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Sir Gerard Clauson

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OBITUARY

SIR GERARD CLAUSON

Sir Gerard Clauson, who died on 1 May 1974, had at the time of his death been a Fellow of this Society for 62 years, a period equalled in this century only by Sir Archibald Creswell. Born in 1891, he joined the Society in 1912 as an undergraduate at Corpus Christi College, Oxford; he was President for the triennium 1958–61; and in 1973 he was awarded the special gold medal commemorating the Society's sesquicentenary.

His exceptional gift for languages won him a series of distinctions in his early years. His first publication, under the name "G. L. M. Clauson, K.S., of Eton College" and dated 6 November 1906, was a short Pali text. He read Greats at Oxford, where he was Boden Sanskrit Scholar in 1911, Hall-Houghton Syriac Prizeman in 1913, and James Mew Arabic Scholar in 1920. But as he himself put it, "the First War and the need to earn a living diverted my interest into other channels"—a distinguished career in the Colonial Office, where he was Assistant Under-Secretary from 1940 until his retirement in 1951. Throughout his Civil Service career, however, he kept up his interest in philology and archaeology, publishing the occasional article and acquiring new languages, among them Russian and Chinese, while he started his first notebook on Japanese the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The list of his publications shows the breadth of his philological studies throughout his life; it shows also how the number of his published papers increased from the 1950's, when retirement afforded him more leisure. In these later years his interests concentrated on the study of Turkish (for which, he wrote, he "first acquired an affection at the age of fifteen") and more particularly on the question of the validity of the Altaic theory, the doctrine that the Turkish, Mongolian, and Tungus languages are genetically related. Hence, although this Society remained as it were his academic base, he found a second and most congenial academic milieu in the annual meetings of the Permanent International Altaistic Conference.

The writer of *The Times* obituary remarked that "he was never a "yes" man, either in official or private life". Nor was he in the academic field, where the starting-point for many of his articles and for his sometimes pungent reviews was an aversion for expressing admiration of the Emperor's new clothes unless he was sure that he could see them. To take a minor illustration: few things gave him greater pleasure than the detection of a ghost-word, particularly when it appeared to be authoritatively attested; while on a broader front it was this scepticism which led him not merely to abstain from accepting the Altaic theory but to seek to refute it.

The year of his birth suggests that he ought to have been rather old-fashioned, and in two respects perhaps he was: he held firmly to the conviction, now outmoded but not yet entirely discredited, that the study of the classics is the foundation of a liberal education; and he exemplified in his career the dying tradition of the amateur scholar or, in other terms, of the scholarly public servant. Otherwise, however, no octogenarian ever belied his years more convincingly. Right up to his death he retained a positively juvenile zest and an iconoclastic wit that made him a lively and stimulating companion. But the characteristic that his friends would particularly wish to record was his great kindness and patience. He gave generously of his time and of his expertise to the affairs of this Society, whose interests he always sought to promote; while at the personal level any postcard addressed to him with a lexical query would receive, usually by return of post, a detailed and authoritative answer in his distinctive and near-calligraphic hand, a hand so neat and clear that his monumental *Etymological dictionary*, the culmination of a lifetime's study, was set up in type direct from his manuscript.

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In the Foreword to his *Turkish and Mongolian studies* (No. 24), Clauson speaks of his first plan "to compile a new and better 'Radloff'", i.e. a historical dictionary of all the Turkish languages from the earliest times to the present day. Realizing after six years' work, when he had completed the words beginning with vowels and about half of those beginning with *c-/ç-*, that he might never manage to complete it, he began again "on a much more modest scale" to compile the *Etymological dictionary* (No. 46), with its terminus in the thirteenth century, which was published two years before his death. Clauson was conscious of the deficiencies of his "new Radloff"; yet it would have been too cavalier to destroy the product of so much meticulous labour. Through the kindness of Lady Clauson, therefore, the draft—3,900 closely-written pages in 15 loose-leaf books—has been lodged in the Society's library. Sir Gerard would not object to our borrowing in this connexion the words of Sir James Redhouse, that other distinguished lexicographer of Turkish closely connected with the Royal Asiatic Society, who deposited his uncompleted *Thesaurus* in the British Museum "partly as an inducement to do better, and partly as a warning against attempting too much".

As a result of the lively correspondence which he maintained with Turcologists and other scholars in all parts of the world, Sir Gerard had accumulated a very extensive collection of offprints of articles and reviews, which is particularly rich in the publications, sometimes difficult of access, of the USSR. These too Lady Clauson has generously presented to the Society, where they are available to readers, in a series of box-files, as "the Clauson offprints".

V. L. MÉNAGE.