

## Michael J. Osborne (1942–2024)

Professor Michael John Osborne (25 January 1942 – 23 June 2024) is a towering figure of the last half century in the disciplines of Ancient Athenian history and epigraphy. He embodied a remarkable combination of intellect and dedication to his work with an engaging personality, irreverent sense of humour and zest for life, and he will be very much missed.

He was only two years old when his father Samuel lost his life in June 1944 fighting during the Second World War for the liberation of France, and his mother Olive was left on her own to rear him and his brother Chris in Eastbourne, England. He attended Eastbourne Grammar School, and was subsequently awarded a scholarship to Oxford University where he studied classics and archaeology.

After graduating in 1965 (in 1968 he also completed his MA at Oxford in *Literae Humaniores*) he lectured at Bristol University and then, from 1966 to 1982, at Lancaster University. It was in these years that his close connection with and affection for Greece, and in particular Athens, developed (he would joke that he made epigraphy his specialty so as to have the excuse "to bugger off to Greece" as much as possible).

The primary sites of his fieldwork were the Epigraphic Museum, and the basement *apotheke* of the Agora; his research base was the British School at Athens. He managed not only to be prodigiously diligent with his work at epigraphic autopsy or library research, but also to be happily engaged in life. A morning spent with inscriptions in the Epigraphic Museum typically would be followed by a trip by bus to Raphina, to have an unhurried meal accompanied with *Pikermi* retsina with colleague epigraphers at a seafood taverna by the port. Or, if his autopsies were at the Agora, the lunch venue was invariably at the *Epiros* taverna across the road. The pleasure in company and the simple enjoyment of life in Athens was as important to him as his work.

In 1973 while on a fellowship at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, he met the Belgian scholar Leon Mooren, at whose encouragement he undertook his doctorate at the Katholieke Universiteit at Leuven under the promotion of Willy Peremans. The topic was the decrees granting Athenian citizenship, the fieldwork for which he had been working on since 1970. The work culminated in the publication of the four volume *Naturalization in Athens* [Brussels, 1981-1983]. With its painstaking presentation of the decree texts complete with minute epigraphic descriptions, pithy, entertaining and sometimes combative historical commentaries, and, in the final volume, masterful synthesis of a highly complex legal framework and its evolution over centuries, *Naturalization* stands as a monument in Greek epigraphical studies. It remains the standard work on the subject – indeed most of the few revisions have been made by Michael himself in papers published in recent years.

In the 1970s, Peter Fraser, who, as director of the British School at Athens had become a close friend and mentor, invited Michael to edit the Attic volume of the *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*. Key to this decision was Michael's keen interest in the demography of ancient Athens, particularly as evidenced by Attic tombstones, of citizen and foreign residents.

Michael's move from Britain to Australia in 1983 to take up the chair of Classical Studies at The University of Melbourne marked a turning point for the department, which until then had been venerable but staid in its literary and linguistic focus. An early action was to commandeer a disused meeting room and brand it as the Centre for Attic Prosopography and Epigraphy. Into this room he brought dozens of boxes containing his hundreds of squeezes of decrees from the Classical and Hellenistic periods, and dozens more with thousands of file cards made out in his neat hand for Athenian individuals destined for *LGPN*, or with carefully constructed stemmata of Athenian families. He also installed two computer terminals linked to the university mainframe to enable the digitization of the onomastic data, which, in the early 1980s, had placed him at the cutting edge of humanities research.

The move to Melbourne also marked a turning point for his own career. Initially he held no ambition beyond heading his department and continuing his teaching and research. But his dynamic presence was quickly felt and appreciated at his new university. He soon became involved in administrative roles, first at the faculty level, then for central administration, and within a few years he had become Vice-President of the Academic Board and a Pro-Vice-Chancellor. Inevitably, and sadly, this came at a cost to his direct involvement in teaching – his lectures had fast become famous and are remembered fondly by his students to this day – but he was determined to maintain his research.

He became Vice-Chancellor and President of La Trobe University in 1990, a position he was to hold for sixteen years. The demands that this role placed on him were enormous. As well as overseeing the expansion of La Trobe's domestic standing and research credentials, Michael was committed to elevating his university's international profile and developing collaborative programs across the world, and particularly in Asia. This demanded a punishing amount of travel (although, characteristically, he chose not to suffer this as a burden but to relish it in all its details). Yet unusually, perhaps uniquely for a university president, he would not allow these demands to compromise his own research. He saw *LGPN II* through to a timely publication, although tellingly needing to pen his January 1993 preface while on university business in Phnom Penh; two years later, he was in the same city again when he wrote the introduction to the *Foreign Residents of Athens*. He was an active member of the editorial board of the *Inscriptiones Graecae* editio tertia project from its inception, and undertook the editing of fasc. IV of the decrees (300/299–230/29 BC.). The exigencies of his administrative duties may have pressed hard, but he cherished the opportunity to return regularly to Athens to lecture and take part in the epigraphic conferences held in these years. His talks, full of his characteristic wit and verve, were eagerly anticipated by all except the speakers scheduled to follow him, who were wary of his status as the hard act to follow.

In May 2014 he signed off the preface to the *IG* fascicle "in capitibus Sinarum". This was several years after his retirement, and attests that alongside his Greek connections, those he had made in China, especially with Peking University where he accepted a professorship and had introduced programs of Greek studies,

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were strong and enduring. This was also the case with the Greek community in Australia, with whose generous support he had founded the National Centre for Hellenic Studies.

Michael's personal qualities – his enjoyment of relaxing in company, his self-effacing humour, his generosity and kindness – will be long remembered and missed. He was one of a post-war generation of Attic epigraphers, from Greece and across the world, which has made an immeasurable contribution to its field, and his membership of this group was a feature of his rich and varied life of which he was extremely proud.

S. G. BYRNE



Michael J. Osborne in the Epigraphical Museum by *IG II<sup>3</sup> 1, 4, 985*.