

IN MEMORIAM
RICHARD KEITH SPRIGG (1922–2011)

A consequence of the 1945 Scarborough Report, which recommended an expansion of the teaching of non-European languages in British universities, was the appointment of a group of young scholars to the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics at London University's School of Oriental & African Studies. Amongst their number was Keith Sprigg, who died on September 8th 2011 at the age of 89.

His route to SOAS was from King Edward VII Grammar School in Melton Mowbray, his home-town, and Oakham School, to St. John's College, Cambridge, where he studied Classics, graduating in BA in 1944 and MA in 1947. For the latter part of World War 2, he served in the Royal Air Force in Eastern and Southern Asia.

On arrival at SOAS in 1946, Sprigg and his fellow appointees joined a group of mainly older colleagues who had been engaged in various war-related activities in the civilian sphere. The two rather disparate groups had now to unite to forge a teaching and research community for peacetime conditions, under the leadership of J. R. Firth, active at the school from 1938, and appointed Professor of General Linguistics in 1944.

Sprigg's initial status was as holder of a Studentship in the phonetics of Burmese, Siamese and Annamese 'with a view to being appointed to staff'; and he became Lecturer in Phonetics in 1948. During the 1947–48 session he attended classes on Tibetan taught by E. J. A. Henderson, continuing his work in the session collecting Tibetan language material on which he based his 1969 Ph.D. thesis, the early stages of which were supervised by Firth. This work was carried out both in Tibet itself and in the West Bengal town of Kalimpong, a hill station in the foothills of Kangchenjunga. He went on to study Lepcha and Arakanese and, during a year in Nepal in 1955–56, Newari, Tamang, Limbu and Rai.

Sprigg and almost all the other post-war entrants to SOAS stood apart from the main body of linguists and phoneticians of the time in that they received the whole of their training in linguistics there, a training that differed markedly from that prevailing at other academic centres of linguistic study. For Firth the proper objects of linguistic study were instances of language, restricted 'texts' such as 'the language of buying and selling in Cyrenaica', 'the disyllabic noun in Chaga', 'the Harauti nominal', 'the personal forms of the Russian verb', studies of all of which appear in papers produced by writers trained in Firth's department. Sprigg's doctoral work examines 'the grammatical constituents of verbal-phrase words in spoken Tibetan'. Within the text attention was again to be focused, this time on particular structures, with systems to be set up for places within these, differing, if appropriate, from one place to another, a two-term system here, a three-term there, with no phonological identity posited for an identical phonetic element occurring in different systems. Phonetic features that had relevance for structure, at whatever level of the analysis, were to be distinguished from those that had not.

A phonological approach of this sort, well exemplified in Sprigg's paper on 'Prosodic analysis and Burmese syllable-initial features' (*Anthropological Linguistics* 7/6, 1965, 59–81), gives primacy in phonological analysis to syntagmatic relations and to the workings of individual phonetic features, alone or in various bundles, no construct comparable to the phoneme will arise. Given this, although the phoneme was then the dominant theory in the work of most others, the SOAS linguists saw no value in it – indeed, regarded it as pernicious. The others, for their part, were baffled by 'prosodies' and 'phonematic units'. But there was little help for them. Since Firthian linguistics eschewed procedures, there were no handbooks, no training manuals, little at all by way of exegesis. Sprigg's long series of papers, then, uniting what amounted to miniature grammars of portions of various Tibeto-Burman languages with explicit Firthian analyses, went some way to make up this lack. It was to this end, for instance,

that the paper mentioned above was placed, in an unusual step for London-school linguists, in an American journal. To Keith Sprigg, then, goes the credit for being probably Firth's best apologist.

He was appointed Reader in Phonetics in 1968 and retired eleven years later, the University of Cambridge bestowing on him in 1982 the degree of Litt.D. in recognition of a substantial body of high-quality work in Tibeto-Burman linguistics; and his Honorary Life Membership of the Lepcha Association of Kalimpong pleased him almost as much.

But this was far from the close of his research and publishing activity. In retirement he took up residence again in Kalimpong, where many exiles from Tibet had settled after 1959. There he lived mainly in the guest-house at Dr. Graham's Homes, a charitable school for underprivileged children of the region, with Tibetan on its teaching syllabus. He returned to Britain in 2000 and there completed work on a Balti-English dictionary, which appeared in 2002. Then he moved on to something quite new.

Like most phoneticians, Sprigg had an interest in his native language, but, as his particular remit at SOAS was the linguistics of Tibeto-Burman, and the teaching of English phonology was in other hands, he postponed any publication on this topic until the later years of his retirement, his two final published papers, on the 'R-prosodic piece' and the 'Short quantity piece' in English, appearing in *York Papers in Linguistics* in 2005.

The quiet and undemonstrative nature of Keith Sprigg's everyday demeanour masked a gentle charm allied to considerable firmness of purpose, qualities that earned him the respect and affection of his colleagues and students. His adherence to his aims is well demonstrated by the volume of his published work and found more dramatic expression on occasions such as that when, finding that none of his local informants in Kalimpong was able to read an archaic Lepcha script, he undertook an expedition into Eastern Nepal in search of help, notwithstanding the fact that, under the conditions prevailing at the time, the journey was, as he knew, somewhat hazardous; happily, his persistence was rewarded. It was strength of character of this kind that underlay the fortitude with which, latterly, he met the tribulations of advancing age.

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