Pat Longley – in memoriam

A plaque to honor her memory was hung in one of the postgraduate interpreting course classrooms in Westminster.

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On Friday 27th June 2003, interpreters, academics and students gathered at the University of Westminster to commemorate Pat Longley. The event marked the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the postgraduate course in conference interpretation – the course still known to many as PCL, the Polytechnic of Central London.

The university’s Vice-Chancellor Geoffrey Copland and the Provost, Margaret Blunden conducted proceedings. The Longley family attended in force. The main purpose of the celebration was to affix a plaque in memory of Pat Longley in one of the main classrooms used in the postgraduate interpreting course.

In the 1960s Pat was chief interpreter at UNESCO and was aware of the shortage of English booth interpreters within the whole UN system, particularly those with passive Russian. She devised a course that was opened at the Holborn College of Languages and Law in 1963. This course was a new departure: it was short in length (one academic year), it taught technique not languages, it applied rigorous entry testing that looked for a person’s potential rather than the finished product. It was based on practical exercises and interpreting was seen as a skill separate from translating.

Pat Longley considered simultaneous and consecutive interpretation as interactive skills – other schools used a more sequential model of teaching consecutive before allowing students to embark on simultaneous.

In its early days the course served the need for English language interpreters, but it has grown since then. It has always covered the main EU and UN languages and now, on the threshold of enlargement, it is actively involved in courses to train interpreters from accession countries as well as to perfect the English of interpreters who will work from accession languages into an English B.

Pat was the course leader from 1963 until 1981, and she stamped her personality on it. A hard taskmaster, she evoked fierce loyalty in her students.

Pat was London-Irish, and I think it reasonable to say that she was not a woman who suffered fools gladly. She was a founding member of AIIC, but throughout her life she maintained a love/hate relationship with the association – not surprising in one so forthright. She liked jazz.

Pat took a broad view of interpreting and its long-term commercial interests. When colleagues were establishing themselves in the Irish market, Pat not only provided training but also passed on her Irish clients to the newly established interpreters. Such support betokens a breadth of vision of the profession.
Dedication of the plaque in memory of Pat Longley. Left to right: Jean Longley, daughter-in-law of CIT founder; Patrick Twiddle, European Parliament (Interpretation Directorate); Brian Fox, European Commission, Head of Multilingualism Unit; Ingeborg Smallwood, Course Leader - Conference Interpreting, University of Westminster; David Longley, son of CIT founder; Dr. Geoffrey Copland, Vice-Chancellor, University of Westminster; Prof. Margaret Blunden, Provost, University of Westminster.

The original Holborn College of Languages and Law became the Polytechnic of Central London and is now the University of Westminster. The Conference Interpreting Techniques (CIT) course is now housed on Upper Regent Street, and Westminster in 1997 became the coordinating institution for the European Masters in Conference Interpreting (EMCI) – a consortium of 15 European universities offering postgraduate interpreting studies. It now also offers an MA in Conference Interpreting.

This autumn the course will admit another 20-30 students, following in the tradition set by Pat. Courses like this sit awkwardly on academic administrative structures, so it is important that the powers-that-be realise that Pat has passed on to them a gem of a course.

And fittingly, this autumn’s intake will be taught in the Patricia Longley room.

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