

WILLIAM ST CLAIR

William Linn St Clair

7 December 1937 – 30 June 2021

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1992

by

RODERICK BEATON

Fellow of the Academy

Born in London to Scottish parents and brought up Falkirk, Stirlingshire, William St Clair embarked on his career as an independent scholar while working as a senior civil servant in Whitehall. After publishing a series of landmark biographical studies relating to Romanticism and the creation of modern Greece, he left the civil service to take up research positions successively at All Souls College, Oxford, Trinity College, Cambridge, and the University of London. His scholarly interests encompassed the history of publishing and reading practices in Britain since the invention of printing, women's studies, the history of slavery, and the custodianship of cultural heritage, exemplified by the notorious case of the 'Elgin Marbles' or 'Sculptures of the Parthenon'. He was an early champion of Open Access publishing and a co-founder and Director of Open Book Publishers.



William H. Clavis

Among the rollcall of Fellows of the British Academy in recent years, the name of ‘Mr William St Clair’ stood out. He never took a doctorate or held a teaching post at a university, and was always proud to call himself an Independent Scholar. His entry in the *Directory of Research and Expertise* for the School of Advanced Study, University of London, lists his research interests as: ‘Archaeology, Classics, English Literature, History of art, History of the book, Romanticism’.¹ During a lifetime in which fields of professional academic specialism tended to become ever narrower, St Clair, on the contrary, chose to tread a very different path, inspired perhaps by the Enlightenment ideal of the all-round man of learning. To achieve the success that he did, in several senses ‘against the grain’ of his times, required extraordinary resources of personality: tenacity, persistence, a forensic attention to detail, and above all a strong moral conviction.

Irmgard Maassen, his co-editor on one of his projects, writes that ‘He was intellectually fearless – he needed to be as he often came to the topics he wrote about essentially as an outsider.’ Others who knew him at various times in his life and worked alongside him have recalled his bearlike quality (both in physique and manner), a stubbornness that could be exasperating, but also his many acts of kindness and generosity, particularly towards younger scholars and the graduate students with whom he came into contact at Oxford, Cambridge, and London.² A prolific biographer himself, St Clair also reflected sceptically on the nature of biography as an art, and ‘used to insist that the truth of a life is likely to lie beyond the testimony of archives and documents’.³ Anyone attempting to write a memoir such as this has been fairly warned!

Early life and civil service career

William Linn St Clair was born in London on 7 December 1937. His father, Joseph, was an engineering draughtsman who at the time was representing a group of Scottish foundries. Joseph was an enthusiastic follower of art and ballet, and back in his native land a keen mountaineer. William’s mother, Susan Bow, was an English teacher, with a degree from the University of Glasgow. Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War the family moved back to Scotland, where the young William St Clair attended schools near Glasgow and Falkirk before he became a day boy at the prestigious Edinburgh Academy.

¹ <https://research.sas.ac.uk/search/fellow/158>.

² See the website of Open Book Publishers: <https://blogs.openbookpublishers.com/in-memoriam-william-st-clair/>.

³ Irmgard Maassen, personal communication. See also the volume on the nature of biography commissioned as part of the centenary celebrations of the British Academy: Peter France and William St Clair (eds), *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2002), and especially the chapter by William St Clair, ‘The Biographer as Archaeologist’.

An only child for the first ten years of his life, St Clair became the eldest of three with the arrival of his twin brothers, David and John. When their father died of cancer six years later, he became to some extent the head of the family at the age of sixteen.

From Edinburgh Academy, St Clair won a scholarship in classics to St John's College, Oxford, where he rowed for the First VIII and also made his first visit to Greece, the country that would figure so largely in some of his best known books. From university he went straight into the British civil service, bypassing the postgraduate study that would increasingly become a prerequisite for an academic career in the decades to come. Declining a position in the Scottish Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (known pejoratively as 'Ag and Fish'), St Clair negotiated a more prestigious alternative as Assistant Principal in the Admiralty. His brother David recalls:

He spent time in Whitehall, at the Admiralty naval headquarters in Bath, the naval base Portsmouth, and at sea in many types of naval vessels including an aircraft carrier. During a stay in Portsmouth when he got to know the officers they allowed him for fun to be photographed transferring by breeches buoy between two destroyers dressed in senior civil service garb that included wearing a bowler hat and carrying a large rolled up umbrella. He served as Private Secretary to successive Civil Lords of the Admiralty in Conservative and Labour governments.

It was during his time at the Admiralty that St Clair married Heidi Fischer, with whom he had two daughters, who survive him. After the Admiralty was merged into the Ministry of Defence in 1964, St Clair took on a new role reviewing British defence arrangements for the Labour government led by Harold Wilson during the last years of empire. His duties took him frequently to Germany, and farther afield to Aden, Malaya, Borneo, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Secondment to the Foreign Office (from 1968 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office), as First Secretary from 1966 to 1969, gave him responsibility during the dispute with Spain over the status of Gibraltar, and latterly saw him briefly serving in the Paris embassy.

In 1969, St Clair moved to HM Treasury, with the grade of Principal, and was promoted to Assistant Secretary in 1974. In this role he was involved in devising and implementing the Prices and Incomes Policy of the Conservative government of Edward Heath. The previous year, he had separated from his wife, but there was no divorce; although many close relationships would follow, St Clair seems never again to have wished to take on the commitments of marriage.

Of his brother's subsequent career at the Treasury, David St Clair writes:

In 1978, he was head of Industrial Policy Division and helped to devise and operate the Callaghan/Healey industrial policy aimed at reviving British competitiveness in manufacturing. He was also Treasury member of the Monopolies and Mergers Panel, and of several industrial National Economic Development Committees (NEDC). By 1979 St Clair was

head of the Treasury Overseas Aid Division and his career appeared to be going from strength to strength. However when the Thatcher government came to power things changed. St Clair had a degree in Classics from Oxford and as such was looked upon as a relative amateur. ... 'We admire your intellect but not your commitment', was what he was told.

In 1982 he was semi-sidelined into what at the time was considered a position of low prestige in the Treasury. As head of the Superannuation Division, he was responsible for the Principal Civil Service pension scheme and for Treasury supervision of the other public service pension schemes. He unexpectedly enjoyed this assignment and during this period became interested in policy evaluation with a view to improving and professionalising decision making within the civil service in general. In 1985 he was made deputy head of a Cabinet Office/Treasury joint management unit, charged with improving policy analysis and evaluation across government. In 1988 he was promoted to Deputy Under Secretary and was able to attend the Top Management Programme restricted to those potentially promotable to the highest civil grades. His promotion coincided with the publication of a booklet that he wrote for HM Treasury. Using his well honed literary skills he produced a booklet that was easily readable and accessible to all grades of management. It was highly influential and was translated into several languages, including French, Arabic, and Turkish. In 1990 he was promoted to Under-Secretary with responsibility for Treasury control of the civil service and shortly thereafter published his second practical manual for civil service managers.⁴

It was at this time, in his mid-fifties, that St Clair suddenly developed severe coronary angina. Quadruple heart bypass surgery in 1992 was successful. But as his brother recalls, at that time the life expectancy for someone with the condition was about ten years. This seems to have been the moment for St Clair to take stock of his life and decide his priorities for the time remaining to him. Shortly afterwards he took early retirement from the civil service to embark full-time on his career as an independent scholar (an independence, in his case, underwritten by a generous pension).

Writer and independent scholar

Earlier in the same year, St Clair had been elected a Fellow of the British Academy, on whose Council he would serve from 1996 to 2000. He was already the author of four acclaimed books, a prolific book reviewer for publications such as the *Financial Times*, the *TLS*, and the *Economist*, and a prominent member of PEN International. He had been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1973, of the Huntington Library in California in 1985, and as a Visiting Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford, in 1981–2. Once

⁴William St Clair, *Policy Evaluation: A Guide for Managers* (London: HMSO, 1988); *Executive Agencies: A Guide to Setting Targets and Judging Performance* (London: HMSO, 1992).

he had left the civil service, affiliations at prestigious research institutions followed one another: as a Fellow of All Souls from 1992 to 1996, of Trinity College, Cambridge, from 1998 to 2006, and thereafter until his death, as a Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of English Studies, part of the School of Advanced Study at the University of London.

St Clair's parting with public administration was a protracted affair, however. From 1991 to 1998, alongside his academic affiliation, he acted as consultant to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). His role was chiefly to advise on strategic planning, resource allocation and budgeting, performance measurement, and evaluation. On a visit to Turkey on behalf of the OECD, he had a narrow escape after being arrested by local police while photographing a Kurdish refugee camp in the southeast of the country. Although he was interrogated for several hours, the officers did not think to search his car – in which he was carrying a comprehensive list of Turkish writers imprisoned for political reasons, that had been entrusted to him by PEN International, on whose Writers in Prison Committee he was serving at the time. It was one instance when the collision between St Clair's role as a public servant and his service to literature could have brought him into real danger.

It was through his involvement in PEN that St Clair became a friend of the American playwright Arthur Miller, whose biography he offered to write. The two men corresponded and met frequently between 1992 and Miller's death in 2005. Miller was fully in agreement with the plan for a biography, on condition that it must be posthumous. Miller's third wife, the Austrian photographer Inge Morath, had also known St Clair well and had been supportive of the project. But Morath died three years before Miller, and the playwright's literary executors decided not to grant St Clair the access to his subject's private diaries that had been promised. In the words of his brother David, 'St Clair always claimed the diaries were not essential for him to continue writing the biography; but most of the momentum was gone and he reluctantly did not pursue it further.'

William St Clair remained fully active until his death, in Oxford, on the afternoon of Wednesday 30 June 2021. His last book was in the final stages of preparation for press; with the relaxing of restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, he was looking forward to travelling to Greece to receive an award for his work on the Greek Revolution of the 1820s. In November he had been due to give a keynote lecture at the University of Edinburgh at a conference that I was co-organising. Ten days before he died, he wrote to me a long email, asking for details of the arrangements, and sharing his latest thoughts about the publication of his book and how his new work could best be presented to a live audience in Edinburgh.

Contribution to scholarship

Biography: Romanticism, Greece, and beyond

St Clair's career as a writer, biographer, and historian seems to have begun almost by accident, with an advertisement in *The Times*. Mrs A.C. Langland, of Abingdon, had inherited the papers of a 'great-grand-uncle' and was seeking someone interested in acquiring them. Her relative turned out to be Dr Philip Hunt, who as a young clergyman had been engaged by Thomas Bruce, Seventh Earl of Elgin, as his private secretary during the latter's service as HM Ambassador to Constantinople from 1799 to 1803.⁵ And so was born *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, St Clair's first book, published in 1967.

At heart, in its original form, at just over 300 pages, this was a biography. Its subject is a minor figure on the fringes of the British Romantic movement – a Scottish nobleman with a chip on his shoulder, congenital syphilis, an unbending sense of honour and his own dignity – and far too little money to encompass his grand schemes. Starting out with an ambition to use his embassy to the Ottoman empire as an opportunity to benefit 'the progress of the Fine Arts in Great Britain' by bringing back drawings of Greek antiquities to be found in Ottoman lands, Elgin moved on to the notorious removal of a large amount of sculpture from the Parthenon and other ancient temples that had been built in the 5th century BC to adorn the Acropolis of Athens. Later known as the 'Elgin Marbles', and later still as the 'Sculptures of the Parthenon', these monuments of the highpoint of ancient Greek art would end up being sold in 1816 to the British Museum, where they have remained, as the subject of controversy, ever since.

Subsequently, St Clair would return to the topic of this first book and also become an activist in the campaign for the restitution of the sculptures to their original home in Athens. But in 1967 his focus was firmly biographical. His treatment of his flawed subject is penetrating, but always evenhanded. And as well as being a blow-by-blow account of all that Elgin set in motion and that his agents did in Athens in his name, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* is a fine exploration, not just of its biographical subject, but of the multiple ways – mostly unforeseen by Elgin himself – in which the ambassador's controversial actions did indeed have an impact in Great Britain and throughout Europe: not by influencing practice in the arts and crafts, but in establishing the reputation of the sculptors of 5th-century BC Athens at the very pinnacle of European artistic achievement.

From one tarnished and troubled individual on the fringes of British Romanticism, it would not be long before St Clair would move on to another. If Elgin had been, in the eyes

⁵ William St Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles: The Controversial History of the Parthenon Sculptures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. ix (preface to the 1st edition of 1967).

of many, a thief and a plunderer, Edward John Trelawny (1792–1881) was, as St Clair’s subtitle has it, *The Incurable Romancer*. An incorrigible liar, fantasist and self-publicist, Trelawny would outlive all his contemporaries to write two (often contradictory, as St Clair points out) memoirs of his time spent in the company of the great Romantic poets of the ‘second generation’, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron. St Clair is forensic in pursuing the facts and the reality of the man beneath the many layers of self-fashioning – often in characteristically acerbic style. But, as a good biographer should, he never loses the focus on his subject, and never simply debunks him either. One of the achievements of this eminently readable, and still largely definitive, book is to secure a place for the picturesque and charismatic wannabe Romantic poet in the company of his more famous peers. In St Clair’s reading, *Records of Shelley, Byron and the Author* (1878) by E.J. Trelawny comes to seem in its own right a belated achievement, as well as an apologia, of the Romantic era.

Trelawny appeared in 1977. Before that, St Clair had broadened his canvas considerably, while still keeping within the timeframe of the Romantic period and the geographical space of Greece, where some of Trelawny’s most famous exploits also took place. *That Greece Might Still Be Free: The Philhellenes in the War of Independence* is, in a sense, a group biography, with a cast of approximately 1,200 – the number of volunteers who set out from all over Europe and from the United States of America to take part in a revolutionary war that began in 1821 and ended with international recognition for Greece as a sovereign state a decade later. St Clair was risking moving into a crowded field when he published this book in 1972; the respected University of London historian Douglas Dakin had published *British and American Philhellenes During the War of Greek Independence* in 1955; *The Philhellenes* by the prolific C.M. Woodhouse, himself a decorated war hero who had served in occupied Greece during the Second World War, had appeared only three years previously. The achievement was all the more remarkable in that, unlike those authors, St Clair, on his own frank admission, did not read modern Greek.

It may have helped that in the early 1970s Greece was in the grip of the military dictatorship of the ‘Colonels’. The modern country was frequently in the news; indeed interest in contemporary Greece across Europe and North America seems to have peaked during those years. As well as being repressive at home, the ‘Colonels’ promoted a brash and naive version of nationalist exceptionalism in their propaganda and public statements. This provided St Clair with the perfect target for the acerbic irony of which he was a master. The heroic themes trumpeted by the regime in Greece became fair game; the author’s revulsion at the many excesses committed in the name of liberty is plain to see. A recurrent theme is that Greeks were as often responsible for horrific atrocities as their enemies the Turks and Muslim Albanians. For this reason, the book was not welcome at the time in Greece; indeed a Greek translation was not commissioned until 2020. On the other hand,

it was well received by its intended readership; Woodhouse generously paid tribute to a ‘melancholy story [told] with sardonic relish and lucid scholarship’.⁶

Part of what makes this book such an enduring classic is its unwavering focus on the foreign volunteers who are its prime subject. St Clair knew very well that the story of the Greek struggle for independence had been told many times already, as indeed it also has been since. The Greeks, whose revolution it was, are in a sense secondary. As he had done with Elgin previously, and would with Trelawny later, St Clair gets under the skin of the perceptions, the expectations (often cruelly falsified by events), and above all the motivations and responses of so many different individuals, of different nationalities, ideologies and backgrounds, who risked everything to fight in a war and for a cause that was not even their own. One of the most poignant aspects of the book, and one that links it closely with the biographies that chronologically frame it, is the author’s unswerving exposure of the assumptions that brought many of his protagonists into the field. Again and again he highlights the unbridgeable gaps that separated classically educated youths, straight out of northern universities, from the realities of an inter-confessional war of extermination on the ground. Once again, the biographical subjects are not simply debunked – but once again, too, just as in the more conventional biographies of Elgin and Trelawny, the contradictions that made their experiences so often tragic are mercilessly exposed.

St Clair’s most ambitious foray into the genre of biography was published while he was still at the Treasury, in 1989. *The Godwins and the Shelleys* has the subtitle, *The Biography of a Family*. And the author delivers on his promise. Framed by the eight decades of the life of William Godwin, the prolific radical thinker and author of *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), it tells the closely interwoven stories of Godwin himself, of the early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, who died giving birth to their daughter, the future Mary Shelley in 1797, and the short and tempestuous life of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Once again St Clair’s gift for meticulous archival research is matched by close focus on the documented actions, thoughts and experiences of his subjects, from whom he also exercises a consistently sardonic distance.

St Clair had begun to reflect critically about the nature of the biographer’s task. Not only, he realised in the book’s final chapter, was he following in the footsteps of Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, who in later life had shaped the biographies of her father and her husband for posterity, but his task had actually been to undo precisely what she had done; as he put it, ‘Mary Shelley ... broke the link between the ideas and the lives. In 1831 she had written a memoir of Godwin without mentioning Shelley: in 1839 she wrote her notes in [sic] Shelley without mentioning Godwin’.⁷ It was William St Clair who

⁶C.M. Woodhouse, review, *The Observer* cited in William St Clair, *That Greece Might Still Be Free: The Philhellenes in the War of Independence* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2008 [1st ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1972], front matter.

⁷William St Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The Biography of a Family* (London: Faber, 1989), p. 392.

had painstakingly reassembled the whole picture. In the process he had also teased out a complex skein of ideas and behaviours that linked the radical wing of Enlightenment thought in Britain in the 1790s with the most explosive manifestations of Romanticism, in *Frankenstein* and the visionary and political poems of Shelley two decades later.

Three densely documented appendices to *The Godwins and the Shelleys*, probably skipped by most readers, simultaneously hark back to St Clair's rigorous training on the job as a senior civil servant and anticipate directions that his scholarship would take in future. Decoding the record of his sexual relationship with Mary Wollstonecraft that Godwin kept in his journal during their year together before their marriage, St Clair trains the spotlight on intimate details that had previously been literally unmentionable in a serious, scholarly biography – but also on attitudes and practices related to sex and birth control at the time. It may well have been while he was working on the life story of Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), that William St Clair became, himself, in his own distinctive way, a champion of modern feminism.

A second appendix, a bibliographical essay on the 'advice books' for women which proliferated during the decades covered by the biography, takes this topic further, and lays the foundation for what was to become a major editing and publishing project a decade later. A graph which plots the number of such books published in each five-year period from 1780 to 1825, relative to the price of government stocks during the same years, has the title (which may or may not be tongue-in-cheek): 'Women: Indicators of changing anxiety levels among the threatened groups'. Rarely can the routines of HM Treasury have found such an inventive application in the field of literary and social studies! And the final appendix, 'Shelley and the pirates', looks forward directly to what would become St Clair's next writing project, as it explores in detail the publishing practices of the time and their impact on the way that Shelley's work came to be received by the reading public.

Conduct literature

The 'advice books' into which St Clair had tapped in investigating the background to the proto-feminist writings of Mary Wollstonecraft turned out to have been the tip of a very large iceberg indeed. *Conduct Literature for Women I, 1500–1640*, edited by William St Clair and Irmgard Maassen, was published in six volumes in 2000; the companion set, also in six volumes, covering the period 1640–1710, two years later. The sum total of just under 5,000 printed pages was priced at the time at just under £1,000. It was not lost on the editors that this exorbitant cost was prohibitive for all but the largest libraries – a realisation that was to have important consequences later. Consisting mostly of facsimiles of original, rare editions (some complete, some excerpted) with a wealth of contextual material supplied by the two editors, this huge undertaking came to fruition too early to benefit

from digital publication – of whose potential St Clair would become a vigorous champion in the last years of his life.

Conduct literature, as defined by his co-editor, Irmgard Maassen, encompasses a wide range

of admonitory and instructional genres – among them marriage and funeral sermons, household manuals, treatises on education, but also chapbook verse and satire. Advising on apparel and comportment, talk and taste, piety and leisure, household affairs and reading for all walks and ranks of life, these texts are, on account of their overtly ideological nature, a prime source for studying historical constructions of identities and class and gender relations.⁸

On her collaboration with St Clair on this project, Maassen writes:

We first met in 1996, at a Romanticism conference in Duisburg, Germany, where he gave a talk on the reception of Byron, and I on the anxiety of reading in Mary Wollstonecraft. He took an interest – he was quite in the habit of taking an interest in other people’s work, and was always tremendously generous with his wide-ranging knowledge and encouragement of younger scholars. His readiness to share in others’ work, I think, provided him with the intellectual exchange and stimulus he did not, as a scholar working outside the university, get through the more mundane business of teaching.

As it turned out, William had on his overflowing shelves (and in storage somewhere up in Golders Green) what was easily the largest collection of English conduct books for women in the country. ... Hunting down the texts for the edition was immensely enjoyable – William would dive into the gloom of old libraries as if in his native element, to emerge triumphantly wielding a new piece of relevant information, which more often than not led to another heated conversation over a dinner getting cold. [St Clair] was one of the most stimulating intellectual companions one can hope to meet, interested in new perspectives and ideas, witty in conversation, refreshingly and surprisingly unstuffy.

On the significance of this project in relation to St Clair’s other scholarly work, Maassen concludes:

[H]is interest in conduct literature for women may, at first sight, strike one as a bit unexpected. But no-one writing about the Godwin-Shelley circle, as he had done, can remain unsympathetic to feminist concerns. William wore his feminism lightly, and with a disarming degree of self-irony, but it was an integral part of his enlightened, atheist rationalism. His interest grew directly out of his book-historical research: conduct titles were plentiful, often came in large print-runs, were frequently excessively (depressingly, from a feminist point of view) long-lived and highly intertextual They provided excellent examples for the way such advice migrated through different formats for different readers. They also contained lots of fascinating paratexts that shed light on marketing strategies.

⁸ Irmgard Maassen, ‘Whoring, Scolding, Gadding About: Threats to Family Order in Early Modern Conduct Literature’, *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*, 9/2 (2002), 159–71.

All this feeds directly into the materialist, cultural-economic key concern of William's [next book], *The Reading Nation*: how the accessibility of books, their longevity, pricing and licensing shaped the reception and mentalities of reader constituencies.

'The political economy of reading'

If his work on the conduct books grew out of the first two appendices to *The Godwins and the Shelleys*, St Clair's magnum opus, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, published in 2004, assuredly grew out of the third. Weighing in at more than 700 pages, with thirteen appendices taking up more than a third of the total, and illustrated by numerous tables and reproductions of engravings from rare editions, this has been described as 'the kind of book that few academics are able to write anymore: a massive compilation of material, based on years of archival work, that thoroughly transforms knowledge about a topic of widespread interest'.⁹ The author's aim is nothing less than 'to develop a political economy of texts, books, reading, and mentalities'.¹⁰ St Clair was not, of course, the first to examine the practices of publishing, disseminating and (so far as this is recoverable) reading, and in this way to open out the discussion of literature from the production and the product to its consumers and the intermediaries whose activities make the connection possible. Conceptually, St Clair's project has much in common with 'Reception Aesthetic' or the 'reader-response theory' associated with the German theorists Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser; but in his case the formidable intellectual underpinning that lies behind it owes more to the empirical traditions of the British civil service than to theoretical hermeneutics. Rigorous, data-driven, and far-ranging in its scope, *The Reading Nation* tells the story, and provides the evidence to prove it, of the mechanisms that brought the ideas and the imaginative visions of a tiny elite into the consciousness of average Britons from the time of the first printed books in the 16th century to the Victorian period.

On this book, and its relationship to *The Godwins and the Shelleys* as the two chief pillars of St Clair's contribution to studies of Romanticism, Sir Drummond Bone writes:

both [these books] share William's insistence that meaningful explanations are testable on the one hand ('there is no way of determining impact on opinion by looking at inputs alone'),¹¹ and a driving energy aimed at social justice, and particularly social justice for women, on the other. If he was in some ways a man of the sixties – the 1960s that is – there is no doubt that for him the sexual revolution should only be based on a revolution in women's place in society. And his involvement in open access publication has its roots too in the effects of the copyright law and the publication industry on the education of those

⁹ Andrew Elfenbein, review in *Victorian Studies*, 47/3 (2005), 457–9.

¹⁰ William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 451.

¹¹ St Clair, *The Godwins*, p. 510.

without the social or economic freedom to choose. So if Godwin was ‘scornful of the “fictitious rules of decorum”’, William likewise with Wollstonecraft made openness a major theme of the campaign for equality, and so has no qualms in giving a detailed account of Godwin’s sexual relationship with Mary. And this leads him on to manuals of sex education and so to manuals of female conduct and we are heading towards not only publication study but the editions of those conduct books to come. ... His conclusion is pointed: ‘... women were evidently a problem ... during the revolutionary and romantic period’ – a problem that is, for the male hereditary landed authority.¹²

Perhaps surprisingly, in coming to that conclusion about women, William quotes Foucault approvingly. ‘Surprisingly’, because he was not a ‘theory’ supporter, in the sense of the term used by English Literature academics. He was actually less disturbed by the deconstructionists than by the new historicists, and less disturbed by the originals than by their followers who seemed to reduce everything by the application of ready-made framework ‘explanations’. This considerable irritation was one of the motivations behind *The Reading Nation* – there was a real desire to base cultural explanations on data which could in turn be used to test these explanations. ‘Can we begin to model the links between texts, books, reading, changing mentalities, and wider historical effects? ... If we could ... understand how certain texts came to be made available in printed form to certain constituencies of buyers and readers, we would have made a good start in narrowing the questions to be addressed in tracing ideas’.¹³

We note the vocabulary of ‘modelling’, and the care in differentiation of ‘text’ and ‘book’. Out of the wealth of data on publication he brings together, the pirate publishers emerge as the heroes of the anti-establishment revolution. The myriad of pirated editions of *Don Juan* for example make it ‘the Galapagos Islands of literature’ in the Romantic and indeed Victorian period. ‘The argument that intellectual property is a privilege granted for a limited period in order to reward and encourage innovation that is valuable to the society that grants it is as valid today as it was in Adam Smith’s time ... [but it should be granted] with eyes open to the public interest in the likely consequences’.¹⁴ Here we see William’s insistence on the primacy of the social. This massively ‘academic’ and fact-driven study, has in fact a clear reformist goal. Both these books – I use the term advisedly! – are aimed at ‘changing mentalities’.

Something, it may be added, which had once upon a time been the stated aim of the authors of the *Encyclopédie*, that foundational set of texts for the European Enlightenment.¹⁵

¹² St Clair, *The Godwins*, p. 509.

¹³ St Clair, *The Reading Nation*, pp. 1, 7.

¹⁴ St Clair, *The Reading Nation*, p. 451.

¹⁵ *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris, 1751–1772), 5.642 (‘changer la façon commune de penser’) (Diderot). Available online at <http://encore.academie-sciences.fr/encyclopedie/>.

Anatomy of the transatlantic slave trade

The last of his books that St Clair saw through to publication was, at first sight, another unexpected departure. Once again, it grew, in part at least, out of a chance occurrence, and would soon far exceed the scope of its simple beginnings. The genesis and significance of *The Grand Slave Emporium: Cape Coast Castle and the British Slave Trade* (2006), published a year later in the US as *The Door of No Return, The History of Cape Coast Castle and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, are explained by David St Clair:

Around 2000 Cambridge classics don, Mary Beard became general editor of *Wonders of the World*, a new mini-series to be published by Harvard University Press, USA. She invited a number of experts to write no more than 50,000 words on a famous building or monument. Buildings included the Treasury of Atreus at Mycenae, the Temple of Jerusalem, the Alhambra, and St Pancras Station. Mary invited St Clair to write about a famous building. While the obvious choice would have been the Parthenon, Mary had already lined it up for herself. Although Cape Coast Castle in Ghana (west Africa) had been designated a UNESCO world heritage building, its history at the time was little known outside specialists in the field of African and international slavery studies. St Clair agreed to write on the castle. Its heyday as a centre of the British slave trade was a period familiar to him, namely the 18th and early 19th centuries. It was an inspired choice.

One of about sixty forts spanning the Ghana coast, Cape Coast was the African headquarters of the British slave trade for nearly 150 years until the legal trade was abolished in 1807. It was out of the dungeon and through 'the door of no return' that Africans passed on their way to the waiting slave vessels. Although the castle appeared forbidding to all who approached it by sea, surrounded by breakers and cannons pointing seawards, in reality it was poorly fortified. It was a key link in a multinational global trading network that 'From the mid-fifteenth century to the late nineteenth century [carried] over 11 million people born in Africa ... across the ocean. About 3 million were taken by ships belonging to British merchants and those of British settlers in North America and the West Indies'.¹⁶ The entire records of Cape Coast Castle were removed and taken to the British National Archives shortly after the slave trade was abolished. Largely forgotten, the records, ledgers, letters and notes bleached by the sun or stained by salt water offer glimpses of people and events as they happened on an almost daily basis over a period of a hundred and fifty years.

From these immense archives St Clair derived most of the source material for his book which soon became too long to include in Professor Beard's mini-series. It allowed him to draw a vivid and authentic picture of the British officers, men and women that formed the small garrison of the fort. He describes the high death rates, boredom, and life both inside and outside the fort.

¹⁶ William St Clair, *The Grand Slave Emporium: Cape Coast Castle and the British Slave Trade* (London: Profile, 2006), p. 3.

Unsurprisingly, nowhere does the book describe the thoughts and feelings of the human cargo passing through the dungeons of the ‘Grand Slave Emporium’. Comprehensive records were kept but only in the form of numbers of slaves confined and waiting in the castle and numbers and dates of embarkation on which awaiting ships, their tonnage and nationality. The slaves themselves were voiceless. After the slave trade was abolished, St Clair tells how the castle became a staging post for the British empire’s inroads into the West African interior.

Even in this unlikely setting, St Clair’s penchant for the rebellious literary spirit of the Romantic movement, and for gender issues, found an outlet, as he pieced together the story of the poet Letitia Landon, who was briefly married to the Governor of Cape Coast Castle, where she died of an overdose of prussic acid in 1838. This story would later become the subject of a full biography of the poet known by the ‘genderless three initials L.E.L.’, who had briefly become ‘the darling of what Disraeli called silver fork society’ and died in disgrace, at the age of 36, in this desolate outpost of British colonialism.¹⁷

Champion of causes

St Clair was never involved in formal politics; but once he had left the civil service he made good use of his newfound freedom to take up public causes on which he felt strongly. And he was a man of strong opinions, which he was never shy of expressing publicly.

The ‘Elgin Marbles’ / ‘Parthenon Sculptures’

In 1983 a vigorous campaign for the return of the sculptures that Lord Elgin had taken from Athens in the first years of the 19th century was mounted by the Minister of Culture in the socialist Greek government of Andreas Papandreu that had been elected two years before. Melina Mercouri was not only a committed socialist; she was a world-famous actress (especially for her role in the 1960 film *Never on a Sunday*) and a much loved, charismatic public figure in Greece. Her impassioned speeches at the Oxford Union and at UNESCO made headlines around the world. Oxford University Press rushed out a new paperback edition of *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, with photographs of Mercouri and some of the newspaper coverage of her campaign on the back cover. In a brief new epilogue to the book, St Clair gave an outline of the newly revived controversy about the future of the ‘Marbles’. And he concluded:

¹⁷Lucasta Miller, *L.E.L.: The Lost Life and Scandalous Death of Letitia Elizabeth Landon, The Celebrated Female Byron* (London: Penguin Random House, 2019).

It is evident that Lord Elgin's aims were, from the beginning, honourable; that he obtained as much legal authority for his operations as it was possible to do in the disordered circumstances of the time; and that the Parthenon sculptures would be in a far worse state today if he, or someone else, had not removed them.¹⁸

This might have been the end of the matter. But St Clair was not done with the sculptures, or with the Parthenon, the building that more than any other stands, in the eyes of many, as the emblem of classical Greek civilisation and its artistic achievements. He would return to them again and again until the end of his life. The second edition of his book had not long been published before he was trying to fill in gaps in the story – which was becoming no longer the biography of Lord Elgin, but rather about the fortunes of the sculptures. Almost at once, it seems, St Clair had begun to question the assertion he had made in the final sentence of his book, with such seeming confidence and certainty.

The very next year, in 1984, he embarked on what would prove to be a long-drawn-out battle by correspondence with officials at the British Museum. It was known that in 1938 and 1939 Lord Duveen, the donor of the gallery in which the Parthenon sculptures are still displayed today, had ordered the cleaning of their surfaces, using methods which had not been authorised and were contrary to accepted practice. St Clair now sought access to the museum's records, to find out exactly what had happened. The responses that he received convinced him that the Museum was determined to cover up damage to the artworks in their care, that had been far more serious than anyone had ever admitted.¹⁹ Returning to the case after a decade, St Clair was finally given full access in 1996 – and set about with gusto to reveal what he considered to be a major 'scandal'.

The result was the third edition of *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, now with the added subtitle, *The Controversial History of the Parthenon Sculptures*. Published in 1998, the new edition was almost a hundred pages longer than its predecessors, and included three new chapters devoted to the fate of the sculptures since Elgin's time. By now, St Clair's faith in the British Museum's custodianship had been shattered; he had also, in the meantime, unearthed further documentary evidence that cast doubt on the claimed legitimacy of Elgin's actions, in his dealings with the Ottoman authorities in Constantinople and Athens. The third edition includes, in an Appendix, the surviving text of the *firman*, or decree, that gave permission for the removal of 'some stones' from the Acropolis of Athens, along with evidence to show how far Elgin had exceeded the terms set out in that document, and what appeared to be bribes that he had paid to the local governor. St Clair was now ready to take up the cudgels on behalf of the campaign for restitution of the sculptures to Greece –

¹⁸ William St Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, [2nd edn] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 275–6.

¹⁹ For St Clair's own account, and extracts from correspondence dated 1984 and 1995, see St Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 3rd edn, pp. 306–8, 389–90.

principally on the grounds, trenchantly set out in the final sentence of the new edition: 'Now that the British Museum's stewardship of the Elgin Marbles turns out to have been a cynical sham for more than half a century, the British claim to a trusteeship has been forfeited'.²⁰

After the book was published, with its explosive twenty-fourth chapter, the 'scandal' of the way the sculptures had been treated while in the care of the British Museum, and its implications for their future custodianship, erupted in the British and Greek press. In hopes of clearing the air, the Museum organised a conference, open to the public, which was held on 30 November and 1 December 1999, and attended by some three hundred delegates.

First to speak was St Clair, who in the meantime had followed up the new edition of his book with a long article, supported by some fifty-five cited documents, in which he pressed home his claims about the seriousness of the damage to the sculptures and the culpability of the Museum, both at the time and since, in systematically trying to conceal the whole episode from public view.²¹ The Museum's case was put by Dr Ian Jenkins, the Senior Curator with responsibility for the sculptures, who explained in more technical terms what had happened in 1938–9, while excusing neither the act of cleaning nor the later cover-up. Several Greek experts also spoke. By all accounts the occasion was conducted courteously throughout, until the final session. When the Press Counsellor at the Greek Embassy, Nikos Papadakis, took advantage of the question and answer session to object to a satirical piece that had been published that morning in the *Daily Telegraph* by the columnist Auberon Waugh, he was abruptly told to stop speaking. At the same time – it is not clear for what reason – St Clair was informed that he would no longer be welcome at the dinner hosted by the Museum's Director, Dr Robert Anderson, that evening. Tempers flared. The meeting ended without any conclusions, let alone consensus, on the subject at hand. Eventually, after several acts of mediation, St Clair did attend the dinner, still furious at the way in which the Greek Press Counsellor had been treated.

Relations between St Clair and the British Museum remained frosty for some time, and he never wavered in his newfound support for restitution of the 'marbles' to Athens. But at least at the personal level, it seems that he and Ian Jenkins (who would predecease him by seven months) retained, or regained, something of the mutual respect that seems fitting for two scholars of great distinction who, despite their differences, shared a passion for many of the same things.

The case for restitution continues to be pressed from many quarters, including by successive Greek governments and by pressure groups in the UK and other countries. But the story of the cleaning of the sculptures and the attempts to cover it up has not, in the long

²⁰ St Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 3rd edn, p. 336.

²¹ William St Clair, 'The Elgin Marbles: Questions of Authenticity and Accountability', *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 8/2 (1999), 391–521.

run, played a crucial role in these campaigns. These have rather tended to focus on the legality of Elgin's acquisition and methods, and on the aim to unify the surviving sculptures from the Parthenon, that for more than two hundred years have been separated in Athens, London, and museums in several other European cities. The fullest account of the cleaning, its nature, its consequences, and the extent to which the sculptures can be said to have been 'damaged', is to be found in the paper which Jenkins published after the British Museum conference, and runs to sixty-five printed pages.²²

Open Access publishing

His research for *The Reading Nation* had provided St Clair with a deep understanding of the social and economic processes that for hundreds of years had enabled the dissemination of knowledge and ideas through the medium of the printed word. His own experience of publishing with England's longest-established and most prestigious university presses, as well as with 'trade' imprints, caused him to think long and hard about the future of academic publishing. By the early 2000s, the possibilities for electronic publishing were beginning to be appreciated, first of all by the science community, and latterly in Humanities and Social Sciences. These were the early days of the debate about 'Open Access', as it has come to be known since that time. St Clair could see that the internet would quickly become the equivalent, for the new century, to what inexpensive chapbooks and unlicensed 'pirate' editions had been in the 18th and 19th. He had demonstrated that it had been those cheap editions that had by far the greater reach in transmitting ideas (from the age-old to the revolutionary) to the mass of the British population. And the need for something similar in our own time was becoming acute, as he saw it, particularly when the price of academic monographs was rising exponentially and their print runs were being cut back in almost equal proportion. The fact that many of the highly priced monographs that resulted had been very poorly sub-edited convinced St Clair that academic publishers were outrageously cutting their costs at the same as pushing up their prices and, seemingly deliberately, narrowing their market. Might it be possible to devise a business model that would simultaneously allow free access to readers on the internet and generate sufficient income to cover costs and ensure a high-quality product?

In 2007, in Cambridge, husband-and-wife team Rupert Gatti, an economist and Fellow of Trinity College, and Alessandra Tosi, a specialist in Russian literature, had embarked on a project of their own to establish an Open Access publisher for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Open Book Publishers (OBP) began life as a legal entity in 2008, and began to make its first, cautious approaches to potential authors. One of those was St Clair, whom

²² Ian Jenkins, *Cleaning and Controversy: The Parthenon Sculptures, 1811–1939*, Occasional Paper no. 146 (London: The British Museum, 2001).

Gatti had already met during the former's fellowship at Trinity. A close personal and working relationship was quickly formed, and by the end of that year St Clair had joined Gatti and Tosi as co-founder and Chairman of Directors of the new enterprise.

The business model was quickly hammered out, with each of the three contributing expertise: Gatti on the technical and financial side, Tosi managing the day-to-day business, including acquiring manuscripts and commissioning assessments (there was to be no cutting of corners when it came to peer review), and St Clair advising on strategy and recommending particular projects. The first of these, offered up as the 'guinea pig' for the entire venture, was St Clair's own second book, *That Greece Might Still Be Free*. This had long been out of print, and the rights had reverted to the author. The new edition was essentially a reprint of the old, but with much new visual material added, taking advantage of the possibilities afforded by the new medium. (I had only recently met St Clair for the first time, and felt honoured to be invited to contribute a preface.)

Since then, OBP has published some 250 titles, all available to read online and download in multiple formats free of charge, and to download in ebook and printed editions for a price. On the experience of working with St Clair, Alessandra Tosi writes:

What characterised our collaboration throughout were the stimulating and free discussions we managed to have until the very end. William always spurred us to push ahead and think outside the box, take risks, and challenge the status quo whenever it was deemed right to do so. His moral compass and disregard of received opinions on the one hand, and his enthusiasm and courage on the other have been at the core of OBP from our first encounter in 2008, until our very last one in June 2021. I'll always remember our last meeting in our garden after months of Zoom encounters: the warmth in William's eyes and the sheer energy of his vision will sustain us into the future.

From his first engagement with OBP, St Clair became a passionate advocate of Open Access publishing in general, and more particularly of the business model that he and his co-directors had pioneered. He appeared frequently – and often combatively – in panel discussions on the subject, including one held at the British Academy in 2012.²³ In the meantime, the Open Access debate has moved on; the big academic publishing houses and the government agencies that sponsor academic research in the Humanities and Social Sciences in the UK, the EU and elsewhere, have developed a huge, bureaucratic industry around the regulation and financing of Open Access publishing in different forms. The simplicity of the vision that St Clair shared with Gatti and Tosi has much to recommend it, in the more complex hybrid environment of academic publishing that has grown up since they set up OBP. Simplicity, forthrightness, and a no-nonsense, practical approach to complex problems, as well as the 'moral compass' remembered by Tosi, were the hallmarks of St Clair's commitment to those causes that were dear to him.

²³<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/events/open-access-new-future-academic-publishing/>.

Swansong

During the last two decades of his life, St Clair returned to the subject of the Parthenon and the antiquities of Athens for what he conceived as a single, monumental study. As the years went by, it grew and grew. Starting from diplomatic documents preserved in the National Archives, Kew, that had previously been overlooked, and with assistance from Professor Edhem Eldem of Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, who was able to furnish him with translations of Ottoman sources, St Clair embarked on an elaborate counter-argument to that of Elgin and his supporters, who had argued that the removal of the sculptures in the early 1800s had ‘saved’ them from destruction, either by the Ottoman Turks, or during hostilities when Athens and its Acropolis changed hands no fewer than three times in the course of the Greek Revolution (1821–33). From this nucleus, the study gathered momentum and accumulated material in the manner of snowball.

It had been St Clair’s intention to publish it during the two hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of that revolution, in 2021. But by the summer of that year, it had grown too large to be easily accommodated in a single volume. Its author had moved beyond his earlier focus on either biography or Romanticism; his subject this time was the Parthenon itself – or more precisely the architectural and sculptural monuments of the 5th century BC that had been created to adorn the Acropolis of Athens. In essays and lectures while he had been working on the book, St Clair had begun to develop a concept of ‘viewing’ to match that of ‘reading’ that he had explored in *The Reading Nation*.²⁴ In the new book, which he rather wonderfully described as ‘a history of conjunctures of consumption’, he discusses the many contrasting, overlapping, and self-contradictory ways in which different categories of viewer, and many different individuals of many different backgrounds and nationalities, had viewed those monuments from the 17th century to the present – with the lion’s share going to the period immediately before, during and after the Greek Revolution of the 1820s. By the time of his death, St Clair had extended this novel approach all the way back to the time when the monuments had first been built.

Who Saved the Parthenon? A New History of the Acropolis Before, During and After the Greek Revolution, edited by David St Clair and Lucy Barnes, was published by Open Book in spring 2022, to be followed shortly afterwards by the shorter *The Classical Parthenon*, in which the last of the chapters to be written are presented by the editors as a self-contained work, aimed primarily at readers more interested in the classical period than in its modern reception.

²⁴ William St Clair, ‘Imperial Appropriations of the Parthenon’, in John Henry Merryman (ed.), *Imperialism, Art and Restitution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 65–97; William St Clair, ‘Looking at the Acropolis of Athens from Modern Times to Antiquity’, in Constantine Sandis (ed.), *Cultural Heritage Ethics: Between Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2014), pp. 57–102, the latter based on the 2012 annual Runciman Lecture at King’s College London.

At the time of writing, it would be foolhardy to predict for which of his many qualities, interests, and achievements this remarkable man and scholar will be most remembered. His life and work ranged across fields and types of scholarship which have little intrinsically in common, and whose practitioners more often than not are likely to be unknown to each other (as indeed was the case with those who have assisted in compiling this memoir). A significant portion of his life was spent far from academia. And yet it must have been his background in the upper echelons of the British civil service, and the aptitudes he had honed there, that equipped William St Clair to become the polymath, forensic seeker after facts and their underlying causes, and champion of rationalism and ethical values, that he became in later life. Indeed, one way to appreciate his life and work as a whole might be to see him in the company of some of the great figures of the 18th-century Enlightenment (Edward Gibbon, perhaps, most of all) that he admired so much.

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