

Lionel Giles, 1875–1958

The news of the death of Lionel Giles in a nursing home at St. Albans on 22 January 1958 will have been heard with regret not only by Chinese scholars everywhere, many of whom were his friends or correspondents, but also by those general readers who owe much of their knowledge of Chinese culture to his entertaining books.

He was the fourth son of the late Professor Herbert Allen Giles and was born in Sutton, Surrey, in 1875. One of his favorite stories in the last years of his life was an account of how he was christened. H. A. Giles, as a staunch Victorian agnostic, held baptism in abhorrence and the ceremony took place without his knowledge at a time when he was away from home. Lionel's godfather was no other than Edward Harper Parker, whose quarrels with Giles senior were to scandalize and entertain the world of sinology in the early years of the century. "My father nearly had a fit when he found out what had happened," Giles would say, with his infectious laugh.

His early years were spent in China, chiefly in Shanghai, and then at Tamsui in Formosa where his father was Consul. They appear to have been altogether delightful and although in due course he had to return to Europe for his schooling, and never saw China again, his memories of that wonderful country filled his mind for the rest of his life.

His father was anxious that he should perfect himself in French and German and so, instead of going to an English public school, he was sent to Jesuit establishments on the Continent, first to the Collège St. Servais at Liège and then to Feldkirch in the Austrian Tyrol. After that he entered Aberdeen University and from there passed on to Wadham College, Oxford, where he took a 1st Class in Classical Mods. in 1897, and a 2nd Class Lit. Hum. in 1899.

Giles was not attracted by the idea of following in his father's footsteps and joining the China Consular Service. All his tastes were in the direction of a quiet life among books, and in the year 1900, he entered the library of the British Museum as a second class assistant. Half a century later he recalled the old-world atmosphere of those days and in particular the supply of goose-quills for the use of the staff. He acquired the rudiments of cataloguing in a room in which

Macaulay had written part of his History and he had a close look at Samuel Butler, the author of *Erewhon*.

He was attached to the Department of Printed Books, but on his father's advice he took up the study of Chinese with the aim of being transferred to the Department of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts. At that time the Chinese books were in the charge of Sir Robert Kennaway Douglas, as they had been since 1865, and, as Douglas was not to retire until 1907, the policy was of a long-term kind. Yet in his patient unhurried way Giles made extraordinarily rapid progress in his Chinese, which he apparently did not begin until 1900, and by 1904 he had already published *The Sayings of Lao Tzu* to be followed in 1906 by *Musings of a Chinese Mystic*.

In the latter year there occurred a most unpleasant adventure to which Giles would often refer when he was in the mood for reminiscences. Messrs. Luzac & Co., the oriental booksellers, asked him to make a catalogue of a collection of Chinese books which they were offering for sale, and when the catalogue was published, Giles's name and his connexion with the Museum were given on the title-page. This was in fact a breach of Museum regulations, and some kindly soul drew the attention of the Trustees to the matter. Poor Giles was summoned before the Director, a tyrannical old horror named Sir Edward Maunde Thompson, at whose name men still turn pale in Great Russell Street. The experience must have been appalling, and when at last the Director pointed to the door and shouted "Go," Giles was more than half convinced that he had been dismissed from the Museum altogether. Yet his plans prospered, and when Douglas retired in the following year the Director allowed him to succeed as custodian of Chinese books. So modest a man was Giles that he acknowledged a debt of gratitude to Thompson for not thwarting his ambition. That he was the best man for the post, and that the Director and the Trustees ought to have been grateful to him, was an idea which never occurred to him.

For the next thirty years Giles had, in his own words, "an ideal retreat" among the Chinese books and manuscripts. In the year 1909 the collection received an addition in the shape of the Stein manuscripts, and it was clear that a

new task had come his way. The First World War, during which he was seconded for service at the Admiralty, interrupted his plans, but from 1919 onwards to the last year of his life he was engaged in preparing a catalogue of the Chinese documents from Tunhuang, and in the course of this work he published from time to time the results of his investigations. The most important of these are to be found in *Chinese Inscriptions* (1928) (an Appendix to Stein's *Innermost Asia*); *Dated Chinese Manuscripts in the Stein Collection* (1935-43); *A Brief Glossary of Chinese Topographical Terms* (1943); and *Six Centuries at Tunhuang* (1944).

Exacting though his task on the Stein manuscripts was, it did not engross his attention to the exclusion of other literary activities. In his early days in the Oriental Department he had published *The Sayings of Confucius* (1907); *Sun Tzū on the Art of War* (1910); and *An Alphabetical Index to the Chinese Encyclopaedia . . . Ch'in Ting Ku Chin T'u Shu Chi Ch'eng* (1911). But in later life it was Taoism above all that attracted him. His *Taoist Teachings* appeared in 1912, and in 1947 *A Gallery of Chinese Immortals*. Mention should also be made of *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Limited Editions Club, 1933), and *The Book of Mencius* (1942).

In 1936, on the retirement of Dr. Barnett, Giles was appointed Keeper of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts. One fancy, however, that he received this promotion with mixed feelings. He frankly loathed the business of administration, and confessed that it was always with immense relief that he escaped from it to his beloved Chinese books.

In the middle 1930's, looking ahead to his retirement, he talked from time to time of going to end his days in Peking, and most certainly he would have been happy in the Sino-foreign academic society of that city. But events took an evil turn, and the ritual photograph in the British Museum, which shows him at his desk on his last day as Keeper, was actually taken in the middle of an air-raid in 1940.

After his retirement, he still came regularly to the Museum, to catalogue additions to the Chinese collection, and to work on the proofs of his Stein catalogue. By 1954, however, ill health had caused his visits to become rarer. But whenever he came, it was a great occasion

in the Department, where he would sit for an hour or two in the room where he had worked as Keeper, and talk gaily about everything under the sun. For he had the most multifarious interests. Until well into middle age he had been a keen tennis player. He was an avid reader of detective stories, with a special preference for the works of Agatha Christie. And for many years he had been extremely interested in Spiritualism and had assisted at many seances. By a coincidence Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who had the same interest, had, twenty years before Giles, been a pupil at the same Jesuit school at Feldkirch, and learning of Giles's enthusiasm wrote to him and expressed a wish to meet him. This letter must have been one of the last Sir Arthur wrote, because its receipt by Giles was followed immediately by the news of its sender's illness and death. It is a pity the two men never had their talk because they would have enjoyed each other's company.

Giles was of small stature, with a youthful figure and gait, and a boyish expression of countenance which he retained to the end of his life. There was never the slightest suggestion of academic gravity about his manner or conversation, and all the world felt at ease in his presence. One would have to go very far indeed to find so charming a man.

He married in 1903 Phyllis Isobel Coughtrie. They were a devoted couple for over fifty years, and her death in 1954 made him a lonely man. A son and daughter survive them.

Giles was Examiner in Chinese to the University of London, and was the last of the founders of the China Society of London, for which he worked for half a century. The University of Oxford conferred on him the degree of D.Litt. in 1913. In 1947, the Chinese Government gave him the Order of the Brilliant Star, and in 1951 he was made a C.B.E.

It is pleasant to record that his magnum opus *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Chinese Manuscripts from Tunhuang in the British Museum* saw the light of day in December 1957, a few weeks before his death. (See p. 625 of this Number.) But when all is said and done, it is probably true that his chief memorial is to be found in the thousands of blue slips, inscribed in his large clear hand, which some day, one hopes will form the basis of a new catalogue of the British Museum's collection of Chinese books.