

In Memoriam - Joseph Patrick Atherton, KHS

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IN MEMORIAM

Joseph Patrick Atherton, KHS

Professor Patrick Atherton, who devoted his entire life as University teacher, administrator, and scholar to the Department of Classics, the University of King's College, and Dalhousie University passed away early on the morning of the sixth of September. He was 77. In the current state of the university, the range of his teaching, the scope of his scholarship, and the weight and diversity of his administrative work are scarcely imaginable when viewed together. Yet, by them, he was crucial to saving King's College from bankruptcy and irrelevance, to raising the Department of Classics to the important place in international scholarship it now occupies, and to giving both their present characters, making them the vibrant centres of humanities education they are. Dalhousie and King's owe him enormous debts of gratitude. After news of his passing, the flags in the King's Quadrangle were lowered to half mast in his honour.

Patrick was born in recusant Lancaster and educated by the Jesuit Fathers in their College at Preston. Winning an open scholarship in Classics to Brasenose College, Oxford, he took an Honours degree in Ancient History together with Ancient and Modern Philosophy (*Literae Humaniores*), and then went on to hold the Queen's Commission as an Artillery Officer in the British Army serving on the Rhine. He was loyally proud of these elements of his formation. Three results of them which most evidently served the university here were his mastery of Greek and Latin—I witnessed him correct the Greek of a great European scholar—, his ability to move between linguistic, historical and philosophical teaching and scholarship, and his practical efficacy as an administrator.

Appointed to a post in Classics as one of the King's professors on the Carnegie endowment in 1959, Patrick combined his teaching in the Joint Dalhousie-King's Faculty of Arts and Science—as it then was—with the duties of Dean of Men and Acting Registrar at King's. This combination of a full teaching load and scholarship with administrative work both at King's and Dalhousie characterised his whole career here. At some time or other, he occupied positions in nearly every aspect of the administration of the Department of Classics and of the Faculty, administration, and Board of Governors at King's, as well as many in the Faculties of Arts and Science and of Graduate Studies at Dalhousie, where he was a Senator. This is not the place for a complete list, but I cannot fail to note his more than thirty years as Public Orator at King's, where his citations for honorary graduates at Encaenia were models of oratorical art, celebrated for their concision and their elegant use of the precisely apt literary or scriptural quotation. I must record his years as Vice-President at King's (1980-83), when he was directly charged with bringing King's into accord with the Dalhousie salary scale and with the revision of the pension plan. Patrick served as Chairman of the Department of Classics for two terms (1976-81 and 1992-1998).

Patrick's classes and seminars ranged from those in Latin and Greek, Classical Literature, and

Ancient History, to others in Ancient, Late Ancient, and Medieval philosophy. Again a list would be inappropriate, but in them Patrick expounded Plato and Aristotle, Vergil and the Classical Roman poets and historians, Plotinus and Augustine, Aquinas and Meister Eckhardt. After his PhD gained from the University of Liverpool in 1972, supervised by A.H. Armstrong, on "Infinity, Finitude and the *arche* in Greek and Early Christian Thought", Patrick's publications and addresses to scholarly conferences moved beyond Classical poets like Homer and Vergil, and subjects like the polis, to focus on the nature of the First Principle. In articles and chapters he treated this question through the examination of texts of Aristotle, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Aquinas, Eckhardt and Cusanus, of the early Modern Commentators on Aristotle (especially in the *Cursus Conimbricenses*), and of the German Idealists, especially Schelling and Hegel, together with their British heirs, especially T.H. Green, F.G. Bradley, and G.R.G. Mure. Through all these studies Patrick defended the truth of Aristotle's representation of the First as $\text{NOH}\Sigma\text{I}\Sigma\text{NOH}\Sigma\text{E}\Omega\Sigma$ and the validity of its interpretation by Aquinas and Hegel. Although appreciating what the Neoplatonists contributed to our understanding of the *arche*, and fostering the study of their work, he remained a convinced Aristotelian and his influence in this regard continues in the Department. Besides Greek and Latin, Dr Atherton's scholarly work had at its disposal French, German, and Italian; he later added Spanish and Portuguese. His facility with modern languages served us well, when, as Secretary of *Dionysius*, he was responsible for a multilingual correspondence. Patrick was promoted to full Professor in 1978. He retired in 2000, after which he was made an Inglis Professor at King's.

From the beginning of his teaching here, Patrick joined wholeheartedly in James Doull's work of radically changing the approach to Classical Studies by making philosophy, philosophical theology, and religion foundational. In this enterprise, they were later enthusiastically joined by Robert Crouse. Patrick's Jesuit schooling and, to a degree, the approach of *Literae Humaniores* at Oxford, prepared him for this common effort. He made a critical contribution, when, in 1970, he attracted his Supervisor at Liverpool, A. H. Armstrong, the great Plotinus scholar, here as a Killam Fellow. In 1972, on his retirement as Gladstone Professor, Armstrong became Visiting Professor with us. Armstrong was the author of one of the most widely used textbooks on Ancient Philosophy; he and Patrick developed and taught the first classes on the introduction to Ancient Philosophy in the Classics Department and secured their recognition by the Department of Philosophy. Together Armstrong, Doull, Crouse, and Atherton founded our international journal, *Dionysius*, established Dalhousie Classics as the centre for the study of Neoplatonism and of the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions it continues to be, and won acceptance of our PhD programme in Hellenic and Hellenistic studies.

Along with his reflections on the need for new foundations for the study of Classics, Patrick was acutely aware of the consequences of the shift in the university from curriculum to enrolment numbers as the primary criterion for decision-making. He established the agreement with the Department of History by which Classics assumed responsibility for the teaching of Ancient History. Patrick started our large introductory class in Ancient History, gave it its immense scope, and he created a history curriculum in the Department. Later, as Chairman, Patrick brought the Ancient historian, Dr Peter Kussmaul, to the Department. By these measures, he established an essential element of the present success of the Department.

The good and lasting effects of Patrick's work are every bit as much evident at King's as in the Department of Classics. His arrival there immediately preceded the financially disastrous overreach of the College in constructing three new buildings. When this was followed by the departure of the Faculty of Divinity for the Atlantic School of Theology, the bankrupt College was left with nothing

specifically its own to do, and was threatened with the withdrawal of financial support by the Province of Nova Scotia. In this crisis, Patrick chaired the committee which introduced the Foundation Year Programme in 1972, and thus established the basis of the other programmes at King's and of its entire rebuilding as an academic institution. He was one of the first six professors coordinating the Sections of the Programme and he continued as a Coordinator or lecturer until his retirement. In 2000, Patrick delivered the Concluding Lecture of the Foundation Year Programme for the academic year, "Contemporary Individualism and its Future: A Prophecy." Two others of the original six coordinating professors were also Classicists, thus establishing the close connection of the Department and the Programme, which continues to serve both to the present time.

In 1963 Patrick married Lorraine Laurence of Annapolis Royal, who acquired a MSc and PhD in Microbiology while raising a family of three sons with him: Patrick, Geoffrey, and Hilary. Patrick and Lorraine's homes were places of generous hospitality, where Patrick's excellent cooking heartened many colleagues and students and heightened the conviviality essential to the transformative work being undertaken in the Department and at King's. Indicative was the period when, with others, Patrick imported grapes in wine making season and we literally trod them out at his house! The Department has received condolences from former students who have been reminded, by his passing, of Patrick's many kindnesses to them. These continued right up to his death and his encouragements extended from those interested in reviving Gregorian Chant in the Church to those who might turn toward the study of Classics and Medieval Philosophy. Patrick was a long-standing parishioner of St Mary's Basilica and served as Chairman of the Parish Council for several years. He was a member of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem.

Patrick's life was entirely devoted to his family, the Catholic Church, the Classics Department, King's College, and Dalhousie University. He was a model of the Vergilian *pietas* he taught, and, of him, Vergil might also write: "heu pietas, heu prisca fides". His Funeral Mass was celebrated at St Mary's Basilica on Monday, September 10th at 10 o'clock.

Requiescat in pace.
Wayne Hankey
Chairman of Classics