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Patricia (Pat) Easterling (1934–2026)

by Chris Carey



Since her death on 18 August tributes have poured in for Pat Easterling, one of the outstanding classicists of her time.

Patricia Fairfax studied at Blackburn High School for Girls before starting a Classics degree at Newnham College Cambridge in 1952, the first person in her family to go to university. She graduated with a First in 1955. While still an undergraduate she met her future husband John Easterling, also studying Classics, whom she married a year

after graduation. Her first academic job came two years later, with an assistant lectureship at the University of Manchester. In 1958 she returned to Cambridge, where she stayed until 1987, when she was appointed to the chair of Greek at UCL as successor to Eric Handley, a post she held for seven years. She returned to Cambridge in 1984 as the first and so far the only female Regius Professor of Greek in the 400+ year history of the chair, a post she held until her retirement.

For over six decades Pat Easterling's name was synonymous with the study of Greek drama. The passion was already visible in her undergraduate years, when she began a lasting association with the Cambridge Greek play. She acted alongside John in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in 1953 and again in Euripides' *Bacchae* in 1956, the year they married. She and John produced the translation for the 1962 production of Aristophanes *Clouds* (published by Heffer in 1961); Pat directed Euripides' *Medea* in 1974 and co-directed Sophocles' *Electra* in 1977, and (fittingly, since she was working on her commentary on the play) she helped produce the souvenir programme for the play of 1983, 'One hundred years of the Greek play: *The Women of Trachis*'.

Pat never studied for a PhD. When she began her research in the 50s, the PhD had yet to become the inevitable gateway to an academic career in the UK, unlike Germany and the USA, where it was already well established. So throughout her first period in Cambridge she taught as Mrs Easterling. Instead she began with several publications on Greek manuscripts, especially Sophocles. That set the trajectory for her future research. Though she published widely on Greek society and literature (including epic, lyric and New Comedy), her first love and primary focus was always Greek theatre, especially tragedy. During her long career (her first publication was in 1960, her last in 2021) she wrote on every aspect of tragedy, text, language and style, form, plot, themes, recurrent motifs and elements, character(s), context, religion and ritual, staging, performance and reperformance, manuscript transmission and reception, and history of scholarship, always with the same sensitivity, acuity, economy, and clarity – she had no time for unnecessary jargon. She was comfortable with the whole spectrum from the fine detail of language and palaeography through to the big themes. Throughout her life she remained open to new developments and new ways of thinking about tragedy; she early recognised the importance of reception studies for Classics

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(she devoted a whole section to reception in the *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, which she edited in 1997) and was warmly receptive to cognitive approaches to tragedy, on which she wrote with Felix Budelmann ('Reading Minds in Greek Tragedy' in *Greece and Rome* 2010). Though she wrote on all three tragedians, Sophocles remained her favourite. Her commentary on Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, published in 1982 in the Cambridge Green and Yellow series, is still the best guide to the play. She was still working on her commentary on the *Oedipus at Colonus* when she died; there are plans to bring it to press, and reports indicate that it will become the standard support for the study of Sophocles' final masterpiece. Her immense output of articles, chapters and notes has now been edited in two volumes by Felix Budelmann and Eveline Krummen (*P.E. Easterling, Studies in Greek Literature*, CUP 2026); the bibliography of her work there fills four pages. The volumes were presented to her shortly before her death.

As well as her own authored articles, chapters and books, she was also a prolific editor, a natural collaborator and a tireless promoter of research. She edited (among other things) the first volume of *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature* with Bernard Knox, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession* (with Edith Hall), *Greek Scripts: An Illustrated Introduction* (with Carol Handley), and while busy as Head of the Department of Greek and Latin at UCL she was the Greek literature area advisor (one of the largest areas) for ed. 3 of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* in 1989–1994; this included writing some of the key entries herself while deftly getting big names on board and pacifying more awkward contributors. Her crowning achievement as a promoter of research was her role as general editor from the outset of the Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics Series (the Green and Yellows) with Ted Kenney, one of the most important contributions to classical scholarship in the last half century.[1] She was the first chair of the committee for the *Cambridge Greek Lexicon*. Not all her intervention was visible. When the digital imaging of a palimpsested Byzantine prayer book containing

[1] Anyone interested in the history of the series might consult Roy Gibson (2021) 'Fifty Years of Green and Yellow: The *Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics* Series 1970–2020', in *Classical Scholarship and Its History From the Renaissance to the Present. Essays in Honour of Christopher Stray*, ed. Stephen Harrison and Chris Pelling, Brill: Leiden, 175–217.

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fragments of the mathematician Archimedes unearthed substantial fragments of the orator Hyperides and of a commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, it was Pat Easterling and her predecessor at UCL and Cambridge, Eric Handley, who brought the British Academy on board to support it and unobtrusively guided the decipherment project (divided among different teams) through to publication. Mike Edwards has observed: 'The publication in *ZPE* of the work on the *Against Diondas* is under the names of Carey, Edwards, Farkas, Herrman, Horváth, Mayer, Mészáros, Rhodes, and Tchernetska: but it would not have been possible without Professors Easterling and Handley.'

Pat was a superb teacher, popular as a lecturer but especially remembered for the supervisions in her rooms at Newnham. Those lucky enough to be taught by her have all spoken warmly of the atmosphere in supervisions, both intellectually challenging and supportive. She took you seriously and was genuinely interested in what you had to say. She was a superb graduate supervisor, and many of her PhD supervisees in turn went on to distinguished careers. As a supervisor she achieved the delicate balance of steering the research project while leaving space for students to develop their own ideas, and correcting error while preserving enthusiasm. Drafts were returned promptly, always thoughtfully and generously annotated; one former PhD student remarks: 'such an empathetic reader – astute, gentle and kind'. Her support continued unwavering long after her (many) research students had moved on to professional careers. She was also for decades a magnet for visiting scholars and students from abroad. She was convinced of the value of Classics in the modern world (the subject of her Housman lecture – the first – at UCL, 'Ancient Plays for Modern Minds?'). She was an early champion of the Classical Civilisation A level, which has done so much to democratise the study of the ancient world and to reverse what was by the mid-twentieth century a seemingly terminal decline in Classics. And she was keen to take the subject to audiences beyond the university and the schoolroom. During her time at UCL she was instrumental in setting up the highly successful London Festival of Greek Drama.

All her photos, from her graduation through to just before she died, show the same quiet, warm, often slightly enigmatic smile. The warmth was real, and infectious. Pat

had a unique capacity for creating calm and healing rifts. Edith Hall has said: 'She had a remarkable quality, of making everyone in a room with her uncharacteristically well behaved.' She was deft in navigating complex environments. Managing interdepartmental and intercollegiate relations in Classics and Ancient History in London, and holding a chair in Cambridge (especially in the period when Pat was appointed to the Chair of Greek) by definition require good interpersonal and diplomatic skills; so too does chairing a Research Assessment Exercise (now REF) panel, as she did in 1996. Whether she was chairing a meeting at departmental, university or national level or steering an international group of researchers, she always kept things moving smoothly and ensured everyone had a voice; and she had a gift for disarming difficult colleagues without rancour. Part of her charm, and her capacity to keep things cool, was her gift for understatement, even, and especially, in criticism. She could put her finger on a flaw, unerringly but always delicately. I remember of one senior scholar she observed matter-of-factly: 'He writes quickly'; no more needed. Unsurprisingly, she was never known to swear.

She was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1998, and received honorary doctorates from the Universities of Athens, Bristol, Royal Holloway University of London, Uppsala and Ioannina. She was elected an Honorary Fellow of UCL in 1997, and in 2013 Associé étranger de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Institut de France. But throughout she remained steadfastly down to earth. Outside work, she was a keen walker, and she and John were hiking in southern Turkey well into their seventies.

John Davies, writing in the *THES* in 1995, observed: 'It is hard to find a bad word said about Patricia Easterling.' It still is.

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