

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on February 12, 2008, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Charles William Dunn was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

CHARLES WILLIAM DUNN

BORN: November 30, 1915

DIED: July 24, 2006

Charles William Dunn was born in 1915 in Arbuthnott, Scotland, a small village in Aberdeenshire a few miles from the North Sea, where his father was the Presbyterian minister. The family moved, as his father's appointments took them, to Aberdeen, to Edinburgh, and eventually, like so many other Scots, to North America. He arrived in Boston at the age of twelve, and subsequently moved with his family to Ontario, where he attended McMaster University. Like any good Gael, he was fundamentally shaped by the places in which he lived. He never lost his attachment to the Scottish countryside, its people, its ways, its stories, and all of its languages—Gaelic, Scots and English. On this side of the Atlantic, he would recover that world in Cape Breton, where he studied every dimension of the life of *The Highland Settler* in a book that has been described as a uniquely comprehensive introduction to Nova Scotia Gaelic culture, still fundamental after more than a half century. But he was as well the consummately urbane denizen of two of the English-speaking world's most literate and literary cities, Edinburgh and Cambridge, a dedicated clubman and passionate book collector, witty, charming, and gregarious.

Charles first came to Harvard as a graduate student. He studied with Fred Norris Robinson, the great Chaucerian who also introduced the study of medieval Irish and Welsh to Harvard; with Francis Peabody Magoun, the distinguished philologist of English and especially of its place names who was also a translator of Grimms' folktales and an eager student of medieval Finnish literature; with B. J. Whiting, another eminent Chaucerian who also taught medieval French literature and the Middle Scots poets at Harvard, and who was a leading scholar of the proverb and its history. From the outset, Charles made plain his own seamless interest in both oral tradition and medieval texts, writing his dissertation on the folkloric and historical backgrounds to the twelfth-century Old French romance *Guillaume de Palerne* and its translations into English and Irish. That work was published as *The Foundling and the Werwolf*. In the tradition of his teachers, Charles became a wide-ranging medievalist: he wrote about *Le Roman de la Rose*, the *Poetic Edda*, and the *Historia Regum Britanniae*; he compiled a fine anthology of Middle English literature, and with his friend Morton Bloomfield wrote a study of *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies*.

Charles was enamored of spoken language, and in 1958 and 1959 he made two recordings for Folkways Records. One was designed to illustrate the history of the English language and includes, among other things, renderings of the parable of the prodigal son in Old, Middle, Early Modern, and Modern English and in Scottish dialect; the other is an anthology of readings from Old and Middle English poetry.

His overarching love, though, was for Scottish Gaelic poetry and narrative tradition, and for the narrative and lyric literature of the other Celtic languages as well. Throughout his teaching career, which included appointments at Cornell, the University of Toronto, and New York University, he worked to put the literature and traditions of the Celtic languages on an equal footing with those of the Germanic and Romance languages in the study of the European Middle Ages. In 1963, he returned to Harvard to continue that work as the third chairman of the Celtic Department, and in 1967 he was named to the Margaret Brooks Robinson Professorship of Celtic Languages and Literatures, endowed by Fred Norris Robinson, his first teacher of those languages. He was chair of the department for twenty years, until his retirement in 1984.

When Charles took over the chairmanship of the Department, Celtic studies barely existed within the American constellation of humanities subjects; ten years later, his students were teaching at universities throughout the country and overseas; within fifteen years, they had established the Celtic Studies Association of North America, with an annual conference that attracts scholars from around the world and a respected annual publication. The range of his interests allowed his students to broaden the definition of the field by pursuing research in areas as diverse as contemporary oral tradition, medieval versecraft, manuscript studies, and dialectology.

In 1966, Charles became Master of Quincy House, and brought to that role too his love of Scottish tradition and his gift for good fellowship. No one who was associated with the house during the fifteen years that he was there will forget him, resplendent in his kilt, following the piper in the annual “beating of the bounds” of Quincy House. No one will forget the way that his distinctive jovial laughter suffused his hospitable gatherings of faculty, graduates, undergraduates and visitors in the Master’s residence. Charles understood instinctively that the life of the mind flourishes when senior scholars from various disciplines, college students, and graduates enjoy one another’s company and an occasional Scottish country dance. He had a gift for the creation of community that proved to be invaluable during the course of the political tumult that threatened to overwhelm Harvard and other universities in the late 1960s.

He was a tall and handsome man, with a mass of wavy golden hair and a bearing that did credit to both his tweeds and his kilt. His classes and his parties sparkled with the breadth of his knowledge, the variety of dialects that he could deploy at the drop of a hat, an

impeccable sense of dramatic timing, and his inimitable laugh. He died on July 24, 2006, at the age of ninety. He is survived by his wife, Elaine Birnbaum Dunn, and three children, Peter Dunn, Deirdre Dunn Strachan, and Alexander Dunn, as well as two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Respectfully submitted,

Patrick K. Ford
Tomás Ó Cathasaigh
Catherine McKenna, Chair