

## Memories of Robert K. Sherk (I)

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Neil Coffee has asked me to share some of my memories of Robert K. Sherk, Emeritus Professor of Classics, who died in Lockport, NY, on July 8. Professor Sherk had been a member of the Classics Department from 1962 until his retirement in 1990. I first met him on a visit to the Department in 1975 and, during my time as a graduate student at Buffalo (1979-1984), I benefited greatly from his instruction and advice. I last saw him several years ago in the stacks of Lockwood, where we had a brief conversation. In 2010, he phoned to congratulate me on a publication.

What did Ronald Syme ask for—and receive—for his 70th birthday? Once, while chatting with me about *The Roman Revolution*, Professor Sherk let drop that Syme's requested gift had been a copy of Sherk's *Roman Documents from the Greek East*. I suspect Ernst Badian was Sherk's source for that information. During Badian's brief tenure at Buffalo, he and Sherk became fast friends, and I recall Sherk telling me that Badian had once joined the Sherks for a camping trip on Cape Cod. Together with Badian, Togo Salmon, and a few others, Sherk was in on the foundation of what quickly came to be the Association of Ancient Historians. He and Badian later joined forces to launch the series *Translated Documents of Greece & Rome*, to which Sherk contributed the volumes *Rome and the Greek East to the Death of Augustus* and *The Roman Empire: Augustus to Hadrian*. I did three of the five indices in the second of these, and, as Sherk—a great fan of indices—had predicted, I learned much in the process.

Professor Sherk kept close to him in his office a set of the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, though I recollect it was merely a volume of *Aufstieg und Niedergang* he was perusing the day I introduced myself. While prosopography linked Sherk to Badian and Syme, Sherk focused on the publication of inscriptions that contributed to, rather than on the application of, the prosopographic approach. A search of *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* will reveal some of the result. He once lamented to me the destruction, during the bombing of Berlin, of the vast collection of prosopographic data Mommsen had begun to assemble there.

Professor Sherk shared with Mommsen an admiration for Caesar and—as my friend and fellow Buffalo Classics Ph.D., Tom Virginia, reminded me—a disdain for Cicero. Some prosopographer might see a truer cause in Sherk’s ancestors, loyalists during the American Revolution and—once displaced—the founders of Sherkston, Ontario. (Thanks to another Buffalo Classics Ph.D., Madeleine Kaufman, for recalling that chapter of the Sherk family’s history). But there were close links, too, between various practitioners of German *Altertumswissenschaft* and some members of the newly formed Classics Department—created in 1946 from several other departments—at Johns Hopkins, where Sherk did his own Ph.D. work, in part under the direction of the epigrapher and historian James H. Oliver.

If Professor Sherk spoke of Oliver, I do not recollect. However, I do recall Sherk’s following anecdote about the great biblical scholar William Foxwell Albright. One day (I reckon in 1948) someone interrupted one of Albright’s courses at Hopkins, spoke quietly to the professor, then left. Albright cleared his desk, announced that a colleague would take over the class, and departed. Sherk later learned that Albright had just been informed of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and had gone to take a look.

Professor Sherk made several unscheduled departures of his own, one of which involved the oral portion of my general Ph.D. examinations. The weather was especially bad that afternoon. Sherk stopped at my office and, after some words of encouragement, advised me to take a seat in the Goetz, the site of the examination. When all seemed ready, Evelyn Smithson, then chair, observed that Sherk was missing. A check of his office revealed that his coat, hat, and boots had also disappeared. He soon called from Lockport. With his mind on the weather and the challenge of the drive, he had left my office, headed to his, gathered his things, and made for home. I was amused. Others were not.

An important element of that examination was to have been Aristotle’s (?) *Athenaiôn Politeia*. Professor Sherk and I had read the whole of it—at his wise suggestion, the second half first—and a broad range of *testimonia* and related literary and epigraphic sources, and had worked through a facsimile of the papyrus text itself. The experience made a great impression on me, one I have attempted to replicate in some of my own Greek and Latin classes. Sherk’s courses on Greek biography and Greek epigraphy likewise left their mark on me. Friedrich Leo’s *Die griechisch-römische Biographie nach ihrer litterarischen Form* had convinced Sherk to include in the former

close readings of Satyrus' papyrus *Life of Euripides* and of several manuscript *Lives* of the tragedian. Through their study, we learned much about the nature of ancient biography, papyri, and the editorial conventions of papyrology. If an introduction to the conventions of epigraphy, to the major corpora of Greek inscriptions, to letter forms, genres, and the actual production of inscriptions were not enough, Sherk's epigraphy class also required a very detailed study of an inscription of our choice, included in which was to be a critical evaluation of all major publications of our text from its *editio princeps*. One result of my choice—the *Marmor Parium*—was my first trip to the Canisius College library, where Sherk told me I would find an important edition of the *Marmor Parium* in Boeckh's *CIG*, a set of which neither Lockwood nor the Goetz possessed. He was correct, and, with the help of a letter of recommendation from him, I would soon join the Classics Department at Canisius. Another result was Sherk leading me to the Goetz, showing me Jacoby's edition of the *Marmor Parium* in *FgrH*, and, with a smile, issuing a gentle injunction to me to learn my way around Jacoby. This good advice has since served me well.

Professor Sherk was a regular figure at what then were semi-exclusive, Classics-dominated (*viz.* Garton, Peradotto, Smithson, Zirin, and Barry—hardly a bad thing), deipnosophistic lunches. He was usually engaged, rarely disinterested, and sometimes openly aghast. My good friend Scott Eberle, then a Ph.D. candidate in History and now Vice President for Interpretation at Rochester's Strong National Museum of Play, reminds me of one noon when conversation turned to the joys of visiting Rome. Sherk remarked matter-of-factly, and in no way in an effort to make any sort of particular point, that he had once flown to the Eternal City to check a reading on an inscription that he thought he might mention in a footnote.

That was far from the only time he had flown. Those familiar with his teaching and scholarship alone will not know that during World War II he was a bombardier, flying 21 missions in B-24s over Germany and Austria. After his plane was shot down, he became a prisoner of war in Germany in the infamous Stalag III. I wish I had taken care to make notes about what seeped out to me over a period of years. Professor Sherk surmised that his German saved him from being killed by civilians after they discovered him, barely conscious and badly injured. As a P.O.W., his first guards were *Luftwaffe* men. One, during an interrogation, showed Sherk a copy of his own "missing and presumed dead" notice from a Buffalo paper and wondered out loud how Sherk's family was bearing the bad news.

Eventually Sherk escaped, wearing civilian clothing over his A.A.C. uniform, but once he realized capture was imminent he stripped to his uniform just in time to avoid what probably would have been summary execution. He told me of Gestapo collecting British prisoners and executing them outside the barbed wire—in the aftermath, I imagine, of what is now called the “Great Escape”—and how all the guards vanished one morning, and of the subsequent liberation of the captives by U.S. troops.

Professor Sherk did not work from Loeb's. He drank tea, never coffee. His eyes were particularly sharp. He preferred Ulrich Wilcken's Alexander to Tarn's and Badian's, and the Ink Spots to the Mills Brothers. He recommended I read H. Rider Haggard's *She*, and not just because of its Greek and Latin inscriptions. He prized Menander's *Dyskolos*, maybe as much as he did its vehicle, *Pap. Bodmer 4*. After their retirements, he and George Kustas, his longtime friend and colleague in Classics at Buffalo, enjoyed periodic lunches together. I regret now that I waited too long to ask if I might join them occasionally.

## Memories of Robert K. Sherk (II)

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I'm sorry, but I cannot think of him as Bob Sherk. While I was in grad school in the '70s, I did not sufficiently realize how extraordinary Professor Sherk was. I took for granted his professionalism. I did attempt to imitate his desire to know everything which could be known about something before thinking that he knew anything about it, but I lack his patience. I did not know how extraordinary he was in viewing newcomers to his own specialty [of epigraphy] with patience and maybe a little wistfulness if their klutziness persisted in spite of all his work. It was astonishing to me at the time that he had suffered so much as a POW yet emerged without, so far as I could ever see, a trace of bitterness toward a person, a nation, or fate, this despite continuing medical consequences. This is still astonishing in retrospect; he seems to me now to justify the epithet “Greatest Generation.” How callow and clueless he must have found us, but he certainly never showed it.

Since he never exhibited a trace of preachiness or judgmentalism, I was therefore all the more impressed when, infrequently, some serious issue of

professional conduct or ethics arose within problems we were studying or publications we were using, and we would have a rare view of implacable resolve beneath his fully open and exploratory manner in classes. On these occasions he would articulate that he had dedicated himself to conduct beyond any imagined reproach and, as was NOT his custom, share some anecdotes in class, illustrating how much harm could be done quickly by even an appearance of corner-cutting. This was always put in terms of standards to which he held himself, never labels slapped on others. I did not then appreciate the rarity of this juxtaposition of adoption of the highest ethical standards with humane forbearance toward the lapses of others.

To this day I remember specific conversations in his seminars, because he never focused on what was useful to him, or on getting us to some milestones he had defined unilaterally, but because he drew us into the process of problem solving with a skill I could not recognize at the time. The success of his approach was demonstrated by my working to understand the problems presented by the epigraphical text and not for his approval, although I still remember with pleasure times when I did feel as though he approved my solutions. Of course, I realize now that on most occasions my “success” meant that I had grasped about 50% of what he understood about that text. This extremely difficult style of teaching looked effortless. It depended on great learning about which he was apparently egoless.

I realize that I am speaking exclusively about his character and not his undoubted scholarly accomplishments. What can one say? He published texts and commentaries on which dozens of other books have been built and which will be in use for another couple of centuries. Before “interdisciplinary” was a buzzword, he was evoking it with Romans, Greeks, Galatians, Syrians, *et al.* And the substructure he provided is so taken for granted that people debating questions of “theory,” while relying on descriptions of Romans in “the East” in monographs, don’t even know who organized the crucial evidence and asked related questions of it. On many interdisciplinary and comparative issues, he was so vital as to become invisible. I believe that his pursuit of learning was such that he would be proud of those monographs dependent on his scaffolding and amused at his invisibility in the next layer of interpretation.

Such an interdisciplinary person ahead of his time would presumably not object to my borrowing an epithet from outside the western classical tradition, albeit one which resonates with Plato and Pindar among others:

*Dhammapada* 94, “He whose passions are subdued, like horses well trained by a charioteer, whose pride is vanquished and who is free from corruption, even the gods cherish such a one.”