

Anna Morpurgo Davies, 1937-2014



Anna Morpurgo Davies, Diebold Professor Emeritus of Comparative Philology at the University of Oxford (FBA, honorary DBE) and one of the foremost and best-loved comparative philologists of the twentieth century, died on 27 September 2014.

(Left to right:) Henry Hoenigswald, Stanley Insler, Anna Morpurgo Davies, George Dunkel, Jay Jasanoff, and Stephanie Jamison at the first East Coast Indo-European Conference (Yale, 1982). Many thanks to Ives Goddard for the photograph.

She was born Anna Elbina Morpurgo on 21 June 1937 in Milan, to a secular Jewish family. Her father, a successful engineer, lost his job in 1939 in the wake of anti-Jewish legislation. After searching desperately for alternative employment he accepted a post in Brazil, but died before taking it up. Anna's mother, Maria Morpurgo (née Castelnuovo), moved to Rome with Anna and her three older brothers. On 16 October 1943 Maria had gone out early with the eldest child to buy food, and met a woman who had seen soldiers carry a woman and baby out of a house and throw them into a lorry. She ran home in terror and left immediately with the children. They survived thanks to several families who risked their lives, and a hospital that offered shelter to Jews by disguising them as patients. Anna seldom mentioned these years to colleagues and students, but they left a deep impression. In 2005 she gave an address for Holocaust Memorial Day in Oxford at Somerville College, combining searing personal memories with clear-headed and remarkably generous historical analysis. The full text of the address is available online (Morpurgo Davies 2005).

Anna's grandfather was the distinguished mathematician Guido Castelnuovo. Anna had envisaged that she would be a mathematician too, but a school teacher, Mario Bonardi, brought the classics to life in her penultimate year at the Liceo Classico Giulio Cesare. 'Greek was no longer epitomized by the irregular verbs which I had been relentlessly taught, but by the poems of Sappho and Alcaeus. It is only much later that the verbs became as important.' (Morpurgo Davies 2002: 214)

She went to the University of Rome to study 'lettere antiche'. A different person might later have constructed a narrative in which she was always destined for comparative philology, but Anna was not given to grand or teleological narratives. Her narratives were characterised by contingent events and hilarious anecdotes, not least about herself. With no intention of becoming a linguist Anna nevertheless went to some lectures on Sanskrit, out of curiosity and because she had heard that all languages descend from Sanskrit. After the first sentence of the lecture, to the effect that 'it is a common misconception that Sanskrit is the mother of all languages', Anna lost interest and walked out. A year later she had acquired other reasons to be interested in Sanskrit and she returned to the Sanskrit lessons, much chastened.

In the meantime she had been introduced to Mycenaean Greek by Carlo Gallavotti. Ventris' decipherment of the Linear B script was very new, and Anna saw the excitement of the new subject. She was soon part of the first generation of scholars doing serious work on Mycenaean, and her interest in historical and comparative linguistics began with its value for tackling Mycenaean problems.

While still at Rome as an undergraduate and then an assistente to Professor Gallavotti (1959-61), she came to find out about Structuralist linguistics. On a recent occasion when somebody at a linguistic gathering made a disparaging remark about Structuralism Anna exclaimed, 'Look, you don't remember life before Structuralism, but let me tell you what it was like because I do.' General laughter ensued because Anna was obviously too young to remember life before Structuralism. But she proceeded to explain. When Structuralist linguistics was hardly new elsewhere and was already giving way to Generative linguistics in the United States, linguistics in Italy was still largely untouched. Anna discovered Structuralism rather furtively together with a few other young scholars, who worked their way through Trubetzkoy's *Grundzüge der Phonologie* (the French translation, 1957) and Zellig Harris' *Methods in Structural Linguistics* (1951); they were not sure that the older generation would approve. Structuralism provided tools for thinking clearly about linguistic structure, and for grounding accounts of language change in clear accounts of successive linguistic stages.

In 1961-2 Anna spent a year at Harvard University's Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, DC. Later on her time here provided one of her many anecdotes. Everybody (as she put it) in Italy was a communist at the time, without quite knowing what this meant (and Italian communism was in any case a brand of its own), and this automatically entailed being anti-American, also without quite knowing what it meant. One thing Anti-Americanism did mean, though, was that Coca-Cola was a forbidden beverage. In any case Anna's family had little money and Coca-Cola would have been an inappropriate extravagance. But at the Center for Hellenic Studies Anna had a modest stipend and so was better off than she had ever been, and the Center possessed a soft drinks vending machine. She felt deliciously subversive being able to get a can of Coca-Cola, in America, with her own money—from a machine. Over time she came to positively like America, and hence also Coca-Cola.

At the Center for Hellenic Studies Anna met the ancient historian John Davies; she returned to Oxford with him and they married a year later. The marriage was dissolved in 1978, but in the meantime Anna had been appointed to a Lectureship in Classical Philology at St Hilda's College, Oxford (1964-71) followed by the Chair of Comparative Philology when Leonard Palmer retired in 1971.

On being appointed to the Chair at the age of 33, Anna was quoted in the *Oxford Times* (7 May 1971, p. 9) as saying, 'I seem to spend most of my time on teaching now, but my major work was on Linear B, the script found in Crete and deciphered in 1952 by an English architect. I compiled a dictionary [Morpurgo 1963] of the words found on the tablet<s> after they had been deciphered. The script turned out to be a form of Greek which was centuries earlier than previous finds.'

Anna continued to be an extraordinarily dedicated and well-loved teacher, at all levels from lectures for beginning undergraduates to doctoral supervision. She was incredibly generous with her time—whether this meant devising and painstakingly marking philology exercises to go with elementary lectures, or

allowing a 6 p.m. meeting with a graduate student to go on until 10 o'clock at night. This was all the more remarkable because Anna always had a vast number of commitments. She came to understand the workings of the university as few others did, and she took on administrative responsibilities not because she enjoyed them (though the success of the Somerville coffee committee was a semi-serious source of pride) but because she thought things had better be done right.

As a supervisor she was very frank. Indeed we sometimes felt there were no holds barred on what she might say, and occasionally she reduced a supervisee to tears. Yet students who had been at the receiving end of devastating comments sometimes gathered that at the same time Anna had given others a warm account of the work they were doing and why it was interesting. We came to realise that Anna's comments to us were sharply focussed on the draft chapter at hand, and often that needed to improve. But in front of others she took a different perspective, and her support for her students was warm and genuine.

She was a wonderful, warm presence at social occasions, and really a brilliant raconteur. With colleagues she was a constant source of good advice on all manner of subjects, with a very generous admixture of characteristic anecdotes. To illustrate the difficulty of getting British students to speak up in class, for instance, she recounted the occasions on which she had managed to do this. Once the ice was broken by means of a large blackboard falling on top of her. On another occasion she had the flu and said to the class, 'Look, I can't talk for an hour so you'd better do some talking'. Another time, a student who displayed his erudition with many questions—the young Leofranc Holford-Strevens—had irritated the others into making a pact that every time Leofranc asked a question, one of them would ask one too. Anna noted that this was extremely good for the students, because they had to do an incredible amount of work in order to keep having a question. Another time again, Anna had recently returned from a sabbatical in America and couldn't resist expressing her feelings (or 'exploding') to the class: 'Look, I had a really good time in America because the students speak, and now I have to come back here.' She also recalled being reconciled to life in Oxford again when she crossed paths with the theologian and old-fashioned English gentleman Henry Chadwick, who doffed his hat nonchalantly as he passed.

Although Anna spoke in 1971 as if she would have little more time for research, she went on to make further major contributions to the study of Mycenaean Greek as well as to the study of Greek dialect inscriptions and dialectology, Greek folk linguistics, Greek onomastics, the nineteenth-century history of Linguistics, and Hieroglyphic Luwian—the last of these through a long and fruitful collaboration with David Hawkins. (For a list of downloadable articles see: http://www.ling-phil.ox.ac.uk/AMD_pubs)

A constant feature of Anna's work was an interest in linguistic structure and in the interactions between linguistic structure and language change. How does a linguistic change alter the structure of the language as a whole? And was the change motivated by structural features of the system in the first place, or by a haphazard chain of events? Much earlier than most people in the field, Anna saw that comparative philologists need serious tools for the structural description of languages. She was instrumental not only in establishing 'general' linguistics as a subject at Oxford, but in linking philology and linguistics to the mutual benefit of both. At the same time, Anna saw that philologists need contact with other scholars working on the literature, history, and culture connected to 'their'

languages: the other classicists, Sanskritists, modern linguists, and so on. Today it is increasingly common in the world for classical philologists to benefit from a serious training both as classicists and as linguists. Her early contributions to this movement are among the many things for which we have Anna to thank.

Morpurgo, A. 1963. *Mycenaeae graecitatis lexicon* (Incunabula Graeca, 3). Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo.

Morpurgo Davies, A. 2002. 'Anna Morpurgo Davies', in K. Brown and V. Law (eds), *Linguistics in Britain: personal histories* (Publications of the Philological Society, 36). Oxford/Malden: Blackwell, 213-27.

Morpurgo Davies, A. 2005. 'Holocaust memories from Italy'. An address given in Somerville Chapel by Professor Anna Morpurgo Davies on 23 January 2005, for Holocaust Memorial Day.

http://www.some.ox.ac.uk/cms/files/Professor%20Anna%20Morpurgo%20Davies_Holocaust%20Memorial%20Day%20address.pdf

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