David Mervyn Jones (1922–2008)

David Mervyn Jones (29 July 1922 – 14 October 2008) was a Fellow of Exeter, and Lecturer in Greek and Latin Languages and Literature 1951–1961; he vacated his Fellowship in 1962, was a Research Fellow of St Antony’s 1962–3, and then spent the rest of his working life in the Information Research Department of the Foreign Office.

Mervyn (he never used his first name) was brought up in Sheffield, and went to King Edward VII School there. His father was an Old English scholar, and his mother also an English teacher. He left school with a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge, but was not to take this up till after the war. After a year studying classics at Aberystwyth, he joined, in 1942, one of the Japanese courses designed to train translators who could help to decipher and interpret Japanese intercepts. He therefore spent the rest of the war at Bletchley Park, where he was one of a team of four (including the late Regius Professor of Divinity, Maurice Wiles) who worked on a particular set of ciphers. (His contribution is recorded by Wiles in *Codebreakers*, ed. F. H. Hinsely and Alan Stripp, Oxford 1993, 285). Life at Bletchley was not all work and no play. The place was full of music and musicians, and Mervyn was one of many to be seen carrying his instrument (a viola) around to join some congenial group. Classical music in fact remained always a vital part of his life. Haydn in particular was his constant companion, and in his last years he kept himself sane by going over in his head the many classical works he knew by heart.

Returning to Cambridge in 1945, he took a First in the Classical Tripos and won the Porson Prize for Greek Verse. He enjoyed mimicking his tutor’s comment on this event: ‘I’m glad you won the Porson, they nearly didn’t award it.’ It was the kind of remark he liked to make himself. He went on to become a Research Fellow of Trinity (1949–51), working on the scholia to Aristophanes, and then spent a brief period as a Lecturer in Glasgow, before being appointed to Exeter as Fellow in Classics, following E A Barber who since 1943 had combined that role with the Rectorship.

In his ten years as a tutor, he continued working on Aristophanes and the scholia, as well as examining in Mods and playing his part in College and faculty affairs. Pupils have vivid memories of him: a certain bird-like look; a sharpness (‘the alphabet for marking does not stop at gamma’); and a kindness shown in hospitality; a readiness to share his love of music (‘if he thought you were intelligent he played you LPs of Sibelius’) or display his skill at table tennis; and, in particular, a memorable revision period at a retreat house near Glastonbury in 1961.

But this was at the very end of his time at Exeter, for in the second half of the fifties Mervyn’s life had changed greatly. His marriage to Marion Webster fell apart. He found himself disenchanted with classical studies; he was not, he would later say, a literary person. Having long been a somewhat strident unbeliever, he became a confirmed Anglican. Most of all, in the context of the Hungarian uprising of 1956, he became fascinated with Hungary and its language. In this he was helped by Stefan Weinstock, Senior Lecturer in Roman Religion and later himself a Fellow of Exeter, who was amazed at Mervyn’s facility in learning Hungarian. (Mervyn in fact had a very great ability for 14 languages of all kinds: he had an exact memory and an exact ear.) The upshot of all this was a change of career. In making this, he was generously supported by the College, and especially by Rector Wheare, and was able to take up a Research Fellowship at St Antony’s before joining his Foreign Office.
department. His work thereafter was not limited to Hungary: he became an expert in many aspects of eastern European affairs under Soviet domination. He remained a scholar. His book *Five Hungarian Writers* was published in 1966, and much later (1998) he produced a two-volume translation of the huge work on political theory by the nineteenth-century Hungarian thinker József Eötvös, for which he was honoured by the Hungarian government.

In 1972, Mervyn married Nan Dunbar, a Fellow of Somerville, who had been his pupil at Glasgow. She was occupied for many years in writing a very important commentary on Aristophanes’ *Birds* (1994). She dedicated it to Mervyn and records not only his work on reading, improving and abbreviating her drafts, but his ‘gentle but unrelenting pressure to get the work finished’.

Nan died in 2005. Mervyn’s health was by then much impaired, and he spent the last two years of his life in a nursing home in North Oxford.

Donald Russell

Reproduced with permission from the Exeter College Association Register 2009