

Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members
Receiving Emeritus Status



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Michael George Wood



Michael Wood, the Charles Barnwell Straut Class of 1923 Professor of English and Comparative Literature, retires this summer.

Michael is one of the foremost literary and cultural critics in the English-speaking world, and enjoys the rare privilege of being an author of critical and scholarly books as well as a highly respected writer of reviews, review articles, and columns. He writes in such distinguished literary publications as *The New York Review of Books* and, especially, *The London Review of Books*, where he is also an editorial board member and where his column, “At the Movies,” is regarded with reverence. He is, in short, one of the most famous and widely read critics of our time, combining sharp insight, keen engagement, irresistible readability, and great complexity.

Michael was born in Lincoln, Lincolnshire, in the northeast midlands of England in 1936, during the lead-up to the Second World War, which had notable consequences for him. His father was quickly conscripted into the navy and Michael didn’t see him except very briefly for several years. One glimpse was made possible when as a boy Michael traveled with his family across England to Liverpool when his father’s ship docked there.

With an as-yet unexpanded university system, Great Britain’s secondary schools were full of very well qualified teachers. Michael recalls the very high cultural values in the grammar schools of the 1950s, which certainly left their mark on him and set him up well as a modern languages undergraduate at St. John’s College, at the University of Cambridge. A specialist in French and German, Michael studied under J. P. Stern and stayed in the college not only as an undergraduate and graduate student, but also as a Prize Fellow, the Oxbridge equivalent of a high level postdoc.

Then, in search of his next appointment, Michael crossed the water to the mind-enlarging environment of Columbia University, where he

would rise through the professorial ranks and stay until 1982. He joined Columbia's Department of English and Comparative Literature, and in so doing made the easy transition to teaching English as well as continental literature. Here was an exciting world of many possibilities, and a time when disciplines were undergoing rapid reinvention. In these years, he met his longtime friend, the late Edward Said, who was introducing continental literary theory to English-speaking readers and helping to invent postcolonial studies. Here, too, Michael met his wife Elena Uribe, with whom he would begin a life of triangular travel between the American northeast, Mexico, and the United Kingdom.

During the course of the 1970s, their three children arrived to keep them company on this exciting journey: Gaby, Patrick, and Tony, all remarkably talented and yet distinct individuals with different interests. Even as he moved toward completing his first book on Stendhal (1971), Michael was branching out innovatively into film studies. *America in the Movies* (1975) remains a landmark work—no surprise, perhaps, since Michael had earlier harbored ambitions to be a film scriptwriter. He had already gained a notable reputation as a teacher; he is still remembered by Columbia graduate students for his genial, open-minded, and friendly guidance, as the then-strange world of literary theory was encountered for the first time.

Michael, Elena, and family lived briefly in Mexico City before Michael took the chair of English at University of Exeter in Devon, England. A colleague then young in the profession remembers those days: “Michael’s arrival made me realize what a professor was: he professed.” As at Columbia, Michael patiently introduced new ways of looking at literary texts, and kept alive older virtues of careful attention to textual details and, that rare quality, critical wit, always used in a constructive and humane way. That civilized and highly creative skepticism, like Michel de Montaigne in its broad reach, was noted when Michael delivered the Bateson Lecture at the University of Oxford’s Corpus Christi College in 1993. His wit was most needed when the U.K. university system became subject to government-imposed research and teaching assessments; Michael was a member of the first national research assessment panel.

Michael kept contact with the U. S. literary scene in these years through reviewing, and through teaching for Middlebury College's Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont during the summers. This brought Michael to Princeton permanently in 1995 (he had visited in 1993), effectively to replace A. Walton Litz, and immediately he was in his element. The chance to work across disciplines was a great stimulus, so that Michael's teaching matched up with his writing. By the mid-1990s, he could claim to be an authority on the modern novel in English, French, German, and Spanish in addition to an international repertoire of cinema. Michael was made chair of the Gauss Seminars in Criticism from 1995 until 2001 and then chair of the English department from 1998 until 2004. In his inimitably tireless fashion, he maintained all these roles alongside his vital membership in Princeton's Department of Comparative Literature, where his capacities as teacher, adviser, and administrative tower of strength gave that emerging department the enormous gift of his graceful and global authority.

Michael's teaching prowess was noticed immediately. His special ability has been to bring people together and to make them work much more effectively as individuals because he makes them all friends to each other. The unconfident become confident, and the overconfident adjust into mature and reserved precision. Students attest to his patience in reading drafts, in remembering all of the precept postings in discussion, and in his general availability. By every testimony, Michael's gift, in the most genial of ways, is to shift comfortable perceptions and givens and make students see that in fact our literature is always marked by the strange and the unsettling: "I no longer went to lecture hoping to be told what *Jane Eyre* or *Mrs. Dalloway* was really about; I went to watch Professor Wood effectively strip back the smooth surface of everything I thought about." At the heart of this gift is Michael's strong sense that great fiction comes from an uncanny fusion of lies and hard truths, and that as such it is endlessly absorbing, never to be completely unraveled, just as his comments on students' work might appear at first to be tangential but in hindsight would reveal themselves to be exactly right. This has been judged a "rare combination of rigor and a deep open-mindedness," pulling students towards the lifetime of study that

true literariness involves, to reach an awareness that “the act of thinking transforms who we are.”

“The most inspiring teacher I’ve ever had” might be a fine way to end such a career account, but there is more. Michael’s talents, all of the fore-mentioned qualities, left him in a strong position to chair the English department, and with deft guidance and seeming light touch, to lead it through a period of renewal in the first decade of the new century, with the rapid expansion or addition of such fields as African American, postcolonial, and Asian American literature, as well as many other positions. All the while, this teaching prowess was matched by a huge critical output. In addition to the many thought-provoking reviews, he produced books on Nabokov as both a serious and playful magician, on the trans-historical appeal of the oracle, from the Greeks to the cinema, on the relations between contemporary fiction and storytelling, and on such disparate figures in the modern cultural pantheon as Luis Buñuel, Franz Kafka, Gabriel García Márquez, and W. B. Yeats. It is a staggering tally.

It is not right to call Michael a father figure because he is always an equal colleague to everyone. But his creative and inspiring wisdom has coursed through the campus these last eighteen years, well beyond the English and comparative literature departments, to be a truly nurturing force in the University. Its thoughtfulness is felt in Nassau Hall and in Small World Coffee. To say that he has been very good for us is an understatement, and, for us to have more of this sunshine, we hope that Michael and Elena will spend much time with us in Princeton in retirement.

