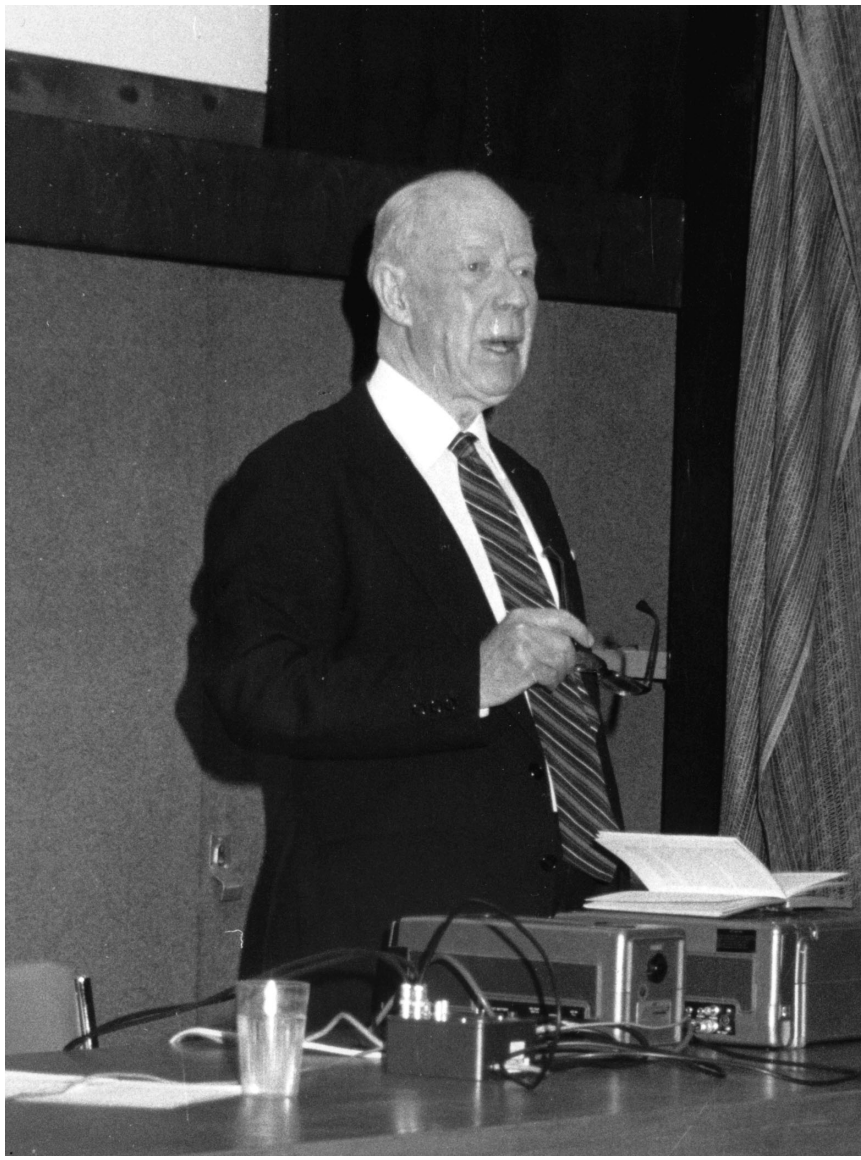

CHARLES BECKINGHAM

Charles Fraser Beckingham
1914–1998

THE DEATH OF CHARLES BECKINGHAM, Emeritus Professor of Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, evoked unusually widespread and profound sadness and grief among his colleagues and friends as well as among very many others who had met him at a more superficial level, yet had at once been impressed with a personality of exceptional graciousness, courtesy, and quite patent sincerity. His learning went far beyond his professional expertise and touched a great many subjects beyond the narrow confines of the Chair which he adorned so memorably. He had studied and learnt to speak a goodly number of European languages and had a remarkable knowledge of their literatures. While he possessed most of the usual university qualifications, he was also an astonishing autodidact in so many disparate spheres. It never occurred to him to write doctoral theses or dissertations whose Procrustean restrictions would have irked him. He read very widely, and it was rare that he was unable to respond with accuracy to the queries, however recondite, addressed to him by his colleagues.

While he was thus a university professor of a by now almost extinct disposition and quintessence, his most genuine claim to be remembered and celebrated lay, perhaps, in the wellnigh uniqueness of his character and patent goodness, and in the unselfconscious influence his rectitude exerted on all those close to him. Good manners mattered to him greatly; modesty and self-effacement were of the essence of the gentlemanly persona he represented in a virtually unequalled measure. The most vituperative expressions in his linguistic arsenal were 'ill mannered' or

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'uncivilised'—and *in extremis* 'vulgar'. Charles had style, in his life and in his pen as well as in his conduct throughout, and in the way he assembled words on paper. He was mild in manner and not easily aroused or stirred to anger, but when that contingency occurred, he could be tough and strong and tenacious. Perhaps he might have appeared to some a little old-fashioned; if so, one can only pray for the revival in our day and age of the characteristics with which this fine scholar and singular man was imbued.

Charles Beckingham was born on 18 February 1914 at Houghton in what was then Huntingdonshire (now Houghton-and-Wyton in Cambridgeshire). He was the only child of Arthur Beckingham (1855–1920), a painter—later ARBA, and of Alice, née Shingles, a nurse. Charles's paternal grandmother was the daughter of the Scottish painter Alexander Fraser, RSA. Arthur Beckingham, though closely associated with Marcus Stone, RA, was impecunious, and when he died in 1920, he left Charles's mother, who was 29 years her husband's junior, very short of money. Their son was just six at the time and subsequently had only hazy memories of his father. Charles was educated at local day schools, but from Huntingdon Grammar School he won a State Scholarship, a County Major Scholarship, and an Open Scholarship in English and History to Queens' College, Cambridge. His extraordinary command of, and sensitivity to, English as well as his historical erudition were thus manifested at an early age. His loyalty to Queens' College remained with him throughout his life.

At Cambridge he took both parts of the English Tripos (Preliminary: first class; part I: 2(1); part II: first) and won the Members' English Essay Prize in 1934 on the subject 'The sense of locality in the English Novel'. In later life he averred that 'except for Jane Austen and T.L. Peacock I have not been much given to reading novels'.

In 1936, at the age of twenty-two, he joined the staff of what was then the Department of Printed Books in the British Museum. His appointment was that of a 'Temporary Assistant Cataloguer'. This category had been specially created when it had been decided to publish a new edition of the General Catalogue of Printed Books. Absurdly optimistic estimates had been made of the time and labour involved in this complex enterprise. By now the TACs' handiwork has long been transferred into printed book form, and their original handwritten volumes have been relegated to the basements of the new St Pancras library—the curiosity of a bygone age. Presumably the computer now rules supreme.

The then TACs were unestablished civil servants, for normal recruitment to established posts had been suspended. There were some twenty

of these temporary jobs, and their holders were regarded by most of the established staff as a decidedly inferior form of life. Charles found the work often boring and, since many of the books being catalogued should never have been published in the first place, he and his colleagues felt the enterprise was pretty futile. There were, however, two compensating factors: because of the prevalent unemployment and the suspension of recruitment to many governmental and professional bodies, some of those who joined the Museum at that time had interests and abilities unusual among librarians or academics. Several of those with whom Charles worked came to have distinguished careers in very different fields. Quite a few 'of my colleagues were excellent company and I learnt much from them'. Secondly, it was useful to him to acquire first-hand knowledge of how to use a large library: 'I have sometimes been credited with recondite knowledge merely because I knew how to exploit the BM catalogue'—a characteristic CFB remark, for he possessed both recondite knowledge as well as expertise in making good use of the ample resources of the catalogue.

When war was declared in 1939, the cataloguers were deemed to be in a reserved occupation, but they were gradually released for military service in reverse order of seniority. Charles worked in the Museum until the summer of 1942. He was then given basic military training and drafted into the Intelligence Corps. He had originally been selected to work at Bletchley Park but was soon transferred to the Naval Intelligence Division of the Admiralty to assist Dr Hugh Scott, FRS, the entomologist and traveller, with the preparation of the Admiralty's confidential *Handbook of Western Arabia and the Red Sea Coasts* which was, in fact, not published until 1946. While it is marked as having been 'produced and printed for official purposes during the war of 1939–45' and bears several notices about being 'restricted' and 'for official use only', it is difficult to fathom of what use this learned tome could conceivably have been to the enemy. Beckingham himself was as puzzled about this as is the present writer. The volume runs to 659 pages of scholarly prose, and page 619 enumerates the predominantly academic contributors, among them C. F. Beckingham, Kenneth Mason, H. St. J. B. Philby, R. B. Serjeant, Bertram Thomas, and many others.

Charles was involved in this connection in a curious and protracted, at times acrimonious, dispute between the British Museum, the Treasury, and the Admiralty. He left an account of this episode in an autobiographical note deposited with the Academy. It is more than somewhat absurd that so much ink should have been spilt in mid-world war over a

matter of little importance and concerning the placing of a minor cog (still in his late twenties) in some major governmental organisations:

> The contretemps began when I was asked to catalogue the old series of Admiralty handbooks dating from World War I. These had been confidential publications and had therefore not as yet been entered in the General Catalogue. I had for some time been interested in the history of Arabia and had learnt a little Arabic. I noticed that there were errors in the old Handbook and that readers were invited to notify the Director of Naval Intelligence of any they might detect. Accordingly I wrote to the D.N.I. asking whether he was still interested in receiving corrections. He replied that a new series was being prepared, so that corrections to the old volumes were no longer of interest, but that he would be glad to receive any notes I might have made about Arabia. My notes, mostly on history, were passed to Scott who was editing the new Arabia volume, and he asked me to meet him. The result of our conversation was that he applied, through the Admiralty, for me to be released from the B.M. to work with him. The cataloguers were by no means fully occupied at the Museum, but the Keeper of the Department received Scott's request with indignation and categorically refused it. Scott continued to press and the Museum to resist, and in the meantime I was released to the army. I understand that a large file about me accumulated in the office of the D.N.I. Finally, in January 1943, the Admiralty secured my release from the army. I spent the remainder of 1943 working with Scott. I then returned to the army and spent the rest of the war at Bletchley Park.

When the war ended Charles had no wish to return to the British Museum but accepted an offer to join GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters) where he remained until his appointment in 1951 as Lecturer in Islamic History at Manchester University. It appears that his war-time employment on cryptographic work had held enough of his interest not to be lured back to the BM. But it is surprising in retrospect that his scholarly disposition could have resisted the attractions of academic life for as long as it did. He was aged fully thirty-seven by the time he embarked on his university career. He developed a great liking for Manchester University but was not much attracted to the city; he maintained his Kensington residence, travelling to London at weekends and staying there during vacations. He had married in 1946 Margery, the only daughter of the conductor and composer John Ansell. He described his marriage as 'one of total happiness'. Margery, who had published a volume of fairy tales translated by her from Turkish, gave him an interest in Turkish and an appreciation of Georgian and Regency domestic architecture and décor. They had one daughter, Carolyn, whose literary tastes and aptitudes are close to those of her father. Margery Beckingham died in 1966, and since then father and daughter have generally shared their home.

At Manchester University Charles worked in great amity under the headship of Professor James Robson, Professor of Arabic, whom he succeeded in the Chair in 1958. Although his knowledge of Arabic was extremely serviceable, Charles did not consider that technically or linguistically he represented what was then still understood by the term 'Arabist' with its essential philological equipment. He wished to be known as 'Professor of Islamic Studies'; he made the same stipulation when he succeeded Professor R.B. Serjeant in the Chair of Arabic at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1965. In his inaugural lecture at SOAS he referred to that change in the nomenclature of the Chair, in characteristically felicitous terms, as having been 're-upholstered and reconditioned to accommodate an altogether less weighty and less substantial figure than my predecessor'. While this was certainly true in purely physical terms, in other respects it was merely an expression of his very genuine modesty.

But I have been anticipating: During the early years of his tenure at Manchester Charles collaborated twice in producing major publications with G. W. B. Huntingford; the first was an edition and annotation of Almeida's *History of High Ethiopia* and the second was a translation and historical commentary of Alvares's *A True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John of the Indies*. It is no slight upon the memory of Huntingford to surmise that much of the caution and scholarly rigour in both these volumes were owed to the restraining hand of Beckingham. During the 1960s he also edited an atlas of the Arab World and extracts from James Bruce's Travels in Ethiopia.

I had known Charles Beckingham since 1948; our friendship was cemented when, in 1959 a year after his own elevation to the Chair, I was appointed to the Chair of Semitic Languages in the University of Manchester. We thus became close colleagues and joint heads of the Near East Department. For many years at Manchester and SOAS we saw each other almost daily, and after retirement we met either socially or at the Academy. This friendship of exactly fifty years, lasting to the day of his death ('let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above'—Job 3: 4), was the most significant meeting of minds in my life. That Charles's own thoughts in this respect were not altogether at variance with this pronouncement became manifest in a moving letter he wrote to my wife and myself on his eightieth birthday which remains a treasured possession.

In 1964 and 1966 he joined me on journeys to Ethiopia and was thus able to see for the first time the country to whose historical exploration he had made such notable contributions. His acquaintance with the historical geography of Ethiopia as well as with its fauna and flora was

extensive. His knowledge of Amharic, though very limited, developed a marked penchant for those areas of the vocabulary connected with food and drink. As my liver was unable to tolerate the highly seasoned traditional food and the national drink called 'tedg', I generally introduced Charles to our Ethiopian hosts as the one who would be engaged in eating and drinking, while I would be in charge of the Amharic conversation. This arrangement worked extremely well, and Charles's omnivorous and omnibibulous prowess impressed our Ethiopian friends no end. Yet he had a highly informed interest in food and drink. He was no mean connoisseur of wine and was a wonderful host. His vocabulary in the area of *haute cuisine* and drink was extensive; he was able to describe with admirable precision some of the more remarkable flavours and savours of oriental or European cooking.

He met Emperor Haile Sellassie twice, once at a formal audience granted to us, and on the second occasion at a command performance of a splendid Ethiopian play by the foremost poet and writer Mangestu Lemma whose social satire 'Marriage of Unequals' was a huge success. The performance, carried by some notable actors, was so vivid and graphic that Charles could grasp most of it without following the details of the dialogue.

One evening during our sojourn at Addis Ababa we were invited to dinner by the American Ambassador. I had hired a Land Rover for the duration of our Ethiopian visit; its handle on the passenger door had the peculiarity of requiring a hefty upward push to open. Charles was not a practical person and turned out to be incapable of coming to terms with that door-handle. When we arrived at the Embassy, the Ambassador and his wife were in the garden. I jumped out to greet them, we chatted briefly and then entered the building. After a little while the Ambassador enquired as to what had happened to Professor Beckingham; I realised at once that my friend had been incarcerated in the vehicle. Indeed, there he sat entirely calm and serene; it had never occurred to him to manipulate the handle—he knew he would be rescued eventually. This was a good example of his angelic patience as well as of his inaptitude when faced with a mechanical problem.

Charles gave some seminars and lectures at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of Addis Ababa University; though impromptu and unprepared, he impressed his audience with his knowledge and self-effacement—altogether a highly successful expedition.

On our way to Ethiopia we had stopped off at Rome to enable Charles to make some contacts in connection with his work on the Portuguese

explorer Jeronimo Lobo. I was greatly taken with his fluent command of Portuguese when conversing with some Portuguese priests. Another purpose of our Roman visit was his desire to meet again the Nestor of Ethiopian Studies, the great Enrico Cerulli, President elect of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. I also had occasion to conduct Charles to the Collegio Etiopico, the only college within the walls of the Vatican. When my wife and I recently visited the Ethiopian College in the Vatican gardens, I remembered with doleful nostalgia our late friend's visit to that wonderful haven of peace some thirty-five years ago.

Back at Manchester, one of our regular meeting points was concerned with the *Journal of Semitic Studies* which had been founded in 1955 by my predecessor, Professor H. H. Rowley, and whose editorship I had inherited from him. I was immediately very anxious to associate Charles with the editing of this journal. Our collaboration, unclouded as in everything else, helped to shift the journal somewhat away from predominantly Old Testament concerns to more general Semitic studies. Another aspect of our time at Manchester was connected with the second international Conference of Ethiopian Studies which we jointly ran at Manchester, in the summer of 1963, at the behest of Enrico Cerulli who had organized the first such gathering in Rome in 1959. The Proceedings of the Manchester Conference were published in the *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 1964/1.

When I left Manchester in 1964 to accept an invitation to occupy the recently created Chair of Ethiopian Studies at SOAS, London University, R. B. Serjeant had just vacated the Chair of Arabic. SOAS experienced some difficulty in attracting a suitable candidate; to me this seemed perhaps a fortunate opportunity to bring Charles to London and spare him his weekly journeys to his family in Kensington. I had a somewhat hesitant word with the Director of SOAS; since my friendship with Charles was well-known, it would have been wrong to exert any pressure. The need to change the nomenclature of the Chair to 'Islamic Studies' (as demanded by CFB) was something of an obstacle (with which I sympathised), for the centrality of Arabic as a language was indisputable. Charles himself had some initial doubts, as he was rather affected by Serjeant's aversion to SOAS. Eventually, however, the hesitations on both sides were resolved and Charles came to occupy the Chair in 1965.

David Morgan, in a particularly well-crafted obituary article in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, July 1999, observed correctly that Beckingham's assertion of insufficient knowledge of Arabic 'tells us a good deal more about his character and personality than it does about his knowledge of Arabic'. In this context it is sufficient to refer to Charles's

translation from Arabic, with annotation, of the fourth volume of Ibn Baṭṭuṭa's travels (the Riḥla) which was entrusted to him by no less an authority than Sir Hamilton Gibb who was prevented from completing the work by a severe and disabling illness. In his foreword to the volume CFB observes that the translation of Ibn Baṭṭuṭa's narrative 'has taken more than twice as long as the travels themselves', i.e. from about 1922 until 1994.

The sixteen years of Charles's tenure of the Chair at SOAS (1965–81) included three years as head of the large Near and Middle East Department as well as time-consuming service to three societies: the Royal Asiatic, the Royal Society for Asian Affairs (formerly the Royal Central Asian Society), and the Hakluyt Society. The last named body published several of his books, and the RAS is indebted to him for two strenuous periods as its president. At the end of a long chapter on the history of the RAS, which he contributed and which was published in 1979 to commemorate its sesquicentenary (somewhat belatedly), he ventured to express some personal opinions on the role and importance of learned societies. This section was 'slightly modified in deference to the qualms of a timorous President', while Charles remained convinced that, under present conditions in universities, voluntary learned societies had certain advantages over university departments in promoting genuine scholarship without intervention, direction, or tergiversations by governments. His wise words on pages 71 and 72 of the *History of the Royal Asiatic Society*, *1823–1973*, still repay careful study.

Meanwhile at SOAS and at the School's extra-mural department he gained an enviable reputation as a superb lecturer. He spoke with remarkable fluency and perfectly formed sentences, invariably without notes. When I felt unable, on the grounds of closeness to the deceased, to speak at our colleague Stefan Strelcyn's funeral, Charles stepped gallantly into the breach. On the train journey to Manchester we chatted until I asked him whether he would not require a little time for thought about his speech. He shook his head, and in the event he produced the most naturally flowing and poignant address of a quarter of an hour that I have ever listened to—delivered 'without script, hesitation or repetition'.

In the lecture room his students were in awe at such accomplished performances. It was characteristically one of those students who took the initiative in proposing a *Festschrift* to honour his teacher on his seventieth birthday. CFB's colleagues took up this suggestion with alacrity, and in 1984 the spring issue of the *Journal of Semitic Studies* was dedicated to him. In a sense CFB did not appear to be a typical dedicatee of such

celebratory compositions. Unlike some scholars, he had not sent forth, however delicately, any signals that such a volume would be appropriate or timely. Indeed, I believe he was truly surprised (as I had hinted in my introductory article), not least because his genuine modesty had never allowed his thoughts to stray in that direction. The initiator of this project, his former student Ian Netton, was among the contributors, for the respect and affection for his teaching, his scholarship, and his personality have not been confined to his professional peers but have always been clearly perceived also by those sitting at his feet and imbibing that amalgam of carefully digested recognitions spiced with wit and a felicity of expression typical of the man as a whole.

Among his many outside interests one ought to mention the congenial chairmanship of the St Marylebone Society. In 1987 he was awarded the Sir Percy Sykes Memorial Medal which he received from the hands of the Prince of Wales. From 1984 to 1987 he was Editor of the *JRAS*, a task which he then transferred to our highly competent colleague David Morgan. When the Royal Asiatic Society (in whose premises at St Marylebone he and his daughter had lived for a number of years) moved to another location in London, Charles and Carolyn found an agreeably old and quaint house whose back looks out on the castle at Lewes, East Sussex.

It was here that he spent the last years of his life—with the proximity of Glyndebourne an additional and highly valued boon to Carolyn. He travelled quite frequently to London and visited his much favoured Travellers Club. These journeys became increasingly arduous for him, as his frailty became more evident. He was, however, determined to continue both his London-based activities and his travels abroad. He indulgently listened to warnings of his friends against such strenuous exertions, but insisted on continuing as hitherto. The Travellers Club was also the venue where his colleagues had arranged his eightieth birthday party attended by his chosen friends. During the last ten years Charles and Carolyn travelled every year to the famous mediaeval city of Rothenburg ob der Tauber (in Mittelfranken, Germany) whose carefully preserved and pleasantly old-fashioned character greatly appealed to their shared tastes and inclinations. Not long before his last disabling stroke they ventured as far as Vienna and Prague.

Charles's scholarly output during his SOAS years was markedly greater than before (cf. J. D. Pearson's bibliography up to 1983 published in the above-mentioned *Festschrift* of 1984). The main focus of his work (apart from his joint enterprises with Huntingford and the Ibn Baṭṭuṭa book—referred to before) was now directed towards Prester John and

Lobo. His inaugural lecture on the elusive Prester was a witty *tour de force*, full of valuable insights. In 1982 he published, jointly with the present writer, a book entitled *The Hebrew Letters of Prester John* which includes several Hebrew versions of that letter as well as Latin, Provençal, Italian, etc., adumbrations of the legend—accompanied by earlier texts foreshadowing the later production. His last book (jointly edited with Bernard Hamilton and others) assembles papers on *Prester John, the Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes* (Variorum 1996). Together with A. J. Arberry he had dealt with Islam in the two Cambridge volumes of *Religion in the Middle East* (CUP 1969). Jointly with Lockhart and da Costa he brought out the excellent edition of the *Itinerario of Jeronimo Lobo*. All these books had numerous precursors in the form of preparatory articles published in a large variety of learned journals. Some of them were collected in a stout Variorum volume of 1983.

David Morgan (obituary, *JRAS*, July 1999) has perceptively said that 'Beckingham never wrote a book—that is, while he wrote many articles and was responsible in one way or another for the publication of several books, there is no monograph, no book all the words in which are by Beckingham . . . The likelihood is that many of Beckingham's publications . . . will still be in constant use by scholars long after some of those recent monographs by others have deservedly been forgotten.' The mysteries of Prester John and the travels of Ibn Baṭṭuṭa, Jeronimo Lobo, Almeida, Alvares, James Bruce, Prutky, etc., held an abiding fascination for him and remained the principal themes of his published work. *Vielschreiberei*, churning out the stuff for the sake of swelling his bibliography, never appealed to him. He was a minimalist in most respects.

In 1983 Charles Beckingham was elected to fellowship of the British Academy. His election may have seemed unduly delayed, but this was not for want of recognition of his academic achievements. Human institutions have sections and compartments which are not necessarily ideally suited for someone with such catholic tastes and wide-ranging scholarly activities as Beckingham had displayed. Occasionally Charles would refer to himself as essentially a dilettante who happened to have been lucky. While this pronouncement was entirely genuine and without affectation, it was plainly an aspect of his modesty and self-effacement. He had meant to underline the somewhat general and autodidactic element in his academic development as distinct from the technical university career of most of his colleagues whose scholarly training was predominantly based on the canons of one particular discipline.

CFB was sad to have come to the reluctant conclusion that the British

Academy was not, perhaps, all that he had expected it to be before his election. He felt unhappy with some of its organisational aspects and procedures. When, some years ago, he was unanimously elected to the chairmanship of the Oriental and African section, he was subsequently informed by the powers that be that his age made the election unacceptable. He was hurt, but was naturally immediately content to resign. Since the bye-laws did not refer to any age limitation with respect to chairmen of sections, the decision rankled with him for a long time. It is, however, true that a 'convention' was being established at that time to expect those particular chairmen to be below the age of seventy.

Charles served for a number of years as chairman of the Fontes Historiae Africanae Committee. He did so with much zeal and dedication and to the entire satisfaction of his colleagues on the committee. By virtue of this chairmanship he was appointed Director of the International Fontes Historiae Africanae project of the Union Académique Internationale, 1986–95. He greatly enjoyed the yearly visits abroad to the meetings of the Union. Others have told me that his annual reports on the Fontes project were delivered with much aplomb, wit, and succinctness.

It may well be the case that with advancing age and frailty he might have taken the initiative of resigning from the chairmanship of the Fontes Committee. In the event, he felt, rightly or wrongly, that he was pushed. What mattered to him more, however, was that new terms of reference had been laid down for the reconstituted committee which differed markedly from the guidelines originally devised by the International body. What had been intended as a strictly scholarly enterprise of editing and translating Arabic and African historical texts into English in a purely academic framework was now also conceived as an educational aid to Africans—including translations from such common European languages as French, German, or Italian. The present writer has no recent knowledge of the deliberations of the current Fontes Committee and must, therefore, rely on the information received from his late colleague.

Beckingham was devoid of all personal vanity. Truthfulness was a hallmark of his personality. His humour and wit were always kind, and it would have been impossible to think that anything mean or unworthy could ever be associated with him. He never tried to exert influence on others, but by virtue of his own example he unwittingly made an impact on all who came into contact with him. In his presence we all behaved a little better. He may at times have seemed quaint or old-fashioned (as I have said), but that is only so because his standards of rectitude were not of this contemporary age.

Charles died as the result of a severe stroke on 30 September 1998. He had spent a few months in Brighton hospitals and a somewhat longer period at a Lewes Nursing Home. Two well attended memorial meetings were held in his honour: the first took place in November 1998 at the Travellers Club, organised jointly by the Hakluyt and the Royal Asiatic Societies; the second was at SOAS on what would have been his eighty-fifth birthday on 18 February 1999. The eloquent tributes paid to his memory attested to the admiration and warmth felt in such wide circles for his personality and his unusual erudition.

EDWARD ULLENDORFF
Fellow of the Academy