

Johnstone T.M

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OBITUARY

Professor Thomas Muir Johnstone (1924-1983)

Tom Johnstone died on 11 January 1983, only a few days after his fifty-ninth birthday.

Tom was born and reared in Broughty Ferry near Dundee and educated at the Grove Academy there. He was awarded a London external BCom degree through the School of Economics, Dundee in 1944. He then entered the employ of ICI and spent the period 1944-57 with that company in Manchester. Throughout this time his profound interest in languages -- all languages -- remained with him and in 1954 he took a BA external London degree in Arabic. In 1957 an opportunity arose for Tom Johnstone to abandon industry and enter the infinitely more satisfying academic world. He was appointed Lecturer in Arabic in the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London. His progress from then on was indeed remarkable. He successfully completed a PhD dissertation in 1962, a study of great depth of the Eastern Arabian dialects, which involved many long months of fieldwork. Three years later, in 1965, he was appointed Reader and in 1970, only thirteen years after his entry into the academic world, he was appointed to the chair of Arabic at SOAS. He took early retirement in September 1982 and moved to Whickham, near Newcastle-on-Tyne. In the Michaelmas term of 1982 he was appointed Honorary Fellow of the School of Oriental Studies in the University of Durham.

During the years 1957-82 he travelled widely in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in the Gulf and Oman. His research was concentrated mainly on Arabic dialectology, folklore and the modern South Arabian (MSA) languages, Mehri, Jibbāli, Soqōtri, Harsūsi etc. He published numerous articles: on dialects, etc. mainly in the *BSOAS* and in the *Journal of Arabic Linguistics*, of which he was a member of the editorial board; on folklore, particularly in *Arabian Studies*.

In 1967 his revised thesis was published by Oxford University Press: *Eastern Arabian Dialect Studies*. Then began the mammoth task of compiling lexica for the various MSA languages, a task of immense importance to the Semitist and Arabist. His *Ḥarsūsi lexicon and English-Ḥarsūsi word-list* was published, again by OUP, in 1977. Next came the *Jibbāli lexicon* (OUP, 1981). His *magnum opus*, a Mehri lexicon, remains in typescript, but it is clearly in a publishable state. It is to be hoped that it will take its place alongside his other published books as expeditiously as can be arranged.

Tom Johnstone was not only a dedicated scholar of international repute; he also cared greatly for the well-being, both academic and personal, of his students, both undergraduate and graduate. He was a painstaking and popular teacher of undergraduates and a conscientious research supervisor.



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OBITUARY

THOMAS MUIR JOHNSTONE

Professor T. M. Johnstone died on 11 January 1983 in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Gateshead, after a brief illness. He would have been 59 on 18 January.

Johnstone was born in 1924 in Broughty Ferry near Dundee, Scotland, where he attended the local Grove Academy. He showed early linguistic promise and was quickly taking French, German, Latin and Greek in his stride. After the outbreak of war in 1939 the Dundee area saw an influx of Polish servicemen and the young schoolboy was drawn closely into the Polish service community. With his gift for languages and his quick ear, he soon picked up their language. This experience was to have a profound effect on him throughout his life. Despite other numerous linguistic distractions, he always retained a special place in his heart for Polish. He spoke it at every available opportunity and always regarded it as one of the languages with which he coped best.

Johnstone's meeting in Dundee with David Cowan while still a schoolboy was to have an even more profound effect on his life, however. The connexion with Arabic was established. One wonders what better ambassador of the language could have been found for this enthusiastic young man. Of all the languages which Johnstone might have selected and pursued to the highest possible level of attainment, it was Arabic that he was eventually to choose.

Despite his outstanding linguistic achievements at school, the harsh economic realities of war led Johnstone along a totally different path. His father, the owner of a small business, had been called up into the RAF and the luxury of a university education in languages was not at that time to be contemplated. He settled for the study of economics and enrolled at the School of Economics in Dundee for a London external B.Com. degree. He graduated in 1944, and, armed with a degree in economics, entered the employ of ICI in Manchester, a company for which he was to work until 1957. He was always reticent regarding this period of his life and I was never able to discover whether he really enjoyed his work in industry. He nevertheless appears to have been a competent servant of the company and certainly showed great skill at reading the vicissitudes of the stock market and of financial investment in general.

Manchester had its compensations. He met there and married in 1949 a young nurse named Bernice Jobling. He found too that the city provided fulfilment for many of his intellectual cravings. Because of his wife's occupation, many of his leisure hours outside work had to be spent alone and he needed little prompting to enrol for educational classes. Of those available he chose Hebrew and began to learn both the classical and modern language under Arie Rubinstein, who had the reputation of charging for his services according to the means of his pupil. Johnstone soon proved to be such a promising find that his fees were waived altogether. Much stimulated by this Semitic language, he began to pick up his Arabic again. With his wife still working long and unsocial hours, he decided to register for an external London degree in Arabic and Hebrew. ICI were sympathetic and helpful and he was allowed time off work for study. His presence in Manchester also brought him into contact with a number of scholars who all had an influence on his life. The late Professor James Robson he found extremely kind, interested in him as a person as well as in his work. For Professor Charles Beckingham too, whom he met at this time, he felt the same depth of gratitude. He not only assisted Johnstone all he could with the



THOMAS MUIR JOHNSTONE