



ROBERT BROWNING

Robert Browning 1914–1997

ROBERT BROWNING, FBA, who died on 11 March 1997 at the age of 83, was an indefatigable scholar, and at the same time something of an enigma. His retirement in 1981 as Emeritus Professor of Classics and Ancient History from Birkbeck College, University of London, where he had been since 1965, caused hardly a hiatus in his scholarly activity as one of the leading international Byzantine scholars, for he then took up a regular visiting appointment at the Centre for Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC, and continued to hold a series of offices including the Chairmanship from its inception of the Academy Research Project on the Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire. He had been Chairman of what was then the British National Byzantine Committee from 1974 to 1983, and a Vice-President of the International Association for Byzantine Studies since 1981. His long career and scholarly contribution in the fields of classics, Byzantine studies, and modern Greek, and in particular his later role as Chairman of the British Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon Marbles, led to his receiving an exceptional number of honours from Greece, including honorary doctorates from the Universities of Athens and Ioannina, the Gold Medals of the Onassis Foundation and the city of Athens, membership of the Academy of Athens and appointment as Commander of the Order of the Phoenix. He was elected an honorary citizen of Mistra in the Peloponnese on 29 May 1996. His election as a Fellow of the British Academy in 1978 was complemented by that to a Corresponding Fellowship of the Academy of Athens in 1981, and he had received an honorary

Proceedings of the British Academy, **105**, 289–306. © The British Academy 2000.

doctorate from the University of Birmingham in 1980. He was in later years a deeply committed member of the Board of the new University of Cyprus. So great indeed was the esteem in which he was held as a modern philhellene that he was granted the high honour of a funeral at the expense of the Greek state.

Robert Browning was a genuine polymath. He was born in Glasgow in 1914 and remained all his life a reserved and quietly-spoken Scot. In later years his rapid movement and quick speech were still characteristic; according to a contemporary, he had altered little in appearance and manner since 1938. It was the same with his intellectual energy and appetite for learning; in 1996 his stamina in attending lectures at the international Byzantinists' congress in Copenhagen left younger scholars far behind—indeed, it is claimed that some of his younger friends tried to persuade him (unsuccessfully) to slow down a little. He had showed the same eager curiosity at the previous international congress held in Moscow in 1991, at the time of the attempted coup against Gorbachev, when he listened with the greatest interest to the exchanges between civilians and the soldiers in the tanks. This intellectual curiosity, together with his encyclopaedic knowledge of his field, found expression in long service as the compiler of the British entries for the bibliographies of scholarly work on Byzantine subjects which appear year by year in the journal *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*. Official retirement from Birkbeck in 1981 represented no more than a slight blip in his continuing writing and lecturing, and above all in his contacts with younger scholars. Indeed, while many of those who later regarded themselves as his pupils and protégés never in fact had an institutional connection with him, during his career he helped a wide range of now well-established scholars to get a start in their academic careers by telling them what jobs might be coming up and by offering advice at the right time. It is not surprising then that his years as Visiting Professor at the Centre for Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington should have given him great pleasure, for they allowed him to continue to hold seminars and direct the researches of the young. Real retirement was not in his nature. He gently complained that he now had to type all his own letters and pay for his own postage, but he greatly valued and used the opportunities which came his way to continue in much the same scholarly way as before. It would have been hard to imagine him leading a quiet life in the country; he belonged in the urban, and especially the London, world of libraries and friends and colleagues.

Pupils and colleagues alike were struck by the wide range of his know-

ledge, especially of languages. One of his later Australian postgraduate students says of him: 'One of my vivid memories is of having a supervision session when the phone would ring. With extraordinary facility he would switch to Greek, any Slavic language you could name, and back again. Sometimes in about half an hour you would hear half a dozen languages.' Stories of this kind abound: Costas Constantinides remembers Robert while on a bus from Ioannina to Metsovo, going over to a group of old men in local costume and talking to them in Vlach. When asked how he knew the language so well, he replied 'My Latin used to be quite good.' On one occasion he became very excited after dreaming that he had found a Hungarian grammar in a secondhand book shop—and equally disappointed to discover that it was only a dream. Just as he picked up languages for the sheer pleasure of it, so he seemed to have read everything, and to have the whole of Greek literature from the ancient world to the end of the Byzantine empire at his fingertips. Some found this rather daunting, but Robert did not use his encyclopaedic knowledge to score points; his intellectual curiosity was entirely genuine, and he loved to share his knowledge with others. As he grew older his quick-fire lecturing style speeded up, if anything. This was apparent in the major public lectures which he gave in later years, including his Runciman lecture at King's College London in 1994 on Byzantine Thessaloniki, which was subsequently published in *Dialogos*. This rapid delivery, combined with a throwaway manner, had been a subject for comment even in his early days as a lecturer, and his soft Glaswegian voice and accent were not always easy to follow. But Robert enjoyed the sense of sharing his knowledge with others less learned, and while the many honours which he received in later life undoubtedly gave him great pleasure, he was always too modest to be a performer. There was nothing of the show-off about him, and he never wanted to pontificate. But as a result, not everyone knew how remarkable, or how learned, he actually was.

Until the end of his life Browning would go out of his way to advise and help younger scholars. More than one senior academic remembers being sent to him as a young student for a first research topic. A typical comment is: 'he was not my supervisor, but he was as helpful as if he had been'. He had pupils and protégés all over the world, notably in Australia, where a Festschrift edited by Ann Moffatt under the title *Maistor* and with bibliography to date was published in 1984 to celebrate his seventieth birthday. A second Festschrift, edited under the Greek title *Philhellene* by his Cypriot pupil and colleague Costas Constantinides, with Nikolaos

Panagiotakis, Elizabeth Jeffreys, and Athanasios Angelou, was published in Venice in 1996 under the auspices of the Hellenic Institute of Byzantine Studies. It contains a bibliography of Browning's writings since the publication of *Maistor*, compiled like the first by the late Ian Martin, formerly Classics librarian at University College London and a student there during Browning's time. Martin has written of how Robert took the trouble to write to him about the recent Menander discoveries (Menander being the subject of Martin's thesis) when he was himself a serving soldier and a student of modern Greek in Cyprus in the 1950s. Robert's list of publications in later years ranged as widely as ever, and includes a large number of entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (1991) which was edited and inspired by his colleague the late Alexander Kazhdan and produced at Dumbarton Oaks during his time there. When he died after only a short illness, which he thought at first was a slight attack of flu, Robert had been looking forward with anticipation to his annual visit to Washington, and had his air ticket already booked.

Robert Browning was the oldest of the three sons of Alexander M. Browning, owner of small cardboard box factory founded by his own father, and his wife Jean Miller, a primary school teacher. On his father's side he was descended from a family of hand-loom weavers from the village of Eaglesham, Lanarkshire, while his mother's parents had come to Glasgow from the north of Scotland and from Perthshire. His maternal grandfather became an inspector of postmen, and on retirement took the job of pier-master at Keppel Pier on the island of Cumbrae in the Firth of Clyde, where Robert often went on visits as a child. On one of these visits during the First World War, when he was very small, Robert was shown a big ship passing by and told by his grandfather that it was carrying American soldiers coming to fight the Kaiser. Other Brownings in Glasgow also followed academic careers: Andrew and Carl Browning, assumed to be of the same family, became professors of history and bacteriology in Glasgow University; a cousin, also Robert Browning, became professor of accountancy there, and another held a chair in surgery at Glasgow Royal Infirmary. Schooldays began in a local dame school kept by Miss Macfarlane and Mrs Miller, and continued after a brief spell at Glasgow High School, at Kelvinside Academy, which Robert later described as having only modest intellectual pretensions at that time; it was enlivened for him by the presence of one of the teachers, D. H. Low, and his tales of student life in Paris and Marburg and his years spent teaching English in the University of Belgrade and as tutor to Prince Paul

of Yugoslavia.¹ Low had published a book on the Serbian oral ballads about Marko Kraljevic, and Robert retained his copy throughout his life. For the first time Robert met a man who had a study lined with books from floor to ceiling, and who was ready to lend them. His own study was later to seem to his children a kind of hallowed sanctuary, enlivened only by the offer of a piece of the dark chocolate which he kept there, or the chance to help in rolling an after-dinner cigarette.

When faced with a choice between science or Greek, Robert's parents decreed that he must learn science. It was the wrong choice, and Robert joined the Greek class three years later after working on the language by himself during a wet summer holiday. He came top, or 'dux', in every year while at the school, and in 1931 also came top in the open bursary competition to Glasgow University, which provided a scholarship of some £40 a year. The four years spent studying classics there were happy and successful ones, under the guidance of A. W. Gomme, H. D. F. Kitto, R. G. Austin, William Rennie, and C. J. Fordyce. Robert was a lively participator in student causes such as Charities Day, for which he was Publicity Convenor, and an elected member throughout his undergraduate years of the Student Representative Council. In his public relations role, he wrote to a number of famous people, including George Bernard Shaw, asking for their support, but Shaw brusquely refused, on the grounds that the institutions which Robert had mentioned as possible recipients of funds raised by the Charities Day collections ought to be wholly financed by the government. Robert considered publishing his letter in the local press over the signature 'George Bernard Pshaw'. He edited the Student Handbook and even took part in a student charity revue with a passable impersonation of Noel Coward. He was also a regular attender at Saturday night dances in the Students' Union. The Snell Exhibition, which permitted one graduate of Glasgow University per year to go on to Balliol, entailed a further competitive examination, sat and passed at the end of 1934, some nine months or so before the final honours degree examinations themselves.

Robert was trained as a classicist in the best tradition at Kelvinside Academy, and the Universities of Glasgow and Oxford. He won all the important classical prizes at Oxford—the Chancellor's Prize for Latin

¹ The Headmaster, also called David Low, later produced an abridged edition of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and went on to join the Classics Department at King's College London.

Prose (with a Latin version of Hume's *Essay on Avarice*), the Ireland, Craven, and de Paravacini Scholarships, the Jenkyns Prize and the Derby—an achievement of which he was justifiably proud. Browning arrived at Balliol as a Snell Exhibitioner in 1935, only a week or two after graduating with a first in classics from Glasgow, and proceeded to read for a second degree in classics (in Oxford terms *Literae Humaniores*), achieving firsts in both 'Mods' and 'Greats', and being vivaed for the latter in 1939 by A. H. M. Jones. At Balliol Robert had among his contemporaries Denis Healey, Edward Heath, Kenneth Garlick, Nigel Nicolson, and Rodney Hilton, with whom he was later to collaborate on *Past and Present*. The Snell Exhibitioners made a distinctive contribution to the social and regional mix represented among the undergraduates; conversely when Robert won the Ireland in 1937 a Glasgow paper printed his photograph under the headline 'Glasgow man wins Blue Riband of classical scholarship'. He had among his tutors at Balliol Cyril Bailey and Roger Mynors, as well as Donald Allan (who was later to become Professor of Greek at Glasgow) in philosophy and Russell Meiggs in ancient history. He was soon renowned as someone who could pick up a language almost without effort; he would later occasionally show surprise if his young protégés were less fluent in Bulgarian, Georgian or Albanian, say, than he was himself. After he left Balliol it was noticed with admiration that he chose to occupy himself by learning Georgian when sailing in wartime convoy to the Middle East via Cape Town on the *Oreades*.

Browning had been introduced to eastern Europe in Glasgow through his teacher David Low, whose Serbian father-in-law when on a visit would switch easily in family conversation from English, French, and German to Serbo-Croat and Russian. He himself made several visits to central Europe before the war, and he was in Vienna at the time of the Anschluss, when his own arrival coincided with that of Hitler; he later expressed the relief he had felt when he boarded a train leaving Austria for Hungary. This was also the start of his fascination with Byzantium. Robert's eastern European interests coincided with his classical ones, and he already saw the interest and significance of Greek history as extending far beyond the classical period. The Second World War broke out immediately after he had taken Greats, and he volunteered for service in October 1939, joined the Royal Artillery and as a linguist was soon recruited to work for Intelligence in Cairo, reaching the rank of Major. Before going out to Egypt the recruits were mustered in Oxford, with Oriel College Library as a meeting place and parades on the Meadows. Robert's quick step on the walks which were taken for recreation was remembered, and the same

characteristic walk noted later in Cairo. The *Oreades* was provisioned with a year's supply of food and Robert and his three cabin-mates had free run of the first-class lounge and the ship's library.² Once arrived in Cairo he found Enoch Powell and Rodney Hilton already there, and moved in what has been described as an exciting entourage of local left-wing activists. Egypt was followed in 1944 by Italy, Bulgaria, and Belgrade, where he was Assistant to the Military Attaché in 1945–6. In 1946 he married a Bulgarian, Galina Chichekova; the marriage ended in divorce, but produced two daughters, one of whom tragically died as a young adult. His widow, Ruth, who survives him, herself shared a background in Cairo.

His travel and experiences during the war years further stimulated his interest in Byzantium, and though not published until 1975, his book *Byzantium and Bulgaria* drew directly on the interests of these years. Robert's lifelong attachment to Greece, as he later recalled, was a facet of the early and very broad curiosity about eastern Europe which went back to his wartime service in the Middle East and his introduction to the Balkans via Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. He did not often talk of these experiences, but one day, many years later, when the name of a remote Greek island came up in conversation, he quietly remarked, 'The last time I was there, I had to leave rather fast and by submarine.'³ Unlike a number of classicists of his generation, several of whom have subsequently written their memoirs, Robert was not part of SOE in Greece and was not dropped in Crete or Epirus to aid the resistance against the Germans. Nor did he himself record his wartime experiences or try to put his particular case. Nevertheless some of his own feelings about Greece come out in a memoir which he wrote about Constantine Trypanis in 1995. He began with Trypanis's famous predecessors who had claim to be natives of Chios, from Homer, Ion, and Theopompus to Adamantios Koraes, and quoted Trypanis as remembering with emotion his feelings when he found himself briefly at Marathon during the retreat before the Germans during the Second World War. The same memoir demonstrates the breadth and historical understanding of Robert's philhellenism, for he commends Trypanis for his lack of national chauvinism and his interest in Greece when it was part of the Roman Empire, which led to his founding a Greek Society for Roman Studies and promoting research in Latin. As Greek

² One of the three was Eric Dallibar, who provided these comments.

³ Professor Eric Handley, FBA, personal communication.

Minister of Culture it was Trypanis who launched the project for the restoration of the Acropolis and its monuments which was carried on by his successor Melina Mercouri, and which Robert warmly endorsed, often speaking at meetings on the subject of the return of the Parthenon marbles, serving as Chairman of the British Committee and contributing to a book on the subject published with Christopher Hitchens and Graham Binns in 1997. He also served for many years as Chairman of the National Trust for Greece. These services to Greece were recognised in his many awards and in the addresses delivered at his funeral.

There is no doubt that the war years as an officer were exciting and critical ones in Robert's development. He enjoyed being an officer (and listed his military appointments in the Balliol College Register), and in Belgrade, in particular, he was able to enjoy what may have seemed a rather glamorous lifestyle. An early family photograph which shows him smartly dressed in a double-breasted suit with a carnation in his button-hole also reveals a different Browning from the one most people knew in later years, and permits a rare glimpse of a more carefree, and even a dashing personality. A brief first marriage in 1940 to a former Glasgow student who was by then an aspiring actress had encouraged this, and perhaps reflected a side of Robert that was rarely to be seen after the war when as a young academic in post-war Britain money was tight and living necessarily frugal. In his case, after his two first degrees and then the intervention of the war years, the beginning of his university career and his return to civilian life took place at a later age than would otherwise have been normal, and the transition to an existence as a married graduate student in Oxford cannot have been easy.

Life as a junior lecturer in London in the late 1940s had its strains, and Robert clearly felt that he had to work very hard and maintain a high output of publication. His intellectual direction was not yet fully clear: he wrote his first article on a Byzantine subject in 1950 in Bulgarian, but he was already publishing on classical literature, and indeed, continued throughout his life to publish on a very wide range of periods, and to address both philological and historical problems. He did so out of a sense of responsibility to his subject as well as from wide-ranging interest, and in this connection his input to the Mycenaean seminar newly set up at University College London in 1954 was long remembered; he shared fully in the excitement of the new discoveries, and published *The Linear B Texts from Knossos* in 1955, and he also introduced the newly deciphered Linear B to Soviet scholars in a lecture which he delivered in Russian in Moscow as part of a delegation of British Marxist historians.

He made an unsuccessful attempt to return to Balliol as classical tutor in the early 1950s when Gordon Williams, a more mainstream Latinist, was appointed. However he was made a Reader at University College London in 1955 and after he moved to his chair at Birkbeck in 1965, and especially after his marriage to Ruth Gresh in 1972, Robert became noticeably more relaxed; while his work rate did not diminish, in later life he was able to enjoy the many honours that came his way with unaffected pleasure, and a University College London colleague who met him in America in later years described him as having become 'much easier to talk to'.

At University College London Browning was one of a remarkable group of staff and students many of whom had shared interests in the later Roman Empire from a social and economic, or in some cases, Marxist, point of view. These were crucial years for Browning. Shared political interests and allegiances led him to the Historians' Group of the Communist Party during the years between 1946 and 1956, and supported him in friendships with historians such as his colleague at Birkbeck, Eric Hobsbawm, and Christopher Hill, former Master of Balliol. He was not one of the founders of *Past and Present*, however, joining the board only in 1965.⁴ He remained a member of the Communist Party through the crisis of 1956 and never lost his commitment to it. There is some uncertainty about when he was drawn to communism. Robert himself typically says nothing of the matter in the notes which he provided for the Academy, and while some Balliol contemporaries remember it differently, his brother Martin doubts that it happened before he went to Oxford in 1935; he remembers Robert up to that time as a not very active member of the Glasgow University Liberal Club. During the Munich crisis and later, however, his linguistic skills allowed him to tune to news from an impressive range of foreign stations, and he was an active supporter of A. D. Lindsay, then Master of Balliol, when he stood as an independent Popular Front candidate in the Oxford by-election against Quintin Hogg, later Lord Hailsham. Like many others at the time, not least at Balliol, he saw in communism the most effective force against Nazism, and his experiences during and at the end of the war led him to believe that it offered the best hope of reconstruction and stability. He maintained contacts over many years with Byzantinists in the Soviet bloc who were themselves Party members, sometimes to the surprise or disapproval of colleagues in the west and indeed of some in eastern Europe. Perhaps this loyalty

⁴ See the short memoir by Judith Herrin, in *Past and Present*, 156 (1997), 3–6.

should be ascribed more to his own non-judgemental personality than to ideological reasons; a certain personal naivety may have been involved, and it certainly also reflects the importance he attached to loyalty in friendship. Even his Party loyalty was perhaps mainly pragmatic in character. This may be why in practice the sustained commitment which was cemented during his war service (for years he wrote regularly for the *Daily Worker*, *Labour Monthly*, and other Party publications) rarely showed itself in his historical writings. The disjuncture noticed by his colleagues did not strike him as a problem. He did, however, in *Past and Present* review *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981), an explicitly Marxist work by Geoffrey de Ste Croix, who as a mature student had worked with A. H. M. Jones at University College London when Robert was a lecturer there, noting in his review that it was likely to become one of the most important works of our generation. He showed an interest in the subject of popular uprisings and protest in his paper of 1950 in Bulgarian on the zealots at Thessaloniki in the fourteenth century as well as in a significant article of 1952 in the *Journal of Roman Studies* on the riots at Antioch in AD 387. But he rarely published in Russian Byzantine journals and in only one article in a British academic journal, 'Enlightenment and repression in Byzantium in the eleventh and twelfth centuries', published in *Past and Present*, 69 (1975), 3–23,⁵ did he attempt a critical analysis of Byzantine society based on his social principles. In it he expresses the view that Byzantine culture, dominated by the church, was sterile and empty, a view now increasingly rejected by Byzantinists; Browning himself continued to stress the repetitiveness of Byzantine education, for example in his contribution to the introductory volume edited by G. Cavallo in 1992, though he now allowed for the freedom of an individual teacher to vary the content, and for the possibility that such studies might still be useful.⁶

Browning will be remembered most as a Byzantinist. Yet he began as a classicist, and his interest in Byzantium—which distinguished him from many of his classical colleagues—was not owed to his institutional back-

⁵ See, however, *Marxism Today*, 5 (1961), 318–19, 'On stages of social development', and *Our History*, Pamphlet 35, Communist Party of Great Britain, Historians' Group (1964), 'Slave society: some problems'.

⁶ See R. Browning, 'Teachers', in G. Cavallo (ed.), *The Byzantines*, Eng. trans. (Chicago, 1997, originally published as *L'Uomo bizantino*, Milan, 1992), 95–115; for change and development in Byzantine education, notably in the eleventh century, see P. A. Agapitos, 'Teachers, pupils and imperial power in eleventh-century Byzantium', in Yun Lee Too and Niall Livingstone (eds.), *Pedagogy and Power. Rhetorics of Classical Learning* (Cambridge, 1998), 170–91.

ground or to the demands of syllabuses, but rather to his wide conception of scholarship and to the love of modern Greece which found its fullest expression in his later years. His title at Birkbeck was and remained Professor of Classics and Ancient History and he belonged in the classical tradition in the University of London. Though his graduate students always worked on a very wide range of topics, it was not in his nature to want to overturn what was well-established and he did not seek to influence the undergraduate teaching of Byzantine history in London, which in any case fell under the Board of Studies in History and was very much the province of Professor Joan Hussey at Royal Holloway College and Professor Donald Nicol at King's. He was a life-long supporter of the Institute of Classical Studies and the Joint Library (where, incidentally, in its former home in Gordon Square, he was given a memorable eightieth birthday party—Robert is in every one of the photographs from that day, looking very much the centre of things, though he felt himself that he was upstaged in age by Sir Steven Runciman). Browning was also President of the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies from 1974 to 1977 and for ten years before that had served as Reviews Editor of the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, both of these offices bringing him into close and intimate connection with the Institute. He was punctilious about University committees, and never revealed whether or not he found them boring (some of them certainly were). He was a particularly valued colleague in the matter of library ordering, whether in connection with the Joint Library of the Institute of Classical Studies or the sub-committee which then existed to coordinate Byzantine accessions across the University, for he invariably knew the latest books over the entire range from classical to modern, and had probably already reviewed most of them.

When he joined the Classics department at University College London in 1947 much of the College was still in ruins after an air raid in 1940, and part of the library had been burnt. In the words of a colleague, 'many people, like Robert, had had a long war and were rebuilding their lives and careers; many of their students were similarly placed'. More anecdotally, 'Robert is remembered as one of a party sorting library books damaged by fire and water. He picked one up, apparently at random, opened it at the end, and began to make the most convincing Oriental noises. "Good heavens", said someone, "do you read Arabic as well?" "Not really", he replied, "it's the Koran."⁷ Another colleague shared a small

⁷ Eric Handley, personal communication.

office with him while rebuilding was still going on. 'He seemed to know everything about the Greek and Latin languages. From time to time he had a domestic conversation on the phone with his wife, in totally fluent French, and I knew that he spoke many other languages as well (Greek, Bulgarian?). . . . He spoke so fast that I had trouble understanding even his English.'⁸ At University College London he was one of a remarkable collection of scholars. A. H. M. Jones, the great historian of the Late Roman Empire, had succeeded Norman Baynes as Professor of Ancient History, and John Morris and Edward Thompson, the author of a classic study of Ammianus Marcellinus published in 1949, were two of those who could sympathise with Robert's political leanings. Characteristically, he is remembered by some students of ancient history at University College London through the class which he took for them in Greek; others remembered his proficiency in Latin, which extended to late Latin and the development of the Romance languages. He would see some ten people individually for tutorials in each week of term, and would before long know everyone in the department by name and interests. He was to remember them for years afterwards, and they him. Although David Furley remembers Robert once trying to recruit him for a Party meeting, most of those who knew him as students in those days say that they never remember his expressing left-wing or communist principles even in relation to such obviously relevant historical topics as the fall of the Roman Empire. This is all the more remarkable in view of his continued writing in the socialist press, a part of his activity which remained mysterious to most of his academic colleagues and his pupils. This reserve was however entirely in line with the mildness that was so much part of his character. Robert had strong views, which he retained, but they were balanced by Scottish circumspection and toleration for others, and indeed his dealings with others were sometimes mild to a fault.

Of Browning's books on Byzantine history, *Byzantium and Bulgaria* (1975), written for a series on comparative history, clearly grew from his own knowledge of the region from 1944 onwards, when he was first in Bulgaria as an officer in the Allied Control Commission. It is more revealing than some of his other works, in the first place for its demonstration of his close familiarity with Russian and Bulgarian academic writing, which is cited in the original with no concession to the less technically equipped reader, and in the second, for its comparison between Bulgaria

⁸ Professor David Furley, personal communication.

and Byzantium in the ninth and tenth centuries, which works to the detriment of the latter as a 'totalitarian' state and claims that the apparent backwardness of the former is to be explained by its Slavic egalitarianism and the sense of independence of its citizens as the 'underdogs of the feudal world'. Not long after the period which he discusses, the Byzantines, under the Emperor Basil II, later known as the 'Bulgar-slayer', reconquered Bulgaria and reduced it to the status of a Byzantine province, but Browning passes this over in a few lines as resulting from 'the logic of history and the traditions of the Roman empire'. He emphasises the number and vigour of revolts with which the Byzantine rulers were faced, but leaves the long submergence of Bulgaria within the Ottoman empire as something to be explained by others. It is interesting in the light of his later connection with Dumbarton Oaks to see the number of citations of the Soviet Byzantinist Alexander Kazhdan, who left Moscow not long after the publication of *Byzantium and Bulgaria* as a Jewish émigré and spent the rest of his career at Dumbarton Oaks. The view of Byzantium as a state in which the citizen was atomised and alienated which is hinted at in *Byzantium and Bulgaria* was to be a feature of the first of several books published in English by Kazhdan with the collaboration of a western scholar, *People and Power in Byzantium* (Washington DC, 1982, with Giles Constable).

It is legitimate to ask why Robert chose to write about Byzantine issues when he was apparently unsympathetic to Byzantium as a society. Much of his interest lay in fact in the direction of Byzantine scholarship and in intellectual, rather than social or economic history. One of the clearest strands in his scholarship has been his interest in Byzantine education, high culture, and literacy, all subjects on which he frequently published, and Judith Herrin has seen in this an identification with his own deepest concerns.⁹ Indeed this may have led him to over-emphasise to some degree the spread of literacy and higher education in Byzantium.¹⁰ Disappointingly, it did not find fulfilment in the book-length treatment of the topic which had seemed to some a natural outcome. But perhaps another reason for Robert's continued fascination with Byzantium is to be found in his sense of the continuity, or at least the resilience, of Greek civilisation, and in his admiration for the scholarly writers who kept

⁹ Memoir, *Past and Present*, 156 (1997), 4–5.

¹⁰ Though this is partly a matter of changing definitions of literacy: see Margaret Mullett, 'Writing in early mediaeval Byzantium', in Rosamund McKitterick (ed.), *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe* (Cambridge, 1990), 156–85.

classical culture alive. Yet Browning did not go on to develop his views about Byzantine history in more detail. Among his more notable articles on Byzantine topics mention must however be made for instance of those of 1962 and 1963 on the patriarchal school in Constantinople, that on an unpublished funeral oration on Anna Comnena in the *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, also in 1962, his paper on literacy in Byzantium in *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* in 1978, that on Cyprus in the dark ages in 1979, his lecture to the Friends of Dr Williams's Library published in 1981 and his paper on 'The "low-level" saint's life in the early Byzantine world', published in the same year.¹¹

All these became standard and are still regularly cited. But his other historical books are for the most part useful introductions rather than new analyses; they do not reveal much of the personal views of the writer. He preferred to keep his deeper views for a different audience, and reading these works alone, one would not have thought to associate Browning with historians of the later Roman Empire such as F. W. Wallbank (*The Awful Revolution*, 1949), John Morris, E. A. Thompson, or G. E. M. de Ste Croix. Browning's *Justinian and Theodora* (1971, rev. 1987) is an attractive presentation for a general public of the world of sixth-century Byzantium as seen through the personalities of the emperor and empress reflected in contemporary texts. With *The Emperor Julian* (1976) Browning directly addressed the later Roman Empire and a subject much discussed by its historians; he did so however in a book that is brief and without footnotes, and while he devotes some pages to the rise of Christianity and imagines Julian pondering the ills of his time, he does not offer any ideological critique as such. His aim was to present Julian as a man of his time, conscious of 'being an outsider with a mission to heal a sick society', but not as the demon seen by Christian contemporaries nor yet readily explicable in psychological terms as the product of a lonely boyhood. The book took shape when he was a Visiting Scholar at Dumbarton Oaks and he refers to American students who compared Julian to President Kennedy; he must have liked the comparison, for it

¹¹ R. Browning, 'The patriarchal school at Constantinople in the twelfth century', *Byzantion*, 32 (1962), 167–202; 'The patriarchal school at Constantinople in the twelfth century (continued)', *ibid.* 33 (1963), 11–40; 'An unpublished funeral oration on Anna Comnena', *PCPhS*, 188, NS 8 (1962), 1–12; 'Literacy in the Byzantine world', *BMGS*, 4 (1978), 39–54; 'Byzantium and Islam in Cyprus in the early Middle Ages', *Epeteris Kentrou Epistemonikon Ereunon*, 9 (1977–79), 101–16; *Church, State and Learning in Twelfth-Century Byzantium* (London, Dr Williams's Trust, 1981); 'The "low-level" saint's life in the early Byzantine world', in S. Hackel (ed.), *The Byzantine Saint* (London, 1981), 117–27.

appears both in the preface and at the end of the book. But his Julian is straightforwardly presented, and he does not discuss in any detail either Julian's own very interesting writings or the important and in some ways mixed account given of the emperor by the historian Ammianus Marcellinus. Browning's *History of the Byzantine Empire* (1980, rev. 1992) came out just before his retirement, and takes the form of a chronological account, also without annotation; it is much less idiosyncratic than Cyril Mango's *Byzantium. The Empire of New Rome*, which was published in the same year. Nevertheless, Browning sees Byzantium in this book as a society in which there was a great gap between the elitist culture of the few and the experience of the many, and the later Byzantine period as one of inexorable decline. Not much is said about the role of religion in this society, except in terms of church institutions or, in the case of Hesychasm, as displacement activity when times were hard, but again we look in vain for overt Marxist analysis. It was the book which Browning edited under the title *The Greek World* (London, 1985) and for which he wrote an introduction entitled 'Land and people' that revealed most clearly his deep sense of the whole sweep of Hellenic history, and the importance of connecting the world of classical Greece to its modern successors. Here one sees something of the man who had been a tireless worker for the anti-dictatorship committee in the days of the *junta*, when it was said that he would take on and coach Greek Ph.D. students personally in order to provide them with an excuse for not returning to Greece at that difficult time.

Over his long career his academic writings covered a chronological span from Linear B to modern Greece, and a range that included an article on the date of Petronius (he also expressed an ambition to write a commentary on the *Satyricon*, though this aim he did not fulfil). But this did not lead him, as has often been the case with others, to see Byzantium only through the eyes of a classicist, except in the important sense of his deep knowledge of palaeography and of the history of the Greek language. Among his articles a number present hitherto unpublished Byzantine literary works, and his great learning in this field at last found a worthy subject in the magisterial catalogue of dated Byzantine manuscripts from Cyprus up to AD 1570, published jointly in 1993 by Dumbarton Oaks and by the Cyprus Research Centre in Nicosia, a major undertaking on which he collaborated with his former pupil Professor Costas Constantinides of the University of Ioannina. This catalogue is a very considerable achievement; it involved years of long and hard work and its publication, which in itself marked a landmark in the study of

Byzantine Cyprus, was a fine result of Robert's close association with Cyprus in his later years. It breaks new ground in assembling material about all manuscripts known to be copied in Cyprus or by Cypriot copyists between the tenth century and AD 1570, the date of the Ottoman occupation. Thus it allows users to get something of an idea both of the extent of Cypriot activity in this field and of its subsequent spread and dispersal. The introductory chapters are an important contribution to the intellectual history of Cyprus and to the history of literary and church patronage. According to a typical statement in the preface, written by Robert, much of the necessary work in a wide range of European libraries, as well as the initial drafting of the introductory chapters, was done by Constantinides, but 'every word of this book', as well as its general principles, was agreed by both the two authors over their many years of labour (the project was agreed by Dumbarton Oaks and the Cyprus Research Centre in 1983 and completed in 1993). Engagingly, they themselves adopted the practice of many of the copyists whose work they include by appending a colophon in Byzantine twelve syllables, giving their names and the date of completing the work, and taking over lines used in similar contexts in some of the manuscripts in the catalogue.

A work of this kind, which was indeed many years in the preparation, takes time even for specialists to appreciate fully. It is very different in kind from his *Medieval and Modern Greek* (1969, rev. 1983), which he published many years before, and which quickly became one of Browning's best-known contributions to scholarship: this is a brief but incisive treatment of the development of the Greek language from the late classical period to modern days. This book can genuinely be called a classic, and it is sometimes hard to remember now what a huge gap it filled at the time. Both its precision and its breadth of scholarship are typical of its author. His other great passion was the history of education, again from classical times right through the Byzantine period, and one of the last things he wrote was a substantial chapter on education in the fifth and sixth centuries AD for volume XIV of the new Cambridge Ancient History. Characteristically, the delivery of the chapter and its coverage were exemplary, even though done on the familiar typewriter with additions in Robert's recognisable hand, for one thing he never achieved was the leap into modern technology.

Among those who knew him best Robert is generally remembered as quiet and reserved, but at Dumbarton Oaks he liked to be the first into the swimming pool at the start of the season, and regularly outwalked younger friends when in his seventies and eighties. He was a particularly

energetic and devoted grandfather to two young granddaughters from whom he was otherwise mostly separated by the Atlantic. Browning's academic strengths showed most clearly in his near encyclopaedic knowledge of literary texts and of the history of scholarship, and this was perhaps related to other traits of character, for instance his love of browsing in secondhand bookshops (a habit he had acquired when visiting the 'barrows' in Glasgow), and his taste for conversation about etymology.

The lively and gregarious character exhibited in the Glasgow years came into its own again in later life. Robert much enjoyed not only the incomparable Byzantine library and beautiful setting of Dumbarton Oaks, and the chance to continue holding seminars and acting as mentor to new generations of young scholars, but also the opportunities for new friendships. He was an appreciative guest, always arriving with flowers or a bottle of wine, and his friendship extended to sons and daughters when they in turn would invite him to dinner in student accommodation in various universities. When in Washington in his later years he still prided himself on walking, and would never take a taxi unless in extreme circumstances, even if it meant a metro journey and two buses. Retirement from this 'retirement' post was something he did not wish to contemplate, and from which he was in the event happily spared.

Robert was cremated in a strictly secular ceremony presided over by Christopher Hill, at which a series of tributes were delivered by his daughter Tamara and by his friend Eric Hobsbawm among others; there were also tributes from Greece including a message read by the Greek Ambassador. Besides the national dailies, obituaries appeared in the Athens newspaper *To Bema*, the *Glasgow Herald*, and in *Paroikiake*, the newspaper of the Greek Cypriot community in London, both of the last two by Ian Martin. A year later, in 1998, a memorial meeting under the title 'Mnemosyne for Robert Browning' was held at Birkbeck College. He left many books and articles so that we can remember him, but the most vivid memories must surely be those of his friends.

AVERIL CAMERON

Fellow of the Academy

Note. For help and information in compiling this memoir I should like to thank Professors Costas Constantinides, Eric Handley, David Furley, Eric Hobsbawm, and Wolf Liebeschutz, as well as Ruth and Tamara Browning, Nancy Matthews, the late

Ian Martin, and Robert's brother Martin Browning. I have also consulted the notes which Browning himself provided to the Academy, and had access to the files of correspondence dating from the preparation of his first Festschrift, *Maistor* (1984), as well as to personal comments by many of Robert's friends and former pupils.