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Ralph Russell: Teacher, Scholar, and Friend

By Marion Molteno

Wherever Urdu is spoken Ralph Russell will be remembered as an Englishman who loved Urdu. He had an exceptional command of the language, loved speaking it, and enjoyed meeting Urdu speakers of every section of society. He studied Urdu literature, not just as an academic pursuit but to find in it reflections of experience that would be valuable to him in his own life. Through his writing and translations he made ghazal poetry intelligible to thousands of readers for whom it would otherwise have remained inaccessible.

He had a huge impact as a teacher. He developed a highly effective style of teaching the language to English speakers, first at university level, and then, when large numbers of South Asians came to settle in Britain, in the wider community. Through the courses he initiated, thousands of English speakers learnt to speak Urdu at a basic level, which had a transformational effect on their relationships with people in communities of Pakistani origin in Britain. He also became concerned about the loss of language by children in immigrant communities, and campaigned for Urdu and other minority languages to be taught within the British education system.

To those lucky enough to know him personally, he was a stimulating colleague, generous in his appreciation, outspoken when he felt the need to be so. He was an inspirational mentor to hundreds of people who were working in similar fields, each of whom felt individually supported to become what they might otherwise not have been. He was a man of deeply felt humanist convictions and clear moral principles, who brought this understanding to bear on all aspects of his life. And with all that, he was an intensely loving and fun-loving friend.

That he achieved so much, and worked with such long-term dedication at the tasks he had set himself, reflects the kind of person he was. In his autobiography, *Findings Keepings*, Ralph wrote:

There have been three main strands of my life: the commitment to the fundamental values which made me a communist, the study of Urdu, and an aware-

ness of love as the fundamental feature of true humanity... To me the three strands have always been inextricably intertwined, each informing the other.

Francis Robinson, a historian of Islam in South Asia, has neatly summarised the effect of this ‘intertwining’:¹

These interacting strands are key to understanding the nature and direction of Ralph’s academic work. His communism led to his study of Urdu so that he could communicate with his Indian sepoy [when posted to the Indian army during WWII]. His belief in love led him, amongst other things, to focus on the great Urdu love poets, in particular Ghalib. His belief in the service of his fellow human beings meant that his academic work had to be socially useful. So his work on Urdu literature was designed to make it accessible to those who knew nothing of the Urdu literary tradition. So his teaching of Urdu language was designed to produce students who could begin to speak the language from the very first class, and make it work for them in their daily lives.

Ralph was, above all, someone who loved people, and for whom that love was both wide and deep. With Hasrat Mohani he believed that

All love is unconditionally good,
Be it for God, be it for human beauty.

For Ralph this was no simplistic form of words. His belief in the value of love informed both his personal and his working life, and was a key factor in his passionately held interpretation of the Urdu ghazal, which became the centre-piece of his work in Urdu literature. It appealed to him strongly that the beloved of the ghazal could be interpreted either as a human beloved or in a mystical sense. To people who knew that he was an atheist it seemed surprising that he was so at home with the concept of the love of God as expressed in the ghazal. To him it presented no difficulty. He understood it as a commitment to high ideals, of which he had plenty, or a sense of universal love, something that in earlier times could only have been understood in religious terms, but that today can also bear a humanist inter-

pretation. In the same way he would happily sing the Christian hymns he had been brought up with and give a human rather than divine interpretation to words such as

Surely thy sweet and wondrous love
Shall measure all my days.

A basic tenet of his belief was that love is indivisible. He was distressed that Faiz, with whom he in other respects shared a great deal – they were both progressive in political outlook, and both deeply familiar with the ghazal tradition - should have written the poem

Mujh se pehli si muhabbat, meri mahbub, na maang -
My love, do not ask me for that former love again -

in which the poet tells his beloved that he now has to give his energy to a political struggle, so will be less able to give his beloved full commitment. To Ralph it made no sense to think of love as something finite, where if you gave more in one direction there would be less available for another. To him love was a way of being, and the more you practiced it, in *all* your relationships and *all* your undertakings, the more it would grow, and the greater would be your power for good.

And that is how he lived his own life. He committed himself fully to his political values, giving time and energy to working for things he believed in, being outspoken even though it cost him other people's approval or professional advancement. For sixty years he seemed tireless in his dedicated work for Urdu, and during that time listened to and encouraged literally hundreds of people in their own endeavours, giving each his full attention. And to the remarkably large number of people with whom he had a strong personal relationship, he was an irreplaceable spirit, a very special friend.

Each person who knew Ralph will have their own story, their own way of remembering him. Here are a few memories from people who knew him in the decades before I met him. Chris Freeman was a life-long friend, starting from the days when they were both students in the Communist Party in Cambridge. They later shared a house for some years:

During the war [when he was posted in India] he wrote lovely letters which taught me about India and about Urdu and world literature. One of his many fine characteristics was that he educated not only his students but his friends too. An-

other which made him an exceptional and wonderful person was that he remained true to the ideals of his youth throughout his life and lived by those ideals. This did not make him a dogmatic ideologist because he always kept his sense of humour even about his own beliefs. He always sang as he did household chores, often parodies of revolutionary songs, which he made up himself.

Chris's daughter, Susie, who was a child in that shared household, said When I think of Ralph it makes me smile. He was a rare and wonderful person who exuded love, and happy love at that!

Ursula Rothen Dubs was one of his earliest students at SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where he headed the Urdu department for thirty years. She remembers the vivid way he introduced her to Urdu literature.² As she read her way slowly through the prescribed texts he said,

‘At this speed you will never get through them all, so I’ll read them out to you’ which he proceeded to do throughout the four years. And how Ralph enjoyed himself! How he laughed at Khoji’s misdeeds! How he enjoyed Nazir’s market scenes! So much so that instead of looking at the text I watched Ralph’s face as he read. How he suffered with the unfortunate lovers! How he filled the bare little winter room with the garden greenery and the mauve clouds of the rainy season! How he felt with the lovers, the indifference of their various beloveds and at the imaginative doings of the revolving heavens! Ralph did teach, yes. Unforgettable his way of getting through all those drawn-out relative sentences, but even more he *lived* Urdu literature and made a student feel the innermost emotions of the writers and poets. My life has been enriched ever since. The feelings of mankind are the same the world over; poets of different cultures just find different words for expressing them. Thank you, Ralph, for making me realize this.

Ibadat Brelvi, an Urdu scholar whom Ralph first met in Delhi immediately after Partition and who subsequently moved to Pakistan, worked alongside Ralph at SOAS in the 1960s. His home in Lahore was Ralph’s base whenever he visited Pakistan. He wrote a chapter on his impressions of Ralph which give a vivid picture of his extraordinary capacity for work, his puckish delight in verbal play in

Urdu, and his openness to enjoying life in a Pakistani village. (A translation was published in the 2009 issue of *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, along with many other tributes to Ralph. www.urdustudies.com)

Sughra Choudhry was one of the first of the second generation of Pakistanis settled in Britain who came to study Urdu in SOAS. She went on to teach it, and then to become chief executive of the Aga Khan Educational Services in Pakistan. Ralph became for her a life-long mentor:³

He was the most approachable of lecturers and showed a real interest in his students' personal as well as professional lives. As a British born Pakistani of Kashmiri origin, learning Urdu was a 'returning to roots' experience for me. I admired his immense knowledge of Urdu and Urdu literature and his cool ability to appreciate as if from within and yet be able to stand outside and criticise with reason. Facilitated by discussions with Ralph, I learnt to take what I needed to take from both my cultures and to adapt or reject things I questioned.

Terry Byres, an economic historian of South Asia, was for years Ralph's colleague at SOAS and a member of the SOAS Left Group which Ralph led during the rapidly changing political context of the 1970s. He remembers him as

a brilliant organizer. He was articulate to a marked degree, and he was indomitable. He was fiercely honest and a loyal friend. It was a great privilege to have worked with him and to have been his friend.

My own first meeting with Ralph was in 1982, a year after he had retired from SOAS and was very busy running Urdu courses for people outside the university. I was in a way typical of the kinds of people he was now teaching. I was running English classes for women who had come from elsewhere to live in Britain, many from India and Pakistan, and I wanted to put my relationships with the students in our classes on a more equal basis by learning one of their languages while I was teaching mine. But after two years of trying to learn Hindi on my own, while I could struggle through reading and writing at a basic level I could still hardly speak two sentences confidently. I was depressed about my lack of progress, and feeling I was failing at something that was potentially important. Then I saw Ralph at work

and, like many others, knew immediately that this was someone who could help me get there. I asked him, if I switched to Urdu, would he take me on. He used to laughingly tell the story of how he responded – he said that the only time he could possibly fit me in would be before breakfast once a week. I instantly agreed. He was amused that I was so keen – I was amazed at my luck that he had said yes. Within half a year my latent knowledge of Hindi had been transformed, and I could chat to people in Urdu about everyday things.

He was an extraordinary one-to-one teacher, effortlessly zoning in to the appropriate level for each learner, and making his interest in talking to you so obvious that it overrode the difficulties, and you found you could respond, far more than you had thought your struggling brain was capable of. He had also prepared a course book so well suited to the context that I and others like me were learning in, and so linguistically thorough, that we could work through it on our own between lessons and surprise ourselves with our progress.

Then, with hardly time for me to breathe in-between, he persuaded me to co-teach with him on a beginners' Urdu course. The courses he had pioneered had become so popular that he alone could not meet the demand. The reason was clear – his methods *worked*, unlike those of many well-meaning Pakistani teachers in adult education classes who used the methods they had grown up with, that is, starting with the alphabet. Typically half the class would drift off in frustration before they had learnt to speak one sentence. Ralph got complete beginners talking from the word go, and didn't bother them with the script unless they said had reasons for wanting to learn to read. Most didn't – they just wanted to be able to talk to people from India and Pakistan whom they were meeting in their daily lives. Ralph travelled all over the country to teach groups who invited him, and didn't bother whether he was paid or not. And to help him meet the growing demand, he launched his own more advanced students into being co-teachers, using his course materials.

When he suggested I start teaching alongside him I was stunned. I told him it was impossible – my Urdu was no way near fluent enough. He said, 'You only have to be fluent in what's in Part I of my course, and you are that already.' He won, and I joined his growing team, and got drawn into six years of using holidays and weekends teaching on intensive Urdu courses.

Neither I nor the others would have stuck with it if it had not been so much fun. Ralph just had a way of making the most serious endeavour enjoyable. The ones I remember best are the week long residential courses at Chorley College in Lancashire, where most of the learners were teachers in schools with large numbers of children from Pakistani families, many of whom knew no English when they first arrived at school. There were three or more courses a year through most of the

1980s, and many of the same people used to come back each time, and in between courses would get together with friends from the course to keep practicing. I was helping Ralph teach and my own Urdu was pushing ahead through the experience. By the end of each week's course we were all on a high – we felt we had been on an amazing journey together, and that something which had previously seemed unattainable was increasingly within our grasp, if we could just go on working at it. The unique nature of that experience, shared so intensely with each other, was something none of us could adequately explain to the partners and friends we went back to. Special friendships formed among us, and Ralph was the delightful magician who had made it all happen - through the systematic logic of his course materials, the effectiveness of his teaching style, but just as much through his pleasure in all of us and the sense of fun he generated.

Jill Matthews, a teacher who had helped set up the Chorley courses, describes the atmosphere:

We were devoted to his teachings because in learning the language we better understood the culture. 'Them' versus 'us' went out the window along with stereotypes and sanctimonious platitudes. We came away from the Chorley College courses exhilarated because we had been so real and alive.

Jill Catlow, another regular Chorley attender, remembers:

I loved the way our lessons were interspersed with insights into Urdu speakers' culture and way of life, both here in the UK and in Pakistan. These were sometimes very funny, such as his story about the All Asia Engineering Company which was a small bicycle repair shop run by one of his friends; sometimes empathetic, such as stories about well qualified people living in this country who were unable to get suitable employment due to discriminatory policies. Sometimes the insights were linked to the language structures we were learning. I particularly remember realising how many things that we express actively in English are expressed passively in Urdu and pondering on whether this in fact reflected or indeed promoted a fatalistic way of viewing life's twists and

turns - if Allah wills it or Inshallah! Lateness, marriage, pregnancy and broken pencils are all things that just happen to us. Knowledge comes to us, or perhaps in some cases doesn't!

It was great to go away from the Chorley residential courses and immediately be able to try out what I had learned with the children I taught, with their parents, with local shop keepers, taxi drivers and Urdu speaking colleagues. Most importantly Ralph was genuinely interested in each and every one of his students, which made us all feel very special indeed.

There were Chorley in-jokes and vocabulary, often centred around the personality of Ralph. One was about his openly expressed pleasure in being surrounded by a group of students who were mostly women – whom Jill Matthews called his 'harem'. With his preference for one-to-one teaching he managed to make each of them feel that he was teaching them individually. Someone said it was like Krishna and the *gopis* - all these women hanging on his every word, and each thinking she was the only one he was dancing with. Another was about the Roman transcriptions of the sounds of Urdu, devised by Firth but which Ralph popularised in his courses. Ralph insisted that we learn to use the transcription accurately, to be sure we would be pronouncing new words correctly. The script became known as the *Ralphabet*, or *Ralphy* for short. When one of the teachers used a word that was new to the students, they would say, 'Can you write that for me in Ralphy?'

The fact that he was an internationally known scholar of Urdu, and was here spending his efforts teaching at a basic level that carried no status in academic eyes did not worry Ralph in the slightest. He loved the engagement with so many different people, and was delighted that so many English speakers *wanted* to learn to communicate with Urdu speakers. He once wrote that Urdu speakers 'have taught me more than I could have ever expected. I want to help others, at *every* level, to have access to what Urdu speaking people can give to them, and a means of communicating what they in turn can give to Urdu-speaking people.'

During those same years Ralph was engaged in 101 tasks to do with encouraging the teaching of Urdu in schools. He had formed a National Council of Urdu Teaching and applied to it not only the meticulous attention to detail for which he was well known, but also the considerable skills in political leadership he had developed as a student organizer in the Communist Party, and applied later among left-wing academics in British universities. His work in the National Council for Urdu

Teaching tapped into all those qualities, and he needed his sense of humour in this context every bit as much as in his days of challenging the Communist Party hierarchy. Many of the Pakistani-origin teachers he was working with had a great deal invested in their professional standing and resented any challenge to their expertise. Only a minority were seriously interested in trying to adjust their traditional methods, acquired in Pakistani schools decades earlier, to the totally different context of children of Pakistani families growing up in Britain.

Over the years I saw Ralph often in situations where he was working with such teachers, and was always amazed at how comfortably he managed what could have been tense relationships. The basis of it was his genuine interest in each person he was talking to. It was obvious that he really wanted to hear the story of how they had each got into this work and what they were trying to do. He was appreciative of effort and made people feel recognized. But he never backed away from the task of challenging people's approaches if he thought that necessary. His standing as a scholar of Urdu gave him a unique legitimacy, but his success came as much from the way he had of being completely frank while remaining warm and respectful to the person whose work he was challenging. There was always lots of laughter in these exchanges, and much quoting of Urdu poetry. That his interventions were received in the spirit in which they were given was shown by the fact that scores of teachers came to him to talk about the difficulties they faced, and sent him their materials to comment on. Mahfooz Hussain, a Lancashire Pakistani who co-taught on the courses in Chorley, said, 'Ralph was wonderful and influenced my life immensely. I still think of him as the most charismatic person I ever met and had the pleasure to work with.'

Apart from his influence on scores of individuals, Ralph's political understanding made him alert also to the structural pressures which put obstacles in the way of Urdu being effectively taught. He sat on committees to reform the public examination structure to bring Urdu into line with other modern languages. He advised the education authorities in cities where he had contacts through the National Council, and gave lectures on the cultural backgrounds and educational needs of South Asian communities, leaving behind an atmosphere of much greater openness. One manager of a multi-cultural unit in Waltham Forest said she wished she could carry him around in her pocket as a resource. His own personal input was always in relation to Urdu, but the work had spin-off effects for the teaching of all minority languages.

One activity to which he devoted hours of time was meeting publishers who were willing to produce simple bi-lingual stories for primary-age children, and painstakingly checking the Urdu translations himself. It all seemed natural at the time, part of his bigger task of encouraging bi-lingualism. I think back to it now

and wonder whether there was ever another scholar of his standing who would have given time to this while he was still engaged in translating Ghalib.

During the 1990s Ralph retired from most of these activities to concentrate on completing his work on Urdu literature, and to write his autobiography. But people kept coming to him, he took on new students in his home, and to his last days he never stopped being engaged, never stopped feeling intensely interested in everyone he was with. Mohammad Talib, an anthropology fellow at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, came to know Ralph only in his last year when he was already very frail. He said that seeing Ralph in that state summon his energy to teach and interact with other people made him understand the concept of ‘non-alienation’ ! Sheila Rosenberg asked if she could visit him to get advice about something she was writing. It was her first visit, and turned out to be just three weeks before he died:

He was so warm, welcoming and knowledgeable. He taught me a lot but was also interested in my project. He invited me to call again in a month’s time. And I am writing this now instead. I shall always value that afternoon visit.

To all the people who never met him personally, Ralph’s lasting contribution will be through his writing. There are many fine scholars of Urdu literature, and Ralph always stressed that those who had grown up with Urdu as their mother tongue, in families where Urdu poetry was constantly quoted, were bound to have a knowledge of Urdu literature more extensive and more rooted than his. But as an English speaker who had come to Urdu only as an adult, he brought something unique, which in the end enabled him to open up the riches of Urdu literature to thousands of new readers.

From the early 1950s when he began his fruitful collaboration with Khurshidul Islam, Ralph had a clear sense of what should be the central focus of his life’s work – to provide English translations of a quality that would make it possible for people who did not know Urdu to appreciate some of its greatest literature.

The most challenging part of that task, and the one closest to his heart, was to present the ghazal poets, Mir and Ghalib, whose poetry had greatly enriched his own understanding of life. In his landmark essay, *The pursuit of the Urdu ghazal*, he described his initial difficulties in appreciating the ghazal, and how he eventually

found his way through them. He drew creatively on that experience to make ghazal poetry intelligible to others who like him had to approach it from the outside.

By 1969 he and Khurshid had produced their two great books, *Three Mughal Poets* and *Ghalib, Life and Letters*, which are probably still the books for which Ralph is best known. *Three Mughal Poets* includes three chapters on Mir which were largely Ralph's work. They were my first introduction to ghazal poetry, and I still feel they provide the most effective way of presenting it, not only to anyone new to Urdu, but also to the increasing number of people who have grown up in an Urdu speaking environment but don't know much about ghazal poetry.

Ghalib, Life and Letters, gives a vivid reconstruction of Ghalib's life through translations of his letters and diaries. He and Khurshid thought of it as Volume 1 of a three volume work on Ghalib, and started work on the second volume, which would include translations of the most significant verses from all Ghalib's ghazals. They worked on this for decades, and it became the central focus of Ralph's work on literature. Khurshid would come to Britain, Ralph would go to India, and they would sit together meticulously going through each verse, making sure that Ralph understood all the nuances of each Urdu or Persian couplet before he began work on his translations. From the mid 1980s Ralph felt their work was nearly complete, but Khurshid was never willing to agree that they were ready to publish, nor yet willing to make time to complete it. In the end Ralph began to publish some of his translations on his own, over thirty years after they had begun work on them. An initial short selection was published in India in 2000 as *The Famous Ghalib*, with the Urdu original alongside the English translation, and transcriptions in Devanagari and Roman script, thus making it accessible to the widest possible readership. The full collection was finally published in 2003 – in Pakistan as *The Seeing Eye* (published by Alhamra), and in India as part of *The Oxford India Ghalib*, (Oxford University Press.) For anyone who knows some Urdu, the Alhamra edition is the more satisfying because it gives the Urdu/Persian verses alongside the English translations.

Ralph accompanied his translations with interpretative essays which illuminated the traditional ghazal concepts, and a chapter called *On translating Ghalib* in which he wrote perceptively about the barriers to translation and his approach to getting round them. He put the highest value on faithfulness to the *sense* of the original but did not try to replicate Urdu's poetic diction, convinced that for English readers flowery language was more likely to diminish the power of the verse than enhance it. His translations seem at first reading deceptively simple, but they have an uncluttered precision, and the more you read them the more you become aware of how the subtleties have been captured.

Meanwhile Ralph had begun bringing together the many articles and translations of other Urdu writers that he had produced over the years. These were published in the UK and India as *The Pursuit of Urdu literature: a select history* in 1992 and *Hidden in the lute: An Anthology of Urdu Literature* in 1995. He used translated extracts to share his eclectic enjoyment of literature of all kinds, from the religious leader, Khwaja Hasan Nizami's chatty guidance to his followers on everyday matters, to Rusva's taboo-breaking story of a Lucknow courtesan, *Umrao Jan Ada*. In 20th C literature he translated stories by many of the writers linked to the Progressive Writers Movement, most of whom he knew personally and with whom he shared a political outlook. The stories he chose reflected their and his shared empathy with people of all kinds, and strongly held humane values. He also wrote perceptively about the movement itself. The only full-length prose works he translated were his colleague Aziz Ahmad's novel *Aisi Bulandi, Aisi Pasti* (with the English title, *The Shore and the Wave*), and Anis Qidvai's moving memoirs of the Partition period, *In Freedom's Shadow*. As a translator of prose he had an extraordinary facility. I have heard him dictate a translation straight onto cassette as his eyes read the Urdu original. He would afterwards get it transcribed and would correct it in his usual meticulous way, but the flow and the instinctive matching of idioms was there first time round.

There are still few English speakers who have any idea of Urdu literature, and Ralph's books never reached a mass audience. But their impact on those who have found them has been powerful. Helen Goodway is one such person. She describes her excitement at discovering *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* in her local library at a stage when she knew very little about Urdu literature – she later went on to co-edit the Urdu/English journal *Tadeeb*. She admits to having deprived other readers in her home town of access to the book for quite a while by renewing it seventeen times!

It has been of profound importance for me. It is subtitled *A Select History* but, whatever else I read on the subject, it is this work which provides the framework of knowledge on which to rest everything else. I made an unannounced approach to Ralph. His response to my enquiries was immediately fertile, generous and encouraging to all aspects of my journey [in discovering Urdu literature.] Part of the beauty of *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* is the limpid clarity of its language. I understand that Ralph is renowned for the clarity and beauty of his use of Urdu. The quality

of directness, that lies at the heart of his linguistic powers, matches, I think, his character as an honest human being.

The people Ralph hoped to reach through his translations and writing were not just those who knew nothing about Urdu. He hoped also that his books would be read by South Asians who for whatever reason would find it difficult to appreciate Urdu literature in its original form. He wrote for Urdu speakers in Pakistan and India who have been English-medium educated and can more easily read English novels than Urdu poetry, for a second and third generation settled in Britain or the USA, who cannot read the Urdu script and may even have lost the ability to speak Urdu, but want to know about its literature. And also for the many people in India or in Indian communities elsewhere who don't know Urdu but know that it has a rich poetic tradition and want to find out about it. One such person is Deepak Kripilani. Growing up in Bombay with no apparent Urdu influences, he was fascinated by the lyrics of Hindi film songs, which he then discovered had often been written by Urdu poets. That led to a desire to read Urdu poetry directly. Some way along that journey

I discovered Ralph Russell on a late November afternoon in 1991. I came across his book *Three Mughal Poets* (co-authored by Khurshidul Islam) in Delhi - a first-of-its-kind Urdu-English translation of the classical poets. The thing that struck me was the ability of the authors to reconstruct and bring alive the lives of Mir, Sauda and Mir Dard and the times they lived in. It was both fascinating and engrossing. The narrative catered to my interest in history as well, the difference being the perspective, poets in place of kings, noblemen and invaders.

Then came *Ghalib-Life and Letters*, the most detailed account I have come across of the poet's life and the social and political milieu of those times. Only a personal diary could have gotten closer.

Three Mughal Poets whetted my appetite for the main course - *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* - two years later. The treatment of the subject going back several hundred years was unlike anything I had come across before, and was presented in

an easy-to-understand, chatty style. It combined the knowledge of an expert with the tone of a guide and the familiarity of a favourite uncle who took you as a child to the ice cream vendor or the cricket ground.

But Ralph did not speak only to newcomers to Urdu. There are countless Urdu speakers who are well read in its literature, who have loved his books and have learnt from them things they had did not know or had not thought about before. Rashid Qureshi described him as ‘a literary giant, whose command of Ghalib’s poetry was phenomenal.’ Ashraf Faruqi, now at the University of North Carolina, has a vivid memory from 1960 when he as a child listened to Ralph discussing literary matters with his father, Khwaja Ahmad Faruqi, then head of the Department of Urdu at Delhi University:

I was mesmerized by his eloquent conversation in chaste Urdu. He spoke the language with perfect accent and fluency. The book *Mir Taqi Mir: Hayat aur Shairi* which my father wrote became the topic of many discussions and meetings at our house. Later as a graduate student at Duke University in the 1970s I read his masterpieces *Three Mughal Poets* and *Ghalib: Life and Letters*. Both are beautifully conceived books with excellent commentary. I also remember reading his brilliant translation of Ismat Chughtai’s short story *Nanhi ki Naani*, with the title *Tiny’s Aunt*.

Asad Abbas, a psychologist from Pakistan now living in London, has read everything that Ralph has written, and regularly used to visit him to discuss the many points that stimulated him in them. Here is one example:

In one of his writings he mentioned a book of folk stories which I had never heard of and which he had cited as an example of popular culture. I asked him where I could buy a copy in Pakistan and he replied that I could find it on any bookstall in a railway station. To me it was a perfect example of how he took an interest in whatever surrounded him and was open to any experience. I had always simply assumed that books sold in a station would be of no interest to me.

Ralph's writing extended beyond the traditional scope of literature, to critical essays on aspects of South Asian society and politics. As in all other spheres of life, he was always willing to tackle controversy head on – in fact it was often the fact that a topic was controversial that motivated him to write about it. A fine example is his essay *Maududi and Islamic Obscurantism*, published in *How not to write the history of Urdu literature* in 1999 but written before the rise of fundamentalism had hit the headlines. It ends

And that is why Maududi's movement needs to be taken seriously – and vigorously combatted.

In the aftermath of the Salman Rushdie fatwa he much regretted the fact that Muslims who did *not* support the fundamentalists were not willing to say so publicly. So he took it on himself to try to raise the debate. Through a series of articles in *Jang*, the Urdu language daily newspaper in the UK, he stressed the 'other Islam' which was there for Muslims to draw on, one which was strongly humanist and upheld religious tolerance – as expressed by the great ghazal poets.

In a blog on 'Governance in Pakistan' the writer 'South Asian' holds up Ralph's article *Strands of Muslim Identity* to students as an example of clear, well argued analysis, and also of honesty:

It was from him that I picked up the line: 'Do you want me to say what I think or what you want to hear?' In another of his essays, Professor Russell says 'I sometimes have the impression that in the field of Islamic studies more than most, scholars feel a need to be 'diplomatic' (which, let us face it, is only a polite way of saying 'less than completely honest') so that influential people will not be offended.' And then he refers to Thomas Hardy in the Explanatory Note to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, that 'if an offence comes out of the truth, better it is that the offence come out than that the truth be concealed.'

Ralph was never inhibited by a concern for what Urdu scholars might think when he, an Englishman, expressed forthright views on topics they might be expected to be the experts on. He simply assumed that such relationships would be on the basis of equality and mutual respect, and they almost always were. Shamsur Rahman

Farouqi, whom Ralph only met once but whose erudition he much admired, ended a keynote address to the UrduFest at the University of Virginia in Sept 2008 with a tribute to Ralph, knowing that he was seriously ill but not that he had already died:

I cannot conclude this section without paying sincere tribute to Ralph Russell for his erudition, forthrightness, and his services to the cause of extending appreciation for Urdu literature in the western world and even in South Asia. His essay about how not to write a history of Urdu literature is just one example of how his teachings and ideas can benefit native Urdu readers and writers.

Ralph once said that a suitable summary of his approach to life was contained in a Persian couplet which he translated as

I live, and suffer censure, and am happy
For in my creed to grieve is blasphemy.

He lived in the way he thought right, committed to the values he believed in, and giving his energy for something he hoped would bring benefit to others. If any of that brought him censure, well, too bad. Though he was widely referred to by Urdu speakers as Professor Russell, SOAS in fact never made him a professor, and it was no secret that this was because he was a communist. His colleagues thought this a scandal. Ralph was philosophical – it was important mainly because it showed up the political attitudes of the university establishment; for himself, he really didn't care what title he had. In his later years his colleague Khalid Hasan Qadiri made repeated efforts to get a leading Pakistani university to award Ralph an honorary doctorate. It was subsequently revealed that the nomination had been blocked by someone on the board because Ralph was known to be an atheist and '*vuh Iqbal nahin mante*' – he didn't revere Iqbal. Qadiri, himself a devout Muslim and Pakistani nationalist, was outraged – What had religion and Iqbal got to do with assessing Ralph Russell's contribution to Urdu studies? Ralph himself was touched at Qadiri's efforts and reaction, but the significance for him was what it revealed about political attitudes; an honorary doctorate as such was unimportant to him.

In some respects he faced an opposite hazard. Given the degree of public admiration he received from people in the Urdu speaking world, and the extraordi-

nary spread of his influence, it seems remarkable how free he remained of any trace of self-importance. He didn't undervalue either himself or his work, and of course he loved it if other people appreciated it, but the point of it was always *the work itself*, not any praise or recognition it might bring him. Some years before his death he was awarded the prestigious *Sitara-e-imtiyaz* by the Pakistan government. So little did this register with him that his children only found out that it had happened when they saw it in an obituary. One of the sayings he liked was

neki kar, awr dariya men dal
Do good, and throw it in the river.

He continued teaching and writing until a month before his death at the age of 90. He wrote from a conviction that it was important to share what he understood and believed, regardless of whether he could be sure it would be published. There was a Sanskrit verse he particularly liked, by Bhavabhuti, translated by John Brough who had been his teacher in SOAS. He used to laugh about the fact that Brough had said Sanskrit poetry could not be translated, and then had produced some wonderful translations . Bhavabhuti says:

If learned critics publicly deride
My verse, well, let them. Not for them I wrought.
One day a man shall live to share my thought:
For time is endless, and the world is wide.

Those of us who knew and loved Ralph, or have absorbed something of his spirit through his writing, will continue to be influenced by the things he shared with us – about how to be open to people, how to learn from literature, and how to live. His friend Asad Abbas wrote, 'I can't imagine a time when I will cease to miss him.' That is true for many of us. But in Ghalib's words, and Ralph's translation,

Gham nahin hota hay azadon ko besh az yak nafas
Barq se karte hayn rawshan e shama matam khana ham

We who are free grieve only for a moment
And use the lightning's flash to light our homes.

Notes:

¹ Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from personal tributes received shortly after Ralph's death, Sept 2009.

² Contribution to a day conference in SOAS in June 2007, celebrating Ralph's life and work.

³ Contribution to the SOAS day, see 2 above.