

David West



The notice in the *Hexham Courant* read:

'David West, Emeritus Professor of Latin at the University of Newcastle on Tyne, died suddenly, after a morning's scholarship, a jolly good lunch and an afternoon gardening, on 13 May 2013 aged 86.'

A consummation devoutly to be wished, then; and a final day that epitomised the man. He regarded travel, especially foreign travel, as a snare and a delusion, and in

retirement, home was where he wanted to be, at his desk or in the garden, and among close friends and family (he was a father of five). Though there was always an element of austerity about David, in life as in scholarship, his hospitality was second to none.

Son of a ship's carpenter, David was born in Aberdeen, and after the local Grammar School and University, National Service (RAF) and Cambridge, started research in 1951 on the manuscript tradition of Aristophanes' *Frogs*. It was a false start. In 1952 he took up a lectureship at Sheffield, and in January 1956 moved to Edinburgh. The articles now started to roll out: the first on the metre of Catullus' elegies (1957), five on passages in Lucretius, a note on Sallust's *Jugurtha* and in 1967 *Reading Horace*, soon followed by *The Image and Poetry of Lucretius* (1969, both Edinburgh), this latter one of George Steiner's books of the year. The same year his 'Multiple-correspondence similes in the *Aeneid*' (*JRS*) also appeared, and he took up the chair of Latin in Newcastle. There followed further articles on Horace, Gallus and Lucretius, and co-edited essays on Latin literature (*Quality and Pleasure* [1974], *Creative Imitation and Latin Literature* [1979], and *Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus* [1984], all Cambridge); his Jackson Knight Memorial Lecture at Exeter ('The Bough and the Gate', 1987) was especially memorable. In 1990 Penguin published his prose translation of the *Aeneid*, which he felt did more justice to the poetry than most so-called 'poetic' translations.

He retired in 1992, the moment marked by a Festschrift, *Author and Audience in Latin Literature* (1992, Cambridge), testifying to the affection and respect in which he was held by colleagues, and Newcastle's first Exaugural lecture,

on George Herbert's poem 'Easter Wings' (Herbert was a favourite poet of his). But his stride did not falter. His three-volume commentary on Horace's *Odes* (1995-2002) and complete translation of the *Odes* and *Epodes* (1997, all OUP) were followed by his most daring venture: *Shakespeare's Sonnets: With a New Commentary* (Duckworth Overlook, 2007). He was busy translating Gavin Douglas' *Eneados* (1513), itself a translation of the *Aeneid* into Scots, when he died.

David's central interest was poetry. He regarded a poem as a logical construct and the question he asked about it was: how did it work? This meant what the argument of the poem was – the point it was trying to make – and how that argument, the logic, was articulated in the words themselves. What those words meant and how they fitted together to construct the argument – that was what fascinated him and what he dedicated his scholarly work to revealing. From 1990-1991 he wrote a weekly column in *The Times*, entitled 'How it worked', doing just that on a poem in English (the first was Edward Thomas's 'Adelstrop').

Anyone who wants a brief introduction to his methods should read his 1995 presidential address to the Classical Association entitled 'Cast Out Theory', contrasting Horace *Odes* 1.4 and 4.7. There one can see him working intensely with every word, but with a view to uncovering the structure, logic and sense of the whole. It was, for David, an attempt – only that, no more, and (as he admitted) bound to fail – to approach some sort of objective, historical judgement about how the poet was working. What emerges is a deeply humane exposition of the two poems as poetic constructs, which ended 'the job of the literary scholar is to point to what's there and give a historical explanation of it, where explanation is necessary ... it's just a matter of using our senses, intelligence, emotions and, let's not forget it, our imagination, all of these under the discipline of history, as best we can'.

He later wished he had entitled the address 'Fling Away Theory', subtitled 'By that sin fell the angels' (*Henry VIII* iii.2.440, only for 'theory' read 'ambition'). The reason for the title was that David wanted to contrast his approach with that of much contemporary scholarship which he regarded with the same outrage as the physicist and mathematician Alan Sokal.¹ David also turned his fire on reception theory and intertextuality, on the grounds that they contributed nothing of significance to the understanding of the ancient texts: reception theory merely took classicists into important historical areas where they were not experts, while intertextuality 'produced [no] new knowledge, but new terms to describe old practices'. Nor could he resist a stab at a favourite bugbear, the widespread 'pansemantic fallacy' (as he called it) 'by which any shade of meaning of a word can

¹ Sokal decided to see if the journal *Social Text* would publish 'an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors' ideological preconceptions'. When 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity' was published (May, 1996), Sokal revealed that it was a hoax, 'a pastiche of left-wing cant, fawning references, grandiose quotations, and outright nonsense...structured around the silliest quotations [by postmodernist academics] he could find about mathematics and physics ... [The editors] apparently felt no need to analyze the quality of the evidence, the cogency of the arguments, or even the relevance of the arguments to the purported conclusion'.

be thought to be active in any context' (the word 'Voices' always got him going). David, in other words, had no time for what he regarded as vague, evidence-light conclusions, let alone authority or fashion, in scholarship or anything else. He argued his case and would argue it with anyone, courteously and rigorously, but without fear or favour. Indeed, he once good-humouredly objected to a vote of thanks to himself after a lecture – a world first? - because the speaker had misunderstood his argument.

As for the teacher and colleague, his arrival in Newcastle in 1969 caused widespread astonishment. Since time began, it seemed, the previous professor of Latin, the formidable GBA Fletcher, had wielded a rod of iron over the department and the university administration. That a professor of Latin should leave his door open, invite in all-comers and welcome engagement with anyone, at any time, on any topic, seemed to defy a basic law of nature. But for David, that was what a university was for, and where a university teacher should be – at his desk. Vacation as well as term-time found him there, every day, on call for students and colleagues alike. If anyone had a problem, he would drop everything to help grapple with it. It was no surprise that he served, among much else, as a pro-vice chancellor.

David admitted finding it hard to lecture to large classes, especially if the text was in English translation, even his own, and not the Latin; there was no give and take, and he did not deal in large generalisations. His sentiments were not shared by the audience. He always drew huge crowds on schools' open days. He himself felt he did his best work in the seminar, students all huddled round a Latin text, which he encouraged them to pull apart, bit by bit, word by word.

In fact he loved the sheer fun and challenge of using his brain to solve problems, whatever the problems were. He said he knew no better club than the daily car-pool from Hexham into the university, where medics, architects, historians, scientists – come one, come all – would argue ferociously all the way there and all the way back. He was always putting on random lunch-time seminars with other departments – a series on the English Hymnal here, George Herbert there, and many others - especially with the English department, whose flights of fancy he took great pleasure in teasing apart with his intellectual scalpel. In that light it is no surprise that his *Shakespeare's Sonnets* was greeted with almost total silence by the frozen wastelands of English scholarship. Anyone who has ever been baffled by a sonnet and wants to know what it is getting at, and how it gets at it, will find his text, analysis and commentary a revelation.

The great thing about David was that he was never afraid to say what he thought, whether he knew anything about the subject or not, because he saw things no one else did, came up with angles you had never thought of. Coffee time in the department would not be coffee time without David there, to launch some argument about something or other. Big issues would be dealt with by a lunch in an Italian restaurant or a walk along Tynemouth beach – all quite off the cuff. *Joie de vivre*: that was David. Make the most of this life: and he did, enriching ours and showing us how to make the most of it as well.

His friend Tom Stoppard always turned to him if he had classical questions (David's influence on *The Invention of Love* was profound). On hearing of David's death, he immediately e-mailed 'a lovely man, who gave intellectuals a good name'. Later, in conversation, he said: 'It was an honour to know him. He was alert to *everything*. Nobody was less up an ivory tower than David. He was a moral example too: a deeply humane person. He constantly pricked one's conscience about where we as individuals, as a community and as a planet were going. I wish I'd known him longer and seen him more frequently. But that does not matter now: I knew him. He was one of the most important people in my life.'

As in the lives of all of us who knew him.

Peter Jones, University of Newcastle 1979-97