

Charles Peter Brand

7 February 1923 – 4 November 2016

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1990

by

MARTIN MCLAUGHLIN



PETER BRAND

Peter Brand, as he preferred to be known, was born in Cambridge on 7 February 1923. His father was a printer and his mother a secretary who also typed up theses for students in the town, so he was not born into privilege. However, after attending the Cambridgeshire High School for Boys, his precocious intelligence won him an Open Major Scholarship to Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he began a degree in Modern Languages in 1941. Like many of his generation, his university course was interrupted in 1943 by the intensifying conflict of the Second World War, but his language skills were useful to the army and he spent the end of the war going round Sicily and Southern Italy on a motorbike investigating Fascists and Fascist sympathisers. In peacetime he returned to Cambridge and completed his BA in 1948, obtaining a first-class degree in Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. It was around this time that he met and married his Swedish wife, Gunvor.

After his BA, Brand went on to do his PhD under the then Professor of Italian, E. R. Vincent, on 'The Italianate fashion in early nineteenth-century England', receiving his doctorate in 1952. His teaching career began with a short spell at the Perse School in Cambridge and he also taught briefly as an assistant in the Italian department at Edinburgh University: although he was captivated by the Scottish capital, he did not get on well with the head of department, the eccentric Mario Manlio Rossi, and soon returned to a post as University Lecturer in Cambridge and Fellow in his old college, Trinity Hall. However, when in 1966 the Edinburgh Chair became vacant (Rossi retired and returned to Italy), Brand successfully applied for the job (perhaps Edinburgh was ready for a change from the unconventional Italian whose main research interest was in esoteric philosophy). Brand went on to hold the Edinburgh chair with great distinction until retirement in 1988, presiding over the expansion of his department as it became one of the foremost units of Italian studies in the UK. The success of this department was almost entirely due to Brand himself: he was a highly talented administrator and, given his skills in this area, it was no surprise that he went on to become Dean of the Faculty of Arts, which allowed him to recruit replacement staff for Italian. His administrative career culminated in him becoming Vice Principal of Edinburgh University in 1984–8. It was a triumphal and well-deserved end to his academic life.

However, devoted as he was to his beloved Edinburgh and Scotland, Brand did not confine himself to promoting Italian studies north of the border. He was very much a 'good citizen' at national level. He was the Honorary Treasurer of the main subject association, the Society for Italian Studies (SIS), from 1957 to 1962. Here too he was a force for change: one of the reforms he instigated was to persuade the SIS to publish, in addition to its academic journal *Italian Studies*, an annual newsletter, which later became *The Bulletin of the Society for Italian Studies*, with an emphasis on practical developments in teaching. He then went on to serve on the editorial board of the

main journal of the SIS, *Italian Studies* (volumes 31–6, for the years 1976–81). However, his reforms were not always welcomed: he had a difficult relationship with J. H. Whitfield, who became Chair of the SIS in 1962, in succession to Brand's former supervisor, E. R. Vincent. The initiative to launch the *Bulletin*, for instance, did not have the Chair's approval. Relations remained frosty and Whitfield published quite a harsh review (in *Italian Studies*, 21 (1966), 122–4) of Brand's 1965 monograph on Torquato Tasso, though this was countered by more generous reviews elsewhere. Brand continued to maintain a national profile, serving as General Editor of the *Modern Language Review* for volumes 66–73 (1971–8), as well as acting as subject Editor for Italian and Spanish in the journal. His national contribution did not go unnoticed: he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1990, and in 1995 became President of the Modern Humanities Research Association. He was recognised beyond the UK as well: in 1970 he was invited as Visiting Professor to Cornell University in the USA, and he also held visiting professorships in Italy, a country that made him a Cavaliere dell'Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana in 1975, and then in 1988 a Commendatore.

Brand's skills as teacher and head of department were of the same high order as his more widely known achievements as a scholar. He was an inspirational teacher who lectured with great clarity and charisma, and his practical, 'can-do' attitude genuinely helped students who were sometimes daunted by taking up a new language and literature: he would regularly explain to undergraduates how they too could work a forty-hour week in an effective and feasible way. His administrative brilliance was evident first and foremost in his own department, where all colleagues were treated with exemplary fairness. His willingness to take on major administrative roles also benefited his own department. When in the late 1970s he agreed to become Dean of the Faculty of Arts, he did so on condition that the Faculty grant him a replacement for a departing colleague and an extra lectureship to help cope with the rising numbers of undergraduates in Italian: indeed, in that year the only two appointments in the whole of humanities at Edinburgh were in Italian, surely a unique occurrence in any modern-day university. Brand also had a justified reputation for making deals with colleagues in his own and other faculties, and significantly many of these deals were struck during or after a tennis or squash match, or over lunch in the university's staff club. In return for all this, the Italian departmental team had to do more than perform well in teaching and research: they also had to become involved in the social activities that helped make it a cohesive unit. Colleagues were encouraged to join in the annual reading party at a country house in Angus owned by the Scottish universities, an event to which students and staff from other Scottish Italian departments also willingly came. With one of the earliest language assistants at Edinburgh, Laura Caretti, a dynamic personality, Brand launched the idea of an annual Italian play, to be put on

in Edinburgh by both undergraduates and staff every spring. The plays performed ranged from Machiavelli's *La mandragola* to works by De Filippo and Dario Fo, and they attracted not just a university audience (which included coachloads of students from Glasgow and Aberdeen) but also large numbers from the Italian community in Edinburgh – all this long before Outreach and Impact were coined in their current academic meanings.

Brand himself recalled that when he took over the Edinburgh chair in 1966 there were only two lecturers in the department, and dangerously low levels of undergraduates; but by the end of the 1970s there were four full-time lecturers, and student enrolments were so high that the Faculty had to put a cap on the numbers taking Italian. This was, he said, 'one of the most exciting and cheering periods of my life'. Part of the secret of this success was his campaign to have the beginners' course in Italian accepted as a graduating course that would count towards the degree. There was some hostility to this idea in the faculty, but he succeeded in convincing one of the main opponents, the professor of French, after a drink with him at the university Staff Club following a game of tennis. This was typical of Brand: he took great pleasure in sporting and social activities for themselves but he always had an eye to securing practical advantages. He was a networker before his time, and it is no surprise that some of his colleagues in other faculties nicknamed him 'Brando' (after the lead actor in the two films of *The Godfather*, which were very popular in the early 1970s). But he never rested on his laurels or neglected his own department. Thanks to conversations with Gunvor, he developed a new small-group teaching structure for the crucial beginners' course, which was based on the Swedish car manufacturer SAAB's idea that small units were much better than lengthy conveyor belts.

In terms of scholarship, Peter Brand will be remembered for three major monographs as well as his generous editorial work for *Modern Language Review*. His first book, based on his Cambridge thesis, was *Italy and the English Romantics: the Italianate Fashion in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1957). This was a substantial, fifteen-chapter, interdisciplinary study of what he terms the 'Italomania' that seized England in the first forty years of the nineteenth century. It was not just a literary study. The four main divisions of the book give a good idea of its scope: travel and language; the influence of Italian literature in England; the arts and landscape; history, politics and religion. To round it off there is a substantial conclusion, eight illustrations, and eight appendices outlining the huge range of sources he drew on for the volume. Given this breadth it is no wonder that Brand's first monograph is still a point of reference for scholars today, sixty years after its first publication.

Brand's second book saw him move from the nineteenth century to the Renaissance period, but there was still an English dimension. In *Torquato Tasso: a Study of the Poet and of his Contribution to English Literature* (Cambridge, 1965) he devoted seven

of the ten chapters to Tasso's life and works, and three to the poet's reception in England. This was a milestone volume in that it was the first complete study in English of Tasso, and it also provided a comprehensive survey of the poet's influence and reputation in England up to the end of the nineteenth century. One particularly striking aspect of the book is that in the part devoted to Tasso's life and works there was no bibliography in English for Brand to draw on: it was genuinely a pioneering volume. The book contains some sensitive literary analyses, particularly of the epic *Gerusalemme liberata* and the pastoral drama *Aminta*. In the substantial forty-page chapter on the *Liberata*, the line of enquiry is largely thematic, but Brand does reserve a quarter of the chapter for an assessment of Tasso's language and style in the poem, with plenty of quotations to illustrate his points. His down-to-earth approach, unburdened by the Crocean jargon that had dominated Italian studies of Tasso, or by modern theory, made the book indispensable for students studying this difficult author.

His final monograph was a book devoted solely to the other great writer of Renaissance chivalric epic, Ariosto, and this time there was to be little attention to the poet's critical fortune in English. *Ariosto: a Preface to the 'Orlando furioso'* (Edinburgh, 1974) was also pioneering in that it was the first of the twelve volumes that would be published by Edinburgh University Press in a series devised by Brand himself, 'Writers of Italy'. The aim of each volume in this series, as he states in the preface, is 'to explain and interpret the work of a major Italian writer'; the books are 'designed also to be intelligible and of interest to those whose knowledge of Italian is slight' (p. vii). That is why each quotation is accompanied by an English translation, unlike in the book on Tasso, and with a view to this broader readership there are no footnotes, though there is a good, up-to-date bibliography at the end. Of the ten chapters, there are two on Ariosto's life and 'minor works', then seven devoted to the thematics and style of the epic, and one on the poem's general reception, with just a few pages on the poem's critical fortune in the UK. As in the volume on Tasso, there are helpful thematic accounts (in the three chapters on love, arms and politics) and sensitive poetic and narratological analyses (in the chapters on narrative, poetry and language). Some of the conclusions hint at why Brand found Ariosto so congenial: towards the end of the chapter on politics, he writes: 'Out of the loves and encounters of his knights and damsels come not so much answers for the ills of his society, but meditation and tentative counsel on the business of living with our fellows, friends, masters, enemies, daughters, wives' (p. 125). The author of the Ariosto book always found a way of living humanely with those around him, be they colleagues, friends or family.

This talent for bringing the values he found in Renaissance works into his life was particularly evident in the case of another favourite text, Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. Not surprisingly, this work appeared in the Writers of Italy series, when Brand

commissioned John Woodhouse to write what became one of the most successful of its volumes: *Baldesar Castiglione: a Reassessment of The Courtier* (Edinburgh, 1978). Castiglione's most famous concept was that of *sprezzatura*, a neologism coined by the author to mean a kind of outward nonchalance which somehow accompanies brilliant achievements. Brand loved teaching *The Courtier* to undergraduates and explaining its relevance, and there was something of that seemingly effortless excellence in many areas of his own life.

Among his other publications were two coedited volumes, which bookend his career looking both backwards and forwards: one was a Festschrift for his supervisor, coedited with Kenelm Foster and Uberto Limentani, *Italian Studies presented to E. R. Vincent on his Retirement from the Chair of Italian at Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1962); the other was the substantial and very successful history of Italian literature coedited with Lino Pertile, Brand's successor at Edinburgh: *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* (Cambridge, 1996; revised paperback edition, 1999). There was one final book of translations, cowritten with Richard Andrews and Corinna Salvadori: *Overture to the Opera: Italian Pastoral Drama in the Renaissance: Poliziano's Orfeo and Tasso's Aminta with Facing English Verse Translations* (Dublin, 2013). For this work, Brand translated Tasso's *Aminta*, a play that he had read and loved when he first studied it on an Italian course with Army Intelligence in the 1940s and which he finally translated for the last volume he contributed to.

Peter Brand died on 4 November 2016, and with his passing British academia lost the most successful promoter of Italian studies in Scotland. In these days of small nationalisms, it is worth noting that the person who did most to promote Italian studies in Scotland in recent times was an Englishman who had fallen in love with the country (he was also a fanatical supporter of the Scottish rugby team). In broad academic terms, his legacy will be his three major monographs, as well as the twelve volumes of the Writers of Italy series and the monumental *Cambridge History of Italian Literature*.

Outside academia, Brand loved sport and the outdoors, and would often escape with family, friends or colleagues to his caravan, first in the borders, then at Blair Atholl. His wife of over sixty years, Gunvor, died suddenly in 2010, but Brand coped with his grief with typical fortitude. A number of colleagues from different parts of the UK and Ireland had the pleasure of attending his ninetieth birthday party at a restaurant in Edinburgh in February 2013. The next day he generously invited all of them to a lunch at his house, but only after he had taken his daily morning walk up Corstorphine Hill. His infectious love of life stayed with him to the end. Perhaps that quality also came from one of his favourite authors. In his Ariosto book, while speaking of the 'message' of the *Furioso*, he notes: 'Such philosophy as emerges, is a personal one, a human, humane and common sense acceptance of love as a power for good or

evil in men's lives' (p. 59). The human, humane and common sense are all qualities that were epitomised by Peter Brand himself. Very much a family man, he is survived by three daughters Jane, Anne and Catharine, and a son, Simon.

Acknowledgements

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Note on the author: Martin L. McLaughlin was Professor of Italian and Agnelli-Serena Professor of Italian Studies at the University of Oxford; he won the British Academy's Serena Medal in 2017.

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