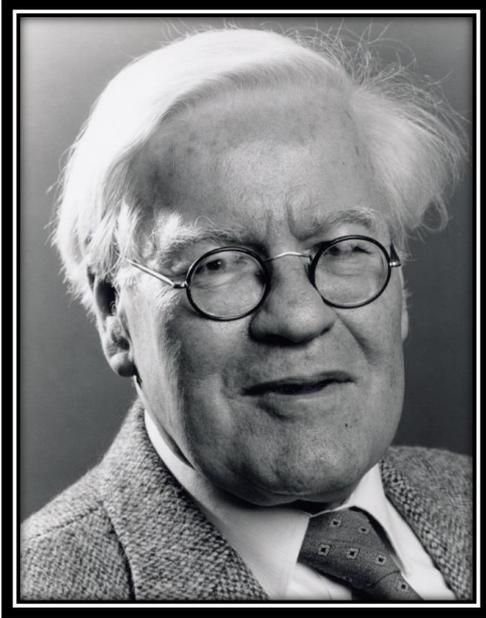


Robin Nisbet



Robin Nisbet (known professionally as R.G.M. Nisbet), who died on Tuesday 14th May 2013 at the age of 87, was one of the most influential Latin scholars of his time.

Born into an academic family (his father, R.G. Nisbet, was a lecturer in Humanity (Latin) at the University of Glasgow, who like his son wrote a commentary on a Cicero speech, and Nisbet was sometimes amused to be confused with his father in bibliographies and the like), he had a distinguished undergraduate career at Glasgow before going to Balliol College, Oxford on the prestigious Snell Exhibition (previous holders include Adam Smith) to read for a second undergraduate degree in Classics. He moved as a Junior Research Fellow to Corpus Christi College, Oxford in 1951, where he was appointed as a Tutorial Fellow in 1952, and then elected as Corpus Professor of Latin in 1970. He retired in 1992 and was (unusually) elected to an Honorary Fellowship at Corpus; other distinctions included an Honorary Fellowship at Balliol, and a Fellowship of the British Academy.

His first scholarly book was a commentary on Cicero's *In Pisonem* (1961), a masterpiece of Roman invective oratory, where he made major contributions to both text and interpretation; its introduction contains the best brief guide to Latin metrical prose-rhythm, always a topic close to his heart. Cicero remained a key figure for him, but for the next forty years his main scholarly energies were dedicated to a commentary on the first three books of Horace's *Odes*, for the first two books (1970, 1978) in collaboration with Margaret Hubbard, his Oxford colleague, and for the third with Niall Rudd, formerly of Bristol (2004); here he was fortunate in both his co-authors. The first volume set a new standard for depth and learning in Latin commentaries, and was notable for making terse and sometimes controversial literary judgements on a canonical Latin poet, and for quoting English poetic imitations. From the late 1970s he also produced a regular and wide range of stimulating essays on the literary and textual criticism of Latin poets from Catullus to Juvenal, many of which remain fundamental for any scholarly work: most of these appear in his *Collected Papers on Latin Literature* (1995).

For many years Nisbet played a central role in the administration of classics at Oxford, and in particular (along with his colleague and close friend Donald Russell) helped to establish the study of classical literature at Oxford as part of the final honours course in Classics (until the early 1970s it had effectively been restricted to the first part of the course). This provided an outlet in teaching terms for the growth of the study of classical texts as literary artefacts in research in the 1960s and 1970s, a growth in which

Nisbet (alongside such figures in the UK as E.J. Kenney, Niall Rudd, and the late lamented David West) played a key part, publishing important essays on Cicero and Horace which showed that classical texts deserved close New Critical-style literary scrutiny as well as textual criticism and biographical/historical analysis.

As Corpus Professor, he supervised a large proportion of the doctoral students in Latin of the 1970s and 1980s, on a wide range of topics (with many doing commentaries on texts), and was a conscientious and acute reader of his students' work, often well into their professional careers, which he supported generously. His graduate seminars were fundamentally formative for his students, taking a Latin text, whether well-known or not, and subjecting it to the widest range of scrutiny, textual, literary and cultural; his role was essentially maieutic, to encourage, point students towards key bibliography and very occasionally correct. For many, these seminars exemplified true and tolerant scholarship in action.

Many of his doctoral students went on to considerable distinction in the scholarly world, currently holding chairs at Harvard, Princeton and Toronto as well as major UK universities. Though he did not travel, his scholarship and students did, and he enjoyed a worldwide reputation as a Latinist and trainer of scholars. As often happens, having been a reformer in his early career he became more conservative later on, and did not always approve of the emergence of literary theory in Latin studies, driven in the 1990s UK by two of his most brilliant students, John Henderson in Cambridge and the late Don Fowler in Oxford.

In his first years at Corpus he lived the then life of a bachelor don and dedicated tutor in college, but in 1969 he married Anne Wood, with whom he had worked closely as College Secretary in his progress through the various college offices (Corpus was always close to his heart, and he gave it sterling service). The pair moved to Cumnor, close to Oxford, where they enjoyed many years of happy marriage; in retirement Robin was often willingly enlisted in Anne's active charitable life, for example delivering 'meals on wheels'. Her death in 2004 was a sad blow, and the serious ill-health which followed a couple of years later eventually confined him to his home, leaving him unable to visit his beloved Corpus as he had done weekly since retirement. He was sustained in Cumnor by excellent carers and by the devotion of a local family, and kept in touch with friends and colleagues largely by telephone, always keen to know and discuss the latest news, whether political or academic. As Horace says to Virgil in one of his odes, *multis ille bonis flebilis occidit*, 'his death is to be lamented by many worthy people'.

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