

ANNA MORPURGO DAVIES AND THE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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I last spoke to Anna, over the telephone, a few weeks before she died. It was on the surface a very ordinary conversation: she was at home; she had only just stopped driving; the garden had been beautiful that summer. She knew by then that the Philological Society would be setting up a fund in her memory: just the kind of thing that she would herself have opposed, she said, as establishing a precedent. So would I, she said, if it had been for anyone else.

No one else, however, has contributed more and more variously to the work of our society, at least in my lifetime. She joined the council in 1972, after her election as Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford, and became our president soon afterwards, in 1976. A president in those days could, if so inclined, do little more than preside. Council meetings had a ritual agenda, through which Bobby Robins, as long-standing secretary, used to guide us perfectly. I remember one

afternoon in Oxford in the 1970s when he was ill and unable to officiate. Nothing of substance had to be decided; and, as Anna remarked, we were at a loss to spin out our time until tea. At general meetings a president had only to introduce and thank the speaker, and ask for questions. The rest was further ritual, AGM included.

Anna was fascinated, as a foreigner perhaps and as a historian of nineteenth-century linguistics, by the traditions of the society. But she was not a president of that sort. At general meetings she did not simply ask for questions. She usually began by asking one herself, often devastating. She also had to deal, at the outset, with an administrative problem which, if left alone, could have become embarrassing.

The *Transactions* were at that time an annual volume. Those 'for year *n*' were published either in that year or, more normally, in year *n* + 1. But the *Transactions* for 1975 did not appear until 1977, and the next year saw a single volume, with fewer than a hundred pages, for 1976 and 1977. All manner of things could in principle have excused this: shortage of material; contributors not returning first or second proofs, even vagaries of, in those days, the post. The council was beginning of course to ask for explanations. The constitution, however, of the society is modelled on that of a Victorian public company. Ordinary members of the council are in practice the equivalent of non-executive directors, and there was little we would have been able to do unless and until matters got much worse.

Fortunately, our new president took charge. A committee was set up, of which I was also a member; others included the treasurer, E.J. Dobson, and Christopher Ball, who had served previously as secretary for publications. Mr Ball, as he then was, could not in the end attend, but sent a helpful letter. I must confess to having felt a measure of anxiety. Anna and I were

around forty, and this was the first time we had really worked together. The retiring president, Stephen Ullman, was a civilised and charming man who had not clearly exhibited the touch of ruthlessness that might be needed, and I could not quite be sure she had it. Before the meeting therefore, which was in London, I remember stumping for an hour around the National Portrait Gallery, steeling myself to create a serious fuss if necessary. But Anna managed everything impeccably. We concluded that the work of the secretary for publications had become intolerably time-consuming. The natural solution was to establish an informal editorial committee, including the official secretary for publications, the existence of which was made public, for the first time, in the *Transactions* for 1983. Elevation to the editorial committee meant that the burden of editing the *Transactions* was lifted from the shoulders of the former secretary for publications. We thus needed a new secretary, and John Penney took charge admirably until 1989.

This is straightforward stuff, of course, for anyone practised in the administration of institutions settled in their ways. But the officers of learned societies are not always chosen for that talent. In the next three decades I was to work with Anna many times, in the affairs of the society, of the relevant section of the British Academy, and occasionally of our respective universities. Her more important virtues were as a scholar and a friend. I have dealt with no one else, however, who was better able to direct a meeting to the right conclusion; regardless, moreover, of whether she happened to be in the chair.

After the usual four years she was elected a vice-president. This is formally an office, which cannot, by custom if not constitutionally, be resigned. There was a time, however, when most vice-presidents were neither seen nor heard, even the few that remained of working age. It was Anna, above all, who was to change that. She was still in her mid-forties, and when succeeded in the presidency by Ilya Gershevitch she continued to come regularly to meetings of the council. Until a year before she died, as presidents came and went, and others like me were inspired by her example, she was there to guide us both in received traditions and when new initiatives were called for.

But the real work of the Philological Society is at ordinary meetings. They have the continuing attraction, in comparison with the hurried and fragmented conferences of modern times, that just one paper is heard and discussed, at adequate length, by all who are there. Some will be experts in the same field, others not, and it was in such a setting, which is no longer usual beyond university societies, that Anna excelled.

One recent meeting sticks, for illustration, in my memory. The topic was a new Romance etymological dictionary, to replace, one would hope, the great but now outdated work of Meyer-Lübke. The intention, however, of those in charge of it was to proceed as if we were ignorant of Latin, and reconstruct a protolanguage by a method that was strictly comparative. As someone who is not a Romanist I was at first no more than flabbergasted. Why should a historical linguist want to discount any evidence available? This was a project, however, financed generously by the European Union. A committee in Brussels must have sought independent assessments, which must have been favourable. If we thought it perverse, we had to examine carefully the thinking that lay behind it.

It was Anna who put me on the track to make up my own mind. The natural way to introduce the comparative method is to appeal, in the first instance, to resemblances between words which have similar meanings: words, for example, for 'father' as set out in manuals of Indo-European. Comparing one in French with one in Italian or Spanish is, in itself, no different. It is therefore tempting to perceive the unity of Romance, which has never been remotely doubted, as a finding of the same order as that of Indo-European, which has been established by comparison only. If we proceed in this light to ignore what is historically known, our data consist of no more than a set of languages attested individually, whose status as a family, we may then pretend, has still to be confirmed. As an artificial problem this was

being addressed, it seemed, by methods which, as Anna pointed out, were simply not those that have been developed by Indo-Europeanists, for whom the project of reconstruction is central.

On this occasion, her intervention was that of an expert. She had a deep belief, however, in the unity of the broader discipline the Philological Society was founded to promote—call it ‘philology’, call it ‘linguistics’, or whatever. It was not for nothing that she had become the friend, when young, of Zellig Harris and Henry Hoeningwald. There have been many times when I have listened to a paper closer to my own field, and have somehow felt that somewhere, at the heart of it, there was a gap in reasoning or an assumption that needed to be examined. Anna was able to put her finger on it instantly.

Over the best part of four decades she was invited, to speak on just two occasions, at the Sesquicentennial Symposium in 1992 and the Symposium on Linguistics and Philology in 2010. She had previously contributed two papers, neither of which had been read beforehand, to the *Transactions* for 1968 and 1978, the first on gender and declensions in Greek, the second on the Neogrammarians. A future historian must not, however, conclude that these, and her spell as president, represent the whole of her service to the society. She was a scholar of a quality who keeps such bodies alive.