

OBITUARIES

ARTHUR JOHN ARBERRY

The death of Professor Arthur John Arberry at his home in Cambridge on 2 October 1969, at the age of 64, after a long-drawn-out illness suffered with patience and courage, has taken from the world one of the greatest Islamic scholars of this century and from his colleagues a gentle and loyal friend.

Professor Arberry published an autobiographical sketch, which he called 'the story of an ordinary man born in an ordinary household', as the last chapter of his *Oriental essays* (1960). He records that he was born on 12 May 1905, 'prematurely, in a very small house in the working class quarter of Fratton, Portsmouth, the fourth of five children'. At the time his father, William Arberry, had just been promoted Warrant Officer in the Royal Navy and both his parents, he continues, 'were eager readers of good books, and brought up their children to be diligent Christians, and to have an appreciation of serious literature'. It seems that at four years of age he announced his, in the circumstances, exotic ambition to 'go to the University', which he later fulfilled by winning, from Portsmouth Grammar School, a scholarship in classics at Cambridge, entering Pembroke College in 1924 as senior scholar of his year. After taking a double first in the Classical Tripos he was encouraged to study Arabic and Persian by Dr. (later Sir Ellis) Minns and achieved another double first in the Oriental Studies Tripos in 1929. His academic prowess was rewarded with the Sir William Browne Medal and the E. G. Browne Scholarship in 1927, the Wright Studentship in 1929, the Senior Goldsmiths' Studentship in 1930, and, in 1931, with election to a Junior Research Fellowship at Pembroke College.

It was in 1927 that A. J. Arberry, as a student of Arabic, met and was taught by Professor R. A. Nicholson with whom he remained on the closest terms until Nicholson's death in 1945. Through Nicholson's influence Arberry's enduring interest in Ṣūfism was aroused, resulting in his *Introduction to the history of Ṣūfism* (1942), *Sūfism* (1950), and a great series of translations of the works of Rūmī—*Rubā'iyāt* (1949), *Discourses* (1961), *Tales from the Masnavi* (1961), *More tales from the Masnavi* (1963), and the first volume of *The mystical poems* (1968), the *magnum opus* which he had hoped to complete in 15 volumes after his retirement.

He chose to spend the first year of his fellowship in Cairo, and there he met the Roumanian lady, Sarina Simons, whom he married in Cambridge in 1932. Of his wife, who survives him, he wrote that 'her love, her understanding and her companionship have brought the greatest joy into my life'. Soon after the wedding they returned to Egypt upon Arberry's appointment to Cairo University as Head of the Classics Department. In Cairo their only child, Anna Sara, was born. While in Egypt he was able to visit Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria, collecting material for future research, and there he published his first works, an English verse translation of Aḥmad Shauqī's *Majnun Layla*



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(1933) and the edition of al-Kalābādhi's *Kitāb al-ta'arruf* (1934), of which his translation, *The doctrine of the Sūfīs*, appeared in Cambridge in 1935. In 1934, while on leave in England, he was appointed to the post, recently vacated by C. A. Storey, of Assistant Librarian at the India Office Library. The next year he published, at R. A. Nicholson's instigation, an edition and translation of al-Niffari's *Mawāqif* and *Mukhāṭabāt*. Cambridge University, recognizing the talent of this brilliant young scholar, awarded him the degree of Litt.D. in 1936, in which year he published the first of his catalogues, *Catalogue of the Arabic manuscripts in the India Office Library*, vol. II, pt. 2, to be followed by the *Catalogue of Persian books* (1937) and, later, by *A second supplementary hand-list of Muḥammadan manuscripts in Cambridge* (1952) and the catalogues of the Arabic manuscripts (1955–64) and Persian manuscripts (1959–62) in the Chester Beatty collection in Dublin. In 1937 he brought out an edition of al-Muḥāsibī's *Kitāb al-tawāḥḥum* and an edition and translation of *The book of truthfulness* of al-Kharrāz, and in 1939 an edition and translation of 'Irāqī's *Song of lovers*, together with a handbook, based on the India Office collection, *Specimens of Arabic and Persian palaeography*.

This pleasant and productive life of a scholarly librarian was disrupted when, on 1 September 1939, Arberry was transferred to another Civil Service department, to the War Office's Postal Censorship Department in Liverpool and, six months later, to the Ministry of Information in London. There, for the next four years, he provided an endless stream of propaganda material designed for the Middle East, founding and editing several newsletters and magazines in Arabic and Persian. His duties even led him once, as he would recall with a delighted chuckle, to appear in a propaganda film.

It would seem to have been at this time that he took upon himself his avowed task of introducing East to West, to which he was to devote the rest of his life, sacrificing health and strength in producing what is probably an unequalled number of books concerned with Islam. On this subject he himself writes: 'Before the truth about the East and its people can be established in the common consciousness of the West, a vast accumulation of nonsense and misapprehension and deliberate lies will need to be cleared away. It is part of the task of the conscientious orientalist to effect that clearance. Let him not suppose that he will find it an easy or a particularly rewarding task'. His efforts towards such a clearance are attested by the nearly 90 entries of books, editions, translations, works edited, etc., which appear under his name in the catalogue of the Cambridge University Library, a total which does not include more than 70 articles in scholarly journals and numerous reviews and contributions to encyclopaedias.

Another of the results of Arberry's training as a popularizer was the desire to bring the achievements of earlier British students of the Orient to the notice of the British public, and for this reason he produced *British contributions to Persian studies* (1942), *British orientalists* (1943), and, later, *Asiatic Jones* (1946). In 1944, upon Professor V. F. Minorsky's retirement, he was appointed

to the Professorship of Persian at the School of Oriental and African Studies. The same year his *Modern Persian reader* was published; this is the first of his works intended for use in academic teaching, and it was to be followed the next year by an annotated edition of the first two chapters of Sa'dī's *Gulistān, Kings and beggars*, and by *Classical Persian literature* (1958) and *Arabic poetry* (1965). Two years after his appointment to the Chair of Persian at SOAS he was elected to the Professorship of Arabic and Headship of the Middle East Department there. But his tenure in London was to be brief for when, in 1947, C. A. Storey resigned from the Sir Thomas Adams's Professorship at Cambridge, the Chair was offered to Arberry and accepted by him. In his own words, 'This was the supreme, the most eagerly coveted honour, to be a successor of Wheelock and Oekley, Samuel Lee and Wright, Browne and Nicholson'. He was immediately re-elected a Fellow of Pembroke College, and on 30 October 1947 delivered his inaugural lecture, entitled *The Cambridge School of Arabic*, in which he paid homage, with eloquence and feeling, to his predecessors and their works since 1632.

Professor Arberry's own works published in that year of 1947 could not in any way have disappointed the great orientalists of the past; they include an edition, published in Cairo, of al-Tirmidhī's *Kitāb al-riyāda*, a collection of translations, *Fifty poems of Ḥāfiẓ*, and two books directly inspired by Nicholson, *Pages from the Kitāb al-luma'* (which Arberry prefaced with a heart-felt memoir of his great master), and his first translation from the Persian of Muḥammad Iqbāl, *The tulip of Sināi*. He was to continue his series of translations of Iqbāl with *Persian psalms* (1948), *The mysteries of selflessness* (1953), and *Javid-nama* (1966). It was as a translator, especially of verse into verse, that Arberry was probably best known to the reading public. His early training as a classicist had given him a taste for elegant verse-composition. Those who were fortunate enough to have heard him will never forget the music of his beautiful voice, the voice of a singer, as he recited some Persian poem or his rendering of it. It was natural that he should have been attracted to the greatest British oriental versifier, Edward FitzGerald, and he was overjoyed to discover two copies of Omar Khayyām's *Rubā'iyāt*, one in the Chester Beatty collection which he edited in 1949 and translated in 1951, and another which he acquired for the Cambridge University Library in 1950 and of which he published a translation in 1952. In 1956 he republished FitzGerald's two versions of Jāmī's *Salaman and Absal*, with a new literal translation and a long introduction based on material from the FitzGerald archive in the Cambridge University Library, a source which he also used for the introduction to *The romance of the Rubā'iyāt* (1959).

It was in the early 1950's that Professor Arberry undertook the great task for which he was especially qualified, a new translation of the Qur'ān. He first published a long introduction with selected translations, *The Holy Koran*, in 1953, as vol. ix of 'The Ethical and Religious Classics of East and West', a series of which he was an editor from 1950. *The Koran interpreted*, in two

volumes, appeared in 1955. The toil of producing this, his master-work, exhausted his always indifferent health and, after suffering a long and stubborn illness, he went to Malta to convalesce for two months of the winter of 1957. There, unable to study or write, his genius manifested itself again in a series of exquisite pen-and-ink drawings of the island. Restored to health and enriched with a new experience, he turned his attention to Maltese, producing *A Maltese anthology* in 1960 and *Dun Karm, poet of Malta* in 1961.

Many academic honours were bestowed on Arberry; in 1949 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy; the University of Malta conferred an honorary doctorate on him in 1963, and in 1964 the Shāh of Iran honoured him with the Nishān-i Dānish, 1st Class. He was a corresponding member of the Academy of the Arabic Language (Cairo), the Persian Academy, and the Arab Academy of Damascus, and vice-president of the UNESCO Translations Committee and of the British Institute of Persian Studies in Tehran. In 1960 he instituted and was the first chairman of the Middle East Centre in Cambridge, a body concerned with modern social and political developments in the Middle East, now incorporated into the Faculty of Oriental Studies. In 1961, through his recommendation, Cambridge University established a teaching post in Turkish; he always regretted that he had not succeeded in effecting a similar establishment for Urdu.

A gentle, humorous man, Professor Arberry was an indefatigable member of University and college committees, where his quick grasp of a problem and immediate recognition of the funny side would enliven the most tedious discussion; even when close to death he faithfully attended the meetings of his Faculty Board. Massive as his output of published work was, yet he typed every word of it himself, insisting, with a laugh, that only he could decipher his handwriting. He was always shy and reserved and his life centred on his home and his family, which was enriched, after his daughter's marriage to Mr. Guy Evans, by two granddaughters, Katie and Lucy. He was averse to travel which would divorce him from his books and desk, but young scholars from all the Islamic countries flocked to him in Cambridge, drawn by the magic of his erudition and sympathy. He liked his students to visit him at home, at tea-time, and share his joy in his roses, his peach trees, and his snow-white cat; their payment would have to be in stamps from home for his collection, another of his lifelong enthusiasms. Let us remember him thus, an ordinary man in an ordinary home who, by his own efforts, had achieved the extraordinary.

S. A. SKILLITER