

GREEK IN A COLD CLIMATE



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practical rather than a cultural goal, but I became greatly interested in them and learned much from them. At the same time I cannot feel that my education profited as much from them as from my study of the Greeks and Romans, who were after all our own cultural ancestors and the founders of our own civilisation. There exists in our time a kind of cultural egalitarianism which equates all cultures and all languages in a kind of mishmash; this is especially rife among high-minded persons who appease their sense of guilt by flattering the self-esteem of those whom they describe by the loathsome euphemism 'under-privileged'. Thus many Hellenists have tried to atone for the patronising tones which their Victorian predecessors often adopted towards other disciplines by treating the practitioners of these with humble deference. I cannot see the need for this.

But the best reason of all for engaging in Greek studies is that, once the initial drudgery – and even that, in the hands of an inspiring teacher like my old headmaster J.T. Christie,¹⁶ can be a pleasure – Greek literature and art have a peculiar vitality and freshness. Greek and Latin are most inappropriately described as 'dead languages', for much that is written in them has a good deal more life in it than most of what was published in the yellow press this morning. Greek poetry, philosophy and history are concerned not with the ephemeral problems of the moment but with the basic problems that must confront all human beings; that is why Goethe saw in them an antidote against the dreary naturalism and tedious piling up of detail that marked much writing in his time and marks still more in ours. The old-fashioned notion that we study the Greeks in order to acquire 'values' not otherwise to be obtained has rightly been abandoned; what matters to us is not so much the answers these writers gave to the questions which they raised as the way in which they raised the questions.

What kind of classical education does Oxford now provide? When I came up in 1940, and indeed when I became Professor in 1960, Mods, taken after five terms as it is now, dealt simply with language and literature, and Greats, taken after a further seven terms, dealt with ancient history and philosophy. In my inaugural lecture of 1961¹⁷ I suggested that Mods should contain elements of all three subjects and that candidates for Greats should offer any two out of the three. At that time it seemed unlikely that this change would be adopted, but a few years later it was adopted, for good or ill. Had I not been obliged to study philosophy, I certainly should not have done so; but though I could never have become a real philosopher, I am sure that the experience did me good.

In my inaugural lecture I said that some tutors still devoted most of

¹⁶ See *J.T. Christie: a great teacher* (Maldon, Essex: The Plume Press, 1984).

¹⁷ *Op. cit.* (in n.4), 13-31.

their teaching time to the translation of English into Greek and Latin, 'composition', as we called it, and that the essays written in Mods were on the whole poor, many candidates seeming to have had little practice in writing them. Composition now seems to be very little practised, and much time is given to the writing of essays. I am not sure that the decline of composition is altogether a good thing. Indeed it was grossly overvalued by the old Oxford tutors, some of whom, including certain men of great ability, were content to write nothing else. But the practice, if intelligently taught, might have great value, since it helps to give one a grasp of language and of metre; Gilbert Murray enjoyed it more than anything else he learned at school because it was the nearest thing to practising an art that the boys did, and J.D. Denniston said that no one knew a language which he could not write. The abandonment of composition must be one of the causes of the decline of linguistic competence. Nowadays many essays are written, but I am not sure that they are much improved. Undergraduates seem to write worse English than ever, and even when directing the work of graduate students I spend much time in trying to improve their English.

In my inaugural lecture I spoke of tutors as 'desperately overworked'; how much truer is that now, when their numbers have been appreciably reduced! Their task is made harder by the fact that undergraduates come up so much worse prepared than they once were; it is now possible to start Greek at the University, and many have done this with success. But I also wrote that Oxford tutors were making a substantial contribution to research, and that continues to be true. The influence of the learned refugees who came to Oxford in the time of Hitler and Mussolini combined with our native tradition to create a kind of amalgam of Continental and English scholarship, and though the generation which began this movement is no more, we are still doing our best to continue it. Some of my younger colleagues who never knew Eduard Fraenkel¹⁸ are fully conscious of his influence. The refugees also brought us into close touch with European scholarship.

A most agreeable feature of the present time is the presence here of numerous students from the Continent; there are also many from the United States, and I would like to see still more.

One of the biggest changes in my time has been the development of what in America would be called our graduate school; the holding of a graduate class and the direction of a number of theses have been among the most important of my activities, and Professor Russell and Professor Nisbet would, I think, say the same. No amount of experience in directing graduate studies is worth much, because one must try to help the student to become the kind of scholar that he is suited to becoming, and no two students are quite like each other. It is best if the student knows just

¹⁸ See op. cit., 251-60.

what he or she wants to work on; but sometimes one has to help the student find a subject, and those who need that help are by no means always the weakest students. One must try to help the student to find his or her own way of doing things; it is fatal to insist on things being done in one's own way, as one sees from the rubbish that pours out from places where professors try to found 'a school'. It is essential that the student learn to speak and write as well as possible. One must insist on clear and articulate delivery; if people mumble, as so many English are inclined to do, their pupils will suffer greatly. A scholar must learn to write as well as he can; otherwise he will be unable to express delicate nuances with precision, and his work will make disagreeable reading. Unless he becomes shamefully dilatory, the student should be allowed to work in his own time. Most English students need encouragement, and one must be able and willing to provide it. But occasionally the student needs reproof, and one must not lack the courage to dispense this. A classical scholar must know German, French and Italian, and it helps to be able to speak those languages and to know something of their literatures. He must also know something about English literature and English history; the better one knows the modern world, the better one should be able to resist the danger of reading too much of it into the ancient. A scholar must get as much Greek and Latin as he can, and understand enough of textual criticism not to be at the mercy of the editors of the texts he reads. One often hears it said that we now have texts of the chief authors good enough for practical purposes, and that we should concentrate not on editing texts but on understanding them. But unless there are some people capable of editing texts, the understanding of them will decline, and the advance of research and arrival of new material from papyri and inscriptions steadily increase our knowledge. No one is more active or more proficient in the presentation of new material than Peter Parsons, and I am proud to be succeeded by a man who knows Greek as well as he does. I have been extremely fortunate not only in my colleagues but in the students whose work I have directed or have been thought to be directing. Many of them have done all the work themselves, so that I have learned far more from them than they from me; thus I cannot claim to have done anything for Professor Martin West, who had a European reputation before completing the splendid commentary on Hesiod's *Theogony* which was his thesis, beyond introducing him to Professor Reinhold Merkelbach of Cologne. It was Professor Merkelbach who in 1959 invited me for the first time to Germany, where I met among others Walter Burkert, Albrecht Dihle and Rudolf Kassel.

The constellation of famous Oxford Hellenists whom I praised in my inaugural lecture exists no longer; Gilbert Murray and E.R. Dodds, Sir John Beazley and Edgar Lobel, J.D. Denniston, Sir Denys Page and Sir Maurice Bowra, Felix Jacoby and Paul Jacobsthal, Paul Maas, Rudolf Pfeiffer and Eduard Fraenkel. But the present faculty contains a number

of scholars who if spared can be relied on to maintain its high standards for many years ahead. The pleasure of working with such people has been the greatest privilege of occupying the chair, and the knowledge that they will still be here completely consoles me for having to retire. Arnold said, you will remember, that Oxford 'had never given herself to the Philistines'; and the Hellenists of Oxford may be trusted to continue what he called 'that warfare against them which Oxford has been waging against them for centuries, and will wage after we are gone'.¹⁹ In the cold climate in which we shall be fighting, we shall need courage.

¹⁹ Preface to *Essays in Criticism* (in *Lectures and Essays*, ed. R.H. Super, 1962, 290).