

OBITUARY

SUSAN SKILLITER

The death of Dr. Susan Skilliter on 16th September 1985 at the age of 54 will impoverish the Society. She was a steadfast supporter and served it diligently as a Council member from 1968 to 1970, as Honorary Secretary from 1970 to 1977, and again as a Council member from 1977 to 1981 and 1983 to 1985. She cared for its independence and for its services to learning, just as she cared for its integrity. She was delighted as well as proud when she was unanimously elected a Vice-President in May 1985. The honour has proved to be a valedictory mark of respect.

Susan joined the staff of the University Library, Cambridge, after leaving school, and interrupted her career there to take a degree in Arabic and Persian. In the Library she found a set of unpublished Turkish documents which she deciphered so perceptively that Professor Wittek insisted that she should become his student. In 1962 she was urged to apply for the lectureship in Turkish at Manchester University. Professor Beckingham has recounted how monosyllabic were her answers to the questions of the appointing committee until the Chairman asked whether she had any questions to ask them. She had one. Were they sure that there was nobody better qualified who could fill the post? She achieved her doctorate while teaching at Manchester.

From Manchester Susan returned to Cambridge as University lecturer in Turkish in 1964, and the publication of her researches began. Her book on Harborne, the first English ambassador to the Porte, was a masterpiece of detailed accuracy laced with insight and humour. In revealing that Queen Elizabeth I's representative was something of a rogue, she equally lit up the quirks and comedy of Ottoman life. The book, like everything that she wrote, was full of helpful information for all who browsed: thus the limitless use of lead on the roofs of mosques in the 1570s can now be related to the glut of lead caused by illicit English exports on the Turkish market. For humour, her account of the attempt by their mother to have her daughters rescued from the court of Catherine de Medici where they were ladies-in-waiting has nothing to compare. But that paper, too, is full of information that makes the Ottoman government more and more credible. Thus her occasional papers and lectures were as invaluable as her major work. It is all the more depressing that she was not to finish her work in progress, let alone many other unimagined books to come.

Dr. Skilliter worked for her students, lived for her friends who were also her students, and created a remarkable Turkish library. This she has left to Newnham College of which she was a distinguished Fellow in the hope that, whatever cuts the University may impose, Turkish will somehow survive at

Cambridge. It was there that she had her great triumph when she organized the symposium on Ottoman and Pre-Ottoman studies in the spring of 1984, gathering on the lawns of her college as distinguished a body of scholars of Turkish culture as was possible.

Her private life and her sense of fun have no place here or anywhere any more. Her work is a sufficient monument.

GODFREY GOODWIN