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**THREE TRIBUTES GIVEN BY
JANE LIGHTFOOT, ALAN CAMERON AND
ROBERT PARKER
IN MEMORY OF**

MARTIN LITCHFIELD WEST

OM, DPhil (Oxon), DLitt (Oxon), FBA

23 September 1937 – 13 July 2015

Senior Research Fellow, 1991 – 2004, Emeritus Fellow, 2004 – 2014,
Honorary Fellow, 2014 – 2015
Fellow and Praelector in Classics, University College, 1963 – 1974
Honorary Fellow of Balliol, St John's and University College

Saturday, 24 October at 2.30 p.m.

Professor Jane Lightfoot

Almost exactly sixty years ago, in October 1955, a group of bright young men assembled for the first time in Balliol, that year's intake of Classics undergraduates. One of them would later speak of his idyllic memories of his first two weeks in Oxford, 'with the autumn colours in the parks at their peak and the scent in the air of infinite possibilities, both intellectual and social.' His name was Anthony Leggett, and he was Martin's tutorial partner throughout Mods, the first five terms of the Classics degree. It is a sobering thought that one of that tutorial pair would go on to win the Nobel Prize for Physics in 2003, while the other would go on to become the greatest scholar of Greek poetry in the world.

The philosophy of the liberal education that Greats was and is supposed to provide was brilliantly exemplified by that generation. In those days, of course, many of its products went into the Civil Service. Someone else in Martin's year went on to become a private secretary to two Prime Ministers. Whatever they did, their superb linguistic training served them well. Someone in the year below Martin swapped his Greek and Latin for Arabic and served as British Ambassador in various countries in the Middle East. Arabic would become crucial to a comparably gifted young scholar called Gerald Toomer at Corpus Christi, who won the Ireland Scholarship the year before Martin, took Greats in the same year, and became a brilliant historian of mathematics and astronomy in America. We can picture the two of them coinciding at the now-legendary classical seminars on the German model which were introduced into Oxford by Eduard Fraenkel, then Corpus Professor of Latin. Again, what a pair they must have been. Toomer stole a march on Martin by accepting before Martin did the decipherment of Linear B, expounding it to senior colleagues 'like the child Christ among the doctors', as Fraenkel put it. But Martin stole a march on Toomer in that his own interest in astronomy went back to his boyhood. He edited an astronomical journal at St Paul's; and his first three published articles were in the *Journal of the British Astronomical Association*.

It was an intellect that excelled in formal systems — stars, music, above all words. Those seminars by Fraenkel had a huge impact on the young scholar. He describes it in the lecture he delivered when he was awarded the Balzan

Prize over forty years later: 'Here we saw German philology in action; we felt it reverberate through us as Fraenkel patrolled the room behind our chairs, discoursing in forceful accents ... We knew, and could not doubt, that this was what Classical Scholarship was, and that it was for us to learn to carry it on.' And he acknowledged his debt when he hailed Fraenkel's spirit in the preface of his edition of Aeschylus, calling him his *magister* (master). The main allusion here is to Fraenkel's edition of Aeschylus' most celebrated tragedy, but there is also a secondary reference to Gilbert Murray, who had already hailed Fraenkel as *magister* at the same point of his own edition of the same poet. Let us say that Martin's relations with literary theory were distant. But he did allow the word 'intertextuality' into his vocabulary — and here, in fact at a time when the word was only just getting off the ground in classical studies, he gives us a little jewel of it.

The allusion to Murray is clever, but it was Fraenkel's influence that mattered. The tribute ends with a quotation from the *Choephoroe*, where Orestes wonders what offering he can make that will reach his dead father's spirit. And behind Fraenkel loomed a far more intimidating presence — Fraenkel's own teacher, the great nineteenth-century German scholar Wilamowitz, whose portrait hung over the desk where Martin wrote his books. In some ways the two are obvious comparisons, though I think that a metaphor Martin used for his own work points up a salient difference between the two. Martin thought of his work as a climbing-frame or mansion of many rooms; all the parts were linked. Wilamowitz was a colossus bestriding the remains of classical antiquity, in that totalising and all-inclusive thing known as *Altertumswissenschaft*, the science of the ancient world. Martin was more selective, his work more integrated, like a suite of rooms — and his personal style quite different. 'Intellectual thuggishness' was what he imputed to Wilamowitz. If Wilamowitz was a Fafner or Fasolt, I'm not sure quite what Martin would be; the mischievous Loge isn't quite right. But the Wagnerian conceit does lead into a little article that seems to me another gem, a microcosm of Martin the brilliant scholar who made it all seem so much *fun*.

In the first place, it's published in a German journal which is devoted mainly to papyrology and epigraphy: in other words it's for hard-core classicists. It's written in German (Martin's German, which he learned at school and refined

during scholarly visits to Erlangen and Berlin, was perfect). What he does is lay out an excerpt from the Greek lyric poet Bacchylides side by side with a passage from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* and develops their similarities. He asks whether these similarities are coincidental — and refers to an earlier article about a curious coincidence he'd submitted to the same journal ten years earlier. (Hence, he illustrates his own climbing-frame principle, building on his own earlier work.) He speaks of 'a relationship of intertextuality'. He compares the presence of a certain motif in both works and its appositeness or otherwise in its context. That's more or less exactly the way he proceeds when he analyses the strata in the composition of the Homeric poems. Perfectly maintaining the pose of the pedant he talks us through the possibilities. Chronology rules out Bacchylides borrowing from Wagner. There can be no earlier text of which Wagner was aware and we are not, so there is no common source. So Wagner must have borrowed from Bacchylides. But *Götterdämmerung* was premiered in 1876, while Bacchylides didn't see the light of day until over twenty years later. Impasse — and the article ends with feigned bafflement, 'Have I argued falsely?'. As a tribute to-cum-parody of the German scholarly tradition to which he owed so much, with a touch of self-parody too, the piece is graceful, elegant, funny. I doubt whether Wilamowitz could have done it.

I got to know Martin pretty well during my nine years at All Souls, and I could have given a string of anecdotes about his love of fun. After all, I was party to his not-terribly-melodious renditions of the Mallard song, to the surprisingly proficient Churchill impression which he delivered on the night of the great Mallard feast of January 2001, and I was one of the six good men and true who carried the Lord Mallard tipsily round the Great and Front Quad at shoulder-height at the climax of that night's festivities. More importantly, I was the beneficiary of a kindness and generosity and supportiveness which came out in typically unorthodox ways but which were absolutely characteristic. I was lucky to have experienced that, to have been able to add warm humanity to the first aspect of the man that I encountered — the figure whose commentary on Hesiod's *Works and Days* I had borrowed from St John's College library as a jejune eighteen-year-old, desperately ignorant about most things but profoundly certain, at least, of one thing — that this was a class of scholarship I had never seen before. And of course that awe never really went away. Soon after my obituary notice

appeared in the *Guardian* I received a letter from someone who had himself arrived in Oxford as a bright aspiring young classicist. In his case, the year was 1971, the college was Univ, and Martin was his tutor. Martin didn't have the pedagogical leanings of a Fraenkel; but even as he presided over first-year unseens classes in those trademark silences of his, my correspondent recalled how they all regarded him with awe, as an Olympian. Recall Martin's tribute to Fraenkel, as his *magister*. Now, after describing the importance that Martin's work had for him in his subsequent career as classical teacher and scholar, my correspondent concluded: 'He was the best, wasn't he? The master.'

Professor Alan Cameron

Martin and I began Greek on the very same day, in U3C at Colet Court, the prep school to St Paul's. Martin, John North (who is also here today) and I were in the same class from 1949 to 1955.

Martin was always top in Latin and Greek, but I have to say I always thought it a bit unfair that he was top in Maths as well. Unlike the rest of us, Martin took O-levels in Italian as well as German. Not till the day of the exams was it realized that the Italian and German papers were scheduled for the same time. Martin did both simultaneously and still walked out an hour early. Naturally, he passed in both.

We were in a stream destined to take the scholarship exams for Oxford and Cambridge, though our teachers decided that Martin was perhaps ready to take the exams a year sooner than the rest of us. He got the top scholarship at Balliol.

Not all of you will be aware that Martin's first love was astronomy. Indeed the first three items on his bibliography are astronomical, published in the *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* for 1960 and 1961. At St Paul's, he founded an astronomical society, of which there were three members: Martin, me, and Michael Yudkin, now emeritus professor of biochemistry at Oxford. There was a monthly journal, *Starry Nights*, which ran to 22 issues from March 1948 to July 1952, all of which I still possess, all handwritten and illustrated by Martin. Subscription 6d monthly, under sixteen half-price (of course, we were all under sixteen!).

As I look at these wonderful documents now more than 60 years later, what strikes me most is that at the age of eleven Martin already knew what a professional journal should look like, with a letter from the editor (Martin, of course), a monthly astroquiz, an art section and an occasional colour section (done with crayons). Readers are exhorted to 'make a little observatory in your bedroom; keep a pair of binoculars there and keep a diary of what you see.' The May 1952 issue notes that 'A.D.E. Cameron has been appointed Director of Lunar Observation' adding that 'lunar work was previously included in planetary work.' Martin was a strict editor. Letter from the editor

in the December 1951 issue: 'In future, when submitting observations of planets, variables and the Sun, will members please give the Julian date.' And in February 1952: 'I would like to remind you that you may obtain from me application forms for reporting meteors. Nobody has asked for one yet.'

There were occasional supplements. One on Mars, dated summer term 1951, in Martin's hand (the same hand and even the same ink that all who received letters from him in the old days, before email, will recognize). More ambitious is *A Theory concerning the History of the Solar System*, typewritten, First Impression July 1952.

Like all British classics students half a century ago we spent what now seems an extraordinary, not to say disproportionate amount of our time on verse composition, in both Latin and Greek. This is where Martin really excelled, up there with the nineteenth-century dons who seemingly did little else and then published their versions. Notoriously, editors of classical texts write their prefaces in Latin, but the preface to Martin's *Iambi et Elegi Graeci* is in witty Latin sczons!

Perhaps the most treasured of my Martiniana is his reply to an invitation to my 21st birthday party in five elegant Homeric hexameters, promising to bring an εὐζωνος¹ πάρθενος, a well-girdled maiden, to the festivities:

οἶδα χάριν, χάριν οἶδα, χάριν χάριν οἶδα μάλ' οἶδα.
αὐτὰρ εὐζώνην ἐπὶ παρθένον, αἶ κεν ἐφεύρω,
κλήσομαι ἐς ξενίην· τὸ δὲ καὶ μάλα πάντας οἶω
ἄνδρας εὐφρανέειν πυκινὸν κατὰ δῶμα καὶ αὐλήν.
αὐτὰρ ἐς αὔριον ἄλφα τελεσφόρον ἀλφήσαιο.

The πάρθενος (of course) turned out to be Stephanie.

¹ I am correcting his one licence *metri gratia*, giving a compound adjective a feminine termination. The reference in the last line is to the fact that I was about to take Honour Mods on the following day, and Martin was expressing the wish that I get alphas on my papers.

Professor Robert Parker

I first encountered Martin West when, as a first term undergraduate, I went to a lecture by him on Homer's *Iliad*. He greeted his audience in one of the big halls in Schools with a parody of one of those chains of similes used by Homer to indicate huge numbers: like geese or cranes or long-necked swans chattering around the streams of the Cayster, so numerous came the undergraduates down the High to the Examination Schools; like bees or flies around a milking pail, so eagerly did they swarm around the lecturer's dais, and so on: I forget the details, something on those lines, but much better done. Nobody else began a lecture quite like that. It's a small illustration of the delight in linguistic invention and even the restrained touch of showmanship that lurked within this quietest of scholars.

I begin by stressing the creativity and whimsy because, if you just look at statistics, Martin West can seem like a machine for the production of scholarly work. The three volumes of his selected lesser writings contain 93 articles; there are also bibliographies of works in similar areas not included in those volumes. If one does the sum it comes to 35 books, almost all of them major works, 8 editions of papyri, 37 sets of contributions to encyclopaedias and the like, 172 articles in addition to the 93, 131 reviews and various jeux d'esprits; those figures aren't quite up to date, there will be at least 2 books to add; there will also be I don't know how many articles on topics not covered in the three volumes. And yet these numbers don't begin to catch the extraordinary character of his contribution. In an affectionate review of Martin's last book Peter Green wrote 'who else alive today could have written either *Ancient Greek Music*, or *The East Face of Helicon*, let alone both?' A very good question, to which one could add several similar. Who else, after writing *The East Face of Helicon*, could have sat down to follow it up with *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*? In relation to *East Face of Helicon* he writes 'I prepared myself for the task by studying the most relevant oriental languages – Akkadian, Ugaritic, Phoenician, Hebrew, Hittite – and reading the relevant texts in the original.' I've been told that his Akkadian was as good as anybody's. In the preface to the second book he writes more coyly 'I have furnished myself with a working knowledge of some of the relevant languages'. Goodness knows how many languages Martin knew at some point in his career: I remember a long time ago a colleague who had

connections with Univ, where Martin taught, reporting that Martin had just made his first conjecture in Anglo-Saxon. But it wasn't just languages that were required for the Indo-European book: the literatures written in them are vast in scope, he also had to master the hugely complicated and massively studied and almost endlessly multi-branched field of Indo-European reconstruction. The result has been declared a work of masterly scholarship by specialists in that field.

Who else, to continue that theme, would have gone on after this to concentrate on one particular Indo-European language, and publish a translation of the *Hymns of Zoroaster* and even a grammar of old Avestan? At that point even seasoned West-watchers had to gasp; the man was incredible, there can't in fact have been just one Martin West, there must have been at least three. The only argument in favour of unity is the grace and precision and wit of his language throughout – as crisp as an apple, as the poet Peter Levi wrote in a review many years ago.

But I've not yet mentioned the most remarkable aspect. I mustn't say that all this Near Eastern and Indo-European work was ancillary to his main interests: from the very start of his career he set Greek culture in a global perspective, this was one of his central convictions and central achievements; but what I can say is that even without these works of comparativism, even without the work on music and metre, he would still have ranked among the very greatest Hellenists and indeed classical scholars.

Choosing the 'so many greatest ever' is a game for the colour supplements, not for serious discourse, but let's indulge in it for a moment and align Martin with Wilamowitz and Bentley as the supreme masters of classical philology. An extraordinary fact struck me recently: if we consider the whole field of Greek poetry down to the death of Aeschylus minus a single genre, lyric, once the text of the *Odyssey* that he left all but finished at his death is published, the whole of Greek poetry of those centuries will be available in an edition by Martin; and authoritative comment by him is available on all that ocean of poetry except the *Homeric Hymns*. Lyric missed out only because it was already well served, but Martin also made innumerable contributions in that field. One must also remember that much of his best work appeared in the notes and apparatus criticuses of other people's; any sensible person

publishing a newly discovered Greek poem in the last 40 years sought Martin's advice. I wish I had time to illustrate some of his crucial interventions. I'll just mention *exempli gratia* the Greek poem probably of the 2nd century B.C. discovered on a bronze tablet in Kandahar a few years ago. Immense excitement: it mentioned the Chinese, it provided the earliest written evidence for trade with China – it did at any rate until Martin pointed out that the Chinese had only got in there through a false word division. He provided a quality control on work throughout the world; without being aggressive, he did it in many Oxford seminars, and we are deeply impoverished without him.

What made Martin what he was? Obviously an unanswerable question; one can't explain genius. But in his acceptance speech for the Balzan Prize Martin mentioned by name just three individuals who influenced him; two of these were what he calls a 'legendary pair of teachers' at St Paul's School in London. I followed him to the same school 13 years later and was taught by the same teachers. It was a varied education: it varied between Greek and Latin, in writing the ancient languages one alternated between attempts at verse and attempts at prose. There was almost nothing else; but it was this disgracefully narrow education, combined of course with native genius, that gave Martin his fantastic facility with the ancient languages and acute linguistic sensibility. The third name he mentioned in the acceptance speech was that of Edouard Fraenkel: he credited Fraenkel with opening to him the world of ancient literatures beyond their linguistic aspect. Obviously many other people influenced him, not least his learned wife Stephanie; I think in the Balzan speech he deliberately didn't mention the living.

But there's a quality of his work that I want to end with which I don't think he got from any of his teachers. It was once said of Ronald Syme, another OM, that he possessed a 'ruthlessly concrete fantasy': one can transfer that judgment to Martin West. Fantasy there isn't intended dismissively; the term just acknowledges that such a scholar applies a trained and disciplined imagination beyond the limits of what's strictly demonstrable to describe in very precise terms what's likely to have been the case. I don't think Martin would have rejected the description: anybody who gives an article the title 'Greek poetry 2000 – 700 BC', a period from which on his own view no Greek poetry survived, is evidently happy to take calculated risks. All he would

have wanted to insist is that every element of his fantasy was supported by analogy and argument. He had an unparalleled instinct for how, for instance, early Greek cosmologies hung together and how mythical genealogies worked: on an earlier memorial occasion Simon Hornblower hailed his reconstruction of the largely lost *Catalogue of Women* of Hesiod as his finest work.

Indo-European Poetry and Myth is a reconstruction on a very large scale. Right at the end Martin characteristically presents an 'Elegy for an Indo-European Hero' of his own composition, in which he incorporates many of his conclusions: we are back again where I began with the scholar who isn't dusty and academic, the man of whimsy and creativity. I don't suppose he thought of himself when composing it, but because of his death the last two stanzas can now, alas, be applied to him:

He has gone the way of no return
to you and the Fathers in the mansion below,
but his name does not fail or grow old:
it lives in the mouth of us earth-walkers.

It will sound until Dieus' fair daughter
embraces her dark sister in one house,
or until the poet's woven songs
are sung no more in the kings' halls.