

A.K. RAMANUJAN BOOK PRIZE FOR TRANSLATION
South Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies

Winner 1998: Patrick Olivelle
Upaniṣads
Oxford University Press, 1993

A corpus of Sanskrit prose and poetic works, the Upaniṣads are among the most important religious and literary texts of ancient India. Presenting secret doctrines mainly in the form of dialogues between teachers and students of sacred learning, the Upaniṣads contributed substantially to the development of philosophical ideas in Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. Patrick Olivelle's elegant, lucid, and accurate renderings capture the power and beauty of these ancient texts.

His terse English prose matches the spare style of the dialogues in the original, while the poetic passages evoke the lyrical spirit of the Sanskrit in full measure. His refusal to archaize his translations of these sacred texts, which are so far removed from us in time and cultural contexts, is refreshing and very effective, resulting in dialogues vivid with tones and rhythms of a living, spoken language. While specialists will revel in the depth, originality and impartial spirit of Olivelle's scholarship, the author has aimed his work above all at an audience of uninitiated readers. His historical introduction to the Vedic religion and society out of which the Upaniṣads arose is at once magisterial and eminently accessible, yet his greatest achievement is his ability to let the translation speak for itself. At every point his renderings offer new insights to these enigmatic texts.

Patrick Olivelle tells us that one of his goals in translating the Upaniṣads is to illuminate the distant past of India for the reader, but as he himself remarks in another context, a text is a living reality, not an artifact to be excavated. By making the far near, and by letting these ancient voices speak to us in all their humanity, Patrick Olivelle has made the Upaniṣads a living reality for us. In doing so, he has acted fully in the spirit of A.K. Ramanujan, the poet-scholar-translator for whom this prize was named.

AAS President James Scott
AAS Secretary-Treasurer John Campbell
South Asia Council Chair Gary Tartakov

Selection Committee: Indira Peterson (Chair), Wendy Doniger, Prances Pritchett