

THE HONG KONG BRANCH OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY

The Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society was originally founded in 1847, but it ceased to exist at the end of 1859. Exactly a century later, on December 28, 1959, it was resuscitated with the approval of the parent society in London—The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

The Royal Asiatic Society was founded in March 1823 “for the investigation of subjects connected with and for the encouragement of science, literature and the arts, in relation to Asia”. It received its Charter of Incorporation as a royal society from George IV on August 11, 1824. The Royal Asiatic Society is the oldest and most important Society of its kind in Europe, and its standing as the doyen of Societies promoting the study of Asia has been maintained by the devotion of generations of eminent scholars, explorers and others who have contributed through its Journal, in public addresses and in many other ways, a rich harvest of knowledge, both academic and practical, in the service of Western understanding of the East.

A large part of the Society's work has always been done through its branches and affiliated Societies in the East. Branches were formed at Bombay and at Madras about 1838, and in Ceylon in 1845. The Hong Kong Branch followed in 1847, the North China Branch at Shanghai in 1857, the Japanese in 1875, the Malayan in 1878, and the Korean in 1900, etc. etc.

THE HONG KONG BRANCH grew out of a Medico-Chirurgical Society founded in 1845. This Society, however, in accord with the contemporary spirit of inquiry and the enthusiasm for better knowledge of Asia in general and China in particular, had contemplated setting up a Philosophical Society; but the movement ended in the establishment of the Asiatic Society with laws drafted by Andrew Shortrede, Editor of the *China Mail*, framed on the model of those of the Royal Asiatic Society. Sir John F. Davis, the Governor, by reason of his known literary and scientific acquirements rather than his official rank, was asked to be President. He suggested that the Society should seek to be admitted as a Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society with which, as a founder member, he was in close touch and with whose active President, the Earl of Auckland, he had discussions on these lines before he left England.

So in January 1847 the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society was founded, and all the members of the Medico-Chirurgical Society who wished to join were admitted without ballot or entrance fee on condition of their Society's apparatus and books being handed over to the new body.

Besides the Governor and Shortrede, the first office-bearers included Major-General D'Aguilar, Peter Young the Colonial Surgeon, Mercer the Colonial Treasurer, John Bowring the Younger (of Jardines); and also Thomas Wade, the celebrated interpreter and Envoy to China, who later became famous as inventor of the Wade System of romanization of Chinese still in general use today, and, as Sir Thomas, was to become President of the Society in London in 1887.

In his Inaugural Address as President, Sir John Davis stressed the importance of directing the Society's attention to practical projects and to natural history, geology and botany, as well as to literary pursuits, and suggested that he could get the sanction of the Colonial Office to the grant of a moderate piece of ground for a Botanical Garden. Sir John left the Colony in 1848; but, as the result of a stirring appeal by Mr. G. Gutzlaff, the missionary, at a meeting of the Society in August 1848, the project was approved, although it was not carried into effect until the governorship of Sir John Bowring (the younger John Bowring's father), and then the Garden was placed under Government control and not under that of the Society.

During the twelve years of its life, the Society was dogged to some extent by the personal animosities prevalent in Hong Kong in the early days; but it flourished under the inspiration of Sir John Davis, and also for a time under Sir John Bowring, who enjoyed a European reputation as a scholar—as President he preferred to be called *Dr.* Bowring—and who animated the Society with his personal influence and by his contributions to its discussions. The Society had no permanent home of its own, but in 1849 it was granted by Sir S. G. Bonham a room in the Supreme Court building. It published six volumes of Transactions, the first in 1847 and the last in 1859.

With the departure of Sir John Bowring in May 1859 and the death in the September following of the Branch's devoted Secretary—Dr. W. A. Harland, M.D.—the Society collapsed. The efforts of Dr. James Legge, as well as those of Sir Hercules Robinson, the new Governor, as President, of the Bishop of Victoria and of the Acting Chief Justice as Vice-Presidents and of Harry (later Sir Harry) S. Parkes were of no avail.

The collapse of the Society came at an unfortunate time and deprived it of the prestige and momentum which it would have gained from the work of some of its famous members. Legge was on the eve of publishing his famous translation of the Chinese Classics, which could be printed and distributed only through the generosity of Joseph Jardine, and his successor Sir Robert Jardine, and of John Dent, the heads of the two largest merchant houses in the Colony. A little later, in 1865, T. W. Kingsmill had to resort to the aid of the Shanghai Branch for the publication of his studies on the geology of Hong Kong.

THE NORTH CHINA BRANCH started in Shanghai in 1857 under the name of the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society. Its first President was the Rev. E. C. Bridgman, D.D., the first American missionary in China and the founder and manager of the *Chinese Repository*. Its first Journal appeared in 1858 in the name of the Literary and Scientific Society, but in that year the Society became affiliated to the Royal Asiatic Society as its North China Branch. Except for a brief period between 1861, when Dr. Bridgman died, and 1864 when the Society was reanimated through the unremitting efforts of Sir Harry Parkes as President, the Society maintained for nearly 85 years—until the outbreak of the second world war in December 1941—almost an unbroken vigour and a high reputation as the principal centre of Oriental culture among the foreign and Chinese communities in Central China. It also kept up a high standard of scholarship and of cultural appeal in its Journal, which appeared unflinchingly every year. After the war it continued its work until, after 1948, it was forced through political troubles to cease its activities. The last issues of the Journal had been published with the co-operation of the International Institute of China.

The Society in Shanghai was from its early days fortunate in the support of a generous public and of the British Government, which in 1868 provided it with a site at a nominal rent for its own building, completed in 1871. Later the property was conveyed to the Society in perpetuity or for so long as it was used for the Society's purpose. Thus, in 1931 the Society was able, with the aid of public subscriptions and generous municipal grants, to build in Museum Road close to the British Consulate a commodious building of its own; it contained a lecture hall named after the late Dr. Wu Lien-teh, a floor to accommodate its Oriental Library of 12,000 volumes and adjacent reading rooms, as well as space for an excellent natural history museum and for the exhibition of Chinese paintings and other works of art.

In 1941 the Society had nearly 800 members, including most of the leading Oriental scholars, explorers and travellers. Amongst the outstanding personalities who had been associated with the North China Branch a few may be mentioned—Dr. Joseph Edkins, Thomas W. Kingsmill, Dr. Emil Breitschneider, Henri Cordier (at one time the Society's Librarian), P. G. van Mollendorf, Sir Robert Hart, Sir Harry Parkes, Sir Byron Brennan, W. H. Medhurst, Sir Edmund Hornby (the first British Judge in China), Sir Rutherford Alcock, H. A. Giles, G. H. Parker, H. B. Morse, A. P. Parker, Alexander Hosie, Samuel Couling, Sir Sidney Barton and Dr. J. C. Ferguson, an American, former President of Nanking University and a man of profound learning and wisdom who, in the course of half a century, served the Society as President, Secretary and Editor of the Journal.

THE HONG KONG BRANCH was resuscitated as the outcome of a meeting attended by some thirty interested persons, held at the British Council Centre on December 28, 1959. The meeting adopted a constitution approved by the parent Society in London, and formed an interim Council to hold office until a General Meeting should be held. The following were elected to the Council:—President: Dr. J. R. Jones; Vice-Presidents: the Hon. Sir Tsun-nin Chau and Dr. L. T. Ride; Hon. Secretary: Mr. J. D. Duncanson; Hon. Treasurer: Mr. T. J. Lindsay; Hon. Editor of the Journal: Mr. J. L. Cranmer-Byng; other Councillors: Dr. Marjorie Topley and Messrs. James Liu, Holmes Welch, and G. B. Endacott.

The Inaugural Meeting of the revived Branch was held on April 7, 1960, in the Loke Yew Hall of Hong Kong University. It was to have been presided over by H.E. the Governor, Sir Robert Black, K.C.M.G., O.B.E., had illness not prevented it. The Inaugural Address was delivered by Professor F. S. Drake, Professor of Chinese at Hong Kong University, on "The Study of Asia: a Heritage and a Task".

On January 23, 1961, Sir Robert Black presided over a meeting of the Branch in his capacity as Patron, and thus restored a tradition after a lapse of a hundred years.