

## **Foreword by Gordon Johnson**

Peter Collin became a member of the Hong Kong Royal Asiatic Society in 1967 when he was head of French in the Department of European Languages and Literature at Hong Kong University. While there he published an article in the Society's journal about paintings by George Augustus Schomberg depicting Hong Kong in the 1850s and this led to correspondence with Valerie Gibson, the Secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society in London. Peter returned to the UK in 1973 to work for Harrap, publishers of schoolbooks and dictionaries before starting his own publishing house, P H Collin in 1985 (acquired on his retirement in 2002 by Bloomsbury). He became an active member of the Royal Asiatic Society, and since 1973 he has served continuously on many committees including several turns on the Council.

In his Introduction, Peter explains how he became interested in compiling a list of the founding members of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland. I think to begin with we thought this would lead simply to a helpful guide to the new cataloguing of the Society's own institutional records being undertaken by Nancy Charley, the archivist. But as Peter's assiduous research gained momentum the extent and value of what could be discovered about those members (over five hundred of them) who signed up in the 1820s became clear. In discussion, we resolved on a more ambitious plan for publication – though still framed within the concept of a definitive printed list – a Who's Who of the founding generation of the Society. As the work progressed, however, it became obvious that, besides being very expensive to publish in this way, to turn the project into a data base, freely available in the Society's digital archive and capable of being updated as new information came to hand, would bring greater benefits to scholarship. We are indebted to Matty Bradley for formatting the biographies for electronic publication.

Originally applied to the history of the Romano-Greek Classical world, prosopography is now a common tool for the historian. The detailed knowledge of the social, economic, and political background of individuals that together make up important communities and movements that extend across the connections of family, kin and class, has proved fruitful in many fields of historical research. The Royal Asiatic Society, founded in 1823 for 'the investigation of subjects connected with and for the encouragement of science, literature and the arts in relation to Asia' is an example of such an organisation, focussed on a particular purpose, and creating new networks of social interaction.

The Society drew its inspiration from the Asiatic Society, established in Calcutta in 1784 by Sir William Jones, then newly arrived in India to serve as a judge. Jones, besides being a

common law lawyer, was a remarkable philologist, touched by the European Enlightenment and moved by the emotional swell of Romanticism. As he crossed the Indian Ocean he found himself in 'a noble amphitheatre, almost encircled by the vast regions of Asia, which has ever been esteemed the nurse of sciences, the inventress of delightful and useful arts, the scene of glorious actions, fertile in the productions of human genius, abounding in natural wonders, and infinitely diversified in the forms of religion and government, in the laws, manners, customs and languages, as well as in the features and complexions, of men.' To research such remarkable natural and human phenomena would, Jones thought, require 'the united efforts of many, who are not easily brought, without some pressing inducement or strong impulse, to converge in a common point'. But he found in Calcutta sufficient interest in his hobby to create a body of learned friends with the ambition to rival in scope and importance the achievements of The Royal Society in seventeenth-century England.

By the end of the 1600s, Asia and its cultures already influenced European thought and taste. Although British expansion westwards in the Atlantic, to North America and the Caribbean, with their settler and slave economies was, and would remain, the major source of wealth and drivers of domestic economic development, British metropolitan interests in Asia were growing. The most obvious evidence of this was the activity of the East India Company, an unwieldy organisation covering a diversity of often fractious and competing interests. It was a body dependent on the support of the state and subject to regulation to protect its privileges but bound into it in mutually dependent ways. By the second half of the eighteenth century, interlocked with financial interests in state and society, it had become too big to fail. It became a prime objective to make the Company more transparent and to regulate it more thoroughly while at the same time giving way to those who sought to dislodge it from its privileged financial position. Not surprisingly, Asian interests of many sorts were embroiled in the cockpit of London politics. The Royal Asiatic Society proved a forum where a canny mix of scholarly research and aesthetic appreciation for the civilisations of Asia met increasing public curiosity and practical politicking.

Peter Collin's biographical research offers a splendid opportunity for further research. It is good to know who joined the Society, and why (membership was not cheap). What did the Society do, that attracted such an interesting range of supporters? It's true that many of them had east Asian connections from professional lives as military, diplomatic, administrative and trading men, retiring after long years of residence in the East. But the Society went beyond being a haven for those 'noblemen and gentlemen associated with the administration of our Eastern empire, or who have travelled or resided in Asia, at St. Helena, in Egypt, at the Cape of Good Hope, the Mauritius, or at Constantinople'. That desire was fulfilled by the Oriental Club (founded in 1824). But the membership between elite Club and learned Society overlapped to a degree. The Society attracted support from wealthy London with houses within easy reach of Parliament and Clubland, extending

eastwards into the City. It also drew in the intellectuals; after all, the driving force behind the foundation was the sanskritist and mathematician Thomas Colebrooke. While he, and others like James Tod, the chronicler of Rajasthan, had served long years in India, they were joined in the Society by Oxford and Cambridge dons and librarians in the British Museum who had no background of eastern adventuring but who were fascinated by languages and religions and cultures other than those of Europe. The Society won for itself the patronage of the King, and of English aristocrats; but it contained a goodly number of self-made men, coming out of poor Scottish and Irish families and for whom a life in Asia had been the route to economic salvation and social respect. The biographies provide new evidence and new examples for the interplay of more general cultural movements in British society sweeping in slave-holders and abolitionists, free traders and monopolists, Evangelicals and missionary endeavours – the list is endless.

The biographies themselves remain subject to further research, and this method of publication allows new information to be added to them. But Peter Collin's work of the past five years or so is a splendid way of heralding the Society's two hundredth anniversary.