

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on November 4, 2014,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Calvert Watkins
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

CALVERT WARD WATKINS

BORN: March 13, 1933

DIED: March 20, 2013

Calvert Watkins, Victor S. Thomas Professor of Linguistics and the Classics, *Emeritus*, died in Los Angeles on March 20, 2013, a week after his eightieth birthday. At the time of his death he was Distinguished Professor in Residence of the Department of Classics and the Program in Indo-European Studies at UCLA, where he continued his scholarly career after retiring from Harvard in 2003.

Cal Watkins started out as a prodigy and always remained one. After finding that he liked Latin and Greek in school, he decided at fifteen to become an Indo-Europeanist, delving into Sanskrit, Avestan, Hittite, Old Irish, and the other early languages of the Indo-European family. It was an unusual turn for an American teenager, but languages came easily to Cal. Once, when he changed schools and had to catch up in French, the transition was smoothed by his being taken to see French movies, making sure he always got seated behind a lady in a fancy hat so he would be unable to see the subtitles. As a Harvard undergraduate, he concentrated in Linguistics and the Classics, graduating *summa cum laude* in 1954 with a thesis on a dialect of ancient Gaulish. His graduate career, likewise at Harvard, was spent partly in the Society of Fellows and partly abroad in Paris, Dublin, and Cracow. He received his Ph.D. in Linguistics in 1959 and, after an accelerated rise through the junior ranks, found himself, at the age of twenty-nine, Associate Professor of Linguistics and the Classics. This made him, a year later, Chairman and the only tenured member of the Department of Linguistics.

The Linguistics Department grew rapidly under Cal's leadership, and still bears his mark strongly. The sixties and seventies were the period of his greatest productivity as a linguist, with brilliant books on the history of the Celtic verb and on the verb in Proto-Indo-European, as well as seminal articles on language-particular problems and general topics such as the methodology of syntactic reconstruction. Not much of this output is accessible to a general audience. A striking exception, however, is his contribution to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the first edition of which contained a Watkins-edited "Appendix of Indo-European Roots" and two essays on the Indo-Europeans and the Indo-European

heritage of English. The blend of clarity, authority, and elegance in these little pieces epitomizes what made Cal's scholarship so compelling. His role models were mostly French or French-trained; he was particularly attached to his former teachers Émile Benveniste and Jerzy Kuryłowicz, both academic "grandchildren" of Ferdinand de Saussure. In what was still disproportionately a German field, he preferred the broad, culturally embedded French way of doing linguistics to the prevailing Teutonic heaviness, which he made it his business to combat.

As his career advanced, Cal's work tended to focus less on individual grammatical facts and increasingly on poetics and the reconstruction of poetic language. On top of his immense learning, he seemed never to forget anything he had ever read in any text in any language, so that when he looked at, say, a newly published text in Hittite, he would come upon a passage that reminded him of something he had seen in Greek, Vedic Sanskrit, or Old Irish thirty years earlier. The parallel might be in some detail of phrasing, or some twist in a narrative, or some seemingly meaningless step in the description of a ritual. His *magnum opus* in this domain, organized around the theme of the Indo-European dragon-slaying myth, was the magisterial *How to Kill a Dragon in Indo-European: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*, which won the 1998 Goodwin Prize from the American Philological Association. Over his long scholarly lifetime he was the recipient of countless other honors as well, including the presidency of his "other" professional society, the Linguistic Society of America.

Cal was an inspirational teacher. Class time was not for imparting cut and dried factual knowledge, which was something books could do after hours. Classes for Cal were an occasion for object lessons in how knowledge could be used to generate more knowledge. What he most enjoyed was to demonstrate to a roomful of students, with immense flair, how a word, phrase, or motif in one Indo-European cultural tradition was historically the same, after secondary developments were stripped away, as a word, phrase, or motif in another. Those on the receiving end of this kind of teaching not only got invaluable training in how to build an argument, but also acquired an almost esthetic sense of what kinds of problems were worth working on and what kinds of solutions were worth looking for. Today Cal's students, and the students of his students, are to be found in classics and linguistics departments everywhere, and dominate every aspect of Indo-European studies in the United States.

Outside the classroom too, Cal was larger than life. Although mostly raised in New York, he was proud of his Texas roots, and carefully cultivated his hint of a Texas drawl. His love of good times — good food, good drink, good friends — was legendary. So was his sense of humor; one of the ways a student or junior colleague got to feel at ease with the redoubtable Professor Watkins was by making a remark that he found funny, or, better, that made him crack up, as happened rather often. The annual "Dead-of-Winter" parties at the Watkins home on Locke Street in Cambridge were for many years a treasured institution at which a

huge circle of friends, relatives, colleagues, and students joined in conviviality around a table that, in addition to other refreshments, invariably included a large pot of black-eyed peas, prepared by the master's own hand. Although he had recently gone through a period of poor health, Cal's death came as a shock, leaving a void that for the many whose lives he touched can never be filled. He is survived by his wife of thirty-two years, the eminent Sanskritist Stephanie Jamison, four children, Cynthia Watkins, David Cushman, Catherine Cushman, and Nicholas Watkins, and eight grandchildren.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathleen M. Coleman
Joseph C. Harris
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