

## Michael F. Foley



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### Description

Dr. Foley was appointed Assistant Professor of history at Georgetown in 1967. His early research focused on the English Civil War but he also specialized in Native American history. Extremely popular with both colleagues and students, College seniors twice voted to award him the Bunn Award for Faculty Excellence, in 1974 and 1983. Dr. Foley died unexpectedly in June 1984. Emmett Curran, then Chair of the History Department, said the following in a homily for his friend and colleague: 'Teaching was his vocation and few have been his equal . . . Mike wanted students to get an education that would prepare them to live, not just to make a living. No one prepared them for such living any better. He challenged, insulted, cajoled, did anything to open their minds and their hearts, to stretch their horizons to truly know civilization, the tradition in which they half-consciously lived, to confront a world they were so ignorant of, so complacent about.'

### Title

Michael F. Foley

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[Ye Domesday Booke](#)

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# One Georgetown Great: a Tribute to Micheal Foley and His Legacy

October 16, 1998

President Clinton has not yet invoked the name of Michael Foley on television, nor is there a building or a chair in his name. However, in light of recent developments at Georgetown, it seems that the time has come to revisit the career of this outstanding educator, who often courageously defied the arrogance of administrators when it threatened to diminish what was and is best about the university.

Professor Michael F. Foley taught the history of Great Britain and Modern Europe at Georgetown until his death in 1984. Among students in particular, he was noted for his generosity with his time and academic advice.

In a period of Georgetown's history when lucrative jobs and the "values" of the 1980s defined for many the purpose of a university degree, he persistently refocused our priorities.

"There should be a great sign over the gate at Healy Circle to warn you all," he said once, "and it should read, 'You Are Presumed to Be a Consenting Adult From the Day You Enter Here.'"

He recognized, of course, that for 18 year-olds that presumption is a shaky one. This was so, in part, because Professor Foley had to take control of his own undergraduate education, which he was only able to afford on a basketball scholarship. I suspect he was "underwhelmed" by his undergraduate environment, for he supplemented his studies by forming a group of students who agreed each week to read and discuss a work of some literary or historic significance.

These discussions became, I suspect, the model for his courses. Professor Foley was a Christian Socialist, influenced by the career of Arnold Toynbee. This was a lonely philosophy in the Georgetown of any time, even if the professor's socialism, like Toynbee's, was informed by his Christianity, not vice versa.

The following pronouncement by Toynbee summarizes well Foley's philosophy regarding the social and historical imperative facing all nations: "We – the middle classes I

mean, but not merely the very rich – we have neglected you; instead of justice, we have offered you charity, and instead of sympathy we have offered you hard and unreal advice. You have to forgive us. We will serve you, we will devote our lives to your service. We are willing to give up the life we care for, the life with books and with those we love. We will do this and only ask you to remember one thing in return. If you get a better life, you will really *lead* a better life. (Peter d'A. Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival, 1877-1914* [Princeton: Princeton University press 1968], 85-6, n.2)

Although Foley's views were no secret, he gave traditional and Marxist historians equal time; Hugh Trevor-Roper and Eric J. Hobsbawm each got his lumps. Moreover, whatever well-considered lumps his students had to offer (even if at odds with his own views) were welcome.

Foley was committed to teach what happened in Great Britain and Europe, to make us read what academics said about what happened, and then to ensure that we wrote critically about what they said. It is heady stuff for any teenager to reconstruct Hugh Trevor-Roper's thinking and then presume to explain why Trevor-Roper was wrong, or how bias undermined the credibility of his conclusions.

Yet it was by this method that we came to understand what Metternich described, when distinguishing after the Congress of Vienna between "what happened, and what really happened." If the foregoing description of

Professor Foley's style and vision for Georgetown seems unremarkable, one need only consider a recent, unflattering report from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The report criticized a pattern among premier universities of assigning graduate assistants to the task of teaching undergraduate, and particularly freshman classes .(["Undergraduate Education is Lacking, Report Finds," (The New York Times, April 20)](<https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/20/us/undergraduate-education-is-lacking-report-finds.html>))scp=1&sq=%22Undergraduate%20Education%20is%20Lacking,%20Report%20Finds%22&st=cse), p. A12, col. 5.).

This, to be sure, was never characteristic of Foley's Georgetown. The professor was as eager to do battle within the university about the hot topics of the day as he was to debate whether France or England was the first nation-state, or whether the Cromwellian Commonwealth was the product of a rising bourgeoisie.

Professor Foley never perceived an issue so dangerous that he could not risk taking a public stand. Some alumni may recall a controversial proposal he defended to reduce the standard semester course load from five to four — an intriguing position in view of his insistence that the standards of undergraduate education not be diluted.

His frank disgust concerning the improper role of outsiders in the denial of tenure to a distinguished professor was another example of his investment in

Georgetown, expressed in defiance of orthodoxy and authority.

We have recently witnessed several disquieting academic developments at Georgetown. For example, the School of Languages and Linguistics is now a memory. The academic leadership of the Main Campus itself is becoming more reminiscent of a Russian Cabinet than I would find comfortable.

And the integrity of the undergraduate curriculum in the undergraduate colleges — particularly that of the English Department — has been placed in question, at times in the context of unflattering national press. Consequently, it seems inescapable to this writer that we still need a voice as fearless and respected as that of Professor Foley in our ongoing discussion of Georgetown's future. (Perhaps the successful dissent by some faculty from the astonishing scheme to dismiss the Law Center's Dean Judith Areen has brought some latter-day "Foleys" into the open.)

I exhort undergraduates to evaluate today's faculty and today's administrators by the standard he set. The "Great Professor" at Georgetown is set apart by the principle that undergraduate education is as much about cultivating a thinking process as it is about conveying information. The "Great Professor" lights a fire in the mind and makes that mind work on its own forever. Late in the afternoon of March 17, 1982, Foley abruptly concluded his lecture on the European Enlightenment with a speech beginning with

the following pronouncement: “Ireland has been ruled by priests, poets, prelates and politicians, and has been betrayed by all four.”

It is due to the memory I have of him that I have spent my free time reading the history of that island, a long neglected topic. This is his enduring contribution to my idea of Georgetown: although I now spend my week practicing law, my undergraduate education is not really over. And Foley’s balance between respect for Georgetown’s history on the one hand and his willingness to be an outspoken critic on the other remains an equally important contribution.

I, for one, entered Georgetown as a worshipful product of Jesuit education, and left as a confirmed member of the Loyal Opposition. With his imprint on my idea of Georgetown, I have never since doubted that it was the “Great University.”

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