Donald Russell at Bletchley Park

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Verse came before service – but only just. In 1939, when Donald Russell went up to Balliol College, with hardly any practice in verse composition, his tutor asked him whether he did hexameters or elegiac couplets (a hexameter followed by a pentameter). Russell averred hexameters with the suspicion that they would be easier, so his tutor set him twenty lines of Matthew Arnold. "It took me *most of the week* to do it, to tell you the truth, with the aid of Winbolt's book, *Latin Hexameter Verse*," he tells me. "I sweated over it most of the week."

Composition – both verse and prose – was key in Classical studies until the War, Professor Russell says after I have brought in the coffee from the kitchen. At 91, he uses a stroller to get around, making carrying a tray impossible, although he is not much harder of hearing than a decade ago when I sat at his dining table for verse lessons and he is certainly no less acute, his mind oiled if not his limbs. "At one time these things were thought to be the most important part of Classical education – that's long, long ago. Great prestige was acquired by being able to do these things properly and it was thought that this was a good sign that you were going to do well in the world." He gives a brief cheerful laugh, suffixed by a rising wheezy *hmmm*, which does not express puzzlement but is more a rhetorical invitation to assent. "But that's all gone really. That situation in the schools, late Victorian and Edwardian and early Georgian times, that certainly held. The people who did this very well, they're top civil servants or governors of India or something."

The antiquity of this world of versifying viceroys is captured in the hand-me-down textbooks. The standard book, Sidgwick and Morice's *Introduction to Greek Verse Composition*, was written in 1883 and last revised in 1955, and there has been almost nothing for Latin verse comp this side of the war. Nevertheless, like those who would return us to the gold standard, verse-composers survive, mostly under Professor Russell's tutelage. (Boris Johnson commissioned Jesus College Classicist Armand D'Angour to write an ode in Greek for the London Olympics.) Others don't like teaching verse composition, Professor Russell says, because it requires not just the skill of verse composition – hard enough – but also "correcting the work with them with the minimum change. It's easier to start afresh than it is to modify what the pupil has done. That is a *difficult* skill." You can't just give your version of the verse as the correct one – like a subtle editor, you have to respect the author's voice, even when the author is a bolshie second-year undergraduate, and work with what they give you.

There is an element of nature in being able to do verses, he says – an innate manipulative skill, the ability to conceive of the manifold repercussions of putting *this* word *there* within a complex system of rules, just like a chess player contemplating the board and its arrayed nobility. This must be combined with a capacious memory, able to draw on a line of Ovid or Euripides for support. Using words from the right era or dialect is important: he once damned a verse of mine by looking up some unusual word I had used and kindly querying, "Clement of Alexandria, eh?" That was too late a word for Sophocles to have used – by about seven

hundred years. Like all skills, however, it is improved by time and practice, neither of which Professor Russell currently lacks: “It’s been easier since I retired. I’ve probably written more verses in the past ten or fifteen years than I ever wrote before!”

Evidence of this is lying in front of me on the coffee table: he has composed an introduction in Latin elegiac couplets to a new collection of verses made by pupils at Merchant Taylors’ School over the centuries. With his surpassing modesty – if that is not an oxymoron – Professor Russell earlier in his career refused to let his compositions be published; even if his ability was never in doubt, he said that he lacked the confidence. In his new poem Professor Russell focuses on the composers rather than the composed, which tended to be standbys like Arnold and Shakespeare, with psalms and extracts from the Bible when in vogue. He captures the proud young poets (*gaudentes poetae*) who worked on verses because their teachers taught them that “only classics could/ give fortune, eloquence and moral good” (*eloquium mores virtutem cuncta parari/ his tantum studiis credere moris erat*), the essence of imperial self-assurance. Foolish some call verse composition, but “great men emerged from all that foolishness!” (*summos… hac e stultitia prosiluisse viros*).

If this view of verse composition as literary bran flakes no longer holds true, its endurance – like so much else in Classics – is its own charm: students like to do it partly because “it’s got a tradition behind it and they like to be in it.” But there is something else, something not much found in education any more: creativity. “When you’ve done it, you’ve made a little bit of handwork. I think that appeals *hmmmm*.” Later he comes back to this idea: “It has a deeper side to it, an imaginative side to it, because you have to think about shapes and colours and events and people as well as manipulating the line.” He concludes with a satisfied *yes*. It’s typical of Oxford that one of the few forms of creative writing that goes on is in Classical verse.

Inside my copy of Sidgwick and Morice, at the end of the Authors’ Preface, there is a Publishers’ Note which begins, “The entire stock of this work was destroyed by enemy action in December 1940.” In December 1940, Donald Russell was in his second year at Balliol, probably anticipating Mods with its verse comp paper the following term, working with or without one of the unconflagrated copies of Sidgwick and Morice. If the book-bombing was an incursion of the war into Classics, several of Oxford’s brightest Classicists, including Donald Russell, were about to find themselves repaying the favour at Bletchley Park.

In a lecture Professor Russell gave in 1996, eventually published in 2007, he spoke about his own undergraduate experience and in particular what Oxford was like during the war. Some of the most renowned German Classicists had fled to England, Hitler’s persecutions having an unintended benefit to Oxonian undergraduates. The days of 1940 and 1941 were taken up with study and with military preparation, with “drilling in the Meadow, learning the parts of the Bren gun, and listening to improbable lectures: the poet Edmund Blunden on platoon tactics and a philosophy don, who shall be nameless, who managed to cast a cloud of metaphysical obscurity over the relatively simple topic of map-reading.” Despite the intellectual light, darkness was preponderant: “For our real pleasures, we took our dimmed torches and scuttled through the dark streets of a blacked-out Oxford to Corpus or Christ

Church or Oriel. No lines of festal light, no welcoming lamps in college lodges, only wicket-gates to be pushed open, and a discreet glimmer within."

Assimilating and mixing with those returning from the war, including those from Dunkirk who were camping on Port Meadow, led the students into an unwitting doublethink predicated on fearful self-preservation. Through "youthful resilience – or callousness, or immaturity, or plain stupidity, or whatever it is", the undergraduates imagined an impermeable line between themselves and the soldiers, who had themselves been the undergraduates a short time before. Although they were keen to contribute to the war effort, they could simultaneously compartmentalise, in Professor Russell's word.

Asked about when he got his summons, Professor Russell sounds almost a little impatient – not with the question but with the delay to his service (I hope): "The call-up was not very quick – it was 1941 before I actually got into the army." He also has a certain modesty – or reticence – about how he was picked for Bletchley: "I expect through the University. It's all written up in the books on the Bletchley Park affair and how it was recruited and so on. Lindsay Moss was Master of Balliol at that time. He no doubt put a lot of names forward." Several published accounts credit Oxbridge heads of house with selecting chess-playing, crossword-solving Classicists. They joined an extensive list of notable Classicists at BP.

But Russell was not picked to work on the German codes at Bletchley – he was part of the much smaller band of Japanese codebreakers, needed after Pearl Harbour opened a new front. "I was in the army, in the Signals actually. I had been in training really and then I was suddenly fetched out and I was sent to learn Japanese – it's well written-up – at Bedford and I spent the rest of the war doing that." He moves away from the subject of Bletchley but returns a little later to elaborate. "I was on the third, I think, of these courses, and there were other courses. These course were held at Bedford, at a house in the middle of Bedford, and the person in charge, you'll find him mentioned in all these things, was Oswald Tuck, Captain Tuck, RN, the naval captain. Splendid man with a little white beard and a *very good teacher*. Really a gifted teacher.

"The whole thing was organised by that very brilliant cryptographer, John Tiltman, who was a regular army officer and had made great advances in the Japanese codes. And he recruited people, he thought that you could teach people enough in six months or so to be useful." Two years was felt to be the minimum sufficient. "The Americans didn't believe it but he was proved right."

His voice is kindly and didactic even as he scours his memory. "There we all were, quite sharp at doing Latin proses and things, and we could all do it and we managed to do it. It was a curious business. I was there for some months. Most of my colleagues like Bill Sibley are dead now. The person I worked under, Chris Wiles, I think he's still alive, he's very deaf, and I didn't get a Christmas card this year so I don't know! His younger brother, Maurice Wiles, the Regius Professor of Divinity here, he was in it too."

Cambridge Classicist Hugh Denham's account of his schooling in Japanese at Bedford was published in *Code Breakers: The Inside Story of Bletchley Park*. It gives some evocative details – Captain Tuck's first words to the students, for example: "'When I come into the room,' he began, 'you are to stand up. I shall then say *shokun ohayo*, which means "all you

princes are honourably early". You will then reply *ohayo gozaimasu*, which means "honourably early it honourably is". I shall now leave the room and come in again, and we shall do this.' Which we did."

The course's chief difficulty was teaching several Japanese systems of writing, all of which might be needed for translating decoded messages: *hiragama* and *katakana*, two fifty-character syllabic *kana* scripts (each symbol represents a consonant and a vowel); *kanji*, logographic Chinese symbols; and *romaji*, transliterations of Japanese into the Roman alphabet. Dictionaries were available, though in scarcity – Denham recorded his relief at receiving "a treasure… the 2,294-page Japanese-to-English Kenkyusha dictionary" – and the students learnt a thousand military and diplomatic terms. Having an actual conversation in Japanese was another, impossible, matter, a skill taught mainly to those who would be interrogating Japanese prisoners. The need for all these alphabets was not because they would have to read the messages in them – decodes were rendered as *romaji* – but because the translators had to be able to look the words up in dictionaries. Even once you had decoded the message, it took a certain tilt of mind to understand foreign words the Japanese had used: "CHI-YA-A-CHI-RU does not obviously spell Churchill to the untrained eye," wrote Maurice Wiles wryly.

Before translation came decryption. There were many types of codes used by the Japanese: some simpler, where the operator looked up a word in a codebook and transmitted just that code-group (JN 4); some more complicated, where the code-group was "reciphered" (JN 25, the main system of Japanese naval communications). The code Donald Russell worked on was that of the Japanese Military Attaché (JMA),

> a digraph code in which the basic *kana* syllables stood for themselves and other two-letter groups stood for certain words or phrases commonly used in military communications: for example, AB stood for 'west' and AV for 'message continued'. The two-letter groups were then set out in a square grid in adjacent squares, sometimes horizontally and sometimes diagonally, and the letters were read off vertically to form the basis for the encrypted text. They were then enciphered using a pre-arranged 'literal additive', a series of letters that would be notionally 'added' to the letters taken out of the grid on the basis of a pattern laid down in advance on a separate table. Reading off the enciphered letter along the relevant horizontal line and the 'additive' letter down the appropriate vertical column would produce a superenciphered letter which would be transmitted by the operator.

The recipient, as someone once said of Ginger Rogers, had to do all of this, but backwards.

John Tiltman had broken the code but did not feel that his Japanese was strong enough to work on the decoded messages, so he set up the unit at Bletchley: "That stage was being largely handed over to us," wrote Maurice Wiles. "We felt pretty ill-equipped… None of the thousand or so characters that we had so painstakingly learnt were there on the page before

us. Something more was needed, for which we had no specialist training – an approach to problem-solving that our initial interviewers no doubt hoped had been ingrained in us by our interest in chess and crosswords."

Although Maurice Wiles said it was "not the most difficult of codes" once they had understood how it worked, Professor Russell says it was not simple either: "I was basically a translator, but in the Military Attaché Cipher, the process of deciphering it could hardly be done without the co-operation of the people who knew something of the language. So I was involved in several stages of this apart from the final translation. I can remember spending hours and hours with *huge* sheets of paper, trying to reconstruct what they call the subtractor at the top of the page, going through all sorts of things." They were called strippers, the people who found the subtractor and removed it from the received message.

Work on the JMA was fruitful, "producing a good deal of intelligence… The codebreakers were able to read the messages of the Japanese military attachés without any problems… The messages provided a wealth of useful material on the movement and existence of Japanese military units." Messages which were a few weeks old could still be valuable, given the advance planning that a pan-Pacific campaign necessitated. The code often transmitted political and military affairs, whether fact or gossip, but individually significant messages were rare. They did discern the intention of the Japanese to have British POWs build the Burma Railroad and there was one particularly notable message from 1944, which Professor Russell had recently been reminded of when an old friend of his late wife visited him. The lady recollected that "in the weeks before D-Day, in the spring of 1944, the Japanese people in Berlin were shown the defences of the French coast by the Germans, they were given a tour of these defences and they wrote home about it."

Professor Russell has a self-deprecating attitude to his time at Bletchley, despite the continual good work his unit did. It could be modesty but on its edges frustration mingles with indifference. He says of the intercepted D-Day message that "that was one of the few times when one thought one was doing something fairly close to the –" and even though he breaks off it is clear he means something close to the action, something of importance. Were there other important messages? "There must have been quite a lot. Some of it was nonsense. You learned at an early date that not everything that is a secret is important." His laugh ends on a cliff-edge silence.

Other Japanese codebreakers had better cause to deprecate the time they spent at Bletchley. Hugh Denham was told in 1942, before the newly-trained undergraduates arrived, that of the thousand Japanese naval messages intercepted every day, only 40 got to Bletchley, and that the real work of decryption was done in Washington, Kilindini in Kenya and Melbourne. These other centres continued to be of greater importance throughout the war. One of Denham's colleagues in the Japanese Naval Section said, "The recoveries that the section made and circulated were few, tentative and regarded with condescension" by the other units, and Denham recalled much greater satisfaction and achievement during his postings at Kilindini and Colombo.

As the Brits at Bletchley worked away, the bulk of the deciphering was being done in America. The Americans had early computers and plenty of people at the Navy decoding

centre, OP-20-G, in Washington, which Professor Russell recalls without bitterness but without satisfaction: "Whereas we had a small handful of people, they turned masses of people onto the job. The whole computer thing started in these circumstances. I was not involved in that at all – it was pencil and paper, our job." He then occupies the traditional English redoubt: "I'm afraid we thought their efforts were sometimes a little unscholarly." I say that that's a very dignified way of putting it. "We thought, just as you would – it was our Classical training – we thought they were churning this stuff out and they made quite a lot of mistakes." This suits as a microcosm of British perceptions of America during and since the war: brains and pluck on one side, might on the other, Britain's erudite Greece to America's brash Rome.

Elizabeth Ross, who worked on Japanese codes at the Park, recalled the competition with the Americans, straining to beat their computers with British intellect: "If we got some way in there was always a feeling that we shouldn't tell them this time: 'We can get there first. Don't let them know about this one.' That was always the joke, of course. We always did tell them but we always felt that we did terribly well without the machinery and vast amounts of manpower they had." Maurice Wiles, in a generally acerbic account of his – and Bletchley's – role in Japanese code-breaking, concurs as to the mood: "There is a sense in which they were for us the 'enemy' against whom we were working, the spur to more vigorous endeavour." When the Americans sent hints about codes, they were "greeted with a feeling of failure and self-reproach", but "times when we could show they had got something wrong were occasions of unconcealed glee." These happy occasions were made rarer because of a significant level of jealous territorialism and suspicion between competing military and intelligence hierarchies across the Atlantic.

Despite the successes of the various Japanese decryption units, Bletchley Park's role in cracking Japanese codes was of minor significance next to Washington's *and* next to the work others at Bletchley did on German codes. This infected the air, according to Maurice Wiles:

> We did not have the stimulus of knowing that the fruits of our labour were of immediate importance in the conduct of the war – something which, we dimly realized, characterized the work of some of those in other sections, even though internal security was sufficient to ensure that we had little idea how true those surmisings were.

Michael Loewe in *Code Breakers* agrees: "All in all the value of this work seen in retrospect was highly questionable." And the author of *The Emperor's Codes* says that the successes of the Japanese codebreakers ultimately did not approach those of the German ones: "The influence exerted by Ultra on the war in the Far East and Pacific only rarely matched its effect on the European war." When the end of the war in the East came, its sound was not that of scratching pencils in an English hut, but of whirring machines in American laboratories. Two months after the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, some of the Bletchley Park codebreakers were ready to go back to university.

I ask Professor Russell how he feels about his personal contribution, but instantly I realise that this question is meaningless – anyone I have spoken to who lived through the war has been a generous communitarian. When they consider the war, they talk of duty and service, not achievement and individualism. So with Professor Russell: "No, well, there was nothing personal about it really – we as a department probably did, we worked quite hard, but there was nothing personal about it. I think that was a rather good thing about it, compared with your usual ethos of academia, which goes in for personal achievement and individual effort. This was a team effort, very much."

Bletchley was conducive to teamwork by hut, but the silent hours of decryption meant a default mode of keeping to oneself. Half a century after the war, Professor Russell's lady friend proved this: "We discovered we'd both been at the Park at the same time and we discovered that we must have at one time been working in the same room!" You never spoke to someone from another hut – let alone from outside Bletchley – about your work. There were also long years after the war where no-one could talk about Bletchley, an intense and penetrating secrecy: "It was rather uncanny in a way because there we were all back as young undergraduates in the late Forties and half of us knew one another from this, but we couldn't talk about it. I suppose privately, me and my former colleagues, we might have made a joke or two about the old days."

The silence of the Park is something which Professor Russell recalls, although it is hard to imagine judging by a visit today, where stentorian, faux-jolly tour guides march blue-rinsed groups from hut to hut, delivering Enigmatic blasts of obscure facts. Several of the huts and blocks have been filled with informative displays, which are their own kind of noise: visual, verbal, historical. One hut tells how three brave sailors – including sixteen-year old Tommy Brown – recovered codebooks from a sinking U-boat which helped those in Bletchley working on Turing's Bombe. Indeed, in Block B is a full-size whirring recreation of the Bombe and, a little further away, Turing's teddy bear, Porgy.

Finding the display in Block B about breaking the Japanese codes does itself require a little detective work, or at least persistence, also a cherished Bletchley quality. A small alcove tucked around several corners, it is not even visible until you stumble on it, and only then if you have forged past Tommy Brown's carriage clock. Consisting of two vitrines of documents and a case with Japanese codebooks, card indices of deciphered messages and a scarf apparently belonging to a kamikaze pilot, it has been set out of the way so as not to distract from the more famous (and admittedly more significant) German code-cracking exhibits. Still, its materials are interesting: an intercepted Japanese telegraph message, represented as pencilled pairs of numbers; two codebooks lying open, with their columns of methodical combinations of English letters and Japanese symbols; translators' vocab notebooks (*shireichookan* = commander-in-chief); notebooks with Japanese characters above transliterations above translations; flashcards with single words on, the sort students today still use. With the Enigma machines and the massive Bombe and the explanatory video, you get a vivid sense of the process of code-catching and code-cracking; this Japanese display makes it seem like only so much labour-intensive paperwork. It's a deathly display away

from the hum and crackle and electricity (literal and metaphorical) of its German cousin round the corner. Given the silence that Professor Russell recalled, perhaps this is fair.

This silence is in another way, in another part of the Park, too easy to imagine. Neither Hut 5, where John Tiltman broke the Japanese Military Attaché code, nor Block F, where Donald Russell worked, has survived. The former had been demolished by 1954, the latter in 1987. If you want to hear the silence Donald Russell heard, stand in front of the crumbling steps and blank plot which are all that remain of Block F, in an unvisited corner of the Park.

All the time I have been reading about verse composition and the work at Bletchley Park, each has suggested to me the other, so I ask Professor Russell whether there is a symmetry between the skills needed for verse composition and those for his activities at Bletchley – a dexterity with encoded texts.

He gives his dismissal in his kindly tone: “I don’t think you can make a case for verse in particular but you can make a case for a connection with various kinds of Classical scholarly activities. Frankly I don’t think the particular skills of verse were relevant. The skills of textual criticism were more to the point really – sorting out corruptions and that sort of thing. That was more to the point. And also the habit of thinking hard and deep thinking – the general habit of translating. I don’t think you can say that verse-writing skills had anything to do with it.” Not even with the precise manipulation of syllables? “Not particularly. You do manipulations in any case in any kind of translation, either way round, you manipulate when you’re considering variant readings in a text. That sort of sharpness was probably more relevant, and as students in those days we did a lot of that too.” Students in those days did a lot more than that too.