

Obituary: A. K. Irvine, 1935–2011

David L. Appleyard

Arthur Irvine was a member of faculty at SOAS from 1961 until 1998, throughout the thirty-seven years of his academic career. Though he preferred to sign his publications with his initials, A.K., he was always known to his colleagues simply as Arthur. He retired officially in 1992 as Reader in Semitic languages, having been a member of both the Near and Middle East department and the Africa department, a dual appointment which reflected his teaching and research interests in the Semitic languages of both the Near East and Ethiopia.

Born on 23 August 1935, the second son of Arthur J. and Bethia Irvine, in Glasgow where his father was Professor of music at the university, he received his education at the famous Hutchesons' Grammar School in the city and matriculated in 1952 in the Scottish Higher in Latin, Greek, Mathematics, English and History. From there he went to St. Andrews, where he read Classics and where he met Edward Ullendorff, with whom he first studied Arabic and who, of course, was to remain a life-long friend and colleague after the latter, too, moved to SOAS in 1964 where Arthur was already Lecturer in Semitic languages. After graduating in 1956 he went on to St. John's College, Oxford, where he worked for his doctorate on Old South Arabian, the group of languages that was to remain the principal focus of his research for the rest of his life. In those days supervisors were less a regular part of a research student's life than they are now, but at John's he was fortunate enough to work with the renowned Arabist and Old South Arabianist, A. F. L. Beeston. The subject of his thesis was a survey of Old South Arabian lexical materials connected with irrigation techniques, which was published by the Faculty of Oriental Studies in 1962–3. After Oxford he spent the year of 1959–60 in Tübingen conducting post-doctoral work, a time which he would occasionally mention with fondness, the mountains and forests of the Schwarzwald bringing to mind the north of Scotland. Although he was not a great traveller, and never for instance visited those countries whose languages, cultures and history occupied his scholarly interests, this period of his life in Germany along with the following year he spent on military service in the Navy on board a minesweeper, and in particular the time spent sailing within the Arctic Circle, remained experiences which he looked back on with nostalgia whenever he felt especially disillusioned with the daily round of academic life.

After his period of national service, Arthur joined SOAS in 1961 as Lecturer in Semitic languages. With Ullendorff's arrival at SOAS three years later he became more involved with Ethiopian Semitic languages and shared the teaching of Amharic after 1967 when the language was first taught as part of an undergraduate degree programme. He also taught Ge'ez, when required, and occasionally Classical Arabic. His principal field of research remained, however, Old South Arabian and it is fair to say that he became one of the two British experts in the field at the time alongside his teacher, A. F. L. Beeston, though his modesty would never have permitted him to concede as much. He regularly

corresponded and consulted with Beeston on a number of research questions, publishing jointly with him in 1967 an article on “Homicide in pre-Islamic South Arabia” in *BSOAS*, and in 1988 an article on “New evidence on the Qatabanian letter order” in the *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*. The majority of his published articles also deals with South Arabian matters or the links between South Arabia and Ancient Ethiopia, in the latter instance notably his 1965 article “On the identity of Ḥabashat in the South Arabian inscriptions” in the *Journal of Semitic Studies*, a seminal study which tackled the long-standing debate on the meaning of the term in its Arabian context. Looking at a list of his publications, however, it is immediately evident that his greatest contribution by far is in the area of academic book reviews, a task to which he brought the same scholarly care, perspicacity and vigour that he applied to all his writing. A rough count yields around 140 book reviews, written mostly between 1963 and 1996, almost a hundred of which appeared in the *Bulletin*, with most of the rest in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, and others in the *Journal of Semitic Studies*, the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, the *Journal of Arabian Studies*, and *Africa*, to name but the most obvious. The fields covered by his reviews range, of course, from South Arabian philology and archaeology, to various other areas of Semitic linguistics and philology, and the linguistic and historical spheres of Ethiopian studies and Islamic studies, especially relating to the Arabian peninsula. Whilst thinking of his publications, one should not overlook numerous contributions to encyclopaedias, such as the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2nd edition) and the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (vol. 1), as well as the semi-popular encyclopaedia of mythology, religion and the supernatural *Man, Myth & Magic*, which appeared in weekly instalments beginning in 1970 and which included articles by a number of academics and specialists in the field. Another major reference volume to which he contributed is Routledge’s *Atlas of the World’s Languages* (1st edition), for which he was also editor of the section on the Middle East and North Africa. He was an avid writer of obituaries for colleagues in his field – one thinks of those he wrote for H.J. Polotsky in *The Times*, J. Ryckmans in *BSOAS*, and of course for his teacher A.F.L. Beeston also in *BSOAS* – and once when a colleague casually asked him, who was going to write his obituary, he replied that he had already written it himself. That may well have been an example of his wry sense of humour, but if ever such a draft does come to light one can be sure it will be more insightful than the present writer’s effort.

Many of us remember Arthur as a quiet, unassuming, even shy man. For those who were fortunate enough to have been taught by him, he was also a gifted teacher whose knowledge, expertise and, it must be said, patience were highly regarded by all his students and colleagues alike. Though he must at times have been tried, he was never known to raise his voice or openly lose his calm. Throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s much of his teaching focused on Ethiopian languages, and I recall Amharic classes with him, conducted in his smoke-filled office at the time on the top floor of the Percival David Foundation, bringing to mind his own description of supervision sessions with A. F. L. Beeston some twelve or so years earlier. Like Beeston, he was something of a chain smoker in those days. He managed seemingly effortlessly to coax in us an understanding of the most abstruse Amharic and Ge’ez texts without a

word of exasperation. As the 1980s advanced he moved more to teaching Classical Arabic texts, when the responsibility for Amharic passed increasingly to the present writer. Though he officially retired in 1992, he returned to teach Classical Arabic for the Near and Middle East Department on a part-time basis across the next six years. He also acted as Chief Examiner for GCE O-level Classical Arabic for many years, a job that brought him a great deal of work and to which he unfailingly brought his sense of rigour and fairness.

His commitment to his chosen fields was tireless, though he may at times have half jokingly complained of the more humdrum sides of an academic's job and, I recall, often found "business" meetings in particular tedious. In addition to having a close involvement with the *Bulletin* over many years, for much longer than the six years he served on the Editorial Board from 1981 to 1986, Arthur was also a fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society from 1966, serving on Council from 1969 to around 1976, for the last three years of which he was editor of the Society's journal, continuing to serve on the Publications Committee until 1999. At the event to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Society in 1973, he was presented to Her Majesty the Queen and Prince Philip. He cherished the photograph of the event perhaps as much because the angle of the picture gives the impression he is attempting to pinch Her Majesty, appealing to his sense of humour.

Arthur's academic achievements were not inconsiderable, but the modest and very private man that he was, he never advertised or spoke much of them. Though I knew him for over forty years, first as his student and then as colleague and friend, in preparing this obituary I have discovered a not inconsiderable number of unlooked-for facts, and have doubtless overlooked many others. In his life outside the university, there are some unexpected accomplishments, too. Most people who knew Arthur are aware that amongst his interests numismatics took first place and he was immensely proud of his extensive coin collection. To call this a "hobby" seems inadequate. He was on one occasion, at least, able to bring his numismatic expertise into his academic writing in his 1964 article "Some notes on Old South Arabian monetary terminology". Many colleagues knew he had a great love of music and was very knowledgeable on classical music. He once admitted to me that he preferred German opera, especially Wagner, to Italian, especially baroque opera. He had a particular penchant for modern classical composers, though there were limits even here, as he confided in one colleague that he could not, for instance, assess the genius of John Cage since he could not hear a note of the score when it was played. His musical expertise also extended to playing several instruments, notably the piano and the bagpipes, an accomplishment which he claimed owed much to his father's insistence. I wonder, too, if he might not also have counted gardening among his accomplishments, as I recall him once coming to SOAS with badly scratched hands which, he said, were not due to an argumentative cat but to tussling with unruly brambles in his garden.

He lived in Loughton, on the edge of Epping Forest, with his wife, Verity, whom he had met whilst she was a research student at SOAS and whom he married in 1970, and he continued to live in the area after their marriage came to an end. The later years of his life were dogged by ill-health, and he died in London at the age of 76, after a long and debilitating illness, on 31 August 2011. He is survived by his ex-wife, Verity, and their two sons, William and Hugh.