

Sir Harold Bailey

1899–1996

Sir Harold Bailey, Emeritus Professor of Sanskrit in the University of Cambridge, who died on 11 January 1996 at the age of 96, can be described without any fear of exaggeration as one of the most remarkable scholars of the century. A man of immense learning, he has been credited with a knowledge of more than fifty languages, many of which he read for pleasure, for he took great delight in literature, especially epic poetry, as well as in language. Through his publications he made significant contributions to the history of many of these languages, but the principal monument to his scholarship will be his work on two Middle Iranian languages, Middle Persian (Pahlavi) and Khotanese.

Harold Walter Bailey was born in Devizes in Wiltshire on 16 December 1899. At the age of ten, he moved with his parents and two brothers to a remote farm in Western Australia, where he grew up without formal schooling. There were books in the house, however, including a seven-volume encyclopaedia, which he devoured eagerly, and books containing introductory lessons in French, German, Italian, Spanish, Latin, and Greek. At the age of 12 he met a Russian speaker in the outback and soon learned to converse with him. Writing which he could not read on tea-chests from India kindled an interest in more exotic languages and their scripts, which was scarcely satisfied by the acquisition in Perth of selections from the bible translated into Tamil, Arabic, Japanese and other languages. In later years he described to the historian Arnold Toynbee 'how his family used to watch him, with a benign but whimsical gaze, while, during the noonday rest from their common labours in the field, he would be conning his Avestan grammar in the shade of an Antipodean haystack' (A. J. Toynbee, *A study of history*, x, London, 1954, 16). Persian, and later on Sanskrit, particularly took Bailey's fancy, but no courses in Oriental Studies were available in Australia at the time; so in 1921 Bailey entered the University of Western Australia to study Classics with English and Logic.

At Perth Bailey found himself the only student of the Professor of Classics, George Woods, from whose teaching he learnt something of linguistics. In 1926, after completing his Master's thesis on religious ideas in Euripides, he won a scholarship to Oxford, where he finally had access to formal tuition in Sanskrit, Avestan, and Indo-European comparative philology. His interest soon came to centre on the history and development of the Iranian branch of Indo-European, and he spared no effort to seek out everything which might have a bearing on his chosen subject. This entailed learning not only the numerous Iranian languages but also the languages with which Iranian-speakers had come into contact over the centuries. One such was Georgian, which Bailey acquired in 1928, and which inaugurated a lifelong interest in the Caucasian languages. The study of Georgian had the additional advantage of allowing him to indulge his passion for epic. Since he did not possess a text of Rustveli's *Man in the panther's skin*, Bailey sat in the Bodleian and transcribed all 1,600 quatrains by hand.

In 1929 Bailey embarked on his doctoral dissertation, an edition, with translation and commentary, of the *Greater Bundahishn*, a vast compendium of Zoroastrian lore written in Middle Persian in the notoriously ambiguous Pahlavi script. Here Bailey was once again left to his own devices, since there was no scholar in England equipped to help him in this field; and indeed, it is



*Portrait of Professor Sir Harold Bailey in Caucasian costume, painted by Ronald Way.
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said that when the thesis was submitted and Oxford took soundings for a qualified examiner, the name most often suggested was that of H. W. Bailey.

1929 was also the year in which Bailey was appointed to a lectureship in Iranian Studies at the London School of Oriental Studies, as it then was. Although he had only just begun work on his thesis, Bailey immediately began to produce the steady stream of articles which continued unabated for more than sixty years: those published in the years 1930–35 already number more than twenty and fill over 250 pages of his *Opera minora* (2 vols., Shiraz, 1981). Most of these early articles were primarily devoted to Middle Persian and Avestan problems, though the material adduced for comparison already covered an immense range of languages, from Armenian and Syriac to Tibetan and Chinese. After spending several months in Persia in 1932 ‘to hear Persian all around’ he also began to write on the modern dialects of Western Iran. Despite such distractions, he completed and submitted his thesis in 1933.

By this time Bailey’s reputation for his work on the Zoroastrian texts in Pahlavi and Avestan made him the obvious person to be invited to Oxford to give the Ratanbai Katrak Lectures on Zoroastrianism in 1936. The resulting book *Zoroastrian problems in the ninth-century books*, eventually published in 1943, is undoubtedly one of Bailey’s most brilliant works. A masterly combination of philology and etymology in the service of the history of ideas, it was reprinted with a new introduction in 1971 and still remains a treasure-trove of valuable insights. Amongst other contributions in the same mould one may single out Bailey’s discussion (in an article with the characteristic but uninformative title ‘Iranian Studies III’, *BSOAS*, 7/2, 1934, 275–98) of the etymology and meaning of Avestan *spənta-*, traditionally understood as ‘holy’, and its Balto-Slavonic cognates. Here he gives a succinct statement of the method he had so successfully applied to the problem, which involved giving due weight to four types of evidence: ‘(1) the Avestan contexts, (2) the etymology, (3) the Balto-Slav. cognates in their oldest ascertainable meanings, (4) the traditional Pahlavi translation’ (p. 288).

In 1936 Bailey was appointed to the professorship of Sanskrit at Cambridge. His association with SOAS continued in various ways: he became a member of the Governing Body (1946–70) and an Honorary Fellow (1963), and in 1970 an issue of *BSOAS*, to which he had contributed so many important articles over the years, was dedicated to him on the occasion of his seventieth birthday. But henceforth his life was centred in Cambridge, first in his rooms in Queens’ College, and after his retirement in 1967 in his flat at Southacre, a mile away from the college, a distance he regularly walked four times a day.

No doubt Bailey would have preferred a chair of Iranian Studies, had any such existed; but he made himself comfortable in the chair of Sanskrit by giving the widest possible interpretation to his brief. In his inaugural lecture on ‘The content of Indian and Iranian studies’, Bailey surveyed the whole field, confessing to ‘a particular attachment’ for Khotanese, the Middle Iranian language of Khotan in Chinese Turkestan, where a largely Buddhist culture had flourished until about 1000 A.D. By now Khotanese had become the chief focus of his research. Bailey later explained the attraction of Khotanese in a letter to Toynbee: ‘Persian and Sanskrit have come together for me in Khotanese studies—the Iranian speech with the Buddhist culture’ (*A study of history*, x, 17, n. 3). His original plan in devoting himself to Khotanese in 1934 was ‘to publish eleven volumes of text, commentary and lexicon, over eleven years’, a plan ‘abrogated by much teaching in the Old Indian field ... and by adverse external circumstances’, as he ruefully admitted in 1963 in the preface to *Khotanese texts*, v. In fact the task occupied Bailey for nearly fifty years,

during which he published five volumes of Khotanese texts in facsimile (*Codices Khotanenses*, Copenhagen, 1938; *Saka documents*, I–IV, London, 1960–67), two volumes of texts with translation and commentary (*Khotanese texts*, IV, Cambridge, 1961; *Saka documents text volume*, London, 1968), five volumes of texts alone (*Khotanese texts*, I–III, V, Cambridge, 1945–63; *Khotanese Buddhist texts*, London, 1950), a volume of lexical commentary on the longest surviving work of Khotanese literature, the ‘Book of Zambasta’ (*Khotanese texts*, VI: *Prolexis to the Book of Zambasta*, Cambridge, 1967), an etymological dictionary (*Dictionary of Khotan Saka*, Cambridge, 1979), and a study of the names of peoples and places mentioned in the Khotanese texts (*Khotanese texts*, VII, Cambridge, 1985), not to mention enough articles and lectures to fill several more volumes.

The value of this pioneering work can hardly be overestimated. But for Bailey, most of the Khotanese manuscripts would still languish unread in libraries. Even if there had been another scholar willing to take up the challenge, it is doubtful whether anyone else could have brought to the task so much learning, stamina, and sheer intellectual ability. R. E. Emmerick, one of Bailey’s most distinguished pupils, has paid tribute to his teacher’s skill in reading the late Khotanese texts in cursive script, scarcely any of which had previously been deciphered (*The Guardian*, 25 January 1996). Bailey’s familiarity with the literatures of the region helped him to identify parallel versions of texts, while his encyclopaedic knowledge of languages made it possible for him to find etymological connexions for the new words to be met with on every page. The comparison of the Khotanese vocabulary with those of other Iranian and Indo-European languages was mutually beneficial, illuminating the language and culture of pre-Islamic Khotan and at the same time shedding many incidental shafts of light on the history of other languages.

Naturally, even Bailey was not always successful in his attempts to interpret the Khotanese texts. The material presents problems which are sometimes insurmountable: the beginnings and ends of words are not marked, the manuscripts are often damaged, and the scribes were sometimes careless. Since Bailey’s etymological ingenuity enabled him to find explanations even for words which resulted from misreadings, scribal error, or wrong word-division, it must be admitted that his *Dictionary* contains a good many ghost-words, most of them provided with learned etymologies. But such errors must be seen in the context of a body of work which has added immeasurably to our knowledge of Khotanese and which lays the foundations for its future study. Those of us who attempt to walk in Bailey’s footsteps cannot fail to feel both humility and gratitude at the scale of his achievement, even though we may occasionally discover him to have been in error on one point or another.

While the rest of the scholarly world naturally came to see the Khotanese language as occupying centre stage in Bailey’s work, he himself seems always to have regarded his excursion into Khotanese as a temporary diversion. In January 1984, in the introduction to *Khotanese texts*, VII, he wrote of his intention to retire ‘from a field too involved with Tibetan, Chinese and Central Asian Indica for my taste, which tends to Indo-Iranian and primarily Iranian’. In words which reveal a sense of weariness, he continues: ‘It has been over the forty-eight years an interesting pioneering task which made the struggle seem worth while. But my own interest had at the first in 1934 been purely Iranist. I wished to draw out “Middle Iranian” from those unexplored MSS with a view to advancing Zoroastrian studies.’ And so, remarkably enough, Bailey returned to the subject of his D.Phil. thesis of fifty years before, his beloved *Bundahishn*. In 1933, when he had discovered that Kaj Barr too was

planning an edition of this work, Bailey had abandoned his intention to publish his own and, with characteristic generosity, had put it at Barr's disposal. But since Barr had died in 1970 without having completed an edition, it was once again open to Bailey to take up the work, which he did with alacrity.

Another favourite subject to which Bailey was able to return in these years was that of the languages and literatures of the Caucasus. He had always been fascinated by the huge diversity of languages in this region, particularly by the two dialects of Ossetic, which belongs to the Iranian family, and its non-Indo-European neighbours, Chechen (from the Veinakh group) and Circassian (North West Caucasian). He was bemused at the way in which Circassian manages to function with most native roots consisting of a single consonant, surrounded, in the case of the verb, by strings of similarly short prefixes and suffixes, but he relished the different challenges of Chechen with its large array of nominal cases and many declensional patterns, writing in a personal letter in 1987: 'I like it as the very "civilized" form of Caucasian.' Bailey's love of epic literature consolidated his fascination with the Caucasus. He took a particular interest in the oral Nart epic, attested throughout the North Caucasus, which he (like many other specialists, though perhaps not those in Circassia or Abkhazia!) believed to have originated with the Ossetes. For Bailey, the point was proved by the word *Nart* itself, the term used to refer to the heroes of the epic, which he compared with Khotanese *nade* 'man', deriving both from the Indo-European verbal root underlying Greek *ἀνήρ*, Sanskrit *nár-* 'man, hero' (*JRAS*, 1953, 103–16).

Whenever the speaker of a language known to him only from books was visiting, Bailey would eagerly make his acquaintance in order to hear the sounds of the language. Shortly after the war, Cambridge University was persuaded to employ a native speaker of Digoron, the rarer and more archaic dialect of Ossetic, as an informant both for Bailey and for Dr Ilya Gershevitch, who had recently become Bailey's colleague as Lecturer in Iranian Studies. Bailey thus obtained a practical knowledge of the language which enabled him, on the occasion of his sole visit to the Caucasus in 1966, to astonish his audience by addressing them in both varieties of Ossetic. On the same trip, visiting Tbilisi to participate in the celebrations of the eighth centenary of Rustveli's birth, Bailey was presented with a full Caucasian costume, in which garb he was later painted for the portrait reproduced here.

Bailey was also fond of the Celtic languages and their literature, a field in which he was extremely knowledgeable. Sir Ralph Turner, who had been responsible for appointing him to his first post at SO(A)S and who later became a close friend, told how he and his wife were visited by Bailey whilst staying with a friend in Wales. 'Kept indoors by rain, he entertained us with talk on Welsh language, Welsh history and Welsh antiquities. When the visitor, who had been introduced as Professor Bailey from Cambridge, had left, one of the company remarked: "I did not know that Cambridge had a Chair of Celtic!"' It is said that Bailey once asked a colleague to correspond in Cornish, which had been extinct since the eighteenth century. He did not see the lack of authentic vocabulary as a problem: 'If one knows the Welsh and Breton plus the Cornish sound-laws, one could easily construct the missing items.'

Bailey's prodigious output might lead one to assume that he had no interests beyond his books. In fact he enjoyed many recreations, especially those involving fresh air and physical exertion. Until the mid-fifties he cycled often and far, thinking nothing of the journey from Cambridge to London or Oxford, or to Devizes to visit his cousins. Subsequently, he continued to gain exercise by walking, always at a vigorous pace, and by gardening, which he took up

after retirement and engaged in on an epic scale. For a time he played chess, but gave it up because he found himself replaying the games in his head when he wished to sleep or work. He taught himself the violin and viola, and played in a string quartet for some years. He wrote poetry, both in English and in 'Sarmatian', a real Iranian language, but one of which so little survives that Bailey was able to give free reign to fantasy in recreating it.

In addition to his own writings and teaching Bailey left a further valuable legacy to the world in the form of the library which he had acquired over the years, a collection of almost incredible richness, covering all the areas in which he was interested, from Manchu and Mongolian to Arthurian romance and Icelandic sagas, but most nearly approaching comprehensiveness in the field of Indo-Iranian philology. In order to preserve his library for posterity, Bailey joined forces in 1978 with four like-minded scholars to set up the Ancient India and Iran Trust and to buy a large house in Cambridge which could serve as a permanent repository for the collections of all five and a centre for other activities such as lectures and seminars. Here he resided for the last fifteen years of his life, opening his home and library to all who chose to make use of it—not only humans but also cats, several of whom, on discovering Bailey's liking for their kind, wisely chose to take up residence with him.

In his last years Bailey was increasingly troubled by failing eyesight, a heavy misfortune for a scholar whose work was so much concerned with the written word. He was able to read with great labour using a cumbersome electronic magnifying device, but he could no longer use a typewriter and his handwriting became totally illegible. Though his mind remained as active as ever, these practical difficulties brought his production of articles almost to a standstill. His edition of the *Bundahishn* was completed in 1989 but remains unpublished, in part because the sole existing copy, intended to be used for photographic reproduction, was rendered partially illegible when Bailey attempted to insert by hand the words in Pahlavi script.

Frustrated in his desire to communicate a stream of ideas which continued to flow unabated, Bailey came to cherish personal contacts with his many friends and colleagues more than ever, taking great pleasure in the increased scholarly activity and personal contacts generated by the Trust. Although his preoccupation with abstruse learning and the austerity of his life might have made him seem a rather remote figure to those who did not know him, Bailey was always approachable and delighted to put his vast knowledge at the service of others, be they distinguished colleagues or lowly undergraduates. Retiring though he was, he enjoyed entertaining guests to tea or to lunch at Queens'. He was just as keen to accept invitations, especially to tea, for, being a lifelong vegetarian and teetotaler, he did not really enjoy participating in formal meals. His birthday tea-parties were famous. On these occasions it was his custom to present bouquets to the ladies with old-fashioned courtesy and to make a short speech about some aspect of his current research. Whenever his age reached yet another round figure there would be an especially splendid cake with a Brahmi or Kharoshthi inscription in icing.

In an affectionate memoir written to mark Bailey's ninetieth birthday and published in Russian translation in the *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii*, 1990, 4, 208–16, Ilya Gershevitch described his first meeting with Bailey in 1940, painting a picture which anyone who made Bailey's acquaintance during his Cambridge years will recognize immediately: 'In British academic circles Bailey was already by then a celebrity. It was therefore with trepidation that I knocked at the door of the famous professor, expecting him to probe meticulously into my shaky knowledge. My fears soon melted away before his utter freedom from

airs and the visible pleasure he invariably takes in talking to anybody engaged in studies Iranian. He showed me a pile of books freshly arrived, and dwelled on their contents. He next made tea and cut up a cake, while telling me of his work. Over tea at his desk he wrote down one Khotanese word after the other, of some of which he had recently identified the meaning “after years of thinking about them”...’.

Bailey scrupulously avoided becoming involved in political questions affecting those parts of the world whose languages he studied, though he often expressed his sadness at the upheavals and loss of life flowing from the various conflicts. During the War his duties had involved reading Georgian and Armenian materials; he often said that he discovered nothing of use to the war effort but was deeply affected by the personal tragedies he read about in prisoners’ letters to their families.

Bailey never lost his attachment to Australia, which he revisited on several occasions, including a longer stay in 1970–71, when he was Honorary President of the International Congress of Orientalists in Canberra. Honorary degrees from the University of Western Australia (1963) and the Australian National University (1970) gave him considerable pleasure. Although the course of his life during his teenage years in Australia could hardly be regarded as a propitious preparation for an academic career, much of his subsequent life can be seen to have been shaped by these early experiences. The unremitting nature of work on the farm instilled a self-discipline which stood him in good stead throughout his life, when he remained an early riser and an indefatigable worker. Having picked up so many languages as a boy, often without the aid of a grammar or dictionary, no language of the world held any terror for him (though he admitted that Circassian had defeated him). As he used to say himself, ‘once one has learnt thirty or so languages, the principles become obvious and it is only a matter of spending a few days with the vocabulary.’

Above all, the fact that Bailey was so largely self-taught helped him to remain self-reliant and independent of all schools and trends. He willingly dispensed advice when asked but seldom sought it, and preferred to ignore rather than to criticize views with which he did not agree. When he did find it necessary to comment on views he could not share, he did not engage in controversy or indulge in harsh criticism, though occasionally he might allow himself a caustic note in disassociating himself from an unacceptable opinion, as for instance: ‘I do not share an interest in “lichtlose Licht”, nor “invisible light” which in the next paragraph becomes “mind”...’ (*Zoroastrian Problems*, 1971 edition, xxix). Bailey was sensitive both to praise and to criticism, taking quiet satisfaction in the honours which came to him, but easily pained by anything which he interpreted as hostile criticism. Since he himself was disinclined to censure the views of others, however much he might deprecate them, he tended to view any adverse criticism as a personal attack. But his was not a nature either to give offence or to bear a grudge, and he seems to have been that happiest of mortals, a man without enemies, who was respected and loved by all who knew him. At the end of his life, if he had a regret, it was that he held so much more knowledge in his head than he could hope to pass on. On his last birthday, he spoke still of ideas which he hoped to write up. But despite such unfinished projects, he had the good fortune to be able to devote his long life fully to the questions that had fascinated him from boyhood, to which he had supplied so many answers, and to which he had encouraged so many other scholars of diverse specialities—a world-wide academic surrogate for the family he never had—to apply their minds over the decades.

Bailey was knighted in 1960 for services to Oriental Studies. Some of the

many other honours which he received have already been mentioned. He became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1944 and later a corresponding fellow of the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish Academies, the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, and of the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente. He became an Honorary Fellow both of Queens' College, Cambridge, and of his Oxford College, St. Catharine's. He received honorary degrees from Oxford and Manchester as well as from Western Australia and from the Australian National University. At various times he was President or Chairman of the Philological Society, the Royal Asiatic Society, the Society for Afghan Studies, the Society for Mithraic Studies, the Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, the Anglo-Mongolian Society, and the Ancient India and Iran Trust. The Royal Asiatic Society awarded him its Triennial Gold Medal in 1972 and the Denis Sinor Medal for Inner Asian Studies, of which he was the first recipient, in 1993.

The bibliography of Bailey's books and articles in his Festschrift (*BSOAS*, 33/1, 1970), continued in *Acta Iranica*, xx, 1979, 33–35, will be completed and brought up to date by R. E. Emmerick in an obituary to be published in the *Indo-Iranian Journal*.

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