Obituary

WILLIAM MAXWELL BICKERTON
1901 - 1966

"Max" Bickerton, who died at Hampstead on November 20th, 1966, represented by his life and work pretty well everything for which our Japan Society stands, plus a scrupulous personal integrity which was all his own.

His connection with Japan began earlier than that of most of us, at the age of 23. Born at Christchurch, New Zealand, he attended, like David Low, the famous cartoonist, the Boys’ High School in that city and, thereafter, Victoria College, Wellington, of the University of New Zealand, from which he graduated in 1923. He went straight into teaching after graduation and it was following a year’s experience in a high school in Maori territories that he came to Japan, where he was appointed to the staff of the Tokyo University of Commerce at Hitotsubashi.

He spent four years (1924-28) at Shodai, and then six at the First High School (1928-34). I was his colleague at the former during his last year there and was a fairly close friend for the rest of his life. I came, then, to know him well both academically and otherwise.

From the outset, he plunged almost completely into Japanese life. He started serious study of the Japanese language on arrival and kept it up until his departure, acquiring a knowledge which was to serve him and others in good stead when, captured in Hong Kong in 1941, he acted as interpreter at the Stanley Internment Camp. Meanwhile, it gave him an intimate understanding of Japanese life and lore. He got out of Japan, then, in knowledge as much as he put into it by straightforward, competent teaching of English. He did not, however, put out as much about it as he might have done, although his study of “Issa’s Life and Poetry” and his translations of the stories of Higuchi Ichiyo and also of some of the proletarian writers of the late twenties are of permanent value.

Essentially, he was a good learner just as he was a good teacher but not given to exploitation of what he learned. And so, until his death, he just went on learning and teaching side by side. After the war, he taught English privately in London for a time and then went to China, where he taught, mostly in Peking schools, until the advent of the communist regime. For the last ten years of his life, he was Lecturer in English at the Holborn College of Commerce of the University of London and during the whole of that time he was following university courses in Japanese and Chinese.

We see, then, a man serving in an unspectacular way the purposes to which our Society is dedicated, the study of Japanese culture including its intimate Chinese associations and the promotion of Anglo-Japanese cultural exchanges. But his service was always subject to the limitations imposed by his scrupulously critical assessment of his capacities and his horror of any form of exploitation, this last the product to some extent of Marxist idealism under the influence of which he came during his stay in Japan. Few scholars are disposed to exploit their fellow men in the accepted economic sense of the word. Max Bickerton went further than that; he was always consciously anxious not to exploit his learning. He felt—mistakenly, I believe—that he had no important contribution to make to oriental studies and that led him to avoid what he regarded as “facile exposition of the second-rate”. His was an exacting scholastic conscience. But it bears the hallmark of an integrity almost frightening to many of us.

VERE REDMAN