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SOPHIE KNIGHT CHOUK

Lost IN A Good Book

Medieval translator
Michael Herren '62 unravels
ancient literary mysteries.

BY NICHOLAS OWCHAR '90

What on earth is a “titaneus arotus?”

Michael Herren '62 encountered this strange phrase as he pored over a medieval manuscript in the Vatican Library.

Was it Greek? Latin? Aramaic?

Herren realized it was all of these. In fact, he deduced, the phrase referred to an object familiar to all of us: the sun.

“The vocabulary of this text is so unusual,” he explains. “It gives us a rare glimpse of daily life in a school in Ireland, yet no one could penetrate it. I knew I had to try.”

Herren's efforts paid off. He unraveled the daunting poetic wordplay found in this seventh-century manuscript, the *Hisperica Famina* (“Western Sayings”) and published a critical translation in two volumes. With the appearance of the first, in 1974, this medievalist-cum-classicist began a 40-year career translating overlooked or forgotten medieval manuscripts, primarily concerning the British Isles, to the delight—and gratitude—of the international community of classical scholars.

“No other living scholar could have produced this book so well,” declared preeminent Latin scholar and translator Michael Winterbottom in a review of Herren's edition of the *Hisperica*. “And it will remain definitive for many a long year.”

Now distinguished research professor of classics emeritus at York University and the University of Toronto—Herren held a cross appointment at both institutions for many years—he looks back on a body of translation and critical work that reveals a great deal about Anglo-Latin literature between the fifth and 11th centuries: traditions of poetry, letter-writing, the influence of the ancient Greeks, and the efforts, in particular, of Irish monks to preserve traditions (something Thomas Cahill described in his 1995 bestseller *How the Irish Saved Civilization*).

Recent years have proved a good time for specialists in the classics. Not only have there been a variety of bestselling books about pleasurable encounters with Dante, Plato, and Company (David Denby's *Great Books*, for instance, or Christopher Beha's *The Whole Five Feet*), but several new translations have met with astonishing mainstream success, including Seamus Heaney's 1999

translation of *Beowulf*, which no one ever expected to see on national bestseller lists (yet, there it was), and Robert Fagles' recent acclaimed versions of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Herren's efforts, however, have been primarily on behalf of a group beyond mainstream audiences: historians. By providing them with more resources, Herren hopes to enrich and augment their portraits of the past which—as the perceived wisdom goes—inevitably also teach us something about ourselves and our place in the world.

“There are many texts, like *Hisperica*, that are known but not understood,” he says. “I've tried to get these out into the daylight.”

The note of modesty in Herren's attitude belies the reality of his influence: Historians repeatedly draw from him as they tell us more about a world that was, in historian William Manchester's phrase, “lit only by fire.”

References to Herren's work abound in books of history; two notable recent mentions are Oxford University Press' *A New History of Ireland* and Christopher Allen Snyder's *The Britons*. His name also surfaces in Carl Olson's *Celibacy and Religious Traditions*, James Leslie Houlden's *Jesus in History, Thought and Culture*, and Jennifer Heath's *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics*, and bubbles up in a book whose title evokes J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth saga: *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, by Alaric Hall.

Besides the call to scholarly duty, however, there's another reason why Herren has dedicated his career to such acts of editorial recovery: He loves a good mystery. When he comes across a text scattered with enigmas, his bibliodetective curiosity goes into high gear.

Take the above-mentioned “titaneus arotus,” for example. Herren's deductive reasoning led him to split the first word into two parts: the Greek word *titanos* (“a titan”), joined to a Latin ending, and *arotus*, a word that seems to derive

from “arut,” an Aramaic word for stellar bodies. Herren knew there could be only one “titanic star” dominating the daytime sky for the Irish student who wrote those words in *The Hisperica*. This conclusion came at the end of long hours of research in a variety of lexical sources.

“There’s a lot of textual slogging that goes into my work,” Herren says, trying at first to sound serious. Then, he chuckles. “On the other hand, I can’t believe I’ve been paid to do this!”

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Go back to the CMC yearbook for 1962 and you find plenty of scions of diversely prominent industries and families such as Spalding, United Airlines, and Olympia Beer, to name a few. Yet when Herren remembers them, his memory boils down to a single, four-wheel image: “They all drove Corvettes,” he says with a smile.

Herren certainly cut an unexpected figure among this group. Whereas many of his classmates planned on entering the family business after graduation, Herren was fascinated by the distant past. With so many people around him looking ahead to positions in business and government, what helped him maintain his focus on the medieval and classical worlds?

Herren credits two things: CMC’s humanities tradition, which is the core of its educational philosophy, and the larger framework of The Claremont Colleges. Together, these illuminated his scholarly path as brightly as light from the *titaneus arotus*.

Today, as college budgets are being affected by the current global economic crisis, humanities traditions have come under siege. Earlier this year, an article in *The New York Times* identified this situation under the headline “In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth.” Herren finds such a sentiment “mind-boggling.”

“I can’t imagine my student experience at CMC—or, for that matter, my experience in postgraduate work—without humanities training! My education gave me a broader background probably than other fellows in my doctoral program,” he explains. “All of what you learn helps. Nothing goes to waste when you’re trying to understand how people lived and thought a long time ago.”

Herren relished his philosophy courses at Scripps and Pomona while, in a course on The Federalist Papers, CMC political scientist Martin Diamond provided him with a crucial lesson for his future career.

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“Even though I wouldn’t go on to work on that type of material, Diamond is the one who taught me how to read a text,” Herren says, “how to study it closely and see it as the work of another human being.”

Herren says he once thought journalism would be his future career—he edited both CMC’s and The Claremont Colleges’ newspapers—but a stint after graduation as a teacher at Servite High School in Anaheim “really solidified my Latin,” he says, and he set his sights on studying medieval Latin and paleography—the study of scripts—at the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto. He went on to receive a doctorate in the Classics at the University of Toronto in 1969 and stayed there.

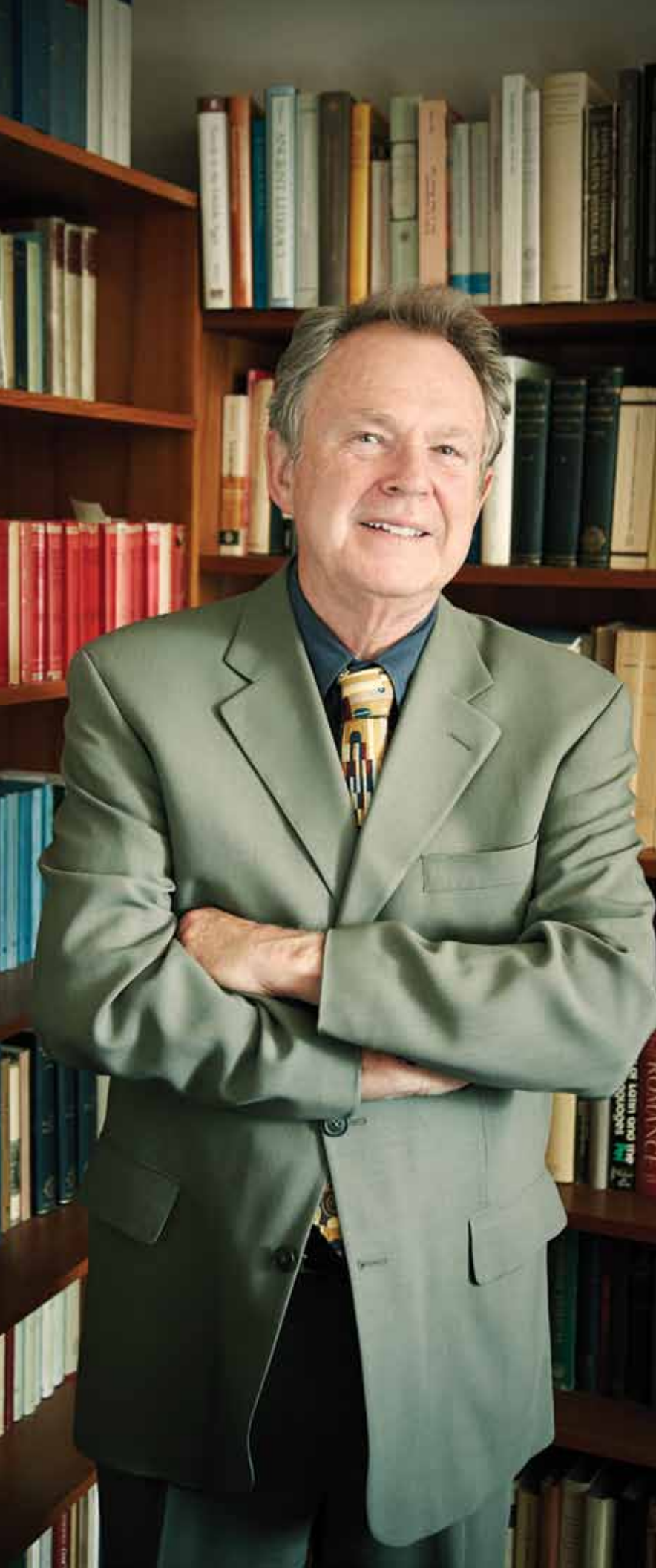
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One of the most important lessons Herren learned early is a simple one: Expect the unexpected.

“You walk into a library to look for one thing and find something else. This happens all the time,” he says.

Herren recalls the time he was studying a Latin fragment when something scrawled in the margins caught his attention. It was strange scribbling that seemed incomprehensible—until he looked more closely.

“Those garbles turned out to be snippets of Greek, quotations from Epicurus,” he says. “How did they get there? No one in ninth century Europe could have read Epicurus in Greek!”



That discovery led Herren to theorize about how the learning of the ancient Greeks was transmitted from one generation to the next and how it could surface centuries later in a Latin manuscript.

Although he has given scholars fresh looks at the work of familiar classical and medieval figures, like the Roman philosopher Lucretius and Isidore of Seville, the bulk of Herren's research has focused on thinkers who were important in their time but, for some reason, are only dimly known now: Aldhelm, John Scottus Eriugena, Virgil the grammarian (not to be mistaken for the poet of the *Aeneid*), and Gildas (a British chronicler preceding Geoffrey of Monmouth, the historian of King Arthur).

"Professor Herren offers a timely reminder to the current generation of the standards they have to follow," wrote Irish historian Daibhi O Croinin in a review of Herren's *Latin Letters in Early Christian Ireland*. "His own collection is one of the finest to appear in the *Collected Studies*, and is a real service to the field."

In 1990, Herren founded *The Journal of Medieval Latin*, which, he proudly notes, has established an international reputation and receives submissions from as far away as South Africa and Australia.

Today, at age 68, Herren is hardly done with his work. On most days, he spends his time in the study of the Toronto home where he and his wife Shirley Ann Brown (a professor of art history at York University) have lived for many years. His current project involves the fragments of an early 8th century travelogue-cum-cosmology known as the "Cosmography of Aethicus the Scythian Philosopher."

"I love fitting the pieces together," he says.

Though the Herrens' son and daughter haven't followed either parent into the academic world—"They resisted it stoutly," Herren says with a chuckle—he isn't at a loss for students. Even now he makes time to teach a new generation of literary private eyes the secret of the world of medieval manuscripts that is as true today as it was when he started.

What is it?

"I tell them there are still plenty of mysteries waiting to be understood," he says, "and waiting for them."