

Professor Robert Odoni

When he informed the school's careers master of his wish to read chemistry at university, Robert Odoni received the advice not to proceed. Chemistry, he was told, was "very mathematical these days" (this was the 1960s) and his maths was not up to it. He not only got his maths "up to it" but *up* was very much the direction in which he continued, leaving behind even his old love, chemistry. This story was one that Robert relished telling in later life. To this unknown adviser a special debt came to be owed: by Robert, mathematics in general and his own later research interests in Galois theory.

In pursuit of these interests Robert became a "kenspeckle figure" even outside the academic environment. In Italian cafe or real ale pub he would often be seen sitting quietly in a corner working or re-working equations or approaches to a problem with an intensity that risked the coffee growing cold or the beer flat. The friends he made in these places, as elsewhere, came to recognise when he did not wish to be disturbed. A degree of focus and concentration communicated itself in subtle ways: a pursing of the lips, the arching of eyebrows the furrowing of a forehead, the pace and intensity of writing. Nevertheless, Robert in the midst of even such concentration could register the arrival of a friend and would happily socialise at a convenient point.

Although he was often guarded on making a new acquaintance- and indeed remained so over time with certain individuals - Robert could be a very companionable man who enjoyed good coffee, real ale, a decent lunch with a glass of wine, notably the shiraz grape. This was particularly true of those who shared one or other of his extra-curricular interests: hill-walking and music. When his family home moved to Manchester, Robert found it impossible to visit every weekend. His wife, Josie, was also his chief companion on his outdoor walks. Robert, however, enjoyed walking every weekend that weather would permit and even some that a less dedicated walker would deem that it did not. Like-minded companions were found and Robert was seen striding the hills as far apart as The Quirang on Skye or The Whangie less than an hour's drive from his Glasgow flat.

Even as his health grew less robust, Robert drove himself on both at work and on the hills. The year before illness forced him to retire, he combined much of the organisational work for hosting the British Association with physically demanding days on the hills. On one of the latter his three companions grew very alarmed at his pallor and manifest exhaustion and one was ready even to summon an air ambulance. But Robert, with typical courage, asked only to rest to recover his breath before completing the walk and driving the party back to Glasgow.

His other great love, music, preceded that for the outdoors. Robert had sung in a choir which perhaps accounted for any bias towards what Sir Thomas Beecham described as the most beautiful musical instrument of them all -the human voice. In

recent years, at any rate, Scottish Opera received more of his patronage than the three great symphony orchestras of Scotland which he also treasured. Productions as different as *Rigoletto* and *Ariadne auf Naxos* delighted him. He took great pleasure in ScotOp's currently unfolding Ring Cycle and managed to see *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* in Glasgow. Shortly before his death he expressed the hope that he would be fit enough to travel from Manchester to the 2002 Edinburgh Festival for *Siegfried* - a visit he hoped to combine with attendance at the morning concert of the Bulgarian mezzo, Vesselina Kasarova. Alas, he died the week before the Festival opened. As a sad footnote, Scottish Opera is to visit for the first time The Lowry in Manchester next season, touring with their complete *Ring*.

Robert Odoni's passing will obviously be mourned by his family, friends, colleagues and a wide range of scholars and international correspondents in the world of mathematics. Less obvious, is the small gap in the lives of a large number of visitors to Tinderbox, The Three Judges and Little Italy who recall an intense, industrious man working quietly in a corner with pen and paper. And their own curiosity as to what he was about.

Thomas McLaughlin
Friend