aid whom he was unable to help.

When Oxford saw, within a short period not long after the turn of the millennia, inaugural lectures from the new Regius Professor of Greek (Christopher Pelling) and Corpus Christi Professor of Latin (Philip Hardie) – lectures in which it is customary for scholars to interweave references to the teachers and mentors who have most influenced their own development – Donald Russell was the only scholar mentioned in both. This aptly symbolised his impact in both Greek and Latin studies. To his eighty-fifth birthday dinner, for which he had requested a low-key event, Nicholas Purcell and I invited a small number of guests representing the many generations which his life had shaped and was shaping: from a current St John's undergraduate being tutored by him in verse composition, to his collaborator and slight-

1 https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/sjc.prod/documents/Donald_Russell_publicationsv2.pdf.

2 Pelling, Winterbottom 2020.

3 Purcell 2020.

ly younger contemporary Robin Nisbet. At his lunch parties he was (in the words of the late Jasper Griffin) a 'princely host'. The unveiling of his portrait on 11th May 2018 brought an enormous gathering to St John's of pupils (in whose achievements Russell took a modest but due satisfaction) and colleagues of all ages. The impact of a great man's life, the contribution that he made to the common good, were as it were personified in that overwhelming crowd; and it is a source of consolation to us who so miss him now that he was there to see it.

The emphasis on linguistic attainment which Russell prized is in some quarters less valued than it was. Scholarly fashions will come and go, but the need to understand Latin and Greek will always be with us, for as long as people wish to come to an understanding of Greco-Roman civilisation. Russell's many profound contributions to our understanding of the literature written in those languages, as well as his enrichment of so many lives as a teacher, colleague, and friend, form the best possible memorial to his name.

Obituaries etc. of Donald Russell

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An *In Memoriam* page on the website of St John's College, Oxford, which will see further updates, can be found <https://www.sjc.ox.ac.uk/discover/about-college/in-memoriam/donald-russell/>. The same website also contains a link to a full list of Donald Russell's publications (https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/sjc.prod/documents/Donald_Russell_publicationsv2.pdf).