

13 April 2019

Memorial service for Stanley Insler

Many people here knew Stanley for much longer than I did. I can only talk about my experience at Yale as an infinitely junior colleague of Stanley from the mid-1990s. He was well-known to me in advance as a friend of my own supervisor at Oxford, Anna Davies, and as a world-famous scholar in the field. I now see that when he took me out for dinner during the interview process he was under the beady eye of a Classical colleague and on his very best behaviour.

When I arrived in New Haven the best behaviour vanished, happily, and was replaced by the warmth, generosity and humour of a man who became one of my most faithful friends while I was at Yale, and after that until his death. I ran into him on the street, and was instantly invited to dinner at his home. The extraordinary hospitality of the Insler-Sanford household became a central part of my life in New Haven.

Stanley went out of his way to invite younger colleagues, as well as students and non-academic friends in New Haven, to dinners and parties marked by Bill's wonderful cooking and Stanley's own dangerous martinis. Some of my best memories are of Stanley's glittering form on these occasions: charming, hilariously funny, and sharp, but also concerned with the problems of friends, and ready to advise or help in any way he could.

To a young academic his honesty and openness were striking, and in many respects an important model. He hated what he called phoney baloney, and spoke up sharply at Yale for the academic values he believed in. I sat in on a number of his courses, and learned some valuable lessons. He deliberately took breaks in the teaching where he'd talk to the students informally or make a joke, to give them a rest; he was completely honest about what he knew or didn't know -- though he mostly knew everything, he hated the pretences of the great professor. In line with this, he said once that one of the important changes in university life during his academic career had been the decline of formality: he loved being able to come to work in casual and comfortable gear rather than a suit and tie.

In retirement he generally came to London around Thanksgiving. A perfect house-guest, he bumbled round Soho every morning waving a coffee and a cigarette (his breakfast); in the evening he liked to go out for a martini -- he would turn to the person next to him, ask them what they did, then tell them how to do it. I could see my compatriots torn between being scandalised and charmed by this behaviour, but the charm always won out. I shall miss him enormously, and it was a huge privilege to have known him.

Stephen Colvin