



## OBITUARY

### Derek Davis (3 May 1945–8 July 2023)

In 2012, some years after retiring from a distinguished career in the Civil Service, Derek Davis brought his vast experience, energy, and outstanding intellectual interests to the Royal Asiatic Society. The RAS pulled together several threads of his life, one spent puzzling over the intricacies of Russian and Indian literature with the same diligence and grip he had brought to Whitehall policy problems. Using the skills he developed and the knowledge he cultivated in both these spheres, Derek served continually, and to great effect, on the Society's Council and its Finance and Investment Committee, advising on management as well as participating keenly in matters academic. He was also a generous and imaginative benefactor, and a driving force behind the successful establishment of the annual Professor Sir Christopher Bayly Prize, awarded for an outstanding doctoral thesis completed at an institution within Great Britain and Ireland.

As a scholar, he contributed 'Premchand plays chess' to the *Journal* in 2015 (vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 269–300). Later, as part of the Society's bicentenary celebrations, his translation, with commentary, of 'A journey to Arzrum during the 1829 campaign by A. S. Pushkin' was published as a special stand-alone *Supplement* in 2022 (*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* vol. 32).

The first of these essays contextualised and compared Urdu and Hindi versions of Premchand's 1924 short story 'The chess players'. Derek's close examination of the two texts illuminated the challenges Premchand grappled with as he moved from his Persian/Urdu literary home base to the world of modern Hindi that he did so much to create in the early twentieth century.

The second was Derek's sensitive new and complete translation into English of Pushkin's famous account of his visit to army friends and political dissidents as they moved to roll back Ottoman influence in Central Asia and inaugurate a period of Russian dominance in the Middle East. The text is accompanied by 45 pages of supporting material and over 500 footnotes which explain the complexities and political context of Pushkin's elegant, innovative, and skilfully drafted Russian account of his visit. 'A journey' was close to two centuries old by the time Derek published his translation; he had spent 60 of those years studying the text to decrypt its numerous layers of meaning—a periodic exercise in patience, reasoning, and painstaking care that reflected his commitment to completing any job he undertook to the highest standard.

Derek was educated at Clifton College, a school renowned for its excellence in classical and modern language teaching, and at Balliol College, Oxford, where he read Greats. Before going up to Oxford, however, he spent 1962–1963 as an assistant master at the Scindia School in Gwalior in India. He relished the experience and all that India had to offer. For recreation he read Russian, begun at school, and became enthralled by Pushkin. During the Oxford long vacation of 1965, he embarked on an overland trek to India and back with his Balliol friend, Christopher Bayly. An unexpected consequence

was that the latter changed his proposed research subject from Russian and Eastern European history to work instead (with Professor Sarvepalli Gopal) on South Asia.

Over the years, the RAS has drawn on the intellectual activity of amateur as well as professional scholars. In the days of empire, the scholarly mandarin was a mainstay of the Society; that is now part of the Society's heritage. However, it continues to appreciate the generosity of support and the intellectual accomplishments of those, like Derek Davis, who have not pursued a formal academic career. Although Derek's cruel and untimely death has robbed the Society of a valued Fellow, his example will continue to inspire others in the years to come.