

# **In Memory and in Celebration of Colin Wells (1933–2010)**

*Frank Kersnowski*

I met Colin Wells in 1988 when he was appointed the Murchison Professor of Classical Studies and Chair of the Department of Classical Studies at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, where I was a Professor of English. His appointment was distinctly appropriate, since he actually had to form a department and develop its curriculum. He did both, and continued his distinguished career as a classicist and archaeologist with the poise and modesty of the truly exceptional.

By the time he came to Trinity, Colin had served ably as a teacher and administrator at the University of Ottawa. Entering there as a Lecturer in 1960, he was a Professor when he resigned in 1988. He had also served as the Chair of the Department of Classical Studies, as interim Dean of the Faculty of Arts and School of Graduate Studies, and, in a typically eclectic role, as Acting Chair of the Department of Music. Following these he was appointed Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Arts. Other appointments concerning curriculum and research testify to professional abilities of an unusually high order.

Such administrative positions as these reflected the esteem of his colleagues for a teacher and scholar of exceptional talent and accomplishment, as is evident in his own modestly phrased résumé, which simply lists the nineteen professional organisations in which he had accepted responsibilities by the time I met him. By then he had also published his four major books, though revisions and translations would follow, forty articles, and twenty-nine reviews. Reviews are a service to the profession that is often undervalued: Colin's were a notable contribution to his discipline. He makes no mention of the number of papers read, panels participated in, meetings chaired; undoubtedly they were legion. He was a visiting lecturer at Oxford, Berkley, Strasbourg, Austin,

a visiting Fellow at Brasenose College, Oxford, and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, London. Trinity University was indeed fortunate to have such a distinguished academic. He was, also, as I found, a distinguished human being, someone who always brought lustre to our profession.

Colin and I would have met at a reception or over coffee in the faculty club, somewhere informally, and discovered that we had an interest in common: Robert Graves. Kate Wells, Colin's wife, is the daughter of the writer Richard Hughes, who was a friend of Robert Graves. In fact, Graves found for him a house in Wales that the family still owns. As members of the Robert Graves Society will recall from meeting them at conferences in Paris and Oxford, where Colin presented erudite and elegant papers, Kate and Colin shared a special understanding of Graves and his writing.

With our mutual interest in Graves as a start, I like to think that Colin and I developed a friendship that we both enjoyed, albeit my part was often that of comic relief. Administrative work at Trinity was often vexing, or at least troublesome. I remember one morning seeing Colin coming toward me in a hallway, head down and frowning; so I stopped him: 'Colin, on my way to work this morning I went by my dry cleaners and heard a conversation replete with classical wit and allusion.' (Colin's sceptical look did not deter me.) 'The man in line in front of me handed the clerk a pair of torn trousers. Receiving them, the clerk said: "You ripa dees?" To which the customer replied: "You mena dees?"' Colin brightened a bit, then said with fingers pinching the bridge of his nose, 'Thanks, Frank. This morning I needed that'.

That Colin's efforts as an administrator were not only successful but also prescient and forward thinking is shown in the stature of his department, even in the time since he retired. The Classics Department under his guidance went from the occasional teaching of classical languages to one that has a shaping influence at the university and attracts students of real merit. Such does not occur in a vacuum. Colin not only served on divisional councils, search committees and curriculum councils as is expected of

departmental chairs, he did so with exceptional tolerance and intelligence. Here was a scholar who could have had a prestigious appointment as a Latinist at an Irish university but was willing to negotiate with outsized egos to strengthen this university and its community.

Colin laboured in the academic trenches, but did not neglect the strong base in research that so identified him, and gave him his international stature. The excavations of Carthage that he began while he was at Ottawa continued when he came to Trinity, often with the participation of undergraduate students. He also extended his research to northern France. As his publications show, much of the strength of his research came from his concern with the lives of people during the time, as well as the historical events that shaped them. His publications after he came to Trinity build on what he had done before. He published twenty-two articles, thirteen book reviews, and six books, of which five were revisions or translations of *The Roman Empire* (1984; second edition, 1992). This book was for me the jewel in his crown. It gave him opportunity to use the full range of his abilities: historian, translator, archaeologist, and storyteller. All of this he did in prose that is both authoritative and readable, as is evident in his preface to *The Roman Empire* when discussing the forming of ‘the equestrian order (*ordo equester*)’ by wealthy men who did not wish for a political career:

This had evolved from the cavalry of the Early Republic, but the equestrians (equites or knights) of the Late Republic had no more in common with mounted warriors than have the successful businessmen, diligent civil servants and distinguished academics raised to the knighthood in modern Britain ('Prince, Bayard would have smashed his sword / To see the sort of knights you dub. / Is that the last of them? O Lord, / Will someone take me to a pub?').

After a brief illness, Colin died on 11 March 2010 at his home in France with his family around him. We shall not look upon his

like again.

**Colin Wells** was born on 15 November 1933 in West Bridgford, Nottinghamshire, England. His education comprised Nottingham High School 1943–52; Foundation Scholar, Sir Thomas White Senior Scholar; Varley Scholarship for Classics, Oriel College, Oxford 1950; Oriel College, Oxford 1952–54. His university education was interrupted by National Service, in the Royal Artillery as a Second Lieutenant in the Forty-first Field Regiment in Egypt and Germany. He was a Lieutenant in the South Notts Hussars Yeomanry, Royal Horse Artillery 1956–60. He was again at Oxford as an undergraduate 1956–58 and as a D. Phil. student 1962–64. His degrees were University of Oxford B.A. 1958; M.A. 1959; D. Phil. 1965 (thesis, ‘The Frontiers of the Roman Empire under Augustus’, under the supervision of Professor Sir Ian Richmond). Colin Wells died on 11 March 2010. He is survived by his wife Kate, two sons, Dominic and Christopher, and his grandchildren.