

OBITUARY

A. L. BASHAM

Professor A. L. Basham, who died in Calcutta on 27 January 1986, was for many years a dominant figure in the study of ancient Indian history, teaching first at S.O.A.S., then in Canberra, and finally in various universities in Canada, the United States and Latin America.

Born on 24 June 1914, in Loughton, Arthur Llewellyn Basham was educated at Gorleston School, and embarked on a literary career in left-wing circles before going to university. He was very reluctant to talk about this period of youthful enthusiasm, but he published *Proem*, a volume of poetry, in 1935, and *Golden Furrow*, a novel, in 1939. At a time when for many a scholarship was an essential precondition for a university education, in 1938 he won the Ouseley Scholarship in Urdu at S.O.A.S. At his urgent request he was allowed instead to read Indo-Aryan, and he was placed in the First Class in the B.A. examinations in 1941. He was also awarded a School Diploma in Hindustani.

A conscientious objector to military service, he spent the rest of the war in the Auxiliary Fire Service at Lowestoft, first as a fireman and from 1944 as a Lecturer on Current Affairs for the National Fire Service. Soon he became a full-time W.E.A. tutor.

He returned to Indological studies in 1947, and in 1948 was appointed Lecturer in Ancient Indian History at S.O.A.S. In 1953 he was made Reader in the History of India, and in 1957 Professor of the History of South Asia in the University of London. Meanwhile his research had developed in a manner which combined Sanskritic learning with a wide historical perspective. Indeed, there were times when some of his colleagues feared that such width might have been won at the expense of the caution proper to scholars. In his first major published work, *The history and doctrines of the Ājīvikas: a vanished Indian religion* (London, 1951), he went so far as to suggest that the rigid determinism of that little-known sect might have been particularly acceptable to people living under a rigid despotism (although it did not commend itself to the multitudes who have subsequently had the misfortune to live in a like situation). That book emerged from a successful Ph.D. thesis written under the guidance of his revered teacher, L. D. Barnett. His next major work, *The wonder that was India* (London, 1954), was of vaster scope. It was, and remains, a masterpiece of synthesis. It also contained many stimulating generalizations. Regrettably, it was his last major work.

He organized an important conference on the date of Kanīṣka at S.O.A.S. in 1960, taking up some of the questions left unresolved by the first conference on this problem, which had taken place in 1913 under the auspices of the Royal Asiatic Society. On that occasion it had been accepted, with the help of archaeological and numismatic evidence, that the first century B.C. could no longer be regarded as a possible time for the Kuṣāṇa ruler Kanīṣka. Thereafter opinion varied between the first and second centuries A.D.: the majority favoured 78 A.D. as the date of his accession. In 1960 fresh evidence was adduced from Chinese, Iranian and Central Asian sources. Chinese and Iranian sources tended to suggest a later date, while Central Asian inscriptions tended to support 78 A.D., the year which most conveniently fitted the accepted chronological structures of ancient Indian history. In short, no agreement was reached, while Basham himself still favoured 78 A.D. He edited and published the proceedings under the title *Papers on the date of Kanīṣka* (Leiden, 1968). The volume was given

greater interest by the inclusion of summaries of the discussions prepared by two of his own research students, subsequently scholars in their own right. Meanwhile, with Mortimer Wheeler, he had revised the first part of Vincent Smith's *Oxford history of India* (1958). He also published a collection of historical essays on South Asia, including Sri Lanka, under the title *Studies in Indian history and culture* (Calcutta, 1964).

By now he was devoting most of his time to teaching, especially the supervision of research students, and to the guidance and encouragement of younger scholars. He left S.O.A.S. in 1965 to become Professor and Head of the Department of Ancient Civilizations at the Australian National University, Canberra, a post which he held until his retirement in 1979. Thereafter he held visiting appointments at different universities. He particularly enjoyed his time at the Colegio el Mexico. When the International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa (formerly the International Congress of Orientalists) met in Mexico in 1976, he organized a panel on the general theme of *Kingship in Asia and Early America*: eventually, in 1981, he published the proceedings of that panel under the auspices of the Colegio el Mexico.

Generous to a fault with students, especially with those whose enthusiasm for the study of ancient India seemed greater than their linguistic ability, he could be ruthless in his disagreements with more senior scholars. But his bluff and genial manner usually disarmed his opponents. He became a familiar and highly respected figure in India, especially in Calcutta, where he never hesitated to express his forthright opinions on public affairs. Such opinions were widely reported in the local newspapers, and sometimes distressed those who knew him only as an Indologist—for example, when he said that Hindi, as the official language of India, should not be overloaded with Sanskrit terms comprehensible only to the élite, or that the Roman alphabet should be used because it would be easier for the people in general. For many years before his death, he had been engaged in a study of the development of Hindu thought, and also in editing an encyclopaedia of Hinduism. It is to be hoped that means may be found to bring these projects to completion.

KENNETH BALLHATCHET