GEOFFREY ARNOTT

William Geoffrey Arnott

17 September 1930 – 1 December 2010

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1999

compiled by

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Fellow of the Academy

W. Geoffrey Arnott was Professor of Greek Language and Literature at the University of Leeds. He studied comedy, including the works of Alexis and Menander, and also birds in the ancient Greek world.

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W Geoffrey Arnott

This memoir is something of a mosaic. It is composed of various elements: autobiographical notes deposited by Arnott himself with the British Academy in 2001, a notice by Douglas Olson, an account of his ornithological interests by Roger Brock, and some other material added by myself.

Autobiography

We begin with a substantial extract from the autobiographical note deposited by **Geoffrey Arnott**.

> I come from a loving, supportive and happily remembered, but entirely working-class family, My father, born in 1896 and christened Bertie, came from Heap Bridge, a small community on the River Roch at the east end of Bury, Lancashire. He had an excellent brain but was not well educated, and in his late teens he suffered a stroke which left him slightly lame and totally deaf. Despite this he was fond of music, and for much of his life he acted as librarian for the Heap Bridge Silver Band. He worked as a cutterman at Yates Duxbury's paper mill nearby, and that is where he met my mother. Before her marriage she was Edith Mary Smith, born in 1903 but orphaned along with her brothers when very young, and beginning work at Duxbury's mill in her early teens as a paper sorter. My parents married in 1926, and I was their only child, born 17 September 1930 in the house where I continued to live until my marriage. It was a small terraced house (10 Ormrod Street) with four rooms and an outside toilet, on the east side of Bury looking towards Kenyon's cotton mill. I was christened William Geoffrey, but have always been known as Geoffrey. In the depression of the early 1930s my parents, like most people in Bury, were reduced to part-time working, but during and after the Second World War they both had full-time jobs, and until leaving school I had my lunch provided by an elderly childless couple in the next street, where the husband worked as a weaver in the cotton mill and his wife introduced me to crown green bowling in a local park. Despite the area's general poverty in the 1930s, there was a splendid community spirit, and I have fond memories of street parties to celebrate the Silver Jubilee of 1935 and the Coronation in 1937.
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> Round the corner were St Thomas' church and its attached C. of E. primary school. I joined the choir of the former and took part in the Whit Friday processions, and at the age of four started my education at the latter. I won a scholarship to Bury Grammar School, which I attended from 1941 to 1948. It was a 16th-century foundation designed to provide an academic education for all members of the community, whether poor or rich, and although there was mild bullying (I was fairly skinny, small and considered too bright for my own good) and skirmishing, my form worked, played and got on well together during the difficult war and postwar years. Despite the absence of many masters on active service, the quality of teaching was very high; classics was still the primary subject in the arts, with three remarkable teachers: A.H. Shaw (who doubled as a local politician, eventually chairman of the Education Committee and mayor), E.J. Voss, and

the headmaster R.L. Chambers. I began Latin at the age of 10, Greek at 11, took school certificate at the age of 14 with 9 distinctions, and Higher School Certificate twice at 15 and 16. I was entered for Cambridge scholarships in 1947, and was awarded an Open Minor Scholarship to Pembroke College, Cambridge (Chambers' old college). The classics sixth form flourished at this period, producing also (Sir) Brian Cubbon, who became permanent secretary at the Home Office, and Colin Wills, who became Inland Revenue chief in Northern Ireland. Soccer was the main sport; I played left full back occasionally for the 1st team, and gained 2nd-team colours. Cubbon, Wills and myself habitually met on Saturday afternoons at Gigg Lane to watch the professional team. Bury fortunately suffered little physical damage from bombing during the war, but two incidents remain fixed in my mind: a night when we looked south through a bedroom window and saw the sky's red glow when Manchester was hit badly, and another towards the end of the war when the engine of a flying bomb (V–1) terrified me by cutting out right above my head before exploding about three miles further on. All through my school career, however, I need to emphasise that my greatest debt was to my parents, who backed my education in every way possible to them: sitting quietly in the same room while I did hours of homework, for instance, and encouraging me in all that I did.

I left school in the summer of 1948 to do my national service in the RAF; this lasted only fifteen months, because a beneficent government minister allowed my release to go up to Cambridge in October 1949. Squarebashing and preliminary training at West Kirby, promotion to acting-sergeant in Education after training at Wellesbourne Mountford, and a final posting to Bircham Newton in Norfolk. The main value was its inculcation of team spirit and self reliance. I went straight from demobilisation to Cambridge. There my main teachers were Tony Camps, Denys Page and Roger Mynors. I got a first in Preliminary to Part I of the Classical Tripos in 1950, along with a college prize and an H.A. Thomas travelling exhibition. In 1951 I got a first in Part I of the Classical Tripos, with distinctions in Latin and Greek Verse Composition, along with a college prize, and won a John Stewart of Rannoch scholarship (first on list). In 1952 I got a first in Part II of the Classical Tripos, with distinction in my special subject (literature), along with the Porson Prize for Greek verse composition and Porson and H.A. Thomas (University) scholarships. I played soccer, tennis and (badly) squash, and got college colours for badminton. I sang in the chapel and music society choirs, learnt to listen to chamber music, and enjoyed walking holidays, partly on my own (Yorkshire coast, Derbyshire, Lancashire hills) and partly with friends (the Lakes, North Wales, Pilgrim's Way). Colin Wills and I scrambled up many of the Lakes peaks together, and eventually spent two holidays climbing some of the more accessible Austrian Alps.

I wasn't entirely sure what career to follow. In order to gain some experience of teaching, I spent a year (1952–53) teaching classics at Bristol Grammar School, not with any great success; I looked younger than my years, and found some difficulty in trying to control unruly 15-year-olds. But I was allowed to do a great deal of sixth-form work, and the year as a whole taught me a great deal more about how to teach Latin, Greek and Ancient History than I could have expected. In 1953 I was awarded a Carrington-Koe Studentship for research in classics, and returned as a PhD student to Pembroke College.

T.B.L. Webster, Professor of Greek at University College, London, suggested to me that I should work on the comic fragments of Alexi, and he was anomalously appointed by Cambridge as my research supervisor because he was at that time the agreed expert on later Greek comedy. I spent two years in Cambridge on what eventually proved a mammoth task. The fragments of Alexis had not been carefully investigated for over half a century. By close study of the Codex Marcianus of Athenaeus and other manuscripts I was able to improve the transmitted text at certain points, and by the study of Greek and Roman comedy in all its facets I was able to interpret many fragments and play titles in new ways. My thesis was eventually submitted under the title *Alexis: A Commentary on Selected Fragments* in the summer of 1960, and after examination by F.H. Sandbach of Trinity College, Cambridge, and M. Platnauer of Brasenose College, Oxford, I was awarded the degree of PhD.

My major reason for leaving Cambridge in 1955 was personal. In my teens and early twenties I had led a normal social life: playing table tennis at the church youth club and socialising with one or two of the girls there, being taught ballroom dancing later by another. But right from my earliest days I was aware of the existence of one girl whom I always put upon a pedestal. I believe we first met in our prams as babies. Vera Hodson was a few months older than me; her mother and mine had always been close friends, but the death of Vera's father when she was still a young child led to her family's move to the Lancashire coast north of Blackpool. She was remarkably clever, getting a first in chemistry at Bristol University, and a sincere Christian. Our meetings had been merely companionable at first, but during my two years of research at Cambridge we happened to meet more frequently, and we got engaged, being married at St Thomas' church in Bury on 20 August 1955. This marriage has been very happy, and has given us three daughters: Ann Rosemary in 1961, Alison Susan in 1963, Hilary Julia in 1968.

From 1955 to 1959 I had a terminable appointment as Assistant Lecturer in Greek at Bedford College in the University of London. That appointment, as well as our marriage, began rather disastrously, because within four months I was taken ill and diagnosed eventually as suffering from tuberculosis. This led to six months or more in a sanatorium (Hart's Hospital) at Woodford Green in north London. It was fortunate for me that this illness came just after successful treatments had been discovered, but the six months passed slowly and drearily, enlivened only by the limited visits (only 2½ hours each week!) permitted to my wife, the chance of reading every word of Fraenkel's edition of the *Agamemnon*, and learning to paint in watercolours. When I returned to work at Bedford College, I came into close contact and longlasting friendship with eminent scholars such as Victor Ehrenberg (and his wife Eva), Oswald Szemerényi and Arthur Adkins, while I had the good fortune to take part in the seminars at the Institute of Classical Studies on the newly discovered papyrus of Menander's *Dyskolos* before its publication. In this period too I gave my first papers: to the London Classical Society, at Cumberland Lodge, and Chigwell School. During term time my wife and I invited friends every week to listen to records of classical music; these proved very popular.

My appointment at Bedford College ended in 1959, and as there seemed to be no university posts in classics advertised, I applied for the post of Assistant Director of

Examinations at the Civil Service Commission, then still in London. During the year I spent in this post I was heavily involved with the organisation of competitions and interviews for entry into Civil Service posts as varied as Fatstock Inspectors and British Museum Keeps, while working every evening to complete my Cambridge thesis.

In 1960 I became an academic once more. My teaching career in England thereafter can be tabulated simply:

1960–61: assistant lecturer in Classics, University of Hull. My teaching was mainly on the Latin side, but one course that I was delighted to give linked classical and modern literature (e.g. Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Racine's *Phèdre*, Plautus/Terence and Molière). Though very happy at Hull, in 1961 I was invited by Newcastle to apply for a more senior (and better paid) post there.

1961–67: Newcastle upon Tyne. 1961–63, lecturer in Classics, at King's College, Newcastle upon Tyne, in the University of Durham; 1963–66, lecturer in Classics, University of Newcastle upon Tyne (the new, independent status of King's College); 1966–67, senior lecturer in Classics there. Here again my teaching was mainly on the Latin side, specialising on Apuleius and Roman comedy. During this period I was a member of the Capella Novocastriensis, a choir devoted mainly to singing Bach and Monteverdi, and I helped to form a William Temple Society.

1968–91: Professor of Greek Language and Literature, University of Leeds. This appointment made me departmental head until 1978, with responsibilities for finance and general administration; in 1978 the departments of Greek and Latin were restructured, with a new constitution and rotating chairmanships. Here my personal focus was on language teaching and on two areas of literature: Greek drama and Hellenistic literature, with a good number of students who went on to do research successfully in both these fields. During my time as professor I acted as external examiner for at least a dozen British universities at pre-graduate and postgraduate levels. One PhD viva that I handled was that of Richard Hunter, subsequently appointed Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge, where my fellow-examiner was F.H. Sandbach, and the viva was held in the same room of Trinity College where I had been vivaed by Sandbach so many years before.

In 1991 I applied for and took early retirement, partly out of disillusion at the increasing administrative loads that professors had to bear, but mainly because I saw that otherwise I should not have the time and energy to complete the two major projects on which I had long been engaged: my commentary on Alexis, and the three-volume Loeb edition of Menander.

During my period in post (1955–91) I was appointed to various bodies, mainly connected with classics [including the Classical Association, the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies, and the Board of Management for the periodical *Greece & Rome*].

While I was teaching at Leeds, I received several invitations to short-term posts abroad. In addition to all these, I was permitted by the University of Leeds to spend the academic year 1987–88 as visiting fellow at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, in order to make substantial progress on my Alexis commentary.

After retirement in September 1991 I hoped to be able to devote more time to finishing my Alexis commentary and my edition of Menander, but at first there were unexpected difficulties. Both my wife and I had experienced health problems during our time in Leeds. I shall always be thankful that my retirement helped me to devote much more time to looking after my wife through a critical period than I should have been able to if still in post.

Greek comedy

Next comes an assessment of Arnott's work on Greek comedy provided by **Douglas Olson** (University of Minnesota), who begins by setting the genre in its historical context.

Beginning sometime probably around 507 BCE, after the overthrow of the Peisistratid tyranny and the establishment of a democracy, Athens held annual competitions for tragic poets at the City Dionysia festival. Comedy was added to the programme in the early 480s, and similar competitions were instituted at the Lenaea festival in the mid–440s. Although the organisation of the programme varied, as many as ten poets competed with a comedy in some years. Inscriptional evidence shows that the Athenian competitions continued until at least the mid–2nd century BCE, by which time comedies and tragedies were being staged throughout the Greco-Roman world. Of the thousands of comedies produced by hundreds of poets during these years, only eleven, all by Aristophanes (*c.* 450–388 BCE), have been passed down to us by the manuscript tradition. Substantial papyrus fragments of a number of plays by Menander (344/3–292/1 BCE) have also been recovered from the sands of Egypt. But almost all the rest of Greek comedy is 'lost' – which is to say, preserved only in fragments.

Comedy is full of interesting colloquialisms, coinages, words for everyday objects and customs, and references to historical persons, and it was accordingly of great interest to the scholars working in the Library at Alexandria during the Hellenistic period. Copies of complete plays by the 'Old Comic' poets Aristophanes, Eupolis and Cratinus, on the one hand, and the 'New Comic' poet Menander, on the other, continued to circulate well into the Roman periods. But the work of the other comic poets survived only in the form of excerpts (often only a single verse or less) pulled out of context and quoted by the Alexandrian authorities, or by later authors who drew on their work, to illustrate a lexicographic or historical point or the like. We often know the titles of the plays from which these fragments come, but we rarely have more than the barest hint of their plots. The selection of material has been heavily influenced by the individual interests of the ancient compilers. Numerous comic fragments deal with food and drink and symposium customs, for example, because they are preserved in the *Learned Banqueters* of Athenaeus of Naucratis, whose central theme is dining and luxury, while many fragments from late 5th-century plays mention important political figures because they are cited by Plutarch in his Lives for that period. Finally, the text of individual fragments is

often corrupt, or consists of a few battered words with no obvious surviving poetic form, or is only a paraphrase of what the poet said.

Alexis was from Thurii in Southern Italy, and is known to have been victorious at least once in the City Dionysia competition (in 347 BCE) and at least twice at the Lenaea (first probably in the late 350s BCE). The *Suda* (the great 10th-century CE Byzantine dictionary, incorporating large amounts of older material) credits Alexis with 245 plays, many of which must have been performed outside of Athens. The *Suda* also claims that he was Menander's paternal uncle, which may be a garbled version of the report in an ancient essay on comedy that Menander spent a considerable amount of time with, and was trained by, him. A total of 342 fragments (including two *dubia* and one *spurium*) of Alexis' plays survive. The longest fragment is 26 lines; many consist of a single word.

Arnott's commentary on Alexis (building on his doctoral thesis) was published in 1996 as part of the prestigious Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries series. When Arnott began work on Alexis in the 1950s, the standard edition of the fragments was by Theodor Kock and dated to the 1880s. In 1991, however, Rudolf Kassel and Colin Austin published a definitive new edition of the Greek, allowing Arnott to build on their work and to avoid printing his own text. The Alexis is nonetheless almost 900 pages long – the author himself was surprised that the press did not require substantial pruning – and is an extraordinary display of traditional philological scholarship. Arnott gives particularly detailed consideration to textual issues and engages deeply and critically with Kassel–Austin. Little mercy is shown to those unfamiliar with Greek and Latin, and the secondary bibliography – the fruit of over 40 years of reading – is overwhelming. But the extreme academic rigour of the work coexists with an engaged and occasionally almost conversational tone, and Arnott will be the standard commentary on Alexis for generations.

Arnott's second great academic achievement was a Loeb edition of the better-preserved plays of Menander. Menander was victorious at the Lenaea in Athens for the first time in 317/6 BCE with *Dyskolos* ('The Difficult Man'), in his late 20s, and took the prize at the City Dionysia for the first time the next year. Ancient scholarship reports that he was victorious 'only' eight times before dying at age 52; over 100 titles of his plays are preserved. Along with his close contemporaries Philemon I, Apollodorus of Gela and Diphilus, he was one of the leading advocates and inventors of the so-called 'New Comedy', domestic farces full of intrigue and surprises and with universally happy endings. Many of his plays were revived after his death in Athens and elsewhere in the Greek world, or were translated into Latin by poets such as Plautus and Terence.

About 900 fragments of Menander's plays are preserved in other authors in the manner described above in regard to Alexis. Much more important, extensive portions of a number of plays are known from papyri discovered in Egypt and published in the second half of the 20th century; Arnott himself was involved in some of the early work on *Dyskolos* in London during his student years. Volume I of his Loeb appeared in 1979, Volumes II and III only after his retirement, in 1996 and 2000, respectively. Volume III also includes remains of a number of unidentified plays that may or may not be by Menander. The Loeb format is in general and by design quite sparse: Greek on the left,

English translation on the right, and a bare minimum of notes. Because the Menander papyri are so badly damaged – often only the left or right side of a column of text is preserved, for example, or there are small worm-holes throughout, and in most cases we have only disconnected portions of the play – and because the relevant Kassel–Austin volume (III.1) was never completed, leaving a vast gap in the scholarly literature, Arnott's Greek text is supported by a substantial critical apparatus, and there are extensive interpretative notes of other sorts throughout. Each play is also accorded a clear and substantial introduction. The quality of Arnott's text and the extent of the supporting material he provides have made this the standard modern edition of Menander, a distinction rarely awarded to Loebs.

Though some colleagues were inclined to play down the significance of Arnott's contribution to the study of Greek comedy, Rudolf Kassel, the leading expert in the field, once told me in a letter that, despite certain shortcomings, the edition of Menander is valuable and needed to be consulted while he was preparing his own edition. And it is worth quoting from a review of the Alexis edition, by Marc Huys in *Mnemosyne*, 53:5 (2000), 609: 'Professor Arnott deserves our utmost praise and gratitude for this extraordinary achievement. … This commentary abounds in text-critical, lexical, grammatical, metrical, literary and historical notes – not to mention the zoological, botanical and gastronomical ones – of unsurpassable density, completeness, accuracy and cautiousness.'

Ornithology

A note from **Roger Brock** (University of Leeds).

Birds played an important part in Arnott's professional and personal life. Items concerned with aspects of ancient Greek ornithology appear regularly in his list of publications from 'Ocnus, with reference to a passage in Apuleius and to a black-figure lekythos in Palermo' of 1962, to the authoritative *Birds in the Ancient World, from A to Z* (London: Routledge, 2007; the title should properly read *Birds in the Ancient Greek World*). The latter is effectively an updating of and worthy successor to D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (2nd edn) of 1936; Arnott devoted almost all his scholarly effort to it after the completion of the Loeb Menander, and it forms an appropriate culmination to his work in this field. Although he disavowed any claim to be an ornithologist himself, the discussions of individual species and bibliography bear witness to a solid and extensive knowledge of the scientific literature, both historical and contemporary, as well as his unrivalled familiarity with the ancient sources and the scholarship on them.

The volume is dedicated to the members of the Leeds Birdwatchers Club and of the local RSPB group: he was a past President of the former body, and regularly gave talks

on the history of ornithology and related topics such as bird painting (he much admired H.C. Richter, the collaborator of John Gould, whose painting of Robins adorns the cover of his book), and presentations arising from his frequent travels. When giving papers or attending conferences abroad, he would always go out into parks or the hotel gardens in search of the local avifauna, taking photographs on old-fashioned slide film, while at home his birdwatching was always done in company, since he did not drive. He was a very traditional birdwatcher, rather in the same way as he was a traditional classical philologist: he kept lists, of each trip, each year, and a life list (there was a running joke about his failure to see a Secretary Bird on his visits to family in Africa, an ambition achieved in the last couple of years of his life). However, though he joyed seeing rarities when he encountered them, he was the antithesis of the stereotypical 'twitcher', and obtained the same pleasure from all the species he observed, even the most familiar.

The above enables me to add an anecdote. Arnott with his wife and a daughter were visiting Rudolf Kassel in Cologne. When it was time to leave in order to catch the train, the two wives and the daughter had to wait impatiently because Kassel's young son Markus was having a lively discussion with Arnott about birds. Markus reported to his schoolmates that he had had a long conversation with 'the English professor'. Later Arnott sent a card to Markus from South Africa, in which he reported having seen a lammergeier.

Arnott was a man of wide interests. Apart from ornithology, he set cryptic crosswords for The Listener for quite a number of years, and as a young man he had acquired some skill as a water-colour painter, which led him to take an interest in the work of Audubon and other illustrators. He was a kind host, and once took the trouble to give me a tour of some of the leading medieval monuments in Yorkshire. But he and his family had a passion for travel further afield. This was often, but by no means always, combined with lecturing; he reckoned that he had given nearly six hundred public lectures to university audiences all round the world.

Note on the compiler: Nigel Wilson is Emeritus Fellow and Tutor in Classics, Lincoln College, Oxford. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1980.

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