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## Obituary

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GERALD RANDALL TIBBETTS

Gerald Randall Tibbetts was born on 22 January 1926 in Brackley, Northants, and died on 21 November 1999 aged 73 after a fall at his much loved home in Eynsham, Oxfordshire. He came from a long line of family blacksmiths. One of Gerald's favourite pastimes was genealogy and it was a source of great pleasure that he had managed to trace his family back to the fifteenth century. His study in Eynsham contained a rich mine of genealogical material and he was frequently consulted by others wishing to trace family ancestry.

After attending the local junior school, Gerald, at 13, was awarded a scholarship to Magdalen College School in Brackley where he developed a great interest in the Sciences, but at an early age he also explored a much wider range of interests in all of which he excelled. These were soon to come to the fore in very different fields. He was very fond of music and became a most proficient piano player, and at the age of 16 he was appointed church organist in the nearby village of Whitfield. This love of music he was to share with his wife Hazel and it remained with him to the end of his life as a great solace and source of pleasure. His regular weekend practice is a memory much treasured by his children. His

love of music and his skill as a performer led to the award of a Choral Scholarship to Caius College, Cambridge. In the event Gerald did not take this up. He was called into the army in 1944 and was posted to India and Malaya in the Royal Army Education Corps. This proved to be a defining experience.

At school in the 6th form Gerald had developed an interest in languages with strange scripts and had taught himself Hebrew, Arabic and Assyrian, this last being learnt from a textbook in French. His experience in the army in South-East Asia raised doubts in his mind as to what course to take at University. Eventually, through one of his friends, he was introduced to Professor Driver at Magdalen College, Oxford. Gerald's interest in these languages together with his army experience led Professor Driver to accept him for an Honours degree course in Arabic and Hebrew. He began his university studies in 1948 and graduated from Oxford University with a B.A. in 1951.

After graduation he worked for a short time with O.U.P. on the compilation of the *Gazeteer for the Oxford Atlas* before taking a Postgraduate Diploma in Librarianship at London University. His qualifications in Arabic and Hebrew led to him being attached to the School of Oriental and African Studies and it was while working here that he met Hazel, his future wife. Part of his studies included a dissertation, entitled *Arabia in Early Maps*, later published in 1978 by Oleander Press. This was the first of his studies in what was to become his great academic interest, early Arab navigation in the Indian Ocean. After completion of his Librarianship course he worked for a short time at the London School of Oriental and African Studies before taking up a post in the Library of the University of Singapore in 1953. Here, he was concerned with the classification of works in Oriental languages, and he wrote a series of papers on the subject dealing with works in Arabic in particular. The appointment in Singapore gave him the opportunity to pursue his interest in mediaeval Arab navigation. It was also at this time that he began his study of early Arabic texts on South-East Asia.

In 1956 he left Singapore to become Deputy Librarian at the University of Khartoum where he had special responsibility for the collection of Arabic books and manuscripts. On leave from Khartoum in 1959 he married Hazel. In 1960, after four years in the Sudan, he was appointed Librarian in the newly founded Oriental Institute in Oxford and settled down in what became the family home in Eynsham. Unfortunately, things did not work out as far as Gerald was concerned and he was to return to Africa.

In 1964 he took up the post of Deputy Librarian at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Northern Nigeria, but was soon made Librarian of the newly founded Abdullahi Bayero University College in Kano. Here he received considerable support from the Ford Foundation to assist in the gathering together of Arabic and Islamic texts for its Library. For this purpose he was to visit many countries of the Arab World and Europe. He worked there with considerable success, in spite of the Nigerian civil war, until in 1967 he was offered the post of Administrative Secretary at the University of London Library, an appointment which he was to continue to hold until his retirement in 1990.

It was after his return from Nigeria that the two main works, on which his reputation as a Arabic scholar is based, were published. The first, entitled *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the Coming of the Portuguese*, was first published in 1971 by the Royal Asiatic Society of which he was a longtime member and served for a while on its Council. A

second edition appeared in 1981. The title page says that it is a translation of the famous manuscript on navigation in the Indian Ocean attributed to Ahmad b. Majid al-Najdi, the fifteenth century Arab pilot and navigator. But in fact it is very much more with the translation accounting for less than 200 of the over 500 pages. The rest of the text includes the writings of other mediaeval Arab navigators, explanatory notes, and a masterly examination of the mediaeval Arab theories of ocean navigation. At times Gerald was working with most obscure Arabic texts from which the navigational meaning needed to be teased out. In this work he demonstrated not only his skill as a scholar of Classical and mediaeval colloquial Arabic, but also showed his unrivalled grasp of mediaeval astronomy, physics, navigation techniques, shipping and topography. The book is accompanied by a series of maps of the Indian Ocean and the adjacent Red Sea which show meticulous care over detail with the delineations based upon the information he had teased out from the various Arabic texts. It was Gerald's work on mediaeval Arab navigation, portrayed in this book, that led Tim Severin to say, in *The Sinbad Voyage* published in 1982, that he had been convinced by Gerald that the early Arab navigators could sail the Indian ocean quite safely with the aid of only string, pieces of wood and the Pole Star. Extracts from Gerald's book were also used in an Australian cartographic exhibition in 1994, aimed at correcting some commonly held erroneous views in Australia about navigation in the Indian Ocean.

His second book, *A Study of the Arabic Texts containing material on South-East Asia*, was published by Brill for the Royal Asiatic Society in 1979. Gerald says that his intention is to examine the relevant texts of Arab geographers and travellers and to attempt to sort out fact from fiction. The final chapter deals with the Arab navigators' conception of South-East Asia and is largely based upon the writings of Ahmad b. Majid al-Najdi and Sulayman al-Mahri. Again Gerald's painstaking work is demonstrated in the seven maps that accompany the text.

Both of his two main works were acclaimed as important contributions to scholarship on the mediaeval Arab World, and as a result Oxford University was pleased to award him a D.Litt. in 1982. Gerald was to continue with his studies and was Associate Editor for the History of Cartography Series published by the University of Chicago Press. In particular, he contributed significant chapters on Islamic cartography in Volume Two Book One, *Cartography in Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies*, 1992. Gerald also wrote important papers on traditional Chinese and Pacific islander navigation methods comparing these with those used by the mediaeval Arab navigators. His advice on matters relating to mediaeval navigation in the Indian Ocean and further afield was frequently sort right up to his death. His expertise was also valued by the editors of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* for whom he wrote articles on the Balkhi School, 'isba, Sulayman al-Mahri, Wak wak and Zabadj.

Gerald's academic achievements in the field of Islamic studies were distinct from his fulltime work as a librarian. At the London University Library he was concerned with administration of a myriad items including the hiring and firing of staff. He found much of this work tedious and other parts he disliked. However, to the staff he was an ideal colleague: most approachable, noted for his patience and quiet diplomacy in listening to and sorting out their difficulties and frustrations. To them he was always the perfect gentleman with an uncanny ability to create calm in the midst of frenetic activity.

At home he loved his garden where he and Hazel grew excellent fruit, vegetables and

flowers. He was especially fond of fuchsia and dahlias and made his own wines. He was very practical at DIY and by himself dug out and furnished a sizeable swimming pool where he and the family loved to swim in the summer time, and he made dolls houses for his daughters, including a replica of their own house. Early in life he had started to paint in oils and many of his paintings adorn the house including one of his much loved Hazel. He was also a great walker and loved Snowdonia in particular and, as befits librarians, both he and Hazel were avid readers. It was a particular sadness when Parkinson's disease struck him after retirement and restricted so many of his activities.

Gerald is survived by his wife, three daughters and a granddaughter. This multi-gifted man, who perhaps never fulfilled his true potential, will be greatly missed not only by his own family but also by former colleagues and scholars who held him in such high regard.

H. R. J. DAVIES