SPENCER BARRETT

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William Spencer Barrett 1914–2001

SPENCER BARRETT (he disliked his first given name) was born on 29 May 1914, educated at Derby School, and won a scholarship to Christ Church, Oxford, where he received high praise from tutors including A. J. Ayer and D. L. Page. Although he gave his life to classics, at school Barrett had been equally good at mathematics, as one might have guessed from his extra-curricular activities as well as the tenor of his classical work. He duly obtained a First in Mods and Greats, and won a wide range of university prizes. After a year's teaching at Christ Church he moved to Keble in 1939, participating for a while in the attenuated academic life of wartime Oxford. The college, which at that time was also inhabited by MI5 secretaries, became the Barretts' first family home when Spencer married Peggy Hill; their son and daughter were born in this period. A snapshot from his early years: once he had cause to write to the very senior Cyril Bailey, editor of Lucretius. He started the letter 'Dear Dr Bailey', but it came back to him with 'Dr' firmly deleted; 'Dear Bailey' would have been correct, despite their disparity in age. From 1942 (without needing to leave Oxford, since the group functioned in the School of Geography) Spencer also worked as a civilian officer for Naval Intelligence, acquiring his preferred sleeping hours, 4 a.m. to 12 noon—since his material had to be ready for collection at 8 a.m., it was more convenient to stay up for most of the night than to rise at crack of dawn. As a result, his post-war tutorials were usually given in the afternoon or evening, though he would agree to 12 noon if pressed.

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Quite a number of classical scholars worked in the same Naval Intelligence division. The formidable W. S. Watt, later Professor of Latin at Aberdeen University (for whom, see below, pp. 359–72), became a particular friend to Spencer Barrett; among others were A. N. Sherwin-White (St John's College, Oxford) and A. F. Wells (University College, Oxford). One of their tasks was to produce handbooks on different countries, bringing together information which might be useful (in the broadest sense, including 'to maintain the high standard of education in the Navy') to naval commanders operating in that area. Many of these volumes came to rest in Hertford College Library, since the Professor of Geography, who led the group, was a Fellow of that college. Stephanie West (the present Librarian) has found the volume on Persia valuable for her own work on Herodotus. Spencer's family think that they remember him speaking about Madagascar in such a context, but we have not been able to confirm this—perhaps the volume was never finished.

He liked to remark that there were strong links between Christ Church and Keble, going back to the latter's foundation; nonetheless it was strange that Spencer Barrett became so devoted to a college where, as a firm and scrupulous atheist, he could not make the declaration allowing him to hold the title of Fellow—in all other respects he was treated as a Fellow—until the Keble Statutes changed in 1952. Following the sudden death of Austin Farrer in 1968, it fell to Spencer, as Acting Warden, to preside over another change of statute: henceforth the Warden of Keble need not be an Anglican clergyman. Characteristically he ensured that the immediate election should be conducted under the old statutes. He had a great respect for tradition; for example, making a pointed version of the Latin grace, so that non-classical scholars reading in Hall could get their pauses right. When it became increasingly hard to find recipients of closed awards in theology who would commit themselves to serving in particular dioceses, Spencer felt real sadness that the wishes of the original donors could no longer be fulfilled.

Spencer Barrett immersed himself in very many aspects of college life. His favourite projects usually had a mathematical component, and often made allowance for alternative courses of future events: for example, would it be worth double-glazing the new building on the assumption that the price of heating oil doubled? He worked out the salary scales, redesigned the Porters' Lodge and made a model of a proposed stairway in the Warden's Lodgings. A car was returned to the garage with a precise statement of the speedometer's degree of inaccuracy. When an Inspector of Taxes queried whether a calculator was an allowable working expense

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for a classicist, Spencer shot him down in flames with a demonstration that, in order to understand a particular line of Pindar, one had to know how Mount Etna would appear to a sailor passing at a certain distance from the shore. Of course the amount of money at issue was insignificant—but that was not the point.

My first encounter (as an undergraduate from another college) with Spencer Barrett was at his Euripides *Hippolytus* lectures in 1959. The Pusey lecture room was always packed. Full and immaculate hand-outs suggested a finished commentary (no doubt anyone else would long since have sent the typescript to the Press). Certain small points immediately struck us; it seemed that we had not been taught Greek correctly at school. *Sigma* on the blackboard was shaped like a half-moon, *iota* written adscript where we had been taught to write it subscript, *zeta* pronounced as 'sd' (e.g. in Hippolytus' mother, the Amasdon). None of this, as I recall, was explained, but it all carried a mysterious authority. Always there was something to wonder at, whether an emendation to the text by one John Milton, 'a scholar who was also a poet', or the occasion when a minor British scholar who had previously always been condemned, got something right where the great Wilamowitz got it wrong. Above all we were struck by the rigour of Barrett's argumentation: erroneous opinions must be refuted by multiple hard evidence, not set aside by hazy impressions. Once I was emboldened to write to him, proposing an emendation which to an eighteen-year-old seemed unquestionably right. No reply—ah well, perhaps I had hoped for too much. Then, six months later, a reply came, explaining at some length where my letter had spent the intervening period, pointing out that my emendation was the wrong tense but adding kindly that one incidental remark of mine had been useful to him.

In 1960 E. R. Dodds retired from the Regius Professorship of Greek, and Spencer Barrett could have been considered a plausible successor. Oral tradition—at least in Keble—suggests that this was indeed so, hinting that things might have been different if only his *Hippolytus* had been published by then. Certainly Barrett was invincible in his specialist areas, but he did not have Hugh Lloyd-Jones's wide interest in ancient Greek literature of all types and periods, from Homer to Nonnus in the fifth century AD. He would probably not have enjoyed the extra burden of administration which went with the chair; his work as Acting Warden of Keble after Austin Farrer's death was very conscientious but very slow, and it was with relief that he handed the college over to Dennis Nineham. The personal Readership (quite a rare distinction in 1966) which he was

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granted by Oxford University suited him better. Another well-merited recognition was his Fellowship of the British Academy (1965).

The Oxford University Press must have been driven to distraction by Spencer's perfectionism; several times they announced a publication date for *Hippolytus*, but had to postpone because there was something with which he was not entirely happy. Finally, however, in 1964, the great book, which had dominated family as well as professional life for so long, saw the light of day. I did notice one unfavourable review, which predicted 'a patient literature of refutation' in the periodicals (this did not materialise!). Spencer himself expressed intense irritation about another reviewer—not a native English speaker. On *Hippolytus* 18, Barrett observed that the Greek word for 'dog', when applied to a hound, is ordinarily feminine; the unhappy reviewer informed the world that, according to Barrett, the Greeks normally employed bitches for hunting! Undergraduates did not find the book altogether easy to use, but it was quickly realised that, for any scholar working seriously on Greek Tragedy, Barrett's *Hippolytus* was essential reading.

The fullest and most penetrating discussion of Barrett's *Hippolytus* was that of Professor Hugh Lloyd-Jones in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 85 (1965), 164–71; for example, on p. 165 (starting from the use of secondary literature)

> Barrett cites enough evidence to support his argument, and no more; he has the finest and most delicate appreciation of that evidence's value. The minutest points are treated, and yet the reader is never bored, so lively and so lucid is the editor's presentation and so compelling the continuous activity of the keenest and sharpest critical intelligence. Sometimes ruthless logic is pushed too far. Euripides was a poet and not a scholar, and cannot have taken half the trouble to write the play that Barrett has taken to explain it [!]; in some places he is credited with a degree of rationality hardly to be demanded of the most rational of logicians. But the occasional annoyance caused by what some readers may think pedantry or fussiness is a small price to pay for the privilege of contact with a mind of such remarkable acuteness.

Individual components of the work are judged as follows: (p. 165) Barrett 'is a textual critic of the highest order, possessing learning, ingenuity and judgement, each in high degree. He stands as far from the conservatism of those who cling desperately to the most absurd readings of the manuscripts as from the radicalism of the wild emenders'; (p. 165) '. . . the author's extraordinary familiarity with the Greek language. He knows classical Greek poetry by heart, and his knowledge is made more effective by his firm grasp of Greek grammar, both morphology and syn-

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tax'; (p. 166) 'The treatment of metre is throughout masterly; the handling of the lyrics compares well with that of Wilamowitz, undemonstrable theorising is absent, and the book is rich in the detailed metrical observation that aids textual criticism.'

Lloyd-Jones is not uncritical: for example on p. 166:

> No mortal can have everything, and this commentary will not inspire the reader with delight in the *Hippolytus* as work of art . . . More serious is a tendency to water down the tragic dilemma by lecturing Hippolytus for 'puritanism', 'priggishness' etc., at times almost giving the impression that the whole trouble might have been avoided if Hippolytus had shown more common sense. Barrett truly says (pp. 391 f.) that the downfall of Hippolytus 'springs from a defect that it is the reverse side of his very virtue; his cult of purity, for all its beauty and nobility, is bound up with an intolerant rejection of an essential part of human life'. Hippolytus' utterance at 1364–7 causes the editor to rebuke him for 'blindness to the defects of his narrow puritanism'; and the farewell of Artemis at 1437–9 prompts him to complain that 'for all its beauty the love of Hippolytus for Artemis lacks something essential'. That is the attitude of a monotheist [Spencer would have described himself as an atheist, but perhaps we see here the difference between a monotheistic atheist and a polytheistic atheist!]. The ancient Greeks were not Christians and did not insist on having everything; and they knew that there are some good things that one cannot have without sacrificing others.

Lloyd-Jones concludes (p. 171), 'If some of [the above remarks] indicate disagreement, that should not obscure the reviewer's admiration of what seems to him a truly great achievement.' Those who know Sir Hugh will be aware that he does not bestow such praise lightly.

Apart from *Hippolytus*, Spencer Barrett's most important publication was a sixty-five-page discussion of Sophocles' *Niobe* (and other plays on the same theme) in Richard Carden's book, *The Papyrus Fragments of Sophocles*, 'with a Contribution by W. S. Barrett' (he insisted on that wording). The two papyri to which he devotes most attention (neither ascribed to Sophocles by any positive external evidence such as coincidence with an already-known quotation) both describe the killing of Niobe's children by Apollo and Artemis. The damaged nature of the text calls forth his own views about the staging of such a spectacular scene. One of the papyri is in five fragments, which Spencer himself had examined in the minutest detail. Although one would not have described him as a papyrologist, to an outsider he seemed to possess all the techniques of a professional. Indeed the majority of Greek authors in whom he took a special interest depend to a considerable extent on ancient papyri for their text; Spencer would often go up to London at a weekend, coming

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back to say that he had managed to read a few more letters from a papyrus of Bacchylides or Stesichorus. I was surprised—since he had never spoken to me about this—to find out that he had played quite a part in the recovery of Menander's comedy *Dyscolos* from papyri. Among other writings, note his contribution (on Pindar, *Olympian* 13) to '*Dionysiaca*', *Studies by former pupils presented to Sir Denys Page*, his Christ Church tutor.

Spencer Barrett's Readership reduced his college teaching by more than a half and opened the way for a new appointment at Keble, as a result of which I had the privilege of being his colleague for fourteen years. The division between Greek and Latin teaching was absolute—for this purpose the New Testament was deemed to be written in Latin. In his later years he pretended not to know Latin, which was nonsense, of course. Not to mention his youthful epyllion on Delos, of which only the first line survives ('Latonam perhibent, genitor quo tempore divum'), the editors of *Classical Quarterly* tried long and hard to extract from his head a substantial article on Seneca's tragedies, one of which he had used with the greatest caution in the preface to *Hippolytus* as possible evidence for Euripides' earlier, lost, play on the same theme. Apparently he sent some suggestions to an editor of Seneca, with disappointing results. An indication of Spencer's high repute in Latin too was the pleasure expressed by Robin Nisbet on learning that his emendation 'Sidone' for 'sidere' in Horace, *Odes* 3. 1. 42 had won Barrett's approval.

Admissions-time at Oxford (now much changed) as it was in the 1970s, brought out certain Spencerian characteristics in their purest form. The system at its most complicated decreed that a minor award (Exhibition) at a lower-choice college outweighed ('trumped') a mere commoner place at a higher-choice college; similarly a major award (Scholarship) trumped an Exhibition. There always seemed to be a battle royal between Keble and Pembroke, in the persons of Spencer Barrett and Godfrey Bond. One soon learned that it was fatal to betray, by word, gesture or expression, the slightest interest in, say, a Balliol candidate, since Pembroke, despite having used their full advertised quota of awards, would inevitably then produce an extra award and whisk away the promising youngster. The system also led to log-jams in which everybody's decision depended upon everybody else's decision. Gordon Williams (a Fellow of Balliol, later Professor at St Andrews and Yale) told me of an occasion in his time when one college had announced a decision, and it fell to Keble to make the next move. Before he would do this, Spencer Barrett called for a Greek lexicon, to ascertain whether or not the candidate's use of a

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particle in his Greek prose was correct—if Spencer himself did not know the answer, this was surely a matter of pure chance! Another complicated part of the system was arranging interview times so that candidates could get from one end of Oxford to the other, visiting five or six colleges. Although under no obligation whatever, Spencer used to organise the timetable; this clearly appealed to the mathematical and puzzle-solving side of his nature (he regularly entered *The Times* crossword competition and reached the final stages without ever winning). Anyone interviewed at the maximum number of colleges was hailed as a *perihodonikes* (an athlete who had competed with success in all the major Greek games).

Keble did not obtain very many top-flight undergraduates in classics; Spencer's *annus mirabilis* was 1963, when three obtained a First in Mods (two of these, Brian Bosworth and Richard Hawkins, went on to become professional academics). He confessed that, in social terms, he sometimes found less able ones to be more interesting. Certainly he made a great impression on his pupils of all ranges of ability, and was viewed by them with much affection. Proof of this comes from his retirement party held in 1981. One participant has computed that two thirds of all his Keble pupils, from 1939 to 1981, were present on that occasion—an extraordinary statistic. Spencer himself regularly came back from retirement in Bristol for college reunions, until shortly before his death in 2001; he remembered all his pupils in detail, and was able to pronounce that a candidate in Mods in 1995 had obtained the second best First of any Keble classicist since 1939.

In many ways Spencer Barrett may seem to have been an old-style Oxford classics don. He did not move very far from homebase. As far as I am aware, he did not lecture outside England (although he was certainly invited to speak in America) and not very often outside Oxford. He did not even visit Greece until middle age, and that was partly to confirm some details of the topography of Trozen (thus, not Troezen, in Euripides' time) about which, essentially, he had already made up his mind. His published work, though superb in quality, was modest in quantity, considering that he had such a long career. One could not imagine him leaving his college for a chair at another university. There were no honorary degrees for him (and no sign that he felt the lack of them), no international fame as a lecturer. Yet he was fully abreast of continental scholarship. When he presided at a meeting of the Oxford Philological Society at which Eduard Fraenkel gave a personal memoir of Wilamowitz, he described the occasion as 'the living scholar to whom I owe most talking about the dead scholar to

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whom I owe most'. Conversely there is evidence of the high esteem in which Spencer Barrett was held by scholars in his field, for example in France and Germany.

Graduate studies at Oxford were relatively undeveloped in his time, but, to the extent that he was involved in these, he demanded the very highest standards. One pupil despaired of meeting these after a single session; in another case, as an examiner, he not only pointed out the candidate's error but even charted in detail the path through the secondary literature which had led to the erroneous conclusion. On the other hand Annette Harder in her edition of Euripides' *Kresphontes* and *Archelaos* thanks W.S.B. for 'long discussions in Keble College' of her Groningen dissertation. Spencer was never fully reconciled to the introduction of literature into Greats, and resolved not to examine in that Final Honours School. In fact he did not often examine in Mods, partly, perhaps, because his perfectionism made him such a slow marker—something which causes difficulties for fellow-examiners. In one Mods year, however, he was deputed to mark the Juvenal paper, outside his normal range. The problem, as he recalled, was solved when he discovered the existence of a candidate called Nisbet—it was only necessary to read Nisbet's script first.

As well as laicisation of the Wardenship, Keble underwent a radical change in Spencer Barrett's time, in the admission of women (1979). Spencer was in favour—as indeed was almost everyone else. But his stated reason was idiosyncratic, though quite logical: so that, after retirement, he should not have to return to a college which was unfamiliar to him. A story which he used to tell against himself must belong to the intervening two years. Spencer was always much concerned that there should be free space in the Fellows' car park when (as a consequence of his unusual sleeping hours) he arrived early in the afternoon. Once seeing a young woman leaning her bicycle against the forbidden wall, he went up to her: 'Excuse me, are you a member of this college?' To which the reply was 'No, but I spend quite a lot of time here, and so I can probably help you.'

When retirement came, in 1981, Keble elected Spencer Barrett to an Honorary Fellowship (rather than an Emeritus Fellowship). The higher accolade was fully deserved on the double criterion of exceptional academic distinction and exceptional service to the college. He was greatly moved by the farewell gathering of his former pupils: 'One does one's job, and then' (with a gesture towards the company) 'this'. Roman obituaries sometimes include a section which opens 'He did not see . . .'. Dying in 2001, Spencer did not know of Keble's decision to cease admitting undergraduates to read classics, classics and modern languages and classics and

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English with effect from 2004. This knowledge would undoubtedly have distressed him very much.

The dinner given to Spencer by his Senior Common Room colleagues was perhaps one of Peggy Barrett's last public occasions—and she did very well, since Alzheimer's disease was already beginning to take a hold. Spencer continued to live in Oxford for several years; after Peggy was transferred to a nursing home he used to take her out for a drive in the car, which she seemed to enjoy, though by the end she hardly knew who he was. Thereafter he moved down to Clifton, close to the family of his son John who was teaching mathematics at Clifton College.

During our years of tutorial collaboration at Keble there was little or no overlap in our research interests (incidentally Spencer did not much like the term 'research', preferring to speak of 'doing my own work'). But during the 1980s the present writer was working on a Greek project, editing with a commentary Callimachus' fragmentary poem, *Hecale*. Spencer took a keen interest in this, eventually accepting the dedication of the book. If a problem gripped his imagination, Spencer would spend an extraordinary amount of time and trouble on it. One such arose in Callimachus' *Hecale*. The question was, did some papyrus scholia on Thucydides quote just a part (already known from another source) of one line from the *Hecale*, or two complete hexameters? Pfeiffer had taken the former view, Wilamowitz the latter. It seemed to me that Wilamowitz had much the more convincing arguments. The thing to do was to telephone Spencer about 11 p.m., when he was at his brightest and best. He did indeed immerse himself in this problem. First he consulted a (not very good) photograph of the papyrus in the Ashmolean Museum, and, with the help of graph paper, traced what could be read of the crucial letters. A papyrological specialist was shortly due to visit Cairo, where the original lay in the Egyptian Museum, and had asked whether anyone had particular questions on which he might be able to give a verdict. It was Spencer who formulated, with the utmost precision, the question which needed answering. In due course the hoped-for reply came from Cairo, 'If you are to read . . . which I think you can . . .' Furthermore Spencer emended one letter (which would have to be deemed a scribal error) in the Thucydides-scholion, making sense of the two lines of Callimachus (the earliest Athenians celebrated dramatic festivals in honour of Dionysus of the Marshes, not Dionysus of the Black Goatskin). Finally, he had to discuss the width of the column in the Thucydides-scholion. All of this (mostly verbatim from Spencer) can be followed in Callimachus, *Hecale*, ed. Hollis (Oxford, 1990), pp. 271–5 on fr. 85.

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Although having served as Spencer Barrett's colleague on the most amicable terms for many years, I never lost a sense of awe at his scholarship. One question often arose in my mind—how many times had he been proved definitely to be wrong on an academic matter? Of course it may seldom fall to classical literary scholars to be proved beyond all doubt either right or wrong. In the early 1960s a papyrus fragment of Greek elegy came to light. Its style rather suggested the early third century BC, before the influence of Callimachus became so strong; authorship unknown (Hermesianax of Colophon is one possibility). The text is describing a series of mythological scenes, but what is the connection between them? Unfortunately the first part of the Greek lines had been lost. It was Spencer Barrett who provided a most unexpected solution to the problem, by restoring the verb 'I will tattoo'. Thus the mythological scenes and objects are to be tattooed on various parts of a miscreant's body. This seems to bring the text into the territory of a recognisable Hellenistic genre, the curse-poem. Once, many years later, I was walking with Spencer round the quad at Keble when he said 'They have found the other part of that papyrus—it confirms my restoration'. It seems that the finder (or a subsequent owner) of the papyrus may deliberately have torn it in two, perhaps in the hope of making more money from a double sale.

Apart from tragedy, Barrett's main interests lay in Greek lyric: Stesichorus, Bacchylides and above all Pindar, on whom he delivered notable lectures. For many years he had some borrowed papyri of Pindar at home. As time went on and nothing was heard of them, I was deputed to enquire about their well-being, which I did with some caution. All he said was, 'People are quite wrong in thinking that they contain remarkable new readings'; but this sufficed and they were safely retrieved with the help of John Barrett. A former pupil, not particularly academic, once lamented to him how difficult he found Pindar; Spencer's reply came out uncensored: 'Oh no, very easy.' Everyone always believed that some great work on Pindar would emerge, whether a commentary or a critical text. Spencer was concerned that a publisher might not be willing to arrange the lines on the page as he himself desired and believed to be correct. In fact his own typescript was always so meticulous and so pleasing to the eye that it would only have needed photocopying.

Spencer was to have twenty years of retirement. His intellect remained as sharp as ever, but his energy decreased. Of the papers recovered after his death, none seemed to have been written very recently. There are eleven boxes of these papers, collected—some of them from the floor of his Bristol flat—by his daughter, Mrs Gillian Hill (Spencer found a pleas-

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ing symmetry in the fact that his wife had been surnamed Hill before her marriage, his daughter after hers). She, as a professional archivist, also made a first attempt at cataloguing the papers. Of course it was necessary for them to be examined by a scholar of the highest calibre and interests similar to those of Spencer Barrett; much gratitude is due to Martin West for the many hours which he has already devoted to this work, and for consulting James Diggle. Hopes that we might find the authoritative Barrett text of Pindar have been fulfilled only in part. There is indeed a text, incorporating some of his own ideas, but no accompanying apparatus criticus. That is surprising, since one can hardly imagine Spencer making one without the other, but, if the app. crit. was mislaid in a removal of household belongings, it has clearly been lost for ever. As one might expect, there are very detailed metrical investigations, for example of final syllables in Pindar. Not everything is suitable for publication, but in the opinion of Martin West, it should be possible to make up a medium-sized volume of papers by Spencer Barrett on Greek lyric and tragedy. And the text of Pindar without apparatus criticus might still be of considerable value to a very promising young scholar who is preparing an Oxford Classical Text of Pindar.

Looking for a brief quotation to express the nature of Spencer Barrett's scholarship, I hit upon the following extract in W.S.B.'s contribution to Richard Carden's *Papyrus Fragments of Sophocles*, pp. 198–9. It is a matter of setting arguments against an impression: 'If that impression was right, my arguments here must be rejected; if the arguments are valid, the impression was wrong. I have not much doubt myself that the arguments should prevail.' No less important to Spencer were the personal relationships with his pupils, characterised by lasting affection and respect. Two examples come to mind, both showing that differences of religious belief were no barrier. An early pupil receiving the degree of Doctor of Divinity in the Sheldonian was touched to find that Spencer had specially come up from his retirement in Bristol so as to be present at the ceremony. The second example concerns a pupil who read Classical Mods followed by Theology Finals (later he became a Chaplain Fellow of Keble). He was about to be ordained, on which occasion it is the custom to send out cards to friends and associates, saying 'Please pray for x . . .'. What to do about Spencer, who could not reasonably be expected to pray? The easiest course was simply to omit him from the circulation list. Instead John Davies sent a card to Spencer, adding in the top left-hand corner 'For Information'. Spencer himself was delighted with the neatness of this solution.

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Spencer Barrett's last visit to Keble was to attend the memorial service for a long-standing colleague, the historian Douglas Price. Just recently alterations had been made to Spencer's design for the Porters' Lodge, and I was a little worried about how he would take these. His only comment was 'Ah, so they have done what I originally recommended'. He died on 23 September 2001, aged 87. At a well-attended memorial meeting in Keble on 1 June 2002, there were speeches by representatives of the Barrett family, colleagues (including Peter Parsons, Regius Professor of Greek) and pupils. One of his granddaughters, who had read Biology at Keble in the 1990s, played the viola beautifully. In the Keble Senior Common Room there is a drawing of Spencer. Sadly, he himself (according to his family) did not like it. Although never having been taught by him myself, I can imagine him just so when in tutorial mode, explaining gently but firmly why the Greek language does not allow us to understand a line of Pindar or Euripides in Professor So and So's manner.

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