



## Royal Holloway, University of London, and Royal Asiatic Society: TECHNE Collaborative Doctoral Partnership Application

The Department of History at Royal Holloway University of London and The Royal Asiatic Society welcome applications from students for a PhD studentship to be funded (**if the application is successful – the project is through to the second round**) by TECHNE under its Doctoral Training Partnership Scheme, to begin in October 2019. Shortlisted applicants will be interviewed, and one selected to be included in the second-stage TECHNE application process in Spring 2019.

### The Project

***From ‘orientalist’ learned society to a knowledge-exchange forum?: the Royal Asiatic Society, 1823-2023*** will be supervised by Professor Sarah Ansari, in collaboration with Dr Alison Ohta, Director of the Royal Asiatic Society.

2023 will mark the 200th anniversary of the founding of the RAS, which was formed in London in 1823 by East India Company bureaucrat and Sanskrit scholar, Henry Thomas Colebrooke, as the British counterpart of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta. Within a year the RAS had received its Royal Charter from King George IV, tasked to investigate “subjects connected with and for the encouragement of science, literature and the arts in relation to Asia”. Its Journal made its appearance a decade later, the first volume published in 1834. RAS membership was one of four qualifications for membership of the Oriental Club established in 1824, while RAS meetings - at which fellows read papers - witnessed the production and sharing of state-of-the-art information regarding these distant places, their past and their present. Over the following decades, fellows chose to donate their papers, artwork and other forms of material culture to the RAS, in effect turning it into a key repository of Asian ‘knowledge’. Many distinguished scholars (mostly men, though there have been high-profile individual women associated with the RAS such as Freya Stark and Gertrude Bell) have been RAS Fellows, including Richard Burton (1821-90), noted explorer and translator of *One Thousand and One Nights* and the *Kama Sutra*; Aurel Stein (1862-1943), renowned archaeologist of the ‘Silk Road’, and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), leading Bengali writer and 1913 recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature. In many ways, the RAS might be viewed as a classic ‘orientalist’ initiative, emerging at precisely the moment when Britain was expanding its power across the world, in particular in Asia.

The RAS’s ‘orientalist’ foundations, and the 21st-century legacies of its origins and subsequent evolution, raise very timely questions. What can the specific history of one of the earliest British examples of a ‘corporate’ institution “dealing with the Orient” tell us about what ‘orientalism’ meant in practice during the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, and how far—if at all—is it possible to loosen this problematic label from its historical moorings and the broader political environment within which it operated? Over time, the expansion and decline of British imperial ambition arguably

reconfigured the RAS into a 'forum' where 'West' could meet 'East', and today as a charity the RAS now focuses on delivering public benefit objectives through the exchange of scholarly knowledge. This historical trajectory demands fresh thinking about how, why and to what extent the RAS has evolved since its establishment, how to understand the significance attached to the collection of knowledge, particularly in the political context of empire, decolonisation and the Cold War, the impact of change on the composition of the RAS fellowship, and its changing relationship with 'sister organisations' in different Asian countries that today have very different political/power relationships with Britain.

Accordingly, this CDA project will address three aspects of the RAS's evolution as a case study of 'corporate orientalism', directly shaped both by the direct political impact of Empire and by 'softer' forms of cultural imperialism for around 200 years. First, it will study the RAS's complex relationship with and response to Britain's shifting place in the world: over the course of two centuries, Britain's global position altered hugely, and so how, if at all, has the RAS accommodated these political shifts, particularly since its mission was to communicate knowledge about the 'East' when knowledge itself played a part in British global dominance? Second, it will explore the RAS's relationship with wider British society and how this may have been affected by Britain becoming increasingly diverse particularly from the second half of the 20th century: as a (self-appointed) 'learned society' speaking to and for particular sectional interests, to what extent, if at all, did the RAS adapt to, anticipate, and perhaps resist the fluctuating political landscape and dominant views operating within it? Third, it will consider the RAS from the perspective of class, gendered and 'racialised' space: how did its membership shift from aristocratic 'gentleman-scholars' to professional academics, where did women fit into what was undoubtedly for much of the RAS's history 'male space' (as yet, there has still never been a female President of the Society), and likewise how did people of Asian heritage such as Tagore (mentioned above) rationalise their involvement?

These are all questions that in today's Britain need to be asked, and asked transparently. Hence, at the heart of this CDA project lies a public exhibition scheduled to take place during the third year of the PhD, which will mark the RAS's 200th anniversary by introducing the activities of the organisation to a wider audience, and in the process enable its present-day Fellowship to evaluate and shape the RAS's wider role moving forward. The student will combine their critical academic research on the evolution of an 'orientalist' learned society with hands-on curatorial involvement in the mounting of this exhibition. The objective is for them to make their mark on both historical scholarship in this field and public engagement with the broad debates that underpin it, while developing valuable skills of archival management and exhibition curatorship.

### **The Studentship**

The project proposal, should it be successful and secure funding from TECHNE, will fund a full-time PhD studentship for three years.

The main focus for the three years of study will be on the successful development and completion of the thesis, and within this timescale the student will also be expected to share research outcomes at the Royal Asiatic Society and attend relevant conferences. But the student will also contribute to the scheduled 2023 exhibition and other 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary initiatives undertaken by the Society, its Fellowship and its staff.

Throughout the research process, the student will divide their time between the Royal Asiatic Society and Royal Holloway, where a full academic training programme is provided. Visits to other institutions will also be required from time to time based on the focus of the research and in response to the project's over-arching research questions.

As well as undertaking research training at Royal Holloway, the successful student will also be inducted and trained at the Royal Asiatic Society where they will learn about this unique institution and its collections. The student will also be expected to participate in the specially designed research training programme run by the Techne consortium.

Further details about postgraduate research in the Department of History at Royal Holloway are available on the following website:

<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/history/prospectivestudents/postgraduateresearch/home.aspx>

### **Qualifications**

Students must comply with the eligibility criteria and other terms and conditions as described on the AHRC's web page:

<https://ahrc.ukri.org/skills/phdstudents/currentawardholders/#AHRC%20current%20award%20holders>

Candidates should have obtained a minimum of an Upper Second-class (2.1) honours degree in History or an appropriate alternative subject area. In addition, candidates should normally have gained an upper merit or distinction at postgraduate Master's level, or an international equivalent, in a subject relevant to the research project. Candidates with backgrounds in anthropology, cultural geography or museum studies are also encouraged to apply for this studentship.

Candidates should also meet the UK/EU residency requirements set out in 'Conditions of Research Council Training Grants' section D:

<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/RCUK-prod/assets/documents/documents/TermsConditionsTrainingGrants.pdf>

Note that EU students are generally eligible for a fees-only award, but not a stipend.

**Start Date:** the preferred start date is **1 October 2019**.

Informal enquires can be made, or further details about the research project's scope discussed, by contacting Professor Sarah Ansari ([s.ansari@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:s.ansari@rhul.ac.uk)).

### **Application procedure**

Your application should include:

- A 1-2 page statement outlining your interest in the research project.
- A copy of your first degree and postgraduate qualifications.
- A current CV.

**Closing Date for formal applications: 17.00 MONDAY 5 November 2018.**

**Interviews will take place later in November.** Short-listed candidates will be asked to make a 10-minute presentation at their interviews on a topic to be advised.