

OBITUARY

FRANCIS HERBERT CULVERHOUSE BUTLER

(1894-1970)

FRANCIS BUTLER, Foundation Secretary of the British Society for the History of Science, died at his home in Kent on 14 November 1970 after a very long illness.

Francis Herbert Culverhouse Butler, son of Herbert William Butler, was born at Oswestry, Salop, on 10 July 1894. In 1897 the family moved to Winchester, where Francis was later educated at Peter Symonds' School. In 1913 he entered Selwyn College, Cambridge, and read for the Natural Sciences Tripos. He was then already commissioned in the 4th (Territorial) Battalion of the Hampshire Regiment, with which he served throughout the war in the Middle East—including the relief of Kut. He ended as a captain, and was twice mentioned in dispatches. On demobilization he transferred to St. John's College, completed Part II of the Tripos, graduated B.A. (Cantab.) in 1921, and later became M.A.

After a year's research at Cambridge, and three years teaching science at King Alfred's College, Winchester, Butler became a science master at Dulwich College in 1925. In that year he married Eleanor Madeleine Beck, and they had a son and a daughter. While at Dulwich he studied at University College London, and graduated M.Sc. in the History and Philosophy of Science. In 1929 he was appointed as an L.C.C. Inspector of Schools, and was soon posted to the Lewisham area. In 1932 he built a house, "Ravensmead", at Keston in Kent—later well known by name to members of the Society.

In an air-raid over Keston in 1941 Butler was badly wounded in the right arm, and the L.C.C. soon transferred him for duty in East Anglia. The Butlers lived near Cambridge, and it was now that he started his real life's work. Within two years he had founded the Field Studies Council and he was secretary of the History of Science Lectures Committee at Cambridge.

At Cambridge Butler had been associated with several persons anxious to form a Society for the History of Science. After the Butlers had returned to Ravensmead, he acted as secretary to the provisional committee that, at the foundation meeting on 5 May 1947, recommended the election of Charles Singer as the first President and himself as Honorary Secretary. During the next sixteen years he served continuously as Honorary Secretary, and for two years longer he continued to handle the Society's publications as Honorary Publications Secretary. Thereafter he continued to attend Council Meetings as a Vice-President until 1967.

On Butler's retirement as Honorary Secretary the President

(Mr. Thomas Martin) said that during all the years he had “carried the Society on his back” and its position was “largely due to his tireless efforts”. My own long friendship with him progressively emphasized his sterling qualities. To show briefly what the Society owed to him reference may be made to a few of the many difficulties that beset the Society during its first fifteen years.

The publication of “a journal” was first proposed at the meeting on 5 May 1947. By 1949 the first two numbers of the *Bulletin* had been published, and Butler was responsible for storage and distribution. There followed later the negotiations for the publication of the *Bulletin* as an integral part of *Annals of Science*, and in 1958 the proposal that the Society should start its own journal. In all these negotiations through the years the Council was greatly indebted to Butler for his spade-work and advice. Despite all efforts it was not until June 1962 that the first issue of this journal was published. The Society now had a journal—after fifteen years! Incorporation of the Society was first suggested on 2 November 1952. Even then it was over three years later before the formalities could be completed and the Society was finally incorporated. The formation of a National Committee was first proposed in September 1947. There followed numerous negotiations on the part of Butler and others, the formation by the Royal Society of a National Committee in May 1950, its dissolution and re-establishment in 1961.

During its first five years the registered office of the Society was at Butler’s office in South Kensington, but for the next eleven years it was at “Ravensmead”, where he and Mrs. Butler did all the administrative and clerical work of the Society. A student of typography and a practical printer, from 1953 he printed the notices of the ordinary meetings. Later, with his own power-driven press, he printed large notices with long summaries, and in 1959 there appeared his first notice of several pages, dealing with the Darwin Symposium. The Society’s congratulatory address to the Royal Society on the occasion of its Tercentenary was beautifully printed by him.

Butler, a man of affairs, never published anything, and only once do I remember him having discussed a paper. That was in June 1963, when he gave his experiences of scurvy in the survivors of the besieged force at Kut.

Butler was a highly intelligent, able, and unassuming man. He served continuously as the Society’s Honorary Secretary under the first seven of its Presidents. His minutes were models of their kind. During my own five years in the Presidential Chair he gave me the utmost loyalty and assistance. From the earliest beginnings of the British Society for the History of Science, Butler was indubitably both the midwife who assisted at its birth, and the nurse who enabled it to reach its maturity.

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