

BOOK REVIEW

Reading Latin Epitaphs: A Handbook for Beginners with Illustrations. By JOHN PARKER. New Edition. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2012. Distributed in the United States by the University of Chicago Press. Pp. 133. Paper, \$21.00. ISBN 978-1-90581605-7.

If this book were in an American bookstore's travel section, one looking for a quick and easy approach to reading inscriptions found on ancient tombs of Europe would pick it up immediately. A quick scan would reveal "modern" (late 1500 to late 1800) British, not ancient European, epitaphs. Additionally, only a few epitaphs come from churches generally visited on a "first trip" to England, i.e. #1 Westminster Abbey, #40 Bath Abbey. Said traveler unfortunately would return it to the shelf. On the other hand, a traveler to the book's locales or one reading the introduction prior to purchase would be enticed to retain this slim volume. The eight black-and-white illustrations might also pique one's interest.

The subtitle *A Handbook for Beginners ...*, however, raises the question: Is this beginner a Latin novice or a neophyte epitaph reader? Is it for someone with a smattering of Latin or an experienced classical Latinist? Whoever the "beginner" is, (s)he would do well to heed the comments and suggestions found in this short, 133-page, republished, newly reissued treasure trove of "modern" Latin epitaph nuances.

The book's introduction is a "must read" for all, experienced in Latin or not. Parker explains the conventions, abbreviations (131–3), Latin-English word list (99–130), common names (133), and Latin grammar (9–24) used throughout the 52 epitaphs. Stock formulae (1–2) make a handy, albeit limited, on-the-spot reference.

Each epitaph entry gives a location; a number; the Latin text; the reproduction of line patterns, word breaks, fonts, and capitalizations as much as possible in print reflecting the appearance of the original stone epitaph (e.g., small, LARGE, Normal); an English (usually literal) translation; and additional helpful notes.

These Notes include unusual formulae, history, familial relationships, descriptions, alternate translations, unusual grammar, classical references, etc. The

latter are noted by author, e.g., #19, #24, and #42 (Horace); #44 (Cicero); #49 (Ovid); #47, #49, and #50 (Virgil). Biblical references likewise appear, e.g., #49.

According to the author himself, the challenge for the non-Latin reader is that since the “notes are progressive,” “once a particular feature of an epitaph has been commented on, subsequent appearances of the same feature are usually passed over without comment” (3). This progressive stance and the following comments highlight issues of confusion for the beginner. I list these specifics not as criticism of an otherwise handy guide, but as items for consideration during the next revision.

The grammar section does not give dative case endings even though the case is used in several epitaphs. The reader is told that the endings “can be found in any grammar book” (12). The same page lists the 5th declension genitive singular ending as *-i*, not the possibly expected *-ei*.

“Coniux” (#5) appears here and in the Wordlist without mention of the expected form *coniunx*. IUD (#16) in line 3 has neither note nor inclusion in the Wordlist or the Abbreviations. The English translation suggests “of each.” *Simul* (#18) in line 3 appears as “also” in the English and, more literally, as “at the same time” in the notes. The note (#21) on the abbreviation “A AE...S” may suffice for someone familiar with Latin, but the true beginner requires further clarification. Variations of *aetas/aetatis* become confusing when spelled out in #1 and #31, yet abbreviated as here, as “AE. S.” in #43, “AEt” in #35 and, “At at” in #46.

In #25, the epitaph’s Greek font appears only in transliteration in the notes. At #27, “Ar” (abbreviation for *armiger*) requires a reference here or inclusion in the Abbreviations list since it occurs in other epitaphs. “Cadam” (the last word of #26) is translated into the English as the future “I shall ... fall” and identified in the notes as “first person singular present subjunctive.” Is there, or isn’t there, a difference? “Prid Non Martis” in #41, lines 7–8, “the day before the Nones of March,” is translated in brackets as March 4th. Traditionally, the Nones of March (also May, July, and October) is on the month’s 7th day (24). In #51, a discussion of the form “svstvlit” in line 8 may be interesting to Latin grammarians but offers little help to the novice.

On the plus side, the note on “pene” (#20) directs readers to the more usual *paene*. This also occurs with “charisimam” for *carissimam* (#43) and “sopultus” for *sepultus* (#46). In #26, there is a most helpful note for the date of 1697–8. This overlapping year occurrence is also noted in #49. In #46 Parker gives his reasoning for the English word “July” appearing in an otherwise Latin-worded epitaph.

At #50, the author provides information regarding the phrase “sui generis” both as an English expression and as regards its specific meaning/usage here. Historical information on two surviving sons of Lydia Borlase appears in #50, and notes on the deceased or their families also appear in #51 and #52.

Overall this compact book provides assistance to travelers wishing to decipher Latin epitaphs found in medieval (and later) churches. The true non-Latin beginner needs effort and perseverance. For others, this book is a handy vade mecum for epitaphs both in Britain and throughout Europe. I, for one, on a recent trip to England and Scotland, found it useful.

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