

TWENTY-SEVENTH CONGREGATION

Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Literature honoris causa

A Citation

Professor William Watson, CBE

Ever since the accidental discovery of the famous Rosetta stone around the turn of the 18th century by a Napoleonic expeditionary force to Egypt, it seemed to have become a time-honoured tradition for archaeologists or would-be archaeologists to march alongside troops, especially in the Near and Middle East. It could not therefore have been entirely accidental that the young Intelligence Officer William Watson should, after six years' of service in places like Egypt and India, find the lure of antiquity irresistible. As a matter of fact, the lifelong scholarly pursuit set off by this potent experience went further afield beyond the Middle East to faraway China and Japan, whence the riches of the art of these two ancient civilisations were brought much closer to the Western world.

Born in 1917 during the First World War, the young William Watson read Modern and Medieval Languages in Gonville and Caius at Cambridge, and upon graduation found himself on the eve of another devastating general war, which was to involve him in military service of the most unusual kind. When peace returned he decided cipher and secret rendezvous was no country for him, and traded it for a more placid existence at that hallowed institution, the British Museum, where as Assistant Keeper for the next two decades he became engaged in deciphering a totally different sort of secret for the benefit of the general public. First with the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities and then the Department of Oriental Antiquities, he was during this period mainly interested in Japanese sculptures and Shang and Chou bronzes of ancient China, on which a number of studies were subsequently published, incorporating much of the new materials just then coming to light and making use of special exhibitions being held in London.

In 1966 he moved a few blocks up Gower Street over to Gordon Square, to take up the Chair of Chinese Art and Archaeology at the School of African and Oriental Studies of London University. He was also invited to head the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, which holds a most magnificent collection of Chinese porcelain, mainly of the Sung period and onwards, that would have been the envy of any curator outside China itself. Naturally his attention and energy increasingly turned towards this particular Oriental art form, and as a result the fame of the Foundation as a centre for Oriental ceramic studies had been steadily on the rise throughout his tenure. He was also active in arranging exhibitions, an outstanding example being the dazzling 1973/74 London

presentation of major new archaeological finds of China, for which he wrote the masterly introduction, The Genius of China. At the same time a steady harvest of scholarly publications was kept up, eventually totalling some ten books and numerous articles on a wide spectrum of Chinese art, including the Cultural Frontiers in Ancient East Asia published in 1971 and the Tang and Liao Ceramics published this year. Thus when Professor Watson retired from his Chair and the Percival David Foundation last year, it must have been with considerable pride and satisfaction that he looked back on those 36 years of solid scholarly achievement, and presumably would not have totally regretted the six years' stint with Intelligence which might have led up to it.

Over the years, it would but be natural that a stream of honours and distinctions should have been attracted to a renowned scholar like Professor Watson. He was awarded the Sir Percy Sykes Memorial Medal in 1973, the Commander of the Order of British Empire in 1982, has been elected Fellow of the British Academy, Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London and Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society, has been made a Trustee of the British Museum since 1980 and was the President of the Oriental Ceramic Society from 1981 to 1984.

Mr. Chancellor, in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the study and exposition of Oriental art, may I request your Excellency to confer on Professor William Watson the Degree of Doctor of Literature honoris causa.

October 18, 1984.