

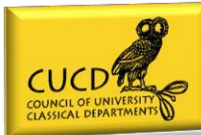
# Peter Parsons (1936–2022)



*by* **Gregory Hutchinson**

The word that keeps occurring in notes that people have written about Peter is 'kind'. How wonderful that a pre-eminent scholar should have this for his standing epithet!

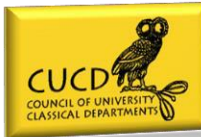
Peter was born in 1936. He was an only son. He attended Raynes Park County Grammar School; a friend who attended the same school shortly afterwards saw 'P. J. Parsons' repeated several times in gold letters on the school's Honours Board. Peter went to Christ Church, Oxford as an undergraduate. After that, E. R. Dodds suggested that he should take up papyrology; he did this with John Barns, and then for a year with H. C. Youtie in Michigan. He secured a permanent position in papyrology at Oxford, and not long after was given a research post at Christ Church. Here he created a domain for himself like something in a fairy-story. His rooms stood at the top of the perilously polished stairs of Killcanon Tower; from outside the tower could be seen the papyrus plant in a window-box. Within were all the instruments of the papyrologist's trade, and an abundance of books, records, and other manifestations of exceptional scholarship and culture.



Peter worked tirelessly editing papyri himself, and sustaining the vast and complicated enterprise of P. Oxy., with its large number of editors—a few fixed, many fleeting, some graduates—and its constant need for funding. He was made Regius Professor of Greek in 1989, and filled the role superbly. He retired in 2003. With a garden, he could take up gardening and grow his beloved dahlias. But he continued to work incessantly on papyri and related projects. In 2006 he married Barbara Macleod, to whom he had long been close; she died in that year, from cancer. Peter greatly valued the Italian family he gained from Barbara, as they did him. He kept going on his papyrology, with the assistance of younger friends, despite growing problems of mobility. He died suddenly on 16 November 2022.

Peter loved food, flowers, music; his aesthetic feelings were strong and concrete, his judgements fastidious and vigorously put. Even words were for him something tangible: penned by hapless scribes or, in his own graceful hand, himself; deployed with startling mastery in seventeenth-century English authors or in Callimachus; set flying, as he talked, in fantastical images, or peeping mischievously, as he wrote, through the severe and tiny lines of P. Oxy. notes. All who knew him will remember some phrases—thus in a note of thanks for a mince-pie party ‘so elegant and so fattening’. With people he was so warm and friendly, and so sympathetic and considerate. He was self-deprecating and modest to an extraordinary degree. The fastidiousness, the humility, the warmth, the wit—aspects you might not have expected to go together united into a unique person. He captivated everyone he met; the more one knew him, the more wonder and fondness grew.

Editing papyri, for their first appearance or after it, was Peter’s basic activity. The literary papyri we associate with him, in *editiones principes* or in fundamental articles, include ones that have greatly enlarged our understanding of classical literature: Stesichorus, Simonides, Callimachus . . . His treatment of papyri always shows epistemological restraint: possibilities are set out, preferences indicated. The material, enhanced by erudition in many fields, is allowed to make its own impact; we are gently shown why it matters. The editor enjoys the specific problems of papyri, and has fun with the detail of handwriting and literary style: ‘his is a sloppy, ugly half-cursive’; a

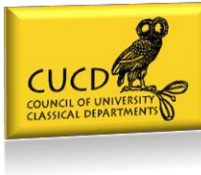


possibly amateur poet 'commands the erotic argot (1, 15, 19 f.) and attains a certain neatness (16, 20), but his flat sluggish composition contrasts with his ambitious vocabulary'. However, Peter went beyond separate editions to build up two breathtaking works.

The *Supplementum Hellenisticum* (1983), written with Hugh Lloyd-Jones, and *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish: Greek Lives in Roman Egypt* (2007) contrast with each other in many ways: literary and documentary; Hellenistic and Imperial; Latin and English. These contrasts show the range of Peter's abilities; but either work has its own very particular character. *SH*, despite its odd and modest title, is a physically massive book, packed with an infinity of scholarly detail. The ambition of collecting all hitherto uncollected fragments of Hellenistic poetry results in an enormous canvas of literary activity; but wherever one looks in, intelligence, erudition, and fresh suggestions are to be found. Latin is made into a medium for the neat exposition of complicated problems; the heart of the book is the lapidary and enlightening presentation of papyrus fragments.<sup>1</sup>

*City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish* draws together the mass of documentary papyri from Oxyrhynchus to present an overwhelmingly vivid picture of ancient life. A general argument is not built up; but cohesion springs from the author, kindly, witty, and interested in everything. Well-rendered quotes and well-chosen images immerse us in the material; and beyond the material we are made to think of what people ate, what boats were like, how medicines were made up. There comes through to the reader the intensity with which individuals lived their difficult lives. A personal preface leads the reader in from the author's own life; it begins with Peter starting to learn Greek and ends with Barbara.

Peter dedicated himself to the subject, and in doing so expressed his love of words and things, history and poetry. Our debt to him is enormous. His departure is such a sadness; but we can truly say that he lived life well.



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<sup>1</sup> With typically extravagant generosity, the editors gave me a copy of *SH* simply because I was starting to work on Hellenistic poetry. The ensuing thank-you poem may be added here as a tribute:

*Addendum*

‘πότνια, καὶ τόδε μοι λέξον ἀνειρομένωι·  
κῶς ὦδ᾽ ἔτλητε, θεαί, τοιήνδε παρεῖναι  
ἐς φάος; οὐκ ὀλίγον τοῦτο πέφηνε κακόν.  
τὸν γλυκερὸν πέλασάν με, τό μ’ ἀγλαὸν ὕμμιν ἄγαλμα,  
Ἄντιμάχου Καμίωι τ’ Ἰακίωι τε πόνοις  
Βουπορικοὶ Τελχίνες.’ ἀμείψασθε δ’ αὖθι, Θάλεια,  
σὺν γέλωι· ἥ τρίζεις καὶ σὺ τὰ βασκανίης·  
καὶ Πινάκων κρατέοντι (σύννοισθα γάρ) ἄχθεται ἔργωι.  
Αἰδῶς γὰρ παρέην Εὐρυνόμης τε κόραι  
γεινομένωι, στάξαν δὲ κατ’ ὄμματος ἄκρον ἄωτον  
λεπταλέης σοφίης. καὶ δ’ ἐπαγαλλόμεθα  
ἔρνεϊ καλλίστωι.’ τὸ δέ μοι ῥέθος ἦιθεν ἐρεύθει·  
φῆν δέ· ‘θεή, νικᾷς· τίς κε μάχοιτο θεῆι;  
χαῖρε σὺ, χαῖρε μέγα, μέγα δὴ καλόν (οὐκ ἄρ’ ἀληθῆς  
ἢ φάτις ἦν). ἄλλου δ’ ὁ Φθόνος ἦπαρ ἔδοι.’