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# Annual General Meeting 7th May 2009,

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## President's Address

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Fellows of the Society and guests. At each Anniversary General Meeting we commemorate the inauguration of the Society in 1823 and reaffirm our founders' commitment to the encouragement of research and the dissemination of learning in relation to Asia. In his address at the first meeting, Henry Colebrooke declared that Britain owed a "debt of gratitude" to Asia and had a duty to repay its "obligation" by "promoting an interchange of benefits". It was a time of vigorous British expansion in Asia; but it was also a time of woeful indifference in Britain to Asian societies and cultures. In those days universities did little to make good such neglect. Indeed, lamenting the ignorance of Asia in British public life, another founder-member of the Society, Sir George Staunton, would later emphasise its educational function. It was, he said "the province of the Royal Asiatic Society . . . to bring together into one focus those who are able to impart this knowledge, and those who are desirous to receive it". Clearly the RAS was established to meet a national need, as were other learned societies of the same era, such as the Royal Astronomical Society formed three years earlier, the Zoological Society of London formed three years later and the Royal Geographical Society which came into being in 1830.

The creation of our Society was, therefore, a bold and radical departure. But times change, and learned societies have had to change with them or become moribund. Somewhat ironically, it has been the expansion of higher education in this country that has posed one of the greatest challenges to the *raison d'être* of learned societies. As they grapple with fluctuating finances and uncertain premises, how can they be expected to survive alongside – let alone compete with – state-funded universities, libraries, museums and galleries? And, it may with some justification be asked, how can they build on their traditions without being constrained by them? A survey of learned societies published last December in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* commented: "There is something about the very phrase 'learned society' that evokes dark wooden panelling, comfortable leather armchairs – and men too elderly to haul themselves out of them". And, the article continued, "it isn't hard to find examples that justify these clichés".

But such examples are not to be found here. For this Society is in the enviable position to complement institutions of higher education by promoting research and scholarship untrammelled by the vagaries of government funding. It is able to act, as George Staunton put it, "without any kind of political bias or influence". Moreover, through the lecture series, study days and publications programme this Society continues to provide a much-valued forum in which academics and non-academics may participate in what Henry Colebrooke called an 'interchange of benefits'. Furthermore, having recently been relaunched with a professional staff and in a more suitable building, the Society is now strenuously working

to make its resources more accessible. Now that the revolution in global communications has increased the temptation to spread error, prejudice and mediocrity, our commitment to open the Society's learning to a global audience is more pressing than ever. As our Patron has reminded us, if we are to harness the positive elements of globalisation "we need to underpin this new proximity with a much greater knowledge and understanding of one another".

Consequently, under the dynamic leadership of its Curator, the Society has embarked on an integrated programme of projects for the conservation of the Society's unique collections, the development of an on-line catalogue, and the dissemination of information not only to its members but also to schools, universities and the wider public. Perhaps I might pick out some indicative moments from the past twelve months. The first occurred shortly after last year's AGM, when Alison Ohta, our curator, organised a public exhibition of paintings from the Society's collections at Christies. Entitled 'In Good Company – The Royal Asiatic Society and India', it included works donated by early members such as Colonel James Tod. The next event that comes to mind is the Kazakh Study Day which the Society ran at the British Museum in October (in association with the British Museum, the British-Kazakh Society and the Central Asian Forum of Cambridge University). Attended by several hundred participants, it was the culmination of two years' careful planning, exhausting field work and some deft diplomacy. Kazakh scholars gave papers alongside British scholars, and the opportunity was taken at a workshop held here at Stephenson Way to establish closer links between Kazakh and British academic institutions.

Turning from events to publications, we may note that Fellows and other subscribers to the Society's quarterly *Journal* have recently been offered free on-line access both to the current issue and those of the previous five years. You will be interested to learn that the Society has also entered into an agreement with the Cambridge University Press for the digitisation of the complete back issues of the *Journal* starting with the first series of the *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society*. CUP is covering the cost of digitisation and, once this outlay has been met, revenue from the sale of the archive will be divided equally between the publisher and the Society. Fellows will be given free access to the on-line archive which they will be able to interrogate through the use of a search engine. Digitisation is currently in progress and we expect the on-line version to become available in 2010.

The Report and Accounts for 2008 which are before us this evening indicate that the publication of RAS books continues to flourish. I should add to this list a major work which is due to appear in the autumn. This is a study by Dr Barbara Brend of the Society's most treasured possession, the *Shahnameh* of Muhammad Juki, an illuminated Persian manuscript which was once held in the imperial library of the Mughal dynasty in Delhi and was presented to the Society by Lt-Colonel Doyle in 1834. Barbara Brend's book, to be published by Philip Wilson, will be richly illustrated and yet will retail at a reasonable price with a discount to Fellows.

Fundamental to the Society's scholarly and educational objectives are the cataloguing and conservation of its unique collections. Without this we shall be hamstrung in our mission to disseminate knowledge worldwide. The creation of an integrated on-line catalogue, to include records for books, manuscripts, paintings, drawings and photographs, is the pre-requisite for widening access. During the year cataloguing of all types of material has continued. In November first results went on-line and have been continually added to since.

They can be seen via a link on the Library page of the RAS web site. This enables the public to explore the collections as well. In order to produce the on-line catalogue within a reasonable period of time, we have submitted several grant applications to trusts and other potential donors, the largest of which is for £192,000. A significant start has also been made on conservation but this work, too, is costly and time-consuming. On 30 April we celebrated the conservation of two Persian Manuscripts: the *Bustan of Sa'adi* or Garden of Sa'adi which dates from about 1530, and two tales from the Khamsa of Nizami which dates from the 1470s. This project would not have been possible without a generous grant from the Don Baker Memorial Fund.

It is clear that fundraising is crucial to the completion of these projects and others that are outlined in the brochure that was sent to Fellows last summer. In addition to the Society's membership, we have been approaching individuals and corporate business with interests in Asia, and also British and American trusts. Fundraising is hard work but, rather than hire extra staff for the task, we decided to use the time which the Society's established staff can set aside for this work as well as the skills of those on Council who have been involved in other, successful campaigns. We aim to raise £5m. This is an ambitious target and we have a long way to go. So far the Society has received over £60,000 with pledges for a further £15,000. I am glad to have the opportunity this evening to thank everyone who has contributed. I hope that all Fellows will consider giving something, with gift aid. It would also be very helpful if you could bring the campaign to the attention of others who may be able to help. Professor Francis Robinson, the chair of the Fundraising Committee, would be happy to discuss plans with Fellows and potential donors at any time.

Now that we are well settled at Stephenson Way and have the measure of the new systems for running the building and for handling the great expansion in activity that has followed the re-launch, Council has been reviewing the governance of the Society and in particular the byelaws so as to ensure that they reflect the management structure which is now in place and are consistent with recent national legislation governing charities. Any change to the constitution will, of course, require the approval of a Special General Meeting of the Society and we expect to convene one sometime during the next session once Council has concluded its examination and drawn up its recommendations.

My term of office ends this evening. It has been an immense privilege to be president at this stage in the Society's history. I have to say that I have had an easy time of it, thanks to congenial colleagues on Council and to the extraordinary commitment – and it has been quite out of the ordinary – made by Alison Ohta and her team to the success of the re-launch. I am also very grateful for Brampton Mundy's calm and expert stewardship of the Society's finances in what have proved to be challenging times for financial managers all over the world. Brampton has been offered, and has accepted, a position overseas and has therefore regretfully decided not to seek re-election for another term as Honorary Treasurer. We wish him well in his new appointment.

I am delighted to be handing over to Dr Gordon Johnson. Gordon's association with the Society dates from 1967 when he was joint-winner of the Universities Prize Essay Competition. He is an historian whose principal interest is eighteenth-century India. He also has exceptional administrative experience as President of Wolfson College, Cambridge, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Chair of the Syndicate governing Cambridge University Press and

Provost of the Gates Cambridge Trust. I wish him the very best and hope that he will have as much enjoyment in the job as I have. Finally, as I look forward to my continuing involvement with the Society, I would like to thank you, the Fellows, for your support during the last three years.

ANTHONY STOCKWELL  
*Stephenson Way, May 2009*