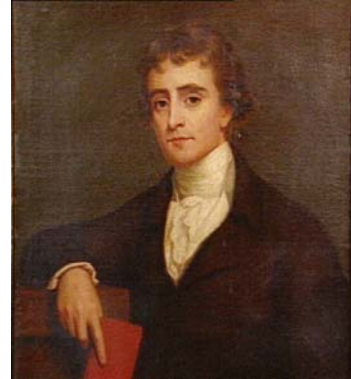


**History** of the Asiatic Society, Asiatic Society Website  
<http://www.indev.nic.in/asiatic/History/index.htm>



**Founder: Sir William Jones (1746-94)**

WHEN THE ASIATIC SOCIETY was founded on 15 January 1784, its begetter Sir William Jones (1746-1794) began his work with nothing but a dream, a dream as baffling and bizarre as the continent of Asia itself. He dreamt of a centre for Asian studies including almost everything concerning man and nature within the geographical limits of the continent - "the history, civil and natural, the antiquities, arts, sciences and literature of Asia". Most of the mysteries of this "Continent of Circe", like its old inscriptions in Brahmi, were still undeciphered, and Comparative Philology as a discipline or science was not yet born.

In those dim hours of the genesis of the Asiatic Society, William Jones for all his efforts could not procure even a slice of land wherein to house his Asian dream. The Society which in no time was to be regarded as the first and best of its kind in the whole world had no permanent address, no fixed place for holding its meetings and, which was most disconcerting, no funds.

Sir William Jones arrived in Calcutta on 25 September 1783 as a Puisne Judge of the Old Supreme Court. While still on board of the frigate *Crococle* carrying him from England to India, he prepared a memorandum detailing his plan of study. This included 'the laws of the Hindus and Mahomedans; the history of the ancient world; proofs and illustrations of scripture; traditions concerning the deluge; modern politics and geography of Hindusthan; Arithmatic and Geometry and mixed sciences of Asiaticks; Medicine, Chemistry, Surgery and Anatomy of the Indians; natural products of India; poetry, rhetoric and morality of Asia; music of the Eastern nations; the best accounts of Tibet and Kashmir; trade, manufactures, agriculture and commerce of India: Mughal constitution, Marhatta constitution etc.'" This memorandum could easily be regarded as an early draft of the memorandum of the Asiatic Society itself. The Society which was still in the embryo of a dream was actually born within four months of Jones's arrival in India.

William Jones was, however, not the earliest among the Orientalists of the East India Company to arrive in India. About a decade earlier came Charles Wilkins (1770), Nathaniel Brassey Halhed (1772) and Jonathan Duncan (1772): Warren Hastings's "bright young men", who had paved the way for the two future institutions- The Asiatic Society and the

College at Fort William. All the Orientalists who became famous in history clustered around either the Society or the College or both. The Society, of course, was the pioneer and first in the field.

While others were thinking in terms of individual study and research, Sir William Jones was the first man to think in terms of a permanent organisation for Oriental studies and researches on a grand scale in this country. He took the initiative and in January 1784 sent out a circular letter to selected persons of the elite with a view to establishing a Society for this purpose. In response to his letter, thirty European gentlemen of Calcutta including Mr. Justice Hyde, John Carnac, Henry Vansittart, John Shore, Charles Wilkins, Francis Gladwin, Jonathan Duncan and others gathered on 15 January 1784 in the Grand Jury Room of the old Supreme Court of Calcutta. The Chief Justice Sir Robert Chambers presided at the first meeting and Jones delivered his first discourse in which he put forward his plans for the Society.

Asia, he said, was the "nurse of sciences" and the "inventress of delightful and useful arts." He proposed to found a Society under the name of **The Asiatic Society**. The name went through a number of changes like **The Asiatic Society (1784-1825)**, **The Asiatic Society (1825-1832)**, **The Asiatic Society of Bengal (1832-1935)**, **The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal (1936-1951)** and **The Asiatic Society** again since July 1951.

In the first meeting, the Governor-General, Warren Hastings was elected Patron and Sir William Jones the President. The Memorandum of Articles of Society read as follows: "**The bounds of its investigations will be the geographical limits of Asia, and within these limits its enquiries will be extended to whatever is performed by MAN or produced by NATURE.**" Later, in his famous Third Annual Discourse, Jones emphasised the superiority of Sanskrit as a language: "**The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure, more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin and more exquisitely refined than either.**"

The pioneering activity of the Society was praised abroad and even compared with that of the Italian Humanists of the *quattrocento*. But the first two decades of the Society's existence remained precarious. The original plan of holding meetings every week had to be discarded, and even monthly meetings were not possible. When William Jones died in 1794, the Society was just an orphan of ten, having no roof overhead and no assured funds to defray normal running expenses, not to speak of having in its proud possession, as it has today, an invaluable Asokan rock edict or precious old coins. There was hardly any hint at that time that Jones's dream of a world centre of Oriental studies in Calcutta was going to survive.

### **Building**

In 1805 the Government gifted to the Society a plot of land at the corner of Park Street and Chowringhee, the present site of the Asiatic Society, to which was added later, in 1849, a small portion on the western side. The construction of the Society's own building on the plot was completed in 1808, and the books, papers and records that had accumulated over the years could get a permanent shelter. Years rolled on, and with the expansion of the activities of the Society the problem of accommodation was acutely felt. But no solution was forthcoming till after India's Independence. As late as 1961, thanks to the generous helps of the Government of India and the Government of West Bengal, the construction of a new building was started in the premises of the Society to solve the problem of space, and the new four-storeyed building was formally opened by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the then President of India, on 22 February 1965.

### **Membership**

Membership of the Society for many years remained exclusively European, and only in January 1829, on the suggestion of Dr. Horace Hayman Wilson, Indian members were for the

first time admitted to the Society. The earliest Indian members of the Society were Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Dwarkanath Tagore, Russamay Dutt and Ram Camul Sen. It was not until December 1832 that Radhakanta Deb was invited to become a member.

### **Organisation**

In the beginning, the Society was very loosely organised and had no real Executive Body. It had only two important functionaries: a President who conducted meetings, and a Secretary who kept the minutes. After Jones's death the interest of the members declined considerably and in 1800 a resolution had to be passed urging members to attend meetings more regularly. Financial conditions were so bad, and there were so many defaulters among the members, that the first Treasurer of the Society, Henry Trail resigned in desperation in 1799. After the turn of the century things began to look up.

The vacuum created by the death of Jones led to the institutionalisation of the Society more rapidly. Regular admission and membership fees, and annual election of a Treasurer and two Vice-Presidents were introduced, and a proposal for the construction of Society's own building was made on 29 September 1796 to Sir John Shore, President of the Society, who was also the Governor-General. The next Governor-General, Lord Wellesley took steps to coordinate between the works of the Society and those of the College at Fort William, and on 2 April 1800 John Gilchrist, Professor at the College of Fort William, was made Secretary of the Society. As the Society began to function more institutionally, the post of Secretary assumed new importance, second to that of the President. After Gilchrist, the two illustrious Secretaries were H. H. Wilson and James Prinsep. Gilchrist moved energetically in the matter of the construction of building for the Society and in 1808 when at last the Society had its own building, the Asiatic Society became the first fully equipped, established institution in the world for Asian studies.

### **Asiatic Society and Fort William College**

Meanwhile, the collaboration between the Society and the Fort William College increased, and this collaboration was symbolised in 1807 when Henry Colebrooke became the President of the College Council as well as the President of the Asiatic Society. Already in 1805 the Secretary of the Society, William Hunter had been made the Secretary of the College. In 1808 Colebrooke as President of the College transferred a section of the Fort William College Library to the Society.

The publication of the [\*Asiatick Researches\*](#) became assured when Hunter's Hindoostan Press took up its printing responsibility. Ram Comal Sen, the 'native' manager of Hunter's Press, later on became the 'native' Secretary of the Asiatic Society itself. In 1846, two years after Ram comal Sen's death, Rajendralala Mitra, then a young man, joined the Asiatic Society as its Assistant Librarian. The Indian Renaissance was made possible and in fact was accelerated by the quiet but far-reaching work going on at the corner of Park Street despite all odds and adverse circumstances.

In 1808 two Committees were formed, the **Physical Committee** and the **Library Committee**, the former for the promotion of Natural History, Medicine, Physics etc. and the latter for that of Literature, Philosophy, History, Antiquities etc. William Carey, J. Leyden, A. Lockett and W. Hunter were included in both the Committees. Both these Committees went moribund in no time and the Physical Committee had to be revived in 1818 by a resolution. A new chapter of the Society opened when in 1829 its membership was made open to native Indians. Ram comal Sen, one of the earliest Indian members of the Society and a close friend of Wilson, the then Secretary, recalled his twenty nine years with the Society when he accepted the post of native Secretary, and Wilson appointed Ram comal to his new post only seven days before the Special Meeting of the Society in which he announced his departure for England. At this Special Meeting held on 19 December 1833 the President of the Society, Sir Edward Ryan spoke highly of the services rendered by Wilson to the Society.

In 1837, only four years after Wilson's departure, James Prinsep, the new Secretary of the Society, deciphered the Brahmi Script and was able to read the Asokan Edicts. It was a world event that revolutionised all future Oriental studies and contributed to the growth of Comparative Philology.

The Transactions of the Asiatic Society were first published under the title of *Asiatick Researches* in 1788, the subsequent four volumes being published in 1790, 1793, 1795 and 1797 respectively. At first the publication was private, undertaken by Manual Cantopher on the condition that each member of the Society would purchase one volume at a price of Rs. 20. Later on, the Society itself undertook the responsibility of the publication. The publication *Asiatick Researches* was so much in demand in the literary and scholarly world that a pirated edition of the first volume came into circulation in England in 1798, and some of the volumes of the *Asiatick Researches* were translated into German as well as in French. Through its published Transactions the Society now came in touch with several distinguished scholarly Associations abroad such as the **American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia**, the **Linnean Society of London**, the **Royal Society of Edinburgh**, and the **Society of Antiquities of England**.

The Society also proved to be a pivotal centre of Oriental studies and research and extended its helping hand to the other two major centres of activity that paved the way to the Indian Renaissance, namely, the College at Fort William and the Serampore Mission of William Carey. In 1805 a proposal came to the Asiatic Society from the Serampore Mission to publish classical Sanskrit works with their English translations, and the first book chosen for this was the Sanskrit epic, **Ramayana**. For this purpose the Society spent from its fund five thousand and five hundred rupees. From 1788 till its cessation in 1839 the journal *Asiatick Researches* ran into twenty volumes and was superseded by the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, henceforth the official organ of the Society. The Society also started in 1905 a new serial entitled the *Memoirs* which was discontinued in 1933. The nucleus of the Society's own library was formed soon after the building was completed in 1808. The Fort William College which was helped a lot academically by the Society, presented books to the Society from its own collection, and another valuable collection of books came from the **Palace Library of Tipu Sultan** in 1808.

The Society also started a public **museum** under its own auspices in 1814 and its first Superintendent was Dr. N. Wallich. Some of the famous contributions of the Asiatic Society during the first thirty years are as follows:

*William Jones's Third Annual Discourse in 1788 on Indo-European Language and Culture;*

*Charles Wilkins's 'A Royal Grant of Land on a Copper Plate' in 1788;*

*S. Davis's 'On Astronomical Calculations of the Hindus' in 1795;*

*H. T. Colebrooke's 'On the Duties of a Faithful Hindu Widow' in 1795;*

*J. Duncan's 'Discovery of Two Urns in the Vicinity of Benares' in 1797;*

*H. T. Colebrooke's 'On the Vedas' in 1805;*

*J. Malcolm's 'Sketch of the Sikhs' in 1810;*

*F. Wilford's 'On the Ancients Geography of India' in 1815 and*

*E. Strachey's 'On Early History of Algebra' in 1816.*

It may be mentioned that two decades before Ram Mohan Roy's first tract on *Sati* it was H. T. Colebrooke who proved from the early texts that the practice of *Sati* was a gross deviation from the authentic tradition. The founding fathers of the Asiatic Society were responsible for the rediscovery of India and her past.

Sir Charles Wilkins (1750-1833) translated the *Bhagavadgita* into English in 1785, deciphered a number of Sanskrit inscriptions published a translation of *Hitopadesa* (1787) and a *Grammar of the Sanskrit Language*. Sir William Jones translated Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* (1789), Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* (1789) and *Manusamhita* (1794), and edited *Ritusamhara*

(1792). Jones also translated a Persian work *Laila Majnu*. The works initiated by Wilkins and Jones were continued by Colebrooke (1765-1837) and Wilson (1784-1860). Colebrooke was the President of the Society from 1806 to 1815 and contributed nineteen papers to the Transactions of the Society. He published an English translation of Jagannath Tarkapanchanan's celebrated work on Hindu law, the *Vivadabhangarnava* under the title *Digest of Hindu Law on Contracts and Successions* (1798). He also published a critical edition of the Sanskrit lexicon *Amarakosha* (1808). Wilson was Secretary to the Asiatic Society from 1811 to 1833 and published Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* (1813) and got the eighteen principal *Puranas* also translated into English. He also published an edition of Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* (1825). Sir John Shore (1751-1834) who succeeded William Jones as President of the Society in 1794, published from a Persian version an abridged English translation of the *Yoga Vasistha* and contributed six papers to the *Asiatick Researches*. Most of the works of the Society are research-based and research-oriented, and have not been loudly spectacular. But its publication, the [Bibliotheca Indica](#), consisting of a series of several hundred Oriental texts in Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Bengali, Tibetan and other Asian languages, both in original and translation, has earned the Society a rare reputation among scholars all over the world. Its Monographs were supplemented by several new series such as Public Lectures, Monthly Bulletins, Seminar Proceedings, Memorial Lectures and Memoirs (1905-33). These are in addition to the Society's Journal, Journal of the Asiatic Society, formerly, *Asiatick Researches* (1788-1849), *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1832-1904), *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society* (1865-1904), *Journal and the Proceedings of the Asiatic Society* (1905-1934), *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1935-1952) and *Journal of the Asiatic Society* (since 1953). A cursory glance at the contents of the [publications of the Asiatic Society](#) will show how great many historical Monographs and Oriental studies, all fruits of original research, were brought out in them. Archaeological and Geological surveys, census reports, treatises on law and revenue systems, all these prepared the solid basis for all future researches on Asia and the Orient.