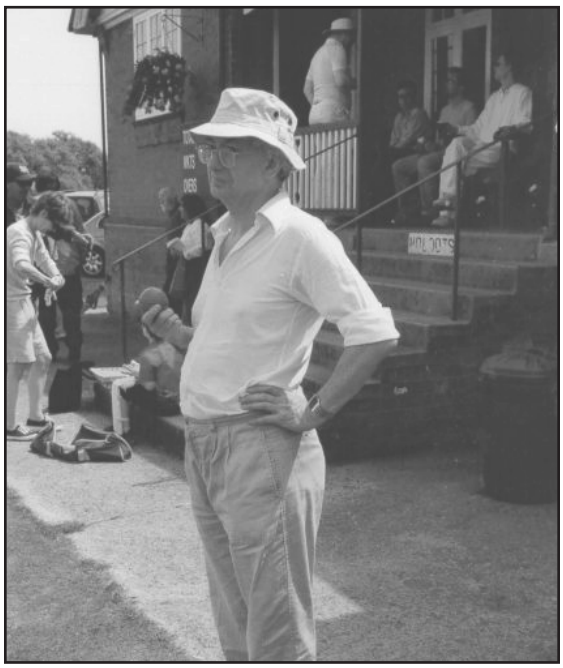
MARTIN LITCHFIELD WEST



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An obituary writer has an obligation to present an overview of her subject's life. For a scholar, it might begin with their school, and would certainly include details of their university and academic career. She should of course survey her subject's work, its importance and intellectual character, its contribution to the field. She should mention distinctions and honors. And she should give a sense of the individual, to recall the person to those that knew them, to bring them to life for those who did not.

Martin West, one of the most eminent classical scholars in the world, was a master of literary genre; that will be one of my main emphases. But—quite apart from the fact that an obituary *per se* seems so wrong for someone who had apparently aged so lightly and was at least as creative and productive as he had ever been at the time of his death, at age 77—a formally perfect but cold example of the genre seems wholly false to his wit, frequent subversiveness, and rather oddball human warmth.

In Martin's case the biodata are easily rehearsed.[1] They look, and are, very English: a superlative (if skewed) education at one of England's top public schools; a scholarship to what was then Oxford's top college for the study of Classics; and then a career mostly in Oxford, first as a tutorial fellow (charged with both research and the provision of tutorial teaching and lectures to undergraduates; it is not a matter of obscurity where Martin's particular priorities lay), then as a Senior Research Fellow in All Souls College, which liberated him from the worsening administrative grind in his in-between stint as Professor of Greek in Royal Holloway and Bedford New College in the University of London. He loved not only the liberation that All Souls afforded him, but also the eccentricity of the place and some of its characters. The doggedness with which this research institution went its own way in the midst of a teaching university largely baffled by it suited his own, utterly indefeasible, mental independence. It gave him the time and uncircumscribed freedom to write the works that culminated in the Order of Merit (2014), a recognition of distinguished service, which is the personal gift of the Sovereign and limited to 24 living recipients from the Commonwealth countries.

There were many extraordinary things about his scholarly achievement, and the minimal impact that teaching and administrative burdens seem to have had on its early stages is the least of them. Much more

1 St. Paul's School, London; Balliol College, Oxford (1955–1959); Woodhouse Research Fellow, St. John's College (1960–1963); Tutorial Fellow at University College (1963–1974); Professor of Greek at Royal Holloway, subsequently Royal Holloway and Bedford New College (1974–1991); Senior Research Fellow at All Souls College (1991–2004), then Emeritus Fellow (2004–2014) and Honorary Fellow (2014–2015).

remarkable is that right at the outset he seemed to know exactly where he was going and had a method for getting there. His doctoral dissertation on Hesiod's *Theogony*—his examiners are said to have thought it worthy of at least three doctorates—did much more than just establish the credentials of the young editor and commentator. It exemplified the principle stated in *The East Face of Helicon*, published over 30 years later, that "culture expands outwards like gas," and that it would be in the Indo-European and Semitic cultures of the Ancient Near East that the culture and literature of archaic Greece would find its most enriching context. And so it was to Hurrian-Hittite and Akkadian sources that he went, not just to illuminate Hesiod's particular poem, but in so doing to make the case that Greece was the beneficiary of literary genres, motifs, themes, theological notions—in short, culture patterns, which diffused outward from the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and which Greece made her own. The Akkadian that Martin would learn at Oxford's Oriental Institute brought within his reach the texts that would enable him to establish his case, not just by means of the massive accumulation of parallels, but also by demonstrating the shared formal structures, the conventions and narrative techniques, that held it all together.

The linguistic giftedness on which all this was based was extraordinary. We all acquire languages at school only for them to haze over in adulthood. The German that Martin began to acquire at St. Paul's and refined during his time in Erlangen (1960) when Reinhold Merkelbach invited him to collaborate on a new edition of the fragments of Hesiod became so idiomatic that he could write parodies of Heidegger (and fool some into the belief that he was being serious).[2] I am not sure when he acquired Old Norse, but dating from many years before his *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*—which did for the cognates between Greek and Indo-European literatures what *The East Face of Helicon* had done for the Ancient Near East—comes an isometric translation of the Old Norse poem "The Waking of Angantyr" from the *Poetic Edda*. *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* was published in 2007, when Martin was 70 years old. He became so fascinated in the course of writing that book by the figure of Zoroaster that he coolly acquired Avestan and three years later published a translation of the *Gathas*—and not just any old translation either, but one which he claimed was more correct, intelligible, and true to the spirit of the hymns than those of any of his predecessors. This was followed up the following year with the first modern and comprehensive study of Avestan syntax. There was a touch

2 Martin L. W. Eggheider, "Die Wahrheitserkenntnis des Pythermos. Eine Denkproblemuntersuchung," *Zeitschrift fur Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 3 (1968): 255–56.

of rambunctiousness in Martin (for example, the mention of "this little book" in the preface to his 662-page *East Face of Helicon*), but the deities who take note of *hybris* appear simply to have looked on him with an amused smile and passed on to offenders who were less merry and young at heart. It was simply what he was like.

He would probably not have put it in such terms, but it was a matter of both *langue* and *parole*. The ability to penetrate to the deep structures of a language was matched by an immaculate sense for individual utterance; he had a perfect ear, not only for what an ancient author would have said, but also how he—or she—would have said it. His restorations of the new fragments of Sappho in 2005 are testimony to that.[3] What it was all about was essentially the mastery of intricate, rule-governed systems, and their inflection so as to produce intellectually cogent, aesthetically pleasing, and humanly meaningful results. The book *Greek Metre* (1982) is not an easy read, yet the notation is never so rebarbative, the terminology never so off-putting, as to conceal the sense that the poetry is all realizable—marvelous and elaborate riches produced by a culture both traditional and profoundly creative. He was at his best when he could bring everything together, as he did in his book *Ancient Greek Music* (1992). Here was mastery of a formidable subject whose "horrors" (his word) were entirely neutralized by being subordinated to the purpose of showing how ancient music worked in practice—not just what rules governed it, but *what it actually sounded like,* what effects it achieved, what could be done with it, what part it played in ancient culture. More than that, it was once again a question of comparative study, for knowledge of the civilizations of the Ancient Near East was clearly vital to understanding Greek music in its widest context. In a variant of the rambunctious trope, this time he wrote that he was "particularly well qualified to do this [that is, to explain the subject from first principles to the intelligent nonspecialist], being wholly without musical training. I have to take these things slowly to make them clear to myself."

Sometimes one plays the game of what one would have done if one had not done *x*. It is hard but not impossible to imagine Martin outside languages and literature. Other intricate, rule-governed systems, like law or medicine, would not have suited him. Music, though, certainly did, and there are seven piano sonatas to witness it; because he had had no musical training, they were not worked out in terms of formal musical grammar, but they followed a logic of Martin's own. Another possible domain was astronomy. The hilarity of the surviving journals

3 M. L. West, "The New Sappho," *Zeitschrift fur Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 151 (2005): 1–9.

of the schoolboy Herschelian Society, which he had handwritten and edited between 1948 and 1952, is that one cannot be quite sure whether the prose is as borderline-autistic as it appears or whether it actually, already, between the ages of 11 and 15, contains the germs of the mature Martin who was master of so many styles that he could use or send up as he pleased. (He wrote on December 3, 1951: "In future, when submitting observations of planets, variables and the Sun, will members please give the Julian date if possible? This begins at noon and is more convenient for calculation.") Certainly his famous handwriting—so regular and neat as to seem almost computer-generated—is already there. That the interest itself was more than schoolboy whimsy is demonstrated by the fact that his first three published articles were, in fact, in professional astronomical journals.[4]

Ultimately, though, only the study of the literature of the ancient world was capable of bringing together that unrepeatable combination of precision and flair, formality and unconventionality, demanding discipline and boldness of imagination. He combined the gifts of the great papyrologist Edgar Lobel with those of the equally wide-ranging and imaginative student of the ancient world Walter Burkert (who was, in fact, his friend, and whom Martin outlived by only four months). If he saw himself as part of a greater classical tradition, it would have been as heir to Wilamowitz, whose haughty portrait presided over the desk where he wrote his books. But Wilamowitz was both broader and narrower. Wilamowitz roamed all over the classical world, as opposed to taking carefully chosen paths through it in very selected directions. Wilamowitz stopped at the gates of the Ancient Near East, where Martin drove superbly—not to mention rambunctiously—through them. Nevertheless, the perceived affinity may have been based on the ability to formulate the bold hypothesis, and, whether or not the answers commanded assent, in having a gift for always posing the right questions.

Martin's mother came from Yorkshire, and he liked to think he had something of the qualities of that plain-spoken northern county. That had a great deal of relevance to his intolerance of any literary theory that was not empirical and solidly based on the evidence of the text. So too to a deliberate and dogged unfashionability and persistence in believing that some things were right, other things were wrong, and that was that ("*Positivismus*!" he would utter with great relish). It also

4 M. L. West, "Anaxagoras and the Meteorite of 467 B.C.," *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* 70 (1960): 3689; M. L. West, "An Ancient Reference to the Quadrantids," *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* 71 (1961): 206; M. L. West, "Alleged Apparitions of Halley's Comet in the Eighteenth Century B.C. and Earlier," *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* 71 (1961): 324–26.

extended to a certain bloody-minded insistence on doing things his way. On occasion it could go as far as being pretty dismissive of some of the courtesies of academic life ("I can't stop you," in reply to a colleague's proposal to send him a draft of an article). It certainly had reference to total absence of small talk. When he was younger this had, apparently, been downright awkward. Later, one suspects it was sometimes perversity, or rather, that his mode of converse favored shafts of wit so finely honed that there was simply no way of following them up. (When a young female fellow controversially wanted to alter the terms of the fixed seven-year Prize Fellowship in All Souls in order to allow for maternity leave, Martin's comment was, "Oh what a tangled web we weave/When first we practise to Conceive.")

But Yorkshiremen have another side. Yorkshiremen are blunt but warm of heart. Yorkshiremen don't beat about the bush, and it was directness that he favored: simplicity, lack of embellishment, the limpid quality of the best early Greek lyric poetry (as opposed to what he called the "clever-clever" Hellenistic poets, for whom he had little time). And indeed—now abandoning Yorkshiremen altogether—it was grace and elegance that were the hallmarks of his writing. Elsewhere I have referred to the metaphor he applied to his own work, that of the climbing-frame, a three-dimensional structure which one clambers about in, explores, and to which all sorts of exciting new parts can be added. But that in turn implies the athletic ability to clamber about in it. And throughout his career he was characterized by an intellectual litheness and blitheness, which even—because Martin was one of those happy beings in whom the ethos of the whole inheres in every part—extended to a certain trimness and catlike physical quality. Apparently when he first moved into his room as a young tutorial fellow in University College, Oxford, he tried to see whether he could maneuver around the perimeter without touching the floor. He succeeded.

All the things I have been talking about—the stylishness, wit, brio—come out in little flourishes with which his work is embellished. The prefaces to the first and second editions of the Greek elegiac and iambic poets convey all the requisite information (including some pretty intractable proper names), but done into Latin, in dragged iambics, the appropriate meter. The "Elegy on an Indo-European Hero"—in English, this time—at the end of *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, demonstrate the topoi and poetic devices the book has been discussing, complete with invented heroic names of appropriate etymology. ("Well-joined was the dear name/you set on your son, Seghekleves:/ wide in truth his glory spreads/under that heaven, over this earth.") Unpublished writings also show Martin writing in different genres, but

with his distinctive accent in every one. Take for instance the perfect rhythm and pointing of the opening of this short story: "When Mabel J. Cable had her first son, she called him Matthew. When she had her second, she called him Mark. When she had her third, she called him Luke. When she had her fourth, she called him Bohuslav. Bohuslav Cable. This story is wholly about Luke." Or, from a chapter of early reminiscence: "[two of his uncles] became business partners in a motor parts firm, West & Sellick. They supplied tyres for all the ambulances in Hertfordshire. I used to cherish this information as a useful means of contributing to any conversation that happened to touch on Hertfordshire or ambulances or tyres." There are poems in various meters; one describes a winter evening in sepulchral Brasenose Lane in central Oxford in free verse that pays tribute to Eliot's "Preludes." The isometric translation from the *Poetic Edda* that I mentioned before reproduces the Old Norse Stabreim as follows:

Hervard, HjQrvad,	Hrani, Angantyr,
all awaken	under the wood's roots
with helm, corslet	and keen sword,
shield, strapping,	and spear blood-reddened!

It was presumably this perfect sense of style and generic appropriateness that made William McGonagall ("the worst poet in history") so irresistible to Martin. He would declaim his celebrated poem on the Tay Bridge disaster, not a single line of which escapes infelicity,[5] in a surprisingly effective Scottish accent.

Solemnity was not his thing. He kept a collection of the exam howlers produced by his students in Royal Holloway, and came close to tears as he reproduced them ("Zeus' power over the other gods is illustrated in Homer's *Iliad* by the tale of when Hera went behind Zeus' back and he hung her upside down by her anvil").

His attempts at gravitas on assuming academic paraphernalia, in which he paraded around with relish on honorary degree days, fooled no one. And yet he *was* capable of solemnity. At the celebration of his life in All Souls in the October following his death, Jonathan Katz played an excerpt from Martin's final piano sonata whose last movement was subscribed "Amen." This from a confirmed atheist who, when once asked to give a reading in All Souls chapel, had expressed relish at the prospect that, in his view, the 21st century would be Christianity's last.

5 "Beautiful railway bridge of the silv'ry Tay/Alas! I am very sorry to say/That ninety lives have been taken away/On the last sabbath day of 1879/Which will be remember'd for a very long time."

A colleague once described Martin as having "moral luck." It seemed to run out on a Monday morning in mid-July with an entirely unforeseen heart attack; it had never occurred to anyone that some day Martin would no longer be there. But in a way his sudden disappearance, with faculties as sharp as they had ever been, was the only way for Martin to go. As he once said to an awestruck junior scholar who was introduced to him at a conference and effused that to her he was like a god: "No, not a god—but I am a creature of legend."

Elected 2010

Jane L. Lightfoot
Professor of Greek Literature
New College, University of Oxford