

MOSES AND MARY FINLEY

The following tribute was paid by the Vice-Master, Professor D. H. Mellor during the Finley Memorial Concert in the Music School, West Road, on Sunday 26 October 1986.

I speak tonight for Darwin College, of which I was a Fellow throughout Sir Moses Finley's reign as Master – a republican reign, I should say, and republican more in an ancient than in a modern American sense.

This is a commemoration and a celebration of Moses and Mary Finley in music, not in words. It is not the occasion for long or formal tributes; if only because if it were, there would have to be so many that there'd be no time for anything else. But we must say something. In a moment Geoffrey Lloyd will say something of Moses' real memorial: his work in, and effect on, ancient history, and ancient historians.

But first I must say a little on behalf of Darwin, the last of many academic institutions to feel the powerful and, in our case, wholly good effects of Moses' passionate concern, not only for ancient history but for every worthwhile kind of intellectual and scholarly activity.

Part of what made him a great teacher also made him a great Master of a recently established graduate College. That part was his vivid embodiment of the thesis that the proper pursuit of learning and understanding is not merely a pastime, or a means of making a living (or a reputation), but can be the very core and expression of a way of life, worthwhile both in itself, and in what it can add to the civilisation of all of us. To Moses – and Mary – Finley, the expression 'merely academic' would always have been a contradiction in terms. To them the business of a College, as a place of learning, education and research, was a great business, worthy of anyone's devotion. To have that feeling so powerfully, contagiously and, above all, practically expressed at the heart of the College was very good for our morale – especially in a time when that feeling is none too common in our country.

Of course Moses' and Mary's passion for the academic business of our College came from their experience of many other institutions, and most recently from Jesus College, on which, and through which, Moses also had a great impact: in teaching, and in stimulating and supporting younger scholars as well as undergraduates. But Darwin was fortunate to be able to exploit even more of his qualities as a creative leader of a scholarly community; maybe indeed giving them more scope than they had previously had in this country since his exile from the States and his deliberate abstinence from politics.

The challenge Darwin presented him was precisely to define in practical terms the academic business of a graduate college. **When Moses became Master we were well established, and almost full grown, but still unsure of our role – a role of course less easily defined than that of a college which exists to teach undergraduates. By the time Moses retired our role was defined, not in words but in practice. It was defined for example in the expansion of our Research and Visiting Fellowships and Associateships, in our Colloquia and the activities of our College groups, in our Annual Darwin Lectures. And in all our activities it was defined by the standards that Moses set us, and made us set ourselves, standards that would tax far larger and better endowed institutions. I for instance still recall my mounting alarm at the sheer scale of the Darwin Centenary Conference in 1982 in this very Hall, a Conference that Moses casually talked me into spending two years organising. But now, as in our new Darwin Lecture Series, our Fellows take this kind and scale of College activity for granted.**

We do so largely because of the expectations Moses and Mary excited in us, and the way in which they did so. Their last great gift to us, leaving us Moses' Library, and his estate, to endow a Research Fellowship in Ancient History, is a typical combination of generosity and challenge. It is very like my colleague Elisabeth Leedham-Green's description of meeting Moses in a College corridor: the welcoming smile – and the sudden need to have one's wits about one. Our best memorial to Moses and Mary Finley would be to remain a place of which that is an apt description.