

**IN MEMORY OF
PROFESSOR ALAN JONES**

(Manchester, 16 August 1933 – Oxford, 25 September 2021)

قفا نبك من ذكرى حبيب



Professor Alan Jones, of Oxford University, died on the 25th of September 2021. He was a great scholar, a man of infinite erudition and a true friend throughout the thirty-three years of our acquaintance.

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He was born on the 16th of August 1933 in Manchester, where he spent the first 18 years of his life. He entered the Manchester Grammar School in 1944 and after finishing his studies there in 1951 he won a scholarship to St John's College Cambridge to study Classics. Part way through his time at Cambridge he shifted his focus on Arabic which became his main field of interest throughout his life. His teacher in Arabic was A. J. Arberry. On completing his degree at Cambridge in 1955, Alan Jones moved to Balliol College, Oxford to study Turkish history and to undertake a D. Phil. in Ottoman Turkish history between 1955 and 1957, where he was mentored by Professor Geoffrey Lewis. However, he set aside this intention in 1957 when he was appointed lecturer in Turkish and Islamic Studies, eventually focusing most of his time on Arabic, at the Oriental Institute of Oxford.

In 1963, he took a sabbatical and spent time with his family in Lebanon as a tutor at MECAS, the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies, which was an Arabic language college between 1947 and 1978 just outside Beirut, where many diplomats were taught. Whilst there, he enjoyed his love of travel and visited sites in Jordan and Syria. He particularly loved Petra and the Kingdom of Jordan and was very honoured to teach several royal students from the country.

Back in Oxford, he was involved with the establishment of both Wolfson and St Cross Colleges, becoming a Fellow of the latter, as well as Vice-Master and Senior Tutor between 1965 and 1980. Alan Jones played a significant part in St Cross College's early days as he developed the College's links with the University and with other colleges and was part of the committee tasked with negotiating the College's move from its original St Cross site to its current home in St Giles. He was invited to join several intercollegiate committees and was later elected to the post of University Assessor.

Alan Jones joined Pembroke in 1980 as the first Tutorial Fellow in Arabic and remained there until his retirement in 2000. In 1996 he was promoted to a readership in Classical Arabic, while remained a lecturer in Islamic Studies. In 1997 he became professor of Arabic at the Oriental Institute. Alongside his teaching, he served the University on the General Board, was Chairman of the Oriental Faculty Board and of the Committee of the University's Computing Services and was Vice-Chairman of the governing body of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. Besides, he was immensely proud to serve as a governor at his beloved Manchester Grammar School. He was also a proud trustee of the Altajir Trust, a UK based charitable organisation promoting Islamic studies.

His main fields of scholarly interest were Qur'ānic studies, Spanish Arabic *muwašṣah* poetry and early Arabic poetry. All his writings, both books and articles, are characterised by his concise style in which he treated essential themes of research in these fields, laying the foundations of further studies or giving important tools for those who are doing research on the given subject area.

His very first article, which dealt with the mystical independent letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqattaʿa*) at the beginning of 29 *sūras* of the Qurʾān, has been considered ever since its publication as a fundamental study based primarily on the opinions of the most important mediaeval Arab scholars. He had been teaching the Qurʾān and reading it with his students through half a century. The fruits of this continuous activity were two books: the translation of the Qurʾān and a highly popular textbook for the teaching of the Classical Arabic language, “Arabic through the Qurʾān”.

His translation of the Qurʾān is unique. In addition to incorporating the result of decades of study of the text, of the traditional Muslim authorities and of the works of other scholars, special thought has been given to what the text would have meant to its original hearers. He sought to follow the structure of the original Arabic text as precisely as possible, at the same time aiming at a readable translation. The traditional verse structure has been maintained, and where necessary, the verses were further divided into sections to indicate where there are natural points for pause, and to emphasise the original oral nature of the text. This is the first translation of the Qurʾān to adopt such an approach. The oral nature of the text presents problems for the translator because the recitation frequently gives the text a dimension that does not come across in silent reading. In addition, he provided background information not only for the entire Qurʾān, but also at the beginning of each *sūra*.

Alan Jones has also authored a series of studies dealing with the language and narrative technique of the Qurʾān and the committing of the Qurʾān to writing. In this connection it is especially noteworthy how he made correlation between the register of the pre-Islamic prose texts and that of the Qurʾān. He also called attention to some specially interesting themes in the Qurʾān: the paradise and hell, and the original place of the so-called Satanic verses. His last paper on this topic presented a new and a very much acceptable interpretation of one of the most frequent conjunctive particles in the Qurʾān, *laʿalla*, saying that it many times expresses God’s reminder, and is not meant only as a mere possibility.

His second field of study was the Arabic poetry in Spain, especially the *muwašṣaḥ* poems. He began to collect data of this poetry in the seventies, for which purpose he was one of the firsts to use in this field a computer data base. He even participated as research associate in a project headed by Susan M. Hockey entitled “Output of non-standard characters using an SD4020” at the Oxford University Computer Centre in the mid-seventies and using his knowledge of non-Latin scripts – Greek, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, and even Cyrillic – assisted in creating the Oxford Concordance Programme (OCP) which made it possible to turn texts analysed in transliteration back to the original script. In connection with this activity, mention must be made of a project of which he was the principal investigator and the aim of

which was to establish a full concordance of the poems of Ḥāfīz. In the concordance, a complete line of text was printed for each reference in Persian characters.¹

After a long article on the *muwaššahāt* in the *Journal of Arabic Literature*, he prepared his first book on the Romance *ḥarġas*. Alan Jones made his objective clear at the outset, he wanted to put the academic record straight by making available to non-Arabists accurate information on the text of Romance *ḥarġas*. He worked for this aim by examining in detail each of the 42 *ḥarġas* which occur at the end of certain Arabic *muwaššahs* (some of them at the end of more than one poem) in a painstaking letter-by-letter review of the textual problem. In this book he applied a totally new approach to the readings of these difficult, sometimes hardly legible final lines of the *muwaššah* stanzas: he did not want to decide between the concurring views but only wanted to give an aid for further research presenting and explaining the different variant readings, by giving facsimiles and investigating the *ḥarġas* letter by letter. This book had started new directions of the research in England and Spain which led to a new theoretical approach concerning the Romance influence on the Arabic poetry in Spain. This milestone was followed in the next decade by the edition of two anthologies of the Andalusian *muwaššah* poetry: the *‘Uddat al-ġalīs* of ‘Alī ibn Bišrī from a unique manuscript and the *Ġayš al-tawšīḥ* of Lisān al-Dīn Ibn al-Ḥaṭīb, both being of outstanding literary interest. He had already with great generosity made these texts widely available on computer tape before the printed editions had been published.

The third field in which Alan Jones did research was pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. He presented the results of his work in two magnificent volumes, which can be used by students learning Classical Arabic poetry on a higher level and scholars interested in this field. In these volumes he not only gave the edition and translation of the chosen poems but also detailed commentaries of the expressions and the grammar of the lines as well as the interpretation of the different situations described by the poets. His aim was not to decide by any means the right interpretation of a word or line but instead he listed many occasional variants giving support to each of them. This method is better suited to the difficult Arabic poems than the effort to prefer one or another translation. Besides, he provided the two volumes with valuable introductory chapters on the different issues concerning pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, like origins and form, the language of early poetry, metre, authenticity, transmission, and the presentation of the different poetic genres. As is often the case with oral literature, we know next to nothing of the origins of Arabic poetry. The first surviving pieces, from the beginning of the sixth century, are fully developed, and the period from

¹ See *Computer-assisted research in the humanities: A directory of scholars active*. Edited by Joseph Raben, 15, 99. New York: Pergamon, 1977. See also, Susan M. Hockey, "A concordance to the Poems of Hafiz with output in Persian characters". In: *The computer and literary studies*. Edited by A.J. Aitken, R.W. Bailey, and N. Hamilton-Smith, 291–306. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973.

then till the second quarter of the seventh century was remarkable for the amount and quality of the poetry that was composed. In later times it was acknowledged as the zenith of Arabic poetic composition, notable for its many masterpieces. Learning to appreciate this early poetry is difficult, for a range of reasons: it is the work of people of a very alien milieu – the great composers were camel-dependant nomads; it has an extraordinarily rich vocabulary; its grammar has many complications that do not survive in the later language; its texts were transmitted orally for up to two-and-a-half centuries; and there are serious problems about authenticity. Yet all later Arabic poetry stems from it, and it is important for our understanding of the language and ideas current in Arabia at the rise of Islam. Its study is therefore a necessity for all serious students of Arabic. The poems are analysed in minute detail, providing the student with all the information needed to understand the texts and the accompanying translations, and then to consider each poem's overall purpose. Alan Jones opened a new way of discussing Arabic poetry when he gave a comprehensive handbook for the students instead of the previous Western method of 'text and vocabulary', similarly to the traditional way of teaching this kind of poetry in the Arab world where students have always been provided with detailed commentaries if they wanted to read the poems, in mediaeval and modern times as well.

The first volume of his *Early Arabic poetry* contains a study of fifteen poems from two of the more vivid genres: laments and poems by the outlaws, including the magnificent, brooding *Lāmiyyat al-'arab* of aš-Šanfarā, whilst the second focuses on famous odes (*qaṣīdas*), such as the *Mu'allaqāt* of Imru' ul-Qays, Labīd and 'Abīd, the *Kāfiyya* of Zuhayr and the *Mariyya* of Abū Du'ayb. The new, 2011 edition of *Early Arabic Poetry* combines the two volumes first published in 1992 and 1996, bringing them together with a new foreword and introduction covering the major background problems faced by students of early Arabic poetry.

Professor Alan Jones continued his scholarly activities till the end of his life and had several major projects which remained unfinished. In his last lecture entitled "The linguistic background to the Qur'ān", held in October 2019 at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, he critically examined the approaches of early Arabic grammarians to the Qur'ān in relation to the language of pre-Islamic poetry and the dialect of the Qurayš. Thence the presentation moved on to a discussion of a range of topics including linguistic registers, pausal forms, and patterns of assonance to shed new light on the language of the Qur'ān. On this occasion he also informed his audience that he was writing a book on the pre-Islamic background of the Qur'ān. Another last ambitious program of his was to compile a handbook on the *muwašṣah* poetry. It is a tremendous source of sadness that he has not lived to bring these two books to fruition.

His memory will be kept in the heart of his family, friends, colleagues and students and the products of his scholarship will serve generations to come.

The Publications of Professor Alan Jones

Books

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