

OBITUARY (by George Hewitt for Daily Telegraph)

Prof. Sir Harold Bailey

Professor of Sanskrit (1936-1967, later Emeritus) in the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Queens\ College from 1937 (Honorary Fellow 1967), Fellow of the British Academy (1944), President of the Philological Society (1948), Knighted for services to Indo-Iranian studies (1960), President of the Royal Asiatic Society (1964-67), author of *Khotanese Texts I-VIII* (1945-85), *Khotanese Buddhist Texts* (1951< 2nd ed 1981), *Saka Documents I-IV* (1960-67), *Dictionary of Khotan Saka* (1979), *The Culture of the Sakas in Ancient Iranian Khotan* (1981), *Bundahishn* (to appear) and countless demanding articles in specialist journals. The bare facts testify to a career of outstanding academic merit but cannot even begin to present a rounded appreciation of this prodigious scholar and extraordinary man.

Harold Walter Bailey was born in Devizes (Wiltshire) on 16 Dec 1899. Aged 10, he and his two brothers were taken by their parents to farm 200 miles east of Perth (Western Australia). Attending a banquet decades later in Oxford he was asked by a fellow-diner, fascinated by what (no doubt public) school could lay claim to have inspired so eminent an academic, where he had been educated, he replied with characteristic modesty (visibly deflating the questioner) that he had had no formal secondary education. There being no school, it was the few books fortuitously available in the home that sparked his lifetime\ fascination with scripts, languages, words and their etymologies. A collection of Bible-translations in such languages as Arabic, Tamil, Turkish, Japanese and Finnish introduced him to his first love, Persian, but grammars were to hand for only French, German, Italian, Spanish, Latin and Greek, all of which he mastered. At the age of 12 he met a Russian worker in the outback< this too was learned.

He entered Perth University (1921), where, Oriental Studies being unavailable, he read Classics, producing a Master\s thesis (1926) on religion in Euripides. With a scholarship to Oxford, he finally had access to formal study of Avestan, Sanskrit and comparative philology. In 1929 he embarked on his doctorate, studying the Zoroastrian sacred book, the *Bundahishn.*, in Pahlavi. The same year he was appointed to his first post, as first lecturer in Iranian Studies at the School of Oriental (later, and African) Studies (London).

A year in Iran |to hear Persian all around\ delayed completion of his thesis until 1933. Oxford took soundings for a qualified examiner, and the name of one H. W. Bailey

was the common preference! Emile Benveniste eventually served. The thesis was placed at the disposal of a Scandinavian colleague who planned publication, though this never materialised, and it was in his 90th year that Bailey's edition was finally due to appear, incorporating a further half-century's learning, though its publication is still awaited. Bailey himself turned to what proved his main preoccupation until 1979> editing and translating the texts discovered in Chinese Turkestan in 1907 of an Iranian language that had flourished in Khotan until c. 1000 AD, whereafter it had been forgotten. The Buddhist content of the texts necessitated acquisition of Chinese, Tibetan and Turkish, which were duly assimilated.

Though an Iranian chair would have been preferred, none such existed. Thus, in 1936 Bailey became professor of Sanskrit, oldest form of the closely related Aryan branch of Indo-Iranian. Thinking of posterity, he joined with two husband-and-wife teams of orientalist (Drs. Raymond and Brigit Allchin, who continue to research in Cambridge, and Dr. Jan and Prof. Johanna van Lohuizen of Amsterdam) to establish the Ancient Iran and India Trust in Brooklands House (Cambridge), where he lived amidst his unique and monumental library, now openly accessible to all interested readers, from 1979. A large donation was expected from Tehran, just as ^20,000 helped finance the Khotanese dictionary, but the Khomeini revolution dashed these hopes.

Sir Harold's driving force was to understand the origin and development of the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family. This entailed knowing not only the various Iranian languages themselves but those languages with which Iranian-speakers came in contact. One such was Georgian, which was acquired in 1928 and allowed Bailey to indulge his passion for epic through Rustveli's *Man in the Pantherskin* (c. 1200). Then without the text, Bailey sat in the Bodleian and copied all 1,600 quatrains by hand in transcription. He later remarked> |Georgian has so many Iranian roots, they shout at me from the page, almost translating themselves|. Part of his wartime duties was to read letters from Georgian and (Indo-European) Armenian prisoners. Well-versed in Celtic languages (especially Arthurian legend), he once asked a colleague to correspond in Cornish (extinct since 18th century). Lack of authentic vocabulary troubled the colleague, which perplexed Bailey> |If one knows the Welsh and Breton plus the Cornish sound-laws, one could easily construct the missing items|.

Perhaps his favourite Iranian language was Ossetic in the North Caucasus, the likely source of the pan-North Caucasian Nart epic. Full perspective required familiarity with its eastern neighbour, Chechen (Veinakh group of Caucasian). Completing his reworking of the Bundahishn, he spoke of |relaxing with some Veinakh| (which will bring envious smiles to most Caucasologists), writing of Chechen in 1987> |I like it as

the very 'civilized' form of Caucasian, and later I read through the whole gospel of John. I like the many vowel changes. There is of course some method. However, when it came to the western neighbour, Circassian (North West Caucasian), he confessed this to be the only language that had ever defeated him -- he read over fifty.

A life-long vegetarian (eating sparingly even then), non-smoker and tea-totaller, he never married. Ascetic in his habits, he yet had interests beyond languages. He cycled often and far, subsequently turning to (brisk) walking. He taught himself the violin and viola, forming a quartet in the 40s-50s. Chess was his only game. Whilst the story of Pindar being light bed-time reading *may* be apocryphal, he did enjoy re-reading Sherlock Holmes. Retirement allowed him a practical indulgence of gardening, naturally knowing all the botanical designations, delighting in the gardens of Peterhouse and Pembroke colleges.

His college-rooms and later Southacre-flat were so crammed with books he once reputedly mislaid his typewriter beneath a pile, but he always knew the precise location of his volumes, invariably annotated. When entertaining guests to morning-coffee or afternoon-tea, he would be constantly plucking books from the shelves, so that the small side-table would soon fill up, unless one was careful to leave a saucer there. Peoples (and cats) were his final enthusiasm, for he never tired of encouraging or sharing his unparalleled knowledge with anyone who approached him, from lowly undergraduate to distinguished fellow scholars, in all of whose affections he earned a special niche. Hearing-defects in his 70s were cured by effective aids, but his last years were plagued by failing eyesight. His door, however, remained open to the end, which came in hospital following a heart-attack some six weeks after a fall shortly before his 96th birthday, on which day he spoke of three projects he still hoped to tackle.

A naturally diffident man, the many honours heaped upon him the world over meant nothing. He desired only (and was happily able) to devote his life and formidable talents to his inextinguishable love of languages.

He died on 11th January.