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THE BRITISH COUNCIL'S WORK IN ASIAN COUNTRIES

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(Address given to the Royal Central Asian Society on October 11, 1961)

WHAT I want to talk about today is the British Council's part in the general role now played by the British in the second half of the twentieth century. In a sense, our contribution to that role is something fairly new, but in a profounder sense it is a continuation, in many countries, of the work done in a different way and in far different circumstances by our British predecessors. So I hope that the subject of the talk may prove appropriate to an audience which contains so many people who have served in those parts in earlier times.

I want to begin first by giving some practical and rather wandering examples of the opportunities open to the British Council in that part of the world and show how we are trying to meet them, and then make some generalizations about what we are trying to do and in what way.

First, may I begin with some reflections in a Persian rose garden. Some months ago I was in Meshed, where we started a British Council Centre about two years ago. Our Centre is housed in the old British Consulate-General, which was a very magnificent place, in a compound of about thirty acres, with half a dozen houses for the Vice-Consul, the Indian Adviser, the Persian Adviser, the doctor to the Consul-General and staff, and so on, and, most striking of all, a large array of cavalry stables for the Indian Lancers who used, I was told, to accompany the Consul-General when he went out in Meshed. Now, I am sorry to have to report, the cavalry stables are overgrown, the roofs of all the houses except the main one have fallen in, and the garden is a wilderness, except for the rose-garden round the Consul-General's house; and even the Consul-General's house has a roof which was condemned by the Ministry of Works ten years ago and is expected to fall in at any moment. Indeed, one of the problems I had to tackle was how to get it put right: that was a minor by-product of the end of the British Raj in India. In 1947 the Consulate-General in Meshed was handed over to the successor Governments, two-thirds to the Indians and one-third to the Pakistanis, so the roof is owned jointly by India and Pakistan, and their agent in the matter is the British Ministry of Works—a somewhat odd tripartite arrangement and not an easy one to get to work. However, we have now solved that problem with the support of the Indian and Pakistani Ambassadors in Iran.

So, in spite of the decay of the buildings in the compound, the British Council is operating there with some success on a modest scale in three main ways: first of all by English teaching (our English classes are held

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in the old Consulate offices); then we have a library, from which there are about 2,000 issues of books a year (which is not bad, because the English-reading public of Meshed is not a very large one); and thirdly—and perhaps most important—many of the leading people in Meshed have, in the last few years, visited this country and in one way or another have been looked after by the British Council and put in touch with their opposite numbers here. So although Meshed is not a place that is very well known in this country, lying as it does on the borders of Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Russia, I was astonished to find how well this country was known to the people I met in Meshed—the Governor-General of Khorosan, the Governor of Meshed, the Rector of the University, some leading figures in the Hospital, the Director of Education, headmasters of schools—all had either been to this country or were hoping to get here in the fairly near future. All these people and many others attended the party given by the Council Representative in his garden and I was able to see for myself what an easy, informal, friendly relationship we had with the people of Meshed.

I was told that in bygone days the British Consul-General's escort of Indian Cavalry was a reminder that the Indian Army of British India was a silent guarantee of Persian independence. However that may be, those days are past. But there is still, even in Meshed, a more modest role for the British to sustain, and we do the same sort of thing in other provincial centres in Iran: Isfahan, Tabriz, Shiraz, and on a larger scale in Teheran. Meshed is a microcosm of most of the British Council's work: first, educational help, especially in English teaching; second, provision of British books and periodicals; and third, and most important, promotion of personal contacts between opposite numbers in countries overseas and in this country. I should like to say a little more about those three aspects in general later on; in the meantime I want to go on to one or two other Asian countries and give a few more rambling examples of the opportunities open to us.

Moving eastwards, to Pakistan, I recently received a visit from the headmaster of the public school (they use the term "public school" in Pakistan in our sense of the word) which the Pakistan Government recently set up in Chittagong, asking us to recruit a British headmaster and some British staff. He told us very graphically about the cyclone which devastated that part of East Pakistan some months ago, when the school went through a pretty difficult time, and he said: "In a way, it was a blessing. It is a new school; we wanted to get instilled into the boys the idea of service, and here was our opportunity." The cyclone had given him an opportunity for getting the school down to grips with a real job of service, in which they were able to render service to the whole countryside. It is because of that tradition of service that the Pakistan Government set up these schools and asked for British headmasters. There are about a dozen such schools in East and West Pakistan combined, to some of which we appoint headmasters and to most of which we appoint British staff.

Incidentally, we recently started an experiment which is working out well, namely to get young men of eighteen from British schools who were willing to give a year between school and University and send them

out to some of these schools, in Pakistan and elsewhere, to work as very junior masters. They can make contact with the senior boys in a way that none of us older people can, and reports on the scheme have been highly satisfactory, both from the receiving school and the headmasters of the British schools which had sent them. We now hope to do this on a larger scale by merging our scheme with the one operated by Voluntary Service Overseas.

Coming to India, perhaps our main opportunity there is "in the training of Indian teachers of English. Some years ago the Ford Foundation said they were willing to put a lot of money into this, and they asked the Indian Government how they could most usefully do it. The Indian Government asked that British teachers should be used, and with great magnanimity the Ford Foundation said: "All right; we will provide the money. Go ahead." So the Indian Government, with the help of British Council staff, and on American money, now runs an all-India training centre for Indian teachers of English, at Hyderabad.

In Southern India and Madras they are tackling the same sort of problem in a rather different way, and at the request of the Government of Madras we have developed a scheme, rather oddly called "the Madras Snowball," by which teachers train teachers who train other teachers—and so on. The Madras Government aim to train 20,000 teachers of English within two or three years; they are spending half a million of their own money on the project and the British Council has provided the central staff. I visited this scheme last year at the Training College where the central training was carried out. It was in a village outside Madras, and it was a Sunday, and therefore work had closed down for the day, but the children of the village school, who were being used as the "white mice" of this experiment and were being taught English by the teachers under training, came clustering round the railings of the College saying: "Aren't you going to teach us today?" This gives an illustration of what I think is universal throughout Asia—an immense and passionate demand for education, and especially for English because English is the key to higher education and therefore the key to good jobs.

In Madras itself we run a Centre and Library which has an immense membership, and two years ago, when we were looking for new premises, we received an invitation from the Madras Government, who were just building a Public Library of their own in Madras. They said: "We would like to have the British Council Centre in our own building. Will you come in as tenants?" Well, it is nice to have such an invitation, and we have accepted.

In the field of libraries and textbooks I propose to say a little more later on. India is, of course, a particularly fruitful field for that sort of work.

In the field of personal contacts, these are of course innumerable and of long standing and deep-rooted. The people I think one feels most uncertain about are the younger generation of educated Indians, although many of them come to this country for their higher education—more, indeed, than ever before. My wife and I visited Durgapur, the great steel works constructed by a British consortium in co-operation with the

Indian Government, staying in the guest house for one night, and I was very glad when, in the evening, a group of about thirty young men came to see us. They had heard that we were there and they said: "We were steel trainees in England; the British Council looked after us and we have come to thank you and would like to give you a party"—which they proceeded to do. I felt that even with the younger generation we are still making some personal contact, by means of the training schemes which this country is providing. It is certainly one of the things to which we in the British Council try to pay the most attention.

Going on to Burma, where I paid a visit to British Council staff a few years ago, I had an opportunity in Mandalay of listening to a very old Burmese telling the story of his life. They have just started a new University in Mandalay, and he was Chairman of the Governors. (He is still alive, I am glad to say, and he was then eighty-five.) He said: "When I was a boy of ten, I saw the British Redcoats march into Mandalay for the first time." He then went on to describe his job in the British Administration (he was in the Forest Service), his experience under the Japanese, the second arrival of the British—in khaki this time—in 1945 or '46, and then, finally, he turned to me at the dinner-table and said: "And now I am very glad to be asking the British to send us more lecturers to our new University."

Perhaps it is not in many parts of the former British Empire in Asia that so much has happened in a single lifetime; he had seen the whole sequence of events, from pacification through administration to education, and I think the end of the story—the invitation to us to send British lecturers, which we have now done—is not unsatisfactory and is a great tribute to those who went before us.

In Indonesia, which has had no tradition of British administration, I think the thing which impressed me most was something I have already mentioned: the passionate demand for education. I was up in Jogjakarta, in the middle of the country, and had to leave at about three o'clock in the morning to get a plane at Surabaya, and I drove with some Indonesian friends in a car along the country roads. The roads were already full of children streaming along, all in one direction, on foot or on bicycles. I said: "What are they doing so early in the morning?" The reply was: "In this part of the country the demand for education is so great, and our teachers are so few, that we run schools in three shifts: before dawn until ten o'clock; a midday shift, and then a night shift." That was happening all over the highly-populated part of Central Java.

Now those children are aiming at getting up the educational ladder, and when they reach a certain point in it they have to know English. With a population of ninety million that is quite a problem, as English was only taught as a very secondary language before Independence. So there, too, our main job is to try to meet the demands of the Indonesian Government for help in the training of their teachers of English and in providing teachers for their Training Colleges and Universities. There is also an immense demand for books in English, and we are helping to meet that demand.

With regard to the Arab world, we feel that in spite of setbacks and

in spite of provocation our job there is just to keep on keeping on, and concentrate on the underlying current of feeling, which is by no means unfriendly to this country, and not pay too much attention to the surface waves. This means that we have got to have faith that, in the long term, our work is worth while, while recognizing that there is room for differences of opinion on this subject.

I now want to turn from these rambling individual examples of opportunities and the way we try to meet them, and to make a few generalizations about our work in the world as a whole, and especially in Asia.

The basic principle underlying all our work is that we seek a mutual advantage; we do not do any work unless we think it will benefit both the other country and this country. Most of the work is done at the request of the other country, and so, to a large extent, the nature of our work is determined by the demand. In Asia most of our work, therefore, is educational, because that is what we are asked most keenly to do. The reasons why there is such a demand do not need much explanation. The key to higher education is English, and higher education is the key to good jobs—and incidentally, from the national point of view it is also the key to playing a part on the world stage. The demand for English gives us in this country a very strong card, which is not possessed, for instance, by the Russians.

We may fairly ask ourselves, "Since we, as taxpayers, pay so much for the work of the British Council, what does this country gain?" I think it not only gains from the fact that the more people who speak English the easier it is for us to communicate with them, but, more important, the demand for English gives us a natural lead-in to the personal contacts which we seek to promote with leaders of opinion in various walks of life. Our job is not to contact leaders of opinion in commercial, financial or diplomatic circles, but to promote contacts in the extensive range outside the normal political and commercial fields, especially in education and science and the professional fields like law, architecture and engineering, and in the cultural fields. In this role our position is very modest. We are not the experts: we are the middlemen who try to put the experts into touch with each other, and most of our work is therefore done as the middleman. It is only in the specific field of English teaching that we ourselves can have some claim to professional status.

Because all our work is based on the principle that it is to the benefit of the other country as well as ourselves we are on a good wicket. We are not a charity: we do not pretend to be doing anything just for the good of the other country. We are not propagandists, seeking only to serve the interest of this country.

It is also a strength to us that we are independent of the Government and known to be so. One uncommitted country, not long ago, was asked by the British Government if H.M. Mission could open Information Offices in a number of provincial centres in that country. The country

concerned said: "No. If we give this to the British we shall have to give it to other people. But why don't you open British Council Reading Rooms?"

From these basic principles we have evolved three main tasks: first of all to give educational help, especially—but not exclusively—in the teaching of English: partly by teaching English ourselves, by training local teachers of English, by recruiting British teachers to go to overseas universities, schools and training colleges; and partly by looking after the people who come to this country for training and education, which I shall mention in a moment.

Our second main task is to promote personal contacts in the fields with which we are concerned—educational, professional, etc. Above all, by bringing together opposite numbers in the various fields of activity. A lot of this work is done at home, and each year in this country we look after about 7,000 visitors from overseas. They come over here generally at their own expense, or they are sent by their governments, or by United Nations agencies or under the Colombo Plan, for training or to learn how this country operates in the field in which they are interested, and the British Council's job is to advise them on their programmes, give them introductions, and so on. In the outward direction, on a much smaller scale, we send quite a number—several hundreds—of distinguished people overseas every year to make contacts in the opposite direction, so to speak—often on advisory visits.

That is aimed at the people who are already leaders of opinion in their own walks of life, but we have to think also of the future leaders of opinion and that is where our work for students comes in. There are at present in this country 55,000 overseas students—about a quarter at universities and the rest at technical colleges, in industry, Inns of Court, hospitals and so on. That we believe to be about equal to the number in the United States, and a good many more than any other country in the world imports in the way of students. So this country can take pride in the immense job it is doing in helping with the education, especially the technical education, of the underdeveloped countries—because most of these students come from the underdeveloped countries and most of them are taking scientific or technical subjects. The British Council's role is again a modest one, but a necessary one: to meet them on arrival and help them to find accommodation, which is often a difficulty. We have a register of lodgings in London numbering some 7,000 inspected lodgings. We aim above all at putting the students into touch with British people who are willing to offer hospitality, and one of the most encouraging things about our work is the immense amount of British hospitality on offer for this purpose.

Our third main task is in connection with the printed word. We run about 130 Council libraries overseas. We have made the quite interesting experiment recently in these libraries, trying it out first in India and Pakistan, of keeping not one copy, but sometimes as many as 100 copies of an expensive British textbook on engineering, or medicine, or law—the kind of book which students want and cannot afford to buy—and it is proving a great success.

We have also been concerned in advising on the subsidized books that the British Government are providing in India and Pakistan, and again most of the subsidy is going—quite rightly, in our opinion—into reducing the cost of British textbooks so that students are able to buy them. There we are up against great competition from the Russians and Chinese, who for years have been pouring into India, Pakistan and other countries immense numbers of books—some propaganda, some not—in English, and that is a challenge which we can never meet on the same scale as the Russians and Chinese because they spend enormous sums on this. The British Government is concentrating mainly on serious textbooks, which the young people need for their education.

Another important part of the British Council's work under the heading of the printed word is book exhibitions, which we hold in many countries every year and in many subjects. We also make fairly extensive book presentations to university libraries all over the world, and also present learned periodicals which they would not otherwise be able to obtain.

I have not said anything about the scale of our operation, and I cannot attempt to do any more than outline it very briefly. I suppose on the three tasks I have just mentioned we spend about ninety per cent. of our resources—and our resources total now over £7 million a year as compared with less than £3 million a year a few years ago. So I don't think we need doubt whether we have adequate support from H.M. Government. Four-fifths of our resources go to the underdeveloped countries, and a greater part of that to Asia.

Finally, I should like to quote a passage from a book recently published by the former head of Chatham House, now a Member of Parliament and a Junior Minister, Mr. C. M. Woodhouse. His book, *British Foreign Policy since the Second World War*,* is an extremely solid and valuable summary of the subject and, rather surprisingly, at the end he makes the following statement of opinion. He says that fifteen years after the war he had come to the conclusion that the following were "the two most important tasks of British policy in the long run. One was to remain a great commercial power; for a strong and favourable balance of payments was recognized as the one indispensable condition of prosperity at home, as well as of the capacity to promote prosperity abroad in underdeveloped areas. The other was to maintain the English language, with the cultural tradition and educational system that flowed from it, in its place as the first in the world. This was not a foregone conclusion, though its chances were good, English having already outstripped Spanish and French as a world-language, and not yet been rivalled by Russian or Chinese. Compared with these challenges to Britain's leadership, problems of defence and colonial rule, though still inescapable, were mercifully becoming secondary."†

In the accomplishment of the second of these two tasks the British Council is the main British agency (and I hope that we are succeeding in making a very modest long-term contribution to the other main task,

* London, Hutchinson, 1961.

† *Op. cit.*, p. 245.

commercial prosperity). In addition, we can justifiably feel that we contribute to the educational, and therefore the economic, development of the countries of Asia, the countries which ask for our help and which receive it in the form in which they want it.

I noticed that in a recent series of articles in *The Times*, on seeing ourselves as others see us, an African writer picked out as a main characteristic of the British, "adaptability." The biologists tell us that adaptability is the main quality needed for survival, so I hope the African will prove to be right. And if I may return in this last minute to Meshed, where I started, I think the Council's position there is an example of British adaptability and I hope and think that what we are doing there would be approved, if they could return to see it—though perhaps approved with a rather wry smile—by those who represented this country there in earlier days and in very different circumstances.

REPORT OF DISCUSSION

On the question of the expense of large-scale production of English-language books for Asian students a member recalled having been told that the American answer to Russian and Chinese competition was the use of microfilm. If a microfilm of a text were made copies could apparently be reproduced very cheaply and he wondered if the technique were being used in this country. The lecturer said he had no information on the point. Another member commented that the production of readable books from microfilm was an expensive matter in this country, as he supposed it would also be in Asia. It was a convenient way of sending books into a country, since a very long book could be contained in a tiny spool of film, but reading it—except by a microfilm reader, which could only be used by one or two people at a time—was another matter. It was doubtful if the process had any practical application as yet. The lecturer said the British Council would look into the matter.

A member then asked whether the British Council dealt only with textbooks, to which the lecturer replied that this was by no means the case. British Council libraries varied according to the country they were in, but in general an attempt was made to provide something like a reasonably good College library, with the addition of an adequate fiction branch. He added that the low-priced books which the British Government were putting out in consultation with publishers and the British Council had in the first place been textbooks but that a number of general books were now being developed, especially the "Do-It-Yourself" type, which was in great demand.

Pointing out that what had been heard was an account of what the British Council were doing to project English, and through English many of our values, the same member asked if the British Council could not join up with those who were working in the other direction—that is to say, studying Asia. He was thinking of bodies like the School of Oriental Studies in London and similar bodies in Oxford and Cambridge, who according to the Hayter Report would be largely responsible for making the people of Asia feel that we were interested in them and in their cultures as well as wishing to project our own culture and our own language. The

lecturer replied that the British Council was much concerned with the point in question. They had been consulted by the Foreign Office before the Hayter Committee was set up, and had made various suggestions about increasing the number of young men at universities who take oriental languages or the history of Asian countries and who study the institutions of Asia. It was a difficult problem, which he hoped the Hayter Report would be able to solve. The British Council was trying to do so in a small way by paying more attention, in the training of its recruits, to the learning of oriental languages. This autumn it was for the first time sending a young man to Lahore who spoke Urdu. In recognizing the importance of this question the British Council also recognized the importance of the work of Societies such as the Royal Central Asian Society, which stimulated interest in other countries. Apart from the value and interest of the work itself it was psychologically a good thing that we in this country should show interest in other countries as well as expecting them to show interest in this country.

Asked if a more co-operative attitude by the Press towards the British Council would not be of value the lecturer replied that newspapers varied in their attitudes; some were more co-operative than others.

To a member who enquired how much co-operation was possible between the British Council and the Americans in counteracting Communist propaganda the lecturer answered that there was some embarrassment, because the Americans did not distinguish between political information work on the one hand and educational, scientific and cultural work on the other. The United States Information Agency was responsible for both, and its libraries had anti-Communist literature as well as other books. We in this country had followed the French tradition of separating the two but had taken it even further than the French because the British Council was not part of the Foreign Service but was independent. In the British Council's proper field, which was educational, there was close co-operation. Biennial conferences were now being held with the Americans on the teaching of English overseas, information was freely exchanged and resources on matters of research into methods of teaching and materials were being pooled. The amount of English teaching being done by the Americans overseas, however, was not in proportion to their resources; this was because they had nothing corresponding to the British Council service overseas. Americans were as a rule sent out for short periods only.

Asked whether the U.S. Information Agency was handicapped by being part of the Government Service, and whether the independence of the British Council was in fact believed in, the lecturer said he thought the main handicap of the Americans was not the fact that the United States Information Agency was part of the Government service but that it covered political propaganda as well as educational work. The independence of the British Council from H.M. Government was certainly recognized in some countries, had been of value and was expected to go on being of value.

A member then enquired whether the British Council had been able to make any progress in, or had any plans for, projecting British culture

or the English language towards the Asian peoples of the Soviet Union. At present their only facility for learning English was through the medium of Russian, which they did not necessarily want. In reply the lecturer spoke of an arrangement whereby teachers of English from the Soviet Union came to this country and British teachers of Russian were sent to the U.S.S.R. Some of the former came from the Asian part of the Soviet Union but he had met none who were not also Russian speakers. He thought there would be no opportunity whatever to have direct dealings with a constituent republic of the Soviet Union but he was interested to hear of the wish to learn English direct.

Mentioning that he had a friend who in spite of difficulties had long been a subscriber to the Dickens Fellowship, another member asked if the British Council were doing anything behind the Bamboo Curtain. The lecturer answered that nothing was being done, because there was no possibility of doing anything there at present.

