

## IN MEMORIAM

### **John Masson Smith, Jr. (1930–2019)**

John Masson Smith, Jr., was born into an academic family in Northampton, Massachusetts and was one of the early alums of the Putney School. Upon graduation from Harvard College, where he met his future wife Grace, John served in the U.S. Army. He then went to Columbia University, where he earned a Ph.D. in 1964. After spending a year in Istanbul, where he directed the American Research Institute in Turkey, the Smiths came to the University of California, Berkeley, from which he retired as Professor Emeritus of History. John was an original, inspiring, and masterful scholar of Eurasian studies.

Columbia's Near East faculty, built upon a bedrock of émigrés, offered challenges to any aspiring scholar, unless you already knew one or two Central European languages. Tibor Halasi-Kun's program of Turkish and Ottoman study required a summer spent in a small town in Anatolia, one without English-speakers. John ended up in Niğde, then a Cappadocian hamlet, from which he returned learned in the language and lighter by twenty pounds. At Columbia John began to work with Islamic coins, and under the tutelage of George C. Miles, chief curator of the American Numismatic Society, he became adept at the nuts and bolts of medieval economic history. John's dissertation, on a peculiar post-Mongol dynasty called the Sarbadars (Sarbadar means "head on the gibbet" – if you can catch us!), appeared in print in 1971 and was immediately recognized as a model study, using numismatic material John discovered in Istanbul, St. Petersburg, Tehran, and elsewhere to establish the goals, means, and career of a remarkable enterprise that teetered between Perso-Islamic scribal culture and Inner Asian nomadic norms.

At Cal, the Smiths joined a remarkable group of medievalists: Robert Brentano, Paul Alexander, Tom Bisson, Stefan Kuttner, Gerard Caspary, and a host of visitors, with whom he taught and counseled. A modest and irenic personality, John gathered students by attraction rather than

persuasion. A number of today's senior medievalists took his methods seminar and published their results.

After the Sarbadars, John turned to the wider world of the Mongols, first in the Near East and then to their historic enterprise, the greatest land empire in world history. His work in this area depended upon a detailed mastery of anthropological and statistical sources that explicated the economy, society, technology, cuisine, and ideologies of pastoral nomadic powers. This required him to poke around in little-known studies published in Mongolia, China, the Near East, and the Soviet Union, and even works on America's steppe nomads, the plains Indians. He worked up his material slowly and methodically; when he had written a draft, even during his probationary years, he placed it in a drawer, turned to something else, and returned to revise after six months had passed. The result was work noted for its clarity, probity, depth of analysis, and dry humor.

At the time when he entered this field, the study of nomad empires rested upon generalizations born, ultimately, from the anger of their (usually) defeated enemies, and even specialists found it easy to repeat the notion that the success of a horde rested on the character defects of its members. In a long series of articles John was able to bring order from chaos, numbers from notions, and to explain steppe nomadic history on a firm and, often, quantitative basis. In this he was a pioneer, a most influential scholar of the ways of the steppe from China to the Great Hungarian Plain. John was among the first of those who looked at the history of the steppe from the nomads' point of view and explicated the ways in which nomads are precisely unlike sedentary societies.

His work began with the Mongols in Iran. At the beginning, John faced the extraordinary puzzle of Mongol coinage, the most complex and expansive of Islamic coinages. In short order he discovered the system, mechanisms of exchange, and methods of the Mongol mints. He then, with the aid of undergraduate students, worked out just how Mongol (and other thirteenth-century Mediterranean coinages) actually passed in the marketplace, from Nishapur to Naples.

He then turned to Mongol fiscal thought. After a close study of anthropological accounts of steppe societies, John worked out the legal and tax practices of the khans. The significance of this work lay in the realization that the independent dynastic law of the Mongols formed the basis for all non-Shari'a legal practice from the Middle Ages to the present. He was also able to explain those demographic changes in Iran that transformed a Sunni Islamic peasantry into a Shi'i society.

John's major work was on the Mongol military, the rock on which their success and their reputation rested. After a number of preliminary essays, he prepared a monograph on Mongol warfare in which he explained just how a relatively small Inner Asian tribe managed to conquer Inner Asia, unify China, tilt the balance between peasants and pastoralists in the Near East, and reach out beyond the Great Hungarian Plain. Students and audiences enjoyed his proof of the advantages of nomadic archery, based on Islamic miniatures and John's demonstration of just how to shoot three arrows from horseback in two seconds. It was a virtuoso performance.

When Grace and John were not riding their horses in the East Bay hills, they traveled widely to collections, libraries, and conferences in the Near East and Inner Asia. On a number of occasions they lectured in Mongolia, where John also taught a number of Mongol (and American) scholars how to tie a bow tie. The friendships they contracted were deep and lasting. Among those who felt closest to John were scholars who disagreed with some of his ideas, and they have spoken of their gratitude for the politeness and gentle manner in which he expressed both respect and a reasoned opposition.

John Masson Smith, Jr. was a scholar's scholar and one of the valiant crew who, having come to Cal in the early 1960s, helped the Department of History to vault to the top of the profession within a decade. He changed the way we look at the sea of grass linking Budapest to Beijing and brought us to a closer understanding of the people and ideas traversing it. ✨

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