

OBITUARY

Peter Mackridge (1946–2022)

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Peter Alexander Mackridge was born on 12 March 1946 in Harpenden, Hertfordshire, the eldest of three sons of Irene, *née* Pickering, and Donald Mackridge, who originated from Yorkshire. He was educated at the Royal Grammar School, Guildford, and Eastbourne College – the latter he did not enjoy, but it sent him on an inspiring school trip to Greece – and then spent a year working in his father's advertising business in London. He went up to St John's College, Oxford, in October 1964 to read law. He soon realized that he wasn't cut out for that and was permitted to switch to Modern Languages: French and Modern Greek. As part of his degree he spent a year in Athens and graduated with a First in 1968.

He then embarked on studying for his doctorate, for which he was awarded a Laming Travelling Scholarship at The Queen's College; the main stipulation was that he should spend most of the three years outside the UK. He naturally headed for Athens. His time there, despite the unpropitious political situation, was productive both in research and in personal contacts, long cherished, with leading figures in the literary and academic worlds. He also ratcheted up his Greek to full idiomatic fluency. His research topic was the Greek novel of the 1930s. The Generation of the Thirties saw a Greek version of Modernism take root, particularly in poetry, but the prose fiction of that period was little known or appreciated outside Greece, and even in Greece had not attracted much serious literary criticism. Peter's researches were thus highly original, but he was too modest to seek their publication, even in a revised form: his DPhil thesis can only be consulted in the Bodleian Library. His research did, however, feed into many subsequent publications, such as his pioneering article on 'European influences on the Greek novel during the 1930s'¹ and his later work on Prevelakis, Kosmas Politis, and other novelists.

In 1973 Peter was appointed to the new lectureship in Modern Greek language and literature at the University of London, shared between King's College and the School of

1 *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 3.1 (1985) 1–20.

Slavonic and East European Studies. As well as devising and teaching a new BA degree course, he took on his first PhD students. After eight busy years at King's the opportunity to return to Oxford presented itself. In 1981 he was appointed Lecturer in Modern Greek, and a Fellow of St Cross College, and served for 22 years, the last seven as Professor of Modern Greek, until his early retirement in 2003. In 1982 he married Jackie Willcox, who shared his life for the next forty years. At Oxford he taught single-handed the entire literary syllabus, from the twelfth century to the present, and supervised growing numbers of Masters and DPhil students. At the same time, he maintained a steady stream of publications, across the whole range of Greek literary texts, as well as translations (some in collaboration with Jackie) and edited volumes. Peter's prodigious breadth of reading in the field made him the ideal editor for two whole decades (2000–2020) of the modern side of *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, and in that role he upheld the scholarly standards of accuracy and originality he himself exemplified. Unlike some eminent scholars, he was always eager to learn from his juniors and generous in acknowledging his debts to them.

Peter's contributions to the study of some of the most important and complex Greek authors – Solomos, Cavafy, Karyotakis, Elytis and Seferis, among the poets – are masterpieces of elucidation and interpretation. He also wrote extensively on the fiction of Papadiamantis, Theotokas, Prevelakis, Kosmas Politis, Tsirkas, and Ioannou, and produced a number of thematic studies focused on myth, language, and place. It was both characteristic and very salutary that, at a conference in his honour in 2017 (later published as *Μα τί γρρεύουν οι ψυχές μας ταξιδεύοντας; Αναζητήσεις και αγωνίες των Ελλήνων λογοτεχνών του Μεσοπολέμου (1918–1939)* (Athens: Nefeli 2018), Peter exhorted a new generation to jettison two long-established critical terms. The 'mythical method' and the 'interior monologue', he urged, bedevil discussion of two areas to which he made invaluable contributions: mythical symbolism and narrative voice in twentieth-century Greek writing.

Peter's exemplary editions of Kosmas Politis' two finest novels (*Eroïca*, 1982 and *Στον Χατζηφράγκο*, 1988) set a standard for the study of Modernist fiction. The earlier of these novels has been much loved, but also open to impressionistic misreading: Peter, drawing on earlier studies of his own (going back to his 1972 doctoral thesis), provides a subtle and lucid guide to the text's varied symbolic structures and slippery ironies. Kosmas Politis, a close student of Joyce, now at last came in for the elaborate critical account he deserved. Even more so, perhaps, the later novel, a product of Kosmas Politis' latter years, and neglected perhaps because of the painful events it retails, culminating in the fall of Smyrna in 1922, receives a discussion which helps the reader get to grips with a complex masterpiece. In concluding his ample Introduction, Peter rose to an eloquent summation: 'το ίδιο το κείμενο μιμείται το χώρο στον οποίο αναφέρεται, με τους φαρδιούς κεντρικούς δρόμους και το λαβύρινθο από μικρά σκολιά σοκάκια. Σ' αυτό το χώρο ο αφηγητής είναι ξεναγός, εμείς οι περιηγητές.'

Peter relished his friendship with many Greek poets; of the dead, three stood out for him: Solomos, Cavafy, and Seferis. They form the subject of his dense volume of collected

studies, many translated from English and extensively revised: *Εκμιαγεία της ποίησης* (Hestia, 2008). Anyone seriously interested in any of the three poets needs to know this volume. When it came to Cavafy, Peter was a close reader adept at generating suggestive and unexpected links between poems and thus enlarging a sense of Cavafy's poetic development and the coherence of his oeuvre. Likewise, the bringing to light of hidden word plays and sound patterns in Cavafy is wholly persuasive, indeed inspiring, as was his definitive account of Cavafy's versification. Peter's brilliantly compressed twenty-page introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition and translation of Cavafy (2007) showed that such expertise is entirely compatible with a commitment to the general reader.

But when it came to purely literary study, Peter's greatest labour of love was perhaps Solomos. The essay on 'The Cretan', first published in this journal in 1984, is fundamental for our understanding of a poem which the poet's first editor had despairingly labelled as a 'Fragment'. Peter was not daunted by Solomos' terrifyingly disorderly *Αυτόγραφα*. No view about this great poet will ever command universal agreement; but it was a mark of Peter's determination that he insisted on the form *Οι Ελεύθεροι Πολιορκισμένοι* because that is what Solomos wrote and a mark of his acumen that so many difficulties are faced and then cleared up. Editorial problems relating to Solomos are at a high level of technicality and involve great density of detail (in the Italian as much as the Greek), and the greatest patience is required to unpick them. Peter distilled his insights in a short study for the general reader (1989, Greek translation *Διονύσιος Σολωμός*, Athens: Kastaniotis 1995) and freshly edited some of Solomos' major texts to accompany the translations in the volume *The Free Besieged and Other Poems* (Beeston, Notts: Shoestring Press 2000, second revised edition 2015). The international reader now has the best possible introduction – in just 93 pages – to Greece's greatest and most difficult poet.

Peter's formidable equipment as a modern languages scholar, painstakingly acquired and kept in impressive running order right to the end, also embraced an equally important identity as a linguist. In fact, his first monograph was *The Modern Greek Language: a descriptive analysis of Standard Modern Greek* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985). Nearly forty years later it is still frequently cited, in both its English and Greek versions. The great virtue of the book is that it describes real language, not some idealized construct of grammarians with an axe to grind. For those learning the language, it answers the questions that the grammars and coursebooks of the time conspicuously ignored. The term Standard Modern Greek, replacing 'demotic', has since become the normal descriptor of the language in everyday use. His description is detailed and precise, but not prescriptive. Three whole chapters are devoted to syntax, a domain which the traditional grammars barely touched on. It was simply a break-through in the study and teaching of Modern Greek, and indeed a work from which native speakers too could profit.

The natural – though unplanned – sequel to this book was a reference grammar. It resulted from an approach by Routledge for a 'comprehensive reference grammar' of

400–500 pages. This would have been a large undertaking for a single author, given the lack of authoritative precursors, and the project became the work of three, with Peter as the coordinator who skilfully handled tricky negotiations with the publisher and kept his colleagues up to the mark.² Peter was an ideal collaborator on this and many other projects. He had the talent of leading by example, encouraging and supporting where necessary, evincing authority, but also flexibility.

Peter never shied away from projects, such as grammars and glossaries, that would be of huge benefit to teachers and students but didn't score highly as original research (though in fact they all involved a great deal of research). One of his early publications was a much-needed glossary to a novel by Prevelakis.³ In his last years he compiled a number of glossaries to Phanariot texts, correcting the errors of previous editors and drawing on his range of linguistic skills and his literary sensitivity. One of these glossaries has been published,⁴ while others are available online.

From the late 1980s Peter was developing a research interest in the history of Greek. His ingenuity solved one linguistic puzzle that hadn't even been thought to be a puzzle until he tackled it. The order of verb and clitic pronoun in Medieval and Early Modern Greek had been believed to be random, a free choice; and some editors even reversed the order to improve the metre. Peter sensed that something was wrong. In a series of articles published in 1993, 1995 and 2000 he formulated, and then refined, the complex rules that underpin the syntax of the verb phrase. Similarly, in another article he traced the survival of the infinitive in Medieval Greek and the modern dialects, correcting many false assumptions. Of particular interest to him were the Asia Minor dialects Cappadocian and Pontic, to which he devoted a string of articles from 1987 onwards. His interest was fuelled by his travels, often on foot, across the whole Greek-speaking world.

Peter's fascination with the Greek language, combined with his exacting historical and ideological analyses, led to his *magnum opus*, the definitive study of the Γλωσσικό Ζήτημα: *Language and National Identity in Greece, 1766–1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009). The issues are complex, the bibliography extensive. Even if older works are outdated or misguided, they are valuable evidence of attitudes of the time they were written. Peter's book is not just a historical account of the stages of the controversy but a penetrating analysis of the arguments and prejudices of the

2 David Holton, Peter Mackridge and Irene Philippaki-Warburton. *Greek: a comprehensive grammar of the modern language* (London: Routledge 1997) (repr. with corrections 1999 and 2004); 2nd edition, revised by Vassilios Spyropoulos (London: Routledge 2012). The same authors produced *Greek: an essential grammar of the modern language* (London: Routledge 2004). Both grammars were translated into Greek.

3 *Greek Letters* 3 (1984/5), 99–147.

4 'Γλωσσάρι', in Natalia Deliyannaki (ed.), *Έρωτος αποτελέσματα (1792): τα στιχογραήματα* (Athens: MIET 2018), 285–300. It is worth quoting the editor's appreciation: 'Πάνω απ' όλους όμως ευχαριστώ τον Πήτερ Μάκριτς, που δέχτηκε με χαρά να αναλάβει τη σύνταξη του Γλωσσαρίου· η συμβολή του υπήρξε καθοριστική για την πορεία αυτής της έκδοσης και η κεφάτη και δημιουργική συντροφιά του στο ταξίδι αυτό η ιδανική.'

participants. As one reviewer wrote: '[T]he strength of the book lies in Mackridge's impressive knowledge of the range of the language controversy debates and his ability to distil them as well as place them in their appropriate historical context.'⁵ The ground was thus cleared for a much more nuanced understanding of some of the literary artists who were of most interest to Peter through his career: Solomos, Cavafy, Vizyinos, Papadiamantis. And though his own stance is clear – and notably cool towards modern Greece's intellectual founding father Koraïs – he faithfully reports and judiciously assesses a mass of different authorities and positions. As in all his work, Peter was open to different versions of what it is to be Greek. For him, regional variety, whether exhibited in dialect (including *Romeyka* and Cypriot Greek), or in local identities and affiliations (Thessalonian, Cretan, etc), was a source of great cultural riches and expressive resonance.

In February 2020 Peter was diagnosed with cancer, which ultimately proved to be untreatable. He pressed on with his research, driven by a new urgency. He continued working intensively on Phanariot literary texts and their language and, despite his deteriorating health, gave a sparkling keynote lecture (online) on the subject to a conference in Thessaloniki in November 2021. He also began writing a short memoir of his early formation as a Neohellenist, but was unable to finish it. It is to be hoped that extracts will be made available in some form.

Formal recognition of Peter's contributions to Greek scholarship came from various quarters. He was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Athens; the University of the Peloponnese conferred an honorary professorship on him and organized a conference in his honour; and he had been due to receive another honorary degree, from the Democritus University of Thrace. Fittingly, in March 2022 he was made an honorary Greek citizen, in a moving ceremony at the Ambassador's residence in London. During a final visit to Athens he continued collecting data on Pontic dialect for his ongoing researches, but also acquired his Greek ταυτότητα (identity card), of which he was justly proud. Greek language and identity: he now had them both.

Peter died peacefully on 16 June 2022. Among the many expressions of grief were affectionate tributes from his former students, who had benefited from his painstaking supervision, encouragement, and lasting friendship. He was truly an exceptional scholar. The range and depth of his publications are unparalleled; they will continue to guide, instruct, and inspire researchers for generations to come.

5 Alexander Kitroeff, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 29.1 (2011) 145.