

Memorial of Archie Christopherson

Archie Christopherson was born in 1931, and died quite unexpectedly of a stroke while the last two guests lingered at his 80th birthday party last September 17. He was a retired Associate Professor of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Cincinnati.

He became a member of the Literary Club in 2006, much too short a time ago. His chief sponsor for Club membership was Gordon Christenson, a long time friend. Archie lectured on ancient Roman law in Gordon's seminar on Jurisprudence; and the two lunched regularly and conversed far into the night at each other's homes. For Archie's memorial service, Gordon wrote of him: "He was enormously learned, a teacher with old fashioned standards. It was not so much his learning I loved, though that always entered any conversation, but his humanity and kindness, a deft but not quite sardonic wit and always a skeptical eye for phonies." Of the circumstances of Archie's death, Gordon says: "It was a return, perhaps, to an ancient honorable death in a warm tub with family and friends around as one passed into the Underworld."

Paul Franz had Archie for a class in Latin poetry during the year of campus uprisings, 1969-70. Paul tells the following anecdote. The class was held in an old UC building on a floor several stories above ground level. "There were student strikes against the Vietnam War one snowy day. Archie was at class, in a three-piece herringbone tweed suit, the trousers tucked into brown lace-up knee boots. Some noise from strike protestors filtered up to his classroom. He walked over to the window and looked down for a long moment. Still looking out the window, he said, 'The barbarians are not outside the gates, they are inside the walls.' Class resumed."

During the Korean War, Archie was in an Army intelligence unit based in Baltimore. His job was interrogating spies.

Archie was a connoisseur of wine, often making suggestions to the wine shop on Ludlow Avenue for the purchase of wine. He also brought about the appearance of selected wines here at the Club. He was an avid and knowledgeable gardener, a wise investor, a maker of musical instruments, a skilled woodworker, and a man deeply knowledgeable about music who constantly had WGUC playing on the radio. His plastering skill helped the Club find a good plasterer to patch some walls and ceiling.

As a twice married family man, he lovingly brought about the amalgamation of two groups of children and became their councilor on everything from personal problems to good bourbon to cooking. His grandchildren always wanted to call up “Papa”, as they called him, and talk to him at length.

Archie wrote three papers in his brief tenure with the Literary Club. The first, in January of 2008 was a budget paper entitled “An Unsung Hero of Early Rome”. The paper dealt with the clan based social classes upon which rested the division between the patricians and the plebeians, and the attempts by the patrician class to move all political control of the newly formed Republic into their own hands and to seize for themselves all public land. In the latter attempt, they were opposed by the Unsung Hero of Archie’s’ paper, Spurius Cassius, three term Chief Magistrate of the City, the equivalent of Chief Executive Officer. Cassius was probably a plebeian who had been elected to the rare honor of three terms because of his personal qualities. He was arrested and executed for treason immediately upon the completion of his third term. The only two ancient historical sources disagree on whether Cassius was a true guardian of the republic who ran afoul of the patricians or whether he was a demagogue trying to make himself a new dictator. Archie

held to the former view.

Archie's second paper, in January 2009, a full length one, was fiction, with the title: "Love and Hate: Ben's Case". It was the story of a man training for a career in classical archeology and history, who became obsessed by sexual desire for a Greek woman he met on an archeological dig. Divorcing his first wife, he married her and in effect became her slave in return for sex. She, by contrast, had contempt for him and had sex with whoever was convenient at the moment. The paper, with a masterful use of dialogue, described the agony of the protagonist, and ended with his sudden death in an automobile accident at the moment when he was just beginning to glimpse the truth.

Archie's third and last paper, read May of 2011, was "Heroism: A Question of Epic Proportions". It was a splendid example of his erudition and insight. It combines a lengthy explication of the archaic Greek concept of a Hero, with a capital H, with a deep literary analysis of Homer's poem, the Iliad. In the paper, Archie seeks to explain why the wrath of Achilles, the theme of the Iliad, suddenly disappeared when King Priam of Troy came unaccompanied and unprotected to Achilles' tent to ransom Priam's son, Hector, whom Achilles had slain in hand to hand combat. Archie recalls that Achilles was regarded by all of the Greeks as their greatest hero. Achilles had been deeply insulted and enraged when Agamemnon, the Greek Commander in Chief, kept for himself a certain woman whom Achilles regarded as a legitimate prize for his exploits. Archie maintains that Priam's coming suddenly changed Achilles' view on what gave a man the true status of a Hero. Hitherto, Achilles had accepted the conventional standard that the accolade was earned by killing in single combat a steady succession of noted warriors. In the face of Priam's visit, Achilles saw that a true Hero was characterized by courage alone, not by victory; and that the honor was bestowed by the gods, not by men. Priam was the paradigm Hero of the Trojan War. As for

Achilles' anger and its cause, all that mattered was how the gods evaluated his own courage, not any human evaluation and its tokens.

So it is with Archie. Those of us who knew him will always remember him with honor and affection, and with a sense of loss both for ourselves and for the Literary Club.

Submitted January 9, 2012, by Rollin Workman, chair of the memorial committee, Gordon Christenson and Paul Franz, members.