

**Speech about Mark Whittow, delivered by James Howard-Johnston on the evening of 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2018, between the main course and dessert in Oriel Hall, reconstructed a month later from scrawled notes on an index card.**

I rise full of trepidation. We have had many eloquent evocations of a past world bestridden by Mark from pupils and colleagues in the course of the day. Then Helen rose to her feet and, consummate wordsmith that she is, brought Mark back to life with her account of various facets of his life, not the least of which was his sartorial elegance. One pities the advocates who have had to face her in court.

My *locus standi* is that of Mark's tutor and supervisor. We first met in January 1979, in part of what is now the lunching room of Corpus SCR. I was laid out on a *chaise longue* after a skiing accident. The plaster casts, first long, then short, remained on for nine months. The young Mark was taking a year off having caught hepatitis in his second Long Vacation. He would be taking the Byzantine Special Subject the following Michaelmas Term. He wanted advice on what to read beforehand. So I gave him some, including, I remember, the works of E.E. Evans-Prichard, the great anthropologist, and Clive Foss. The reading-list, he used to say, shaped his life – not that I believed that for a moment. What it did do was to make him an admirer of Clive's and, through reading Clive, to develop an appetite for hunting castles in Turkey.

Eight months later he became my pupil. At this stage, being a historian who prizes primary sources, I shall read out the report I wrote at the end of term. Here it is, this piece of paper which I have retrieved from an ancient file.

TRINITY COLLEGE, OXFORD  
Report for Michaelmas Term 1979

Name: M. Whittow

Subject: Modern History, Constantine Porphyrogenitus  
Special Subject

Mr. Whittow has been an admirable pupil this term. He has worked very hard, mastered the set texts and ranged widely over the fields of Byzantine, Near Eastern and Balkan history in the tenth century. A highly developed scepticism, a natural attachment to his own, often original interpretations, and a sharp critical sense made him a resilient, resourceful and formidable adversary in tutorial dialogues. My only criticism is this: he tends to compress his argument into densely-packed sentences and paragraphs; a little more selection and highlighting of the main themes would improve his written work on this subject, to clear first class standard.

Signed: J.D. Howard-Johnston

What an extraordinary criticism of the Great Whittow, whose lectures were to be models of lucid, carefully-phased exposition, never losing sight of the wood for the trees! It was indeed Mark's ability to gather his thoughts and to turn out gripping lectures on large topics, full of fresh insights, *at short notice*, which was one of his most daunting characteristics. For those of us who have to excavate information from old notes and texts

and then spend quite some time in rumination before we can utter something that makes sense, Mark was a phenomenon. His agility can be likened to that of a speedboat, as against a lumbering cargo vessel.

There are many other pieces of paper in the Whittow file which I could brandish – all those references which I wrote for him when he was applying for academic posts. They were, I still think, eloquent testimonials to his talent and wide-ranging scholarship. But year after year would pass, post after post would be advertised. He would be short-listed, but never chosen. It is a quite extraordinary historical mystery (at the level of a locality, in this case late twentieth-century Oxford) that so fine a tutor – appreciated above all in Oriel – and first-rate lecturer and serious scholar who combined archaeological with historical expertise, spent *nearly fifteen years* without obtaining a permanent job. He was about to go off and become an interior decorator – whether or not he would have been successful I dare not speculate – when he was appointed medieval history tutor at St. Peter's in succession to Henry Mayr-Harting.

What can I say about Mark that has not been said already? He was never *glum*. Words like *brio* and *verve* come to mind as one thinks of him. Here was a man who could galvanise his pupils like no other, who conjured up more Prize Fellows for All Souls (four, I believe) in a shorter time (a mere twelve years) than any other tutor in any other Humanities subject – a striking rate at least thirty times the norm.

I looked to him as to a *hound-dog* – not just when we visited archaeological sites (my policy being to follow him and listen to his every word) but also back in Oxford where I relied on Mark *qua* best-read historian at Oxford for advice on books. His last recommendation, a very good one, was for John Kiszely's history of the Norway campaign – a triumph for Hitler and appalling fiasco on the British side. I should add that he was the best of travelling companions. We shared rooms in Iran in 2002 and Algeria in 2017. I treasure the photographs I took of the Great Whittow, relaxed in bed and reading a French colonial history of Algeria (he made rather slow progress compared to his performance in Iran – three massive works, a biography of J.P. Morgan, a history of Italy in the 1920s and 1930s, and a study of nomadism in Azerbaijan, were consumed in three weeks). The green turban which he wrapped around his head at night has been captured in action and lying, discarded but ready for the next night, on the bed. He took great care of his body, taking a shower at every opportunity. He would reappear dressed and *fragrant*. I am afraid to say that I began to address him as *His Fragrance*, and, if I was feeling bold enough to be familiar, as *Fragrance*. He took it in good part. There could be plenty of *banter* with Mark.

Let me end with an anecdote. It concerns the paper he was to give at the last workshop on the Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East held in Leiden early in December some fifteen years ago. The theme was material culture and Mark was to speak about Byzantine material culture. He could not go, though, because he would be involved in the entrance exam. Eager to go myself, I offered to deliver Mark's paper – *i.e.* to be the Whittow mouthpiece. We agreed to meet beforehand. I called on Mark one morning in his rooms in St. Peter's. I think it was the one time that I had the pupil's treatment – coffee and something to eat. We turned to the subject of the paper. Mark began to think aloud, listing some key points. I must have chipped it with a very few of my own. We talked on, and as we did so, it dawned

on me that Mark envisaged us writing a joint paper and, furthermore, that he was delegating the task of writing it to me. So, off I went, armed with our joint ideas, and decided to play the part of the tutorial pupil, throwing aside the years and producing the paper in three or four hours as if it were a tutorial essay. My daughter was an undergraduate at the time and had just shown me a fine essay she had written on late Roman patronage. So the spirit of emulation was present. The essay, ours I mean, was rather good. It went down well at the conference. I revised it later for publication and returned it to Mark for additional annotation. That never happened and the paper languishes among Mark's *Nachlassen* somewhere in my files.

The trouble with Mark is that he was so alive that nothing can convince me that he really is dead. His funeral in Christ Church was the staid English equivalent of the Ayatollah's funeral outside Tehran. But the addresses left him more alive than ever. The same is true of the many reminiscences of the tutor and scholar and traveller which we have heard today. So he is obviously here, watching benignly over the former *bambini* and others who are dining in Oriel tonight. Let us drink to his spirit.