

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS

To Mrs Whitaker, with love

The moral philosopher James Mumford remembers his old English teacher, “who worked in what is *au fond* a profoundly sacrificial profession”

THIS ORDEAL is revealing things to us about who we cherish. Our own inevitable winnowing process, who we call versus who we are content to wait to see on the other side, may surprise us. “I didn’t think I would miss *her*”, we might think. So too, conversely, may other people’s inevitable winnowing processes hurt us. “I thought *he* would Zoom me at least.”

The ordeal may also be creating space to reflect upon whom we cherish among the departed, and why. My old English teacher has moved from the first category to the second; she was buried last week. I had called Mrs Whitaker to see how she was enduring self-isolation, aged 70. Fine, she reported. A

few days later she was out biking when she suffered a massive stroke. By the end of the week she was dead.

Pour away the ocean and
sweep up the wood,
For nothing now can come
to any good.

From “Funeral Blues”
by W.H.Auden

Some people are too important for front-page obituaries. They work too productively to worry about recognition. They do too well what is before them to do to leave enough time to ensure they get the deserved credit, and the accolades that come with it.

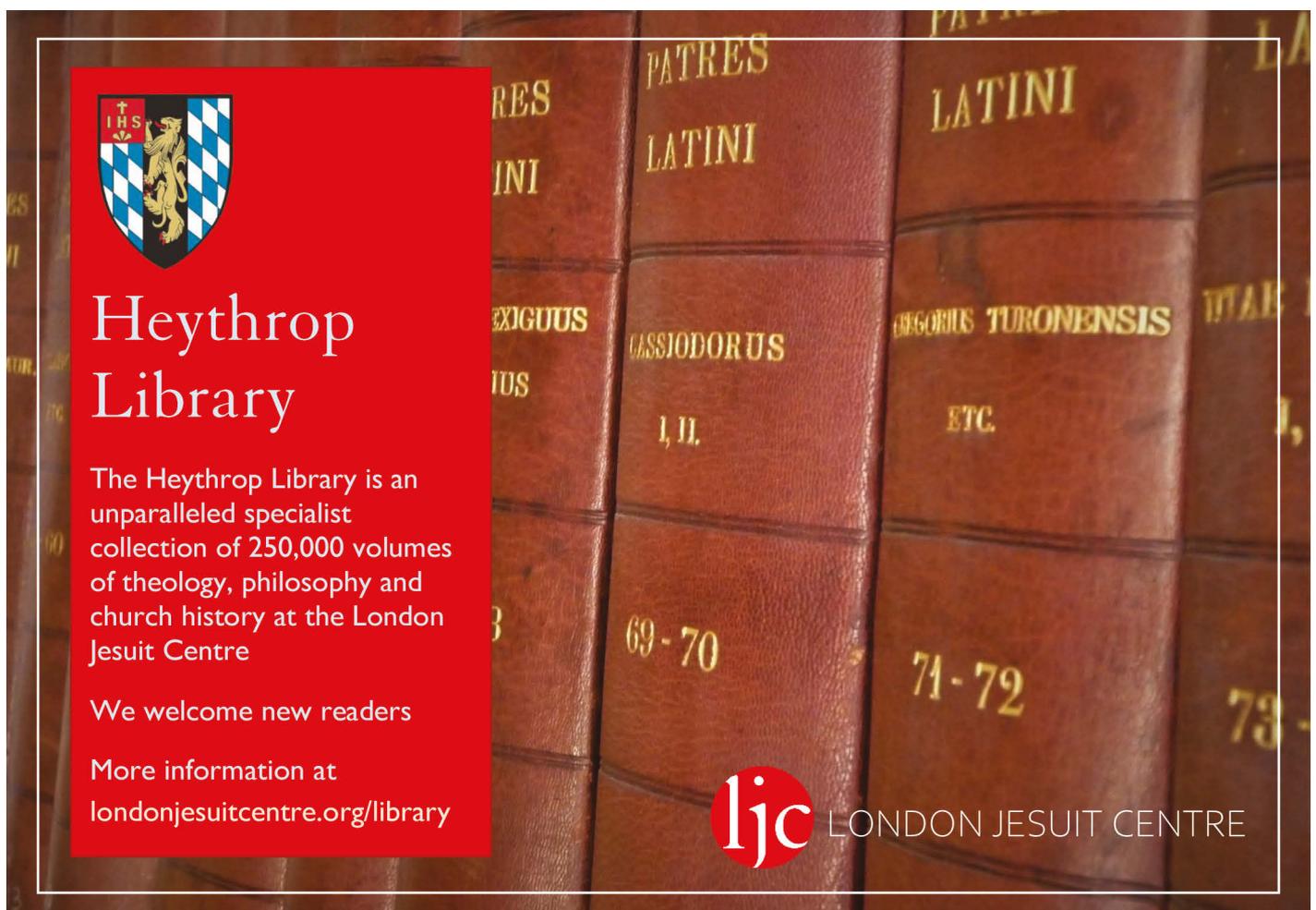
Certainly, as a teacher, she

worked in what is *au fond* a profoundly sacrificial profession. But her uninterest in career advancement even within that profession also allowed her to remain undeterred from its primary purpose: that curious, beautiful dialectical relationship between instilling in pupils a love of learning and imparting the skills so they could pursue that passion for themselves.

One thing that reveals, I think, is that some people could not have proved so pivotal in your life if they had had more concern with their own. I had always thought laying down your life for your friends, according to Christ the ultimate demonstration of love, is by itself *dramatic*. Think of the celibate Maximilian Kolbe

offering his life as a substitute for the father at Auschwitz. Or of the soldier throwing himself on the grenade. They laid down their lives for their friends, certainly. But perhaps there’s a more mundane form of this love. There’s staying up all night penning copious comments – she wrote *sides* on this student’s shoddy A-level essays on *Antony and Cleopatra*. Or the unpaid extracurricular tutorials to help me have a shot at Oxbridge. She was not rewarded or recognised for much of what she achieved. The secret of one person’s success is another person’s success remaining a secret.

James Mumford is a British writer on ethics, culture and literature.




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