



A. F. L. BEESTON

Remsey & Muspratt

Alfred Felix Landon Beeston 1911–1995

DURING THE LAST twenty-five years of Freddie Beeston's life he could, without hyperbole, be referred to as the most accomplished scholar of the Arabic language anywhere. He was also, by universal consent, the foremost student of South Arabian and the acknowledged Nestor of that discipline. Of general Semitics he was no mean practitioner, and his knowledge of Hebrew was good enough for him to quote (occasionally even to misquote) from memory passages of the Old Testament. When in charge of the Oriental Department of the Bodleian Library he felt obliged to familiarise himself with the rudiments of Chinese; and when asked, on departing for a conference in Hungary, in which language he would converse there, his reply was 'in Magyar, of course'. Yet he was the most modest, self-effacing, and un pompous of men; he preferred critical comment to encomia. While skilled in social intercourse as an inveterate college man, he liked above all else to talk shop on most aspects of language and linguistics.

Until his early fifties he wore his hair 'short back and sides'; thereafter he let it grow to shoulder-length, and his white straggly mane and partly unbuttoned shirts became a familiar sight all over Oxford. With his massive body and gargantuan appetite (he was both gourmet and gourmand—as he was a man of startling contrasts generally) he cut a Falstaffian figure. He had a penchant for formality and punctilious academic procedures which, at first sight, seemed to consort strangely with his fanfares of coughing and laughter (which would momentarily interrupt any academic discussion or conference) and with the chains of

cigarettes constantly drooping from his mouth. By his students and colleagues and the large number of his friends he was much loved and indeed revered as a deeply learned man of singular genuineness, honesty and truth, without any airs, affectation, vanity, or arrogance. He was one of the last true Oxford characters with his entire career and virtually his whole life profoundly tied to, and associated with, this ancient seat of learning of which he became such a remarkable ornament.

Freddie (as he was almost universally known—at times even by those who would not address him in that manner) was born in London on 23 February 1911.¹ He was the only son (there was an elder sister who predeceased him) of Herbert Arthur Beeston (1872–1941) and of Edith Mary Landon (1873–1965). His father was apprenticed as an engineer (a term by which he described himself throughout), but he subsequently became a white-collar draughtsman in a firm of patent agents.² Freddie was greatly attached to his mother of whom he would speak occasionally with great affection. I remember vividly a meeting in 1965 of the Association of British Orientalists at the Queens' College, Cambridge, when we were having lunch together in hall. In the early stages of the meal a college servant approached high table and asked for Professor Beeston; he then handed him a telegram. As Freddie opened it, he changed colour and was absolutely stunned and shaking. When I asked him if there was anything I could do, he requested me to drive him to the railway station. *En route* he told me that his mother had

¹ Freddie Beeston left two short autobiographical fragments dealing with the early stages of his career and with the elements that caused him to become an orientalist. The first was published as the introduction to a Festschrift dedicated to him by the fraternity of continental *sud-arabisants* in *Sayhadica* 1987 (Paris, Geuthner). The second appeared in the *Oxford Magazine*, No. 122, Michaelmas Term 1995, and bears the following postscript by the editor: 'Happily, we had just accepted Freddie Beeston's account of his career shortly before he died'. Both versions reveal a considerable degree of overlap and are strictly confined to his scholarly life; they are characteristically reticent about all private and personal concerns. They will be referred to in the following pages together with some additions and minor corrections within the knowledge of the present writer.

² In the *Oxford Magazine* article (see above, n. 1) Freddie pays tribute to his father (and indeed both his parents) for being 'totally supportive and encouraging' once they had assured themselves that he was seriously set on his course of studying oriental languages. His father also gave him financial assistance when he had embarked on his D.Phil. research before his Christ Church and James Mew scholarships had been formally approved. Freddie's niece, Mrs S. Fuller, confirms Freddie's well-known reticence to discuss family or personal matters. I am greatly obliged to Mrs Fuller for her helpfulness in giving me access to many of Freddie's unpublished papers.

died; otherwise he was incapable of speech. In all the fifty-five years of our acquaintance I never saw him so moved and grieved.

Freddie received his secondary education at Westminster School, where he obtained 'a thorough training'³ in Latin and Greek. The two classical languages remained throughout his life a primary aspect of his linguistic equipment; indeed he chose classics later on when he was obliged to 'approach oriental finals by way of Moderations in another Faculty'. 'From at least the age of ten' he displayed a 'passionate interest in foreign languages'. He had come across a 'school textbook of English grammar . . . which included an introduction with an account of the Indo-European languages' and their interrelationships. In his spare time he taught himself 'German in order to have access to scholarly work in that language'. The same applied to 'the rudiments of Arabic', for he had 'always had an inclination for specialising in something unusual and exotic'. 'I avidly scanned any language manuals that I could lay my hands on, from ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics to Spanish and Welsh, etc.—the more exotic the better . . . *My interest was in theoretical linguistics, in the structure of a language and its strategies for expressing ideas.* All this created in me a predisposition in favour of non-European languages'.

The penultimate sentence of the preceding paragraph (which I have italicised) seems to me the reflection of the mature scholar which, by an act of anachronistic inadvertence, he put into the mouth of the school-boy. But it is clear that from an early age Freddie displayed remarkably precocious talents in the study of languages and in philological (as it would have been called in the early to mid-1920s) analysis. Thus from the age of fourteen (when he gained his School Certificate⁴) he was not only a budding student of several Indo-European as well as of one or two oriental languages, but he also 'began to debate . . . the choice of a career'. He felt that a large number of occupations were closed to him from the outset: he had no manual skills and he considered himself deficient in numeracy which prevented him contemplating a career in

³ Passages within quotation marks, cited without indication of source, are derived from the two autobiographical sketches referred to in n. 1.

⁴ Freddie's attachment to Westminster School lasted throughout his life. He was there from 1923 until 1929 under the headmastership (1919–37) of Harold Costley-White, later Dean of Gloucester. Among Freddie's unpublished papers, now in Mrs Fuller's possession, is a piece of some eighteen closely typed pages entitled 'Westminster School sixty years ago' (written about 1983). He also attended the centenary dinner of Ashburnham House, Westminster School, in 1982 and made a speech on that occasion.

architecture to which he was otherwise drawn. He also had no confidence in his capacity (or indeed his desire) 'to influence or persuade people' which ruled out the Bar. He thought he had 'a total aversion to engaging in any sort of buying and selling whatsoever'. Then he read in some magazine about careers in librarianship, an idea which appealed to him.

The article in question dealt not only with municipal libraries but included a full description of the various departments of the British Museum Library as well as 'the qualifications required for each department'. He realised at once that any job in the Department of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts (for which a degree in one or more oriental languages was *de rigueur*) was precisely what he was seeking. The only problem was that any such post was liable to occur only about once in ten years. He now felt that he ought to set out on the choice of language(s) in which to specialise. He determined that Sanskrit and Persian, being Indo-European languages, were not sufficiently 'exotic' to appeal to his taste. Ancient Egyptian, in his view, was too archaeologically orientated, although there are quite a number of Egyptologists, among them notably H. J. Polotsky, who had no interest in digging. Freddie had already 'experimented' with Hebrew, but he found that the only grammar (probably Davidson's) he could lay his hands on was very old-fashioned and unsatisfactory.

He now hesitated between Arabic and Chinese. For the latter he could only get hold of phrase-books which did not convey to him how the language operated. For Arabic, on the other hand, he unearthed a copy of 'Palmer's little Arabic grammar' in a second-hand bookshop. So by sheer and somewhat fortuitous elimination it had to be Arabic. He then set out to acquire as much Arabic as possible, although Palmer's work was not exactly an ideal tool. But he also got hold of an Arabic dictionary and a copy of the Qur'an which he 'demanded as prizes from my school' (senior boys were allowed to make their own choice of books as prizes).

He decided that he would go to Oxford; for reasons he was unable to explain later in life 'Cambridge never entered into my calculations'. So from an early stage during his school career at Westminster he expected to obtain a degree in Arabic eventually and then 'sit down and wait hopefully for a vacancy for an Arabist in the British Museum'. In due course (1929) he entered the Honour School of Oriental Languages, on a scholarship to Christ Church, to study Arabic as his major language and Persian as a minor; the latter was one of the few languages that

could be combined with Arabic at that time. There was also an option to take an extra paper in one of a prescribed list of subjects, among which South Arabian epigraphy had been placed by D. S. Margoliouth, the Laudian Professor of Arabic. Freddie availed himself of this opportunity with great enthusiasm, for 'since the age of fourteen I had become fascinated with the South Arabian inscriptions in the British Museum'. This epigraphic material was in the past displayed in a room adjoining the Egyptian gallery; while the latter was always full of visitors, Freddie was usually alone in the South Arabian room.

He spent many hours copying South Arabian inscriptions whose lapidary style attracted him aesthetically (indeed it did so to his dying day) and whose mode of non-ligature writing offered no insuperable obstacles to decipherment. He subsequently came across J. Theodore Bent's *The Sacred City of the Ethiopians* (London, 1893), and from the appendix on the inscriptions of Yeha and Aksum by D. H. Müller he was able to make out the South Arabian alphabet and 'identify one or two words, but naturally the texts as a whole eluded me'. When he came to Oxford it was, therefore, a matter of great excitement to him that his principal teacher and master, Professor Margoliouth, had taken an interest in Sabaean epigraphy and had himself published several important texts. Freddie was the first to attempt (and indeed notably succeed in) the South Arabian option which made such an impact on his entire subsequent career. It will be realised that the South Arabian dialects are not part of the Arabic language but a separate branch of the Semitic phylum. After graduating he continued work on South Arabian and gained his D.Phil. with a dissertation on a selection of Sabaean inscriptions.

Freddie's attachment to, and admiration for, Margoliouth⁵ was profound. The latter's impact on him was enduring. When on one occasion I was tempted, in a review article, to compare the former pupil's knowledge of the Arabic *language* with that of the erstwhile teacher, he was quite angry and urged me to omit that comparison. David Samuel Margoliouth (1858–1940) was a classical scholar and orientalist; the son of the convert missionary Ezekiel Margoliouth, he possessed (according to Gilbert Murray, his obituarist in the *DNB* and in the *Proceedings of the British Academy* 26 (1940) an 'exotic and vivid appearance'; and although the latter was 'not strikingly Jewish, he bore

⁵ An exercise book of 1931 survives which shows Freddie's fine Arabic hand even at that early stage. There are several handwritten corrections and marks by Margoliouth in red ink.

about him some marks of Eastern origin'). He was a polymath and, again according to the great Gilbert Murray (*ibid.*), 'no scholar of his generation left so deep and permanent a mark on oriental studies'. I think this judgement ought to be understood and limited to 'within the British context'. It is interesting to visualise that from Margoliouth's appointment to the Laudian Chair of Arabic in 1889 until Freddie's retirement from the same Chair in 1978 only three incumbents (1889–1937; Gibb 1937–55; Beeston 1955–78) occupied this prestigious office over a period of 89 years, a succession of virtually unparalleled distinction.

When the young Beeston arrived at Oxford, he found that Margoliouth's 'teaching methods were considered slightly odd, but they suited me admirably', for he required no spoon-feeding, was already familiar with the rudiments of some Semitic languages, and expected independent work under some pressure and with stringent demands. He was less impressed with the teacher (an ex-Indian civil servant) and his offerings in Persian which Freddie managed to neglect (as far as that was practicable without damaging his degree prospects) in favour of Arabic and South Arabian. While still an undergraduate, in 1932, he had attended the International Congress of Orientalists meeting at Leiden, that famous centre of Arabic scholarship. There he met for the first time Mgr Gonzague Ryckmans, one of the most renowned of the then tiny fraternity of South Arabian experts. He and his nephew Jacques Ryckmans have made Louvain a focal point of these studies throughout the twentieth century. Freddie wrote of the 'immense debt' he owed to G. Ryckmans for the help and encouragement he gave him in pursuit of his Epigraphic South Arabian (ESA) researches, especially after the retirement and subsequent death of Margoliouth.

I find it strange, in view of the fact that Freddie's name and major scholarly endeavours are so intimately associated with ESA, that he should have thought, if only for a brief moment, of that immense work as a 'spare time' occupation and 'hardly otherwise than as a very arcane sort of hobby, just as someone might . . . become an expert in the works of a very minor mediaeval poet'. True, the Arabic language was his bread-and-butter subject, the nomenclature of his Chair, and the focus of some of his most cerebral disquisitions—and, of course, the point of contact with his students and his principal teaching. But his greatest international fame is almost certainly based on his very extensive South Arabian work over the past fifty years: texts, grammar, lexicography, etc. There is no question of 'hobby' or 'minor' here! The present writer's teacher, the late H. J. Polotsky, was uncharacteristically

indignant when some reviewer referred to the neo-Semitic languages on which HJP had worked as ‘peripheral’. In the same way Freddie could not possibly allude in similar terms to his own ESA research which had occupied more than half his lifetime. Indeed, in the very same column of the *Oxford Magazine*, where the above-quoted observations were published, we also find the following more balanced passage:

These twin passions, for Arabic language and literature, and for the ancient Yemeni inscriptions, have dominated my life since the age of fifteen; and they have been aided to a remarkable extent by a series of lucky chances. To be paid for doing what one most enjoys doing is surely the most blissful state of life.

The study of South Arabian, in its manifold manifestations, has expanded enormously during the last two or three decades, in terms of substance as well as in the number of its practitioners. To this consummation the labours of Freddie Beeston, Walter Müller, and Jacques Ryckmans have made an immense contribution.

I must return to the earlier parts of Freddie’s career. Still in the course of his undergraduate days he obtained an interview with the Keeper of the Oriental Department of the British Museum Library and set out to him his ambitions in oriental librarianship. The Keeper promised to get in touch with him when the prospect of a vacancy arose, but he made it clear that that might not happen for some time to come. So Freddie settled down ‘cheerfully’ to his D.Phil. research, supported by two scholarships and by his father, for the next two years (1933–5). And then the unexpected happened—as so often it does—when in the summer of 1935 two vacancies arose: the British Museum wrote to invite him to present himself to be interviewed for a post requiring an Arabist, while at the Bodleian Library the Keeper of Oriental Books had suddenly died. He was succeeded by the next most senior member of the department which left a vacancy at the more junior level. Bodley’s Librarian informed Freddie that the Curators intended to ask him to occupy the junior position. Professor (Sir) Godfrey Driver did not yet hold the personal Chair of Comparative Semitic Philology (which Freddie somewhat prematurely assigns to him in 1935—*Oxford Magazine*, p. 5), but he was an influential personality within the Oxford establishment and a prominent Bodleian Curator. It was no doubt Driver (as Freddie rightly surmised) who intervened in favour of the young orientalist—as he was to do again, most effectively, exactly twenty years later. Driver had then, and retained ever

after, a large measure of respect for ‘young Beeston’ (as he used to refer to him until Freddie was nearly sixty).

‘Faced with the choice between the two jobs, there could hardly be any hesitation about opting for the Bodleian one’. First, it was certain and required no further interviews; secondly, it was much easier to complete his D.Phil. thesis at Oxford than elsewhere (which he did in 1937); and lastly, he had come to like Oxford during the past six years and considered it now his ‘natural home’. Indeed it remained very much his home for sixty-six years, from 1929, when the young undergraduate arrived, until 1995, when the celebrated scholar died suddenly at the entrance gate to his college. Oxford could have had few alumni and senior fellows more single-mindedly dedicated to her intramural charms and traditions than this faithful son of hers.

Incidentally, he did attend (‘just for the devil of it’) the interview with the Civil Service Commissioners about the British Museum post. But when asked what he would do if he were not appointed to this job, he had to confess that he had a firm offer from the Bodleian Library. The chairman clearly felt that he was wasting their time.

Freddie remained at the Bodleian for precisely twenty years, but his work was interrupted by six years of war service when he joined the army in the Intelligence Corps, first as lieutenant, later as captain. In January 1941 he sailed from Liverpool, by way of the Cape, to Suez; and, after just a few days in Cairo, he went to Palestine where he was stationed for the duration of the war. Among the papers in Mrs Fuller’s custody is an army diary penned by Freddie in 1941–2. This was the first time that he lived in an Arabic-speaking environment, though army life naturally prevented total exposure to that ambience. He learnt something of the Palestinian colloquial, but it was apparently not sufficient to quell a violent scene when the Palestinian cook ran amok in the mess kitchen.

In *Ṣayhadica* he reports two amusing experiences: in an Arab café at Haifa he got into a conversation with some young Arab students who ‘shot’ at him the question how he would construe the grammar of the quotation ‘*táaddadati l-ʿasbābu wa l-mawtu wāḥidun*’ (‘numerous are the causes (of death), while death itself is unique’). Freddie was, of course, able to give a full syntactical explanation, in terms of *waw al-ḥāl* and *taqdir*, ‘thus vindicating Oxford training’. On another occasion he was one of a boisterous group seeing off a friend at Lydda railway station, when one of a gang of schoolboys shouted at him in the local Arabic patois ‘is it beer or whiskey that you have been drinking?’ His

immediate response was the literary Arabic *kilāhumā* ‘both of them’ which caused the boys a good deal of hilarity. While they knew the classical expression from school or from the Qur’an (Surah 17:24), they would never have used it themselves.

It was in Palestine during the war that I first met Freddie, at an intelligence briefing at Sarafand. We happened to be sitting next to each other, and I noticed at once his remarkable booming bass voice. He was nine years my senior and held an important orientalist appointment at the Bodleian, while I had just finished my studies in Semitic languages and was about to set out for service in Eritrea-Ethiopia. Whereas my name was *tabula rasa*, his seemed somehow known to me, though I could not immediately place it in any particular context. It was only a little while later that I realised that he was the author of an epigraphic appendix to H. St J. B. Philby’s *Sheba’s Daughters* which had been published two or three years earlier. I did not see Freddie again until I came to Oxford not long after the war to join (Dame) Margery Perham’s Institute of Colonial Studies. He received me with his accustomed cordiality and soon after suggested that I might be interested in cataloguing the Bodleian’s Ethiopic manuscripts that had been acquired since Dillmann’s splendid catalogue of 1848, just about a hundred years before this proposal. I accepted with alacrity, both *per se* and for the financial help this work offered. Our collaboration then marked the beginning of a long friendship.

Freddie had returned to Oxford and to the Bodleian Library in 1946. Meanwhile the Keeper of the Oriental Department had retired⁶ and Freddie had been promoted and appointed to the vacancy in his absence in Palestine. The keepership itself had been upgraded to the rank of sub-librarian. So by the age of thirty-five he had reached the apex of his career as an orientalist librarian. He was thoroughly satisfied with his job in the Bodleian and enjoyed it greatly. He ‘threw himself’ into a number of cataloguing enterprises (including the completion of the Ethiopic catalogue which was published in 1951). He considered that ‘perhaps the most enduring service to the Library had been the acquisition of several particularly fine MSS at pretty reasonable prices’. In the early years (1946–8) after his return to Bodley’s he kept a detailed diary of his private and official as well as scholarly concerns. His

⁶ Thus correctly in the *Oxford Magazine*, tacitly amending the erroneous ‘died’ in *Sayhadica*.

service to the Library is commemorated in an obituary article published in the *Bodleian Library Record*, April 1996.

During his time at Bodley's he continued vigorously with his South Arabian researches, a steady stream of articles flowing from his pen. He also taught South Arabian texts occasionally and numbered among those attending his classes the present writer as well as A. J. Drewes (*Ṣayhadica*, p. XVIII). He forgot to mention that he also supervised the very successful D.Phil. thesis of Arthur Irvine (who later became Reader in Semitic Languages at SOAS) on South Arabian epigraphic material connected with irrigation techniques. To me it was a great pleasure when he was appointed (together with David Winton Thomas, Regius Professor of Hebrew in the University of Cambridge) examiner of my Oxford D.Phil. dissertation on the subject of the relationship of classical Ethiopic to the modern Ethiopian languages. Although neither of them was an expert in this particular subject, both had taken immense trouble and proved to be very knowledgeable and congenial examiners. I think he felt that the only drawback of his Bodleian appointment was the fact that in the library he could not indulge in his habit of chain-smoking cigarettes; I frequently observed, however, that on the short distance between the old and the new buildings of the Bodleian he would briefly light up and smoke part of a cigarette.

In 1953 the late Joseph Schacht, who had been Reader in Arabic at Oxford, left for the prestigious Chair of Arabic at Leiden (and subsequently moved to the United States).⁷ H. A. R. (later Sir Hamilton) Gibb, the then incumbent of the Laudian Chair of Arabic, spoke to Freddie and others about the problem of finding a successor. He appears to have sounded him out, perhaps somewhat obliquely, whether he would be interested in this post. But to the Keeper of the Bodleian Oriental Department there were no obvious advantages, neither of promotion nor of finance, in such a move. The situation was quite different, however, when in 1955 Gibb departed for Harvard University and the Laudian Chair became vacant. Freddie entertained no thoughts of the succession, but Professor (Sir) Godfrey Driver, one of the principal electors, urged him in the strongest terms to apply—a request to which Freddie yielded with some reluctance and indeed trepidation.

After his application had eventually been submitted, 'in deference to Driver's bidding', I received a summons from the latter to come to

⁷ Beeston's account of this matter contains a number of minor factual errors (*Ṣayhadica*, p. XVIII).

Oxford 'on an urgent and secret mission' (I was teaching at St Andrews University at that time) and was asked to let him have a short paper for the electors on Beeston's prowess as a teacher of South Arabian and as an examiner in Ethiopic. No easier or more congenial task had ever been entrusted to me. Some weeks later I got one of Driver's characteristic postcards which read:

Dear U.,

Isaiah 55: 11⁸

Yours

G.R.D.

I never doubted that Driver would succeed in the task he had set himself, and to the knowledgeable and the prescient it was the obvious and desirable denouement.

But the successful candidate himself, when told of the decision, had a feeling 'almost of alarm'; this appeared to be shared, Beeston continues, by a correspondent to *The Times* who criticised this appointment to the most prestigious Chair of Arabic in the world.⁹ I penned a private note of protest to the writer of that letter and suggested that the time was bound to come when he would have to eat his words. I got no reply, but many years later that scholar invited me to lunch at his college; and before any greetings were uttered he said to me: '*touché*'. To my genuine sense of puzzlement he responded, 'You were right about Beeston! I wanted you to see me eat my words'. Nothing further was said on this subject.

Freddie's acceptance of the Chair of Arabic was not a decision taken lightly, but at forty-four he reckoned that this was his best chance, in mid-career, to take on a teaching and research appointment of a kind that was unlikely to recur. He later wrote (and at the time declared) that his 'equipment in Arabic was much less comprehensive than that of my illustrious predecessors in the Chair'. This *may* initially have been the case: Margoliouth was, of course, a polymath who had spread his wings over a vast area, while Gibb ('a daunting succession') had written a monograph on modern Arabic literature and was, above all, 'a very

⁸ 'So shall my word be that issues from my mouth; it shall not return to me fruitless without accomplishing my purpose; it has succeeded in the task I set it'.

⁹ Freddie's recollection of this letter to *The Times* is not quite accurate: 'G. Elwell-Sutton of Durham' (read in any event 'L. P. Elwell-Sutton of Edinburgh') was not the writer, but it was a much more distinguished scholar, in a different discipline, who neither referred to Beeston as a 'mere administrator' (*Ṣayhadica*) nor as a 'mere librarian' (*Oxford Magazine*) but as 'an antiquarian who does not speak colloquial Arabic'.

distinguished historian' as well as a man of affairs. In those fields Freddie considered himself 'notably deficient'. Though Arabic language and literature cannot be studied without some basic knowledge of Islam, the new Professor always refused to present himself 'as in any way an authority on Islam as a religion or on Islamic history'. He pursued this line unflinching, and when some Arabist or Islamic scholar was under consideration for election to the British Academy, Freddie rigorously declined to offer an opinion on the Islamic aspect. Yet, Gibb would have been the first to acknowledge that he was no grammarian or linguist and that in that area of Arabic Freddie was his superior and indeed became, with time, everybody else's as well.

Of great weight in his decision to allow his name to go forward for the Chair was the prospect of a professorial fellowship at St John's College (to which the Laudian Chair is affiliated), a privilege he valued very highly: 'nothing in my career has given me more pleasure and comfort than my membership of that friendly and generous society.' Being unmarried he enjoyed that company of scholars and friends to the full. Here he entertained his colleagues (and often their wives) in some style and graciousness. He was knowledgeable on food and a dab hand at cooking. As a guest he was always much appreciated, for he ate unstintingly and with genuine discrimination. On occasion he would say to me 'is it not time for me to have another taste of Dina's *zuppa di pesce*?!'

While the Academy (to which he was elected in 1965, in the same year as myself) was somehow slow to attach him to committees or to admit him to its inner counsels and offices, his college made much use of his manifold qualifications and allowed him to serve as Dean of Degrees for twenty-six years. Few people can visualise the Sheldonian Theatre without his gowned and ample figure with his long white hair. At Oxford he was widely known and much in demand as a scholar as well as socially. He also served with much aplomb on scholarly bodies outside Oxford: he was elected to the Council of the Royal Asiatic Society and was appointed to the Governing Body of the School of Oriental and African Studies. He was assiduous in his attendance of meetings, but his membership of the last-named body was not renewed, no doubt because his scholarly conscience was unable to sanction one or two aberrant decisions in areas where his particular expertise should have carried crucial weight. He became the linchpin in the annual Seminar for Arabian Studies whose foundation and prospering owed much to his personality, drive, and devotion.

Freddie's teaching commitments in Arabic grew apace. In the pre-war and immediate post-war years the number of undergraduates reading Arabic had been very small. It was only in the fifties and early sixties that the large influx of candidates taking Arabic began. In Alan Jones and Donald Richards Freddie had two highly congenial colleagues of marked ability to whom he was devoted—and they no doubt to him. Later M. M. Badawi and F. Zimmermann, and subsequently Robin Ostle, lent further strength to this happy team. While the heavy teaching load 'put a severe strain on us all', Freddie was 'thankful to have had that experience . . . for I have found that teaching is an invaluable background to research; being obliged to present material in a way comprehensible to those who know nothing to start with clears one's own mind in a way that nothing else would do'. This recognition will be shared by all those of us who have been fortunate enough to have encountered undergraduates of a calibre to benefit from the type of instruction a scholar like Beeston was able to impart. Quite a few of us have met pupils or former pupils taught by Freddie and have been impressed not only with their standard in Arabic but especially with their esteem for their teacher's meticulous method of conveying knowledge—and indeed for his personality. Many of them have remained his friends.

In later years he was much in demand as an examiner of doctoral theses. If the subject and the candidate interested him, these examinations could be very prolonged. His attention to detail could on some occasions be such that it bordered on pedantry—if such a notion had not been quite alien to his character and general disposition. I remember at least one such doctoral inquisition which took place in my room at SOAS and stretched to close on six hours, only interrupted by lunch. It was not that he entertained doubts about the result but rather that his interest in the substance and the quality of the examinee's responses let him forget the effluxion of time—until in the end I had to explain that my room had to be vacated. Incidentally, the candidate concerned was (Professor) Simon Hopkins FBA.

As a reviewer Freddie was painstaking in the extreme. If the work under review was within the centre of his scholarly interests (and normally he only accepted commissions of that nature), he would scrutinise, analyse, and explore it to a remarkable extent. Such an examination could be severe, but it would always be just and directed *ad rem*, never *ad hominem*. He genuinely felt that his duty as a reviewer had not been properly discharged, unless he had explained to the reader

and the author what the substance of his objections or assent was. Some potential reviewees were in fear of the impending avalanche, a few may have been aggrieved; but the proper reaction to so knowledgeable an assessment of one's work by so eminent an authority should have been gratification at such a fate. I remember well that I sent Freddie a passage of the typescript of one of my earliest books for comment. When I received his animadversions I included them as an extensive footnote *ad locum* (*The Semitic Languages of Ethiopia*, pp. 8 and 9). The reviews of the book which subsequently appeared almost invariably singled out Beeston's footnote for special praise and said fairly little about the rest of the book. His comments were an ornament to the book and enlightening to the reader and to myself.

My Beeston file containing correspondence from 1948 to 1995 forms a precious collection of Freddie's thoughts on many aspects of Semitic languages. Nearly all his letters deal with matters of scholarship and would make, if published, a valuable addition to his *oeuvre*. They are concerned with many disparate subjects over a wide range of Semitics, e.g. on Ge'ez (classical Ethiopic) orthography and in particular on variant spelling patterns of sibilants in epigraphic contexts as well as in MSS; and in the same letter questions on the advisability of acquiring certain MSS for the Bodleian (letter of 2 March 1951). Or: how to deal with a request by Sylvia Pankhurst for photographs of an Ethiopic MS which is inadequately identified (10 February 1954); some choice information about a collection (uncatalogued) of Ethiopic MSS in the possession of the London Library (9 June 1954). A long and very detailed letter on Ugaritic etymologies; on Sidney Smith's monograph on the history of the sixth century in Arabia; and on Caskel's Lihyan and Lihyanic (15 December 1954). On 13 April 1962 he writes about reviews of his *A Descriptive Grammar of Epigraphic South Arabian* (London, 1962, 1st ed.), of Littmann-Höfner's *Tigre Wörterbuch*, and about an Aden-based political officer who wishes to write on Mahri (modern South Arabian). All his letters are full of interesting ideas and ought to be more widely known; there are about a hundred of them and they decrease in frequency with my return to live at Oxford in 1970 when we could meet or speak on the telephone. Quite a few of his missives begin: 'Now that I've finished this (typescript enclosed), I feel thoroughly dissatisfied with it . . .' (21 March 1971). This is a typical example of Freddie's modesty and self-critical attitude to his own work. Over the next year or two I shall consider whether it might be possible to find a publisher for Freddie's correspondence on Semitic languages

(cf. my edition of the late H. J. Polotsky's (Corresponding Fellow) Collected Letters, Stuttgart, 1992).

During his tenure of the Bodleian Keepership and, later, of the Chair of Arabic Freddie 'continued throughout it all to concern myself with research in South Arabian studies':

I had only very limited time in which to do so. But my output in published articles is very large, and at the same time varied in quality. I have always held that a learned journal is the place not only for definitive results of research but also for a dialectical process in which hypotheses may be put forward for discussion, which may either validate or invalidate them. My total output in articles would hence need considerable sifting in order to extract what might possibly be regarded as an abiding contribution to the subject; the rest is better forgotten.

In the earlier half of my time as professor, I produced little concerned with Arabic properly speaking, since I was preoccupied both with the day-to-day routine of teaching and with myself learning and gaining experience. It is only in the more recent years that I have published much in respect of Arabic.

I have quoted these passages from *Ṣayhadica* because they reflect accurately Freddie's self-effacing manner as well as his attitude towards the respective demands of teaching and publication. His (select) bibliography attached to *Ṣayhadica* covers the years 1937–86 but is very incomplete. His friend, Mr Michael Macdonald, is to publish a full bibliography in the *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*. My own library contains about a hundred items of Beestoniana, articles as well as books, but this, too, is very far from the complete tally. Most of his contributions have appeared in the form of articles, his preferred means of expressing his ideas (as he explains in the above-quoted extract). Even his books are not large tomes but relatively small volumes composed with considerable concision. Among the latter I would single out his *Baidāwī's Commentary on Surah 12, Written Arabic, The Arabic Language Today, Samples of Arabic Prose*, the important *Sabaic Grammar* (2nd ed.—which received a masterly review penned by no less a connoisseur than Walter Müller), and the *Sabaic Dictionary*, jointly composed with his colleagues Ghul, Müller, and Ryckmans. On the last-named work I have written a few pages of commentary in the Beeston Festschrift (*Arabicus Felix*—see below).

In terms of pure cerebral distinction his *The Arabic Language Today* (1970) stands out as a masterpiece which summarises in some 120 pages the salient elements of that highly complex and beautiful tongue. It is a slim and elegantly produced volume which represents something

of a landmark in the study and description of a Semitic language. I do not know of any comparable work that manages, with such economy of language, to offer a reasonably full, succinct, and reliable introduction (couched in terms that are acceptable to the contemporary student of language) to any Semitic tongue. The editor of the series in which this work appears could not have made a better choice for the authorship of a modern book on the Arabic language. At a time when most Arabists have become *islamisans* and most Hebraists have turned into *Alttestamentler*, Freddie Beeston has adhered to the Arabist's first and principal concern, i.e. the study of the Arabic language.

It would undoubtedly have been easier to write a book twice the size of this volume, for the conciseness of formulation and economy of descriptive detail are apt to conceal the vast amount of thought and sheer intellectual effort that must have gone into the planning and execution of this work. The extreme succinctness makes it at times quite a difficult book to read, and I rather doubt whether it is appropriate diet for the novice. Essentially it tells us how the Arabic language works and how its operations relate to the underlying principles and theoretical bases. In the Arabic—as opposed to South Arabian—field, this is the present writer's favourite Beeston book.

In 1983 the Lidzbarski Committee (Spitaler, Rosenthal, Caquot, Ullendorff), on behalf of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, resolved to award the Lidzbarski Medal for Semitic epigraphy to Freddie Beeston. The decision was unanimous and was widely welcomed and approved. Beeston was, perhaps, the first scholar who received this medal in the most literal conformity with the testator's wishes, i.e. that it should be bestowed on someone whose principal work had been in epigraphy. The immediately preceding recipient had been H. J. Polotsky. The latter warmly concurred with the choice of the electors and expressed his pleasure that Beeston should be his successor. Such manifestations of approval were extremely rare and generally alien to the austere temperament of Polotsky who was always economical with praise. In a letter to the present writer (p. 110, top, of his *Collected Letters*, 1992) he said: 'I feel greatly honoured that Beeston should succeed me in the bestowal of the Lidzbarski Medal, although I must insist on my special position as the only Lidzbarski pupil in receipt of this honour'.

Polotsky's judgement, as the foremost Semitist of our generation, is particularly germane, for he expressed similarly complimentary feelings for Beeston's work also elsewhere: 'The feature (*na't sababiyy*) . . .

has been defined with greater precision by Professor A. F. L. Beeston; . . . his description of this phenomenon in his *Arabic Language Today*, 94–5, and his comments therein contain practically all that needs to be said on this topic . . . ; my present note is not to dilute . . . Beeston's beautifully compact formulation . . .' (*Israel Oriental Studies*, 1978, 159). When I showed this passage to Freddie he was both pleased and embarrassed, for he knew to value approval from that source. Unhappily, circumstances conspired against my repeated attempts to bring those two giants of Semitic scholarship together at the same place and at the same time; both were, however, aware of each other's worth.

In n. 1 I have referred to the Festschrift in Freddie's honour published in *Ṣayhadica* 1987. In 1991, for his eightieth birthday, Alan Jones, his close colleague, organised and edited another volume in Freddie's honour, with contributions by his friends, colleagues, and former pupils. It appeared under the brilliant and highly appropriate title *Arabicus Felix* (punned on his second Christian name), *Luminosus Britannicus*, and covered four areas of study in which Freddie had shown a special interest: the Yemen, Arabic language and literature, modern Arabic literature, and Semitica. There is also a lively introduction by Michael Gilsenan and an *envoi*, a *jeu d'esprit*, by Geoffrey Lewis.

Gilsenan has splendidly caught the essentials of Freddie's remarkable personality in his fine essay:

. . . He was a personage more exotic . . . than any of our Hadhrami friends. He was clearly in his element too, this professor whose approachability also contained surely some quality of shyness and reserve. I mentioned to Freddie that I was due to go up to Pembroke College, Oxford, in October 1960 to read English, but I was thinking now of switching to Arabic . . . The invitation to come and see the Laudian Professor at St John's was warm and immediate. And so, with a chance and in this case unforgettable encounter, the course of one's life changed.

Freddie sat down with the text of a pre-Islamic poem with all the relish of a wine connoisseur before a great claret. His eyes shone, notes and commentaries were lovingly and meticulously scanned, metres established, subtleties of translation propounded, meanings elucidated. He was obviously . . . a lover of language, avid for learning, delighted by inquiry. Even a student like myself, temperamentally little inclined to the classical discipline, began to see that language need not be treated as 'dead' and that one could become enthused by these apparently arcane and abstruse topics of textual construction.

How many hours were spent in his room at St John's or in one of the large number of classes at the new Oriental Institute . . . with its wonderful

innovation of a shared coffee room? And did ever a professor spend so much time teaching undergraduates? . . . In my tutorials with him there were often agonising silences as he waited for me to translate. No spoon-feeding there, but a gentle insistence that one look at context and grammar and struggle for an answer. It was a very demanding form of teaching and often made a student sweat with embarrassed discomfort, or hope that a coughing fit would distract him, but it never did. . . .

. . . Gradually, the complete unpretentiousness, the manifest pleasure in and reverence for Arabic language and literature, and the terrifyingly lavish supplies of sherry or beer in a pub after a class gave us a greater awareness and appreciation of the person. That it was so was due mostly to the realisation that we mattered to him . . . and that he was not concerned only with high-flyers or the number of firsts and that students were central to his life, students and St John's College.

Freddie obviously took the rites and ceremonies of Oxford with the greatest seriousness. College, chapel, high table, these were central to his world, and he was courteous and generous in his invitations to students. That world in its higher reaches remained largely mysterious, but first nervous participations in high table as his guest were made easier by recognising the same delight as he took in travelling in South Arabia. . . . This was obviously not the stereotype of the bachelor don . . . devoted only to some obscure subject; Freddie was a mine of information and knowledge on any number of obscure subjects, but beyond that an immensely sociable man.

Gilsenan's portrait will be recognised as remarkably apposite and as offering a key to Freddie's personality, at once complex as well as revelatory. It would be hard to improve on this characterisation. All of us were also aware of his physical strength, of the exertions in travelling he undertook at the age of eighty-four, the number of publications—never decreasing in quantity or quality—the personal contacts, the academic and social engagements, the conferences and papers and reviews. We thought this amplitude of activities would go on for ever. Then, one day he telephoned me about a colleague's paper on Ethiopian names in Sabaic; would I let him have my candid opinion: 'but don't reply to my home address; don't write to Iffley but to St John's; I have returned to live in college, temporarily'. In reply to my question he said, in a matter-of-fact tone, 'I have contracted cancer of the colon, and it is easier to be in town for my visits to hospital'. This was a terrible blow, especially for a man who had never known any illness or weakness throughout his life. His friends rallied and visited him. He himself carried on fairly normally and certainly uncomplainingly. We spoke on the telephone frequently, mostly on matters of scholarship.

My wife and I were in Scotland during the first week of October 1995

when we saw the death announcement in the personal columns of *The Times* on 5 October. He had died on 29 September. Apparently, after a convivial evening, he went out briefly the following morning and on his return collapsed and died by the Porter's Lodge of St John's. For him it was a merciful death within the precincts of the college he loved; for his friends and colleagues it was a truly irreparable loss. *The Times* and the *Independent* had wonderful and very detailed obituaries on 6 and 7 October, respectively; the latter written by Donald Richards and the former (I would confidently surmise) by Alan Jones, both former pupils and devoted colleagues. The funeral service took place at St Mary Magdalen Church close by his college, a High Church service which Freddie, a devout Christian, favoured.¹⁰ The congregation was very large, many standing in the aisles and overflowing outside the church. So many people wished to take their leave of this prominent Oxonian. There was genuine and widespread mourning. The memorial service took place in the same church some six weeks later; the address was delivered by Robin Ostle, Arabist and Fellow of St John's.

There were giants in the earth in those days (Genesis 6:4).

EDWARD ULLENDORFF

Fellow of the Academy

Note. The present writer is particularly obliged for information and documents kindly made available by Freddie Beeston's only surviving relative, his niece (daughter of his elder sister), Mrs S. Fuller of Witney, Oxfordshire. I also wish to acknowledge gratefully assistance given by the following: Sir Keith Thomas; Alan Jones; Donald Richards; Michael Macdonald; C. F. Beckingham; Miss Susan Churchill and Miss Rosemary Lambeth, both of the British Academy; M. M. Badawi; and Adrian Roberts of the Bodleian Library.

Appendix

Nearly all of Freddie Beeston's correspondence was concerned with aspects of scholarship to the virtual exclusion of all private matters. I have referred to this in the main part of this memoir, but I thought it might be of interest to readers to have two specimens of his epistolary

¹⁰ Very occasionally he would agree to deliver a sermon in St John's Chapel. One such address, dated 28 October 1973, survives in a typescript of five pages.

genre, one of his early period and one of a more recent vintage—divided by some thirty years. I am appending these samples partly because *le style c'est l'homme* and partly because the facts and opinions described in them have not, as far as I know, been made generally available.

65a St Giles
Oxford, 31.8.51

Dear Ullendorff,

Many thanks for your most valuable letter. I fear that there is no likelihood of my paper being published in the near future, since it obviously needs a good deal of recasting and polishing before it would be fit to print. If there is anything in it useful for your work, you are welcome to use it; but if you want actually to quote, I should prefer not to have this first preliminary draft brought up against me, but will try and produce a second draft as soon as my various commitments permit.

For the moment, I should merely like to discuss one or two of the points raised in your letter.

(1) I would by no means oppose the statement that South Arabian colonists brought the South Arabian alphabet into Africa (though I would be reluctant to think that this could have been as early as 500 BC); nor would I oppose the statement that South Semitic speech came into Africa from South Arabia. What I do object to is the implication (which is certainly present in Diringer's words, although he may not perhaps have intended it that way) that it was the *same* wave of colonization which was responsible for both developments. The two things seem to me to belong to quite different stages historically.

(2) The mimation is irrelevant to our linguistic problem, because it is a common Semitic feature, shared with other languages—Accadian, where it is present in full force, and Hebrew where it has left some traces. The same is true of the deictic *n* insofar as it is a component in various adverbial, pronominal and conjunctive forms. These features are not specifically characteristic of ESA. What *is* peculiarly characteristic of ESA is the regular and extensive use of this deictic *n* as an affix to *nouns*, in the function of a *definite article*. Since this usage has imposed itself on all the four ESA dialects, which otherwise have indications of very diverse origins, and is not found in other Semitic languages, it must be regarded as a linguistic innovation in the ESA dialects. It therefore seems to me a wholly unsubstantiated hypothesis to conclude, on the basis of the presence of the deictic *n* in Ge'ez adverbs, that Ge'ez has 'lost' a nominal termination which it once possessed.

(3) I would agree that Ur-Ge'ez (if I may coin a term) must at some period have been spoken in South Arabia; and also that the linguistic resemblances between Ge'ez and ESA point to a period in which UG was in geographical

contiguity with the parents of the ESA dialects. It is doubtful, however, whether these periods coincided; and I find it difficult to believe that either of them can have coincided to any large extent with the period in which ESA is historically attested, otherwise, as I have said, the distinctive features of ESA which had the power to impose themselves on all the ESA dialects, would have spread to UG too.

(4) Your remarks on the influence of the Cushitic substratum are fully justified. At the same time, it is worth remembering that ESA itself was imposed on a non-Semitic substratum, which is ethnographically prevalent even today. Theoretically, one might perhaps envisage some of the differences between Ge'ez and ESA as arising on the Arabian side from the pre-Semitic Arabian peoples (this of course presupposes that the residence of the UG speakers in South Arabia was brief and transitional).

(5) As regards Ethiopic archaeology, you speak with authority. Nevertheless, the fact remains that in South Arabia, even without any systematic excavation, thousands of inscriptions of the seven centuries immediately B.C. have turned up; in Ethiopia they have not.

(6) In your final paragraph, on the motivation of the Ethiopic vowelised script, surely we are in complete agreement? You say that you cannot agree that the Ge'ez people should have behaved in very much the same way as the South Arabians, for the circumstances were completely different. This was precisely my argument, though put the other way round—that *because* the Ge'ez people did not behave like their South Arabian neighbours, *therefore* the circumstances must have been different.

I am off to Istanbul next week, but hope that we may continue this discussion, which to me at any rate is most profitable.

Yours sincerely,

A. F. L. Beeston

Dear Edward,

15.9.81

As you know, in 1951 a campaign of excavation was undertaken at Timna' in the lower Wadi Bayhan (at that time in the Eastern Protectorate of Aden), the ancient metropolis of the kingdom of Qataban. This was done under the aegis of the 'American Foundation for the Study of Man', which in fact was created by and entirely financed by the subsequently deceased Wendell Phillips. Two epigraphists were invited to join the expedition, Professor Honeyman of St. Andrews and Professor A. Jamme (now of the Catholic University of America). These two did not, however, work in collaboration; they divided the area of the excavations between them and each assumed sole responsibility for the inscriptions discovered in his own sector. The inscriptions were recorded in the form of latex squeezes.

Jamme's portion of the finds has been published. Of Honeyman's share one single photograph, without any transcription or editorial work, was published in the *Biblical Archaeologist* for February 1952. The remainder has been ever since in Professor Honeyman's possession, without a particle of information of any kind about it being divulged to the learned world.

According to the very few people who have been permitted even a cursory glance at the collection of squeezes, it comprises several dozen substantial texts which must certainly be of the utmost importance for the study of the ancient history and language of Qataban. Experience at other sites makes it all too probable that, once unearthed, many of the original monuments will have been destroyed in subsequent years, or even if they survive may well have been dispersed and thus lost the indispensable link with their original archaeological setting.

On Professor Honeyman's removal from St. Andrews to the north of Scotland, this collection of squeezes was packed into a box (or boxes) and stored along with his library in a barn-like structure at his new residence. While one must deplore the fact that for thirty years the scholarly world has been denied access to these important materials, the situation now is even graver. He is said to be in hospital and apparently totally incapacitated physically; and there is an increasing danger that his library may be disposed of, and the collection of squeezes either destroyed by someone ignorant of their scientific value, or at least disposed of in some way which will make it difficult to trace their fate. Research on ancient South Arabia urgently needs these precious materials, and it is high time that some move should be made to safeguard them in some way which will ensure their presentation to the world. While it is true that latex itself is virtually indestructible, it is far from sure that squeezes will not progressively deteriorate the longer they are kept in boxes.

When next you go to Scotland, could you please discuss this with Honeyman?

Yours,
Freddie