



NEIL MACKENZIE

Inh. G. Schmuck

David Neil MacKenzie 1926–2001

DAVID NEIL MACKENZIE passed away in Bangor on 13 October 2001, following multiple complications that resulted from a deteriorating heart disease from which he had suffered for some years. With him, Iranian Studies lost an outstanding representative, whose scholarly competence and interests spanned a broad range of ancient and modern Iranian languages: such comprehensiveness is becoming increasingly unusual in modern times. Several of MacKenzie's philological publications, especially those concerning (New Iranian) Kurdish and the two Middle Iranian languages, Middle Persian and Khwarezmian, are by now well established as standard works of reference and will surely remain so for a long time.

Neil (as he was known to his family and friends) was born in London on 8 April 1926, the first of the two children of the British colonial officer David MacKenzie (of Scottish extraction) and his wife Ada (known as Jerry), née Hopkins. His father served at various places in West Africa, but had to return to England in the early 1930s for health reasons. In the following years he worked as a civil servant, and the family changed their place of residence several times. His son Neil thus attended schools in Slough, Windsor and Cambridge. Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War, Neil's mother left England for Canada, together with his younger sister. Neil chose not to go, but stayed in England with his father.

In 1943, after completing his secondary education in Cambridge, MacKenzie volunteered to join the British armed forces, to avoid being

drafted as a regular soldier. To what he would later consider his greatest luck, he was not sent to the European battlefields, but to India, where he gained a temporary commission at the Indian Military Academy at Dehra Dun (Uttar Pradesh). On board the ship that brought him to India, he stayed with a group of young Welshmen who often sang Welsh folk songs. MacKenzie could still remember some of them word by word fifty years later, after his retirement, when he moved to Llanfairpwll in Wales. After two years of service in Burma, MacKenzie was posted to the North West Frontier Province of India (now Pakistan), where he learned his first Iranian language, Pashto. His exceptional gift for picking up languages became clear at that time.

When the war was over, and following Partition in 1947, MacKenzie returned to England as a civilian, and enrolled at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London to study Persian. After passing his BA exams in Persian (1951, with Ann K. S. Lambton) he found his calling, and teacher, in Walter Bruno Henning, an emigré from Nazi Germany, under whom he obtained an MA in Old and Middle Iranian languages in 1953.

After graduation, MacKenzie married his first wife Gina (née Schaefer, together they had four children, born between 1952 and 1968), and started acquainting himself with Kurdish, which he chose (following Henning's suggestion) as the subject of his doctoral thesis. In autumn 1954, he left London with his family for a year, to do fieldwork on Kurdish in Iraqi Kurdistan. Since the Turkish authorities did not allow him to continue his work in Turkey, the survey of Kurdish dialects that resulted from his fieldwork had to remain partly incomplete. The description of Kurdish dialects that he submitted in December 1957 as a doctoral thesis, however, was impressive enough, and the published version (*Kurdish dialect studies*, I, II (London, 1961, 1962)) established his fame as the world's leading expert in Kurdish linguistics.

The refusal of a permit to carry out research in Turkey did not help to make MacKenzie a close friend of that country. Neil once told me how in the train from Istanbul to Iraq, probably shortly before the Iraqi border, a Turkish policeman entered his compartment, asking for some documents that MacKenzie could not readily provide. The policeman pulled his hand-gun and shouted: 'Vous êtes dans la Turquie!'—a sentence that would remain a deterrent for MacKenzie for the rest of his life.

MacKenzie had already been appointed 'Lecturer in Kurdish' at SOAS in 1955. During the late 1950s and the 1960s he gradually extended the range of Iranian languages on which he worked and which he could

teach, adding Middle Iranian languages such as Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian and Khwarezmian to the modern Iranian languages, Pashto and Kurdish, which he had already made his own. The title of his position at SOAS was accordingly changed to ‘Lecturer in Iranian languages’ in 1961, and he was promoted to a University Readership in 1965. In 1967 and 1971, MacKenzie published two of his most important and influential works on Middle Persian, his article ‘Notes on the Transcription of Pahlavi’ and his *Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (on both of which see below).

In 1975, when MacKenzie was acknowledged as one of the leading scholars in Middle and Modern Iranian languages world-wide, he was appointed Professor of Iranian Studies at the University of Göttingen, at the institute where his teacher Henning had studied under Carl Friedrich Andreas from 1926 to 1930. After some years in Göttingen, he got divorced from his first wife and married his second wife Gabi, but the marriage would last for only about three years.

In Göttingen, MacKenzie continued to work on a broad range of Iranian languages, but concentrated more and more on Middle Persian and Khwarezmian. After his retirement in 1994, he resolved to return not exactly to his home country, but to neighbouring Wales. In 1995, after a serious heart bypass operation, he moved to a small house in Llanfairpwll on the Isle of Anglesey, where he wanted to complete his major project, the Khwarezmian–English dictionary on which he had been working since the 1970s.

He never really felt at home in his new residence, often complaining (on frequent visits to Göttingen) that ‘this is no longer the Britain that I knew’. He also increasingly felt isolated in Llanfairpwll, and cut off from scholarly libraries and other opportunities, and began to repent his move from Göttingen. In 2001, he resolved to move back to Göttingen, astounding everyone around him by the vitality and energy which he devoted to achieving this aim at the age of 75. Shortly before he could put this plan into practice, however, he was prevented from doing so by his deteriorating health, and the ensuing complications that took him from our midst.

From 1970 to 1996, he served as a treasurer of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*. He was a member of the Turfan Commission of the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften from 1994 to his death. In 1996 he was elected a Senior Fellow of the British Academy. In 1991 MacKenzie was honoured with a *Festschrift* (*Corolla Iranica. Papers in Honour of Prof. Dr. David Neil MacKenzie on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday on April 8th, 1991*, eds. R. E. Emmerick and D. Weber, Frankfurt

a. M. (u.a.), 1991), and in 1999 there appeared a collection of his major smaller works, containing also important corrigenda and addenda (*Iranica Diversa*. Vols. I, II, eds. C. G. Cereti and L. Paul, Rome, 1999). A memorial volume for him (edited by D. Weber) is under preparation, which will contain a full bibliography of his works.

The basis of MacKenzie's scholarly career was his amazing talent for learning languages and understanding their subtleties and grammatical structure(s). He did not, however, work on various languages, so to say, indiscriminately, but rather concentrated on a small set of New and Middle Iranian languages and their literatures. On the two modern Iranian languages 'of his youth', Pashto and Kurdish (in both of which he became a world authority) he would publish only occasionally after the mid-1960s. From then onwards, the three Middle Iranian languages Middle Persian, Sogdian and Khwarezmian absorbed most of his scholarly energy for the rest of his lifetime.

MacKenzie's command of the Middle Persian language and literature was proverbial. He was 'at home' in this dead language whose writing conventions and grammar abound in problems, and whose Zoroastrian and Manichaean texts are so important for the study of the history of religions. He could practically 'feel' if a Middle Persian construction was right or wrong, what a Middle Persian author wanted to say, or how a Middle Persian translator misunderstood his Avestan 'Vorlage'.

With his twenty-page article 'Notes on the Transcription of Pahlavi' (*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 30 (1967), 17–29), MacKenzie laid the very foundation for a much improved understanding of the phonology and writing system of the language of the Middle Persian Zoroastrian books. Four years later, he supplemented this article with his *Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (London, 1971), which soon became a standard work of reference for Iranologists. MacKenzie had prepared this dictionary on the basis of his intensive philological work on some of the most important Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts such as the *Bundahishn* and the *Wizidagiha-yi Zadspram*.

The editions of Manichaean and Inscriptional Middle Persian texts (*Shabuhrgan*, inscriptions of Kartir) that MacKenzie prepared during his time in Göttingen are proofs of his philological mastery of Middle Persian. It is therefore regrettable that he never published a critical edition of any of the major Zoroastrian books that he had worked upon so intensively during the preparation of his *Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*. His reluctance to publish Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts was partly due to his perfectionism and scrupulousness. These texts had been so severely

‘corrupted’ by a long line of copyists that it seemed impossible to reconstruct a fully satisfying and reliable edition of any of them.

One of the most important of these texts, the *Bundahishn*, is particularly difficult to understand in its last sections. MacKenzie had already published the translation of its astrological chapter in 1964, and apparently had prepared for himself an edition of the greater part of the whole work by the end of the 1960s. In addition to the insoluble philological problems of the last chapters, there was a psychological factor that prevented him from publishing this text. The famous Iranologist Sir Harold Walter Bailey (1899–1996) had prepared (but not published) an edition of the *Bundahishn* already in the 1930s, which he allowed MacKenzie to use. MacKenzie feared that if he published the text, its good sides would be credited to Bailey, but its bad ones to himself. Later on, MacKenzie refrained from publishing the text, because in the meantime he had found so many errors in Bailey’s edition that his own edition, with full references to Bailey’s work, would necessarily compromise the latter (which MacKenzie wanted to avoid).

Sogdian, an East Middle Iranian language that was spoken in Central Asia approximately during the third to tenth centuries AD, was less important than Middle Persian for MacKenzie’s scholarly work as a whole. Nevertheless, MacKenzie had a good knowledge and intuitive understanding of Sogdian, and published excellent editions of the Sogdian versions of several Chinese Buddhist texts (*The ‘Sūtra of the Causes of Effects and Actions’ in Sogdian*, London, 1970, and *The Buddhist Sogdian Texts of the British Library*, Leiden, 1976). These works showed that he had also familiarised himself with the Buddhist Chinese terminology whose understanding is a necessary prerequisite for a proper understanding of the Sogdian texts.

Khwarezmian, another East Middle Iranian language that continued to be used and written well into Islamic times (at least the thirteenth century AD), is known mainly from scattered sentences in Arabic law-books and glosses to Arabic dictionaries rather than continuous texts. Shortly after his teacher Henning’s untimely death in 1967 at the age of 59, MacKenzie prepared the edition of a small part of the Khwarezmian–English dictionary that Henning had been working upon (W. B. Henning, *A Fragment of a Khwarezmian Dictionary*, ed. D. N. MacKenzie (London, 1971)). At the same time, he also wrote a series of comprehensive articles on Khwarezmian lexicology. He then left Khwarezmian for a while, but returned to it during the 1980s with the edition of an important part of the Khwarezmian glosses (*The Khwarezmian Element in the Qunyat al-Munya* (London, 1990)).

MacKenzie's long-awaited Khwarezmian magnum opus, a comprehensive Khwarezmian–English dictionary with full text references, was left unfinished. Shortly before his death, he completed the first third of it, covering the Khwarezmian entries up to the end of the letter beta. I met Neil in summer 2000, when he was working intensively on Khwarezmian; he was freshening up his Arabic, to better understand the Arabic originals to the Khwarezmian glosses, and proudly said something like, 'my Arabic isn't that bad after all, is it?'

Altogether, MacKenzie's scholarly achievements and merits include an impressive range of New and Middle Iranian languages (Kurdish, Pashto; Middle Persian, Sogdian, Khwarezmian), in all of which—especially in Kurdish and Middle Persian—he produced philological standard works of reference that are unlikely to be replaced for a long time. In addition he occasionally published valuable works on other Iranian languages such as the Hawrami dialect of Gurani, a modern West Iranian language closely related to Kurdish (of which he wrote a short grammar, 1966), Early New Persian (especially Judaeo-Persian, see his important edition of a 'Judaeo-Persian Argument' of 1968), or Parthian (acting as editor of Diakonoff and Livshits' edition of the Nisa documents). MacKenzie did not publish on Old Iranian, but he knew both Avestan and Old Persian well. He also knew a number of non-Iranian languages like Arabic, Sanskrit or Armenian, whose knowledge is necessary for a proper understanding of various aspects and stages of Iranian linguistic history.

MacKenzie was—as he would jokingly say in his last years—one of the 'last dinosaurs' of 'traditional' Iranian philology. He was an excellent empirical linguist in the sense that he could grasp and explain the subtleties, and difficulties, of various Iranian languages, be it from listening to them (he had an excellent ear and pronunciation), or from written texts. He was not interested in linguistic theories; his approach to the description of languages was a mixture of traditional grammar and the Prague school of structuralism. In conversation, he sometimes made fun of 'modern' linguistic theories like the 'Chomsky-Momskian' one and their various ramifications. Without disparaging the sharpness of MacKenzie's linguistic insights, one might observe that he tended to analyse Iranological linguistic problems as phenomena *sui generis* (e.g., the 'indirect affectee' in Middle Persian, or the 'open compound construction' or the various forms of 'agential constructions' in Kurdish); one may sometimes miss at these instances a reference to non-Iranological, general linguistic (e.g., typological) terms or explanations. For example, he generally avoided the

term 'ergative' in his description of Kurdish transitive past constructions, using 'agential' instead.

MacKenzie was interested in the Iranian languages as such, but he also regarded them as a means to an end. One of his major aims in studying the Zoroastrian and Manichaean texts of Iranian antiquity was to restore those which were fragmentary and to emend those which appeared to be corrupt, thus establishing their 'original' form as far as possible and laying the grounds for a proper understanding of their contents. He was a 'pure' philologist in the sense that his scholarly interest in Iranian history and religions was largely confined to the interpretation of the extant texts. I remember Neil saying once that everything that can be said about the early history of Zoroastrianism had already been said by Mary Boyce and that there was no point in writing any more books, or speculating about theories that cannot be proven or disproved, until new *texts* were found.

In more than one way, MacKenzie's scholarly work and approach can be seen as a continuation of those of his teacher Henning, whose philological genius and achievements he admired. While MacKenzie was at the beginning of his career, he followed Henning's advice to study modern Iranian languages (something which Henning himself seldom did), but during the 1960s, and especially after Henning had left London for Berkeley in 1961, he more and more followed in Henning's footsteps in focusing on Middle Persian (including Manichaean Middle Persian), Sogdian and Khwarezmian.

MacKenzie admired Henning's scholarly prose, by which his own style of writing certainly did not remain unaffected. Both Henning and MacKenzie were uncompromising in their publications: every letter and stroke had to be correct and verifiable (hence one of MacKenzie's favourite mottoes: 'always check your sources!'), there was no room left for 'prating', theorising, doubtful readings or dubious interpretations. Like Henning's, most of MacKenzie's articles are exemplary in their learning and philological scholarship. Both scholars' styles of writing are very precise, compact, 'dense' and artistic, using literary allusions or quotations, or word games, especially in the introductory parts or titles of their articles. For undergraduate students and those who are not native speakers of English, however, Henning's and MacKenzie's works are sometimes difficult to grasp and do not always provide easy access to the complicated subjects with which they are concerned.

MacKenzie was likewise uncompromising with respect to the works of others. He was a witty, keen and sharp reviewer who 'did not know friend

or foe' if he found philological errors in an Iranological publication, or if the method by which a scholar approached a certain subject did not correspond to what he judged the 'right way'. Although his specific criticisms were often right, he was perhaps overcritical in some cases, where his irritation concerning errors of detail made him unduly overlook the real efforts or achievements of the author.

As a teacher, MacKenzie was at the same time demanding and unconventional. In his classes, he would not lose much time with preliminaries, but from the very beginning went straightway into the texts, and discussed, together with the students, their various philological and etymological aspects on a high scholarly level. He expected his students to acquire on their own the background knowledge in history, religions and so on which was necessary in order to be able to understand the texts fully.

He called his students by their first names and addressed each of them as 'Du', ignoring the normal usage in Germany. While attending one of his lessons, one could always expect, interspersed between two Middle Persian sentences, a joke or funny story about his military service in India, about one of his colleagues, or about a 'Knöllchen' (i.e. parking ticket; he loved the German word, which literally means 'small tuber') that he had just found on his car.

The number of students who took a degree under MacKenzie during his time in Göttingen was unfortunately lower than it should have been in view of his great scholarly expertise. On the other hand, MacKenzie's world-wide fame, especially in Kurdish and Middle Persian, often attracted advanced students from all over Germany and Europe, who came to Göttingen for a limited period to study a certain language with him, and then went on to other universities to obtain further degrees or a professorship there.

For those who were accepted by MacKenzie as serious students or scholars, his readiness to help and cooperate went far beyond what would be expected from a professor at a German university. For my doctorate, for instance, Neil not only familiarised himself with a modern Iranian language that he had not known before (Zazaki, which is closely related to Kurdish and Gurani), he also provided all the technical and computer assistance (i.e. software, fonts, concordances) that were necessary for work on a previously undescribed language, devoting an immense amount of time to all these tasks. Very ungrudgingly, he was also ready to share all his unpublished work, e.g. his preliminary edition of parts of the Middle Persian text *Bundahishn*, with any young scholar who he thought might be able to prepare an edition of it.

For MacKenzie, Iranology, like Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism, could be seen as a contest between competing personalities, usually ‘the good’ against ‘the bad’. The ‘good’, represented by himself, his teacher Henning and a select list of other scholars, were almost always in the right but not always victorious; typically enough, he sometimes called this inner circle of Iranologists ‘the family’. From the very beginning his students learned about, for instance, the conflict between Henning and the Swedish orientalist Henrik Samuel Nyberg, concerning the transcription of Middle Persian and various other matters. MacKenzie, who experienced the academic competition with Nyberg also as a personal rivalry, would later settle the whole matter with his famous ‘Notes on the Transcription of Pahlavi’ (1967) and his *Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (1971). Right up to his last years, he would grow indignant when he remembered, for instance, how Nyberg, whom he met as a student, once disparaged his Swedish as a ‘little tourist Swedish’, though MacKenzie actually knew Swedish quite well.

To complete the picture of his personality, MacKenzie loved Franz Schubert and Isabelle Huppert, and was not a very good driver. Nevertheless, he liked to drive others and show them around in his BMW, which led to a number of fast prayers among his front-seat passengers.

In his last years, MacKenzie showed slightly increasing signs of bitterness, complaining that what he had done for Iranian studies would not last. He was certainly too pessimistic in this, as is shown by the continuing importance of his works, some of which have set a new scholarly standard in their area. But he must sometimes have felt like Don Quixote, tilting at the windmills of an enemy—human ignorance—that is impossible to overcome.

MacKenzie also had something in common with another hero of the Spanish chivalrous epic. MacKenzie loved and worshipped his mother tongue English, and its literature, and in his lessons (as in his writings) he loved to quote certain works, and speak ‘in proverbs’ and sayings drawn from them, as did Sancho Panza, Don Quixote’s squire. To quote just two of his favourite sayings, MacKenzie used to characterise the philological incompetence of some of his adversaries with Humpty-Dumpty’s words (from *Alice in Wonderland*): ‘When I use a word, it means just what I want it to mean.’ Whenever one of his adversaries, although MacKenzie had proven him to be wrong, remained obstinate, he would say: ‘A man convinced against his will, is of the same opinion still.’

In his last years after his retirement, one of MacKenzie’s favourite sayings was, sadly, ‘Stop the world, I wanna get off!’ Saying this, he also

wanted to express his concern about the political situation especially in the Near and Middle East, which seemed to him to have deteriorated more and more during the last years. Indeed the world stopped on 11 September 2001, and shortly afterwards MacKenzie's body 'got off' and left the material world. Everyone who knew him and had seen him in summer 2001 would be convinced that this last saying was mere coquetry, and that MacKenzie's soul, spirit and wit did not at all want to 'get off'. Instead, he had many more things that he still wanted to write, to do, and to give to others.

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