Alan Gordon Finlay and the Telephonic Interpretation System

A tribute to the man who played an essential role in the design and development of a forerunner of present-day simultaneous interpretation equipment.

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Conference diplomacy was not a new phenomenon at the beginning of the 20th century; it had been developing gradually for almost a hundred years before that. A new multilateral scenario and the emergence of English as a language of diplomacy required new formats and means of communication.

While the interwar era can be called the “golden age” of consecutive interpreting, a new step forward was made with the invention of the Telephonic Interpretation System.

The name of the American businessman and philanthropist Edward Filene readily comes to mind when one thinks of early simultaneous interpretation systems. But while Filene was a great promoter of them, he wasn’t an engineer – and that is where Alan Gordon Finlay came into the picture. He was brought in to lend his expertise as inventor and engineer to what later would be referred to as Filene-Finlay system, or telephonic system as it used existing telephone technology.

We know little about the life of Alan Gordon Finlay (often incorrectly called Gordon Finlay, Finley or Findlay) and his family archives were lost in the Blitz in WWII. After I published an article about the early history of simultaneous interpretation equipment in The AIIC Blog, Gordon Finlay’s daughter, Dionne Venables, left a comment and I got in touch with her. She kindly provided the two photographs of her father that illustrate this page.

From her I also learned that Alan Gordon Finlay was born in Turramurra, New South Wales, Australia on 8 June 1890. He was brought up in Switzerland and had a good command of French and German. After graduating from The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS) in the UK, he served in Afghanistan. He married Florence Mary Gallagher and had 2 children. He passed away in January 1959 in Uckfield, Surrey, England.

His good command of languages probably helped him better understand the difficulties interpreters faced, and spurred his work on the telephonic interpretation system undertaken at the League of Nations in the 1920s.

In any case, A. Gordon Finlay was directly involved in all the aspects of system design and testing, and deserves more credit than he is usually given. It was certainly an uphill struggle, because the very concept was so new. At first, no one was sure that “live” simultaneous interpretation was possible, so the system was used to read out pre-translated texts or sight translate shorthand notes taken by an official stenographer (Baigorri, 2014).

According to G.E. Berkley, A. Gordon Finlay’s name, together with Edward Filene’s, was at one time inscribed on the headsets delegates use at the United Nations (Berkley, 2014).

It is also interesting to note that in a 1927 report, he wrote: “Experience has shown this work to be of a difficult and exacting nature, demanding special qualities on the part of the interpreters and particularly fatiguing owing to the degree of concentration involved, and it would seem desirable to place instantaneous interpreters in a special category receiving extra Conference pay, to encourage them to take it up.”[i]

In our conversation Dionne Venables stressed that her father was an inventor all his life and never ceased to look at the world with eyes wide open. These words of Carl Jung could very well be applied to his life: The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves.”[ii]

References
