

## OBITUARY

### Sir Angus Fraser, 1928–2001

In the original Special Section on Romani migrations (*Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Volume 13, Number 2), we had the honour of publishing one of the last articles written by Sir Angus Fraser, who died in May 2001. We would like to dedicate this follow-up Special Issue of *Nationalities Papers* to him with a short obituary by Thomas Acton, Professor of Romani Studies at Greenwich University.

#### **Sir Angus Fraser**

*Born 10 March 1928, died 27 May 2001, survived by his son Simon and second wife Gillian. Educated Falkirk High School, and Glasgow University. After National Service and a teaching assistantship in France, entered the Civil Service in 1952, rising to become Chairman of Customs and Excise in 1983. Retiring in 1987, he was for a time special adviser on efficiency to the Prime Minister. He was a deputy editor of the Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society in the 1950s, President of the George Borrow Society 1991 to 2001, and a member of the executive committee of ACERT in the 1990s.*

Sir Angus Fraser was the link between an older generation of romantic amateur “Gypsyloists” (Members of the Gypsy Lore Society) divorced from mainstream academia, and the developing university-based field of Romani studies. He exemplifies in his own writings the field’s emancipation from the older, racist, theoretical explanations of the origins and migrations of Roma to contemporary, but always historically informed, functionalist explanations.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Angus Fraser had to withdraw from politically sensitive writing on Gypsies when he became head of Customs and Excise and eventually gained a knighthood. After his retirement, however, he not only published the magisterial history *The Gypsies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), which he had written during his silent years, but also became active in lobbying activities through his membership of the Advisory Council for the Education of Romanies and Travellers (ACERT) and as rapporteur at a conference of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

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His deep historical and linguistic scholarship led him to express scepticism about several pieces of conventional wisdom: most notably, the claim that the end of Romanian slavery triggered nineteenth-century Romani migrations. He argued that Romani migrations, like other emigrations of subordinated ethnic minorities from Eastern Europe, were caused by general economic and social crises, which also led to the end of slavery. Thus, emigration was more a cause than an effect of the ending of slavery. Faced by criticism from the present writer that there were structural reasons why the texts and records on which he relied underestimated the after-effects of slavery, he came down to Woolwich to debate the issue formally in front of a Romani studies class at the University of Greenwich. Then, as in his lapidary summary of the issues in his last paper for the *Review*, “The Present and Future of the Gypsy Past,” he demonstrated the importance of punctilious historical scholarship in understanding the here and now. It is fitting that we remember him as we take the debates on current migrations forward.

*Thomas Acton*