



## SIR HAROLD WALTER BAILEY

### 1899-1996

---

Harold Bailey grew up beyond Merredin in Western Australia, after coming to Australia from Devizes, Wiltshire at the age of 10 years. On his mother's side there were German forebears. There was no school in the vicinity of the family farm; so he taught himself from a home encyclopedia and from four volumes on French, German, Italian, Spanish and Greek. Another volume, which set out the rudiments of twenty other languages, supplemented by newspaper wrappings on parcels, turned him towards his passion for oriental languages.

Life on the farm was strenuous and gave him a physical fitness which stood him in good stead as a scholar (until well into his eighties he slept for only four hours a night and during the 1939-45 war, while working at the Foreign Office, with Arnold Toynbee, he rode his bicycle from London to Cambridge). After his brothers had returned from the Great War (1914-18), he felt no obligation to remain on the farm. The University of Western Australia then came into existence, so he went to Perth. When he asked to study oriental languages, he learnt that they were not available, and was told 'You had better do Classics'. He matriculated in one year under the teaching of a former scholar of Brasenose College, Oxford, and completed his first degree with distinction. After two years teaching, he was awarded a scholarship to Oxford, where he studied Sanskrit, Avestan and comparative philology, and gained a DPhil for a study of a Middle Persian text. In 1936, after teaching Iranian Studies for eight years in London he became Professor of Sanskrit at Cambridge and was the first graduate of the University of Western Australia to become a university professor anywhere.

His major work was to decipher and edit documents from Chinese Turkestan which were discovered in a cave and brought to Europe between 1900 and 1916 by Sir Aurel Stein. Written in an Indian script, they reproduced a Middle Iranian language which Bailey called Khotanese, from the district where they were found, Khotan. Some of the documents had been deposited at the British Museum and the India Office Library; others were in Paris, Berlin, Stockholm and Leningrad. Bailey's edition ran to eight volumes *Khotanese Texts* (1945-85), as well as *Khotanese Buddhist Texts* (1951, 2 ed., 1981) and *Saka Documents* (4 vol., 1960-67). The language and the culture of the literature were set out in his *Dictionary of Khotan Saka* (1979) and *The Culture of the Sakas in Ancient Iranian Khotan* (1981). More than 200 articles, derived from these texts, explained their relevance to linguistic and historical problems of Central Asia and to fresh interpretations of ancient Indian texts.

As a research student at Queen's, I heard him lecture once in 1953. He spoke about the new language which he had discovered and was asked how you discovered a language which no one knew. His reply was 'You crack it like a code' which assured his hearers that there were more difficult things to do than those which were dominating their existence at the time. From 1965 onwards it was my privilege for thirty years to talk with him for endless hours when I was in Cambridge, to enjoy long walks, drink much tea (commonly Earl Grey triple strength) and eat bitter chocolate together. In the Humanities, he and Gilbert Murray were, I think, the foremost scholars to come from Australia (he never lost a deep attachment to the land of his youth), and he was once described as the greatest scholar at Queen's since Erasmus. For these reasons his views on scholarly life and endeavour have a special interest for this Academy of which he was a Fellow.

While he did not enjoy farming, he gained from those formative years. qualities of mind which stayed with him always. These included the ability to live in other worlds beyond his immediate environment. His conversation, in a clear voice where each tone counted, was nearly always about

his work. He lost friends because of his determination to 'talk shop', a habit which was frowned upon by members of High Table. Yet his world was so rich that even those who had little knowledge of it could enter in imagination and be enlarged.

The rigour of survival in outback Australia carried over into his scholarship. He was intolerant of shoddiness. When he went to Egypt after graduation from Oxford, he sat with a scholar of the Koran by the walls of old Cairo to perfect his Arabic pronunciation. His earlier formation protected him from the mediocrity which peer-group pressure can induce. His matriculation tutor in Perth, who made him write Greek verse to enlarge his vocabulary, deserves some credit for his habits and standards of study. The humaneness of the outback never left him. When a colleague in the field wrote something inaccurate, he commented wistfully, 'I was going to put him right; but he died'. Scholarship was cooperative rather than competitive. Life began, he believed, with retirement; teaching was all right, but it meant keeping the mind full of details which were of little use and he lacked, he felt, the gifts of display. He wrote to Australia with joy when he sent off the eighth and last volume on Khotanese which he had begun forty years earlier.

His interests were widely philological, reaching to Welsh, Cornish and the Arthurian legends. Most spectacular was a visit to the Caucasus for the 800th anniversary of the Georgian poet Rustaveli. Here he astounded his hosts by delivering speeches in two local Ossetic dialects and was given a mountaineer's coat and hat, the later worn in the portrait which hangs in his college. A competent musician, thanks initially to a travelling teacher in his farming days, his world ran from Cambridge to Western Australia, where he was greatly honoured, with stops in all the places over which ordinary travellers ignorantly fly at high altitude. At the age of eighty he flew to New York for two weeks of lecturing. He was a great encourager, always interested in the work of his companions, and consistently modest in the face of great honours from many parts of the world. His library appeared to be an overwhelming chaos until in later years, friends like James Cornick took over.

He had a great gift of friendship, but did not conform to social norms. He was vegetarian and abstained from alcohol ('I decided I did not want to get caught up in that sort of thing'). Especially in his later years he dressed very simply and was delighted when he was told 'But I always thought you were the gardener'; he was indeed a keen gardener, a common pursuit for those who have grown up in dry places. He had little time for established religion and found, I think, spiritual power in Zoroastrianism. An honorary DD from Manchester was accepted with hesitation. The glories of the world were foreign and sometimes amusing. A knighthood was all right because he thought that the journeys and conflicts of the knights of old were like the adventures of scholarship. These had a moral content which was the centre of his existence and he never ceased to enjoy them. He told me with excitement of a new word in one of his languages, which meant confronting difficulty and coming out stronger for it. This word like Paul's *ὑπερνικάω*, summed up his life.

*Eric Osborn*