It is fitting that this issue of the British Library Journal devoted to the East Asian collections should open with an appreciation of the late Kenneth Gardner. Prior to his retirement in 1986, Ken had held distinguished posts for thirty-one years in the British Museum and British Library, including the Keepership of the Department of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts (1957–70), the Principal Keepership of Printed Books (1970–4) and a Deputy Keepership of the renamed Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books (1974–86). During those years of service he brought total commitment to his departments and an international reputation for scholarship in his specialism: Japanese historical bibliography.

Kenneth Burslam Gardner was born on 5 June 1924 in Wood Green, north London. His father was a schoolmaster who became a full-time farmer in west Wales in his mid-fifties. After attending Alleyne’s Grammar School in Stevenage, Ken went on to study History and French at University College, London, where he had one year before joining the Army. Like many of his contemporaries, he built his knowledge of Japan on foundations laid during the Second World War. From 1943 to 1944, he was one of a small group of young men known as ‘Translators V’, who did an intensive Fifth Class course in military written Japanese in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. He never discovered, he said, how useful or otherwise had been the captured Japanese documents he had translated and sent back to Britain from South East Asia where he served from 1944 to 1947. But the human encounters with the Japanese he interviewed and helped repatriate set the direction of his career. He readily warmed to the Japanese and soon regarded them as people not enemies. Indeed, his own life was saved by a Japanese lieutenant after he had been wounded in an Indonesian ambush during the reoccupation of Sumatra. On demobilization, he returned to SOAS and in 1949 gained a first class honours degree in Japanese.

Ken Gardner began his career as an Assistant Librarian at SOAS looking after the collection of Japanese books, which had grown from a few hundred volumes to many thousands as a result of the Scarborough Report on oriental studies. After five years there he moved to the British Museum as an Assistant Keeper to take charge of its great riches in antiquarian Japanese books and manuscripts as well as to build a modern collection. Ken was the first formally trained Japanese linguist ever to have been appointed at the
British Museum. Prior to that the Japanese collection had been overseen by Chinese specialists. Henry McAleavy, into whose shoes Ken stepped, was an expert on Chinese Law; and, of course, the very first Keeper of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts who retired in 1907 was the distinguished Sinologist, Sir Robert Kennaway Douglas. It would seem that there was a long gap between Douglas and McAleavy when there was nobody dealing with Japanese, so Ken had a great deal to catch up on. This he did with flying colours. Within two years, he was promoted to the Keepership of the Department while retaining responsibility for the Japanese collection.

The decades before his second promotion in 1970 to the rank of Principal Keeper, in charge of Printed Books in all western languages, were Ken Gardner’s happiest years and his golden age. However, some of the epoch-making books in the history of Japanese printing were acquired between 1974 and 1980, after his return to the Oriental department, enhancing an antiquarian collection already peerless outside Japan. Prominent among these new acquisitions were the earliest specimens of datable printing discovered so far, the ‘One Million Pagoda Dhārani’ or mantras of Empress Shōtoku (AD 764–70) (Or.78.a.11); one of the earliest printed editions of the Lotus Sutra (late twelfth century) (Or.64.b.37); and the earliest book (1400–1500) printed in the mixture of Chinese characters and cursive hiragana syllabary, a script commonly used to write Japanese today (Or.64.b.19). Throughout his career in the Oriental department Ken also worked tirelessly to build relationships with eminent Japanese scholars, librarians and rare book dealers, especially the late Sorimachi Shigeo, to the lasting benefit of the British Museum and then the British Library. For his efforts he was awarded in 1979 the Order of the Sacred Treasure, third order of merit, by the Emperor of Japan.

However, the principal keepership took Ken away from all duties connected with Japan for four years. Coupled with the increased administrative load of a much larger department were the onerous responsibilities that he undertook in helping to plan the new British Library in the aftermath of the Dainton Report. Severance from Japanese books was painful to Ken. Moreover, the fearsome task of presiding over a library in the throes of wholesale reorganization made impossible demands on his health. It was characteristic that he soldiered on uncomplaining and undelegating, until he physically collapsed under the strain.

In 1974, he was able to return to his old department as Deputy Keeper. Though he found solace in his beloved Japanese books and manuscripts, administrative tasks still prevented him from concentrating on his chief scholarly work, the compiling of a catalogue of early Japanese books. This had to wait until after his retirement in 1986.

The mammoth Descriptive Catalogue of Japanese Books in the British Library printed before 1700, published a year before his death, was a crowning achievement. It took him nine years to complete this distillation of his accumulated knowledge of Japanese literature and culture between the covers of a single book. In recognition of this monumental work, he was awarded in February 1995 the prestigious Yamagata prize by the Osaka Prefectural Government.

Outside the British Museum and British Library Ken Gardner was actively involved
in the wider circle of Japanese studies, serving as President and Chairman respectively of the British Association for Japanese Studies and the Japan Library Group. For many years, he was honorary librarian of the Japan Society in London. Here, too, he derived great pleasure from cataloguing the Society library, which contains rare books and papers, in particular ones published in English in the nineteenth century. This catalogue, also, was published shortly before he died.

Despite his legendary perfectionism and disciplined mind, Ken had a zany sense of humour and fun. He was blessed with a fine tenor voice which he exercised in church choirs and, in lighter vein, at regular reunions of Translators V, when he would sing Japanese wartime songs in the vernacular. He loved nature and was a committed Christian. He died at a church meeting on 19 April 1995, aged seventy. In 1949 he married Cleone Adams and she survives him, together with two sons, two daughters, and nine grandchildren.

His many colleagues and friends around the world, not least in Japan, will remember Ken Gardner as an outstanding scholar and librarian and as a man of unfailing courtesy, gentleness and deep humility. Some words by John Donne, the seventeenth century poet and cleric which his eldest son David read at the funeral service well reflect his religious feeling and his attitude to language and translation:

All mankind is of one Author and is in one volume: when one man dies one Chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into better language; and every Chapter must be so translated; God employs several translations: some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation; and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that Library where every book shall lie open to one another.

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