

# Tom McArthur 1938–2020

JACQUELINE LAM

Tom McArthur, Honorary Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIoL), was a world-renowned linguist who knew no less than eight languages – Scots, English, French, German, Italian, Persian/Farsi, Sanskrit, Russian, and Cantonese. He maintained that universal understanding could only be achieved when languages are professionally used at the highest standard, and that being linguists, we have the tall order of enhancing communications across language boundaries and cultural barriers.

Tom was born in Glasgow, Scotland. He studied at the University of Glasgow (MA) and University of Edinburgh (MLitt, PhD). His rich international career started as an Educational Officer in the British Army; he was then Head of English at the Cathedral and John Connon School, and visiting professor at Bharatiya Vidya Bhaban University in Bombay, India. Later he was Director of Studies for the Extra Mural English Language Courses at University of Edinburgh, and subsequently Associate Professor of English at Université du Québec, Canada. When he returned to the UK in 1983, he decided to work as an independent academic. Since then, he had visiting professorships at numerous universities around the globe. He was a distinguished visiting professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and at Xiamen University of China. In 1999, he was awarded an honorary Doctorate by the University of Uppsala.

Tom was the founding editor of *English Today*: *The International Review of the English Language* and *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. He was on the editorial boards of the *International Journal of Lexicography*, *World Englishes*, *The Professional Journal of the Book World*, and was editorial advisor to *The Good Book Guide* and *The Hong Kong Linguist*. He was a consultant to well known organizations such as the BBC, Bloomsbury, Collins, Chambers, Longman, WHO, Henson International TV (creators of *The Muppets*), Government of Québec, Century Hutchinson (now Helicon), Macmillan, Time-Life Books, Routledge, Cambridge University Press, and Oxford University Press. He was also involved

in numerous broadcasts relating to the English language on the BBC World Service.

Tom was a notable lexicographer. He instilled life into words with the utmost clarity. This can be seen through all his publications, from his early *Collins Patterns of English* series, No. 1–7 (1972–1974), to his latest, *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (2018). He also pioneered *The Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English* (1981), which was the first of its kind – innovatively arranging words in themes when conventional A–Z dictionaries were prevalent in the educational sectors at the time. The *Lexicon* has been translated into Latin-American Spanish, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese, opening a practical avenue for learners to acquire languages in an effective bilingual manner.

Tom translated the *Bhagavad Gita*, a mystical poem and one of the most popular Hindu works on religion, from Sanskrit into English in the form of *An Easy-to-Read Bhagavad Gita* (1978). His aim was to introduce a culture that might not have been otherwise appreciated and understood by its readers. He salted the text with such basic Sanskrit terms as *atman*, *karma*, *buddhi*, *prakriti*, and the *gunas*, as he put it:

To edit [those words] out is too easy a step. They are now common in many other books, and so it is useful to see how the original writer of the *Gita* used them. They are part of a pattern of ideas that help make sense of the whole poem, a pattern that is only partially convertible into traditional English. The English language, instead, has to extend to include *them*. (p. 6)

He indicated that English should have the flexibility and the obligation to include words from other cultures to make itself more complete, alive, inclusive, and useful to the world.

Tom was a visionary. Before the World Wide Web existed, he already envisaged, in his four communicative shifts in *Worlds of Reference* (1986), that in no time at all reference depositories would be separated from reference objects. The electronically literate would drastically change the mindsets of

human race. His insight foresaw the time when we no longer required to be physically present in a building, such as a library, museum or book shop, to look for information. Instead we could access it from all corners of the world in the comfort at our own home. When social gatherings become impossible, and isolation shatters our daily lives right now amid the COVID-19 pandemic, technologies have come to the rescue. He also lucidly explained how 'reference science' operated within the framework of its history, principles, utility, and the future of reference works. His work has given a good grounding for knowledge lovers to start or expand their careers in making dictionaries, encyclopaedia, referencing systems, search engines, and the like.

He saw the importance of an organization that upholds the status of linguists to be on a par with those of the legal, medical, and engineering professions, and once clarified to an audience that *linguists*, in the context of CIoL, embraces everyone who uses more than one tongue for professional

purposes, as well as those specialists who study languages as a science. During my years as the Chair of the Hong Kong Society (1998–2002) and as editor of its journal, *The Hong Kong Linguist* (1994–2007), Tom lent us his relentless support.

Behind all those achievements there was a very kind, unassuming, and unconventional scholar who was always there to nurture young budding intellectuals. He always accepted new ideas with open arms, always wittily faced adversity, and was always there to help the less fortunate. Even during his long struggle with cancer and dementia, his compassion never faltered. We miss him sorely and he will never be forgotten.

*A professional linguist, specializing in English and Chinese, Jacqueline Lam lives in and works from Cambridge. She was formerly the chair of The CIoL Hong Kong Society and the editor of its journal, The Hong Kong Linguist.*

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