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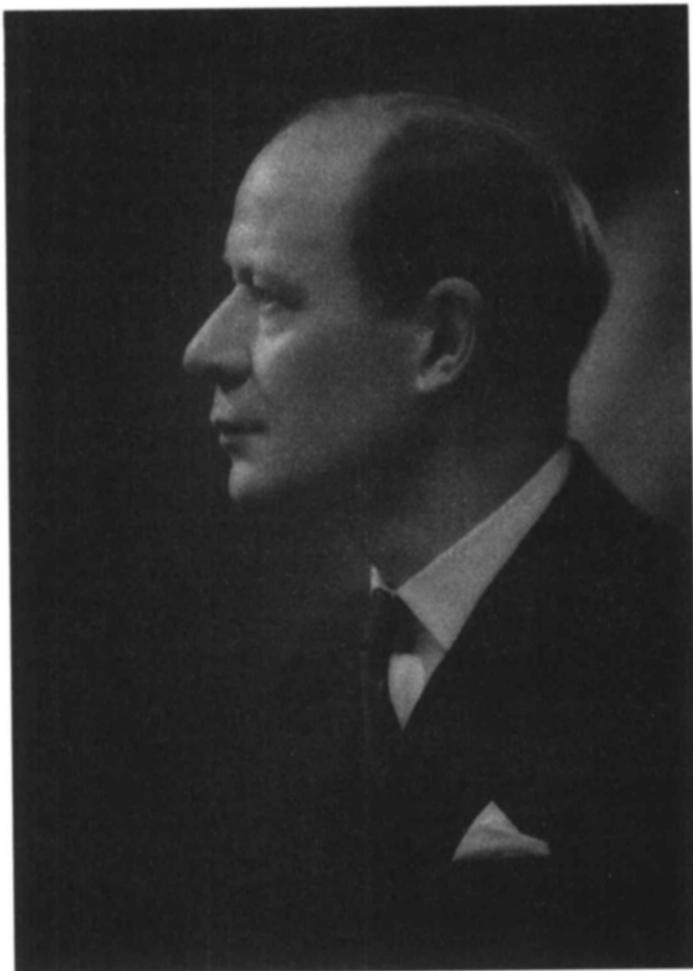
*Professor Charles Fraser Beckingham, FBA,*

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*18th February 1914 to 30th September 1998*

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Charles Beckingham was one of the Royal Asiatic Society's most distinguished and faithful servants of recent times. A Fellow since 1949, he was Honorary Treasurer (1964–67), twice President (1967–70 and 1976–79), and finally Honorary Editor (1984–87). In one sense he was the epitome of the truly scholarly Orientalist, holding chairs of Islamic Studies in two major English universities (Manchester, 1958–65, and London, 1965–81). In another sense, however, his career followed, at least initially, a rather unconventional path for an academic; and he was always very much his own man, not someone who conformed to any stereotype.

*JRAS*, Series 3, 9, 2 (1999), pp. 287–292

He was born in Huntingdon, the son of an artist, Arthur Beckingham, and his wife Alice. After Huntingdon Grammar School he went up to Queens' College, Cambridge, where he read English, not, as those who later observed his mastery of Latin and Greek may have supposed, Classics. This did not preclude an early, though at this stage perhaps recreational, interest in matters Oriental. Today we are continually being told that we should not regard the East as exotic. Beckingham would probably not have agreed, but then for him what was exotic was also likely to be interesting.

After Cambridge he joined (1936) the Department of Printed Books at the British Museum. He remained there, theoretically, until 1946, but between 1942 and 1946 he was seconded to Military and Naval Intelligence. During those years he made important contributions to the still useful *Admiralty Handbook of Western Arabia* (1946). Like so many able academics of those days, he spent part of the war at the then highly secret though now celebrated cryptographical establishment at Bletchley Park. Between 1946 and 1951 his employer was the Foreign Office, specifically GCHQ. After fifteen years away from the university world, it might have seemed that the course of Beckingham's future career was set. Perhaps unfortunately for the Foreign Office, but certainly most fortunately for scholarship, this proved not to be so.

In 1951 he went to the University of Manchester as Lecturer in Islamic History, rising to Senior Lecturer in 1955. So began a university career of great distinction which lasted until his retirement thirty years later, and in terms of his scholarly activity, till not long before his death. While holding his chair at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, he did his duty as Head of the Department of the Near and Middle East (1969–72). Aside from the major role he played in the affairs of the Royal Asiatic Society, he was active in a variety of other ways beyond his immediate university responsibilities: he was Joint Editor, then Editor, of the *Journal of Semitic Studies* (1961–65), which many years later did him the honour of making one of its issues into a Beckingham Festschrift; he was, appropriately for someone with his profound interest in and knowledge of the history of travel, President of the Hakluyt Society (1969–72); he was International Director of the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* Project (1986–95). He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1983, and in 1987 the Royal Society for Asian Affairs awarded him its Sir Percy Sykes Memorial Medal (and one might wonder if on that occasion he remembered his very just remark, in a review [*JRAS* 1972/1, p. 69], that “the history of Iran has occasioned a number of excessively bad books, some of which have exercised undesirable influence”).

Beckingham was a superb lecturer. Invariably he lectured without notes, even when the lecture contained lengthy verbatim quotations in foreign languages. Asked about this practice, he once explained – rather as though he felt it to be a serious character defect – that he was quite unable to lecture if he had notes in front of him: he found them distracting. Unlike many if not most university teachers, he greatly enjoyed, and was extraordinarily gifted at, lecturing to the sixth forms of schools. He never talked down to them, but spoke in a way that caught their attention, that they could understand, and which, because of his clarity and humour, they would remember. Those who accompanied him on visits to schools organised by the SOAS Extra-Mural Department, and who had to speak after him, had a difficult act to follow.

It would not be easy to meet a more learned man, or one whose learning was more lightly borne and so little displayed except when it was necessary. His knowledge was vast in both breadth and depth. It has been rightly said that he was devoid of personal vanity. Indeed, he had no great opinion of himself as a scholar. He would sometimes say – and without the slightest trace of affectation – he was only a dilettante who had been unexpectedly lucky in life. This modest judgement was very far indeed from the mark, though there were one or two people in the profession who were so lacking in perception as to take him at his own valuation. In his London inaugural lecture, *The Achievements of Prester John* (1966), he remarked that his new chair of Islamic Studies had “been reupholstered, reconditioned, as it were, to accommodate an altogether less weighty and less substantial figure than my predecessor.” This was Professor R. B. Serjeant, who had been Professor of Arabic, as he was soon to be again at Cambridge. Beckingham’s remark may have been true in the physical sense. No doubt he also supposed it to apply intellectually, but we are under no obligation to agree with him. Beckingham said, privately, that when he was invited to move from Manchester to London, he had insisted that his new title, like his old, should be “Islamic Studies” because, since he did not really know Arabic, he could not honestly call himself a Professor of it. This is a claim which tells us a good deal more about Beckingham’s character and personality than it does about his knowledge of Arabic; and in response it is perhaps sufficient to observe that Beckingham’s translation of the fourth volume of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s *Travels* (1994) is an even more impressive piece of work than it already looks if it came from the pen of a translator who did not know Arabic.

Beckingham’s scholarly contribution was remarkable and of permanent value. Yet in the university climate of the 1990s and by the criteria of scholarly worth which prevailed at the end of his life, it has a slightly old-fashioned feel to it – not that that should be assumed to be to its discredit. Beckingham never wrote a book – that is, while he wrote a great many articles and was responsible in one way or another for the publication of a considerable number of books, there is no monograph, no book all the words in which are by Beckingham, except for *Between Islam and Christendom* (London, 1983), the Variorum volume which most usefully reprints twenty-five of his articles, papers and lectures. But the concept of the overwhelming importance of the scholarly monograph as a genre is to a large extent an artificial creation of the centrally-driven research assessment exercises of the last few years, the period after Beckingham’s retirement: it is a very inadequate guide, in itself, to real scholarly significance. The likelihood is that many of Beckingham’s publications, such as his Hakluyt Society volumes, will still be in constant use by scholars long after most of those recent monographs have deservedly been forgotten.

The twin poles of Beckingham’s published scholarship are probably Prester John and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa: a fabulous individual who never existed and a real person who had what one might certainly call fabulous adventures – it is not for nothing that Professor Ross Dunn’s excellent study of the latter is called *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*. Beckingham described Prester John as “someone less substantial than even I am.” Perhaps the parallel with Ibn Baṭṭūṭa was closer: Dunn, in his book, thanks and acknowledges Beckingham by describing him as “a man of learning and urbanity with whom Ibn Battuta would have found much in common.”

Beckingham's London inaugural lecture, *The Achievements of Prester John*, has already been referred to. In 1979 he delivered another lecture, widely read since its publication, in memory of his former colleague John Boyle, Manchester's Professor of Persian whose interests were particularly in the Mongol period of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when European travellers were ransacking Asia for the "real" Prester John. So "The quest for Prester John" was an appropriate choice of subject. Then in 1982 Beckingham and his friend and colleague Edward Ullendorff, a specialist on Ethiopia who was also expert in Hebrew, not one of Beckingham's languages, published *The Hebrew Letters of Prester John* (Oxford, 1982). In this important volume they edited and translated Hebrew versions of the celebrated letter which had perhaps been provoked by the fact that Prester John allegedly included the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel among his subjects. They also considered the curious relationship between the letter and a Hebrew narrative which contains some of the same material but is nearly three centuries older.

The fascination of Prester John never left Beckingham, and towards the end of his life he returned to the subject with his last substantial publication, a volume which he edited with Professor Bernard Hamilton, a European medievalist and historian of the Crusades. In this, *Prester John, the Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes* (Aldershot, 1996), they reprinted Zarncke's editions of some of the main texts, which by then were very difficult to come by, as well as eleven studies. Some of these were reprints, others, including one by Beckingham, specially written for the volume. This was a volume of major significance for all who were interested in the subject. As this *Journal's* reviewer remarked of it, "the collection of valuable papers and documents reviewed here . . . provides a fresh starting-point for future research on the development of the legend" (P. Jackson, "Prester John *redivivus*: a review article", *JRAS*, 3rd series, VII/3, 1997, p. 428).

There cannot have been many, if indeed any, greater travellers than Ibn Baṭṭūṭa the fourteenth-century Moroccan, at least among those who wrote down, or caused to be written down, an account of their adventures. Even Marco Polo, by comparison, looks a little lacking in enterprise. Beckingham related, in his absorbing 1977 lecture, "In search of Ibn Battuta" (*Asian Affairs*, VIII, 1978, pp. 263–77: reprinted in *Between Islam and Christendom*) how in 1922 young Mr Gibb, later Professor Sir Hamilton Gibb, proposed to the Hakluyt Society to publish an annotated English translation of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* in four volumes, with a fifth of additional commentary; and how the first volume appeared thirty-six years later, in 1958. The second was published in 1962, and the third, with which Beckingham had helped the now ailing Gibb, just after the translator's death in 1971. Beckingham had previously promised Gibb that he would take over the remainder of the translation, and ensure that the project was brought to completion. Volume four, the final part of the annotated translation, appeared in 1994. Beckingham noted in his foreword that "the translation of the narrative of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's travels has taken more than twice as long as the travels themselves." As one of the volume's reviewers remarked, "the new translation is highly readable", and "the annotation is wide-ranging and erudite, though never overwhelming." (P. Jackson in *JRAS*, 3rd series, VI/2, 1996, p. 262). Another wrote of Beckingham's "exemplary scholarship and meticulous editing and translation skills" (I. R. Netton in *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 February 1996, p. 13). The volume is indeed a model of how such translations should be presented. Beckingham's annotation tends to be

fuller, and rightly so, than Gibb's was. His volume brought Gibb's scheme to a belated but nevertheless highly successful conclusion. Beckingham was not able to complete the proposed fifth volume of additional commentary: perhaps, therefore, we shall never know his final thoughts on such controversial matters as whether Ibn Baṭṭūṭa ever in fact went to China.

Another major area of Beckingham's expertise was Ethiopia, which he visited for the first time, with Edward Ullendorff, in 1964: a visit about which he would tell some most entertaining stories. He had already published a selection from *Bruce's Travels* (1964), as well as, in collaboration with G. W. B. Huntingford, two relevant volumes for the Hakluyt Society (1954 and 1961). He later (1984) provided the introduction and notes to the Hakluyt Society translation of the *Itinerário* of Jerónimo Lobo. He also provided the major contribution, on the history of the Royal Asiatic Society, for the Society's Sesquicentenary volume, *The Royal Asiatic Society: its History and Treasures*, ed. E. H. S. Simmonds and S. E. Digby (1979). This is some indication of the breadth of Beckingham's interests and knowledge, of which *Between Islam and Christendom* provides a good, though not an exhaustive, conspectus. Those twenty-five pieces deal with travel and travellers, Arab, Portuguese, Dutch, English and so on; legends like that of Prester John and their significance; conceptions and misconceptions of Islam among Europeans; and other matters such as an article on "The Turks of Cyprus" (1957), which arose out of a sabbatical term which he and his wife Margery had spent studying that community. These contributions are a joy to read: a rare combination of erudition, perception, lucidity and wit. Even the specially written Preface is striking. Beckingham remarks (pp. ii–iii) of medieval Christians and Muslims that "the mass of the people, who had not studied theology, did not regard Islam and Christianity so much as two mutually exclusive systems of belief, but rather as two sets of well-defined practices. When living in a different country, it was only reasonable to adopt the dress, and diet and the rituals of its inhabitants. Christian Ethiopian pilgrims going to Jerusalem are said often to have become Muslims while passing through the Sudan and Egypt on the outward and on the return journey without being the less fervent in their Christianity at the Holy Sepulchre and after they had reached home again." Beckingham would probably have thought that all rather obvious. Perhaps, for him, it was. For others, those few sentences throw a shaft of light on to a lost yet still comprehensible medieval world.

As President of the Society, Beckingham was highly effective. Perhaps his most important long-term contribution was in helping to persuade first the Council and ultimately the membership of the necessity – cruel necessity, but it had to be faced – of selling one of the Society's treasures, the *World History* of Rashīd al-Dīn, so as to secure the otherwise precarious future of the Society, and in particular to provide the funds necessary for moving from the leasehold property in Queen Anne Street to a freehold property, which was eventually to be the Society's present house in Queen's Gardens. He was also a notable Editor of the *Journal*, being responsible during his three years of office for a major expansion in its size. His successor followed, for years to come, the pattern which Beckingham had laid down – and he was very content to do so.

Beckingham's wife, Margery, whom he married in 1946, died in 1966. They had a daughter, Carolyn. Personally, he was a man of absolute integrity, to be regarded as wholly

trustworthy in any and all situations. He was considerate and generous with his time, his advice, and his other resources. He could not have been more encouraging and helpful to younger scholars and students. He had a very marked sense of humour, a notable gift for anecdote, and he was extraordinarily enjoyable company. A dinner as his guest at the Travellers' Club was a privilege much to be looked forward to. One of his last publications was an obituary of Professor A. F. L. Beeston (*JSS*, XLI/2, 1996, pp. 199–201), an Arabist in his own way just as memorable as Beckingham was in his. Beckingham wrote of Beeston that “he scrupulously avoided any unnecessary display of his own knowledge, and few people realised how extensive that knowledge was.” “He combined austere scholarship with a convivial personality. He was always excellent company and added to the gaiety of any gathering in which he participated. With his utter lack of pomposity or pretensions, he had very successful relations with younger generations.” That is certainly all true of Beeston. But it is no less an unwittingly accurate self-portrait of its remarkable and greatly missed author.

D. O. Morgan

*The photograph of Professor Beckingham is reproduced by courtesy of the British Academy.*