

In Memoriam
Calvert Watkins

(*13 March 1933 – † 20 March 2013)

Calvert Watkins, Distinguished Professor in Residence of the Department of Classics and Program in Indo-European Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, died during the night of March 20, 2013, at his home in Los Angeles. Having suffered from ill health for several months, he appeared to be on his way to recovery at the time of his death. He was born in Pittsburgh, March 13, 1933, son of Ralph James and Willye (Ward) Watkins. Both his father, an economist who held a number of advisory positions with the United States government, and his mother were born in San Marcos, Texas, where Calvert also spent several years of his childhood and which he called home.

Calvert Watkins received both his A.B. degree and his Ph.D. in Linguistics from Harvard University in 1954 and 1959 respectively. Also formational for his academic career were his studies at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris 1954-55 and 1958 and at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, School of Celtic Studies 1957-58. A junior fellow of the Society of Fellows at Harvard 1956-59, he was appointed instructor there in 1959, assistant professor in 1960, associate professor (with tenure) in 1962, and full professor in 1966. In 1989 he was appointed the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Linguistics and the Classics at Harvard, retiring in 2003 to join his wife Stephanie Jamison, Professor of Indo-Iranian Languages and Cultures, at the University of California, Los Angeles. During his long tenure at Harvard, he served as Chair of the Department of Linguistics for eleven years, most recently 1985-91.

He taught at three Summer Institutes of the Linguistic Society of America, including that of 1979 at

the University of Salzburg, where he was the Hermann and Clara Collitz Professor, and held visiting positions at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (twice), Stanford University, and the École Normale Supérieure and Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle.

He was an Honorary Member of the Royal Irish Academy (1968), a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1973), a Member of the American Philosophical Society (1975), a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy (1987), and of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Correspondant Etranger (1990), Associé Etranger, Membre de l'Institut (1999). He received a Senior Fellowship for Independent Study and Research from the National Endowment for the Humanities (1984-85) and was a Guggenheim Fellow (1992). He served as president of the Linguistic Society of America in 1988.

His scholarship, embodied in more than one hundred and fifty publications stretching over more than half a century, is characterized first of all by its remarkable breadth, in multiple senses.¹ His research focused on the history of the Indo-European languages, but his interest in the nature of language and of language change was boundless, and he did not hesitate to address fundamental methodological issues of historical linguistics: the role of typology (97), reconstruction techniques (123), extension of the comparative method to poetics and culture (93, 120, 128), and areal diffusion (164). He was also able to complete in 2011 a third revised edition of the widely admired *American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (191), whose introductory essay on “Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans”—“popularization” in the very best sense of the term—has introduced thousands of English-speaking readers to the workings and results of Indo-European studies. While he is best known for his study of the Indo-European verb and of comparative mythology and poetics, there is virtually no aspect of Indo-European linguistics to which he did not make seminal contributions: phonology (26, 27, 36, 64), nominal morphology (30, 58,

¹ The numbers in the following summary are those of the accompanying bibliography.

59, 60, 95), syntax (19, 23, 63, 75, 150, 160), and language contact (29, 153, 165, 166, 168, 184, 186). His conception of cultural reconstruction included besides myth and poetics also comparative law (45, 74, 111). In terms of the languages studied, he gave particular attention to Celtic, Hittite, Greek, and Latin, but he also published on topics in Indo-Iranian, Baltic, Slavic, Germanic, and Tocharian, and his broad syntheses of the history of the verb and comparative mythology and poetics attest to his extensive knowledge of all major sub-families of Indo-European.

A second hallmark of Calvert Watkins' career scholarship was his readiness to address problems from a new, even radically new viewpoint and willingness to advance novel, sometimes daring hypotheses in response to them. This openness to new perspectives manifested itself already in his dissertation on the sigmatic aorist (published officially as 14 in 1962), where in addition to the usual inductive method of historical reconstruction he also introduced "forward reconstruction" (1962: 5) and what has become enshrined as "Watkins' Law" (1962: 90–96 et alibi): reanalysis of a functionally "unmarked" member of a paradigm with an overt formal marker as having rather a zero marker, followed by reshaping of the entire paradigm on the basis of the new stem of the "founding" member of the paradigm (for widespread application of this principle see Koch 1995).

This attitude also enabled him to play a leading role in the integration of the facts of Hittite and Tocharian into the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European, a task that preoccupied the discipline in the second half of the twentieth century. Along with Wolfgang Meid (1963), he was led to propose a radically new reconstruction of the PIE verbal system, one which relied at least as much, if not more, on the facts of Insular Celtic and Hittite, as it did on those of Indo-Iranian, Greek, and Latin, on which the traditional model was largely built. In his introduction to the *Geschichte der indogermanischen Verbalflexion* of 1969 (39), Watkins was quite explicit (1969: 21) about the need to build on the tradition of predecessors by formulating new hypotheses and theories, fully conscious of the fact

that not all would survive the ongoing scholarly debate without which there is no progress in science, citing with approval similar sentiments of Christian Stang. Many years later (in 1955) he epitomized this view by borrowing the phrase of the late Jochem Schindler: to be a productive scholar, one needs to have “Mut zum Irrtum” (1999: 11-12).

In the event, the most radical aspects of the “Italo-Celtic-Hittite” model of the PIE verb did not stand the test of time, nor did all the analyses of the Insular Celtic verb offered in 1962. A meaningful implementation of a “Zeit und Raum Modell” to *replace* the Stammbaum (cf. 1969: 17 “in einem zeitlichen und räumlichen Kontinuum” and Meid 1975) also proved beyond our capabilities. However, “forward reconstruction” is now an integral part of the methodological arsenal of Indo-Europeanists, having achieved lasting results in myriad applications. It is also now widely acknowledged that Hittite (that is, Anatolian) did not take part in some major common innovations of the rest of the Indo-European family (including some in the verbal system). Stated in Stammbaum terms, Anatolian was the first sub-branch to become isolated from the rest, and more than a few scholars now suppose that Tocharian was the next, and that Italo-Celtic followed. Furthermore, the view is now widespread (and growing) that what we may term “early Indo-European” (the oldest PIE reached by direct comparative reconstruction) was typologically quite different from Vedic Sanskrit, Avestan, Homeric Greek, and Latin, and that some of the morphological complexity and “fusional” character of these languages is a post-PIE development. It is hard to imagine the present currency of these views in the field without the “revolution” of the 1960s in which Calvert Watkins played a leading role.

His own openness to new ideas included the ability to change his mind, and one of the most important lessons he taught his students was that one must never invest too much of one’s ego (much less one’s sense of self-worth) in any of one’s hypotheses. When asked about something he had written that he now rejected, he repeatedly cited with relish a quotation he attributed to Rudolf Thurneysen:

“Das, was ich da geschrieben habe, ist Quatsch.” Refusing ever to be imprisoned by his own previous claims, he continued up to his death to expand his knowledge of and refine his views about all aspects of Indo-European studies.

As he himself expressed it in characteristically plain language, his interest in prehistoric and early Indo-European speakers also vitally included “not only how they talked, but what they talked about.” Hence his career-long devotion to the study of what was once called “Wörter und Sachen.” Virtually all of his etymological studies are characterized by his close attention to the linguistic and cultural context in which the attested words and their putative etyma were used, and in many cases this context is crucial to his overall demonstration. I cite among many merely as personal favorites his “delocutory” account of Latin *sōns* ‘guilty’ (35; see also the follow-up in 82), NAM.RA GUD UDU in Hittite (88), and the remarkable story behind Greek ὄρχις (68). The subtitle of the last mentioned article “linguistique, poétique, et mythologie,” leads to the other area of Indo-European studies beyond the verb for which Calvert Watkins will most be remembered: comparative poetics and mythology. His extension of the comparative method to the reconstruction of Indo-European poetic formulae, metrics, and stylistics and of mythological themes occupied him for more than forty years, culminating (but not ending!) in the monumental *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* of 1995 (135). In Chapter 2 of that work he paid full homage to his many predecessors, but in his insistence on the systematicity of poetic “grammar,” of poetic language as a subset of ordinary language, and in the almost boundless wealth of the pan-Indo-European case studies with which he illustrated and justified his methodological approach, he stands alone. Predictably, as in the case of his linguistic studies, not every poetic or mythological analysis has won universal acceptance, but it is to him more than any other individual that we owe the reemergence of comparative poetics and mythology in current Indo-European studies.

With his gift for large-scale synthesis and willingness to explore novel approaches, Calvert Watkins nevertheless

firmly believed that “the devil is in the details.” All of his linguistic analyses and hypotheses, from the most modest individual word etymology to his grandest and boldest reconstructed schemata rested on rock-solid philological foundations—and he insisted that his students’ analyses did likewise. Originality without proper grounding veers easily into unbridled fantasy, and generalizations become self-perpetuating dogma. In Watkins’ work an unwavering “reverence for the text” forestalled any such tendencies. He viewed recalcitrant facts that did not fit an analysis not as inconveniences to be ignored, but as priceless clues to a better solution—something to which he hoped his students would contribute.

His teaching will be as great a legacy as his scholarship. He advised or co-advised at least twenty doctoral dissertations. Not all of these dealt with Indo-European topics, but he trained many of the current practicing Indo-Europeanists and historical linguists in North America or their teachers (he lived to enjoy meeting those he termed academic “great-grandchildren”). His personal influence naturally extended beyond his formal advisees. A founding member of the “East Coast Indo-European Conference” in 1982, he participated in all but three of its first thirty annual meetings, and after his move to Los Angeles likewise was active in the annual UCLA Indo-European conferences. His genuine interest in others’ work and the openness of his personality assured that students from programs anywhere who met him at these and other conferences received the benefits of his counsel.

Some characteristics of his teaching have been alluded to above: insistence on sound philology and close reading of texts, stressing the need for students to formulate and defend meaningful hypotheses, and inculcating the importance of being prepared to change one’s views. He preferred to teach these (and other) things by example rather than overt instruction. We were advised to read model analyses by master scholars and were actively shown how to go about identifying and trying to solve a linguistic problem (several of his published papers began as classroom presentations). We then tried it

ourselves, received firm but patient criticism, and tried again, gradually learning how to be a practicing scholar. We were certainly taught a definite viewpoint on major issues of Indo-European, with supporting arguments to motivate it, but the emphasis was never on facts or doctrine, but on how to *think* as historical linguists.

The preceding lines have attempted to summarize Calvert Watkins' impact as scholar and teacher. Those who had the good fortune not only to meet him or hear him lecture, but also to come to know him as friend and colleague, can attest that his influence was greatly enhanced due to his qualities as a human being: warmth, openness, utter lack of pretension, genuine interest in and respect for his interlocutor (regardless of station), rich sense of humor, and irrepressible joie de vivre. For this reason his legacy will live on not merely in the continuing influence of his ideas, but above all in the hearts and minds of the many whose lives he touched.

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