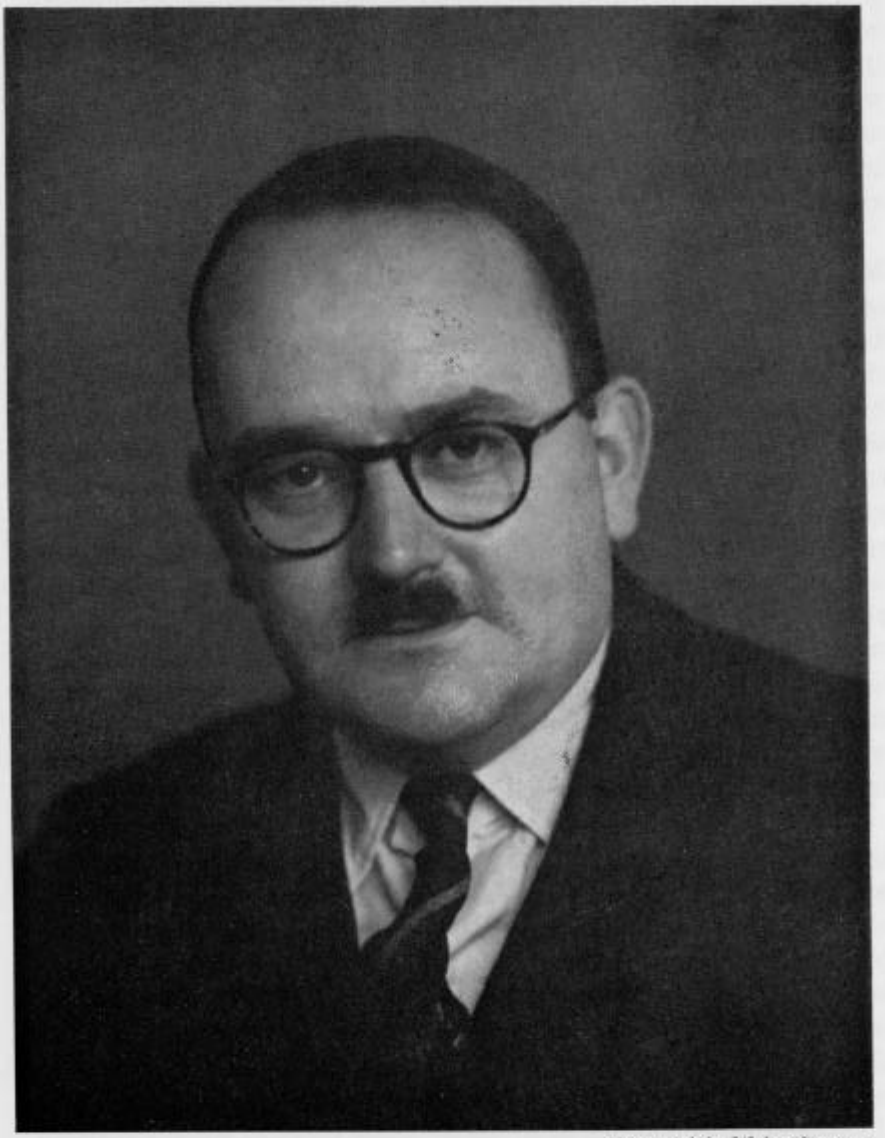
PLATE XXII



Photograph by Walter Stoneman

ARTHUR JOHN ARBERRY

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1905–1969

ARTHUR JOHN ARBERRY was born at Portsmouth on 12 May 1905, penultimate member of a large family whose father was at that time a petty-officer in the Royal Navy. He was particularly, if (for one so pacific) somewhat surprisingly, proud of his father's service, in the signals branch, at the Battle of Jutland; and though his own career, and his developing tastes and interests, took him far out of his family's modest orbit, he never lost touch with them, remaining affectionate and loyal to their persons (or, as time passed, to their memory in some cases) until the end of his life. His own family life was equally animated by simple and old-fashioned piety: while in Egypt in the early 1930s he met Miss Sarina Simons, a native of Braila, in Romania; they married in 1932 and had one daughter, Anna, on whom they lavished all the care and affection they had hoped (as they often said) to bestow on a family of somewhat larger proportions. The widow died in January 1973; the daughter survives them.

Arberry proceeded by hard-won scholarships to Portsmouth Grammar School and Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he was a Senior Scholar. At first he continued to read the Classics which had brought him to Cambridge, gaining a First Class in both parts of the Tripos, with a portentous distinction in Literature in Part II. The traditional approaches of Classical Studies would influence him for the rest of his life; but in 1927 he transferred his professional interest to the Oriental Languages for which his College had a measure of traditional celebrity, and again gained a First Class in both parts of the second Tripos within the space of only two years. His chosen life's work, the study of the languages, literatures, and thought of the Islamic world (specifically of Arabic and Persian), had been entered upon in triumph. He became Sir William Browne Medallist, E. G. Browne Scholar, William Wright Student, Senior Goldsmiths' Student, and finally in 1931 Fellow of Pembroke College. It has been unkindly observed that these rewards, in the years in question, would fall more or less automatically to anyone who gained the Tripos standing that Arberry attained, for they were in some cases governed by the Calendar, and competition in such a field in those days was in any case slight to non-existent. Against this, it can be urged that

Arberry's abilities were very real, and that the standards of such critics as R. A. Nicholson and A. A. Bevan were anything but lenient. Where Arberry's particular good fortune lay was in the fact that his talents and tastes so closely conformed to those of his judges, for whom (and above all for Nicholson) he retained an unfeigned respect that, as the years accumulated, bordered ever more nearly on reverent devotion.

The seven years of his student life was a period to which Arberry looked back with never-tarnished pride and satisfaction, at least as concerned his academic career and his intellectual growth. He would often allude, however, to less happy recollections of his personal and social life in those days. Though small, the College and the University had a considerable component of 'hearties' and philistines among the undergraduates, with whom at best he found it hard to get along and who at worst made his life more than something of a torment. Even much later in life, Arberry's opinion of his abilities combined with a shy temperament to irritate many of his colleagues, goading them sometimes to savage attack upon him despite their recognition of his essential kindness and quiet good-humour, to say nothing of his fundamental ability: it may well be supposed that as a bright young scholarship-boy these character-traits, almost inviting victimization, were even more abrasively in evidence.

In 1932 began a period of 12 or 13 years which, while very fruitful in terms of study and publication, gave Arberry considerably less over-all sense of satisfaction and achievement. Having reached no convincing conclusion to his reflections on the possibility of a call to holy orders, and being under the pressing necessity to earn some sort of regular livelihood, he abandoned the brilliant but short-lived rewards of Cambridge for the post of Head of the Classics Department at Cairo University. At that date, this was a prestigious appointment of its kind and in no way a banishment to outer academic darkness; at the same time, it enabled him not only to reinforce his Islamic interests, but to give them a foundation of actuality and modernity which they otherwise lacked. This represented in fact his only physical immersion in the contemporary Middle East; but, such as it was, it was still a great advance on the position of many of his Orientalist teachers and colleagues, who unashamedly admitted to never having gone, or tried to go, further east than Vienna. By 1934 he was back in Britain as Assistant Librarian at the India Office, where he gained

unique experience in the handling and appraisal of Islamic manuscripts, as well as many opportunities to publish material not always known or freely available to the scholarly world at large. One may take satisfaction that if this material was sometimes monopolized, it was at least in skilful and sensitive hands. With the coming of World War II, Arberry was seconded first to Postal Censorship and then to the Ministry of Information, where he helped to plead the Allied cause and Allied goodwill to the literate part of the population of the Arab lands, as well as of Iran and Turkey. Typically, many of the publications and broadcasts with which he was associated contained material of an almost impossibly high intellectual and aesthetic standard for the crudely tendentious purpose in hand. All his life, Arberry deserved to be regarded as an 'artist' in the sense that he wrote and spoke primarily to fulfil his own needs and aspirations rather than to communicate with a clearly envisioned audience.

In 1944, though the War still had a year or so to run, Arberry returned, at least formally, to the explicitly academic world to which he felt he essentially belonged. This period was to last a quarter-century, ending with his death, before retirement, on 2 October 1969. In terms of honours and *éclat* it opened with coruscating brilliance: as with his prizes and his scholarships, and his award of the Cambridge Litt.D. at the early age of 31, he never ceased to be unsophisticatedly proud of occupying three Chairs in the space of as many years—that of Persian, at London, 1944; of Arabic (together with the Headship of the Near and Middle East Department), at London, 1946; and the Sir Thomas Adams's Professorship of Arabic at Cambridge, 1947 (this being the old Chair of W. Wright, E. G. Browne, and R. A. Nicholson). But, for all the favourable omens at the outset, Arberry was soon to find himself, in post-war academe, caught up by forces and pressures for which he had never seriously bargained; and he increasingly retreated into almost compulsive scholarly production (some of it of undoubtedly high quality) rather than oppose, or lend support to, his various colleagues around the tables where the politics and economics of the new academic administration were being hammered out. For the last years of his life, growing distresses of body and mind made him a virtual recluse, accessible to only a few close associates—and not always to them. Many attractive invitations to lecture abroad had to be either turned down or abandoned half-way as the ill-health he often recalled from his earlier years returned to plague him: he was one of the

few academics of his generation who was never able to accept a lecture-tour of North America; and this may be accounted more than a pity, for Arberry was not one to degrade such occasions by producing the all too common yellow and tattered bundles of notes that have served their mercenary turn on many previous platforms. His last public act, on behalf of his subject and of the colleagues for whom he was responsible (*de facto* if not *de jure*, in the Cambridge system), was to negotiate the setting up of the Middle East Centre at Cambridge, of which he became the nominal Chairman. But in the circumstances then obtaining, in politics and economics as well as academically, this could only be described as much too little and a great deal too late.

From what has been said so far, it will be obvious that, within the academic world, Arberry was a figure of unusual complexity and controversy. Virtually no one who knew him and his work and was in any measure qualified to judge both, would deny that his many successes were largely offset by an only partial realization of all his potentialities and even, in some instances of note, by downright failure. Had he lived, as did several of his academic heroes, in the period, say, 1860–1940, when changes in academic and established intellectual life (at least on the side of the humanities) were relatively slow and few and superficial; or had British universities provided an acknowledged place, as do some American institutions, for the pure, 'uninvolved' research-scholar in the humanities; or, finally, had Arberry himself had a more colourful, dominating, and outgoing personality—on any or all of these contingencies, the story might well have been one of virtually unqualified success. It is difficult to estimate, as it always was in his lifetime, how much he himself realized this, or indeed whether for most of the time he realized it at all. The very revealing piece of autobiography in his *Oriental Essays* (1960), entitled with characteristic romanticism 'The Disciple', makes very clear (pp. 239–40) that he regarded his return to academic life from the Civil Service as a conclusive farewell to the uncongenial chores of administration, with its unending committees and responsibility for others. It was, as he says of the Cambridge Chair, 'a most eagerly coveted honour', something to be worn proudly together with his early academic triumphs and the (as it turned out, relatively few) public awards and elections of his mature years. He certainly takes credit (in the same article) for the modest expansion that took place in Islamic and other Oriental Studies after 1947, but again in terms that betray the

excessively idealistic and vague view he took of the general situation and his own role in it.

On the score of recognition, incidentally, Arberry was not a contented man. He considered (and of this he made no secret) that the scholarly and cultural achievements of which he was so conscious had not attracted all the rewards they seemed to him to deserve, either nationally or abroad, or in his College and University. Of his election as a Fellow of the British Academy in 1949 he was enormously proud; and indeed he played an active part for many years in the Academy's affairs. But this was no adequate compensation for other disappointments, and he was always preternaturally sensitive, for a man of his eminence, to even the most trifling criticism or opposition. He had small capacity to see himself as he appeared to others and this, combined with erratic and sometimes fickle judgement of people and events, inevitably meant in the long run that he inspired more affection and compassion than loyalty or confidence; and that in not a few instances he provoked open hostility.

Any honest and rounded assessment must accordingly take for granted that, despite the best of intentions, Arberry did not enjoy even modest success as an administrator or a working colleague. To judge, too, by comments from students, he did not find it easy to 'project' himself as an effective teacher. All this says nothing of his gift for quiet friendship, of which more later. But as a public figure he must be judged almost exclusively on his scholarship and his record of publication.

Of Arberry's formidable erudition, as of his ability to apply it quickly and appositely, there can be no doubt whatsoever. He had a first-rate background in Classical Studies, and that not only in language and literature but in philosophy as well. He was well-read in theology and mysticism, both generally and as regarded the Islamic religion in particular. His knowledge of the Islamic languages and literatures was bookish, but deep and wide-ranging. Yet in all this his intellectual outlook was more than a little old-fashioned: again, one may emphasize the 'classical' colouring of his heritage, in the sense that he dealt primarily in texts and absolutes and abstractions. He had little understanding of, and even less use for, post-classical historiography, modern techniques of literary criticism and analysis, or the new insights gained from linguistics and the social sciences. The milieu in which he felt most at home, and which to a great extent he must have built up out of his own

imagination, was on the one hand that of his teachers and their teachers, on the other the spiritual world of medieval Islam that was his chosen field of study. But his intellectual movements were quick and sensitive, often original; and he could handle ideas and words with, at his best, remarkable skill and speed. At less than his best, there were lapses, all too frequent as time went on, into the facile and the precious—which brings one to his record of publication.

Of all the several major figures in Islamic Studies lost in unusual prematurity to the world, and particularly to the English-speaking world, in the late 1960s and the opening years of the 70s, Arberry was incomparably the most prolific. Indeed, his output was constantly a matter of comment among his colleagues, sometimes good-humoured and rallying, on occasion outright savage. Apart from his early work, there were few years in the last quarter-century of his life when he did not produce at least one book and several articles. Altogether, he wrote or edited some 70 books (more in terms of volumes) and contributed a great number of articles, many of them now virtually lost, in learned journals and elsewhere.

Before discussing his work as viewed by others, it might be useful to recall how Arberry said he saw it himself. His scholarly and intellectual pre-eminence, he believed, experience gave him grounds to take for granted. What he was convinced placed him in a class by himself, however, was his literary skill and taste, and the delicacy and subtlety of his thought. To use a somewhat old-fashioned term, he saw himself as a 'man of letters'. Proud as he certainly was of his prose style, his particular vanity was translation into rhymed verse. In both mediums he did indeed occasionally bring off a veritable *tour de force*; but in both, too, he could all too often be monotonous, archaic, artificial, and even arch. Even so, the prose was usually very much superior to the verse, as several advisers (including at least one publisher) at different times told Arberry, very obviously to his distress; but his faith in the comprehensive nature of his gifts as a writer was not to be shaken, for it rested ultimately on the wider foundations of his imaginative view of the academic world and of his own place in it. The positive side of this attitude was represented by his general freedom from what he (sometimes no doubt with justice) regarded as the pointless and inhuman pedantry of some of his colleagues. He was always willing to proclaim his total lack of sympathy with the sort of scholarship which is more concerned with a word's shape and derivation

than with its use in the lively interchange of thought and human affairs generally; or his disgust with the laborious research that accumulates useful, but largely untreated, heaps of 'data', geographical, historical, economic, sociological, or whatever. As with his *Scheherezade* (1953), he delighted in posing as an *enfant terrible*, a spoilt scholar playing to the gallery; but every so often he would produce a piece of purest scholarship like *Sakhawiana* (1951: Chester Beatty Monographs No. 1), just to show he could be as learnedly dull and systematic as anyone else if he chose to. His own analogy for this is somewhat fanciful and pretentious, but sufficiently illuminating to merit quotation: 'Picasso could paint conventionally when he wanted to do so, and Prokofiev could write a *Classical Symphony* with the best.' The irony here, that his own taste in the arts themselves was quite conventional, never seems to have occurred to his mind.

When he affected a mood of judicious and 'respectable' comment on these matters, however, he would use a different argument. One of his most constant rationalizations of his publication and other activities was to picture himself as having a mission to bring his intellectual interests attractively and persuasively before the 'general educated public', rather than to speak cogently to specialist colleagues. But if he envisioned his public at all in any distinct lineaments or colourings, it must again have been something his ever-active imagination had conjured up from the mid-Victorian, middle-class world of Gladstone and John Stuart Mill. Certainly, practically everything he wrote was foreign to the taste, and usually technically far beyond the capacity, of any sort of general reading public that has existed these 50 years past.

But to come again to the central question: how did fellow-academics view this vast output? There were some who, disliking the manner and professed philosophy of the man himself, were inclined to dismiss the whole *corpus* as trivia and with it its author. These were not many, nor had they the courage to express such judgements publicly or in permanent form. Yet, outside his very indulgent publishers, there was virtually nobody who, with the greatest of goodwill, was prepared to give his work as a whole unqualified respect. It is true that there were many, beyond the pale of Islamic Studies themselves, who were impressed enough by Arberry's large bulking in bibliographies and library catalogues to assume that he must be *the* leading Islamist of his day. Probably, however, the most

fair-minded, informed, and balanced verdict would say that, while with his abilities any and all of his writings could have been outstandingly good, only a handful were so in fact. The common feeling was that whatever daemon of insecurity or ambition drove him to such rapid and continuous publication, he rarely if ever allowed himself the time or reflection to complete a task properly. Opinion might well differ as to which selection of his writings is of lasting value, but (with the possible exception of the last three items) the following short list might meet the most general consensus:

The various library and other catalogues he compiled; his first major work, to which he was directed by R. A. Nicholson, the *Mawāqif of Niffarī* (1935); *Kings and Beggars* (1945), chiefly valuable for its fine introduction; *The Spiritual Physick of Rhazes* (1950); *Sufism* (1951); *Avicenna on Theology* (1951); *The Koran Interpreted* (1955); *Reason and Revelation in Islam* (1957); *The Seven Odes* (1957); *Classical Persian Literature* (1958); *Arabic Poetry* (1965).

All of the works in this list have one or more clearly recognizable and typical deficiencies; but they are redeemed either by exhibiting such deficiencies in a reduced degree as compared with the many other titles not included, or by special merits that must be taken as a large measure of compensation. In other words, the above-named titles are those works in which Arberry, in a moment of clearer insight or by the nature of the subject-matter, was enabled to control his innate shortcomings while making the most of his own special gifts: these works represent the contribution which, in his own generation, probably he alone was capable of making to the general body of Islamic Studies.

Since the above strictures, both explicit and implied, are unusual and peculiarly severe in a notice such as this, it might be proper to pass from generalities to a more detailed discussion of one or two specific items.

Probably the most important and useful of all Arberry's writings was his new translation of the Koran. It has been rightly praised as elegant and attractive, a sort of 'revelation' and a 'new creation' in its own right. Certainly, it is easily the best of the several versions currently available in English (or, probably, in other Western languages). Yet all its merits rest on something of an illusion. The Koran, by the very circumstances of its physical compilation after the Prophet's death (as distinct from what Muslims believe to be its revelation during his lifetime), is in no way a seamless whole or a work of articulated

literary craft; and it is misleading to suggest that it is. Certainly, much of it has a music and a sonority that have hammered the hearts and ears of believers for centuries, but these qualities have much to do with the nature of the Arabic language itself (hence part of the orthodox reluctance to encourage translation into vernaculars). Moreover, as the hundreds of major commentaries indicate, and notwithstanding its virtually invariable text and such epithets as 'The Lucid Revelation', it has always given much exercise of thought at every turn to some of the best and most devout minds of the Islamic community. With Arberry's version, however, apart from a short introduction, none of this long history of varied communal interpretation comes through at any point. This being suggested to him when the work was still in typescript, he inserted the word 'Interpreted' in the title as sufficient justification for his method of procedure: i.e. this became his personal version of what the commonly accepted and untrammelled text *might* mean to a believer, and of the effect it *might* have upon him. Arberry produced his version in a fantastically short time, and it of course rested on a lifetime's interest in the subject. But he certainly did not go to work to equip himself for his task as someone like Sir Hamilton Gibb might have done, namely by a protracted and laborious re-reading of the text and the 'literature' together with all the major commentaries.

Take, again, *Scheherezade*, to which passing allusion has already been made. At this juncture in the history of the *Arabian Nights*, it is difficult to imagine who could be expecting a new translation of just four of the stories, especially as presented, once again, without any commentary or notes beyond a short (and not uninteresting) introduction. What would constitute an obvious *desideratum* would be a complete new translation, modern in spirit and adequately annotated, to replace such never quite satisfactory versions as those of Lane and Burton; but, in these days of economic and academic stringency such a project might not be altogether realistic. This would not, however, preclude the almost equally valuable possibility of a sizeable 'portable' volume along similar lines. Again, Arberry could easily have produced such work, better, indeed, than probably any contemporary in the English-speaking world; but it would of course have taken him longer than his usual *courte haleine* span of six weeks to two months or so.

In *Shiraz, Persian City of Saints and Poets* (1960) we encounter a different, but still typical, sort of disappointment. This book

appears in a series designed to present great cities of the world at the peak of their fame and prosperity; and the expectation, well justified in many cases, is of a picture whose elements are not only those of the intellect or the spirit, but physical, political, social, economic, and artistic as well. Arberry's Shiraz, for which again he seeks partial justification in the wording of his title, is little more than a city of his own imagination, the nightingale-and-rose home of the poets Hāfez and Sa'dī, about whom as persons we are—as with virtually all Persian poets—sadly ill-informed. For various reasons relating to the nature and the present state of Islamic records and documents, the proper discharge of this task would not have been easy for anyone. It should never even have been contemplated by Arberry, who had no first-hand acquaintance with Shiraz (or any other part of Iran), and little or no interest in the 'social-science' aspects of history that might have given his account some substance. This may, interestingly enough, be the one work about which even Arberry himself entertained some doubts of his accomplishment, for he consistently omitted it (his attention to such matters, as in anything pertaining to textual accuracy, precludes an oversight) from the carefully prepared entry in *Who's Who* of the 'inchage' of which he was so immensely and unselfconsciously proud.

As an example of Arberry's 'artistic' but often misleading metamorphoses, we may take a case from the area of which he was proudest, his translations of Persian poetry, and in particular of the odes of Hāfez. Poem No. 15, in his *Ḥāfiẓ: Fifty Poems* (1947), comprises in the original 10 double-lines, which follow, as is customary in most Persian poetry, in unbroken sequence. In Arberry's version there are 11 stanzas of six lines each (a more than threefold magnification), arranged in five numbered sections. What he has in fact done here (and it is a practice to which he is commonly given elsewhere) is to expand each double-line of the original into a whole stanza, drastically altering the sequence, and adding a new stanza (the 7th) which corresponds to nothing particular in the original. Without in any measure espousing the cause of dry and pedestrian faithfulness, one may perhaps suggest that this is going a little too far in the cause of creative originality, especially if no indication be given to the trusting reader as to what is toward.

But apart from physical 'inflation' this poem provides also a good example of how, particularly in poetry, Arberry could often give a misleading impression of the *style* of his originals.

As anyone having a living acquaintance with the language soon recognizes, Persian lyric poetry, despite its rich imagery and allusions, is often extremely simple and colloquial in manner. The first double-line of this poem, for example, reads (having due regard to the hierarchy of vocabulary and style used and making no attempt to impose a false poeticality): 'For years my heart sought Jamshid's cup of me, / Desiring from a stranger what it itself had.' ('Jamshid's cup', as a note could make clear, was the ancient Persian hero's goblet, which gave supernatural insights into the secrets of the universe.) Arberry's version reads: 'Long years my heart had made request / Of me, a stranger, hopefully / (Not knowing that itself possessed / The treasure that it sought of me), / That Jamshid's chalice I should win / And it would see the world therein.' This is a mild example of Arberry's style-distortion, and it is at least free from his favourite archaisms, but it displays his habitual and out-of-century manner of writing.

As a public and professional figure, then, Arberry may not unjustly be seen as a man whose great intellectual ability developed disproportionately to his strength of character, his judgement, and his powers of self-criticism. This fundamental imbalance was no doubt exacerbated by the fact that his early promise and various chance circumstances rapidly pushed him into a series of subsequent situations for which he was in varying degrees ill-fitted. Nor, when the several mismatchings were recognized by others—and perhaps to a limited extent, instinctively, by himself—could anything be done to redeem the situation, and to free his essential talents for their rightful sphere of operation, without an unthinkable loss of esteem all round. In the circumstances surrounding the development of Oriental Studies in Britain between about 1945 and 1960, this misplacement had truly tragic dimensions. One wonders, inevitably, what might have happened if Arberry had followed a different career, for which he similarly manifested early gifts, that of mathematics. If any administration had been involved, there would doubtless have been a parallel failure in that area once more; nor could one easily imagine Arberry, the introspective solitary, as a successfully functioning member of a modern scientific collaboration, much less of a team. But the Platonic side of mathematics, with its abstractions and its poetry, might have allowed his intellect and imagination full and fruitful play, without necessary concern for the peculiar and even extraneous constrictions imposed on work in the humanities. This, however,

is mere speculation. Beyond all doubt, what he did accomplish in his chosen field (if not always as selflessly or magisterially as he believed) was to introduce large numbers of people to at least an awareness of the Islamic literatures and Islamic thought that they would almost certainly not otherwise have gained.

There was a side of Arberry which has scarcely been touched upon so far, and which ought certainly to be mentioned here, especially as it goes some way to qualify, and to atone for, the severity (what has, on long reflection, been adjudged the *necessary* severity) of the foregoing assessment. It has been suggested that two of his crucial deficiencies were a lack of the toughness (even of the vulgarity) necessary to life in the modern world, and a want of impressive 'personality'. While this is probably true, it had its reverse and favourable side. In his personal life he had very simple, uninhibited tastes; and he could, at the one-to-one, personal level if not in a gathering, display considerable kindness and a capacity for gentle friendship. He liked nothing better than a cup of tea, or a glass of something, after a meeting or class; and at a time when so many academics were self-consciously deploring the inherent evils of television, he would happily sit for hours, on at least one evening a week, enjoying everything that was offered. During several years, the present writer joined him on such evenings: if he singularly failed to convince Arberry of the error of some of his professional ways (at least, beyond mere technicalities), he himself benefited by the encouragement of his own tastes into a greater diversity and catholicity.

G. M. Wickens