

Sebastian Paul Brock
***Haddaya* of Syriac Studies**

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'Rise in front of the teacher in honor: For the teacher is almost a prophet'
Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932)

While Modern Linguistics has been revolutionized by Chomsky, and Modern Science by Stephen Hawking, so has Syriac Studies been championed and transformed by Sebastian P. Brock. With Brock's name ubiquitously attached to every single aspect of Syriac Studies, it has simply become a synonym to the field itself. In fact, today, there exists virtually no Syriac Studies scholar that does not recognize his name, or has not cited him in one way or another. Yet, despite all his fame, there exists no scholar with more humility about his accomplishments.

It was during his undergraduate studies at the University of Cambridge, England, that Brock was introduced to the world of Aramaic. There, he received a B.A. degree in 1962 after studying Classics (Greek and Latin), and Oriental languages, in particular Hebrew and Aramaic. Brock excelled as a student and graduated with 1st Class rank, an equivalent to *suma cum laude* in American Universities. Brock continued his post graduate studies at the University of Oxford. His doctoral dissertation was on the recensions of the Septuagint version of first book of Samuel of the Old Testament. After a successful viva, as the doctoral defense is called in Oxford, he received a D.Phil. (doctorate) degree in 1966.

It was in that same year that Sebastian Brock married Helen MacGill Charrington Hughes, a vivacious archaeologist with fervent interest in the Near East. Sebastian and Helen chose the underdeveloped region of Tur Abdin, southeast Turkey, as a destination for their honeymoon. The location of their not-so-romantic honeymoon destination further demonstrates the devotion and passion the couple had for Syriac-speaking Christianity.

It was on a momentous trip to Tur Abdin that the young scholar Sebastian met Mor (Mar) Philoxenos Yuhannon Dolabani, Syrian Orthodox Bishop of Mardin. Bishop Dolabani being a scholar himself with a vast knowledge of his own heritage took interest in the young English scholar. The bishop apparently had made a memorable impression on Brock as years later, he would comment on this experience indicating

that he saw in Dolabani a good-natured humble scholar, a humanist who led a simple life of scholarship and devotion. Perhaps it was then that Brock subconsciously recognized a kindred spirit in Dolabani and seized Dolabani as a role model. In fact it was not long ago that Brock was instrumental in establishing the Oxford-based Dolabani Fund to help students of the Syriac tradition to study at Oxford. Within each academic year, a few students from all denominations of the heritage from India, the Middle East, and the diaspora benefit from this fund.

Brock began his academic teaching career in 1963 when he became Assistant Lecturer at the Department of Theology at the University of Birmingham. Four years later, in 1967, he moved to Cambridge where he first became Lecturer in Hebrew, and then Hebrew and Aramaic, at the Faculty of Oriental Studies. In 1974, Brock moved to Oxford where he became Lecturer in Aramaic and Syriac at the Oriental Institute, and was made Fellow of Wolfson College there. Later he became Reader of Aramaic and Syriac Studies and held that position until his retirement in 2003 (Reader is equivalent to a full Professor in the American system). His first research student—his *bukhra*—was J. F. Coakley who later became a specialist on the modern Assyrian studies.

Sebastian P. Brock, during a lifetime of humble scholarship, has received a many accolades due his academic excellence. He was welcomed to the rather prestigious position of Fellow of the British Academy in 1977. Two years later, in 1979, he became a Corresponding Member of the Syriac Section of the Iraqi Academy during the short period when the Assyrians, Chaldeans and Syriacs were given “cultural rights” by the former Iraqi regime.

In 1982, Brock became Curator of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham. He also held the position of Vice-Chairman of the Oxford-based Aram Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies, and many other editorial positions.

As Syriac Studies was not just a career but rather a passion for Brock, he kept contact with the heirs of the Syriac tradition throughout the years of his scholarship. He hosted in his humble home many visitors and dignitaries. The visitor will notice on the lower floor a large pillow on which one sits in Eastern style. Brock always recalls that when Mar Dinkha IV, Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, visited him during his bishopric days, he sat on that same pillow on the floor. Indeed, humility and genuine hospitality is one attribute that everyone notices about Brock and his life style.

Brock's accomplishments in scholarship also embraced the various Syriac Churches who always appreciated his work and Brock the person. Indeed, in 1989, at the nomination of the Maronite Eparchy of St. Maron, USA, he was given the Order of St. Silvester from the Vatican. He was also given an Honorary Doctorate from the Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Rome. Recently, His Holiness Mor (Mar) Ignatius Zakka I, Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, bestowed upon Brock the title Commander of St. Ephrem, a dignity given for the first time to a lay person. In 2003, Beth Mardutho (The Syriac Institute), held a party at Oxford to honor Brock and named him *Haddaya* of Syriac Studies. The Syriac Orthodox Church was represented there by three bishops. Patriarch Zakka had instructed Mor (Mar) Yulius Y. Cicek, Metropolitan of Central Europe, to deliver to Brock a message, "the Syriac Church considers you one of the Church Doctors—*Malphone d-'Idto*."

Christianity in the Syriac-speaking world could not have been more divided throughout history. The theological positions of the Assyrian Church of the East and that of the Syriac Orthodox Church with regards to Christology have always been considered heretical in each other's eyes, and certainly by the outside world. Brock has been instrumental in demonstrating the orthodoxy of these Churches and how they should be understood from their own perspectives, respectively. His studies are tools that can be applied to bring closeness and unity of hearts between the various denominations Christian of the Syriac tradition.

If one were to ask Brock, "what is your specialty?" as I once did, he will humbly reply with a limited domain, something like "seventh century translations from Greek to Syriac." In reality, one cannot just pin a particular specialty in the field of Syriac studies in which Brock is an expert for he literally knows it all! He is truly a walking encyclopedia of knowledge, not just on matters Syriac, but on related disciplines as well, a veritable treasure indeed.

Brock is the author of over thirty books, and has published about 300 scholarly articles in various journals and collections. All this was done during his busy teaching career, and he will probably author much more now that he is retired. He wrote a number of books aimed at the general reader where he introduced writers such as St. Ephrem, Aphrahat, Mar Babai (Bawai) the Great, Mar Isaac of Nineveh and others to the English-speaking world. Recently, he co-authored *The Hidden Pearl*, an illustrated three volume set on the entire history of Syriac Christianity. His contributions to ecumenism have already been mentioned.

But Brock's contribution to the Syriac-speaking world goes beyond writing books and articles. He taught an army (relatively speaking) of scholars to have a passion for *suryayutha* (in the non ethnic sense of the word). Those who graduated at his hands include bishops and clergy of the various denominations of Syriac Christianity, both from the Middle East and especially India. His students learn from him *makkikhutha* 'humbleness' of scholarship.

Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932), the Egyptian Prince of Poets, once wrote in Arabic,

قم للمعلم وفه التبجيلا: كاد المعلم أن يكون رسولا

Rise in front of the teacher in honor

For the teacher is almost a prophet

Brock may not be a prophet in the prophetic sense of the word, but one can borrow another epithet that was so familiar to early Syriac writers such as Aphrahat and St. Ephrem: many of us—his *talmidhe* 'students'—truly believe that Brock, through his dedication to Syriac Christianity and his good deeds as a humanist, attained the state of *qaddishutha* 'consecration,' as the term is understood by early Syriac writers. Are we exaggerating? You can decide for yourself after you meet Mar (Mor) Sebastian of Oxford!