

J. N. Adams  
(1943-2021)

ELEANOR DICKEY

James Noel Adams, probably the greatest scholar of the Latin language in our times, has died at the age of 78. A prolific writer who over a span of fifty years published ten books (most of them enormous) and nearly a hundred other scholarly works, Adams was legendary for the depth and breadth of his knowledge of Latin. He had a firm command of the languages of archaic inscriptions, late antique literature, North African ostraca, the Vindolanda tablets, and countless texts that most Latinists have never heard of. His grasp of linguistic theory was well nigh as good, though that knowledge is less visible in his work because of his preference for theoretically neutral analyses – a preference that greatly contributes to his work’s lasting value. Adams was equally legendary for his generous mentoring and encouragement of younger scholars and thus in one way or another contributed to most of the Anglophone and a substantial percentage of the non-Anglophone work on Latin linguistics over the past several decades.

Adams’ work falls into two periods. In the first he produced in-depth examinations of small, well-defined topics, clearly and concisely providing all the information anyone is ever likely to need on those issues. The most famous of these works is undoubtedly *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (1982), which clarified many passages of Latin literature by explaining words traditionally not treated in lexica in a matter-of-fact way, with a focus on their varying registers. But possibly even more useful is *The Vulgar Latin of the Letters of Claudius Terentianus* (1977), a thorough and methodical explanation of the phonology, morphology, syntax, word order, and vocabulary of a bilingual Roman soldier of the second century AD. Starting from just six papyrus letters, Adams extracted enough information about Terentianus’ Latin to fill a hundred pages of concise exposition. Not a word is wasted, and not a word is spared for any topic other than language: there is no information on the content of the letters, and even their texts are not included. Non-standard Latin is notoriously difficult to pin down because of its chronological, geographical and social diversity, and this book’s laser-sharp focus on one particular time and

place allowed Adams to make significant scholarly advances, as well as providing an accessible, reliable handbook.

Adams' first book (1976), *The Text and Language of a Vulgar Latin Chronicle (Anonymus Valesianus II)*, is less well known but shares many features with *Claudius Terentianus*. It too offers an exhaustive and yet concise analysis of the language of an obscure Latin text, without offering any clues to its content. Very different is *Wackernagel's Law and the Placement of the Copula esse in Classical Latin* (1994), which examines the evidence for enclitic use of forms of *sum* across a range of authors. *Pelagonius and Latin Veterinary Terminology in the Roman Empire* (1995) returns to the linguistic examination of an individual text, but this time on a new scale: whereas all the earlier books are fairly short, *Pelagonius* contains almost 700 pages. The writing is just as concise as in the shorter works, producing an extraordinarily dense volume.

In the twenty-first century Adams entered his second period, in which he produced huge tomes on huge topics. The shift was probably connected to his move to a senior research fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford: from 1998 onwards, he was largely freed from teaching responsibilities and able to devote himself to research. It was probably also related to his partnership with Cambridge University Press and its Classics editor Michael Sharp, a remarkable individual who worked closely with Adams to ensure appropriate embodiment and dissemination of the research that formed his last five books (by contrast, none of Adams' earlier publishing partnerships lasted for more than one book). The concentration on huge books led to a sharp reduction in Adams' article production after three highly prolific decades.

The centrepiece of this period is a connected trilogy consisting of *Bilingualism and the Latin Language* (2003), *The Regional Diversification of Latin, 200 BC - AD 600* (2007), and *Social Variation and the Latin Language* (2013), which together total more than 2,500 pages. The questions addressed in these works are so large that despite Adams' concise style and the books' great length, he was unable to provide the kind of comprehensive discussions that characterise his earlier work; the treatments are selective. A different scholar, when producing a selective treatment of a large topic, might have concentrated on the most important points, even if some of those were well established and uncontroversial. But Adams hated to waste words explaining a *communis opinio* that someone else could have set out equally well; he preferred to concentrate on the points where he had something new to contribute, and that preference grew stronger as time went on. As a result, these books, particularly the

last two, can best be appreciated by specialists in Latin linguistics who already know the material that Adams leaves out. For those specialists, however, the trilogy is extremely valuable, providing treasuries of individual new insights which together add up to revolutionise our understanding of these topics – even if that adding up is sometimes left to the reader.

The third book of the trilogy, *Social Variation*, had originally been designed with an appendix of sample texts and commentaries, but when the book grew to over 900 pages even without this material, the appendix was split off to form a separate book. It appeared in 2016 as *An Anthology of Informal Latin, 200 BC - AD 900: Fifty Texts with Translations and Linguistic Commentary* and is over 700 pages long. Like *Social Variation* itself, the anthology consists of high-level discussion aimed at specialists in Latin linguistics, for whom it is a gold mine of new insights.

Just before Adams' death another major work appeared: *Asyndeton and its Interpretation in Latin Literature: History, Patterns, Textual Criticism* (2021, over 700 pages long). Latinists are still digesting this one, but it will no doubt make a significant difference to the field in due course.

Adams also produced many shorter pieces and collaborative works. He co-edited *Aspects of the Language of Latin Poetry* (1999), *Aspects of the Language of Latin Prose* (2005), *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language Contact and the Written Word* (2002), and *Early and Late Latin: Continuity or Change?* (2016). He collaborated with Alan Bowman and David Thomas on their publications of Vindolanda tablets, providing the first linguistic analyses of these texts as they were discovered. He played a key role in ensuring the completion of the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, whose supervisory committee he chaired for over a decade. And many of his articles are of fundamental importance.

Born in Sydney, Australia, in 1943, Adams graduated from the University of Sydney in 1965 and in 1967 flew to England to embark on doctoral work at Oxford. He found the flying so traumatic that he could never get on an aeroplane again and remained in Britain for the rest of his life, though he always considered himself emphatically Australian. Adams' dislike of travel was not confined to flying: he almost never crossed the Channel by any means, and even within the UK rarely attended conferences. He thereby gained much more time for writing, and he ran no risk of being sidelined from contemporary scholarly discourse: the world's Latinists flocked to consult him individually, both about his ideas and about their own. Adams was extraordinarily generous to younger scholars, as long as their research fell within the areas that interested him,

and his criticisms of their work (though sometimes brutal) helped an entire generation of Latinists become better scholars.

Adams' career was spent in Manchester, Oxford, Reading, and Cambridge. He did his doctorate in Oxford, completing it in 1970; his dissertation, 'A philological commentary on Tacitus, *Annals* 14.1-54', was published as a series of articles. He then spent two years in Cambridge as Rouse Research Fellow at Christ's College before taking up a lectureship at the University of Manchester, where he remained for more than two decades. For most of that time he received little recognition outside Manchester despite the quantity and quality of his scholarly output, since work on Latin linguistics was little valued in Britain. The introduction of national research assessments in the UK, which encouraged a focus on high-quality work regardless of its topic, changed that situation dramatically, and during the 1990s Adams shot up the academic hierarchy. In 1992 he was elected Fellow of the British Academy, in 1993 he was given a personal chair at Manchester, in 1995 he was lured to a specially-created Professorship of Latin at the University of Reading, and in 1998 he was elected Senior Research Fellow at All Souls College Oxford. But on his retirement in 2010 he returned to Manchester, where he still had a house as well as long-established friendships, and rejoined the Manchester department via honorary appointments.

In later years he continued to accumulate honours, including in 2002 election as an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, in 2007 election to the Academia Europaea, in 2009 the British Academy's Kenyon Medal for Classical Studies, in 2010 a *Festschrift* (*Colloquial and Literary Latin*, published by Cambridge University Press), in 2013 the Association of American Publishers' PROSE award in Language and Linguistics, and in 2015 appointment as Commander of the Order of the British Empire. He remained very active as a scholar until his death on 11 October 2021, so that publications bearing his name will no doubt continue to appear for several years. Other publications shaped by his mentoring will be coming out for decades, and the influence of his work will last as long as Latin linguistics remains a subject of academic inquiry.

*Abstract:* Obituary of J. N. Adams, author of *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language*, and c. 100 other works on Latin linguistics. After a distinguished and immensely influential career in Manchester, Oxford, and Reading, Adams died on 11 October 2021.

ELEANOR DICKEY  
e.dickey@reading.ac.uk