

Mortimer H. Chambers, Jr. **(1927 – 2020)**

Mort Chambers, who died on December 14, 2020, was the product of the American Midwest and its public schools and served in the U.S. Army for two years. He arrived at Harvard College in the Spring semester of 1947 and, in the manner of the post-war whiz kids, graduated in 1949 after only five semesters.

In 1949 Mort became a Rhodes Scholar and spent the next three years at Oxford studying ancient history and philosophy until he returned to Harvard to pursue a doctorate. In a mere two years, he submitted his “Studies in the Veracity of Thucydides” and was awarded the Ph.D. in Classics. He served a year as an Instructor at Harvard (1954-1955).

After three years as an assistant professor of History and Classics at the University of Chicago, he arrived at UCLA where he would remain for his entire career. No one can calculate the number of students Mortimer Chambers taught, but with upper-division Greek and Roman history classes of 150 or more and an occasional Western Civilization of 300-500, one can conservatively estimate that 20,000 UCLA undergraduates attended his riveting lectures on the ancient world.

Students especially delighted in the professor’s peculiarities: Mort’s penchant for quoting Winston Churchill, his talent for mimicry - students heard “his” Marlon Brando or Jimmy Cagney while colleagues enjoyed “his” repertoire of scholars - and most of all his annual demonstration of Hippocleides dancing away his bride. Mort standing on his head and waving his legs in the air acquired such renown that students have been known to ask other faculty members if they too stood on their heads like Professor Chambers. Some of those undergraduates went on to pursue graduate work and to teach ancient history and classics. Another, one Lew Alcindor, went on to become better known as Kareem Abdul Jabbar.

For many years Mort taught Roman history at UCLA (while Truesdell Brown taught Greek history), but Brown’s retirement allowed Mort to turn to his own specialty of Greek history. In the 1990s, Mort conducted a UCLA Summer Session course in Greece for undergraduates, a perfect venue for him to convey his love of Greece.

Though remaining loyal to UCLA, Mort also enjoyed teaching in other venues and traveling for the sheer joy of meeting old friends and making new ones. This was made easier by his marriage to Catherine, who not only adores travel but whose linguistic facility rivaled Mort’s own in German, French, Italian, and modern Greek. Mort served from 1976 to 1978 as Director of the University of California’s Education Abroad Program in Göttingen, Germany. He has also served as a lecturer on cruises conducted by Swan’s Tours and the UCLA Alumni Tours in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean.

After his dissertation and early publications on Thucydides and Greek historiography, Mort's 1962 book, *Aristotle's History of Athenian Democracy*, announced another of his specialties in which he became internationally known: Aristotle and the Athenian constitution. In that important book, Mort showed how the *Athenaion Politeia* was itself shaped by Aristotelian ideas found in the *Politics*.

Mort increasingly turned to the editing of papyrological texts and to the history of Classical scholarship. In the first instance, he edited the papyri of Herodotus for *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (1981) and Aristotle's *Athenaion Politeia* for Teubner (1986). Mort then turned to examining the development of Classical studies during the past two centuries, editing a volume of Georg Busolt's letters, and publishing research papers on Edward Gibbon, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Felix Jacoby, Eduard Meyer, Francis Cornford, and his teacher Werner Jaeger as well as two dozen encyclopedia articles on classicists, ancient historians, and classical archaeologists. Mort also wrote and edited a wide array of teaching materials, especially the Western Civilization textbook, *The Western Experience*, which for almost fifty years (through ten editions) remained a popular text.

In 1999 Mort's former doctoral students joined an international group of scholars for a "Mortfest" at UCLA – a convivial scholarly celebration of the extraordinary career of a wonderful man. A few years later the papers appeared as a book: *Text and Tradition: Studies in Greek History and Historiography in Honor of Mortimer Chambers* (ed. Ronald Mellor and Lawrence Tritle).

These bare facts of Mort's career give little impression of the energy and enthusiasms of the man. Those who have enjoyed the Chambers' lavish hospitality in their hilltop Bel-Air home on Orum Road know their devotion to food and fine wine. They might also have been shown his collection of first editions: books on travel to Greece, Baedeker guidebooks, 19th century English books with colored plates, and editions of Thucydides. Not all are so high-minded. There are also first editions of George Orwell, Eric Ambler, and Raymond Chandler.

Where most of us have "interests" or "hobbies," Mort's wholehearted devotion turned his into true passions. He was a consummate sports fan, who played tennis, faithfully attended UCLA basketball games, and devoted to baseball statistics that prodigious memory that he otherwise employed on bibliographical citations or wine lore. His interest in the democratic process, ancient and modern, made him a long-time biennial volunteer at the election-day telephone bank at the local Democratic party headquarters. In addition to fine wine and rare books, Mort and Catherine were true amateurs of classical music, with a special love for the German and Austrian classics. She would play the 1908 Bechstein in their living room; he played his large collection of CDs, LPs, and even his treasured 78s. But all these passions, even his beloved 1967 MG, were relatively recent compared to his love of tennis as player and expert observer. After sixty years of playing, his serve no longer exceeded 100 MPH, but his wiliness at the net improved over the years. The Chambers' own pilgrimages were not to Santiago de Compostela, but to the Austrian Schubertiade, to Delphi, and to Wimbledon.

There will be a celebration of his life when the pandemic permits.

Ronald Mellor

