

# OBITUARY

## Michael Gunningham (1924 – 2019)

Michael Gunningham died peacefully on 5<sup>th</sup> April 2019 in Hastings at the age of 94. He was unquestionably one of the truly great Classics schoolteachers of the second half of the twentieth century. He left an indelible mark not only on the teaching of his beloved subject but on all who encountered him. In many cases, they were captivated by his magnetism, as he was an irresistibly passionate proselytiser. He was, indeed, a rare phenomenon. His fierce dedication and formidable energy stayed with him throughout a distinguished career as teacher, organiser, administrator, writer and especially editor.

Born in Constantinople into a Diplomatic family, with the hands-off parenting of his time and class, his first words and sentences were in Greek, learnt from his Greek nurse. A family photograph showed him as a young child standing on the Acropolis, as if foreshadowing his lifelong immersion in Hellenic culture. Returning to England, Michael went to St Paul's School as a Foundation Scholar and after school joined the Royal Navy where he served in World War II. In 1946, he returned to take up his Exhibition at St Catharine's College, Cambridge. He worked as a journalist on national newspapers before going into teaching, the profession in which he remained until 'retirement' in 1984.

'Retirement' has rarely been a less fitting word: until well into his eighties, Michael, a consummate editor, was still zealously commissioning new titles in his latest distinguished series 'Classical Literature and Society', with the same restless energy and passionate commitment that had characterised his selfless and dedicated career for well over half a century. In the early 1960s, as an exceptionally strong and established head

of one of the most successful Classics departments in a fully comprehensive school, St Ignatius' College, he rapidly joined forces with John Sharwood Smith at the University of London Institute of Education and other pioneers of that revolutionary decade. A natural reforming radical in education, although in style and bearing seemingly the epitome of traditional values, Michael stamped a deep and lasting imprint on the explosion of new courses, methods and materials which so completely changed the landscape of Classics, especially in courses in Classical Studies and Civilisation. His vision was never seen to better effect than in his embrace of new examinations. Only those of a certain vintage will recall 'CSE Mode 3' - teacher-devised and teacher-assessed syllabuses which offered the prospect of certification in a classical subject across the full range of 16-year-old students, and which paved the way for GCSE. Michael's highly innovative and far-sighted belief in the continuing relevance - to all - and the breadth of interest of the Greco-Roman world led him to create a CSE course in 'Classics and Technology' which was an outstanding example of interdisciplinarity - a vogue concept in the 1960s, but no less important for that.

Michael's supreme gifts as teacher and editor of three series which filled vital gaps in the resources available for teaching Classical Civilisation at different levels (the other two were 'Inside the Ancient World' and 'Classical Society') bear ample testimony to his legacy, marked impressively by scholarly range, insistence on high standards and precision and unflinching sensitivity to language. Writers of titles in his series were often painfully aware that nothing short of perfection was tolerable to him, and their own contributions were immeasurably improved by his meticulous editing. However, his achievements in relation to the work of the 'ACTs' which followed the creation of the (now much-lamented) Joint Association of Classical Teachers (JACT) are equally impressive. It is no exaggeration to say that without his extraordinary leadership and indefatigable efforts, LACT would not have existed, let alone become an irresistible force in leading teacher development, in-service training and reform across the capital city. The incomparable LACTOR series is simply the most striking manifestation of LACT's

dynamic engagement. Michael was LACT's Foundation Secretary and later its President. He was also a ferociously industrious and efficient Executive Secretary of JACT, editor of its *Bulletin* and later its Consultant Secretary-General and an Honorary Member. In addition, he served on the Councils of the Classical Association and Hellenic Society, and held numerous senior positions in examination boards and national working groups.

At his funeral Mass (he converted to Catholicism in his later years), many tributes were read out from some of those who knew his work. 'He was a man of intellectual and social finesse and of spiritual depth', wrote a former Classics teaching colleague, Father Peter Gallagher, SJ. One of Michael's authors, Marion Gibbs, reflected: 'He was a great man (and a witty one and wonderful company) who made a huge difference to the teaching of the Classics over the years.'

His successor at JACT, John Murrell, says: 'I was indeed saddened to learn of Michael's death. It marks an end of an era in the history of classical teaching. The world of classical teaching in schools in the United Kingdom owes an immense and unequalled debt to Michael.'

And finally, John Muir of King's College, London, writes: 'Michael had remarkable gifts, not only of clear vision and inspiration but also an infinite capacity for taking pains. He was a vital member of that central group which transformed classical education in this country when it was in very serious danger of collapse. For me he was a gentleman in the best and widest sense: his company was delightful, he had a rare generosity of spirit, boundless hospitality, and - always - an entirely natural and cheerful courtesy.'

There are some common threads here, which underline emphatically that Michael should be seen as standing squarely at the centre of a now largely forgotten but extraordinarily transformative period. Sir Christopher Wren's epitaph in St Paul's (fittingly, for an alumnus of St Paul's School) has an apt resonance. 'Look all round, if you wish to see the legacy': *si monumentum requiris, circumspice*. The inspirational, impassioned and above all infinitely humane leadership and friendship which Michael offered over so many years will rightly live on.

**David Taylor**