

OBITUARY

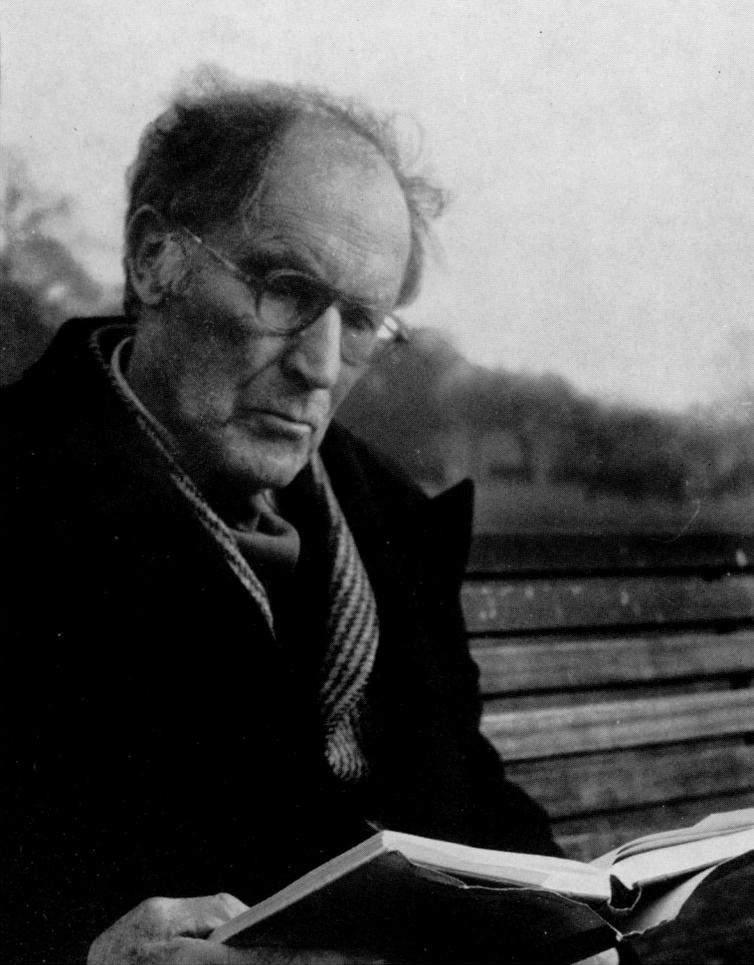
ARTHUR WALEY

Arthur David Waley was born on 16 August 1889, the second of three sons of David Frederick Schloss¹; the name Waley, which was his mother's maiden name, was adopted by the family at the beginning of the first World War. He was educated at Rugby and went up to King's College, Cambridge, in 1907 to study Classics (including some Sanskrit). In 1910 he obtained a first in Part I of the Classical Tripos; he was awarded his degree on the basis of this result as, owing to trouble with his eyes, he was prevented from taking Part II of the Tripos. Instead he went to Spain to learn Spanish when offered an opening in an export business to trade with South America. Contacts he made in Spain suggested to him a post in the British Museum as a more congenial alternative, and early in 1913, after a short initial period in the Department of Prints, Waley transferred to the Sub-Department of Oriental Prints and Drawings, which had just then been inaugurated by Laurence Binyon. He started on cataloguing the Sir Aurel Stein Collection, his first entries dating from June 1913. For this purpose he taught himself Chinese and Japanese, and greatly enlarged his knowledge of Sanskrit. While his *Catalogue of paintings recovered from Tun-huang by Sir Aurel Stein* (published in 1931) was the final result of his work in the British Museum, his *Index of Chinese artists represented in the British Museum* (1922) and his *Introduction to the study of Chinese painting* (1923), as well as articles in the *Burlington Magazine* provided more immediate evidence of his activities there. The free access to the shelves of the Far Eastern book collection, and to the Library of the British Museum generally, may have facilitated to a certain extent the formidable task of acquiring the two main Far Eastern languages without any further guidance such as casual contacts with scholars from China and Japan might have provided, and the daily handling of Far Eastern art treasures will have contributed to accumulate the astounding 'background knowledge', which is a prominent feature of Waley's translations.

In 1929, after completing his catalogue of the Tun-huang Collection, Waley resigned his appointment of Assistant Keeper in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum for reasons of health, being then 40 years of age, and apparently firmly resolved not to take up any further appointment, though he could be persuaded to give a few seminars on Chinese poetry at the School of Oriental Studies. His name appeared, however, on the Panel of Additional Lecturers from 1924. He was made an Honorary Lecturer in Chinese Poetry in 1948 and an Honorary Fellow of the School in 1959.

Waley's literary output shows no clear-cut break between his official career

¹ He was a barrister and later a Civil Servant in the Labour Department of the Board of Trade and wrote, *inter alia*, *Methods of industrial remuneration*, first published in 1892, which saw two further editions and was translated into French and Italian.



[Courtesy Alison Waley]

ARTHUR WALEY

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and the ensuing period of whole-time work as a private scholar. Owing to the rigid discipline which he saw fit to inflict upon himself, his work continues without interruption and at an amazing speed.

Three years after entering the British Museum, we witness Waley's first translation, *Chinese poems* (16 pp., privately printed²), to be increased to his famous *A hundred and seventy Chinese poems*, in 1918, which *inter alia* resulted in his being accepted into the Bloomsbury circle. One year earlier he published 'Pre-T'ang poetry' and 'Thirty-eight poems by Po Chü-i' in the very first issue of the present *Bulletin*. The majority of publications in this period were, however, in the Japanese field, such as the *Uta* (1919), the *Nō plays of Japan* (1921), and the *Pillow-book of Sei Shōnagon* (1928). They culminated in the translation of the *Tale of Genji*, whose first part was published in 1925. The monumental work was completed in 1933, three years after his resignation from the British Museum, with the final sixth part, the novel as a whole being first reprinted in 1935. As is well known, the translation was acclaimed as a remarkable enrichment of English and indeed of world literature, no less than as a major contribution to Japanology.

A chance remark in *The real Tripitaka*³ reveals the relief he felt after completing this huge novel (the one-volume edition has 1,135 pp.), and not until 10 years later or so did he in fact present his readers with the (abridged) translation of the *Hsi-yu chi* (*Monkey*) to match his *Tale of Genji* with a Chinese novel.

With the *Travels of an alchemist*, in which Waley shows himself fully familiar with the Mongol period (including the 'Secret history of the Yüan Dynasty'), though published in 1931, clearly still belonging to his 'Museum period', the break then, as far as it is noticeable, occurs with a time lag of three years. He begins his period of translation from Chinese classical literature with *The Way and its power* (1934), followed by *The Book of songs* (1937), *The Analects* (1938), and *Three ways of thought in ancient China* (1939). In this new departure Waley shows himself fully abreast of Eastern and Western sinological research into this period. While retaining the style and elegance of his former renderings, he astounds his readers by the boldness and frequency of his attempts to break away from time-honoured tradition. His *Analects*, perhaps the most successful of these contributions,⁴ may still to-day, almost 30 years after its publication, serve as the best introduction to Sinology in all its aspects and it cannot fail to impress by the strict honesty of the translation which never leaves the student in any doubt as to how Waley understood each single word of his text, not to

² See the first entry in F. A. Johns, 'A preliminary list of the published writings of Dr. Arthur Waley' (in 'Arthur Waley anniversary volume'), *Asia Major*, NS, VII, 1-2, 1959, 1-10, to which the present writer feels greatly indebted.

³ p. 127: 'I remember my own feelings when having completed the six volumes of the *Tale of Genji* I was asked to set to work upon the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a book of almost equal length'.

⁴ The opening words of the preface are characteristic of its author: 'This book, begun years ago, has been several times rewritten and laid aside'.

mention the salutary iconoclasm concerning the commentaries,⁵ or the amazing discovery, tucked away in a note, that the character 爲 *wei* in one of the sayings had not been recognized by the commentaries as the name of a person (xiv, 15). 'Translators have followed suit' is the laconic ending of the note.

During the second World War Waley—just 50 years of age at its beginning—served in various capacities in the Ministry of Information, and not before his sixtieth year did he start on a further set of publications, the biographies. As might be expected, the first of them was devoted to Po Chü-i (1949), closely followed by a biography of Li Po. The above-mentioned translation of *Monkey*, in which Hsüan Tsang figures prominently under the name of Tripitaka, induced Waley to place *The real Tripitaka* (1952) by the side of the character in the novel. We witness in 1956 a study of Yüan Mei, and the publication in China of Lin Tse-hsü's diary gave rise to Waley's study (in 1958) of Commissioner Lin, which he entitled *The Opium War through Chinese eyes*.

In his *Nine songs: a study of shamanism in ancient China* (1955) Waley went back to the Chinese classical period, in his *Ballads and stories from Tun-huang* (1960) to T'ang times, and in his last book *The Secret history of the Mongols and other pieces* (1963), to the Mongol period. (Among the other contributions in that book, which also contains original pieces by Waley himself, his study on the Ainu Epic, reprinted from *Botteghe Oscure*, must be mentioned especially.)

But this brief survey of Waley's books, into which the main part of this obituary was bound to turn after his official career came to an end, gives a very incomplete picture of the range of his interests, as a study of the above-mentioned bibliography by F. A. Johns will easily convince us.

In the early 1960's, when the expiry of its lease forced Waley to leave his house in Gordon Square, he generously donated the major part of his books to the University of Durham and apparently intended to retire from the Oriental field. In reality, he continued working and had made plans for substantial further translation work. Yet the article 'Colloquial in the *Yu-hsien k'u*', published in the preceding number of this *Bulletin*,⁶ was fated to be his last. A tragic illness resulting from a traffic accident brought all his plans to a sudden end. He was nursed with self-sacrificing devotion and endurance by his wife, formerly Mrs. Alison Grant Robertson, whom he married in May 1966. On 27 June 1966, Arthur Waley succumbed to his illness and a few days later was laid to eternal rest in Highgate Cemetery.

Though in possession of an astounding scholarly equipment, Waley saw himself primarily in the role of a mediator between Eastern and Western cultures. As is evident from a passage in the preface to his translation of the 'Analects', he refused to neglect the needs of the general reader.⁷ It was in

⁵ p. 72: 'Almost all the information they supply is such as anyone familiar with extant early literature could even to-day easily supply for himself'.

⁶ See *BSOAS*, xxix, 3, 1966, 559-65.

⁷ 'The present book is somewhat dry and technical in character. But I would not have it supposed that I have definitely abandoned literature for learning, or forgotten the claims of the ordinary reader.'

the first instance for this kind of an audience that he unlocked the treasure house of Far Eastern literature, thus placing countless numbers of readers under an immense debt of gratitude.

But though he used to cut down to a bare minimum any learned apparatus, the debt owed him by Far Eastern scholars and students is hardly less great, not to mention the help and encouragement he gave to those who, like the present writer, were privileged enough to know him personally. The axiom that the Far Eastern scholar must be at home in Japanese as well as in Chinese, pervades implicitly the whole of Waley's publications and will increasingly be taken for granted in Far Eastern studies, as *mutatis mutandis* it has long been considered an axiom in the classical field. Again the breadth and depth of his learning, accumulated in a lifetime of intense and unremitting study, is self-evident, as are unmistakable manifestations of his genius.

Reading Waley's translations, admiring their elegance and lucidity, their freshness and charm, one cannot help feeling that the texts themselves spoke to him with a voice of singular clarity, and though knowing full well of the infinite labour and attention to detail which lies behind all his translations, owing to their perfection one is always under the delusion that Waley, poet and writer in his own right, merely wrote down in English what he heard them saying in Chinese or Japanese.

There was a certain finality in all of Waley's utterances, as also Sir Denison Ross observed on one occasion.⁸ But this was only one of many traits characteristic of the genius whose loss we mourn. *Ingenium*, to vary a famous dictum of Wilhelm Dilthey's on the individual, *est ineffabile*.

WALTER SIMON

⁸ See *Both ends of the candle: the autobiography of Sir E. Denison Ross*, London, 1943, 264.