

# Professor Charles Fraser Beckingham

## 1914–1998

A gente se alvoroça e, de alegria,  
Não sabe mais que olhar a causa dela.  
Que gente será esta? em si diziam;  
Que costumes, que Lei, que Rei teriam?

Charles Beckingham was for 23 years a distinguished Professor of Islamic Studies, first at the University of Manchester and subsequently at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Born at Houghton in Huntingdonshire on 18 February 1914, he completed his schooling at Huntingdon Grammar School in 1932 and won an Open Scholarship to Queens' College, Cambridge, where he read English, graduating with First Class Honours in 1935. The following year he joined the Department of Printed Books at the British Museum, remaining there until being seconded to Naval Intelligence, where he served between 1942 and 1946, and in 1946 he transferred the cryptographic skills he had acquired at Bletchley Park to a Foreign Office post at GCHQ in Cheltenham.

Although there is nothing in the above bald recital of the facts of his early career to suggest how it would develop later, he had in fact long been concerned with Oriental history and geography, in which he was widely read. Further, unlike most English graduates, let alone graduates of English, he had a lively interest and wide competence in languages. Familiar with Classics from school, his later scholarly work would in addition demonstrate mastery not only of the mainstream modern European languages but also of primary sources in Portuguese. Given his regional concerns it was thus inevitable that he would also embark upon Arabic, and he was later to become proficient in Turkish too. His scholarly potential was already bearing fruit in the form of articles published as early as 1940 in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, and as part of his war work he made significant contributions to the *Admiralty Handbook of Western Asia*. By 1950 he had decided that he wished to transfer to a university post, and in 1951 he obtained a Lectureship in Islamic History at Manchester, his qualities thereafter securing for him rapid recognition: in 1955 he became Senior Lecturer and in 1958 he was appointed to succeed Robson as Professor of Islamic Studies. Three years later he took on the editorship of the *Journal of Semitic Studies*, and in 1965 he accepted an invitation to move to the School of Oriental and African Studies, where he was to remain, again as Professor of Islamic Studies, until his retirement in 1981.

He was, by all accounts, a superb lecturer, combining erudition with wit and clarity of exposition, qualities the more impressive because of his habit of speaking without notes (an aid which, with characteristic modesty, he professed to find distracting). Invariably sympathetic and helpful to his students, he was equally supportive of the younger colleagues with whom he came into contact, especially during his headship of the Near and Middle East Department. Even if the School of Oriental and African Studies was at the time a more relaxed, even leisurely institution, this was a particularly busy period for him, as it coincided with his presidency of the Hakluyt Society and overlapped with his presidency of the Royal Asiatic Society. But despite this his headship of the department was marked by an unobtrusive efficiency. Affairs were managed with a light, deft touch: discussion of anything more than trivia might

involve an invitation to lunch at a nearby restaurant, sympathetic but probing attentiveness, and consequent prompt and effective action. His trust in those he judged reliable was a reflection of his own trustworthiness and personal integrity. Considerate, helpful, and modest to a fault, he combined impeccable manners with a keen sense of humour: indeed, among his many friends he was noted not only for his connoisseurship of food and wine but also for his conviviality and his gifts as a mimic and raconteur.

Two years after his retirement in 1981 he was elected Fellow of the British Academy, and it was typical of his selfless promotion of scholarship that he then served for a further ten years as Chairman of its Committee for the *Fontes Historiae Africanae*, nursing along the publications of this important series. He had also accepted the onerous task of continuing and completing Gibb's annotated translation of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, and the final volume duly appeared in 1994. He continued to work for as long as was physically possible, and in his last years bore his increasing frailty with stoic good humour and grace.

The conjunction of history and geography was central to Beckingham's concerns. It is enough to glance at the 25 of his articles collected in the Variorum volume *Between Islam and Christendom: travellers, facts and legends in the middle ages and the Renaissance* (1983) to see what a major part travel and discovery played in his interests. Some are concerned with Arabic geographical works, like 'Ibn Hauqal's map of Italy' (in *Iran and Islam*, the memorial volume for Vladimir Minorsky, 1971) and 'Arabic texts and the Hakluyt Society' (his address to the Society's annual general meeting in 1979). But European travellers in both Ethiopia and the Near East loom even larger, notably the Portuguese explorers Pero da Covilhã, Pantaleão de Aveiro, Jerónimo Lobo and Francisco Alvarez.

Much of Beckingham's more substantial published work on Ethiopia appeared under the aegis of the Hakluyt Society. In 1954, he published, jointly with G. W. B. Huntingford, *Some records of Ethiopia 1593-1646*, comprising translated extracts from Manoel de Almeida's *History of High Ethiopia or Abassia* (based on a manuscript superior to that used by Beccari for his edition of the text early in this century) and a translation of the short *History of the Galla* by Bahrey. In 1961 Beckingham and Huntingford produced *The Prester John of the Indies*, a translation of Alvarez's description of Ethiopia. Alvarez was a member of the first European embassy to Ethiopia which both reached its destination and returned in safety. The textual history of this important work is highly complex, and the new version represented a considerable advance on that produced by Lord Stanley of Alderley in 1881, incorporating as it does all the additional material found in Ramusio's Italian text of Alvarez's report, published in 1550. Much later Beckingham also supplied the introduction and notes for another Hakluyt Society publication, Donald Lockhart's translation (1984) of the *Itinerário* of Jerónimo Lobo, a Jesuit who spent the years 1625-34 in Ethiopia.

His work on Ethiopia had brought him into contact with Prester John, the mythical priest-cum-king whose supposed presence in the East exercised such a strong fascination for medieval Western Christians, and on whom Beckingham became a leading authority. In seeking (and believing they had located) Prester John in Ethiopia, of course, the Portuguese were pursuing a quest that had begun in the twelfth century and had initially been focused in a somewhat different direction (although such an assertion is perhaps misleading, given the geographical perspective of Western Christians, for whom Ethiopia tended to constitute 'Middle India'). The defeat of the Muslims of Central Asia by a Buddhist power, the Qara-Khitan, in 1141 had caused

Western Christians to look for Prester John to the east of the Islamic world with which Crusaders were by now locked in continual conflict. It was not until Ethiopian embassies began to reach Western Europe in the early fourteenth century that attention moved towards Africa. In 'An Ethiopian Embassy to Europe c. 1310' (*Journal of Semitic Studies*, 14, 1989, 337–46), Beckingham would conduct an in-depth examination of an episode that may have played a major role in this shift.

Well before this, his inaugural lecture at SOAS in 1966, 'The achievements of Prester John', had signalled the extension of his interest to the obscure genesis of the legend, including the notorious 'Letter of Prester John', which did so much to nurture its growth. The original document, which appears to have been concocted within Western Europe in the mid-twelfth century, was in Latin; but it was subsequently translated into many vernacular languages, usually with matter added or omitted. The provenance of the three Hebrew versions of the Letter presents an especially difficult and fascinating problem, and in 1982 Beckingham and Edward Ullendorff published *The Hebrew letters of Prester John* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). This volume comprised the texts and English translations together with an authoritative commentary, the scope of which was by no means confined to the Hebrew documents alone. Beckingham's last major publication was again a collaborative work, an edition (with Bernard Hamilton) of a collection of texts and essays entitled *Prester John, the Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes* (Variorum, 1996). Here were combined reprintings of some of the seminal material on Prester John, by Zarncke and by Pelliot, and a number of specially commissioned studies; the result was a valuable addition to the corpus of scholarship on this labyrinthine problem. The volume incorporated three of Beckingham's papers, including his SOAS inaugural lecture, and a hitherto unpublished piece, 'Prester John in West Africa', so that his total input outstripped that of any other single contributor.

These engagements with the mythical Christian potentate did not keep Beckingham from a long-standing commitment to work on the most famous of medieval Muslim travellers. Sir Hamilton Gibb had undertaken in 1922 to produce for the Hakluyt Society an annotated translation of the itinerary of the fourteenth-century Moroccan pilgrim and jurist Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, who had aimed to visit every part of the Islamic world. Beckingham assisted Gibb with the production of the third volume of *The travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa A.D. 1325–54*, which appeared in print just a week after Gibb's death in 1971. It was left to Beckingham to complete the fourth and last volume of the translation, which he accompanied with a commentary that tended to be fuller than was Gibb's in the earlier volumes. This section of the *Travels* comprised much of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's stay in India, his visits to the Maldives and (purportedly) to Bengal, south-east Asia and China, his return home to Morocco, and a further journey—his last—to Spain and then across the Sahara to the kingdom of Mali. In the foreword to the volume, which finally saw the light of day in 1994, Beckingham observed wryly that 'the translation of the narrative of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's travels has taken more than twice as long as the travels themselves'. Be that as it may, by bringing the project to completion he had earned the heartfelt gratitude of present and future scholars concerned with the Islamic world and with the history of the Indian subcontinent. When he died, he was engaged in the preparation of a fifth volume, which would have included an index to the entire work and appendices on difficult matters like the chronology of the travels and the authenticity of certain visits.

Beckingham's work was characterized not merely by meticulous and lucid scholarship, but by the perhaps rarer qualities of humour and common sense,

as when he described the Peutinger Table as sharing ‘some of the limitations and the compression of those familiar, highly schematic and extremely useful maps of the London underground railway system’ (‘Achievements’, p. 19); or when he wrote of the Letter of Prester John (‘discussed more often than it has been read’) that ‘much of the enormous mass of commentary that has accumulated around it, however ingenious and erudite it may be, seems to me somewhat perverse. When so many people had such good reasons for wishing to believe in it, it seems to me to partake of their naïveté to search for geographical and historical facts which might help to justify their acceptance of this or that preposterous assertion’ (*ibid.*, 13). Good sense was manifest, too, in his insistence that medieval Europeans were far less ignorant of the geography of the world than is often thought; they lacked, rather, the tools to distinguish reliable traditions from those that were bogus and fabulous.

He tried, wherever possible, to experience at first hand the areas with which his research was concerned, visiting, for example, Ethiopia on more than one occasion and touring southern India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives in the steps of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa. Beckingham’s own high standards did not lead him, however, to engage in captious or mordant criticism of other scholars. The unflinching courtesy he displayed in his professional relationships was in evidence also in his writing: either he was content to correct error without attacking the individuals responsible, or his strictures were couched in general terms and no less effective for that. One reason for this restraint was undoubtedly the modesty that rendered him ever alert for flaws in his own work, a modesty that was genuinely felt and never assumed by way of conventional *politesse*. A notable instance appears early in his inaugural lecture at SOAS, when he introduced Prester John as ‘someone less substantial than even I am’. There was nothing remotely insubstantial about Beckingham’s wide-ranging erudition, and his published work will prove of immense value to scholars for a considerable time to come.

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