



WALTER BRUNO HENNING

OBITUARY

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W. B. Henning, who died at Berkeley, California, on 8 January 1967, at the early age of 58, was one of the small group of outstanding scholars drawn to Middle Iranian studies in this century by the wealth of new material discovered in Chinese Turkistan. The challenge of the unexplored attracted others also of the finest calibre, notably, among his contemporaries, H. W. Bailey and E. Benveniste; but Henning alone chose to concentrate his splendid gifts within this particular field. His contributions to Middle Iranian, in language, literature, history, geography, and religion, were superb in quality and from the first bore a magisterial stamp. To outstanding powers of memory and reasoning, judgement and analysis, he added profound originality and remarkable imaginative insight, which enabled him to excel as translator and interpreter of the fragmentary and often crabbed material with which he dealt. His work, concentrated in scope, had the broadest basis, since his intellectual interests were unbounded. He garnered immense learning, and used it in the service of his chosen subject, to which his devotion, conceived before he reached his twenties, never flagged, despite ill-health, and the professional temptations put in the way of a scholar of his genius.

Henning was born on 26 August 1908, at Ragnit in Eastern Prussia, but grew up in Pomerania, to memories of which he remained strongly attached, especially to those of the Baltic coast, with its pines and sand dunes, and great stretches of sky and sea. After schooling in Köslin he went to the University of Göttingen to study mathematics (an interest which he maintained throughout his life); but during his first year there he turned instead to Iranian subjects, which he studied under F. C. Andreas. Henning was the youngest of the last group of Andreas's students (which included H. J. Polotsky, K. Barr, and W. Lentz); and he held his venerable teacher in deep affection and respect. Under his direction he took up for a doctoral thesis the study of the Middle Persian verb as represented in the then still largely unpublished Turfan texts. For his dissertation, presented after Andreas's death, he received in 1931 the degree of Ph.D., *summa cum laude*. The previous year he had spent as assistant to the Concordance of Islamic Studies in Leyden; and in 1932 he was appointed by the Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften as an editor of the Manichaean manuscript fragments in their Turfan collection. During the next four years he published, out of Andreas's *Nachlass*, three important sets of Middle Persian and Parthian manuscript remains (*Mitteliranische Manichaica aus Chinesisch-Turkestan*, I, II, and III), in editions distinguished for their learning, precision, and excellence of translation. He also produced independently the first major publication of the difficult Manichaean Sogdian texts (in *Ein manichäisches Bet- und Beichtbuch*), and published a number of articles. Two of these (in the *Nachrichten von der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*) were brilliant contributions to

the understanding of Iranian Manichaeism; and another (in the *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*) contained a condensed but penetrating study of points of Manichaean history. In the same number of the *ZDMG* there appeared an abstract of a pioneering lecture on the Khwarezmian language, delivered by him, in collaboration with Zeki Velidi Togan, at the eighth German *Orientalistentag*.

While working in Berlin Henning became engaged to be married to Maria Polotsky, the sister of his distinguished Jewish fellow-student in Göttingen. This was a dangerous step to take in Nazi Germany; and to escape from the mounting pressures there he accepted in 1936 an invitation to succeed H. W. Bailey as the Parsee Community's Lecturer in Iranian Studies at the School of Oriental Studies in London. From London he returned later that same year, at considerable risk, to Berlin, and succeeded in arranging for his future wife to leave and join him in England, where they were married in 1937.

There followed three fruitful years of work in London, where an almost complete set of photographs of the Turfan fragments enabled him, with the permission of the Preussische Akademie, to continue his specialized studies. In 1939 he was made Senior Lecturer; but he had not yet acquired British nationality when war broke out that same year. In 1940 German invasion threatened, and he was interned, under a general order against enemy aliens, on the Isle of Man. It was during his internment that his *Sogdica* was published, a masterly contribution to Middle Iranian lexicography. He was released within a year, and, his health not being good, he spent the remainder of the war teaching and studying in Cambridge, where what was by now called the School of Oriental and African Studies had been evacuated. It was some little time after the end of hostilities before the School wholly returned to the capital; and this was a tranquil period in Henning's life, with the tensions over of the conflict between his native and his adopted lands, and with the enjoyment, in the quietness of Cambridge, of the society of such congenial scholars as V. Minorsky, H. M. Chadwick, S. H. Taqizadeh (then Iranian Ambassador to England), H. W. Bailey, and G. Haloun. Summer holidays with his wife and small daughter on the East Anglian coast brought back moreover peaceful recollections of Pomerania and its Baltic shores.

In 1946 Henning went as Visiting Professor of Indo-Iranian to Columbia University, New York. The following year the title was conferred on him of Reader in Central Asian Studies in the University of London, and in 1947 he became Professor in the same field. In 1949 he delivered the Ratanbai Katrak lectures in Oxford, devoting them, as he had been asked to do, to a critical assessment of works on Zoroaster by E. Herzfeld and H. S. Nyberg. The result was a penetrating and lucid study, in which devastating wit gave force to his criticisms, and constructive, though conservative, interpretations of his own were offered. Although so often splendidly original, Henning never pursued originality for its own sake; and his strong common-sense and feeling for history provided much-needed ballast for the ship of Iranian studies, all too

apt to be carrying a dangerously heavy top-hammer of theories. These lectures showed, however, one slight limitation of sympathy, namely a lack of imaginative comprehension of some of the obscurer forms of religious life. Henning had a great respect for Zoroastrianism, holding that, among the major religions, its basic doctrines were intellectually the most acceptable. He was very ready, therefore, to defend it against what he thought to be unworthy imputations; but had he had more interest in the general history of religions, it is possible that he might have judged Nyberg's interpretation a little less harshly. (His respect for Nyberg's general contributions to Iranian studies was considerable, and he inculcated a regard for this eminent scholar among his own pupils.)

In 1950, at the invitation of the Iranian government, he travelled to southern Persia to work on the Pahlavi inscriptions there. Here he showed his qualities of physical courage and endurance, and also a mastery of technical matters, securing admirable squeezes of rock inscriptions, most notably of the huge and almost inaccessible inscription of Sar-Mašhad, obtained in extremely difficult and exacting conditions. He formed as usual excellent relationships with those who worked with him, who accorded his distinction of mind and character their warm respect; but while he was prepared to spend his last ounce of strength for scholarly discovery, he was impatient of social life, and quickly tired by it, a fact which caused some misunderstandings on his return, weary from field-work, through hospitable Tehran.

In 1954 Henning became Chairman, on its inception, of the Executive Council of *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*, in which capacity he acted until his death, showing marked shrewdness and financial acumen. It seemed that whatever he wished to do, he could do well. It was among the publications of the *Corpus* that he produced his three meticulously edited portfolios of Pahlavi inscriptions, from the material he had gathered so arduously in Persia. It is a matter for the deepest regret that he did not live to publish his eagerly awaited editions of these texts.

In the same year he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy. He was also a member of the Royal Danish Academy, and corresponding member of the Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin. The first part of 1956 he spent at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies, a time which he devoted largely to Khwarezmian. This period of freedom from teaching and administrative duties was one which he greatly enjoyed. He was in fact a supremely good teacher, endlessly patient with beginners who were eager to learn, able through his perceptiveness to understand their difficulties, and with his learning and his own unquenchable scientific curiosity making each hour one of exploration and discovery. He was never even faintly pompous, and his wit and humour were a delightful enrichment to his teaching, although at times his tongue could be mordant. Formal lecturing he always disliked, preferring to teach, like Andreas before him, in his own study, surrounded by a well-ordered maze of books, and with a steady flow of tea to support him. In these

happy circumstances he would in his prime teach for 5 or 6 hours at a stretch, breaking off at some point for a brief quarter of an hour's sleep, which he had the Napoleonic gift of taking when he pleased. These sessions would sometimes end after midnight, for he was a night-worker by preference, and while at his own studies saw in many a dawn. As he grew older, and his strength began to fail, he was more reluctant to spend himself in teaching; and when in his last years he found himself in a climate of opinion where stress was laid on the don as 'educator', he continued to insist that for a university appointment the chief consideration must be, not whether a man was a good teacher, but whether he was a good learner. He himself was both, superlatively.

By this stage in his life Henning had published some 70 articles, many of them in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, *Asia Major*, and the *Transactions of the Philological Society*. The majority were devoted to Manichaean texts in Middle Persian, Parthian, and Sogdian; but many other matters also came under his consideration. He worked on Buddhist and Christian Sogdian, and made an outstanding contribution to Sogdian studies by dating the Sogdian 'Ancient Letters'. His Manichaean interests led him also to work on Uigur Turkish and Chinese. His articles on the great trilingual inscription on the Ka'ba-yi Zardušt, discovered only in 1936, formed a massive contribution to Sasanian history as well as lexicography, and it was he who first identified this royal inscription as celebrating the victory of Shapur I over the Romans. His detailed studies of other, shorter, inscriptions of the Middle Iranian period (Parthian, Middle Persian, Middle Indian, Elymaic, and Aramaic) were both invaluable in themselves and led to his magisterial work on Middle Iranian scripts and systems of writing (published as 'Mitteliranisch' in B. Spuler's *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, Abt. I, Bd. IV, Abschn. I, 1958). He made masterly contributions to the decipherment of the Bactrian inscriptions newly discovered by French archaeologists in Afghanistan, and in the light of these inscriptions identified as Bactrian also the language of a unique and tiny manuscript fragment in the Turfan collection. In more traditional fields he made a brief but illuminating study of Avestan and Middle Iranian metres, and published several articles on Pahlavi texts, as well as making many incidental elucidations of Avestan and Pahlavi problems in the course of his other writings. His articles were always filled in every rift with ore, and were expressed with the utmost conciseness and clarity. He gathered material also for Iranian dialectology, and published fragments of some of the oldest known Persian poetry, preserved in Manichaean script. One of the most important of his unpublished works is his etymological dictionary of the Persian language, over which he laboured for years, and which, even in its unfinished card-index form, must be a priceless treasure-house of fact and erudition.

In 1957 Henning was appointed acting Head of the Department of the Languages and Cultures of the Near and Middle East at SOAS, an appointment which was confirmed the following year. He performed his administrative

duties with the utmost conscientiousness, but they remained continually irksome to him. His health too was deteriorating, and the chill damp of English winters was each year more exhausting to endure. Both these considerations were factors in leading him to accept an invitation to become Professor of Iranian Studies at Berkeley, California, an appointment which he took up in September 1961. Here he was involved in more teaching of a formal character than was congenial to him, and as he prepared his lectures with unflinching meticulousness, they imposed a heavy burden. He had, however, begun to build up a new centre of Iranian studies there, and despite physical weakness was getting back indomitably into his own working stride. Several articles by him appeared in 1966; and he obtained leave of absence for 1967 to complete his dictionary of Khwarezmian, a master-work which was uniquely within his competence, the fruit of 30 years' labour on scattered and most difficult sources. Hardly more than 100 pages had been written when he fell and broke a leg. This unhappy accident precipitated a congestion of the lungs, and from this he died some two weeks later.

Henning's death has been mourned wherever there are Iranian scholars, and friend and foe alike have felt the greatness of the loss. That he had foes it would be idle to deny. His tongue was too sharp and his criticisms too trenchant for it to be otherwise. But although he never hesitated to give battle over matters which he took seriously, and although (which was naturally harder to forgive) he plainly enjoyed the contest, and the rapier-thrusts of wit, he was never harsh towards young scholars, nor given to merely destructive criticism. His general attitude was positive and magnanimous, and he welcomed every contribution to the advancement of Iranian studies. His large correspondence, which afflicted him in later years by its bulk, showed how many consulted him on how wide a range of subjects; nearly all of them received patient and detailed replies. He was a fine stylist, in English as in German; and his singular personal charm often made itself felt in his letters, with their vividness, and touches of humour and humanity. Although he would have repudiated sardonically any suggestion that he was a kind man, he often showed the greatest kindness and consideration. Biting in controversy, he could be gentleness and forbearance itself on occasion. He was in fact a man of infinite variety and subtlety; but at the core of his character was an iron integrity, and the courage necessary to preserve it. He evoked deep loyalty in his friends and students, and he gave loyalty also; though in late years, as his energies flagged, he tended more and more to contract his personal life to the society of his much-loved wife and daughter. Above all, he remained throughout his days the servant of his overriding scholarly devotion, and an eager explorer of new fields of knowledge. He was a great man, and he leaves behind him the monument of his own abiding achievements.

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