

Wolverhampton Wanderings

A Tribute to Classics Master Reginald Percival Baker

By Barry Baldwin

From the Garton Archive: Item of Interest No 35

Editorial Introduction

The latest Item of Interest from the Garton archive at Lincoln Christ's Hospital School has been written by the distinguished alumnus, Barry Baldwin, who also composed Occasional Paper No 8, 'Not the Browning Version', a memoir of life at Lincoln School in the late 1940s and early '50s.

A selection of Barry's extensive oeuvre graces the shelves in the Garton Archive, including *An Anthology of Later Latin Literature*, published in 1987 by JC Gieben, Amsterdam; and *The Latin and Greek Poems of Samuel Johnson*, first published by Duckworth & Co Ltd in 1995.

Peter Harrod
Assistant Archivist at LCHS



Barry Baldwin at Lincoln School in 1949



The Mature Barry Baldwin

In the Classical Sixth at our Lincoln School (1956-59), we were coached in Latin Verse Composition by the Reverend R. P. Baker, universally known as 'Bunny', as was, by remarkable coincidence, one of our lecturers at Nottingham University. He invariably appeared with his other bible, a black-bound copy of *Versus Wulfrunenses*, containing the Latin verses composed at Wolverhampton Grammar School, of which 'Bunny' was a proud alumnus.

Our efforts were compared to these *exempla*, usually unfavourably. I recall being once stunned when a compliment came my way for hitting off the line *Depereunt pariter reges et gloria regum* (Kings and their glory perish alike), pronounced by him to be “not unworthy of Ovid.” This one minute of fame was not repeated.

The ‘Bunny Bible’ comprised verses from the years 1897-1929, the latter marking its date of publication. From time to time, Amazon UK offers a copy for the preposterous price of 100+ quid. At the time of writing, it is “currently unavailable”. At the other end of the pecuniary scale, a copy recently went on E-Bay for 99p + postage. You could probably get a copy directly from the School. When librarian Lynne Johnson kindly replaced my flood-lost one, she mentioned that there were lots of copies available.

The Preface tells all:

“This volume contains the Latin Verse written in concert by the Sixth Form of Wolverhampton Grammar School during the mastership of Alfred Robinson. These compositions, with the exception of Mr Robinson’s own versions at the end of the volume, are verses made to order, blackboard versions, the work of many hands: they cannot be expected to exhibit the unity of style and treatment that should characterize the work of the individual scholar working as the spirit moves him. But if these few versions, such as they are, can in any way serve to indicate the standard of excellence attained by that Sixth Form under the teaching of Mr Robinson, if they can in any way reflect his own untiring personal devotion during that period and serve as some memorial of his mastership, it will be enough.”

As Simon and Garfunkel almost warbled, Here’s To You, Mr Robinson....

An unusual opportunity, then, to witness both collective and individual at work, “licking their bear-cubs into shape,” as Virgil said of his own work method.

Various English poets are put into elegiac couplets, the only metre employed. The usual suspects: Shakespeare; Gray’s Elegy - beginning *iam campana* as almost all versions do; Tennyson; Yeats; and Matthew Arnold who gets the lion’s share. Alongside these are a handful of translations from the Greek Anthology, a tradition going back at least to Sir Thomas More in England, also ubiquitous across Europe as the two books by James Hutton show in abundant detail.

For a conveniently short example of the collective in action, here’s Housman’s ‘Epitaph On An Army of Mercenaries’:

These, in the day when heaven was falling,
The hour when earth’s foundations fled,
Followed their mercenary calling
And took their wages and are dead.
Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
They stood and earth’s foundations stay;
What God abandoned these defended
And saved the sum of things for pay.

In Wolverhamptonian couplets this turned into:

*Hi quo templa die caeli concussa ruebant,
ima ubi terrestris dissiluisse globi.*

*conducti pretio sua dum stipendia quaerunt,
et pretium et mortem mox meruere suam.
sed suspensa umeris caeli conversa tenebant,
sed stabant, tellus et stabilita manet:
quod di prodiderant falsi servare valebant,
proque suo reddunt omnia tuta lucro.*

You hardly need me to point up the elegant distillation of Virgilian, Lucretian, and Ovidian flavours. To this is appended *Qui legis, hi pro te prima periere iuventa/ crastina ne perdas haec hodierna dabant*, rendering “For your to-morrow they gave their today.”

As specimen of Mr Robinson going solo, I choose this piece of Wordsworth:

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love.
A violet by a mossy stone
Half-hidden from the eye -
Fair as a star when only one
Is shining in the sky.
She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!

Mr R did this full justice:

*Te locus humano numquam pede tritus habebat,
amnis ubi primas Dovius haurit aquas:
per vitam nullis ibi commendata fuisti
grataque quam paucis caraque facta tuis!
flos veluti violas quae fallens lumina saxo
condita muscoso semireducta latet:
lux veluti stellae quae splendet in aethere lato
sola et sidereo non comitata choro:
talis eras, ignota viris dum vita manebat,
et pauci norant fata obiisse Chloen;
terra tamen te condit, et o quam vita superstes
iam mutata mihi dissimilisque meast!*

The volume concludes with Robinson’s salute to the School, *Carmen Wulfrunense*, from which I borrow the line *Vivat crescat floreat* as salutation and valediction, both to this anthology and the memory of ‘Bunny’ Baker.

Biographical details of the author

Lincoln School, 1948-56. University of Nottingham, 1956-59, on Revis Scholarship (BA Classics, 1st-Class Honours); PhD Classics, 1962. Assistant Lecturer in History, Loughborough College, 1960-62. Lecturer in History, University of New England, NSW, Australia, 1963-65. Professor of Classics, University of Calgary, Canada, 1965-1997, including 10 years as Department Head. Emeritus Professor, 1997-present. Elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, 1997. Publications: 12 books on Greek/Roman/Byzantine history/language/literature; c. 1000 articles/chapters/reviews on classical, neo-Latin (especially Samuel Johnson), and the more esoteric Albanian history, language, & literature; c. 70 short stories, mainly mysteries; numerous articles and reviews on numerous topics for numerous magazines & newspapers.

Barry remains a devoted, long-suffering supporter of Lincoln City! So does Peter Harrod and also, curiously enough, of Wolverhampton Wanderers!