

Michael Graham-Jones

At the end of May 2006, a brief listing in the jobs section of the *Oxford University Gazette* caught my attention. It began: ‘*Not* a diary secretary, but a personal assistant to make downsizing enjoyable for family with one elderly member.’

At that time, I hadn’t been looking for an archival position, being busy with academic work, but the entry piqued my interest and made me laugh, unusual for the *Gazette*’s small ads, so I immediately telephoned the author ~ the ‘elderly family member’ ~ who was, of course, Michael.

We got along famously from that very first phone call. As with Charles (Handy), it was immediately apparent to me that Michael was a terribly special person, and that my sudden decision to apply for the position was a very serendipitous one.

Within the first five minutes of meeting, we discovered a comfortable web of shared references. Amongst other connections, my father, another Oxonian, had worked in Egypt for the British Council in the 1940s, under the command of the same characterful boss as Michael: C. A. F. Dundas, the Director of the Near East Section. With my father’s influence, I had inherited Civil Service-type habits ~ so, with a shared love of pedantry, rationalism and precise filing systems, Michael and I began our work together in perfect intellectual harmony.

The downsizing of the advert was in fact Michael’s final great project: the trimming, streamlining and organising of the vast paper trail of a wonderfully rich and meaningful life. Every room at the Limes was full of boxes, drawers and filing cabinets of photographs, sketches, newspaper cuttings, letters, articles, manuscripts and memoranda. His driving urgency, in typical Michael fashion, was to remove the burden from Susie and Felix of tackling this vast muddled treasure house. Over five years, we gradually whittled the mountain down into a manageable archive and kept the papers for his ongoing projects ticking over.

When I was pondering what to say today, one thought came to mind. That one of our tasks in this celebratory service ~ to try to distill something of the complex and beautiful polyphony of Michael’s fourscore and eleven ~ could be achieved by sharing some of the names of files we created over our five year project. A snapshot of the rich multiple strands informing his life.

The first day we tackled the heaps, for instance, a small sampling of active folders included: the Abbey at Sutton Courtenay, Music at Oriel, the Oxford and Cambridge Club, The Prison Phoenix Trust, The Thomas Hardy Society, Time and Eternity, Chatham House, Harrow, the Iran Society, the Yale Chamber Music Festival in Norfolk, Connecticut, the Society for the Promotion of New Music, the foundation of the NHS, Aspell, MODEM, and Sebastian’s *Commedia* project, which, of course, came to successful fruition earlier this year. Indeed Michael’s late eighties were busier and more productive than most people half his age: to reiterate Tom ~ they just don’t make them like that anymore.

Papers relating to friends and family constituted the most voluminous piles. As everyone gathered here knows, Michael inspired, supported and counselled his loved ones in all seasons, in darkness and in light. Again and again, I was deeply moved by his quiet care of his fellow human beings. Wordsworth wrote that “The best portion of a good man’s life/His little, nameless, unremembered acts/Of kindness and of love.” And while the many, many recipients of Michael’s loving letters and actions, do very much remember and indeed treasure his kindness and love ~ there were countless other life-changing benevolent acts that he managed to perform without others knowing.

When my mother died, being able to talk to Michael was always a huge comfort. In my career as an historian and curator, his support was invaluable, both practically and theoretically: indeed, once he was the only attendee at a badly scheduled lecture I was to give at the Museum of Oxford in 2008. We decided to skip the talk and have a long, leisurely lunch instead.

Michael's bright-eyed, unsentimental clarity of perception, about himself and others ~ that 'prune in the fruit salad' quality mentioned by Charles ~ was always tempered with an active compassion that facilitated positive change.

I think in this context, the influence of John Collins, founder of Christian Action, Chairman of CND and Chaplain of Oriel during Michael's undergraduate years is relevant. Canon Collins profoundly shaped his youthful theological and political beliefs and, indeed, is central to Michael's ongoing legacy to Oriel College. In 2007, with Felix, Collin's godson, we arranged for a portrait of Collins to be hung permanently in the Senior Common Room.

Oriel, for Michael, has also been one of many musical centres in his life, with the aforementioned champagne concerts and a new commissioned piece by Robin Holloway, to celebrate 25 years of Jennifer and Michael's marriage, being first performed there in 1971. Other constants were Glyndebourne, Garsington, Cerne Abbas Music Festival, and, of course, the ever-delightful Music at the Limes, which he was able to enjoy even when very frail. It was at Harrow, though, under the tutelage of Henry Havergal, that his musical education was really honed and, as another recent initiative, Michael and I worked on preserving his memory at the school.

Other Harrovian projects have included his establishment of a drama scholarship, in the name of Sebastian, for the best actor or director at the school and already some very fine young thespians have been assisted, including a president of OUDS.

Michael's extraordinary productivity and service to society is something that we must all try to continue. As one of Jennifer's ancestors, William Wilberforce (who sent all his sons to Oriel) asserted: "If any country were indeed filled with men, each thus diligently discharging the duties of his own station without breaking in upon the rights of others, but on the contrary endeavouring, so far as he might be able, to forward their views and promote their happiness, all would be active and harmonious in the goodly frame of human society."

For my own part, I will miss Michael most as a beloved friend: whose passing has left a very big hole in my life. Ninety-one seems very young at times like this. However, as C. S. Lewis the tutor of Michael's great friend the Rev Peter Wyld, once said, "Christians never really say goodbye..."

I'll close with an extract from one of the Harrow songs, which I shall read rather than sing:

When the afternoon is over
And the evening brings the breeze,
And the sunset glories hover
Round the steeple and the trees,
In the twilight as the shadows
Come to meet us o'er the plain,
We will wander through the meadows
Up the Hill and home again.

Anne Louise Avery, Oxford
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