

Obituary

Sir Laurence Kirwan, KCMG, TD

Sir Laurence Kirwan, Director and Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society from 1945 to 1975, and one of the founders of the Institute, of which he was an Honorary Member, died in London on 16 April 1999 aged 91. The events that took place early in 1946, and led to the foundation of the Institute of Navigation the following year, have been well documented by Pat Hansford in his article in the special issue of the *Journal* (September 1997) published to commemorate the Institute's fiftieth anniversary. Kirwan was a member of the original Steering Committee and then of the Provisional Council which undertook the preliminary work that culminated in the inaugural meeting in March 1947. He served on the first elected Council as Chairman of the Executive Committee, which in those days assumed responsibility for administering the Institute between meetings of the Council.

In his article, Hansford recalls how the Royal Society, when approached about the formation of the Institute, had suggested that (in the somewhat uncertain situation immediately after the war) the new body might thrive best, at any rate to start with, under the aegis of an existing scientific society with similar objectives. Kirwan, then the recently appointed Director of the Royal Geographical Society, took the suggestion up by proposing various ways in which the RGS might assist the new body, and notably by offering it accommodation; and the Institute has, of course, been at the Society's house ever since. The original accommodation was not lavish but, quite apart from the prestigious address and pleasant and appropriate surroundings, the facilities available included the use of the Society's lecture theatre and the Council and committee rooms. It is difficult to see how the new body, with a handful of members and no money, could have survived without some such assistance. But it was perhaps at a deeper level that the arrangement was to prove so influential, for it brought the young Institute into immediate contact with the liberal traditions of the learned societies in this country, concerned essentially with the subject rather than the benefit of its members, no doubt very much as the Royal Society would have wished.

Kirwan was by avocation an archaeologist and anthropologist and before the war, at a young age, had been director of the Archaeological Survey of Nubia run by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities and later Field Director of the Oxford University Expeditions to the Sudan. His more important scholarly work dates from this period. He was in the Territorial Army and, at the outbreak of war, was posted to the General Staff, serving on the joint planning staff of the war cabinet in 1942 and 1943.

Kirwan's orderly and scholarly mind combined with great administrative skills were undoubtedly of great service to the RGS during the 1950s when the Society was largely responsible for the organization of a remarkable series of expeditions of geographical discovery. First the Norwegian–British–Swedish Antarctic Expedition of 1949–52, then the successful Everest Expedition of 1953 under John Hunt and finally the Transantarctic Expedition of 1955–7 under Vivian Fuchs. It must stand as one of the great eras of British geographical exploration. In 1959, he published *The White Road*, a history of polar exploration. He was accorded many academic distinctions both archaeological and geographical and, on his retirement, was awarded the Founder's Medal of the Royal Geographical Society. He was knighted, in 1972.

I had known Larry Kirwan fairly well over some fifty years (it had in fact been he who put my name forward to the Steering Committee as a possible candidate for Executive Secretary).

Inevitably one saw less of him as time went on but, it so happens, I called on him about a month before he died, now quite blind. We drank some whisky together and talked of old times, his mind as sharp as ever, the humour undiminished and beneath the somewhat austere exterior, the beguiling boyish charm still there.

M. W. R.