

# HOMER PREPARES

[Iliad 23 & 24]

## “THE LAST PASSAGE”

**James McCaughey with Matthew Horsley, percussion**

The *Iliad* came into being as a series of performances. The oral poet could not read or write; neither could his audience. No one could read these poems; they could only listen to them. How The *Iliad* found its way into the written form in which we now have it, we do not know.

*Homer Prepares* assumes each the twenty-four “books” of the *Iliad* as they are usually called arose as an individual, free-standing performance. These performances would have been like a piece of jazz, in a constant process of evolution. Whenever and wherever the audience listened, it was engaging with a process that had lasted for centuries. Generations of singers learned from one another and then renewed the tale. Each evening of singing was both old and new.

What explains the enormous length of the *Iliad* which far outstrips the bounds of one night’s entertainment? We do not know. But we can imagine. This evening we will imagine that people have come together on an island for a festival centred on twelve days of singing – a performance every afternoon and another in the evening – twenty-four performances in all, the twenty-four books of the *Iliad*! We will imagine that we have come to the last day of the festival. There will be two final singings before everyone, singer and audience, sails home.

### **What happened in the poem before this evening’s performance...**

The onslaught on the city of Troy had become a battle between fire and water. The great duel between Hector, the defender of Troy, and Achilles, the greatest warrior of the forces that will destroy the city, ended in disaster. Hector turned and fled. He was run down by Achilles. His body was outraged. A whole tradition of singing, based on the final great conflict between the greatest heroes of the warring armies, tradition nurtured and renewed down countless centuries, was destroyed.

### **The full background...**

The poem started with a falling out between Agamemnon, king of kings, and Achilles, the Greeks’ most powerful fighter. As a result, Achilles withdrew from the fighting. In his absence many other men went into action engaging in the many forms that action can take. Hector, empowered by Achilles’ absence made a successful foray against the Greeks, burst through their walls, and almost burned their boats. At this point, Patroclus, Achilles’ closest friend volunteered to fight the Trojans in Achilles’ stead, dressed as Achilles himself. He was killed. His death intensified Achilles’ rage, which was now directed against Patroclus’ killer, Hector, and through him against the city that he defended.

The climactic combat between Hector and Achilles was in fact no combat at all.

In it we saw the destruction of the heroic dream.

## What will happen tonight...

Faced by the ruin of all we had looked and hoped for, the characters will struggle forward to start life anew. And, over two performances, one in the afternoon, one in the evening, the singer will seek new courses of singing. He will do so through three rituals, played out under the shadow of the impending fall of Troy.

## Translations

The translations are based on Richmond Lattimore's published by University of Chicago Press (1951) – modified from time to time by James McCaughey - with some additional elements from Stanley Lombardo's translation published by Kansas University Press. James McCaughey acknowledges his debt to these translators and recommends them both to the modern reader.

<b>Producer</b>	Jeff Richardson
<b>Director</b>	Sarah Cathcart
<b>Writer</b>	James McCaughey
<b>Homer's stool</b>	Designed and fabricated from an ancient olive tree in Brunswick by Sam Johnston (SEM Design).
<b>Costume design</b>	Emily Busch
<b>Graphic design</b>	Jennifer Huntley
<b>Graphic image</b>	Tony King

## Performers

**James McCaughey** has also performed *Conversations with the Gods about their Deaths and other Matters* and *Vlad and Me*; *Conversations with the Soul about reincarnation and other inconveniences*. He is a former classicist.

**Matthew Horsley** is a multi-instrumentalist and composer specialising in the uilleann pipes (Irish bagpipes) and percussion. He has performed with artists including Steve Reich, Speak Percussion, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Clocked Out, Topology and the Australian Art Orchestra. His debut album of Irish traditional music, *Australian Waters*, was released in 2015. He currently plays whistles, Irish flutes and uilleann pipes in the Australian production of *Come From Away*.

## With Thanks To:

The staff of the Ian Potter Performing Arts Centre, Monash  
John McCaughey  
Stephen Costan

**Duration:** 80 minutes; no interval.