



RALPH TURNER

*Walter Stoneman*

## Ralph Lilley Turner 1888–1983

SIR RALPH TURNER HAD THREE CAREERS, and was equally renowned in each of the three. His first career was that of an Indian Army officer in the First World War, whose service commanding Gurkhas lay in India and Palestine and was rewarded with the Military Cross at the end of the war; the second career was that of an Indo-Aryan scholar, one of the most distinguished of his time, whose work still inspires today; finally, he was the Director of what became the School of Oriental and African Studies, first during a period of uncertainty and then during a period of post-war expansion and success.

Ralph Lilley Turner was born on 5 October 1888. He was educated at the Perse School in Cambridge, and was introduced to Sanskrit by his headmaster, W. H. D. Rouse, who habitually introduced the best of his sixth-form Classics pupils to that subject, but rarely with such success. Turner then gained First Class Honours in both Classics and Oriental Languages at Cambridge, and was elected in 1912 to a fellowship at Christ's College, the fellowship being awarded for his pioneering work on the survival in Nepal of a Buddhist Sanskrit manuscript tradition.

Deservedly, he dedicated his *Collected Papers 1912–1973* to the memory of Rouse. These papers are selected so as to constitute a corpus of phonological criteria fundamental to his major contributions to the comparative linguistics of Indo-Aryan. Significantly, however, the first paper is a discussion of the phonetics of the word accent in classical Latin. He brought the disciplines of classical philology to Indian

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linguistic study, and later he was to bring his experience of Indo-Aryan phenomena fruitfully to bear on the problems of accent in both Greek and Latin (in 1912, 1915 and 1930).<sup>1</sup>

Turner subsequently joined the Indian Education Service, and was appointed Lecturer in Sanskrit at Queen's College, later to become the Hindu University of Benares. His attention then turned to Gujarati and, inspired by Jules Bloch's historical-descriptive study of Marathi, then nearing completion, Turner went on to devote his researches in India specifically to the evolution of the modern Indo-Aryan languages from Sanskrit (1915, 1921).

Having been a cadet in the Cambridge Officers Training Corps, he was attached to a battalion of the Gurkha Rifles in 1916, and had reached the rank of captain by the end of the war. His admiration for his troops was aptly demonstrated by the dedication in the Preface to his *Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language*: 'My thoughts return to you who were my comrades, the stubborn and indomitable peasants of Nepal. Once more I hear the laughter with which you greeted every hardship . . . . Uncomplaining you endure hunger and thirst and wounds; and at the last your unwavering lines disappear into the smoke and wrath of battle. Bravest of the brave, most generous of the generous, never had country more faithful friends than you.' He transcribed some of the epic songs and prose narratives in which his men recalled the exploits of their battalion, the 2/3 QAO Gurkha Rifles, in both France and Palestine. By this stage, Turner had mastered the Nepali language, although, as he regretted in the same Preface, he had never been able to enter Nepal. After the Second World War, however, he visited Nepal twice, the second time representing the Queen at the coronation of King Mahendra.

Having married Dorothy Rivers Goulty, he returned to India after the war to inaugurate a Chair of Indian Linguistics at the Hindu University of Benares. In 1922 he was appointed to the Chair of Sanskrit in the University of London and thus started his close attachment to the School of Oriental Studies.

In the period up to 1937 Turner had published around forty articles on Indo-Aryan linguistic themes, mainly in the field of historical phonology, of which those on Gujarati, Sindhi, and Romani have

<sup>1</sup> Publications referred to in the text under date of appearance are to be found in their full form in 'Writings of Sir Ralph Turner (Books and Articles)', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, xx (1957) xiii-xvi.

been particularly valued by other scholars. The long 1921 paper on Gujarati phonology remains the starting-point for any historical study of that language; of particular value was the establishment of the conditions for the development of the two varieties of *e* and *o* vowels (to which a further article was devoted in 1925). The three papers on Sindhi were concerned with the conditions giving rise in that language to a series of retroflex implosive consonants, a type almost unique in the sub-continent. The 1926 paper on Romani, later republished as a monograph, firmly established the position of these dialects in relation to other Indo-Aryan languages. Two of his papers on mutually-related subjects, 'The Phonetic Weakness of Terminational Elements in Indo-Aryan' (1927) and 'Anticipation of Normal Sound-changes in Indo-Aryan' (1937) have proved to be highly relevant to comparable phenomena in a wider range of languages.

The *Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language* is in fact much more than the plain title might convey. For each entry contains not only the Sanskrit or other origin of the word, but also, where attested, all the cognate forms in the other Middle and Modern Indo-Aryan languages. Each of these cognates is then listed in a language-by-language index (compiled by his wife, herself a Cambridge classicist) alongside the Nepali form under which it is cited. It was thus possible in effect to use the work as a general etymological dictionary of the Indo-Aryan languages; and was uniquely valuable to scholars in this role until the completion of the great definitive work, *The Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages*. It is quite remarkable that, as Turner notes in the Preface to the Nepali Dictionary, none of the university presses would venture to undertake the publication of the work – this duty being shouldered by the Government of Nepal, the Royal Asiatic Society, and the eventual publishers, Kegan Paul.

In 1937 Turner succeeded Sir Denison Ross as Director of the School of Oriental Studies, while continuing to occupy the Chair of Sanskrit. On appointment, he was quickly involved first with the building of what is now part of the present School and its move from its original site in Finsbury Circus, and then in the hurried evacuation of the School to Cambridge at the outbreak of war in 1939.

Of Turner's time as Director of the London School a former member of staff has written:

Many must have wondered at the time and many more wondered thereafter how so dedicated a scholar of so retiring a disposition brought himself to

accept appointment to an office, some of the responsibilities of which were not likely to be congenial to him. He was certainly not driven by personal ambition or love of power. He did have a good head for business and a grasp of the financial aspects not always found in the holders of high academic office. But what really moved him to accept the Directorship seems to have been his strong sense of duty, a vision of the role awaiting the School if adequate financial resources were made available to it, and a steadfast determination to do all that in him lay to make that vision into a reality.

As Director, he was a living illustration of the distinction which is often made between the attributes of the politician and those of the statesman. He had few of the qualities and aptitudes of the former; he shrank from publicity and had no taste for public occasions and speech making; he was not an agile academic tactician, nor was he a conspicuously gifted chairman of committees, being too tolerant and courteous to deal effectively with irrelevance and prolixity; he relied more on the inherent strength of the case he was advocating than on forcefulness and artifice in its presentation. On the other hand, he had many of the virtues of the true statesman: a clear vision of his long-term strategic objectives, patience, persistence and determination in seeking to attain them, and the indispensable gift of sensing when the time had come for decisive action.

He became Director when the School had been in existence for twenty years. Though its achievements in that period had been highly creditable and its staff included a number of scholars of distinction, it had to struggle against the most severe penury and, despite the firm and enlightened backing of the Court and Senate of the University, its future must still have looked precarious. One of the immediate objectives was to improve the financial position and to extract the maximum advantage from the School's membership of the federal University of London.

The last of these objectives was the first to be realised, when in 1938, with financial help from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Department of the Languages and Cultures of Africa was inaugurated, with Professor Ida Ward as its Head. This was the first such department in a British university and led to the change in the School's name to 'The School of Oriental and African Studies'.

The second objective was of a different nature, more a continuing process, the momentum of which had to be maintained. It did not begin with Turner's tenure of the Directorship, nor did it end with his retirement, but its importance to the School was one of his articles of faith. He saw that specialist institutions standing on their own not only were especially vulnerable but also were in danger of becoming unduly introverted. Membership of a strong federation was therefore greatly to their advantage. That advantage was enhanced for the School when it was enabled to leave its old building in Finsbury Circus and transfer its activities to a new site in the central University precinct in Bloomsbury, a long and complicated exercise finally accomplished though not initiated during Turner's Directorship. In his valedictory address in 1957 he noted with satisfaction that, whereas in the School's early years the only real academic link with other colleges was the

tenuous one of membership of the Board of Studies in Oriental Languages and Literatures, by the time of his retirement members of the staff were participating in the work of no fewer than eleven Boards of Studies and providing the chairmen of four of them.

The most important task of all, was to improve the financial position. On Turner's initiative, the Foreign Office, the India Office, the Colonial Office and the War Office were persuaded to set up an Inter-departmental Committee to consider the School's case for increased financial assistance. A detailed exposition prepared under his direction convinced the Committee, which recommended to the Treasury that the School's income should be nearly doubled. The Treasury, however, turned a deaf ear; expansion on the scale envisaged would, said the Chancellor of the Exchequer, have to wait for 'happier times', the Treasury version of the Greek Kalends. A few months later, the country was at war.

Even before that, when it had become probable that the outbreak of war would not be long delayed, Turner had begun to urge upon the service departments that they were seriously under-provided with personnel trained in Asian languages, particularly Japanese and Chinese. After hostilities began, he redoubled his efforts. When full allowance has been made for other preoccupations, the complacency and unimaginative short-sightedness of the responses he received almost beggar belief. As late as August 1941 he was told by the War Office that 'we are at present reasonably insured in the matter of officers knowing Oriental languages'. He must at times have felt like Mirabeau: 'J'aurai probablement le sort de Cassandre; je prédirai toujours vrai et ne serai jamais cru.' When Japan attacked and a series of disasters rapidly followed, his warnings were at last seen to have been justified; and the School was called upon at short notice and with limited resources to train many hundreds of young servicemen in Chinese and Japanese for intelligence duties in Eastern theatres of war. By the time the requirement came to an end nearly 1,700 such students had been trained at the School.

Meanwhile, with his usual foresight, Turner was already looking ahead to the post-war period. The ever-growing importance of the countries of Asia and Africa (and the USSR) in world affairs, and the consequent need to build up in Britain an adequate fund of expertise in the languages and cultures of their peoples provided what he perceived to be a unique opportunity to try and secure the future of Asian and African (and Slavonic and East European) studies in British universities. As early as autumn 1943 he began to prepare the ground. Largely as a result of his patient and unflagging advocacy, strongly backed by Lord Hailey, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs appointed in 1944 the Scarbrough Commission of Enquiry into means of improving the study in post-war Britain of Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African languages and cultures. Turner took the lead in supplying and marshalling evidence for presentation to the Commission, which worked with exceptional speed to produce by 1946 a report effectively endorsing all his arguments in favour of a major expansion in the provision for these studies in British universities and the building up of the School and its sister

institution, the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, as the main centres. His great satisfaction with this result of his protracted labour was exceeded only by that which he felt when the first post-war government decided to implement the recommendations in full and made substantial earmarked grants available for the purpose.

None knew better than Turner that expansion on the scale envisaged should ideally have been spread over a period of ten to fifteen years to minimize any danger to the maintenance of academic standards. Nevertheless, recognising that the financial climate might quickly deteriorate and wishing to take advantage of the pool of promising young scholars who were being released from the armed forces after having their interest awakened during service in Asia or Africa, he decided on a bold course of rapid recruitment and training while the funds were available and before other national needs emerged to claim priority. In the event his judgement in this also was vindicated. The quality of the staff appointed in the period of maximum expansion from 1947 to 1952 was almost uniformly high and the mistakes remarkably few. The result was that when the chill wind of financial retrenchment began to blow in the closing years of his Directorship, the School had ample strength to withstand it. By any standards, he had been an outstanding Director and left the School permanently indebted to him.

Many honours were conferred on Turner, notably his knighthood in 1950. This must be regarded as a recognition of his service during the war and his period of office as Director during the critical years in the life of the School. The honour which he prized the most, however, was his Honorary Fellowship of Christ's College, Cambridge. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1942, and was an honorary member of academies and learned societies in India, Sri Lanka, France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Norway and the United States of America. He was President of the Philological Society, 1939–43, President of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1952–55, and was awarded their Triennial Gold Medal in 1953. Whilst President of the Philological Society, he was also its Treasurer, 1931–62, again a phenomenal achievement. Although this was at a time when the School's expansion, and therefore his responsibilities, were at their height, he did not push even the most mundane tasks on to other officers of the Society or onto his own office at the School. Such vital, but mundane, tasks as the reclamation of income tax through charitable covenants, and defaulting subscribers, were all dealt with by him.

Turner never permitted his administrative duties to inhibit his scholarship. In the period 1937–57, he published five major articles and numerous printed versions of official speeches, ceremonial addresses, and similar matters. He also continued the work on the

massive task he had set himself many years earlier: the production of *The Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages* (1966–85). Wounded in the assault upon Jerusalem during the First World War, in hospital he briefly had the leisure to consider how best to approach the work which became his crowning scholastic achievement: how a pioneering etymological analysis of Nepali was to be made the basis of a comparative study of the modern Indo-Aryan languages, similar to that which had already been undertaken for the Romance languages. This work is, in itself, a massive undertaking for the life of any one scholar, particularly as it was achieved without the use of research assistants, let alone when considered in conjunction with his other works, administrative responsibilities and substantial efforts for the School. This work was not mentioned in the obituary published in *The Times*, presumably because it had been prepared at the time of his retirement, and it probably seemed inconceivable to the Editor that such a vast undertaking could possibly be produced after retirement. The omission was remedied by a communication from three of his colleagues, who clarified the issue.

Like its provisional predecessor, *The Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepal Language* of 1931, the completed *Comparative Dictionary* was immediately accepted as the basic reference work for all diachronic study of the languages of India, being generously utilised and fully cross-referenced in the new editions of the Dravidian etymological dictionary and *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen*, and making a contribution to Anglo-Indian etymology in the latest revisions of the Oxford English dictionaries.

When Turner first went to India, his interests lay in the languages of Gujarat and Nepal. Summers spent with his wife in Almora and Naini Tal had permitted him to develop an interest in the archaic dialects of the Himalayan region. In London he had the opportunity to work with researchers from India and Ceylon but also with linguists such as Grierson, Lorimer, and Morgenstierne who were exploring hitherto unknown languages of the north-west frontier. Turner considered the problems of the phonology of both Sindhi and the Gypsy languages, and his solutions to basic problems have yet to be superseded (1924, 1926). After the groundwork had been laid in the Nepali dictionary, it fell to him to evaluate newly discovered Asokan Prakrit inscriptions from South India, and this proceeded to the solution of some major outstanding problems of Middle Indian phonology (1931, 1936).

The *Comparative Dictionary* began appearing in fascicles in 1962.

This was added to in 1971 by an Index of 140,000 lexical items and a computer-based listing of each occurrence of every individual sound-sequence attested in the parent language, based on his wife's work as a collaborator over the fifty years of the dictionary's evolution. Further articles appeared over the next ten years, evaluating the data which had been collected; and a volume of Addenda on which he worked periodically was published posthumously. Although known as an Indo-Aryanist, he was a philologist and especially an Indo-European philologist.

In 1957 the School of Oriental and African Studies published a special volume of its *Bulletin* in honour of Turner, with contributions from fifty-seven scholars; it also listed over seventy of his publications, dating back to 1912.

In speech Turner was a man of few, but wise, words. In one oral report at the end of a summer term on the School's work over the past academic year he publicly disclaimed the power of a Homer to weave poetry from something as dry as a 'Catalogue of ships'; but a glance at his writing at once reveals his combination of scholarly precision and an attractive and enlightening English style. He was a great pipe-smoker (he grew his own tobacco, and for a year or two cured it himself, later sending it for curing to the British Tobacco Growers Association), and one felt that this put other pipe-smokers at their ease when, in accordance with the etiquette of the times, newly appointed staff paid a formal call on him as Director during their first year of service. A mutual exchange of tobacco puffs lessened the need to keep up a continuous conversation. Those who have known him, however distantly, and worked with him, however fleetingly, retain an enduring memory of an officer and gentleman and a most distinguished scholar.

One of his daughters recalls his family life:

When he came back to England in 1922 he settled with Dorothy and their first daughter, who had been born in India, in Bishop's Stortford in a rambling Victorian house with extensive gardens. 'Haverbrack' was their home for fifty years, where two more daughters and a son were born, where friends and graduate students were entertained and where he found his happiest relaxation. Bishop's Stortford was chosen as half-way between London and Cambridge for in those early years his ambition was to go back to Cambridge (and he might well have followed in Rapson's chair). But he never regretted the turn of events that led him to stay in the London School.

The garden was his delight. He spent many happy hours redesigning, planting hedges (the great yew hedge round the tennis court he continued to cut on a ladder until his 80s), constructing steps and paths, tending his

cuttings bed. He was a great constructor in concrete: water tanks in the greenhouse, a dipping pool in the garden, and special pits for his MS slips for the Dictionary as a wartime precaution (later converted into excellent compost pits with return of peace). The garden with its various areas, different levels and secret corners was a children's paradise for hiding games.

He had an affinity with small children and was very fond of them and they were glad when they could entice him out of his study to play in the garden. He was also a very good storyteller. His own family gave him great happiness and he was proud of their achievements and various careers. It was a special pleasure that both his son and a grandson followed him to Christ's.

Just before the war he and Dorothy opened their home to a young German Jewish boy from Berlin who lived with them all through the war. The house in wartime was also home for a succession of London evacuees. Both he and his wife were air-raid wardens and took their turns on night duty at the local post.

Family ties were close and important to him: the network of relatives was almost tribal. The close bond with his two brothers' families was cemented by long joint holidays in August in Wales and Christmas at their mother's house in Cambridge.

Not given to social life outside the home he and Dorothy preferred to work in the study in the evenings. Relaxation was talking to friends on the south-facing verandah under the wisteria (and there were often friends from early years at school, and university and army service). Dorothy was the anchor in the neighbourhood and its doings and made the local contacts.

He was a capable handyman, though disclaiming any real carpenter's expertise, and took DIY to extremes. He mended slippers with pieces from rubber hot water bottles, constructed bunks in the cellar for safe sleeping at the start of the war, and always preferred to service his car. Undoubtedly this urge to mend and adapt, as well as his abstemious nature, was an inborn thrift from his nonconformist background. I think he always felt an affinity with Bunyan, having been brought up in Bunyan's Chapel in Bedford in childhood. He also preferred old clothes (and sometimes these needed to be diplomatically 'lost'!). His only dressing gown was a survivor from his teens.

#### An old friend has written:

The impression which Ralph Turner made on most people who met him was that of a man at peace with himself and his fellow beings. This was, no doubt, mainly due to the inherent benevolence and serenity of his personality, but it was enhanced by the happiness of his marriage and the domestic contentment and stability within which he lived. A quiet man, sparing of speech, he listened with care to the opinions of others and was grateful for the help he derived from them. There was nothing ostentatious or overbearing in his disposition. He shunned the limelight and was content to lead by example. Because his example was so good and the affection he inspired in his staff was so great, he was served well; and, in turn, he was always careful to acknowledge the contribution others had made to the

achievement of his objectives.

His devotion to his scholarly interests was absolute and unwavering. He was still at work only a week before his death at the age of 94 and a visitor could walk along the path immediately outside the window of his study without disturbing his concentration. . . . Though he did not look very robust, he was endowed with a hardy constitution. In the coldest weather he wore neither overcoat nor hat and was pleased when the temperature fell to a level which enabled him to skate on the fens. In his later years, when he rarely left his home at Bishop's Stortford, nothing pleased him more than to be visited by former colleagues, with whom he would sit and talk. To the last his memory was clear and accurate and the conversation often returned to the Great War and his friends and comrades, the Gurkha soldiers. As he did not forget them, so will he never be forgotten by those who had the privilege of serving him and enjoying his friendship.

He died peacefully in his own home, on 22 April 1983.

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