



BRILL

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF THE PLATONIC TRADITION 12 (2018) 197-202

The International
Journal of the
Platonic Tradition
brill.com/jpt

Interview with Professor John M. Dillon

John M. Dillon

jmdillon@eircom.net

Suzanne Stern-Gillet

suzanne.stern-gillet@manchester.ac.uk

John Dillon, who belongs to the elite of scholars to have been honoured by two *Festschriften*,¹ has had the kind of career that most aspiring academics of today can only dream of. An Irishman largely educated in England, he took two gap years after graduation. He spent the first one in Ethiopia, where his father's cousin, Sir Charles Mathew, was legal advisor to the Emperor Haile Selassie; there he taught Greek and Latin in a school run under the aegis of the British Council and enjoyed a life of colonial ease, interacting happily with the then thriving international community. His time in Africa became the subject of his one and only novel so far, *The Scent of Eucalyptus. An Ethiopian Tale* (2006). Returned to Ireland, he briefly studied for the Bar before realising that his vocation lay elsewhere, got married and took another gap year, again teaching Classics in a school, this time in Limerick, before deciding to pursue research with a view to an academic career. Largely through the good offices of John O'Meara, with whom he had started work on Calcidius' commentary on the *Timaeus*, he obtained a generous scholarship from the University of California at Berkeley to embark on a doctoral dissertation on the fragments of Iamblichus' commentaries on a number of Platonic dialogues, most notably the *Timaeus*. This became the basis of his first book, *Iamblichi Chalcidensis in Platonis dialogos commentariorum fragmenta* (1973). Upon successful completion of his doctorate in 1969, he was invited to join the Faculty at Berkeley and, for a number of years, taught various courses on Greek literature and philosophy. In 1980, he successfully applied for the Regius Chair of Greek at

1 The first was edited by the late John Cleary in 1999 under the title *Traditions of Platonism: Essays in Honour of John Dillon*. London: Ashgate. The second Festschrift was edited in 2017 by J.F. Finamore and S. Klitenic Wear under the title *Defining Platonism: Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday of John M. Dillon*. Steubenville: Franciscan University Press. It is reviewed above, pp. 193-195, by José Baracat Jr.

Trinity College, Dublin. Reluctant to let him go, the then Dean of Humanities at Berkeley offered him a hefty rise in salary. But money and a relatively low teaching load could not tempt John to remain away from his native Ireland any longer. As he replied to the Dean, “I am taking a salary cut of one third and an increase in teaching load of one third. You cannot match that.” Even a sun-drenched life of ease on one of the most famous campuses in the U.S. would no longer keep John away from home.

SOG: How did you come to Plotinus?

JMD: Ever since reading Stephen MacKenna’s translation of the *Enneads* in my teenage years, I felt drawn to Plotinus. During my undergraduate years at Oxford I formed the project of integrating a “special subject” course on Plotinus into my *Greats* curriculum, but I was discouraged from the idea by both Peter Brunt, my moral tutor, and Eric Dodds, who had retired by then and knew that there would be no supervisory support available. Both diplomatically pointed out to me that the heavy requirements of a “special subject” in *Greats* as well as my lack of background in specialised knowledge made it unwise for me to delve into the intricacies of the *Enneads* at that time. Although I took their advice, I did not lose my interest in Plotinus. Dodds, I am happy to say, later encouraged me to work on Plotinus. So, I did, and in fact my first published article was a study of *Ennead* III 5 for our short-lived graduate student journal in Berkeley, *AGON* in 1969²—which proved a much more demanding job than I had anticipated when I agreed to do it! But, in the following years, Plotinus was [again] put on the back burner since, through a series of happy accidents, whatever leisure I had after becoming Chair of the Department, was taken up with what became a largish book on *The Middle Platonists* (Cornell, 1977, 2nd ed. 1996). This was followed by further works on other notable figures of the period of transition between the Old Academy and the new phase of Platonism associated with Plotinus. I did a translation and commentary of Alcinous’ *Handbook of Platonism* and worked on Philo of Alexandria—if, that is, he can be counted as a Middle Platonist—and Plutarch. Later came works on the direct heirs of Plato, the Old Academy, Speusippus, Xenocrates and Polemon.

Pressure on my time grew worse after I returned to Ireland: an increased teaching load was added to the need to devise an entirely new curriculum in ancient philosophy. As a result, Plotinus had to remain on the back burner for a while longer.

2 “*Ennead* III 5: Plotinus’ Exegesis of the *Symposium* Myth”, *AGON* III, pp. 24-44.