

In memoriam

Alasdair Livingstone, 1954–2021

His many friends, colleagues and former students were shocked and grieved to learn of the sudden death in January, from Covid, of the Assyriologist Alasdair Livingstone. A man of warmth, humour, and eclectic erudition, he inspired generations of students at Birmingham University, where he had taught since 1993 until his retirement in 2017. His dedication to the history of the ancient Middle East was all the more remarkable for combining a mastery of cuneiform studies with a familiarity not only with the scripts and languages of ancient Arabia but also with Arabic in both classical and colloquial forms.

Alasdair was born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, on 29 January 1954, where his father was a mathematics lecturer. His boyhood left him with a lifelong stock of Zulu phrases, which his father insisted should be used around the house. When the latter was appointed to a chair of Pure Mathematics at Birmingham, the family moved there in 1968. Having attended King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys in Birmingham, Alasdair won a place at Queens' College, Cambridge. In 1975 he gained a First in Assyriology and Arabic Studies, before returning to Birmingham to study with the foremost British Assyriologist Wilfred Lambert, who became his lifelong guru. Alasdair gained his PhD in 1980 with a thesis (published in 1986) entitled *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*.

From 1979 to 1981 he worked as a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Munich, which confirmed him in his reverence for German scholarship. In 1981, and now married to Anita from an East African Asian family, he moved to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Here he succeeded Juris Zarins as Archaeological Adviser at the Department of Antiquities and Museums, then run by Dr Abdullah Masry. His job included arduous field trips to record rock art and inscriptions, and to serve as epigrapher on excavations in Tayma and Thaj. He was also on the editorial team of *Atlat* (the journal of Saudi Arabian archaeology), co-authored various guidebooks, and helped with the cataloguing of the Department's collections.

This was where I first met him, in the early 1980s, while working on the project to set up the six local archaeological museums at Tayma, al-'Ula, Dumat al-Jandal, al-Hofuf, Najran, and Jizan. His advice on the pre-Islamic scripts and languages of pre-Islamic Arabia was invaluable. Living in Saudi Arabia in those days demanded stoicism and an ability to see the funny side, both qualities he possessed in abundance. Domestic life took place against the roar of dripping, wall-mounted air conditioners and involved a constant battle against dust, all the more necessary after a baby, Kristina, arrived. Anita's only regular outside entertainment was a trip to the supermarket (much like life under Covid today). Alasdair enjoyed greater freedom and took mischievous pleasure, not always shared by his passengers, in driving like the locals. As a witty polyglot, he revelled in the linguistic environment and was popular with his colleagues. He could lecture in Arabic and had a great ear for the nuances of local idiom, once introducing me to the myriad ways of saying *Ay wallah* – from the positive 'Absolutely!' to the sardonic 'Pull the other one' and all shades in between – depending on intonation.

In 1985 he was appointed to the staff at Heidelberg University. There he completed *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* and published on inscriptions from Tayma. By then we had become good friends, and he was to me, as to so many others, a friendly and helpful critic. He took pride in his Scottish ancestry and seldom travelled without his bagpipes, which he would produce at the slightest provocation. I recall him coming to stay in Dorset, where one evening he donned full Highland dress and played them *fortissimo* in the garden, to the stupefaction of the neighbourhood. In 1993 he finally returned to Birmingham, replacing both Lambert and the archaeologist Jeffrey Orchard, as lecturer. He was promoted to Reader in 1997.

Alasdair's mother, Trudy, was a local councillor in Birmingham. She nurtured in him a genuine empathy and strong sense of fairness. As a teacher of Assyriology, he was a great scholar who wore his learning lightly, encouraging his students to learn deeply but never trying to overawe them with his own erudition. He was also unconventional. An annual highlight of his classroom year was to leave Birmingham at dawn in a Land Rover full of students and head for the British Museum, where he would frogmarch them down to the basement to read cuneiform brick and cone inscriptions from the originals, under his watchful eye. His classes, which would inevitably include forays into Arabic or Zulu, were notable for their humour and use of apt examples. He was profoundly supportive of all his students and won their affection in return.

In 2013 Alasdair published *Hemerologies of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, a subject long at the centre of his interests. Following retirement in 2017, he was working on Assyrian literature and a host of smaller projects. He leaves behind a legacy as an insightful scholar, a genial colleague, a much-loved teacher, and a remarkable character. He is survived by his partner, Birgit Haskamp, and by Kristina and her children, on whom he doted.

William Facey, with thanks to Irving Finkel and Jonathan Taylor