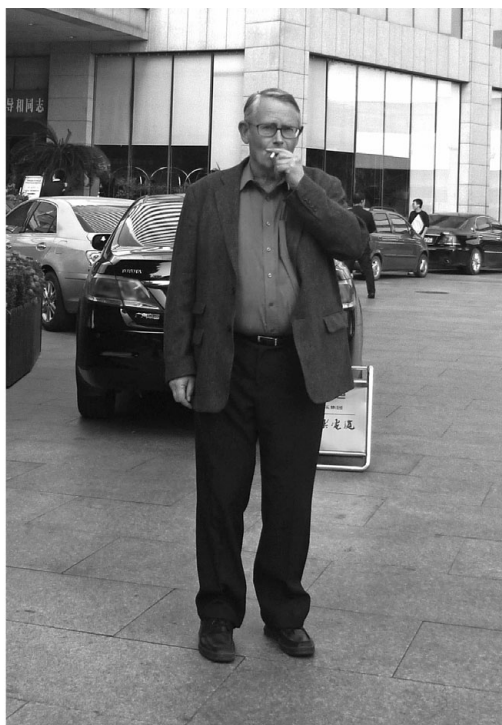
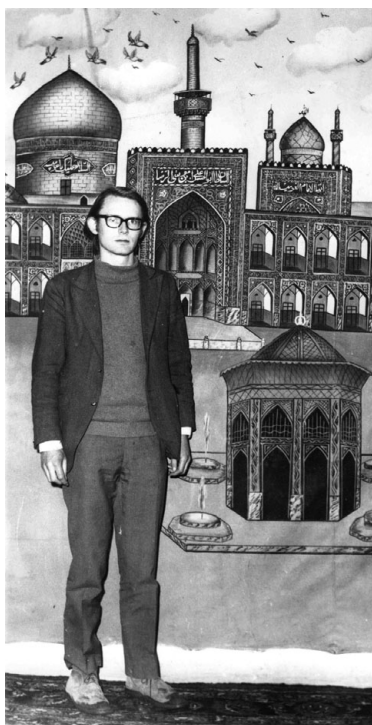

Obituary

Alexander (Sandy) Morton, 1942–2011



If the measure of the man is reflected in the circle of his friends then Sandy Morton is impressively out-size. The turn-out for his memorial service was large and varied and the prevailing mood was warm and pleasingly nostalgic. Sandy would very definitely have enjoyed it. The choice of St George's Church, Bloomsbury was appropriate and fitting as was the relaxed reception later in the British Museum's Islamic Gallery. Sandy's presence could be felt appreciatively basking in the gentle tide of warm reminiscences as friends, family, and colleagues mixed easily and exchanged anecdotes and memories. The mood was light and relaxed and it contrasted with the more respectfully sombre memorial service which had combined hymns, Persian verse and eulogies from his brothers, William and

James and colleagues Narguess Farzad and Charles Melville. In St George's the atmosphere was reflective and emotions were heightened. Even Charles Melville's courtly and measured address cracked and stumbled as a particularly poignant memory broke through his famously unflappable façade. Emotional but not oppressively so, the service reminded us of our loss but also informed us of our gains and the many ways Sandy had entered and enriched our lives.

It is over twenty years since I first encountered Sandy Morton at SOAS when I rather belatedly embarked on an academic career as a rather mature student. He presented himself as a slightly intimidating and serious figure, aloof and demanding, and someone who would not suffer fools gladly. Sandy was an old-style scholar and traditionalist teacher but he was also passionate about his subject and extremely erudite, these two qualities made a profound impression on an emerging academic. Other facets of this very private surprisingly shy man slowly emerged as I gradually got to know him. Beneath that aloof exterior was a kind and tolerant man who later, while remaining a teacher, became a colleague and I hope, in the last years, a friend.

In early 2011 when his advancing cancer had rendered him a virtual prisoner in his own home, I began visiting him on a regular basis to consult him on our shared research into Persians in Yuan China. Previously, he had been in the habit of calling into my office on his trips into SOAS and I benefited greatly from his invaluable help and unrivalled knowledge of mediaeval Persian and Arabic. No longer able to stir more than a couple of blocks from his Camberwell haven, I became one of his links to the outside world. His Camberwell flat could have been a caricature of an academic's den. Books were piled in every conceivable spare space on, under, and beside the scattered furniture and yet all were assigned their own specific place which Sandy knew and could find without hesitation. His Apple laptop and printer lurked amongst all this apparent confusion. The permanently draped tall windows allowed dusty light to filter through onto solid, old wooden furniture upholstered in faded fabrics and cluttered with cigarette boxes, ash trays and of course books. A sunken sofa of an indeterminate dulled colour matched the drab covers of a couple of scattered chairs which, cleared of books and notebooks, would serve his guests. The small kitchenette was the only place in his flat where books were not piled-high, replaced instead by a confirmed bachelor's detritus of single plates, saucerless cups, single-servings of prepared food and a bottle of good whiskey.

Sandy sunk into his enveloping sofa, his ravaged leg supported by a stool, and let loose. He summoned books from their many piles which I would duly retrieve and would come alive as sources leapt from the pages and a new pile of books would begin to form around his feet. Some of the smaller towers of books would represent previous afternoon's unfinished discussions, ready to be pulled over for conversation and discussion to be resumed. Not always feeling up to scrutinising heavy mediaeval Persian texts, as had been our wont over the years, he had taken to reminiscing instead about the years he had spent in Iran and Afghanistan during the 1970s and of his trip to the wilds of Yemen.

He had been a young scholar at the prestigious British Institute of Persian Studies in the Iranian capital, Tehran and eventually he was appointed Assistant Director of BIPS. However, he had still found the time to travel around the region both within Iran and outside especially to Afghanistan, once a synonym for liberality and indulgence. With a

wistful smile he recalled hitting the hippie trail and he regaled me with tales of haggling in the bazaars and hashish in the *chaikhana*s of Herat. He relished the memories of his trips to Afghanistan and the gloriously anarchic border posts, the run-down but welcoming hippie hotels, the decrepit intercity buses in a permanent state of lethal disrepair and spoke with affection of those long-gone days of hazy adventures in a land that is no more.

Since 2009, Sandy had become increasingly excited with a clutch of mediaeval Persian tombstones that I had chanced upon in Hangzhou, eastern China. I had asked for his help with translating them and he had thrown himself with gusto into the task and everything connected with Persian Yuan China and mediaeval Hangzhou. When an invitation to a conference in Hangzhou centred on the thirteenth-century Phoenix mosque was extended to him, he accepted with composed relish and we left Heathrow together in November 2010. He revealed yet another very different side to his personality on this trip to Zhejiang Province in China for this conference on the Yuan dynasty. He was more than happy to explore without question the culinary excesses laid before him at the many meals we enjoyed together and he readily launched into foot tours of the backstreets and local markets of Hangzhou away from the usual tourist haunts, fed only by the stimulant of restless curiosity and large bottles of local beer. I completely forgot that I was accompanied by a 69 year old man wracked by cancer as I led him from one historical site to another, up one mountain and down another, only to plunge into the thick jostling crowds haggling at Hangzhou's night-time street market before finishing off another day over local beers which we enjoyed seated on beer crates at a street bar. He was a man very much alive, attuned to his new surroundings and enjoying life whether it was the intellectual nourishment of the conference, the rich and varied food of China's streets or simply the tapestry of life in evidence in the crowds swarming around West Lake. Sandy was a man who appreciated new experiences and he had had a full life and career on which to look and reflect back on.

Born 11 April 1942 in India (now Pakistan) in the last years of the Raj, Sandy still retained memories on which he reminisced from his time in Multan where his father, Kenneth Morton CIE OBE, a member of the Indian Civil Service, was stationed. Sandy was the third of five children (Felicity, Kenneth, who died sometime ago, Sandy, William and James). His mother, Mary Morton, was the daughter of Harold Hargreaves, the Deputy Director of the Indian Archaeological Survey under Sir John Marshall, who is known for his work at the sites of Mohenjodaro and Taxila.

The family left the sub-continent in 1947 shortly before independence and moved to Edinburgh where they lived for a short while before moving to Cambridge in 1948. Sandy first went to prep school in Cambridge after which he attended Rugby where he specialised in Classics. Following father's example, he entered University College, Oxford, where he earned a First in Classical Moderations. However, he switched courses and found his true vocation studying Persian and Arabic language and literature. He completed the three year course after only two years for which he was in consequence awarded a second class degree. Graduating in 1964 and supported by a scholarship, he commenced work at the British Institute of Persian Studies in Tehran where he remained until 1967. He interrupted his time in Tehran to return to London where he enrolled at SOAS to begin a PhD under the supervision of the formidable Professor Ann Lambton. The subject of his thesis was Persian Travel Diaries of the nineteenth century but he never completed his dissertation the call of

the East being stronger and he returned to Tehran as Assistant Director of BIPS. In 1976 he travelled with Anthony Smith on one of his expeditions and they explored Iran's *qanats* in search of blind white fish which lived in the underground canals. Anthony Smith makes a number of references to Sandy in his book "A Persian Quarter Century". It was during his time at BIPS that he assisted with the move of the institute from their premises in central Tehran into the Embassy Compound in North Tehran. Sandy also acquired a considerable knowledge of Persian coins while in Iran. His sojourn in Iran coincided with the heyday of the late Shah's reign and he left sometime before the Islamic revolution of 1979.

Returning to the UK, Sandy's initial work was at the British Museum where he worked cataloguing their collection of Middle-East coins. It was not until 1983 that he joined SOAS though he remained in contact with the British Museum throughout his life. Their appreciation of his contributions to the museum was clear as they loaned the Islamic Gallery for his memorial reception.

Though Sandy never completed his PhD, he had the distinction of being one of the few distinguished scholars who achieved academic success without having to actually submit a dissertation. He wore the title of 'Mr' with pride. At SOAS where he remained until his early retirement in 1999, he began initially as a lecturer in Persian and was eventually appointed Senior Lecturer of the Persian section of the NME Department.

For one who carries such a formidable reputation and whose renown is international and widely respected, his publishing output is surprisingly modest. On his death only three books bore his name so it is most welcome that at least two more titles will be appearing soon in China under his name, confirmation of which he gratefully received before the end. Both books will be concerned with the mediaeval Persian tombstones from Hangzhou's Phoenix Mosque. The subjects of his books reflect the diversity of his interest with a translation from mediaeval Italian and an edited mediaeval Persian history and thirdly *A Catalogue of Early Islamic Glass Stamps in the British Museum*. The books which are to appear in China concern the Persian tombstone inscriptions. He authored a number of highly erudite articles whose varied subject matter reflected his own multiple interests. There are a number of Numismatic papers, others concerning the Ardibil Shrine and the Safavids, others on glass seals, some on poetry, a couple on gold and money and more on poetry and historical subjects. One at least has caused quite a stir and to the annoyance of certain scholars has become the last word and definitive account of the so-called 'Letters of Rashīd al-Dīn'. Despite the erudition and sometimes obscurity of the subject matter, Sandy wrote in a clear and accessible style. His aim was to communicate and explain and not to alienate or to intimidate. One reason for his very great reputation was the personal help that he offered to so many people. I was very surprised to find that the great deal of invaluable assistance that he graciously offered to me with my work over the years was an experience shared and valued by many. He was everybody's favourite source for help with the intractable linguistic problems that inevitably occurred during our research

Towards the end Sandy had been reluctant to let people know just how ill he had become and when people did contact him to enquire after his health he would rarely reveal the true situation. He of course was under no illusion as to the seriousness of his spreading cancer and he had insisted that his doctors be brutally honest with him at all times. He remained philosophical to the end however and certainly never indulged in any self-pity preferring

to view his predicament with a sometimes disconcerting but at other times refreshingly, grim humour. Since he was reluctant to burden others with his medical problems, I felt that I should ensure that people knew. What immediately struck me was just how many people were so pleased that I had contacted them and were anxious to contact Sandy to offer their help and warmest regards. All the people that I managed to contact harboured great warmth and affection for Sandy and he was very moved and genuinely surprised at the number of well-wishers that contacted him in his final weeks. Even though he was loathe to impose himself on others, he was immensely touched at just how many people cared for his well-being and how deeply people valued their connections with him.

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