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Remembering Anna Morpurgo Davies

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## Remembering Anna Morpurgo Davies

Anna died ten years ago.<sup>1</sup> The news was not a surprise when it came, in an email from Philomen Probert, but it seemed unreal, more thud than laceration. I was numb, so I waited. Wasn't I supposed to feel sorrow? I desperately wanted to. I have had this sense before: *If I don't feel grief, something is wrong with me.*

I first encountered Anna in 1987 at an Indo-European linguistics conference at Yale. I was a 25-year-old Harvard graduate student. At 49, she was an authority on Ancient Greek (especially Mycenaean and Linear B), Anatolian (especially Hieroglyphic Luwian), and nineteenth-century linguistics.<sup>2</sup> I felt like an outsider, not knowledgeable enough in a field that prizes grammatical prowess, intimidated and even frightened by teachers at the apex of that field. A pop quiz in one seminar featured translation from Herodotus; in another, we were chided when nobody knew the genitive of *Sapphō*. At the Yale conference, the host surprised us on the last morning by announcing that each student present would be called on to summarize one of the previous days' papers. Nervous shuffling accompanied a long pause before this was revealed to be a joke.

At Harvard in 1990, Anna gave a series of lectures on Ancient Greek dialects. I attended them all but dared to speak with her only at the reception in the Faculty Club. There, an eminent linguist called her "the smartest woman in England" (or maybe it was Europe). Another corrected him: "the smartest *person*," she said. A classics professor blithely told Anna about a predecessor who was once scandalized to see a woman entering the Faculty Club by its front door; the woman turned out to be Eleanor Roosevelt. I wonder how Anna processed such slights, reminder after indirect reminder that women did not belong in the academy. There must have been many small (and less small) insults over the years at Oxford, where she spent her career beginning in 1964 and, in 1971, became one of only two women with the title Professor. Others may know her story of a college dinner when she was a new Professor and the only woman present. At some point a college functionary escorted her from the table but was too dignified to explain that he was showing her to the women's toilet, so the two of them stood in the hallway in baffled silence. This and other vignettes of English academic life Anna sketched with endless fascination. I think she loved England without ever fully understanding it. She was the perfect insider-outsider, an ethnographer from mid-century Italy, a stranger in a strange land that had become her home.

I saw Anna again in 1991 when she hosted an Indo-European linguistics conference at Oxford. It was a surreal weekend. George Dunkel and Jared Klein, international authorities on Indo-European particles, played frisbee on the lawn; indoors, when the 86-year-old Indologist Paul Thieme made an appearance at one session, a roomful of linguists burst into spontaneous applause. My own teacher Joki Schindler, who had left Harvard in 1987 to return to Vienna, told me solemnly after my talk that Indo-European syntax was in good hands. This felt like a benediction. I did not know that I would soon move on to general historical linguistics and then to California language documentation and revitalization.

It was not until Anna first came to Berkeley that I got to know her well. Our classics department had invited her as its visiting Sather Professor for the 2000 spring semester. In Berkeley, she taught a graduate seminar on Greek dialects and, on six Wednesday evenings, gave public lectures on the language of Greek names.<sup>3</sup> Afterwards, Leslie Kurke (my wife, a classicist) and I would drive Anna home, sometimes stopping at Chez Panisse for dessert. In her apartment, where she had, inevitably, cultivated the friendship of a local cat, she would make tea and we would talk about her lectures, our classes, and the people in our overlapping worlds of classics and linguistics.

Then and for fourteen years, gossip with Anna was unusually pleasurable. She was so interested in people: our passions and idiosyncrasies; what moves us; how we get along; how we teach and learn; what pleases and troubles us. With her, Leslie and I talked about Berkeley students and colleagues; Anna told us about Oxford colleagues present and past. Through her, I saw how a scholarly community is more than individuals pursuing separate goals, how it thrives if boundaries are complemented by norms of care, respect, and obligation. She had helped create such a linguistics community at Oxford and knew what it meant, and what it took to sustain: tea, of course, but also showing up. This sense was behind the “philological lunches” Anna instituted in 1972. (She brought me to one in 2003; I remember her care in assembling food that morning, as she must have done for decades, and an atmosphere of fond respect among generations of scholars.<sup>4</sup>) And she did not hesitate to reproach me if I fell short — for example, when I skipped a lecture she thought I had a duty to attend.

During the years after her first Berkeley visit, I saw Anna every year or two. She came to Berkeley for a 2002 workshop on Ancient Greek linguistics that assembled very different kinds of scholars: epigrapher-linguists, textually-grounded linguists, and theoretical linguists with Greek expertise. The night before it started, Leslie and I took Anna and Ruedi Wachter to a restaurant whose menu that week, unbeknownst to us, was all pork: a striking meal. The workshop itself was more eclectic, and could easily have flamed out. But it worked, thanks to Anna’s mediating role. A talk by Leslie Threatte had to do with spelling mistakes in inscriptions written on schist fragments found in the area of the Academy in Athens. Many of us could not make head or tail of it until Anna, chairing the session, thanked him and explained how the details mattered. Without condescension or displeasure, she restated by way of summary why the talk had been interesting.<sup>5</sup> I try to keep her example of generous intellectual leadership in mind.

In Oxford a few months later, I gave a talk about Yurok, an Indigenous language of northern California. I began with a 1901 document connecting Berkeley and Oxford linguistics (Figure 1, left): a letter from Joseph Wright, one of Anna’s Oxford predecessors as professor of comparative philology, to Benjamin Ide Wheeler, president of the University of California and chair of its first linguistics department in 1901. The two had been Heidelberg students together in the 1880s and shared a dissertation advisor, the neogrammarian Hermann Osthoff. I included this letter mainly as a gift to Anna, who was always interested in intellectual histories and relationships. I remember her smile and murmur of appreciation as I explained my exhibit.<sup>6</sup>

My teacher Cal Watkins happened to be in Oxford and came to this talk, which included a brief analysis of culturally resonant Yurok language in the style of his own beloved mentor Émile Benveniste. My memory is that Cal was beaming. It felt like pride, a simple response that every student deserves but that I had not earlier let myself perceive. This change in my capacity I attribute to Anna. She made a space where I felt safe enough to see that a formidable teacher accepted who I was, where I could let some of my own sense of inadequacy

The English Dialect Dictionary

Editor: PROF. J. WRIGHT, M.A., Langdale House, Park Town, Oxford.  
 Publishers: LONDON AND COUNTY BANK, OXFORD.

Mar. 23. 1901.

My dear Wheeler, I have sent  
 in your letter to a man who  
 will suit very well,  
 provided he would come  
 up to America. He is  
 a Spaniard who has a  
 good knowledge of the  
 subject, in all points,  
 and is at the same  
 time a first-rate lecturer!  
 With kind regards  
 Yours &c  
 Wright  
 A. H. R. R. R.



FIGURE 1: Joseph Wright to Benjamin Ide Wheeler, March 23, 1901; Anna at the Linguistic Institute, Berkeley, July 2009.



FIGURE 2: Leslie and Anna at the Praeneste, Rousham House, Oxfordshire, 2002.

go. Maybe an imposter complex is never eradicated, but it can recede.

Visits with Anna often featured excursions. On one trip, we saw the Blenheim Palace gardens; on another, the gardens at Rousham House (Figure 2). An outing's centerpiece might be a pub lunch or a visit with friends. (The destination was always pleasant, the driving sometimes alarming.) When Anna brought us to lunch at David Hawkins's and Geoff Ryman's house, we left with a gift of potatoes fresh from their garden. In California, Anna disapproved of the American inclination to keep park land undeveloped; she wanted a pleasant cafe at the summit of a hike. Somehow perfect, therefore, was a 2007 road trip that Anna, Leslie, and I took to Yurok land (northern California) and Crater Lake (Oregon). In Sue-meg State Park in California, we ran into park ranger Skip Lowry and Anna was delighted to hear the two of us speaking Yurok. In Oregon, we stayed at the Crater Lake Lodge, overlooking impossibly blue water two thousand feet deep in a volcanic caldera. It was May, so the roads and landscape were still buried in yards of snow. Anna loved the lodge, with its massive fireplace, chairs outside facing the lake, and visitors from all over. She said it reminded her of the Alps; it seemed she would be comfortable in a long stay there, reading *déclassé* fiction and making new acquaintances. So Leslie and I came to imagine Anna as a latter-day Miss Marple, a shrewd observer of people, with younger relatives and friends all over and "an uncanny knack of being always right" (Christie 1930:87). We watch Miss Marple on television to remind ourselves of Anna.

In retirement, Anna taught at Berkeley three times after her stint as Sather Professor: in the 2006 spring semester, again in spring 2007, and in July 2009 at the Linguistic Society of America's Linguistic Institute. At the Institute, Anna taught a course on Anatolian and Indo-European (Figure 1, right); in the regular semesters, she taught Greek linguistics and the history of linguistics. She also attended a graduate historical linguistics course I taught in 2006. For me this was generative, leading to many conversations with Anna about language and linguistics. My students for their part got to know a colleague who questioned me when I made no sense and gently punctured my intermittent pomposities. She helped them see scholarship as the work of curious and fallible human beings.

Anna's Berkeley office on the top floor of Dwinelle Hall had a partial view of Sather Tower. This especially pleased her because the tower reminded her of its model, the Campanile di San Marco in Venice. (Her grandfather, the mathematician and postwar life senator Guido Castelnuovo, was Venetian.) During her long stays in Berkeley, we often had dinner at her apartment or our house. Anna taught me how to cook fennel — slowly, letting it caramelize far longer than I would have guessed, adding water as needed. We went to a few movies (Anna loved Mike Leigh's *Topsy Turvy*) and on day trips. Once, Anna said she wanted to go to a bar; she had never been to an American-style bar, at least one of her imagining. So in March 2006 we headed to Mel-O-Dee Cocktails, one of the East Bay's "top ten dive bars." There was no karaoke that night, but it has suitably dark wood and ornate wallpaper, and we surely had suitable drinks.

As English as Anna sometimes seemed, as in her devotion to her garden, she was also always Italian. For Easter dinner she brought a colomba pasquale, which I had not heard of but she thought was essential, and a box of chocolates. (At night, a raccoon came in our window, tore open the box, and took a chocolate.) In 2006, she lived near Trader Joe's, a grocery store she was fond of (she called it "Trader's Joe"). About city life, she said the "Anglo-Saxon" impulse to live in the countryside puzzled her; to her it seemed natural to live in the centro. Yet Italian cultural nuances could escape her. Anna once mentioned an occasion in Italy when she



FIGURE 3: Tawi, Oxford, April 2007.

and her mother had seen some older women in black. “How will I know when I should start wearing black?” she had asked. “When it’s time, you’ll know,” her mother had answered. I cannot say just why Anna held on to this memory. It has stuck with me because it evokes a sense of partial disconnection from one’s own world that I have sometimes felt.

Anna and I shared several traits. Like many linguists, each of us once intended to be a mathematician but eventually thought better of it. Her inspiration was her grandfather; mine was the English mathematician G. H. Hardy (1940), to whom, with Edmund Crispin (author of the Gervase Fen mysteries) and Tolkien, are due my childhood fantasies of eccentric academia. Anna had true prosopagnosia; I may not be face-blind, but it is hard for me to remember or describe what people look like. And we shared a love of cats.

Anna’s relationships with cats merit their own essay. She befriended a Berkeley cat in 2000; in 2006, renting from a colleague on sabbatical, she looked after the exceptionally reclusive Peanut. It was a triumph for Anna when Peanut was finally willing to come out and spend time with her. On our cats she lavished attention, like a grandmother or favorite aunt, commiserating when Rex died (“Rex tremendae majestatis,” she wrote) and casting dignity to the winds when she later met Sam and Sophie. She made the most surprising noises in talking to them; they in turn were fascinated by a human behaving toward them as no other ever had. In Oxford, when Anna added an annex to her house in preparation for retirement, she was delighted that English builders just assumed she would want a cat door. They were right, as her beloved Tawi (Figure 3) might have explained.<sup>7</sup>

Our first road trip, in 2006, took us to Berkeley from Albuquerque, New Mexico, where Leslie and I had been with my family and then Anna flew to join us. En route, we first visited two Indigenous cities, Acoma and Zuni; the Ancestral Puebloan Chaco Canyon; and two monuments of capitalism, Hoover Dam and Las Vegas. Then we went to Death Valley, where we saw a coyote and a roadrunner in quick succession, like cartoon refugees, and where we almost killed Anna. If you hike uphill in Death Valley in May with a 69-year-

old friend, you should start before 10 in the morning. We did not. That day's high temperature was only 94 Fahrenheit, but the sky was cloudless as noon approached, the sun relentless. Anna walked methodically, as always, insisting she was fine: the Dolomites of her childhood had prepared her. A young Italian couple passed, dangerously exposed to the sun, carrying no water, and almost running up the rock trail; we soon gave up. Over lunch, Anna looked faint and said she felt odd; she seemed on the verge of collapse. We wondered what to do, but it passed. The next day, we drove to the White Mountains and visited the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest, whose trees are older than any writing in any Indo-European language.

My friendship with Anna was not emotionally intimate in the sense of expressing personal feelings openly, as I might to a close friend my own age. I think this suited her. Yet she came to sign her emails "Love, Anna," which unsettled me. Wasn't "love" for family and intimate friends? In this relationship, the contours of personal formation emerged slowly. Not until we had been friends for several years did Anna talk about her childhood under Mussolini's fascism. It came up by chance when Leslie bought a Bianchi bicycle. This prompted Anna to tell us about her father's death in 1939, as he was trying to go abroad after Jews in Italy lost their jobs; and how she, her mother, and her brothers later hid from the Nazis for almost a year under the name Bianchi, with documents forged by the Resistance, until the liberation of Rome in June 1944.

I have had no other colleague at once so present and so committed to doing what was needed. Leslie and I spent many evenings with Anna, as dinner or house guests, or with her at our house. She was always engaged in the moment, whether discussing the aloofness of cats, the foibles of colleagues, garden challenges, or the Greek language. She was twenty-four years my senior, but I was the one who flagged and had to go home, or to bed. She would have kept talking until midnight or later: she had all the time in the world for people she was with. Yet when she was alone, however late it was, she sat at her desk and finished her work for the next day, reading a thesis or manuscript or preparing a class. Her administrative labor for Somerville College and Oxford and as an Oxford University Press Delegate was time-consuming to a degree that U.S. academics rarely experience. In retirement, she was just as committed to the monumental *Companion to Linear B*, whose third volume was published in the year of her death.<sup>8</sup>

Anna's intellectual standards were uncompromising; she did not accept hand-waving or sloppiness in colleagues or students. More than once, she told me about a student's thesis she had rewritten to make the argument clearer. But she also knew how to encourage students, how to make them comfortable. I remember a conference we attended. Meals were in a university dining hall, which was nearly empty when Anna and I arrived one morning. I would have left people alone at breakfast, but she made a point of sitting next to a student and asking about his interests and work. She showed him that he belonged to a professional community: she knew that the world of scholarship is a world of relationships as much as ideas. Her 2008 obituary of her dear friend Henry Hoenigswald illustrates this as well as anything I have read, delineating with erudition and unstated love a life of the mind and the personal and professional networks that shaped it.

I never fully understood Anna's respect for my scholarly work, or *accepted* may be a better word. I expect people from the old world of Greek and Indo-European linguistics to see through me. At the University of Rome, Anna was a classics student for whom, she said, Greek came alive in the poetry of Sappho and Alcaeus; and the decipherment of Linear B transformed her career. But she was also excited by reading structuralist linguists with a new way of looking at language. From this perspective, as she put it, "even the most factual



FIGURE 4: Philological Society, Cambridge, March 20, 2010. Anna is in the center of the second row.

statements presupposed a series of theoretical assumptions.” I came to realize that we shared this view, which defined a kind of linguistics we both valued, in which textually grounded research is symbiotic with theoretical and typological inquiry: “philology . . . can combine with linguistic awareness to reach results that would otherwise be unimaginable.”<sup>9</sup> In this light a comment Anna made about me is revealing. At Oxford in 2003, I gave a pair of talks on verbal morphology, aspect, and modality in Greek and in Yurok. The first was introduced by a colleague who said, intending praise and impressed by the factual rabbits we Indo-Europeanists can pull out of our capacious pedagogical hats, “he knows everything.” The next day, introducing the second talk, Anna said instead, with pointed contrast, “he *understands* everything.” This was and is very far from the truth, but I was struck by what it showed about what she valued and wanted students to value.

Anna was partly responsible for my being invited to speak to the Philological Society in 2010. At a very pleasant meeting in Cambridge (Figure 4), I described a view of Indo-European dialectology that was partly inspired by passing remarks she herself had made about early Greek.<sup>10</sup> I was not convincing; Anna herself asked the most penetrating questions after my talk, and remained skeptical. Still, for years, she urged me to write a book collecting some of my published and unpublished papers, so that (she said) she could point students to a kind of work she hoped they would do. I am lucky that someone like Anna took me seriously and believed in my capacity when I did not always do so myself. From a mentor or an elder, a colleague or a friend, I would wish the same for everyone.

En route to Sicily in 2011, Leslie and I spent two memorable nights at Anna’s Rome apartment near the Via Nomentana. She had lived there as a child, from 1939 on, and had studied Greek in the front hall; her



mother had died there in 2000. On our first night we ate at her local restaurant. “I need to go there,” she wrote; “otherwise Emilio forgets me.” On our second night she took us to Al Pompiere in the Ghetto, where I ate the best artichokes I have ever had (deep-fried, *alla giudia*).<sup>11</sup> Part of that day was spent walking around Rome; part was devoted to my attempt, with Anna’s telephone help, to get the international driver’s license I had not realized I should have if I wanted to rent a car. In the end, nobody in Sicily asked to see it.

I last saw Anna in August 2013. After a historical linguistics conference in Oslo and a vacation in Norway and Copenhagen, Leslie and I stayed with her in Oxford for two nights; a highlight was dinner with Frans Plank, Henning Reetz, and Anna’s colleague Aditi Lahiri. In the months that followed, we skyped and wrote from time to time. Anna was concerned with her own health and with that of her aunt, the mathematician and mathematics educator Emma Castelnuovo, whose care Anna helped manage and who died at the age of 100 in April 2014, five months before Anna herself. In May, our final exchange with Anna was a report on her friends’ recent Berkeley stay. Her last words to us were, “What did you make of Aditi and Henning?” Leslie told her it was “a triumphant visit.”

Five and a half years after Anna died, in March 2020, COVID changed the world. Businesses and universities closed. Communities shrank to bubbles; people died alone; life was uncertain and sometimes terrifying. I processed this by making a small book: a satire of classical scholarship, adaptations of the Greek poems of Sappho and Alcaeus as if they had been written by our cats, who are themselves named Sappho and Alcaeus.<sup>12</sup> A further conceit is that they were isolated during a plague, and, of course, had the concerns of cats. The book is illustrated with photos of our cats in poses meant to echo the poems on each facing page. And because it integrated two of Anna’s loves, cats and the poetry of Sappho and Alcaeus, I dedicated it to her: “In memoria della mia carissima amica, Anna Morpurgo Davies, amante dei gatti e di poesia lirica di Lesbo.”

I shared my book with an Italian colleague who said its dedication reminded her how powerful a language can be. She had not expected to be moved just by reading Italian. This was surely a symptom of COVID and the isolation it brought. I was pondering this one night, unable to sleep, when my thoughts drifted to Anna. I imagined showing her my book. I saw her reading in her meticulous way, page by page, studying each photo of our cats with affection, and I heard again her murmur of approval. She might speak appreciatively about some of the images. Then, unexpectedly, as I lay in bed, I was crying, because I missed Anna and would not get to show her what I had made. I could not stop crying; I did not want to stop. In that moment, in the dark, even in the loneliness of COVID, even in tears, I knew at last that nothing is wrong with me. I had found the grace of grief, and learned that sorrow can also be love.

Today, once again, the world is changed. We lurch toward new fascisms as others slaughter children under banners of nationalism. Many of us do not know what to do. Anna ended her memories of the Holocaust with reflections on action and inaction. “Absence of heroism is not a sin,” she wrote. “But there is something which we should strive for in our everyday life even if it is difficult: the moral courage which leads to protest when this is necessary, the mental strength which reacts against the laziness of the *laissez faire*, the determination to be alert and not to choose the line of least resistance.” May her memory be a blessing.

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## Notes

1. Anna died on September 27, 2014, and would have been 87 on June 21, 2024. For encouragement, information, and suggestions as I wrote and revised this essay, thanks to many friends and colleagues, including Claire Bower, Stephen Colvin, Larry Hyman, Paul Kiparsky, Athena Kirk, Aditi Lahiri, Joan Maas, Lutz Marten, Mairi McLaughlin, Piero Morpurgo, Julia Peck, Frans Plank, Philomen Probert, Donca Steriade, and especially Leslie Kurke.
2. Anna's Yale talk was published as Morpurgo Davies (1987). Even then I knew her work (e.g., Jeffery and Morpurgo Davies 1970, Hawkins, Morpurgo Davies, and Neumann 1974, Morpurgo Davies 1982-83), but it is hard to single out items in a rich dossier (Penney 2004, Morpurgo Davies 2014). Deserving of special mention here are Anna's academic memoir and her memories of the Holocaust (Morpurgo Davies 2002, 2005); for the latter, her nephew Piero Morpurgo (2015) adds valuable context.
3. Anna used material from the lectures in several publications (Morpurgo Davies 1999, 2000, 2006).
4. I want to believe that Anna's collegial values had deep roots. A century ago, her grandfather hosted Saturday gatherings at his house in Rome. "Grande era l'ascendente da Lui esercitato su tutti," wrote a colleague (Segre 1954:33), "con la Sua pacata saggezza ed il vigile interessamento verso ogni manifestazione dello spirito, con i giudizi sereni ed obiettivi, gli equilibrati consigli, il porger signorile, la sincera modestia. Queste doti . . . Lo facevano amare ed apprezzare da tutti." Some of the same qualities inspired devotion to Anna.
5. Six years later (by email, April 2, 2008), Anna reported coming across the publication from this talk (Threatte 2007): "It seems well done and this time he explained why they [the inscriptions] were interesting. I must write and thank him, I am starved of gossip." Ruedi's own talk at the workshop was published in Anna's Festschrift (Wachter 2004).
6. The letter's text: "My dear Wheeler, I have sent on your letter to a man who will suit you very well, provided he would care to go to America. He is a Spaniard who has a good knowledge of the subject from all points of view, and is at the same time a first-rate lecturer! With kind regards, Yours ever, Wright." Source: University of California, Office of the President, Records: Alphabetical Files, 1885-1913, CU-5, series 1, Box 6 (1899-1902), Folder 32 (Romance Languages).
7. On Anna's cat Tawi ('Queenie', from Hittite *tawananna* 'queen'), see Mora (2015); thanks to Joan Maas for the photo in Figure 3.
8. See Duhoux and Morpurgo Davies (2007-14); a planned fourth volume with Anna's chapter "The Mycenaean language" did not appear.
9. For the first quotation above, see Morpurgo Davies (2002:215); for the second, see Morpurgo Davies (2008:867). Anna herself exemplified the symbiotic approach in an article published a few years later in the *Transactions of the Philological Society* (Morpurgo Davies 2011).
10. "What emerges" from Mycenaean Greek, she wrote (Morpurgo Davies 1985:76), "is that some of the features shared by all [later Greek] dialects are due to post-Mycenaean and a fortiori to post-Common Greek innovations which occurred independently in the various dialects."
11. The reference to Emilio was by email (April 26, 2011); thanks to Piero Morpurgo for identifying Al Pompiere.
12. The title is *Poetarum lesbiorum carmina pestilentialia*, or in English *Lesbian plague poems* (Garrett 2020).

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