IN MEMORIAM
MICHAEL J.B. ALLEN
(1.IV.1941–25.II.2023)

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WITH AN APPENDIX BY

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When a great scholar dies there is an outpouring of appreciation as well as grief on his passing. When a man of truly great stature dies, people feel utterly bereft. This was certainly the mood last spring among those who had worked with Michael Allen over the years, who had come close to his genius and his geniality. At his funeral, which was widely shared online, colleagues and friends all spoke of his great gifts of friendship and warmth as well as his immense erudition. Michael brought joy to every occasion, not just through his sparkling wit, his empathy, and a certain playfulness of nature, but because those very qualities rested on a bedrock of humility, integrity and faith in human nature.

Over the course of his long life, many honours were bestowed on him. Amongst these were a Guggenheim Fellowship early in his career; the Eby Award for Undergraduate Teaching (UCLA’s top teaching honour); UCLA’s Faculty Research Lectureship and guest professorships at the universities of Munich, Toronto, and Tempe. In 2007 he received the Commendatore decoration from the Italian Republic, an Order of Merit with the rank of Commander. Another highly prized honour from Italy was the International Galileo Galilei Prize (2008) for his work on Florentine Platonism. In 2012 the British Academy in London welcomed him to the rank of Corresponding Fellow; in 2013, he was Scholar in Residence at the American Academy in Rome; and in 2015, the full significance of his contribution to scholarship was recognised by presentation of the Renaissance Society of
Valery Rees & John Monfasani

America’s Paul Oskar Kristeller Lifetime Achievement Award. He also prized highly the D. Litt honoris causa granted to him by Oxford in 1987 for his exceptional academic and scholarly work.

Michael Allen was born in England, and his training in literature and languages began at Lewes Grammar School in Sussex. Lewes is situated on the edge of the South Downs, where Simon de Montfort and the rebel barons defeated King Henry III. This provided a perfect place to develop a deep sense of history, as well as a pervasive love of botany and ecology, while roaming the downs on long walks, whether alone or as a Boy Scout, as they were then called. (Michael reached the highest rank of Queen’s Scout before leaving Lewes. He never let the disability left by his encounter with polio earlier in childhood hold him back.) In Lewes too, he learned Latin and Greek, and developed a love of the music and liturgy of the English church, which was to serve him well when he came to pursue religious questions related to the authors in whom he specialised. From Lewes, he won a place to read English at Wadham College, Oxford, graduating in 1964, and earning a Master’s degree in 1966. After that, adventure called, and he went to teach in Ohio, moving on to the vibrant university town of Ann Arbor in Michigan to study for a doctorate, which he was awarded in 1970. It was also there that he met his future wife, Elena, who was engaged in Theatre Studies and Art. A position in the English Faculty at UCLA was offered soon after and they took up residence in nearby Santa Monica.

At UCLA he soon made a reputation for himself as his lectures conveyed to his students an immediacy of engagement with the worlds of the past, from Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxons to Chaucer, Milton, Donne and Shakespeare. A combination of brilliant imagination and true erudition always shone out from Allen’s writings and his talks. He was as deeply versed in English literature as he was in the philosophy of the ancients, Greeks and Latins, having mastered even the most difficult texts of the Platonic tradition to support his exploration of the works of Marsilio Ficino. Renowned among his undergraduate students at UCLA as the professor who brought Shakespeare to life with sparkling wit and boundless enthusiasm, it was nevertheless chiefly as a translator and expounder of Ficino that he made his mark on the academic world.

He also led parties from UCLA to various parts of the world, lecturing with his customary vivacity and style, linking the history of the places visited to philosophy and literature. For many years he gave seminars on the plays being performed each season at the Stratford-upon-Avon Shakespeare summer school, and later at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

From 1988 to 1993 he served as Director of UCLA’s Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies (CMRS). This led him deeper into the world of Renaissance studies, and from 1993 he was elected Senior Editor of the prestigious Renaissance Quarterly, serving in that post until 2001 and, after five more years of engagement
on the Society’s higher Councils, he was elected President of the Renaissance Society of America (RSA), serving with great distinction from 2006 to 2008. In
2007–8 he was also National Visiting Scholar for the Phi Beta Kappa association, the oldest academic honour society in the United States. Always popular as a
lecturer and invited speaker, he additionally gave a great deal of his time to attending academic conferences, where he never failed to encourage young
scholars, even as he probed their work with searching questions. He had developed
the gift of real listening, with the result that when he engaged in discussion it was
always supportive, allowing new understandings to arise and new connections to
be appreciated.

It was in the context of just such a conference that I first met Michael, in the
wooded hills north of Budapest, at Piliscaba, in 1998. I was already familiar with
his work, and was thrilled when he agreed to be the lead speaker at a Ficino
conference I was organizing in London for the quincentenary of Ficino’s death the
following year. At the concluding dinner of the London conference he persuaded
me to take on the task of editing the conference papers, promising to support and
guide me in this, as I had never undertaken such work before. It proved to be a
magnificent learning experience, conducted though it was at a distance of 5,500
miles, and often through late night telephone calls. The volume we produced
together, Marsilio Ficino: his Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy (2002), turned out to
be immensely successful, like all his publications; for me, it certainly assisted the
development of my subsequent career. With characteristic forethought, he also
persuaded me to take an active role in running Ficino sessions at RSA, which I did
for the following twenty years, his presence always guaranteeing a full room and
a great sense of occasion. On his visits to London he was always generous with his
time for the Ficino Letters group, helping us to appreciate the context of the
material we were working with, giving inspiring talks, offering wisdom and
guidance to individual members, and celebrating all the interests we had in
common. To be counted among his complatonici was a truly happy attainment.

On his eventual retirement from UCLA in 2012 his official title was
Distinguished Research Professor of English and Italian Renaissance Studies and it
was his work in this latter field, Italian Renaissance Studies, that formed the basis
of nearly all his research and publications. His first undertaking was a revised
version of his doctoral thesis, an edition and translation of Ficino’s commentary
on Plato’s Philebus. This appeared from the University of California Press in 1975,
and was reissued by ACMRS in 2000. It set the path for making truly significant
works available to a much wider public by rendering them into English. The rather
relaxed style of English in this first work was something he refined in later works,
but what is important is how he grappled with and made sense of its complex
arguments and diverse themes, many of which required a thorough acquaintance
with Ficino’s sources – a truly impressive undertaking in itself.
There followed a series of books which combine explanatory essays with translation of the relevant texts. In those essays the reader can rely with confidence on his sure guidance through complex matters, even if on occasion he later refined some of his views. For example, *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer* (UCP, 1981) was followed by *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino* (UCP, 1984), and both together were revised and represented in the I Tatti Renaissance Library issue of *Marsilio Ficino: Commentaries on Plato: Volume I: Phaedrus and Ion* (HUP, 2008). Other Plato commentaries singled out for similar treatment were *Icastes: Marsilio Ficino's Interpretation of Plato's 'Sophist'* (UCP, 1989 and ACMRS, 2016) and a particularly challenging section of Book VIII of the *Republic: Nuptial Arithmetic: Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on the Fatal Number in Book VIII of Plato's 'Republic'* (UCP, 1994).

In 1998 he brought out a volume under the title of *Synoptic Art* (Olschki, 1998) which paints a broad canvas of the history of Platonic Interpretation, and then focuses in through the lens of Ficino's place in that tradition, noting the several different types of opposition Ficino encountered among his contemporaries. This volume encompasses a huge range of learning. It was published before an index had been compiled, which was a great shame given the encyclopaedic nature of the material presented. That deficiency has now been remedied in an appendix to this obituary by John Monfasani on pages 299–307 and Renaissance scholars the world over will be duly grateful.

Over a period of many years, Ficino's texts caused Allen to delve deeply into astronomy, numerology, theology, magic, and myth, the last of these giving rise to substantial articles on Saturn, Orpheus, Prometheus and other themes. Many of these essays were gathered together into two Variorum volumes, *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino's Metaphysics and its Sources* (1995), to which I find myself returning again and again, and the equally valuable *Studies in the Platonism of Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico* (Routledge, 2017).

Perhaps it was through his immersion in the finest literature of the English language, and his determined mastery of the philosophy and literature of ancient Greece and Rome, that he was able to write compellingly in a variety of styles, and with a dazzling command of vocabulary, prosody and intonation. From epic to lyric poetry, from narrative and history to rhetoric and philosophic argumentation, he appreciated and was at home in every genre, perhaps even more so than Ficino who consciously modelled himself on Plato whom he famously described (in *Letters*, vol. II, p. 9) as writing in a style «that flows midway between prose and poetry». Perhaps the scholastic style was the one that least attracted

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Allen, though he dealt with it most competently when required, as it was, in some of his later translations. His expositions of material that was difficult or complex are always accessible, suffused with elegance and clarity. It delighted him to help others extend their mastery of language and develop their powers of independent critical thought, and his wit is reflected in some of the imaginative titles he gave to some of his papers: to quote just a few, «Ocean Blue» (2003) for discussion of his Plotinus commentary of 1492; «Life as a Dead Platonist» (2002), «Ficino’s Magical Mousing Cat» (2007) and the well-known «Ficino, smoke, and the strangled chickens» (1992).

The two works which gave him most satisfaction, however, were Ficino’s own magnum opus, the *Platonic Theology*, which came out as six volumes in the I Tatti series (HUP, 2001–2006), an undertaking shared with James Hankins, and his two volumes on Ficino’s commentary on two works of Dionysius the Areopagite: vol. I: *On Mystical Theology & The Divine Names*, part I; vol. II: *On The Divine Names*, part II (HUP, 2015). Here he was able to follow his highly developed interest in what he had come to believe mattered more than anything to Ficino: the pursuit of divine wisdom for the soul, and its return to a state in which its divine essence could be fully realized. This fully united the Platonic and the Christian, in his view. This pursuit mattered also to Allen, and, as with Ficino, in no way conflicted with the responsibilities and benefits of living with and for his fellow human beings.

His greatest academic achievement was surely the opening up of the study of Ficino to a far wider circle than had previously been possible. But over and above all his academic achievements and honours, and the high standards he set in academic writing and research, let us not forget how highly he valued being a family man. With his wife, Elena, always at his side, he was a constant and stalwart support, first as son, revisiting his place of birth at least annually, then as husband, father, and grandfather to a growing tribe of whom he was immensely and justifiably proud. It was his delight to share with them – and with so many friends whom he welcomed into that family circle – his unquenchable sense of curiosity, his love of the outdoors, and of art and literature, poetry and theatre.

Being with him was always a joy, and conversation never lagged. One teenage family friend who had arrived early for dinner had with him what she later called the conversation of a lifetime while I was preparing the food. Memorable moments of this kind were frequent because he had developed the art of welcoming and valuing everyone he met. Even from his hospital bed in later times he was keen to hear about other people’s progress and to probe the sometimes unfathomable aspects of British politics. His sunny disposition never left him, allowing him to make light of difficulties even as they multiplied, and he was always prompt to show his appreciation for anything done for him. Whether as mentor, as family, or friend, it was noticeable that advice he proffered was not only wise but always readily actionable.
John Monfasani, in an earlier edition of this journal, summarised Allen’s career as «one of the most productive and consequential scholarly careers in the last half century». To his numerous publications, of which the database *Regesta Imperii* lists no less than 107, one must add the enormous influence he has had on three generations of scholars who have been inspired by him, and who have benefitted in so many ways from his friendship, his kindness and his generosity.

Since Michael was renowned for his hiking expeditions, it is utterly fitting that portions of his ashes have come to rest in the Santa Monica hills, and on the Sussex Downs, on the escarpment just below the beacon on Mount Harry, an old Norse holy place. Both these locations were very dear to him. But his memory lives on among so many of us, as a guiding star or Ficinian *daimon*.
Appendix


**INDEX NOMINUM**

**JOHN MONFASANI**

*Synoptic Art* is Michael Allen’s most historically oriented book as he delved deeply into Ficino’s understanding of the history of the Platonic tradition and sundry aspects of this tradition, such as demons, dialectics, and poetry. When I asked why it had no index, Michael told me that to his surprise the book was published before he had a chance to prepare the index. The text below is an attempt to satisfy this *desideratum*. It is an index of names rather than of topics because in such a dense book only Michael would have been able to tease out all the allusions here and there to all possible topics. Themes such as Aristotelianism, Hermeticism, and Orphism, however, can be found in the *Index Nominum*. Because of their ubiquity, Marsilio Ficino and Plato are not indexed. References to Plato’s various dialogues are indexed under *Platonic Dialogues* and to books of the Bible under *Scripture*. If a name is cited in the main text and also in the notes on the same page, the page is only listed once, e.g., (page) 19 and not (page) 19, 19n.

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