

Richard Keith Sprigg (1922-2011)

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With the death of Richard Keith Sprigg on September 8, 2011, the Himalayan scholarly community has to say farewell to this pioneering intellectual, who was a generous mentor and engaging friend to many of us. Keith Sprigg remains well known for his important contributions to Tibetan, Lepcha, Limbu, Burmese and other languages, as well as for his Firthian approach to phonology, applied to the field of comparative Tibeto-Burman linguistics.

Keith Sprigg was born in Melton Mowbray in the United Kingdom on March 31, 1922 and completed his first academic degree in Cambridge, where he received a First Class Honours in the Classical Tripos in 1942.

He joined the Royal Air Force during the Second World War and between 1943 and 1947 he served in the UK, India, Ceylon, Singapore and Japan. During this eventful period, he managed to pursue his linguistic studies and obtained War Degrees, a B.A. in 1944 and an M.A. in 1947.

In 1948, Keith started working at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London as a Lecturer in Phonetics. He studied Tibetan in Kalimpong and Gyantse, during visits in 1949 and 1950, during which time he was mentored by David Macdonald. This visit not only kindled a long-lasting interest in both Tibetan and Lepcha, but in Kalimpong Keith also met his future wife, Ray Margaret Williams, a great-granddaughter



Dr. Sprigg presents a paper to the Tenth Annual Conference of the Linguistic Society of Nepal at Kirtipur, November 1989.

Photo by Michael Hutt

of David Macdonald. Keith and Ray married in 1952 in Melton Mowbray.

During 1951 and 1952, the Lepcha scholar Karphoo Tamsang from Kalimpong worked with Keith on the Lepcha language at SOAS. In 1955-6, Keith and Ray went on an expedition to Nepal to do fieldwork for six months. The country had not been open to foreign visitors for long when they travelled from eastern Nepal to Kathmandu, which made for an interesting and impressive journey. Keith was able to collect abundant material on the languages he had become interested in, such as Limbu, Newar, Bantawa, Sherpa and Tamang.

Following this long fieldtrip, Ray and Keith had two children: David, born in 1957, and Maya, born in 1958. Keith continued to work at SOAS, and the first fieldtrip would be followed by many others, to Sikkim, Pakistan and India. He completed a Ph.D. in the 'Phonetics and Phonology of Tibetan (Lhasa dialect)', and was promoted to Reader in Phonetics at SOAS in 1968.

After Ray suffered a stroke on New Year's Eve of 1975, she remained partially paralysed and her health was fragile. In 1980, Keith took early retirement and he and Ray settled in Kalimpong. There, Dr Sprigg became something of an institution. He was much liked by the local residents, to whom he would often address an elaborate greeting in their native language, which left some of them dazzled even after many years of him doing so. Many scholarly guests from all over the world came to seek his advice and guidance, or simply to enjoy his and his wife's delightful company. Those who did not know Keith Sprigg personally in Kalimpong recall the sound of his bagpipes, which travelled far in the hills and was familiar to many.

In 1982 he was awarded a Litt.D. by the University of Cambridge, and on his 65th birthday a Festschrift was presented to him (D. Bradley, M. Mazaudon and E.J.A. Henderson, eds, 1988, *Prosodic Analysis and Asian Linguistics to honour R.K. Sprigg*, Pacific Linguistics). A bibliography of his work up to 1987 can be found in this Festschrift. For his work on Lepcha language, culture and history, Keith was awarded the K.P. Tamsang Lepcha Language and Literary Award in 1996. In 1997 he was made a life member of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association, which refers to him as 'a champion of the Lepchas'.

When Ray died in 1999, Keith returned to the UK and initially stayed with his children. He later remarried and lived in Crowborough, Sussex, with his second wife, Elizabeth. In his later years, Keith was struck by macular degeneration, but although his eyesight slowly deteriorated, he

kept working and completed a dictionary of Balti, which was published in 2002 (RK Sprigg, *Balti-English English-Balti Dictionary*, London: Routledge Curzon). Elizabeth and Keith enjoyed travelling and visited several conferences together. Keith kept in touch with the academic world and his colleagues and former students until his health started giving away. During the last year of his life, Keith was not in good health and his eyesight was very poor. He was lovingly nursed by his wife at home.

Those of us who have had the privilege of knowing this remarkable man may recall that Keith appreciated saying a cheerful goodbye, along the lines of 'Happy we have met, happy we have been, happily we part and happy we shall meet again.' We remember his intellectual sharpness, his generosity and his unfailing sense of humour. Keith Sprigg will be dearly missed by many.