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*In Memoriam Professor Mihaela Irimia:
Some Personal Recollections
on the Passing of One of the Most Erudite and
Highly Reputed Specialists in British Studies*

With the death on Christmas Eve, 2022 of Professor Mihaela Irimia after a period of prolonged pain and suffering, the world of Eighteenth-century English scholarship has lost one of its most erudite, humane and sharp-witted voices and a classy, vivacious lady whom everybody was proud to call Mickey, or even Tricky Mickey. To me and a thousand other scholars, Mickey is alive, keeping spirits high with everybody around her and her presence still leads us all to reflect on our own roles as we go about our daily lives engaging in research, teaching, learning and disseminating knowledge. I cannot be too formal when it comes to writing about her conviviality and sophistication: there was such an organized spontaneity in Professor Irimia's academic commitment that whenever the telephone rings in my house at any time during the day, I imagine it is Mickey, reminding me of an abstract to submit or an invitation to an international conference she is organising somewhere, telling me to "send her shouts." She merged metadiscourse markers, ludic rhetoric and elegant address with such refinement either in a single eloquent speech or in an ordinary e-mail that very few scholars can boast. I was amazed to discover that an august Professor could be more than just a professorial figure and share her research and experience in a familiar, comfortable, jocular, and creative way outside the classroom.

I first met Professor Mihaela Irimia in May 1999 in Fântânele, Cluj, where the British Council, Romania organised a university seminar on Youth, Youth Subcultures, and National Identities. It was all Greek to me, since I, as a graduate teaching assistant, was not in the least familiar with

cultural studies and the variety of topics and histories brought into the discipline in the wake of globalisation. By that point in time, Professor Irimia was well accomplished. She was a Reader in the English Department at the University of Bucharest and Director of Studies of the British Cultural Studies Centre (BCSC). She came to me during one of the seminar breaks and began telling me about the MA in British Cultural Studies in such a convincing tone and in fascinating a manner that in the autumn of the same year I enrolled as an MA student in British Cultural Studies, thus becoming one of Mickey's "victims," as she so dearly cuddled all of us. That summer I read all possible books from Martin Heidegger to Jean Baudrillard to Graeme Turner to Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault for the admission examination. The experience completely changed my outlook on life and I remember telling Mickey that I felt so behind in my academic achievement! With her energy, humour, and burning enthusiasm, Mickey was supportive all along and she taught me not to give up even when facing great adversity. I'll never forget the cotton tote bag crammed with books that she used to bring to us, MA students, in the BCSC room from her personal library. She went above and beyond for her students through writing recommendations for scholarships, giving them advice and books for their research work, involving them in projects and insisting that they attend this conference or that workshop. Indeed, there were times when her perseverance and tenacity were difficult to grapple with but I would definitely not have been where I am now if she hadn't taken "the mickey out of me." At times she could be overwhelmingly exigent and intimidatingly vibrant, but how else to be when you invite to Bucharest the likes of George Rousseau, François Hartog, Peter Burke or José Esteves Pereira, all "di granda" Professors – as she used to say – of Cultural History? I was so thrilled when Mickey accepted to be my PhD supervisor even though I knew years of hard-work were awaiting me, albeit of effervescence and enthusiasm: the former was due to her academic rigor, whereas the latter took the shape of epistemic curiosity, meetings in Mickey's home (it was in her kitchen I ate the greatest beef tongue with olives that simply melted in my mouth), loads of emails, a Rațiu research scholarship at Cambridge University and a plethora of conferences and cultural events that she either organised, or

was invited to. That was a glorious age and Mickey was fantastic! She always was in a laborious disposition, eager to get things done. Sharing a 23-year-long journey with Mickey was not always easy, since she called herself a “slave-driver,” but it was an absolute privilege, since ours was one of those chance meetings that utterly changed my life forever.

While the main objective of this in memoriam essay is to honour Professor Mihaela Irimia as the remarkable lady she was, this tribute would be incomplete without mentioning some of her exceptional achievements during her extensive academic career. It was during one of Professor Irimia’s MA classes on Cultural Methodology that my colleagues and I found out she was a polyglot, apart from being a polymath. We were all in the BCSC room, attending her class, when the landline telephone rang. When she answered the phone and started speaking flawless Portuguese, we all fell silent and looked at each other in awe. Professor Irimia switched from English, to French, Italian and Portuguese in style, which made it easy for her to make lifetime connections and professional partnerships: in 1993 she was awarded a Fulbright Postdoctoral Research Scholarship by Harvard University. She was also granted, along the years, various research fellowships at some of the most world’s prestigious universities: Harvard, Oxford, Baylor and Yale; in 2007 she was Visiting Professor at the Central European University, Budapest and in 2008 at Université d’Orléans; she was EES Fellow at St. John’s College, Oxford and Research Fellow at Yale University and Baylor University. Additionally, she was the founding member of the “Dante” Society of Romania in 1996 and Director of the Cultural Identity Debate Society; she was Director of the Centre of Excellence for the Study of Cultural Identity, Director of the Literary-Cultural Studies Doctoral School, and Vice-President of the Romanian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. After retiring, she became Emeritus Professor at her alma mater, University of Bucharest.

Her tireless energy and ingenuity inspired projects and programmes which have shaped both the discipline and the disciples: she organized and participated in joint Romanian-British cultural programmes and events, joint NEC – British Cultural Studies seminars, joint CESIC – NEC – Romanian Cultural Institute international

conferences, et al. Mickey never forgot to invite her students to partake of these events, where they grew and learnt the hard – but satisfying – way. Her professorship was a never-ending dialogue with students, colleagues and friends. Along the years I was in constant correspondence with Mickey, staying in touch with her making a great difference to me.

In 2018, as co-organiser of the annual conference of the Department of British, American and German Studies of the University of Craiova, I was honoured to have her as keynote speaker, along with her lifetime friends and eminent scholars, the late Professor Stephen Prickett, Honorary Professor of English at the University of Kent at Canterbury and Regius Professor Emeritus of English Language and Literature at the University of Glasgow, and his wife, Patricia Erskine-Hill, a retired Professor of Italian and Medieval Literature at Baylor University. One year later, in September 2019, having been awarded an ESSE research grant to conduct research at Bodleian Library, I was asked by Mickey whether accommodation at King's Mount, Balliol College would suit me, since she was there, next door to my apartment, for the same period of time with her husband, Cezar. How could I refuse such a generous offer? They were both absolutely wonderful in trying to make my stay as comfy and pleasant as they could by inviting me to have lunch or dinner with them and by showing me around. Washing the dishes with Mickey in the kitchen and drinking with her a glass of wine in the living room while we sat chatting and laughing are experiences that go beyond academic outcomes. The culmination of those two weeks we spent together in Oxford was on a Sunday morning, when Mickey came to my apartment offering me a huge bouquet of lilies, telling me that I definitely needed some flowers to warm up the room to feel at home. It is rare that someone who was so successful as an academic stayed so humane and warm-hearted. I felt blessed to have her as my mentor.

A great scholar and a role model, Mickey remained humble and gracious all her life, an inspiration for generations of students, researchers and colleagues, in their endeavour to acquire and disseminate knowledge in English Literature and Culture. To her, nothing seemed impossible and her whole abundant career stands proof of that.

Putting together all these life achievements and a wonderful corresponding personality is one way to describe a person who never left us and whose legacy we will treasure in memory and heart. Dear Mickey, we, Crazy Mickey Club members, as you sprightly used to call us, feel impoverished by your absence but also refined and polished by the delicate, yet pestering force with which you instilled in us the importance of moral rectitude, academic rigour, and empathic communication. The academic world feels lonely and rather poor without you but grateful for your long-lasting legacy. Do send us shouts, Mickey!

*ELENA BUTOESCU
University of Craiova, Romania*

