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978-1-107-16442-0 - The School of Oriental and African Studies: Imperial Training and the Expansion of Learning

Ian Brown

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## Introduction

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The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) is a college of the University of London and a major world centre for research and teaching relating to Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The history of the School since its foundation in 1916 is commonly said to be marked by a central paradox, and that paradox is caught in the subtitle of this book, *Imperial Training and the Expansion of Learning*. Briefly, the School was established principally to train the colonial administrators who ran the British Empire in the languages of Asia and Africa. It was established, that is, with an explicitly imperial purpose. Yet the School would come to transcend that function to become a world centre of scholarship and learning, in many important ways challenging its imperial origins.<sup>1</sup>

The explanation commonly given for this paradox is simple, and involves a minor reworking of a famous remark by the former US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson. In the middle of the twentieth century, it might be said, the School of Oriental and African Studies lost an empire but (unlike Great Britain) found a role. No longer called upon to teach colonial administrators the language of the territory they would rule, the School turned to scholarship and academic learning. Although there may be some truth in that account, the transition from imperial training to scholarship was in reality a far more complex matter. In the first place, the School's commitment to scholarship dates from its founding, the staff in the mid 1930s, for example, including such major figures as Denison Ross (Persian), Ralph Turner (Sanskrit), H. W. Bailey (Iranian Studies), C. O. Blagden (Malay), and H. A. R. Gibb (Arabic). Conversely, the teaching of Asian and African languages to government officials, military officers, and to business has remained a significant part of the School's work right through to the present, although no

<sup>1</sup> The School has been said – not strictly accurately – to possess ‘the only economics department in Britain that is solidly Marxist’: Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*. Oxford University Press, 2008, 158. *The Times Higher Education*, 9–15 July 2015, referred to the School as ‘arguably the UK's most left-wing university in terms of its staff and students’.

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longer imperial training, of course, but still concerned with strengthening Britain's political, economic, and commercial presence in Asia and Africa. More importantly, at no point in its history, except during the years in which Britain was at war with Japan from late 1941, has the School been involved in teaching languages to officials, officers, and business on anything close to the scale envisaged by its founders. The School may well have been founded to train men to run the Empire but imperial training and its modern equivalent have almost always been less important than the expansion of learning. Here are significant themes for the pages which follow.

The second phrase in the subtitle, 'the expansion of learning', itself requires an introductory explanation, for it adds further to the themes of this history. The phrase as used here carries three meanings. The first refers to the fact that over the past century the range of disciplines and subjects taught and researched at the School, its disciplinary approaches to understanding Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, has expanded hugely. In its first half-century, through to the early 1960s, studies at the School were dominated by the languages, with only a modest provision in the humanities, notably in history. The second half-century has seen an extension into the social sciences, initially in economics, politics, and geography but also later into development studies and finance and management, together with major expansions in law and anthropology. The social sciences now dominate the School, in terms of staff and student numbers, while the number of languages taught as part of degree programmes is much diminished.

The field of Oriental and African studies is, of course, vast, and no institution, unless free of financial constraints and practical considerations, could possibly provide teaching and research in more than a fraction of it. Choices must constantly be made. In this way, the configuration of teaching and research provided at the School has shifted over the decades, on occasion fundamentally as the further major disciplines noted above have been introduced but also near constantly in the details of the School's provision. It is clearly essential that this history describes the changing configuration of studies over time. But far more important is that it explores the circumstances that determined the configuration at any one time, the decisions to have provision for this or that part of Oriental and African studies but not elsewhere. Thus the configuration of the School's teaching provision when it opened in 1917 and for its first two decades was determined largely by its founding function of training colonial officials, military officers, and businessmen for work in Asia and Africa, and further refinement in that period simply decided which Asian and African languages would be taught and, for each language, on what

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scale and to what depth. Then the decision to expand into the social sciences in the 1960s was determined by an acceptance that, with the passing of empire, the School would no longer be called upon to teach languages to colonial officials – although again it had never in fact done so on the scale first envisaged – but more importantly, a realization that in order to recharge its intellectual drive, secure greater state funding, and increase student numbers, it must engage directly with the problems and ambitions of contemporary Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. In the most recent decades, the configuration of teaching and, in turn, research at the School has been determined largely by degree-student demand. The social sciences, therefore, have flourished, while the languages – with the exceptions of Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic – have struggled, and indeed many have been lost. The shifting configuration of studies at the School, and in particular the shifting complex of circumstances that have determined the configuration at different times, is perhaps the central theme of this history.

The second meaning of the phrase ‘the expansion of learning’ concerns the nature of understandings of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. This challenging theme is perhaps best introduced through a simple example. The Head of the Department of Oriental History and Law before the war was H. H. Dodwell, Professor of History and Culture of British Dominions in Asia, with special reference to India. Henry Dodwell’s research and teaching were concerned with the British presence in India, seen particularly clearly in his editing of the volume of *The Cambridge History of India* covering the period 1497–1858 (published in 1929), which focused on the histories of not only the British, but also the Portuguese, French, and Dutch in India. This was an understanding of India primarily in terms of its engagement with the West. In the first decades after the war, historians at the School turned increasingly but decisively to see the history of their region in its own terms: the history not of Western activity but of the local societies, a new approach applied most strikingly in pioneering work from the 1950s in constructing the history of Africa. Thus even when research and teaching were concerned with Asia, Africa, or the Middle East under Western rule, the focus was now not on the actions of the colonial ruler but on the impact of those actions on the local people in terms, for example, of economic disruption, social fracture, or political resistance. In many if not most cases, that research (as well, of course, as research in the histories of societies not under colonial rule) required a command of the local language or languages. Language competence was more than a practical necessity. It gave the School’s historians but also its political scientists, anthropologists, and economists, confidence that they possessed unmediated access

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to the beliefs and perceptions of the peoples and cultures that they were studying, enabling them to speak directly, both literally and figuratively, to and for Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

The confident belief that Asia, Africa, and the Middle East were being understood in their own terms, from their own perspectives, was challenged from the late 1970s by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, its central argument being that Western scholars, writers, and administrators, despite often superb language competence, had long portrayed the Orient, and specifically the Arabs and Islam, in patronizing, derogatory terms. Whether the Said challenge was securely founded or not – and *Orientalism* and its criticism of the work of two of the School's most prominent staff are considered at length in a later chapter – the controversy it provoked reinforced among scholars of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (not only at the School of course) a critical self-examination of the contextual influences within which they were working. Scholarship in these fields became far more self-reflective, far more questioning of the assumptions upon which it proceeded. It also became more theoretically informed, which in turn raised critical issues surrounding the integration of local specificities outside the West and global theory. Perhaps these processes are less the *expansion* than the refinement of learning: perhaps too they indicate an increased awareness of the limits of our understandings of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

The phrase 'expansion of learning' carries a third meaning here, one which refers to the contributions made by the School over the century to the growth in the study of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The School's central contributions have been in the language and research training of academics in these fields, large numbers of whom have then occupied posts in departments in universities in Britain and across the world, and in the volume, range, and quality of its published scholarship. A number of contributions are briefly noted in the chapters which follow but a summary assessment of the School's commitment to the expansion of learning in its fields is attempted in the final pages of this history.

As will be evident from the paragraphs above, this history is concerned principally with high-level policy and administration. It is the history of the School as seen from the Director's office rather than as viewed from the classroom and the common room. Externally it focuses on the School's central but vastly changing relationship with the British state from the time of empire, reflecting ultimately the fundamental change that occurred in Britain's place in the modern world in the twentieth century. And internally it focuses on the creation of new departments, the expansions and contractions in staff numbers, and on the Directors and occasionally other senior staff. The following pages have relatively

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little to say about the School's domestic life, and make little attempt to capture the atmosphere of the institution through reminiscence and anecdote. That omission will undoubtedly disappoint those who know the School well, staff and students, past and present, not least because there are a vast number of SOAS tales, many surely apocryphal, which long-time residents will undoubtedly have hoped to see repeated here. I have, of course, slipped in a few such tales (although conscious that while they often delight those who remember the individuals involved, institutional stories mean little to outsiders), but in truth the vibrancy and diversity of the SOAS community – its unique atmosphere – have already been well caught by others. Notable here is *SOAS since the Sixties*, edited by David Arnold and Christopher Shackle, which appeared in 2003. This is a collection of essays by long-serving senior staff on various aspects of the School since the 1960s – the Directors, language studies, arts and humanities, the social sciences, the library and archives, and the estate. The volume seeks to be not only 'an institutional record', but also 'something of a collective personal memoir', and in that last respect it is extremely effective in capturing life at the School. In particular, the final contribution to the volume, by Hugh Baker, stuffed with anecdotes, is immensely affectionate as well as insightful in catching the distinctive character of the School in those decades. Also valuable is an impressively produced *SOAS: a Celebration in Many Voices*, which appeared in 2007, an unashamed celebration of the School in all its aspects – 'its extraordinary history, its vibrant present and its opinion-shaping future'. The contributors, who are staff, students, and alumni, each adopts a personal tone and their reminiscences convey the distinctiveness of the School for those who have worked and studied there.

Three further earlier contributions to the literature on the School must be noted here. The first published history of the School was *The School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London, 1917–1967: an Introduction* (1967) written by the then Director, C. H. Philips. It provides a clear outline of the School's first half-century, written in an untiring 'upward and onward' vein that reflects not only the expansionary spirit of the age in which it was written, but also Philips's ambitious drive. It is interesting to read this account alongside Philips's autobiography completed in the mid 1990s, *Beyond the Ivory Tower*, which, for the period from the late 1930s to the mid 1970s, gives far more on the School's domestic life and often eccentric individuals. A further valuable history, focused again on high-level policy and administration, is a paper, 'Knowledge and power: reflections on national interest and the study of Asia', by a later Director, Michael McWilliam, and published in *Asian Affairs* in 1995. Seeking to illustrate the ways in which from the

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early twentieth century the British Government had sought to mobilise scholarship relating to Asia in support of the national interest, the paper focuses on the five major reports, from 1909 to 1993, that can be said to have determined the history of the School.

This present history was prompted by the approach of the School's centenary in 2016–17. It is built principally on a reading of the School's own administration files from the beginning of the twentieth century, voluminous if occasionally patchy, supplemented by research in government archives and among newspapers, and by interviews with many former and current staff. It is important to emphasize that this is not a commissioned or official history. The School provided a modest budget to cover incurred costs, but there has been no other financial provision and the senior management did not see the manuscript before publication. I have been free to approach the history of the School as I saw fit.

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## 1 ‘Long contemplated and too long delayed’: the founding of the School

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The School of Oriental and African Studies was founded by the British state as an instrument to strengthen Britain’s political, commercial, and military presence in Asia and Africa. In other words, it was established to secure the running of the British Empire. It would do so by providing instruction to colonial administrators, commercial managers, and military officers, but also to missionaries, doctors, and teachers, in the language of that part of Asia or Africa to which each was being posted, together with an authoritative introduction to the customs, religion, laws, and history of the people whom they were to govern or among whom they would be working. A command of the local language and some familiarity with the practices and beliefs of the local people, acquired in London before posting, was seen as crucial if effective imperial administration, military security, and the prosperity of British commerce, particularly in the East, were to be achieved.

It is therefore somewhat surprising to see that it was not until just before the First World War that the firm decision was taken to establish in London a School of Oriental Languages – as the institution was initially to be named – and not until January 1917 that its first students were admitted. After all, by that time Britain had been the world’s major political and economic power for a century or more, and even the more recently acquired parts of the now vast British Empire had been under colonial rule for several decades. Thus the first task of this opening chapter is to review briefly the provision that had existed earlier, in particular in London, for the teaching of Oriental languages (and for the pursuit of Oriental scholarship) before turning to explore the circumstances which led finally, in the second decade of the twentieth century, to the decision – ‘long contemplated and too long delayed’ – to establish ‘a great School of Oriental Studies’ in the capital of the Empire.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The two phrases quoted here were used by Sir John Hewett, chairman of the Governing Body, in his address to the King at the formal opening of the School on 23 February 1917. The full text of the address was reproduced in an account of the opening

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In fact, a substantial number of Oriental languages had been taught in London in the nineteenth century, at University College and at King's College.<sup>2</sup> When University College was founded in 1826, chairs were established there in Hebrew, in Oriental Literature, and in Hindustani, a chair in Sanskrit being added in 1831 and a chair in Chinese in 1836.<sup>3</sup> Then in the 1850s, posts were created in Telugu, Tamil, Arabic, Persian, Gujarati, Bengali, and in Indian law. A chair in Pali and Buddhist Literature was added in 1871. At King's, Oriental languages and literature were taught from the founding of the college in 1829. An endowed chair in Chinese was established in 1846, and in time there were also posts in Arabic, Sanskrit, Hindustani, and in other Indian languages. From the late 1880s, provision at the two colleges was rationalized, with University College taking responsibility for the Indian languages, and other Oriental languages being allocated to King's. By the mid 1900s, King's College had posts in Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Chinese, Japanese, and Malay, as well as in the African languages of Hausa, Swahili, and Zulu. That rationalization arose from the creation in 1889 of a School of Modern Oriental Studies, an initiative of the Imperial Institute, which had been established in 1887 to mark the golden jubilee of Queen Victoria.<sup>4</sup> Although the aim had been to create in London a school of Oriental languages on the lines of the schools that already existed in Berlin, Paris, and Vienna – an ambition that would be pressed with increasing force by numerous interests in the years to come – the School of Modern Oriental Studies was never to be more than a paper arrangement. It was to have no buildings or secure income, while the teaching nominally under its auspices remained physically located in University College and at King's. At the end of 1902, the School

ceremony published in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, London Institution*, 1, 1 (1917), 23–31.

<sup>2</sup> 'Memoranda on teaching in Oriental languages at University and King's Colleges, London', *Report of the Committee appointed by the Lords Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury to consider the Organisation of Oriental Studies in London*. London: HMSO, 1909, Appendix V, 65–67. See also: T. Gregory Foster, Provost, University College, to Philip Hartog, 5 May 1914, SOAS R 10/4.

<sup>3</sup> For an account of Chinese studies in nineteenth-century London, see: T. H. Barrett, *Singular Listlessness: a Short History of Chinese Books and British Scholars*. London: Wellsweep Press, 1989, 66–75.

<sup>4</sup> 'Memorandum on the history of the School of Modern Oriental Studies founded in connection with the Imperial Institute, by Professor Wyndham R. Dunstan, Director of the Imperial Institute', *Report of the Committee ... to consider the Organisation of Oriental Studies in London*, 1909, Appendix XVI, 153–56. As initially established, the core function of the Imperial Institute was to promote the Empire's trade, notably by organizing exhibitions of home and colonial produce, and by collecting and disseminating commercial intelligence. For the School of Modern Oriental Studies, see also: *Daily Telegraph*, 18 May 1914.



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was closed and its modest operations transferred to the University of London.

It is important to note too that specific arrangements were in place in this period, in London but also elsewhere, by which the Empire's administrators learnt the language of the territory to which they were to be posted and were introduced to the beliefs and customs of the people. In the case of the India administration, from the 1850s, candidates in Britain for the *corps d'élite*, the Indian Civil Service (ICS), were first appointed on probation for one or two years in order to take courses in the law, languages, history, and customs of India, after which, assuming examinations were passed, the appointment was confirmed.<sup>5</sup> A high proportion of the probationers were at Oxford. But in 1879, University College London was also recognized as an institution for the training of ICS probationers – an Indian School was established in the college, mainly to meet the needs of those students – and in 1894, the India Office added Victoria University, Manchester, to the list of approved institutions.<sup>6</sup>

The initial training of the Empire's administrators also took place outside the universities. In the first half of the nineteenth century, young men intended for service with the East India Company first attended Haileybury College in Hertfordshire, established by the Company in 1806, where they received a general education – in mathematics, philosophy, classical literature, history, and law – but were also taught the rudiments of Oriental languages, in particular Arabic and Persian. Then, on arriving in India, they attended the College of Fort William at Calcutta, established in 1800, where they were expected to achieve a firm competence in two Oriental languages.<sup>7</sup> More importantly for the present context, by the early twentieth century it had been the practice of the Colonial Office 'for many years past' to arrange for its officials to receive instruction in the language of the colony to which they were posted, not at home before being sent overseas but from local teachers once they were at work in the territory itself.<sup>8</sup> It was a practice the Colonial Office would maintain even after the School, founded primarily to provide language instruction for the officials who would run the Empire, was established. Finally, there was at least one case of a commercial firm

<sup>5</sup> L. S. S. O'Malley, *The Indian Civil Service 1601–1930*. London: Frank Cass, 2nd edn, 1965, 241–50.

<sup>6</sup> Papers in IOR L/PJ/6/1487, File 1980. The ICS probationers for 1906/07 spent the year at either Oxford, Cambridge, Dublin, or University College, London: *Report of the Committee ... to consider the Organisation of Oriental Studies in London*, 1909, 6, fn.

<sup>7</sup> O'Malley, *The Indian Civil Service 1601–1930*, 231–41.

<sup>8</sup> India Office to Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, 30 October 1913, IOR L/PJ/6/990, File 736.

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organizing classes for its employees and others to learn an appropriate language. A short time before the School was established, it was reported that the London offices of Steel Brothers, a British firm with substantial interests in Burma, was running a class in Burmese, attended by ‘between 20 and 30 young men learning the language with a view to going out to Burma’.<sup>9</sup>

In the final two decades of the nineteenth century, the complaint was frequently heard from the learned societies that the provision in Britain for the teaching of Oriental languages and, more broadly, the pursuit of Oriental scholarship, was poor.<sup>10</sup> Thus the President of the Royal Asiatic Society, in his annual address of 1887, referred to ‘the decay or diminution of the pursuit of Oriental studies in this country’. An early response to that dispiriting assessment had been the establishment of the School of Modern Oriental Studies by the Imperial Institute in 1889. But that response was clearly inadequate – as noted, the School had no building or secure income – and from the mid 1890s, the Royal Asiatic Society was calling, year after year, for the establishment in London of an Oriental school ‘on a better basis than the existing one’.<sup>11</sup>

An important stimulus to action, finally, appears to have come from a paper by T. W. Rhys Davids, ‘Oriental studies in England and abroad’, read before the British Academy in February 1904.<sup>12</sup> Davids was then Professor in Pali and Buddhist Literature at University College, and a Fellow of the Academy. A major aim of his paper was to measure the strength of Oriental studies in Britain against the position in France, the Netherlands, and, in particular, Germany, by calculating the number of university posts in the field in the four countries. According to Davids, in Britain and Ireland, with a population of around forty million and with fourteen universities, there were five chairs in Oriental studies,

<sup>9</sup> Philip Hartog to Cromer, 9 February 1912, SOAS R 3/2.

<sup>10</sup> The details are in: P. J. Hartog, ‘The origins of the School of Oriental Studies’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, The London Institution*, 1, 1 (1917), 6–9.

<sup>11</sup> For an account of the involvement of the Royal Asiatic Society in the movement to establish an Oriental school in London, see C. F. Beckingham, ‘A history of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1823–1973’, in Stuart Simmonds and Simon Digby (eds), *The Royal Asiatic Society: its History and Treasures*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979, 55–57. A further authoritative voice calling for action in this period was the Central Asian Society: Hugh Leach, with Susan Maria Farrington, *Strolling about on the Roof of the World: the First Hundred Years of the Royal Society for Asian Affairs (formerly Royal Central Asian Society)*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, 153–55. Indeed, in mid 1904, the Central Asian Society and the Royal Asiatic Society created a joint committee to consider the establishment of a school for Oriental languages in London: Central Asian Society, ‘Minutes of Council meeting, June 1st. 1904’, Royal Society for Asian Affairs records.

<sup>12</sup> T. W. Rhys Davids, ‘Oriental studies in England and abroad’, in *Proceedings of the British Academy, 1903–1904*. London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, n.d., 183–97.