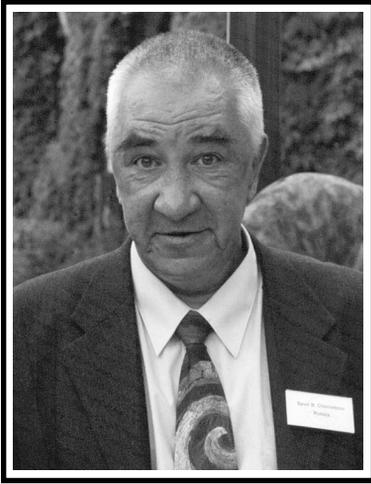


Sevir Chernetsov, Teacher of Classical Ethiopic (1943–2005): A Tribute



Writing an obituary is always painful and difficult, all the more so if its subject is one's own much-loved teacher, the last in the great line of those who initiated one into the mysteries of Oriental and African studies, and who were able to help one's view of the world form itself without putting any pressure on one or being didactic in an obvious way.

On 3 February 2005, Sevir Borisovich Chernetsov died suddenly at his home in St Petersburg. He had been fighting bravely with serious illness for over a year, and one felt that he had got the better of it this time as well. After all, he survived TB as a young man, and then another dreadful illness in 2000, when at first it seemed there was not much hope he would survive, let alone return to scholarly activity. The doctors managed to save him those times, but it seems that death was not going to be outwitted on a third occasion, even by him.

I was myself lucky enough to make Sevir Chernetsov's acquaintance fourteen and a half years ago, in early autumn 1990, soon after he was nominated as one of the examiners of my candidate's dissertation.¹ He told me directly that by and large he was im-

¹ The normal first research degree, roughly equivalent to a Ph.D. [Editor].

pressed, and he said a number of things which made clear that he had read the dissertation with close attention, but he refused to make any detailed comments, since he did not consider himself an expert in the rather narrow field that I had written about (the history of a Yemeni province in the early medieval era). This honesty and conscientiousness were typical of him as a scholar.

Not long afterwards, when, under his supervision, I had plunged myself into the study of Ethiopia, Sevir Borisovich started urging me to study the Axumite and Pre-Axumite periods, which he himself had studiously avoided for decades, a few marginal remarks in, say, his book about the Ethiopian feudal monarchy in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries aside.¹ Rather startled, I enquired why he, as such an outstanding scholar of medieval Ethiopia, had decided not to go back to the origins of the local civilisation. But he replied that the rare surviving sources, a handful of inscriptions left by the Sabæan colonies in the Horn of Africa and the Axumian kingdom, were accessible only to epigraphers and specialists in South Arabian studies. In his work, on the other hand, he concentrated on narrative sources in Ge'ez, the classical language of Ethiopia — and could not see any point in dilettante messing about with material beyond the boundaries of his expertise.

This attitude had nothing to do with any one-sidedness or narrowness in his personality generally. I was able to realise just how extensive his knowledge was at the Ge'ez classes for students of Amharic that he began holding at the Faculty of Oriental Studies in St Petersburg in 1991. At Sevir Borisovich's generous invitation, everyone who had some pressing reason to learn the language began coming along — without, of course, any payment being expected. Such 'attached students' comprised at least half the group, and much the more active half too, doing their best to keep the others up to scratch. In terms of his breadth of interests and a devotion to scholarship that is all too rare these days, particularly outstanding was Leonid Kogan, who later joined the Russian State Humanities University in Moscow (though, alas, not the Faculty of Oriental Studies of St. Petersburg State University!) and became a leading semitologist, and Vadim Lourié (whose religious name was then reader [*chets*] Vasily, and who is now, under the name Grigory, a monk in holy orders (hieromonachos), who is deservedly renowned both for his spiritual work in the Russian Autonomous Orthodox Church,² and among lay people for his noble efforts to resurrect the Russian traditions of studying the Christian East).

It was, of course, not just Sevir Chernetsov's first-class knowledge of Ge'ez texts and his deftness in using these to examine complex questions of ethnic and political history, but his personal qualities, that united around him such very different people: his openness to debate and conversation, his wit, his generosity of spirit... He would not only supply commentaries to the Classical Ethiopic works that we were reading, but launch into extremely interesting digressions about monastic and ecclesiastical life in Ethiopia, about

¹ S. B. Chernetsov. *Efiopskaya feodalnaya monarkhiya v XIII–XVI vv.* [The Ethiopian Feudal Monarchy in the XIII–XVI Centuries]. Moscow, 1982. Pp. 6–7.

² A small group of Russian Orthodox Church dissidents who seceded from the Moscow Patriarchate in the mid-1990s and who profess theologically conservative, eschatological views. [Editor].

military affairs, the life of the court, and about the peasantry in medieval times. Sometimes these digressions turned into improvised lectures, each of which displayed extraordinary erudition and rare pedagogical skills. I shouldn't exaggerate: we got through more than just a few lines at each session, unlike might sometimes happen, according to Sevir Borisovich, at the seminars his friend and colleague Professor Manfred Kropp used to organise in Mainz. But our historical and philological study of Ge'ez literature moved along at a pleasantly unhurried pace, and the sessions were much more useful than some lecture courses of the ordinary kind, which tend to be stuffed with generalisations and with abstract facts far removed from the sources themselves, and which students often find boring and unhelpful.

Our Ge'ez sessions were soon transferred from the university to the African Sector of the *Kunstkamera*, and the conversations over a cup of strong coffee that came at the end of them gradually acquainted us with some central moments in the academic and personal biography of our teacher.

Sevir Borisovich Chernetsov was born on 15 December 1943 in Kostroma, where his mother was living in wartime evacuation, and he was very proud of his connection with this old Russian town. In fact, he was fond of small provincial Russian towns generally, for example Myshkin, which he visited several times in the 1990s with his wife Milena Rozhdestvenskaya, daughter of the well-known Leningrad poet Vsevolod Rozhdestvensky, who herself is a former student of the famous medievalist Dmitry Likhachev, and a noted specialist in early Russian literature; here the couple would stay with a local priest.

Sevir's father, Boris Dmitrievich Chernetsov, was called up for service in the Red Army not long before the Second World War broke out; he was quickly promoted to the rank of officer and, according to his son, was lucky to avoid arrest and imprisonment when his regiment was billeted in what had formerly been the estate of a Polish magnate after Western Belorussia was annexed to the Soviet Union.¹ Boris Chernetsov, who loved dogs and was good with the animals, took 'under his wing' the kennels on the estate — the dogs had no-one to look after them now that their owner had lost his possessions. This aroused the suspicion of a member of the army's secret police section, who decided that Chernetsov had to be a relation of the former estate's owner, who had hidden his noble descent from the Soviet authorities. After all, the dogs knew who he was! And in fact, though Sevir Borisovich did not come from an old aristocratic family, whether that of the first prince of ancient Russia Rurik (Hrörekr) or that of the famous grand-duke of Lithuania Gedymin (Gediminas), he was marked out by that true nobility of behaviour that, by and large, is ingrained in a person from childhood and which is evident above all in that person's relations with other people.

After the War, Sevir Borisovich's father continued to serve in the army, but he was soon decommissioned from active service after he developed TB; he was moved into a position as military overseer [*voenpred*]² at one of Leningrad's most important weapons factories. However, the factory

¹ In 1939, as a consequence of the partition of Poland agreed under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. [Editor].

² i.e. the person deputed from the military to oversee the execution of orders for weapons etc. being carried out at a given factory. [Editor].

director's tendency to sail close to the wind in terms of corruption, false accounting, and so on, which Boris Chernetsov could not argue him out of, was a risky matter in those days: it could have led to a major crackdown, and one, what is more, that would have been completely justified.¹ So Boris Chernetsov had to leave this prestigious and well-paid post and take up a position as an ordinary engineer at another factory.

Sevir himself was a gifted boy, but it was clear to him once he reached the senior classes of his school that his abilities in the direction of hard sciences were limited, and he did not want to end up only an average student at university. He therefore opted for the humanities — not a terribly popular career route in the early sixties — and did extremely well. In 1967, Dmitry Alekseevich Olderogge, the chair of the Department of African Studies at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Leningrad State University, and a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences, gave Sevir, now a graduate of the Amharic section of his Department, a position as his research assistant in the *Kunstkamera* (or the Leningrad section of the Mikhlukho-Maklai Institute of Ethnography, Academy of Sciences of the USSR, as it then was), where Olderogge was head of the African sector. In those days, every member of the Academy was officially entitled to an assistant of this kind. Having become the Boss's secretary ('the Boss' is the name still used for Olderogge among people who knew him personally, in recognition of his role in setting up the Leningrad school of African studies), Sevir Chernetsov devoted all the time that he could spare from his main duties to an effort to revive the Russian traditions of classical Ethiopian studies, which was a task of no small proportions, given that the once very promising line of development had been broken by the death of Academician B. A. Turaev in 1920, a death that resulted from '*disgust at the real world that surrounded him*'.² One need hardly add that these efforts were warmly supported by the Boss himself, who, in 1955, edited and saw through the press *Vvedenie v efjopskuyu filologiyu* [Introduction to Ethiopian Philology] written by the late I. Yu. Krachkovsky, who had left Ethiopian studies and devoted himself to Arabic studies, but who continued to take a close interest in the classical heritage of Ethiopia to the end of his days.

The subject that Chernetsov selected for his candidate's degree was one previously touched upon by Turaev, and one, moreover, lying at the cusp of Ethiopian philology and ethnography. His dissertation, under the title 'Ethiopian Magic Scrolls (an Attempt at a Philological and Ethnographical Analysis)',³ was supervised by D. A. Olderogge, and the defence took place

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- ¹ In other words: had the corrupt goings-on in the factory come to the attention of the higher Party and secret police authorities, the entire factory management would have been held to blame and purged, including Boris Chernetsov. In the Stalin era, stiff prison sentences or indeed execution for 'sabotage' or 'counter-revolutionary activity' would have been very likely. [Editor].
- ² Here I might add that Sevir Chernetsov used to attribute the death of his colleague and predecessor as head of the African department at the *Kunstkamera*, the Arabist V. V. Matveev, in post-perestroika St Petersburg to much the same causes. He was fond of making such parallels between these two comparable eras of catastrophic change in Russian history.
- ³ Cf. B. A. Turaev. 'Abissinskie magicheskie svitki' [Abyssinian Magic Scrolls] // *Sbornik statej v chest' grafini P. S. Uvarovoj (1885-1915)*. Moscow, 1916. Pp. 176–201. A reference to this article at the very beginning of the long abstract of Chernetsov's dissertation [*avtoreferat*] clearly demonstrates the importance that he attributed to the continuity in Ethiopian studies.

successfully in the Kunstkamera during May 1974.¹ It is usually considered that 31 is on the old side for defending your candidate's dissertation, but Sevir Chernetsov himself was always convinced that it took far more than three years to put together a properly-written piece of research. The view of the Learned Council — whose members had no doubt that the candidate was already a fully-fledged scholar — was well summed up in the uniquely laconic statement made by the senior examiner, Yu. V. Knozorov, whose work on decoding the script used by the Mayan Indians had already brought him renown: *'The dissertation is of the appropriate standard; the candidate merits the degree.'*²

Two genres in particular of medieval Ethiopian literature — the Imperial chronicles (more generally, the local historiography generally), and the lives of the saints — were of especial interest to Chernetsov. This was not only because B. A. Turaev himself had devoted considerable attention to them, but, and in the first instance, because these materials could be used as a basis for reconstructing the course of Ethiopian history and working towards an understanding of the crux of the processes that had taken place in the Horn of Africa during medieval times. However, in Soviet days there was a fairly strict prohibition on the study and publication of hagiographical documents. And although Chernetsov managed once to evade the latter prohibition — by placing his translation of a thirteenth-century saint's life in an ecclesiastical periodical, where it appeared anonymously³ — the systematic study of hagiography was more or less impossible at the time. All the greater was the energy, though, with which he followed up another lead laid down by Turaev, who had the idea of acquainting Russian readers with the works of Ethiopian historiography and who achieved the task of translating from Ge'ez those that had been composed in the first two centuries of the genre's existence.⁴ Over the course of five years, Chernetsov himself managed to prepare and publish three volumes of translations of the Ethiopian chronicles, with detailed commentaries, taking the project begun by Turaev to the late eighteenth century.⁵ Alongside these translations, he also completed two monographs addressing the history of Ethiopia under the Solomon dynasty from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries.⁶ The extent of his scholarly productivity is amazing, particularly

¹ The conferral of the degree was endorsed by the Supreme Certifying Commission of the Ministry of Higher Education [VAK], speciality no. 07.00.07, 'Ethnography', on 28 January 1975.

² In Russia, as in Germany, France, Scandinavia, and many other parts of Europe, defence is always a public occasion, and often has an adversarial character: it is almost unheard of for an examiner (literally 'opponent') to find nothing critical to say. [Editor].

³ 'Zhitie Yaferkana Egzie' [The Life of Yaferqan Egzie] // *Bogoslovskie trudy*. 1972. Vol. 10. Pp. 225–51.

⁴ B. A. Turaev. 'Abissinskie khroniki XIV–XVI vv.' [Abyssinian Chronicles of the XIV–XVI Centuries]. Trans. from Ethiopic under the Direction of I. Yu. Krachkovsky. Moscow, 1936. (*Trudy Instituta vostokovedeniya AN SSSR*. Vol. 18).

⁵ *Efiopskie khroniki XVI–XVII vekov* [Ethiopian Chronicles of the XVI–XVII Centuries]. Introduction and Afterword, Trans. and Commentaries by S. B. Chernetsov. Moscow, 1984; *Efiopskie khroniki XVII–XVIII vekov* [Ethiopian Chronicles of the XVII–XVIII Centuries]. Preface and Afterword, Trans. and Commentaries by S. B. Chernetsov. Moscow, 1989; *Efiopskie khroniki XVIII veka*. [Ethiopian Chronicles of the XVIII Century]. Preface, Trans., Commentaries and Afterword by S. B. Chernetsov. Moscow, 1991.

⁶ *Efiopskaya feodalnaya monarkhiya v XIII–XVI vv.* (see above); *Efiopskaya feodalnaya monarkhiya v XVII veke*. [The Ethiopian Feudal Monarchy in the XVII Century]. Moscow, 1990.

if one bears in mind that, far from being, as sometimes happens, mere paraphrases of the documentation, both his monographs were original works of scholarship, in which an ability to conceptualise and interpret general historical issues in their relation to the local context was combined with a detailed and interesting discussion of individual issues and events. Deservedly, Chernetsov received the degree of Doctor of Sciences for the first study, on the Ethiopian feudal monarchy from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries.¹ In my view, these monographs may be placed, alongside the work of A. Ya. Gurevich, among the best achievements of Soviet medieval studies, in which Marxist methodology was used in a creative rather than programmatic way. Each time one re-reads them, one finds new material of interest, some nuance placing what one thought one knew already in a new perspective.

Chernetsov's independence of mind was his strength as a historian. Let me cite a particularly memorable example, relating here to the failed attempt by Emperor Socinius (1607–1632) to convert Ethiopia to Roman Catholicism. Going against the majority of Western and Ethiopian scholars, who had been inclined to see Socinius's motivations and aims in terms of 'modernisation' and 'Westernisation', Chernetsov saw the Emperor's actions as an attempt to find support for his own perceptions of autocratic rule in the dogmatic certainties and iron discipline of the Portuguese Jesuits.²

A high point in Sevir Chernetsov's work at the borders of socio-political history and ethnography was marked by his articles on the origins of the Amhara,³ the first of which, as he admitted himself, was originally a side-track from his work on the royal chronicles.⁴ The flowering of ethnocentrism in modern Ethiopia that followed the fall of Mengistu Haile Mariam unexpectedly made this issue of topical as well as historical interest, and this was what made Chernetsov take a fresh look at the subject in the 1990s. When he inscribed for me on 19 March 1999 an offprint of an essay he had first published in 1995, he meaningfully noted that he was presenting it '*as a mark of the fact that medieval history in our area has no terminus ad quem*'. The central conclusion he arrived at was that one could not decide whether the Amhara were an ethnos, a super-ethnos, or a ruling feudal class⁵ within the Ethiopian empire. '*Human beings are no animals, or they are, they may be, social animals, and any ethnic problem is no less social than ethnic,*'⁶ he concluded with the sarcasm so characteristic of him.

¹ The defence under speciality no. 07.00.03, 'General History', took place at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Leningrad State University, in January 1984, and the conferral of the degree Doctor of Sciences was approved by VAK on 11 May that same year.

² *Efiopskaya feodal'naya monarkhiya v XVII veke*. Pp. 174–9.

³ 'Kto takie amkhara? Opyt istoricheskogo obzora termina i ego soderzhaniya' // *Etnicheskaya istoriya Afriki*. Moscow, 1977. Pp. 18–45. (An abridged translation into English appeared as S. Chernetsov. 'On the Origins of the Amhara' // *St Petersburg Journal of African Studies*. 1993. No. 1. Pp. 97–103). See also idem, 'On the Problems of the Ethnogenesis of the Amhara' // *Der Sudan in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart (Sudan Past and Present)*. Gundlach R., Kropp M., Leibundgut A. (eds.). No place given: Peter Lang, 1995. Pp. 17–35.

⁴ 'On the Problem of the Ethnogenesis of the Amhara'. P. 17.

⁵ Lit. 'social estate', *soslovie*. [Editor].

⁶ 'On the Problem of the Ethnogenesis of the Amhara'. P. 33.

An obituary is perhaps not the most appropriate place for funny stories, but in this case the person being commemorated loved jokes, set great store by humour, and, I think, would have taken in good part my citation of a story that I heard from him. On one occasion, his American colleague, Donald N. Levine, whom Sevir used to refer to half-jokingly (but only half) as *'that CIA agent'*, sent him a letter that had a typo in the final letter of his name: Chernetson. In his reply, Sevir made a similar mistake, only this time deliberately, turning the third letter of Levine's name into an n. Jokes may be jokes, but I do wonder whether this one didn't have a fatal effect on the subconscious of Professor Levine himself: at the Fifteenth International Congress of Ethiopian Scholars, held in Hamburg at the end of July 2003, Levine, to the considerable consternation of his colleagues, coined the rather foggy term *'ethnoleninism'* to describe the national politics of the present post-Marxist Ethiopian administration...

Sevir Chernetsov very much enjoyed plunging into theoretical problems, but he in no sense fought shy of the demands of routine, time-consuming work and spent a good deal of time and effort on the *Kunstkamera's* Ethiopian collections, especially after the institution was accorded museum status. He carried out a descriptive catalogue of the collections of Ethiopian art there¹ and at the end of the 1990s he gave a brilliant talk about the same subject to the Learned Council of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, illustrating it by showing the audience actual pictures and drawings from the collections. He thought that one of the paintings (inventory no. 2594–21), an image by an unknown artist from June 1912 showing Alexander the Great's journey to Heavenly Jerusalem, was a depiction of a hitherto undiscovered episode in the Ethiopian version of the Alexander Romance, and could not hide his delight when he found confirmation of this hypothesis in an Amharic chronograph, No. B–36 from the National Library in Addis Abbaba.²

Chernetsov was a convinced atheist; suggestions that he should get himself baptised were met with the response that he preferred to die in the faith in which he had been brought up. This did not, however, prevent him treating believers with respect or from participating in projects and scholarly events organised by the Russian Orthodox Church; however, he rejected on principle the possibility that there might be such a thing as a specifically 'Orthodox' (or 'Jewish', 'Islamic', and so on) tradition of scholarship. It was he persuaded me to take on the articles about the Arab Christian world, and in particular on Ethiopian subjects, in the *Pravoslav-naya entsiklopediya* [Encyclopedia of Orthodoxy]. In December 1999, I hastily put together a list of suggestions which Sevir Borisovich then checked through and approved; the work is still in progress at the present time. We wrote some essays, for instance on the Cathedral of Our Lady of Syon in Axum in collaboration with each other; the last such essay, on the Ge'ez language, was completed a couple of weeks before Chernetsov's death. But, of course, most of the essays on Ethiopian subjects — around

¹ S. B. Chernetsov. 'Ethiopian Traditional Painting: On the Materials in the Collection of the Peter the Great Kunstammer' // *St Petersburg Journal of African Studies*. 1997. No. 6. Pp. 128–55.

² S. B. Chernetsov. 'The Aerial Flight of Alexander the Great in Ethiopian Painting and Literature' // *Oriens Christianus. Hefte für die Kunde des christlichen Orients*. 1999. Bd. 83. Pp. 177–86.

a hundred in all — were written by him, and there is simply no-one around to replace him as an expert in this field.

Chernetsov was a true patriot, who reacted with sorrow to the misfortunes that swept over Russia in recent years, and did everything he could to salvage Russian scholarship, whose decline he could not sit by and observe with indifference. It was painful for him when his favourite student — Denis Novitsyn — decided to stay on in Germany, though he well knew that Professor Siegbert Uhlig could have found no better helper in the preparation of the most ambitious project in Ethiopian studies of recent times — the *Encyclopædia Æthiopica* (EAE). Not long before he died, Sevir remarked with gentle irony that he himself had something approaching the role of a ‘fireman’ with regard to the EAE, with the editors regularly assigning him essays by other contributors that had not come up to scratch, so that he could rewrite them, or persuading him to tackle topics that others were too faint-hearted to embark on. On 28 January 2005, the last time we met, he proudly showed me on his home computer the text of an only just completed article, ‘Genealogy’, for volume 2 of the EAE. How long had it taken to write? A few days, and an entire lifetime...

Sevir Borisovich’s ‘baby’ was the journal *Khristianskii vostok* [The Christian East], revived in 1999, and he remained to the end an extremely active member of its editorial board. Our telephone conversations usually began and ended with a discussion of where we were up to with preparing the latest number, seeing it through the press, and so on. From the outset, Sevir Borisovich insisted that the journal should observe the highest standards: we were to publish only original scholarly articles or previously unpublished texts in Eastern languages. He was on principle opposed to using the journal for Russian translations of material in Eastern languages that had already appeared elsewhere, as some of his colleagues thought was quite acceptable. It was at his initiative that the fifth issue of the journal was turned over completely to work in the field of Arabic studies and dedicated to the 120th anniversary of the birth of Academician I. Yu. Krachkovsky (1883–1951). Respect for Sevir Borisovich’s memory alone should make us ensure the volume sees the light of day.

Sincere respect for the scholarly achievements of his predecessors and colleagues was one of Sevir Chernetsov’s most enduring characteristics. Three out of five of his published books (*Efiopskie khroniki XVII–XVIII vekov*, *Efiopskaya feodalnaya monarkhiya v XVII veke* and *Efiopskie khroniki XVIII veka*) were dedicated to the memory of such people: his teacher D. A. Olderogge (1903–1987), and two senior colleagues, L. E. Kubbel (1929–1988), and G. M. Bauer (1925–1989).

It is sad to recall that Sevir, who spent his entire life working on Ethiopia, in fact only ever managed to visit the country twice, and for a short time on each occasion — to attend the Eighth and the Eleventh Congresses of Ethiopian Scholars held in Addis Abbaba in November 1984 and in April 1991. However, like many Orientalists of his generation, he was able to visit, during the 1990s, the main Western European centres of work in the field, above all Mainz, where he was on several occasions the much-valued guest of Manfred Kropp, and the *Gastprofessor* at his Ethiopian seminar.

A project in whose future Sevir Chernetsov placed warm hopes was the

Istoriya efiopskoi pismennosti [History of Ethiopian Literature].¹ He wanted this to be a wide-ranging guide to classical Ethiopian studies of a kind that had no parallels elsewhere, and invited me to collaborate, and also Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Platonov, an expert on Ethiopian manuscripts. I was to write the sections on the pre-Axumite and Axumite eras. He was planning to organise a discussion of the project in the St Petersburg section of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, with participation from leading experts on the manuscript tradition. Unfortunately though, the plan for this book seems to have been born under an unlucky star: other more urgent affairs kept stopping us from completing work on it. The last time I met Sevir, we reached an agreement to put the book forward for discussion by our colleagues in the autumn of 2005²: after all, 95 per cent of the work was now completed... Now Vyacheslav Platonov and I will have to finish the book alone. And we should do our best to ensure that *Istoriya efiopskoi pismennosti* becomes an indispensable point of reference for future generations of Ethiopian specialists. One could imagine no better monument to Sevir Borisovich Chernetsov.

St Petersburg, 17 March 2005,
Sergei Frantsouzoff

Translated by Catriona Kelly

¹ In the broad sense, literally 'writing'. [Editor].

² i.e. for approval by the Learned Council as a preliminary to putting the book into production. [Editor].