



Timon Screech &lt;ts8@soas.ac.uk&gt;

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**FW: The Rev Professor Michael Screech obituary | Register | The Times**

2 messages

**Richard Cooper** <richard.cooper@bnc.ox.ac.uk>

19 July 2018 at 23:32

To: Timon Screech &lt;ts8@soas.ac.uk&gt;, matthew screech &lt;matthewscreech@ntlworld.com&gt;

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**From:** Richard Cooper**Sent:** 19 July 2018 08:23**To:** Richard Cooper <[richard.cooper@bnc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:richard.cooper@bnc.ox.ac.uk)>**Subject:** The Rev Professor Michael Screech obituary | Register | The Times<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-rev-professor-michael-screech-obituary-7zfg5qk0p>

# The Rev Professor Michael Screech obituary

July 19 2018, 12:01am,

Colourful scholar and not always reverent cleric who delighted in translating bawdy puns from 16th-century France into English



Michael Screech was an authority on the French Renaissance writer Rabelais

A Renaissance scholar of world repute, the Rev Professor Michael Screech was no prude. He had a rare knack of rendering the bawdy puns of 16th-century France into colloquial, yet accurate English.

At the age of 67 he was ordained into the Church of England. Thereafter his parishioners enjoyed daily sport, totting up the number of references to Rabelais in each of his sermons. Often he crammed his white hair beneath a four-cornered Canterbury cap to ape his hero, Erasmus.

MA Screech, as his name appeared in print, was perhaps best known for his authoritative translation of the essays of Michel de Montaigne. In 1572 the Frenchman retired to his château to write "essays" on topics ranging from the purpose of philosophy to his preference for white wine, above red, and even the size of his penis.

Each chapter of Screech's translation, first published by Penguin in 1991, and in paperback in 1993, was prefaced by pithy notes stuffed with telling detail, including what Montaigne had been reading at the time of writing.

By such methods he single-handedly scotched the once-popular theory that

Rabelais, once a monk, later transformed into a militant atheist. Instead, Screech showed that the erotic wit peppering Rabelais derived from "in-jokes" in 16th-century university or medical and legal circles.

Highly convivial, and renowned for his dinner-party anecdotes, Screech did not believe irreverence automatically equalled atheism. *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (1998) was an exploration of humour in the Bible.

Brought up Methodist, in a household where wine was absent, Screech later became well acquainted with claret. Once marching into a restaurant in the south of France on Easter Sunday, he demanded "*le meilleur vin rouge que vous avez*" (the best red wine you have).

For that holiday, travelling the region's canals, Screech had stocked up on boxes of cigars at Heathrow, to tip the lock-keepers. In church, however, his vice was snuff, which he plucked from boxes made of wood or silver.

Michael Andrew Screech was born in 1926 in Plymouth, Devon, the youngest son of Richard, a policeman, and Nellie (née Maunder), a housewife. Educated at Sutton High School in Plymouth, he completed one year of a French and Latin degree at University College London before National Service.

Dispatched in October 1944 to a Japanese school at Bletchley Park, he was taught by an elderly naval officer, who prefaced a lesson with the words: "Gentleman, Japanese is easy as long as you remember that the adjectives are verbs."

In April 1945 Screech was sent to India as part of the Field Security Section, a branch of Military Intelligence.

By February 1946, when Screech arrived in Japan, the war had ended, and, keen to use his Japanese, he rejected a chance to take up a commission in France. Instead he went with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) to Kure, a naval city in the Hiroshima prefecture.

Nineteen-year-old Screech, in shock at the destruction wrought on Hiroshima, found his everyday Japanese vocabulary at first limited. "If anybody asked me what a daisy was, I wouldn't know. But if they wanted to say, 'Within five weeks, we brought down 13 aircraft,' I'd do it in a shot," he told Thomas Lockley, the

Japanese historian, in 2017.

His unit was disbanded when a sergeant-major Screech had thought a "very nice, fatherly sort of man" was arrested for money laundering.

Sent to the rural fastness of Tottori, in the Chugoku region of Japan, Screech lived in a 16th-century castle. He was instructed to visit Japanese army brothels and tell the prostitutes, or "comfort women", they were free to leave.

Returning home, he completed his degree in London, meeting his future wife at a lecture on Erasmus. He married Anne Reeve in 1956.

Their first son was named Matthew Erasmus and is now a senior lecturer in French at Manchester Metropolitan University. Toby, his youngest brother, is an interpreter in the Netherlands and Tim, the middle brother, is a professor of Japanese art history at Soas (the School of Oriental and African Studies) in London.

Appointed an assistant lecturer to the French department of the University of Birmingham in 1951, a decade later Screech joined the French department of University College London. In 1971 he was made Fielden Professor of French Language and Literature.

With Stephen Rawles, the principal assistant librarian at Glasgow University Library, Screech compiled an exhaustive bibliography of every edition of the works of Rabelais. Published in 1987, it spanned nearly 700 pages. Screech identified a clever Rabelais forgery found in rural France.

And he quickly realised that a copy of Lucretius at Eton library was Montaigne's personal edition. In any library, Screech might be easily identified because he wore a sun visor on his head, with a bright-green shade. At home he pored over Latin folios in a broad-armed rector's chair. For bedtime reading he absorbed two pages a night from 16th-century book catalogues.

While still in his thirties, his hair went white. Known to friends as "Mike", he was friendly, but fastidious in academe. Once he took to his bed in Tours, France, in horror, after an American gave a paper at a conference, describing Rabelais as "unreadable".

Bilingual in French, Screech spent two months each summer with Anne in French-speaking Switzerland. He enjoyed croquet in the garden of his house at Whitchurch-on-Thames, and in France, lengthy chats over the dinner table. He regretted the decline of Latin as a school subject.

A sense that this distanced today's students from the Christian culture of Montaigne prompted Screech to produce his acclaimed translations. Leonard Woolf once saluted Montaigne as "the first completely modern man". Screech's scholarship provided vital context.

Such was his stature as a scholar of Rabelais that Screech appears briefly in a novel by the Canadian Robertson Davies. A character in *The Lyre of Orpheus* (1988) calls Screech "a mitred abbot among you Rabelaisians".

In 1994 he fulfilled a longstanding desire to be ordained as a non-stipendiary clergyman for the diocese of Oxford. At the subsequent party a friend asked: "Well, Mike, what now?" Screech quipped: "I hear York is vacant."

At 6ft tall, he was a distinctive figure in the pulpit, where in a rich, modulated voice tinged with a West Country accent, he would segue from the collect prayer to a sermon on the Renaissance. He became a fellow and a chaplain of All Souls and a chaplain and honorary fellow of Wolfson College. In Oxford he served as the assistant curate at St Giles with St Philip and St James with St Margaret.

Revered in France, Screech was appointed Chevalier in the Legion d'Honneur in 1992. A generous man, who combined exuberance with skill as listener, he often put a quiet word in for friends he felt worthy of public honour.

A priest of literary bent became, thanks to Screech's influence, a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

He encouraged Anne, who had a quieter temperament, but was his intellectual equal, with her detailed research on Erasmus. For this she received in 2001 a Lambeth degree from the Archbishop of Canterbury. When she developed dementia, Screech always brought her with him to parties. With delicacy, he would always warn the host what to expect beforehand.

Until succumbing to the ravages of Lewy body dementia some months ago, he kept up his Japanese with daily reading.

Screech was known for sticking to his principles. Once, he even sat in the branches of a glorious beech tree near his home, to prevent it from being chopped down. He succeeded.

**The Rev Professor Michael Screech was born on May 2, 1926. He died on June 1, 2018, aged 92**

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**Timon Screech** <ts8@soas.ac.uk>

20 July 2018 at 09:27

To: Richard Cooper <richard.cooper@bnc.ox.ac.uk>

Cc: matthew screech <matthewscreech@ntlworld.com>

Thank you Richard,

What a charming piece!

I'm holed up in the remote Japanese island of Okinoerabu waiting for a typhoon to pass over. Probably the nearest copy of the Times is in Taiwan.

very best wishes.

tim

[Quoted text hidden]

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Timon Screech

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