

*At a Meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on April 11, 2000, the following Minute was placed upon the records.*

## JOHN HUSTON FINLEY

Born: February 11, 1904

Died: June 11, 1995

On a festive occasion marking John Finley's retirement as Master of Eliot House in 1968, an admiring colleague evoked the mythical image of Cheiron, the wise centaur who was teacher to the greatest men of heroic times, even to Achilles. Cheiron was different from other centaurs because he was son of Kronos, ruler of the Golden Age. In his own way, Finley's father came from another such Golden Age: he was editor of *The New York Times* in the era of Woodrow Wilson.

John Huston Finley, Jr. was born in New York City on February 11, 1904. He attended Albany Academy and the Phillips Exeter Academy before receiving the bachelor's degree from Harvard in 1925. As an undergraduate, he was President of the Signet Society and the *Advocate*. He received the Ph.D. degree in 1933, again from Harvard. That same year, he was invited to join the Harvard faculty.

John Finley's own Golden Age at Harvard was inaugurated in 1942, when at the age of 38 he became Master of Eliot House. In 1945, he became the Eliot Professor of Greek Literature. Within the next few years, wherever one looked for the most distinctive signs of what is sometimes called simply the Harvard experience, one found the presence and influence of John Finley. It was an exhilarating time in America. The war had been won; freedom and peace seemed assured; the world was bright for remaking by idealists. The atmosphere was illuminated by Finley's boundless energy and unflinching optimism.

In 1945, America had greeted with enthusiasm the publication of Harvard's educational blueprint for a new age: "General Education in a Free Society," soon known everywhere as "The Harvard Red Book." President Conant had appointed a committee in 1943 to formulate the "Objectives of a General Education in a Free Society." The chairman was Paul Buck, then Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences; the vice chairman was John Finley, and it is clear that much of the report was formulated by him. The first chapter is headed, aptly, with quotations from Thucydides' *History* and Plato's *Republic*. The heightened eloquence and idealism of many passages are his, and the clarity of presentation gained by his participation. Those were heady times, as Harvard again took the lead in guiding American education. John Finley's role as one of the chief architects of General Education at Harvard was recognized nationally and internationally. He taught, in concert with Harry Levin, a preeminent course in the new General Education program — *Humanities 2* — in which he lectured on the development of epic. Hundreds of students, generation after generation, flocked to hear him.

Finley first made his mark in Classical scholarship with three long articles, published in three consecutive volumes of *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* from 1938 to 1940, on the style, intellectual background, and composition of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, reprinted thirty years later in the first of the Loeb Classical monographs under the title *Three*

*Essays on Thucydides*. This earlier work became the basis for his first major book, entitled *Thucydides*, published by Harvard University Press in 1942, which argues for the unified conception, design, and style of Thucydides' *History*. These two books, considered indispensable to the understanding of Thucydides, offer a still unsurpassed account of the intellectual ferment at the height of the Classical period of ancient Greece.

His next book was *Pindar and Aeschylus* (Harvard University Press 1952). Based on his 1952 Martin Classical Lectures at Oberlin, this work is a detailed analysis and comparison of Pindar's victory odes and Aeschylus' tragedies, emphasizing the different world views of the two master poets, the one looking back to the stable values of a traditional aristocracy, the other embodying the more dynamic, revolutionary ways of thinking in the emerging Athenian democracy. In 1954-1955, Finley was George Eastman visiting professor at Oxford. In 1966 he published *Four Stages of Greek Thought*, based on his Harry Camp Lectures at Stanford University.

The rich years of intense teaching and dedicated service as Master of Eliot House slowed down the pace of publications in John Finley's later years, though the research continued. The students of Eliot House, in any case, could justly feel that they mattered more to Finley than either his writing or even his teaching. He knew every one of them by name, and he showed a special concern for each individual member of the House. His total personal commitment to Eliot House embodied his ideal of the House system. A shining testimonial is the vast corpus of his famous letters of recommendation for his students. It is rumored that the Harvard Medical School at one point even thought of publishing an anthology of them.

Finley's fourth and last book, *Homer's Odyssey*, published by Harvard University Press in 1978, when he was 74, argues for the poem's unified aesthetic design and offers many incisive readings, particularly on characterization. It won the Goodwin Award of Merit from the American Philological Association in 1981, the classical profession's highest recognition of scholarly achievement.

Finley's books, like his lectures, draw stimulating comparisons between ancient and modern literature, ranging from the Old Testament to Dante, Shakespeare, and contemporary poetry. He conceived of these books not as a specialized activity set apart from his duties as a teacher and as Master of Eliot House but as an organic growth from teaching, discussing with colleagues and students, and personal reading and reflection. From his first articles to his last book, Finley's publications display brilliant powers of synthesis, mastery of the ancient texts, scrupulous reading of both the ancient and modern scholarship in many languages, careful argumentation, and above all a broad, synoptic vision of style, historical moment, aesthetic effect, and moral questions. His scholarly writing reflects many of the concerns of his famous lectures: the interplay between mythic and analytic modes of thought and the vision of the classical mind that holds in powerful and inseparable union the finely etched details of situation or character and the typical features of human behavior.

John Finley held honorary degrees from many colleges. In 1968, Harvard University made him Doctor of Humane Letters. In 1984, he received the Harvard Medal from the Associated Harvard Alumni and was Commencement Speaker.

After his retirement in 1976, he divided his time between Cambridge and his family's beloved 18th century farmhouse in Tamworth, New Hampshire, where he had spent his summers ever since childhood. In 1984, the death of his cherished wife and lifelong friend (as he fondly referred to her), Magdalena Greenslet, seized him with the deepest grief and loneliness, and he never recovered from it. As his friends and former students were quick to recognize, Mr. Finley was never again the same. During the last decade of his life, he was besieged by an increasingly debilitating and isolating infirmity, and he was eventually confined to a nursing home in New Hampshire, where his life finally gave out on an early summer day in 1995. He was 91 years old.

Those who knew him and cherished him tried to console themselves by thinking back to the glory days of Finley the teacher of Humanities 103 - the Great Age of Athens. "A single three-by-five card," as his son used to remark, "would last him an entire lecture." One student recalled: "I remember him striding back and forth on the Sanders Theatre stage, quoting Aeschylus before a thousand students and just ever-so-slightly faltering. It was only afterward that I realized he was translating the *Oresteia* directly from the Greek text into English. This was marvelous." An admirer writes: "Mr. Finley had friends of all ages and all walks of life, and he delighted in introducing them to one another." Whatever is missing from this memorial minute, John Finley's friends will supply from their own treasured memories.

John Finley is survived by his son, John III, his daughter, Corinna Hammond, and five grandchildren.

Respectfully submitted,

Alan Heimert †  
Walter J. Kaiser  
Stephen Mitchell  
Charles Segal  
Zeph Stewart  
Emily Vermeule  
Gregory Nagy, Chair