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A History of the First Fifty Years of the Library of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1900 to 1950

by Harold M. OTNESS

The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland was officially formed in 1823 in London as, in the words of its first President Sir William Jones, “a Society for enquiring into the History, civil and natural, the Antiquities, Arts, Sciences, and Literature of Asia”.1 In time it came to establish, or recognize previously established, branches in the expatriate communities of Asia itself. While a thoroughly British institution in conception, from its early days it accepted members from other Western nations, and, in time, Asians as well. It was neither a political nor a missionary society, although many diplomats, government employees, and missionaries were members. It was a scholarly society comprised of curious and serious amateurs, in the British tradition. Each branch maintained some sort of meeting place in which to gather for lectures and other activities. Most branches also published scholarly journals, and the more successful among them attempted to build library collections as well.

The Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society was formed much later than its counterparts in India (Calcutta 1874, Bombay 1804, Madras 1812), Southeast Asia (Ceylon 1845, Singapore 1871, China (Hong Kong 1845, Shanghai 1857), and Japan (1872). The Korean peninsula was more remote to Westerners, and it appeared to offer fewer commercial, political, and religious opportunities than either China or Japan.

It was the missionaries in Seoul who formed the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1900,and kept it going, often under very difficult circumstances, over the years. In both China and Japan the counterpart organizations had a more equitable mix of diplomats, government employees, merchants, and academics, as well as missionaries. In Korea, where the expatriate population was heavily missionary, the Society was essentially theirs in the early days. Of the original 37 members, both honorary and “ordinary,” no fewer than 25 were missionaries. The remainder were government officials and teachers. There were no Korean charter members.2 [page 2]

In fact the Society was one of the few organizations that the missionaries could agree upon and work together in. Missionaries were a particularly contentious group, judging from the expatriate literature of the day. Dr. Horace Allen, a medical missionary himself who set aside his calling to become the U.S. Consul general in Seoul, supported the formation of the Society to get the missionaries off his back. In a letter to a confidant, he wrote, “I encourage it, as it tends to keep (the missionaries) out of mischief”.3 Dr. Lak-Geoon George Paik, in the only paper so far written on the history of the Society, reported that the

... rapid progress of the Christian mission work and the arrival of some business interests, at the turn of the century, increased the number of Occidental residents in the land. Among them, there were people who soon recognized the intrinsic as well as utilitarian values of the once highly developed culture of Korea. These men of vision and wide interests began to devote their extra time to Korean studies and gradually associated themselves in an organized efforts [sic],which finally culminated into the inauguration of the Korean Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.4

Paik’s excellent paper on the history of the Society devoted only a page and a half to its library. This paper expands on that source by drawing on the annual reports of the librarians and other officers as publishea in the Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, and other sources. The records for this library are particularly spotty. The Transactions is an annual publication, but it did not come out every year, and those years in which it did appear, it did not always include a librarian’s report. There were few other contemporary Western language publications in Korea to shed light on this library. The library was apparently never open to the public in the sense that counterpart libraries in Shanghai and Tokyo were, and was therefore not likely to have been seen and used by visitors, and commented upon by them in their published writings. The Japanese colonial administration kept the Society low-key from 1905 until World War II when it essentially ceased to exist. That war, and the ravages of the Korean War which followed, destroyed not only most of the collection, but the records of it as well, including the catalog of holdings. As Paik stated: [page 3]

We have no record of the accessions to the library. There is a report that a catalogue was made and mimeographed in 1928... but none... is now in existence.... [An] accurate estimate of the size of the library is not currently available.5

The Society held its first meeting in 1900, in Seoul, and named Alexander Kenmure, a British missionary attached to the Bible House in Seoul, as its first “honorary librarian.” The librarian was expected to see that the Transactions got published and distributed to members and exchanged with other organizations, as well as oversee whatever kind of library could be assembled. Among the ten duties of the librarian spelled out in the Constitution and By-Laws were these:

(a) Take charge of the Society’s Library and stock of Publications, keep its books and periodicals in order, catalogue all additions to the Library and supervise the binding and preservation of the books.

(b) Carry out the regulations of the Council for the use and lending of the Society’s books.

(f) Draw up a list of exchanges and of additions to the Library for insertion in the Council’s Annual Report.6

“The Society’s Rooms and Library shall be in Seoul... and The Library shall be open to Members for consultation during the day, the keys of the book-cases being in the possession of the Librarian... and books may be borrowed on application to the Librarian,” the document continued.7 However, in the beginning, there was no library and there were apparently no books.

The first library location was in the British and Foreign Bible Society in Seoul where the Society held some of its early meetings.8 The first books were some loaned volumes from Kenmure along with a collection from the estate of Dr. Eli Barr Landis, an English medical missionary at Chemulpo (now Inchon, the nearby port for Seoul) who had died of typhoid fever in 1898. Landis was described as “an industrious student of Korean Chinese” who had accumulated a library which though “not extensive, contained a considerable collection of native works and of foreign books and papers on Korea and neighboring lands.”9

Landis’ books had been in the possession of the English Mission, which, in turn, loaned them to the Society. However they were never merged with the other books and periodicals the Society was gathering. The Landis [page 4] Collection was kept separate and added to over the years, and it remained in the English Mission. Paik reported about 500 volumes in the Landis collection at the turn of the century, but this number may have been high.10 A printed catalog of the collection appeared in the Transactions in 1903 and it only showed about 200 titles, including serials.11 However it was probably the most comprehensive collection of Koreana in Western languages assembled in Korea to that date.

Kenmure’s efforts to establish a Society library are not well documented today. He had a short tenure as librarian and was succeeded in 1902 by the Rev. H. G. Appenzeller of the Methodist Mission in Seoul. Appenzeller drowned while a passenger on a Japanese ship soon after, so Kenmure once again took the reins of the library.12

In 1903 the Rev. M.N. Trollope, author of The Church in Korea and one of the most scholarly of the early missionaries, loaned his collection to the Society, but the arrangements of that loan and the nature of his collection is not clear today.13

With the Japanese consolidation of power in Korea soon after, the Society became moribund, and from 1903 until 1910 its members met only sporadically. There were no Transactions published to record any activities.

In 1911 the Society once again came to life, this time under the leader-ship of the now-Bishop Trollope. Regular meetings were held in various facilities, including the U.S. Consulate, Dr. Scranton’s Sanitorium, and the British Consulate. F. M. Brockman was appointed librarian and thought was given as to what kind of library the Society should develop. It was decided that Korea should be the focus of the collection, and that China and Japan would receive only secondary consideration. A bookcase was authorized for purchase, but whether for library or administrative use is not clear.14 A formal, although brief, “librarian’s report” appeared in the 1914 Transactions which included a modest list of exchanged journals, mostly with other Royal Asiatic Society branches, but “only six books were loaned for reading during the year.” Gerald Bonwich was now the librarian .15

The Rev. S. A. Beck replaced Bonwich in what was becoming an almost annual turnover in librarians, and in 1917 a second modest accession list was issued. The membership resolved that the librarian circulate among members a list of books currently held and requested. In return, a list of books they would like to see added to the collection was solicited.16 The By-Laws were amended in 1919 to state: [page 5]

The Library shall be open to Members for consultation during the dsy [sic], the keys of the book-cases being in the possession of the Librarian or other Members of Council resident in the vacinity, and books may be borrowed on application.17

The first catalog of the collection appeared in 1920 under yet another librarian, Dr. J. D. Van Buskirk. It was an abbreviated author-title list which showed only about 80 books, a dozen journals, and such miscellaneous items as a “Commercial Map of Japan,” and some annual Reports of the Smithsonian Institution. About half the books were specifically on Korea; the remainder concerned China and Japan. No mention was made of the Landis Collection, and there were apparently no publications in the Korean language.18 If this was the catalog of the complete collection, it was still a modest library.

In 1922, the Society made what appeared to be its first purchase of books, as opposed to donations and exchanges. Thirty-three volumes were purchased from the library of the late Dr. W. B. Scranton for 300 yen, titles not specified, and another eight volumes, all on China, were accepted as gifts. Just where the library had been housed during the last ten years was not recorded in the Transactions, but it was then reported to be in Bishop’s Lodge of the English Church Mission.9

During the 1920’s, librarians continued to come and go with almost annual regularity. This turnover must have been disruptive to collection-building efforts. Among the “honorary librarians” were Thomas Hobbs, Dr. W.M. Clark, and W. G. B. Boydell. While the libraries of counterpart societies elsewhere in Asia were growing, the Korea Branch appeared to make little progress. The foreign colony was smaller, of course, and it cannot be assumed that the Japanese colonial government was particularly supportive of the Society. Librarians’ annual reports were referred to in the Transactions, but often not printed therein. The 1930’s, however, showed more library activity. In 1931, the Rev. J. E. Fisher, as librarian, breathed life into it. He reported that the collection had been moved “into its attractive quarters in the new Christian Literature Society Building,” and that there were now “comfortable chairs and tables” for readers.20 A bookplate was designed and placed in each volume, along with a check-out card. A cabinet was made to hold the new card catalog, which included, apparently for the first time, full author and title cataloging based on a “simple system which was devised to meet the needs of the library”.21 [page 6]

Fisher also listed twelve new books, of which five were purchased, and eleven journal exchanges, including the American Oriental Society at Yale, the Royal Geographical Society, and the American Philosophical Society, along with counterpart societies in Shanghai, Colombo, Bombay, and Tokyo. New bookcases were acquired and several recommendations were made: that there be an annual appropriation for acquisitions, binding, and clerical help; that the membership be canvassed to fill in missing gaps in the Transactions, and that that set be bound in half leather; that members return periodicals they had borrowed in the past; and that members be urged to donate appropriate books to the library .22 At long last, the library seemed to be heading in the right direction.

Fisher was soon replaced by the Rev. Norman C. Whittemore of the Christian Literature Society, and Whittemore was able to report in 1932 a total of 28 additions to the collection, including 19 that were purchased. Total expenditures were 92.05 yen. Whittemore requested 150 yen for the following year, and he apparently got it. He also reported that the cataloging was up-to-date, “with the exception of cross referencing cataloging, which has never been attempted very much in our library”.23

The next year, Whittemore was able to report 42 new titles, including some from the Government General, the first recorded support from Japanese colonial officials. He also reported that on a trip to the United States he was able to purchase a few used volumes. And he asked for donations:

I would also make an appeal to our members when they are clearing out their superfluous books and pamphlets, for backfiles of Korean publications may very often be acceptable for our library, and I trust they will keep this in mind .24

Whittemore did much for the Society’s library, but in 1935 he “left unexpectedly for America” and the pattern of rapid turnover of librarians resumed.25 Jessie McLaren was commended for devoting “some time to putting the library books in proper shape,” but the next librarian, W.M. Clark, reported:

The Society owns some very valuable books, and it is a pity that these books are not used more by the community .26

He went on to suggest that if the expatriate organizations in Seoul maintaining libraries, such as the Seoul Foreign School, the Seoul Women’s Club, and the Federal Council Library, along with the RAS, [page 7] would combine their collections, the could collectively hire a full-time librarian and run a proper library. He suggested that it be situated at the Seoul Foreign School .21 It appeared a good idea, but apparently nothing came of it.

The next year the Society spent 104.31 yen for the purchase of books, 40.40 for binding, 80.00 for three bookcases, and 158.40 for unspecified “clerical work,” perhaps the employment of a Korean assistant. Total receipts for the Society for the year amounted to 3,557.85 yen, so the library accounted for less than ten percent of its annual income .28

The library remained in the Christian Literature Society’s offices, and members could obtain keys to it at the Information Desk. A “complete index,” apparently on cards, was available. Members residing in Seoul could borrow up to two books for a period of one month; out-of-town members could keep them for two months. The library must have been unstaffed because borrowers were asked to sign and date the circulation cards and leave them on the desk for the librarian to file later. Bound magazines could be checked out, but not the more current loose issues. There was no mention of library access for non-members, nor borrowing privileges for them.29

McLaren was again the librarian in 1939, and she reported that her efforts had been “largely conservative.” Only one volume had been added in the last year, and it concerned “spirit worship in Korea.” No correspondence had been undertaken, but she had put all books and magazines in order. She referred to “the unfortunate illness of previous librarians,”

and ended her report with these words:

Members of long standing have doubtless read most of the books in the Royal Asiatic Society Library, but newer members may be glad to know that there is valuable material in both books and magazines and that such may be borrowed from the Society.30

During World War II, the collection was stored in basements of both the Christian Literature Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society. Following the war, they were “stored in cabinets” on the second floor of the Christian Literature Society.31 In 1950, they were moved to Room 412 of the American Embassy Building. Robert A. Kinney, the librarian in 1950, reported that the card index had been lost during the war, and that many books were “known to be lost.” However he praised what had survived the war, naming runs of *Korea Review Magazine*, *Korean Mission* [page 8] *Field Magazine*, *Korean Repository*, *Annual Reports on Administration of Government-General of Chosen*, 1910-1939, “most volumes” of the *Catalogue of Ancient Monuments and Historical Remains in Korea*, and “about 500 other individual volumes”.32 This was a fair-sized collection and it may have included volumes from other foreign library collections in Seoul that didn’t survive the war intact.

Kinney asked for donations to bring the library up to its pre-war status, and reported that he had already received 50 donations during the year. He also reported that a new catalog was being compiled which would soon be distributed in mimeograph form to members .33 However, a footnote to his report tersely stated:

Almost all of the books in the Library of the RAS, Korea Branch, were lost during the Communist occupation of Seoul in 1950. A few books, recovered by the Librarian after his return to Seoul in September 1950,were shipped to the United States for safekeeping until peace is restored in Korea .34

In recent years, in the words of Horace G. Underwood, the Society “has made no serious attempt to maintain a library, although the matter has been discussed a number of times by the Council,” and in 1986 the title of Librarian was dropped.35 Most recently the Society has entered into an agreement with the Social Science Research Library in Seoul for a “corner” in their library to keep publications belonging to the Society. But no more formal a library is apparently contemplated.36\*

With no surviving catalog, the extent and contents of the library of the Society can only be a matter of speculation. Judging from the landmark work “A Partial Bibliography of Occidental Literature on Korea” compiled by Dr. Horace H. Underwood in 1930,it was probably only the third best of the Western-language Korean collections developed in Seoul during the first half of the twentieth century.37 Perhaps it was only fourth best because the Japanese colonial administration collected actively in this field for its Government General Library as evidenced by its 147-page catalog of Western language publications which it issued in 1927.38 Underwood compiled over 2,800 titles, including periodical articles, in his bibliography, drawing in part on the holdings of three Seoul collections— his own extensive library, the Landis Library (which was donated to Yonsei University just prior to World War II), and the Society’s collection. Underwood thanked Bishop Trollope for making the Landis Library available to [page 9] him, and called it “that fine collection of Koreana”.39

Underwood’s bibliography was divided into thirty categories, ranging from “Early Works to 1880” to “Art, Miscellaneous,” of which the largest category, “Protestant Missions, General” numbered 375 items. Eighty-four percent of the items were in English, but there were 56 in Russian, nine in Dutch, and eight in Swedish. For each listing, the holding library or libraries were given if the item was in one or more of these three collections, so it is possible to partially reconstruct the catalog of the RAS as of 1930.

All three collections were shown as holding the major popular books on Korea including those by Hulbert, Bishop, Allen, and Gale; and all had the Korea Review from 1901 to 1906. But beyond that the collections differed considerably. The following gives a comparison of relative holdings:

Early Works to 1880 History Travel & Description Social Conditions

Total Items 152 199 288 178

Landis 41 35 43 17

Underwood 18 30 36 13

RAS 6 14 9 6

It is clear that the Landis Collection was the strongest in early works of exploration and history in general, and was probably the most scholarly collection of the three. Underwood was very strong in missionary publications. The RAS Library was weak on missionary publications, but better on scientific and technical publications. It had only a few publications of the Japanese colonial government. Overall it had very few publications that were not in the other two collections; an exception being the journals of its counterpart societies in Japan and Shanghai with whom it maintained exchanges. It had some art books, but only three titles classified as “Fiction and Poetry,” Rhodes summarized it as “Small but with files of Japan, India and other branches of the R.A.S., and some works not found elsewhere”.40

Estimating the size of the RAS collection based on the Underwood bibliography is difficult because that bibliography included both articles and books. Of the books listed in Underwood, the Society held about 200. [page 10] It probably had at least an equal number of books on Asia in general and on the countries adjacent to Korea. Of the three libraries covered by Underwood, the RAS appeared to have the best scholarly journal runs because of its active exchanges worldwide. In 1930 the Society probably had a library of 500 volumes plus extensive runs of journals. By com-parison, its sister institution in Shanghai had nearly 10,000 volumes.41

It would appear that the library of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in the first half of this century was never able to become much more than a somewhat miscellaneous collection of primarily donated and exchanged publications. Yet it complemented the Landis and Underwood Collections to some extent. Had the three libraries been merged, as was several times suggested, a major collection of Western language works on Korea would have been the result.

There is no evidence that Korean language publications were ever a part of this collection, nor is it certain that non-members and the Korean public were welcome to use it. The library seemed to be little known outside of the Society itself. Yet it represented a partially successful attempt to document the history and culture of Korea on the part of some Westerners living there. It was formed during a difficult period for them, and viewed in light of the political conditions under which they lived, their limited numbers, and their relative remoteness, their commitment and achievement deserves commendation.

**NOTES:**

\*The RAS Korea Branch is happy to report that the staff of the Social Science Research Library has kindly offered to prepare a professional catalogue of the RAS collection— Ed.

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4. Paik. p. 25.

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6. Transactions. Vol. 1. 1900. pp. 87-88.

7. Ibid. p. 88.

8. “News calendar.” The Korea Review, Vol. 1, No. 3. March, 1901. p. 121.

9. The Korean Repository, Vol. V, April, 1898. p. 150 and May, 1898. p. 186.

10. Paik, P. 34. [page 11]

11. Transactions, Vol. III, pt. I. 1903. pp. 41-61.

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13. Ibid. p. 34.

14. Ibid. Vol. IV, pt. II. 1913. pp. 82-3.

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20. Ibid. Vol. XXI, 1931. p. 191.

21. Ibid. p. 191.

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24. Ibid. Vol. XXIII, 1933. p. 41.

25. Ibid. Vol. XXVI, 1936. p. 53.

26. Ibid. p. 53.

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29. Ibid. p. 142.

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31. Ibid. Vol. XXXII, 1950. pp. 87-8.

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33. Ibid. p. 88.

34. Ibid. p. 88.

35. Underwood, Horace G. Letter to the author, dated 15 September 1987.

36. Underwood, Horace G. Letter to the author, dated 30 October 1987.

37. Underwood, Horace H. “A Partial Bibliography of Occidental Literature on Korea, From Early Times to 1930.” Transactions. Vol. XVIII, 1930. pp. 16-183.

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