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David Raeburn directing Caroline Mackenzie and other students at Bryanston in 1989.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID RAEBURN

*Caroline Mackenzie talks to the great translator and director of Greek plays – and founder of the Greek Summer School – about the importance of speaking Greek, ‘the view from the mountain’ and his contribution to the recent exhibition on Troy at the British Museum*

**David, you have celebrated your 93rd birthday this year – congratulations! With a lifetime dedicated to teaching, translating and bringing ancient Greek drama to the stage in so many locations and for innumerable students, it is hard to know where to begin this interview ...**

**May we commence with your own schooldays? Please could you tell us something about your experiences as a pupil? Do you recall your first encounter with the ancient world?**

As a privately educated boarding-school boy, I started Latin at eight and Greek at ten. To start with it was

mostly about declensions and conjugations, and I loved the way in which Latin worked and the processes of coding into it as well as coding out. Greek mythology will have followed when my first Latin prize was a copy of Charles Kingsley's *The Heroes*, which of course caught my imagination. When I started Greek, I lapped up the grammar fairly easily. One day when I was off sick, my Greek master, who knew I was keen on acting, came up to see me with the volume of the Loeb Euripides that contained the *Alcestis*, and I was thrilled to discover that the Greeks wrote plays that they performed in theatres. As I went through my teens and was able to

read texts, my engagement with the ancient world developed when I realized that they were there not just to be construed but appreciated as examples of a civilization that I wanted to explore further.

**Did your parents or any other family members encourage your interest in classics or were you the first in your family to pursue this?**

My father was a barrister who had been reared on the classics at school, and he certainly encouraged my interest. In the 1930s, Latin and Greek were still the staple fare in the school curriculum of children from my sort of background.



*David Raeburn following a wonderful performance at New College, Oxford.*

**You studied Greats at Christ Church, Oxford. Was this the obvious choice of subject for you and did you have a career plan?**

As Latin and Greek were my best subjects, I was steered towards Oxford Greats on the assumption that the intellectual training would qualify me for many careers after I had graduated and done my National Service. I had long thought of becoming a schoolmaster, though I did toy with the idea of going into the theatre after I had done three productions as an undergraduate.

**From 1970 to 1991 you were Headmaster of Whitgift School, Croydon, having previously been Headmaster at Beckenham and Penge Grammar School. How did you manage to combine such a demanding role with your work as a classicist?**

As a headmaster I was determined to do some teaching and also to direct plays as ways of working

directly with some of the pupils. I managed this with the help of my secretaries who organized my diary and my colleagues generally respected my wish to share in the work they did.

**You and I first met at the JACT (Joint Association of Classical Teachers) Greek Summer School at Bryanston in 1989. I know of many classicists who credit the Summer School with inspiring them to read classics at university, and it was certainly the foundation for my lifelong love of ancient Greece. Please could you describe when and why you decided to establish the Summer School?**

I joined the JACT Greek Committee as its Vice-Chairman in, I think, 1966 – the time when grammar schools were being merged into a comprehensive system. A summer school was one of its key objectives, with the primary aim of offering an opportunity to learn Greek to those who

would no longer have it as an option, though we were also keen to support Greek in schools where it was still available. I was asked to set this up in 1968 – when we ran a pilot course at Bedford College, London – with 40–50 students and a top-notch staff. I devised the daily routine of three classes followed by an evening lecture each day, which has continued ever since. At the end of this, my colleagues and I felt we had started up something so exciting that it should be continued on a fully residential basis to allow total immersion in Greek and things Greek. So from 1969 to 1985 we held the summer school at Dean Close School, Cheltenham, with ever-growing numbers, until in 1986 it moved to Bryanston under more complex management. The students were almost entirely in the 16–19 age-group and the Summer School attracted both beginners and others at intermediate and advanced level. In recent years it has enrolled over 300.



**What is the secret of the Summer School's success?**

There have been several factors. From the earliest days the School developed an atmosphere of almost heady enthusiasm. The students were asked to work extremely hard but they were thrilled to be working alongside so many others. Greek wasn't something odd to be doing but the most natural activity in the world. They were astonished by the progress they made over the fortnight and further stimulated by the friendships they made which often continued at university.

The other main factor has been the quality and composition of the teaching team – men and women drawn from both schools and universities, some very high-powered and experienced and others young and promising. The students learned their Greek from some of the most talented teachers in the profession who themselves loved coming and looked on the School as a high-spot in their calendar.

The evening lectures were a further cultural stimulus. There were some excellent, admirably pitched contributions from members of staff, and I remember with pride that I persuaded E.R. Dodds, Kenneth Dover and Pat Easterling, among others, to share their insights with the students, who were always a marvellous audience.

Certainly, the cancellation of the 2020 school (the first in more than half a century) strikes one as a violation of the natural order!

**The highlight of the Summer School is the production (that you used to direct) of a Greek play, staged in the open-air theatre. Always in the original Greek, it is a fitting celebration of the Summer School and a remarkable achievement in such a short time frame. Why is this such an important part of the whole experience for the students?**

Dean Close had an attractive open-air theatre and it was suggested quite early on that I should direct a rehearsed reading of a tragedy in it

at the end of the course. I greatly enjoyed doing this and it became a tradition that is maintained in the excellent Greek Theatre at Bryanston. It was important to give some of the students the opportunity to deliver Greek aloud and for all to hear a work in spoken Greek and to appreciate the play as a work of drama. In time these occasions became more elaborate when costumes and props were specially made. The best ones were those when the actors were able to learn their words and to project the text more convincingly without holding scripts in their hands.

**I was honoured to be part of your chorus on two of these occasions, in productions of *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Medea*. Normally, I was reluctant to get on the stage, but you instilled in us all a belief that being part of a Greek play was an adventure and something to be embraced rather than shied away from. With hindsight, I recognize the skill with which you ensured everyone was involved in some way – whether it be making the costumes, helping with learning lines or taking centre stage in the starring role. Do you think that a performance in ancient Greek transports the actors and the audience to another place more easily than an English production can?**

Greek is a beautiful-sounding language in its own right, and it is lovely in performance to exploit the wide range of vowel sounds, the striking combinations of consonants and the emotive possibilities in the pitch accent. One senses the grand rhetoric of the long speeches and the adversarial character of *stichomythia*. The choruses can come over as very exciting if the rhythms inherent in the different lyric metres are well stressed in delivery. Productions in a good English translation of course make the play's argument and detailed meaning much easier to follow. Either way, transportation to another place probably depends more on the

clarity, confidence and concentration of the performers.

**You have of course directed many other Greek tragedies, both in the original and in translation, for example, the Bradfield Greek Play and the Cambridge Greek Play, including the centenary production of *Trachiniae* in 1983, and in locations as far afield as Delphi and Sydney. More recently you have staged *Antigone*, *Hippolytus*, *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Bacchae* (to name but a few) in the gardens and cloisters of New College, Oxford. With around 40 productions in total encompassing 20 (I believe) of the extant Greek tragedies, which ones stand out for you and why?**

Difficult question! Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were all, in their different ways, world-class. If I had to choose one of each, I think it would have to be *Agamemnon*, *Antigone* and *Bacchae*, all for their dramatic power, wonderful poetry, ideas that are universal and a brilliant deployment of the medium of *tragōidia* as it evolved.

**How did you decide each year which one to stage and what were the different challenges?**

Choice of play sometimes depended on personal whim; at other times it could be a matter of a particular part suiting a talented actor. At the Summer School it tended to be the play I was reading with my teaching group. Each play has its own specific challenges and the fusion of actor and role is always fascinatingly different.

**Do you think Greek tragedy resonates more than Greek comedy with modern audiences, and, if so, why?**

Aristophanes can be huge fun as the distinctive kinds of humour that he employs are universal. His text, though, is very rooted in its own time and needs to be wittily adapted to resonate with modern audiences. Greek tragedies tend to be more timeless and, with all their powerful emotions, probably more performable.

**Which performance of a Greek play have you most enjoyed as a member of the audience?**

I have to say that I am usually rather disappointed by modern performances of Greek tragedies. The directors are more interested in contriving an original and exciting piece of theatre that reflects some contemporary preoccupation than to interpret and illuminate an ancient text for what it is. I think I have to go back 75 years to a stunning production of *Oedipus Rex*, directed by the very intelligent and discriminating Michel Saint-Denis, with a wonderful cast that included Laurence Olivier in the main part. Saint-Denis believed that to find the *truth* in a play you had to get the *style* in which the piece was composed right. Although he was working in a normal London playhouse, he understood how the Greek tragedy medium worked, and this included his management of the chorus, which most directors find a problem, or else an opportunity for often irrelevant physical movement.

**As well as translating numerous works for performance, you have translated (for Penguin Classics) Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2004) and plays of Sophocles (2008). Please could you tell us about your work as a translator? What was the first translation that you undertook?**

My first translation was a compressed version of *Antigone* which was designed to precede a performance of the play in Greek, like acting a libretto before an opera. This told the audience what the play was about and was directed in a lower key to throw the Greek presentation into high relief. This experiment worked rather well and I repeated it with *Iphigenia in Aulis* when I was invited to work with a group of schools that taught Greek in Sydney.

I came to the *Metamorphoses* rather by accident and wasn't familiar with much of this long work before I started. I think the key to it lay in my choice of metre, using a line of six pulses with plenty of light

*'When people asked me how the work was getting on, I would reply, "Well, Ovid and I are still friends."'*

syllables to keep the pace and movement of Ovid's dactylic verse without being strictly tied to the scheme of the Latin hexameter. This enabled me to find a voice that would capture the spirit of Ovid's storytelling, both in the racier tales and in the grander ones that are more in the heroic mode.

I wrote three of the four plays in my Sophocles volume for actual productions, and they worked quite well onstage. The reason I composed them was to reproduce the rhythmical patterns of the choruses as closely as I could – a difficult task which few translators have attempted in English. Sometimes the original rhythm can only be clearly indicated by the insertion of accents, which isn't really very satisfactory in print, but the metre provided me with the discipline of a clear form in which to compose.

**What do you think makes a good translation today? Should one try to replicate the metre, for instance, in English?**

Readability and speakability are useful but rather vague answers. A lot depends on the audience for which the translation is intended. The Loeb editions are there to help students who are trying to read a text in the original, and the approach has to be more literal. For others a more stylish English version will be needed. The Victorians resorted to archaism but that won't do today. The translator has to find a modern idiom in which to communicate the meaning and spirit of the original. The meaning needs above all to be clear, unless there is an ambiguity to be preserved. Spirit is harder to

define. In my Ovid I tried to establish a sympathetic insight into the poet's mind and to find the tone of voice that would compel the reader's attention. When people asked me how the work was getting on, I would reply, 'Well, Ovid and I are still friends.'

Metre is certainly important in poetry as it provides a heartbeat and lends the discipline of form to the translation. Translators must decide for themselves if replication of the original will work in English, and may well find this is too stilted for them.

Incidentally, I wouldn't categorize works like Ted Hughes' *Tales from Ovid* as translations. They are to be responded to as poems in their own right, with their own movement and quite often their own imagery. They are far more likely to be enduring than straight translations, which rarely survive longer than 50 years or so.

**You are also co-author (with Oliver Thomas) of *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus: A Commentary for Students* (2011) and author of *Greek Tragedies as Plays for Performance* (2016). Both of these were published when you were an octogenarian. That is quite an achievement! Has your passion for classics kept you young at heart?**

I have greatly enjoyed keeping my mind active in engaging with these wonderful plays. My 2016 volume was a project I had always wanted to undertake since I was a young man. I think, though, that it has been the chance to go on working with gifted and intelligent students that has kept me young in heart.

**You have only recently retired from teaching undergraduates and postgraduates at Oxford University where you previously held the Grocyn Lectureship in the Faculty of Literae Humaniores. You also led the students in reading-group trips to Greece. What were the most important lessons you wished to teach your students?**

There were two main aspects to this. First, I wanted to help and encourage young people along the arduous path of learning Latin and Greek *properly*, that is, well enough to read original texts with understanding and to appreciate their nuances. To understand, for example, the concepts of verbal aspect or the different uses of the optative in Greek can be fun and also, I firmly believe, form part of a mental discipline that is valuable in its own right and transferable to other domains.

The other aspect is to communicate my love and enthusiasm for the view at the top, when the mountain has been climbed and our priceless literary legacy from the ancient world can be appreciated better than it can be through translations. This includes appreciation of form as well as meaning. For me, the fusion of the two is the essence of 'the classical'.

**The Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD) at Oxford University houses the David Raeburn Collection – please tell us about this.**

The APGRD contains various records of my past productions, including photographs and prompt scripts. These may prove useful to historians of a kind of modern non-professional performance which aims simply to interpret and illuminate the ancient text in a lively way rather than to use it to create a new and original piece of 'theatre' that is heavily slanted towards contemporary preoccupations.

**I recall fondly from my own schooldays your *Speaking Greek* audio recording that accompanied the *Reading Greek* JACT course. Why is it important that pupils learn Greek as a spoken language and not just the written word?**

Sounding words aloud is surely essential to the acquisition of any foreign language, even if one isn't going to converse in it in an



*Dionysus, god of theatre, and his maenads and satyrs on a black-figure column krater by the Munich Painter, ca. 550 BC.*

everyday way. That apart, I have already indicated how expressive Greek is as a language and how important metre is in poetry and drama. You can't fully appreciate the *Agamemnon* without understanding syncopated iambics or the *Bacchae* without some feeling for ionics and dochmiacs. The sound and the sense, the music and the meaning, belong together.

**At the British Museum's highly acclaimed *Troy* exhibition earlier this year, visitors were treated to a recording of the *Iliad* in the original Greek performed by you and Professor Philomen Probert. Which part did you choose to read and why? How do you think this enhanced the experience for visitors, even if they did not understand the Greek words?**

I was just asked to deliver the opening lines of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in front of a microphone. When I visited the exhibition myself, they came across to my impaired

hearing as rather a babble! I'm told that other visitors heard something a little clearer, but whether the recordings really enhanced their experience I couldn't say. Presumably the organizers thought they would 'lend authenticity' or contribute a bit of atmosphere.

**If you had to save just one Greek text from a fire, which would it be and why?**

Another impossible one! If I were saving the text for myself, I suppose it would have to be the *Oresteia*. But what for the world? The *Iliad*? Thucydides? Plato's *Republic*?

**Finally, what is your next project?!**

My next project was to have been a production of Euripides' *Helen* in June. At the time of answering it might conceivably happen in October. Otherwise, I might do some more work on a translation of the *Medea* for possible performance in 2021. I won't give up till I have to!