



## BUNTING, BASIL CHEESMAN

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**BUNTING, Basil Cheesman** (b. Scotswood Upon Tyne, Northumberland 1st March 1900; d. Hexam General Hospital, Northumberland, 17 April 1985), poet, linguist, translator, journalist, diplomat, and spy.

Bunting was born into a comfortable middle class family. His father, Thomas Lowe Bunting (1868-1925) was a physician and his mother, Annie Cheesman (1875-1968) was the daughter of a mining engineer. His early education was at Quaker schools in Yorkshire and Berkshire. His school holidays were spent at a Quaker centre in the village of Briggflatts in Yorkshire. At the end of the First World War he was imprisoned (June 1918-early 1919) as a conscientious objector. When released, Bunting first spent a short time at the London School of Economics, but abandoned higher education for a life in London's literary society. He met and became friendly with many famous writers such as T. S. Eliot, Ford Madox Ford and Ezra Pound. The last of these had a long lasting influence both on his poetry and on his interest in Persian.

Bunting followed Ezra Pound to Rapallo in Italy in 1924. He returned to Newcastle in 1925 on his father's death. He lived in poverty for some years and was supported by his mother. In 1929 he traveled to Rapallo via Germany and Venice where he met his first wife Marian Gray Culver (1900-1982), the daughter of an American businessman, whom he married in July 1930. They had two daughters, (Bourtai and Roudaba), and a son whom Basil never saw. Marian left Basil for America in 1937 with the two daughters and pregnant with the future Rustam. They divorced in 1940. Rustam died of polio in 1952 at his boarding school in New Hampshire. Bunting's poem 'A Song for Rustam'



(Bunting, 2000, p.197) speaks of his loss and inner turmoil. Formally the poem also has its roots both in English elegy and the *martīya* genre of Persian poetry, with which Bunting would have been familiar; the names (except for Bourtai) given to his children are indicative of his growing love for the *Šāh-nāma*. His interest in Persian had started in early 1930 when he had picked up a volume of the *Šāh-nāma* in French in Genoa; he took it to Rapallo and read it for the Pounds. Seeing his enthusiasm Pound bought him a three-volume copy of the original, and with the help of Richardson's dictionary Bunting taught himself to read Persian. His enthusiasm for Ferdowsi is immortalized in Ezra Pound's Canto 77: "If Basil sing of Shah Nameh" (Pound, p. 488). In an earlier Ode written in 1937 on a boat on the Essex coast Bunting invokes 'Samangan' where Rustam begat Sohrab in the *Šāh-nāma*. The poem is a powerful expression of his feelings at the loss of his family: "Let them remember Samangan, the bridge and tower / where we looked out from the walls to the marble mountains, / ate and lay and were happy an hour and a night; / Let them remember Samangan, remember / they wept to remember the hour and go (Bunting, 2000, p. 127).

In 1942, during the Second World War, Bunting joined the Royal Air Force; because of his knowledge of Persian he was sent to Iran, first as an interpreter, rising to the rank of Squadron Leader, based within the Baḳtiāri region, and later starting work as an intelligence officer for MI6. He is thought to have quelled a German supported Baḳtiāri uprising (Alldritt, p. 103). In Iran he quickly mastered many of the local dialects. His squadron was moved to the Mediterranean in 1943. Towards the end of the War, Bunting was ordered back to London and then appointed vice-consul in Isfahan, of which he became an avid admirer. His job combined espionage and diplomacy; he had to deal with both American and Russian Intelligence Services. After 18 months in Isfahan, he was recalled back to England (June 1946). In the spring of 1947 he was once more sent to Iran as Chief of Political Intelligence in Tehran. He traveled extensively within Iran during his service. During his first year in Tehran he met and fell in love with the fourteen-year-old Sima Alladadian (b. 1931), an Armenian Kurd, thirty years his junior, whose sister was married to another British Agent, Ronald Oakshot. They married on the 2nd Dec. 1948, the marriage lasting until 1979. Because of his marriage to an underage girl Bunting lost his position at the British Embassy, but continued his important intelligence work under the guise of being correspondent for *The Times* in Tehran; he retained this post until April 1950. His contract with *The Times* was not renewed after Sima at the age of fifteen gave birth to their first child, Sima-



Maria, in January 1950. They left Iran in April. Their son Thomas Faramy (Fariborz) was born 12th Dec 1952 in Britain. Robert Payne who stayed with the Buntings in Šemirān in 1949 describes vividly the Bunting household (Payne, pp. 194-7). Bunting was reappointed *Times* correspondent in Oct. 1951 but was expelled by the government of Prime Minister Mossadeq in April 1952.

Bunting loved and admired many of the early Persian poets. He wrote extensively about them to Louis Zukofsky and in his introduction to Omar Pound's translations (1970). The *Collected Poems* (1968) contains "Overdrafts" from Ferdowsi, Rudaki, Manučehri, Sa'di and one *rubai'* of Hafez, which was originally sent in a letter to Zukofsky but appears as Ode I. 28 under his own name. His justification was that there was not "much of Hafiz left in the product" (Ford, p. 202). In fact, aside from the break up of the form, it is an accurate translation (Loloī and Pursglove, 2000, pp. 201-3). The simplicity and economy of language as well as clarity of diction and musical rhythm of early Persian poetry are qualities he believes any good poet should possess and ones that he strove to produce in his own poetry and translations. Although there are still some as yet unpublished translations, many of his previously uncollected "Overdrafts" from Persian appear in *Complete Poems* (2000). They include translations from the above poets and 'Obayd Zākāni's *Muš o gorba*, as "The Pious Cat" (also translated by Omar Pound). This is perhaps the only one of his Persian translations in which he imitates successfully the rhyming couplets of the original, and the ironic tone of Zākāni is beautifully re-created, despite the modernization of the subject. His first translation, however, was a long piece from the *Šāh-nāma*: "From Faridun's Sons", published by T. S. Eliot in his influential periodical *The Criterion* (April 1936). Bunting's translations are free and in a variety of English poetical forms. Some are very accurate, at least as regards subject, such as the translations from Ferdowsi and Rudaki. His aversion towards any kind of mysticism has stripped his translations of Hafez of any Sufi implications. He wrote "Persian poetry has suffered badly from neoplatonic dons determined to find an arbitrary mysticism in everything" (Pound, p. 11). His language in these versions of Hafez is more ironic and his music terser than the original. What makes his translations outstanding is the concise language, marked by that economy of expression which is characteristic of Bunting's own poetry. He believed that "[a] good translator intends to make the same impression on his readers as the original poet made on his"; (Makin, p. 46) and in the introduction to his *Collected Poems*, he wrote "I have set down words as a musician pricks his score, not to



be read in silence, but to trace in the air a pattern of sound that may sometimes be pleasing.” Indeed his Persian “Overdrafts” impart more of the tone and poetic qualities of their originals than many more literal translations do.

A complicated character, Bunting’s love for Iran, its people and culture was enduring, and his experiences there are reflected in his own poetry. His long poems which are entitled “Sonatas” include two biographical poems: *Briggflatts*, and *The Spoils*. The second part of the latter is devoted to his life in Iran: “Taj is to sing ... / he had cadence and phrase from Hafez ... / but Moluk-e-Zarrabi / draws her voice from a well / deeper than history” (Bunting, 2000, pp. 52-3). The language here is typically elegant and yet straightforward, speaking of nostalgic moments without sentimentality or exoticism.

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