In Memoriam
Richard David Barnett

CBE, MA, DLitt, FBA, FSA (1909–1986)

Since its foundation nearly a century ago, this Society has owed its continuing vitality to a succession of individuals who, while being themselves able scholars, realized that enthusiasm is of little use without sustained address to humdrum tasks like administration, planning, proof-reading and begging, and have given generously of their time and energy to keeping our activities going at a cultural and scholarly level in which we may take pride. One thinks of Lucien Wolf and Israel Abrahams, of Albert Hyamson and Cecil Roth: and to the roll of departed giants we must now add the name of Richard Barnett, whose passing on 29 July 1986 we mourn.

This is not the occasion for an obituary account of close detail, but what is, perhaps, in place is to sketch the traditions and influences that moulded Richard, and thanks to which he was so well endowed with the gifts that he laid at the Society’s service—as its President, as chairman of its executive committee, as honorary editor of our publications, and in a host of other ways as well.

First, then, his home. Lionel Barnett, his father, began as a classical scholar, and while at Trinity College, Cambridge, he turned his attention towards Sanskrit; he went on to become in due course Keeper of the Oriental Books and Manuscripts at the British Museum and one of the leading indologists of Europe. He also commanded very significant Hebrew competence, and on his moving to London he was encouraged by Haham Dr Moses Gaster to join the Sephardi congregation, the Records Committee of which—designed to make accessible the Congregation’s important series of archives—was the elder Barnett’s creation. Richard’s home background thus gave him both an example and a pointer. During the First World War he was evacuated to Oxford, the architecture and atmosphere of which can hardly leave an intelligent child untouched; after which it was St Paul’s—still a bastion of humane yet rigorous training in the Greek and Latin classics—and so on to Corpus, Cambridge, and classical archaeology. Fieldwork in Asia Minor and Iraq, administrative experience at the British School of Archaeology at Athens and subsequently on the staff of the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum, gave him the foundation of his professional expertise. Then came the war and service in the Middle East, and so back to his Museum Department, to the headship of which—Egyptology having become a separate section—he in due course succeeded as Keeper of Western Asiatic Antiquities. All this time his stature and reputation as a specialist in Near
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Eastern antiquity were growing: a year or two before his death, they earned him the accolade of a volume of scholarly articles published in his honour. Here one can but mention his work on the Nimrud ivories and the reliefs that include illustrations of the Assyrian siege of Lakhish, and his masterly reorganization of the Assyrian and Babylonian galleries in the Museum, where the great gates flanked by their winged bulls can now be seen more or less as they were originally erected; and his creation of a room specially devoted to the archaeology of Palestine.

If it be asked how this scholarly achievement in another field is immediately relevant to the interests of the Jewish Historical Society of England, or indeed how Richard could find time amidst his other professional scholarly work to cultivate his interest in Anglo-Jewish history, part of the answer must lie in the self-discipline and judicious deployment of time, energy and resources that his career as a civil servant and an archaeologist taught him. His services to the Jewish Museum matched those that he gave to this Society, and the older ones among us will recall the impressiveness of the Tercentenary Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, with its valuable catalogue. The mounting of that exhibition was, of course, teamwork, but it was all done under his chairmanship and direction, and it bore the stamp of his own supreme professionalism. His publications in our Transactions and Miscellanea speak for themselves, but we should not overlook the amount of effort—much of it sheer drudgery—devoted by him to the improvement, or indispensable reorganization, of the work of others. His calendars and indexes of Sephardi burial records, circumcisions, and of autos da fé in Portugal—some of them not yet published—will greatly ease and fructify the work of his successors, who one hopes will not omit to acknowledge their debt to him. The 18th century—the century of rationalism and of the heyday of Anglo-Sephardism—was where he was happiest in Jewish history; and from that age’s supposed atmosphere of orderliness, perhaps, there in part derived the order that he brought to bear on the Sephardi community’s archives; a lasting memorial indeed, springing out of a love and dedication inherited from his father and bestowed on a Congregation whose synagogue in Bevis Marks and whose ritual he loved and, as an Elder, served so well.

Richard’s academic connections, both at home and abroad, stretched wide, and stood our Society in good stead. Because his scholarly judgement was much respected, recommendations from him carried weight: witness his advocacy of our cause with the British Academy, whence has come such valued subvention of our publication of the Plea Rolls. The memory of his genial humour and modest bearing is still fresh and will long endure with us. His beliefs and his loyalties ran deep, and his appreciation of the professional competence of his Israeli confrères was palpable; but enthusiasms, flag-waving, and jingoism of any sort was alien to his nature. Rather, he appreciated that while scholarship as an art is a mistress who demands both unbiased address and unremitting attention, the achievements of scholarship

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can generate a spirit of international understanding that percolates beyond the sheltered groves of Academe.

The Hebrew Bible ends with the edict of Cyrus authorizing the return of the Judean exiles from Babylon and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. While no external evidence directly confirms the biblical statement, there is strong indirect evidence in the well-known Cyrus Cylinder in the British Museum, which contains a similarly eirenec message to the temples of Babylon after Cyrus' capture of the city. When, in 1972, the late Shah of Persia celebrated the 2500th anniversary of the death of Cyrus with much pomp, the Cylinder was lent to Teheran, and became the symbol of the whole event; and it was Richard Barnett who was deputed by the Trustees of the British Museum to escort it. Like Cyrus, Richard was a man who valued peace. We may take pride in the circumstance that it was a Jew and descendant of those whose Aliyyah to Eretz Yisra'el Cyrus had facilitated, who was selected to be the Museum's emissary. As Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rabbi Hanina, scholars promote peace in the world.

Raphael Loewe
Dr Richard Barnett (1909–1986)