

# Anton Powell

## 1947-2020

by Stephen Mitchell and Paul Cartledge



*Stephen Mitchell (Chairman, 1993-2001, left) and Anton Powell (Secretary, the Director of the University of Wales Institute of Classics and Ancient History, 1993-2008, right), renew an old partnership at the Celtic Conference in Classics, Bordeaux 2012).*

(Christopher) Anton Powell, Classical Scholar and Publisher  
born 26 March 1947, Leicester; died 11 June 2020, Swansea

**N**o Spartan secret was safe from the probing historical intelligence of Anton Powell, a leading figure among British Classicists, who has died after a short illness aged 73. Ancient Sparta presented the most compelling and most secretive challenge to Athens, as the standard bearer of ancient Greek civilization. Powell was the catalyst for a revolution in Sparta studies. But that was far from his only achievement in and legacy to the world of Classical scholarship.

Anton, a son of Hugh Powell, Professor of German at the Universities of Leicester and Indiana, USA, learned Greek and Latin among a remarkable group of contemporaries at Wyggeston Boys' Grammar School, Leicester, in the 1960s, before graduating in Classics at Gonville and Gaius College, Cambridge in 1969, and completing a doctorate, on "The Role of Religion in Athenian Foreign Policy, 480-346 B.C.", at University College London in 1973.

This fairly conventional start to a high-flying career took a typically unconventional turn during the 1970s and 1980s, when Dr Powell operated freelance in London. He was a tour guide to intimate corners of the city, authored books on London walks and a history of Greece for

children, and above all worked as a teacher at the Working Men's College, Camden Town, Europe's oldest surviving centre for adult education, where he introduced ancient history to a generation of students. His first major book, *Athens and Sparta: Constructing Greek political and social history from 478 BC*, was written in the 1980s and published by Routledge in 1988; the third edition of 2016 is still the benchmark study of Classical Greek history, used by students and instructors world-wide. He also launched a published seminar series, including edited volumes on Euripides and on Classical Sparta, which laid down a marker for the rest of his career.

In 1986 he moved to Nottingham, and in 1990, reverting to his father's Welsh roots, to Swansea, two cities which he came to know intimately and for which he had a deep affection. Both in life and in his research and writing he had an instinctive sympathy for ordinary working people in all spheres of life, and was a close observer of their work and leisure activities, speech-patterns (he was a fabulous mimic), and politics. In his last years he was a decided supporter of Brexit, an orientation the germ of which can be traced as far back as his schooldays.

Most of his career in terms of employment was conducted freelance, outside formal academic institutions, but from 1989 to 1993 he held a lectureship in ancient history at Cardiff University, and it was on his initiative that the Classical departments of the then federal University of Wales founded the Institute of Classics and Ancient History (UWICAH), which he directed until 2008, drawing a quarter-time salary funded by the University of Wales Classics departments. Although he was an outlier in the profession and often took an unconventional, non-institutional approach, he was not an eccentric maverick. His approach was shaped rather in an age of innocence before the era of the RAE/REF, dominated as that is by a preoccupation with the search for large-scale research funding that tends to consume younger colleagues. His model for collective and collaborative scholarship, independent of the strategic objectives of funding bodies and employers, was and remains hugely attractive.

In 1993 he also created his own scholarly publishing house, the Classical Press of Wales (CPW). The Press and UWICAH operated in close partnership through the 1990s, producing a series of successful monographs, many by Welsh colleagues, and conference volumes, instantly recognizable by their maroon livery. In the early years CPW enjoyed an association with Duckworth, founded by the maverick publisher (and classicist) Colin Haycraft (1929-94), so that, for example, *Sparta: New Perspectives* (1999), co-edited by Powell with his long-time friend and close collaborator Stephen Hodkinson (Cambridge, Manchester and now Nottingham), was published with Duckworth's duck logo emblazoned on the jacket spine above 'Duckworth with The Classical Press of Wales'. But thereafter the jacket covers of Powell's solo CPW volumes were distinguished by the logo of the red kite, the national bird of Wales, and by his uncompromising editorial standards. There are now over 100 volumes on the CPW list, including eighteen volumes devoted to the history of ancient Sparta. They were a key, but by no means the only, justification for his election in March 2011 as a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London.

Powell would assemble an international team of specialists for the Sparta project, often adding scholars new to Sparta studies, whom he expected to rise to the challenge of saying something new and important, and let them loose on the subject. For conspicuous instance, *Sparta: New Perspectives*, which was dedicated to Geoffrey to Ste. Croix, contained 14 essays by scholars from Israel, France, the United States, Canada, Italy, and the Netherlands, besides England and Wales. As a basis for a collective volume a conference held at an unconventional venue – a hotel near Hay-on-Wye was a favourite choice – provided the initial impetus, critical discussion ensued, and the papers delivered would appear, revised, a couple years later in an impeccably presented volume, edited by Powell and one or other of his close collaborators.

A further boost to Powell's editorial and publishing productivity was given in 1998, when he founded the peripatetic and biennial (more recently annual) Celtic Conference in Classics, based on a collaborative and low-risk financial model. At a time when university administration is driven by focus on the bottom line, it is salutary to quote his own words from the CCC website: "Any capital the CCC may possess is moral only. As befits an NGO, the CCC does not aim to make a profit, indeed does not possess a bank account. Each conference is financed by the registration fees of those attending; ensuing income passes to the university campus hosting the conference. In consequence, the CCC itself cannot subsidise the expenses of speakers. But panel convenors and others are of course welcome to apply for subsidies from other sources." Powell himself never looked for research support funding from institutions or research councils. The Classical Press of Wales was from the outset a financially autonomous private business, and within a few years its scope stretched far beyond the partnership with the University of Wales institute of Classics and Ancient History. The groups of scholars that he organized and supported, and whose work he published, were, in his words, "the (extremely cheap!) counterpart of a scientific research team."

The impact of his work has been exceptional in several fields of Classical research, reflecting both his own special interests and an omnivorous approach: the headlines would be Plutarch, the Hellenistic world, Greek philosophy, the Roman Civil Wars, and above all Sparta. In the words of a colleague, 'CPW's output has underpinned the astonishing renaissance of Spartan studies over the last generation, which would hardly have been possible without the Press.' The whole field of research on ancient Sparta, and its modern receptions, has been reshaped as a result. Powell was therefore the obvious and natural choice to select the contributors and edit the 2-volume Wiley-Blackwell *Companion to Ancient Sparta* (2018), which is now the go-to point of reference for any new Spartan research. Two essays that he wrote himself for this collection are utterly characteristic: 'Sparta: reconstructing history from secrecy, lies and myth', and 'Sparta and the imperial school of Britain'. The latter, combining erudition with razor-sharp analysis, drew a telling comparison between Dr. Thomas Arnold, architect of ideology and pedagogical practice in Victorian public schools, and Lycurgus, the legendary founder of ancient Sparta's institutions. Time and again, Powell's work has revealed links, many previously undetected, between the classical past and contemporary social attitudes.

A further brilliant article of his, on the treatment of Sparta by Thucydides, remains to be published, in *Thucydides and Sparta* (co-edited with Paula Debnar). This was designed as the second in a series of author-based volumes, the first of which, *Xenophon and Sparta* co-edited with Nicolas Richer (Lyon), was published in early 2020. In a 'Publisher's Note' prefacing the entire series, which is also a manifesto, Dr Powell wrote: 'Xenophon's work thus engages the commitment of the present publisher to the principle of combining historical and literary analysis: to resist centrifugal and hermetic tendencies of modern research, and to promote a re-integration of Classics as a discipline'.

Re-integration is a term that he used again in the sub-title of his book on Virgil. One of the central objectives of Powell's work as a publisher and conference organizer was to mitigate the risk of Classical Studies becoming fragmented through excessive specialization. In an interview he gave in 2011 he identified the importance of holding serious but socially relaxed meetings of isolated specialists working in small departments: "So [the Welsh Classics departments] have, quite properly, seldom more than one specialist in any one field . . . But whom is this single specialist to talk to? International networking was the only solution for us. And that of course is now the rule, as research becomes deeper and narrower. If your field is Sparta's ideals, your go-to man is in Haifa [Prof. Ephraim 'Freddie' David]. If your special interest is in Sextus Pompeius, the go-to woman [Dr Kathryn Welch] is in Sydney." At the

same time, the web-site of the Celtic Classic Conferences stresses the aim of collegiality and interdisciplinarity: “The intention (is) to combine the virtues of the small, precisely-focused conference of specialists, perhaps aiming to generate a collective volume, with the openness of a grand occasion for classicists and ancient historians with widely-varying specialisms. Separate panels . . . run in parallel, with members encouraged to migrate freely between them.”

Two of his intellectual heroes were the London and Oxford Marxist ancient historian Geoffrey de Ste. Croix (1910-2000) and George Orwell. He shared their republican (although not always their socialist) sympathies, and their conviction that the work of writers and scholars was a vital form of political engagement. His greatest debt to Orwell was an ear and an eye for the linguistic nuances of political and social propaganda, whether deployed by the writers of antiquity, or, often unconsciously, by their modern interpreters. His interest in the ways in which political actors represented and misrepresented their policies and achievements, and the failure of most subsequent historical judgements to escape from the narratives set out by the victors, is a common thread in his work.

His acute reading of propaganda is particularly prominent in the other field of ancient history on which he has left a lasting mark: the history of the Roman civil wars, the fall of the Roman Republic and the emergence of the totalitarian system of the charismatic emperor Augustus. He commissioned, edited and contributed his own papers to volumes that re-evaluated the key figures of the Roman revolution: Julius Caesar, Sextus Pompeius (the son of Pompey the Great, almost air-brushed out of history by Octavian/Augustus), and the literary heritage of Augustus himself. Histories that were never written, or imagined counterfactual histories of what might have occurred had losers triumphed, provided him with the theme for another brilliant set of essays, *Hindsight in Greek and Roman history*, including his own ‘Anticipating Octavian’s failure’.

His understanding of the Roman revolution is expounded in his most controversial book, *Virgil the Partisan: a study in the reintegration of Classics* (2008), which argues that Virgil, a homosexual admirer of the glamorous political newcomer, wrote his great poems as a life-long supporter of the cause of Octavian/Augustus. In 2011 the book won the Alexander McKay Prize of the Vergilian Society of America for ‘the book which makes the greatest contribution toward our understanding and appreciation of Vergil’. Powell throws down the gauntlet to much established Vergilian scholarship with characteristic panache: “To use an image which Virgil and his model Hesiod might have recognized, we must put the hawk of history back among the doves of literature”.

By founding the Celtic Conference in Classics, Powell, with indispensable support from Professor Douglas Cairns, deliberately attempted to shift the metropolitan focus of traditional scholarship away from the golden triangle of Cambridge, London and Oxford. By building alliances with regional universities, and calling on his growing international contacts, multi-panel meetings have been held in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, France, Germany, Canada, and Portugal and are set to continue after his death. The most recent meeting at Coimbra attracted over 350 participants, the highest attendance of the series, and has established a milestone in the development of Classical Studies in Portugal. The planned 2021 iteration at Lyon, co-organised by his close friends Douglas Cairns and Nicholas Richer, will be dedicated to Anton Powell’s memory. He was an excellent French speaker, an acute observer of contemporary French politics, and was three times invited as professor to give seminar series on Sparta and on Virgil at the École pratique des hautes études in Paris and in Bordeaux. Building bridges between anglophone and francophone scholarship was close to his heart.

Anton Powell was a Classical historian of major importance who achieved high academic distinction through a self-made career, not by joining traditional institutions but by creating new ones. His work shows various features that recall its author: fierce opposition to fraud, hypocrisy, and official obfuscation; respect for evidence and careful attention to original sources; a compelling narrative and rhetorical style combined with subtle argument; and a constructive historical imagination informed by experience of the contemporary world. The writing of his younger days betrays both bitterness and passion. In his later work the bitterness faded, but the passion remained. To him, both as a scholar and as an academic publisher, Classical Studies in the UK and world-wide are deeply in debt.

He had two daughters by his first partner, and is survived by his wife, the ancient Greek historian Dr Ioanna Kralli.

**Stephen Mitchell ([mitchank@gmail.com](mailto:mitchank@gmail.com)) / Paul Cartledge ([pac1001@cam.ac.uk](mailto:pac1001@cam.ac.uk))**

Friends and colleagues of Anton Powell have sent us memories and appreciations, on which we have drawn. We end with three tributes sent to *CUCD Bulletin* by overseas colleagues who worked closely with him.

My heart is filled with great sorrow over the passing of an excellent scholar, marvelous editor, and a beloved friend.

Anton Powell introduced himself to me at a reception of the Association of Ancient Historians at the simulacrum of the Parthenon in Nashville, Tennessee in 1995. That venue was perfect for two individuals with sensibilities over what might be counterfeit in academe. By the mid-1980s, I thought that I had *Sparti-ed* hearty and out with several long articles. Yet Anton invited me to the first meeting of the International Sparta Seminar at Hay-on-Wye in 1997 which began a lasting re-enchantment with Laconian studies under his generous encouragement and with his enduring collaboration. His positive impact on my scholarship is almost inexpressible.

I think that the projects which we shared with many dear friends embodied fine scholarship and great generosity, inclusiveness, and empathy. His unstinting work in building the International Sparta Seminar, Classical Press of Wales, and Celtic Conferences in Classics were enhanced by his ability to draw into these endeavors many gifted disparate fellow toilers. Let us all keep bright the memory of our friend and colleague.

I am saddened that I could not share again with Anton himself my feelings of respect and affection in his last days, as I had learned about Anton's final illness so late. Yet it is my understanding that he wished to keep this great struggle private as much as possible. We had a number of funny, affectionate exchanges right up to the end of April, when I had to wait before answering his latest communication because of a health crisis in my own family. I shall cherish these letters as an expression of his spirit in dark times.

**Thomas J. Figueira**, Rutgers University

I am perhaps the most recent of Anton Powell's friends. And yet I write with a deep feeling of sadness and loss. I was very lucky to have met him last year at the 12th Celtic Conference in Classics, held in my own university of Coimbra. Since then I was blessed to earn his trust and to establish a relationship of mutual admiration. I

thought we would have many years ahead for us to strengthen the bonds of a natural friendship and genuine mutual sympathy. But Atropos is ruthless...

Beyond all Anton's immense scholarly merits, I shall miss and remember him always as one of the dearest and most sensitive classicists I have ever known. I will always remember him with immense *saudade*, the Portuguese word whose untranslatable meaning Anton learned and used in personal correspondence exchanged between us.

But the debt of gratitude to Anton is not only personal. The Centre for Classical and Humanistic Studies, which I also represent (as its Scientific Coordinator) owes him great regard and respect. It was an opportunity he gave us, last year, to host the 12th Celtic Conference in Classics, that inspired us to plan (under his auspicious tutorship) an international conference in Classics and Ancient History (meanwhile postponed to 2021). In addition to being a member of our Conference Scientific Committee, Anton had already accepted our invitation to be our guest keynote speaker.

My love and prayers are with Anton.

**Carmen Soares**, Universidade de Coimbra

Like many of my fellow Classicists, I was deeply saddened to learn of the passing of Anton Powell. Anton was not only a beloved friend and the most generous of souls, but also an exemplary scholar, generous collaborator, and remarkably productive editor. I had the great fortune to have Anton as a close friend and colleague since September 1997, when he invited me to participate in the international conference on Spartan history held at Hay-on-Wye. At this and subsequent conferences, Anton demonstrated his interest in promoting the work of young scholars and making our field as inclusive as possible. His impact on my own career, as on that of many other scholars, has been immeasurable. With his own publications, his organization of numerous conferences, and his creation of the highly esteemed Classical Press of Wales, Anton has fostered what seems to be an unquenchable interest in ancient Lacedaemon. As an editor, Anton was always there to give a boost, when one had doubts about an argument or a paper's feasibility, and to give tough love when a paper needed drastic revision. Together with Steve Hodkinson, Anton created the International Sparta Seminar, which has grown over the years into a family of Spartan specialists. Our "family" would meet up every few years at conferences that promoted collaboration, prompted deep debate, and created lifelong friendships. More recently, Anton extended his warm embrace to the field of Classics as a whole with his creation of the annual Celtic Conference in Classics. When one considers the many contributions to our field and to our lives that Anton has made as a scholar, a conference organizer, an editor, a collaborator, and a mentor, it is impossible to imagine Classics without Anton. I know that I and his other friends, however, will miss far more the empathy, humor, generosity, and humanity that Anton brought to every aspect of his life. He will be dearly missed.

**Ellen Millender**, Reed College