

A Tribute to Prof. Ian Kirby
Anglican Church, Christ Church, Lausanne
28 October 2017

On behalf of the English Department I would like to present my sincere condolences to the Kirby Family.

I personally owe Professor Kirby an immense debt, as he was one of the first persons at a Swiss university to give me a teaching opportunity after the completion of my doctoral research in England. I was offered a part-time position in the English department and held it from 1995 to 2001. That gave me the opportunity to collaborate with Ian and to get to know the English department very well. Although Professor Kirby was not involved in the appointment of his successor in 2005, I had, thanks to him, gained much experience and knowledge about the department, and I am sure it gave me an insider's perspective which was not negligible. I am very proud to be Professor Kirby's successor here at the University of Lausanne and I have always tried to build medieval English studies further, based on the very strong foundation that he provided before he retired in 2004.

In addition to his excellent teaching skills, Ian was a superb administrator. He offered his talent and skills to the English Department as its Head, a role he held for fourteen years. When one compares the two-year period that most of us cover as Head nowadays, one can measure the degree of attention and devotion Ian had for what was in a sense his second family. Ian was also a very important member of IAUPE, the International Association of University Professors of English, for which he worked as Secretary General for eighteen years. Following his retirement, Ian paid regular visits to the department, attending guest lectures and social events. It was always a pleasure seeing him on these occasions.

Ian's research interests were many. He published a monograph and several articles on Biblical quotations in Old Norse literature. He was also working on the completion of an edition for the Early English Text Society of an extremely significant early Middle English poem, Layamon's *Brut*. Ian also published several papers on runic inscriptions in North America, using that evidence to argue for a much earlier date for the colonization of North America by Europeans. He also co-authored an excellent piece on a fourteenth-century poem, *Pearl*, which provided new contextual evidence for the composition of the poem. I am teaching this semester a course on Arthurian literature with several sessions on Layamon's *Brut*, the epic poem Ian devoted so much of his research time. I am also teaching a seminar on the anonymous poem *Pearl* about which he co-wrote an influential article. I take particular pride knowing that my predecessor contributed significant information on these very important texts.

Ian was always humble, discreet and modest, which means his colleagues never managed to get a complete picture of his subtle personality and talents. For instance, I never saw Ian on stage, but I have been told that he was a marvellous actor. I believe he was also involved with the church and other local societies. What I know however is that Ian had an incredible knowledge in the field of medieval English literature, as well as Old Norse. He never displayed his knowledge just for the sake of it, but his competence was immense and broad ranging. However, when it mattered he would share it and he was especially generous and well intentioned towards his junior colleagues. To conclude, I would like to offer the following lines from the anonymous fourteenth-century poem called *Pearl*, mentioned earlier:

'O, perle,' quoth I, 'in perles pyght,
Art thou my perle that I have playned,

'Oh pearl, in those priceless pearls,' I said,
'are you really my pearl, whose passing I
mourn,

Regretted by myn one on nighte?
Much longing have I for thee layned
Syn into gresse thou me aglyghte.

Pensyf, payred, I am forpayned, -
And thou in a lif of lykyng light,
In Paradise erde, of stryf unstrayned. (ll. 241-48)

and grieve for alone through lonely nights?
Endless sorrow I have suffered and endured
since you slipped from my grasp to the grassy
earth;
I am hollow with loss and harrowed by pain,
Yet here you stand, lightened of all strife,
at peace in the land of Paradise. (trans. Simon
Armitage)

On behalf of the whole English Department and especially your medievalist colleagues, I would like to thank you, Ian, for having been such an inspiring colleague and such a good person.

Denis Renevey 28.10.2017