



ARTHUR LLEWELLYN BASHAM

ARTHUR LLEWELLYN BASHAM  
1914-1986

Emeritus Professor A.L. Basham died on 27 January 1986 in Calcutta. He had been a Foundation Fellow of the Academy, and a member of its Council and its Vice-President from 1970 to 1972. He was born in England in 1914, and retired from his chair at the A.N.U. at the end of 1979.

Professor Basham came to the A.N.U. in September 1965 as foundation Professor of Oriental Civilization and Head of the new Department of that name. He came from the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, where he had risen quickly from a lectureship in the History of India from 1948 to the Chair in that discipline in 1957. From 1964 he had also been Director of the Royal Asiatic Society, London. By 1965 his reputation as a foremost scholar in the field of Ancient Indian history had been firmly established by his books *History and Doctrines of the Ajivikas*, and *The Wonder that was India*, and his many articles and chapters in books.

Professor Basham came to the A.N.U. at a time when Asian studies were beginning to expand. His inspiration and leadership contributed greatly to their development over the 15 years he served the Faculty of Asian Studies. Throughout that time, he was head of the Department of Asian History and Civilizations, as it came to be called, and he served as Dean of Faculty from 1968 to 1970. It was his dream to see the Faculty grow into a major centre for the study of Asia in Australia and he put all his energy into the realization of that dream.

Professor Basham's service to the field of Asian Studies reached far beyond the Faculty and the A.N.U. into Australian society. In 1977 he was elected Vice-President of the Asian Studies Association of Australia. Thanks to his international stature and his efforts the 28th International Congress of Orientalists was held at the A.N.U. in 1971 with Professor Basham as its President. In 1979 he was President of the First International Conference of Traditional Asian Medicine held in Canberra. This led to the formation of the International Society of Traditional Asian Medicine. His extraordinary contribution to scholarship was repeatedly recognized: in 1965 he was awarded an Honorary D.Litt. from the University of Kurukshetra; in 1966 a D.Litt. from the University of London; in 1975 the Bimal Churn Law Gold Medal of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta; in 1977 an Honorary D.Litt. of the Nava Nalanda Mahavira, and finally in December 1965, shortly before his death, the Prime Minister of India, Mr Rajiv Gandhi conferred upon him the Desikottama Award of the Vishvabharati University, founded by Rabindranath Tagore.

Another way in which Professor Basham's extraordinary influence can be gauged was his activity in supervising doctoral students. During his career at the SAOS and at the A.N.U. he supervised about fifty doctoral students. Many chairs of South Asian History in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere are now occupied by his former students. As a supervisor he became a near legend; his dedication to his students, his kindness and personal concern, the intellectual stimulus and concrete assistance he provided have earned him the lasting gratitude of many historians of South Asia.

Basham's scholarship was extraordinarily wide. The doctoral theses he supervised range widely from ancient to medieval history of India, from religion and art to economy and medicine. He was as scholarly and eloquent about the date of Kanishka as he was about the popular posters of gods and goddesses in contemporary India. His wide reading always astounded me. He was a fine humanist with an insatiable thirst to know about mankind, its hopes, dreams, achievements, tragedies, and he enjoyed seeing these expressed in the arts. To him history had always to be the story of the totality of human experience. That is precisely what he so magnificently achieved in his *The Wonder that was India*.

The name of Professor Basham is also treasured by the many thousands of readers of his book *The Wonder that was India*, which was translated into several languages, and has been constantly re-published since its first appearance in 1954. In some ways, that book most appropriately encapsulates the man Basham, and the reasons why he was so loved and admired. Its fine and demanding scholarship is never on show, but conceals itself in a superb style, easy and elegant. The book shows Basham as a historian and a humanist with wide interests and a fine appreciation for art and literature. Basham's appreciation and deep understanding of the classical literature of India is best expressed in the translations that lie scattered in his 'Wonder'. In these small masterpieces his knowledge of Indian languages and culture, his love for India, and his fine command of the English language came together in perfect harmony.

Basham was a great scholar and a great teacher; to me and to many he was the finest historian it has been my privilege to know. Many of us will remember for a long time his deep yet unpretentious scholarship as a historian, his profound humanism, the elegance of his writings and of his teaching, his total dedication to his staff and to his students. The Academy of the Humanities may be proud to have counted him among its Fellowship.

*J. T. F. Jordens*