



## TRIBUTE -

### Rev Prof Ernest Nicholson

The death took place earlier this month of Rev Professor Ernest Nicholson. Born in Portadown, he taught at TCD, Cambridge and Oxford where he was Mater of Oriel College. He was the author of a major book called *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century*,

### The Oxford Mail - Clergyman and professor was Oriel College's 50th provost

A former provost at an Oxford college has died aged 75.

Rev Prof Ernest Nicholson was provost of Oriel College between 1990 and 2003, when he retired.

He took up the post against the background of the decline of state funding of the university sector but during his tenure the college built additional student accommodation and launched a nationwide drive to fund bursaries.

But throughout his years as head of house at Oriel, Prof Nicholson never lost touch with his subject.



He published a major book called *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century*, a definitive study of academic investigation of the five 'books of Moses' of the Old Testament from 1900.

The work for the book was mostly written in moments snatched from other obligations, often before breakfast.

It is now considered one of the most important and convoluted areas in biblical study, and he was a master of it.

Prof Nicholson also contributed greatly to the work of the British Academy, which draws together expertise on the humanities and the social sciences, and was a member of its council.

Ernest Nicholson was born on September 26, 1938 in Portadown, Northern Ireland, where he went to school.

In his teens he met Hazel Jackson, his life-long love, who he married in 1962.

He attended Trinity College Dublin on which he had set his sights before moving to Glasgow to study for a PhD.

After his marriage he moved back to Dublin to take up a teaching post at Trinity College and five years later the couple moved to Cambridge where he was a lecturer in Old Testament Studies and fellow of University College, which has since been renamed Wolfson College.

He later became chaplain and then dean of chapel at Pembroke College, all the time teaching and writing in Old Testament Studies.

He first came to Oxford in 1979 after being appointed Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture.

He was appointed Oriel College's 50th provost in 1990 and held the position until he retired, though he continued publishing until the time of his death.

Revd Prof Ernest Nicholson died on December 22, 2013 and his funeral took place at St Peter's Church in Wolvercote on January 10.

He is survived by his wife, three of his four children and four grandchildren.

## The Portadown Times

**Professor Ernest Nicholson, Provost of Oriel College, Oxford from 1990-2003, never tried to hide the fact that he failed the 11-plus (or 'Qualifying Exam' in those days). Rather, he used the experience**

**throughout his life in academia to encourage young people that anything can be achieved through hard work and application.**

Prof Nicholson (75), who died a fortnight ago, achieved so much from his early life which started in Deer Park, off Portadown's Charles Street.

His education threaded its way through the Hart [Memorial](#) Primary School, Portadown 'Tech, Portadown College, Trinity College, Dublin, Glasgow University and ultimately to 'Oxbridge', culminating in Pembroke College, Cambridge, and then 'The Dreaming Spires' of Oxford.

He was installed as Provost of Oriel by Queen Elizabeth II, in line with the university's proud tradition going back to 1326, when Edward II founded Oriel.

Professor Nicholson's towering intellect made him a world figure in 'The



Classics' - Latin and Hebrew and Semitic languages. His scholastic travels took him all over the world, including the continent, Australia, Canada, Scandinavia and to the great American universities of Yale and Harvard.

His services as a world-respected guest lecturer were in great demand. Yet, he was the most gracious and humble of men,

treating everyone the same, and never forgetting his Portadown 'roots'

All along the way, by his side, was his devoted wife Hazel (nee Jackson) from the Birches. Together with Portadown College Latin teachers Donald Woodman (headmaster during Ernest's time there) and Nora Harvey, Hazel "force fed" him his six-year 'O' level course in Latin within three months, and he sailed through the exam. Hazel was a student at Glasgow University, and the young Ernest was regarded as a wonder student at PC in those days of the mid 1950s.

But it wasn't all work. He was as keen a rugby player as PC ever experienced. His colleagues in the first XV included Kenneth Flannagan, Victor Locke (who died a few weeks back in Hong Kong), Gordon Graham, Austin Elliott and Ernest's cousin Bert Wilson, deputy head boy.

Bert, now living in Banbridge, recalled, "Ernest always revered his Portadown background. He loved to talk about the town – playing football for the Hart, rugby for the College, Charlie Magowan's barber's shop in Edgarstown. He and I were like brothers and we used to 'do' the cloakroom at the Savoy Ballroom (West Street) on a Saturday night while my mum and dad (Albert and Lottie Wilson) played in the famous Savoy Orchestra. It was strictly ballroom dancing."

Ernest had spent four years at 'The Tech', but wanted to enter the Church, and felt that subjects at the College would suit him better. After discovering that a transfer was possible, he had a chat with Donald Woodman and the 'transfer' was arranged. "There was no fee!" he laughingly told a **Portadown Times** reporter who had the singular honour of interviewing him at Oriel back in 1996.

Ernest Nicholson went from Portadown College to Trinity where his main lecturer was world-renowned Professor Jacob Weingreen.

He gained his Bachelor of Arts Degree and then progressed to Glasgow, where he attained his Doctor of Philosophy Degree, his thesis being the Old Testament.

Ernest and Hazel were wed in St Mark's Church of Ireland, Portadown, in 1962, having met during their Portadown College days. They had both played a role in the church, where he had been a choirboy, a member of the Boys Brigade and of the senior Bible Class.

He then took up a role as lecturer back in Trinity, in Hebrew and Semitics. He moved to Cambridge in 1967, as University Lecturer in Divinity – he was made Fellow at University College, Cambridge, later Wolfson College.

In 1969, he was ordained in Ely Cathedral to become Chaplain of Pembroke College, Cambridge. And Oxford came into his life in 1979, when he became a Fellow of Oriel, specialising in Biblical Studies. In 1989, he was elected Provost of Oriel and installed by the Queen the following year.

Our reporter will never forget the day he spent with the Nicholsons, recalling that the Professor was much more interested in talking about days in Portadown than speaking about his worldwide fame and achievements.

Firstly, he spoke of the way that Hazel had enriched his life. “She selflessly lends a listening ear to the students and hosts classics scholars from all parts of the world. Hazel’s a wonderful cook into the bargain,” he enthused, and went on to say a few important things about the Dickson Plan for Education.

He added: “There wasn’t all that much contact between Portadown College and Tech in my days there. The 11-plus, or Qualifying as it was known, was a barrier to a wide-ranging education. My situation would have been picked up immediately by Dickson. It would have provided me with a safety net and I would have been spared all that trauma. But all’s well that ends well.”

Ernest and Hazel settled in an [apartment](#) in Oxford after he retired – they loved the atmosphere of the city and had many friends among the Dreaming Spires. They had three daughters – Rosalind, Kathryn and Jane – plus a son Peter, who sadly passed away recently in Mexico where he had married and was settled. There are six grandchildren.

Professor Nicholson was the son of Ernest sr and Vera Nicholson, and is survived by Hazel, brother Norman (Richhill) and predeceased by sister Thelma.

He died after a long battle with cancer, and his remains will be cremated on January 10 in Oxford in a strictly private family burial.

There will be a [memorial](#) service at a later date.