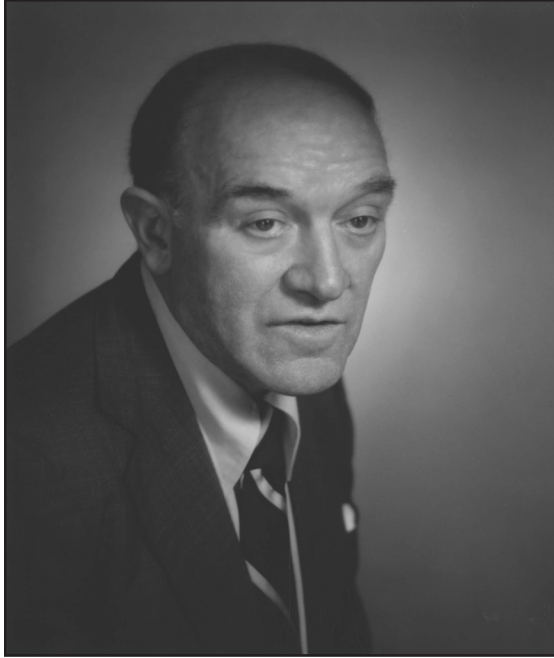

BERNARD M. W. KNOX



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By temperament Bernard Knox was a pioneer, and his early work on Sophocles opened up new and exciting ways of approaching Greek tragedy. The preface of his first book, *Oedipus at Thebes* (Yale University Press 1957) begins with a characteristically bold statement: “This book is addressed to the classical scholar and at the same time to ‘the Greekless reader’, a category which, once treated with scorn by the professor of more educated ages, now includes the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the planet. The book is therefore condemned from the start to fall between two stools.” In fact it made a distinctive impact, thanks in part to Bernard’s passionate interest in the way creative writers use language, and this and later publications, especially *The Heroic Temper* (University of California Press 1964), established his reputation as an innovative interpreter of ancient drama and society.

I had been excited and impressed by his work, but my first direct contact with him was in the 1970s, when he and I were enlisted as co-editors of Volume I of *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature* (CHCL), which finally appeared in 1985. Our exchanges were mainly by post, although we did manage to meet a few times in Cambridge or Washington, DC, and after the original planning stages most of our letters were devoted to frank and detailed discussion of contributors’ drafts as they came in. We both set great store by clarity of expression, and I was always struck by the relish that Bernard showed over details of style and usage.

It is interesting to read what some former fellows at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, DC, had to say about the attentive academic support given them by Bernard in his years as director from 1961, the year of its founding. Here is an excerpt from William Whallon’s essay in *Arktouros* (Walter de Gruyter 1979), a Festschrift presented to Bernard on his 65th birthday:

Though some of the talents given to Bernard Knox are widely recognized, few people know him to be the ablest and most generous editor any author could wish for. In the late 1960s he edited, and the Center published, my little book on formulaic poetry . . . and I should like to declare his method—which was to read the typescript twice and both sets of proof, to make at each stage numerous suggestions of the highest value, and then to leave every decision to me. (18)

Edwin L. Brown dedicated his *Arktouros* essay to “Bernard Knox, who made me sharply aware of the multivalent force of proper names in Greek tragedy” (299).

Our correspondence was not all devoted to the exchange of minutiae or thoughts on Greek literature. Bernard’s letters often ended

with a paragraph or two on more personal topics, which helped me to get to know him better and gave a vivid sense of his powers of recall. Some examples are below:

Washington, alas, *is* sticky; and now unfortunately we have to suffer air pollution too—there is no industry here but the entire federal government and all its bureaucracies comes in and out from the suburbs every day in cars with the result that from time to time old people are warned not to leave the house and the air smells and tastes the way it used to when I was a very small boy living in Bradford just back of a big textile mill and the clouds held the soft coal smoke down just over our heads day after day. (July 8, 1977)

It is very sad to me to read news about England these days. I grew up (that is from about the age of 4 to 14) in a place called Brixton, which was then a lower middle class area, rather charming semi-detached houses, with a great deal of parkland and distinguished by the fact that it was full of boarding houses which catered to what we called in those days “theatricals”—they were the actors of travelling companies which (in those days before the talkies) came and performed at the local theaters (there were three within easy reach of where I lived) such classics as: *The Ghost Train*, *The Uncle from America* and (without the benefit of music) *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber*. As a result, one of my closest friends was the son of a music hall conjuror with the remarkable name of Yetma; his son used to show me all the complicated apparatus which made it possible to produce rabbits from a hat. So whenever I read about more riots in Brixton I am quite unable to imagine it. (July 20, 1981)

Below is his postscript to a letter (date lost) sometime in 1980, on acknowledgements to be printed in *CHCL*:

I would like to be listed on the dust cover or the title page or wherever, not as the Director of the Center for Hellenic Studies (well, perhaps that could be on the dust cover), but simply as “sometime Scholar of St. John’s College, Cambridge”. When I was an undergraduate at John’s I used to buy all these second-hand editions of the classics which were edited by old schoolmasters and clergymen who always signed themselves “Sometime Scholar of Sidney Sussex College” etc. I remember having a vision of my name in a similar formula (like a young actor thinking of his name in lights)—this was before I had visions of overthrowing His Majesty’s government by force. [Explained below.] But I would dearly love to have such a rubric if it can be done. It would also be an act of piety to my college which, I must say, put up with my youthful foolishness in exemplary fashion.

Not surprisingly, the publishers insisted on his current title.

Bernard's gifts as a raconteur are illustrated more fully and in fascinating detail in publications recalling early stages in his career: his time at school in London, his student days in Cambridge as a political activist attending Marxist study groups and taking part in demonstrations, and—soon after he graduated in 1936—his experiences with his friend John Cornford as a volunteer in the French Battalion fighting in Spain, where he was seriously wounded. Then there was a new military phase to recall: his distinguished career in the U.S. army (1942–1945), much of it spent working on covert and highly dangerous operations coordinated from Britain, with the French Resistance and with partisans in northern Italy.

The main sources are the introduction to his *Essays Ancient and Modern* (John Hopkins University Press 1989) and “Premature Anti-Fascist,” a lecture given in 1998 at New York University and now available online, which takes the story up to 1946, the crucial year when Bernard applied to the Department of Classics at Yale for admission to the Ph.D. program. Another of Bernard's early pieces is “John Cornford in Spain,” in *John Cornford: A Memoir*, edited by Pat Sloan (Cape 1938, reprinted by Borderline Press 1978).

A significant presence in Bernard's publications is his wife, Betty Baur, the dedicatee under the name “Bianca” of almost all his books (her pen name as a novelist was Bianca Van Orden). He met Betty when they were both undergraduates at Cambridge, she at Girton reading English, he at St. John's reading Classics, but it was only after his return from Spain that the two became close, and after their marriage in New Jersey, her home state, in 1939, it was possible for him to apply for American citizenship, serve in the U.S. armed forces, and qualify for a GI grant to study for a Ph.D., in his case at Yale. He records that she too was a volunteer for war work, as a “sheet-metal mechanic, building fighter planes for the United States Navy” (*Essays Ancient and Modern*, xxi). The marriage lasted until her death in 2006.

Friendly, supportive, and generous as he was toward colleagues and students, Bernard could be outspoken and even polemical in his writing, though his criticisms were often tempered with wit, and the extraordinarily rich range of his own reading made him an enlightening reviewer. In Bernard's perceptive review of George Steiner's *Antigones* (Clarendon Press 1984), first printed in the *New Republic* (1984) and reprinted in *Essays Ancient and Modern* (129–36), Bernard cites Steiner's remark that “the integral authority of the classic is such that it can absorb without loss of identity the millennial incursions upon it, the accretions to it, of commentary, of translation, of enacted variation. *Ulysses* reinforces Homer; Broch's *Death of Virgil* enriches the *Aeneid*,

Sophocles' *Antigone* will not suffer from Lacan." Bernard agrees strongly with Steiner's claim about Joyce and Broch, but he is more bluntly dismissive of Lacan: "That Sophocles' *Antigone* will not suffer from Lacan is something about which I have no doubt whatever—for the simple reason that Lacan is unreadable even now and will be forgotten tomorrow" (130).

He had been much influenced by New Criticism in his early career as a scholar and teacher, and greatly valued the process of reading any text, ancient or modern, with close attention to the nuances of its style. But he had little enthusiasm for some, at least, of the theoretical approaches to the study of ancient literature that became more and more influential in the course of his career. Indeed, anything that put dogma and abstraction before close and sympathetic engagement with an author's text he saw as unpromising. In his *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater* (Johns Hopkins University Press 1979) the first paper, entitled "Myth and Attic Tragedy," which acts as prologue to this collection of already published articles, chapters, and reviews, captures his equivocal reaction to debates of the time:

Any title which includes the word "myth" is almost certain, these days, to raise expectations, entertained by some with enthusiasm and by others with dismay, that the writer will deal in wide, if not universal, terms of reference—the complexes, displacements, and sublimations of Sigmund Freud; the somewhat arbitrary archetypes of Jung; the Indo-European tripartite functions of Dumézil; or the codes, contradictions and mediations of Claude Lévi-Strauss—and also that the article will come equipped with at least one complicated diagram. This essay is less ambitious. It tries to deal in specific, pragmatic terms with a limited area—the myths preferred by the Attic tragic poets of the fifth century B.C.

A much later publication, *The Oldest Dead White European Males: And Other Reflections on the Classics* (W. W. Norton & Company 1993), responds with some irritation to the denunciation by "advocates of multiculturalism and militant feminists, among others" of the traditional canon of ancient Greek literature (12), but then offers a sensitive and persuasive study of the reception of Greek culture, its meaning in different periods and places, sometimes, indeed, as "the instrument of change and disturbance" (18).

There is usually a playful element in Bernard's critiques, especially as he was himself more of an innovator than he was inclined to admit. He never seems to have shared the long established academic attitudes, normal among teachers of Classics in his school and student days, toward the notion of "best authors" and "best periods" of antiquity. In

“The Continuity of Greek Culture,” the third essay in *The Oldest Dead White European Males*, he looks back on his own training, which he describes as “rigidly linguistic in emphasis” (110–11):

I went through three years of Cambridge with the general impression that all the Greek worth reading came to a full stop with Theocritus (though there was, of course, the New Testament, but that was something for people studying divinity) and further-more that Greek history came to a stop with the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. (after that it was Hellenistic history). Toward the end of my career at Cambridge I discovered that a friend of mine, who had chosen archaeology as his special field and was on his way to the British School in Athens, was studying, from a German handbook (there wasn't one in English) modern Greek. After talking to him and looking at the book, I asked my tutor whether perhaps an acquaintance with modern Greek might be useful. “Not only will it not be useful,” he said, “—the only people who use it are archaeologists who have to go there—not only will it not be useful; it will corrupt your prose style, and you will end up writing Greek that sounds like Polybius.”

Bernard's chapter goes on to make an impassioned case for getting to know as much as possible about contemporary Greece and its culture firsthand, through visits, learning the language, and above all through reading its contemporary literature.

His own fluent command of modern languages—French, Spanish, Italian, modern Greek, and German—and his wide reading outside scholarly publications—gave his work a refreshingly independent perspective, which must have been a stimulus to the many young scholars who spent time at the Center for Hellenic Studies. It also equipped him to write with flair, and re-reading his work continues to be a pleasure.

Elected 1985

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