



ETHEL STEFANA, LADY DROWER

## OBITUARY

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One of the highlights of the twenty-third International Congress of Orientalists at Cambridge in 1954 was an illustrated lecture on the Mandaeans. The hall was filled to overflowing with scholars of widely varying fields of study. They had been attracted by interest in that small sect of gnostics whose amalgam of beliefs and practices mirrors the long history of the Middle East; and they came under the spell of the enthusiasm and vitality of the lecturer, Lady Drower.

For centuries Englishwomen have played an altogether remarkable part in interpreting the Middle East to the Western world—a tradition that happily continues. Already under her maiden name of Ethel Stefana Stevens, Lady Drower had been fired by the romance of the Orient; between 1909 and 1927 she published 13 novels, and she was the author of two delectable books of travel. But it was in 1923 during her residence in Iraq, where her husband was Judicial Adviser from 1921 to 1946, that she first came into contact with the Mandaeans, or Şubba. In 1931 she began to study closely their literature and their history and religion. She rapidly achieved a reputation that may well outlive the existence of the Şubba as a corporate group.

Lady Drower's general works on the Mandaeans are distinguished by clarity of writing and by an alert sympathy and perceptiveness. Her *Water into wine* (1956) and *The Secret Adam* (1960) are widely ranging theses on comparative religion and gnosticism. Her *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* will long remain the standard exposition of the customs and traditions of the Şubba. It is the fruit of methodical direct observation, set out with exemplary restraint. It appeared, admirably illustrated, in 1937, but Lady Drower pursued her inquiries with tireless energy. When a new edition of this book was issued in 1962 it was, regrettably, only a photomechanical reprint of the original work, and the opportunity was lost of incorporating in it the extended and deepened knowledge of the Mandaeans that Lady Drower had acquired during the intervening years.

The care and skill that Lady Drower devoted to the observation of Şubbi habits and rituals were applied in equal measure to Mandaic literature. Nöldeke and Lidzbarski are still the acknowledged giants in the study of the language, as an examination of the work of Macuch amply proves. But to-day the situation is radically different from that of their day, and this change is due almost wholly to the labours of Lady Drower. She won the confidence and respect of leaders of the Şubba, a remarkable triumph for a European and yet more remarkable for a woman. They permitted her to make recordings and to take home manuscripts of texts which had been accounted secret and beyond the reach of strangers. A series of Mandaic documents were edited by her in swift

succession. One, the *Haran Gawaita* (1953), deals with the history of the Mandaeans. The others may be classified as liturgical—notably *The canonical prayerbook of the Mandaeans* (1959), *The thousand and twelve questions* (1960) with its detailed account of ceremonial and beliefs, and *The coronation of the great Šišlam* (1962) on the role of priesthood and containing a description of the *masiqta*, the Nasoraean sacrament.

It was not the mere act of publication of these many texts by Lady Drower that placed students of Semitics eternally in her debt, but the manner of their publication. Every volume is accompanied by a facsimile of the manuscript or manuscripts, some by a transliterated text also, in addition to a reliable translation and notes. And, with her understanding of the needs of scholarship, Lady Drower gave her unique collection of manuscripts and tapes into the safe-keeping of the Bodleian at Oxford. Finally, in collaboration with Rudolf Macuch, she compiled *A Mandaic dictionary* (1963) in which the precious material that she had assembled was fully exploited. (Later, the ground was further consolidated by Macuch's excellent *Handbook of classical and modern Mandaic* (1965).) At last a sound base had been established for the study of a language and a literature that have features of exceptional importance for comparative linguists and comparative theologians alike.

This rare tale of achievement could not have been accomplished by Lady Drower, almost single-handed, without her personal qualities of patience, of self-criticism, of irresistible charm—above all, of deep sincerity. To students—indeed, to all who were interested in the people to whom she had dedicated her life—she was generosity itself. Her friends, from many countries and from many walks of life, were innumerable. She affected a diffident, good-humoured nervousness of the professional philologist; but it was a source of great pleasure to her—and of great honour to us—that she was numbered among the Honorary Fellows of this School (in addition to her other honours). In the fulness of years she had reaped a rich harvest. May the Great Life be gracious to her in the World of Light.

J. B. SEGAL