

Professor O. R. Gurney M.A., D.Phil., F.B.A. (1911-2001)

Professor Oliver Gurney died, on 11 January 2001, only some two weeks short of his 90th birthday. His long life embraced a career which began with the study of Hittite (then in its infancy), centred on the study and teaching of Assyriology (Akkadian) in Oxford, and returned with renewed enthusiasm to Hittite during his many years of retirement. In both these academic fields he has left valuable and distinctive contributions.

Oliver Robert Gurney was born on 28 January 1911 into the established, formerly Quaker family of the Gurneys of Norfolk. He was educated at Eton and New College, Oxford, where he read Classical Greats, graduating in 1933. He was fortunate in having as uncle, his mother's brother, the traveller and archaeologist John Garstang, Professor of Archaeology in the University of Liverpool from 1907-1941, whose principal work in Egypt and the Levant did not preclude close interest in archaeological developments in Anatolia. It was Garstang who drew the attention of the young Gurney to the nascent discipline of Hittite studies. Following the excavation of the Hittite royal library of cuneiform clay tablets at Boğazköy in the years 1906-12, and the recognition in 1915 of Hittite as an Indo-European language (by far the oldest), the Hittite texts had been in the process of publication and edition for less than 20 years. Gurney's enthusiasm became engaged in what was to be a life-time's pursuit.

In preparation for a visit to Germany, at that time the centre of Hittite studies, Gurney took a course in 1934-5 in Assyriology (Akkadian language and cuneiform script) at Oxford. His main induction into the field of Hittite then was the winter semester 1935-6 in Berlin with Hans Ehelolf, curator of tablets in the Berlin museum. On his return to England he registered for a doctorate on Hittite prayers (a notable literary genre), which he completed in three years in 1939. He also found time in 1938-9 to join Garstang's excavations at Mersin in Cilicia to familiarise himself with Anatolian field-work.

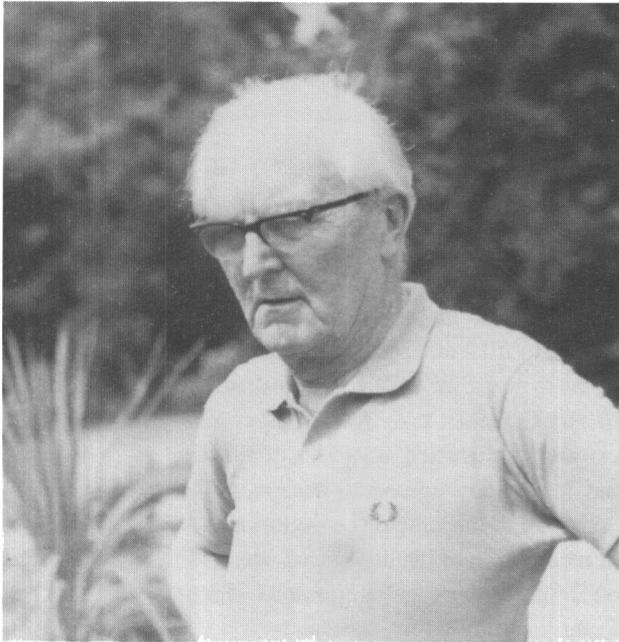
With the outbreak of the Second World War, Gurney volunteered for service in November 1939, and was commissioned in the Royal Artillery. He was sent out with the Sudan Defence Force, and fought in the campaigns in Eritrea and Abyssinia. The war for him represented a six-year interruption of his career.

In Oxford the Shillito Readership in Assyriology had fallen vacant in the war, but in 1945 the University moved to fill it and offered it to Gurney while he was still in the army. Since his specialisation and doctorate were in Hittite rather than Assyriology, he felt reservations, certainly unjustified, about his qualifications for the post, but fortunately agreed to accept it. He held it for 33 years, up to the time of his retirement in 1978. In 1965, in recognition of his distinction, the University conferred on him the title of Professor, which he retained as Emeritus after his retirement.

It is fair to say that under Gurney's tenure and the influence of his personality, the study of Assyriology moved from a peripheral to a more main-stream position. With typical thoroughness Gurney mastered the field, and devised an effective and wide-ranging syllabus, which has essentially survived down to the present. That he was able to add a Hittite component to this degree was a great bonus, offering as it did a course unrivalled at that date elsewhere in the country, and fulfilling the early hopes of Garstang when he persuaded his nephew into the subject. In these years Gurney trained a number of scholars who went on to occupy with distinction posts in the subject.

Gurney's research during these years in post concentrated largely on tablet publication, including groups held by the British Museum and the Ashmolean. He was an obvious choice to be involved with the important archive of Assyrian tablets excavated by Seton Lloyd at Sultantepe in Turkey in 1951-2, which yielded a number of notable literary texts. In many of these publications Gurney collaborated profitably with more specialised scholars. His tolerance, patience and generosity made him an ideal collaborator in a field where practitioners have not been universally distinguished by such qualities.

A further initiative of Garstang's was to claim much of Gurney's energies throughout his life. In 1948-9 Garstang was successful in establishing the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, deliberately and wisely associating the British archaeological effort with the new Turkish capital rather than Istanbul. Gurney was a member of the Council of Management from its inception as representative of Oxford University, and this link he maintained throughout his life.



For the Institute's journal, *Anatolian Studies*, Gurney was already named as Assistant Editor (to Professor Gordon Childe) for volume 2 (1952), and in 1956 he took over as Editor, a duty which he undertook unassisted for the following 40 years. The journal bears his imprimatur of meticulous editing and much positive input in the form of judicious advice to contributors. Always deeply involved in the running of the Institute, Gurney was named Deputy Chairman in 1965, and in 1982 in recognition of his long and outstanding service, the Council invited him to take up the Presidency, which he then held until his death. Clearly no single individual has contributed more to the Institute throughout its existence.

Gurney's retirement from academic post in 1978 by no means led to his withdrawal from academic activity, though his ongoing commitments to the Ankara Institute might have been enough for many. From the mid-1980s onwards a series of dramatic new discoveries in the Hittite field drew him back into his early specialisation, and he followed these developments with keen interest and participation, making his own contribution in a number of articles, of which the most recent one will appear posthumously. Gurney's Assyriological publications are characteristically thorough and careful, and in particular with the Sultantepe tablets his memory will be associated with a number of striking texts, especially the amusing folk-tale, the 'Poor Man of Nippur'. But his scholarship is perhaps best seen in his Hittite publications, which though not numerous are of the highest quality. His doctorate *Hittite Prayers of Mursili II* (1940) is a model edition of a fine monument of Hittite literature, and *Some Aspects of Hittite Religion* (1977), the printed version of his Schweich lectures of 1976, conceals beneath a modest title an important review of

Hittite religious practices. *The Geography of the Hittite Empire* (1959), the product of many years' collaboration with Garstang, which distils the expertises of the two men, is a ground-breaking work, and though some of its proposals have not stood the test of time, many more have been triumphantly vindicated in recent years. Above all, his Penguin book *The Hittites*, first published in 1952 and never out of print since, with two major revisions, remains deservedly a standard work on the subject. Most recently (1999) it has enjoyed the accolade of a lavish reprint by the Folio Society, with yet another revision carried out by Gurney himself.

Gurney was a man of the greatest courtesy and integrity. It may be admitted that his refusal to think, let alone speak, ill of anyone could on occasion lead him to misjudge those who did not adhere to his own high standards. One of his characteristic accomplishments, now unfortunately considered old-fashioned, was as a letter-writer. He was a voluminous correspondent and a great practitioner of answering by return of post. No subject was too small and no correspondent too inept to secure his full attention. Sometimes from one so polite and generous his replies could be unexpectedly sharp, but this was probably the product of his unflinching honesty. He had a dogged determination in pursuing problems, not only academic ones. Thus many treasurers of academic bodies with which he was involved had reason to regret the attention with which he habitually inspected accounts. It was very difficult to slip anything past him, whether an unsound argument or a piece of creative accounting.

Gurney's distinction was duly recognised by honours: Fellow of the British Academy, 1959; Foreign Member of the Royal Danish Academy of Science and Letters, 1976; Honorary Doctorate of Higher Letters, Chicago, 1991. He was also Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford from 1963; and a Freeman of the City of Norwich.

He married in 1957 Diane Hope Grazebrook (née Esencourt). They had no children of their own, but her daughter by her previous marriage provided family.

President of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara (1982-2001)

Editor of Anatolian Studies (1956-97)

Deputy Chairman of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara (1965-82)

Professor Gurney was in attendance at the first meeting concerned with the establishment of a British archaeological institute in Turkey in September 1946, and shortly after was a founder member of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara.

This obituary, by J D Hawkins, originally appeared in The Independent 17.i.2001.