

Anthony Grafton

## Twelve Months in Oz



Anthony Grafton was born in New Haven (CT) on May 21, 1950. He studied history, classics and history of science at the University of Chicago and University College London, where he worked with Arnaldo Momigliano. After receiving his doctorate in 1975, he became an assistant professor of teaching history at Princeton University, where he has been ever since. He became Dodge Professor of History at Princeton in 1993. Guest professorships: Columbia University, California Institute of Technology, Collège de France, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. Publications: *Joseph Scaliger* (Oxford, 1983-93); (with L. Jardine) *From Humanism to the Humanities* (London and Cambridge [MA], 1986); *Forgers and Critics* (Princeton, 1990; German 1991; French 1993); *Defenders of the Text* (Cambridge [MA] and London, 1991). — Address: Department of History, 129 Dickinson Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA.

On August 2, 1993 we arrived, hot, dusty, and exhausted at Tempelhof. The cheapest one-way flights we could find (on Sabena) had brought us from JFK, by way of a few hours of sightseeing in Brussels and an oddly long flight on an oddly small prop-plane, to Berlin. A European academic family, arriving at New York, as we did in Berlin, dishevelled, overwhelmed with luggage, and unequipped with visas, would have been put immediately in the holding pen and left there to starve. We, by contrast, were greeted with civility. And as soon as I had explained, in German that had all the charm and color of a trickle of brown water from a rusty pipe, that I was a visiting professor, all further formalities disappeared and the way to the two taxis we needed was made straight. We could see that we were no longer in Kansas.

Our first sight of the Wissenschaftskolleg brought the further realization that we had in fact reached Oz. This impression only grew in strength with the days — for example, at the first assembly my son and I attended at the Rathenau Gymnasium, where an all-girl steel band serenaded new children and their parents (we have no steel bands in central

New Jersey; also no Gymnasien). Clearly we would have to keep our eyes open and learn to duck.

In fact, our Berlin year had even more surprises in store for us than these first strange weeks led us to expect. My work began more or less as planned. I spent the first part of August proof-reading and indexing the big book on the sixteenth-century scholar Joseph Scaliger, which I had finished a year before: miraculously, the volume appeared on schedule, before the end of the year. September and October went on making a book out of some lectures about four Renaissance intellectuals — Leon Battista Alberti, Pico della Mirandola, Guillaume Budé and Johannes Kepler. I had tried to work out from a variety of different kinds of evidence — ranging from the skills they had learned in school to their own manuscript notes to their own literary works — the different ways in which these men had read and used Greek and Latin texts. I had held the lectures in Rome, Paris and Ann Arbor, in languages as varied, and I needed to do more research as well. In September, before the Kolleg library was open, the seminar libraries of the *Freie Universität* provided a wealth of material on their blissfully open shelves. In October, when I leapt on the newly available loan service like hunger on a loaf, a flood of material from the *Staatsbibliothek*, the FU and Berlin's other remarkable libraries began to course across my desk. The manuscript expanded: articles published in a vast range of French historical journals in the last century, for example, revealed in vivid color and detail the Parisian library and bookselling scene that Budé, the founder of the Collège de France, knew and worked in. In early November I finished a draft and sent it off to my publisher. I assumed that my substantial work on the book was done: that it would soon be accepted, and after a couple of weeks' polishing go into production; and that I could now start work on my real object for the year, the Renaissance astrologer, mathematician, dream-interpreter and mad savant Girolamo Cardano — whose books were readily available to me (at least on Thursdays and, stretching a point, on Mondays) in *Haus I* of the Stabi.

It was not to be. The wonderful Cardano collection at the Stabi, all of it duly listed in the standard finding guide for 16th century books, turned out to be a set of ghosts, and not in the standard bibliographical sense. Almost all of the books had disappeared during the war, leaving behind only their cards in the old catalogue. The two experts consulted by the publisher of my book on reading, following American custom, disappeared into black holes or brown studies; one took months to produce a report, the other never did so at all. Meanwhile the material grew. A visit to Tübingen enabled me to meet a local expert on Kepler, Friedrich Seck, who led me to a large amount of unstudied material on teaching at the

University of Tübingen in Kepler's time as a student. Suddenly I could reconstruct, in intricate detail, how one of the greatest scientists in the history of the west had learned the techniques of classical philology that he applied — it was an age of encyclopedists — throughout his life, alongside his mathematical techniques. Even more exciting news came from a colleague at the Wissenschaftskolleg, Thomas Gelzer, to whom I described my work one day while waiting for the gong to sound. I mentioned that Budé's family had converted to Protestantism and moved to Geneva, and that one of them, at the end of the last century, had still had seven of Budé's notebooks, bulging with extracts from classical texts. Within a week after this short conversation in the *Clubraum* I had been invited to come to the *Fondation Hardt*, a classical research institute high on a hill outside Geneva, and spend a week studying the notebooks at my leisure. They posed new questions and offered new insights. By the end of the year at the Kolleg, when my publisher finally offered me a contract for the book I had submitted in the fall, the ironic witchcraft of the Kolleg's *genius loci* had given me enough new material to require another rewriting of the text, which will take place in New Jersey and reach completion, I hope, before Halloween.

I did work on Cardano — quite a bit of it. An almost complete edition of his works appeared in the mid-17th century. The modern reprint of this offered plenty of undisturbed plots to excavate. A few books of importance turned up in the new Stabi; microfilms of other texts came from Göttingen and elsewhere; a visit to Paris in May, where I served as *Directeur d'Etudes Associé* at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*, gave me time in the matchless collections of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* as well as the chance to present and discuss my work with some very lively Parisian scholars. Especially rewarding was the discovery that a rich vein of complementary evidence about an astrologer contemporary with Cardano, Erasmus Reinhold, lay unpublished in the *Geheimes Staatsarchiv* in Dahlem. Above all, the year of conversations with Thomas Gelzer, Francois Hartog, Ora Limor, Richard Trexler and Paul Zanker gave me a range of new questions to think about and new scholarship to read. I presented my tentative results in April at the fellows' colloquium and ended the year with a bit over half the research for Cardano done — as well as a new outline for the whole enterprise, which hardly resembles the one I arrived with a year ago.

I failed to finish with Cardano, quite simply, because Berlin — and the Wissenschaftskolleg — came between me and my Renaissance man. Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, historian of Renaissance philosophy at the FU, invited me to join his seminar during the fall semester and to codirect a *Forschungskolloquium* in the spring, on "Spekulative Philologie in der

frühen Neuzeit". This naturally took place in German (even philosophical German). Frustrated by my feeble active command of the language, inspired by the teaching of Eva Hund, and supported by my wonderful colleagues in the advanced learners' group, I plunged in and tried to learn, not only to speak but also to write this most Begriff-stricken of languages. Several texts I wrote in German words (other will have to judge the sentences) will appear in the fairly close future — one in a volume of talks from this July's conference on "Formen der Wissensvermittlung" at the Potsdam *Einstein Forum*, another in a volume of essays stemming from the *Forschungskolloquium* at the FU. More important, as my German ceased constantly to creak and sputter, I realized that I had landed in the midst of a very talented group of younger scholars and advanced students, whose nets of contacts extended to their contemporaries elsewhere in Germany. Many plans for future discussions, and more than one collaborative project, emerged from my Monday evenings at the Philosophical faculty and the *Silberlaube*.

If this were not distraction enough, there was also the very bad example of François Hartog, a historian who thinks (our normal professional rule is, of course, "only digest"). Some eager discussions about the development of history and the social sciences — and our joint discovery of the combative and fascinating recent German literature on this field — inspired us to organize a small *Treffen* about the use of examples in early modern history and other fields, which took place in May. The funding was arranged, with miraculous ease, by Dr. Nettelbeck, and the arrangements were conducted, with miraculous deftness, by Andrea Friedrich. A day and a half of lively, polyglot sessions seemed to please, and certainly engaged, all participants. The quality of both lectures and discussions leads us to think that a further and more formal conference, aiming at a publication, would also prove rewarding. We hope to arrange this in due course.

Finally, the tragic origins of the German footnote. An article on the history of documentation in historical writing, which I had written before my arrival, proved fascinating to some of the journalists I met in the Kolleg (another bit of evidence for the thesis that this is Oz). Their response — and the warm interest of an editor — fanned my interest in the subject: and this time the Berlin libraries lent themselves to my quest. The *Nachlaß* of Leopold von Ranke, who played a principal role in my story, was heaped up in disorderly boxes, each one an Mi Babi's cave, at *Haus II* of the Stabi. The printed literature of early modern and 19th century historiography lay in piles on the shelves of the libraries of the FU (notably the *Meinecke-Institut*), the Stabi and elsewhere. Again and again, the staff of the library threw out their nets and hauled in a heavy catch, reeking with historical

interest. Miraculously, overconsumption didn't cause indigestion. By the end of July, I had completed a short book on the footnote from the Renaissance to Ranke, to be published, in the first instance, in a German translation by the new *Berlin Verlag*. This essay tries both to tell a story and to point several morals about the ironies inherent in the development of positivism and objectivity. For good or ill, it is a Wissenschaftskolleg project (though, like others of its kind, it stems ultimately from questions posed in a Princeton seminar). It owes much to corridor and printer-room conversation as well as to the Kolleg's research facilities.

A steady crackle of small-scale projects accompanied the slower-paced large-scale ones through the year. To keep my general education going, I wrote a number of long book reviews. In addition to those already mentioned I gave lectures in Princeton, Tübingen, Evanston, Cambridge (MA), London, Paris, Athens, Göttingen, and at the Institutes for Classical and Romance Philology of the FU and the chair for Ancient History at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Last but not least, as Germans say, my family and I had the chance to travel from this strategically-placed base, to Italy, to Greece, to a number of cities in the former East and to as many corners of the former East Berlin as we could manage in a year. No part of this year's work meant more to my family or to me, than the chance to know and come to love the strange, half-ruinous charm of this haunted city, which will now haunt us — and, we hope, draw us back.

Our warmest gratitude then, to the whole staff of the Wissenschaftskolleg — for luring us here; for arranging for our children to become native informants on local mores as they attended German schools; and for making our stay in this wonderland outside normal academic space and time so enjoyable, so productive and so revealing. We're especially grateful to have been housed in the Heydenstraße (an accident caused by the existence of a place for my daughter in what turned out to be a wonderful class at the Carl-Orff-Schule). This distant posting didn't make us feel excluded from the warmth and hospitality of the other fellows. But it did give us the chance to learn about such features of local culture as the *Imbiß*, on which my son became especially expert, and to make any number of non-academic friends. In addition, it gave me the wonderful opportunity of a half-hour's walk to and from work, much of it on the yellow brick road by the Hubertussee, whose ever-changing beauties and irrepressible ducks cheered me on the sleepest mornings and chilliest afternoons, down to the last hot days of our second summer in Berlin. A final word of thanks belongs to those who made the implausible seem easy: Barbara Sanders, *sine qua non*, who welcomed us (and more than once saved our sanity) when we arrived last summer at the low point of the Kolleg year; Eva Hund, who gave endlessly generous instruction in the mysteries of the

German language and much else; and Frau Bottomley and her staff of women of valor, whose inexhaustible energy and patience brought the hidden treasure of Berlin's libraries to an ignorant, greedy stranger.