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## Obituaries

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### **DR JOHN DENNIS DUNCANSON, O.B.E.**

**26th May 1917 to 15th April 1998**

Dennis Duncanson was an outstanding example of the old-time British Overseas Civil Servant. He was energetic, practical and robust in outlook, also notably witty and unusually versatile. With extensive experience of the Indian Ocean area, from East Africa to China, he had the widest expertise of any of the Royal Asiatic Society's contemporary Council members. It is probable the Society owes more to his administrative work on its behalf than to that of any recent officer.

He was born in Lambeth on 26th May 1917, 81 years ago. His mother, Marguerite née Burke, sadly died when he was only a teenager. He had been an only child. His father, John Duncanson, was the last of his line born in the city of Venice. John had been the



Dr John Dennis Duncanson, O.B.E.

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offspring of a marriage between a Scottish engineer and a Venetian music teacher, Dennis's grandparents. They came to settle in England in the last years of the nineteenth century, but Dennis never forgot his Venetian ancestry. He loved the city, and during his many visits there, by diligent research discovered much about the family's descent: from café proprietors named Alberti, generations of glass workers called Zanetti on the island of Murano, and earlier still from farmers in the Friuli region of north-east Italy. He was even more diligent in investigating the genealogy of the Duncansons in Scotland, and traced the line back to a Robert Duncanson of Inverary in 1595.

Dennis seems to have regarded Italian as his second language, though we shall see he became familiar with, and spoke, many more. With a fierce intelligence, and thirst for knowledge, typical of those who go on to become recognized experts in their fields, he was to have a career which took him to many parts of the world, and at times even played a part in shaping world affairs.

He went to school at Dulwich College in London, and later obtained a scholarship to study at the Sorbonne in Paris. After completing his time there he seriously considered the idea of settling in France. However, in the late 1930s war was imminent, and he decided to remain a British citizen rather than become a French one. When war began in 1939, one of the first things he did was to get married – to Betty Mapsted, a girl he had met several years earlier, when they were both at Pitman's College learning secretarial skills. Dennis and Betty were to be married for 56 years. During the war, Dennis served in the Royal Berkshire Regiment, first in Norway, and later in Eritrea, where, after the Allied occupation of the country, he worked in its civil administration. During a spell at home in England, as he liked to recall, he served under Malcolm Muggeridge. It is not certain that they stayed in touch, but Dennis was later to make his own contribution to what was to be Muggeridge's field of radio and television.

It was after the war that Dennis joined the Colonial Service, and embarked on what was to become his life's speciality: the Far East, and especially South-East Asia. He shone as ADC to the Governor of Hong Kong, and subsequently joined the administration in what was then Malaya. There, during the emergency, he served on the staff of Sir Gerald Templar. Before long, he was undertaking serious responsibilities, dealing with key figures, drafting difficult documents, and negotiating, no doubt in whichever language the situation demanded. All the time he was learning more about the countries and cultures in which he and Betty were living.

Soon an acknowledged authority, in 1961 he was invited to join the British Advisory Mission in Saigon, under Sir Robert Thomson, and worked as Counsellor in Aid at the British Embassy in Saigon during the mid-sixties, being later awarded the OBE. At this time he gained considerable proficiency in spoken Chinese, and began also to study Vietnamese. He was being increasingly called upon by broadcasters and the press as a commentator on events. He became a regular contributor on the BBC World Service, and, as the Vietnam War escalated, was to be found in TV studios debating with the likes of Ludovic Kennedy the causes and development of the conflict. It was natural, then, that after his return to England he worked for a while with the BBC, as a Vietnam Programme Organiser. Subsequently he joined the staff of the University of Kent at Canterbury, where he became Reader, and set up the Centre for South-East Asian Studies. His book,

*Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (Oxford, 1968), was written while the war was still in progress, and found its place as recommended reading in politics and government at several universities. He was an active member of the Royal Society for Asian Affairs, long serving as Chairman of its Publications Committee, and afterwards elected Honorary Vice-President of that Society. His later work, *Changing Qualities of Chinese Life* (Macmillans), appeared in 1982. From 1975–1990 he served on the Governing Body of the London University School of Oriental and African Studies.

It was, however, in the work of the Royal Asiatic Society that he played the most influential role during his later years. He was elected to the Council in 1969, and in 1977 he became its Director, undertaking most of the Society's administrative work. He was President in 1982–5, and again Director in 1986–9 and 1992–5. In all these capacities he dedicated himself to solving the two serious problems threatening the Society's future: the approaching expiry of its leasehold at 56, Queen Anne Street, and its insufficient income to meet the rising costs of a Central London base. To deal with the first problem he supported the president of the day, Professor C. F. Beckingham, in the laborious search for appropriate freehold property. Through his persevering efforts a suitable home was eventually found at 60, Queen's Gardens, and the difficult arrangements of the move were successfully orchestrated. A library sale, of the Farquhar Albums (containing attractive natural history paintings, but outside the current interests of the Society) was needed to provide the income to run the new property. Here his acumen enabled the Society to choose the most opportune moment for this disposal, so placing the Society's future on a secure basis.

During his latest tenure as Director, his days were saddened by the distressing malady of his charming wife. When it turned out Betty had Alzheimer's Disease, a condition so devastating for sufferers and carers alike, it was Dennis who looked after her, heroically and alone, for as long as he possibly could. When Betty died in 1995, Dennis had already found he was the victim of the puzzling illness which was progressively to sap his strength, and eventually claim his life. The condition meant his gradual loss of ability to walk, then to write, even to read for any length of time. For a man whose life had revolved round travelling the world, and communicating knowledge and ideas, these limitations seemed desperately cruel. When it became clear to him that living in the home he loved, his London flat in Leinster Mews, was no longer practical, he decided to move to Osborne House in the Isle of Wight, where he could be looked after by the dedicated staff, and be near to his closest relatives. As one of these commented on his lively career, he usually sparkled in any company. He was always something of a showman, and seemed to enjoy the public stage. His trademark was often the colourful bow tie. He gave always a meticulous and gentlemanly attention to good manners, but at the same time was a great mimic, and a clever story-teller, with a serious addiction to puns – which could be drawn from any of the languages he knew so well, a gift that might leave some of his guests bemused. He would have thought it a bit rich to discover his own death would come on the same day that of the Cambodian dictator Pol Pot was announced. "Good riddance" he might have said, "Let's hope we are not heading for the same place".

Contemporaries on the Council equally remember Dennis as a lively and amusing companion, no less than as a staunch and dependable colleague. His clear-sighted plans

have done much to fulfil his steadfast purpose of securing the Society's continuation, as its Charter requires, in perpetuity. After retirement from active Council work, he was elected an Honorary Vice-President of the Society, a distinction visitors to Osborne tell us gave him much pleasure. He most generously presented an important selection of his books to the Library, substantially strengthening its representation on South-East Asia. Dennis will be greatly missed at the Society, to which his contribution over more than twenty-one years has been so impressive.

A. D. H. Bivar

**FRANK STEELE, OBE**  
**February 11 1923 to November 20 1997**

Frank Steele, after a successful career as an intelligence officer, made an effective transition to merchant banking at the age of 52. He gave further evidence of his versatility in his voluntary work for the Royal Asiatic Society and for the Royal Society of Asian Affairs.

Frank Fenwick Steele came from a family with a tradition, over several generations, of service in India. He was, however, educated in this country, first at St Peter's School, York and after at Emmanuel College Cambridge where he read mechanical engineering. It was natural, therefore, that in 1943 he was commissioned into REME in which he served until 1947, mainly in India and South-East Asia. On leaving the Army he joined the Colonial Service and served in Uganda between 1948–1950.

In 1951 he joined SIS by the unusual method of placing an advertisement in the press, detailing his qualifications. Soon after joining, he was posted to Basra, at the time when active planning was taking place for the invasion of southern Iran after the temporary expulsion of the Shah and the nationalization of BP's interests. The invasion, fortunately, did not take place. But Steele's contribution to its planning marked him out early as an officer of exceptional ability.

Service in Cyprus, Libya and London followed, in the course of which he won considerable respect from his colleagues and was identified as a "flier". In the late 1950s he served in Beirut, returning to London in 1961. In 1965 he was posted to Amman and 1968 to Nairobi. In 1971 he went to Northern Ireland as a member of the small FCO team there, and in May of the following year succeeded to its senior position. This intensely political post, in a rapidly changing situation, suited Steele's talents and temperament well and further enhanced his reputation. In 1973 he returned to a senior position connected with the Middle East in London, but he took premature retirement in 1975, frustrated by the constraints placed upon his freedom of action. After leaving the FCO in 1975, Frank Steele joined Kleinwort Benson Limited, the merchant bank, first as a consultant on Middle East matters and then as a director in charge of the bank's not inconsiderable export financing activities. He retired in 1987.

Working at Kleinworts gave him the opportunity to use, in a commercial context, his characteristic tenacity, persuasiveness and thoroughness. He made many friendships with both clients and colleagues and became, within a short space of time, a true banker.