

Obituary

GEORGE N. KATES (1895–1990)

George N. Kates died at the age of ninety-four on March 23, 1990, at the Grand Islander Health Care Center in Middletown, Rhode Island. Asian specialists will perhaps best remember Dr. Kates for his beautiful description of life in Peking in the 1930s, *The Years That Were Fat* (Harper and Brothers, 1952; reissued by M.I.T. Press, 1967, and Oxford University Press, 1988).

Kates was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1895. His father was a successful industrialist who had emigrated to the United States from Poland, and his mother came from a German family. During his youth, Kates traveled widely in Latin America and Europe where he acquired an impressive command of European languages. After serving as a translator in the American Army in Europe during World War I, Kates studied at Harvard where he graduated *summa cum laude* in 1922. He went on to do graduate work in European History and Fine Arts at the Queen's College, Oxford. He did not complete his doctoral degree there until 1930, in part because he spent much of the late 1920s in Hollywood serving as what he later termed a "cultural consultant" for Paramount Pictures.

Kates moved to Rhode Island in 1932 and it was there that he made "a joyous discovery" of Chinese literature in translation. He soon began studying Chinese on his own and, after consulting with Professor Langdon Warner at Harvard, decided to see China for himself. After his arrival in Peking in 1933, Kates continued to study Chinese and was eventually proficient enough to attend classes at Peking University and to conduct research in Chinese sources. Shunning life in the foreign quarter of Peking, Kates chose to recapture the vanished life of the old literati class. Among other things, he rented a traditional residence inside the Imperial City from a former eunuch. Kates's love of art and decoration led him to fill his home with as many pieces of antique furniture, rugs, scrolls, porcelains, and other Chinese *objets d'art* as possible. His special project became to explore every corner of the Forbidden City, and he eventually wrote two scholarly articles describing his findings. The first, coauthored with H. S. Ch'en, was "Prince Kung's Palace and Its Adjoining Garden in Peking," *Monumenta Serica*, V (1940):1–80; a second, "A New Date for the Origins of the Forbidden City," appeared in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, VII (1942):180–202.

To Kates's never diminished regret, the idyllic life he described so beautifully in *The Years That Were Fat* came to an abrupt end in 1941 as the Sino-Japanese War worsened and hostilities between Japan and the United States appeared likely. After a brief stay in the United States, he returned to China with the Office of Strategic Services in Chungking in 1943–44. Following the war, he served as a Linguistic Research Specialist at the United Nations where he helped to draft the Chinese text of the U.N. Charter. Later he was Curator of Oriental Art at the Brooklyn Museum, where he wrote another book which drew upon his intimate knowledge of elite life in Peking, *Chinese Household Furniture* (Harper and Brothers, 1948).

In 1988, forty-seven years after he left Peking for the last time, George Kates

still remembered his life there with clarity and great warmth. He said he had come to admire in particular the "patience and sense of harmony" he found among his numerous Chinese friends. As many in the China field will be aware, it was this sense of harmony that Dr. Kates was able to convey so movingly in his written reminiscences of Peking.

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