

Memories: Martin Maiden\*

When the news of Anna's death came last September I realized that, as Chair of the Faculty Board of Linguistics, I would have to find some suitable way of officially breaking the news to the Faculty. The best I could manage was this: 'The loss to academic life in, and far beyond, Oxford, and to many of us individually, is inexpressible. An outstanding scholar, a remarkably wise and kind counsellor, and above all a much-loved friend, has been taken from us.' Those few words were scarcely adequate to express the magnitude of what Anna achieved and the profound feelings of respect and affection which so many of us felt towards her. I am convinced that nobody who ever met Anna failed to like and respect her.

I am as stuck now for truly adequate words as I was then, and I can do little more than repeat what I said about Anna: 'an outstanding scholar, a wise and kind counsellor, and above all a much-loved friend'. One thing I did not mention in that message is Anna's benevolent creative energy. If, today, Linguistics and Philology are strong and vibrant subjects in Oxford, if we have an autonomous Faculty of Linguistics in the University, this is because of Anna's indefatigable activity over decades on University committees, as a genuinely respected counsellor of some of the most influential people in the University; it's because of her remarkable grasp of the complex, not to say Byzantine, structures of Oxford; it's because of her penetrating shrewdness as a judge of others' character and intellect; and, not least, it's because of her capacity to make friends (I forbear to call it 'networking'). If, today, Oxford University Press is (many would reckon) the world's most distinguished publisher of books in Linguistics, and if today the Oxford English Dictionary remains the most impressive and innovative lexicographical enterprise in history, all this owes an enormous amount to her work as a Delegate of the Press, effectively rescuing and enlivening a subject area that had practically withered at OUP some 20 years ago, and arousing new energy and enthusiasm for the OED at a time when its fate hung in the balance. If, today, linguistic and philology have a strong and clear profile within the British Academy, if the Philological Society and its journal are today powerhouses of linguistic and philological activity, look for Anna's benevolent magic.

All this is well known, but Anna's legacy has less tangible and less public aspects. Those who worked with her, as many of us did, had what can only be described as a 'role-model', a paragon of shrewd and professional, yet always kindly, good sense in facing the challenges of everyday academic life. I can honestly say that scarcely a day goes by without my asking myself: 'What would Anna do in this situation?', but we can no longer pick up the phone and ask her advice. One feels rather like Dr Watson as he tried to solve crimes after the (apparent) death of his friend Sherlock Holmes: he struggled vainly to use methods which only the master, or in our case the mistress, really knew how to apply. In fact, I regularly still hear her voice saying to me, as she did on at least one occasion, 'I think you are being reasonably silly, Martin': I was indeed being 'reasonably silly', but only Anna could be so direct yet at the same time make you actually feel better and more confident about yourself.

I always felt that there was an aspect of Anna's remarkable achievements which too many of us just took for granted, but which actually constituted an extraordinary feat. I had confirmation that I was right to suspect this when I mentioned it in a speech I gave at her retirement dinner. As I said it she exclaimed 'ah, yes', beamed, and nodded. I was alluding to

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\* This is a revised and augmented version of a talk given by Martin Maiden at the memorial service for Anna Morpurgo Davies held in Somerville College, Oxford, on 21 June 2015.

the fact that Anna was born, and always remained, Italian: this meant that virtually everything she achieved in her career she had achieved in a foreign language. I believe she may have been in her twenties before she really started to learn English; as she herself reported in an autobiographical essay, she did not start out as a linguist, and certainly not as a modern linguist. There were indeed details of English which, endearingly, she never quite mastered, particularly where the capricious relation between pronunciation and orthography was concerned. For example, she frequently apologized for what she — quite wrongly — described as her ‘poor’ command of English by pointing out that she was, after all, a ‘forejner. I do know, because I once asked her, that when she was on her own she habitually thought in Italian, not English. On the other hand, the remarkable depth and sophistication of her grasp of English was apparent, paradoxically, in the fact that, as she again told me, she did not feel that she would have been easily capable of writing in Italian her major contribution to the history of linguistic thought, on nineteenth century linguistics: I had naively assumed that her prize-winning monograph *La linguistica dell’Ottocento* had been originally conceived in Italian and then translated into English. Quite the opposite, in fact. My point is not merely about language. Anna was an outsider to the institutions and cultures to which she eventually made such a benevolent and enduring contribution. Indeed, one sometimes sensed that she had to overcome a deep-rooted diffidence and wariness on encountering new people and new situations. Nonetheless, she managed to grasp and penetrate the complexities of the life of a country and of academic institutions quite different from those of her native Italy, while always retaining some of the detachment of the foreigner. This allowed her to take, I think, a much clearer perspective on what we are doing than many of us had.

Anna’s slight wariness, her sense of being an outsider, had its roots I am sure in the traumatic experiences of her childhood in Italy during the Second World War and I might recount here an anecdote whose significance escaped me at the time. Many years ago, after a seminar which she had organized, she and I went ahead to a local Lebanese restaurant where she had booked dinner for the speaker and others. When we arrived, she said she had a booking in the name of ‘Davies’. The waiter said ‘Which one? We have two parties called Davies this evening’. I then asked Anna why she had not used the more distinctive name ‘Morpurgo’. To which her reply was: ‘I didn’t want them to know that I was Jewish’. It should be explained that Italian surnames which originate as placenames (Morpurgo = Marburg an der Drau, modern Maribor in Slovenia) are often Jewish, and Morpurgo is distinctively Jewish. At the time, I thought that Anna’s reaction was verging on paranoia. I fear I may even have told her so. Alas its speaks volumes.

Anna came from outside, but she left an indelible mark inside us all. If she were here now, this is what I would say to her: Anna, la morte non può portarti via. Rimarrà sempre vivo il ricordo della tua profonda saggezza e della tua preziosissima amicizia. Rimarrà sempre la tua opera che ci incita ad andare avanti con forza e con coraggio. Siamo stati davvero fortunati ad averti con noi. Non ti dimenticheremo. We shall not forget you.