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ALAN CAMERON



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Alan Cameron, a prolific and widely respected scholar of classical literature and ancient history, died at the age of 79 in 2017. He had been diagnosed with ALS, a disease that he endured with characteristic good humor, even as it consumed him far more quickly than he had been led to expect. Fortunately, a titanic output of books and articles will keep his wide-ranging scholarship before the public, together with his endlessly original and often provocative views about the ancient world.

Alan's career was like a stupendous comet in the firmament of classical studies, a comet that illuminated the skies of our discipline with startling brilliance and transformed the lives of everyone who witnessed it. He opened up, over and over again, wholly new areas of research and interpretation. The quiet modesty of his personal manner, which made him such delightful company, belied the magnitude of what he was doing—and what he had been doing from his earliest years at St. Paul's School in London.

Alan was a formidable schoolboy at St. Paul's, where he befriended the equally precocious Martin West, who ended his career in the small company of British scholars named to the Order of Merit. As schoolboys, Cameron and West formed an astronomical society, which in its curiosity and attention to minute observation prefigured the careers of both of them. They, like other budding classicists in St. Paul's at that time, were pupils of a legendary and demanding schoolmaster, W. W. Cruickshank, to whom Alan paid homage in a volume (*Apodosis*) for Cruickshank's 80th birthday.

He never forgot those who taught and encouraged him and was generous in acknowledging their inspiration. In the preface to his book on Callimachus, he singled out Cruickshank, along with Eduard Fraenkel, whose Oxford seminars he had attended, and Arnaldo Momigliano, who had shown interest in his earliest publications. I too attended Fraenkel's seminars, although not so often as Alan, but they were unforgettably instructive, memorable, and terrifying in equal measure. Alan obviously sharpened his innate taste for polemic in part from his experience with Fraenkel. I also knew Momigliano well and benefited from his friendship and support over many decades. He had the rare ability to nourish work with which he sometimes did not agree, and to leave scholars, especially young ones, fortified and wiser.

Alan's adventurous disposition was on display right from the beginning. The preface to his first book *Claudian* (1970), on the late antique Latin poet Claudian, began, "A large book on a poet little read even in universities might seem to require justification, if not apology. I offer neither." In a similarly challenging spirit he consistently maintained his

independence from the growing consensus about the late antique imperial biographies known as the *Historia Augusta*, which for many years engaged a distinguished company of ancient historians who gathered annually in Bonn to discuss it. Although classical Greece held no great interest for him, everything from the Hellenistic age until the early Byzantine Empire did. This included monuments and objects as well as texts. His work on Christian diptychs attracted the attention of art historians.

Like Martin West, Alan had a prodigious knowledge of Greek and Latin, but he could never simply rest with that. He pushed forward the frontiers of classical studies by employing every tool of the profession—textual criticism, metrics, epigraphy, papyrology, numismatics, iconography, topography, and archaeology. His gifts were irresistibly called into play by the discovery of new texts, such as a stone stele with inscribed epigrams, concerning the Byzantine charioteer Porphyrius, or a papyrus of epigrams by Posidippus in Milan, which engendered a lengthy reassessment of the Hellenistic poet Callimachus. Alan wandered, much like those late antique Egyptian poets he celebrated in an early and now famous article (“Wandering Poets”), across styles and themes of breathtaking diversity.

Alan’s career began its impressive rise with his undergraduate years at New College, Oxford, where he took First Class Honours in the philological part of the AB Literae Humaniores degree (in those days called “Moderations”) and another First Class in the second part (known as “Greats”), devoted to ancient history and philosophy. Anyone who remembers, as I do, the Honour School of Literae Humaniores at Oxford in the late fifties will know how methodologically and chronologically restricted it was—prescribed texts in Moderations, and rigidly defined periods of Greek and Roman history in Greats, along with perhaps excessive worrying in analytic philosophy, although the philosophy component had been designed to concentrate on reading Plato and Aristotle. After completing his examinations with great success, Alan immediately began exploring new areas of antiquity without even contemplating research for a doctoral degree. He soon immersed himself in authors and historical problems that most of his Oxford tutors did not teach and may not even have heard of. Alan went his own way and never looked back.

He devoured texts that lay outside the Lit. Hum. syllabus, such as the *Aetia* of Callimachus and the epigrams of the *Greek Anthology*, and he fastened onto the 48 books of Nonnus’s vast epic poem about Dionysus, the *Dionysiaca*, with a competence that very few scholars in the 20th century could muster. His mastery of the myths concerning

Dionysus, as well as the poetic diction and metre of Nonnus, enabled him to examine what was happening among the poets inspired by his verses, the so-called Nonniani. In examining their work he was able to expose and document the acceptability of pagan mythology in an emerging Christian Egypt. He was among the first to recognize that a Christian could celebrate a pagan divinity, and it was in large part thanks to his work that scholars have come to accept that the verse paraphrase of the Gospel of St. John, attributed to Nonnus himself, was not, as long supposed, a production from a time after the poet had converted from paganism to Christianity, but in fact a poem by the same person who had written, also as a Christian, the narrative epic about Dionysus.

Alan did all this with an openness and charm that disguised the fiercely critical readings in which he was constantly engaged. At Oxford he had been a bright bird of colorful plumage, sporting “mod” clothes and a pageboy haircut, which he maintained to the end. He seemed so laid back—with his slow and drawling speech—that it was hard to credit the intense work that went into his early work, down to and including his first book *Claudian*. After leaving Oxford in 1961 with his double First, he accepted an invitation to teach at the University of Glasgow from the eminent Latinist, C. J. Fordyce, whose commentary on Catullus had appeared in that year and who must have been on the lookout for a promising young scholar in his field. But Alan soon moved on, leaving Glasgow in 1964 to become Lecturer at Bedford College London. He was soon promoted to Reader at Bedford but vacated that post in 1972 to assume the Chair of Latin at King’s College London.

Five years later he accepted an offer to become the Charles Anthon Professor of the Latin Language and Literature at Columbia University, but not before the British Academy had already recognized his remarkable publications by electing him a Fellow in 1975. In moving to Columbia, Alan took up the chair which had been held famously for many decades by Gilbert Highet, another British classicist (a Scot in fact) with a broad range of interests and an uncommon talent for communicating to the general public. In following Highet, Alan observed in tribute to his predecessor that never again would the entire range of classics be surveyed through the vision of one person. Alan himself was ultimately to falsify this tribute through his own subsequent career.

It was with the publication of his magisterial work *Porphyrus the Charioteer* (1973) that the fully mature Alan was on display for all to see. Here he presented the texts of a hitherto unpublished dossier of

inscribed epigrams on a monument in honor of a Byzantine chariot driver who had the fame of a rock star. In Constantinople, where he was celebrated, the populace was divided into rival factions that were named for the colors they displayed in cheering on their favorites in the “circus” where the chariots competed. A great scholar of Roman and late antique Asia Minor, Louis Robert, had noticed the range and depth of Alan’s work and, in a rare gesture of esteem, entrusted to him the first publication of the entire dossier of the charioteer Porphyrius. Alan prepared a meticulous edition of all the texts on the charioteer’s monument as well as a detailed commentary on them. He went on to place Porphyrius’s victories in the context of chariot-racing generally at that time. In doing this he laid the foundations for yet another book, a more general study of the fans of the charioteers and the rival circus factions that cheered them on: *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (1976).

Alan’s epigraphical and historical commentary on Porphyrius immediately won the approval of the scholar who had given him the dossier. Louis Robert, who was by far the greatest of all authorities on Greek epigraphy, signaled his approval by sending Alan, every year from that time onward, an offprint of the annual *Bulletin épigraphique*, which dominated the discipline until Robert’s death in 1984.

Claudian, the Nonniani, and the circus factions were just a part of Alan’s intellectual world. At the same time he looked back to the Hellenistic poet Callimachus to return to an earlier interest in the poet’s *Aetia* in the light of a newly discovered papyrus of Posidippus. The result was a large book about Greek poetry many centuries before Nonnus or Porphyrius: *Callimachus and His Critics* (1995). His study of Callimachus meshed perfectly with his early interest in the epigrams of the *Greek Anthology*, to which he had devoted many articles in the past. This interest led eventually to a book, *The Greek Anthology: From Meleager to Planudes* (1993). Both Callimachus and the array of other poets in the *Anthology* had inevitably raised many complex questions of mythology, and the various traditions in which the stories were preserved. Hence, Alan now undertook to look closely at the writing of Greek myths and how they were composed and disseminated. His large book, *Greek Mythography in the Roman World* (2004), took many of us by surprise and seemed, despite its bulk and detail, almost to be a spin-off from his more recent work when compared with his groundbreaking work on Porphyrius and Callimachus. But Alan’s immense energy always matched his unquenchable curiosity.

From the beginning he long had in mind a great work on the last pagans at Rome. He mentioned it often over the years and engaged with it in different formats and sometimes from different perspectives. His thinking about this subject, like that of many of his colleagues, had shifted dramatically during the many decades since he first read a now-classic article by Herbert Bloch from 1963 on “The Pagan Revival in the West at the End of the Fourth Century.”<sup>1</sup> The project on the last pagans was dear to his heart, and he was determined not to let it go, even if the constituency for which Bloch had been writing had largely disappeared. Many pagans, such as Nonnus, had turned out to be Christians, and in latter years even the writer Macrobius, who had indisputably seemed to Alan in 1967 and again in 1977 to be pagan, became surprisingly, in Alan’s last work, a Christian after all.

When his book *The Last Pagans of Rome* finally appeared in 2011, it was hard to know what to expect after such a long gestation. I had suggested to him that by then it seemed as if there had not actually been any generation of last pagans at Rome at all, but Alan would not abandon his title because he had lived with it for so long, even though much of his own work seemed to subvert what it implied. No one doubted that, despite its enormous length and the tremendous range of topics that it encompassed, *The Last Pagans* was the masterpiece we had been waiting for all along. It incorporated a lifetime of original research in support of interpretations that were as innovative and bold as they were illuminating. Reactions to its arguments occupied him in his last years, particularly a sustained assault on the work from François Paschoud, who had devoted himself to many of the themes and authors that had occupied Alan. But Paschoud, for reasons I cannot comprehend, considered the work a threat from the world of anglophone scholarship. This paradoxical opinion came from someone who is himself polyglot, concerning a book that is steeped in scholarship in languages other than English. Alan was confident enough not to worry much about Paschoud, but I suspect that Paschoud’s critique may have emboldened him in his own polemic with other scholars of the time.

Prominent among Alan’s vigorous debates with his contemporaries during his last years are two lively pieces that appear in a volume of collected essays that was published in 2016: *Wandering Poets and Other Essays on Late Greek Literature and Philosophy*. The first of these papers contains a lengthy argument against a new date for the poet Palladas of Alexandria in the age of Constantine. Previously this epigrammatist had been thought to have witnessed antipagan disturbances in Alexandria in 391 AD and to have been one of the last of the

1 Arnaldo Momigliano (ed.), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 193–218.

old Greek pagans. But the discovery of a fragmentary codex of epigrams with known poems ascribed to Palladas challenged the consensus. A palaeographical assessment of the codex initially suggested an early fourth-century date, although other opinions were possible. Kevin Wilkinson had taken up the earlier date and argued for moving Palladas back to Constantine. Although Alan had at first believed him, he subsequently changed his mind and now presented a strong case against Wilkinson.

The second paper, from the same volume, is a powerful attack on the Byzantinist Anthony Kaldellis, who had argued that paganism continued to be strong into the Christian empire of Justinian. He roused Alan's indignation by arguing that most secular writers who had classicizing tastes at that time were "die-hard pagans only pretending to be Christians." This eccentric view provoked Alan into making a thoroughly documented riposte in characteristically memorable prose: "Kaldellis is prepared to assume that the pagans he has unmasked were just pretending to be Christians to protect themselves and advance their careers. . . . Is this really just an elaborate pretense? Above all, what sort of pagan states as fact that a Sibyl prophesied the crucifixion?"

It is exhilarating to hear Alan's voice in these arguments. He was always open to new ideas and always ready to change his mind, but his knowledge of the ancient sources was impeccable, and when he saw an inconsistency, improbability, or error he took an obvious delight in saying so. He was a tireless scholar until he drew his last breath, and the profusion of books and articles he has left behind will instruct future generations in the practice and joy of classical scholarship. As a teacher he was always eager to show the young how to read and write both Latin and Greek—a disposition and a talent he undoubtedly imbibed from Dr. Cruickshank at St. Paul's. During his years at Columbia Alan offered hands-on training in the original composition of Latin and Greek in both prose and verse, and he did this in the congenial context of his own home on Riverside Drive. His students were fortunate to have such a mentor, who doubtless never even thought of being a mentor. For he possessed by nature an extraordinary generosity and openness all his life, both in print and in academic relations. This is what enlivened and enriched his publications, not only in their erudition and judgment but in their unmistakably personal tone.

Alan leaves behind his first wife, the eminent historian Dame Averil Cameron, with whom he remained in cordial contact over the years, their son Daniel and daughter Sophie, and Sophie's infant child Silas, whom Alan was able to meet before it was too late. In his latter years

he had the love and support of his devoted wife Carla Asher, with whom he shared his pleasure in watching films and television, and to whom he owed the happiness and tranquility that made his work possible.

Elected 1992

GLEN W. BOWERSOCK  
Professor Emeritus of Ancient History  
Institute for Advanced Study