

## OBITUARIES

# 'Jock' Burnet

"JOCK" BURNET, the former Bursar of Magdalene College, Cambridge, who has died aged 79, was an benign *éminence grise* whose influence in the Church, the public schools and the universities extended well beyond the Fens.

Slight and bespectacled, with a quiet and self-effacing manner and the air of a courteous owl, Jock Burnet's appearance gave no hint of his extraordinary skills, organising power and influence.

As a schoolboy he founded the Jesters Club, which now has more than 6,000 members across the world. It began when he and a few friends wanted to play cricket in the holidays.

After a year Burnet decided to expand into fives, and this was soon followed by the inclusion of squash and rackets. The club had no premises of its own but soon had a strong fixture list, playing Oxford and Cambridge and touring sides.

The criterion for membership which Burnet and his school-fellows established still holds. Competence on the playing field is not enough, and those candidates who are thought to lack the necessary qualities of unselfishness, modesty and friendliness find their election indefinitely delayed.

John Forbes Burnet was born on April 16 1910, the son of W Hodgson Burnet, Architect to the Office of Works — by virtue of office he was given a set of

grace and favour chambers at Windsor Castle — and a contributor of light-hearted articles to *The Morning Post*.

Burnet was educated at St Paul's and Christ's College, Cambridge, where he won a Rugby Fives blue. After leaving Cambridge he became an assistant master at St George's Choir School, Windsor Castle.

During this period he also edited a magazine devoted to court games (any game played with walls) and assisted Sir Owen Morshead, the King's Librarian, in cataloguing Disraeli's books and editing his letters at Hughendon.

Burnet's organising skills were invaluable during the 1939-45 war, when he was an influential member of the Air Crew Selection Board. He was recruited as a night observer by his great Cambridge friend, the Surrey cricketer Roger Winlaw, but moved to the education department because of his poor eyesight.

He began his service at Cranwell, but was transferred to personnel and briefed to take former air aces around the schools to encourage potential airmen, who were then interviewed and assessed.

After being demobilised in 1945 Burnet worked briefly for the publishers A & C Black before turning freelance and taking on the editorship of the *Public Schools Yearbook* and *Girls' Schools Yearbook*, with which he continued until earlier this year.

In the late 1940s Burnet started a bookshop in Windsor (Forbes and Francis) and taught at the Eton Choir School. And in 1949 he became the Bursar of Magdalene College, Cambridge, later becoming a Fellow and taking on some tutorial work.

He was a formidable fund raiser; when Oxford University Rugby Fives Club desperately needed new courts in 1988 he wrote to every former Cambridge Rugby Fives player and raised more money from them than the entire Oxford contribution. This year, although dogged by ill-health, he managed to raise £500,000 for Cambridge Court Games when their site was threatened with development.

He was a governor of Wellingborough, Glenalmond, Shrewsbury, Bromsgrove and Radley, of which he was also vice-chairman. In spite of his commitments he always found time for unhurried conversations with his many friends. He was a perfect host, as much at home with intellectuals as with athletes and games players.

Burnet was neither snobbish nor elitist, and could be progressive when the occasion demanded — although he used often to quote the adage: "When it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change".

In 1938 he married Pauline Willis, and they had two sons and a daughter.

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J. F. BURNET

WITH deep sadness we have to report the death, at 79, of our indefatigable editor for the last forty-two years, Jock Burnet.

Jock was an excellent editor: meticulous over detail, ever tactful in his dealings with both schools and publisher and resolute in defence of the approach he believed to be appropriate.

It was the perfect job for him because he loved both schools and books and his detailed knowledge of the former was unrivalled, as his appetite for the latter was insatiable. It was his habit to rise at 5.00 a.m. and break the back of his day's work before breakfast while most of us are abed. That was the favourite time for writing a mass of letters in his own hand. He invariably replied to letters by return and he was disappointed if others did not do the same. He would also devour two or three major novels a week to keep his well furnished mind in good trim and he remembered what he read and delighted to quote accurately.

Fittingly Jock had started life as a schoolmaster and had also run a bookshop. When his old friend, Jack Newth, secured his services for A & C Black he had been on the point of going to the National Book League. After a few happy years with A & C Black he was persuaded by the King's Librarian, Sir Owen Morshead, to throw in his lot with the fellows of Magdalene as their Bursar. It was an inspired appointment and it was to be his life's work.

In the uncomplicated post-war days in Cambridge the Bursar's job was often done by a fellow with time on his hands, and it was not difficult for Jock to handle the Public Schools Yearbook (as it then was) along with the bursarial duties of the College and a handful of Church History students all in the same week.

As the book became a fuller, more exhaustive and professional work so the College, too, became a more complex and demanding organisation to administer. He was more than equal to the challenge, for his gifts were those of a quick mind, a capacity for well organised, sustained hard work and above all for friendship. He loved the school world he so carefully tabulated, and his work was play to him. His knowledge of those who worked in schools was often canvassed to help to pick those who came to run them. It put flesh on the bones of what might otherwise have made a dry meal, and in his beaming, puckish way he rather enjoyed being a kingmaker.

This did not mean that he became blind to the faults of heads, rather the reverse. Many remarked on the courteous way in which he sent his ever so gentle reminders to those all powerful dictators, so unused to reprimand. Seldom was a mistake found in these pages during Jock's 42 years at the helm for he never forgot that each school had, at most, only three pages to pore over when the finished article emerged, and those who might have been careless at galley proof stage were apt to be hawklike over the finished article. Jock gave them little to feed upon.

It was typical of the support he enjoyed from his wife Pauline through nearly 50 years of marriage, that she should have shouldered the burden of the full editorship in this centenary year when illness struck him down. It has been a heroic finale to a truly distinguished reign. It will be a hard act to follow.

D. R. W. SILK

## 'Jock' Burnet

"JOCK" BURNET gave most of his life to education and young people. Schooled at St Paul's, he went up to Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1929 to read History, won a Rugby Fives Blue and, after a brief interlude as a prep school master, joined the Royal Air Force in 1940. In 1945, he joined A & C Black, a publishing firm with which he retained a lifelong association through editing, with meticulous efficiency, the *Independent Schools Year Book*.

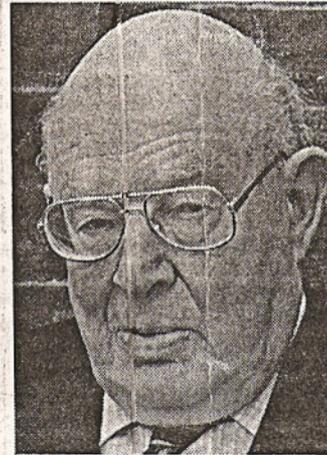
It was Sir Owen Morshead, the Queen's Librarian, former Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge and Pepys Librarian, who engineered his appointment as Bursar of Magdalene in 1949, and this post gave Burnet the opportunity to exercise his remarkable gift with people. He would rise early and break the back of his day's work between 5 and 8.30am in order to leave time for undergraduates and colleagues to drop in throughout the day. It was Burnet who brought the early morning cup of tea to a household

which overflowed with guests, and on the tea tray there would invariably be a volume, in the end papers of which were pencilled page references that he knew would interest his guests and alleviate the shock of an earlier than usual awakening.

He won the confidence of those who came to see him by being a patient and sincere listener, and his wise and down-to-earth advice came from a well-furnished mind nourished on the best of English literature.

He read swiftly and retentively and delighted to quote accurately for all occasions. No one enjoyed book hunting in a second-hand bookshop more than he; seldom did he fail to discover a neglected treasure. He loved books, and his library overflowed into the garage.

Burnet's letters were a joy to receive. Few men can have kept



up so wide a correspondence. He always answered letters by return of post, and was disappointed if his correspondents did not do the same. His natural efficiency, financial acumen and orderly

thought process made him an ideal Bursar.

At the age of 18, he founded the Jesters Club, now the largest court games club in the world, and lived to preside over its jubilee in 1978.

His love of cricket centred on the batting of Frank Woolley, and he revelled in the rugby-playing skills and dry wit of the Cambridge and Scottish wing, Arthur Smith.

"Jock" Burnet governed five independent schools — Bromsgrove, Glenalmond, Radley, Shrewsbury and Wellingborough — and had in addition to turn down many others. He was at his happiest visiting a boarding school, calling on masters, talking with boys and absorbing the atmosphere; those looking for headmasters usually went to see "Jock" Burnet at his home in Selwyn Gardens. He always main-

tained that the secret of headmastering was to appoint the right men and leave your study door open.

Perhaps the greatest enabler in his own life was his wife Pauline; together they dispensed hospitality in a manner which became a legend to their army of friends. Each Sunday in term time, "Jock" would sit in his armchair wearing his embroidered bedroom slippers and Marks & Spencer pull-over, surrounded by a sea of undergraduates, looking like one of those benign and beaming archdeacons immortalised by Osbert Lancaster. He knew just who to introduce to whom, and took delight in friendships which sprang from his introductions.

Dennis Silk

*John Forbes ("Jock") Burnet, schoolmaster and bursar, born 16 April 1910, Bursar Magdalene College, Cambridge 1949-77, married 1940 Pauline Willis (one son, one daughter, and one son deceased), died Cambridge 6 August 1989.*