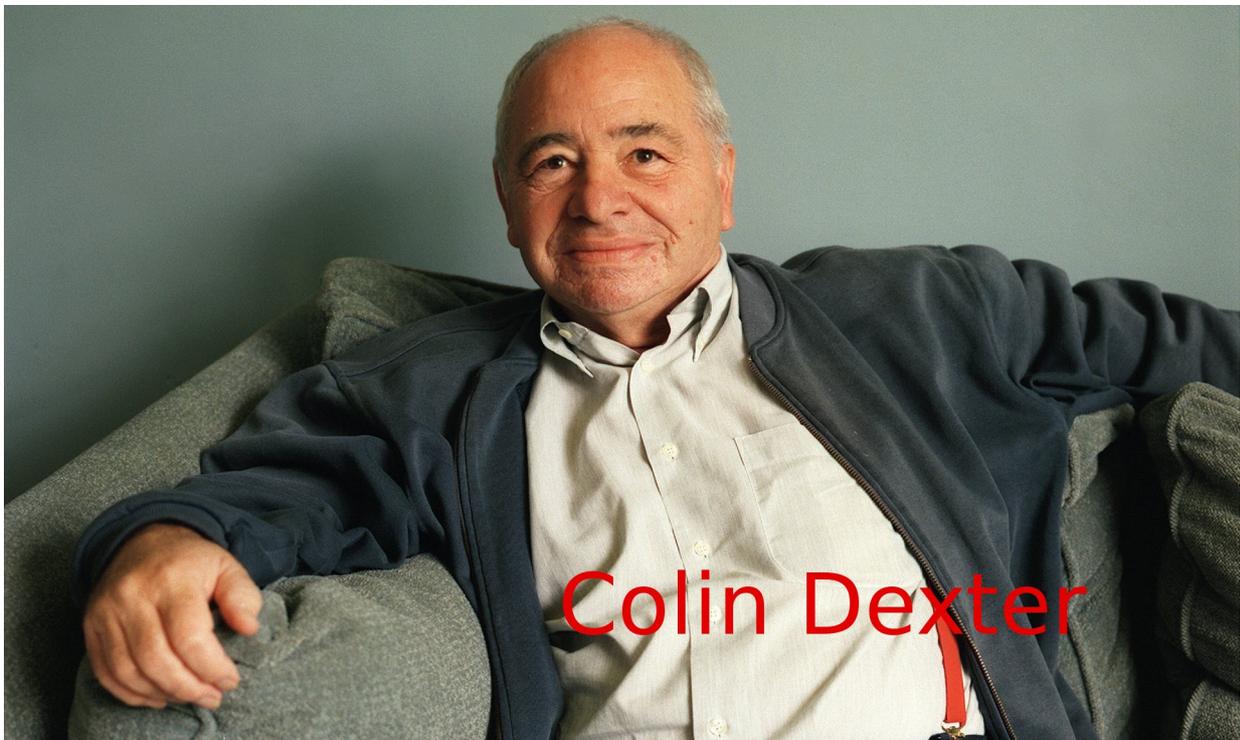


KV Articles – March 2017 – Paul Humphreys writes ...

# The Last Days of Socrates

— Paul's memoir of Colin Dexter, September 1930 - March 2017.



'The thing about public examinations,' Colin explained to me from the floor of his room, where he sat unpacking boxes of library books on his first day at work in the University's newly-built offices in Summertown — 'The thing about public examinations, is not whether candidates know the answer to the questions you set. It's about making sure they understand the question being asked of them. It's a difficult one, you know, writing good questions, it's not easy.'

It was around the late-1960s when former school-teacher Colin had been appointed by Oxford University as Subject Officer for the Classics at its Delegacy of Local Examinations (examinations set for pupils in secondary schools at O- and A-Level). This appointment was long before Colin's Morse days had taken off, his *Last Bus to Woodstock* did not depart the press until 1975; he was approaching his forties.

I was still in my teens at that time, already employed at the Oxford Delegacy in admin support with the gift of a job-title, *Confidential Clerk*. With that title I could sometimes get myself off the hook when senior academics asked me a question whose answer I had no clue about. And with that device I could often wriggle out, with some legitimacy, I thought, simply by replying to the questioner, 'I am not allowed to tell you.' But my frequently-rehearsed response did not wash with Colin that day.

I met him by chance, early morning, as he drew up in the car park.

Casting over his book collection which I had helped the new man carry in from the boot of his car – I did not then know his name – I noticed that Colin seemed particularly cheered to locate his Chambers dictionary, his *Vade Mecum*. I remember, he actually pointed to it before carefully extracting the volume from its box. From memory I'm sure he did kiss its bright-red cover before offering it up safely from the floor onto the corner of his desk. Evidently this title was not destined for any place on his floor-to-ceiling shelving.

'*Chambers* has more swear words in it than any of the Oxfords,' he said.

While we were unpacking his books and other papers, many of Colin's fresher questions went over my head. He asked me seemingly easy questions like, 'Is this a nice place to work?' But followed, 'Are the people here forgiving, do you know?' I pretended not to hear the tricky ones.

We were almost done, around 10.30-ish, and I asked if he would like me to take him up for coffee.

He said, 'I'll crack on here. Get settled in. But before you go could you perhaps spare me another minute for something? Good — ', he said, 'So, you say you are a confidential clerk? Please take a seat. I take it that *confidential* means you are good at keeping secrets, is that right?'

I sat down.

Colin told me that what would follow was very hush-hush. In the excited run up to his new job, he had been working on a new exam question. It was a question for an

Ordinary Level paper designated O\*14, *Greek Literature in Translation* to be sat in schools two Summers hence (next year's exams were already in the bag). Across his desk he passed me his hand-written draft and said, 'Well, tell me, what do you make of this one?'

I instinctively knew in this case that any attempt on my part to explain my lowly role or otherwise seek to dodge his question, would fail. At first blush, the written question looked pretty long to me, so probably a comprehension. But I began to tackle it, aware that Colin was closely studying the expression on my face as I scanned his text. 'What do you think?' he said again. I had not finished. He gave me some extra time. 'Carry on.'

'Any good?' he asked. 'Not a bad question — eh? For a newcomer?'

'I'm afraid I'm rather out of my depth here Colin,' I replied. 'I do not recognised some of these words. I'm not very good with handwriting, I'm sorry, but are *these* words in Greek? (I pointed to them, my stab was a guess) I did a bit of Latin at school but no ...';

'Yes, they are Greek,' he confirmed as I continued my apology.

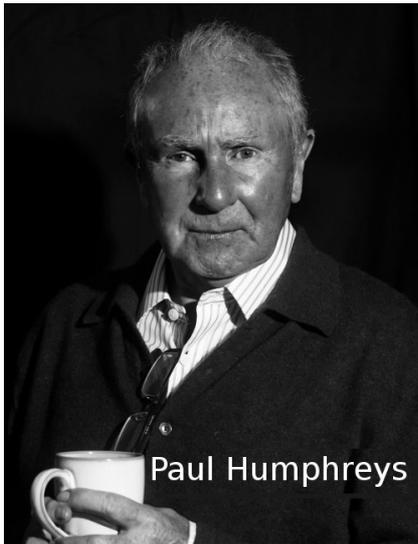
'Did no Greek?' he said in apparent astonishment, 'No Greek?' 'How on earth did you get into this place?' he asked. 'Never mind, never mind, I have a plan.'

Colin stood up and picked out something from the shelf behind him. He handed me a book written by Plato. The paperback was published by Penguin Classics, entitled *The Last Days of Socrates*. 'Read this,' he said. 'Come back next Monday, say, around ten-ish, and we'll take another look at my question. Agree?'

Colin had always thought of himself primarily as a teacher, a self-assessment surely confirmed by all of us who came away from even the briefest of conversations with him unexpectedly better informed about such things as the purpose of the Oxford comma; about where to place the apostrophe, if at all; or simply being put at rest that the etymology of 'Syllabus' had indeed derived from Greece, not from Rome.

Today, I continue to do my bit to pass it all on. My eight-year-old granddaughter can recite by rote the series: *nominative, vocative, accusative, genitive, dative, ablative*. My five-year-old grandson stops his wild activity and gracefully bows his head in my direction in great reverence as he quietly responds *Magister* when I ask him the Latin for Master. My two-year-old granddaughter laughs the heartiest of laughs when I speak to her the funny name of *Aristophanes*.

On my shelf at home I keep a copy of *The Last Days of Socrates* which I dip into from time to time so to keep up my homework, thanks to Colin. I know that each of us at the Delegacy has our own, very personal, Colin-story to tell. Collectively he taught us that the best of exam answers always came from candidates whose time was well-spent in preparation, individually he always encouraged us to do the same. His own books remain, as does my Plato at home, surrounded by an enduring affection for Colin. He was an extraordinarily inspirational and influential teacher. He was such a great person to have met, worked with, learned from, and to have been around. Thank you Colin! *Arduus ad Solem!*



Paul Humphreys is a resident of Kidlington. He is now retired and spends much of his time with his grandchildren who live nearby. Paul is a member of Kidlington Voice — he looks forward to its monthly breakfast meetings, not only for the bacon and eggs, but the opportunities Voice meetings bring to meet and learn about the diversity of activities and special interests of people who live and work in and around the village.

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