

**Obituary and Memorials for Professor Alan K. Brown**  
**English Department Website, September 2009**

On September 17, 2009, The Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies lost a distinguished affiliate with the death of Alan Brown, Emeritus Professor of Old English and Medieval Literature.

Alan Kelsey Brown was a faculty member in the English Department from 1970 until his retirement in 1997. He received his Ph.D. from Stanford University in 1969 with a concentration in Old English Language and Literature. After teaching briefly at The University of Arizona, he was hired by Ohio State to teach classes in Old English as well as the History of the English Language. Even after his retirement, Alan continued to present papers at conferences and to pursue his scholarship. A frequent visitor to OSU Library's Rare Book Room in the last years of his life, Alan was an inspiration to those of us who hope to continue our serious work even after we are released from the pedagogical duties that define our daily lives.

Alan was a productive scholar of Old English over his very long career. In addition to Beowulf-studies, he had a longstanding interest in medieval glossaries and lexicography. He served for many years as a bibliographer-reviewer for the Old English Newsletter, and in that capacity his generosity to the field has helped all of us do our work more effectively.

- Drew Jones

He recited Beowulf (in Old English of course and dressed in period costume) at the annual Renaissance Festival held at OSU.

— Les Tannenbaum

I didn't really know Alan, but I recall that encounters that I had with him showed him to have a gentle disposition and manner. He struck me as the picture of the retiring scholar. One image that remains in my mind: he had a tall monk's desk, at which he stood. I recall passing his office and seeing him standing there working.

— Jon Erickson

The greatness of [Alan's] learning, however, never tainted him with pride; he was a modest and gentle man in his dealings with those less learned than he. ... — Lisa Kiser

In his years at Ohio State, Alan always had a circle of devoted graduate students who were attracted not only by his deep philological expertise but also by the inimitable joy with which he exercised it. During his career, he taught Old English to hundreds of students, making the subject come alive by his ability to actually perform the ancient poetry in the classroom. Using his knowledge of early musical modes and his careful analysis of the bard-scenes in old Germanic poetry, he constructed an Anglo-Saxon lyre-upon which he would perform sections of the poetry that students were in the process of studying. Certainly one of his most memorable contributions to the university community at large was his annual appearance at the Medieval/Renaissance Fair. Dressed in robes and with lyre in hand, he would perform *Beowulf* from memory, a

performance that took several hours to complete. Thronging together at his feet were scores of undergraduates, entranced both by the music and by the costumed figure giving it voice.

Alan's scholarship was characterized by great philological learning as well as an appreciation for medieval material culture. He published essays on subjects such as the OE compass points; the unusual Anglo-Saxon compound word referring to Paradise (*neorxnawang*); the fire-drake in *Beowulf*; and the etymology and meaning of the Old Irish *astal* and its relationship to a similar word in Old English. Alan was an expert, too, in the Latin-Old English glossaries of the Pre-Conquest period. With a mastery of Latin, Old French, Old Spanish, Old and Middle High German, the medieval Scandinavian languages, the Celtic tongues (including what little is known about medieval Pictish!), and the medieval English vernaculars, Alan served as the unofficial CMRS linguist, generously sharing his knowledge with all of us. The greatness of his learning, however, never tainted him with pride; he was a modest and gentle man in his dealings with those less learned than he.

What many may not know is that Alan was also a world-renowned contributor to the field of California history. His studies of California place-names, his publications on the aboriginal peoples of the American West, and his award-winning translation of the journals of Juan Crespi and Pedro Font (two early Franciscan missionaries in California) gained him an international reputation among historians of Spanish-American relations.