

Obituary

OTTO BERKELBACH VAN DER SPRENKEL



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OTTO PIERRE NICHOLAS BERKELBACH VAN DER SPRENKEL, Foundation Fellow of the Academy, died on 24 April 1978.

A man of wide learning, keen perception and great wit, and an outstanding teacher and lecturer, Otto will be fondly remembered by all those who had the privilege of being associated with him.

His life and career were marked by change: the ease and competence he always showed in handling subjects as diverse as American history, French literature, Chinese Taoism and the New Theology, not to speak of music and stamp collecting, reflect the unusually broad spectrum of his experience.

Born in 1906 in Bossum, Holland, of Dutch parents, Otto was brought up in England where he completed his formal education at the London School of Economics. He graduated in 1929 with first class honours and was the first holder of the prestigious Graham Wallis Prize. Keenly aware of social and political issues from an early age, he had joined, while still an undergraduate, the 'nursery' of the Fabian Society which then, under the inspiration of Sydney and Beatrice Webb, Bernard Shaw and other leading intellectuals dominated the thinking of the left. He was one of the most active and brilliant members of this group.

From 1931 to 1933 he lectured in Political Science at the University of Toronto and spent some time in the United States before returning to England in 1934. In the following years he was occupied chiefly with the Workers' Educational Association, lecturing all over the country on international affairs. It was as a result of his teaching activity in this period, and possibly also under the influence of R. H. Tawney (with H. Laski and G. D. H. Cole, one of the leading figures in the WEA) that Otto became interested in China. However, with the outbreak of the war he was recruited as a lecturer in the educational programme for the forces and it was not until 1943 that he could pursue his sinological interest by enrolling as a student of Chinese in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Before long he was invited to lecture in Far Eastern History at the School. With his feet solidly implanted in the Western tradition and, particularly, in social and economic history and political philosophy, Otto began probing the *terra semi-incognita* of Chinese institutions of the pre-Modern period. A unique opportunity to become closely acquainted with China came in 1947, when he was appointed, through the British Council, a visiting professor at Nankai University in Tientsin, then one of the leading Chinese universities. He remained there until after the Communist victory. On his return to England he published, in 1950, *New China. Three Views*, with Michael Lindsay (now Lord Lindsay of Birker) and Robert Guillaín. In 1951 he joined the staff of SOAS and was sent by the School on an

extensive lecture tour of the United States, thus becoming one of the first visitors to that country who had first-hand experience of China under the new regime.

With the rich source material that he had collected in China, Otto began to carry out an in-depth investigation of Chinese society, focusing his research on the Ming dynasty, an interesting and then almost totally neglected field, which gave him ample scope to study the role played by the gentry and the bureaucracy. The outcome of his research was a series of outstanding articles (mostly published in the *Bulletin of the S.O.A.S.*) on the Ming civil service characterized by extreme thoroughness and clarity of exposition—the two hallmarks of all Otto's writings.

Late in 1956 he accepted the post of Senior Lecturer in Asian Civilizations in the then Canberra University College and after the amalgamation with the ANU he was appointed Associate Professor in the same department. His lectures on Chinese history combined wide knowledge and interpretation, and inspired a whole generation of younger Australian scholars who are now carrying on his tradition in various universities. In 1960, he was elected a member of the Australian Humanities Research Council.

Otto never lost his keen interest in Chinese history and philosophy, but over the years he moved gradually into two new disciplines through which he could put to the best use his critical acumen and vast store of information: these were historiography and bibliography. The essays he wrote on Chinese historiography are, perhaps, among his most perceptive writings. One should mention in particular the one on Confucius, first presented as a lecture at a symposium in Asian Studies at the University of Melbourne (May 1974) organized as part of the Annual Meeting of the Academy.

One offshoot of his historiographic interest was the contribution he made, from 1964 onwards, to the understanding of the New Testament. This mainly took the form of lectures and papers delivered to the Canberra Society of Friends (of which he was an active member) and special study groups on topics like 'Form Criticism', 'Demythologizing', 'New Reformation in Theology' and 'Hermeneutics'. In his stimulating papers and talks Otto always made it a point to compare and contrast East and West in their respective approaches to religion, man and human values.

It is, however, in the field of bibliography that Otto has made his main contribution to scholarship. The start of what was to become a major bibliographical enterprise was Otto's not infrequent discovery, in the course of his work, of important sinological contributions buried in lesser known and now extinct journals. This prompted him, in the early 1960s, to begin a one-man rescue operation which soon turned into a full-fledged project aiming at a critical review of published material on China in several languages from the first contact with the West to 1965. The project received from 1966 the financial support of the ARGC. Otto devoted himself full-time to it after his retirement from the University in 1971 and, with the essential facilities provided

by the National Library, was able to produce several volumes in manuscript. Although afflicted with a serious illness since 1976, he continued his work until shortly before his death. The bibliography is now being completed along the lines set out by him and, when published, it will be a most fitting monument to a man who, during his lifetime, made his the dictum *Timeo hominem unius libri*.

Otto bore his long last illness cheerfully. He never lost interest in people or events and was always ready to give advice to friends, vet a manuscript or just tell a good story. For him death was merely the end of a conversation. Many of us are forever grateful to him for keeping the conversation going in his inimitable way against such tremendous odds.

I. de Rachewiltz