

PETER PARSONS

Peter John Parsons

24 September 1936 – 16 November 2022

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1977

by

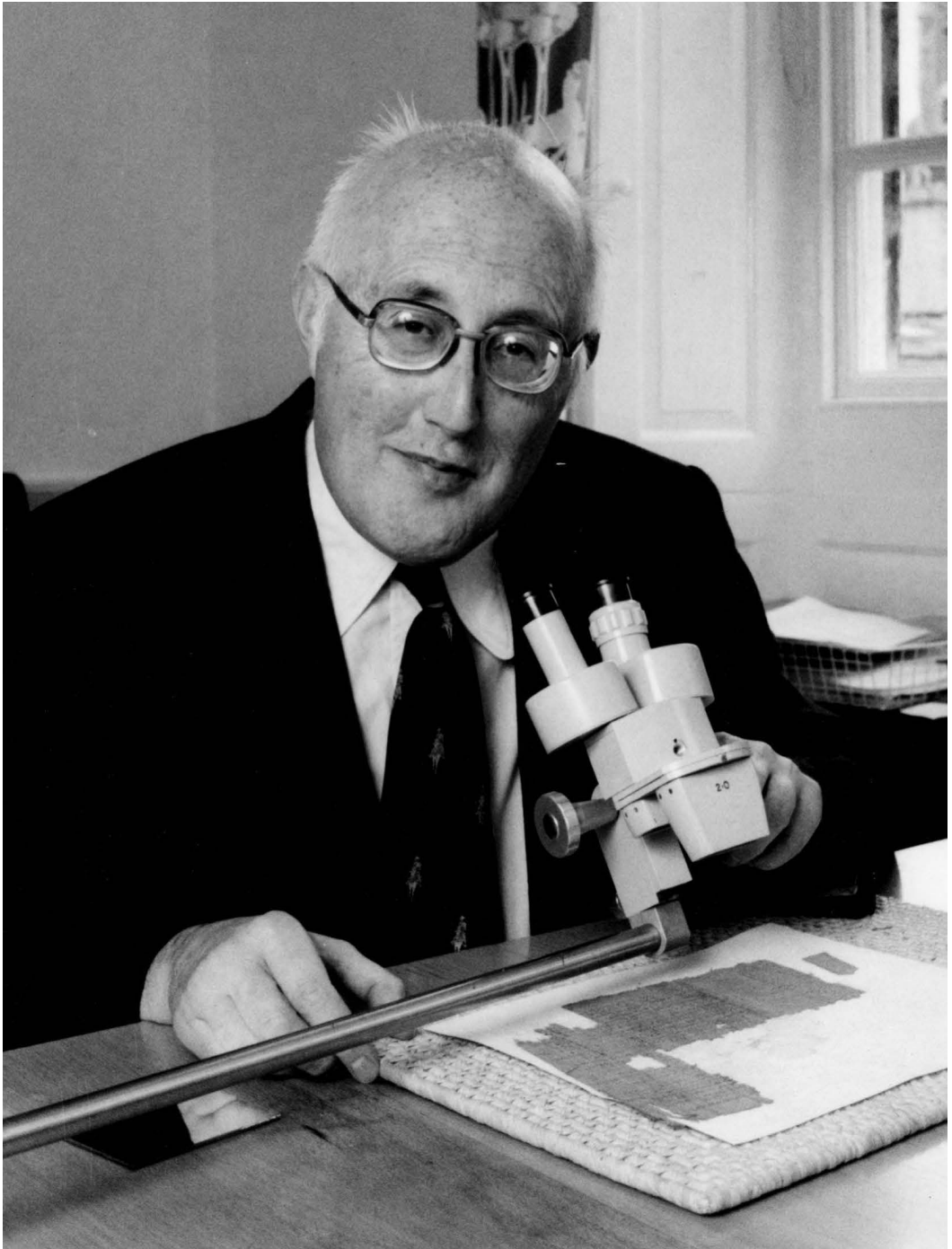
RICHARD RUTHERFORD

Summary. Peter Parsons, Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford and Student (i.e. Fellow) of Christ Church, was one of the most eminent Greek scholars of his generation and a master of the techniques of papyrology. His work on the massive collection of texts salvaged from Oxyrhynchus in Egypt gained him worldwide recognition. Some of the new texts he edited changed the face of Greek literary history. Late in life he opened many people's eyes to the fascination of his field through his prize-winning book *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish* (2007), a work based on deep scholarship which can be read with pleasure by any interested reader.

Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy, 23, 209–233

<https://doi.org/10.5871/mem/023.209>

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Pt Parsons.

Peter John Parsons was born in Surbiton in south-west London, on 24 September 1936. He was the only child of Robert Parsons (1905–94) and his wife Ethel (née Frary) (1907–2001). His father came from near Snettisham in Norfolk and maintained contact with relatives there; holiday visits to that area were frequent. His mother came from London but met her husband when on a camping holiday near Snettisham. Although both parents were well educated, they had no experience of university. His father worked initially as an under-buyer in Barker's of Kensington, a London department store, and subsequently gained a qualification as a pharmacist. During part of the Second World War Ethel and Peter 'self-evacuated' to escape bombing raids, moving from London to a small village near Bedford, where they could be near the family of his cousin David Tuck, son of Robert's sister Marie. David has kindly supplied some recollections from the period of Peter's youth.

Snettisham remained central to all the family because Bob's mother, sister Hilda and brothers Alec and Leslie still lived there and I believe summer holidays were spent either in the village or in a holiday bungalow which Hilda had on the beach. Unfortunately, the Great Flood of 1953 swept away all the buildings on the beach and flooded the gravel pits which by then separated the beach from Shepherd's Port, the old farmhouse where the family had grown up. Subsequent to that event the beach was restored and commercialised and Bob and Ethel rented a bungalow there most years. Peter would have been there and so on occasions would have been his various cousins. I was ten years younger than Peter but I can remember him taking me for a walk along the beach towards The Wash to see the colonies of seabirds.

After Robert's retirement the couple lived in Abingdon to be near their son, who was assiduous in visiting and helping them with the shopping at weekends. David Tuck writes: 'I liked Bob who was a kind, easy-going man, interesting to talk to and alert into his old age. Ethel was the livelier of the two and was quite a character. I can remember going to Bob's funeral with my mother and sister and meeting Barbara¹ for the first and only time.'

Peter Parsons attended Raynes Park, a boys' grammar school in Surrey. He remembered the teaching he received there with gratitude and had high praise for the headmaster of his day, Henry Porter. His academic abilities were recognised from the

Abbreviations: 'One Foot' = 'One Foot in the Quad', a short article contributed in the year of his retirement to an alumni magazine entitled *Christ Church Matters*, Trinity Term 2003, p. 5. *City* = P.J. Parsons, *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 2007). *Culture in Pieces* = *Culture in Pieces: essays on ancient texts in honour of Peter Parsons*, ed. D. Obbink & R. Rutherford (Oxford, 2011). Numerous unpublished lectures and drafts have been deposited in the archives of the Bodleian Art, Archaeology and Ancient World Library, but have yet to be fully catalogued: where these are cited, I use the designation 'Parsons archive'. POxy = *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* series.

¹ Barbara Montagna Macleod, by then Peter Parsons's partner (see below).

start (surviving end-of-term reports often verge on the hyperbolic), and younger students observed the frequency of his name on the school honour boards. Photographs from his schooldays show him as a tall, cheerful figure with chubby cheeks, already showing a tendency to put on weight. Besides his evident determination to achieve academic distinction, he allowed his often whimsical sense of humour some leeway with various contributions to the school magazine, known as *The Spur*. These include a spoof descent to the underworld emulating the famous episode in book 6 of Virgil's *Aeneid*, but also displaying his knowledge of Milton (who in this parody acts as the guide, like the Sibyl in Virgil or Virgil himself in Dante). In this piece he represented Hades as managed by the Ministry of Infernal Affairs, and introduced various snipes at bureaucracy (Cerberus, who guards Hell's gates, is equipped 'with heads, appropriately, in triplicate').²

Peter's school, a modern foundation, had no experience of sending pupils to Oxford. Faced with the arcane admissions process, in which the colleges were divided into three groups to simplify administration, they decided he should apply to Christ Church simply because it was the first college alphabetically in the first group. He has described how he came to take the entrance examination in college (as was normal at that time): 'It was an occasion – my first suit, the unimagined splendour of Tom Quad, the last rabbit pie before myxomatosis.'³ Apart from the written papers, there was an interview with the subject tutors. John Gould, who was Tutor in Greek and Latin Literature at the time, liked to tell the story of how he was sent to summon the candidates in turn, and the time came to call in young Parsons. From the application (and possibly from the written papers) Gould had formed a clear picture in his mind of what this able youngster would be like – fresh-faced, eager, a bundle of energy ... 'When I entered the room I was confronted with a man who appeared to be considerably older than I was myself.' Gould doubtless exaggerated, but it is true that photographs soon after that time show Peter's hair already receding, and it turned white at a remarkably early stage.

Parsons was awarded a scholarship on the basis of the entrance exercise, came up to read *Literae Humaniores* in 1954, and so took Classical Mods in 1956 and Greats in 1958. He was taught by a remarkable team. John Gould himself, an import from Cambridge, had much wider horizons and a more imaginative approach to classical literature than many of the older 'Mods dons'.⁴ He was also a hospitable figure, keeping virtually open house for his pupils, and introducing many of them to new musical or

² *The Spur*, 10 (1953).

³ Cited from 'One Foot'.

⁴ Cf. his inaugural lecture at Swansea, 'Ancient poetry and modern readers', reprinted in the volume of his papers, *Myth, Ritual, memory and exchange* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 1–21. On Gould's career and character, see N. Fisher, 'John Percy Algernon Gould', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 11 (2012), 239–63.

culinary experiences. In his tribute to Gould in the Christ Church Report, Christopher Robinson wrote:

Peter Parsons vividly recalls John inviting him to a meeting of the Philological Society (normally closed territory to undergraduates) to hear a paper on Catullus, then taking him home and regaling him with Scotch and a Bartok quartet on the hi-fi. As Peter himself puts it: ‘To the undergraduate of limited horizons (and no experience of Scotch), it seemed like a novel of the intellectual *vie de Bohème*. An interest in Scotch has stuck; but 45 years on I still find the Bartok quartets very hard going ...’⁵

In Greats, the second part of the course, students were at that time required to divide their attention equally between Ancient History and Philosophy (partly ancient, partly modern). Parsons never claimed to have penetrated the higher realms of philosophy, but he was grateful for the close attention he was given by Michael Foster and by Oscar Wood (‘writing commentaries on my essays longer than the essays themselves’).⁶ For History the Christ Church tutors were David Lewis and Eric Gray.⁷ Lewis’s gifts were outstanding, but they did not always extend to putting a nervous undergraduate at ease. Parsons recalled being urged to exercise his imagination rather more, and also remembered Lewis interrupting the reading of one essay with the question ‘How many more pages before the judicious *non liquet*?’ Nevertheless, Lewis’s laconic comments in his termly reports make clear that he regarded this student as exceptional (on one term his report consisted of the single word ‘Impeccable’). Parsons felt more at home with the more abundant evidential base of Roman History, for which he was taught by Gray (his reports too were positive, though expressing concern at the risk that his pupil might have difficulty seeing the wood for the trees; but he noted that Parsons ‘has first class brains, massive industry, and, surely, the art of persuasion’). Gray was a figure of great learning who (unlike Lewis) produced very little in terms of publication, but who evidently awakened in his pupil a fascination with the workings of the imperial system on the ground. Indeed, they later trod some of the ground together, as Parsons and Gray travelled in the Near East for much of the summer of 1966, sharing parts of the journey with Gray’s sons Patrick and John: travelling in a Volkswagen dormobile, they ventured as far as Baghdad, and Patrick remembers swimming with Peter Parsons in the waters of the Caspian Sea.

Unsurprisingly Parsons obtained Firsts in Mods (the top first of the year) and in Greats. He won the Craven scholarship in 1955, the de Paravicini prize in 1956, the

⁵ *Christ Church annual record 2003*, 82. Robinson was a pupil of Gould’s who initially read Classical Honour Mods but then changed to Modern Languages. At a later stage he returned to Christ Church as Tutor in French and Modern Greek, and taught there from 1971 to 2002.

⁶ ‘One Foot’.

⁷ D.M. Lewis, Tutor in Ancient [Greek] History, Christ Church, 1955–84; Professor of Greek History, 1984–94: see S. Hornblower, ‘David Malcolm Lewis’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 94 (1997), 557–96. E.W. Gray: Tutor in Ancient [Roman] History, Christ Church, 1939–77.

Chancellor's Prize for Latin Verse and the Gaisford Prize in Greek Verse in 1958; he was Passmore Edwards Scholar in 1959. Of these the Chancellor's Prize is especially noteworthy, as the prizewinning effort was a spectacular composition in Latin hexameters, over 100 lines in the manner of the satirist Juvenal, denouncing the earlier poet Ovid as a slick and superficial versifier. The verses were prefaced with a parodic Latin *praefatio* in the manner of authoritative editions, including reference to a fictitious scholar called Piffel. The composition elicited a congratulatory letter from R.G.M. Nisbet, Tutor at Corpus Christi College and future Corpus Professor of Latin.⁸ Nisbet wrote as follows: 'Dear Mr Parsons, I am writing to let you know how much I enjoyed your satire. I don't think I have ever seen verses of this type which came off so successfully. There were a few bits I didn't understand, but they made it look all the more like the real thing' (9 May 1958). Little did Nisbet know that twenty years later he and the young addressee would be sharing the task of editing the Gallus papyrus unearthed at Qasr Ibrim in Egypt (see below).

Parsons proceeded swiftly to graduate work, having previously consulted the Regius Professor of Greek, E.R. Dodds, as to the best area for him to explore. Dodds's advice was that the potential growth areas of the subject, and those which most needed experts, were papyrology and Greek religion.⁹ Parsons claims that religion would have been beyond his powers; whatever we may think about that, it is clear that his fascination with words and language was better satisfied by the study and reconstruction of specific texts. On graduation he was awarded the Derby Scholarship by a University committee, and elected to a Senior Scholarship at Christ Church.

Peter Parsons was a great lover of language and a superb stylist. Rather than spoiling his own account by paraphrase, it will be better to quote his recollections of his mentors after graduation.

I had enthusiasm but no knowledge, and so I went to learn the elements of the trade. First, in Oxford, I had the good fortune to be taught by the Revd John Barns.¹⁰ He was a genial and eccentric figure, who straightened papyri by sitting on them and half-way through our sessions would produce a bottle of Guinness and drink it ('Sorry I haven't got one for you, old man'). He was also a scholar of exceptional learning (he knew Egyptian as well as Greek) and broad interests, and under his supervision my vision widened from the familiar literary texts to a whole new world of everyday documents. For the sake of the documents, I moved on to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor,

⁸ On Nisbet see S.J. Harrison, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 13 (2014), 365–82.

⁹ For this advice see *City*, preface xxv. On Dodds, see D.A. Russell, 'Eric Robertson Dodds, 1893–1979', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 67 (1981), 367–70, and C. Stray, C. Pelling & S.J. Harrison (eds), *Rediscovering E.R. Dodds* (Oxford, 2019).

¹⁰ J.W.B. Barns (1912–1974), Professor of Egyptology at Oxford, 1965–74. See W.V. Davies, 'John Wintour Baldwin Barns', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 60 (1974), 243–6.

to study with Professor Herbert C. Youtie, the world leader in this field.¹¹ To him and his wife Louise (also a papyrologist) I owe a year of kindness (including the gift of ear-muffs against the bitter Michigan winter) and a paradigm of scholarship conducted in the spirit of international amity and collaboration. Youtie understood the documentary language as few others, and his intuitive gift enabled him to decipher the most illegible script and also to detect errors in the decipherment of others. I remember how he would read through newly published texts, questing like a bloodhound, and then a sudden ‘Hah’ showed that he had found a mistake and imagined the correction required. He made himself an arbiter of the subject, but without any arrogance. ‘We all stand on one another’s shoulders’, he would say.¹²

While in Michigan Parsons received news from Oxford that the University had created a post of Lecturer in Documentary Papyrology and appointed him to it. He held this role from 1960 to 1965, when he became University Lecturer in Papyrology in succession to John Barns, who had become Professor of Egyptology. As the first title suggests, he initially focused on documents, and most of his early contributions to the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* volumes fell into that category. Later he concentrated more on Greek literary papyri, but he never lost sight of the documentary material, and showed himself equally expert in the decipherment and interpretation of both.

At this point it may be helpful to explain the nature of his work in more detail.¹³ Most of the texts that have come down to us from the Greek and Roman world have been transmitted in manuscript copies, and subsequently turned into printed books once print technology became normal. Even the best-preserved texts rest on manuscripts centuries later than the authorial original, as copies were made to replace torn, damaged or worn-out versions (for instance, the earliest manuscript containing a complete text of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* dates from the 10th century CE, 1500 years after the poet’s death). But under certain conditions, as in the warm dry climate of Egypt, it is possible to discover the remains of original texts on papyri (a form of writing material made by pasting together strips from the stem of the papyrus plant). Scholars became aware of this in the 19th century (Peter Parsons was fond of quoting the dictum once attributed to the historian Mommsen, that the 20th century would be the age of papyrology as the 19th

¹¹ Herbert Chayyim Youtie (1904–1980). See the tribute by Parsons in *Archiv für Papyrusforschung*, 28 (1982), 100; also L. Koenen, ‘Herbert Chayyim Youtie (1904–1980)’, in M. Capasso (ed.), *Hermae: Scholars and Scholarship in Papyrology* (Pisa, 2004), pp. 295–305.

¹² From the preface to *City*, xxv–vi.

¹³ His own account of this, aimed at a general audience, may be read in *City* chapter 2. For more advanced treatment, see E.G. Turner, *Greek Papyri: an introduction* (Oxford, 1968; enlarged edition 1980); R.S. Bagnall (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (Oxford, 2011). A fascinating collection of illustrated examples is E.G. Turner, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World* (Oxford, 1971). This was later expanded and updated by Parsons and issued as a second edition (*Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies [BICS] Supplement*, 46; London, 1987).

was that of epigraphy). Expeditions were organised to seek out papyri in sites known to have been occupied over a long period. One such expedition was led by a duo of Oxford scholars, B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt, who from 1896 organised excavations at the site of Oxyrhynchus in Middle Egypt, c. 160 kilometres south of Cairo, under the auspices of the Egypt Exploration Fund. Over the course of several years they shipped back to England something like 50,000 papyri, as yet unsorted and unidentified, and in the years that followed they laboured over this material and began to publish their finds; volume 1 of the series *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* appeared in 1898. At the time of writing, 87 volumes have been published, and there is still much more to be done.

These texts are mostly from rubbish dumps, and derive from different historical layers. The majority come from the period in which Rome governed Egypt, but some go back to the kingdom of the Ptolemies, the dynasty of rulers descended from Ptolemy I, one of Alexander's generals. They fall into different categories, but the simplest distinction is between documents (letters, tax returns, census registers, administrative bulletins, petitions, and so forth) and literature (prose, poems, plays). The proportion of documents to literary texts is approximately 10:1. The documents show us how people lived and how they were governed; the literary texts show us what they read, or at least had available to read. They in turn can be divided into texts already known and new material. The new items are the ones that make headlines, but the papyri of known works are often much older than the manuscripts previously known to scholars, and can help improve editions which take them into account.

Parsons was unusual in being equally versatile in handling all these varieties. Throughout his career he was fascinated by the opportunities the documents provided to reconstruct a society and chart developments over time; he also had a keen sense of reality. As for literature, he relished the prospect of recovering poetry that had been lost for centuries, and in his published work he showed how new discoveries can change our perspective on what has long been known. Some of his major articles have indeed brought about such change, for instance in our understanding of Simonides or Callimachus, but he was not only concerned with writers traditionally labelled 'great'. Indeed, he had a long-standing interest in less dignified texts, by some dubbed 'sub-literary': 'Late Greek and Low Greek' was a characteristic lecture title.¹⁴

Because Grenfell and Hunt were both based at Queen's College, Oxford, the Oxyrhynchus collection was initially housed in that college. From 1938 space was allocated by the Ashmolean Museum and later by the Sackler Library (now renamed the Bodleian Art, Archaeology and Ancient World Library). The collection is owned by the Egypt Exploration Society, based in London, which also oversees the publication of the

¹⁴ A lecture delivered to the Triennial meeting of the Greek and Roman Societies held in Oxford in 1981 (typescript in the Parsons archive).

papyri in a dedicated series. Important organisational work by E.G. Turner placed the whole operation on a firmer financial and administrative basis.¹⁵ In 1966 the publication of the volumes became a British Academy project, and regular reports on progress were submitted by the editors. The continuation of the grant for preparation and publication of these volumes in later years became dependent on an increasingly complex application process. Parsons's skill in preparing applications and demonstrating the achievements of the scholars involved was crucial in securing continued support.

Peter Parsons first figures as one of the editorial team in volume 31 of the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* series (1966); he served as a General Editor for five decades, beginning with volume 36 (1970). This did not necessarily mean he edited texts for every volume; it did mean that he gave close attention to many of those which were included, and his meticulous care in this task helped sustain the high reputation which the series has enjoyed since its inception. He himself contributed to twenty-four volumes, and volume 42 (1973) was entirely his own work, an astonishing achievement in that the volume included almost a hundred texts ranging from fragments of lost works by Hesiod to a letter from the Emperor Trajan to the people of Alexandria.

His official title as far as Oxford was concerned was University Lecturer, and he was assiduous in delivering lectures. Much effort went into a series on Roman Egypt which went through many iterations; for one version the handout material for six lectures amounted to a total of 32 pages, concluding with the text of W.H. Auden's poem 'The Fall of Rome', one stanza of which alludes to a scenario comparable with those found in the documents: 'Agents of the Fisc pursue/ absconding tax-defaulters through/ the sewers of provincial towns.' His capacity to absorb detail, present the primary evidence and integrate it in a larger picture made this series memorable to many who went on to be professional historians. One of his earliest articles established that significant changes in the administrative system of Egypt were made by the Emperor known as Philip the Arab. Philip's reign is very poorly documented in literary sources: the fragmentary evidence from the papyri was therefore crucial. The paper remains a classic in its field.¹⁶ His expertise was drawn upon by distinguished scholars: thus in 1975 the Camden Professor of the day, P.A. Brunt, published a major paper on 'The Administrators of Roman Egypt' in which he acknowledged help from Parsons.¹⁷ Years later, after his promotion to higher office, he was greeted affably by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill with the words 'You must be the most distinguished Roman historian ever appointed to the Regius Chair of Greek'!

In addition to lecturing in the usual fashion, he organised regular classes to introduce interested undergraduates and graduates to the study of papyri (often these would run in

¹⁵ Turner (1911–1983) was himself a distinguished papyrologist: see P.J. Parsons, 'Eric Gardner Turner', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 73 (1987), 325–55.

¹⁶ 'Philippus Arabs and Egypt', *Journal of Roman Studies (JRS)*, 57 (1967), 134–41.

¹⁷ Brunt, *JRS*, 65 (1975), 124–47 = *Roman Imperial Themes* (1990), pp. 215–54.

parallel with classes by John Rea, who succeeded him as Lecturer in Documentary Papyri).¹⁸ The partnership of Parsons and Rea as joint General Editors of the *Oxyrhynchus* volumes lasted several decades. Interest in the classes they offered was slight at first: Stephanie West remembered herself as constituting half of Parsons's first class in 1960–1.¹⁹ The option formed no part of the examination syllabus; it was unpretentiously advertised, on the fringes of the termly lecture list; but for many these classes represented an introduction to the cutting edge of scholarship. His preferred title was 'Papyrology: informal instruction': his relations with students were always friendly and supportive. Llewelyn Morgan, now a Fellow of Brasenose, remembers how he attended one of these sessions in the 1980s, a young and nervous undergraduate somewhat overawed by a confident tutorial partner.

Peter clearly recognised some discomfort in me, and offered me a papyrus containing a word that, he said, had foxed interpreters for decades. I looked at it and it obviously read *véος*, to which Peter responded, 'Well, it's a shame you weren't around 40 years ago.' Clearly he had selected that papyrus very carefully, and I understood that even at the time, but I was walking on air for the rest of the session, and the effort he had gone to make an undergraduate comfortable was just so like him.

In due course Christ Church offered him an association and appointed him to a Studentship (1964). In Christ Church, Fellows are known as Students, and there were at that time three categories of these: Official Students (= Tutorial Fellows), Ordinary Students (including statutory professors such as the holders of Regius chairs), and Research Students. His was a Research Studentship. Hence, although he was on the Governing Body and did indeed provide a considerable amount of tutorial teaching in addition to his university classes, he was not a full-blooded tutor and did not have pastoral obligations (though naturally his amiable and generous manner elicited some confidences).

Nowadays the membership of any Oxford college is so large and rooms are in such demand that it is hard to imagine anyone, however popular or distinguished, being offered the extraordinary live-in set which Parsons occupied, both as University Lecturer and later as Regius Professor, for almost forty years. It was in the Killcanon building, and the main room, a beautiful and spacious living space which also served as his study and teaching room, looked both east and west, with views of the Library and of the Canons' gardens. Many aspiring scholars were initiated into the mysteries of papyrology at the large table in his living room, which supported a microscope, joined in later years first by an electric typewriter (IBM with Greek golfball) and subsequently by an Apple Macintosh computer.

¹⁸ John Rea (1933–2023); Lecturer in Documentary Papyrology, University of Oxford, 1965–1996. See A.K. Bowman, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 23 (2026), 41–9.

¹⁹ *Culture in Pieces*, p. 69.

Parsons always valued his connection with Christ Church, and indeed he had fruitful interaction with the other classical scholars attached to the institution. His collaboration with Hugh Lloyd-Jones will be discussed below; David Lewis was always at hand to provide authoritative advice on historical and epigraphic matters; and Alan Bowman, appointed in 1977 to succeed Eric Gray, had himself worked on Roman Egypt and was a skilled documentary papyrologist.

Parsons was also an enthusiastic teacher. Although his post did not include a formal requirement to teach the classical languages or instruct undergraduates, he regularly played a part in the teaching of Christ Church pupils, working in close harmony with the successive Tutors in Greek and Latin Literature, at first with his own mentor John Gould, later with Colin Macleod and eventually with myself. The range of the syllabus was wide, and he found himself giving tutorials on texts as varied as the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus and the *Acts of the Apostles*. A master of prose and verse composition in the ancient languages, he was adept at helping able students to reach their full potential. He also encouraged the hesitant and underconfident. Often he would bring in material related to his own interests, opening their eyes to the broader picture beyond the conventional 'classic' authors. Professor Greg Woolf remembers tutorials from his undergraduate days at Christ Church (1981–5):

He really was the model of the serious scholar filled with joy at his calling. He was also full of boyish enthusiasm for so many things. I remember how excited he was at having taken delivery of a golfball electronic typewriter and showing us how beautiful the Greek font looked that it produced. It was really liberating too seeing how he would follow up ideas wherever they led, often far beyond the syllabus. At one point he had me reading the Antiochus of Commagene inscription alongside Kent's *Old Persian* comparing the theonyms. I once asked if we could read Horace's *Satires* and he looked quite disapproving. 'I suppose I could ask you if Horace's *Satires* are as trivial and pointless as they seem?' We compromised on Juvenal, which he loved, and he introduced me to the importance of rhetoric. I never heard him say an unkind word about another scholar or another student.

Many of the students he taught would be unaware of his stature in the wider realm of international scholarship. In his early career he frequently attended the International Congress of Papyrologists. Together with David Thomas and Eric Turner, he taught a papyrological summer school in Philadelphia in 1968, and again at Berkeley in 1969, where his stay coincided with the eruption of student protests and police reaction mirrored in the events of David Lodge's novel *Changing Places* (1975). Professor Susan Stephens recalls the atmosphere of the time:

I met Peter when I was a graduate student first learning papyrology. In the summer of 1969 Peter coming from the environs of Christ Church found himself in what the *Guardian* described as 'Bohemian Berkeley, the New Left's west coast HQ'. Only a

few weeks before our seminar began the then governor of California, Ronald Reagan, had sent the national guard to quell the People's Park riots a few blocks from campus, with deadly results. Removed from the park, many on and around campus turned themselves to protesting the Vietnam war. Sporadic clashes continued throughout the weeks of the seminar, and on one occasion even our sedate rooms in the Bancroft Library were flooded with tear gas causing us to flee. Peter dealt with the constant interruptions with characteristic aplomb, and I suspect took vicarious pleasure from his experience in what he afterwards always referred to as 'Lotus land'.

In 1982 he was invited to give the Gray lectures in Cambridge, a sparkling survey of recent discoveries, expounded in three lectures alliteratively titled 'Antecedents', 'Anthologists' and 'Amateurs'.²⁰ He revisited Berkeley to give the Heller Lecture in 1988, speaking on Simonides (see further below), and delivered the E.A. Lowe lectures in Palaeography in Oxford in 1990. At a later stage he was approached as a possible Sather Professor. To give the Sather Classical Lectures at Berkeley is generally regarded as the highest distinction a classicist can attain; among the eminent scholars who have done so are E.R. Dodds, J.D. Beazley, Emily Vermeule, Bernard Williams and Paul Zanker. Parsons would have been a brilliant choice, but he declined the invitation, apparently reluctant to spend so much time in remote California at a time when his mother was living alone and in poor health.

His early contributions to the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* series, as has been said, were editions of documents: 28 of them in the first volume in which he appeared, varying from horoscopes to contracts, from lease of land to orders to arrest. Two volumes later he edited papyri of well-known Platonic texts, but the rest of his allocation was documentary. Similarly his publications in journals only gradually turned to more literary matters. But in 1971 a substantial paper combined two interests which were to prove enduring, the ancient novel and 'low' or lubricious Greek. In this paper, 'A Greek Satyricon?', he presented in more accessible form what appeared as POxy 3010 a couple of years later: a papyrus from the 2nd century CE containing a fictional narrative passage of about 50 lines.²¹ Caution is required in reconstructing the plot, but it involves multiple characters, one of whom is being initiated into the mysteries of Cybele and dressing up in female clothing, claiming he is now a *gallus*, a castrated devotee of the goddess. He proceeds to instruct another character, named Iolaos. The text is a mixture of prose and verse; the speech the initiate makes is in verse, but the metre is the disreputable Sotadean. This and other features (especially vulgarisms of language) indicate that this is not a dignified

²⁰ Typescript in the Parsons archive.

²¹ *BICS*, 18 (1971), 53–68, including photograph. Later the repertoire of comic novel material was enlarged by a further prosimetric text, *Tinouphis*, edited by M.W. Haslam, *Papyri edited in honour of E.G. Turner* (1971), no. 8: see S.A. Stephens & J.J. Winkler, *Ancient Greek Novels: the Fragments* (Princeton, 1995), pp. 400–08.

narrative. E.R. Dodds brilliantly suggested to Parsons that the young man is only pretending to be a eunuch, in order to infiltrate the women's quarters for amatory ends (cf. Terence's *Eunuchus*).²² The crudity of language, the mix of prose and verse, the clever wheeze, all seem reminiscent of Petronius' novel; but the papyrus is from the century following Petronius. The notion that Petronius' work had Greek antecedents had often been aired, but indecisively. On the final page of the article Parsons elegantly posed the question as it now stood.

. . . Chronologically, then, it might derive from Petronius. If so, the normal current is reversed: Greek borrows from Latin. On general grounds we might prefer the opposite: to create a Greek picaresque tradition, which Petronius parallels and imitates.

Of course, this is not a new creation. Natural reason long ago revealed that Petronius had a Greek model. Unbelievers could only complain that the bricks lacked straw. . . . either Petronius had a Greek model, but we can't prove it; or else he had no model at all.

POxy 3010 falls infinitely short of proof: it is a faded daisy from a long-since-vanished jungle of exotica. But if something must be done with it, I suggest that in Iolaos, his clown and his gallus, bastard and lamentation and ribaldry in the past, furtive love in the future, the Greek *Schelmenroman* ['picaresque novel'] has at last become flesh.²³

The question is still open, but many have been persuaded that the 'Iolaos-fragment' carries more weight than its editor allows. It is at any rate a fascinating glimpse into a largely lost genre, the prosimetric Greek novel.²⁴

The year 1977 was an *annus mirabilis* in his list of publications. Two major papers in successive issues of the journal *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* (*ZPE*) dealt with two major poets – Stesichorus, a lyric poet of the 6th century BCE, and Callimachus (fl. first half of 3rd century BCE), perhaps the most remarkable and influential of the scholar-poets based in Ptolemaic Alexandria.²⁵ The new finds were not from the Oxyrhynchus collection but from an important store of papyri housed in the University of Lille. To take the earlier poet first, Stesichorus was known to have handled epic themes

²² Dodds ap. Parsons, POxy 42.3010, at p. 35 n.1.

²³ *BICS*, 18 (1971), 66.

²⁴ Among those who recognise the case for a pre-Petronian Greek tradition are E. Courtney, *A Companion to Petronius* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 23–6; S.J. Harrison (ed.), *Oxford readings in the Roman novel* (Oxford, 1999), introd. xviii–ix; Stephens & Winkler, pp. 364–6 (though in the end they retreat from accepting any direct relationship). The most recent commentator on Petronius resists the conclusion, seeming not to relish the gentle irony of Parsons's reference to 'natural reason' (G. Schmeling, *A Commentary on the Satyricon of Petronius* (Oxford, 2011), p. xxxi).

²⁵ 'The Lille "Stesichorus"', *ZPE*, 26 (1977), 7–36; 'Callimachus, *Victoria Berenices*', *ZPE*, 25 (1977), 1–50. Cf. Turner/Parsons, *Greek Manuscripts* (n. 13 above), 74 and 75 for photographs with brief comments.

in lyric form, but the papyrus from Lille, initially edited by Meillier and Archer, contains lines from a previously unknown poem which clearly deals with a portion of the Theban myth of the war between the rival sons of Oedipus. The title may have been *Thebais* – we do not know. The length of the poem was considerable: we have remnants of a passage lasting well over 100 lines and the papyrus originally contained some 175 lines before that. Eteocles and Polynices are already in conflict; their mother is involved but is not named; so is the prophet Tiresias, who utters dire warnings of the future. The episode is thought by some to anticipate the treatment in Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, in which Jocasta survives after the downfall of Oedipus (her presence during the war between her sons had been thought an invention by the tragedian). But a more probable view is that this is a different queen, and that in Stesichorus the incest between Oedipus and Jocasta did not result in children. The new evidence provides a clearer picture of Stesichorus' narrative art (much direct speech) but also modifies our picture of the development of one of the most renowned sequences in Greek mythology. The *editio princeps* of the papyrus had some weaknesses and there was scope for further progress; the treatment by Parsons represented a cautious but decisive step forward in understanding. As noted by two prominent younger scholars, one of whom is co-author of the latest and best edition of this poet, his article counts as 'one of the great works of Greek scholarship; all subsequent work on this papyrus, whether in terms of its text, its interpretation or its wider significance, can be considered mere footnotes to Parsons.'²⁶

Callimachus' *Hymns* and *Epigrams*, which have come down to us in manuscript form, make clear his stature as one of the greatest poets of the Hellenistic age; and many would place Callimachus at the head of the list of those whose complete works they would wish to recover. Although that hope has not been wholly fulfilled, fortune has been kind, and the papyri have yielded much precious material to enlarge our knowledge of his *Hecale*, his *Iambi*, and the poem which was surely his *chef d'oeuvre*, the *Aetia* ('Origins'), an elaborate assemblage of 'just-so' stories explaining why certain rituals, customs, artefacts etc. have taken the form that they have. When Roman poets claim to emulate Callimachus, it is commonly the *Aetia* that they invoke. Much ink has been expended on the question of the work's structure. In a long and magisterial article Parsons combined a number of fragments in a single poem (sixty lines of which were at least partially preserved) and on this foundation advanced an argument about the overall plan of the poem. Developing a thesis of Callimachus' editor Rudolf Pfeiffer, he proposed that the poem in the Lille papyrus, a celebration of the victory won on behalf of Queen Berenice II in the Nemean games, formed the beginning of book 3 of the *Aetia* and

²⁶ P.J. Finglass & A. Kelly, 'The state of Stesichorean studies', in Finglass & Kelly (eds), *Stesichorus in Context* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 9. The fragment is re-edited with commentary in M. Davies & P.J. Finglass, *Stesichorus: the Poems* (Cambridge, 2014), as fr. 94.

traced the origins of the games, narrating with wit and learning the tale of Heracles and Molorchos. This poem ('The Victory of Berenice') was balanced by another piece of court poetry, the 'Lock of Berenice' (famously translated by Catullus), at the end of the final book, book 4. His argument led on to a conclusion that books 1 and 2 differed in their narrative technique from books 3 and 4. In books 1 and 2 Callimachus represented himself as questioning the Muses and being instructed by them in recondite explanations of myths and cults; in books 3 and 4 this Q&A procedure seems to have been abandoned. There were chronological consequences too: books 1 and 2 were written at an earlier period of Callimachus' life than books 3 and 4. The details cannot be discussed here, but although these conclusions may seem bold, they were set out with exemplary clarity and caution, and have been generally accepted.²⁷

This article surely counts as the most cited and most admired of his many contributions to journals. But not all were convinced. In 1995 Alan Cameron published a brilliant and provocative book, *Callimachus and his Critics*, in which he questioned many *idées reçues* and challenged orthodoxies without number. Parsons's account of the form and dating of the *Aetia* came in for some rough treatment. In 1996 a small conference was organised in Oxford to discuss this important book, and Parsons with typical good humour praised Cameron's work ('masterly scholarship and masterly imagination'), while regretfully expressing his scepticism and restating his own position. The opening words of his talk were 'It is no service to civilisation to stick a cold skewer into a hot soufflé'; the closing paragraph began 'I do not believe Alan Cameron; I almost believe me.'²⁸ Cameron himself was a benign presence at the event, and took the criticism in good part.

E.R. Dodds had retired from the Regius Chair of Greek in 1960 and was succeeded by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, a scholar of immense energy and enthusiasm who was eager to advance knowledge of the great discoveries at Oxyrhynchus and elsewhere.²⁹ Besides lecturing and organising seminars on areas such as Greek lyric poetry, New Comedy and Hellenistic poetry, where the gains had been particularly great, he published a number of papers engaging with papyrological material. Lloyd-Jones recognised the excellence of Parsons's work, and did much to assist and encourage his younger colleague (Lloyd-Jones is for instance singled out for special thanks in the paper on the *Victoria Berenices*). The most important consequence of their friendship was the collaborative project which the two men undertook, the task of editing, annotating and publishing a collection of the

²⁷ E.g. by Giulio Massimilla (1996–2010) and by A. Harder (2012) in their important commentaries on the *Aetia*.

²⁸ 'Cameron and his Critics', Parsons archive.

²⁹ See N.G. Wilson, 'Peter Hugh Jefferd Lloyd-Jones', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 172 (2011), 215–29, and also Parsons' own tribute in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 156:1 (2012), 95–8.

fragmentary poetic texts from the Hellenistic period.³⁰ Originally this was conceived as a supplement to the older compilation by J.U. Powell, *Collectanea Alexandrina* (1925), and the title remained *Supplementum Hellenisticum*. The eventual volume, however, published in 1983, was far larger and more comprehensive than the work it sought to update: more than 850 pages long, it contained 1185 fragments by over a hundred poets. Many minor figures were included, but there were great names as well, above all Callimachus, to whom they devoted 50 pages. Powell's work had omitted him, and even the monumental edition of his fragments by Rudolf Pfeiffer (1949) was now out of date on the poet's most significant works. The new volume (*SH* in many a list of abbreviations henceforth) was immediately recognised as an essential collection of primary texts, skilfully and meticulously presented, and all the more valuable because of the bibliographies and annotation (in suitably polished Latin) with which the texts were provided.³¹ Reviewers were enthusiastic: James Zetzel acclaimed 'the extraordinary accuracy and clarity of the editions and the profound philological and papyrological learning of the editors' (cited in n. 31, 347). Of course, no work of scholarship is definitive, and much has been published since, but the work of Lloyd-Jones and Parsons paved the way and set the bar very high for subsequent researchers in the field.³²

Most papyri with which he concerned himself were in Greek, but Parsons also participated in a number of projects involving Latin finds. Of these the most significant, and certainly the most controversial, was the papyrus containing a series of elegiac couplets convincingly ascribed to Cornelius Gallus.³³ Although previously only one line of his actual poetry survived, Gallus was known from literary sources as a significant figure in both poetics and politics: he was a close friend of Virgil (who celebrates his work in

³⁰ The project is described in advance of publication by Lloyd-Jones, 'A Hellenistic Miscellany', *Studi italiani di filologia classica*, 2 (1984), 52–71 = Lloyd-Jones, *Academic Papers*, ii (Oxford 1990), pp. 231–49. It seems appropriate also to quote a letter which Lloyd-Jones wrote to me on 25 July 1983, soon after the publication of the volume: 'I am delighted that you are pleased with *SH*. I didn't contribute as much as I should have, but at least I got Peter started; he has done a phenomenal job of work, and I think his handling of all those papyri is up to a Lobelian standard.' (The reference is to Edgar Lobel [1888–1982], a towering figure in the study of Greek literature and papyrology: his contributions to the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* series from 1941 to 1972 were of outstanding importance.)

³¹ For major reviews see esp. J.E.G. Zetzel, *Classical Philology*, 82 (1987), 347–62; E. Livrea, *Gnomon*, 57 (1985), 592–601. For the research prospects opened up by the book, see A. Harder, 'More facts from fragments', in *Culture in Pieces*, pp. 174–87.

³² For later work on these and other texts see A.S. Hollis, *Callimachus Hecale* (Oxford, 1990; 2nd edn, 2009); Lloyd-Jones, *Supplementum Supplementi Hellenistici* (Berlin, 2005); D. Sider *et al.*, *Hellenistic Poetry: a selection* (Michigan, 2017); M. Perale, *Adespota Papyracea Hexametra Graeca* (Berlin, 2020); F. Montanari *et al.*, *Supplementum Hellenisticum Novum* (vol. 1 announced from Berlin for 2026).

³³ R.D. Anderson, P.J. Parsons & R.G.M. Nisbet, *JRS*, 69 (1979), 125–55. For later work, see esp. E. Courtney, *The Fragmentary Latin Poets* (Oxford, 1993; 2nd edn, 2003), pp. 263–8, 518–19, and A.S. Hollis, *Fragments of Roman Poetry c. 60 BC-AD 20* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 241–52.

two of his bucolic poems); he wrote poetry which focused on his mistress, whom he called Lycoris (allegedly the actress Cytheris, at another stage the mistress of Mark Antony); scholars had long regarded him as the missing link between Catullus and the Augustan elegists Propertius and Tibullus. Politically he was apparently an adherent of Julius Caesar, and was later appointed by Octavian (the future Augustus) as the first governor of Egypt after the fall of Cleopatra; but he later fell from grace and was driven to suicide. The new papyrus, unearthed at Qasr Ibrim on an island in Lake Nasser, was close in date to Gallus' governorship, and possibly once belonged to some officer or administrator on his staff; if so, it may well be 'the oldest Roman book ever found', to quote the title of a short piece Parsons wrote in the wake of the main publication.³⁴ Much in the brief text is open to dispute, but it seems to show that Gallus could juxtapose poems on erotic and political themes, that he looked forward to praising the victories of 'Caesar' (probably Julius Caesar's campaigns against the Parthians, thwarted by the assassination on the Ides of March), that he used the motif of *servitium amoris*, treating Lycoris as his *domina*. In the *Journal of Roman Studies* this important text received exemplary treatment, with Parsons carefully describing and deciphering the papyrus, Nisbet expertly placing it in literary and historical context. Seldom has an *editio princeps* been so widely read.

Regrettably there were those who thought that the find was too good to be true. In such cases the sceptic may question the attribution to the alleged author, or more damagingly claim that the text is a modern forgery. The latter was the argument of Professor Brunhölzl, but it has been widely acknowledged that his criticisms are ill-founded. In a paper which has remained unpublished, Parsons drafted an effective response; others have joined in the refutation.³⁵ In any case, colleagues who knew the scholars involved knew that they were the last people who could be imagined perpetrating such a fraud. Robin Nisbet took the matter lightly. In a paper describing his own career, he commented: 'A professor at Munich concluded that the verses were so bad that I must have composed them myself, and presumably got Peter Parsons to transcribe them on papyrus. I was delighted to be thought capable of such enterprise, and had a vision of us swimming Lake Nasser to deposit our handiwork in the rubbish-dump of Qasr Ibrim.'³⁶ No more need be said.

³⁴ *Omnibus* 1 (1981) 1–4. But on the dating of the papyrus other views have been canvassed.

³⁵ F. Brunhölzl, *Codices Manuscripti*, 10 (1984), 33–40. The response, headed with the date 7 September 1987, is among the papers deposited in the Parsons archive. For published rejection of the claims made by Brunhölzl, see J. Blänsdorf, *ZPE*, 67 (1937), 43–50; G. Ballaira, *Paideia*, 42 (1987), 47–54, and other works cited by R.G.M. Nisbet, *Collected Papers on Latin Literature* (Oxford, 1995), p. 432.

³⁶ R.G.M. Nisbet, 'A Retrospect', a paper given to the Oxford Philological Society on Nisbet's 80th birthday, 20 May 2005 (p. 6): see Corpus Christi College, Oxford: Nisbet archives.

Another poet who has benefited from the papyrological discoveries is Simonides of Ceos, who lived around the time of the Persian wars, and to whom one of the most famous epigrams from the ancient world was traditionally ascribed, the epitaph on those who died at Thermopylae ('go tell the Spartans, you who pass us by,/ that here, obedient to their word we lie').³⁷ He had a high reputation in the ancient world, and enough survived in book-quotations for moderns to recognise a poet of the front rank, one who could be mentioned in the same breath as Pindar (both men wrote victory-odes for athletes, and much else besides). In 1992 Parsons joined published and unpublished papyri of Simonides, revealing a celebratory elegy recounting the Greek victory at Plataea, which the poet compared with the triumphs of the Trojan War: mythic past and historical present were brought into alignment, and Simonides claims something of the status of Homer himself.³⁸ The date and occasion of the poem or poems are hotly debated, but there is no doubt that Parsons's presentation of the text in volume 59 of the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* was a masterpiece of concise and precise editorship.³⁹

Much more could be said regarding his publication of individual texts, large and small. Equally important, however, Parsons was concerned to weave together old and new texts, and illuminate the literary milieu from which they came and the literary traditions of which they formed part. Several papers present clear and richly documented syntheses: 'Facts from Fragments' (1982), 'Identities in Diversity' (1993), 'New Texts and Old Theories' (2002).⁴⁰ Here and elsewhere he outlined the significance of the new discoveries, often emphasising that old orthodoxies had been disturbed, that lazy assumptions had been startlingly challenged. Traditional scholarship has divided Greek literature into three periods: archaic, classical, Hellenistic. Periodicity and smooth patterns of development are always suspect: the papyri, he stressed, have shown how unreliable these patterns are. The fuller picture we gain is more complex, and therefore more interesting.

³⁷ Herodotus (7.228) quotes the epigram but without identifying it as by Simonides. See further D.L. Page, *Further Greek Epigrams* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 186–302, gathering numerous epigrams of which (as he shows in detail) only a small proportion are likely to be authentic.

³⁸ Simonides, *Elegies*: POxy 59 (1992), no 3965.

³⁹ Parsons had benefited greatly from discussion with others, especially M.L. West, whose version of the same text as Simonides 10–18 in the second edition of *Iambi et Elegi Graeci* vol. 2 (1992) may be compared by connoisseurs. See also D. Boedeker & D. Sider (ed.), *The New Simonides* (Oxford, 1997), which includes an essay by Parsons himself on the significance of the poem (pp. 55–64). For later work on Simonides, see O. Poltera, *Simonides Lyricus: Testimonia und Fragmenta* (Basel, 2008), complemented by D. Sider, *Simonides: Epigrams and Elegies* (Oxford, 2020); the latter volume includes the fragments previously edited by Parsons at pp. 254ff., with translation and commentary.

⁴⁰ See also 'Summing Up' (Proceedings of the XX International Congress of Papyrologists, Copenhagen 23–29 August 1992; Copenhagen, 1994), 118–23, a powerful piece including a firm defence of the value and achievements of papyrology (quoted by me in the introduction to *Culture in Pieces*, pp. 7–8).

In Christ Church, as elsewhere, he was an immensely popular figure. His genial persona made him a delightful conversationalist at lunch and on high table, and his broad culture enabled him to bridge gaps between disciplines with ease. He took a particular interest in the work of young researchers, and many became lifelong friends (among these were historians such as Boyd Hilton, Colin Matthew and Ross McKibbin). When disputes and unpleasant arguments arose at college meetings, his gentle wit and humane wisdom often calmed tempers. His attitude to administration was sceptical but rational: it needed to be done, and done conscientiously, but of course it was important not to get bogged down in formalities and regulations. One had to remember the human beings who would be affected.

In the mid-1980s he served two consecutive terms as Tutor for Graduates at Christ Church (1983–9), and in that period he gradually pulled out of tutorial teaching and undergraduate admissions duties, pleading overwork. Certainly he took the job very seriously, not least in organising regular graduate lunches. The end of his second term of three years coincided with a dramatic change in his status which surprised some and delighted many others.

Hugh Lloyd-Jones retired in 1989, and Peter Parsons was appointed his successor as Regius Professor of Greek. Many had anticipated that the chair would go to one of two other distinguished scholars, Martin West or Jasper Griffin.⁴¹ Either of these would have held the position with great distinction, but both rivals accepted that Peter Parsons was eminently fit to occupy the Regius chair, and in the event this proved an exceptionally successful appointment. The depth of his scholarship was never in doubt, but he also proved himself a skilled administrator, acting as Director of Graduate Studies for three years and Chair of the Faculty Board of Literae Humaniores for two, quite apart from innumerable other committees and appointment boards.

Parsons was an outstanding supervisor of graduates, sometimes encouraging them to produce a thesis based on editions of texts from Oxyrhynchus, as most notably with Nikolaos Gonis, now one of the editors of the series. In other cases he helped them in their exegesis of particular authors: Arnd Kerkhecker on Callimachus' *Iambi* and Gideon Nisbet on 'skoptic' or abusive epigrams were among the monographs which resulted. Many other monographs from these years acknowledge his help either in a formal role as adviser or in response to requests: he was always happy to assist younger scholars in the difficult task of transforming thesis into book. As another part of his duties, he held a series of popular and successful graduate seminars on a wide range of Greek authors: the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, Pindar, Bacchylides, Euripides, Apollonius and

⁴¹ See R.L. Fowler, 'Martin Litchfield West', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 17 (2018), 89–120; G.O. Hutchinson, 'Jasper Griffin', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 23 (2026), 1–8.

Theocritus all figured at various stages. In at least one case (Callimachus, *Epigrams*), the work for the class contributed to a notable publication.⁴² He preferred to focus on analysis and exegesis of specific texts rather than grand themes or theories, but he readily participated in seminar series and constantly sought to refine and improve his undergraduate lectures.

The year 1998 marked the hundredth anniversary of the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* series, an event which aroused some interest in the British national press. Parsons wrote a substantial piece about it for the *Times Literary Supplement* (entitled ‘A Wealth of Garbage’).⁴³ This attracted interest and led to a BBC radio series with the general title ‘City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish’, broadcast in June 2002.⁴⁴ Parsons planned the sequence of episodes and narrated considerable parts. Meanwhile he had signed a contract for a long-meditated project, a book describing the world of Oxyrhynchus as revealed in the papyri. *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish* finally appeared in 2007, and was received with enthusiasm by experts and amateurs alike.⁴⁵ In due course it won the John D. Criticos prize from the Hellenic Foundation (2007) and the Classical Association Prize (2008). It has been translated into at least seven languages.

The title, at first sight perplexing, refers to the Oxyrhynchus fish itself, worshipped as a god by the local inhabitants (the name means ‘sharp-nosed’). The original sub-title, ‘Greek Lives in Roman Egypt’, clarifies the nature of the book.⁴⁶ It is a fascinating presentation of the society revealed by the documents: chapter titles such as ‘The River’, ‘Markets’, ‘Family and Friends’, ‘Poets and Pedants’, ‘Bureaucrats’, ‘Christians and Christianities’, give an idea of its scope. The exposition is a model of lucidity (often enlivened by characteristic touches of wit); annotation is light, but the careful reader will be able to see the depth of learning which underlies every page. The narrative and illustrations sometimes touch on high politics (as when a new emperor seeks to erase the memory of his predecessor, and this is reflected in the Town Council Minutes by the blacking out of the dead emperor’s name).⁴⁷ More often the book takes us into the

⁴² ‘Callimachus and the Hellenistic Epigram’, in F. Montanari & L. Lehnus (eds), *Callimaque (Fondation Hardt Entretiens*, 48; Vandoeuvres-Geneva, 2002), 99–136, with discussion on 137–41. A newly published edition of this poet’s epigrams has the dedication ‘In memory of Peter Parsons, inspiration and model’ (S.A. Stephens & B. Acosta-Hughes, *Callimachus: Epigrams* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2025)).

⁴³ *TLS* (29 May 1998), 3–4.

⁴⁴ Presented by Michael Kustow and Amanda Hargeaves. The episodes were entitled ‘Rubbish Tips and Riches’; ‘Postcards from an Ancient World’; ‘Paper Riddles in the Sand’; ‘Greek Tragedies and Daily Soaps’.

⁴⁵ Among the reviews may be noted Mary Beard, *TLS* (27 March 2007), 10–12; John Ray, *Times Higher Education Supplement* (17 April 2008), 48–9; C. Kelly, *London Review of Books*, 30 (4), 2008, 13–14; A.B. Robinson, *World-Archaeology*, 24 (4 July 2007) [online]; P. Foster, *Expository Times*, 119:7 (April 2008), 334–5. All were enthusiastic.

⁴⁶ For some reason the subtitle was changed in various editions of the paperback.

⁴⁷ *City* 67–71, with plate 22.

everyday lives of labourers and administrators, schoolboys and shipowners, doctors and priests. The author makes clear his own fascination with this little world, recovered through its waste-paper; the reader is moved to share it. In particular, there is an elegiac note which recurs throughout, a sympathy with the forgotten dead who through the papyri are given a new lease on life. The last words of the book give the flavour.⁴⁸

Oxyrhynchus exists again today as a waste-paper city, a virtual landscape which we can repopulate with living and speaking people. The theatre has vanished, but we still have some of the prompt-copies that its actors used. The baths have vanished, but we can reconstruct their dynasty of cloakroom-attendants. The market has vanished, but we know its porridge-stall and its imported cow-pats and the harassed officials who collected the tax on its brothels. Long-dead citizens, of whom we have no portrait and no tombstone, communicate from their documents. ...

... In the event, their memory does survive – survives, by a strange irony, precisely through the written material that they threw away. Tryphon and countless others lived and died without ever knowing that they were destined to such accidental immortality.⁴⁹

He was a frequent contributor to various non-specialist journals, including the *TLS* and the *London Review of Books*, to which he supplied witty and illuminating accounts of new publications on Greek literature and culture. His comments and criticisms were always courteously phrased; he had no time for the waspish polemic which has often marred the pages of classical journals. Yet he did allow himself the occasional note of mischief and irony ('It takes a true patriot to love Roman Britain' was the opening of one review).⁵⁰

For much of his career he lived in college as a bachelor don. This changed in the mid-1980s, following the death of his classical colleague and friend Colin Macleod, a brilliant scholar and teacher but tragically afflicted by depression.⁵¹ After Macleod killed himself in December 1981, Peter Parsons was one of those who sought to comfort and give support to his widow Barbara (née Montagna). A close friendship gradually deepened, and in subsequent years the happiness these two found in each other was a source of delight to those who knew them both. After the deaths of his parents, Parsons prepared for retirement by purchasing a house in Riverside Road, off the Botley Road in Oxford and near Barbara's own residence. Although maintaining separate establishments, they travelled and spent much time together, not least sharing the task of tending his splendid garden (photographs show Barbara assisted in the work by her niece Ilaria, who adored

⁴⁸ See also e.g. p.136 (quoted by me in *Culture in Pieces* 11), or pp. 156–8, 181–2.

⁴⁹ *City* 216.

⁵⁰ 'Roman Wall Blues', in *London Review of Books*, 6:9 (17 May 1984), 10–11.

⁵¹ See O. Taplin's preface to the posthumously published collection of Macleod's papers (*Collected Essays* [Oxford, 1983]), pp. ix–xi.

her aunt and adoptive uncle). A fluent speaker of Italian, Parsons became the beloved friend of Ilaria's parents Aldo and Memi Montagna. To the distress of all, Barbara died of cancer in 2006. They had married earlier in the year ('after a twenty-four year engagement', quipped Barbara). The group of close friends present at her funeral were in awe of Peter's resolute determination to speak the eulogy himself. In the following year he dedicated the book *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish* to her memory ('without whom, nothing').

In his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor he declared that the acme of European civilisation had been reached in Prague on Monday 29 October 1787 (the premiere of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*). Music was indeed a passion with him: he was a longstanding member of the committee which organised the Oxford Subscription Concerts in the 1960s and '70s, and acted as senior member of the Christ Church Music Society. One of the consolations in his last years was the availability of so many notable performances through YouTube and other internet sources. Equally wide was the range of his reading: he could read several modern languages with ease, and had a taste for biography and modern history. On my last visit to him he had just received via Amazon the massive biography of the Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa by Barbara Stollinger-Rilinger; it was by his bedside after his death. But his tastes were varied: just as he enjoyed exploring 'low' genres and the low life of antiquity (for instance through graffiti or mimes), so he relished the hard-boiled thrillers of the mid-20th century (Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and others), and their modern successors such as Elmore Leonard. He was fond of quoting punchy one-liners such as 'The cheaper the crook, the gaudier the patter.'⁵² He could turn readily from Sir Thomas Browne's meditative prose to contemporary soap operas and action movies. In his last years he subscribed to Netflix, and his cousin David Tuck records that he learned by email that Peter was ploughing through all 86 episodes of the French police/judicial series *Spiral*.

Many of those who met him will remember best the ebullient good humour of his greetings and the gusto with which he approached a new challenge ('Achievement-time!', he would exclaim as he rose after a hearty college lunch). He used to say that the most exciting moment was when one opened a new box of papyri without knowing what it contained – 'the thrill of the hunt'. He enjoyed many aspects of life: his entry in *Who's Who* listed his hobbies as 'music, cinema, cooking and eating'. (Gardening might also have been included.) Yet there was a streak of melancholy in his character: faced with some bureaucratic obstacle or the latest short-sighted decision by our political masters, he was often heard to say briskly 'It's all quite hopeless really.' But pessimism did not weaken his resolve, or prevent him from doing his utmost to guide and reassure others.

⁵² Sam Spade in D. Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* (1931), chapter 12 (p. 105 in the Pan Books edition of 1951, which Parsons had in his library).

In 2006 his seventieth birthday in September was celebrated by a conference in Oxford entitled ‘Culture in Pieces’, a quotation from Roland Barthes which was chosen with an eye to the process of reconstruction involved in the work of papyrologists, and more broadly the problems of literary and historical work using fragmentary material. Many friends and colleagues attended. A highlight of the proceedings was the presentation of a uniquely learned gift at the celebratory dinner. Colin Austin had composed a short lyric poem in Greek acclaiming the honoree’s achievements, and Revel Coles had provided a version on actual papyrus, in plausibly ancient script.⁵³ The protective case containing the papyrus was presented at the end of the meal, and Austin ceremoniously chanted the poem from memory. The verses were later reproduced at the front of the published *Festschrift*, *Culture in Pieces*, which despite regrettable delays appeared in 2011.

After retirement there was little let-up in Parsons’s activities. Quite apart from his continued work on Oxyrhynchus texts, he lectured to papyrological summer schools, took part in seminars, accepted invitations to contribute to the *Festschriften* of distinguished colleagues, and continued to write the occasional review. He co-edited a volume surveying many aspects of Oxyrhynchus, its history and the achievements of scholarly work there, and himself contributed an essay on the scribes.⁵⁴ A long-running collaborative project to publish a papyrus containing the opening lines of numerous epigrams came to fulfilment in 2015.⁵⁵ There was more besides. Yet he constantly claimed to be largely inactive and unproductive (in one email he remarked ‘I seem to spend half the day coaxing my socks on’⁵⁶).

One project which came his way rather unexpectedly was the preparation of a new Oxford Classical Text of the comedian Menander. The older edition by F.H. Sandbach (1972, repr. with minor additions 1984) was now badly out of date in view of more recent finds. A new edition had been undertaken by Colin Austin, but his death in 2010 left the work unfinished. Austin had supposed that little more needed to be done, and entrusted its completion to Parsons in conjunction with Eric Handley (d. 2013).⁵⁷ In fact Austin’s hopes proved over-optimistic, and Parsons found a great deal to do, besides

⁵³ Colin Austin (1941–2010), a longstanding friend, was an expert on Greek comedy: see R. Hunter & P.J. Parsons, ‘Colin François Lloyd Austin’, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 14 (2015), 3–12. Revel Coles (1938–2025) was a fellow papyrologist who worked for years alongside Parsons and Rea on the Oxyrhynchus publications.

⁵⁴ ‘Copyists of Oxyrhynchus’, in A.K. Bowman, R.A. Coles, N. Gonis, D. Obbink & P.J. Parsons (eds), *Oxyrhynchus: a city and its texts* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2007), pp. 262–70.

⁵⁵ P.J. Parsons, H. Maehler & F. Maltomini, *The Vienna Epigrams Papyrus (G 40611)* (= CPR XXXIII) (Berlin–New York, 2015). For informative reviews see K. Gutzwiller, *Gnomon*, 88 (2016), 493–6; G. Del Mastro, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2016.01.37.

⁵⁶ Email to the present writer, 14 July 2011.

⁵⁷ Handley (1926–2013) was Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge from 1984 to 1994. See P.E. Easterling, ‘Eric Walter Handley’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (entry published January 2017).

concluding that a companion volume of notes was indispensable. A short selection of the plays closest to a publishable version was completed and issued as a slim volume under Austin's name in 2013.⁵⁸ He had previously edited new papyri of Menander together with Lucia Prauscello, and when she moved to All Souls College in Oxford (2018) they began to work on the text together, finding themselves in disagreement with Austin's editorial style. The Oxford text remains a work-in-progress: since Parsons's death, Prauscello has inherited the task.

By the end of 2019 he was sufficiently immobile to be almost completely housebound (although he purchased an electric wheelchair, the unevenness of Oxford pavements dissuaded him from making much use of it). Nevertheless, the determination of Daniela Colomo and Lucia Prauscello enabled him to give what turned out to be his final public paper at a seminar in All Souls that autumn. Many graduates and younger colleagues were present to hear the master perform. In a sparkling exposition, he revisited the key issues involved in editing the *Lille Callimachus* mentioned above, and gracefully presented a fresh solution to one crux: characteristically this suggestion was accompanied by self-rebuke for his own failure to spot this when he originally published the text.⁵⁹

During the Covid years he continued to work away at further texts, while also amusing himself by composing light verse mocking the incompetence of the Prime Minister of the day. Once the lockdown was lifted, he again began to receive many visitors from Oxford and much further afield. Colleagues and collaborators, former pupils, visiting scholars from other countries, all travelled to maintain contact with 'the Buddha of Botley', as he jokingly described himself. During the last year of his life, *City* was published in a Japanese version, and the translator journeyed to Oxford to meet him in person. It was typical that Parsons requested his visitor's autograph in the book rather than the other way round.

In his later years, problems with his health multiplied, but he managed to remain in his home and never completely stopped working. In the end death came swiftly. After being taken urgently to the John Radcliffe Hospital, he died on 16 November 2022. At the funeral in Christ Church Cathedral, Alan Bowman paid tribute to his colleague and friend, concluding with the words Doctor Watson applied to Sherlock Holmes, 'whom I shall ever regard as the best and the wisest man whom I have ever known'.⁶⁰ Many of

⁵⁸ *Menander: Eleven Plays* (Cambridge Classical Journal Supplementary vol. 37, 2013), with a brief preface by Richard Hunter and Peter Parsons.

⁵⁹ The paper was posthumously published in a volume honouring his friend Susan Stephens, herself a major contributor to Callimachean studies ('No lyre for Heracles', in B. Acosta-Hughes, J. Arthur-Montagne & Ph. Vasunia (eds), *Hellenistic Literature and Culture: Studies in Honor of Susan A. Stephens* (London, 2024), pp. 191–200).

⁶⁰ The closing words of Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Final Problem', in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1893).

those present will have shared that judgement.

Parsons was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1977. He was also the recipient of Honorary Doctorates from Bern (1985) and Athens (1995), and of a DLitt from Milan (1994). In 2004 he was made Honorary President of the Association Internationale de Papyrologues. The British Academy honoured him with the Kenyon Medal for Classical Studies in 2019. These marks of recognition gave him pleasure, but more important still in his housebound state was the continued contact with many devoted pupils and colleagues. Those who knew him will always remember an outstanding scholar, a unique personality, and a beloved friend.⁶¹

Acknowledgements

Many people have helped me in the preparation of this memoir, but I wish particularly to thank Amin Benaissa, Nikolaos Gonis and Gregory Hutchinson, all of whom read and commented on an advanced draft. David Tuck, a cousin of Peter Parsons, provided invaluable information on the family background. Stephanie West was originally asked to undertake the writing of this memoir, but in the end her state of health made this impossible. I am grateful to her for conversation about Peter and for passing on her initial notes.

For information on various aspects, I am indebted to Alan Bowman, John and Patrick Gray, Ross McKibbin, Christopher Pelling, Lucia Prauscello, Susan Stephens and Michael Winterbottom. I must also thank Judith Curthoys, Archivist of Christ Church, for material from the files of tutors' reports.

A bibliography of Peter Parsons's publications up to 2011 appears at the end of *Culture in Pieces* (pp. 323–33). A list of items published after that date has been compiled by Professor Amin Benaissa and a copy has been deposited in the Parsons archive.

Note on the author: Richard Rutherford is an Emeritus Student (Fellow) of Christ Church, Oxford, where he was Tutor in Greek and Latin Literature from 1982 to 2023.

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Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy (ISSN 2753–6777) are published by The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk

⁶¹ For obituaries see H. Bernsdorff, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (21 November 2022); R.B. Rutherford, *Daily Telegraph* (19 December 2022); *The Times* (9 March 2023, unattributed); G.O. Hutchinson, *CUCD Bulletin*, 52 (2023) [online], and *Eikasmos*, 34 (2023), 383–5; also a paragraph of tribute by N. Gonis in the preface to *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, 87 (2023), p. v.

