
Anniversary General Meeting of the

Royal Asiatic Society,

Thursday 13 May 2004

ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT

I should like to begin by thanking the Honorary Treasurer for his admirably succinct report for 2003. I would like to assure you that Council takes his main points very seriously, that is the need to eliminate the current deficit of around £35k, and the connected imperative to move to a more suitable building in a more suitable location. Over the past seven years the Honorary Treasurer has been a great servant of the Society. On behalf of Council, and the fellowship, I thank him for his skills and for keeping us focussed on the need to act.

The report from Council that you have before you ends in December 2003. In speaking today I shall try to bring you right up to date. The most important development during the year has been the implementation of the recommendations of the Strategic Review Group, which examined the most effective ways to fulfil the Society's aims according to its Charter, within the terms of its charitable status and in the circumstances of the twenty-first century. Last year, my predecessor, Tony Stockwell, set out some of the Review's interim recommendations that Council had approved. The final report was delivered to Council in December last year. I would like, on behalf of the Society, to thank Tony Stockwell and his group (Giles Tillotson, Kit Naylor, Helen Cordell, David Waterhouse and Rachel Ward) for their care and effort, and for their most helpful and constructive report.

The first stage in implementing the recommendations of the Strategic Review Group has been to introduce a new administrative structure. At the apex of that structure is the post of curator, or chief executive. Last September this post was filled by Alison Ohta, a Mamluk scholar from the School of Oriental and African Studies. She is supported by four new members of staff: Kathy Lazenbatt, Assistant Librarian, and Simon Fourmy, the Library Assistant, and Catherine Melia, Executive officer, and Angeline Cheng, administrative assistant. This new body of staff has set about implementing the further recommendations of the Strategic Review Group with great energy. In the coming years the fellowship will see the benefits in areas ranging from the Society's programme of activities to its website. It has already been of enormous value in the Society's search for new premises, and in all the necessary preparations to a move to new premises.

Over the past year, we have said farewell to valued staff. I must mention Eileen Zhuo, whose period as administrative assistant was completed in September 2003. But I would like to make especial mention of two people. First, Adrian Thomas, whose contract with us as Secretary finished in December 2003. Adrian brought the highest level of skill to the management of Council and office business. Since leaving us, Adrian has been pursuing his academic interests relating to Asia, and it has been good to have him back amongst us as a Fellow. Second, I mention Michael Pollock, for many years the Society's librarian in

Queen's Gardens. I am sure that I am right in saying that no one knows the Society's library and collections as well as he does, and that few will have loved them as much. Michael, like Adrian, is pursuing his academic interests relating to Asia, and again it is good to have him back with us as a Fellow.

Action has taken place on almost all the lesser recommendations of the Strategic Review Group. The Fellowship list has been brought up to date and a good number of new Fellows admitted. I would like to take this opportunity to urge you to be active in proposing for fellowship suitably qualified candidates; by doing so you do the Society a real service. There has been a substantial assessment of library stock. A newsletter has been published. We have begun to mount lectures at larger venues, as was done most successfully last November in the case of Professor Jessica Rawson's lecture at the Society of Antiquaries. And I have made it my business to be in contact with some of fellow societies in Asia. Last September and October I was most hospitably received by our branches in Hongkong and Korea, while in November I had the honour of giving the plenary address as a conference put on by our mother society in Kolkata. Not all these societies share our strict academic focus, but I sense that they valued the contact, and we shall maintain it.

The most important recommendation of the Strategic Review Group was that the Society should move premises. Council endorsed the recommendation last year, and I should make it clear that it continues to do so. It is unfortunate that, when it came to the point, we were not able to bring the resolution to sell Queen's Gardens and buy Jockey's Fields to the Special General Meeting this afternoon. But I am delighted that the Meeting has seen fit to give the Council discretion, within limits, to move with speed, as suitable opportunities arise. The proposed move to the Bloomsbury area is central to making the Society more available to scholars, in particular younger scholars, to making its spaces work more effectively, to putting its finances on a sounder footing, and to ensuring that its resources work as fully as possible in support of scholarship. Fellows should know that we have had fruitful discussions with more than one learned society of our type, and it is possible that we may move to new premises with one or more such society.

The Society may have been in the throes of change over the past year, but it has not neglected its true purpose. Lectures have been given as usual. I draw your attention in particular to the memorial lecture for the Society's Honorary Fellow, Professor Annemarie Schimmel, which was given by her pupil, Carl Ernst of the University of North Carolina, the lecture by Professor Edmund Bosworth on the occasion of his receiving the Society's Award for his contributions to Islamic studies, and I will remind you of a second award to made next month, that of the Burton Medal to Professor David Snellgrove for his contributions to scholarship and exploration. This will be followed by a lecture from Professor Snellgrove on the cultural history of the Khmers. Study days have been held on Mamluk art and architecture, on the Society's photographic collections, and a third will be held this Saturday on Iraq, together with the British Museum, and at the Museum. The Society's journal has continued to be produced with some delay in the production of the November number, for which I apologise.

The Society's revived publishing programme continues to grow with vigour. A five-volume set of reprints from the Oriental Translation series was published last year; a further set of five will be published in the coming year. In addition, I am delighted to be able

to announce that Volume V of Storey's *Bio-Bibliographical Survey of Persian Literature*, 'The Poetry of the Pre-Mongol Period' by François de Blois, has recently come out. Fellows, I hope, will be pleased to hear that we are seeking major grant funding to give the Storey project a new lease of life. A second new work published in the year was Yoginder Sikand's *Muslims in India since 1947*. This has had the extraordinary achievement for a Royal Asiatic Society book of selling out its first print run within a few weeks of publication. At the moment the Society has sixteen further projects under consideration in its Royal Asiatic Society Books series. I would like at this point to acknowledge our successful publishing collaboration with Routledge/Curzon. The Society provides the scholarly input and the services of a publications officer; the publisher bears all the financial risk.

As my predecessor indicated last year, publishing projects can take a long time to come to fruition. However, I am delighted to be able to announce that in the coming year we will publish the first volume supported by the Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt Fund set up by Princess Fazile Ibrahim. The fund exists to support the publication of Ottoman documents in translation and facsimile from the pre-*Tanzimat* period. The first volume, edited by Michael Ursinus, is a fascinating collection of petitions to the Ottoman rulers of the province of Rumelia in the eighteenth century. Two further volumes are in the pipeline.

Fellows will recall that last year we had to say farewell to Andrea Belloli who had done so much to bring the publishing programme to its current state of rude health. Fortunately, Andrea continues to advise us. Her role as publication's officer has been taken over with great effect by Anna Lethbridge, who is herself a publisher, but fortunately in an area which represents no conflict of interest.

Over the past two years the Society has held conferences and a seminar related to Iran and to Nepal. During the past year these have led to diplomatic visits. Last month the Deputy Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mr Ali Reza Mouaiyeri, made an official visit to the Society. He was concerned, first of all, to thank us for the two conferences we had held together with the Iranian Foreign Ministry on Anglo-Iranian relations, and second to urge us to hold more such conferences. During his visit, Dr Vanessa Martin was able to show him the full typescript of the volume which she is editing out of the papers presented to the conferences; she is to be congratulated on assembling the volume at such exemplary speed. In the same month, the Royal Nepalese Ambassador, Mr Prabal Rana, also visited the Society. David Waterhouse, a personal friend, who two years ago put on a two-day seminar on Brian Houghton Hodgson, administrator and scholar of Nepal, was able to show him Hodgson drawings and correspondence from the Society's collections. Among the correspondence were letters between Hodgson and Jang Bahadur, founder of Nepal's hereditary dynasty of Rana prime ministers and ancestor of the ambassador.

Finally some matters of personal congratulation and gratitude. I am delighted that council has been able to make the Ottoman scholar, Godfrey Goodwin, an Honorary Vice-President of the Society. Godfrey was the Society's honorary librarian during its move in the late 1980s to Queen's Gardens and for some years afterwards. I would like to thank Paola Chadwick and Alexandra Chammas from SOAS, who have been coming to the Society each week as volunteers. They have been labelling our paintings and are helping us tonight. I should also like to thank the NADFAS volunteers, who do much, amongst other things, to keep our book stock in good condition. There is one member of Council of whom we shall

see much less in the coming year as he is moving permanently to India, that is Dr Giles Tillotson, formerly Director of the Society. Over the past six years that he has been closely involved with the affairs of the Society, Giles has been a huge source of energy, imagination and ideas. Giles, we thank you for all you have done, and hope that, one way or the other, you will continue to be able to contribute to the Society's work. Four members of Council retire this year – Jerry Losty, Alan Tritton, Vanessa Martin and Michael Willis: I thank them all for their considerable contributions, and hope that they will be back with us before too long. At the same time, we welcome to Council Joe Cribb, Curator in the Coins and Medals Department of the British Museum with responsibility for the Asian collections, and Mr Nabil Saidi, who was formerly Head of the Islamic Manuscript Department of Sotheby's. In conclusion, on your behalf, the Fellowship, I thank the Society's staff, its Council and its honorary officers for all that they have contributed during the year. As President, may I say that it is a privilege and a pleasure to work with them.

Francis Robinson