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**THE KOREA BRANCH OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY The First One Hundred Years**

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The 1800s were a time of exuberant expansionism in the western world, with a great curiosity about the new lands being discovered or opened to exploration and trade. In this movement a few ships had touched on Korea, but Korea did its best to preserve its isolation and insulation from foreign influnce until the 1880s. Although a few writers were able to put together some information on Korea gathered from outside the country, when the first treaties were signed with western powers in 1882 very little was known of the country. The early small occidental community consisted of missionaries, minor diplomats of some half a dozen countries, representatives of major international trading companies, such as Standard Oil and Singer Sewing Machines, and a few independents. Fortunately they included a number of far-seeing, inquisitive, scholarly men and women who by 1900 had already made significant beginnings in the study of Korean history and culture. However, they believed that such study would be encouraged and strengthened if there were an organization devoted to that purpose, providing a critical local audience and a permanent record in the form of a journal. Preliminary correspondence was carried on with the Royal Asiatic Society in London, and, receiving an encouraging response, on June 11, 1900 they issued a call for a general meeting on Saturday, 16 June, 1900, for the purpose of found[ing] a Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. Seventeen men gathered at the Reading Room of the Seoul Union Club (then located in what is now the front part of the American Ambassadors Residence). They adopted a constitution along the lines suggested by the parent Society, elected officers and notified the home Society, [page 2] which then officially recognized the Korea Branch. Although the official recognition did not reach Seoul until a few months later, the Korea Branch considers 16 June, 1900 as its birthday. The Centennial of the Society was celebrated at the Residence of the British Ambassador on Saturday, 17 June, 2000, with a garden party, attended by some 200 members, and a Korean folk dance performance.

Having turned one hundred years old, it seems appropriate to look at the past one hundred years of the Korea Branch and note some of the high points in that history. More detailed information may be found in three previous accounts. In 1948 Dr. H. R Underwood wrote a brief history of the Society for the benefit of the new occidental community developing in Seoul after World War II. Then after the Korean War the first Report of the Council summarizes the re-establishment of the Branch in 1957. The most extensive report, however, was written in some detail thirty years ago, on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the Branch, by Dr. L. George Paik (Paik, Nak Jun), a long-time member, Councilor and renowned Korean scholar. He wrote a detailed history of the Branch to that date, which he modestly called a resume. This account includes an introduction and five sections; I. A Summary of Developments, II. The Transactions, III. The Library, IV. Membership and Finances, and V. Conclusions. This was published in Volume 47 (1972) of the Transactions and contains much detailed information that will not be recapitulated here.

The history of the Korea Branch can be divided into four periods. It started enthusiastically, with nine papers being presented in the first three years. To preserve the concept of one Transaction per year, Volume Two was published in two parts. However, for reasons not clear but possibly because of the political disturbances related to the Russo-Japanese War and the Annexation of Korea by Japan, there were no general meetings between 1902 and 1911.

To revive the Society, a general meeting was called on 23 January, 1911, attended by nine people, including one woman. This meeting elected officers and resuscitated a membership list of between forty and fifty members. The period from 1911 to 1940 was the most productive period of the Society, in terms of significant and unique papers. Dr. Paik designates the years from 1911 to 1930 as the Trollope era, in honor of the Anglican Bishop, Mark Napier Trollope, the great churchman and scholar who was the dynamic force encouraging the Society and served as President for thirteen of those years, until his untimely death in 1930. From 1930 to 1941 Dr. H. H. Underwood had the leadership role, serving as President four times.

Twenty-seven volumes were published during this period, several in two [page 3] or more Parts, publishing fifty seven papers. These materials were usually the first and, in some cases, to this day the only studies in English on many aspects of Korean life and culture. Many of these papers were extensive enough to make a single thick volume of the Transactions. Dr. H. H. Underwood’s papers on ‘‘Hunting and Hunters Lore” and “Korean Boats and Ships” are the only records existing in any language of aspects of Korea that have virtually disappeared, and Dr. Underwood’s analysis of the design of the famous Turtle Boat is the basis of all subsequent reconstructions. Dr. Boots’ study on Korean Weapons and Armor and Dr. Koon’s paper on the Korean beacon system are still the only material available on these subjects in English. Dr. E.M. Cable was the first to make a study of U.S. Korean relations, and his report of the American naval attack on the Kang Wha forts in 1872 is still the most complete account of that incident, while Dr. Cummings’ “Korean Birds”, Dr. Rufiiss’ “Astronomy in Korea” and Mrs. Boots’ “Introduction to Korean Music” were also pioneer studies in their fields. Perhaps the most famous and widely known proceedings was Volume XXIX, 1939, “The Romanization of the Korean Alphabet” by Dr. George McCune and Dr. Edwin Reischauer, to this day the most widely used Romanization system of Korean, although probably few outside of Korea are aware of its source. Other subjects touched on included Korean art, old coins, traditional medicine, food, climate, mining, the examination system, and many others. In short, many aspects of Korean history, life and culture were explored by these early amateur researchers. Yet despite this variety, the summary history of 1948 suggests seventy four topics for further study, including a catch-all Various historical subjects. Sadly, with the rapid physical and social changes of the past fifty years, some of these cultural elements suggested for study may already be so lost that information may now be virtually impossible to obtain. Even in the last fifty years, for example, many local forts and city walls have sunk into the ground or been pirated for their stones. Unlike recorded historical events, this is especially true of daily life and plebian occupational practices, about which past generations had not even bothered to take note of before they disappeared. For instance, except for possible vestige examples, Koreans no longer do pearl fishing and the native cotton, once an important crop, is no longer grown. Other fields have been explored in Korean but the information is not available in English.

The activities of the Society were brought to a close by the outbreak of the Pacific War in December, 1941. The foreign residents of the country were expelled and the Korean members were forced to dissociate themselves from all foreign organizations. After the war some of the returning members believed that the increased international interest in Korea and the large number of new [page 4] military and civilian residents made it highly desirable to re-activate the Society, with emphasis not only on study but also on instruction. Led by Dr. H. H. Underwood, the last former President, and the Rev. Charles Hunt, a small group held an informal meeting at the Church of England Bishops Lodge on 26 November, 1947. They called an open meeting for 18 December, 1947, at which officers were elected and new members received. The list of ninety four members in Volume XXXI, 1948/49, hints at the changed nature of the expatriate community, with a number of military officers, foreign aid officials and new (to Korea) businesses. The outbreak of the Korean War in June, 1950, again seemed to bring the activities of the Society to an end. Only two volumes of the Transactions were published in this inter-war period, the second being printed in Hong Kong through the valiant efforts of Mr. Robert Kinney, who served the Society faithfully for many years.

During the war the city of Seoul was heavily damaged and the Society lost practically all of its Library, possessions and records, except for a few items rescued by Mr. Kinney, who had returned to the United States. At the end of 1955 there were three former Councilors in Seoul, Dr. George Paik, Mr. H. G. Underwood (Vice President) and Mr. Marc Scherbacher (Recording Secretary). They called an informal meeting at the British Legation on 22 January, 1956 and invited Mr. Stewart, the British Minister, Mr. Dugald Malcolm of the British Legation and Father Richard Rutt of the Anglican Mission to join them in reestablishing the Society. A lecture meeting was held on 22 February followed by others until an Annual Meeting met on 27 February, 1957, which elected officers and councilors. The membership at that time was sixty nine, but as pointed out above, soon rapidly expanded.

In the years from 1957 to 1999 there have been forty two volumes of the Transactions, containing 167 papers, an average of four per volume. This reflects the vastly changed circumstances from the pre-war years. At that time members were generally long-time residents of Korea who over a period of years were able to study various topics in some depth. In the post-war years most of the members resided in Korea for short appointments so their studies tend to be much shorter and limited in scope. A rich source of interesting lectures and often of papers for the Transactions, has been the number of graduate students in Korean Studies from the United States and Europe who came to Korea to gain research materials. Martina Deuchler, Keith Howard, Fred Alford and others all spoke to the Society on their research and later went on to publish their own books on the subjects. Among these scholars have been a number of Peace Corps Volunteers who have gone to further study, sometimes inspired by what they learned through the R.A.S. In the late 1960s [page 5] an attempt was made to devote each Transaction to a single area of study. Vol. 43 (1967) has three articles on the “New Religions of Korea”, Vol. 44 presents “Selected Studies in Korean Arts”, Vol. 45 discusses “Mass Communications in a Developing Korea” and Vol. 46 studies “Life in Urban Korea”. Aside from these four numbers, other issues include a wide variety of topics.

Membership in the Society was originally of two types: Honorary and Ordinary. Honorary Members could be appointed on special grounds determined in each case by the Council, but should not be residents of Korea and did not have to pay the membership fees. Ordinary membership has always been open to any person wishing to join, of whatever nationality, race or creed.. From the time the Society was reactivated in 1911 up until World War II the membership fluctuated between 150 and 200. A few members were overseas, but most of those were persons away on temporary absence. The Bye-Laws provided for lesser fees for overseas members but did not list them as a separate category of membership. After Liberation the Constitution was changed to allow resident Honorary Members, but in practice these have been limited to the successive British Ambassadors though with an occasional special person. At that time the category of Life Member was also introduced. By the payment of a special fee, approximately ten times the annual membership, one could become a Life Member. With the growing number of people on short-term appointments who joined the society, the category of Overseas Member was formalized to encourage such persons to keep up their interest in Korea after their departure. From the 1960s the membership in all categories grew very rapidly. At the present time there are slightly over 1,300 members, including approximately 850 Regular Members, 450 Overseas Members and 70 Life Members.

The affairs of the Society are managed by a Council. Originally the Council was composed of the six officers: President, Vice President. Corresponding Secretary, Recording Secretary, Librarian, and Treasurer and three Ordinary members. However, after the Korean War the number of Ordinary (including Life) Members on the Council was increased to up to twenty to handle the increased load of arranging programs for the bi-monthly meetings, arranging and guiding the tours, and supervising the increased publication program. Moreover, life in Seoul in this period moved at a much faster pace than in pre-war days, and individual Councilors had less time to devote to the affairs of the Society. The problem of recruiting Councilors has become increasingly serious in recent years as the number of long-term residents with general background knowledge has diminished, and short-service residents with sufficient interest and time are hard to identify before they leave the country. [page 6

From its inception in 1900 to the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941, the Society met whenever there was a paper ready for presentation, although the Council actively solicited materials from its members and other residents of Korea. During this period meetings were usually held at the Seoul Union Club although occasionally at the homes of various Councilors. The paper, or a summary of it, would be read, followed by a discussion period and ending with a tea. These papers would then be published in the Transactions. The writers were, with few exceptions, residents of Korea who followed their own hobby interests, but were not what is normally thought of as research scholars, though the quality of their scholarship, as revealed in their papers, is very high. After the Korean War the Council felt that one of the functions of the Society should be to introduce Korean culture to the many newcomers and short service residents. To this end it initiated lectures on a variety of topics of general interest, even if not original research. The day of the meeting was fixed as the first Wednesday of each month so that in an increasingly busy community people could know well in advance when meetings were to be held. Later the format was changed again, to have meetings on the second and fourth Wednesday of each month, except during the summer months.

These talks are open without charge to anyone and are on a wide variety of topics, including popular types of talks for the general public, often with video or slide showings. The aim is to introduce Korea to the greatly enlarged and far more transient English speaking community of Seoul. Of course, more scholarly papers are read, as available, and published in the Transactions. These programs were so highly valued by out-of-town members of the Society that Chapters were organized at various times in Taegu and Taejon. These were mostly short-lived and tended to die when the one or two enthusiastic volunteer promoters left. At the time of the Centennial no such Chapters were functioning.

The meetings of the Society have been held in a wide variety of places. As stated above, in the earliest days they tended to be in the homes of members, but the Seoul Union Club, first located in front of the American Ambassadors residence and later moved to just outside Susomun (Little West Gate) soon came to be the regular meeting place. After the Korean War the location of the lectures has moved from time to time as space became available and conditions of use were changed by the successive landlords. Although circumstances sometime called for special meeting places, the Branch met for fifteen years at the auditorium of he Nursing School of the National Medical Center, and some five years each at the auditorium of the Tonga Ilbo newspaper and a seminar room in the Daewoo Foundation Building. At the [page 7] present time lectures are held at the Goethe Institute (German Cultural Center) on the slopes of Namsan.

Before the Korean War the Society did no publishing except for the Transactions. It did permit authors of some of the longer presentations to have their papers reprinted as separate books. In the late 1960s the Society decided on a program of publishing books of general interest or deemed to have special value, as well as new scholarly works. It has issued twenty five such volumes, including some in cooperation with overseas organizations. Of particular historical interest are “Hamel’s Journal” and a “Description of the Kingdom of Korea”, translated by Br. Jean-Paul Buys, and Father John Bridges’ translation of Father Juan Ruiz de Medina’s “The Catholic Church in Korea: Its origins, 1566 1784.” Both are the first and only translations into English from the original sources of these valuable accounts. Other publications, such as Keith Howard’s “Bands, Songs, and Shamanistic Rituals”, and Pak Ki-hyuk’s “Changing Korean Village”, cover a variety of fields, from other early records of Korea to matters of current interest and event to guides to the modern country. Some of these, such as Paul Crane’s “Korean Patterns” have gone through numerous reprintings. In addition, the Branch initiated a Reprint Series of important early Korean studies that were out of print but of continuing interest to the membership and to scholars. They include such classics as the six volumes of “The Korea Review, 1901-1906”, Dr. J.S. Gale’s “Korean Sketches” and Basil Hall’s “Voyage to the West Coast of Korea and the Great Loo Choo Island”, originally published in 1818. To date thirteen reprints have been issued and others are in the planning stages. The 1970s were the most prolific decade for publications, with ten original works and eight reprints, in addition to the regular Transactions. In the 1980s there were nine originals and two reprints while the 1990s saw three each.

Partly for wider sale or its own publications and partly as a service to its members and other residents of Korea, the Society became the agent for the sale of books on Korea by other publishers. Books by Korean publishers are often in limited editions and are soon unavailable. By purchasing stocks of such books the Society is able to make available material often out of print on the market. This type of service is particularly helpful for books published abroad, as it is generally awkward for the individual expatriate to purchase such books. At the time of the Centennial the R.A.S., with over 350 titles on its book list, carries probably the largest variety of books on Korea of any agency in the world.

In the 1960s the Society initiated a tour program as a supplement to the lectures in introducing Korea. At that time transportation outside of Seoul was [page 8] difficult for the non-Korean-speaking visitor and except for a few famous spots, places worth visiting were frequently unknown or difficult to find for the uninitiated. The tour program was initiated by long-time Council member, Mr. Carl Ferris Miller. A Tour Committee was established as one of the regular committees of the Council and the day to day organization of the tours was taken over by the Office Staff. Under the tour program, knowledgeable members of the Society acted as leaders, sharing their personal knowledge of the places being visited. Some seventy to eighty tours are scheduled each year, a few being repeated in the spring and autumn. Tours may be as short as half a day, most often are a full day, but with many or a weekend. Two or three times a year special overseas tours to other Asian countries are arranged. Of special interest have been tours to sites in Japan associated with Korean history and culture. Members receive 10% discounts on the price of books and tours.

Until the mid-1960s all the operations of the Society were managed entirely on a voluntary basis by the Council. However, as the clerical work of keeping track of memberships, collecting and selling books and supervising tours increased, it became necessary to establish a permanent office. Space was found in the sixth floor of the Christian Building at Yonji-dong, near East gate and Ms. Sue Bae was employed as the clerk in charge, and is now in effect the General Manager of the Society. She suggests the tour schedule for the Tour Committee and Council, prepares and circulates the monthly notices of lectures and tours, sends the quarterly news reports to Overseas Members, sees books and Transactions through the printers, and handles all the details of bus rental, hotel reservations and the other complex details for tours, and accompanies many of them herself. Much of the success of the Society is due to her faithful service over the past 33 years.

The Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society is proud of its contribution to scholarship on and information about Korea for the past one hundred years. Literally thousands of people have been given access to a society and a culture that many have found it difficult to penetrate, and the quality of scholarship shown in the 237 papers published in the Transactions are of a quality seldom matched over so long a period by a single journal.