

OBITUARY

THOMAS BURROW

Thomas Burrow, who was Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford from 1944 to 1976, died on 8 June 1986, just three weeks short of his seventy-seventh birthday. He will be remembered as an Indologist of great distinction, who combined sound scholarship with independence and originality of mind, but above all for his historic contributions to the comparative study of the Dravidian languages.

He was born on 29 June 1909 at Leck in North Lancashire, the eldest of the six children of Joshua and Frances Eleanor Burrow, and numerous members of his family still farm in the area around Kirkby Lonsdale, as they have done for many generations.

He was educated at Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, Kirkby Lonsdale, and won a scholarship to Christ's College, Cambridge. Here he read first for the Classical Tripos, and became interested in Sanskrit as a result of specializing in comparative philology. After this he obtained first-class honours in both parts of the Oriental Languages Tripos, and proceeded to engage in research. He spent a year at the School of Oriental [and African] Studies in London, after which he returned to Cambridge as a Research Fellow at Christ's College, Cambridge, where he remained from 1935 to 1937 and completed his Ph.D. thesis on *The language of the Kharoṣṭhi documents from Chinese Turkestan*, which was published in 1937. The language was a previously unrecorded Prakrit of the North-West of India used as the administrative language of Shan-Shan or Kroraina in the third century A.D., and preserved in documents discovered by Sir Aurel Stein in Central Asia earlier in the century. At about the same time he published articles devoted to the Iranian and the Tocharian elements in the language, and to its dialectal position, finding that whereas the phonology was clearly influenced by that of Tocharian, the morphological developments anticipated those in later forms of Prakrit.

From 1937–44 he was Assistant Keeper in the Department of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts in the British Museum; and from 1938 (nominally until 1948) he was appointed to the Panel of Additional Lecturers, for Sanskrit, at the School of Oriental and African Studies. During the war the books were moved to the north of England and he went with them; he had time for extensive reading, and it was at this stage that he appears to have developed his interest in Dravidian languages, at that time a very neglected field of study. The interest bore fruit first in a series of articles under the general title 'Dravidian Studies', which appeared first in *BSO(A)S* between 1937 and 1948 and were reprinted in 1968 under the title 'Collected papers on Dravidian linguistics' by Annamalai University. In the introduction to this collection Burrow remarked on the neglected state of Dravidian philology when he first became interested in it: the fact that it had been 'virgin ground waiting to be tilled' had been one of the major attractions of the subject.

By the time the collection was published the situation had changed notably. In 1949 Burrow had been approached by Professor M. B. Emeneau of the University of California at Berkeley with the suggestion that they should collaborate in producing a Dravidian etymological dictionary, combining the results of their respective researches. Professor Emeneau had spent three years engaged in field-work on non-literary Dravidian languages from 1935 to 1938;

reviewing his *Kota texts* in *JRAS*, 1949, 202–3, Burrow had commented ‘It is impossible to speak too highly of the work’. Work on the *Dravidian etymological dictionary*, which was to become the major occupation of his life, left no time for the continuation of the Dravidian Studies series, but he hoped that it would lay broader foundations for future work. In a series of field trips to India, Burrow was able to extend the knowledge of Dravidian languages considerably. In collaboration with the late Sri Sudhibhushan Bhattacharya of the Anthropological Survey of India he visited during the 1950s and 1960s a number of regions in Central India where little known or even previously unknown Dravidian languages were still spoken. This collaboration resulted in two grammatical descriptions with texts, *The Parji language* (1953) and *The Pengo language* (1970), as well as *A comparative vocabulary of the Gondi dialects* (1960). In the course of investigating the Pengo language a hitherto unknown language, Maṇḍa, which was closely related to Pengo but a distinct language from it, was accidentally discovered. A sketch of its grammar in comparison with that of Pengo was produced in 1976. This pioneering work not only increased the amount of material available for inclusion in the *Dravidian etymological dictionary*, but also furnished descriptions for Dravidian languages which were thought unlikely to survive for very much longer, as the numbers of their speakers were declining and those who remained were thoroughly bilingual. While in 1968 Burrow was fairly confident that all the minor Dravidian languages of Central India had been identified, and that some material had been collected from all of them, in the introduction to the second edition of the *Dravidian etymological dictionary*, published in 1984, the authors made it clear that the work of discovery and description was still incomplete, but that it was continuing to progress.

In 1944 Burrow was appointed to the Chair of Sanskrit at Oxford, and was solely responsible for the teaching of Sanskrit until the establishment of a lecturer’s post in the sixties. At the same time he became Keeper of the Indian Institute and a Fellow of Balliol. Alongside his Dravidian work he was now producing more articles on Sanskrit, first by way of investigating the Dravidian loanwords in the language, and then moving on to an interest in specific items of Sanskrit vocabulary, and eventually to questions about the relationship of Sanskrit to the other Indo-European languages.

An important contribution was ‘“Shwa” in Sanskrit’ (*TPS*, 1949, 22–61), in which he attacked the time-honoured notion that a correspondence of Sanskrit *i* with European *a* reflected an obscure or reduced vowel of Indo-European which was in its turn the outcome of an earlier ‘laryngeal’ consonant forced by its environment to assume syllabic function. Although he was able to bring powerful arguments against the postulation of ‘shwa indogermanicum’ as an IE vowel, his attempts to explain the disparate vowels of Sanskrit and related languages as belonging to different suffixes was less convincing. The problem of shwa continued to exercise his mind, and his latest thoughts on it were expressed in a monograph ‘The problem of shwa in Sanskrit’, published in 1979. Here he abandoned to some extent his earlier position; having become sceptical about the plurality of the postulated IE laryngeals, he suggested that those long-vowel roots which showed no trace of a laryngeal in Hittite had always simply ended in long vowels: their reduced grades had contained a short vowel which was *a* in Sanskrit as it was elsewhere. It is interesting to note that the shwa notation has been abandoned by M. Mayrhofer in the latest volume of the *Indogermanische Grammatik* series, which deals with the segmental phonology of Indo-European. (p. 176–7). The question of laryngeals at the end of long-vowel roots is really a separate issue, but the material presented as

evidence for alternation of \bar{a} and a cannot be ignored in future research on the subject, whatever explanation for it may be suggested.

His book *The Sanskrit language* in the Faber and Faber Great Languages series (1955, revised edition 1973) concentrated particularly on the early language and the Indo-European antecedents of Sanskrit, in the belief that this was the area in which the need of an up-to-date treatment was greatest. He was well aware that since the discovery of Hittite Indo-European studies had been in a state of flux, so that to present a definitive new synthesis at that time would have been impossible, but tried nevertheless to take the new material into account in his assessment of the relation between Sanskrit and Indo-European. In particular, he was prepared to believe that the verbal system of the parent language had at least in certain respects been less complex than the system reconstructed largely on the basis of Greek and Indo-Iranian evidence, and that the non-Anatolian languages had continued to evolve in contact, although perhaps already dialectally differentiated, after the separation of proto-Anatolian speakers. The issue is still keenly debated today. Although aware of the importance of Hittite, Burrow did not himself become deeply involved with it: he did, however, encourage others to do so.

His greatest monument, the *Dravidian etymological dictionary*, of which he was joint author with Professor M. B. Emeneau, first appeared in 1961; a supplement was published in 1968, and finally, a revised version was undertaken in order to include new material which had been collected in the intervening years. It was to his great satisfaction that he was able to finish work on the revised edition and see it published in 1984. This was his last major work, but despite worsening eyesight, he continued to write articles and reviews until the end of his life. He never appeared to be in a hurry or working under pressure, but was nevertheless a steadily prolific writer, as may be seen from the accompanying provisional bibliography.

Burrow was in many ways a thoroughly traditional scholar. He had read very widely in the original texts of both Sanskrit and Dravidian, and had an extraordinarily good memory for what he had read. He had a great respect for facts, and was inclined to be sceptical about theories. His later attitude to the laryngeal theory is a case in point; he was willing to believe in laryngeals when there was direct evidence for them in Hittite, but when there was no such evidence, preferred to deal with original long vowels alternating with short vowels in the reduced grade.

His attitude to etymology was entirely orthodox. He regarded it as highly important and the basis of all comparative study, and many of his articles were devoted to the elucidation of etymologies which he regarded as having been imprecisely formulated in earlier works. He was especially insistent on the need to attend to the meanings of words and to discriminate between homophones which had been confused in the standard handbooks. But despite his obvious interest in establishing sound etymologies for Sanskrit words the *Dravidian etymological dictionary* stops short of attempting to reconstruct Proto-Dravidian forms. The reason given was that much was still uncertain, and 'the object of the dictionary is to provide material for such studies (sc. the reconstruction of Proto-Dravidian phonemes), not to record results which at the moment could be little more than superficial and non-definitive judgements'. A table of phonological correspondences was nevertheless provided.

Always more interested in data than in theories, he made no attempt to keep up with the proliferating developments in the field of general and theoretical linguistics which the second half of this century has seen. He seems to have believed that its findings had as little relevance to his own activities as

theoretical linguists at one time considered that historical linguistics had to theirs. When told that theoretical linguists were now taking more interest than previously in historical linguistics because they believed that it might throw light on the competence of the native speaker, he drily remarked that he would have thought it more likely to throw light on the incompetence of the native speaker.

In scholarship he undoubtedly regarded himself as carrying on the traditions of nineteenth-century historical linguistics, and applying its methods to new material. The basic task was the establishment of phonetic correspondences, which required the identification of etymological connexions between words in different languages of the family in question; both the earlier articles on Dravidian phonology and the *Dravidian etymological dictionary* itself had this aim in view. Everything was done with the purpose of laying solid foundations on which future work could build. The descriptive grammars also follow the traditional pattern, and here also his lucid and simple style of writing makes the works thoroughly accessible even to those readers who are unfamiliar with the field.

In his way of life too he seemed in some ways to have remained unaffected by the twentieth century. His work was done on an old typewriter which he said that he had found in the Indian Institute in 1944. Possessing neither car nor television set, he preferred to live on the fringes of Oxford, first in Kennington, then briefly in Woodstock, and finally in Kidlington. Perhaps he enjoyed village life; it was rumoured that he liked to play darts in the local pub. Certainly he explained his migration from Woodstock to Kidlington by saying that the previous location had been too noisy, being rather close to the main road. He succeeded in remaining detached from most of the time-consuming but ultimately often unproductive activities which beset university life today, and held that it was unwise to acquire a reputation for being too good at administration. What had to be done he did well and without fuss, but he had no ambitions in that direction.

In the days when he was keeper of the old Indian Institute, before the building was taken over, to his regret, by the History Faculty, he was regarded by Oxford academic society as something of a recluse: certainly his place of work was too isolated to promote frequent contacts with colleagues, but students who penetrated the building found him a tolerant and kindly man, for all his immense learning and natural reticence.

After moving to the new Oriental Institute in Pusey Lane in the sixties he became a familiar figure in the common room at coffee time, apparently happy to converse with anyone who came along, young or old, articulate or shy. He was perhaps at his best and most encouraging with those who were diffident about their conversational skills, but was patient and good-humoured with all, and a sympathetic listener.

His most light-hearted remarks were often delivered with an air of solemnity which made them doubly memorable—as for example, when in 1966 some wit had painted the slogan ‘Normans Go Home’ on a temporary hoarding in the centre of Oxford he said ‘Now that is a sentiment with which I can heartily agree’. He will be sadly missed by all his friends, as well as by the world of scholarship.

He was a member of the Philological Society from 1936, and of the Royal Asiatic Society from 1932. From 1966 he was a vice-president of the International Association of Tamil Research, and was elected an honorary member of the Linguistic Society of India in 1964; he was honoured by the Society in 1978 on the occasion of its Golden Jubilee. It was at about this time that he made his last visit to India, where he was delighted with the welcome he had received.

He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1970, and in 1974 a Fellow of the School of Oriental and African Studies. In 1979 a volume of the SOAS Bulletin was dedicated to him in celebration of his seventieth birthday.

In 1941 he married Inez Mary Haley, who died in 1976. There were no children of the marriage.

GILLIAN R. HART

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¹ The following list is believed to be complete in regard to books and articles. The index of books reviewed has been compiled from the following journals: *Antiquity*, *BSOAS*, *Indo-Iranian Journal (IJ)*, *Journal of the American Asiatic Society (JAOS)*, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (JRAS)*, and *Kratylos*. The compilers would be pleased to have details of any omissions to complete the record.

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GILLIAN HART, ELIZABETH TUCKER and J. C. WRIGHT