

Remembering Colin Allen (1929–2010)

Joseph Bailey

It is with sadness that we have to tell readers of the death of Colin Allen, who together with his wife Patricia was a long-standing member of the Robert Graves Society.

I first got to know Colin and Patricia at the Rome conference on Graves at the British School in July 2002, where Colin gave a paper on what he termed ‘The Enigma of Claudius: Graves and the Historians?’ I think the question mark in the title was decisive for Colin since he followed several speakers who had asked whether or not Graves’s work had been a historically accurate rendition from Suetonius or whether it was best seen as fiction in its own right. The preponderance of opinion seemed to be that it wasn’t and it didn’t much matter. Colin revelled in the attempts to make comparisons between the historical world and modern interpretations of it.

Colin in his professional life had been an Administrative grade civil servant, and as General Manager of the Covent Garden Market had overseen the removal of Covent Garden from the heart of London to its present site in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This would have been a difficult enough job given the historical associations of the market and the concerns of those who lived locally, but in the context of the times in which the changes took place, with mounting worries about the destruction of London and the growing environmental movement, it took all Colin’s political skills and foresight to persuade local communities and businesses where their long-term interests lay.

Colin, who was born in 1929, wanted to study ancient history at Cambridge and was awarded a place, but he decided that the family finances would not support his undergraduate ambitions, and instead took the Civil Service examination at the same time as his Cambridge entrance and passed out top of his year. Those who knew Colin wouldn’t be in the least surprised to learn that later in life he attended Birkbeck College, the part-time college of the

University of London, and obtained two MAs, in archaeology and in the history of the ancient world.

In 1953 Colin married his wife Patricia, and they had three children. Of their two boys, one entered the medical profession and become a general practitioner; the other studied Classics and become an archaeologist (he told me he had been supervising a dig in northern France this past year). Their daughter studied languages and until her marriage was organising conferences in France, Spain and South America.

Colin and Patricia were both strong supporters of the Robert Graves Society, and as well as attending conferences in Rome, Paris and Mallorca they went to Madrid, London and Oxford for shorter 'get-togethers'. I recall one occasion a few years ago at a RGS meeting in Islip, where Robert Graves and Nancy Nicholson lived in the 1920s. We had the meeting in the back room of a historic pub and Colin became very animated when he learned I would be returning to London that day; he insisted that the next time I came to the city for any reason we must meet up and I should stay with him and Patricia at their house in the village of Horspath outside Oxford. I did so not long afterwards and after a long evening meal in the city, I stayed with them at their lovely home. Patricia, who trained as a psychotherapist and ran her practice from their house, had been involved in training another generation of therapists and was very open about the difficulties of her work. It was typical of them both to be so generous with their time and hospitality.

The last time I meet them both was at the Eighth International Robert Graves Conference at Palma, Mallorca, in 2006. I remember to this day the leisurely meal we had at the restaurant overlooking the Cala de Deyá and Colin and Patricia's patient way with a rather dotty young lady who knew next to nothing about Robert Graves and seemed to have come along for the ride.

Colin was interested in archaeological work himself and as a member of the Hadrianic Society had been on sites in Northumberland and elsewhere. He was keen member of the Oxford Wine Society and together with Patricia was an excellent

bridge player. It was very difficult to think of Colin as an older member of the community and I was astonished to learn he was in his eighties when he died. He was active and looked years younger than his chronological age. Sadly, we were told that he would not be coming to the Robert Graves Society's 2008 conference at St John's College, Oxford, because of his doctor's advice about the possibility of catching infections, as he was receiving chemotherapy treatment in a hospital in Oxford. And this year we learned of his death after a short stay in a local hospice. I can still recall his hearty laughter, and I'm sure he always believed like Robert Graves that we had come a long way from the ancient world – and not always in the direction of progress.

Colin Mervyn Gordon Allen (1929–2010). R.I.P.