THE BOOK THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

In praise of F. Kinchin Smith and T. W. Melluish

Sylvia Moody

I don’t know who the above two scholarly gentlemen were, I don’t even know their first names, but I do know that they changed my life by together writing a book called: Teach Yourself Greek. Without them I would never have had the opportunity to study Classics and so would have missed out on what to me has been one of the greatest pleasures in my life: reading the ancient Greek authors and entering into their rich intellectual and imaginative world.

It happened like this:

In my fifth year at school I sat next to a girl called Ursula, who was the only girl in my class studying Ancient Greek. Seeing Ursula often absorbed, apparently pleasurably, in pages full of odd-looking script, I asked her to teach me the Greek letters and began to learn a few Greek words – and what immediately caught my attention was that, once deciphered, these often turned out to be English words. For example: drama, history. By the end of the year I was so enthused that I asked if I could begin Greek in the sixth form and do it as one of my A-levels. Back came the answer ‘No: your strengths are in science, and your Latin is insecure’. (Teacher-speak for ‘utterly hopeless’.)

After a couple of days of sulking and acting sullen, I decided to take action. I headed for the only academic bookshop in town – a sprawling basement with lots of nooks and crannies. Deep in one of the crannies was a single shelf labelled ANCIENT WORLD. Glancing through the books on this shelf, I came across just two on the Greek language. One was a daunting-looking grammar, but the other (be still, my heart!) was Teach Yourself Greek by the above-mentioned FKS and TWM.

Reader, I fell in love with it. Almost from the beginning the authors gave real Greek texts and helped us work out the meaning via etymology. So even before leaving the shop I knew that climax meant ladder in ancient Greek, and zone literally meant belt ... I also got an
immediate feel for the beauty of the Greek language – its dancing quality, its flexibility, its expressiveness. Somewhere in the book I saw a quote from Winston Churchill: *Latin is an honour, Greek is a treat*. I vowed at that moment that, during the summer holiday, I would teach myself Greek and also do something to prop up my 'insecure' Latin.

Our summer holidays were invariably spent at a small resort called Withernsea on the Yorkshire coast. Withernsea could be characterised at that time as being like Scarborough without the attractions, and with even worse weather. For me the only interesting feature of the town was a glass-walled cafe (sorry, refreshment rooms) dramatically sited on top of a sheer cliff. Every morning, while my parents occupied themselves with bracing walks, I would sneak off to this cafe with FKS and TWM and study Greek. And so, as the sea roared below and gales howled around, I read the sunlit prose of Herodotus and the shimmering verse of Sappho. Occasionally I would startle the other denizens of the cafe with exclamations such as: ‘*So that* is where *onomatopoeia* comes from!’ or ‘*Ah – oxymoron* – yes, nice one!’

At the end of the summer I returned home elated, deaf to my parents’ complaints that I had been a ‘bloody dead loss’ for the whole of the holiday. When term began in the autumn I wrote to our headmistress in ancient Greek, explaining what I had done and again asking to be allowed to do Classics in the sixth form. After two tense days of waiting, during which a staff meeting took place, I received a brief reply – also in Greek – from the headmistress: *exesti* (*It is permitted*.)

To give a slight flavour of the book, here is a portion of the first text the reader (after having learnt the alphabet) is asked to decipher:
The authors themselves (speaking in the third person) write of their method as follows:

'One of the most familiar experiences of the teacher of Greek is the delight and surprise of pupils upon discovering that they have actually been using Greek words in English without being aware of it. The authors have tried to make capital out of this attraction by stressing from the outset the close connection between Greek and English. They introduce simple pieces of actual Greek from the very beginning. They provide no translation from English into Greek. They expect no previous knowledge of Latin or any other inflected language. In fact, for the first few chapters Greek is taught through English, and a systematic attempt is made to build up a vocabulary in this way.'

This book is, alas, only available second-hand now, but I would recommend anybody who loves words and language to get hold of a copy and enjoy for themselves the delights of the Greek language under the tuition of two enthusiastic and inspiring teachers. I still have this book on my bookshelf now, of course – in fact I have three copies – and I found that, when opening one of them to write this article, I shed tears of gratitude for the fact that, at an early age, I almost accidentally came across this book – a book which has shaped my life, and to which I often still return with pleasure.

Dear FKS and TWM: I think Teach Yourself Greek should be republished and placed in every hotel room and every airport bookshop in the country; I think it should be on the web with its own Facebook page to collect messages from your admirers. From the bottom of my heart: thank you! You may now be in some Elysian field but...

We'll always have Withernsea.

Sylvia Moody

Sylvia Moody is a Classicist and Psychologist with a life-long passion for Greece and the ancient world. Many years spent in Greece enabled her to remain close to Greek language and culture, and to retain a keen sense of the magic and enchantment of the world of the Ancient Greeks. She is the author of “Eternal Questions: Notes from Ancient Greece”.

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