

In Memoriam: Sir Evelyn Shaw, KCVO, LL.D.

Honorary Fellow of the British School at Rome

Sir Evelyn Shaw, the first Honorary General Secretary of the British School at Rome, died on 23rd January 1974 at the age of 92, twenty-seven years after his retirement.

His connexion with the School began in 1910, when the Commissioners for the Exhibition of 1851, who had just appointed him their secretary, were interesting themselves in the establishment of scholarships in the fine arts, to be run somewhat on the lines of the French Prix de Rome. Soon afterwards in 1911, through the generosity of the Municipality of Rome and the good offices of the British Ambassador, Sir Ronald Rodd (later Lord Rennell of Rodd), the Commissioners received an offer, for the purpose of a British 'cultural' institution, of the site of the British Fine Arts Pavilion at the International Exhibition then being held in Rome; and, largely owing to the vision and initiative of the second Viscount Esher, who was Chairman of the Commissioners' Board of Management, and of their young secretary, they accepted the offer in order to develop the site for what is now the British School at Rome.

Although Lord Esher's enthusiasm stimulated the Commissioners to action, it was left to Evelyn Shaw, then still less than thirty years old, to give shape to their ideas. Not only was he required to draw up in detail a scheme of Rome Scholarships in the Fine Arts, but also to negotiate the incorporation in the proposed new institution of the British School (or Archaeology, History and Letters) already established in the Odescalchi Palace. This body had already agreed, before the Commissioners received the offer of a site for a new building, to assist the proposed Rome Scholars in the Fine Arts in finding accommodation and in other practical ways, but they naturally needed to be convinced of becoming one Faculty in a new and enlarged academy with interests extending to architecture and the fine arts. To these difficult and delicate tasks Evelyn Shaw brought all his genius for diplomacy and organization, with the result that as early as June 1912 the concept was realized by the grant of a Royal Charter and building work (an added responsibility for Evelyn Shaw) was begun on the site.

As Secretary to the 1851 Commissioners, who provided financial backing for the new venture, Evelyn Shaw was without doubt the key figure in the School's development. His relationship to his Chairman, Lord Esher, was akin to that of a Permanent Secretary to an energetic but wayward Minister, and when Lord Esher died in 1930, it was Evelyn Shaw who retained for the School the interest and support of the Commissioners. The title of Honorary General Secretary was given to him in 1912 in recognition of the vital role assigned to him from the start, and that the School has flourished and grown for over sixty years, despite the upsets of two major wars and the difficult period of Fascist rule, is proof enough of the solid foundation which he gave it. Moreover under the wise guidance which he provided right up to the time of his retirement the School has suffered many fewer strains and stresses than might have been expected in an undertaking with somewhat diverse interests.

Too much detail is best avoided in a short memoir, but those who knew Evelyn Shaw, and those who have had access to the records of the Commissioners and of the School, cannot but admire the meticulous care with which he carried out his every task. The Commission and the School were fortunate in absorbing the whole interest of a man who would have left his mark on any organization with which he was connected. His work for the Ministry of Munitions in the 1914–18 war (he was unfit for active service) and, in a quite different sphere, as Hon. Treasurer of the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, showed this very clearly. But there was no trace of the dictator in his make-up; he was warmhearted, sympathetic and kind, and to work with him was as pleasant as it was instructive. He liked his contacts with young students, whether with scholars of any Faculty of the School or, in his other capacity, about which much more could be written, with the science scholars of the 1851 Commission; and he made friendships with many which lasted throughout his long life. Being human he had his dislikes and his absolute honesty sometimes made these apparent, but he was never wittingly unfair to anyone. He was always open to argument, but once he had made a decision he was single-minded in carrying it through, whatever the obstacles.

These words may be the commonplaces of memoirs, but here they are no more than the truth. Evelyn Shaw was a remarkable and gifted man, to whom the School must for ever be indebted.

W. D. STURCH

Hon. General Secretary
1947–1970