



LIONEL DAVID BARNETT

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1871-1960

THE death of Dr. L. D. Barnett, who unassumingly served the cause of Indology for over sixty years, has removed almost the last of a great generation of scholars, whose joint labours in the earlier decades of this century resulted in an immense expansion of our knowledge of one of the most important civilizations of antiquity. Dr. Barnett was the younger contemporary and friend of such scholars as Sir M. Aurel Stein, Sir George Grierson, and Dr. J. F. Fleet. He was already 28 when Max Müller died, and his youngest student is still under 40. Thus his life bridges two centuries of the study of early India.

Dr. Barnett came of an old family of Ashkenazic Jewish rabbis which had migrated from Prussian Poland to England in the time of Napoleon. His grandfather had been a famous leader of the faith, a well-known *dayyān* of the Great Synagogue of London, the chief centre of the Ashkenazic community in England. His father moved to Liverpool, where he was stricken with paralysis. The family was by no means reduced to poverty, but Lionel and his brother had largely to make their own way in the world. With typical modesty, Dr. Barnett described himself in his childhood as 'a sour little creature', by which we may assume that the air of gravity and reserve, characteristic of him in his later years, developed early, and that he was a rather withdrawn and bookish child. He was educated at the Liverpool Institute, where he showed early brilliance in languages. Here he received much encouragement from the headmaster, Dr. Herbert Strong, well-known as a scholar and pedagogue, with whom he later collaborated in the production of a reader in medieval French.¹

From school he entered University College, Liverpool, then part of the Victoria University of Manchester and Liverpool, and read classics. Among his fellow students was F. E. Smith, later first Earl of Birkenhead, and he collaborated with Smith and another student in the translation of Plautus' *Mostellaria*, on the occasion of its performance by the students. This formed his first published work.²

¹ *Historical Reader of Early French*, Edinburgh, 1901.

² *The Haunted House ('Mostellaria') of Plautus*. The original text with a translation by L. P. Anderson, L. D. Barnett, and F. E. Smith. Liverpool, 1890.

In 1892 he was admitted to Trinity College, Cambridge, as a sizar, becoming a scholar in the following year. Here he had a brilliant career, gaining firsts in both parts of the classics tripos, and numerous prizes and distinctions. Three times he won the Sir William Browne's Medal for Greek verse, and once for a Greek epigram. He gained a Craven Scholarship for his showing in Part I of the tripos in 1894, and the Chancellor's Medal on taking his finals in 1896. In the following year he was given a Craven Studentship, and for two years he studied in Germany, at Halle and Berlin, working on a thesis on the *Proxenoï* of the Greek city states. When he returned to England in 1898 he was for some reason unable to obtain a fellowship at his former college. Ultimately it was his first university, Victoria, which conferred his doctorate upon him, in 1900. The abbreviations 'Litt.D. (Vict.)' after his name later led to the widespread impression among those who did not know him well that he was of Australian origin.

Though the thesis on the *Proxenoï*, as far as we are aware, was never published, the young Lionel Barnett showed every promise of becoming a famous classical scholar, and before he was 30 he had made an appreciable contribution to classical learning, with a textbook on the Greek drama,¹ a significant article on Greek vase painting,² a school edition of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*,³ and three translations of textbooks from the German.⁴ But his disappointment at not obtaining a fellowship at Cambridge turned his attention away from classical studies. For a while he considered emigrating to New Zealand. Instead, in 1899, he obtained a post in the Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts Department of the British Museum Library. He had studied Sanskrit at Cambridge under Professor E. B. Cowell, and from now on his professional attention was more and more concentrated on India.

His success as a librarian was rapid. He displayed much energy and administrative ability, and scrupulous scholarly

¹ *The Greek Drama*, London, 1900.

² *Der goldene Hund des Zeus . . . auf griechischen Vasen*, *Hermes*, xxxiii, pp. 638-43.

³ London, 1901.

⁴ H. Swoboda, *Greek History*; J. Koch, *Roman History*; H. Steuding, *Greek and Roman Mythology and Heroic Legend*. These were published by Dent, London, in the *Temple Primers* series, the first two in 1900 and the last in 1901. Later Dr. Barnett added two further translations to the series (R. Maisch, *A Manual of Greek Antiquities*, 1903; H. Joachim, *Roman Literature*, 1904).

accuracy. In 1908, only nine years after his appointment as an assistant keeper, he was given a full keepership, and placed in charge of the Oriental Department of the Library. In the same year appeared the first of his numerous catalogues,¹ the last of which, the catalogue of Panjabi books, was left unfinished at his death. He remained in charge of his department until reaching the age of retirement in 1936.

Pari passu with his work at the British Museum Dr. Barnett served the University of London. He was appointed part-time Professor of Sanskrit at University College in 1906; with the establishment of the School of Oriental Studies, and the appointment of a full-time professor, he still retained his connexion with the university, becoming part-time lecturer in Sanskrit in 1917, and five years later taking on additional duties as lecturer in ancient Indian history and epigraphy.

When he left the British Museum at the age of 65, it was to be expected that he would pass into honourable retirement, producing occasional learned papers and now and again attending important lectures and academic functions. Instead he embarked on what was virtually a new career. His work at the School of Oriental and African Studies continued, practically on a full-time basis, and in 1940, when he was already 69, he was appointed Librarian of the School. He manfully maintained the library throughout the war years, and ably and enthusiastically superintended its removal from its temporary quarters in Westminster to the present building in Bloomsbury. He retired from his second librarianship in 1947 at the age of 76, and his departure was commemorated by a special presentation number of the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, which contains a complete bibliography of his published works down to the date of his retirement. But his career was not yet over. He continued for some years to supervise research students, one of whom was the author of this obituary, and returned once more to his old desk at the British Museum. With the ending of the war there was a great back-log of work in the library, and competent younger scholars in Indian languages were unobtainable. So Dr. Barnett was asked to come back, and he remained at the library until a month or two before his death. In August 1959 a presentation was made to him in honour of the diamond jubilee of his entry into the service of the Museum. In November of that year he fell seriously ill, but was apparently making a steady

¹ *Supplementary Catalogue of Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit Books, 1892-1906*, London, 1908.

recovery, and already planning to return to his work, when he died suddenly, in his ninetieth year, on 28 January 1960.

Dr. Barnett was a brilliant linguist. As well as his profound knowledge of their classical languages he could read all the major modern languages of India and Europe, as well as Sinhalese, Tibetan and Burmese. Besides these he was well versed in Hebrew, Arabic, and Persian. Characteristically, the chief products of this wonderful gift are works not likely to attract attention or bring fame to their author, but rather calculated to aid other scholars in their labours—the great series of British Museum catalogues. He compiled ten of these and supervised the compilation of several others. But his output in other fields was considerable, varied, and important. His excellent *Antiquities of India*, published in 1913, is still a most useful work of reference on many aspects of ancient Indian history and culture. Among other important contributions may be mentioned his translation of the Prākṛit *Antagaḍa Dasāo* (London, 1907). In his early years as a classical scholar he devoted much time to the production of school textbooks, and his aptitude as a writer for the less-informed reader showed itself in numerous graceful translations of Indian literature, mainly religious, published in Murray's *Wisdom of the East* series. Thus he made a very significant contribution to the spreading of a wider and more accurate knowledge of Indian religious thought in the West. He produced many learned articles, mostly in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* and the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, on topics ranging from linguistics to religion, from dynastic chronology to literature. He had great ability as a palaeographer, and edited numerous unpublished medieval Indian inscriptions. He was an indefatigable reviewer, and some 400 reviews were published from his pen. Most of these appeared in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, and were invariably characterized by fairness, scholarship, and good sense. Dr. Barnett usually handled his victims gently, but he could on occasions dispose of a thoroughly bad book in a couple of terse, pungent sentences. Once, and as far as we know once only, he turned his knowledge of Indian languages to popular journalism, when during the First World War he acted as editor of an illustrated propaganda periodical entitled *Satyavānī* ('The Voice of Truth'), published by the British Government for sale in India, and written in Hindustani, Bengali, Gujarati, and Tamil.

He rendered stalwart service to the Royal Asiatic Society, being for many years a member of its council, a vice-president

from 1934, and honorary librarian from 1939. The *Journal* of the society published the great bulk of his reviews and learned papers, and he continued to attend its meetings until his last illness.

His services to learning were recognized by his election to fellowship of the British Academy, on his retirement from the British Museum in 1936, and the award of a Companionship of the Bath in the following year. In 1950 he received the Gold Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society, and only a week or two before his death he was awarded the Sir William Jones Medal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. On being told of this last honour he is said to have remarked, with typical humility, 'They must be very hard up for good men!'

Dr. Barnett was one of the most able authorities on many branches of Hinduism and Buddhism, and he had considerable sympathy for some aspects of Indian religious thought. He had but a low opinion of the mystical monism of Śaṅkara, and the fundamental atheism of Buddhism did not impress him; but the devotional theistic poetry of medieval India struck an answering chord in his soul, for in its theology this approached most closely to the Judaism in which he had been reared. He was always a loyal and devoted Jew, and his learning and ability were also expended in the service of his faith. On coming to London from Liverpool he changed his allegiance from the Ashkenazim to the Sephardim, the second great division of European Jewry, and joined the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, Bevis Marks. Here he served as an elder, and as a member of the Sephardic Board of Guardians. As chairman of the Synagogue Archives Committee he turned his experience of librarianship to good use in the service of his Community, classifying and cataloguing the valuable documents of the Synagogue, and publishing two volumes from its records.¹ In his earlier years he took great interest in Jew's College, and was a member of its council and education committee. His Judaism was part of his very life. A conservative both in religion and in politics, he was one of the few English Jews to oppose Zionism. The formation of the state of Israel, and its success in maintaining itself against Arab opposition, in no way altered this view. To the last he maintained that Israel was a perversion of the true mission of Jewry.

Dr. Barnett married Blanche Berliner, daughter of a well-known minister of St. John's Wood Synagogue, in 1901. His

¹ *El Libro de los Acuerdos . . .*, O.U.P., 1931; *Bevis Marks Records . . .*, O.U.P., 1940.

wife, whom he dearly loved, predeceased him in 1955. He is survived by a son and a daughter; the former, Dr. Richard D. Barnett, also an eminent scholar, has followed his father in the British Museum, but in another department, being Keeper of Western Asiatic Antiquities.

Superficially, at least in his later years, Dr. Barnett seemed rather detached and remote. Yet one quickly learned to feel great affection and respect for him. His colleagues and subordinates at the British Museum loved him for his complete unselfishness, for his consideration, and for the help which he ungrudgingly gave to all who needed his advice or assistance. He was a model of punctuality and administrative efficiency, and could, when the occasion demanded, criticize unscholarliness and inefficiency in laconically censorious minutes. But, in the words of one of his former colleagues, 'he drove himself hard, but was ever kind and considerate to his staff, and merely by his example drew from them their best efforts'.

At the School of Oriental and African Studies he was much loved and respected. He was not brilliant as a lecturer, but what he had to say was always cogent and clear. As a supervisor of research students he showed real genius. Most of his students were Indians, many of them starting their work with an inadequate command of English and no clear knowledge of Western research standards or methods. For them he fulfilled ideally the traditional Hindu role of *guru*. He was never very familiar with his students, always maintaining a degree of remoteness and reserve, and he was quite outspoken in his criticism of them when necessary. But he rapidly won their confidence by his painstaking care for their welfare and progress, and gained their deep respect and love. Many important Indian historians were trained by him, and his name is still remembered with deep affection in most of the universities of India.

His life was, on the whole, a quiet and uneventful one, and he never exchanged the pen (or rather the typewriter, on which he performed with professional competence) for the sword or the archaeologist's trowel. Like Max Müller before him, he never even visited the India which he studied. But he was not without the fortitude more often associated with those of outdoor professions. For thirty years he continued to work, in old age, though blind in one eye; an operation, very late in his life, preserved the sight of his sound eye, but he could only see with difficulty at the end of his career, when he was still busy in the British Museum at an age when most of his contemporaries were

already dead and when few, if any, were continuing to perform a full day's work. In the very last years of his life he became physically somewhat feeble, but one of our most vivid memories of him is of a small grey-bearded figure, already in his eightieth year, scorning the lift and briskly striding up three flights of stairs to the room allocated to him at the School of Oriental and African Studies, with ourselves panting behind him. He possessed real courage of unassuming, unselfconscious type, and his career is a splendid example of perseverance, triumph over difficulties, and service. He was a model of the Hindu virtue of *ekāgratā*, 'one-pointedness', in his devotion to whatever duties came his way. And his remarkably long and useful life was an example to all those who worked with him, in whatever capacity, and forms a paradigm for the scholars who succeed him. It is with deep affection and respect that we honour his memory.

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