

# Gordon Myron Messing

*March 4, 1917 — May 15, 2002*

Gordon Messing, Professor of Classics and Linguistics from 1967-87 and Professor Emeritus from 1987, died on May 15, 2002 after prolonged ill-health, still deeply grieving the loss of his beloved wife and partner of fifty years, Florence, who had passed away in June 1996. He was a gentleman of profound and far-ranging learning, a lover of books, a wonderfully eccentric family man, and one of the most fair-minded and humane colleagues one could hope to have, even though his old-fashioned and outspoken political conservatism often dismayed students and faculty. For Gordon understood better than most how to see even those with whom he profoundly disagreed as individuals whose welfare should be protected, not as manifestations of an ideology to be crushed if the opportunity arose. He lent his support to all his colleagues in their times of personal and professional troubles.

Gordon Messing's education seemed clearly to mark him for the academic world. Born on March 4, 1917 in Toledo, Ohio, he graduated from Shortridge High School in Indianapolis and entered Harvard as a Conant Fellow in 1934. He graduated *summa cum laude* in Classics in 1938 and went on to take his A.M. degree in Classics in 1940 and his Ph.D. degree in Classics and Comparative Philology in 1942, at the age of 25. Gordon wrote his dissertation on Indo-European laryngeal theory, under the direction of the great Joshua Whatmough, and in Latin: "De consonantibus quae laryngophoni vocantur, praecipue quod ad linguam antiquam Graecam attinet." While the Latin of his dissertation linked him to an age that was passing, his reference, in Latin, to Greek as "ancient Greek" put him ahead of most present day Classicists, who, to the confusion of students, still style courses in ancient Greek "Greek," and those in the contemporary language "Modern Greek." The detail is important. For Gordon had spent the year following his A.B. degree, 1938-39, the eve of the Second World War, visiting Europe on a Harvard Traveling Fellowship, before pursuing his graduate work. It was then that his passion for current vernaculars and their cultural environments began to match his enthusiasm for ancient languages and philology. Significantly, when he was recalled from retirement at Cornell to teach Greek in 1988, it was to teach Modern, not Ancient Greek. Indeed, Gordon's long monograph about Modern Greek gypsy dialects, *A Glossary of Greek Romany, As Spoken in Agia Varvara (Athens)*, published by Slavica, in his home state of Ohio, in 1988, was the product of his final years as Professor of Classics and Linguistics at Cornell.

Gordon spent the four years following his Ph.D. degree in the U.S. Army. He served with the Western Task Force in North Africa, with the Fifth Army Headquarters in North Africa and Italy, and with the USFA in Austria, and was awarded the Bronze Star Medal. Yet the academic in him remained intact. He was fond of telling how he met

the philosopher Benedetto Croce in Naples, devastated by war, and searched the whole city for some suitable book to offer him as a present. He found only an old edition of Propertius. Croce appreciated it and reciprocated with one of his own books.

Although, then, given his formal education, it is not surprising to find him appointed, after the end of the war, Instructor in Latin at Bowdoin College and then Assistant Professor of Classics and Chairman of the Department of Comparative Philology at the University of Wisconsin, it is also not surprising that he left academia in 1947 and spent the next twenty years in the United States Foreign Service. He was attached to the U.S. Embassies in Vienna (1947-53), Athens (1955-60), and Reykyavik (1962-65) before returning to the Washington area and taking early retirement in 1967. In keeping with the curious parallelism of his double career and his intellectual interests, however, his most widely-known scholarly work among classicists, his revised edition of Smyth's, *A Greek Grammar for Colleges*, was published by the press of his old *alma mater*, Harvard, in 1956, during his foreign service years. His new edition is still the most complete descriptive Grammar of Ancient Greek in the English language. Unfortunately, in some ways, his revisions, while adapting the original to modern scholarship, were made just before the publication of definitive texts of the recently deciphered Mycenaean Greek. Yet no one has yet stepped in to revise Gordon's revisions.

When Gordon came to Cornell, then, he was resuming a career in teaching, but simply continuing a career of publication. Indeed, around a third of his more than a hundred publications appeared before his official return to academia. Those who knew the tweeded, conservative Gordon of Goldwin Smith Hall found it hard to imagine the other Gordon who spoke or read around a dozen modern languages, and not only conversed with gypsies on the outskirts of Athens, but catalogued their vocabulary. He was, indeed, very much a linguist in an older, polyglot, tradition, profoundly learned in literature of all epochs, a menace to visiting lecturers who misquoted a line of Byron, Pound or Elytis or commented incautiously upon the Russian novel. Language enthralled him not only as a phenomenon in and of itself, but as the vehicle of human expression, be it lofty poetry or lowly conversation. So did music. He and Florence loved all kinds of music and could sing, very ably, popular songs from many lands and many ages (and in many languages). It was always a delight to hear them singing an old French song of Mistinguette's, or a Neapolitan song by Murolo.

Although Gordon's own Modern Greek was replete with archaisms, he championed the teaching of demotic Greek at Cornell even after his retirement. It would have saddened him greatly to know that his most popular contribution to the Classics Department curriculum, "Modern" Greek, did not stay among its offerings for long

after his death. He remains the first and last scholar holding a regular, professorial appointment, to teach Modern Greek at this university.

His children Hope, Faith, Daniel, and Seth, and all his grandchildren share our pride in Gordon and his dear Florence. Perhaps it will console them to know that many at Cornell feel their loss deeply and sincerely.

*Pietro Pucci, Frederick Ahl*