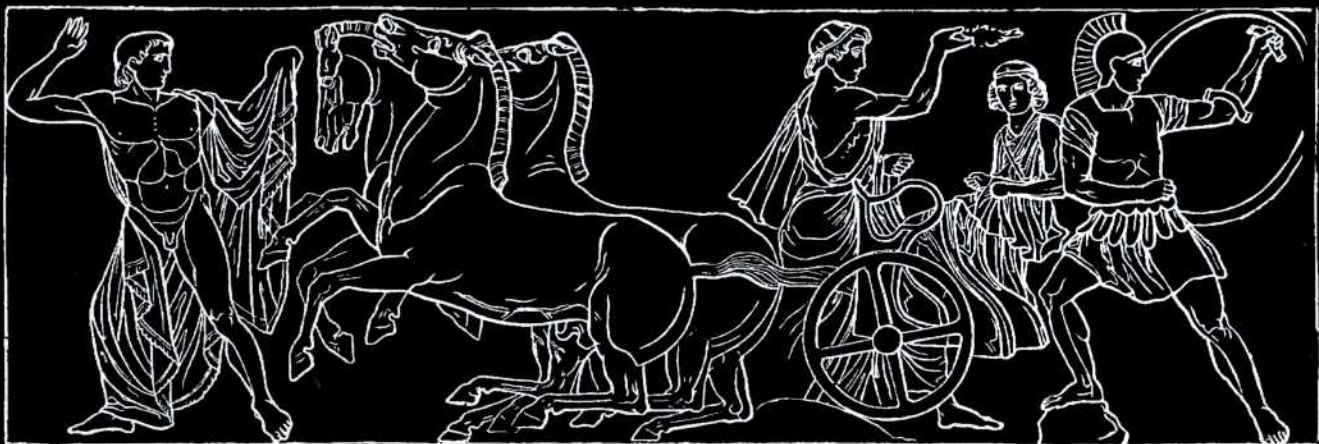


HOMER'S ODYSSEY ENDS IN NORMAN

BY DAWES POTTER

They had a backer
and the original plates.
All these "Homer nuts" needed
was a publisher who
recognized the possibilities.



Many students beginning their studies of Homeric Greek may wonder why their dictionaries and introductory grammars come from the University of Oklahoma Press in Norman. What state would be a more natural source of books about Native American lore and history and languages than Oklahoma? But for 40 years a source of invaluable Homeric texts? Republication of fine old books that have been a strong force behind renewed interest in studying the blind poet in the original?

Homer himself is no doubt still shaking his shaggy head and saying to his muse: "Who'd a' think it? How did it happen?"

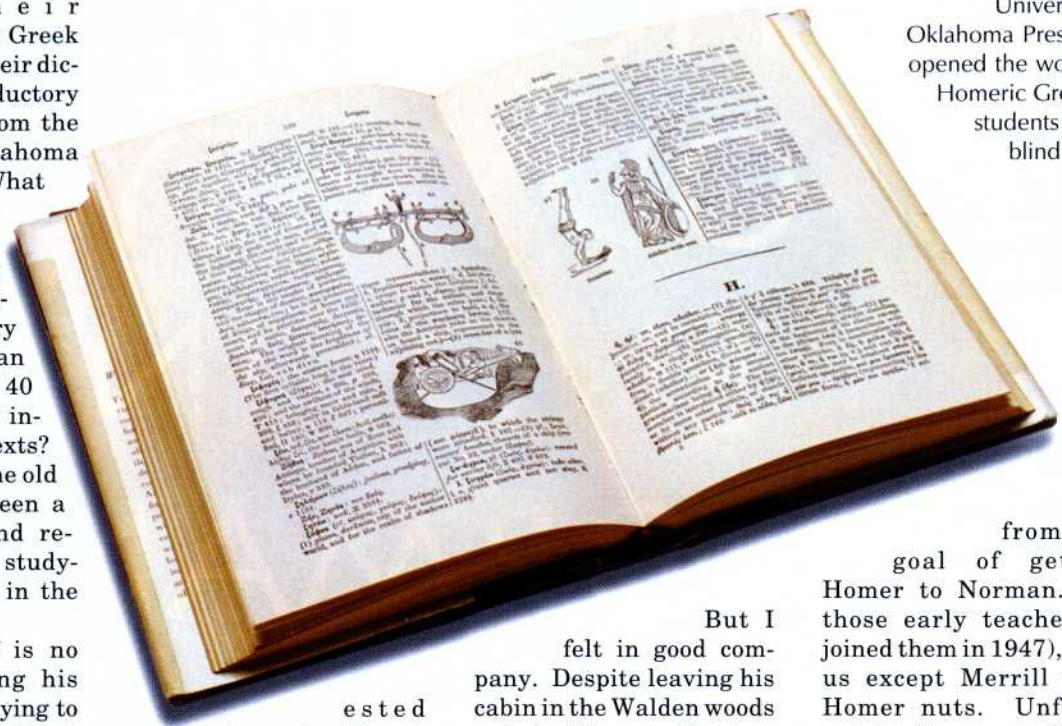
It happened because of one Oklahoman's love of Homeric Greek, the generosity of a son of a Wall Street giant and the determined scouting of a small band of Homer nuts.

(NOTE: A Homer nut is one who has to have no less than a 15-minute Homeric Greek fix every day, sick or well, at home or on the road. An acute and famous case is that of a Dr. Powelson, a Harvard grad, who, at the last count I am aware of, had memorized the first 22 books of the *Iliad*. In Greek, of course. Then there was Alexander the Great, another Homer nut. He had his copies of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* carried along in a special casket wherever his campaigns took him.)

Homer's trip to Norman was masterminded by Robin McCoy, a Pawhuskan, born in 1914. He became inter-

ested in ancient Greek at a Minnesota prep school and at Harvard, where he graduated in '36, with a major in math and a minor in Greek. A year later he had his master's from Cambridge, England.

He was a teacher and mentor of mine at that same Minnesota prep school, and he turned me into a Homer nut. Not to be outdone by Alexander, during our WWII service, McCoy and I had bookbinders cut up our small Greek editions of both epics into four wallet-sized volumes, each with six books, so we could always have instant Homeric pain relief. Better than aspirin. My closest brush with serious danger during the war was having a thief lift books 7-12 of the *Odyssey* from my back pocket. He probably figured it was a billfold.



Since 1958, this small volume, bearing the imprint of the University of Oklahoma Press, has opened the world of Homeric Greek to students of the blind poet.

from my goal of getting Homer to Norman. Of those early teachers (I joined them in 1947), all of us except Merrill were Homer nuts. Unfortunately, for want of suitable beginning Homeric grammars and dictionaries, we had to settle for Attic Greek introductory texts and then make the awkward and sometimes confusing shift to Homeric Greek, a language that flourished some four or five hundred years before the Attic Greek used by Plato.

That was our approach for six or seven years, until some of us ran onto old copies of Autenrieth's *Homeric Dictionary* in used bookstores from St. Louis to Cambridge, Mass. Old here means *old*, as in 1876. The 1898 copy I found is a youngster. We collected enough for our small classes (total school enrollment was only 35 or so) and made do.

This worked well until these rare and fragile volumes gave way under the vigorous handling of our teenaged Ajaxes. Not sons

But I felt in good company. Despite leaving his cabin in the Walden woods unlocked for more than two years, Thoreau reported, "I never missed anything but one small book, a volume of Homer . . . and this I trust a soldier of our camp has found by this time."

In the fall of 1946, McCoy, along with a couple of other Harvard grads, established Thomas Jefferson School in St. Louis, Missouri. Among his colleagues was Charles E. Merrill Jr., years later the founder of the Commonwealth School in Boston, son of the Merrill of Merrill Lynch and brother of poet James Merrill. TJ was possibly the only prep school in the country where Homeric Greek was required, in most cases for three years.

While there were many other interesting policies besides the required Greek at TJ—the teachers made up the entire Board of Trustees, for example—I must not get sidetracked

of Telemon, but sons of Arkansas cotton farmer David and Texas rancher Jim and Oklahoma oilman Jack. In those days, Harvard's director of admissions, Bill Bender, drooled over our graduates. Where else was Harvard

made connections at the University of Oklahoma. If we give the plates to the U of O Press and maybe guarantee the cost of the first printing until they get their expenses back from sales, I think they'll go for it. What do you say?"

THE ORIGINAL 19TH CENTURY AUTENRIETH HOMERIC GREEK DICTIONARY PLATES, STORED IN THE DARK CELLAR OF A LONDON BOOK PUBLISHER, HAD SURVIVED THE BLITZ OF WWII. COULD THEY BE PURCHASED?

going to find well-prepared, full-tuition, gun-totin', Greek-readin', tobacco-chewin', bareback-ridin' cowboys? That's why one year, back in the '50s, seven of our 10 graduates went to You-Know-Where.

Around 1952, McCoy discovered that the original 19th century Autenrieth Homeric Greek dictionary plates, stored in the dark cellar of a London book publisher, had survived the blitz of WWII. Could they be purchased? Yes, they could, for \$5,000. What's that now, in 1998? Maybe \$80,000?

So Robin said to Charley Merrill, "Charley, I know you don't read Homeric Greek, or any other kind of Greek. The trouble is, you don't know what you're missing. But think of the pleasure you're going to give present and future Homer nuts all over the world when you buy those plates and have them sent over here!"

"Who is going to do the printing?" Charley asked.

Robin replied, "I taught at Oklahoma A & M in Stillwater years ago and

The 1958 University of Oklahoma Press edition of Autenrieth, with a preface by Robin McCoy, was Charley's answer.

And that could have been the end of the story. But we kept running on to other Homeric dictionaries and introductory texts, all famous classics in their day, but out of print for decades. Encouraged by the success of its first Homeric adventure, the U of O Press began acquiring plates for these other volumes and republishing them by the thousands.

The Homeric Greek business seems to be booming these days. I've run across U of O Press Greek texts in Barnes and Noble, Borders and countless college and mom-and-pop bookstores from New York to California. A number of recent English translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have been very well received. They are so good, in fact, that they are tempting many, including sev-

eral of my students at Westchester Community College here in New York, to shift over to the original Greek. Despite many fine translations, both new and old, some of us find it hard to disagree with Thoreau's comment: "Homer has never yet been printed in English."

There's a pleasant sequel on how the first 15 lines of Homer's *Iliad* were smuggled into Amherst, Massachusetts, by way of Norman. One of my Scarsdale High School Greek students, trained on Homer books from U of O Press, went to Amherst. She decided to take Greek 101 there her freshman year, since they began with Attic Greek, which she hadn't studied. But the course was a bit too slow for her. She finished her freshman first-quarter Greek exam early. Rather than sit and twiddle her thumbs, she turned her paper over and wrote from memory the first 15 lines of the *Iliad* in Greek, a requirement of mine. Next day her professor asked where on earth she had learned that. At a public school? From Greek texts printed in Norman, Oklahoma? He couldn't hide his amazement.

"You have inspired me," he exclaimed. "I'm going to start memorizing the *Iliad* tonight!"

I wonder how far he got. I'm still struggling to memorize the first 75 lines of Book I in the *Iliad*. Dr. Powelson is probably halfway through the *Odyssey* by now.

As my good fortune would have it, Homer's muse visited me in a dream the other night. She said that Zeus and all the other gods were

in his Mount Olympus penthouse a while back, watching Saturday afternoon football on the Olympian sports channel. Oklahoma was hosting Arkansas. The Sooners were behind, 22 to 24. They had the ball on their own one-yard line, fourth down, 10 seconds left in the game. Zeus reminded the gods about all the good PR they'd gotten from the University of Oklahoma Press over the past 40 years. Then he ordered Aeolus, his wind technician and weatherman, to take his bag of winds on over to the stadium right fast and *do* something. The gods, as you may remember, travel with the speed of thought. A few seconds later, with the help of a mysterious 115 mile-an-hour tailwind, the Oklahoma kicker booted the longest field goal in football history. Final score: Sooners 25, Razorbacks 24.

Moral of the story: Publish and read Homeric Greek books and good things will happen to you.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Dawes Potter is a native Iowan with degrees in mathematics from the University of Minnesota and Harvard University—and a minor in ancient Greek. After WWII service as a Navy meteorologist, he began more than a half century of teaching math and Greek in private and public schools in St. Louis and New York State. Although now in semi-retirement, he continues to introduce students to the wonders of Greek and to tutor local disadvantaged youngsters.*