



W. G. LAMBERT

# Wilfred George Lambert

## 1926–2011

W. G. LAMBERT was one of the most important Assyriologists of the latter part of the twentieth century. He made a greater contribution to the continuing task of recovering and understanding Babylonian literature than any other member of his generation. In the essential skill of reading cuneiform signs inscribed on clay tablets, he excelled above all others. In his pursuit of knowledge and meaning, he brought an uncompromising and individual intellect to the study of cuneiform texts. He was always confident in his conclusions, quick to defend them and not prone to change his mind. He was suspicious of received opinion and scornful of those whose work was not founded, like his, on the most serious engagement with cuneiform texts and the languages in which they were written. For him the facts extracted from textual study were the basis and starting point for all understanding of ancient Mesopotamia. Concrete evidence meant far more to him than ideas and theory.

Wilfred George Lambert was born on 26 February 1926 at 62 Chudleigh Road in Erdington, a modest suburb of north Birmingham. He was the younger child of Herbert Harold Lambert (1882–1951), a railway clerk from Whitacre, Warwickshire, and his wife, Zilla (née Allton, 1886–1958), the daughter of a joiner at a railway-carriage works in Birmingham. His parents were both born Methodist but converted to Christadelphianism. He was educated at local state schools and Christadelphian Sunday School, and remembered the latter as more stimulating. Bible study played a formative role in his life. In 1938 he won a scholarship to King Edward's School, Birmingham. In his spare time he kept bees for a hobby and learned to play the piano. Boyhood encounters

with ancient Mesopotamia were a lecture by Sir Leonard Woolley on the excavations at Ur and Edward Chiera's popular book, *They Wrote on Clay* (Chicago, IL, 1938), which he was first to borrow when it was acquired by Birmingham's Central Lending Library. He was baptised shortly after his sixteenth birthday and became an active member of Birmingham Central Christadelphian Ecclesia.

On matriculating from King Edward's School in 1943 he won the Governors' Prize for Greek Prose, choosing Skinner's commentary on Genesis, and went up to Christ's College, Cambridge, as a Scholar reading Classics. There he found teachers of whom he wrote in an autobiographical memoir, 'while they knew their subjects and were imbued with a love of the classics, few were at the cutting edge of scholarship'.<sup>1</sup> His disappointment encouraged him to transfer to the Oriental tripos in 1945, but almost immediately his undergraduate career was interrupted by national service. As a conscientious objector he was spared conscription into the armed forces and spent three years supervising German prisoners of war at a horticultural nursery north of Birmingham. In this way he acquired a useful competency in spoken German, not necessarily of the academic sort.

When Lambert returned to Cambridge in 1948 he concentrated on Semitic languages and the background of the Old Testament. His new teachers were C. P. T. Winckworth (1896–1954, Eric Yarrow Lecturer in Assyriology) and D. Winton Thomas (1901–70, Regius Professor of Hebrew), among others, but he remembered the Septuagint scholar Peter Katz, later Walters, as an outstanding influence. He graduated in Oriental Languages (Hebrew and Akkadian) in 1950 and, seeing no immediate prospects of employment in Assyriology, took a one-year Diploma in Education at the University of Leeds. On completion he joined Westminster Under School in London as a Classics master. Teaching Greek and Latin suited him, but he was less happy supervising field sports.

Lambert used his move to London to continue his study of Akkadian and other languages written in cuneiform. He became a regular visitor to the Students' Room in the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum. Here, under the initial guidance of the Assistant Keeper D. J. Wiseman (1918–2010), he taught himself to draw cuneiform texts from the original clay tablets. He had a very good eye for

<sup>1</sup>Quotations from this memoir are taken from the text printed in the obituary by Irving Finkel and Alasdair Livingstone, 'Professor Wilfred George Lambert (February 26, 1926–November 9, 2011)', *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 52 (2011), 397–9.

cuneiform signs but was not a born draughtsman and found it difficult at first to produce drawings with which he was satisfied. Quite soon, however, he had developed his own distinctive style. It was a compromise between the exact drawings of the kind produced by natural artists such as Arno Poebel (which he admired enormously) and the freehand 'copies' of prolific cuneiformists such as R. Campbell Thompson (which he did not). In pursuit of clarity, he straightened slanting lines of text and introduced space between them. In pursuit of accuracy, he measured the horizontal distances between the vertical wedges of all the cuneiform signs on a given line of text and mapped them on to ruled paper, reproducing the signs as they were written, not in standardised form. He drew the whole at two, three or four times lifesize, having learned that publishers of illustrated books required artwork in magnified form, so as to give a neater effect when reduced in publication.

In this way he produced beautifully clear cuneiform copies which made the text easier to read than the clay tablet from which it was taken, replicated the distinctive character of the ductus and retained the exact proportions of the signs and any breaks in the surface. This latter point was essential, for Lambert insisted that a good Assyriologist should try to read what was damaged as well as what was clear, and to that end reproduction of the line of text in exact proportion, signs, damage and breaks, was paramount. What he did not do, in common with many others of that time, was attempt to represent a clay tablet as an archaeological object. Though he was certainly alive to the information that could be obtained from examining the physical object, especially the curvature of its surfaces and the place of its edges in relation to the inscription, he did not deem it necessary to include in his copies large expanses of broken clay. For him, a clay tablet was foremost a vehicle for cuneiform text, and it was the inscribed surface alone that he reproduced in drawing.

When he first attended the British Museum's Students' Room, in 1951, it was almost exactly one hundred years since the museum received its first large batch of cuneiform texts: the clay tablets from the Assyrian royal libraries in Kuyunjik, the citadel mound of Nineveh. These 20,000 tablets had been excavated by A. H. Layard, Hormuzd Rassam, George Smith and others. They became known as the 'K-collection' but, for want of trained cuneiformists, only a small proportion of them had been published at the time Lambert started studying in the museum. He set about reading the museum's tablets, not only the Neo-Assyrian library tablets from Nineveh but also the even larger number of Late Babylonian tablets from Babylon, Sippar and other sites, that were either excavated or

purchased by Smith and Rassam in the 1870s and '80s. This was not straightforward, because at that time visiting scholars were only allowed to study tablets that had been catalogued or published in some other way, and this meant large numbers of tablets were out of reach.

Lambert bypassed this obstacle by inserting the numbers of unpublished tablets into lists of published ones, hoping that no one would notice. Mr Bateman, Mr Parsley, and others who brought the tablets to him, seem to have turned a blind eye, while occasionally letting Lambert know that they were aware of what he was up to. Lambert also made full use of the folios of autograph copies of Kuyunjik tablets drawn between the wars by F. W. Geers (1885–1955). In due course, he gained a knowledge of the museum's K-tablets rivalled only by his contemporary Rykle Borger of Göttingen (1929–2010), an Assyriologist who concentrated on the K-collection to the exclusion of almost everything else; and he made greater inroads into the Late Babylonian tablets than anyone apart from T. G. Pinches (1856–1934) and the museum's current staff.

Reading cuneiform tablets in the British Museum was certainly the activity that gave Lambert most pleasure. During the last forty-five years of his life he made it part of his weekly routine and there were few Thursdays when he could not be found there. The host department changed its name three times, and the location of its Students' Room moved twice, but Lambert was an unchanging and enduring fixture. When in 2000 the Students' Room moved to its present location on the Museum's ground floor, the galleried Arched Room designed by Sir Robert Smirke in 1837, Lambert grumbled that these imposing new surroundings were not perfectly suited to reading cuneiform tablets. Other Assyriologists made a point of being in the Students' Room on Thursdays, so that they could meet him, ask him questions and obtain his help in reading difficult and damaged cuneiform signs. He was particularly helpful to younger scholars, and very generous with time, knowledge and museum numbers, on condition only that those who sought his opinion took Assyriology as seriously as he did and were not stepping on his toes.

The legacy of Lambert's years of reading cuneiform tablets, not only in London but in all the museums which had major holdings of Mesopotamian antiquities, is extraordinary. The transliterations of British Museum tablets in his *Nachlass* fill more than 1,400 pages of notebook and nearly 6,000 loose paper slips. He left an astonishing 1,400 unpublished pencil copies of cuneiform texts, mostly from British Museum tablets. These are being processed for eventual publication and will prove a rich resource for future generations.

Shortly after Lambert began reading tablets in the British Museum the department's former Keeper, Sidney Smith (1889–1979), who had moved to the University of London in 1948, encouraged him to embark on the study of a disparate group of Babylonian literary compositions that responded to the problem of theodicy and had ethical and moral concerns similar to those found in biblical wisdom literature. Smith thus set Lambert on course to make a major impact in his field, but the two did not get along. Lambert found a more genial adviser in the person of Abraham Sachs (1915–83), of Brown University, who was also a regular in the Students' Room. In his autobiographical memoir he recalled that 'when at 4 pm tablets were taken away and locked up, Sachs and Lambert would make for Lyons Corner House, where Sachs not only paid the bill but also imparted his learning so that he must be considered one of the chief Assyriological mentors of Lambert'.<sup>2</sup> Sachs was helping Wiseman identify texts of interest among the museum's Late Babylonian tablets, and passed lists of numbers on to Lambert. Lambert held him in the highest regard: Sachs was the only Assyriologist of whom he used the term 'genius'.

Lambert's interest in wisdom literature produced his first Assyriological publication, in which he collaborated in an edition of a newly excavated manuscript of the Babylonian composition *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* with the excavation's epigraphist, the Oxford Assyriologist O. R. Gurney (1911–2001).<sup>3</sup> Almost immediately he caught the notice of the Hebraist R. J. Williams of the University of Toronto. In 1955 he was appointed lecturer in Williams's department in succession to the brief tenure of J. V. Kinnier Wilson, who had moved to Cambridge on Winckworth's death. The Toronto position inaugurated Lambert's full-time academic career, but also began a period of nine years in North America. In 1959 he moved to Baltimore, taking up the chairmanship of the Oriental Seminary at the Johns Hopkins University as associate professor, and replacing William Foxwell Albright (1891–1971), one of the giants of ancient Near Eastern studies.

During these years in Canada and the USA Lambert returned to Britain every summer vacation to study cuneiform tablets in the British Museum. It was not sufficient for him to identify some new fragment and

<sup>2</sup>Finkel and Livingstone, 'Professor Wilfred George Lambert (February 26, 1926–November 9, 2011)', 397–9.

<sup>3</sup>O. R. Gurney and W. G. Lambert, 'The Sultantepe Tablets, III. The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer', *Anatolian Studies*, 4 (1954), 65–99.



publish it in isolation. He began seeking out and collecting fragments, both published and unpublished, as witnesses to larger texts and genres of texts, and to join long-sundered pieces. He soon became known for a series of journal articles in which he presented meticulous copies of cuneiform texts, most augmented by one or more joins that he had made himself, and reconstructed from them editions of previously unsuspected compositions. Particularly important were 'An address of Marduk to the demons',<sup>4</sup> which presented and explicated twelve modest fragments from Nineveh (excavated in 1850 ff.) as belonging to the same exorcistic text, discovered by the German Assyriologist Gerhard Meier (1913–45) but hardly published; 'An incantation of the Maqlû type',<sup>5</sup> which did the same for a complete incantation and magic ritual designed to counter witchcraft, also building on Meier's work; and 'Three literary prayers of the Babylonians',<sup>6</sup> which reconstructed from assorted fragments, again mostly from Nineveh, three hymnic compositions whose existence was then either completely or almost unknown. A pattern was emerging of a young cuneiform scholar of extraordinary talent, wide learning and total dedication, who was moving Assyriology forward by relentlessly expanding current knowledge of the literary and religious legacy of the Babylonians.

In 1960 Lambert published *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* with Oxford University Press, and his reputation was established. *BWL*, as the book became known, is a milestone in the history of Assyriology, reckoned by the next generation of Assyriologists as the first modern edition of Babylonian literary texts. It presents accurate and reliable editions of an array of important texts: poetic compositions, hymnic texts, fables, precepts and proverbs, all with ethical and moral problems at heart. Most important are the Poem of the Righteous Sufferer (*Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*), in which a Babylonian Job relates his downfall and redemption in rare and difficult language, the Babylonian Theodicy, which deals with the gods' apparent disregard of human suffering, and the Dialogue of Pessimism, in which a slave can always find justification for any of his master's intentions, even when successive proposals contradict each of the earlier ones.

The achievement was all the more impressive in that the comprehensive modern dictionaries that now provide substantial aid to Assyriology were then lacking. Lambert worked very much on his own, preferring as always to conquer the mountain single-handed and unaided. He later

<sup>4</sup> *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 17 (1956), 310–21, pls. 13–16.

<sup>5</sup> *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 18 (1958), 288–99, pls. 11–16.

<sup>6</sup> *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 19 (1960), 47–66, pls. 8–23.

looked back on this work and found his method rooted in his experience as an undergraduate. Thus a private letter of 27 June 2007 (Folio 29201 in the *Nachlass*):

I was always a free-thinker, and remain so. . . . In preparing *BWL* I first copied all the tablets I could find, then I composed my transliterations, only occasionally looking at existing editions and translations, and when I was satisfied that I had good transliterations with variants, then I got down to the job of translation. Of course I had ideas in my head, but I actually translated the Theodicy on the train between Buffalo and New York City, because I needed no books, only time to reflect carefully on the transliteration which I took with me, and to find the right English words to express my translation. Later, before I finished the MS, I systematically went through every translation I could find, and with some strange results. Translations from the 1920s were at times better than those of the 1950s. My only classes in Akkadian were for one full term and two full years when my teacher was ill much of the time, and the university authorities said in effect, 'You know what the set books are, get on!'

A combination of intellectual brilliance and something approaching contempt for contemporary scholarship informed the writing of *BWL* and much of what followed.

The introduction to the *Dialogue of Pessimism* offers another rare nugget of personal history: 'the writer once worked for an employer whose plans changed as rapidly as the master's in the *Dialogue*, and whose employees' apparently placid assent to the whim of the moment fully equalled the slave's smooth tongue'. Placid assent to the whim of the moment was something Lambert could never abide, and one wonders how he endured in this employment. The *Dialogue* and the texts edited alongside have been repeatedly studied in the fifty years since Lambert placed knowledge of them on a firm footing. The book is introduced by a seminal essay on the history of Babylonian literature and religious ideas. It gave much attention to the Kassite period as formative in the creation of Standard Babylonian literature, as had Wolfram von Soden's earlier essay,<sup>7</sup> but went further in identifying a change in tone and spirit, from the vitality and confidence of the Old Babylonian period to the academic style and introspection of the Standard Babylonian canon. The book was reprinted in America in 1996.

From the outset Lambert had been developing new ideas about the ancient scholars whose intellectual products he was reconstructing, and about the history of Babylonian religion. Very early in his career he wrote

<sup>7</sup>W. von Soden, 'Das Problem der zeitliche Anordnung akkadischer Literaturwerke', *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft*, 85 (1953), 14–26.



'Ancestors, Authors and Canonicity',<sup>8</sup> a work of analysis in which he examined how the Babylonians constructed a history of their own textual traditions, and contrasted it with modern ideas of canonicity. In doing so, he stressed the importance of the Kassite period in the evolution of Babylonian intellectual and academic traditions. Together with a companion piece, 'A Catalogue of Texts and Authors',<sup>9</sup> in which was collected further evidence for the traditions of scribal ancestry and authorship, it remains one of Lambert's most cited articles. Another seminal piece was an essay on the history of the Babylonian Creation Epic, which argued convincingly that the poem *Enūma eliš* was not older than the twelfth century BC.<sup>10</sup> The idea became orthodox and has gone almost unchallenged for fifty years.

The essay on the date of *Enūma eliš* was an early product of what became a lifelong devotion to the reconstruction and exegesis of the Creation Epic. In succession to *BWL* he planned a new critical edition of the poem, to replace the outdated work of René Labat.<sup>11</sup> This would also include not just *Enūma eliš* itself, but also the various texts that shared the epic's subject matter and those that were vehicles of the same ideology. Much of what Lambert wrote subsequently arose out of the early work he did on *Enūma eliš*. The topic of creation fuelled his interest in ancient Mesopotamian cosmogony and mythology. The list of names of Marduk in Tablets VI and VII sent him in pursuit of god-lists everywhere. The formal aspects of the poem led him to examine Babylonian narrative poetry of all periods. Its cultic context took him into the genres of temple rituals, expository texts relating to rituals and cultic topography, and calendrical commentaries. But this was not the limit of his appetite. From the beginning, his work at the British Museum kept throwing up unpublished sources for compositions of all genres. These led him to plan, in addition to the book on *Enūma eliš*, a treatment of the omen series *Šumma ālu* (requested of him by the editors of the *Assyrian Dictionary* in Chicago), a new edition of the Gilgamesh epic and publication of ancient collections of divination prayers (*ikribs*) and oracular questions (*tamītus*). It was a young man's ambition that, even at Lambert's rate of production, was the work of several lifetimes. As he grew older he realised that what he planned was beyond him. He unloaded *Šumma ālu* on to Erle Leichty of the

<sup>8</sup> *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 11 (1957), 1–14.

<sup>9</sup> *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 16 (1962), 59–77.

<sup>10</sup> 'The reign of Nebuchadnezzar I: A turning point in the history of ancient Mesopotamian religion', in W. S. McCullough (ed.), *The Seed of Wisdom* (Toronto, 1964), pp. 3–13.

<sup>11</sup> R. Labat, *Le poème babylonien de la création (Enūma eliš)* (Paris, 1935).

University of Pennsylvania. He abandoned Gilgamesh to the writer of this memoir. He passed on rituals, expository texts and calendrical esoterica to a succession of research students.

In 1964 Lambert moved back to Britain to take up a new lectureship in Assyriology at the University of Birmingham. He remained there for the rest of his career, though in 1978, on Gurney's retirement, it seemed for a while that he would move to Oxford to succeed him. He settled in Edgbaston, in a two-bedroom flat near the university, and began his regular weekly trips to the British Museum. Important new texts arising from his study there and in other museums continued to appear in journal articles. Most were individual pieces: a compendium of Middle Assyrian incantations,<sup>12</sup> a medical text of the same period setting out treatment for problems in pregnancy and childbirth,<sup>13</sup> Old Babylonian love poetry from the cult of Nabû,<sup>14</sup> an important historiographic composition reporting events in the reign of Nabonidus,<sup>15</sup> and an unusual text describing legal reforms by a Neo-Babylonian king.<sup>16</sup> Most extraordinary was his reconstruction, from ten tablets and fragments that were almost completely unpublished, of a previously unsuspected hymn to the goddess Gula.<sup>17</sup> The edition of the text, in two hundred lines of learned Babylonian, is so good that almost no new reading has been proposed in nearly fifty years of subsequent scholarship. That is an extraordinary history for an *editio princeps*.

Lambert's next books were the results of collaboration with Alan Millard, who later became Rankin Professor of Hebrew and Ancient Semitic Languages at the University of Liverpool. Both scholars had been working on fragments, mostly in the British Museum, of the Babylonian poem of Atra-hasis, about the history of mankind from its creation to the mythical Flood. These included large and obviously important Old Babylonian tablets that had been in the museum since they were purchased by E. A. Wallis Budge in the 1880s and '90s but had defied the attentions of successive museum colleagues, including Sidney Smith and Wiseman. Lambert's chief interest in Atra-hasis was in the account of creation, a

<sup>12</sup>'A Middle Assyrian tablet of incantations', in H. G. Güterbock and T. Jacobsen (eds.), *Studies in Honor of Benno Landsberger on his Seventy-Fifth Birthday*. Assyriological Studies 16 (Chicago, IL, 1965), pp. 283–8.

<sup>13</sup>'A Middle Assyrian medical text', *Iraq*, 31 (1969), 28–39.

<sup>14</sup>'Divine love lyrics from the reign of Abi-ešuh', *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung*, 12 (1966), 41–56.

<sup>15</sup>'A new source for the reign of Nabonidus', *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 22 (1968–9), 1–8.

<sup>16</sup>'Nebuchadnezzar king of justice', *Iraq*, 27 (1965), 1–11.

<sup>17</sup>'The Gula hymn of Bulluṣsa-rabi', *Orientalia*, n.s., 36 (1967), 105–32, pls. 8–23.

topic that this composition held in common with *Enūma eliš*. R. D. Barnett, who was then Keeper at the Museum, suggested the two scholars join forces. Together Lambert and Millard produced a volume of drawings under the title *Babylonian Literary Texts*, vol. 46 in the series *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum* (London, 1965), which Barnett rightly described as ‘without doubt the biggest single advance in the recovery of Babylonian epic literature’ since the 1870s. Their drawings included fragments of already known literary compositions, such as Gilgamesh, but also the larger parts of Atra-hasis. This latter composition they published in 1969 as *Atra-ḫasīs: the Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford). The preface explains that the critical edition was based on the first efforts of both authors, but that the final presentation and cuneiform drawings were largely Lambert’s responsibility, while the glossary was Millard’s.

Like Lambert’s first book, *Atra-ḫasīs* quickly became a standard work, and was reissued in America in 1999. As a first edition of very difficult Old Babylonian tablets it was a work of the highest standard that met with widespread acclaim, and its topics of Creation and Flood meant that it was received hungrily by many outside the field of Assyriology, especially in Bible studies. A remark in the postscript to the preface, however, drew fire from Wolfram von Soden (1908–96) of Münster, the *Großmeister* of German Assyriology and compiler of the monumental *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (1958–81). Lambert had sent von Soden a proof copy of *Atra-ḫasīs*, in order for its rich lexical data to be incorporated in the great dictionary. In return von Soden sent many corrections and suggestions for improvement, as he saw it, and Lambert’s postscript noted that ‘these have been adopted where possible’. It turned out that this comment masked a less positive reality.

Von Soden’s review article came out within a year.<sup>18</sup> The second footnote thanked Lambert for allowing access to the text before publication, but expressed concern that they could not agree about basic issues in the philological interpretation of Babylonian poems. Put another way, von Soden did not accept Lambert’s explanations on many points of grammar and vocabulary.

The very title of von Soden’s review article drew attention to the biggest obstacle: the poem’s incipit, *Inūma ilū awēlum*. Lambert translated, ‘When the gods like men’, commenting that the last word ‘has locative –

<sup>18</sup>W. von Soden, “‘Als die Götter (auch noch) Mensch waren’”. Einige Grundgedanken des altbabylonischen Atram-ḫasīs-Mythos’, *Orientalia*, n.s., 38 (1969), 415–32.

*um* with the meaning of comparative *-iš*'. Von Soden rejected this and took the line as a nominal clause, as translated in his title 'Als die Götter Mensch waren', and spent five pages on explaining how the gods could be man. Appended to his article is a long list of suggestions for readings in later parts of the composition. Lambert's response was immediate and uncompromising.<sup>19</sup> He showed that the poem's first line was reworked as a comparative clause by at least one first-millennium editor and dismissed the idea expressed by von Soden's nominal clause as 'nugatory', asserting that 'it is agreed on all sides' that a translation 'When the gods were mankind' is 'nonsense and cannot be right'. The assertive tone of Lambert's rebuttal of von Soden's interpretation was compounded by personal attacks on his philology and the revelation that the suggestions published in the review article were those already made at proof stage, and that Lambert had found it 'a matter of great regret that he could not accept them as improvements'. This is the reality behind the polite phrase 'adopted where possible'. Von Soden, in return,<sup>20</sup> insisted that meaning came from correct parsing, that 'jede Übersetzung sich grammatisch und lexikalisch rechtfertigen muss'. Lambert, always one to have the last word,<sup>21</sup> insisted in turn that *awēlum* could legitimately have comparative force.

Lambert's hostile and dismissive response to the idea that the line should be parsed as a nominal clause, 'When the gods were man', was probably conditioned by his upbringing as a Christadelphian. Certainly he could not understand that any devout person could write such a statement seriously. But in ancient Mesopotamia notions of god and blasphemy were differently aligned. It may be that Lambert came to realise this. Though he did not change his position in public, privately he may have relaxed it. When a former pupil published a translation of the incipit of *Atra-hasis* that agreed with von Soden and not with Lambert,<sup>22</sup> he half expected to receive a typewritten message of forthright rebuke, but no reaction was forthcoming at all. A further Old Babylonian text awaiting publication supports Lambert, however, in using a comparative preposition, and thereby adds to the impression of divided interpretation among ancients as well as moderns. As for the poem of *Atra-hasis* in general,

<sup>19</sup> 'New evidence for the first line of *Atra-ḫasīs*', *Orientalia*, n.s., 38 (1969), 533–8.

<sup>20</sup> W. von Soden, 'Grundsätzliches zur Interpretation des *Atramḫasīs* Mythos', *Orientalia*, n.s., 39 (1970), 311–14.

<sup>21</sup> 'Critical notes on recent publications', *Orientalia*, n.s., 40 (1971), 90–101.

<sup>22</sup> A. R. George and F. N. H. Al-Rawi, 'Tablets from the Sippar Library VI. *Atra-ḫasīs*', *Iraq*, 58 (1996), 147–90: 'When the gods were man'.

subsequent publication of new witnesses to the text sometimes vindicated Lambert, sometimes von Soden. Between them, they brought huge improvements to our understanding of the composition as a whole, and it is now acclaimed as one of the three most important surviving Babylonian narrative poems, alongside Gilgamesh and *Enūma eliš*.

The legacy of the public argument between Lambert and von Soden was a certain wariness on Lambert's part. Thereafter he often referred to his adversary in class as 'Uncle Wolfram', with a certain gleam in his eye. More seriously, he stopped publishing books. One of Lambert's mentors had early advised him to concentrate on books rather than articles, advice that he later handed on to at least one younger colleague. Not yet forty-five, he had given Assyriology two major text editions and a volume of cuneiform that were quickly established as indispensable to research in Babylonian religious, literary and intellectual culture. Suddenly the pattern of publication changed. The critical edition of the Babylonian Creation Epic, announced as forthcoming already in 1964 and substantially finished by the end of that decade, did not get published until after his death. His book of Sumero-Babylonian god-lists, which occupied him in the 1970s and which he jokily reported as 'put on ice' at the twenty-third *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*—hosted by him at the University of Birmingham during the record-breaking heat wave of July 1976—was never quite completed. (Notes on Tablet IV, on the names of Ishtar, goddess of love and war, were conspicuously absent from his *Nachlass*: it seems he never wrote them up, as if this most enigmatic of Mesopotamian deities somehow eluded submission to his will.) It seems that von Soden's critical reaction to Atra-hasis made Lambert reluctant to commit to print the large projects on which he had been working for fifteen years, even though he already had them in more or less complete draft form.

In place of the promised books came a prolific abundance of journal articles and book chapters. The most important were those that made available Lambert's reconstructed editions of cuneiform texts. Here the 1970s were especially fruitful, as he worked up his knowledge of British Museum fragments into generic editions that published dozens of them for the first time, most notably incantations against fever and angry deities,<sup>23</sup> the extraordinary *agenda et dicenda* of an elaborate public ritual involving a divine *ménage à trois*, Marduk, his wife Zarpanitu and his

<sup>23</sup>'Fire incantations', *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 23 (1970), 39–45 and pls. 1–11; 'Dingir.sà.dib.ba incantations', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 33 (1974), 267–322.

lover Ishtar of Babylon,<sup>24</sup> a group of hymns dedicated to the god of writing by apprentice scribes,<sup>25</sup> and a long literary hymn to the Queen of Nippur.<sup>26</sup> The next decade was punctuated by editions of stand-alone compositions, both those that were previously known but inadequately published and those that were his own discoveries. Three difficult Old Babylonian compositions on tablets in Paris, Philadelphia and London stand out,<sup>27</sup> along with a large Late Babylonian temple ritual that Lambert had passed to a Turkish research student, Galip Çağırğan, in the early 1970s but remained unpublished after the latter's premature death, and a previously unsuspected short Standard Babylonian hymn to Ishtar.<sup>28</sup>

Lambert's publications were by no means confined to editions of cuneiform texts. He wrote extensively on religion and mythology, and twenty-three of his journal articles and book chapters are being reprinted in a volume edited by the writer of this memoir.<sup>29</sup> He also wrote on the history of literature, on ancient Near Eastern history and on the arts of western Asia, especially cylinder seals. These were all topics that he lectured on for many years at Birmingham, so his ideas were founded on a very solid background knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

The Bible, in particular, held Lambert's interest, and its relationship to Mesopotamian literature and religion exercised him all his life. Very often his essays begin with a reflection on some matter in the Old Testament,

<sup>24</sup>'The problem of the love lyrics', in H. Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts (eds.), *Unity and Diversity* (Baltimore, MD, 1975), pp. 98–135.

<sup>25</sup>'Nabû hymns on cylinders', in B. Hruška and G. Komoróczy (eds.), *Festschrift Lubor Matouš* (Budapest, 1978), II, pp. 75–111.

<sup>26</sup>'The hymn to the Queen of Nippur', in G. van Driel et al. (eds.), *Zikir šumim. Assyriological Studies Presented to F. R. Kraus* (Leiden, 1982), pp. 173–218.

<sup>27</sup>'A further attempt at the Babylonian "Man and his God"', in F. Rochberg-Halton (ed.), *Language, Literature, and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner* (New Haven, CT, 1987), pp. 187–202; 'A Babylonian prayer to Anūna', in H. Behrens et al. (eds.), *DUMU-E<sub>3</sub>-DUB-BA-A: Studies in Honor of Åke W. Sjöberg* (Philadelphia, PA, 1989), pp. 321–36; 'A new Babylonian descent to the Netherworld', in T. Abusch et al. (eds.), *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (Atlanta, GA, 1990), pp. 289–300.

<sup>28</sup>G. Çağırğan and W. G. Lambert, 'The Late Babylonian Kislîmu ritual for Esagil', *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 43–5 (1991–3), 89–106; 'A syncretistic hymn to Ištar', *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 50 (2003–4), 21–7.

<sup>29</sup>A. R. George and Takayoshi Oshima (eds.), *Ancient Mesopotamian Religion and Mythology: Selected Essays by W. G. Lambert*, forthcoming from Mohr Siebeck GmbH, Stuttgart.

<sup>30</sup>A bibliography of Lambert's principal academic publications, compiled by C. B. F. Walker, appears in *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 52 (2011), 402–9. An omission there is 'Ancient Mesopotamian gods: superstition, philosophy, theology', *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 207, 2 (1990), 115–30, of which he remarked (tongue in cheek) how good it felt to publish in a well-established periodical.



and his approach to many aspects of Babylonian culture was guided by the unspoken question, common among his contemporaries: how does this phenomenon in Mesopotamia relate to what I learned in Sunday school? Occasionally his response leads to an explicit judgement that Babylonian ideas about mythology and gods were mistaken and failed.<sup>31</sup> Such comments reveal that Lambert placed ancient Mesopotamian religion in a narrative of human progress toward truth, and, unsurprisingly for a committed Christadelphian, found it wanting.

From the vantage point of a cuneiformist Lambert made several serious contributions to Old Testament studies. Probably the most important was in 1977, when he gave the Ethel M. Wood Lecture in Biblical Studies, showing how Chapter 11 of the prophet Daniel adapted a Babylonian genre. The lecture was published in pamphlet form as *The Background of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London, 1978).

Lambert was an extraordinarily good lecturer of undergraduates. Alasdair Livingstone, his successor at Birmingham, recalled at his service of thanksgiving that one student's reaction to Lambert's teaching was to say, 'After a few lessons with Professor Lambert you feel small, but then you realise that you've grown.' If he could inspire, he could also intimidate. His Tuesday text-reading classes brought together smaller groups, a mix of research students, visitors and advanced undergraduates. Lack of preparation was quickly exposed, 'schoolboy howlers' met with fake shock. He was a tremendous supervisor of postgraduate dissertations: where a student floundered in a tangle of evidence and argument, Lambert's extraordinary clarity of thought and instinct for the crux of the matter got straight to the root of the problem and articulated it in such a way (without doing the student's work for him) that a path out of the muddle suddenly opened up. His criticism was direct, his patience and generosity with knowledge endless and his encouragement carefully measured.

He was more than usually successful in launching doctoral candidates in the right direction. In Baltimore he supervised A. Kirk Grayson and Robert D. Biggs, who went on to be leading cuneiformists at the Universities of Toronto and Chicago respectively. In Birmingham those of his research students who succeeded in obtaining posts as professional Assyriologists were: Khalid Al-'Adami (Baghdad), I. L. Finkel (British Museum), A. Livingstone (Heidelberg and Birmingham), A. R. George

<sup>31</sup> e.g. 'Der Mythos im Alten Mesopotamien, sein Werden und Vergehen', *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 26, 1 (1974), 16.

(SOAS, London), W. Horowitz (Hebrew University Jerusalem), Wu Yuhong (Changchun, China) and Frances Reynolds (Oxford). Many of their theses sprang from his own interests, developing his own ideas and publishing British Museum tablets from lists of numbers originally compiled by Sachs but heavily augmented by Lambert. At his thanksgiving service his students joined others in the congregation in subscribing to a bench in his memory. It now stands in the university grounds, not far from the Arts Building where he taught, and bears as epitaph a fitting line from the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, ‘With them the Seed of Wisdom did I sow’.

Lambert retired from the University of Birmingham as professor emeritus in 1993, but went on teaching, researching and publishing much as before. As he reached his mid-seventies, it seemed that the books promised decades before, on *Enūma eliš* and other creation narratives, on the god-lists, on the divinatory texts, on Marduk’s Address, would probably never materialise. That changed when Livingstone persuaded him to allow an amanuensis to type up his editions of divination queries, which he had announced as in preparation at the fourteenth Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in Strasbourg in 1965, and warmed up at another conference in the same city thirty years later.<sup>32</sup> The manuscript was converted into electronic text by Jon Taylor, now of the British Museum, during the period 2003–5 and in due course became *Babylonian Oracle Queries* (Winona Lake, IN, 2007). Here Lambert assembled a group of tablets and fragments that had never before been considered as a genre. They were almost entirely from the Kuyunjik collection, many previously unpublished and his personal discoveries. He showed that first-millennium scholars collected oracle queries of historical, religious and sociological interest on series of tablets as an academic exercise, to serve as models for new queries. The material was quite separate from the contemporaneous records of actual oracle queries, kept in the same Assyrian libraries and published as a corpus by Ivan Starr. The book’s introduction is full of argument about matters arising from the oracle queries (Šamaš and Adad, the etymology of *tamītu*) but lacks contextual information. In particular it fails to explain how extispicy provided the one-word answers (yes or no) demanded by the oracle queries. Lambert expressed puzzlement in this

<sup>32</sup>‘The “*tamītu*” texts’, in J. Nougayrol (ed.), *La divination en Mésopotamie ancienne* (Paris, 1966), pp. 119–23; ‘Questions addressed to the Babylonian oracle: The *tamītu* texts’, in J.-G. Heintz (ed.), *Oracles et prophéties dans l’antiquité. Actes du colloque de Strasbourg, 15–17 juin 1995* (Paris, 1997), pp. 85–98.

regard in both his Strasbourg lectures, in 1965 and again in 1995, but remained silent on the topic in 2007. In fact, the late Ulla Jeyes, who went to his Tuesday classes in Birmingham when she lived in Coventry in the mid-1970s, had given in 1980 a very clear description of the divinatory procedure that led to a positive or negative answer.<sup>33</sup> It is hard to imagine that Lambert failed to read Jeyes's article, or any of the subsequent reiterations of her explanation; evidently he did not accept it, but nowhere did he explain why not.

Encouraged by the production of *Babylonian Oracle Queries*, Lambert dug out the long-finished manuscript of his edition of the Babylonian Creation Epic and other ancient Mesopotamian texts on topics related to creation, to be submitted to the same process. He had already been persuaded to part with a translation of *Enūma eliš*, which appeared first in German and then in English,<sup>34</sup> but now he spent most of his remaining energy on checking the electronic transcripts of his typewritten manuscript of creation narratives, made by Thomas Balke in the period 2008–10, and updating and correcting his work one last time. In addition, as inking his pencil drawings became difficult, he found Henry Buglass, a draughtsman at the university, to do this work electronically. A last visit to the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin in January 2009 enabled him to add drawings of three more small pieces of the poem to his dossier of cuneiform copies; this was a surprise to the person who, having identified them, had communicated their numbers to Lambert in October 2008—but also other plans for copying them. The desire for comprehensive documentation can sometimes trump the niceties of academic etiquette.

In September 2010 Lambert and Balke despatched to the publisher almost all of the final draft of the book (as yet untitled) and many of the drawings of tablets. Thereafter, in declining health which he attributed to the effects of general anaesthetic during an operation earlier in the year, Lambert went on making small changes on the hard copy of the draft that he retained. Among them was one that typified the small gains in knowledge of Babylonian literary texts that he won almost weekly at the British Museum: the last-minute inclusion of two unnumbered Late Babylonian fragments that joined a tablet first published by L. W. King in 1902. It was

<sup>33</sup> U. Jeyes, 'The act of extispicy in ancient Mesopotamia: an outline', in B. Alster (ed.), *Assyriological Miscellanies* (Copenhagen, 1980), pp. 13–32.

<sup>34</sup> 'Enuma elisch', in K. Hecker et al., *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments III. Weisheits Texte, Mythen und Epen 4. Mythen und Epen II* (Gütersloh, 1994), pp. 565–602; 'Mesopotamian creation stories. Appendix: The Babylonian Epic of Creation', in M. J. Geller and M. Schipper (eds.), *Imagining Creation* (Leiden, 2008), pp. 37–59.

an addition with an important consequence for the end of *Enūma eliš*, for the fragments allowed for the first time the complete restoration of the last four lines of the poem. But while they solved that long-standing problem, they also posed a new one, because they showed that the newly enlarged tablet bore witness to an edition of the poem that added two lines on to the end of the previously known text. Unfortunately, the new lines survive only as seven cuneiform signs, not all of them complete. The find was typical of that area of Assyriological research to which Lambert made such a magnificent contribution, delivering at once the miniature triumph of finishing one corner of a vast jigsaw, and the frustrating new knowledge that two more fragmentary lines stand in the way of the jigsaw's completion. It was a fitting climax to many years spent restoring the text of the Babylonian Creation Epic, small piece by small piece.

Using Lambert's collated draft, and drawings inked by Lambert himself, by Buglass and by Junko Taniguchi, his students were able to bring the book through to publication within two years of his death as *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake, IN, 2013). This posthumous book is a wondrous monument to Lambert's scholarship. It combines meticulous editions of *Enūma eliš* and other well-known compositions, improved by the discovery and decipherment of many new sources, with first presentations of several previously unpublished mythological narratives and fragments, all backed up by the trademark hand copies of inimitable clarity and accuracy. The book hugely enriches current knowledge of the mythology of origins and divine conflict.

Some readers will be dismayed by the book's apparent lack of engagement with the secondary literature of the late twentieth century. As one of the most widely read Babylonian compositions, *Enūma eliš* reaps a rich harvest of modern analysis and commentary. In *Babylonian Creation Myths* Lambert cites very little of it. For example, his critical edition of *Enūma eliš* is so sparsely annotated that it makes no response to Moshe Held's original parsing of *šuṣā lā še-'ú* in I 6 from *šé'u* 'to upholster' (accepted by major scholars such as W. L. Moran, C. Wilcke, E. Reiner and B. R. Foster), and sticks to *še'ú* 'to seek out'.<sup>35</sup> The discussion of the theogony of Anu (pp. 417-26) ignores both his own study of the primeval

<sup>35</sup> M. Held, 'Two philological notes on *Enūma eliš*', in B. L. Eichler et al. (eds.), *Kramer Anniversary Volume* (Kevelaer, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1976), pp. 231-9; W. L. Moran, '*Enūma eliš* I 1-8', *Nouvelles assyriologiques brèves et utilitaires*, 1988, 15-16, no. 21; C. Wilcke, 'Die Anfänge der akkadischen Epen', *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 67 (1977), 167; E. Reiner et al. (eds.), *The Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. 17, Š Part II (Chicago, IL, 1992), p. 364; B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses: an Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (2nd edn, Bethesda, MD, 1996), I, p. 353.

pair Laḥmu and Laḥamu and Wolfgang Heimpel's important reaction to it.<sup>36</sup> The arguments in favour of a Middle Babylonian date of composition, evidently written in the early 1960s (pp. 439–44), have not been updated except to cite a selection of scholars who agree; Stephanie Dalley's re-examination of the question in the light of texts published in 1967 and 1992 is ignored.<sup>37</sup> Many more omissions of this kind could be adduced.

Lambert read very widely and knew the *Forschungsgeschichte* and secondary literature as well as anybody, but it was the cuneiform texts that, as the primary sources of Assyriology, were paramount in his scholarship. He reflected in his autobiographical memoir that his Christadelphian background brought with it a 'questioning of current authority and a spirit of free enquiry' and instilled in him the 'need to improve on the standard scholarly dictionaries, to get back to the original sources, to ask fundamental questions and to seek for answers'.<sup>38</sup> He placed his trust in his own knowledge of Babylonian language and culture, perfected by the habit of reading cuneiform tablets in the original all his life. Meaning arose from an encounter between his knowledge, his intellect and the text in front of him. The opinion of others, who had lesser knowledge of the primary sources, was not of much concern, and theoretical approaches held no interest for him. In his aversion to theory he was true to the custom of Assyriology, but in addressing other audiences he acknowledged he was swimming against the stream.<sup>39</sup> As one obituary noted, 'he invented his own brand of Assyriology'.<sup>40</sup> He was convinced of the correctness of his method, and the results of his method repeatedly vindicated that conviction.

Lambert's weekly visits to the British Museum were punctuated by the examination of cuneiform tablets and art objects for antiquities dealers. This activity was certainly driven by a never exhausted appetite for new evidence and resulted in an extraordinary knowledge of the market in Near Eastern antiquities. His *Nachlass* contained 10,000+ typewritten descriptions for dealers, many kept as very faded carbon copies. (Sheets of

<sup>36</sup> 'The pair Laḥmu–Laḥamu in cosmology', *Orientalia*, n.s., 54 (1985), 189–202; W. Heimpel, 'Anthropomorphic and bovine Lahmus', in M. Dietrich and O. Loretz (eds.), *dubsar anta-men. Studien zur Altorientalistik* (Fs. W. H. Ph. Römer; Münster, 1998), pp. 129–56.

<sup>37</sup> S. Dalley, 'Statues of Marduk and the date of *Enūma eliš*', *Altorientalistische Forschungen*, 24 (1997), 163–71.

<sup>38</sup> Finkel and Livingstone, *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 52 (2011), 397–9.

<sup>39</sup> 'Mir ist wohl bewußt, daß ich mit dieser Darlegung gegen den Strom schwimme': 'Der Mythos im Alten Mesopotamien, sein Werden und Vergehen', *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 26, 1 (1974), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Finkel and Livingstone, *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 52 (2011), 399.

carbon paper, like typewriter ribbons, were kept in service for much longer than their manufacturers intended.) His work for dealers gained him notoriety among those who hold that authentication by scholars is a driver of the illegal markets in antiquities. It also enmired him in several police investigations and court cases in which the ownership of objects he had authenticated was disputed. One such case was the *People of the State of New York v. Houshang Mahboubian and Nedjatollah Sakhai* in 1987. The charge was that the defendants had arranged the theft of two crates of Iranian antiquities from a New York warehouse in order to make a fraudulent insurance claim. The prosecution considered that an accusation of fraud would be more convincing if the antiquities could be shown to be fake. Accordingly the trial examined the question of whether they were authentic or not. Lambert, who had authenticated the items in London in strongly approving terms, and others were called as expert witnesses. Some witnesses judged that the stolen goods included at least some fakes. Lambert resolutely maintained the correctness of his authentications.

The case was written up in the *New Yorker*, where Lambert was described as an ‘almost overwhelmingly professorial Englishman, well along in years’ (he was then sixty).<sup>41</sup> He ‘answered questions with an air of authority and a slight smile’, and was throughout a ‘charming and erudite professor, absolutely certain of his scholarly conclusions’. Absolute certainty in the correctness of his own conclusions was indeed a lifelong trait. Over a period of sixty years Lambert very rarely revised positions taken on the basis of the evidence available to him earlier in his career. What is more remarkable is that new evidence seldom arose that conflicted with those positions. This speaks for an astonishing soundness of critical judgement, perhaps even an instinct for factual truth.

Lambert was by nature one who mistrusted collaborative enterprise, with especial suspicion of committees, which he thought susceptible to moral corruption. However, he did not work only for his own ends. His uncompromising pursuit of knowledge and confidence in his own extraordinary capacity for understanding cuneiform texts of all genres and periods led others to enlist his help in collaborative projects. In the British Museum he was engaged to finish the *Catalogue of the Cuneiform Tablets in the Kouyunjik Collection*, begun by Carl Bezold in 1889, and produced two volumes, the *Second Supplement* in 1968 (co-written with Alan Millard) and the *Third Supplement* in 1992. After the publication of the

<sup>41</sup> Calvin Trillin, ‘American chronicles: Frenchy and the Persians’, *The New Yorker*, 29 June 1987, 44–67. I thank Renée Kovacs for providing me with a copy of this article.



first volume of the University of Chicago's monumental *Assyrian Dictionary* (twenty-one volumes, 1956–2010), the editors decided to improve quality by sending drafts of future volumes to external readers. The first person they chose was Lambert, an extraordinary accolade for a scholar who was only just thirty. He remained an unflagging assurer of quality for all ensuing volumes. Much later, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York brought him in to complete the editing of its *Literary and Scholastic Texts of the First Millennium B.C.* (New York, 2005). He represented the University of Birmingham on the council of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq from 1969 to 1996, and encouraged it to meet in London on Thursdays, so that he could attend.

He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1971, and President of the Society for Old Testament Study in 1984. In 1977–8 he was a visiting instructor at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris and became in consequence an honorary professor at the Collège de France. In 2000 he was presented with a Festschrift, *Wisdom, Gods and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honour of W. G. Lambert* (ed. A. R. George and I. L. Finkel; Winona Lake, IN). It was noted that the title of this volume could be abbreviated to *WGL Studies* or *Studies WGL*, depending on whether one preferred Akkadian or West Semitic word order.

Lambert once reproached the writer for not making an obituary critical enough. He never wrote one himself but, had he done so, it is certain that he would not have passed lightly over his subject's flaws. As he once declared, he 'pulled no punches' and it was not in him to sweeten his language for reasons of tact. In this he was quite the opposite of the slave in the dialogue which he edited in *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, who found the words to agree with any proposition. A few last paragraphs will attempt to give a rounded impression of the character of a man who will always be recalled as the most brilliant British Assyriologist of his era.

After the death of his parents Lambert's only close relative was his elder sister, Muriel, who was four years older than him. Both remained unmarried and childless. It seems the goddess Ishtar failed to capture his emotions, just as she thwarted his ambitions in Tablet IV of the god-list *An = Anum*. His social life was divided between the University of Birmingham and the city's Christadelphian Ecclesiae, first Birmingham Central and later West Birmingham. At the university he was a regular in the senior common room and always ready after visitors' lectures to prolong the evening in the Indian restaurants of Selly Oak. To Christadelphian congregations he gave talks on the Bible from ancient Near Eastern perspectives.

Lambert was driven by a thirst for knowledge and measured himself against his contemporaries accordingly. Eloquence alone left him unimpressed. He once remarked after a conference address delivered by an archaeologist, 'He speaks well enough, but I am not sure that he actually said anything.' For him the key question that he brought to any piece of academic writing or lecture was, 'Does this teach me anything I did not know before?' Judgements made in response to this question sometimes combined with his distinctive inability to suppress forthright opinion. This could colour social relations with fellow academics; he made enemies unwittingly. Though sociable to a point, he was not a clubbable individual. Possibly his background excluded him from being at ease in the company of contemporaries whom he felt had been better favoured by birth. He made fun of German surnames prefixed with 'von', not only out of rivalry with his adversary in Münster but also because Christadelphianism had instilled in him an antipathy to social hierarchy.

It seems he was solitary by choice; in consequence he lacked people close to him who might have listened to his grievances and tempered his outrage when his sense of injustice was violated. He could accuse others of spite where none existed, even in print. He let off steam by writing letters of complaint. He always kept carbon copies. On his desk at the time of his death was a correspondence with a railway operator over its poor service, and another with a grocery company over the amount of whole grain actually in a bread roll described as wholegrain on the packaging. More telling was a dossier of letters to and from fellow academics, in which he used frank language and not a little vitriol to denigrate third parties whom he thought had wronged him.

When his professional pride was not in danger of hurt, he was much more congenial. At his service of thanksgiving Anthony Watkins, a Christadelphian friend, gave an address that drew on the recollections of many Christadelphians who had known Lambert. They remarked on qualities that were much in evidence in his academic career, including 'clarity of thought and exposition', 'clear thinking and seemingly unerring instinct for what was right'. They also recalled a 'quiet and undemonstrative' man who was 'unfailingly charming, modest and self-effacing' and 'never paraded his abilities'. Many academic colleagues knew this side of him too. Indeed, personal modesty was the most salient attribute in Lambert's character. Many people of much less distinction have made a bigger splash, but self-promotion and vanity repelled him wherever he found them.

Until the illness of his last few years, his physical health was excellent. Even in his early eighties he walked faster and further than many much younger people. His back developed a hump, but it did not seem to trouble him. A German colleague wrote letters insisting that there was simple and effective treatment. Lambert kept the letters but does not seem to have taken the advice. Probably he had no time to spare. When a cancer finally began to affect his vitality, he complained impatiently to several correspondents of the reduced mobility that he was suffering. Ill health was difficult to endure, not only because it was strange to him but also because it stood between him and his work.

He did not go on holiday, but usually attended the annual *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, the peripatetic international conference for Assyriology. Thus he saw a good deal of the world and its universities. He took pride in writing notes for his conference papers on small pieces of paper while travelling to the venue. The results were delivered extempore with precision, clarity and humour, and always drew large audiences. More rarely his wit was expressed in print. In an early essay on 'Morals in Ancient Mesopotamia' he cited a passage of Gilgamesh XII which promises better treatment in the netherworld for those who had large families while living. 'The family allowances of the ancients,' he observed, 'were apparently not paid until death.'<sup>42</sup>

Lambert's frugality was well known. He was not above picking up a penny in the street. His home life was spartan. He was a lifelong vegetarian and found modern kitchen equipment unnecessary. He did not own a car or a television. Nor did he listen to the radio that his sister gave him, placing it out of sight at the back of a wardrobe. He got his news from the *Daily Telegraph*. In the 1990s he attempted to replace his old manual typewriter with a personal computer, but having bought one could find nobody who could explain to him in non-technical vocabulary how to use it. The experience confirmed his aversion to electrical gadgets and technological aids.

His pastimes were playing the piano, keeping his academic library up to date and collecting ancient Near Eastern cylinder seals. He maintained with pride that his collection of seals was by some distance superior in quality to that of the British Museum. Before his death he arranged for its transfer to the British Museum as a bequest. Thus he enhanced the

<sup>42</sup>'Morals in ancient Mesopotamia', *Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap 'Ex Oriente Lux'*, 15 (1957–8), 190.

museum's collections through an act of unusual generosity as well as through decades of remarkable scholarship. It was his noblest moment.

W. G. Lambert died at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham on 9 November 2011. He was cremated on 25 November at Lodge Hill Cemetery after a service of thanksgiving at West Birmingham Christadelphian Hall in Quinton. He left most of his academic library to his alma mater, Christ's College, Cambridge. The books are now housed in the Haddon Library of the University's Department of Archaeology and Anthropology. The residue of his estate he bequeathed to the Christadelphian Care Homes, a charity that had cared for his sister and many of his friends in their old age.

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*Fellow of the Academy*

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