Joseph Patrick Atherton (1935-2012)

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Patrick Atherton was essentially a University man, who succeeded in combining teaching, research and administration throughout his long active life. He devoted his entire professional life to the Department of Classics, the University of King's College, and Dalhousie University. In the current state of the university, the range of his teaching, the scope of his scholarship, and the weight and diversity of his administrative work are scarcely imaginable when viewed together. It contributed greatly to making these two institutions the vibrant centres of humanities education that they are today. He attracted to Dalhousie his Supervisor at Liverpool, A.H. Armstrong, first as a Killam Fellow, then, at his retirement as Gladstone Professor from the University of Liverpool in 1972, as Visiting Professor. Together with James Doull and Robert Crouse, Patrick and Hilary Armstrong founded Dionysius in 1977.

Patrick was born in recusant Lancashire and educated by the Jesuit Fathers in their College at Preston. Growing up in the old Catholic enclave of the Fylde, Patrick became and remained strong in a faith that was informed by learning. An open scholarship in Classics brought him to Brasenose College, Oxford (1953-1957), where Maurice Platnauer developed his linguistic skills in Greek and Latin and John Ackrill introduced him to the delights of Aristotle. He took an Honours degree in Ancient History together with Ancient and Modern Philosophy (Literae Humaniores), and then went on to hold the Queen's Commission as an Artillery Officer in the British Army serving on the Rhine. He was loyally proud of all these elements of his formation. Three results of them which most evidently served the Canadian university in which he spent his whole career were his mastery of Greek and Latin—I witnessed him correct the Greek of a great European scholar—his ability to move between linguistic, historical and philosophical teaching and scholarship, and his practical efficacy as an administrator. In College, he was a congenial and cultured companion, whose conversation was never less than stimulating.

Patrick's classes and seminars ranged from those in Latin and Greek, Classical Literature, and Ancient History, to others in Ancient, Late Ancient,
and Medieval philosophy. Again, a list would be inappropriate, but in them Patrick expounded Plato and Aristotle, Vergil and the Classical Roman poets and historians, Plotinus and Augustine, Aquinas and Meister Eckhardt. After his PhD on “Infinitude, Finitude and the archē in Greek and Early Christian Thought”, Patrick’s publications and addresses to scholarly conferences moved beyond Classical poets like Homer and Vergil, and subjects like the polis, to focus on the nature of the First Principle. In articles and contributions to books, he treated this question through the examination of texts of Aristotle, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Aquinas, Eckhardt and Cusanus, of the early Modern Commentators on Aristotle (especially in the Cursus Conimbricenses), and of the German Idealists, notably Schelling and Hegel, together with their British heirs, especially T.H. Green, F.G. Bradley, and G.R.G. Mure. Through all these studies Patrick defended the truth of Aristotle’s representation of the First as ΝΟΗΣΙΣ ΝΟΗΣΕΩΣ and the validity of its interpretation by Aquinas and Hegel. Although appreciating what the Neoplatonists contributed to our understanding of the archē, and fostering the study of their work, he remained a convinced Aristotelian.

Patrick was a long-standing member of the International Society for the Study of Neoplatonism and attended several of its meetings until forced to reduce his travelling for health reasons.

Robin Sharp, a friend of Patrick’s from their days together at Brasenose wrote this fine tribute: “For most people progress in an academic career means moving from place to place to occupy progressively more senior positions. For Patrick it meant staying in the same place, saving one institution and enhancing another. Perhaps the most fitting summation of his character is in the Greek aretē, variously translated as virtue, excellence or integrity.”

He is survived by his wife of some forty years, Lorraine Laurence, a microbiologist, and their three sons.