



Kenneth Anderson Kitchen (1932 – 2025)

Ken Kitchen was the Brunner Professor Emeritus of Egyptology at the School of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology, University of Liverpool, England. He was one of the most significant Egyptologists of our time and a pre-eminent Ancient Near Eastern scholar. Until 2021, he was a member of the Editorial Board of this journal. He was a friend of the Institute and a personal friend of some of its members. It is an honour to give recognition to his passing on 6 February 2025, and to remember a great scholar and an authentic personality. In preparing this tribute, I acknowledge assistance from Dr Boyo Ockinga, Honorary Associate Professor, Macquarie University, Dr Bruce Routledge, University of Liverpool, Dr Paul Lawrence, and Dr Peter Williams, Principal of Tyndale House, Cambridge (<https://tyndalehouse.com/updates/news/kenneth-kitchen/>, accessed 8/3/25).

A significant source for Ken's life and perspectives is his autobiography, *In Sunshine & Shadow* (Liverpool: Abercromby Press, 2016). The preface begins, 'This modest essay ... may help people who have (eventually) to compose obituaries when I am gone' (p. ix). The book illustrates his personal organisation, with dates and times for events and details of travel that derive partly from his diaries, which he had kept from his high school years. It offers his reflections on life and work and has a thirty-one-page bibliography.

Ken was proud to have been born in Aberdeen in the summer of 1932. His parents, Hannah Sheen and Leslie Kitchen, met when they were both playing with the Benton Orchestral Society. Ken's grandfather was a master-tailor and Leslie followed in the trade. Two years after Ken's birth the family moved to Hawick, where Leslie managed

a drapery store in the high street. They were still there when World War II began. In 1940, Ken missed a year of schooling because of anxiety and accompanying ailments; he always remembered the noise of the Junker diesel engines of the German planes passing overhead to bomb the docks at Leith. Leslie joined the Airforce and served as aircrew, but because he was a family man he was not allowed to be a rear-gunner. When he was demobbed in 1945, he decided not to return to tailoring, but to become a professional musician, playing the cornet in brass-bands. While this was being arranged, Ken and younger brother Don were billeted by a Hawick couple, where he pored over their copy of J.A. Hammerton's *Wonders of the Past* (New York & London: Putnam 1924). Ken had already read *Harmsworth's Universal History of the World*, also edited by Hammerton, and found most of it boring, except for the sections on ancient Egypt and early Mesopotamia. So, at the age of thirteen, Ken's future was emergent.

The family moved to Kettering, where Ken attended Kettering Grammar School. Gone was the relaxed learning of Hawick High School: he had to catch up in Latin and French and comprehend algebra and trigonometry. He survived sport by running about energetically, well away from the ball. On a school trip to Bedford, he purchased a mint copy of E.A. Budge's *The Mummy: Chapters in Egyptian Funereal Archaeology* (2nd ed, Cambridge: University Press, 1925) from which he started to learn hieroglyphs. The buying of books and the study of the Egyptian language became lifelong passions.

In 1947, the family moved to Newark-on-Trent and Ken enrolled at Newark Magnus Grammar School, where the pace of learning was less driven than it had been at Kettering. It became apparent during Ken's adolescence that he was clever, with a photographic mind and a remarkable capacity for work, and he was besotted with Egypt. He read Amelia B. Edwards' *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* (London: George Routledge and Sons Ltd, 1877) many times, reproduced her sketches in water colour and oils, and took every opportunity to indulge in learning about ancient Egypt. For Newark's 400th birthday celebration, he entered a '4000 year birthday' model of the Mentuhotep II temple at Thebes. As the end of his schooling drew nigh, Ken held to his intention to become an Egyptologist: his parents were dismayed, his teachers bewildered, and even Herbert Fairman, Professor of Egyptology at the University of Liverpool, was discouraging because employment opportunities for Egyptologists were so limited. Unrelentingly, Ken joined the Egypt Exploration Society (EES) and continued independently to learn Latin, which was required for university, and German for studying Egyptology. He described the decision he made on 5 September 1950:

... by the end of the day, I found within me no other real feeling for any other path to follow, other than to attempt to proceed in and with Egyptology, and run the risks of no obvious 'proper' employment, after a degree-course, that very few outsiders



Figure 1: University of Liverpool, 8-14 Abercromby Square, where the School of Histories, Languages & Cultures and the Garstang Museum is located. When Ken enrolled there in 1951, the department was still in its World War II basement accommodation.
Image: courtesy of the University of Liverpool.

would value out there, in a hard everyday world. So, on that day, I opted for the risk; (p. 67).

Many people in ancient world studies have also been faced with this situation and have chosen to take the risk; Ken was one who would go on to contribute significantly to the study of the ancient world.

At the University of Liverpool, Ken resided in Derby Hall, where he developed a circle of friends. He felt like an oddity; not only was he studying Egyptology, but as Coptic was not offered, he also learnt Hebrew with Semitic scholar, W.J. Martin (Figure 1). He participated in most student activities, often with an ancient Egyptian focus. On 'Panto Day', when students dressed-up and raised money for charity, Ken was decked out in a tunic with the double crown to be the Pharaoh of Liverpool for the day; and when he was appointed the chess secretary of the college, of course he created an Egyptian form of chess, based on the game of *senet*. While Ken never won a game of chess, he had better fortune with the 'Egyptian' form, for which he had written the rules. A more significant association was his contact with the *Evangelical Christian Union*. Over time, his 'conversion to the age-old faith came through a quiet, carefully "thinking it through" trial period to its clear conclusion' (p. 75).

University life was frenetic; there was never a dull moment. Visiting speakers included Walter Emery, Michael Ventris, John Chadwick, Jaroslav Černý, and Sir Leonard Woolley, who assured Ken that Abraham did exist, 'Look at all the wife-trouble he had!' (p. 84). Meanwhile, news of the Dead Sea scrolls discovery often filtered through. Away from Liverpool, Ken dug at an archaeological site in Anglesey with Glyn Daniel (later Disney Professor of Archaeology at the University of Cambridge), participated in the Tyndale Fellowship Old Testament Study Group at Cambridge where he met G.T. Manely and Donald Wiseman, attended EES functions in London with people such as Dr Margaret Murray

and Lady Hilda Petrie, and went on excursions with the Newark Archaeological Society. The pace took its toll. In September 1954, Ken was admitted to Newark General Hospital with pleurisy and double pneumonia, and spent a year recuperating. During this time the Army Recruiting Board interviewed him concluding that he was ‘just a bag of bones’ and that he would not be called-up.

The final year of studies in 1955–6 was completed successfully, and he graduated with First-class honours. He was interviewed for an Egyptology position at the British Museum, which he came to realise was not suitable for him, so he informed the interview panel that he also had interests in the Ancient Near East and space travel! The plan worked and he was overlooked for the position. Ken enrolled in a PhD to research Semitic, Hittite and Hurrian loanwords in Ancient Egyptian and, whether the spellings of such words indicated the writing of foreign vowels; it was never completed, but he did enough work to answer the question in the affirmative. He also spent one month at Tyndale House assisting his Hebrew teacher, W.J. Martin, prepare a Hebrew Grammar, but that too never saw the light of day. In June 1957, Ken gave the Tyndale Fellowship Biblical Archaeology lecture in Cambridge entitled, *The Egyptian Background to the Joseph-Narrative in Genesis*. The monograph of the lecture was never published. Ken concludes this story in his autobiography by offering ‘grovelling apologies’ and hoping that ‘someday, something might happen’ (p.102). A scan of Ken’s bibliography reveals that, from about 1960 many things did happen: he published prodigiously in English and German, including scholarly and popular books, papers and reviews, for the next sixty years.

In June 1957, Ken was appointed as an Assistant Lecturer in Egyptian and Coptic at the University of Liverpool,



Figure 2: 50 Rosefield Road, Woolton, where Ken lived with his parents from July 1958. It was a secure home base from which Ken was able to travel widely to research and lecture in Egyptology. Ken’s mother died here in 1981, and his father in 1994. Image: courtesy of Google Earth, accessed 2/10/2025.

to commence for the 1957–8 academic year. He gave his first lecture on 2 October of that year and would continue to do so for the next thirty-nine years! A year later in July, Ken’s parents purchased a house at Woolton, near Liverpool, and Ken moved in with them; all three spent the rest of their lives there (Figure 2).

While Ken’s employment and domestic arrangements were settled, his intellectual journey always sought new horizons. In 1959, after submitting his first academic paper on four Egyptian stelae in the Leicester Museum to *Orientalia* (1960, 75–97), he learnt Russian to help him with Russian Egyptological works; the language later proved useful for Old-South-Arabian studies. Then in 1960, he moved on to Hittite hieroglyphs.

In July 1961, Ken joined his fellow Liverpool University staff member, Dr W.J. Martin, Martin’s son John, and David Winch on a car journey to the Middle East. The intention was to leave Martin’s Rover saloon at Mersin, Türkiye, and to take a boat to Haifa to attend a conference in Jerusalem. In the event, they found that the Turkish authorities would not allow the car to be left in Türkiye, so they sent copies of their papers on to Jerusalem to be read in their absence and instead, travelled through Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, visiting sites as far south as Petra. They did get to East Jerusalem, where they found Kathleen Kenyon and Père De Vaux excavating adjacent trenches next to the city walls. For the rest of his life, Ken travelled regularly and extensively.

Research on the foreign loanwords in ancient Egyptian continued but, by the end of 1961, it was clear to Ken that a large number of relevant New Kingdom inscriptions were not available in any collection. So, he began the *Ramesside Inscriptions* project, arguably the most significant work of his academic career. He accumulated all available texts and prepared to journey to Egypt to copy texts on-site. Finance was a major concern and necessitated prudence at the bookshop.

November 1962 saw Ken on his first visit to Egypt. Work in Cairo began by consulting catalogues and records at the Cairo Museum and at the Centre of Documentation, and continued later at Luxor, where he stayed at Chicago House and worked on site at Karnak. Friends that he met sometimes travelled with him to sites further afield. In January, he joined a tour group for a fortnight as a Guest Lecturer. The program took him to many of the sites between Luxor and Abu Simbel and, as his duties involved only morning briefings and evening lectures, he was free to spend most of the day recording the texts he discovered onsite, wherever that happened to be. He arrived home early on the Monday morning of 11 February, and was lecturing to students on the following Wednesday.

In the following weeks, Ken catalogued the hundreds of slides and monochrome negatives he had taken. These records, and those from the eleven subsequent expeditions to Egypt, were the basis of the *Ramesside Inscriptions* project. Many of his visits to Egypt to collect data



Figure 3: Guest lecturing could be demanding. Ken not only spoke about Ramesses II, but at one tour's closing celebrations, he had to become Ramesses II. Image: K.A. Kitchen In Sunshine & Shadow, fig. 39.

included guest lecturing on tours, which partially funded the trip (Figure 3). Some of the guest lecturing positions were at the behest of Sir Mortimer Wheeler.

Within a month of returning from his first visit to Egypt, Ken received the proofs for *Alter Orient und Altes Testament*, which was later published in English as *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, (London: Tyndale Press 1966) (Figure 4). The cover blurb of the English version explained that ancient Near Eastern research and the study of the Old Testament had developed independently, and that if the principles valid for the study of ancient literature were applied to the structure of the Old Testament, it would be found to stand as it is, and not as it was being reconstructed by nineteenth-century scholars and those who came after them. Ken would return to this subject many times.

For part of 1963 he turned his attention to Hittite king lists and in June, he attended the XIIth *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* in London. There Dr Martin introduced him to numerous Ancient Near Eastern scholars, such as Professors von Soden and Falkenstein. Ken's regular attendance at conferences and extensive travel, not just to Egypt, enabled him to develop a very wide circle of colleagues and friends.

By 1968, the first hieroglyphic texts of the *Ramesside Inscriptions* project began to be published by Blackwells

of Oxford. Publishing continued until 1990, by which time there were seven volumes (5,220 pages). A supplemental series of translations (five of seven have been issued) and two of volumes of annotations have followed. This was a life-long work, which was not quite finished.

In July 1970, Ken travelled to Canada for the first time to participate in a summer school at Regent College, Vancouver, with W.J. Martin, who had moved to Regent from Liverpool. Ken did the Old Testament and its Ancient Near Eastern background, while Dr Martin taught a Hebrew course, and Professor F.F. Bruce taught the New Testament. This event was a little unusual for Ken at the time; his autobiography for this period describes him to be still hard at work recording Ramesside texts on visits to Egypt, and European museums and monuments. The obelisks in Rome, for example, had proved to be an important source of texts.

In 1972, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt (1100–650 BC)*, (Warminster: Aris & Phillips) was published. Ken's doctoral program had stalled in the face of overwhelming data, so this book was submitted as a work of equivalent doctoral standard. It was accepted, so on 7 July 1974, Ken was awarded a PhD in the presence of his parents at the University's Summer Degree Congregation. Later that year he was promoted to the position of Reader

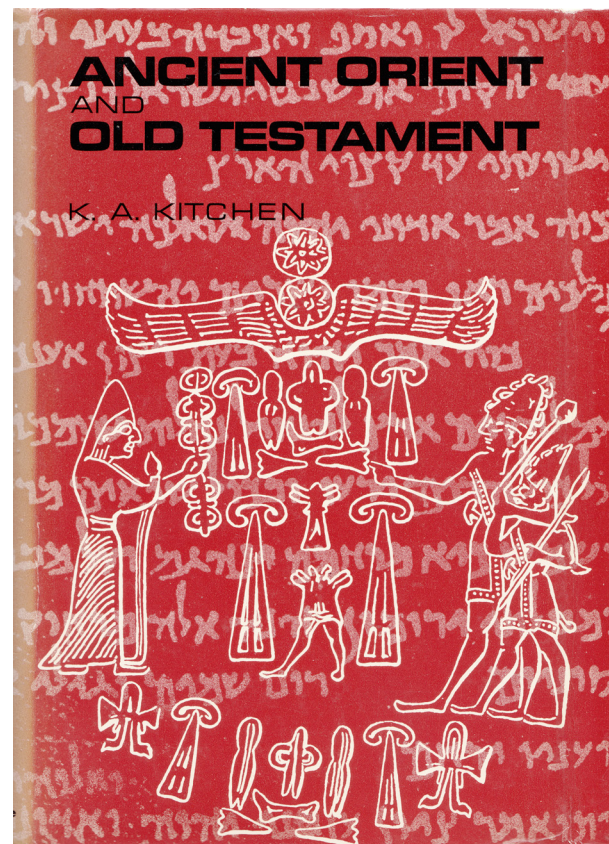


Figure 4: The cover of the first edition of *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, (London: Tyndale Press 1966). Hittite hieroglyphic signs and symbols are in front of Isaiah 49, from the Dead Sea Scrolls.



Figure 5: The 'Crossword' Stela of Peser from the time of Rameses VI. The 'crossword' is sixty-seven squares wide and eighty squares deep, but may originally have been eighty by eighty. It was found at Karnak by Giovanni Belzoni. Image: © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

in Egyptology, which was recognition that meant more to him than the doctorate.

Ken described (p. 172) his work in the summer of 1982 on one text, which is on display in the British Museum (Figure 5). Sitting at a card table in the sunny backyard, he transcribed what is the world's oldest known crossword for *Ramesside Inscriptions* volume VI. The stele contains two hymns to the goddess Mut: one is read horizontally and the second is read vertically using the same symbols. Ken acknowledged the 'incredibly ingenious priest' who devised the text, and lamented that the stele is rarely noticed by visitors to the British Museum. The description demonstrates Ken's skill, concentration, and the manner in which he enjoyed his work.

A not so enjoyable event was the passing of his mother late in the previous year. Ken had been well supported by his mother and was gratified to find at her funeral many other people who had also known her to be 'a kindly counsellor and oft a practical and generous friend' (p. 171).

Ken first visited Australia in 1984. He was a guest of the Rundle Foundation, and was hosted in Brisbane by

Professor Francis Andersen, in Sydney by Professor Naguib Kanawati and in Melbourne by Dr Colin Hope. Colin had been Ken's student. His second visit to Australia in 1989 was sponsored by the Institute, and he was hosted in Melbourne by another of his students, Piers Crocker. This trip included visits to Sydney and Armidale. His last tour to Australia was in 1999.

On holiday in Rio de Janeiro in 1985 Ken found an unpublished collection of Egyptian objects in the National Museum. He promptly abandoned the beach to get permission to publish the collection in Portuguese and English, *Catalogue of the Egyptian collection in the National Museum, Rio de Janeiro* (London: Aris & Phillips, 1990).

As the site work for the *Ramesside Inscriptions* eased off, Ken began studying Old-South-Arabian inscriptions. From 1990 he participated in the Society for Arabian studies and, in 1993, he had a comprehensive and adventurous overland tour of most of the important archaeological sites in Yemen. He later also toured Arabia and the Gulf States. Back in England, he offered help to an auction house trying to sell an Old-South-Arabian inscription that they had displayed upside-down. His interest became known, and he found himself deluged by people seeking information about Old-South-Arabian inscriptions in their possession. Rather than undertaking arduous expeditions to record monuments, as he had done for the *Ramesside Inscriptions* project, this time the texts came to him. One such stela fragment is in the Institute's collection, and was published by him in *Buried History* (46, 2010, 17–18).

Ken retired from teaching in 1996, and his dual professorial positions ended and were replaced by an emeritus title, which left him free to research and publish. His biblical studies perspectives were developed and finally brought together in *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2003), which he informed me with some amusement shortens to OROT. In any case, it is the the most comprehensive single resource for the historical background of the Old Testament.

Another substantial publishing project was the compilation of all ancient treaties and international agreements written in numerous languages, arranged in chronological order to demonstrate the development of treaty structures. This was published in a three-volume work, *Treaty, Law, and Covenant* (Harrassowitz, 2012), with the assistance of Dr Paul Lawrence. The book of Deuteronomy is included in the series, and is placed in the second millennium BC with other documents of similar form.

In 2008 Ken was admitted to the Royal Infirmary with chest-pains. He was diagnosed with angina and, although there was no formal advice, Ken took this as a sign that he should cease flying. Thereafter, he restricted himself to rail travel, mainly in the United Kingdom.

Ken was a compulsive teacher. When a student proposed to adapt their prize-winning honours thesis on Pharaoh



Figure 6: Ken with Professor Donald Wiseman (BH 2009: 3-6) and Professor Alan Millard (BH 2024: 3-6), at Tyndale House in about 1992-93. All three were leading Ancient Near Eastern scholars who also studied the Old Testament in the context of ancient literature and history, and saw no need to reconstruct it. In fact, their approach, which has been shared by the Institute, fosters a much more profound understanding of the Old Testament than would otherwise be the case. Image: used by permission of Tyndale House.

Shoshenq and his expedition to Palestine for this journal, I naturally sent it to Ken for review; he was the appropriate Editorial Board member, and the world authority on the subject. I mentioned that this was a student we were encouraging. Five typewritten pages of detailed comments were soon received. Dr Colin Hope remembers that Ken's teaching was always 'focussed and thorough'.

His published Egyptological record puts him into the pantheon of all-times great Egyptologists. He was also a skilled semitic scholar, for which he has received less recognition. Armed with a well-marked up first edition of *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, I set off in 1972 to study at Cambridge University. The gulf between what Ken called (p. 23) the 'relatively objectively based disciplines' of ancient world studies and the 'idealistic theories' of biblical scholars was vast. My subsequent time in London with scholars such as Professor Donald Wiseman proved more helpful for Old Testament study.

For Ken, the Old Testament was based on ancient texts and had to be studied in the context of ancient literature and culture, whereas biblical scholars are inclined to consider it to be a community/religious text in a more modern sense. For many of them, it was primarily written in a Persian-Hellenistic environment. One critic, Philip Davies, did engage with OROT, saying that it did not:

add up to a coherent case for a certain degree of reliability because of the lack of any overall explanation of what the biblical narratives are, where they come from, how they work, how they have been transmitted, and what we mean by

reliability (Memories of Ancient Israel, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2008, 168).

It is unrealistic to expect Ken to have put together a historically credible 'coherent case'. After 130 years Davies and his colleagues have not successfully done so. In time, scholars trained in ancient languages and history could organise the evidence cited in OROT into such a form. At the last Tyndale Fellowship Old Testament Study Group I attended, I sat with Ken in one session. As the speaker outlined some speculative theories, Ken became increasingly agitated, but his comments 'what about the evidence' were met with shushes. Although some audiences may not appreciate it, Ken leaves an important legacy for those who ground their research and interpretations of the Old Testament in historical evidence and ancient languages.

Ken's autobiography is well illustrated and every image of him, except one, depicts him with a broad smile. He was friendly and always eager to support activities that he espoused. There are, for example, six papers by him in *Buried History*. His friendliness and humour often shrouded his brilliance and vast knowledge of ancient history and literature. He will be missed by friends and ancient world scholars alike.

Christopher J Davey
University of Melbourne, and
The Australian Institute of Archaeology
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1345-8638>
<https://doi.org/10.62614/kk6rmv28>