

The LAYISH Newsletters give updates on progress in my research into the Ancient Near Eastern Canon of Art [CANEA]

THE SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES CENTENARY, LONDON UNIVERSITY BRITISH AND OTHER EMPIRES IN PERSPECTIVE

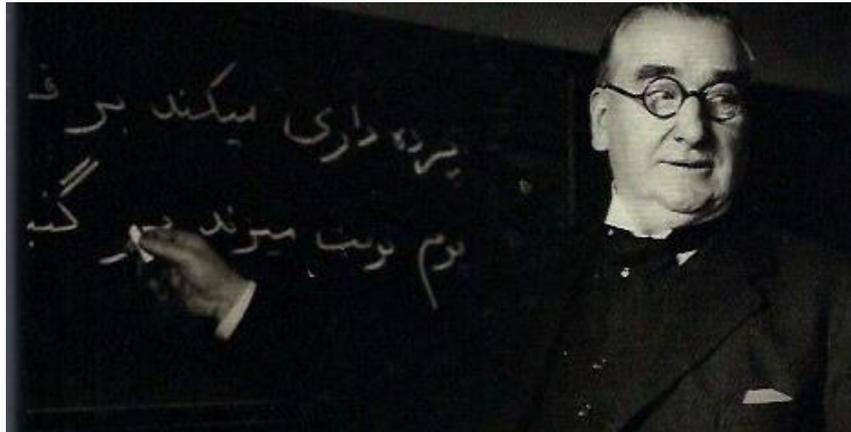
Amongst the four colleges of London University I have attended, SOAS is my chief alma mater. Just to walk through its doors one enters the world in microcosm, where students, teachers and all other staff between them represent most countries of the world. It is a place where people who are citizens of the globe feel at home in an international setting. It was founded initially to teach the languages of those countries occupied by the British Empire - very first of all to train soldiers during World War I and then to all kinds of officials going out to live there in the Overseas Civil Service or Diplomatic Service. It was timely that only in the year of its Centenary celebrations did I find out that amongst the earliest student records of all (for the academic year 1916/17) was that of my grandfather, George Thomas Thomson. He was one of a group of 'brainy' soldiers seconded to learn Arabic (their fees paid for by the War Office) before being sent out to the Middle East. In his case he was sent to Cairo to work under General Allenby in the 'Mesopotamia' (Iraq) Intelligence Department, in the same office as Lawrence of Arabia (though he was usually out in the desert). His story appears under FAMILY BIOGRAPHIES elsewhere on this website.



Ill. 1: Denison Ross, the first Principal of SOAS, in a group photo of the Army Turkish class, outside the Finsbury Circus building

SOAS had definite and circumscribed beginnings with very clear aims, and was housed in a grand Edwardian building in Finsbury Circus with a heavily columned entrance portico. The picture above shows a group of soldiers from the Turkish class (the Ottoman Empire was experiencing its end-game by that time) standing at the front of that building along with Denison Ross, the first Principal of SOAS and an expert in Persian (the next photo shows him at the blackboard). It demonstrates

that these military students attended class in uniform (note the Scotsmen in kilts on the left - my Scots grandfather in his Arabic class would, I presume, have been similarly dressed).



Ill. 2: The first principal, Denison Ross, teaching Persian

Here I am, exactly a hundred years later, attending the Centenary celebration of the School, which due to two World Wars and the dismantling of the British Empire has gone through a series of contractions and expansions (explained in detail in Ian Brown's book *The School of Oriental and African Studies*, Cambridge, just published). Through a window of the 1930s University of London Senate House (the Art Deco classic designed by Charles Holden, temporarily converted into the Ministry of Information during WWII) I took a photo (below) of one end of the next, custom-built, SOAS building in Thornhaugh Street at the corner of Russell Square in Bloomsbury, completed in 1940. I was standing in the northern wing of Senate House, now taken over by SOAS in this Centenary Year after a huge expansion that now demands more lecture theatres, seminar rooms and public spaces now that students from all over the world throng to study here.



Ill. 3: View of the 1940s SOAS building from the Senate House north wing now acquired for SOAS use

Through a window on the South side one has a view of the main entrance into Senate House under its tower (which holds the University of London Library and the Schools of Advanced Research).



Ill. 4: View from a south window down onto the main entrance at the centre of Senate House

We alumni, old and young, now walked into the North wing of Senate House (the new arm of SOAS) to be shown round the new Alumni Lecture Hall and collegiate spaces - and attended a celebratory reception presided over by the newly appointed, latest Principal, Baroness Amos (coincidentally dubbed a Baroness during the period I was in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister), experienced in the higher echelons of multicultural Government, including a stint at the United Nations.



Ill. 5: View of inner courtyard of Senate House, now covered over to provide a cafeteria

The architects who converted the Senate House North Wing for SOAS use must have had the precedent of Norman Foster's Great Court in the British Museum (just behind Senate House) in mind. What better creation of a new, useful space, than to cover an unused inner courtyard with a grid of glass, letting in natural light and enabling the creation of a student cafeteria underneath it (see photos above)? We should not leave out one intermediate project, fostered under the long directorship of Cyril Phillips (below) - which was the addition of a much-expanded library and lecturers' tuition rooms masterfully designed by Denys Lasdun - easily seen in views of SOAS on-line today (see their website home page <http://www.soas.ac.uk/library/>). This building was consequently named the Cyril Phillips Building.



Ill. 6: Cyril Phillips, the first Principal of SOAS to deal with the post-Empire curriculum

In my time at SOAS, initially attending classes in Sanskrit and Arabic, I particularly felt I was under the sane and benign aegis of Cyril Phillips in the workings of the place. Thanks to the School of Oriental and African Studies I found my way to the art history of the ancient world in a roundabout way. I had studied the subject of Western art history (deemed only to have started in ancient Greece) at school for A Level, and inspired by that went on to take the BA Hons degree in The History of Art at the Courtauld Institute, London, a few years later - its Principal being Antony Blunt - later found out to have been a spy for Russia. (I was to discover later that artists, art historians *and* archaeologists have all made good spies over the centuries. But SOAS (with the Warburg Institute) opened out vistas to ancient Sumer, Syria and Anatolia dating back to the Fourth Millennium BC, many of its books coming from the former personal libraries of well-known academics in the field such as Henri Frankfort or Cyril Gadd. I had to start all over again, and to SOAS I owe my new career.

The centenary day was light-hearted and fun, but hardly engaged my most scholarly side. When I looked at some of the senior alumni attending, and then looked at the themes for debate coming from the top, they bore the hallmark of a Director who is African, has worked in the British Government under a Labour Government, and then at the United Nations. These were my conclusions about adjustments needed in the culture of the place to make it perfect:

- ◇ SOAS would not have been founded in the first place without the British Empire - present staff and students do not need to bite the hand of those who set it up and ran it at great sacrifice, nor despise those who worked in a network which has served to unify the world as much as it may be deemed to have divided it. Indeed, think of the many other empires that are the subject of study at this very institution, such as the Persian, Mughal, Islamic or Mongol. Empires are inevitable in the tides of history: any person living in the Roman Empire automatically became a citizen and this is what has happened to those formerly occupied by Britain.
- ◇ There has been an initial a push from the top for debates on Human Rights and World Peace - approaches that reflect Baroness Amos' political training and time working at the United Nations. The latest Events timetable is devoted almost exclusively to Africa

and China. This is all fine as a start, but in the end what is important is for SOAS to foster learning at its deepest level in every nook and cranny of its Oriental and African remit - and to foster those rarer hothouse creatures who wish to devote themselves to the quiet and discreet life of a scholar. Their efforts keep alive and open up more about all the literary, artistic and social traditions of the Oriental and African realms of the world ultimately to be passed in more accurate forms to ordinary people, reminding people why they enact the customs they have.

- ◇ As a child of the British Empire brought up in Africa and married into the Middle East, with the record of my grandfather training as a spy at SOAS going right back to its foundation, I now benefit from all the fruits of SOAS' original foundation. I always have a sense of coming home when I enter its doors and see students and staff from all over the world thronging its doors - many of them friends, and one of them even a former husband. Let's make sure the Indo-Europeans are not drowned out by the prominence of Middle Eastern affairs in world politics, and let's make sure small regional languages like Nepalese or Tibetan are not swallowed up by China on the academic front at least. We should see more Zoroastrians and Hindus in the Alumni Office - and the pastry-base of indigenous British students does not have to feel guiltily soggy about being the free-thinking, formative basis of such a wonderful international institution. And let's not forget to include in this web of friendship the infrastructure staff working in the library, the kitchens, at reception and keeping the premises clean - these can suffer from student imperialism.

[In fact, soon after writing these last sentences I read my *SOAS World 100* magazine a little more carefully, and almost all my comments above were addressed in it.]

There is absolutely no reason why the School's motto, **KNOWLEDGE IS POWER**, should be interpreted as "a harsh reminder of its colonial history" as stated in a recent blog on SOAS I came across recently. This statement simply reveals a mean and uneducated mind bent on churning out the worn-out *clichés* of the past, and ungratefully biting the hand that feeds it.

All true scholars want SOAS to stand first and foremost as a place of higher learning, covering all centuries and territories of its remit - and though some of its students will study current world political issues, it strikes me as highly important that it remains unpoliticised in its core administration.