JOHN FREELY IS the doyen of guidebook writers about Istanbul. His first work, a collaboration with the late Hilary Sumner Boyd in 1972, has been much reprinted and translated. Freely’s subsequent updatings led to its continuing metamorphosis into the Blue Guide. He has forty other travel books to his credit. These include guides to Turkey, Athens, other Aegean cities and islands, and Venice.

Admiring Freely’s books, I had long wanted to meet him. From Oya Basa, Professor of English at the Bosphorus University, arranged a lunch. I set off early for Bebek Bay, situated on the Bosphorus below the campus. Enormous plane trees, some 500 years old and hooped together with iron, grow in the park by the jetty. Cypresses, pines and flowering Judas trees, in pink and magenta, rise up the steep hill. The nearby Bebek hotel has a balcony right on the water. I sat there watching the flow of ships to and from Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, the Ukraine, Georgia and the Caucasus. I checked the time and saw there was no hurry. When I checked it again later it was still the same — my watch had stopped. I had been ‘Bosphorising’, as Freely later called it. I rushed for a taxi, bought some lilac, now sold only by gypsies, and set off up the hill, past one of the many graveyards.

Freely has a long association with the university. ‘The finest institution of higher learning in the Turkey of its time’, it was founded (and named as Robert College after an American philanthropist) in 1863 by Cyrus Hamlin. The latter was ‘an American Missionary who had washed clothes and baked bread for Florence Nightingale’s hospital at Uskudar’, on the Asian side. Graduates of the university include two prime ministers of Turkey and two of Bulgaria. The Turkish government took it over in the 1970s, making it a co-ed institution.

Freely lives in an apartment on the campus heights. By the time I arrived, he was expecting the Turkish translator of his forthcoming book on Jem Sultan, the Turkish pretender, but he kindly invited me to come back later. I waited on the campus terrace. It must have the best view in the world. I looked down on the Bosphorus. Passing ships moved slowly through the foliage and flowering boughs, against a backdrop of palaces and hills on the other side. Sometimes one abruptly rounded the headland of Rumeli Castle; occasionally two smaller ones passed abreast. The great suspension bridge linking the two continents threaded its way through the tree-tops. If the young were not exactly ‘in one another’s arms’, they sat blissfully holding hands. Yet it was down this waterway that Russian ships bearing missiles had sailed on their way to Cuba.

I returned to Freely’s apartment. Born in Ireland, where he spent half his childhood, he learned to read from travel books. His father, a gravedigger, always hoped to go to the USA, and eventually succeeded. There Freely, aged seventeen, dropped out of school to enlist in the navy, serving in World War II. Later he studied nuclear physics to doctorate level. He told me that, if he writes an autobiography, he will call it ‘A Wild Colonial Boy’, and he sang a couple of verses. After marrying, he took up a teaching position at Robert College, remaining there until 1976. He taught in Athens, Venice and Boston, returning to Istanbul in 1993 where he now teaches astronomy, the history of science, and Byzantine and Ottoman monuments. He has travelled extensively in the Balkans and the Middle East.

This combination of interests is unusual for a travel writer. His books on Istanbul are rich in detail, and stories, all transformed by a love of the place that was nurtured by the tradition of historical scholarship shared by teachers at Robert College. Alexander van Millingen, Professor of History, wrote studies of Byzantine churches and the landwalls that scholars still quote. (His original house is just up the hill from Freely’s apartment.) Godfrey Goodwin, professor of classics, wrote on Ottoman archaeology. Hilary Boyd was a scholar of architecture.

Different editions of Freely’s book reveal physical and social changes to this battered city that echo its archaeological layers, many now hidden underground forever. The new has literally been built on the old. Through Freely’s eyes, we see people and places come and go, while personal memories revive and dissolve in what becomes an ‘à la recherche’, as personal history merges with, and departs from, social history. The citadel at the end of the land walls on the Golden Horn is described in the Blue Guide (1991) as ‘still picturesque, despite the ruin and the squalor’ of squatters’ hovels. This has now been cleaned up into neat vegetable gardens, still picturesque.

Changes in Freely’s own life seep imperceptibly into his guide. In an early edition, he allows himself a rare personal reflection when describing a charming restaurant on the Bosphorus shore: ‘Seated here of a spring evening under the flowering vines, drinking white wine and watching the moon rise orange over the hills of Asia, one might well decide to stay forever in Istanbul — and indeed some of us have.’ The Blue Guide describes the meyhahnes (taverns) of Çiçek Paşaji, or passage of flowers, ‘where everyone you ever knew in Beyoğlu is bound to pass by during the evening hours, including the spirits of those who have removed to other worlds’. Freely’s Istanbul is so evocative because of its hymn to time and place, and because of these occasional undertones and memories of enjoyable interludes with friends. His city landscape, existing in and out of time, is a landscape of the heart.