

Charles James Frank Dowsett (1924-1998)

Charles Dowsett was born on 2nd January 1924 and died on (?)8th January 1998 of a heart-attack at the age of 74.

He was educated at Owen's School and spent the year 1942-43 at St. Catherine's Society (Oxford). He resumed his studies in 1947 at Peterhouse College (Cambridge), where his talent for languages earned him a 1st class in both Russian and German in Part I of the Modern and Mediæval Languages' Tripos, whilst in Part II he went one better, gaining a 1st class with distinction in Comparative Philology.

With this distinguished record it was hardly surprising that he was one of the talented young linguists approached to consider taking up one of the special Treasury Studenships then being offered. These had been instituted as a one-off in the late 1940s to fill the gap in the country's academic coverage of certain oriental languages that had been suddenly and uncomfortably revealed during World War II. The idea was that young graduates who had shone in the acquisition of their chosen, more conventional language(s) should be encouraged to take up a designated, more demanding language and then devote themselves to teaching it at university-level. The carrot was that not only would a university-post be assured at the end of the period of study but that during the 5-6 years needed to master the language (including, where possible, at least one year in the country where the relevant language was spoken) the student would receive a lecturer's salary. Armenian became Dowsett's speciality, and, since a sojourn in Soviet Armenia at that difficult time was out of the question, his years of study were spent in Paris, where he added diplomas in Modern Armenian and Old Georgian to his scholarly achievements.

Quite naturally, SOAS benefited from a number of the posts established under this Treasury scheme, and it was at SOAS in 1954 that Dowsett took up his post as lecturer in Armenian. Though he became Reader in 1965, this year saw the founding in Oxford of the Calouste Gulbenkian Chair in Armenian Studies, and it was no surprise that Dowsett became its first holder, moving to a fellowship at Pembroke College, where he remained a full fellow until 1991 (Emeritus thereafter). He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1977. Sadly, his departure left SOAS with no-one to offer tuition in Armenian, a situation that has continued to the present day.

In 1949 Friedel Lapuner of Kornberg (E. Prussia) became Mrs. Dowsett. They were to have no children, and her unexpected death in 1984 left the widower permanently afflicted with a mysterious immobility in one leg, which the medical examiners could only ascribe to a psychosomatic condition consequent upon his personal loss. Though he left home less often after this, his driving ability was not affected, and he continued to travel abroad, dividing his time in his last years between Germany and Oxford, accompanied by his final companion, Ani, an old family-friend from Germany, whose husband had died about the same time as Friedel.

I first met Charles in 1973 when I was about to embark on a doctorate which required my learning Classical Armenian in order to compare its subordinate clause syntax with that of Ancient Greek. I had made this choice after taking advice from Prof. Sir Harold Bailey (then Emeritus Professor of Sanskrit at Cambridge), who arranged for me to have lunch with his old friend at Queens' College, for I was in need of an unofficial supervisor for Armenian in case consultations over grammatical problems became necessary. Charles agreed to undertake this task, though in a memorable phrase later he wrote to me that, as he was no 'epistolary novelist', he preferred face-to-face meetings. And he loved to talk. I recall phoning him shortly after making his acquaintance. My stock of florins was being rapidly depleted when he suddenly asked what the strange intermittent noise might be, blissfully unaware that I was having to feed the machine to keep the line open!

As it happened, I did not need to trouble him much, for, though reading Armenian texts over two years, I was devoting ever more time to Georgian and other Caucasian languages, eventually writing my Ph.D. on a comparison of Abkhaz and Georgian subordinate syntax. Charles never evinced any dismay at losing me to Armenian's northern neighbours, and I am happy to report that he gave me unstinting support in my Caucasian studies, seeming almost personally pained to hear my account one afternoon in his home of the verbal assaults that had descended on my head after I had taken a public stand in the summer of 1989 against the nationalism that was exploding in Georgia at that time. It was under his chairmanship of the privately endowed Wardrop Fund that I was awarded (without an interview) the Marjory Wardrop Scholarship for Georgian in 1978, without which I would have been unable to conduct my doctoral research, and he was still the chairman when I myself joined the Board of Managers in 1983 -- Charles was a Board-member from 1966 to 1991.

Unlike some academics, who do not exactly encourage others to follow in their footsteps, Charles was only too keen to share his fascination with languages. In addition to any official students he might have for Armenian, for a number of years he ran an extraordinary class, usually on Thursday mornings, in his office at Oxford's Oriental Institute in Pusey Lane. He would corral anyone he could with an interest primarily in (Old) Armenian and (Old) Georgian and devote about 40 minutes to each language, pouring over the morpho-syntactic points in some passage from, say, the New Testament. Perhaps a couple of sentences at most would be completed during the sessions, with numerous reference-books consulted in a (not always successful) search for the solutions to the grammatical puzzles thrown up. If anyone was around Oxford with expertise in Amharic, Persian, Turkish (etc...), they might be pressed to attend and conduct an extra session in their own speciality. Liberal quantities of coffee would be provided for all attendees, amongst whom I found myself on a couple of occasions.

A natural denizen of the High Table, he enjoyed good food, fine wine, stimulating conversation (in a number of languages) and was himself an excellent raconteur. It was he who told me of the time Sir Harold Bailey had been invited to dine at some prestigious Oxford gathering. Seated next to him was a rather pompous individual who assumed that such a uniquely talented philologist as Sir Harold could only have been educated at one of England's finest public schools. When he asked where Sir Harold's linguistic talents had first been honed, he was visibly deflated with the reply: 'I had no formal secondary education but taught myself in the Western Australian outback'.

With few students, Charles was able to indulge his love of literature and art. In the latter he was by no means without talent himself. I was delighted one day in the 80s to receive from him a photograph of an original I later saw in his home. Entitled 'Cambridge Caucasologists on a Visit to Oxford', it shews against a background-print of Pembroke College his caricatures of myself, kitted out in Caucasian cherkesska with all accoutrements, and Sir Harold Bailey, wearing a green [sic] cherkesska and black woolly astrakhan hat (bashlyk); we are accompanied by the seated figure of the Turkish counterpart to Mr. Punch.

Apart from translations (some under the pseudonym of Charles Downing) of tales from Armenian, Russian and Flemish, Charles Dowsett will be fondly remembered for his 'History of the Caucasian Albanians by Movses Dasxuranci' (1961) and his expansive 'Sayat-Nova, an 18th century troubador' (1997), to whose verses in Armenian, Georgian and Azeri he devoted many years of careful study.

George Hewitt