

Prof. Norman G. Barrier: An Obituary

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PROFESSOR NORMAN GERALD BARRIER'S passing away in June 2010, [so soon after Hew McLeod's departure], is a great blow to many of us engaged in studying the history and religion of the Sikhs. He was, like Hew McLeod and Mark Juergensmeyer, one of the chief architects who had laboured relentlessly in shaping the Sikh Studies as a distinct academic discipline in the West. In the 1970s when they were trying to give the Sikh Studies a place of honour within the wider academic framework, all three joined hands to organize the First Berkeley Sikh Studies Conference. Its proceedings were subsequently published and Professor Barrier had been one of its editors (1979).

Barefoot Historian:

He had more than a decade long experience of working at the grass root level, dealing with the primary sources of the Sikh past. In the early 1960s, he had worked as a 'bare-foot historian' and devoted much of his time and energy in collecting raw materials of Punjab/Sikh history. That is why he was initially known to a few old book sellers and publishers of Delhi as a bibliophile and nothing more. But these years of hard work introduced him into the by-lanes of the Sikh history, enriched his understanding about the significance of printed source materials and turned him into a first rate researcher on the history of the Sikh renaissance movement. It remained 'his first love' till his end and earned him universal admiration for his pioneering contributions. Actually he had made us aware of the relevance and significance of print-culture in reconstructing the Sikh past of the Singh Sabha days. If Hew McLeod had pioneered the researches on the Sikh textual sources, Jerry Barrier possibly made the circle almost complete by drawing our attention to the pioneering contributions of the fathers of the Sikh print-culture of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

Evolution of Sikh Studies:

His association with the discipline thus goes back to the early 1960s when the evolution of the Sikh Studies had yet to attain its height.

In this sense, he was one of the new designers of the contemporary Sikh Studies based on critical analysis of different categories of sources.

The Missouri Twins:

I first came to be aware of Barrier's scholarship through his work on the Punjab Land Alienation Act (1901) published by the Duke University Press in the mid 1960s. By dint of his work on the Punjab, he became deeply interested in the Sikh lore. These years of hard work of the 1960s received his distinct stamp of scholarship through three of his important publications: "**The Sikhs and their Literature**" (1971) and "**The Punjab Press**" (1970?) that he had co-edited with Professor Paul Wallace (often bracketed with Jerry Barrier as "Missouri Twin", and "**A Guide to Banned Books**" based mostly on the sources preserved in the British Library collection (1976?).

The future generation of Sikh scholars would continue to remember him for his numerous pioneering works. While working in this field, he had not forgotten to compliment his pioneers, like Professor Ganda Singh of the Punjabi University. His research brought him in closer contact with a number of Punjabi scholars. His relationship with them, particularly with that of Professor Harbans Singh, (then engaged in editing the 'Encyclopaedia of Sikhism') resulted in the publication of a wonderful collection of essays entitled: "**Essays in Honour of Professor Ganda Singh**" (1976).

Privileged Memories:

I had the privilege of meeting him for the first time in 1987 during the period of Toronto and Berkeley Conferences on the Sikh Studies.

During the Toronto session, he had kindly commented on my paper and encouraged me like a friend. His friendly impersonal touch made my those days memorable and I still cherish their memories. Our last face to face meeting took place during the UCR seminar days (2009) after a gap of nearly two decades. Professor Jerry Barrier continued to remain the same old friend, encouraging his fellow-travelers in the field of Sikh Studies, as he had always been in the past.

Professor Barrier is no more, but he had left behind a memory of a smiling personality with a touch of humility and modesty, also a scholar ever in admiration of those who had laboured hard for the cause of the Sikh Studies.

