Kenneth Gardner (1924–95): Librarian and Bibliographer

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Kenneth Gardner with his magnum opus

INTRODUCTION

Kenneth B Gardner was an authority in the field of Japanese antiquarian books and, from 1957 until his retirement in 1986, a distinguished librarian in two world-renowned institutions: the British Museum and the British Library. During those years of service in senior posts as Keeper, Principal Keeper and Deputy Keeper he brought total commitment to his departments and an international reputation for scholarship to his specialism of Japanese rare books. The latter culminated in the publication in 1994 (imprint 1993) of Descriptive Catalogue of Japanese Books in the British Library Printed before 1700. For this monumental work, he was awarded the prestigious Yamagata Bantō Prize from the Osaka Prefectural Government in February 1995. The award, worth three million yen (some £20,000 then) was established in 1982 to honour foreign authors on aspects of Japan. Earlier in 1979, he received the Order of the Sacred Treasure, third order of merit, from the Emperor
of Japan for his contributions to promoting Japanese culture and Anglo-Japanese relations.

Born on 5 June 1924 in Wood Green, North London, he moved to Hertfordshire in 1932 where he remained all his life. His father was a schoolmaster for whom the phrase ‘muscular Christianity’ might have been coined. He kept a small holding where Ken had to do the milking before he went to school. In his mid-fifties, the father became a full-time farmer in west Wales. After attending Alleyne’s Grammar School in Stevenage, Ken went on to University College London to read French and History. While he was in his first year there the war broke out and he was evacuated to Bangor, north Wales, from where he was called up to join the army.

TRANSLATORS V

Ken was among those select youth whose aptitude in languages was utilized by military intelligence, the experience of which was often to shape their respective future careers. It was in the spring of 1943 that a motley mob of nine teenagers turned up at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) to begin learning Japanese. They were in uniform but, as Ken recalled later, they were just about ‘the scruffiest and most unsoldierly types you can imagine.’ They took the adolescent’s delight in flirting convention, to the extent of singing enemy songs, including the Japanese Roei no uta (露営の歌) while tramping the London streets together.

This group of raw undergraduates was known as Translators V [pictured below], the Fifth Class in SOAS where they underwent intensive training in written Japanese for the purpose of translating captured documents. The teaching of Japanese was still in its infancy and there was serious shortage of both qualified teachers and textbooks.