IN MEMORIAM

ALEXANDER HART SACKTON

Alexandre Hirsch Sakowitz was born in Galveston, Texas, on January 30, 1911, the son of Tobias and Mathilda Littman Sakowitz. He studied at Rice Institute, took a B.S. degree in Economics at the University of Pennsylvania and a B.A. (honors) in literature at Cambridge University, obtained an M.A. from Cambridge, and earned another M.A. and his Ph.D. in English at Harvard University in 1941. His dissertation, written under the direction of the eminent Renaissance scholar Douglas Bush, dealt with Ben Jonson's plays; it was published by Columbia University Press in 1948 under the title Rhetoric as a Dramatic Language in Ben Jonson. F.R. Leavis and Theodore Spencer of Cambridge and F.O. Matthiessen of Harvard were other notable scholars with whom Alex studied and who wrote admiringly about him.

His father, founder of the Sakowitz retail firm in Houston, had offered him a career in business but consented to Alex's desire to make a profession of scholarship and college-level teaching. Before World War II, however, anti-Semitism was a significant force in the American academy, as in several other professional fields. A conspicuously Russian-German-Jewish name might be an obstacle even to an entry-level appointment in English literature. Toward the end of their doctoral studies, Alex and a fellow graduate student, a Jew with an Anglicized name, sent identical letters of inquiry about academic positions to a major university. The classmate received an expression of interest; the response to Alex was negative. With his father's understanding and blessing Alex consequently adopted Anglicized forms of his own middle name (hirsch is the German for hart) and his patronymic, which means "Son of Isaiah."

His first teaching position, still under the name Sakowitz, was an Instructorship at Texas A&M, from 1936 to 1938. He returned to A&M as an Assistant Professor in 1941-42, then served as a lieutenant in the U.S. Army Air Force, specializing in educational programs, until September 1945. Immediately upon his
discharge, he became an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Delaware, and after a year joined the University of Texas English Department as an Assistant Professor. With the exception of a visiting position at Brandeis University in 1955, Alex Sackton taught for the remainder of his career, 1946-80, at The University of Texas. He rose through the academic ranks to full Professor (1970) and was appointed Professor Emeritus in 1981.

While at A&M, he met Ivria Adlerblum, who became his wife and bore him four children. Ivria Sackton passed away suddenly in September 1990, and Alex followed her on April 21, 1992, at the age of 81, with all his children at his bedside: John Tobias Sackton of Lexington, Massachusetts, Rabbi David Alexander Sackton, of Jerusalem, Israel, Margaret Sackton Rosan of Madison, New Jersey, and Elisabeth Ivria Sackton of Somerville, Mass. He was also survived by 15 grandchildren.

His studies in Elizabethan and early seventeenth-century English literature were shared with the scholarly community through regular, if not copious, articles in learned journals and papers read before professional societies (and of course through his book on Jonson) between 1946 and the early 1950s. In 1954 he published an important essay on Milton's Paradise Regained, an essay admired by the distinguished Miltonist Arnold Stein, and in subsequent years his teaching interests, at the graduate and undergraduate levels, included Milton and the theory and history of criticism. He wrote reviews of important new works in the latter field, such as Northrop Frye's influential Anatomy of Criticism. While his professional concern with English poetry and poetics in the late sixteenth and the seventeenth century continued until he retired from teaching in 1980, as reflected in his publications and work-in-progress, Alex Sackton began in the 1960s to study the manuscripts and printed works of the modernist poet T. S. Eliot. A descriptive article in the University of Texas Library Chronicle (1967) and a 400-page enumerative bibliography, The T. S. Eliot Collection of the University of Texas (1975), were the fruits of this labor. Related to his scholarly enterprises was his faithful work as a reader of submissions to Texas Studies in Literature and Language.
Both Alex and Ivria Sackton were connoisseurs of painting and the graphic arts. Their shared
avocation of collecting and of visiting galleries and museums took an unusual turn when, in 1965, Alex saw an
exhibit at the Methodist Student Center in Austin of drawings by a patient at the Austin State Hospital, Eddie
Arning. Eddie, who was present, referred Alex's questions to his art teacher, Helen Mayfield, who had
arranged the show, and Alex learned that Eddie, after thirty years of committal for schizophrenia, had begun to
draw the year before, at age 66. The signs of his mental illness had disappeared and he would soon be
furloughed to a nursing home. Between 1964 and 1974 he produced a large number of "primitive" works, in
vivid wax crayon or oil pastel on paper, many of them inspired by advertising illustrations in magazines that
appealed to his innate sense of color and form. From purely geometric subjects he moved to automobiles,
animals, landscapes, and human figures. At the height of his creativity, Eddie Arning was producing between
three and seven pieces per week. Support for his endeavors—materials, a good work-table, exhibitions,
placement of drawings in private collections and museums, friendship, respect, and frequent visits—came from
the Sacktons, Mrs. Mayfield and her husband, and another couple.

From 1967 forward, Alex assumed responsibility for keeping a running catalogue of Arning's drawings
and for providing appropriate storage space; and after retirement his care and furtherance of the Arning oeuvre
was Alex's chief labor. He placed Arnings in the Smithsonian, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the San
Antonio Museum, the Archer M. Huntington Museum at The University of Texas, Austin, the New Orleans
Museum of Art, the Museum of American Folk Art (New York), the New York Historical Association, the
High Museum (Atlanta), and the McKissick Museum (South Carolina), among other collections. A major
show of fifty Arning pieces was mounted in 1985 by the Abby Aldridge Rockefeller Folk Art Center in
Williamsburg, Virginia, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts and from Alex and Ivria
Sackton. Included in the exhibit were eight drawings the Sacktons had donated to the Center in 1984 and
forty-two from their own collection. The show was commemorated by a handsome color catalogue, to which
Alex Sackton contributed a preliminary essay, "Eddie Arning: The Man," and a great deal of curatorial
information.
Appreciative former students remember Alex as formal in classroom manner—in no respect "charismatic"—but capable of generating in them great intellectual excitement about seventeenth-century poetry. They also recall his friendliness and personal concern; in the fifties, before it became commonplace to do so, he was one of the few professors to invite classes to his home. He will be remembered fondly by other members of the university community as well, contemporary and younger colleagues in English and companions from several departments with whom he often shared a luncheon table at the Faculty Center. He was a gentleman and a gentle man: soft-spoken, modest, generous, sensitive, exceptionally intelligent, uncommonly humane. His example holds value for us all.

Robert M. Berdahl, President  
The University of Texas at Austin

H. Paul Kelley, Secretary  
The General Faculty

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professor Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Chairman), Professor Larry D. Carver, and Professor Wayne Lesser.
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