



“A Plea for Civilized Study and the Study of Civilization”

Citation

De Sena, W. 2021. “A Plea for Civilized Study and the Study of Civilization”. Academia Letters, Article 519. <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL519>.

Permanent link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37370928>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, WARNING: No applicable access license found.

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

“A Plea for Civilized Study and the Study of Civilization”

Wesley De Sena

123

Certain German scholars’ secular approach to studying Sanskrit in late 18th and early and middle 19th century Europe influenced the establishment of the Wales Professorship of Sanskrit at Harvard. This influence contrasted it with some English scholars’ religious concerns. While these English scholars were attempting to aid in the Christian conversion of the Hindus, those German⁴ scholars were leading the academy into comparative philology. The establishing of the Boden Professorship of Sanskrit at Oxford, the German dominion of the Sanskrit teaching professoriate in the Continent, and the German mentorship of early American scholars interested in the study of India attested to this interplay between a German secular approach and an English religious concern with and to the study of Sanskrit.

In 1832, English religious concerns obliged the Boden Professorship of Sanskrit at Oxford. Colonel Boden required his Professorship to deliver “a more general and critical knowledge of the [Sanskrit] language [that] will be a means of enabling [the English] to proceed in the conversion of the natives of India to the Christian religion” (Symonds 103). Boden regarded Hindus as pagan worshippers whose “civilization [being] barbaric...it [is] both dan-

¹According to Gombrich, “Sanskrit is the name of a language; but the word has a more general meaning... ‘elaborated,’ ‘refine,’ ‘cultured,’ ‘civilized,’...The Sanskrit language is the language of educated [people], and Sanskrit is the vehicle of civilization. Sanskrit... then, is civilized study, is the study of civilization, ... the study of Indian civilization in particular”

²According to Gombrich, civilization is “large-scale, uniting ‘local cultures’ (in the anthropological sense) in allegiance to the values embodied in a ‘high culture’ (29).

³Subtitle of Richard Gombrich’s inaugural lecture as Boden Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Oxford: “Being Sanskritic.”

⁴Other English scholars saw the issue differently. For example, William Jones may be regarded as “indicative of one kind of approach to the English interest in Sanskrit—that is, as an administrative/legal language,” as an anonymous reviewer of this paper on academia.edu noted.

gerous and a violation of the Christian spirit” (McGetchin 35). The Professorship intended to equip Christian ministers with a working knowledge of Sanskrit to translate the Bible into the sacred language of the Hindus to lead Hindus to regard the Bible as a holy book (Symonds 102). Gombrich conveys the English disappointment with Hindus who still considered the Bible less sacred than other Hindu scriptures: “Sathan leadeth those who are out of the pale of the Church around in the maze of error...” It further stirred in the Christian ministers “the greater detestation of these [Hindu] heresies and the more abundant thanksgiving of our calling” (Symonds 102). In other words, to aid in the conversion of the Hindus obliged the establishment of the Oxford Professorship.

The contest among English scholars to first hold the Boden Professorship of Sanskrit at Oxford must have accounted for Boden’s religious concerns. The search committee sought to answer “whether it was more important to elect the best Sanskrit scholar or the candidate who was most likely to aid in the diffusion of Christianity in India” (Symonds 104). According to Gombrich, Horace Wilson, who had studied Sanskrit with local pundits in India (Gombrich 12-13), had the best qualifications. Because Wilson maintained, however, that “India’s improvement would come from a renewed and vigorous study of her own learning” (Symonds 104), Reverend Robert Mill, his opponent, sought to defeat Wilson by accusing the latter, among other things, of being too irreligious and excessively committed to the academic study of Sanskrit in India (Symonds 104). Wilson’s commitment should lead Oxford not to elect him. As Gombrich recounts, Oxford officials, rejecting Mill’s attacks against Wilson, voted to elect Wilson to the Boden Professorship. The score, however, settled by a margin of mere seven points (Gombrich 12), indicative of a “missionary zeal and the nationalist spirit in the 19th century England” as Annie Montaut aptly assesses.⁵

In the meantime, certain German scholars engaged with a secular approach to Sanskrit scholarship. Having no imperialist goals in India, Germany produced scholars as “Franz Bopp and August Wilhelm Von Schlegel [who had earlier] experienced [a] Romantic fascination with [Sanskrit] and the linguistic [philological] possibilities opening with the study of [the language]” (McGetchin 76). The English Alexander Hamilton wrote one of these early romantic works to influence the German scholars, *On the Speech and Wisdom of the Indians*. Hamilton, a cousin of the American political leader, had taught Schlegel in Paris (Roche 1944) and, later, Franz Bopp. The latter would become the holder of the first chair of Sanskrit at the University of Berlin. One of Bopp’s students, Max Mueller, sought but failed to become the second holder of the Boden Professorship of Sanskrit at Oxford (Chaudhuri 41). Oxford officials worried that Mueller’s election might “place a whole array of German professors, spectacles on nose and pipe in mouth, in possession of our cloisters...questioning

⁵In an academia.edu review of this paper.

the Divine inspiration of the Bible” (Symonds 105). The English Monier Williams obliged Colonel Boden’s religious concerns upon founding the Boden professorship (Gombrich 9).

As Oxford attempted to discourage the rise of German secular scholarship in its cloisters, American scholars flocked to German universities. Edward Salisbury inspired his student, William Dwight Whitney, to go to Germany and study with Bopp in Berlin to “bring American Sanskrit studies on par with the highest standards of [continental] Europe” (Sinha 76). Salisbury had studied with Bopp in Berlin and had held the first endowed chair of Sanskrit in America - a University Chair of Sanskrit at Yale established in 1841. Early on, a romantic fascination with India, similar to the German scholars,⁶ drew American scholars to the study of Sanskrit. Weir relates that “the conveyance of such elevated spiritual matters in the balanced language of the eighteenth-century rationalism” led such American scholars to be “among the first in the United States to give the sacred texts of India a sympathetic reading” (Weir 37). Henry Ware Wales, a Harvard College graduate and one of these practitioners, eventually donated the funds to establish Harvard’s Wales Professorship of Sanskrit in 1903.

Wales received his name after the Unitarian minister Henry Ware, whose quarters young Wales lived while a sophomore, junior, and senior sophister at Harvard College.⁶ Wales graduated in 1838, and on the request of his family, attended Harvard Medical School graduating with an MD in 1841. Schaick relates, nonetheless, that Wales “did not practice [medicine]; [he was instead a] traveler and scholar” (30). After earning his MD, Wales traveled to Europe and, further, to the Orient. While in Europe, he studied at the University of Berlin, where Bopp held the chair of Sanskrit. However, it is unclear whether Wales had studied with Bopp while in Berlin. While no records attest to that,⁷ Bentinck-Smith affirms that during Wales’ stay in Berlin, he “discovered a better liking for languages and literatures...He learned to speak French, Italian, and German fluently...and studied Sanskrit and other Oriental languages” (531). By the time of his death, in 1856, Wales had bequeathed the Harvard library “nearly fifteen hundred books in more than a dozen different languages, particularly Sanskrit” (531).

The clauses for establishing the Wales Professorship of Sanskrit at Harvard clarified Wales’ wishes that the German secular approach to the study of Sanskrit inform the holder of the Professorship. Wales’ bequest reads that “said Professorship be established and filled without delay...by inviting some Foreigner learned in Sanskrit Language and Literature to fill the same, or by selecting some person therefor [sic], and sending him to Germany, and to India if required to qualify himself for said Professorship...It is my will that no person shall actu-

⁶Harvard University Catalogue 1837-1845, p17; and Harvard University Catalogue 1819-1837, ps. 17, 19, and 21.

⁷The online archives of the University of Berlin return no results for Henry Ware Wales. [http://edoc.huberlin.de/browsing/digi_hist_dokumente/index.php?!\[7\]=Periodika&_id=174752bb2f37923af4d79983b8b26d1f](http://edoc.huberlin.de/browsing/digi_hist_dokumente/index.php?![7]=Periodika&_id=174752bb2f37923af4d79983b8b26d1f)

ally be elected to fill said office without having a certificate of his competent qualifications from the Chief Professor of the Sanskrit Language of the University of London, or of Paris, or Berlin” (Bentinck-Smith 530). At the time, German scholars occupied the Sanskrit chairs at all three universities: Theodor Goldstucker in London, Julius Von Mohl in Paris, and Franz Bopp in Berlin.⁸

Therefore, a 19th-century German secular approach to the study of Sanskrit informed the establishment of the Wales Professorship of Sanskrit at Harvard. The early American scholars of India partook with the German scholars of a romantic fascination, enabling them to pursue a civilized study of Sanskrit, notwithstanding English religious concerns. Decades later, in his inaugural lecture as Boden Professor at Oxford in 1977, “A Plea for Civilized Study and the Study of Civilization,” Richard Gombrich notes that “though [*The Bhagavad Gita*’s] sentences are intelligible, it contains so many different doctrines, many of them mutually inconsistent... [that] the most diverse religious teachers have been able to find in it justification for their own teachings” (25). Gombrich’s insight proposes a scholarship of respect for the study of ancient civilizations. It should bear on the study of the sacred texts of Classical India, in particular. Yes, they can be open to many different interpretations, but scholars owe them their due respect as texts representing India’s religious ideas.

Works Cited

- Gombrich, Richard F. *On Being Sanskritic: A Plea for Civilized Study and the Study of Civilization*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1978. Print.
- Symonds, Richard. *Oxford and Empire: The Last Lost Cause?* Oxford: New York: Clarendon; Oxford UP, 1991. Print.
- McGetchin, Douglas T. *Indology, Indomania, and Orientalism: Ancient India’s Rebirth in Modern Germany*. Madison [N.J.]: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2009. Print.
- Sinha, Elmarsafy, Ziad, Bernard, Anna, and Attwell, David. *Debating Orientalism*. 2013. Print.
- Bentinck-Smith, William, and Stouffer, Elizabeth. *Harvard University: History of Named Chairs: Sketches of Donors and Donations*. Cambridge, Mass.: Secretary to the U, 1991. Print.

⁸Though this may have been more “a matter of gaining the status of the prestige of the European approaches to philology,” as an anonymous reviewer on academia.edu noted.

Van Schaick, John. *Characters in Tales of a Wayside Inn*. Boston: Universalist House, 1939. Print.

Chaudhuri, Nirad C. *Scholar Extraordinary: The Life of Professor the Rt. Hon. Friedrich Max Müller*, P. C. New York: Oxford UP, 1974. Print.