GORDONSTOUN
Plus Est En Vous

Endymion Wilkinson

Round Square, 1959

Recognised for his scholarly legacy and diplomatic roles which contributed to better relations with and closer understanding of East Asia

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Endymion Wilkinson is a world renowned Sinologist with a distinguished career as a European diplomat.

Born in 1941 in Sussex, to a would-be-writer father, and an artist mother, Endymion's family life was significantly impacted by the war. He had no contact with his father, an MI6 agent, until he was eight, living apart from his mother with his paternal uncle in another part of the country. His mother struggled to make ends meet until she heard from a friend that Aberlour House was looking for an art teacher. After successfully getting the job, she moved to Scotland and arranged for Endymion to become a student there.

Later, Endymion achieved a sScholarship to Gordonstoun where he played viola, was a wicketkeeper for the 1st XI, a champion high jumper and sprinter, became Head of the Coastguard service[1] and, finally, Guardian. He went on to gain an MA from King's College, Cambridge, and a PhD in Chinese History from Princeton before teaching at SOAS, University of London.

In 1974 he was recruited by the European Commission to help set up its diplomatic representation in Japan where he dealt with trade frictions between Europe and Japan and took on solo missions to Beijing to prepare for the opening of EU-China diplomatic relations. These experiences convinced him to pursue a diplomatic career working mainly on East Asia. On becoming a director of the Commission, he was appointed European Union Ambassador to China in 1994. Highlights of his seven years in Beijing included the negotiations leading to China's entry into the WTO; proposing and negotiating the shift in European development cooperation with China from agriculture to education; and the establishment of the China Europe International Business School (CEIBS) in Shanghai.

Endymion has also created a scholarly legacy in his Chinese History: A New Manual, an encyclopaedic study guide the length of fifteen monographs which has stayed in print through seven editions over 55 years and is recognised by the China Books Review as "one of the great works on China published in English in the last one hundred years." His other books include Japan versus the West, which topped bestseller lists in Japan and sold a quarter of a million copies in six languages.

Gordonstoun put me on the path that led me to where I am today.

My housemaster, Dr Meissner, along with my music teachers and the chemistry master had all fled Nazi Germany. Kurt Hahn was no longer Headmaster but visited the school and gave sage advice. They had a huge influence on me through the high standards that they set. For example, it was awe inspiring to spend the weekend playing through the 68 Haydn quartets with my teacher, Susanne Lachmann, a professional violinist who had played with Hindemith's Amar quartet in the 1920s. Dr Meissner, a published historian and a painter in oil, was responsible for my choosing to do history at Cambridge. He taught with the aid of a German study guide, Ploetz's Manual. Years later I named my own study guide to Chinese history a "New Manual" in memory of many mesmerizing hours under his instruction. And of course, I loved the sailing and mountain climbing and still today, 70 years later, I take a swim and a cold shower every morning.

Life is so full of possibilities that it is foolish to restrict yourself to just one career

After leaving Cambridge, I spent 30 years as a diplomat and 30 years in academia. When my career in one was flagging, I shifted my attention to the other and vice-versa. Juggling two careers helped me to sustain my commitment to both. My work in the European Commission was stimulating because I found it so different from being a university professor. My postings enabled me to deal with the ruling elites and trend setters of the countries that I had spent years studying. A perspective denied to most academics whose natural habitat is the library, not the chancellery. In short, my work was an extension of my academic studies.

I always believed that globalisation was a long-term trend in human history

You do not need to be a historian to understand that in the course of history humans have expanded their networks of interaction step by uncertain step from the local to the national, regional, and global levels. Of course, along the way there will be temporary reactions from those that do not benefit from regional and global integration and from those who make their living working in the institutions of the nation state. But these are minor dips in the trendline. I am proud to have played a part in the EU's extraordinary experiment to find new, post-national structures for regional and global development.