



Left to right: Mark Hermans, Richard Whitaker, Berenice Bentel, Clive Chandler, John Atkinson (in traditional dress), Dave Pike, Nigel Bakker, and Aileen Bevis.
(October 2018. Photo: J. Murray)

IN MEMORIAM

JOHN EDWARD ATKINSON (1938–2022)

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To mark John Atkinson's retirement from full-time work at the University of Cape Town in 2001, *Acta Classica* 48 (2005) contained an appreciation of his work up to that point. After a short illness that took an unexpected turn John passed away in April 2022. This appreciation therefore focuses largely on the last two decades of John's nearly sixty years of contribution to Classics in South Africa and more widely.

In the last seventeen years John remained an active scholar and researcher with a wide range of interests, as his two last publications showed in 2021: the major focus of his interest remained Greek history of the fourth century BC, particularly the reigns of Philip II of Macedon and Alexander the Great. Even here he was not content to remain in a rut, but was keen to bring new approaches to bear: in his last article for *Acta Classica* he collaborated with an excellent South African maxillo-facial surgeon, Rushdi Hendricks, to re-examine the wounds suffered by Philip of Macedon. The figure of Coriolanus became a new area of interest, initially as the 500th anniversary of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* loomed; John developed it in various directions, as a chapter in intellectual history by looking at Hazlitt and also historiographically through the lens of Valerius Maximus. This little-loved Tiberian writer had never loomed large on John's radar, but as he saw colleagues at the University of Cape Town (UCT) working on Valerius he decided to apply the methodology Tom Carney had used in his study of Marius to Coriolanus in Valerius. And when the 2017 conference on Valerius that was held at UCT showed him other approaches, he readily rethought and produced an entirely new piece of writing, which became his last scholarly publication.

Having established an unquestioned reputation as the specialist on Curtius Rufus, John produced his last major contribution to this Julio-Claudian author in a volume that appeared in the Clarendon Ancient History Series in 2009, *Curtius Rufus: Histories of Alexander the Great, Book 10*. Finally, one of his commentaries was published by a press that could guarantee its

ready availability for years to come and John was delighted by the volume. With characteristic modesty he chose to use the translation by John Yardley rather than produce his own. It was John's reputation as an Alexander scholar that led Oxford University Press to commission him to write the introduction and historical notes to Martin Hammond's translation of Arrian's *Anabasis* and *Indica* in the Oxford World's Classics series. John put an enormous amount of effort into this, not least with the maps, and was delighted with the outcome.

In retirement John was able to write more about the place and the teaching of Classics in South Africa and to reflect on the contribution of scholars who had taught at UCT and lived in colonial and apartheid South Africa. One article and a chapter focused on the controversial Benjamin Farrington, who in some ways prefigured John in his leftish leanings and his transformative approach to teaching – Farrington introduced what would today be called 'Classical Civilisation' to the UCT curriculum, breaking away from the narrow philological path of his predecessors and contemporaries; John was to carve a particular niche for Ancient History. Farrington endured various kinds of harassment for his political views; John also was widely thought to need careful watching. In retrospect he loved to tell the story of being rung up by the security services in 1966 and being advised that he should not proceed with a long-arranged public lecture on the death of the tyrant Julius Caesar – Hendrik Verwoerd had been assassinated in Parliament that day. John hastened to say that he had nothing to do with either assassination, and he held that Dmitri Tsafendas had been perfectly sane long before that became an accepted idea. Another article looked at three Classicists, Farrington, Harold Baldry, and Mary Renault, and the influence that the South African context had on their interpretations of Alexander. John's review of Michael Lambert's 2011 book, *The Classics and South African Identities*, in *Acta Classica* 55 (2012) provides a beautifully nuanced understanding of the pressures upon academics under apartheid South Africa, no doubt informed by John's personal experience of 'the men in the north'.

Well-polished anecdotes flowed from John's lips, some of the finest involving the few Classics scholars who visited South Africa under apartheid. Vivid images were conveyed, for example, of Maurice Pope taking Ernst Badian by the hand and leading him like a child across a busy road, or the pair of them setting out for a walk on Table Mountain, getting lost and caught in a storm, finally descending to the Atlantic coast only to have Mrs Pope refuse to pick them up by car, and ultimately getting home to no dinner. Again, there were fond pictures of Sir Ronald Syme's well-lubricated final tour of the country in 1986.

Colleagues and students were exposed daily to John's highly developed sense of irony with which he would constantly draw parallels between the

ancient world and current events; to benefit most from John's teaching students had to have read their newspaper, have appraised themselves of the latest indiscretions committed by South African politicians (or members of the British royal family), and to have applied their minds to whatever subject from the ancient world was under discussion.

In 1996 John was elected as Dean of the Faculty of Arts, defeating his opponent with a two-to-one majority. Although he was an excellent administrator with a precise knowledge of systems and a good manager of people and had led both the Department of Classics and the Faculty of Arts ably, John was advised not to apply for the new position of Dean of the Faculty of Humanities in 1998. And so a great opportunity was missed.

After a bout of ill health John retired slightly early in 2001, but he continued to teach in Classics for the next decade. In 2018, to celebrate his 80th birthday, without his knowledge a colloquium was organised for him at UCT, to which his oldest and youngest students were invited and at which Daniel Ogden and Liz Baynham were guest speakers. An impeccable source says that he was pleased.

One of the periods of history that fascinated John was the reign of Justinian, and John loved Procopius' *Secret History*. We may find lying among his papers John's secret history of UCT, a more entertaining and revelatory account than the volumes commissioned by the institution.

Outside UCT John employed his leadership and organizational skills running the complex in which he lived in Rondebosch, until he moved into a retirement home some five years ago.

John studied Alexander the Great, and was happily married to another (greater) Alexander, Val, and was the proud father of two daughters. His colleagues in Classics at the University of Cape Town have lost an inspirational researcher, teacher, leader, mentor, and friend. South African Classics has lost an absolute stalwart and a scholar of indisputable international standing.

List of publications to supplement AClass 48 (2005) vii–xi.

A. Books

Atkinson, J.E. (ed.), with a translation by J. Yardley, 2009. *Curtius Rufus: Histories of Alexander the Great, Book 10*. Clarendon Ancient History Series. Oxford.

Hammond, M. (tr.), with introduction and notes by J.E. Atkinson, 2013. *Alexander the Great: The Anabasis and the Indica*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford.

B. Chapters in Books

- Atkinson, J.E. 2014. 'Alexander and the unity of mankind: some Cape Town perspectives'. In P.R. Bosman (ed.), *Alexander in Africa*, 170-84. Pretoria.
- 2017. 'Farrington and the science of swerve'. In G.R. Parker (ed.), *South Africa, Greece, Rome: Classical Confrontations*, 376-94. Cambridge.
- 2021. 'Coriolanus as an exemplar in Valerius Maximus'. In J.A. Murray and D. Wardle (edd.), *Reading by Example: Valerius Maximus and the Historiography of Exempla*, 75-93. Leiden.

C. Articles

- Atkinson, J.E. 2006. 'Ethnic cleansing in Alexandria AD 38'. *AClass* 49:31-54.
- 2007. 'On judging Alexander: a matter of honour'. *AClass* 50:15-27.
- 2010. 'Benjamin Farrington: Cape Town and the shaping of a public intellectual'. *SAHJ** 62:671-92.
- 2010. 'Honour in the ranks of Alexander the Great's army'. *AClass* 53:1-20.
- 2015. 'Coriolanus, Hazlitt, and the insolence of power'. *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 27:15-23.
- 2015. 'The *graphē paranomōn* in its Athenian context'. *AClass* 58:1-26.
- 2017. 'Valerius Maximus on Coriolanus'. *AClass* 60:1-21.
- Atkinson, J.E. and Hendricks, R. 2021. 'The skull of Philip II of Macedon and the mind of his assassin'. *AClass* 64:29-47.
- Atkinson, J.E., Truter, E., and Truter, E. 2009. 'Alexander's last days: malaria and mind games?' *AClass* 52:23-46.

D. Review articles

- J.E. Atkinson 2006. 'Alexander in Afghanistan'. Review article on Holt, F.L. 2003, *Alexander the Great and the Mystery of the Elephant Medallions*; Holt, F.L. 2004, *Into the Land of Bones: Alexander the Great in Afghanistan*. *Scholia* 15:122-26. Online at casa-kvsa.org.za/scholia.
- 2009. 'The Hellenistic World'. Review article of Malcolm Errington, R. 2008. *A History of the Hellenistic World, 323-30 BC*. *Scholia* 18:129-34. Online at casa-kvsa.org.za/scholia.

* *The South African Historical Journal*

E. Book Reviews

- Atkinson, J.E. 1962. Review of B. Tilly, 1961. *The Story of Pallas*. PACA** 5:62-63. Online at casa-kvsa.org.za/paca.
- 1963. Review of R.D. Williams, 1962. *Vergil: Aeneid Book 3*. PACA** 6:64-66. Online at casa-kvsa.org.za/paca.
- 1964. Review of State Library of South Africa, 1963. *Periodicals on Classical Antiquity and Related Subjects*. AClass 7:128-31.
- 1973. Review of M.L.W. Laistner, 1970. *A History of the Greek World from 479 to 323 B.C.* PACA** 12:55. Online at casa-kvsa.org.za/paca.
- 1979. Review of B. Cunliffe, 1978. *Rome and her Empire*. SAAB*** 34:138-39.
- 1985. Review of P. Salway, 1984. *Roman Britain*. SAAB*** 40:118-19.
- 1985. Review of N.G.L. Hammond, 1983. *Three Historians of Alexander the Great* JHS 105:216.
- 1986. Review of A.R. Burn, 1984. *Persia and the Greeks*. SAAB*** 41:36-37.
- 1986. Review of L.F. Fitzhardinge, 1985. *The Spartans*. SAAB*** 41:37-38.
- 1986. Review of R. Garland, 1985. *The Greek Way of Death*. SAAB*** 41:96-97.
- 1987. Review of M.I. Finley, 1987. *The Use and Abuse of History*. SAAB*** 42:178-79.
- 1989. Review of R. Garland, 1987. *The Piraeus*. SAHJ* 21:129-30.
- 1991. Review of R. MacMullen, 1988. *Corruption and the Decline of Rome*. SAHJ* 24:285-87.
- 1992. Review of R.A. Bauman, 1990. *Political Trials in Ancient Greece*. *Akroterion* 37:82-83.
- 1995. Review of I. Worthington, 1994. *Ventures into Greek History*. *Scholia* 4:149-51.
- 1995. Review of R.J. Evans, 1994. *Gaius Marius*. AClass 38:103-7.
- 1998. Review of A.B. Bosworth, 1996. *Alexander and the East*. *Scholia Reviews* 98.17. Online at casa-kvsa.org.za/scholia.
- 2000. Review of M. Swain, 1999. *Hellenism and Empire*. *Scholia Reviews* 00.29. Online at casa-kvsa.org.za/scholia.
- 2000. Review of M. Hansen, 1999. *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*. *Scholia Reviews* 00.31. Online at casa-kvsa.org.za/scholia.
- 2002. Review of P. Cartledge, 2001. *Spartan Reflections*. AClass 45:142-45.
- 2004. Review of A.B. Bosworth, 2002. *The Legacy of Alexander*. CR 54:157-59.
- 2004. Review of D. Spencer, 2002. *The Roman Alexander*. *Scholia* 13:147-49.
- 2005. Review of I. Worthington, 2004. *Alexander the Great: Man and God*. CR 55:589-91.

* *The South African Historical Journal*

** *The Proceedings of the African Classical Associations*.

*** *The South African Archaeological Bulletin*.

- 2008. Review of C.G. Thomas 2007. *Alexander the Great in his World*. *Scholia Reviews* 08.6. Online at casa-kvsa.org.za/scholia.
- 2008. Review of W. Heckel, L. Trittle, and P. Wheatley, 2007. *Alexander's Empire: Formulation to Decay*. *AHB* 22:112-18.

F. Obituary

Atkinson, J.E. 2020. 'Maurice W. M. Pope (17/2/1926 – 1/8/2019)'. *AClass* 63:9-14.