



GEOFFREY KIRK

Geoffrey Stephen Kirk 1921–2003

GEOFFREY STEPHEN KIRK was born at Nottingham on 3 December 1921, the son of F. T. Kirk, and his wife Edith (née Pentecost). His father's family came from northern Yorkshire and his mother's was of Cornish origin, but had long been established in Nottingham in the dyeing and bleaching trade. His father, a dashing and affectionate character whom his friends addressed as Ferdie, served in the First World War and won the Military Cross. His mother, however, was thought by people who knew her to have a somewhat difficult temperament.

Not long after Kirk's birth the family moved to Radlett in suburban Hertfordshire, where his father became chief administrative officer of the Northampton Polytechnic in London, now the City University. When he was eleven they moved back to the Midlands, his father having been persuaded by a relative to become manager of a factory at Stapleford, between Nottingham and Derby.

Kirk tells us something of his early life in his attractive small book *Towards the Aegean Sea: A Wartime Memoir* (1997). He writes that in general he was lucky in his schooldays, but that that did not prevent him from being 'self-conscious and withdrawn at times, and in his early teens, at least, fairly unhappy'. 'The development of a truly extroverted personality,' he writes, 'was something that took time to accomplish, and has never, to my regret and my friends' surprise, been entirely perfected.' This must indeed have come as a surprise to most people who knew him, especially those who knew him at the start of his career. He was strikingly

handsome, and had considerable charm of manner; he was not bad at games, as well as very good at work, and he did well at all his schools.

He got a good start in Latin at his kindergarten, Radlett House, and at the age of nine went on to a first-rate preparatory school called Shirley House, between Bushey and Watford, where he got excellent teaching. He thought of trying for a scholarship at Shrewsbury, but was persuaded to try at Rossall, mainly because the climate would be good for his hayfever, and he was successful.

Life in this school, some eight miles north of Blackpool, was, as he tells us, 'rather charmless'; Kirk, who was very sensitive to his environment, was glad when, after the outbreak of war in 1939, the school was evacuated to Naworth Castle, the seat of the Earls of Carlisle. But the teaching was of high quality. For a year he studied science, but then switched to classics, improved his Latin and learned Greek, and won a scholarship to Clare College, Cambridge.

Going up to Cambridge in August 1940, Kirk spent a year there before he joined the Navy. Cambridge at that time contained several classical scholars of high distinction. But some of these were austere and somewhat dry, and in general the teaching and lecturing was uninspiring. The classical don at Clare was N. G. L. Hammond, an ideal teacher for Kirk, as he showed after the war; but he was away, and Kirk was sent for supervision to R. M. Rattenbury of Trinity College, a sound scholar but by no means an inspiring teacher. When Kirk told him that he was leaving to join the Navy, Rattenbury exclaimed 'Good Heavens! Well, I don't suppose I shall be seeing *you* again!' However, Kirk made progress in his studies, and obtained a First Class in Part I of the Classical Tripos, though without getting a distinction in the composition papers. Despite having rooms in a very ordinary modern building in Clare College and working in the equally undistinguished Classics Library in Mill Lane, Kirk acquired a deep affection for Cambridge.

Having preferred to become a telegraphist rather than an ordinary seaman, Kirk was posted to HMS *Royal Arthur* at Skegness. But after a few weeks he was chosen to become a candidate for a commission, and after a ten-week course in HMS *Ganges* at Otley was posted to HMS *Hurricane*, in which he spent the severe winter of 1941–2 crossing and re-crossing the North Atlantic. Having been chosen by the Navigating Officer to be his 'Yeoman', he acquired valuable navigational experience, and since the *Hurricane* was commanded by Commander Howard-Johnstone, who had much in common with Captain Bligh, he became acquainted with some of the difficulties of naval life. After six months on

that ship and a final course of intensive training at Lancing, he was commissioned in the late summer of 1942.

Wishing to have freedom and responsibility and to avoid regular naval officers trained at Dartmouth, Kirk opted for service with the Coastal Forces, that is to say, in motor torpedo-boats and motor launches. After a period of training he was chosen to be First Lieutenant of a new motor launch, which for some months was engaged in patrolling against E-boats in the western part of the English Channel and in landing agents in occupied France.

After his motor launch had been damaged and withdrawn from service, Kirk on the advice of a friend managed to call at the Admiralty, find the right office and indicate that he wished to serve in Greece. After a brief course in navigation and a fortnight spent in Oxford being taught some modern Greek, he was posted to the Levant Flotilla. This consisted of a dozen or so caiques (small Greek fishing-boats), based on Beirut, and operating among the Greek islands. Kirk made a hazardous journey to Castelorizo, an island off the Turkish coast located some forty miles east of Rhodes, which was the base of part of the Flotilla, and from there to the Turkish bay of Balisu, some forty miles north of Cos, where the headquarters of the Commander, Aegean Raiding Forces was located. This officer's command consisted of a dozen or so caiques fitted out with Army tank engines and a little concealed armament.

Early in 1944 Kirk became the Second Officer in one of these vessels, which were engaged in sailing around the Dodecanese and the Cyclades, surveying local conditions and dealing with German garrisons and with the difficult problems of navigation. After taking part in operations on Amorgos and on Santorin he made a trip to Mykonos under a First Officer who turned out to be a maniac. After taking over from him, he assisted in dealing with the German garrison on Symi and in a reconnaissance of Paros and Naxos and later in a general reconnaissance of the eastern Cyclades. He movingly records his delight at unexpectedly coming upon the ruins of the splendid temple of Apollo at Didyma, near Miletus, and later at visiting the sacred island of Delos. After about three months the Germans began reducing or even withdrawing their garrisons on the islands, though a cadre of 300 commandos was still moving around the islands and had to be avoided. Kirk now operated in the northern Cyclades and in Chios, and later took part in a trip to Symi, Piscopi and Nisyros.

By the end of 1944 the German presence in Greece and the islands was almost at an end. At that time Kirk was ordered to join the rest of

the flotilla in Tourkolimano, a small-boat harbour on the edge of Phaleron Bay, where other caiques were waiting to hand themselves over to the Greek Navy. He had an agreeable stay in Athens and its neighbourhood, for part of the time acting as liaison officer to the Greek officer who was in charge of the group of boats, and enjoying the study of antiquities and delightful female company. In his own words, 'the trouble was that I liked, in one way or another, practically all girls'; Kirk was so handsome and had so much charm that the liking was usually reciprocated. He was now a full Lieutenant, and was offered the post of Flag-Lieutenant to the Admiral commanding in Greek waters. But he preferred to exercise his right to early demobilisation in order to return to Cambridge, and in September, 1945 left for home. Afterwards he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

Returning to Clare College, he had an ideal director of studies in N. G. L. Hammond, who had now returned from Greece after his notably distinguished service in Epirus. But Hammond was an historian, and Kirk had decided to specialise in ancient philosophy in Part II of the Tripos. Again he was lucky, for he found a supervisor who was both congenial and highly competent in F. H. Sandbach of Trinity College.¹ He got a First Class, and was elected to a Research Fellowship at Trinity Hall.

During his tenure of that post, Kirk spent the year 1947–8 at the British School in Athens, where he wrote a valuable article on the likenesses of ships on Geometric vases (*BSA*, 44, (1951), 93–153), and the year 1949–50 at Harvard as a Commonwealth Fund Fellow. His main concern was with his doctoral thesis, which dealt with Heraclitus.

In 1950 he was elected an Official Fellow of Trinity Hall. In the same year he married Barbara Traill; they had one daughter. Between 1949 and 1959 he published several valuable articles on Heraclitus and one on Anaximander; and in 1954 appeared his book *Heraclitus: the Cosmic Fragments*. By this title he indicated those fragments 'whose subject-matter is the world as a whole, as opposed to men', on which he supplied a learned and judicious commentary, which has stood the test of time. Gregory Vlastos wrote that 'a work as serious and thorough as this compels one to reconsider many things one has previously taken for granted'.² For so young a man, it was a remarkable performance.

¹ See *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 84 (1993), 485–503.

² *American Journal of Philology*, 76 (1955), 337 = *Studies in Greek Philosophy*, I (1995), 127.

In 1957 appeared the first edition of *The Presocratic Philosophers*, edited by Kirk in collaboration with J. E. Raven. This book is an invaluable substitute for the selection of texts from the almost complete collection of fragments and testimonies edited by H. Diels and W. Kranz that had been provided by H. Ritter and L. Preller (edn. 9, 1913), and it contains a commentary that for the most part is of high quality. Kirk dealt with the Ionian tradition and its forerunners, and also with the atomists and Diogenes, and Raven with the Italian tradition and also with Anaxagoras and Archelaus. In 1959 K. R. Popper tried to show that the study of the Presocratics supported his theory that scientific discovery begins not from observation or experiment but from theories or intuitions; Kirk replied to his argument, and had much the better of the controversy.³ In 1959 Kirk, then aged thirty-eight, was elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

From about 1960 Kirk turned his attention to Homeric problems. Milman Parry had proved that the Homeric poems belonged to a tradition that had been oral, and for many years after that most English-speaking scholars assumed that they themselves must have been composed orally. In 1950 classical studies in Cambridge had been greatly stimulated by the appointment to the Regius Chair of Greek of Sir Denys Page, who in two sets of lectures given in America in the 1950s strongly advocated the view that Homer was an oral poet.⁴

In 1962 Kirk published the *Songs of Homer*, which is dedicated to Page and M. I. Finley; he by no means always agrees with Page, but Page's influence is never far away. Kirk believed that the epics were composed orally, but thought that two generations had elapsed between the composition of the poems and the time when they were written down. In 1965 *The Songs of Homer* was abbreviated and somewhat rearranged as *Homer and the Epic* (1965).

The articles relevant to this topic which Kirk published between 1960 and 1973, together with the J. H. Gray Lectures which he gave at Cambridge in 1974, are to be found in *Homer and the Oral Tradition* (1977). The book and these articles contain no reference to Wolfgang Schadewaldt, *Iliasstudien* (1938; 3rd edn., 1966) and *Von Homers Welt und Werk* (1944; 4th edn., 1965) or to Karl Reinhardt, *Die Ilias und ihr Dichter*

³ See Popper, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1958–9), 1. 24 and Kirk, *Mind*, 69 (1960), 318–39.

⁴ On these works see H. Lloyd-Jones, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 65 (1979) = *Blood for the Ghosts* (1982), pp. 300–1.

(1961) and *Tradition und Geist* (1960) who argue that the Homeric epics were composed with the aid of writing, and are coherent works of complex artistry.

But in 1966 Milman Parry's son Adam challenged this view.⁵ Speaking of his father, he wrote 'It is up to us not to stop where he stopped' (*Yale Classical Studies*, 20 (1966), 212; *The Language of Achilles* (1989), pp. 135–6); and in 1971 he published a translation into English of the two famous theses which his father had written in French, with an excellent introduction in which he argued that, though his father had proved that Homer belonged to a tradition that had been oral, Homer himself must have used writing. Kirk replied to Adam Parry,⁶ but not very effectively.

Between 1965 and 1970 Kirk, without ceasing to be a Fellow of Trinity Hall, held a professorship at Yale, and in 1969 he delivered the Sather Lectures at Berkeley, California. In 1970 he contributed to the series of translations published by Prentice-Hall a valuable rendering of Euripides' *Bacchae*. In 1971 he resigned from Trinity Hall and became Professor of Classics at Bristol, where he occupied an attractive house in Clifton. While he was at Bristol he was divorced from his wife, and married Kirsten (née Jensen), formerly wife of Professor Christopher Ricks.

In 1970 Kirk published his Sather Lectures under the title *Myth: its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*. The book was the product of a large amount of learned labour. He had made a careful study of the Mesopotamian myths about which so much information had come to light during the preceding century, and treated the subject in a spirit of English empiricism. He examined critically the five major general theories that had been put forward, giving most attention to what was then the latest, the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and showed how the proponents of each had made the mistake of insisting that their own particular theory explained all myths.

Curiously enough the part of this valuable book that seemed most open to attack was his treatment of Greek myth. He argued that a myth cannot be fully understood unless one understood its origins, and since he held that these origins sometimes went back not simply to the Mycenaean period but to a period earlier than the Bronze Age, they were not always easy to establish. Arnaldo Momigliano in a review argued that to under-

⁵ *Yale Classical Studies*, 20 (1966), 177–216 = *The Language of Achilles and Other Papers* (1989), pp. 104–40.

⁶ *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 196 (1970), 48–59 = *Homer and the Oral Tradition* (1976), pp. 129–45.

stand a myth it was not absolutely necessary to understand its origins, and that it was far more important to understand it in the light of its relation to its own period.⁷ Kirk in his reply argued that many features of Greek myths can be understood only if we take into account oriental myths which may have influenced them, and that to discover instances of this kind of thing was more useful than to examine the enormous variations which myths can be seen to undergo in the period about which we have fullest information.⁸

Many readers were surprised by Kirk's complaint that Greek mythology lacked the fantasy and speculation that were found in other mythologies; 'so droht nun auch der klassischen Mythologie die edle Einfachheit und stille Grösse zum Verhängnis zu werden' was Walter Burkert's comment,⁹ and Brian Vickers delivered an excited but not entirely unjust criticism.¹⁰ Kirk did better justice to Greek mythology in his small but very readable and useful book *The Nature of Greek Mythology* (1974).

In 1973 Sir Denys Page unexpectedly retired from the Regius Chair of Greek at Cambridge five years earlier than he need have done, and Kirk was elected to succeed him. Instead of returning to Trinity Hall, he exercised the claim of a Regius Professor to a Fellowship at Trinity College.

He did much good at Cambridge by instituting formal professorial seminars for graduate students. But he now occupied a fine house at Woodbridge in Suffolk, which was unfortunately far from Cambridge, with the result that after a time much of the work of running the seminar fell to others.

In 1979 he spent a semester as Andrew W. Mellon Professor in Tulane University at New Orleans. When he was asked to give the Gray Lectures for 1974 he had at first thought of speaking on *Vagaries of Athenian Taste, 450–350 BC*, and the only result of this that has come to my knowledge is an Andrew W. Mellon Lecture given at Tulane and published in 1979 by the Graduate School of Tulane University under the title of *Periclean Athens and the Decline of Taste*. In this Kirk considers the changes of taste to be seen in the literature and art of the period in question in a

⁷ *Rivista Storica Italiana*, 83 (1971), 450–4 = *Quinto Contributo alla Storia degli Studi Classici e del Mondo Antico* (1975), pp. 908–11.

⁸ *Rivista Storica Italiana*, 84 (1972), 565–83.

⁹ *Gnomon*, 44 (1972), 128.

¹⁰ *Towards Greek Tragedy: Drama, Myth, Society* (1973), pp. 197 f. and Appendix II (pp. 618–35); for other criticisms, see H. S. Versnel, *Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual* (1994), p. 46 n. 83.

stimulating and interesting way, and it seems a pity that he did not continue to pursue this line of enquiry. In 1980 Kirk made a solid and valuable contribution to the discussion of sacrifice at the Fondation Hardt,¹¹ repeating his warning against monolithic theories. In 1982, six years earlier than he need have done, Kirk resigned the chair, and moved to live at Bath.

In 1983 appeared a second edition of *The Presocratic Philosophers*. Raven, who had died in 1980, was replaced as an editor by M. Schofield, who rewrote the chapters on the Eleatics and Pythagoreans, the chapter on Empedocles and part of the chapter on the Atomists, and Kirk revised the earlier part of the book throughout, 'but with little complete rewriting'.

He now returned to Homeric studies, and began work as general editor of a commentary on the Iliad in six volumes, to be published by the Cambridge University Press. The commentary appeared between 1985 and 1993, Kirk himself being responsible for the first two volumes, dealing with the first eight books. Despite the effects of his adherence to the oralist theory, his part of the commentary is of considerable value, particularly in the treatment of the Catalogue of Ships in Book Two; and he gave much valuable assistance to the other contributors to the commentary.

His last years were sad, since he was plagued by sickness and manic depression. But there were periods when he was free from these troubles, and his friends found his company as delightful as it had always been. He moved to Sussex, and died in a nursing-home at Rove, in Hampshire, on 10 March 2003.

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Note. Without wishing to suggest that he agrees with everything in this memoir, I would like to thank Dr Nicholas Richardson for his assistance.

¹¹ In *Le Sacrifice dans l'Antiquité* (Entretiens de la Fondation Hardt, vol. 27, 1981), 41–90.