

RIVANNE SANDLER

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**George Michael Wickens**  
**1918-2005**



Professor George Michael Wickens, B.A. (1939), M.A. (1946) Trinity College, Cambridge, elected a Fellow of Academy 11 (Humanities and Social Sciences) of the Royal Society of Canada in 1965, University Professor Emeritus in the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto. He was born in 1918 in London, England, and died in Toronto, Canada, in 2006.

Born into modest circumstances in London, Professor Wickens stepped out of the social mode which birth in Britain determined for him, into a place in the world of scholarship which his intelligence and scholarly aptitude, especially linguistic aptitude won for him. In 1935, he was awarded an Open Major Scholarship to Trinity College Cambridge, and went up to Cambridge in 1936. At Cambridge, he settled on the study of the Persian and Arabic languages. Cambridge remained a place of his most happy memories of intellectual stimulation and access to a prodigious collection of books, manuscripts and rare editions.

In 1940, Michael Wickens was called up for military service. He served as a private in the Royal Army Pay Corps from 1939-1941; he was subsequently transferred to the Intelligence Corps. In 1941 he was posted overseas with the rank of Lance-Corporal and became a member of the Iran-Iraq Command where he spent most of the next four years.

Upon his return from war duties to England in 1946, Michael (as he was called by friends and colleagues) taught at Cambridge and then shortly after, the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and returned once again to Cambridge in 1949. In 1957 at the age of thirty nine, Michael Wickens accepted an invitation by the President of the University to become a member of the faculty. He took up an appointment in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at University College, University of Toronto. His mandate was to broaden the scope of that department to include "Modern Near Eastern Studies" which was to focus on the Middle East since the rise of Islam. In 1961, under his direction, a new Department of Islamic Studies (now the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations) came into existence; he was Chair from 1961-1968.

At Michael Wickens' initiative, scholars of Persian, Arabic and Turkish studies were invited to join the new Department of Islamic Studies. In 1980, the University recognized both the discipline of Middle East and Islamic Studies and the distinguished work of Professor Wickens in this field, by awarding him the title of University Professor.

Michael Wickens was both a part of an earlier scholarly tradition, and he outdistanced it. As he himself noted, the field of Middle East studies changed considerably from the language-based discipline, set squarely within the confines of the humanities of an earlier generation of scholars. The breadth of his knowledge extended beyond the confines of his academic specialty, although

his deeply felt fondness for the Persian language remained with him until the end of his life. His translation of the modern Iranian writer Sadiq Hedayat's (1903-1951) satirical novel *Haji Agha* (University of Texas Press, 1979) is based on a sixth Persian edition (with page references to the only other translation at the time, a German version, Berlin 1963). Professor Wickens was concerned to identify this work's "topical relevance to the Iran of the present day." To this end, he invited the anthropologist Lois Beck to write an Introduction for readers unfamiliar with twentieth-century Iran in order to, as she states, "facilitate the book's use in social science courses."

The entire body of Michael Wickens' work covers translations, and also a wealth of articles. For a bibliography of the Publications of G. M. Wickens, 1949-1984, see: *Logos Islamikos. In Honorem GEORGII MICHAELIS WICKENS*. Edited by Roger M. Savory and Dionisius A. Agius. Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984.

Professor Wickens was meticulous in his translations of Persian classics into English and was especially concerned to go beyond the translations of his predecessors to render Persian into an enjoyable, earthy and compelling read in the English language. He translated from Persian into English with a precision and subtlety that make such classics of Persian literature as Nasir al-Din Tusi's 13th century work, translated from Persian into English as *The Nasirean Ethics* (Allen and Unwin, 1964) (the first translation in a Western language) a distinct pleasure to read. He chose this work for translation because, as he states in the Translator's Introduction, it was "a conspectus of most of the significant moral and intellectual preoccupations of the medieval Islamic world." Professor Wickens brought his special linguistic abilities to a text whose language is "Persian of a heavily Arabicized character."

Another 13th century work Wickens for translation is Sa'di's *Bustan* (literally "Kitchen-Garden") (translated as *Morals Pointed and Tales Adorned*) (University of Toronto Press, 1974). In the Introduction, Wickens points out the close relationship of the *Bustan* and Sa'di's other immensely popular *Gulistan* written a short time afterwards. While both works deal with "a code of „lifemanship“ that is at once frankly realistic and...mystical and high-minded," he considers the *Bustan* "solider, plainer, more carefully worked out and thought through" than the *Gulistan*. His translations of revered Persian classics remain treasures for a wide audience, and they are appreciated and their worth noted, in present-day Iran.

Michael Wickens was fiercely protective, proactive and supportive of his graduate students. Their graduate theses frequently found their way into publication, the subject matter ranging from religious commentary to medieval history to modern literature. The scope of Michael Wickens' academic curiosity was wide; and young scholars have commented on his "intellectual generosity" and willingness to comment on their work, which rendered him an unusually supportive authority.

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Professor Wickens retired from the University of Toronto, 30 June 1984. In his last years, he continued to derive pleasure from the Persian language and in particular, the poetry of Omar Khayyam. Out of the academic spotlight in his retirement years, and living in relative seclusion, he was able to draw on a range of experiences and enjoy wide reading. He would recall meetings with people from all walks of life he had met during his long life.

His wife Ruth Lindop Wickens predeceased Michael. They are the parents of eight children.

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