

E. C. B. MacLAURIN AND THE DEPT. OF
SEMITIC STUDIES OF THE UNIVERSITY
OF SYDNEY

It is impossible to say how early the importance of Semitic scholarship came to be recognized in Britain. Disregarding the Glastonbury and other legends, as well as the shadowy trading relationship with the Phoenicians, one can safely conclude that Hebrew was the first Semitic language seriously studied in Britain. The history of British Hebrew scholarship in those early days is not necessarily the history of England's Jewish communities, for, if we dismiss the early stories of the Norwich and Bristol communities as apologetics—as we almost certainly should—we are left with the York families as the first group of Jews of whom we have definite knowledge in the British Isles. Christian biblical scholarship was certainly in existence before this date, and the preparedness of the British bishops to argue at the Council of Arles, and the existence of controversial theologians such as Pelagius undoubtedly indicates the existence of a keen biblical exegesis, certainly of the New Testament, and since the great scholarship of Origen and others had shown that the New Testament could not be understood without the Old, of the Old also. The British reputation for scholarship and piety went as something indivisible. The custom which took British scholars of the Middle Ages to Spain—the most enlightened country in Europe under the Muslims who laid the intellectual foundations of its future greatness—to study Aflaton in his Arabic dress under the guidance of Arab scholars with the help of Jewish interpreters brought them into contact with both Hebrew and Arabic at a date which may well be earlier than we can at present estimate.

Certainly by 1143 English Semitic scholarship had gained the capacity to recognize the faults in Bibliander's Latin paraphrase of the Holy Qur'an. The improved version by Robertus Retenensis is the earliest known work of British Semitic scholarship.

Hebrew scholarship now made itself felt in England, and in the XVIIth Century it became the fashion of the English monarchs to learn Hebrew; the Blue Coat School was founded in London, with Hebrew as part of the curriculum. There is no doubt that the stimulus behind the study of Hebrew was the desire to learn more about what the word of God actually said. Hebrew and Old Testament studies became firmly established at the great Universities, and the stage was set for that amazing feat of scholarship, the Authorised Version of the Old and New

Testaments. Almost simultaneously Brian Walton in his quiet country parsonage, with the collaboration of a brilliant team of correspondents, produced the famous Polyglot Bible. St. Mark's Collegiate Library, Canberra, has a magnificent copy; two other copies exist in Sydney, one in the Fisher Library and one in Camden College. From the time of Walton Hebrew and Aramaic scholarship has never failed in Britain.

Arabic scholarship has been equally brilliantly upheld. The tone was set by early scholars like Pococke and supported by far-seeing patrons like Archbishop Laud. To appreciate the significance of Laud's contribution and to evaluate justly the wisdom and understanding of that remarkable man it is necessary to realise that, so far as the Church was concerned, Islam was regarded as a threat no less than Communism is today; this High Church bishop was concerned to establish a Chair at Oxford which should teach its language and explain its doctrines. The English scholarly world recognised the debt the world owed to Arabic as the medieval vehicle of Greek philosophy and the learning of the ancient world.

Arabic and Islamic studies were given a great impetus in Britain by George Sale's translation of the Holy Qur'an, published in 1734. It was surprisingly accurate, although the translator's literary style is sufficient to discourage all but the most determined from turning the first page. The following century was one of great British expansion in the Muslim world, and produced scholars of the eminence of E. H. Palmer and W. G. Palgrave. Then in 1852 William Wright, Professor of Arabic at Cambridge, brought out the first edition of his famous Arabic Grammar. Edward William Lane was at this time engaged on a task which was to last him for forty years—the vast editing and collating of the *Taj ul-Arus* and the *Qamus* which was the foundation of his Arabic Lexicon. So highly did the British Government value the promulgation of Arabic scholarship that ample financial support was provided—one of the first examples of Governmental support of scholarship. This was the atmosphere in which the Senate of the recently founded University of Sydney decided to establish a Readership in Oriental Studies in 1866, several years before the inauguration of any other Australian University, and about eighty years before a second Australian university was to introduce Arabic as a discipline.

Meanwhile, Hebrew studies had not been neglected in Australia. Jewish communities were flourishing both in Sydney and Melbourne. Various records exist of early Hebrew teachers, notable among whom was Isaac Nathan, a strange man who had once studied for the rabbinate and whose Hebrew had been learnt

from the famous Lyons at Cambridge. Nathan's son Alfred was a member of the Senate of the University, but he had lapsed from Judaism and it is unlikely that he did anything to promote the study of the language—it was to be left to Alfred's son-in-law, who had gained the gold medal in Hebrew at the University of Edinburgh, to make the first step towards introducing Hebrew and Syriac into the University curriculum shortly after the turn of this century.

In 1866 the University of Sydney appointed the Rev. Dr. Wezir Beg as Reader in Oriental Studies. Dr. Beg was an Arabist, a Muslim by birth, and deeply learned in some of the other languages of Islam. He had been born in Poona, orphaned, and adopted by a Scottish family named MacKinnon. He was trained as a teacher by the Church of Scotland Missionary Society, and at the age of 25 was offered the headmastership of the Dharwar Government School, which he declined. In 1846 he was baptised and decided to enter the Presbyterian Ministry: in order to do this he added Latin and Greek to his high competence in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hindustani and English. He then travelled to Scotland and studied Medicine at the University of Edinburgh, became a member of the Royal College of Physicians of England, and obtained the degree of M.D. from the University of Erlanger. He then sailed as a ship's surgeon to Melbourne, where he was ordained. One of his chief interests, however, lay in the academic world, and as there was no Semitic scholarship of any kind in Melbourne in those days he decided to shift to Sydney where the new Readership in Oriental Studies had just been created. He was appointed to this post in 1866, immediately after accepting the call to the ministry of Chalmers Street Presbyterian Church; as he ran these two posts simultaneously one concludes that his academic duties were not exacting. He played an active part in the formation and conduct of the Uniting Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of New South Wales, and rose to be Grand Chaplain of the Grand Lodge of New South Wales. He died in 1885.

The next Semitist of some attainment to come to the University of Sydney was the new Principal of St. Andrew's College. He was the Revd. Andrew Harper who added to his fervent faith an obstinacy and pugnacity which alienated those who would otherwise have strongly supported his efforts to have Hebrew established as an academic discipline. As it was, Hebrew was not introduced until long after he had resigned his post at St. Andrews and had returned to Scotland. The Chancellor of the University was a strong Hebraist, also in the Scots tradition, and tried hard to undo the damage Harper had done.

In 1910 a scholar came to Sydney whose arrival was to have a deep influence on the development of Semitic Studies throughout the country. Griffiths Wheeler Thatcher was the son of a prosperous Melbourne family; after a first-class degree in Science at the University of Melbourne he decided to study for the Congregational ministry. However, his interest in the Old Testament took him to Edinburgh, since this study was impossible in his home university. From Edinburgh he went to Germany where he worked under the great Delitzsch and others, and then back to Britain. He visited Palestine and Syria and paid a fleeting visit back to Melbourne, but, as there was no chance of doing any work in Semitics there, he returned to Oxford, and became a member of the staff of Mansfield College where he eventually became Senior Tutor. He felt, however, that his duty lay in his own country, and resolved to return there if ever the opportunity to teach Semitics were to arise. He became well-known as a scholar in the brilliant galaxy of British scholars—Buchanan Gray, S. R. Driver, Robertson Smith, Sir James Frazer, Harper from Chicago, Brown and Briggs who, with Driver, produced the Oxford Hebrew Lexicon, and refused a famous Chair in the United States which he was invited to apply for—probably because there were rumours about that he was well in the running for the Chair of Arabic at Oxford. He already held the examining post of Professor of Arabic at the University of London. Then there came the call to Camden College, Sydney; he saw in this the hand of God, bringing him back to his own country even although to a different state and university. He travelled to Sydney with fifty-three cases of books, some of which are now in the Fisher Library of the University of Sydney. The next year he was appointed to the part-time staff of the University, to lecture in Islamics to a Comparative Religion course in the Faculty of Arts. The committee which had been pressing for the introduction of Hebrew immediately coopted him and gained the basis of success thereby. The Chancellor's support was obtained; and then the First World War came. After the war the Committee suggested to the University that, as Hebrew would be an essential part of any worth-while theological course, it would be a good idea to introduce a degree in divinity. There was still a reactionary element in the University engaged in fighting the battles between science and religion which had been so wearisome in Europe during the preceding century, consequently the suggestion of the committee was received with great hostility, which was not broken down until early in the 1930s. Then the University agreed to the inauguration of a course in Divinity subject to certain provisos:—that the Churches should provide the staff subject to the name of

every appointee being approved by the University in regard to their academic qualifications; that only graduates be accepted as candidates for the degree; that all examining be done under University supervision; and that lectures, attendance at which was compulsory, must all be given on University premises. This degree was called "The Bachelorate of Divinity", and four departments were set up: Old Testament Language and Literature, New Testament Language and Literature, Ecclesiastical History, and Philosophical and Historical Theology. This was the first theological degree set up within any Australian University, and lectures began in 1936. Dr. Thatcher was appointed Head of the Dept. of Old Testament Language and Literature, assisted by Professor A. L. Sadler and the Rt. Rev. C. V. Pilcher, Bishop-Coadjutor of Sydney. By 1940 both Thatcher and Pilcher felt that the frequent trips to the University to lecture were too demanding for men of their advanced years and the great task the Bishop had in administering a diocese containing a city with about a million Anglican inhabitants. After conferring with Canon Garnsey they approached by letter a soldier in a training unit, E. C. B. MacLaurin, asking him if he were prepared to accept the Grainger Post-graduate Scholarship at St. Paul's College if a temporary release from the Army could be arranged. The idea was that MacLaurin, who had just returned from Cambridge, should be a candidate for the B. D. degree, and should be appointed to do the bulk of the lecturing when the war came to an end. Concessions were made and he re-enlisted at the end of the year, being finally discharged in September 1942, and recognised as a teacher in Divinity in June 1944 after six months work on the Ras Shamra material whilst employed as Assistant Parliamentary Librarian in the Parliamentary Library of New South Wales.

Thatcher now resigned from the department, and spent part of his leisure reading Arabic with a few students, including the new appointee. Bishop Pilcher was temporarily Head of the Department, and on his retirement his place was taken by the Rev. Dr. Cumming Thom. Dr. Thom had a wide academic experience before coming to Australia, both in Scotland and the United States. However, he looked upon the Divinity course as primarily a means of training students for the Presbyterian ministry—a dangerous attitude when influential academics regarded the degree with such suspicion.

In March 1945 E. C. B. MacLaurin was appointed Lecturer-in-charge of a new department, with A. L. Sadler as guardian deity and friend-in-need. He was told to do his best to expand it, but it was made clear that the University had no funds to spend on the subject. The Department consisted of one class of a hand-

ful of students reading Elementary-beginning-Hebrew, housed in one ex-army hut the dimensions of which compared slightly favourably with those of the lecturer's bathroom at home. When classroom space was needed one had to rely on the kindness of one's friends, and Sadler always came to the rescue. The library grant was £30 per annum, and the lecturer discovered with horror that nothing new had been bought since the days of Wezir Beg, who had been the last full-time Semitist employed in the Faculty of Arts, as distinct from the Board of Studies in Divinity. Dr. Thatcher had relied upon his own magnificent collection, and Bishop Pilcher had directed students to the library in each theological college.

The Elementary Hebrew class proved a success, and the following year Hebrew I was introduced. Bishop Pilcher asked the lecturer if he could find work for an assistant, and indicated that among the German POWs in a Victorian camp, awaiting repatriation, was a distinguished scholar who had been captured in Persia. His release was arranged, through the influence of the bishop and Sir Robert Wallace, the vice Chancellor, and Dr. Wilhelm Eilers came to the Department. Dr. Eilers was an Iranian scholar who was also an accomplished Arabist; in the Department he taught Arabic to a class which had been started the year before, and when Hebrew II was introduced as a third year course in 1947, he read Phoenician with them as part of the pass course—a tradition introduced on the instructions of Professor Sadler.

MacLaurin thought that the time had come to introduce Arabic as a regular part of the curriculum, and introduced a motion to that effect to the Faculty of Arts. Two points emerged during lengthy discussions; some of the Faculty—mostly the elder men—were afraid that as Arabic was the language of the Quran it would mean more teaching of religion, whilst others, with the Palestine situation in mind, feared that it would smack of partisanship if Arabic were introduced at that time. However, in July 1946 the Faculty recommended that Arabic be recognised among the subjects covered by the term Semitic Studies and that the course should be on lines similar to those laid down for Hebrew. In the following September the Professorial Board and the Senate approved these recommendations, and Dr. Thatcher was entrusted with the task of drawing up a syllabus for Arabic extending over four years. However nothing came of this recommendation.

About 1948 the Revd. Dr. Bowyer Hayward became a recognised teacher in Divinity and Colin MacLaurin invited Rabbi Dr. Israel Porush to lecture in post-biblical Hebrew on a part-time basis. About this time, too, a break came with Dr. Cumming

Thom, as a result of which the head sought the advice of the vice-Chancellor. In 1950 Dr. Thom resigned from the position of head of the Department of Old Testament Language and Literature, and, later, from his position as Principal of St. Andrews College.

Dr. Eilers had meantime brought his family out to Australia, and all seemed set for a long association with the department when suddenly and inexplicably the funds used to pay him were withdrawn and his appointment, which was only of a temporary nature, terminated. Australia lost a first-rate scholar as his subsequent career has proved. The Rev. C. J. Nash, a former student of the department was appointed in his place, but died of cancer a year later. Nash was a very pleasant man and a most conscientious teacher who had also studied overseas. His place was taken by the Rev. Raymond Abba, an Englishman who had come out to take the wardency of Camden College; he soon afterwards accepted a post in the United Kingdom.

The resignation of Dr. Cumming Thom from the position of Head of the Dept. of Old Testament Language and Literature led to the election of MacLaurin to that honorary post, thereby combining the work of the two Departments.

When Abba returned to Britain a former student, R. J. Maddox, was appointed on a basis far more substantial than that of any previous part-time staff. However, his stay was brief, for he was awarded a travelling scholarship which took him to Yale. Here he gained great distinction, being awarded a gold medal and various honours.

Maddox was replaced by David J. Clines who worked in the Department for a year after graduation; his degree was a brilliant one in Classics and Semitics which gained him a travelling scholarship to Cambridge; here he studied under MacLaurin's former teacher, D. Winton Thomas, Regius Professor of Hebrew, and later became a lecturer in the University of Sheffield. Clines was replaced by Richard F. Hosking who taught well for a year before proceeding also to Winton Thomas at Cambridge. Subsequently he became Assistant Keeper of Semitic Manuscripts in the British Museum.

In the late nineteen fifties E. C. B. MacLaurin found himself giving fourteen hours of lectures per week and, having pointed out that his health would not stand the strain much longer, persuaded the authorities of the wisdom of appointing additional permanent staff. A former student, Miss C. R. F. Lambert, was appointed as Tutor, later Senior Tutor. MacLaurin, gambling on the principle of "play your luck" now asked that a full-time lectureship be created and in 1962 Dr. A. D. Crown joined the staff as Lecturer, later Senior Lecturer.

At this stage the Department of Semitic Studies began its steady development on more 'regular' lines than had hitherto been possible. In the following years another full-time lecturer was appointed, Dr. M. Carter, an Arabist trained in Oxford, Miss Lambert went to London for further post-graduate study and was succeeded by a specialist in Syriac, Mr. B. A. Parker. A Full range of Pass and Honours courses was developed and the first M.A. and Ph.D. candidates graduated from the post graduate schools. Amongst the most recent of these has been one of the part-time teaching staff recruited to cope with the new range of courses (from Biblical studies to Modern Hebrew, Arabic to Akkadian), Dr. Barbara Thiering.

It was observed above that quite a number of Colin MacLaurin's students found academic posts in Australian or overseas Universities and Colleges after post-graduate studies abroad. This stream continues unabated and each year sees a new success in this contribution to teaching Semitic Studies. Currently one of the M.A. graduates of the Department, John Boyd, is spending a post-graduate year at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

In recent years E. C. B. MacLaurin has been awarded a SEATO Fellowship for research into the teaching of Islamics and has been awarded the *Dynastic Order of St. Agatha of Paterno* in recognition of his efforts in developing the teaching of Semitic languages at the University of Sydney.

In 1968, one of Colin MacLaurin's long-standing ambitions, the launching of a scholarly journal devoted to Biblical archaeology, was achieved with the establishment of the *Australian Journal of Biblical Archaeology*, which has since been edited by Eugene Stockton, a graduate of the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem and a post-graduate member of the Department of Semitic Studies. It is most appropriate that this *Festschrift* should be under the aegis of that journal.

The most recent, and a most interesting development in the Department has been the steady stream of visitors from Europe and America who have come to visit and to give lectures. These visits are of immeasurable significance when considered in the light of the development of the Department from the time of the appointment of E. C. B. MacLaurin.