

OBITUARY: ALAN JONES (1933–2021)

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On September 25, 2021, Professor Alan Jones, a scholar of Arabic literature and the Qurʾān, died at his home in Oxford, surrounded by his children and the last one of a sequence of beloved cats. Born into a humble working-class background, a family of shopkeepers in Oldham, Alan passed the entrance examination to Manchester Grammar School at the age of eleven towards the end of the Second World War and then went on to win a scholarship to read Classics at St John’s College, Cambridge. According to his children, Alan’s decision to shift his attention to Arabic during the course of his studies was motivated by the estimation that it seemed “more of a challenge.” Having completed his Cambridge BA in Classics and Oriental Languages in 1955, Alan moved to Oxford and in 1957 began teaching Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Faculty of Oriental Studies. Alan served two four-year terms as the director of Oxford’s Oriental Institute, and from 1980 until his retirement in 2000 was Pembroke College’s first Tutorial Fellow in Arabic (a capacity in which he was succeeded by Christopher Melchert). During a teaching career spanning more than forty years, Alan trained and supervised generations of British and international students, including members of the Jordanian royal house. Quite a few of his students went on to become well-known scholars in their own right; the list of contributors to a *Festschrift* from 2004 reads like a *Who’s Who* of Arabic studies in the UK in the early 2000s.¹

Anecdotes about Alan’s pedagogical persona stress not only his occasionally intimidating linguistic rigor and his aversion to academic jargon but also his profound generosity and kindness. Alan’s dry humor is noted, too: Elisabeth Kendall transmits the matchless gem that “the first twenty-five years of Arabic are the hardest”—words of encouragement that were received during the first week of an undergraduate degree in Arabic. Up until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Alan would regularly take

1. *Islamic Reflections, Arabic Musings: Studies in Honour of Alan Jones*, edited by Robert Hoyland and Philip F. Kennedy (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004).

his Friday lunch (invariably fish and chips) at Pembroke College, ever ready to debate obscure issues of Arabic grammar and qur'ānic exegesis with alacrity and erudition. When he welcomed me to Oxford by kindly extending an invitation to join him for a formal dinner at St Cross College, my sheepish confession to lacking suitable attire was met with shrewd advice about where to purchase an inexpensive but good-quality dinner jacket. I cherish the honor of having been introduced by him, to another dinner guest, as a fellow specimen of that rare academic species, “the Qur'ān-probing ilk.”

Despite what was, in the 1980s, a pioneering interest in exploring how personal computers might aid scholars of Arabic, Alan was an Oxford tutor of the traditional sort, with a strong ethos of devotion to teaching and pastoral care. His scholarly output was nonetheless groundbreaking. Alan's pedagogical concerns and ability are masterfully displayed in his *Arabic through the Qur'ān* (2005), a splendid textbook that includes lucid discussions of many of the more arcane points of qur'ānic Arabic, such as the use of *an* in the sense of *allā* or special uses of the phrase *mā kāna*.² Alan's scholarship embodies the need to study the language of the Qur'ān, and early Arabic more generally, with a keen eye for archaic usage and non-conformity to later grammatical postulates. In this spirit, he notes, for instance, that *la'alla* frequently means “so that” rather than “perhaps” in the Qur'ān, often serving to maintain verse-final rhyme, or that early Arabic quite freely employs asyndetic relative clauses after a definite antecedent.³ A programmatic albeit inaccessibly published article from 1993 on “The Language of the Qur'ān” argues against “the traditional view that the language of the Qur'ān is identical with the *'arabiyya* of early poetry on the one hand and with the dialect of Qurayš, the spoken language of Muḥammad, on the other,” and instead suggests that scholars contextualize the Qur'ān's language with the linguistic registers of soothsayers, orators, and storytellers.⁴ If the field will ever succeed in producing a proper grammar of Qur'ānic Arabic, it will be to a significant degree by following in Alan's trailblazing footsteps.

Likewise of outstanding didactic and scholarly value are two volumes containing line-by-line commentaries on a selection of pre-Islamic and early Islamic poems, entitled *Early Arabic Poetry*.⁵ The two books remain arguably the best available resource for teaching Anglophone students to read early poetry with its plethora of linguistic and other difficulties, but they

2. Alan Jones, *Arabic through the Qur'ān* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2005).

3. Jones, *Arabic through the Qur'ān*, 243 and 146.

4. Alan Jones, “The Language of the Qur'ān,” *Arabist: Budapest Studies in Arabic* 6–7 (1993): 29–48 (quoting p. 29).

5. Alan Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry* (2 vols.; Reading: Ithaca Press, 1992–1996).

also have much to offer to specialists. In particular, they showcase the importance and profitability of a comparative and contrastive analysis of the Qurʾān and Arabic poetry, an abiding interest of Alan's that is also exhibited by a brief 1994 article entitled "Narrative Technique in the Qurʾān and in Early Poetry."⁶ A crowning achievement of Alan's work on the Qurʾān is his full translation of the Islamic scripture, published in 2007 by the Gibb Memorial Trust.⁷ It combines philological acumen and readability, and prefaces each *sūrah* with succinct opening remarks on their compositional structure and main themes. That Alan's erudition went far beyond the Qurʾān is evidenced by his editions of two anthologies of Andalusian stanzaic poetry by Ibn Bishrī and Ibn al-Khatīb, published in 1992 and 1997.

6. Alan Jones, "Narrative Technique in the Qurʾān and in Early Poetry," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 25 (1994): 185–191.

7. Alan Jones (trans.), *The Qurʾān* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007).