

## Humanising Language Teaching

# Remembering Philip Prowse. Voices of Friends and Colleagues



### *Philip Prowse. In Memoriam*



compiled by Thomas Robb

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Looking back on Philip's life, I recall his contributions in five specific areas.

I first met him when he was Director of the Bell College in Saffron Walden. He ran this highly complex institution with a relaxed yet watchful, and above all, caring way. He was deeply committed to less privileged regions of the world, and in particular to Africa. I still recall the groups from Mozambique, Angola and Namibia and the way they were made to feel at home and respected.

Following his departure from Saffron Walden as part of the shameful night of the long knives at Bell, he became active in a number of ways. One was his work on the Education Writers' Group of the Society of Authors. He was tireless in his defence of authors' rights, and in promoting their publishing careers.

At around the same time – the mid-90's – he became the series editor of the highly innovative Cambridge English Readers. These were the first serious attempt to provide learners with engaging stories (often with serious global

content) written in authentic English, without the constraints of word and structure lists. Instead, he encouraged contributors to the series to write simply and accessibly from an intuitive understanding of learner levels.

He was also one of the key founder members of the Extensive Reading Foundation, and worked hard and long at helping to establish frameworks for the organisation in its earliest stages. All this work testifies to his passionate belief in the value of Extensive Reading for language acquisition.

He also served as the Reviews Editor of the ELT Journal, taking a proactive role in the choice of books to review. And as such, was a potent shaper of thinking in our field.

To keep bread on the table, he began a long and productive writing partnership with Judy Garton-Sprenger, publishing a string of highly successful coursebooks. But others are better placed than me to say more about that.

Latterly, he was gaining a reputation as the author of a series of spy-novels, based on the exploits of his flawed hero, Nick Hellyer. There are three titles – Hellyer's Trip, Hellyer's Coup and the recently published Hellyer's Line. Philip prided himself on the authenticity of his overseas settings – based on his earlier postings with the British Council, before he joined Bell, Saffron Walden. These novels were all fast-paced, racy, action-packed narratives, with intriguing plot-lines that kept the reader guessing till the end. I am sad to be deprived of his next.

By any standards, Philip made a great contribution to his chosen profession. But he was also a man with a great sense of humour, a zest for life – and a generous capacity for friendship. I shall miss him greatly.

Alan Maley



I first met Philip in 1976 – we'd both been invited by Tom Jupp to join a writing team for a new Heinemann adult course, and Philip flew in for our first meeting from Athens, where he was working for the British Council. I was immediately struck by his evident creativity and intelligence, even somewhat over-awed.

We re-joined forces in the mid-1990s, working together for 20 more years on upper primary and secondary courses for Heinemann/Macmillan, including Shine, the award-winning Inspiration, and New Inspiration. By this time, Philip was living in Cambridge, and we took turns to meet there or in London, often seeking inspiration by the waterside from the ducks on the Regent's Canal near the Macmillan offices at King's Cross. Philip and I were chalk and cheese, really: he was calm, measured, diplomatic ... But ours was a very happy and productive writing partnership, and I'm so thankful and lucky to have had the opportunity to work with him for so many years. As a co-author, he was intensely conscientious, hardworking, supportive, and generous – as he was in his many other roles in the world of ELT.

The last time we met was in March 2020, just before the first Covid lockdown in the UK. Philip and his wife Rhiannon were now living in St Ives, and we had a delightful lunch at a beachside restaurant, early spring sunshine streaming through the windows. He was so happy to be back in his native Cornwall with Rhiannon. I'm very sad that I shall never see him there again. I miss him dreadfully, but I can hold on to the memory of that happy day.

Judy Garton-Sprenger



The last email I got from Philip read: "Spring is coming, reasons to be cheerful."

And my memory of him is someone who was not merely cheerful but warm, encouraging and always supportive.

I wrote several readers for his Cambridge series and he was the perfect series editor knowing when to comment and give advice and when to leave it to the individual book editors. I owe much of my career to him.

In addition to writing we shared a love of Greece and Crete which inspired both of us.

Another email recounts:

"Went back to Crete recently with Rhiannon and refreshed memories of Chania. In 74 I set up the first Cambridge exams there and vividly remember schoolteachers trying to help their pupils, rather than invigilating, by whispering to them from behind cellar pillars. Not to talk about me trying to do 50 or so Proficiency orals in my hotel bedroom. Almost all candidates were female and all had stereotypical Cretan brothers/fathers/boyfriends who when refused entry stood outside the door with ears pressed. I loved it."

I loved these shared memories and will miss his comradeship. He was a special person.

Antoinette Moses



I don't remember when I first met Philip. But ever since I took over HLTmag from Mario Rinvolucri in 2006, Philip was sending me information about the Extensive Reading Foundation and the lists of the winners. He was as regular as clockwork and the readers were always informed about the developments. Then our contacts dried up. I kind of missed his mails and regular presence in HLT. Then he published the first and next the second and third novel in the Hellyer series. He was very shy, and he never asked me if or how I could promote his books in HLT. But I seized the chance and I was so happy I could give him some presence in HLT again. Reviews of his books, flyers and other information, all got published in HLT. Alan Maley wrote a review of Hellyer's Line for HLT.

Our contacts became closer and more frequent around the beginning of 2023 when he contacted me regarding his plans for the third Hellyer novel which this time was to be set in Poland in the 70ies early 80ies. He explained to me that these novels are set the countries he had worked in and in the years when he was staying there. He asked me for information about the times, my personal memories, the people I knew, striking images and many other things. I recommended books, photo albums and websites. We met on zoom, and he was like an enthusiastic boy in a toy shops. He followed up every link and was always keen to meet up. His last words he wrote to me were: *I'd love to have another video memory recall session – so much more to discover. Up to you. I'm around so say when. Tomorrow or later. Tonight. All bestest Philip* Sadly I was so busy I did not follow up his mail promptly enough.. I am sorry Philip. Had I known....



I first met Philip in 1980 when he was appointed as my successor to the role of Director of Studies at Bell College, Saffron Walden. I liked him immediately and we got on well together. I was sorry that we never worked together as colleagues though we kept in touch occasionally. I admired him for the contribution he subsequently made to ELT in his typically quiet and modest way, during his tenure at Saffron Walden, as reviews editor for ELT Journal and as a talented and inspirational teacher trainer. He will be sorely missed.

Rod Bolitho



Philip and I crossed paths over our ELT careers, at conferences and events in different countries, on training courses and on committees. We wandered round Warsaw together, improvised entertainments in Belo Horizonte, and advised on the development of the Macmillan English Dictionary. He was witty and wise to the ways of the world, had worked in different countries and was an observer of people and cultures, their history and politics. I enjoyed his informed and amusing views, offered with a twinkle in the eye and a hint irony.

In the last few months, we chatted about his Hellyer spy novels, the plots, the settings informed by his own experience, the fast pace and the mix of humour and absurdity. He agreed they could make good graphic novels and had been visualising individual frames. We had in common the recent deaths of our fathers, both at a ripe age and at the end of lives influenced by military service and appetite for adventure. He said how he had become close to his father in the last decade and we spoke about how the death of a parent affects one's own perspective.

I had just started the third Hellyer book when I heard of Philip's passing, and was noticing how he had found a confident and personal writing voice, and I was looking forward to many more stories in the series ...

Thank you Philip, you were a wonderful companion. I wish you well with whatever comes next...

Adrian Underhill



I have quite a few memories of Philip, but the one that comes to me now is the time in the mid-nineties when he contacted me about a new project.

Philip and I both lived in Cambridge at the time. I was newly freelance and running CELTA courses for a school there. I was busy, so we arranged to meet one lunchtime in a corner of the staffroom. He had read my OUP reader, *Desert, Mountain Sea*, which was non-fiction, but written as stories, a kind of 'creative non-fiction', I suppose. He thought I might be interested in his new original fiction project with CUP, which he described. Did I want to write a pilot story for it? As it happened, I had a story buzzing around in my brain; I went ahead and wrote *Death in the Dojo*. It became one of the original pilot readers for what was to become the Cambridge Readers, of which Philip was Series Editor. Over the next few years, I worked with him on nine books. He was always kind and helpful, a sensitive editor and a supportive colleague. I will forever be grateful to him as someone who saw and nurtured my talent as a writer of original fiction.

Sue Leather



I'll let other people comment on Philip's excellent ELT writing and editorial work, and instead I'd like to praise his other writing, the three novels he wrote about a reluctant spy called Nick Hellyer - *Hellyer's Trip*, *Hellyer's Coup* and *Hellyer's Line*. They are all page-turning thrillers, as you would expect from spy novels, but they're also set at dramatic times in world history, and real events form the backdrop to the narratives.

Philip's central character Nick Hellyer is not an easy person to like. At the beginning of the first novel, he's expelled in disgrace from Cambridge University and becomes a junior diplomat almost by accident, and from there his life is turned upside down as he finds himself drawn into the murky world of espionage. The background of the first book is the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict. The second, *Hellyer's Coup*, is set against a background of guerrilla insurgencies in southern Africa, and the army plot to overthrow the Portuguese government in 1974. The last of the trilogy, *Hellyer's Line*, which was published in 2022, is also set in 1974, with events in Greece, Turkey and Cyprus providing the real-life drama.

I'm also a writer of ELT materials with ambitions to write fiction, and Philip was one of the first people I approached for advice about publishing. He was extremely helpful, full of good sense about this area of his work, as he was about his work in English Language Teaching.

Ken Wilson



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While Philip's work with a publisher meant he could not have direct input into the award process itself, he took it upon himself to organize the *Language Learner Literature Awards nights* at the annual IATEFL conferences. With his connections, he was able to arrange British Council funding for the event for over a decade, for which the ERF will be forever thankful.

Upon his retirement, Philip kindly donated his huge collection of graded readers to the "Graded Reader Giveaway", a feature of the Fourth Extensive Reading World Congress (Tokyo, 2017) to which he had been invited as a featured speaker. Typically, he also paid for their shipment to the winners.

A few years later, he followed up by sharing his files containing the outdated word lists and author instructions from various publishers that he had gathered over time. These now comprise the "Graded Reader Historical Archives" on the ERF website.

When the ERF established a website called "Freegradedreaders.com" with PDFs of out-of-copyright readers, Philip not only supplied copies of his own early readers but also put us in contact with other authors whom he believed might also have books to share.

If only there were more Philips in this world!

Thomas N. Robb



I didn't know Philip that well but I have very fond memories of him. He was one of the first people I met from the extensive reading community when I went to the world congress in Tokyo. When I introduced myself to him he could have been cold and distant. He had every right to be. There was me, having written only a few graded readers standing in front of someone who had done and achieved so much in this field. Instead he was warm and kind. He even told me that he had read and enjoyed those graded readers of mine. It was his kindness and the kindness of others in the extensive reading community like yourself Thomas, that gave me the courage to continue writing and trying out new things. and indeed to start talking about extensive reading and making my voice heard. A lot has happened over the last seven years and many of the good things that have happened to me can be put down to those four days in Tokyo when I first got in touch with this amazing community. Philip was a huge part of that community.

We kept in touch after that first meeting and exchanged emails from time to time. I remember how I felt when I wrote the first email to him. Some months had passed since our meeting in Tokyo and I doubted that he would even remember me and told him so. Philip replied immediately. He said that of course he remembered me and sent photos of us together speaking on the closing panel. He was one of those people that can teach you something just by being himself. He was of those people who make you want to do something to make the world a better place to live in.

Michael Lacey Freeman



I first met Philip when he was a very popular and successful Director of Studies at Bell College Saffron Walden and I was a Senior Tutor. We soon developed a great professional relationship as we shared many beliefs and approaches, such as belief in the value of extensive reading and of open-ended activities, in humanistic approaches to language learning and in experiential approaches to teacher development. Then Philip became Principal, I became his Director of Studies and we continued to work together. We also became close friends. Away from work we played squash together and drank innumerable pints of strong ale. We shared a positive attitude towards work and life.

After Saffron Walden we kept in close touch from wherever I was working in the world and we met up in Cambridge for pints of Abbot and for chatty meals whenever I was visiting my daughter in nearby Linton. When I was working in the UK (at the University of Luton or Leeds Metropolitan University) Philip often visited the MA course I was running to give very popular Guest Lectures. And he was also a frequent presenter at the MATSDA Conferences which I've been organising for the last thirty years.

Ever since I left Saffron Walden we've kept in touch, first by letter and then by e-mail and only two weeks before he died Philip sent me an e-mail from St Ives in which he said he was well.

I shall miss you badly and remember you well Philip, both as a colleague and a friend. The world is a bleaker place without you.

Brian Tomlinson



I'm still finding it hard to believe that Philip is no longer with us. I was in touch with him the day before he died, talking about his birthday and his latest book, and he'd seemed so full of life and ideas and plans. Now there's just the memories, but some very special ones, and the sadness that I'll never see him again. Nor hear him again. He had one of the most beautiful voices, that my wife, Eleanor, once described as being like the sound equivalent of liquid honey, which should have made him the prime candidate for doing his own audio-books.

Philip and I go back a long way as colleagues, to our respective early days with the Bell Educational Trust (BET), when we were given the label 'the young Turks' as we and the new generation of Bell principals took Frank Bell's human values and professional standards and made them the core of what was also a cutting edge approach to learning and teaching in language education. Philip was principal of Bell College, Saffron Walden, while I was in the same role at one of Bell's three centres in Norwich, Bowthorpe Hall. We were mates and at the same time competitively collaborative colleagues, stealing each other's best ideas to try to make our centre the most attractive and best reputed within Bell – management by critical comparison and professional pilfering. The outcome of this lack of centralised control within a framework of shared values and goals was that Bell became an organisation widely viewed as 'a beacon of excellence' in ELT. We all also believed passionately in continuing professional development for our teams and in paying people properly. Sadly, our approaches and those of our fellow Bell principals were not shared by a newly-constituted board of trustees, who decided that the BET didn't need its principals any more (as Philip put it, with his lovely sense of black

humour, 'whichever way you spell it'). This despite us running top-rated, profitable institutions. So Philip and I shared the experience of being made redundant for the first time in our lives. Well, it's one way of bonding even more.

We ended up as 'freelancers', working wherever we could and, in particular, in a project to develop the Studio School in Cambridge as a provider of teacher training and continuing professional development (CPD). Here I got to know Philip's professional abilities at close hand and came to see that he was not only a good manager but an incredibly creative materials developer and a brilliant editor. He was also a great critical friend, from whom I learnt a lot. And it was there that the first impetus for NILE, the Norwich Institute for Language Education arose, as we both felt that there was a need for an institution that would offer training and CPD of the highest quality for teachers in ELT. Philip ended up deciding he wanted to make his main focus in editing, reviewing and writing, while I found the courage ('Dave you're brave .....' meaning you must be mad), with Philip's support as NILE trainer and board member, to set up NILE. I owe Philip a lot.

No doubt others will talk about Philip's professional excellence as an editor and as a writer in the world of ELT, good practice no doubt for his move into fiction. I will most of all remember him as a nice guy, a good mate and someone who could raise a smile even when times were hard. He was a tower of strength and resilience for his family when his wife, Lena, suffered an accident that left her with severely limited mobility and he was a good Dad to great kids. In later years he was lucky enough to find great joy from his time together with Rhiannon. A lot of people are really going to miss him.

I will remember him, among many things, for his sense of humour and his delight in language, including one story from our early days as students of languages in Cambridge, when we shared the doubtful pleasure of being tutored by the terrifying Madame Odette de Morgue. In a lesson on the correct pronunciation of spoken French, Madame drew herself up to her full height and addressed Philip.

'Mister Prowse! I do not like your Rs. Philip's reply, sotto voce, involved a critique of the need for phonology specialists to be able to differentiate between 'voiced' and 'voiceless', which she had failed to do. I still smile when I remember that.

Dave Allan



I knew Philip mainly as the editor of the Reviews section of the *ELT Journal*. He commissioned a number of reviews from me, including one larger Survey Review of books on literature, and his kindness and support have been a model for me in my own current role of the very same section. Perhaps the most important book review I wrote for Philip was a review that was never published – when he suggested, in his usual gentle manner, that maybe a review that was overly critical should be abandoned rather than see the light of day. This was evidence of the way in which he considered not only the reviewers but of the authors who were being reviewed, a characteristic which I felt was outstanding. After he handed over the reins of the Reviews editorship we corresponded mainly about his spy novels, and when later I took the role over he would make sometimes send a comment about this review or the other – again always kind, gentle, appreciative. Wonderful qualities and so rare, and I feel grateful that I knew him, even if only so partly.

Amos Paran



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