The sad passing of Professor Graham McFee in October 2023 occasions this series of memorial reflections offered by members of the American Society for Aesthetics. A Professor of Philosophy at the University of Brighton for nearly four decades, he joined the faculty of California State University-Fullerton in the early 2000’s where he continued to teach until the end of 2022. He was the Vice-President of the British Society of Aesthetics from 1999 to 2004, a prolific author for more than fifty years, and greatly admired interlocutor.

His (nearly) complete bibliography is available at his personal website <http://www.graham-mcfee.co.uk/>

Additional memorial tributes from colleagues in the British Society of Aesthetics and at the University of Brighton can be read at <https://british-aesthetics.org/resources/obituaries/graham-mcfee/> and <https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/alumni/2023/11/08/professor-graham-mcfee-1951-2023/>

Beloved colleague and friend of long, Graham McFee, has recently passed away of the effects of a stroke, in Southern California.

I met Graham in the 1990s at the annual
BSA-conferences in Oxford, where he would be standing in the back of the room commenting in a friendly but thorough manner on people’s papers. As one of my two co-promotors, he had regular contact with me in Utrecht. He told me his family once owned a Scottish island, which stirred my imagination. Apparently, he knew John Martyn, whom, I thought, had made a perfect record in 1973 with Inside Out. As it happens, Graham and Martyn had lived in the same street. He did not like his music much, nor Martyn as a person (ha, ha). So, Graham and I became good friends.

We were always separated geographically. Unfortunately, I never went to visit him while he was still in Britain, where he worked as Professor of Philosophy at the University of Brighton. When in 2012 he left for California to teach at the Philosophy Department at California State University-Fullerton, our meetings became even less frequent. Yet, they were always good – old friends reacquainting.

Graham is known for a series of philosophical books on dance: Understanding Dance (1992), The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance: Identity, Performance, and Understanding (2011), and Dance and the Philosophy of Action (2018). He was a thorough scholar of, particularly, Wittgenstein and Wollheim. He studied with Wollheim; and when I organised a conference on Wollheim’s work, with Wollheim present, in May 1997, Graham discussed the necessity of Wollheim’s reference to the psychology of the artist. In those days he gave several talks in Utrecht. The proceedings of this conference were published in 2001 with Cambridge University Press.

Last time we met was in Seattle. Again, we were happy to see each other. He was having health issues at that time but had to go on lecturing to prevent health insurance from kicking him out, or so he wrote me afterwards. Our email contact dried up a bit, but we did not worry. I know I didn’t, and I can only assume he didn’t either.

Then I got the sad message from his wife Myrene telling me Graham had died from a stroke, the last in a series, and I realised that our talks were over, just like that. I know this happens, but it is ever as shocking as if it were the first time. I don’t mean to say that we should have done things differently, I think we did okay.

I cherish fond memories of my good friend and think of him lovingly. I wish his family, Myrene, Adrienne and Stephany all the best.

-Rob van Gerwen

I’m old enough to be identified with elderly scholars of philosophy of dance, and it’s always sad to see yet another of our cohort pass, especially as he was younger than me! Although we didn’t know each other well, coincidentally, Graham McFee and I followed many of the same paths in our careers, albeit on different continents and at different times. We both received our PhDs in 1982. It was difficult to find others with shared interests to talk to in that era, a situation that has improved greatly in recent decades. For whatever reason, we each branched out in various ways, he into philosophy and sport, me into philosophy and intellectual property. We both taught at various times on campuses of the California State University. We both attended many, many meetings of ASA Pacific at Asilomar and a memorable conference on dance in France at Nancy 2 University.

We disagreed strenuously at some of those meetings, although I’m fuzzy on the details. As I remember, Graham felt strongly that seeing a performance in person, in the theater was the only presentation that mattered. I am more sympathetic to filmed performances, as the only way most people on the planet can ever see most great dance, especially performed by great dancers, although I recognize the considerable
limitations of films! I don’t think we really disagreed all that much, but it made for some lively discussions.

After so many years in the wilderness, when journals told me they couldn’t find anybody qualified to referee my submissions and meeting organizers said they had trouble finding a commentator who knew anything about my subject, it was increasingly a relief to see Graham, along with many more junior scholars, emerging in our specialty. (Scholars in more “mainstream” areas of aesthetics have no idea what it’s like to work in such a small, specialized area of the arts.)

In 2012 Graham’s important book, The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance: Identity, Performance and Understanding (2011), won the Selma Jeanne Cohen Prize in Dance Aesthetics, speaking of another generation of philosophers of dance. He seemed surprised by my review for the Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, and I’m pretty sure he never knew that I was on the committee that picked his book for the dance aesthetics prize. I was personally grateful for his contributions to the print symposium I co-edited (with Renee Conroy) on “Dance Art and Science” in JAAC (2013) and to The Bloomsbury Handbook of Dance and Philosophy (2021) co-edited with Rebecca Farinas. We had some tussles over word count, but such are the peculiar entanglements in our world.

Graham’s lively participation in a range of issues in dance and sport, both at meetings and in print, was an invaluable contribution to the ASA and to dance scholarship. He will be missed.

-Julie Van Camp

Graham McFee made a substantial contribution to the philosophy of dance and to the development of dance studies as an academic discipline in the UK. Arguing that philosophical aesthetics should play a central role in dance study, Graham built on the legacy of philosophers such as David Best and Betty Redfern. But he also extended dance aesthetics’ scope significantly by augmenting its range, perspectives, themes, and the reach of its audience. He influenced a generation of students and scholars as they engaged – and sometimes battled – with his arguments, shaping philosophically-informed dance research in incalculable ways.

Graham was prolific in his output, dedicating four monographs to the aesthetics of dance, in addition to his work in other areas of philosophy: Understanding Dance (1992), The Concept of Dance Education (2004), The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance (2011) and Dance and the Philosophy of Action (2018). These monographs and his edited anthology Dance, Education and Philosophy (1999) laid philosophical groundwork on myriad issues central to understanding dance as art and its value as an educational endeavor. Featured prominently on student reading lists, and regarded as required reading among professional scholars, these books offered a springboard for interdisciplinary debate and philosophical research. As dance scholar Geraldine Morris from the University of Roehampton recalls, “he was such an influence […] on my work, I never wrote anything without first seeing what he had written on the subject.” Similarly, I find myself returning again and again to his arguments, each time finding new inspiration on a host of topics.

Graham was always ready to talk through his ideas in person and unfailingly generous in devoting time and energy to bringing different dance-interested constituencies together. He will be particularly missed for his willingness to articulate robust challenges to pervasive, but under-examined, ideas dominant in much discussion of dance. His critique of the view that dancers are artists qua co-authors of dance works, for example, never failed to spark controversy. Though his position met with vociferous objections, it also revealed the careful,
patient, and rigorous character of his thinking. Graham, likewise, ruffled feathers by questioning whether kinesthetic empathy is central to dance appreciation and denying that neuroscience can furnish evidence of its importance. In all such cases, he courted philosophical controversy with both determination and grace, his arguments giving ongoing pause for thought. As Erica Stanton, a colleague from the University of Roehampton, remembers, “Graham was always a voice in my ear – especially when I didn’t agree with him!”.

Graham’s voice still makes itself heard through his writings. But it is sad to no longer to be able to sit, chat and joke with him. Bonnie Rowell, another colleague from the University of Roehampton whose PhD Graham supervised, recalls his energy and enthusiasm in teaching and writing. She reflects, however, that “above all, he was just a lovely human being – generous, good humored, patient and always on the side as he would say of the ‘good guys’.” It’s as a resolutely good guy in dance, philosophy and life that I remember and miss him.

-Anna Pakes

Professor Graham McFee was a dedicated teacher, pioneering scholar of uncommon breadth, and a dear philosophical mentor and friend. He published sixteen single-authored books, five edited volumes, and countless articles on topics from aesthetic theory to free will to Wittgenstein over his five-decade career, and laid the theoretical foundations for two now intellectually vibrant fields focused on movement: the philosophy of dance and the philosophy of sport. Characterized by an ever-patient – but never pedantic – method of argumentation, Graham’s work emphasized philosophical defeasibility, context-sensitivity, the importance of persons and intentionality, and was always punctuated with a bit of unexpected dry wit, as evidenced by titles such as “Everything Goes with Beer” (2010/2019), “An Old Dog Rants Backwards: 1” (2017), and “Much of Jackson Pollock is Vivid Wallpaper . . .” (1978).

His contributions to contemporary philosophy of dance, in particular, cannot be overstated. Between 1992 and 2018, Graham published four monographs on dance aesthetics that collectively established a framework for the discipline revered both for its widely embraced fundamentals (e.g., the distinction between dance and human movement) and its controversial claims (e.g., the importance of notationality to dance work identity). Just as his writing and thinking were consistently animated by the voices of his philosophical forebearers Ludwig Wittgenstein, G.E.M. Anscombe, Stanley Cavell, John Searle, and his doctoral advisor Richard Wollheim; my writing and thinking have been shaped indelibly by his published legacy.

Given my interest in the philosophy of dance, this kind of influence would have taken hold had I never known Graham personally. But due to a fortuitous meeting at a Pacific Division conference of the American Society for Aesthetics, my intellectual-artistic life became entwined with his in numerous ways from 2007 until his death. The points of overlap I was lucky to share with him over fifteen years of unintentional mentorship and unfailing friendship allowed me to appreciate “Professor McFee” and “Graham the gentleman” as constitutive parts of one aesthetically emergent whole.

Graham was quintessentially an aesthetic adventurer with a curious mind, open heart, steel-trap memory, and a dry quip always at the ready. After our introduction in California, we became regular philosophical pen pals and often spent time together at conferences pontificating on panels or shouldering organizational duties. I treasure my copies of our lengthy email correspondences about things like sortal generation and fine individuation as much as my first editions of his monographs, each of which he signed and inscribed with a unique note. Still,
I always remarked ruefully that we never really “talked philosophy” when we were face-to-face because we exhausted all our private time visiting museums, ruins, architectural wonders, bookstores, and dining establishments. I now realize my mistake: we were doing philosophy of art and aesthetics, and exploring personhood and the eudaimon life, together every minute we shared outside conference sessions or academic environments.

To wit: Graham was not at all enthusiastic about heights. Nonetheless, we rode claustrophobic prams to the top of the St. Louis arch the year he came to the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Aesthetics to receive the Selma Jeanne Cohen award in dance (2012), and we shared a drink on the 95th floor of the Hancock Tower in Chicago when he “popped by” the Windy City to give four presentations to my students and colleagues at Purdue University Northwest. These adventures occasioned impromptu reflections on phobias and rational belief.

We visited twelve homes crafted by Frank Llyod Wright, whiled away afternoons at the Art Institute and the Tate Modern, and absorbed the ambience of many old ruins in the English countryside near Eastbourne where he and his wife Myrene lived for many decades. He took me to a tiny, ivy-covered church in East Sussex covered in murals painted by members of the Bloomsbury Group then on to his favorite idyllic pub, The Lamb. On a stopover in the historic town of Lewes, he picked up a copy of Jane Austen’s Persuasion for me simply because I remarked I would like to read it, and he introduced me to British phenomena such as Mapp and Lucia and Doc Martin. At every turn, he taught me about art history, contemporary entertainment, and the very fine art of choosing just the right example to make a philosophical point. He also always cajoled me never to appeal to an artistic work with which I had not had personal commerce. Our aesthetic field trips, therefore, were really his attempt to broaden the range of tools in my academic arsenal.

On these adventures, I learned that Graham could recite A.A. Milne’s works (his family had property that abutted the actual One-Hundred Acre Wood when he was a child), T.S. Eliot poems, and Wallace Stevens’ odes with equal ease from memory, and he would graciously do so whenever I asked. Tellingly, he referred to himself as Edward Bear from Milne’s stories. He loved boats and sailing but would not drink water. He liked a Blue Moon beer with or without the usual orange garnish and became an enthusiast of Francis Ford Coppola wines when he moved to the western coast of the United States. He appreciated movies and music (both old and new), paintings and poems, dance art and cricket with equal sensitivity and curiosity. We disagreed about Errol Morris. He was once on a panel with J.K. Rowling for reasons that eluded him. As a matter of luck, he was socially acquainted with a well-known tattoo artist from the television show LA Ink. And in sharing all these artistic and aesthetic aspects of his life with me, he also imparted his deep-seated philosophical values and helped me find my own intellectual voice with an incredibly gentle and generous hand.

So, Graham will be sorely missed at conferences, pub tables, and in print for many years to come. But he will never be forgotten, especially by those, like me, who were lucky enough to explore the aesthetic aspects of life with him and to know both the philosopher and the gentleman.

-Renee M. Conroy