

John Whitehorne FAHA

1944-2020



Courtesy of the Whitehorne family

John Whitehorne, who passed away on 5 March 2020, was Australia's undisputed premier papyrologist during his lifetime. In truth, he was Australia's only papyrologist for much of this time, a lonely antipodean pursuit sustained by regular visits to the northern hemisphere to meet colleagues and examine papyri. In between such trips, he enjoyed the fellowship of the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Queensland, where he worked for forty years, retiring as an Associate Professor in 2011.

Born in London on 2 July 1944, John was educated at Manchester Grammar School, graduating in 1962 in the same year as

another future leading papyrologist, Alan Bowman. He took his Bachelor of Arts at University College London, graduating with First Class honours in 1965. It was there that he met Professor (later Sir) Eric Turner, the leading British papyrologist, who introduced John to the papyri from Graeco-Roman Egypt which were to become his major academic pursuit. Following his graduation, John undertook an MA at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, graduating in 1967 with a thesis on the Roman poetry and marvelling at the Latin pronunciation of the works of Horace by a local he encountered on a walking tour of Italy during what was his first of many visits to a country he came to love, especially the city of Florence.

At the conclusion of his MA, John was appointed in 1968 as a Lecturer in Classics at the University of Auckland. It was there that his life-long love of bushwalking led him to meet another life-long love, his future wife Judy (whom he was to marry in 1972), in an Alpine sports club. After two short years in Auckland he returned to England in 1970 to begin a PhD under Turner's direction at UCL, editing unpublished Greek papyri from the famous Oxyrhynchus collection of the Egypt Exploration Society held at Oxford. Within the first year of his doctoral studies, however, another job in the antipodes caught his eye.

Bob Milns had been appointed as Chair of Classics and Ancient History at the University

of Queensland in August 1970, replacing the long-time incumbent Charles Gordon Cooper. In 1971, Milns led a selection committee which considered John's application, asking then Agent-General of Queensland Sir William Summerville to interview him in London, as was not uncommon in those days. A favourable impression confirmed his appointment, which was to start in August 1971. Thus after only one year as a full time doctoral candidate John left for Australia, to join the group of young scholars assembled under Milns in Brisbane. His PhD thesis, an 'Edition, with Translation and Commentary, of Twenty Six Unpublished Greek Papyri from Oxyrhynchus' was completed externally, and awarded on 23 February 1977, with John visiting England over the Australian summer to defend it.

He remained at the University of Queensland until his retirement in 2011, teaching Latin and Ancient Greek from introductory to fourth-year Honours level, the literature of the Graeco-Roman world in translation, and the cultural history of the ancient Mediterranean world. In later years he diversified his own teaching and that of the department by introducing courses on 'Egypt and Ancient Western Asia (Mesopotamia)' and 'New Kingdom Egypt' (later called 'Pharaohs and Empire'), units which remained popular even after his retirement, when he continued to teach them in the summer semester. Students recalled him as demanding yet witty, thorough yet laid back, and dedicated to his students to the point of taking on extra workload to assure students had the advanced language training they would need to undertake further study at the highest level. Colleagues valued his keen sense of humour, his disinclination to suffer fools gladly, and his kind and humane nature in equal measure. He participated ritually in the Department's twice-yearly bush walks, adorning his office door with a photo taken while asleep out

bush, which he had captioned 'Flat out as usual'.

John's first publication, in the 1969 issue of *Axion*, took impassioned and wryly humorous issue with the suggestion of the editors in a prior number that one might undertake the translation of Greek or Latin poetry with little or no formal training in the Classical languages. John showed himself there as he did throughout his career to be both a staunch defender of the Classics, and advocate for proper training in them, which numerous students over the years benefited from. He was a Classicist in the old sense: while he taught and wrote on historical topics, his university training in the Classical world had focussed exclusively on its languages and literatures: he once admitted that the last Ancient History he had formally studied was in high school. Yet alongside teaching on the cultures of the Graeco-Roman world, he also published extensively on its history, in addition to regular publications on its languages and literature.

Throughout his career, John published regularly in a range of classical domains. The *Bibliographie Papyrologique* maintained in Brussels lists nearly 100 publications in the domain of papyrology alone, from a short note redating one papyrus and offering corrections on another in 1975, to an edition of a previously unpublished official letter on papyrus in 2015. Yet his output, which, reviews included, extended to 142 publications, stretched beyond papyrology to embrace other Classical topics as diverse as Roman poetry (the Aeneid, Horace); Greek comedy (Aristophanes, Menander), tragedy (Euripides, Sophocles), and poetry (Theocritus); and Roman republican and imperial history.

If he published beyond his chosen discipline, it was nevertheless in papyrology which he made his major and lasting contribution. He served as one of the lead editors on three

volumes of the prestigious series *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (49 [1982], 59 [1992], 62 [1995]), and made contributions, in most cases substantial, to another two (50 [1983], 73 [2009]). He also co-edited volumes of papyri from Prague, Birmingham, and those found at the Egyptian Oasis site of Ismant el-Kharab, ancient Kellis. In addition to these collections, in articles and contributions to edited volumes he published papyri held in museums and libraries as diverse as Michigan, Vienna, and Otago.

As any good papyrologist should, this editorial activity was complemented by a steady procession of historical treatments of Graeco-Roman Egypt drawing on the evidence of the papyri on a wide range of topics, including the Roman administration in Egypt (a topic to which he regularly returned), the social history of the province, Greek literature on papyrus, and the religious landscape of Graeco-Roman Egypt. His interest in the history of Ptolemaic Egypt culminated in a 1994 monograph *Cleopatras*, which took as its topic the less well-known bearers of that name, and which went through multiple editions in the subsequent decade.

Alongside these synthetic works of history, he made a number of important and more lengthy technical contributions, the most used among which was *Strategi and Royal Scribes of Roman Egypt: Chronological List and Index*, first published with his long-time collaborator Guido Bastianini in 1987, with a second revised edition in 2006. He was a fixture at the triennial International Congresses of Papyrology throughout his career, travelling during study leaves to work in Ann Arbor Michigan, Florence, and Oxford, among many locations. A term on the editorial team of the premier Anglophone journal of papyrology, the *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists*, confirmed his status in the field.

In recognition of his international status, in 2003 he was elected as a fellow of the

Academy and joined the Classical Studies section, leading the section from 2008 to 2011.

Despite his fondness for storytelling and occasions, John was in many ways a quiet man, who was modest about his many achievements, and whose characteristic quick-witted quips could not hide his fundamental humane decency. He is survived by his wife Judy, two sons, and four grandchildren.

Malcolm Choat FAHA