

## OBITUARY

# Elizabeth Jeffreys (22 July 1941–12 September 2023)

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It has well over a year since my predecessor, Elizabeth Jeffreys, passed away unexpectedly due to complications after a stroke. Her absence is still acutely felt.

Elizabeth Mary Brown attended Blackheath High School for Girls and read Classics at Girton College, Cambridge. This was followed by a BLitt at Oxford in 1963; her thesis was on the garden and castle motif in medieval French and Greek romances. At Cambridge she met Michael Jeffreys, and they married in 1965. Having moved to London, they initially both taught in schools. Elizabeth then took up a senior research fellowship at the Warburg Institute from 1969 to 1972. In 1972, the great adventure abroad began. She and Michael left the UK only to return in the late 1990s: the first two years were spent at Dumbarton Oaks (it was there that their daughter Katharine was born); the next two at the University of Ioannina; and then they moved to Australia, where Michael had been appointed lecturer at the University of Sydney. During this period Elizabeth held successive research fellowships at the Universities of Canberra, Melbourne, and Sydney until Oxford called her back in 1996 when she was appointed Bywater and Sotheby Professor of Byzantine and Modern Greek Language and Literature and was made a professorial fellow at our home institute, Exeter College. Michael was to follow four years later.

This is the bare outline of Elizabeth's life before I met her. A skeleton without flesh on it, just a page of someone's CV. That, of course, is not how it will have felt to Elizabeth: the years at university; that romantic bridge at Cambridge she once mentioned; teaching and tutoring; the early career fellowships; the pleasures and anxieties of motherhood; her love for cats; the first scholarly publications; the academic recognition that followed; America, Greece, the Antipodes — before suffering her stroke, she will have remembered all those defining moments with a clarity and freshness as if it was yesterday because they mattered to her, as they did to all those who had the pleasure of knowing her and being part of her life in whichever way.

Before coming to Oxford, she had already established a name for herself as an expert in the field of medieval Greek literature, both learned and vernacular. Of her academic accomplishments in those years —and they are many— I would single out three: the Malalas project, the interplay between the oral and the written, and the edition of the

*War of Troy*. The text history of the chronicle of John Malalas (6<sup>th</sup> c.) is incredibly complicated, but thankfully there is the collective effort of Elizabeth, Michael, and their Australian colleagues to guide the puzzled reader through the labyrinth of text witnesses: I am referring to their heavily annotated translation of the whole text (1986) —very useful for anyone at a loss— and their brilliant *Studies in John Malalas* (1990). The issue of orality and its impact on later medieval texts has been at the forefront of the interests of the Τζέφρηδες (as Elizabeth and Michael are lovingly known among Neohellenists): from the *Chronicle of Morea* (14<sup>th</sup> c.) to their latest research project, Manganeios Prodromos (12<sup>th</sup> c.). The *War of Troy* (late 13<sup>th</sup> c.) is an epic-slash-romance-slash- pseudo-Homeric account based on a French original Elizabeth had been working for many years: she completed the edition (14,403 lines!) with a scholar from Ioannina, Manolis Papathomopoulos, in 1996.

In that same year, 1996, she succeeded Cyril Mango as Bywater and Sotheby Professor, to the surprise of some because she lacked a PhD (as was not uncommon in the good old times before PhDs became an industry); to the annoyance of some because they wanted another Cyril Mango; but to the great pleasure of all those who thought Oxford could do with a bit of philology. And let us not forget: Elizabeth was the first female incumbent of the Bywater and Sotheby Chair (my appointment was somewhat disappointing in this regard, so let's hope Oxford will do better in 2025). While Mango can be said to have laid the foundations for the master's programme in Late Antique and Byzantine Studies at Oxford as we know it, it was Elizabeth who professionalized the teaching and streamlined the programme by means of small but decisive steps. Elizabeth was a gifted teacher and much loved by all her students who, many years after her retirement, still hold fond memories of that particular mixture of kindness and firmness that was so typical of her.

Shortly after arriving in Oxford, in 1998, Elizabeth produced an edition and translation of the two oldest versions of *Digenes Akrites*, G and E, which to the present day is used all over the world in academic curricula. Elizabeth and I never quite managed to agree on the precise relation between G and E; but then again, disagreeing with her always felt more inspiring intellectually speaking than agreeing with most others. Elizabeth understood that, in these increasingly Greekless times, translations were needed for Byzantine Studies to stay relevant. It was therefore only right and proper that her translation of *Four Byzantine Novels* (2012) was chosen to inaugurate the series of *Translated Texts for Byzantinists* of Liverpool University Press. It is still the highest selling title in this series.

Elizabeth was incredibly energetic. She organized seminars and conferences, chaired professional bodies (e.g. the editorial board of the *Oxford Studies in Byzantium*), sat on various committees (including in the Modern Greek field), served as Sub-Rector of Exeter College, edited collective volumes, supervised PhD theses, peer-reviewed for periodicals, etcetera, never shying away from tasks that others might consider burdensome or not worth the effort. It is no secret that Elizabeth was one of the driving forces behind the

21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies held in London in 2006. Even after her retirement she kept busy and on top of things. I remember receiving urgent messages in my first year warning me of possible pitfalls, reminding me of things to be done, offering me advice on the arcane unwritten rules of Oxford. I was, and still am, very grateful to Elizabeth for her guidance and kind support, as are all my colleagues in Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies. Elizabeth was a wonderful, generous human being who was always there when you needed her; she was also very modest, to the extent that praise made her blush and thanks were waved away, as she surely would have done, had she been able to read this obituary: ‘But Marc! . . .’

In the year 2000, after four years of living apart, Michael rejoined her. Not that there had ever been a real separation; on the contrary, Elizabeth and Michael were and are inseparable. Most of their research was done as a couple, and even in publications that bear only one of their names one senses the presence of the other hovering somewhere in the background. Their great unfinished project remains the edition of *Manganeios Prodromos*: a massive collection of occasional poetry on which they have been working for as long as I know them. But their marital bond was more than research (and occasional bickering in public over perceived scholarly mistakes): it embraced all aspects of their lives, from that bridge over the river Cam to Elizabeth’s last months. Theirs was a true love story.