

# The Hour Calls Forth the Man?

## Arnold Jennings

In 1984 a master and three boys at Stowe School, as an act of *pietas* both to the school and to Ventris, published a booklet *Michael Ventris Remembered*. Its fifty pages make fascinating reading, for two reasons. Firstly, when a major problem in ancient linguistic scholarship, which has completely defied the attempts at solution of leading scholars the world over for forty years, is solved by an architect in his twenties with no qualifications or experience as a scholar, there is obviously something or someone very remarkable. From this memoir one learns how very remarkable Ventris was. Secondly, the memoir does not follow the common modern convention which attributes to the subject no faults or defects, and no limitations, but chronicles only his virtues and achievements. It gives an account of Ventris' life and character, and of the strengths and limitations of his talents, with a sharper and more complete outline than is often found. It emerges in a quite startling fashion that if Providence had set itself to produce a person uniquely equipped to decipher Linear B, it would have produced someone with exactly Ventris' cast of ability, inclinations, character, mental equipment, and background.

There was a belief at Stowe that he was half-Greek; in fact he was one quarter Polish. His unusual surname is a very old English one, but his mother's father was a wealthy Pole. His father, a regular Army Colonel, served mainly in India, but retired to Switzerland with tuberculosis in the late 1920's. Michael, at age six already speaking Polish and English, went from his English boarding school to a school at Gstaad where all the teaching was either in French or German, and where he also picked up the local *patois*, Schwyzer-Deutsch. Two years later he returned to English schools, where he came constantly top of his form, 'making quite extraordinary progress at Latin and Greek.' Whilst still twelve, he won a scholarship to Stowe.

In the previous year his parents had divorced. His father died four years later and Michael lived with his mother in Highgate, where she created a centre for artists, designers and architects. Paintings by Picasso and Juan Gris, sculptures by Henry Moore and Naum Gabo decorated the flat, which was furnished in the latest designs and styles.

At Stowe he was quiet, withdrawn, hardworking, clever and well-liked. A contemporary says 'he always seemed to be wryly amused by the antics of the conventional public school boy ... I think this dispassionate view of established belief and behaviour must have made it much easier for him to start demolishing Evans' theories and deciphering the Linear B script.'

In his second year at Stowe, when he was fourteen, he was taken in a party of boys to Burlington House to see an exhibition of Minoan finds and to hear a lecture about them and the Knossos scripts from Sir Arthur Evans, then aged eighty-five. At this stage his contemporaries remember him as 'very interested in philology, and the origins of languages; the

rest of us didn't understand what it meant.' After School Certificate he went on to the Classical Side, where he was more interested in Greek than in Latin, but was described by his tutor as 'not much of a formal scholar.'

In October 1938, after the Munich agreement, Michael's Polish grandfather fled to England; a year later the whole of his Polish property was seized by the Germans. This transformed the family's financial position, and in September 1939 his mother decided to take him away from Stowe, at just seventeen, with his course uncompleted. A second reason for this was his desire to study architecture. 'He is not very sensitive to literature', she wrote, 'he loves language, but his aesthetic taste is stronger in music and in the volumes of architecture and sculpture.' He was accepted by the Architectural Association College in London for entry in May 1940. In the same year his Polish grandfather died, and not long afterwards his mother committed suicide.

Michael was then adopted by Naum Gabo, a Russian with an American wife, who lived in the artists' colony at St. Ives, where their next door neighbours were Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth. Michael's wife said later: 'The Gabos were the nearest thing to a family Michael ever had.' Here he usually conversed with Gabo in Russian.

For the next two years, when not in Cornwall, Michael lived alone in his mother's beautiful flat in Highgate. He wrote to a friend 'I am keeping my Greek up ... Very often I read before going to sleep some Plato or verse ... I'm glad to have done the Classics, and I'll keep it with me all my life as a sort of background.'

A strong feature of Ventris' character was a profound modesty. He had been doing far more than simply 'keeping my Greek up'. At the age of seven he had bought and studied a book - in German - on Egyptian hieroglyphics. When he heard Evans' lecture he had set himself to study the Knossos scripts, in the hope of deciphering them, and he sought out all the existing literature. Before May 1940 he had written a twenty-six page article on the problem as it then stood, *Introducing the Minoan Language*, which was published in the American Journal of Archaeology. Its editors were probably unaware that the writer was aged seventeen. Ventris paid tribute to Evans for 'very valuable personal help in the earlier stages of the research.' He took the accepted view, that of Evans, that Linear B was certainly not an early form of Greek; he favoured an early form of Etruscan.

In January 1942 he married a fellow-student, who had previously studied architecture in Vienna and Paris. After two years of his course Ventris joined the R.A.F.. Both in England and in Canada he was always top of his training class (for bomber air crew), and greatly surprised the authorities by insisting on becoming a navigator rather than a pilot, as that was 'a much more interesting thing to do.' He completed seventeen operational sorties over Germany before the end of the war. Had he been shot down, perhaps we would still be



unable to read the Mycenaean scripts.

He returned to spend two more years on architecture and a further year on town planning, and at the age of twenty-seven started work in Buildings Branch of the Ministry of Education, as an architect member of a team designing new schools.

Since the end of the war he had been working consistently on Linear B in his spare time. A fellow-architect at the Ministry says: 'At about midnight, when Ventris' wife and two children had gone to bed, he and I would continue for about two hours on the Penguin Books factory, and then he would get out his latest 'Work Note' on Linear B, and show me what he was doing there.' This same friend says that Ventris did not find the Ministry work very stimulating, and that his main mental activity was Linear B. 'We used to pore over long lists of hieroglyphics in the lunch hour, trying to spot repetitions.' Summer holidays were taken in Greece, for three seasons in Chios (whilst movement in Greece was restricted because of the civil war) as surveyor, including the then new technique of under-water archaeological surveying.

His architectural colleagues give fascinating accounts of his cast of mind as shown in his professional work. 'He was extremely likeable and pleasant to work with, but he was very different from all the rest of us because of his amazing analytical ability ... He liked comparing alternatives, and was often happy to delegate the decision on what to do next, in the creative field, to somebody else.' Again: 'Architecture is both a technical discipline of creative design, and an [analytical] science ... Michael's gift was his astonishing analytical ability. He could look at any problem and analyse the ways it could be solved at three or four times the speed of which anyone else was capable ... We couldn't hope to catch up with his astonishing ability to identify the fundamental alternative possible buildings, always keeping a record of every step in his thought process, with little diagrams on sheets of A4 ... [However], it was Michael's extraordinary analytical ability which made it impossible for him to match that with ... creative imagination in selecting a solution, and making an aesthetic decision.'

Another colleague says: 'He wanted to do design work but wasn't as good at creative as at analytical thinking. This frustrated him.' Another: 'I irritated him immensely,\* for I had a facility for free hand drawing, and Michael desperately wanted to know how to free up. The brain dominated whatever he did ... His intellectual powers held his hand in restraint ... It made him unhappy at the end of his life with the architectural work he got.' This colleague and Ventris together invented a machine for drawing perspectives, which was patented, based on a system of turning visual points into co-ordinates very similar to that in common use in computers producing drawings today. He also points out that Ventris was 'a brilliant visual analyst. He had both capabilities.' He used them in what he called 'normalising' the Linear B symbols. He realised that a number of slightly different symbols might well be a single symbol, written differently in the individual handwriting of different scribes, and he used his visual skills to isolate such groups and then to abstract from them the 'correct' form of the single symbol common to each. During his first year as an

\*His wife, a skier of Olympic standard, says of their family skiing holidays: 'He loved the mountains, but he used to get furious at his inability to go as fast as those of us who were trained racers' – αὐτὸν ἀριστεῦν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων?

'To be always among the bravest, and hold my head above others.'

architect, Ventris set out to see if there was any consensus of opinion among the experts on what type of language Linear B might be, and what relation, if any, it might have to the (also unknown) language of Linear A, and to Cypriot. He drew up a questionnaire and sent it to a dozen scholars of international repute, all actively working on the Knossos scripts, in U.S.A., Britain (Sir John Myres), Germany, Austria, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece and Finland. Ten of the twelve replied, Alice Kober told him he was wasting his time, and some other replies were abusive – how dare he?

Ventris was in no way rebuffed by this, but wrote an account of the state of the problem, analysing all the views received, and adding his own, and circulated the resulting document, *The Language of the Minoan and Mycenaean Civilisations*. This is now commonly referred to as 'The Mid-Century Report', as it appeared in 1950. Its final sentences ran: 'I have good hopes that a sufficient number of people, working on these lines, will before long enable a satisfactory solution to be found. To them I offer my best wishes, being forced by other work to make this, my last, small contribution.' The Report showed that there was little agreement on the basic issues – except only that none of the experts thought the language would be Greek; most said a language connected to Hittite, some (including Ventris), to Etruscan.

Far from leaving the field because of his 'other work', Ventris now did the exact opposite – he gave up his profession, for the time, to concentrate on trying to make the final breakthrough on Linear B. Although he had private means, this was a striking decision for a man of twenty-nine, after only two years in a profession in which he was anxious to succeed, a man too who was just moving into a remarkable new house, designed throughout by his wife and himself. R. Furneaux Jordan, the distinguished architect and writer, said in his *Times* obituary notice of Ventris: 'His own house was beautiful and yet very precise and stripped of every irrelevance.\* He seems deliberately to have limited his activities – it was almost a fault – so that he could within those limits produce something uniquely faultless. It was an unusual faculty taken to unusual lengths.'

Over the next two years Ventris, working partly at home but at times at the British School at Athens, produced twenty 'Work Notes' of nine or ten pages, setting out the latest stage of his work and the steps leading to it, and circulated these to the dozen scholars. In 1951 the American Bennett published the tablets that Carl Blegen, also an American, had unearthed in 1939 after discovering the site at Pylos, commonly known as 'Nestor's Palace'. This added to the 158 Knossos tablets so far published, six hundred more, all in Linear B. This great increase was of vital importance for anyone working, as Ventris was, by internal and quantitative analysis of the symbols, their frequency, positions and relations to each other. He had by now identified some eighty-odd different symbols. The American Alice Kober had identified a number of 'triplets', groups of two or three symbols found a number of times together in the same order, but followed each time by a different final symbol: was the language inflected? Ventris produced a series of 'grids', showing a number of different relationships between symbols, including frequency of

\*As a friend says: 'He had a bit of difficulty as an architect, trying to see what beauty could be created with something which he basically regarded as utilitarian in value.'



occurrence, and occurrence in a given position. Finally, looking for Cretan place-names, he found symbols to which he could give values that gave 'Amnisos', though spelt a-mi-ni-so, completed by different endings. This enabled him to identify 'Knossos' ('Ko-no-so'), 'Tulissos', 'koros' and 'kore', in their archaic forms 'korwos' and 'korwa', spelt 'ko-wo' and 'ko-wa', and the 'totalling formula', which introduced what appeared to be the total at the end of lists, namely 'tosos' (so much), spelt 'to-so'. Ventris headed his next (and last) 'Work Note', no. 20, of June 1, 1952: 'Are the Knossos and Pylos tablets written in Greek?' - though he introduced the Note as a 'frivolous digression.' His widow remembers: 'I'd gone to bed; it was about two o'clock in the morning, so he woke me up and told me a long story about place names like Amnisos and symbols for chariots and so on, all of course with illustrations'.

The B.B.C. had asked him to review Sir John Myres' *Scripta Minoa II*, which had just been published. This review went out on July 1, 1952, and I remember hearing it on my car radio, and Ventris saying: 'During the last few weeks, I have come to the conclusion that the Knossos and Pylos tablets must, after all, be written in Greek - a difficult and archaic Greek, seeing that it is five hundred years older than Homer, and written in rather an abbreviated form, but Greek none the less.' This produced a letter from John Chadwick, which led to a correspondence and their collaboration in Ventris' (projected) article for *J.H.S.*, which was completed in November 1952 (Ventris being just thirty) and appeared in the autumn of 1953.

Chadwick says he found Ventris 'an extremely nice, well-educated man, who was very easy to talk to, and had an extraordinarily quick mind. I don't think I had met anyone who thought as fast as Michael Ventris. If you made a suggestion, before you have finished telling him what it was, he would have three objections to it and would also have thought of how to put them so as not to offend you.' Chadwick, as an expert on early forms of Greek dialects, could 'make some predictions' about what early forms of Greek would look alike, and so help Ventris; 'but when I say ... "help", it was only a temporary matter, because when he knew he needed to know something, he was quite capable of looking it up and learning it for himself, whatever it was, and amazingly quickly'.

In June 1953 Ventris gave a lecture on the decipherment, which was fully reported in *The Times*. Translations could now be given of very many of the tablets. The decipherment was described in the press as 'The Everest of Greek archaeology' (Everest having been first climbed earlier that year). In May 1953 Blegen sent Ventris a copy of a newly-unearthed tablet from Pylos, in which the script, deciphered according to Ventris' values, made sense, and recognisable Greek, and corresponded exactly to the ideogram picture-signs at the end of each line. The *J.H.S.* article, *Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives*, was reprinted as a separate pamphlet, and a thousand copies were sold - an unprecedented event.

Ventris and Chadwick then settled down to write a more complete account of the decipherment, the script, the dialect, the proper names, followed by 300 representative tablets from Knossos, Pylos, and now Mycenae, with transliteration, translation into English, and commentary; finally a vocabulary of 630 Mycenaean words, with their meanings. This 450-page book, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, appeared in the autumn of 1956.

The world of scholarship divided itself into those who hailed

this as a brilliant discovery opening up whole new fields of study; those who said it was nothing revolutionary, others had suggested this sort of thing before; and those who said it failed to carry conviction. Neither the acclaim nor the opposition had any great effect on Ventris. In August 1954 he had been asked to lecture to the International Classical Congress in Copenhagen, and had been received with great enthusiasm; his audience stood up and cheered. Asked on his return how his lecture had gone, he said 'Oh, all right.'

Ventris had a cast of mind which those who have taught classics over many years may have occasionally encountered in a student - a brilliant linguist, interested in and enjoying applying this talent to the Greek and Latin languages, but with little or no interest in what the Greeks and Romans said in those languages, or in what they did. Chadwick says: 'I don't think he was particularly interested in Greek literature. He wasn't really interested in exploiting his own decipherment, for instance; he was interested in the interpretation of the tablets only as a puzzle. But when I suggested deductions one could make ... with reference to Mycenaean life, he was quite surprised that anyone was interested in doing so ... He was only interested in the solution.'

This known and understood, it will be found less surprising that the completion of *Documents* virtually exhausted his interest in Mycenaean studies in any form. John Chadwick again: 'Once the book was published, now anyone could work on the problems' - as people all over the world have done. It is fortunate for us that John Chadwick was there to fulfil the rôle of St. Paul (including the missionary journeys) to the new teachers.

An architect friend talks about the years following the publication of the *J.H.S.* article: 'First of all we had the press, which began to get very excited. And then he was given the doctorate at Uppsala. That was the only University which honoured him in that way.' (He was also made an honorary research associate of University College, London, and was awarded the O.B.E.) 'But he then had to go travelling round the world, and he was not very interested in doing that ... He had little in common with most of the classical academics. He was really wanting to get his professional career going, and it wasn't going too well.'

After completing *Documents* in September 1955 Ventris was awarded the first Research Scholarship of the *Architects' Journal*. The research was into the dissemination of information among architects - how long it takes for new techniques to be put into practice. A friend and colleague took the view that this research was the wrong thing for Ventris; 'I was very conscious of his frustration that every time he got a job in architecture he was pushed towards his capacity as an analyst rather than designer ... It was very distressing to him ... Shortly before he died we had a great heart-to-heart. The last memories of him I have are of his great worries.'

The year of architectural research was coming to an end, and on September 5, 1956 he had lunch with an architect friend, discussing the possibility of going into partnership with him. Later that night he set out to drive to Coventry. In the small hours of the 6th his car went into the back of a lorry parked on the A1 near Hatfield, and he was killed instantly. He was just thirty four. The place where he was killed was within a mile or so of the place where he was born. A few weeks later, *Documents* was published. Some would say that as soon as his work was



the envious Fates, the grudging deities, took him away. One could say that he must have been one of those whom the gods love. The French scholar, Professeur Ventris, said simply: 'Devant les siècles, son oeuvre est

only was Ventris exactly fitted for the problem, the amount of knowledge available, and necessary or useful to solving the problem, was within the range of an outsider like himself, but the amount was enough for a solution. No one starting from the foundation of an uncompleted sixth-form course, and for the first part working in his spare time, without supervision or assistance, could have produced work that would seize the attention of the whole learned world, had his field been, for example, the causes of the decline of the Roman Empire, or its economic structure, or the political and social character of the city-state. Such works as Fraenkel's edition of the papyri rest on half a lifetime or more of learning. The amount of the scripts was closer to the major problems of mathematics or physics, which are open to a brilliant young man to solve. The methods of internal analysis that Ventris used are more in common with cryptography than with linguistics or philology; certainly, knowledge of the relevant history of both of these was required, but Ventris had enough of both for the purpose; he saw that. This is not to depreciate his achievement in any way. The value of a discovery is in no ratio to the range of knowledge possessed by the discoverer. With Linear A, on the other hand, to which he would well have turned had he lived longer, the quantity of

material available is so small that to achieve any breakthrough by methods of internal and quantitative analysis is very difficult, if not impossible.

When even Ventris felt he must devote the whole of his time to the problem, how fortunate for us all that he had the private means to do this. If he had required a grant, he might well never have obtained one. How entertaining that in these days of scholarships, studentships, research grants and so on, a major discovery should still be made by a gifted amateur of independent means – as with Evans in his day.

A theist will find no difficulty in seeing the hand of Providence, which watches over the fall of a sparrow, giving Ventris the particular abilities, the inclinations and the experiences, and placing him in the background, surroundings and influences that would lead to decipherment. A non-theist will have no difficulty in saying that great discoveries in the fields of the mind are made by rare people, suited to the task, if and when the time is ripe, the scene set for the discovery to be made. If and when the electricity is in the clouds, a suitable conductor will attract it. If it is not there, no conductor can bring the lightning down. There may be mute inglorious Miltons in a number of fields, who would have made great discoveries, if they had lived at the right time and place to do so. Perhaps in this sense the hour called forth the young man Michael Ventris, O.B.E., Ph.D. (Uppsala).

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# 1902 and all that : the defence of Classics in the early 20th century

Chris Stray

JACT, now well into an energetic if uncomfortable middle age, was born in the aftermath of the abolition of 'compulsory Latin' at the end of the 1950s. The battle of behalf of Classics since then has taken the form of an orderly retreat marked by a succession of spirited counter-offensives – Cambridge Latin, JACT Greek, the Greek and Latin summer schools, and so on. These initiatives owe much to the salutary puncturing of a longstanding complacency in the traumatic days of the early 1960s. But it would be a mistake to think of the first half of the 20th century as a period of unalloyed bliss for those concerned with the teaching of Classics. If the traumas and initiatives of the 1960s were promoted by the abolition of compulsory Latin, a similar crisis had been resolved – or rather, defused – by the abolition of 'compulsory Greek' at Oxford and Cambridge in the years following the First World War. Together with the publication of the report of the Prime Minister's Committee on Classics ('*The Classics in Education*', 1921), these decisions brought to an end a lengthy and at times vitriolic public debate on Classics which had begun with the passage of the 1902 Education Act.

The passage of the Education Bill through Parliament in 1902 is more than just an artificial landmark. It led directly to the foundation of the Classical Association, which then played the co-ordinating role in the contemporary defence of Classics which JACT was to play in the 1960s. It also sparked off a widespread debate on the curriculum of the new municipal secondary schools, in which the role of Classics formed a major bone of contention. This can be demonstrated by a quotation from a characteristically trenchant article entitled '*Are the Classics to go?*', contributed to the November 1902 issue of the *Fortnightly Review* by J. P. Postgate:

At a time when we appear to be on the eve of extensive reconstructions in the higher educational system of the country, the first duty of those who believe that a due recognition of the claims of Greek and Latin is vital to our intellectual welfare is to know what they want. It is clear that the Classics will not be allowed the lion's share which has been theirs in the past, and the question is, how much we must struggle to retain.

The publication of this article led to an extensive correspondence between Postgate and his critics and supporters, the major result of which was the foundation of the Classical Association in December 1903. The continuing possession by Classics of the 'lion's share' of the public-school curriculum was clearly the most pressing, as it was the most embarrassing, subject of debate in the Association's public meetings; as can be seen from the introductory remarks of Sir Richard Collins, Master of the Rolls, who chaired the foundation meeting:

...they were perhaps not concerned to deny that some of those

students who passed through our public schools and had received a classical training had not quite reached the standard of Senior Classics when they came away from school. (Laughter) The case was not proved against classical studies of reason of the fact that a considerable percentage of persons passed through our public schools without attaining any very high degree of scholarship while they were there.

The speaker's oblique phrasing and his audience's laughter are alike anxious rather than confident: and with reason. Boys of 13 at the larger public schools of the day spent about 40% of their time on Classics, and this rose to about 60% at 16 years. Only a very few, of course, could reach the standard of Senior Classic (the old term for the candidate who headed the first class in the Cambridge Tripos). The brutal fact was, however, that large numbers of ex-public school boys, who had been stuffed with classical learning for up to ten years, failed to pass the fossilised but simple requirements of the intermediate examinations at Oxford ('Responsions') and Cambridge ('Little Go'). The failure rate was the subject of much argument, but contemporary estimates range from a third to a half.

The reader may reasonably ask, What Classics, then, were these pupils taught? In general, the answer is that they spent their early teens (and before) memorising rules of grammar and syntax, vocabulary lists, and passages for repetition. Later on, Greek and Roman authors were read, but largely as corpses of rules and exceptions; while the focus of attention was largely on the practice of composition, the gradient of difficulty and prestige leading upward from prose to verse, Latin to Greek. Much of the burden laid upon the younger pupils derived from a concern with the discipline of memory which must be distinguished from the rationalist idea of 'discipline of faculty'. Here the learning of exceptions seems to have been stressed almost more than the learning of rules. The other major source of this burden was that the classical teaching in boys' public schools was 'directed towards the ultimate production of a certain number of finished scholars in Latin and in Greek, educated for the most part on what may be called linguistic lines, i.e., with special attention to Grammar and Composition.' This was the conclusion of the CA's Curricula Committee, which was set up in 1905 'to consider in what respect the present School Curriculum in Latin and Greek can be lightened and the means of instruction improved'. The Committee recommended that for 'the average boy, with whom...we are mainly concerned', the load of grammar learning should be reduced; and concentrated on Latin rather than Greek, which should be taught 'only with a view to the intelligent reading of the Greek authors'.

It is easy to talk of the burden of rote learning borne by 'the average boy'; and most of us probably know, however vaguely, that several years of 'gerund-grinding' were his lot in 19th-



public schools. The specifics can be learnt by going through the convoluted paragraphs of the early work of Kennedy's *Latin Primer*. Kennedy ran into stiff opposition within the Headmasters' Conference, largely because he tried to incorporate into the book the technical vocabulary of comparative philology, which when he was still unstable and developing. Other, earlier nineteenth century grammars had no such excuse. At the CA's general meeting, the Homeric scholar D. B. Munro explained how

...a few years ago...I was asked...to look at the grammar which was then mostly used in this country, the late Bishop Wordsworth's Greek grammar, and certainly at the first glance I thought that it admitted of very considerable simplification. For instance, there was a very long chapter on the irregular verbs, and I made the experiment of going through it and drawing a pencil through all the forms which did not exist at all, which were fictitious, never had existed at all, and were not to be found in any good author whatever. Out of a quite moderate number of pages I found five or six whole pages which could be removed by this simple process.

In the 1920s, the majority of public schools had 'lightened the burden' of the average classical pupil by streamlining and simplifying grammar teaching on the above lines. The other major casualty was composition, traditionally the crowning glory of English classical scholarship and the feature which distinguished it from the factual learning of the German *Lehrbuch* tradition. But a yet greater casualty of the reforms of this period has still to be mentioned: the teaching of Greek. It is easy to forget, in talking of 'Classics', what a broad and divided subject it is. This point was forcefully made by J. W. Mackail in his opening address to the CA's first general meeting. Mackail's subject was 'The place of Greek in human life'. The name of the CA, he pointed out, referred to a single entity, Classics. But Greece and Rome were civilisations, differently related to the culture and society of the modern West. Greece 'represents the dissolving force of analysis and the creative force of pure intellect', while Rome 'represents all the constructive and conservative forces which make life into an organic structure. Order, reverence for authority... are the creation of the will and intelligence.' He concluded that 'The place of Greece is definite and assured...Greece is in contrast to the thing which we are so far from knowing that we do not have a name for it...While Rome has laid down for the world a realised standard of human conduct, Greece rears up before us an unrealisable ideal of superhuman intelligence.'

It is not to say purple stuff. Yet it is not to be taken lightly or dismissed as empty rhetoric. One good reason for taking it seriously is that Mackail was a senior official in the Ministry of Education; influential both there, where he had previously been put in charge of the Secondary Education Commission, and in Oxford, where he was soon to be elected Professor of Poetry. In his capacity as a civil servant, he was largely responsible for drafting the famous (or notorious) recommendations for Secondary Schools of 1904, in which the teaching of Latin is singled out for special emphasis. Greek, on the other hand, was left outside the Board's curricular recommendations until 1910; until then, grant-aided schools charged extra fees for teaching it. Another good reason for taking

Mackail's relative estimates of Latin and Greek seriously is that his was a majority view. The experience of school inspectors in this period was that support for Latin remained strong well down the social scale, whereas Greek was widely regarded as a 'luxury subject', associated with the upper classes and resented as an elitist badge. An appendix to the CA Curricula Committee's report of 1907 declared that in some of the new secondary schools, 'the teaching of Latin has met with no opposition from the parents, though these are mostly working-class folks, having a strenuous life in the Black Country.' Ten years later, when the struggle for 'Compulsory Greek' at Oxbridge was in its final stage, Mackail commented in an office minute that Greek was supported by 'two extremes: classical scholars and those educated classically on the old lines, and the ultra-democratic movement represented by the WEA. It is remarkable that here Greek is much more pressed for than Latin...the great mass of public opinion is all against Greek. The scientific extremists always concentrate on Greek; if they claim this point ((i.e. the abolition of compulsory Greek)) they will be willing to leave Latin alone.'

The degree to which Latin was regarded as an entrenched part of English education can be measured by the fact that whereas with Greek the issue was one of survival, with Latin the burning question of the day concerned its pronunciation. The issue is hardly a live one any more, except in the sense that there is room for scholarly disagreement. In the late 19th and early 20th century, when so many educated men had learnt lengthy passages of Greek and Latin off by heart and enjoyed reciting them, and when quotations in Latin were still to be heard in Parliament, the question was part of a shared literary culture; more than this, it also involved several contemporary ideological impulses which formed part of English culture and society; in other words, the debates on Latin pronunciation were not just about the pronunciation of Latin.

The pragmatic basis for the reform of Latin pronunciation was simply that existing practice varied so widely from school to school and college to college that mutual incomprehension was common. This was most noticeable at the universities, where undergraduates who used their old schools' peculiar 'dialects' met with lecturers whose textual quotations they could not understand, just as they had difficulty in understanding each others'. In case the reader suspects that this picture is exaggerated, let me quote the remarks of S. H. Butcher - the editor of Aristotle's *Poetics* and generally regarded as being, after Jebb, the country's leading Hellenist - at a CA meeting of 1906 where the subject was discussed:

You will find schools in England in which there are at least two and probably half a dozen different pronunciations...boys have to unlearn at the secondary school what they have learnt at the preparatory school...Neither at Oxford nor at Cambridge, perhaps not within a single college, does any uniform system prevail - not even a consistently incorrect system.

'Uniform system' - these were words to be used with caution in those days. To understand why, one needs to appreciate the wider context of the pronunciation debate. In the later 19th century, the industrial lead Britain had gained from being the original site of the industrial revolution had started to slip, and production and research in several vital fields was moving ahead faster in other countries, notably in the new united Germany. Viewed in connexion with the agricul-



tural depression of the 80s and 90s, and the setbacks of the Boer War, and through the spectacles of Social Darwinism – as it commonly was – this situation gave rise to widespread alarm at the prospects for national survival. The problem was, how to compare efficiently with other nations without becoming unEnglish? in particular, without becoming ‘Prussianised’ – in other words, dominated by an efficient but ruthless central government bureaucracy? The ideological currents which flowed from such concerns revived the tradition of Burke’s attack on the Enlightenment and the French Revolution: freedom, individuality and variety were English virtues, uniformity and central control would kill them. Thus although a uniform pronunciation of Latin was clearly pragmatically sensible, it ran against a powerful ideological grain. Many of the larger public schools regarded their own ‘dialect’ as a symbol of their traditional identity and their independence, and in the case of Westminster, for example, this was reinforced by the annual Latin play, spoken in the school’s distinctive Latin pronunciation.

The history of the pronunciation debate within the Head Masters’ Conference offers a good illustration of this. It should be remembered that this body was set up, in 1869, to organise opposition to proposals for state supervision of secondary education contained in the Endowed Schools Bill. The offending provisions were removed, but the Conference remained as a kind of parliament for the public schools – or rather, a talking-shop, since, true to its origins, its members were extremely reluctant to take decisions which bound themselves or each other. The perceived importance of the pronunciation of Latin to the members of the Conference can be judged from the fact that at its first meeting, in December 1869, it formed the first item of business after constitutional matters had been settled. For several years, in fact, it was discussed almost annually. In part, this was because every time a (non-binding) vote was taken, the defeated minority were encouraged to try again next year, when new members might have been elected, and old members might be dead or absent. At its inaugural meeting, the HMC agreed to ask the Professors of Latin at Oxford and Cambridge to draw up a scheme of recommendations. But when this was received in 1872, it was accepted, but not made compulsory on members, and so had little immediate effect. The obvious absurdity of trying to teach their students an *English* pronunciation led the classical professors of the new University of Wales, founded in 1893, to publish their own recommendations for a (reformed) scheme. These scholarly reports largely agreed with one another, and were confirmed by the CA’s own report on the pronunciation of Latin, issued in 1906 and supported by a majority vote of HMC in the same year. In 1907, the CA recommendations were endorsed by the Board of Education.

The battle was won – or was it? Soundings taken by both CA and HMC in 1912 suggested that the vanquished refused to surrender. The number of preparatory schools adopting the new pronunciation, about 200 out of 300 originally polled, had dropped to 165. Of 39 public schools providing information to the CA, only 24 followed the new rules *in toto*. The public and prep. schools blamed the backsliding on each other; and one headmaster summed up the HMC’s eternal difficulties by pointing out that the last time the Conference had discussed the issue, the headmaster of Rugby ‘with characteristic

incisiveness commanded us all to use the new pronunciation and with equal independence added, “But I’m not going to do it myself”.

The debates on the pronunciation of Latin, then, were about English freedom. The ‘good (or bad) old English pronunciation’, in fact, had something of the status of Chesterton’s ‘rolling English road’, which, as the reformed will remember, was here before the Romans were: it might be wrong, it might be inefficient, but God! it was English. Even for those who could accept uniformity, there were other grounds for rejecting the ‘new’, ‘reformed’ ‘Roman’ pronunciation. To some of the gentlemanly authorities of the public schools, it reeked of professors, and it was enough to condemn it. As T. E. Page wrote to the *Times* from Charterhouse in 1903, ‘In plain truth, the education is being much injured by professors... They do not know exactly what to teach and how to teach it; they live in a world of theory, and from it, hold out a guiding hand to men in hourly contact with hard facts.’ To those who could accept guidance from English scholars, what they saw as the Teutonic style in the marshalling of philological evidence was enough to repel them. Finally, to those for whom German Protestantism was a saving grace, the Catholic associations of the new pronunciation’s Italian nasal twang were anathema (in a book he wrote on the subject, Postgate mentions the furore caused by a Cambridge classicist on holiday in Rome who heard ‘domina’ as ‘domina’ and promptly uttered loud denunciations of Mariolatry).

Latin survived the 1910s: it broadened its recruitment, spreading into the new secondary schools and the cities, and universities and becoming, in the latter, a more popular degree subject than ‘full Classics’ in the 1920s. As Mackail had declared, it was familiar, and it offered the prospect of a discipline, both intellectual and moral. This last virtue, which should remember, was highly prized in conservative quarters in the era of the ‘new voter’, that powerful but unsocialised beast whom enfranchisement was uncaging at the beginning of the century. Greek had no such defence, only the hope of freedom of thought and the taint of an elitist past – the worst of both worlds – and so was, in Gilbert Murray’s phrase, ‘thrown to the wolves’. Cambridge in 1919, Oxford the following year, abandoned ‘compulsory Greek’, and its teaching dwindled in the schools, preserved only by the continued adherence of the independent sector. By the end of the 1920s...but that is another story.

(The above piece is based on some preliminary findings in a quite extensive programme of research into the changing content and status of Classics in English education since 1800. I hope to cover both the broad outlines of curriculum change in universities and schools, and also the everyday realities of teaching and the experiences of individuals. May I therefore invite, from readers of the *Review*, any comments, suggestions or references that may occur to them? A request to one retired Classics teacher to answer a few questions has produced a detailed autobiography in several instalments! If any reader were willing to provide any such material, especially information relating to the period before 1960, I should be very glad to receive it. C.A.S.)

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