

PETER FRASER MA, MC, FBA (1918–2007)

PETER FRASER (FIG. 1), Director of the School from 1968 to 1971, and a Hellenistic historian and epigraphist of international distinction, died in Oxford on 15 September 2007 aged 89. Born on 6 April 1918, he was brought up in Carshalton and went to City of London School; like many great classical scholars he owed much to an early teacher. The preface to his revision of Rostovtzeff's *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (1957, p. ix) acknowledges the help of this teacher, Mr H. C. Oakley, who compiled the index of names and subjects.

Despite his metropolitan upbringing, Fraser was proud to be a highland Scot: he always liked his malt whisky, and would serve in the Seaforth Highlanders in the war. As a young undergraduate at Brasenose in the 1930s, he met William Woodthorpe Tarn, a formative meeting because it pointed him in the direction of the Hellenistic age. He took Classical Mods in 1939, but never completed his undergraduate course by taking Greats, because of the outbreak of war.

Fraser was one of that heroic generation of classical scholars and ancient historians whose love of Greece and the Greeks was formed during active service in German-occupied Greece in the Second World War. But he was unusual, even among that outstandingly talented group, in his superlative command of the modern Greek language, spoken and written. He was also unusual in his later reticence about his wartime experiences: he wrote no autobiographical memoir covering that or any other period, apart from the analytical narratives provided in his typed reports back to the War Office in London. But he was, at least towards the end of his life, willing to speak to genuine researchers such as Mark Mazower, whose book *Inside Hitler's Greece* (1995, p. xix) lists Fraser among those willing to be interviewed or questioned. And, six months before he died, he gave an interesting recorded interview about his wartime service.¹ But in *Ανασκαφές* (1989), the entertaining informal collection of reminiscences of the School over the half century or so before its centenary in 1986, there is no contribution by Fraser. Indeed, the three-year Fraser Directorship is completely invisible in that volume, and his name is mentioned just once anywhere, in the course of Nicholas Hammond's chapter on 'The School at War' (1989, 22). Here, in a paragraph about students of the School who played a leading part in the Allied Military Mission to Greece, Hammond wrote of Fraser, Tony Andrewes, and the Australian-born Eric Gray (tutor in ancient Roman history at Christ Church, and an Asia Minor specialist) as the three who were active in the Peloponnese. The last two were both born in 1910, and died within a few weeks of each other in summer 1990; Fraser (1990) wrote Gray's obituary in the *Independent*, where he described his work with the partisans in the Mt Panachaikon region south of Patras.

For some archaeologists, ancient historians, and classicists, the war was the intrusion of another and entirely different sort of life, after which they returned to more or less placid and bookish normality: one thinks of some of the Bletchley code-breakers. In complete contrast, several of Fraser's later areas of scholarly interest can be traced directly to the years of and

¹ Fraser's son Alexander kindly made available to me a CD recording of this interview given by his father,

probably to an army man, in April 2007. I am not aware of any public broadcast of this interview.

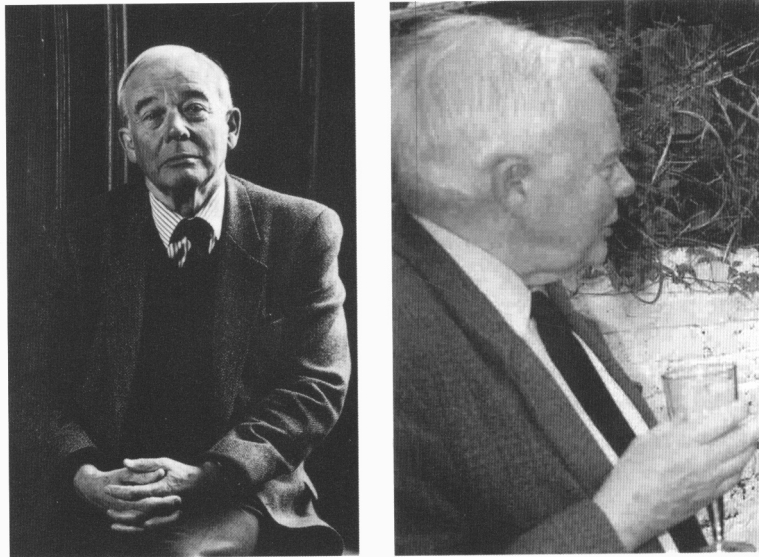


FIG. 1. Peter Fraser (1918–2007), Director of the British School at Athens (1968–1971);
 a) in a 1980s photograph, courtesy of the Warden and Fellows of All Souls College, Oxford;
 b) in a recent photograph, taken at the author's 50th birthday party

immediately after the war. His life was an exceptionally eventful and varied one, but in this respect it formed a continuum. The moment of decision, which changed his entire future existence by making it Greece-dominated, came in late 1942. He had served with his regiment in north Africa at the battle of El Alamein, after which he was in hospital in Cairo. There the military authorities, who clearly knew his educational background, asked him if he would be interested in going behind enemy lines in Greece. When he said 'Yes', he was sent to Palestine, then a British mandate, for general training (parachuting and so forth), and afterwards to Alexandria, where he lived with a Greek hotel-owning family and learnt the language. Here was the germ of an interest which flowered, most obviously, in the three volumes of *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, his most considerable single-authored achievement, but also in the regular bulletins which he contributed to the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, in the 1978 revision of A. J. Butler's *Arab Conquest of Egypt*, and in an article 'Byzantine Alexandria: Decline and Fall', published half a century after the war and his first encounter with the city (Fraser 1995).

He was parachuted into Greece in the summer of 1943, and worked initially in western Messenia. The purpose of his operation was to find and then to arm non-ELAS, i.e. non-communist, officer bands of *andartes*. He succeeded in finding them, but not in arming them, because ELAS prevented this, and because, as he later put it, most of their propaganda in the area was turned against him. In later life he was not a man of the left, and it is reasonable to conjecture that his politics were profoundly affected by what he saw and suffered at that time. He once remarked 'I estimate our contribution to the war effort as *nil*', where 'our' was Special Operations Executive. But this bitter remark should not be taken as objective or final assessment (he was in any case given to making contradictory utterances at different times),

but as an expression of personal disenchantment with the obstructions put in the way of his mission by local groups opposed to those he was working with. He did after all succeed, together with his *andartes* colleagues, in blowing up the aerodrome near Argos, and was awarded the Military Cross for this and for ‘long and difficult negotiations in occupied Greece’. After this (1944), he ran a caique base on the Pelion coast in Thessaly, bringing in arms from Asia Minor; at the end of the war he was in effective charge of Volos. He was just 27 when the war ended. It is a shock to remember how young he was when he sent his 1945 comments on the Greeks and Greece to the War Office. Reading them, one can almost hear the voice—tired, distinguished, and decisive—of the elderly Fraser who gave the aforementioned interview six months before he died (cf. above, n. 1).

After these dangerous and demanding two years of war behind enemy lines, the story goes that he was given some advice at the British School by a student who had no idea about his immediate past, and warned him to be sure to take precautions against unexpected changes of weather when travelling in Greece. This must have been shortly after the School reopened under the Directorship of John Cook.

Fraser’s professional situation at this time was more precarious than that of Major Andrewes or Captain Gray, who were eight years older, a crucial age difference which meant that they had got started in academic life before the war, and thus had secure Oxford tutorial fellowships to return to—indeed Andrewes was elected Wykeham Professor of ancient Greek history in 1953. Fraser took a war degree (i.e. was given an MA with dispensation from final examinations) and held a senior scholarship at Christ Church for a year, presumably through Gray’s influence, and then had a short term teaching job at Balliol. Here he taught, among others, Brian McGuinness, a future philosopher and biographer of Wittgenstein, who recalls that ‘we knew he had been parachuted into some of the places he was teaching us about’. Even when he became university lecturer in Hellenistic history (1948) he had no permanent college attachment until his election to a fellowship at All Souls in 1954. His college for most of the post-war period was Brasenose, and here too he did some teaching: two remarkably bright Greek historians and School students called George Forrest and Robert Wade-Gery (one of them a future Wykeham professor and the other a son of the then Wykeham Professor) were among his pupils. It was lucky for Fraser that the Camden Professor of Roman history is automatically attached to Brasenose, and that his warm supporter and patron Hugh Last was Professor until 1949 and Principal of Brasenose thereafter, until his death in 1957. Fraser never forgot this debt of gratitude, and was to contribute Last’s entry to the *DNB*; it survives in the new *Oxford DNB* (Fraser 2004). The entry is of interest as giving Fraser’s own view of the most important qualities of a historian, qualities which Last had lost in the latter part of his career: ‘a lively historical imagination and a lasting creative vein’. He adds that Last was most successful as a supervisor of young graduate students, and excelled in ‘determining suitable subjects of research’.

During these early years, when he was establishing himself in post-war Oxford, Fraser continued to visit Greece and the islands, as well as Alexandria, and worked intensively on inscriptions every summer. In this way he did the work for *Samothrace: the Inscriptions on Stone* (1960, but handed to the publisher in 1958, and the result of work over several years before that) and *Boiotian and West Greek Tombstones* (Fraser and Rönne 1957). He was drawn especially to Rhodes and the rest of the Dodecanese, and it must be relevant that this region was the last to be ceded to the Greek state (1948). After the Italian and then the German forces left,

Rhodes was under British occupation for a period (1945–7) and Fraser was surely quick to exploit this opportunity. His first published book, *The Rhodian Peraea and Islands* (1954), was joint-authored with George Bean, professor at Istanbul in succession to Ronald Syme, but it had been preceded by a series of articles on Rhodes and Kos by Fraser alone. (1953a, 1953b) and by his 1951 dissertation on Rhodian history and epigraphy, surely embarked on not long after the war. He never published this, or even supplicated for a doctorate with it (nor did he refer to it in print as far as I have been able to discover), but instead entered it successfully for the prestigious Conington Prize of Oxford University. Fraser's Rhodian involvement, which continued into and beyond the period of his Directorship of the British School at Athens and resulted in an article in the *Annual* (Fraser 1972b), crossed the boundaries between history, epigraphy, and archaeology (*Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 1972a added literature as well). He was always alert to material evidence, as witness the revision of Rostovzef (see above). The most archaeologically slanted of his Rhodian publications was *Rhodian Funerary Monuments* (1977), for which he did some of the work when Director; but like its mainland Greek counterpart and predecessor on the Boiotian tombstones (Fraser and Rönne 1957), it contained a heavy epigraphic component. He once remarked that a Director of the School needs to have an excavation or similar project in order to avoid turning into a full-time administrator, and the Rhodian book was perhaps his equivalent of an excavation.

The rest of the Dodecanese was not neglected. Susan Sherwin-White's *Ancient Cos* (1978) began life as a Fraser-supervised Oxford DPhil thesis; she graduated in the year that Fraser became Director, and did some of the work for the thesis as a student at the School. Other Fraser protégés in this period, whose publications gave the School's *Annual* a welcome epigraphical and post-classical flavour for a while (Allen 1971, Osborne 1971), were Michael Osborne from Oxford (*Naturalization in Athens*, 1981–3, was a Leuven thesis, but examined by Fraser) and Robert Allen of UCL (*The Attalid Kingdom*, 1983, was supervised by Fraser). Allen (2007) contributed a supplementary note to Fraser's obituary in the *Independent*, in which he wrote of his Directorship that it was a 'rare privilege to have known him then. As well as learning much about Greece—ancient and modern—I appreciated his many other skills, including a formidable talent at table tennis'. For an appreciation of Fraser's time as Director, see Peter Warren's memoir (Warren 2008) in the *British School at Athens Annual Report of Council for the Session 2006–2007*. The present writer's personal acquaintance with Fraser began in 1971, his very last year as Director. But even in the decade after 1979, when the team of Catling, Spawforth, and Hornblower lectured to the teachers' course in the spring, the Fraser-donated toaster was still functioning bravely in the breakfast room in the Hostel. One always knew when there was a fresh arrival from the UK because of the reek of burnt toast throughout the building.

Fraser's Directorship was relatively short. He combined it with his university post (he had been promoted to a Readership in 1964), rather than being on secondment like many directors of foreign schools, and this was not a situation which could be prolonged indefinitely, and was only possible because at Oxford he did not have responsibility for undergraduates, but taught via a memorable series of graduate seminars, which could be shuffled through the year. In fact, Fraser seems always to have liked to have more than one job on the go at any one time, one administrative and one academic. This (I suggest) is one important key to his character and career; it indicates a certain restlessness and impatience with a purely scholarly routine, and is perhaps to be attributed to the divided demands made

by the war, when he surely became conscious that his gifts went far beyond what could be done in a library. The Warden of All Souls for most of his time there was John Sparrow, who was fond of observing that dons could be divided into two categories, those who could have been something other than dons, and those who could not. Fraser definitely belonged to the first category. Even on the small Oxford stage, he served the university as Junior Proctor, and his college as domestic bursar, and later as a conspicuously successful and popular Acting Warden (in the 1980s, when Warden Neill was Vice-Chancellor).

Two of his large-scale undertakings of the 1970s, both of which originated in the years immediately after the end of the Athens Directorship, can be explained, at least in part, by this correct conviction that he had something more than books to give the world. Both projects differed from the British School and All Souls, which were established institutions, in that they were entirely new creations of his own. They are the most conspicuous testimony to his vision and collaborative genius.

The first was the Society for Afghan Studies, of whose Managing Committee he was Chairman from 1972 to 1982. In this capacity he was the directing mind behind the excavations at Old Kandahar, and he visited Afghanistan more than once: a memorable month-long visit in autumn 1978 with the Boardmans and others took in Balkh, Bamiyan, Helmand province, and Jalalabad, as well as Kandahar. The Institute in Kabul was housed in the former embassy hospital, and one dined in the old operating theatre. The excavations at Kandahar (Alexandria in Arachosia) produced a Greek epigraphic find of great interest, which Fraser published in the short-lived journal *Afghan Studies* (Fraser 1979b and cf. 1982 for another intriguing far eastern item). Even when the Soviet Russian invasion of late 1979 brought excavations to an end, Fraser continued his academic work on the 'Greek far east', work which culminated in his outstanding book *The Cities of Alexander the Great* (1996). This studied the evidence (including Arabic texts and even Chinese material, in translation) for Alexander's city-foundations, and suggested that the inflated numbers which have come down to us in the literary traditions can be hypothetically traced to tendentious Ptolemaic re-allocation to Alexander, and restyling as Alexandrias, of cities really founded by the Seleucids. It is quite something to have published so original and radical book when nearly 80.

The other huge post-Athens undertaking was the *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, of which he was the only begetting parent, and then for more than three decades the controlling intellect; this too began in the early 1970s. By the time of his death, five physical volumes had been published over the two decades since 1987 (Fraser and Matthews 1987–), under the auspices of the British Academy, which in 1973 accepted Fraser's arguments for the *Lexicon's* adoption as one of its Major Research Projects. He chose to set out his manifesto in *Tribute to an Antiquary*, the Festschrift for Marc Fitch, a great School benefactor (Fraser 1976). Here he explained how the *Lexicon* would facilitate the work of the social and religious historian of ancient Greece, as well as illuminating the development of the Greek language. Two special volumes of the Academy's *Proceedings* showed what could be done in this regard, by publishing the papers of two international conferences devoted to Greek personal names as evidence (Hornblower and Matthews 2000; Matthews 2007). The twentieth century saw other great names in ancient Greek epigraphy, on continental Europe and the United States, but it is safe to say that only Fraser had the combination of vast scholarly knowledge on the one hand and administrative capacity on the other—including fund-raising ability and charm, especially directed at Greek individuals and financial institutions—required to make a success of the

Lexicon. The formidable Louis Robert (died 1985) was sceptical about the possibility of the *Lexicon* but was comprehensively proved wrong. He may, however, have contributed in an indirect way to the idea of the project. In a caustic review of the Samothrace inscriptions in *Gnomon*, Robert (1963, 77 = 1969–90, v. 616) had observed by way of reproof that history is also found in ‘banal’ inscriptions, and that personal names have a historical interest. Applied to the Fraser of the *Lexicon* phase, the criticism would be absurdly misdirected. The difference between the two Frasers can perhaps be explained by the principle *fas est et ab hoste doceri*.

As late as the end of 2003, Fraser visited Thessaloniki for a conference at which he read a paper about the *Lexicon*, and memorably enjoyed the social side of the weekend: visits to Greece always knocked decades off his age. He went on working on the *Lexicon*, unpaid as always, until within a fortnight of the end. Meanwhile he had, in 2006 and at the age of 88, finished what he knew would be his last book, *Greek Ethnic Terminology*, a study of the sources of Stephanus of Byzantium (Fraser, forthcoming). It is entirely appropriate that this too is to be published as an Academy monograph, because he saw it as an adjunct to his main work on the *Lexicon*. His remarkable 2003 article ‘Agathon and Cassandra’—a study of a most unusual inscription from Dodona recording a proxeny—hints, on its final page, at what he used—in his 80s!—to speak of as his ‘next project’, alas never formally started. It was to be a commentary on the *Alexandra* of Lycophron, a poem dear to his heart. In the *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus* 1979, a special issue commemorating two old friends, V. Desborough and T. B. Mitford, he proposed a radical new solution to the dating problem, by a detailed examination of the sources for the Cypriot excursus at ll. 447–591 (Fraser 1979a).

He was elected FBA in 1960, and an honorary degree was conferred on him by La Trobe University, Melbourne, in 1996, where Michael Osborne was Vice-Chancellor. His contribution to the academic (and more than academic) life of Greece was pleasingly marked by an honorary degree from the University of Athens (2002) and by election as a Foreign Member of the Athens Academy (2003). By his own wish, his ashes have been buried in the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery on Kephallonia. He was a great scholar, a much-valued friend, and a man who had ‘heard the chimes at midnight’.

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