

OBITUARY NOTICES

Professor Stephen Herbert Langdon

By the death of Professor Langdon Oxford has suffered a grave loss, and another link with the second generation of the pioneers of Assyriology is broken. By a fair reckoning he should have had at least two lustres more of vigorous research in front of him, probably the most valuable decade of his whole life, and his loss becomes thereby the greater tragedy for science.

He was born on May 8, 1876, on a farm in Ida township, Monroe County, Michigan, his father being George Knowles Langdon and his mother's maiden name Abigail Elizabeth Hassinger. He came of pioneer stock, his great grandfather being supervisor of the township in 1848 and 1850, and his grandfather owning a large farm in Eastern Ida. Here he attended the country school, and then entered the Monroe High School, where, according to my authority, it is said that his father, intending him and his brother to carry on the farm, was opposed to his learning Latin, on the grounds that a dead language would be of no service in farming; but other counsels fortunately prevailed, and after the young scholar had graduated in 1891 he taught in a country school for a time, determined to save enough money to take him to college.¹

Naturally it was to the University of Michigan that he went, where he received the degree of B.A. in 1898, followed by the M.A. in the following year, and from this point his steps were led towards Assyriology, which was to become the absorbing passion of his life, fostered here by Professor J. A. Craig, who was editing cuneiform texts on religious and astrological subjects.

¹ I am indebted to a most appreciative article by Miss Gertrude Golden in the *Monroe Evening News* of December 12, 1935, for some of the details in the foregoing paragraph of Professor Langdon's early life, and to Dr. Montgomery, of the University of Pennsylvania, for other information.

The young student had, however, leanings towards theology, and for this reason, in 1900, he entered the Union Theological Seminary, New York City, ultimately, in 1905, being ordained Deacon in the American-Anglican Church, Paris; but happily he had meanwhile taken up the study of Semitic languages in Columbia University, which were ultimately to lead him to the Oxford Professorship. It was the Theological Seminary which brought him into touch with the two scholars, Francis Brown and Charles Briggs, who, with Canon Driver, the Regius Professor of Hebrew in Oxford, had brought out a new edition of Gesenius' great Hebrew dictionary. At Columbia he was guided by Professors Gottheil and Prince, the latter doubtless encouraging the trend of the younger man towards Sumerian, which he was presently to make his special study. He was examined for his Doctorate by the Faculties of Semitic and Greek in 1904, and went to France as an International Fellow of the University, where he was thus brought directly into touch with European scholarship in the persons of Professors Scheil and Fossey, both of them most distinguished Assyriologists. From this point began his long succession of publications, which, during thirty-three years of productivity, include between twenty and thirty volumes, apart from very numerous articles in scientific journals, beginning with his *Annals of Ashurbanipal* in 1904.

In 1905 he submitted his thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Columbia, *The Building Inscriptions of the Neo-Babylonian Empire*, and it is delightful to see all the vigour of youth expressed in the claim which he makes (indeed, not without some justification) that it represents the first attempt to apply the rules of literary criticism to the compositions of the Neo-Babylonian School of scribes. Like most theses, it contained nothing strikingly new, but it shows a great sense of what such a book should be, both in form and style, and was a worthy forerunner of his future work. The fact that he mentions having found an unpublished duplicate of one of his texts in the Louvre (which he was able to use with good

advantage) shows that he had recognized the importance of handling the clay early, a postulate laid down by the earliest cuneiform scholars as essential in the making of an Assyriologist.

I learn from Professor J. Dyneley Prince, who has been so good as to give me the details, that Langdon was his student in Assyrian before and after taking his Ph.D. from Columbia. It would appear that Langdon was at first inclined to accept Halévy's theory of "cryptographic writing" for Sumerian, but later recognized its agglutinative character and relinquished his first trend. "He was," says Professor Prince, "a great scholar with a fixed purpose from which he never swerved."

Thereafter he went to Leipzig, and in 1908, when Miss Mary Wallace Shillito, generously recognizing the needs of Assyriology in England, founded the Shillito Readership in the University of Oxford, Langdon was the first to hold office. The Readership was permanently established in 1911 with a gift of £10,000 from Miss Shillito; Langdon was given an honorary degree in 1910, and was constituted Professor in 1919, after the retirement of Professor Sayce. Incidentally he was made Curator of the Babylonian Section of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, where he spent no little time from August, 1916, onwards, in preparing and publishing tablets in the collections. He became naturalized as an Englishman in 1913, and married in 1925, May, the younger daughter of Mr. Thomas Gregory of Cardiff.

To estimate the value of each of his books in detail would be beyond the limit of the present notice, but it is permissible to discuss a few of them. Much of his work was on those most difficult texts of all, the Sumerian hymns, and in this his careful habit of mind, of documenting every publication which appeared, provided him with that essential base, which every scholar must have, on which to start the exercise of his own knowledge and capacity. It was a task which demanded scholarship, eyesight, and above all determination and

courage in this branch of a study, and the value of Langdon's work, which will form a nucleus for fresh editions, is incalculable, and, indeed, one has only to look round the shelves of the Sayce Assyriological Library in the Ashmolean to be reminded, *si monumentum requiris*. Each work on Sumerian is indicative of his capacity. It was in 1914 that he noted the very important Sumerian tablet which he published in 1919 under the title *Le Poème Sumérien du Paradis*, a most difficult text, in which he, as befits a scholar, modestly admits the probability of errors in his publication.

On the Semitic side he published an admirable edition (both transliteration and translation) of the great Babylonian Epic of Creation. As always, he spared no pains to consult original documents in the British Museum, and the result is a most convenient and modern scholarly book, for which all Assyriologists have been grateful. Nor must his publication of a unique tablet of the Gilgamesh Series be forgotten, a large tablet of the older recension of the latter Epic, which was in the collections in Philadelphia. His most ambitious work, perhaps, is his *Semitic Mythology*, 1931, and in undertaking a study of what is now a vast subject he was hampered by the demands of the Series in which it formed part, which attempted to compress into one volume material which might well need a dozen. He himself saw this, and, as he says, had been embarrassed by the difficulty of selecting what was strictly essential; but he certainly manages to lay a large collection of facts before his public in an interesting way, and to marshal new data in such a fashion that the book must be studied by all who would concern themselves with Semitic religion. At the same time there are points open to criticism at all events in one direction where, perhaps owing to his earlier training, he tried to maintain the theory of a belief in primitive monotheism. Obviously he must of necessity make mistakes in a study in which he published so much, but, then, no one who never made mistakes ever made anything. I am reminded of a great passage in *Tristram Shandy*: “ ‘ A

soldier,' cried my Uncle *Toby*, 'is no more exempt from saying a foolish thing, *Trim*, than a man of letters.' 'But not so often, an' please your honour,' replied the corporal'' Assyriologists are no more exempt than others, and it is not for me to pose as a critic.

After the War, when British interests in Mesopotamia encouraged excavations in that country where we had expended so much blood and treasure, at Langdon's instance Oxford was not behindhand in inaugurating diggings on a site of first-class importance. He extended his energies to raising funds for an expedition, which he regarded as part of the necessities of modern Assyriology, and, with the Field Museum of Chicago, enlisted the help of Mr. Weld-Blundell (afterwards Dr. Herbert Weld), who shouldered the burden of financially supporting the Oxford share of the expedition. The site chosen was Uhairer (Kish), some few miles east of Babylon, and Dr. Ernest Mackay was put in charge in 1923.

Langdon himself went out for two seasons as Director, in 1923 and 1925. Whether this was advisable from the point of view of his health may be doubted; he had never been to the East before, and Mesopotamia is a hard country in which to serve an apprenticeship. But it was in keeping with the courage of the man, and it was not until he nearly died from a severe attack of jaundice that he refrained from going out a third time. M. Watelin succeeded Mackay in 1926, and conducted the excavations until his death in 1934, and in this year, owing to the exacting new laws concerning excavations in Iraq, the Oxford Field expedition, in common with many others, at once ceased. These new laws, so different from their generous predecessors, were not only ungrateful to the memory of Miss Gertrude Bell, who was the prime mover in everything relating to the national collections in Iraq, but also unscientific in their claims on any fresh discoveries made in the half-excavated libraries, with all their jumble of broken antiquities, especially cuneiform tablets, pieces of which were already preserved in European Museums awaiting

what are technically called "joins", that is, the other fragments necessary to complete them. It was hardly a matter for wonder that Langdon, disappointed in this fundamental alteration in the position, should have closed down, "owing," as he says, "to the unfavourable attitude of the Department of Antiquities of the Government of Iraq in regard to the division of archæological objects and other threatening regulations, which would harass the work of the excavator." Indeed, it may be said that these laws have cost Iraq thousands of pounds, both in loss in wages and other expenses in excavating, and in the decreased interest of the tourist, who prefers to see diggings actually in progress rather than formless and uninteresting mounds. But the Kish excavations, carried on for less than ten years, had been very fruitful in the discovery of buildings, prehistoric antiquities of immense interest, and above all a wonderful collection of pictographic tablets, which Langdon himself admirably edited.

An amusing passage from Miss Bell's own letters shows the former treatment of Professor Langdon himself at the first of these Rhadamanthine and unilateral divisions of spoil: "'Who decides,' said the Professor, 'if we disagree?' I replied that I did, but he needn't be afraid for he would find me eager to oblige. I said: 'Come on, Professor, you'll see how it works out.' So we went to his tent, where all the tablets were exposed. There was one unique object, a stone tablet inscribed with what is probably the oldest known human script. The Professor positively pressed it on me. . . . The Professor got what he longed for, a mother of pearl inlay representing a milking scene."

By his two seasons' actual control in the field at Kish Langdon showed himself to be an antiquary of the old school, which held it proper that the chief excavator should understand the language of the people whose records he is digging; our knowledge of the ancients is poor enough in any case, but miserably jejune without that last and almost only intimate

familiarity between them and us. Excavations on Greek sites to this day demand the old habit; but in Mesopotamia, after the inauguration of the German diggings at the end of last century, it had become the fashion to depose the scholar (called thenceforth with due vagueness "epigraphist") to a seat below the salt, which perhaps explains the trend of the more modern interest to prehistory.

So much therefore for Langdon's energy in so many directions, as scholar and excavator, whereby he was to become Professor, and a Fellow of the British Academy. His activities on behalf of the R.A.S. were endless; he was a Member of the Council, and wrote many articles for the *Journal*. Personally he was the kindest of men, and no trouble was too great for him to take in helping those who appealed to his wide knowledge of cuneiform. As the writer of a notice in the *Oxford Magazine* says, he rejoiced in the successes of his pupils, and he counted among them nine professors, three readers, and two lecturers, and I cannot do better than append here what one of his latest pupils says: "As one who has worked under Professor Langdon for nearly four years, I am glad to have the opportunity to express the sense of personal loss with which his sudden death affected me. His enthusiasm for the subject to which he devoted all his energies was a constant inspiration, and he was always ready to take endless trouble in solving any problem that arose in connection with the work of his pupils. It is not for me to criticize his work, but it always seemed to me to be the great virtue of his scholarship that he never ignored any branch of learning which might bear upon his subject, and thus, owing to the peculiar material which the Assyriologist studies, his interests ranged from astronomy to the anatomy of human speech, and from comparative law to the philosophy of the soul, though it was primarily in the spheres of philology and of Sumerian religion that he claimed to speak as an authority.

"But one thinks of him perhaps even more as one who took an immense enjoyment in the simple things of life. At golf

he had his own inimitable style, but his pleasure in the game was always fresh. He had a fund of stories about his own experiences, mainly in connection with his excavations at Kish, and his laughter was of that spontaneous kind which infects all who hear it. That his life should thus be cut short will be a real grief to his many friends, who remember him for these things."

Langdon's career, which began in surroundings where academic learnings were discouraged and ended in an Oxford Professorship, is hardly less than heroic.

R. CAMPBELL THOMPSON.

Hon. Desmond Parsons

At Zurich, on 4th July, Desmond Parsons died after suffering for two years from an illness which seemed to have been the outcome of hardships while travelling in China. Though aged only 26, he had made active advances in the study of Chinese civilization which was his chosen work. Having visited places of archæological moment in the provinces of Honan and Shensi, he made a journey to Tunhuang in difficult circumstances, examining the geographical features of the ancient highway to the West along the Kansu corridor. Some misunderstanding by the local authorities led to his arrest, and he was released at Lanchou only after diplomatic intervention. Before that he had managed to take over 120 photographs in the famous Buddhist cave-shrines at Tunhuang, including certain wall-paintings which had not yet been recorded. Copies are preserved in the Courtauld Institute, and in the collections of Harvard University and several American museums.

Possessed of an unusual capacity for observation and of a fine scholarly instinct, he would doubtless have contributed ably to the Chinese studies he loved. His charming personality and transparent honesty of purpose claimed the admiration of all who knew him.

W. PERCEVAL YETTS.