

# Gordon M. Kirkwood

*May 7, 1916 — January 16, 2007*

Gordon M. Kirkwood was a Professor of Classics at Cornell for nearly 40 years and a renowned scholar of Greek literature. Born May 7, 1916, in Toronto, he was the son of George L.M. and Gertrude Marlatt Kirkwood. After growing up in Peterborough, Ontario, he entered Trinity College, University of Toronto, where he earned his B.A. degree in Classics in 1938. That fall, he enrolled at Cornell for graduate study, where he met Patricia Frueh, also a graduate student in Classics, who was to become his wife of 66 years. After receiving their M.A. degrees from Cornell in 1939, both went to Johns Hopkins University to complete their education. They were married in 1940 and in 1942 were awarded their Ph.D. degrees in Classics.

Mr. Kirkwood enlisted in the Canadian Navy in 1942, and was posted in Ottawa where he served as an intelligence officer during World War II. In 1945, he moved to Washington, DC, where he worked in intelligence for the British Foreign Office until the end of the war.

He returned to academia in 1945, taking a position as a Latin master at Lower Canada College in Montreal. The next year, he joined the Classics Department at Cornell as an Instructor and remained there for the next 38 years. He became a full Professor in 1959 and in 1973 was named the Frederic J. Whiton Professor of Classics.

Among his scholarly publications was *A Study of Sophoclean Drama*, which was selected for the 1959 Goodwin Award of Merit given by the American Philological Association to the year's outstanding contribution to classical scholarship. He was also author of *Early Greek Monody* (1974) and editor of *Poetry and Poetics, Studies in Honor of James Hutton* (1975) and *Selections from Pindar* (1981). On a lighter note, he wrote a popular *Short Guide to Classical Mythology* (1960), which remains in print to this day. He also wrote numerous articles and reviews and was co-editor of *Cornell Studies in Classical Philology*.

Although he was well known for his scholarship, Mr. Kirkwood believed strongly that educating students was a professor's most important job. Not surprisingly, then, he was a dedicated and popular teacher of Greek and Latin language and literature. In 1978, he won Cornell's Clark Award for Distinguished Teaching.

From 1963-72, he was Chairman of the Classics Department. During his tenure, he substantially expanded and strengthened the department. He also helped establish the Prescott W. Townsend Fund, which brings scholars to campus to lecture and supports pre-doctoral fellowships and travel grants for classics graduate students.

Among the awards he received were fellowships from the Ford Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He was elected President of the American Philological Association for 1981.

After he retired in 1984 as Professor Emeritus, friends and colleagues compiled a volume of essays in his honor entitled "Language and the Tragic Hero." During his retirement, he remained involved in his field and wrote *The Classics at Cornell*, a history of the department, published in 1999.

At a memorial gathering on April 14, 2007, many friends and colleagues testified to the importance of Gordon's influence at key times in their lives and others wrote of his outstanding teaching and scholarship and of the famous hospitality of the Kirkwood family. Jeffrey Rusten, Acting Chair of Classics, said:

*"In addition to being a world-renowned scholar of Greek literature and an influential teacher, as department chair Gordon was the first to conceive of classics as embracing archeology, historical linguistics, and contemporary approaches to literature. Our department today is unthinkable without his vision."*

Cornell alumna Isabel McGinty, now a lawyer, wrote that the elementary Greek class he taught was

*"a course that changed the course of my life. I loved the material. It captivated me and sparked my interest in taking more and more Classics courses. But it was Professor Kirkwood himself who made the class such a pleasure to attend, and made the study of the Greek language so exquisite an experience."*

Former colleague Ralph Johnson, now Professor Emeritus in the Department of Classics at the University of Chicago, wrote:

*"of my many warm memories of Ithaca and Cornell among the brightest are those of Gordon and Patricia. Their welcoming of newcomers was overwhelming in its kindness and generosity, and throughout the years their company was delightful and unfailingly affectionate. I've known many chairmen in my day, some of them good, some a bit less so, but none in my mind matches Gordon for what seems now a unique clustering of chairmanly virtues: fair-minded, firm, compassionate, witty, a paragon of unostentatious civility and a perfect master when it came to fashioning equitable compromises. Rarest of rare birds."*

Andrew Ford, a Cornell undergraduate and now Professor of Classics at Princeton, wrote that

*"I vividly see him with the sunlight glinting off his glasses and with that big smile, but I recall few specific dicta. I think this is because so much of what he said became part of my mental furniture; a lot of what I know and respond to in Greek poetry came to light while Gordon was teaching."*

It would not be an exaggeration to say that many who knew Gordon Kirkwood regarded him with a warm affection akin to love.

Mr. Kirkwood was active as a volunteer in the area of mental health. He was a member of the Tompkins Country Mental Health Services Board and was on the original board of directors of HOMES, Inc. He also served on the board of Challenge Industries.

He is survived by his wife, Patricia; his sons, Michael, of Ithaca, and David and his wife, Annie, of New York; his sister-in-law, Margaret Frueh Rogers, of Fairfax, Virginia; and several nieces and nephews.

*Pietro Pucci, Chair; Kevin Clinton, John Coleman*