

## Obituary

# In memoriam James Noel Adams CBE FBA (1943–2021)

David Langslow

University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

J. N. (Jim) Adams, probably the greatest Latinist of his time, perhaps of any time, died from a heart attack on 11 October at the age of 78.

Jim was born and educated in Sydney, Australia, where he took his first degree. He came to the UK in 1967 and never went home. After a doctoral thesis on Tacitus at Oxford, and two years of a research fellowship at Cambridge, he was appointed in 1972 to a lectureship in Manchester, where he stayed for 22 years, being given a personal chair in 1993, the year after his election to a Fellowship of the British Academy. He took leave away from Manchester only in 1994/5, but immediately moved more permanently, to a chair at Reading in 1995, and in 1998 to a Senior Research Fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, from which he retired in 2010.

Jim published ten books and nearly 100 articles and other pieces, and edited with colleagues a further four collective volumes. His work has quite transformed our knowledge and understanding of Latin of all kinds, literary and not. The subject and texture of what remains his most famous book (*The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* [Duckworth, 1982]) have misled many to think that the Latin sources that interested him were narrow and recondite, and his approach uncompromising and exclusive. True, he devoted much attention to authors and sets of documents that most of us had never heard of, let alone studied in detail. True, to follow his presentation and argument was no amble in the park, since he paid his readers the compliment of assuming that they had read much of the relevant background. But his style is plain, his ordering of material and argument startlingly clear, his habit of taking stock at each stage of the long route-march reassuring and inclusive. Reading a typescript of mine in 2020, he took me to task repeatedly for being allusive and for making unreasonable assumptions of prospective readers including students.

Already, longer and more detailed obituaries have appeared focusing on his scholarship, reviewing his work by period and topic.<sup>1</sup> For this journal, I have been asked to say something about Jim as a teacher, and about the consequences of his work for teachers and learners of Latin.

To take first the significance of his work for students of Latin, the key features are, I think, three. First, and most importantly, its comprehensiveness. Jim has decisively and forever broadened views of and approaches to Latin by treating the language as a whole, the high literary, the highly technical, the semiliterate and the most ‘hopeless gibberish’ alike and together – Latin of all sorts, of all periods, genres, registers, from Plautus and early inscriptions

to the emergence of the Romance languages. He has shown us Plautus’s mastery as a mimic of Latin speech and writing of all kinds; features of spoken Latin in Cicero and Catullus and all the usual suspects; the Latin precursors (e.g.) of French *ont* ‘they have’, of the French (and Romance) futures of the type *donnerai*, of the French (and Romance) verb nexus of the type *il le lui dit*. That a growing number of primary school children meet Latin through *Minimus* set in a fort on Hadrian’s Wall is indirectly thanks to Jim’s work within the Vindolanda team in making sense of the Latin of the writing tablets.

Secondly, he addressed single-handed and head-on the three really big outstanding questions about Latin as a whole: (a) What, in broad terms and in detail, are the varieties of Latin – in time, in space, in society, and in style in the broadest sense – and how do they relate to one another? (b) When Latin speakers met speakers of other languages, what happened to Latin, and to the other language, in each contact situation? and (c) How did one language Latin, for all its variety, evolve into the many Romance languages and dialects? These are breathtakingly bold questions to take on, each requiring command of impossibly large amounts of often intractable evidence. Countless scholars have shed narrow shafts of light suggesting often-contradictory ideas about the contents of the dark room. In Jim’s deft combination of exhaustive analysis and presentation of detail with discussion and conclusions of enormous scope and coherence, it is as if stately curtains are swept back, and the vast room flooded with light.

And thirdly, while he commanded all relevant linguistic theory, he referred to it sparingly, and used traditional terminology wherever it served without loss of clarity. The jargon-free neutrality of his language and the straightforward empiricism of his approach make of his results a timeless set of tools and resources.<sup>2</sup>

If Jim was not the classic, quintessential team-player, he did forge or take part in collaborations which yielded extremely important volumes on broad swathes of Latin – in poetry, in prose, in contact with other languages, and pre- and post-classical. Apart from his vital role within the Vindolanda team, mentioned above, it was Jim’s leadership from 1995 that was decisive in bringing to rapid and successful completion (in 2013) the monumental *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*.

Like his scholarship, Jim’s teaching (at least, what I experienced of it, mainly in Oxford) was conducted on, and in, his own terms. He used densely typed handouts and bibliographies, often with a supplementary sheet because he had typically prepared very early, and subsequently found more to read and say between sending the main pages for photocopying and actually delivering the class. His delivery was calm, well-worded, easy on the ear, his pace steady but

**Author of correspondence:** David Langslow, E-mail: [david.langslow@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:david.langslow@manchester.ac.uk)

**Cite this article:** Langslow D (2022) In memoriam James Noel Adams CBE FBA (1943–2021). *Journal of Classics Teaching* 23, 184–185. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631021000805>

relentless, his message terse, crystal-clear, and invigorating. There was no sitting back in his classes, for what he conveyed was to be found as yet nowhere in print. If you cared about his subject, you had to work hard to get it down in note form, since the handout gave only references and examples, little clue to what he was demolishing and rebuilding. His teaching thus ticked the 'research-led' box in no uncertain terms. It was less obviously interactive, although he welcomed questions during class, judged the level of his audience's knowledge sensitively, and spoke accordingly. Those judged to know enough Latin to keep up with an argument based on 100 examples in under an hour would simply (in colleagues' memorable appraisals) watch spellbound as he scored another century before lunch, or hold on for the ride as best they could as their general drove through the Ardennes!

He had little if anything to say *about* the literary or documentary text whose language he was teaching – if you wanted to know the plot of the play, the point of the poem, the historical background of the papyri, well, you knew where to look. His job was to teach you everything about the Latin of the writer of the text, both what was deducible from elsewhere in the same text and from other Latin sources, and what light it shed on broader questions about the history and varieties of the language, colloquial, high-style, male/female, dialectal, Grecising, technical, foreshadowing Italian, or whatever. Jim often recalled the teaching of the Hellenist G. P. Shipp<sup>3</sup> – clearly one of his most influential teachers at the University of Sydney – as giving no clue to the content or plot of the work the class was about. I thought that this was meant as criticism until I attended Jim's classes on Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus*. The point was, why waste precious class time (or written words) on topics already adequately addressed in print?

Jim knew as well as any how to 'walk with kings nor lose the common touch', and he took delight in both. In those of his students interested in the Latin language, he inspired a keen and enduring devotion, devotion to a teacher who was himself in idiosyncratic ways no less devoted to his students. Those pursuing non-academic careers after graduating retain decades later undimmed enthusiasm for the starkly illuminating – and bracing – quality of his classes. As for those of us pursuing postgraduate work and academic careers, Jim was always an unfailingly generous mentor, adviser, and friend, and a refreshingly, sometimes brutally frank reader and critic. The best possible fate for a piece of work on Latin and for its nervous author was to be read in draft by Jim. All who could bear his scrutiny and comments he simply showed how to be a better scholar. This is a vital part of his immense legacy to the study of

Latin. It is no exaggeration to say that by his example to the people he taught, supervised, encouraged, and inspired, he contributed to most of the work published on Latin linguistics in the last 30 years and now in progress.

At the end of a comic fantasy novel by Jim's namesake Douglas, a vast quantity of celestial music is brought to earth and attributed to a single person, J. S. Bach. The character Reg, who is responsible for this miracle, admits that the music was 'rather more than one man could actually do in a lifetime', but comforts himself with the thought, 'I don't suppose anybody will look at that too seriously'. Had we known not Jim the scholar and the man, but merely the thousands of pages that bear his name, we may have had the same doubts. On the other hand, for the sake of the future of the subject, it is vital that many continue to look at his pages really quite seriously. It has been well said (by a mutual friend in conversation) that Jim 'is as close as we can get to a native speaker of Latin'. The wise student of any language knows how important it is to hear and interact with native speakers. It is hard to think of a language-related topic in Latin literature or Roman history on which reading Jim would not shed light or give pause for thought.

His final article, submitted months before he died – appropriately enough challenging traditional views of the standardisation of Latin – will be published posthumously by the Philological Society. His last book, which appeared in May 2021 – on *asyndeton* (that is, omission of coordinators like *and*, *but*, or) in Latin literature, laws, and prayers – bears on its front cover a fitting epitaph for Jim's whole career in the study and teaching of Latin: *VENI, VIDI, VICI*.

## Notes

1 See especially Eleanor Dickey's in *Commentaria Classica*. – For a longer appreciation of Jim's work until his retirement in 2010, see the foreword to the volume published in his honour on that occasion (*Colloquial and Literary Latin*, edited by Eleanor Dickey and Anna Chahoud [CUP 2010]). It is impossible not to repeat here some of the anecdotes I recall there.

2 See, for example, his introduction to the numerous types of code-switching, linguistic interference, and borrowing (with associated terminology) in his sixth book, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language* (CUP 2003), 18–29.

3 Best known perhaps for *Studies in the Language of Homer* (CUP 1953, 2nd edn 1972), and *Modern Greek Evidence for the Ancient Greek Vocabulary* (Sydney UP 1979), Shipp worked also on the language of Latin comedy, an abiding interest of Jim's. Shipp may have inspired also Jim's interest in the distribution of synonymous or complementary words as evidence for their social or connotational meaning, as seen (e.g.) in his articles on words for 'put', 'throw', 'woman', 'wife', 'prostitute', 'kill', and all of the *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*.