



PETER GREEN

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**ALEXANDER**  
**OF MACEDON**  
356–323 B.C.

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A HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHY

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WITH A NEW PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR  
AND A FOREWORD BY EUGENE N. BORZA

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ALEXANDER OF MACEDON

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356–323 B.C.

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PETER GREEN

With a New Preface by the Author

Foreword by Eugene N. Borza



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In Memoriam Ernst Badian  
Still *il miglior fabbro*

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- ποῦ εἶναι ὁ Μεγαλέξανδρος;
  - ὁ Μεγαλέξανδρος ζεῖ καὶ βασιλεύει
  - Where is Great Alexander?
  - Great Alexander lives and reigns

– Medieval Greek proverb

Ἦδέως ἂν πρὸς ὀλίγον ἀνεβίουν, ὃ Ὀνεσίκριτε, ἀποθανὼν ὡς μάθοιμι ἕπως ταῦτα οἱ ἄνθρωποι τότε ἀναγιγνώσκουν. εἰ δὲ νῦν αὐτὰ ἐπαινοῦσι καὶ ἀσπάζονται, μὴ θαυμάσης· οἴονται γὰρ οὐ μικρῶ τινι τῷ δελέατι τούτῳ ἀνασπάσειν ἕκαστος τὴν παρ' ἡμῶν εὐνοίαν.

I should be glad, Onesicritus, to come back to life for a little while after my death to discover how men read these present events then. If now they praise and welcome them do not be surprised; they think, every one of them, that this is a fine bait to catch my goodwill.

– Alexander the Great, quoted by Lucian in  
c. 40 of his essay *How to Write History*



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## Foreword

In a revealing autobiographical interview published in the newsletter of the Classical Association of Iowa, Peter Green once described himself as “basically I’m a writer.” He went on to quote Hamlet’s response to the question “What do you study, my lord?” Hamlet replied, “Words, words, words.” Words indeed! And for Green not only English words, but words in Latin, ancient and modern Greek, German, Italian, and French. He trained as a classicist at the renowned Charterhouse public school, but several years of military service with British armed forces in the Far East during World War II interrupted his formal education. At war’s end he commenced his work as a graduate student in classics at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was awarded a Ph.D. in 1954.

Disillusioned by what he saw as the stuffiness of the classics profession in those days, Green decided to return to his first love, the literary world (reputedly he had read all of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* by the age of six), and he became a literary critic, movie reviewer, TV commentator, and translator of ancient and modern literature. An early love of Greece motivated him to abandon England with his family and take up residence on the island of Lesbos, where he concentrated on a career as a translator from French and Italian as well as Greek and Latin. He eventually joined the faculty at College Year in Athens, where he taught Greek and Latin literature and ancient history, thereby reawakening a love of teaching that he had abandoned earlier. In 1971 he moved to the United States, where he accepted a tenured position at the University of Texas at Austin, an institution he served well until his retirement. While at Texas he guided the education of dozens of graduate students and was a successful undergraduate lecturer. He retired from the university as a distinguished emeritus pro-

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fessor in 1997, at which time he moved to the University of Iowa to join his wife, Carin, who was a member of the classics department there. Since then he has been an adjunct professor of classics at Iowa and has served as the editor of Iowa's classics journal, *Syllecta Classica*.

There are two Peter Greens. One is the scholar of classics who has written extensively about Greek history, produced literary criticism on Greek and Roman letters, and won high praise for his translations into English of several Greek and Latin authors, including Juvenal, Ovid, Apollonius of Rhodes, and Catullus. He is one of the most prolific English-language classical scholars of our time. The other Peter Green is the critic and journalist. Readers on both sides of the Atlantic will be familiar with his criticism of the arts, especially literature. He is a regular reviewer for the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Republic* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. His enormous capacity for reading and writing was characterized, for example, by an astounding critical review of twenty-five (!) books on ancient Egypt, published in the *New York Review of Books* at the time of the 1979 opening of the King Tutankhamun exhibition at Washington's National Gallery of Art. In 1981 Green produced a more modestly sized Macedonian counterpart in a biting review of the National Gallery's "The Search for Alexander" exhibition. In both reviews he not only offered challenging descriptions of the objects but also provided a penetrating analysis of the political forces that lay behind the release of these ancient treasures for display in a foreign country.

No other classicist in recent times – save, perhaps, Garry Wills and the late Bernard Knox – has combined such eclectic literary and scholarly skills. But Green's talents are more extensive: in addition to his career as a classics scholar and a critic of the arts, he is a novelist and poet ("Words, words, words"). His major biography of Alexander reveals how his two primary interests inform each other: Green's intense devotion to the literary arts that describe the human condition enriches the portrait of Alexander that emerges from a close reading of the ancient evidence. This is no mere history of Alexander but

a full-blown biography (as the title indicates) that seeks to illuminate the character and motivations of one of the most famous people who has ever lived. Green understands perfectly the opening phrases of Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*:

I am writing biographies, not histories, and it is true that the brilliant exploits often tell us nothing about the virtues or vices of those who performed them, while a chance remark or a joke may reveal more of a man's character than the mere feat of winning battles where thousands die, marshalling great armies, or besieging cities. When a painter of portraits sets out to create a likeness, he relies mainly upon the face and expression of the eyes, and pays less attention to other parts of the body. Likewise it is my task to dwell upon those actions which reveal the working of the soul, and thereby create an individual portrait of each man.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of histories of Alexander's career, most of them designed to satisfy the course-driven needs of the college undergraduate market. These works mainly constitute a recounting of the king's political and military exploits – History, not Biography, in Plutarch's terms. Some critics have objected that Green often goes beyond what the ancient evidence permits, a charge that he answers at length in his preface to this edition. Nearly forty years after its initial publication, Peter Green's *Alexander of Macedon* remains the most erudite and most literate comprehensive modern assessment of the renowned king.

Eugene N. Borza  
Professor Emeritus of Ancient History  
The Pennsylvania State University

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## Preface to the 2012 Edition

The death of my dedicatee last year and the subsequent final publication of his *Collected Papers on Alexander the Great* offer a natural occasion for a review of the way this book has survived the relentless flood of Alexander scholarship since 1991. When, in deliberate and conscious imitation of T. S. Eliot, I appended the words *il miglior fabbro* to my dedication, the general reaction was that I clearly could have had no notion what Eliot in fact owed to Ezra Pound's wholesale editing of *The Waste Land*. On the contrary: I knew every detail of it, knew too how patiently, and thoroughly, Ernst Badian had gone over so much of *Alexander of Macedon's* first draft. This, obviously, would never have worked had I not previously found the articles in which Ernst set out his findings – and which had impelled me to contact him in the first place – both methodologically impeccable and historically more convincing than any other general thesis I had encountered during the course of my researches. Re-reading those articles recently, some forty years after completing the final draft of my biography, and recognizing how much it owes to them, I found myself marveling at their remorseless logic, their bleak acknowledgment of the Hobbesian *Realien* governing human nature, their commonsensical parsing of every ancient testimony in context, with concession to ancient or modern prejudice only as a historical factor to be taken into account when formulating a judgment.

The political, familial, and personal motives ascribed to Alexander in this biography rest squarely on conclusions worked out with great care by Ernst in the course of a long academic career. The small degree to which, today, I feel like challenging those conclusions in any way is a tribute both to the thoroughness of Ernst's examination of the evidence and to his grim awareness, learned the hard way, of what people are capable of



in their quest for power. (An Austrian Jew, he was a young child when he had heard the mob smashing up synagogues and bay-ing for blood on Kristallnacht; with his parents he fled Vienna for New Zealand only at the time of the 1938 Anschluss with Germany.) One criticism of my work ab initio (most recently, to my knowledge, in Ian Worthington's *Alexander the Great, Man and God* [2004], p. 329) has always been my alleged over-credulous acceptance, at face value, of various episodes in the less-well-regarded ancient sources deemed too lurid, uncivilized, brutal, or vulgarly novelistic for historical actuality. The history of the past few years, not least that of the Near and Middle East, has in fact made many of these look mild by comparison. Ancient *andrapodismós* and modern ethnic cleansing are virtually indistinguishable, and Macedonian court intrigue was hardly more bloody-minded, rapacious, or vulgar than that reported in various Arab dynasties, fallen or surviving, let alone in Soviet Russia or the Third Reich.

Thus useful scholarship, of which there has been a great deal, has not in any fundamental way affected the basic contentions of my biography: that Alexander was a militarily brilliant obsessional whose obsession was conquest; whose superstitious narcissism easily slid, as unparalleled successes accumulated, into megalomania and delusions of godhead; who waged his internal struggle for supremacy against Macedonia's powerful autocracy, throughout his Asiatic expedition, with a ruthlessness worthy of Stalin or Pol Pot; who staved off crisis after crisis with massive bribes to his exhausted troops from the ransacked treasuries of the Achaemenid empire; whose paranoia about conspiracies against him increasingly came to exemplify the old mot that the paranoid very often have something to be paranoid about; and whose goals, by the end of his short life, had diverged so radically from those of the men he led that on his death every single one of his latter-day plans, military and other, was cancelled, literally overnight, and never heard of again.

Some, inevitably, have sought to modify this grim picture. In his eminently sane version of Alexander's career, significantly titled *Alexander the Great: The Hunt for a New Past* (2004), Paul

Cartledge stresses, against what he calls Badian's "buckets of cynical scorn" for W. W. Tarn's "dreamy believer in the unity of mankind," the striking fact that Alexander, almost uniquely, "was willing to extend Greek-oriental collaboration, on a permanent and relatively egalitarian basis, to the home and even the bedroom" (pp. 338–39). But this move was in fact as desperate as it was practical in motivation: a conqueror needs an army, and the progressive alienation of his Macedonians meant that Alexander was forced to look elsewhere for recruits. Gestures like the mass marriages at Susa (which, unfortunately, remind me of similar public ceremonies carried out by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon for the Unification Church) were designed to provide future expeditionary forces with willing troops, aiming to make of Alexander's hoped-for Perso-Macedonian amalgam a kind of army society permanently on the move.

The most distinguished inheritor of Ernst's revolution, on the other hand, Brian Bosworth, on his overall record the finest Alexander historian currently in business, has chosen to emphasize Alexander's supposed liking for mere slaughter, comparing his record, in *Alexander and the East: The Tragedy of Triumph* (1996), to that of the conquistadors in Central America and concluding that "Alexander spent much of his time killing and directing killing, and, arguably, killing was what he did best" (p. v). Here I find myself, for once, on the other side of the divide. This kind of radical reductionism is, in its way, as misleading as Tarn's idealism: even a moment's thought shows how much more there was to Alexander than to Cortés or Pol Pot. Out in the remote East, his dream of reaching Ocean and the world's end battered by monsoon rains, tropical humidity, disastrous errors in geography, fierce Indian warriors, frontline elephants, and the final, unstoppable refusal to go on of his stressed-out troops, Alexander succumbed to a resentful and frustrated violence directed at least as much against his own overgrown expeditionary force as at the enemy (hence the calculated purge of hucksters and other hangers-on created by that notorious death march through the Gedrosian Desert). Paranoia, from then on, did the rest. Alexander had always been

ruthless, especially to those who thwarted his will (his treatment of the local commander at Gaza, dragged behind his captor's chariot like Hector by Achilles, but, unlike Hector, while still alive, is a good example of this), but never on quite such a scale, or with such obvious loss of control.

There is no major factual aspect of my biography I can see (I may, of course, have missed something, but I don't think so) that recent scholarship shows to have been rendered totally obsolete by current research, and in urgent need of rewriting – the kind of thing that should properly spur one into the labor associated with a new edition. On the other hand, these pages remain largely untouched by innovative modes of research, from gender studies to narratology and postcolonialism, that are concerned not so much with new facts as with the way chosen to look at old ones. Also, being for the most part still in the developmental stage, they remain unreliable (or at the very least liable to significant short-term change) when it comes to the evaluation of evidence. It is hard enough, at any time, to work one's way through to lasting historical judgments. I think I may say, without undue immodesty, that in the nearly forty years that have passed since its original U.K. publication, *Alexander of Macedon* has not done too badly in this respect, and I have no desire to dilute the achievement, such as it is, by applying to the evaluation of its subject's career what may, in the long run, prove to be transient fashions.

On the other hand, a great deal of scholarly work has been done which can help the intelligent reader to understand Alexander and his world better, and more easily, than has ever before been possible, and the main purpose of this preface is to guide such a person to titles of particular value as supplements to my narrative. For example, in the old days the only available (but for Anglo-American readers not easily obtained) guide to the prosopography of Alexander's world was volume 2 of H. Berve's *Das Alexanderreich auf prosopographischer Grundlage* (Munich, 1926), but now we have Waldemar Heckel's *Who's Who in the Age of Alexander the Great: Prosopography of Alexander's Empire* (Malden, 2006), a compilation that combines thorough

scholarship with compulsive readability and allows one to examine the dossiers of several hundred intriguing characters in far greater detail than even the most self-indulgent biographer can properly allow himself. Three recent Companions provide a handy general lead-in to the main developments, and bibliographies, of Macedonian and Alexander scholarship during the past several decades: *Brill's Companion to Alexander the Great*, edited by J. Roisman (Leiden, 2003); the literary and historical *A Companion to Ancient Macedonia*, edited by Roisman and I. Worthington (Blackwell, Oxford, 2010); and the mainly archaeological *Brill's Companion to Ancient Macedon*, edited by R. Lane Fox (Leiden, 2011).

The actual course of Alexander's expedition, for which Arrian offers our main narrative, can now be pursued in greater depth than ever before with the aid of two admirable works: that excellent Oxford ancient historian P.A. Brunt's revised two-volume Loeb Arrian (1976, 1983) and *The Landmark Arrian: the Campaigns of Alexander* (New York, 2010), edited by James Romm. The first offers a reliable Greek text with a revised facing translation, the second a new translation with the usual *Landmark* features of good maps and photographs; both provide a stunning collection of crucial appendices on key topics, from "The Visit to Siwah" to "Alexander's Death: the Poisoning Rumors," based on up-to-date research by top scholars. I have myself considerably developed what I originally had to say about the foundation and building of Alexandria: see my detailed essay "Alexander's Alexandria," most easily accessible in *From Ikarria to the Stars* (Austin, 2004), pp. 172–96.

Some periods and areas have done better than others. We now know a great deal more than we did half a century ago about ancient Persia and the Achaemenid empire. Even if little of this knowledge is directly applicable to the final conflict brought about by the Macedonian invasion, enhanced awareness of the vast power and prestige of the Achaemenids greatly increases our respect for Alexander's military achievement in bringing down this Eastern colossus. Two works that summarize recent discoveries and developmental research are of espe-

cial interest. Pierre Briant's *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake, Indiana, 2002), translated by Peter T. Daniels, both updates Briant's original French text and corrects its numerous errors. Amélie Kuhrt's *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (2 vols., London and New York, 2007) provides translations of the original material on which all modern historical interpretation depends. Kuhrt has also written her own account of the period: see vol. II, ch. 13 of her *The Ancient Near East, c. 3000–330 BC* (London and New York, 1995).

Another ancient region that has benefited immeasurably from the inspired researches of a single scholar, Frank Holt, is Bactria, roughly the equivalent of modern Afghanistan. Bactria gave Alexander as tough a reception as Afghanistan has handed out during the past century and a half, in turn, to the British, the Russians, and now the Americans: *Into the Land of Bones* (Berkeley, 2005; 2nd edition scheduled for 2012), which combines ancient history with modern, makes it all too clear that the combination of an impossibly rugged terrain, warring tribes, and ambiguous loyalties offered as daunting a prospect, of exactly the same nature, to Alexander as they do to his contemporary successors similarly bent on invasion. Every optimistic Pentagon commander should be made to read this book—and ask himself, seriously, if he thinks he's smarter than Alexander, who more nearly came unstuck in Bactria than at any other point during his Asiatic expedition. *Into the Land of Bones*, together with the same author's *Alexander the Great and Bactria* (New York, E.J. Brill, 1988), is an essential companion to any account, not least mine, of Alexander's Bactrian campaign, and its consequences. In a lighter but no less penetrating vein is Holt's skillful detective work in *Alexander the Great and the Mystery of the Elephant Medallions* (Berkeley, 2003). His research has always relied to a great extent on his expertise as a numismatist, and here he deftly reveals Alexander's targeting of his exhausted troops with propaganda based on his self-styled invincible leadership. As Holt says, "The leadership of which he had boasted on the medallions was indeed unsur-

passable and irreplaceable” (p. 164)—as the years immediately following Alexander’s death were to prove in no uncertain terms. But that, of course, is another story.

On one last problem, the subject of repeated enquiry from readers over the years, I have to confess baffled failure. This is the notorious crux that I tackled in my appendix, “Propaganda at the Granicus.” It will be recalled that there are two irreconcilable accounts of that battle. In the version given by Arrian and supported by Plutarch, Alexander forces a crossing of the river on the afternoon of his arrival, and wins the subsequent battle. In the version used by Diodorus, Alexander and his Macedonians wait overnight, cross the river unopposed, and then win a battle which is in most particulars that of Arrian and Plutarch. My solution was to posit a first, abortive attack in the afternoon, followed by a withdrawal, an unopposed crossing of the river downstream (probably during the night), and the same successful battle the following morning as that recorded in the alternative tradition. I thought (and still think) this was ingenious, but as Ernst quickly pointed out, and I rather nervously put on record, “Of our two accounts one (Arrian) is a deliberate falsification, combining (roughly) the first half of the first battle with the second half of the second; while the other (Diodorus), coincidentally but by pure accident, omits the first battle and gives us only the second one.” While Arrian’s version would be understandable in the circumstances I posit, that of Diodorus would make no sense at all and, worse, was the result of my breaking one good rule governing the treatment of historiographical evidence, that of trying, against the odds, to reconcile two starkly contradictory texts. Nor could I explain how the contradiction had arisen—and here it must be said that Ernst’s detailed and persuasive exercise in upholding the Arrian version (“The Battle of the Granicus,” no. 15 in his *Collected Papers*, pp. 224–43) similarly ignores the question, thus violating one of his own historical maxims.

Over the years I have cudgelled my brains to find a satisfactory explanation to these questions, but without success. I am not as convinced as I was in 1990 that my theory was “flat wrong,” but

on the evidence as it stands that theory remains untenable and the contradiction inexplicable. As happens more often in ancient history than we like to admit, there are times when the lack of testimonia demands an admission that a particular case is insoluble, and this is one such. In default of fresh evidence, or more compelling arguments – neither forthcoming in recent years – the mystery surrounding the battle of the Granicus must, as E. W. Davis long ago argued, remain a mystery still, to which we simply do not have the answer.

Peter Green  
Iowa City, June 2012

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## Preface to the 1991 Reprint

IT is now over twenty-two years since I packed up my working notes and basic texts—Arrian, Plutarch, Diodorus, Quintus Curtius Rufus, Justin—and retreated to the then little-known Greek island of Astypálaia to hammer out the first draft of *Alexander of Macedon*. I had immersed myself in Alexander scholarship, English, American, French, German, Italian, modern Greek (Alexander as patriotic ikon, not least under the Colonels, deserves a separate monograph), till I felt near drowning-point. I needed to get away, clear my head, re-establish a sense of perspective and try to see Alexander plain, free from that distracting chorus of conflicting ideological claims. It was, of course, a vain endeavor. Propaganda (some of it self-generated) surrounded the King all his life, and mythification took over the moment he was dead—had, indeed, been developing at an alarming rate during the last few years of his life.

Nevertheless, the circumstances in which I first articulated my narrative left their mark on the book, just as not dissimilar restrictions did on A.H.M. Jones's brilliant and idiosyncratic study of Sparta (1967). In particular, I was forced to focus my attention, far more closely than I might otherwise have done, on the surviving sources *as they stood* (even the earliest, Diodorus, being some three centuries after the events he described), rather than embarking on a complicated exercise in historiographical *Quellenforschung* designed to extrapolate and evaluate those earlier authors on which our extant tradition drew.

As a working method, this had advantages as well as drawbacks. It meant, among other things, that judgments were frequently based on common sense rather than on scholarly argument or consensus; but I did not think then,



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