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## Obituary

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### PROFESSOR SIR HAROLD BAILEY, FBA

With the death at the age of 96 of Sir Harold Walter Bailey at Cambridge on 11th January 1996, the Society loses its own, and probably the nation's most outstanding Orientalist. A natural linguistic genius, his early steps in Classical and Eastern languages were substantially self-taught. Born at Devizes, Wiltshire, on 16th December 1899, he emigrated with his family to Australia at the age of ten, and spent his early years working on a farm at "Glen Wood", Nangeenan, near Merredin, 200 miles east of Perth. In Australia, where he left relatives, he was always remembered, and in Perth commemorated with an inscribed plaque in St. George's Terrace, among the State's 150 most distinguished citizens. Eventually he was to receive Honorary Doctorates of Literature from the University of Western Australia, and the Australian National University.

Legendary tales are told how the chance acquisition at his boyhood home of books on language enabled him to gain a reading knowledge of French, German, Italian, Spanish,



Professor Sir Harold Bailey, FBA

Latin and Greek; and from later acquisitions, even a grounding in Arabic, Syriac, Hindustani and Japanese. In 1922, at the mature age of 21, he entered the University of Western Australia at Perth, where he read Classics, and wrote for an M.A. *A study of religion in the dramas of Euripides*. In 1927, after a year's teaching in school, and another as tutor in Latin at the university, he was awarded the Hackett Studentship to Oxford, where, under F. W. Thomas, he gained a first in Sanskrit, Avestan and Comparative Philology. Though equally distinguished in all three fields of study, one may guess his heart was most deeply engaged with the ancient languages and religion of Iran. This involvement was recognised in his appointment in 1927 as the Parsi Community's Lecturer in Zoroastrian Studies at SOAS in London. His doctorate thesis had been devoted to the encyclopaedic mediaeval Pahlavi text, the *Bundahishn* ("The Creation"). Expanded and revised, this study provided the foundation of his Ratanbai Katrak Lectures at Oxford, *Zoroastrian problems in the ninth-century books*, Clarendon Press, 1943 (reprinted 1971). It was during this period in London, in 1928, that Bailey joined the Royal Asiatic Society, of which he was a lifelong supporter, and, at the time of his death, probably its most senior member, as well as its only Honorary Vice-President.

In 1936, Harold Bailey went to Cambridge as Professor of Sanskrit, the post where he remained until his retirement in 1967. With this appointment came a Professorial Fellowship there at Queens', the college thenceforth his home, residential as well as academic, and of which he was a Fellow and Life Fellow from 1936 to 1996. As a bachelor, he continued to live in college, and played an active part in college life. It was then he took up his particular life's work: the decipherment of the Khotanese texts discovered by Aurel Stein's expeditions to Central Asia. These writings were in an Iranian (Saka) language, and in an Indian script requiring much skill for decipherment. The foundations of this new study were laid in his eight volumes of *Khotanese Texts* (1945–85), and reached their culmination in his monumental *Dictionary of Khotan Saka* (1979), and his *Culture of the Sakas in Ancient Iranian Khotan* (1981).

During World War II he had served in London with the Foreign Office, where his proficiency in little-known languages was no doubt of service. He set himself to learn the languages of the Caucasus, Armenian, Georgian, and Ossetic among others, all of which were to provide evidence for the elucidation of the ancient languages of Iran. His interest in the region lasted throughout his career, contributing to lifelong friendships with Soviet scholars; especially of course those of the Caucasus, in particular the Georgian, Professor Georgi Tsereteli. In 1966 he attended the celebrations at Tbilisi marking the 800th anniversary of the Georgian poet Rustaveli, being warmly welcomed, and delivering speeches in both the Ossetic dialects. On this occasion he was presented with the famous Caucasian mountaineer's costume, immortalized in the portrait by Ronald Way which hangs in the Senior Common Room of Queens' College (illustrated in *The Independent*, 12 January 1996, p. 12). In Russia, no less than at home, he was always revered. It is reported an extensive biography by a Cambridge colleague is soon to be published in Russian translation.

Harold Bailey took a wide interest in activities far beyond his special expertise. Primarily a philologist by training, his chosen procedures of research were strictly etymological. Yet

he was far from indifferent to the visual arts of his area, delighting in Persian miniature paintings, and maintaining touch (through his friendship with the retired ICS officer R. B. Whitehead) with exciting discoveries in the Indo-Greek coinage of Afghanistan and the N-W. Frontier. He was said to be a capable performer on the violin, and in his younger days took part with a recital group at Queens' College. Moreover, he took an enthusiastic interest in the Arthurian legends, and was an authority on Welsh philology and antiquities. His old-world courtesy, extraordinary modesty, and hospitable reception of visitors, great and small, were all proverbial; no less was his single-minded, often other-worldly dedication to his studies. He was furthermore a man of the most austere life-style, vegetarian and teetotal, taking only an occasional glass of wine for the toasts at college festivals.

Bailey had played a key part in many academic enterprises. In 1955, with W. B. Henning, Emile Benveniste, R. N. Frye, Ehsan Yar-Shater, Georg Morgenstierne, and Mary Boyce, he was a founder member (later Chairman, and afterwards President) of the Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum: the organization set up, with Iranian government support, to facilitate study of the scattered inscriptions in Iranian languages. After his retirement, he was again among the founders, in 1978, of the Ancient India and Iran Trust, focus for a future revival of these studies in our universities. He helped purchase their headquarters at Brooklands House in Cambridge, donating his vast library. He had been elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1944, President of the Philological Society in 1948, and was knighted in 1960. From 1964–7 he served as President of the Royal Asiatic Society. The Society's Gold Medal was awarded him in 1971, and he became the first recipient of its newly founded Denis Sinor Gold Medal for Inner Asian Studies in 1993. Amongst innumerable honours he was an Honorary Fellow of SOAS, and of St. Catherine's College, Oxford, an Hon. D.Litt. of Oxford, and an Hon. D.D. of Manchester. He was a Member, too, of the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish Academies.

After his retirement from teaching in 1967, Sir Harold pursued his researches with unflagging vigour. A complimentary volume offered to him by the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (BSOAS XXXIII, 1, 1970), contains a bibliography of his 162 writings up to that time. Further articles were dedicated to him in *JRAS* 1990, 1, pp. 6–16, on the occasion of his 90th birthday. Yet to catalogue his even more numerous writings subsequent to 1970 would be a serious enterprise. In his later years he resided at Brooklands House, surrounded by his books, and – a former Garden Steward of Queens' College – devoting much effort to improving the garden of the new institution. He enjoyed also the nearby Botanic Gardens, and, always a well-wisher of cats, adopted a visiting tabby of the area often seen in his company. He had the satisfaction of seeing completed his great project, the *Dictionary of Khotan Saka*; but failing eyesight, on which his line of work made heavy demands, impeded his latest studies. A sonnet composed many years earlier, in 1941, found by Anna Chaudhri among his papers, and read at the exquisite service held in his memory at Queens' College on 9th March 1996, poignantly foreshadowed the handicap.

O weary eyes, yet once again, behold!  
 You keep me from my books, not as you erst  
 So often kept me in my thoughts immersed –  
 Why will you force me leave so much untold?

For the apt pupil and the dull to scan  
Have I not yet to learn the oft-sought tale;  
To read that old grammatic text, to sail  
In chair adventure east by Camoens' plan?

So, eyes of mine, discard this weariness,  
This soul-tormenting ever-foolish play.  
I love to see all things of earth, to stray  
Easily from the path; but 'tis distress  
To feel my books a burden or a grief  
Fretting to fill time lost however brief.

Sir Harold had inspired brilliant students who were to continue and advance his work. Yet even his 96 years were not enough to pass on all his prodigious heritage of learning. No doubt, as he had feared, he was to leave much untold. (Prof. L. de Sousa Rebelo suggests his teasing reference to Camoões echoes *Lusiads*, Canto I, stanza 1, "To track the oceans none had sailed before".) Yet it is his lasting achievement that the Khotanese language is known and can be read, and something of the civilization of Khotan recovered. At the same time, there is hardly a corner in the vast field of Indo-European, and especially Iranian studies, not illuminated by one or other of his multifarious writings. He was no doubt one of the greatest scholars of all time.

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