



OBITUARY OF DR. ARTHUR WALEY

by DAVID HAWKES

On 17 February 1966, while on his way to a meeting of the Editorial Board of *Asia Major*, Arthur Waley was gravely injured in a motor accident and found to be suffering from cancer of the spine. An operation to alleviate his condition was unsuccessful, and as the disease progressed, paralysis became almost total. He died on 27 June at his house in Highgate, in a little room from whose windows he had, during the last years of his life, delighted to look down on the urban panorama, darkening in the dusk or illuminated with a myriad lights, stretching far below him towards the valley of the Lea. His grave is in Highgate Cemetery, most romantic of London's burial grounds, though known to most for its unromantic association with the name of Karl Marx.

Death at seventy-six however lamentable is not usually felt to be premature; yet Waley's death was a tragic one not only because it was protracted and painful. In 1962 a number of personal and domestic blows, culminating in an accident which looked as if it would deprive him permanently of the use of his right hand, had convinced him that his working life was over and that he would never write again. The devoted attention of Mrs. Waley, however, enabled him to make a gradual recovery from the despondency and prostration of that period, and his zest for work had fully returned to him by the time he was struck down. As evidence of this regained activity there is a review article by him on *Yu hsien k'u* appearing in Part 3 of BSOAS 29; and two other articles, one on the tenth-century Zen work *Tsu t'ang chi* on which he would appear to have been working for some considerable time, and one a study of the word 𠄎, were almost complete at the time of his death. There is every indication that a period of vigorous and productive work was abruptly ended by the unlucky conjunction of accident and disease.

Arthur David Waley was born at Tunbridge Wells in 1889, the son of a well-to-do civil servant in the Board of Trade called Schloss—the name which Waley bore throughout school and college and until the age of twenty-five, when the extreme xenophobia of 1914 drove the family to adopt the maiden name of his mother.

Waley was educated at Rugby, and gained a classical scholarship to King's College, Cambridge in 1907, later obtaining a First in Part I of the Classical Tripos, but failing to complete Part II because of eye trouble. His

family arranged for him to go into the export business with South America, but having got as far as Spain, he returned in 1913 to take up an appointment offered him in the Print Room of the British Museum.

It is somewhat startling to discover that this doyen of British sinology, possibly the most widely-known orientalist of his time in the whole world, never set foot in the Far East, never received formal training in an Oriental language, and, if one excepts the occasional lecturing on Chinese poetry he did for London University as an Additional and later as an Honorary Lecturer of the School of Oriental and African Studies, never held an academic post. He began the study of Chinese and Japanese after his transfer to the Oriental Section under Laurence Binyon, sitting, it is said, engrossed in grammars through the Zeppelin raids of the first world war, just as he sat, high up in his Gordon Square flat when all others were in shelters below, absorbedly penning his beloved and immortal *Monkey* during the air raids of the second.

Waley remained in the British Museum for eighteen years (1913-30), during which time his chief official work came to be the cataloging of the paintings recovered from Tun-huang by Sir Aurel Stein. (His *Catalogue* was first published in 1931). But the newly acquired languages were soon put to other uses than the decipherment of colophons. He had to share his new found delights in Chinese poetry with his friends. *One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* was published in 1918, his twenty-ninth year, *More Translations* in 1919, and *The Temple* in 1923.

Much of his translation from the Japanese was also done during these years at the British Museum: *Nō Plays* (1921), the first volumes of *Genji* (1925-33), and *Sei Shōnagon* (1928). He is habitually referred to as a sinologist, but has, of course as much right to be regarded as a Japanologist too. Those three titles alone, if he had never written another book, would surely have been sufficient to gain him an honoured place in the history of Japanese studies: a fact recognized by the Japanese themselves when they awarded him an Order of Merit of the Sacred Treasure in 1959 and made him an Honorary Member of the Japan Academy in 1965.¹

Waley left the Museum in 1930 in order to devote himself exclusively to study and translation, and held no official post for the rest of his life, except for a now somewhat legendary interlude as a censor in the Ministry of Information during the second world war which is recorded in a delightful poem first published in *Horizon* (1941) and reprinted in *The Secret History of the Mongols* (London, 1963).

Waley's fertility and industry were amazing. He published some three dozen full-length books, an output which would be creditable in a hack translator or a writer of detective fiction, although in fact each was the

product of massive reading and painstaking scholarship. His achievement becomes even more astonishing if one adds to the above the number, scope and variety of his articles. A *Preliminary List*, compiled by Mr. F. A. Johns of Rutgers University, of his writings published up to 1958 appeared in this Journal in 1959 (vii pp. 1-10) on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, and there would be no point in repeating the catalogue here. We confine ourselves instead to a brief analysis of it.

Waley's abiding interest throughout his life was Chinese poetry. His earliest publications during his years at the British Museum were, as we have seen, translations of Chinese poetry, and he returned to poetry translation after the second world war in the books on Po Chū-i, Li Po, and Yüan Mei. A statement made by him in the last of these seems to imply that he felt the popularization of Chinese verse to be a major part of his achievement as a translator:

"Despite their imperfections my translations have in the past done something towards inspiring a number of people with the idea that, for lovers of poetry, Chinese is a language worth learning. I hope that this book may serve the same purpose and in particular do something to dispel the common idea that all Chinese poetry belongs to a remote antiquity."²

During his thirties and early forties he worked mainly on Japanese literature; then, after he had completed the monumental *Genji*, and some time after leaving the Museum, he devoted himself up to the outbreak of the second world war, to classical Chinese studies—*The Way and its Power*, *The Book of Songs*, *The Analects*, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*. *Monkey* was written during the early part of the war. Of his very miscellaneous post-war books *The Real Tripitaka* (1952) is a sort of learned postscript to *Monkey*; *The Nine Songs* (1955) developed anthropological interests already manifest in *The Book of Songs*; *The Opium War Through Chinese Eyes* (1958), originally delivered as the Chichele lectures at All Souls College, Oxford, followed naturally on the eighteenth century preoccupations of *Yüan Mei*, in which Chinese reactions to the Western intruder furnish a lively appendix; whilst *Ballads and Stories from Tun-huang* was the flowering of a long-standing interest in the Tun-huang manuscripts dating from his early years at the Museum.

Waley undoubtedly had genius, and it is a cause of rejoicing and self-congratulation to readers of this Journal that he turned his genius in the direction of oriental literature, when there were a dozen other ways in which he might equally well have given it expression. He was a poet on familiar terms with some of the major poets of his time—Yeats, Eliot, Pound, to name no more—whose own poetic gifts found their fulfilment in translation. He belonged not only to the world of oriental studies, but to the

¹ See *Transactions of the Japan Academy* xxiii/3 (Nov. 1965) pp. 241-4.

² *Yuan Mei*, p. 204.

world of literature, and this enabled him to win for Far Eastern studies a prestige and a lustre in circles where they had not previously been regarded as of serious intellectual concern.

His achievement as an interpreter of Chinese poetry, officially recognized in 1953 when he was awarded the Queen's Medal for Poetry, lies in the creation or evolution of a form both suitable to the Chinese style of verse and acceptable to the literary tastes of his own day. This "sprung rhythm" style he handled with a strength and delicacy which are inimitable but clearly had something to do with a mastery of language and a fastidiousness in searching for the *mot juste* or the right turn of phrase which sometimes caused him, to use his own words, to sit "hundreds of times . . . for hours in front of texts the meaning of which I understood perfectly, and yet was unable to see how they ought to be put into English. . ."³ It is a style whose imitators nowadays are legion and whose imitations are banal and insipid to a degree—a tribute, no doubt, to the uniqueness of the original they seek to emulate.

Waley invented not only a new style of translating poetry but a new sort of book. The studies on Po Chü-i, Li Po and Yüan Mei, poets' lives liberally interspersed with examples of their works, are superficially similar to a type of literary biography familiar enough in the West; but they are essentially different in that the main source for the biographical information they contain is in the poems themselves.

Whatever Waley's achievement as a poet may ultimately appear to be, there can be little doubt that his most widely-known works, the novels *Genji* and *Monkey*, are likely to survive longest in popular regard. Indeed, both are likely to retain a permanent place in English literature, comparable with that occupied by the translations of Berners, Dryden, and the like. It is unthinkable that other translations of these novels could ever supersede them in popularity, and improbable that the astringent charm and ascetic delicacy of their style could displease the taste of any age, however much literary fashions may fluctuate and change. His immortality as a translator can the more confidently be predicted because his scholarship was substantial enough to ensure a level of accuracy which time will do little to flaw. Of course he made mistakes—so did the translators of the Authorized Version; but not enough ever to make his translations obsolete.

Precisely what his assessment as a scholar should be, however, is extremely difficult to determine. Certainly he was abreast of all that went on in any of the numerous fields which interested him—a range equalled by very few indeed of his contemporaries, even though some may have excelled him in one or another particularity. He was, moreover, astonishingly well read in Chinese literature. It is probable—though such assertions are impossible to verify—that in sheer bulk he had read far more of it than

any other Occidental living. He corresponded and conversed with a host of scholars of every age and nationality, and his influence, particularly on the younger of them, must have been considerable, in spite of the fact that he never held an academic post. Yet he was not a systematic scholar, and it seems unlikely that he will be remembered as a great sinologist in the way that Karlgren, say, or his friend Pelliot obviously will. In fact he disliked and distrusted systems and theories, regarding them as "boring" (a word to which he had fairly frequent recourse); and although he was capable of communicating the gist of some doctrine, theory, or complex series of events by a few deft and brilliant touches in the course of dealing with a Tripitaka or a Po Chü-i, he seldom ventured on formal expositions of a theoretical nature, even in subjects such as Chinese poetry in which he was manifestly an authority. His articles were often the jottings of a translator: explanations of the meaning of obsolete expressions or rare words and phrases suggested and supported by his voluminous reading and passed on to assist other toilers in the same vineyard.

As a man Waley was often called eccentric and sometimes thought to be formidable, although in fact his friends, of every calling and profession, were legion. Certainly he was somewhat eccentric in his habits—a *private* person in every possible sense of the word. He disliked pretence and pomposity, particularly the institutional kind, and no one, even his nearest and dearest, was exempt from the somewhat bleak candour with which he confronted polite or jocular untruth. His intellectual humility (a quality totally unconnected with any kind of modesty) was so great and so surprising in a person of his pre-eminence that it was sometimes mistaken for irony.

Greatness in men is a rare but unmistakable quality. In our small profession it is unlikely we shall see a man of such magnitude again.

³ "Notes on Translation", *Atlantic Monthly* 202, Nov. 1958, p. 109.