

Memories: Eleanor Dickey

I recently heard Anna described as a saint who played a central role in the development of Linguistics as a subject in Oxford. While this was for the most part spot on, I couldn't help thinking that 'saint' was not quite the right word, and did not quite do justice to Anna's importance to those of us fortunate enough to have studied with her, or to the ways in which she earned our adoration. In what follows I attempt to explain.

I first met Anna as a new M.Phil. student in the autumn of 1989. She sidled up to me with a sweet smile and disarming charm, and in a quarter of an hour had extracted from me all the information that I particularly did not want anyone at Oxford to find out. Fortunately she did not consider it very interesting; in fact for the first term she could not really distinguish me from another student in the entering cohort. That friend (we bonded at once over Anna's mixing us up) got herself into worse and worse hot water as the term progressed; every time she saw Anna, probing questions revealed some hideous deficiency in her background or ongoing efforts. And the next time I saw Anna, she would ask me the same questions – but I always knew the answers, having been warned and having studied up. Eventually Anna persuaded my friend to withdraw from the programme, without spelling out what withdrawal would entail; the hapless student thought it would mean being able to spend all her time on extra-curricular activities, so she had a rude awakening when the college terminated her housing, her parents cut off her allowance, and the government cancelled her visa. In later years I have developed more sympathy with Anna's strategy there, but at the time those of us who remained in the cohort were horrified.

More advanced students impressed on us Anna's uncanny ability to find the flaw that most mortified you, drag it out of wherever you had hidden it, and rebuke you for it – and they were right. More often than was ideal, we wept after meetings with her, and sometimes during them. This did not faze Anna. Still we wanted those meetings, because the gain was greater than the pain – we learned huge amounts from each session. Also, if you listened to what she had to say in private, Anna had nothing but praise for you in public and would defend you to the hilt if anyone else tried to add further suffering to what she had decided you needed. That quid pro quo was mandatory, though; someone once gave a paper in the philology seminar without allowing Anna to take it apart in private first, and she took him apart in front of us all. 'It's better to suffer beforehand', she observed. Standards for student seminar papers were very high after that: we spent weeks on each one.

Some of Anna's supervisees complained that she did not read their work. They said this ostentatiously, because we understood that Anna was over-extended, and we thought the priority she put on reading our work was proportional to how worried she was about it: her failure to read one's work was therefore a badge of honour. But occasionally she would have second thoughts at a late stage; at least one student was honoured for several months by having a chapter ignored and then a week before the thesis was due received instructions to give it major revision. Once I tried to forestall such a retraction of honour by refusing to send work in advance and showing it to Anna only in person, having thriftily printed it out on the back of some work in Physics taken from the scrap paper pile beside the college printer. But Anna's baffled questions to me focussed on the Physics rather than on my chapter...

Nevertheless, she could be a wonderful supervisor even without reading anything. If you explained to her what your argument was and what problems you were having, she could tell you on the spot whether the argument was right, what else you needed to look at, and how to

solve the problems. And having to learn how to explain your argument and its problems orally in a few minutes was excellent training. The only difficulty with this system was that Anna delivered insights at a pace well above what our brains could process, let alone our hands write down. She knew this perfectly well; once when I attempted to get her to slow down by confessing that I only understood eighty percent of what she told me, she responded, ‘Oh Eleanor, it’s a lot less than eighty percent!’ And then she continued at the same pace. She had a lot to get through; supervision meetings were often four hours long.

Because Anna’s insight was so penetrating and her observations so accurate, we desperately wanted her approbation; after all if she were to say something positive, it would be true. But praise was sparingly dispensed. Some students tried flattery, some tried gifts, some tried subterfuge (very dangerous with Anna, but I did once manage a summer vacation by writing chapters beforehand and asking a friend to put them in the internal post at regular intervals), and most of us tried hard work at least sometimes. Only the hard work was really effective (even that summer vacation would not have been possible if I had not worked my socks off writing those chapters beforehand), and that in itself was a great lesson to learn. The standards Anna had for us were not unachievable (even if they sometimes felt that way), just very high, and her praise was sweeter for being so hard to earn.

Anna cared terribly about philology as a subject. Perhaps her proudest achievements were persuading the university to create a third philologist position and getting her chair endowed so that it would continue after her retirement. And she believed that philological inquiry needs a firm grounding in facts, so she wanted us to know as many facts as possible about many different languages. But (on philological questions, at least – on other matters we felt she could be tyrannical) she never put us under any pressure to accept particular views or follow particular theories: we were free to make whatever arguments we chose, as long as they were sound and convincing (or, if we could not manage convincing, at least plausible). This toleration has given her a broad legacy of former students who work on very different subjects (from each other and from Anna), using varied methodologies but united by an effort to make our arguments sound and convincing. Or at least plausible. We are also united by gratitude towards Anna – some of the things she said back then may still hurt today, but the transformative effect of her teaching made it all worthwhile.