

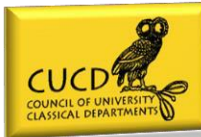
Barbara Levick (1931–2023)

by Rhiannon Ash and
Ed Bispham



Photo courtesy of Fusa McLynn.

Barbara Levick (or ‘Bar’ to many friends) was educated at Brighton and Hove High School, and read Literae Humaniores at St Hugh’s, Oxford. She did a doctorate under the supervision of Ronald Syme, and in 1959 was appointed as a Tutorial Fellow at St Hilda’s (initially the sole classicist, teaching languages and literature as well as ancient history). Her first work was the still essential *Roman Colonies in Southern Asia Minor* (1967), at that time the only monograph to appear out of the long tradition of British

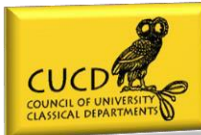


first-person exploration of the backwoods of Anatolia in search of antiquities and inscriptions. The region and its epigraphy would bulk large in her output: she edited two volumes of *Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua* (Vols. IX–X, 1988–1993), and wrote articles and book chapters on related topics; she also exercised a considerable influence on Stephen Mitchell, in his turn the great British expert on Anatolia, a collaborator and friend of Barbara, who sadly outlived her by only a few weeks. Barbara is also widely celebrated for a string of seminal articles on the politics and society of the late Republic and Early Empire; for the still vital sourcebook on *The Government of the Roman Empire* (its lucid, perceptive commentaries often revealing the epigrapher within); and above all for the series of biographies, beginning with *Tiberius the Politician* (1976) and ending with *Catiline* (2015), and taking in three other emperors (Augustus, Claudius, Vespasian) and two sets of Antonine and Severan imperial ladies along the way (the Faustinae and Iulia Domna). Barbara read quickly, avidly and with a gimlet eye, and for many years presided over the review of new publications in *Greece & Rome*, to the delight of readers. Barbara's selfless service to the wider Classical community was manifested in numerous contexts and roles, including her position as Vice-President of the Roman Society.

Barbara Levick As Tutor (RA)

Barbara Levick was an extraordinary and much-loved undergraduate tutor in Roman History, who shaped and enhanced the lives of generations of undergraduates over the course of her career. I was lucky enough to be one of them when as an undergraduate at Univ I was taught by Barbara for the Tacitus and Tiberius Special Subject in Trinity Term 1987 at the end of my first year. This was followed later on by a whole year of tutorials for Roman History in Greats and various revision sessions. This meant that for me, Barbara was a substantial and almost constant presence in my undergraduate life and beyond.

The arrangement whereby Barbara taught Univ students for Roman History was (I think) at that time relatively recent, thanks to Chris Pelling's enterprising arrangements and Barbara's kindness in taking on further students from another college. As newly

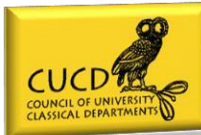


arrived undergraduates at Univ, we had heard students in the years above talk enthusiastically about this sharp, stylish, warm, and friendly tutor across the bridge at St Hilda's. As newcomers, we were intrigued. They also told us that she even had an MG – the reported colour of the car changed depending on which of your fellow-students you were chatting with. It could be purple, yellow, orange... all colours of the rainbow. Before even meeting Barbara, therefore, she already had stature and interest for us. She simply didn't sound like other tutors. It is fair to say that before heading to St Hilda's for our first tutorials, we had the impression that we were going to be taught by some kind of latter-day version of Emma Peel from the Avengers.

That walk across the bridge from Univ to St Hilda's with my cheerful tutorial partner Simon Taylor was always a prelude to something special and scintillating. We never knew where the next tutorial would take us, but it was always fun, always memorable, always illuminating.

We were enchanted and slightly in awe of the idea that our Ancient History tutor lived where she taught, in her beautiful rooms overlooking the river, with the comfortable chairs and the reassuring click-clack of the parquet flooring. The setting of that *locus amoenus* only added to the mystique as we pictured Barbara after-hours immersed in learned journals and Classical texts (and perhaps too with a glass of something to hand from her extraordinary cabinet of multi-coloured liqueurs from around the globe which various students and friends had given her).

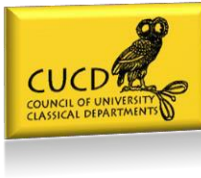
The tutorials were an amazing experience. Despite appearances to the contrary sometimes, Barbara would always listen to our essays with a sharp ear and the occasional wry glance or smile. She had a legendary ability to quote back pretty much verbatim a sentence from our essays where one or other of us had cut a corner – sometimes at precisely the point where, on the walk across the bridge from Univ, I or my tutorial partner had told the other one: 'I ran out of time with some of the reading. I hope that she doesn't push me on Tiberius' foreign policy'. Almost invariably, Barbara would gently ask for clarification about what precisely was meant at that point of the essay, prompting a wry exchange of glances between tutorial partners mystified as to



how she was able to pick out the weak points of our essays so unflinchingly. In so doing, Barbara tacitly reminded us that our arguments needed to be based on proper evidence – but the guidance which she offered was always elegant and friendly, and often accompanied by Barbara’s gentle and infectious gurgling laugh (which was always ready to surface at a moment’s notice). The famous green pen with which she wrote on our essays in her distinctive handwriting was another element uniquely evocative of Barbara from that time.

One of my favourite memories was a tutorial about the development of Gaul from Caesar to Nero. I had been talking about the revolt of Florus and Sacrovir and Druidic practices when Barbara jumped up in a state of great excitement (as if stung by a bee) and said with a degree of urgency that was impressive: ‘Do you know about the *equus* and the egg?’. She went to her shelf and pulled down a volume of Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* and she drew our attention to an amazing description from Book 29 of a mysterious object known as a snake’s egg, created from the saliva and the bodily substances of intertwined serpents. This strange creation could form part of Druidic rituals, and as Pliny’s anecdote went on to explain, one reckless Roman knight even kept a serpent’s egg in his clothing during a lawsuit, which appears to have crossed a red line for the emperor. Claudius had the *equus* executed because of his egg.

Finding out about such things was just one of many magical moments in those tutorials. Quite simply, Barbara changed my life in unimaginable ways. Later on, thanks completely to Barbara’s intervention, I also spent a year as a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at St Hilda’s back in 1996–97 when I had the chance to get to know Barbara better as a colleague. She was devoted to her college and to her pupils. Recently, I came across an expressive quote from the librarian, and later principal, of Somerville, Margery Fry (who, like Barbara, came originally from Brighton). What she said made me think of Barbara: ‘I think the feeling of having belonged, and in a way always belonging to a college, and of sharing common aims and responsibilities and a common pride in it...is bound to make a difference to all one’s life, besides all the more personal influence of one’s immediate friends’. As well as teaching me Ancient History, Barbara also showed me what it meant to belong to a college.

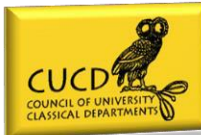


Barbara Levick was one of a kind. She will be very much missed by generations of students and colleagues. Her wit and her wisdom, and her boundless energy made her a unique tutor, who immeasurably enhanced the lives of anyone lucky enough to come into her orbit and be taught by her.

Rhiannon Ash (University College 1986–90), Fellow and Tutor in Classics, Merton College, Oxford

Barbara Levick As Doctoral Supervisor (EB)

I did not really know what to expect when I began graduate work (in the distant past one moved unaccountably, and by a questionable use of public money, directly from undergraduate to doctorate), but even if I had thought ahead, I could never have expected, still less invented, Barbara Levick. I had been fortunate enough to experience Barbara Mitchell's great-auntly kindness, and Miriam Griffin's warm generosity of spirit – and learnt a good deal from both. But Barbara L. was intriguingly different. I came to understand that she was herself a remarkable embodiment of patient generosity, a virtue which she deployed unstintingly in support of students, undergraduate and graduate; as well as for colleagues and visitors, many of whom became close friends and regular visitors across her life. She gave unstintingly of her time, how unstintingly I see only now. Chapters or chapter sections came back within 24–48 hours, no matter how long, annotated in green scrawl, with various sketches for good measure: smiling or frowning faces, a skull-and-cross-bones for particularly asinine remarks, and even a coffin at one point, in disgust at my contemptuous pigeon-holing of a scholar with whose article I had been engaging ('it's discourteous and dangerous to put people into boxes like this; you may find yourself boxed in turn; a coffin is a type of box'). I did not realise at the time that Barbara did not live in a mysterious dimension where time was more freely available; the time she took to read and comment at once on my thirty typed pages was time sacrificed from duties in the Faculty, in College, and also from her own research; her desk was piled with more interesting and better-written pieces which she had agreed to read in draft, or in proof, or as an external reader, or to review. Barbara was unfailing, and unfailingly polite, in



leaping into action to write a reference, or lend other support, or agree to a meeting, long after we had ceased to be her students. Her support was not only unflinching, it was unequivocal – as it was for all her students and friends – and heartfelt. I would not be in a position to write this now without that unremitting commitment.

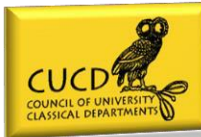
My doctorate began as a curious amalgam: I knew that my topic was one in which I was fully absorbed, and yet I didn't have a clue, in contrast to many of my peers, as to how one transformed that enthusiasm into 100,000 words of typed text; it was clear that I had a great deal to learn, but I vastly over-estimated the value of what I did know, and the ease with which I might come to terms with what I didn't know. Despite the occasional hieroglyphic admonition, and the odd piece of life advice ('I find it helps to read academic German before breakfast – one is sufficiently awake then, but it can't then interfere with the serious business of the day'), Barbara was not openly didactic. She would offer advice if one was stuck, but it was more in the nature of *how* to educate oneself to get one's head around this (or any other) problem, rather than simply *what* to read. Rather, she indulged in a subtle, thoughtful shaping, which was designed to make one more self-critical and more self-conscious about what one was trying to do. There were also occasional cuts to the chase, direct questions asked with a tiny cock of the head, which went right to the heart of the matter, revealing the fragility of assumptions or the emptiness of axioms, without editorially discussing one's failings or mistakes. In those moments one felt a fleeting incorporeal transparency. All this was couched in Barbara's rich oral style, choice, imagistic phrases, leavened with colloquialisms, archaisms, idiolect and neologism ('something which cannot be seen unless from a height *aeroplanikos*'): a wholly individual and neoteric way of communicating, with which I was instantly charmed.

'Sherry or vermouth?' was the ritual question which began every encounter. For this I was not prepared. I knew Barbara Levick as the author of *Tiberius the Politician*, *Claudius* and some seminal *JRS* articles (without thereby forming any realistic notion of how distinguished she was, let alone that she had been a lonely female pioneer in the remote masculine world of Anatolian epigraphy before I was born). I was unprepared, in October 1990, for the initial civilities; I was unprepared for the severe



cut of the silvery hair, the wide, warm toothy smile in its bright lipstick frame, and that voice – a rich, resonant quite deep delivery, almost a drawl, but one full of easy charm rather than negligent disinterest. The jade cigarette-holder and the red (or was it?) sports car had been retired before I met her, but what I did encounter was quite singular as it was.

The first meeting, I had thought, would be full of brilliant *aperçus* and learned instruction on her part, but much of the hour was spent by me subconsciously wondering how to read and best engage with this sphynx-like creature. I was told to 'keep reading Shaggers-Waggers' (I think it was later that week that I realised this was Oxford-parlance for Sherwin-White, whose *Roman Citizenship* was an essential starting point). While I was still digesting this onomastic puzzle, we agreed, slightly to my surprise, that I would write 'a big swirly-whirly essay on Romanization'. Although I was too awkward to admit that the identity 'Shaggers-Waggers' was beyond my prosopographical ken, I did protest gently that what had drawn me into the topic in the first place were texts like the *Tabula Heracleensis* and the *Lex Tarentina* – could I not write on those? Barbara was not against this, but she asked me 'what are you going to do with these laws? Are they just going to smile bronzily at you?'. At the time I had no answer, but I later realised that this was a way of helping me to frame the task on which I was embarking. I don't think Barbara ever used terms like 'research question', at least not in my hearing – she had an unerring-capacity to detect bluster, and instinctively cut through jargon to ask what was really meant – but by subtle prods and hints, by idiosyncratic and almost gnomic questions, she made me ask my own questions, made me see that one has to come to any subject with questions, and that interest in a topic is not a question. Once one got to know Barbara, one could see, or intuit, the subtle moulding exercises that were placed in the way of your train of thought. Indirect, deft, thoughtful, but somehow also bound up in the process of getting to know the other individual as a person, as a human being. Barbara could be direct if necessary, or even express a chill displeasure under much provocation. But charm and understatement often served her better. After a long silence on my part, and the repeated non-arrival of a much-promised chapter, I received an envelope in my pigeon-hole (this was pre-email) with the unmistakable Levickian slur of handwriting

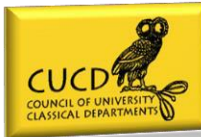


that a patient porter had deciphered as my name. Inside, as ever, a torn off strip of reused paper (a fragment of a draft text of some article on the back), and hastily in green the simple question '*Come stanno i quattuorviri?*'. I knew what this meant, translated into ordinary parlance, but I was grateful for Barbara's polite, non-vernacular nudge, more effective than a more bracing approach, however deserved.

Not long after getting my first job (which, again, I would not have got but for Barbara's support), I had the privilege of working with Barbara in a new context. She became a key member of the Fragmentary Roman Historians project run by Tim Cornell, in which she doughtily took on the 'imperial chaps' in her steady and thoughtful way, producing and revising copy metronomically but brilliantly. Setting off for Manchester, where we often convened, I would be put to shame: as I looked out the rain-blurred window of the 6 am bus as it pulled into the forecourt of Oxford station, I would often see Barbara, unmissable in a mustard-coloured suit, or a bright red mackintosh, in both cases with matching hat, doggedly cycling through the gale to catch the same train.

It was with very great pleasure that I came to consider Barbara a friend, as well as a mentor. It was her warmth and kindness, and her ability to engage people, whatever their origins or interests, which allowed this to happen, just as it drew to her a wide circle of friends, admirers and collaborators, all of whom she selflessly, patiently encouraged, advised, and entertained. Barbara was not without her moments of self-doubt; she felt heavily her responsibilities as a teacher and in her other roles, and sometimes fretted over the difficulties of admissions choices or examination marks, with the implications they had for individuals. But she was gregarious, and marvellous company; her parties for the sub-Faculty at the end of the academic year, in St Hilda's, were the acme of the social calendar, always bursting at the seams. Nothing of the kind could replace them when Barbara retired, but there was always the warmest of welcomes at 120 Morrell Avenue; she and Karen presided there over memorable summer parties for many years.

Barbara's sense of fun, and delight in a good anecdote or an amusing situation never deserted her, even at the end of her life, when she found much to laugh at (that



distinctive deep laugh, almost in slow motion), while never complaining in the face of multiple health setbacks. Watching her you could often see a smile flickering at the edge of her mouth, denoting the observation of something absurd, or amusing, or a conclusion which had escaped the rest of the group.

Humour was blended not just with kindness, but a deep spring of compassion. Empathy was not the least of Barbara's many historical gifts; her concern was with people, not simply with the past. On one of my last visits to her, as on many others, we discussed books we were reading (she, knowing that she had little time left, I think, nevertheless felt bound to finish a rather difficult historical novel which she had borrowed, so that she would not disappoint the friend from whom she had borrowed it, and to whom she had undertaken to return it at a given time). I mentioned I was reading a history of partition in India; I found it fascinating, but Barbara's first thought, characteristically, was that it must be very *moving*; she was right, of course. In her last months Barbara remained, as she had always been, fiercely loyal to, and interested in, the institutions to which she had given her adult life, Oxford and St Hilda's; and the figures who had taught and mentored her, especially C.E. 'Tom Brown' Stevens, with whom Barbara developed an unlikely friendship which survived his throwing her shoes out a window during an early tutorial. She never tired of asking about, and talking about, how 'the young' were faring, how they had found Covid, whether they were happy, what they liked and disliked about the degree, and so on. Teaching, especially undergraduate teaching, had been her life, and was something of which she was very proud. Conversations also turned over topics like the University, world literature (she identified strongly with the servants in Trollope, imagining this was how her distant forebears had lived out their lives), music (Glyndebourne had been a highlight for many years) and politics (she relished meaty topics like the rise and fall of 'Mr Prigozhin'). Above all she thrived on gossip, whether College-, University- or Faculty-based – and if there was tea, and more than one slice of cake, then so much the better.

Barbara's conversation never gave any sense that she thought of herself as a significant academic figure; even the anecdotes about being a keynote speaker tended to be about contingent circumstances, such as the fear of being electrocuted while



speaking in the Palazzo dei Conservatori in Rome. Yet she left a remarkably varied and important body of work: her imperial biographies are studies in politics (fittingly for a pupil of Syme), and meditations on the ruling class, not (only) on the figure of the ruler; but her output spanned late republican politics to gender (with the long-standing seminar on women, co-convoked with Richard Hawley, at a time when gender was an outlier), to the epigraphy and society of Roman Anatolia, and beyond. She once referred to her publications as ‘all the illegitimate children I’ve left on other people’s doorsteps’, for whom she now and then spared a thought. We were fortunate to know her, and fortunate that she continues to speak to us through her ‘children’.

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