

Robert B. Jones

January 31, 1920 – November 23, 2007

Robert B. Jones, Professor Emeritus of Linguistics and Asian Studies, passed away November 23, 2007 in the Lakeside Nursing home, Ithaca. RB, as he was known to all, was born January 31, 1920, in Dallas, Texas. He began undergraduate study in music, studying organ under Dora Poteet Barclay at Southern Methodist University. RB became an accomplished organist, and played organ regularly until shortly before his death. His studies were interrupted in 1941, when war broke out. RB joined the U.S. Army, where he was chosen for language training in Japanese. It was this training that stimulated his interest in linguistics. Following Army service, RB resumed his studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where he graduated in 1947. He continued on for post-graduate studies at Berkeley and completed his Ph.D. degree in Linguistics in 1958 under the renowned specialist in Thai and Amerindian linguistics, Mary Haas. His Ph.D. dissertation was a descriptive and historical study of the major languages in the Karen language family (Sgaw, Pho, and Pa'o), spoken in Burma and Thailand. RB revised and expanded the dissertation after a year of fieldwork in Burma funded by the Ford Foundation in 1957-58. The resulting study was published in the University of California linguistic series as Karen Linguistic Studies. This monograph is among the most thoroughgoing studies of any Tibeto-Burman language and is still the most authoritative single-volume study of the Karen family. In addition to extensive texts, and an in-depth analysis of the phonology, morphology, and syntax of Sgaw, it contains phonological sketches of Pho, Pa'o, and Palaychi and a reconstruction and glossary of Proto-Karen based on a comparison of the phonology of those four dialects.

After leaving Berkeley, RB taught briefly at Georgetown University and in the Foreign Service Institute of the State Department. In 1955, he joined the faculty of the then Division of Modern Languages of Cornell University and was given charge of all the language programs dealing with mainland Southeast Asia as well as Japanese. At the same time, he took part in the development of the Field of Linguistics and in the Southeast Asian Studies program. He taught courses and mentored students in both of these areas. RB taught Vietnamese, Thai, Burmese, as well as Japanese and linguistics courses. This unusually heavy teaching load was reduced somewhat after the first couple of years, when a Japanese teacher was hired, and then again in 1970, when the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics was authorized to hire a professor of Vietnamese studies. RB remained in charge of Burmese and Thai and continued teaching linguistics and area studies courses until

his retirement in 1986. He served as Graduate Field Representative in Linguistics for several years prior to his retirement.

Developing Asian language programs during RB's early days at Cornell meant creating pedagogical materials, for little was available for use in the classroom for Asian languages. RB created and published materials for learning beginning Vietnamese and advanced Thai and for the Burmese and Japanese writing systems. His primary academic interest was historical linguistics, and his teaching covered all of the major language groups in mainland Southeast Asia. He published a seminal article on the historical phonology of the Tai languages, and as noted above, Karen Linguistic Studies, the published version of his Ph.D. dissertation, is a keystone of modern Tibeto-Burman historical linguistics. RB was highly respected by colleagues in his areas of expertise, and he was invited to serve as a consultant to the National Science Foundation, the Defense Language Institute, the Ford Foundation, the Library of Congress, the Encyclopedia Britannica, the Department of Health Education and Welfare, and the Center for Applied Linguistics. An extensive collection of RB's unpublished papers on Southeast Asian linguistics and other topics are catalogued in the Cornell University Library Rare Manuscript Collection. A partial bibliography of RB's writings on Tibeto-Burman follows at the end of this memorial. An important manuscript on Old Burmese was incomplete at the time of RB's death.

RB's social life revolved around music and the church. Upon arriving in Ithaca in 1955, RB joined the choir of St John's Episcopal Church, where he met the choir director and organist, A. Richard Strauss, who became his life-long companion. Several years thereafter, RB and Richard bought a house together on Glenside Road, where Richard established an organ-building business and built a succession of organs for RB, as well as a harpsichord. RB played both instruments regularly. There they entertained their wide circle of friends with music and RB's gourmet cooking. RB was also an avid gardener and established an exquisite garden, ringed with rhododendrons, in the woodsy setting of Glenside. Inside the house, RB had established a solarium filled with orchids and other gorgeous blooming plants, where his several cats (he once had as many as five) loved to nap.

RB's faithful companion, A. Richard Strauss, cared for him in the last months of his life.

R.B. Jones's publications on Tibeto-Burman

1. Jones, Robert B., Jr. 1961. Karen Linguistic Studies: Description, comparison, and texts (UC Cal pub in ling 25). Berkeley and Los Angeles: UC Press.

2. Jones, Robert B. 1972. Sketch of Burmese dialects. Studies in linguistics in honor of George L. Trager (Janua Linguarum, Ser. Maior, 52), ed. by M. Estellie Smith, 413-22. The Hague, Mouton.
3. Jones, Robert B. 1974. Rev. of Okell, A reference grammar of colloquial Burmese. Language 50. 1: 205-7.
4. Jones, Robert B. 1975. Rev. of Roop, An introduction to the Burmese writing system. Journal of Asian Studies 32. 1: 205-6.
5. Jones, Robert B. 1975. The question of Karen linguistic affiliation. 8th International Sino-Tibetan Language and Linguistics.
6. Jones, Robert B. 1976. Prolegomena to a phonology of Old Burmese. Southeast Asian history and historiography: essays presented to D.G.E. Hall, ed. by C.D. Cowan, and O.W. Walters, 43-50. Ithaca, NY, Cornell U. Press.
7. Jones, Robert B. 1986. Pitch Register Languages. Contributions to Sino-Tibetan Studies ed. by John McCoy & Timothy Light, 135-143. Leiden: Brill.
8. Jones, Robert B. 1988. Proto-Burmese as a test of reconstruction. Rhetorica, Phonological syntactica, ed. by Duncan-Rose and Vennemann, 203-211.

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