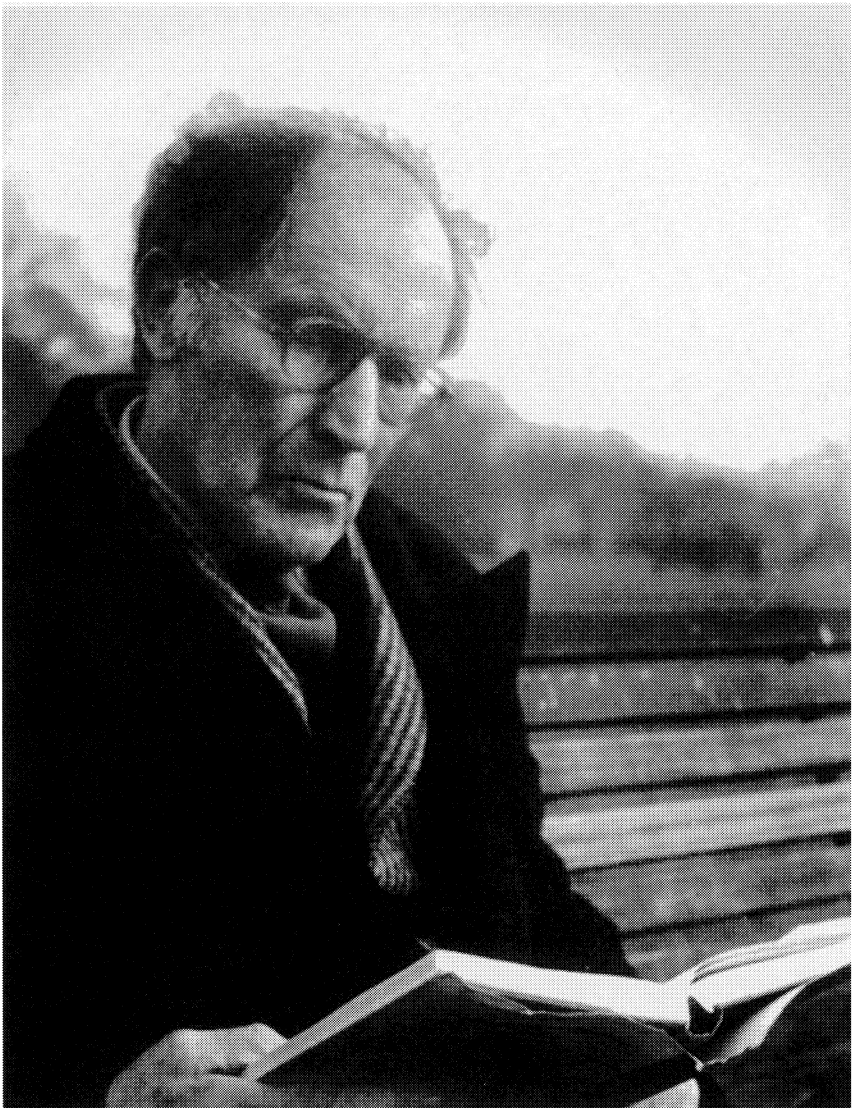

ARTHUR WALEY *Alison Waley*

Arthur David Waley
1889–1966

I

ARTHUR WALEY WAS BORN in Tunbridge Wells, the son of David Frederick Schoss; at the outbreak of the First World War, the family (including his elder brother (Sir) Sigismund Waley, who had a career as a high civil servant) adopted, instead of the Germanic-sounding Schoss, their mother's family name, Waley.[1] He was thus connected with one of the prominent Sephardic Jewish families of nineteenth-century England. He was a classical scholar at Rugby School, and won an open scholarship to King's College, Cambridge, when still sixteen. A First Class in Part I of the Classical Languages Tripos boded well for an academic future, but a threat to the sight of one of his eyes caused him to go down. The sight of his second eye was saved by a period of continental travel, during which he became fluent in French and Spanish.

A connection with Oswald Sickert, brother of the painter Walter, led him to consider a career in the British Museum, and when in 1912 Sir Sidney Colvin retired from his keepership of prints and drawings, Waley became a candidate for the post, supported by Oswald Sickert and (Sir) Sydney Cockerell, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, whom he had come to know at Cambridge. When he in fact started at the Museum in 1913, it was in the newly-constituted Sub-Department of Oriental Prints and Drawings under its first head, Laurence Binyon, with the task of making an index of the Chinese and Japanese painters whose works were represented in the Museum's collection. He immediately started learning Chinese and Japanese, with no formal instructor, since the School of

[1] The biographical material forming section I has been taken by the editor from Basil Gray, art. 'Waley, Arthur David', in *DNB 1961–1970* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 1043–5.

Oriental Studies did not open in Finsbury Circus till 1916, and by that year Waley was already having printed privately his first fifty-two translations of Chinese poems. Other translations followed in the *Bulletin* of the SOS and in literary reviews, so that by 1918 there were enough translations, mainly of T'ang period poems (seventh to tenth centuries), for *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* to be accepted for publication by Constable.

During his sixteen years at the Museum, Waley's only official publications were *An Index of Chinese Artists Represented in the Sub-Department of Oriental Prints and Drawings* (London, 1922), at that time the first to be produced in the West; and *A Catalogue of Paintings Recovered from Tun-Huang* by Sir Aurel Stein (London, 1931) (these last being the half of the paintings acquired by the British Museum, the other half going to Delhi for the Government of India, Stein's employer). Nearly thirty years later, he was to use Chinese literary material from these caves of Eastern Turkestan in his *Ballads and Stories from Tun-Huang, an Anthology* (London, 1960). He also set in order and described the Museum's collection of Japanese books with woodcut illustrations and the large collection of Japanese paintings. An important part of Waley's private scholarship at this time arose also out of his Museum work on the national collections, in particular, his *An Introduction to the Study of Chinese Painting* (London, 1923). In Japanese poetry, he published volumes of classical literature, *Japanese Poetry: the 'Uta'* (London, 1919) and *The No Plays of Japan* (London, 1921), and in 1925 embarked on publishing what were to be six volumes in total of his largest and best-known translation, the *Genji monogatari* 'Tale of Genji' of Murasaki Shikibu (written *c.* 1010) (London, 1925–33). His aim here was to convey the sensibility and the art of the classical Japanese society of the Heian court (late eighth century to late twelfth century) but in idiomatic English. Basil Gray—who was himself to enter the Sub-Department of Oriental Prints and Drawings in 1931, in effect succeeding Waley, although with his area of expertise centred on Persia rather than the Far East—has written that 'In his verse translations Waley not only wanted to evoke the mood and intention of the original text but also to convey in the English mode the stresses of Chinese verse form', and that the level of his speech rhythm had 'the clear phrasing of the flute which he enjoyed playing'. Further, as a scholar, 'Waley aimed always to express Chinese and Japanese thought at their most profound levels, with the highest standard of accuracy and meaning, in a way that would not be possible again because of the growth of professional specialization'.

Up to the end of his life, he continued to produce translations from the Chinese of a very varied nature, including the accounts of Chinese trav-

ellers in such (to them) remote parts as eastern Turkestan and Central Asia (*The Travels of an Alchemist*, London, 1931) and what he regarded as the heroic narrative sections of *The Secret History of the Mongols* (London, 1963). His *The Opium War through Chinese Eyes* (London, 1958) made use of Chinese accounts and reports, above all those of Commissioner Lin from Canton 1839–41, to give what Waley thought was a necessary corrective, for the general reader rather than the professional scholar, to some earlier Western accounts of the war. He felt strongly about Westerners who made no attempt to understand the ancient civilisations of the Far East and their achievements and he condemned episodes like that of the 1839–42 war, fought so that Britain could continue supplying Indian opium to a China whose imperial government was endeavouring to suppress internal Chinese consumption of the drug.

For the last forty years or so of his life, Waley lived in Bloomsbury, mainly in Gordon Square, where he could maintain his connections, at a certain distance, with the Bloomsbury group of artists and writers, some of whom he had known since Cambridge undergraduate days. In his last two decades, many honours came to him, as the foremost interpreter in Britain of Chinese and Japanese culture: he became an Honorary Fellow of King's College, Cambridge and a Fellow of the British Academy in 1945 (resigning from this last in 1962); CBE in 1952; in 1953 the Queen's Medal for Poetry; CH in 1956; and honorary degrees from Aberdeen and Oxford Universities. He had had for some forty years the companionship of an anthropologist and authority on dance forms, Beryl de Zoete, and after her death, and shortly before his own one, he married Mrs Alison Grant Robinson.

II

Arthur Waley selected the jewels of Chinese and Japanese literature and pinned them quietly to his chest. No one ever did anything like it before, and no one will ever do so again.

There are now many Westerners whose knowledge of Chinese or Japanese is greater than his, and there are perhaps a few who can handle both languages as well. But they are not poets, and those who are better poets than Waley do not know Chinese or Japanese. Also the shock will never be repeated, for most of the works that Waley chose to translate were largely unknown in the West, and their impact was thus all the more extraordinary.

Waley sat on a quiet edge of 'Bloomsbury'. Because he lived to a fine

age—from 1889 to 1966—I have always associated him in some corner of my mind with E. M. Forster and Leonard Woolf, for they were all educated in the same special area of pre-World War I Cambridge, and all lived well into the 1960s, shrewd observers of a cataclysmically changing scene. All three were very talented, and none of them was gregarious. They might meet occasionally for tea at Lytton Strachey's house Ham Spray, or run into each other in Gordon Square, but they all defended their right to run their own lives. And all three, rather oddly one might have thought, had an interest in Asia. For Forster there was India; for Woolf, Ceylon; and for Waley, China and Japan. But though Forster worked in India and Woolf worked in Ceylon, Waley never even visited either of the two countries that gave him such extraordinary inspiration.

One can make all kinds of guesses concerning Waley's reasons for not going to Asia: that he didn't want to confuse the ideal with the real, or that he was interested in the ancient written languages and not the modern spoken ones, or that he simply could not afford the journey. Certainly we are safe in assuming that the trip would have been disconcerting, and it is worth reflecting on why this might have been so.

Waley was a classicist; and he was also in King's College at the time when Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson—known as Goldie to generations of students—still presided over young minds, inculcating the virtues of an aesthetic humanism which are the heart of what people came to know as 'Bloomsbury', virtues that were permanently captured in the essays and novels of E. M. Forster.

Dickinson was dejected by the ugliness and cruelty and insensitivity of the world that lurked just outside Cambridge; how could the Athenian ideals be preserved in such an appalling environment? Those men who valued decency, honesty, and compassion must state their values clearly lest the new Englishman—'Divorced from Nature but unreclaimed by Art; instructed, but not educated; assimilative, but incapable of thought'—inherit the earth.

This characterisation of the Englishman was written by Dickinson in 1901, just after the Boxer Rising in China, and appeared in a little book of anonymous essays called *Letters from John Chinaman*, subsequently published in the United States as *Letters from a Chinese Official* (1903).

As Dickinson warmed to the theme, the inspirations came thicker, until his critique of his own society, his affection for his young friends, and shreds from the Chinese poets he had read in translation, all merged into a remarkable hymn to Chinese humanism, written in the first person by 'John Chinaman' himself:

> In China . . . to feel, and in order to feel to express, or at least to understand the expression of all that is lovely in Nature, of all that is poignant and sensitive in man, is to us in itself a sufficient end. A rose in a moonlit garden, the shadow of trees on the turf, almond bloom, scent of pine, the wine cup and the guitar; these and the pathos of life and death, the long embrace, the hand stretched out in vain, the moment that glides for ever away, with its freight of music and light, into the shadow and hush of the haunted past, all that we have, all that eludes us, a bird on the wing, a perfume escaped on the gale—to all these things we are trained to respond, and the response is what we call literature. This we have; this you cannot give us; but this you may so easily take away.[2]

It is remarkable enough that William Jennings Bryan should have taken these letters literally, and written a stirring rebuttal (published in 1906), in which he defended labour-saving machinery, as well as the home and Christianity. What is perhaps even more remarkable is that Dickinson—the political scientist and expert in comparative governments—could visit Peking in 1913 and come away with his fantasy confirmed as reality! He wrote to E. M. Forster, 'China! So gay, friendly, beautiful, sane, hellenic, choice, human . . . Yes, China is much as I imagined it. I thought I was idealizing, but now I doubt it.'

That China should be Hellenic comes hard on a modern graduate school product. But when Arthur Waley took his job in the Oriental Sub-Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum in 1913 such an aesthetic approach was very much in the air, and he breathed in a good deal of it. His first book, *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*, appeared in 1918, and in the introduction Waley wrote of the rationality and tolerance of the Chinese, of their powers of self-analysis, and of their friendship, in a way that could satisfy both Athens and Bloomsbury: 'To the European poet the relation between man and woman is a thing of supreme importance and mystery. To the Chinese, it is something commonplace, obvious—a need of the body, not a satisfaction of the emotions. These he reserves entirely for friendship.' And again, 'For sympathy and intellectual companionship they looked only to their friends'.

Furthermore, in the person of Po Chü-i, the great T'ang poet who lived from 772 to 846, Waley found someone who was immensely compatible, who spoke directly to the worries of Waley's time with a wise voice eleven hundred years old. It was a witty, warm, slightly melancholy voice, one that abhorred pretension, one that could both sympathise with the poor and excoriate the vulgar. On the death of his little daughter, Po Chü-i said, 'At

[2] *Letters from a Chinese Official* (New York, 1903), p. 38.

last, by thinking of the time before she was born, / By thought and reason I drove the pain away'. When travelling through the dangerous Yangtze gorges, the poet wrote, 'How can I believe that since the world began / In every shipwreck none have drowned but rogues?' And, with startling force:

> Sent as a present from Annam—
> A red cockatoo.
> Coloured like the peachtree blossom,
> Speaking with the speech of men.
> And they did to it what is always done
> To the learned and eloquent.
> They took a cage with stout bars
> And shut it up inside.

A second volume, *More Translations from the Chinese*, appeared in 1919. In a brief Introduction, Waley noted that no reviewers had treated the first book of poems 'as an experiment in English unrhymed verse, though this was the aspect of it which most interested the writer'. I am not sure about that 'most interested', but certainly Waley's touch was growing more sure, and he was writing his translations with total simplicity and total command of stress, as in these lines by Po Chü-i's contemporary Wang Chien:

> Poisonous mists rise from the damp sands,
> Strange fires gleam through the night-rain.
> And none passes but the lonely fisher of pearls
> Year by year on his way to the South Sea.

Astonishingly, in the same year of 1919, Waley had produced his first volume of translations from Japanese poetry, having taught himself that language as he had taught himself Chinese. Two years later he published *The No Plays of Japan*. This was an immense leap away from Po Chü-i, but here again Waley found a deeply personal echo. In *No Plays*, he wrote in the Introduction, 'We get no possibility of crude realities; a vision of life indeed, but painted with the colours of memory, longing or regret'.

In another passage of the same Introduction, Waley shows his mastery of combining paraphrase, translation, and analysis, when he writes of the No dramatist Seami's usage of the Zen word *yugen*:

> It means 'what lies beneath the surface': the subtle, as opposed to the obvious; the hint, as opposed to the statement. It is applied to the natural grace of a boy's movements, to the gentle restraint of a nobleman's speech and bearing. 'When notes fall sweetly and flutter delicately to the ear', that is the yugen of music. The symbol of yugen is 'a white bird with a flower in its beak'. 'To watch the sun sink behind a flower-clad hill, to wander on and on in a huge forest with no thought of return, to stand upon the shore and

> gaze after a boat that goes hid by far-off islands, to ponder on the journey of wild geese seen and lost among the clouds'—such are the gates to yugen.

Such a passage is art, as surely as the poetic translations themselves, or the originals from which the translations were taken. If one has a feeling that Waley found what he needed to find—a wryness, a delicacy, a languor, that seems to imbue Genji and Yüan Mei, Sei Shōnagon, and Monkey, even the imperial commissioner Lin Tse-hsü—one cannot cavil, and can immediately find other works that negate any simple generalisation. He also translated the *Book of Songs* and Confucius's *Analects*, for example, and the Ainu poems.

The force of the impact that Waley had, over the fifty years of his creative life, upon a wide circle of artists, intellectuals, teachers, and students is now abundantly recorded in a risky but beautifully executed book that Ivan Morris has compiled: *Madly Singing in the Mountains: An Appreciation and Anthology of Arthur Waley*. I say risky, because one may collect reminiscences, accolades, and passages of a person's works, without having any kind of a readable book. But this beautifully executed anthology is an exception.

Ivan Morris, himself an outstandingly good translator of Japanese literature, has somehow composed a book that is both intimate and distant, that manages to respect Waley's privacy and to be forthright. Much of the credit for the book's effect must go to the essay with which the book opens, 'Intent of Courtesy', by Carmen Blacker, a wild, gentle, and beautiful example of the genus *Eulogy*, building up to a savagely romantic ending, that puts most other such pieces to shame.

As Carmen Blacker tells it, she came to Arthur Waley's house just after he had died, and was taken up to his old room by his widow, Alison Waley. Inside the door, Blacker stopped in surprise, for at first she imagined that the chair in which Waley used to sit had suddenly turned green:

> 'I have changed nothing', she said. 'But that chair by the window wasn't green, was it?' I asked. 'Oh, that', she replied. 'Yes, funny how the creeper has come in.' I looked again. Through the window left open since he died the creeper had burst in like a lion. It had entirely covered the armchair with a thick coat of green leaves. It had flung tendrils across an entire wall. It had seized the long curtain and twined itself tightly round it in a spiral grip from floor to ceiling. It was as though the world of nature had flung itself into the room, and I thought of the swarms of bees which sometimes alight on the graves of saints or the birds which descend at the funerals of great men. That Arthur should have received this oblation seemed entirely fitting.[3]

[3] *Madly Singing in the Mountains* (New York, 1970), p. 28.

As the book progresses, the range of Waley's talents becomes increasingly apparent. The more each modern specialist says how good Waley was in his particular field, the more one is conscious of Waley's independence; his remark that he 'would rather be dead' than a professor at Cambridge dances in the air above those pages that sometimes grow a little solemn.

Waley's reputation grew steadily. In 1929 he was able to retire from the British Museum and devote himself full-time to writing—though how he could possibly have written more in the time past than he already had defies imagining. Fame brought its rewards, some conventional and some surprising. How very nice it must have been, when everybody who was anybody in England thought that Edith Sitwell was brilliant and rather dotty, to have Edith Sitwell think that you were the one who was brilliant and dotty. Having found a book written in some exotic language lying around her brother Sacheverell's library, she placed it next to Waley's bed (he was an overnight houseguest) in the hopes that he might prove unable to translate it. As she recorded the sequel:

> Next morning, Mr. Waley looked a little pale; his manner was languid, but as he placed the book on the breakfast table he announced in a faint voice: 'Turkish. 18th century'. The pages were few; and after an interval of respect we enquired: 'What is it about?' Mr. Waley, with sudden animation; 'The Cat and the Bat. The Cat sat on the Mat. The Cat ate the Rat.' 'Oh, it is a child's book.' 'One would imagine so. One would *hope* so!'[4]

It is an affectionate anecdote; all the Sitwells, indeed, seem to have been captivated by Arthur Waley. His ability to translate from the Chinese and Japanese languages so dazzled them that they spoke of all the works he translated as being his own work. Thus Edith Sitwell wrote in a letter about his translation of the fifteenth-century Chinese novel *Monkey*, 'I don't really *know Monkey* yet, of course. But it has given me that sense of inevitability, of excitement with peace, that your work always does give me.' 'Your work'—whether it was Chinese poetry, *The Tale of Genji*, *The No Plays of Japan*, *An Introduction to Chinese Painting*, or *The Analects of Confucius*. There is a kind of negative side to this: if the work was Waley's, then no attempt had to be made to comprehend the cultures that gave him his raw material.

As Sir Osbert Sitwell (c. 1950) could write in a passage extolling Waley, 'It is precisely in individuality that Western Europe has excelled. Not for us of the Occident the schools of poets and painters, almost indistinguishable one from another in style, and continuing for millenniums: our

[4] *Madly Singing*, p. 96.

works of art are sharply differentiated and defined.' Yet if Waley felt patronised he didn't show it. He dedicated his marvellous book on the eighteenth-century Chinese poet Yüan Mei to Sir Osbert.

The China and Japan that Waley gave to his readers were humane and balanced. From perusing their newspapers, Westerners knew from 1895 onward that China was a torn and wretched country, with its people in misery from famine and civil war, and that Japan was entering a strident and dangerous phase following its startlingly rapid and successful industrialisation on the Western model. Later they could read of the 1911 revolution and the Manchurian crisis, of Tojo, Mao Tse-tung, and Hiroshima. But with Sei Shōnagon and Po Chü-i they were back in a world where courtesy mattered and where good taste was not simply something connected with food.

Waley's translations enraptured readers—whether they were of the Sitwells' social class or of the comfortable upper middle—who felt that the forces of darkness and unreason were taking over. His oriental benedictions to a way of life so seriously threatened were in no way banal. They were, rather, the products of a prodigious energy and erudition, and of a belief that there are certain values that are not transitory, certain attitudes that can never be anachronistic, because they have always been (and always will be) true.

I find it very hard to take leave of Arthur Waley. This is, at least partly, because by reading *Madly Singing in the Mountains* I have learned that at the time I spent a long, happy afternoon with Waley when I was a graduate student just embarking on the study of Chinese history and literature, his lifetime companion, Beryl de Zoete, was dying painfully upstairs. It is clearly fitting that the last words should be his, not mine. So here are some lines from his translation of 'The Bones of Chuang Tzu', by Chang Hêng.[5] This, he once told Carmen Blacker, was his favourite Chinese poem.

> Suddenly I looked and by the roadside
> I saw a man's bones lying in the squelchy earth,
> Black rime-frost over him; and I in sorrow spoke
> And asked him, saying, 'Dead man, how was it?
> Fled you with your friend from famine and for the last grains
> Gambled and lost? Was this earth your tomb,
> Or did floods carry you from afar? Were you mighty, were you wise,
> Were you foolish and poor? A warrior, or a girl?'
> Then a wonder came; for out of the silence a voice—

[5] *Madly Singing*, p. 176.

Thin echo only, in no substance was the Spirit seen—
Mysteriously answered, saying 'I was a man of Sung,
Of the clan of Chuang; Chou was my name.
Beyond the climes of common thought
My reason soared, yet could I not save myself!
For at the last, when the long charter of my years was told,
I too, for all my magic, by Age was brought
To the Black Hill of Death.'[6]

JONATHAN D. SPENCE
Fellow of the Academy

[6] The appreciation forming section II first appeared as an essay in *The New York Times Book Review* (1970) and then as a section in the book, Jonathan D. Spence, *Chinese Roundabout. Essays in History and Culture* (New York and London, 1992), pp. 329–36.