



Presidential Address to the British Academy, 1976

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The premises of the British Academy were in the east wing of Burlington House 1968–82 (the entrance is seen here in 2010)

THE HOLDING of our 74th Annual General Meeting in our 75th year has understandably prompted me to turn to our origins. I may be forgiven for looking back to what my distant predecessor Lord Reay said in his first Presidential Address. 'Well nurtured and wisely directed, the youngest of the Academies will assuredly take its due place among its elder and more favoured sisters, learning by their

experience and profiting by their example.¹ This, I think, we have done, though it is a continuing process, and perhaps, over the years, our elder relations may have found something to learn from us.

The first work of the Academy's Council was the drafting of by-laws – and this year we have, in the light of experience, revised them. Re-reading that first address, I am struck by the number of signposts for guiding the work of the four Sections in which Fellows were then organised, which we are still following. Lord Reay even advocated systematic surveys of research, on the lines I suggested a year ago and which met with a somewhat mixed reception at the General Meeting; and he talked of the 'energetic impulse' of our learned societies – a topic that was discussed at our Council meeting this morning.

Our funds in 1901 were negligible, though the entrance fee was (VAT apart) the same as today. The earliest support from public funds was £200, provided by the old India Office to assist work on *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. So in at least one respect matters have changed considerably. 'Much less recognition by the State is given in Britain to original work than in foreign countries', Lord Reay considered. With the regular and substantial support that we receive from HM Government without any strings attached, we are sufficiently 'well nurtured' (if only just) and enabled to pursue the course which Lord Reay and the founding fathers of 1901 charted for us.

Our fruitful co-operation with the Royal Society continues happily. We have just held our fourth joint discussion meeting, appropriately on Anglo-American Intellectual Relations in the last two hundred years: it proved unusually stimulating. This [86] week a number of the participants will, as guests of the Ditchley Foundation, pursue less formal discussions on a related theme. Our regular contacts with our royal partner in so many areas seems to me an excellent development. The pioneers of this co-operation were Sir Mortimer Wheeler and Sir David Martin, to both of whom the Academy and the Society owe a very great deal. I shall have something to say a little later about our work together to assist learned societies. We shall again be working together in October

¹ 'First Annual General Meeting, June 26, 1903: Address by the President, Lord Reay', *Proceedings of the British Academy 1903–1904* (London, n.d.), 17–20. Donald James MacKay (1839–1921), 11th Lord Reay, was the first President of the British Academy 1902–7.

when we shall be joint hosts at the annual meeting of Western European academies to survey our respective exchange schemes. Our joint approaches to the Science Research Council have led to the creation by that Council of an Archaeological Sciences Awards Committee, of which Professor Grahame Clark is to be the Chairman. Also, we have combined to take a keen interest in the relatively new European Science Foundation, under Sir Brian Flowers. It should be a cause for national pride that at the present time the UK provides the Presidents of both the ESF and, in our own Professor Eric Turner, of the Union Académique Internationale. Lastly, the Academy should note with satisfaction that our admirable Secretary has been elected Chairman of the UK Committee for the European Science Foundation by his colleagues from the Royal Society and the five research councils, and has played no small part in forming the policy which the Foundation in Strasbourg is adopting towards the humanities and social sciences. Even if this brings blushes to his modest cheek, I will not refrain from saying yet again how much his wisdom, tact, humour and friendly personality, and devotion to the Academy, have contributed to the conduct of our affairs. My personal debt to him is growing to unpredictable proportions.

A year ago we discussed together possible ways of averting the crisis in academic publishing, and much thought has been given to this by your officers, by the Publications Committee, and by Council. The joint proposal put to us by the two oldest university presses, for financing at public expense the differences between a minimum edition and an imprint of 2,000 copies, through regular subventions, was not regarded as acceptable. Instead, we have devised a scheme which will give equal opportunity to all authors of important works for limited markets. In our triennial submission we have requested a substantial sum (£125,000 in the first year, additional moneys thereafter) to establish a rotating fund, to help principally by making [87] interest-free loans for three years, such aid to be tied, as a matter of principle, to cheaper methods of production. We will still help with outright grants to learned societies, or for the funding of particular features of monographs, such as illustrations or, where appropriate, special fonts. If there is time later this afternoon we can discuss this in detail.

I now come to a serious and worrying topic. The last three Presidential Addresses have touched on the financial and other

problems facing British learned societies. I need scarcely remind this audience of the degree to which such bodies have contributed to British scholarship; it is all too clear that without them the amount of original research in the humanities would certainly have become seriously curtailed and the publication of it have failed to reach a growing readership. Whether long-established, or comparatively new, learned societies were, as a rule, founded and developed through private initiative; the time, money and effort expended on them have built up a vast scholarly capital, the yield from which has been diffused throughout British society. This private support has not been withdrawn in recent days, but because of the general economic situation the financial position of some of these societies has markedly deteriorated. As is well known, in 1973 the Academy itself became concerned about this in its own provinces of learning, and, more recently, in partnership with the Royal Society, commissioned a wide survey of the scene. Mr J. F. Embling has now completed his report and his main recommendations were considered at a special meeting of the Academy's Council held this morning. Having initiated the inquiry, I believe that the Academy and the Royal Society have a moral duty to do what they can to help. It is now clear that learned societies would welcome advice, in particular on the preparation, issue and distribution of publications, while some of them are in serious need of subventions for journals and monographs. We hope to be able, in alliance with the Royal Society, to organise a source both of advice and (inevitably limited) financial aid, if our endeavours to secure funds succeed. Some societies have serious problems of accommodation, and we are looking constructively at this also. Much of what is being recommended is no more than an extension of the help which our two bodies already offer to learned societies. The topic is a live one, and I cannot today be very specific about our hopes and fears: the purpose of these hasty interim remarks is to assure you that we are facing these problems as urgently and realistically as we can.

[88] A year ago I mentioned the appointment of the Major Projects Review Committee. It had a very full agenda and it succeeded by making in the spring a most valuable survey and report of our activities and commitments. All Fellows will be grateful to Sir John Pope-Hennessy, the Chairman, and to Professors Moses Finley and Herbert Nicholas, who worked laboriously and most effectively at what was fundamentally a task at once tedious and

(morally as well as intellectually) demanding. The Academy needs to ensure that its limited resources for its own official research projects are being utilised appropriately, and while it would be wrong to terminate our funding of those projects which are productive and effectively directed, it would be mistaken policy to continue to support indefinitely open-ended projects where enthusiasm has evaporated, or where the original terms of reference for a limited programme of work have become so re-drawn as to comprehend a much more, perhaps unrealistically extensive, scheme which completely alters the timescale and the size of the budget required. We do not rule out adopting new Academy projects in the future, but the cases will have to be very cogently argued and the financial commitments most carefully assessed. There had been indications, for example, that Bentham, the Early History of Agriculture and the Lexicon of Greek Personal Names were together requiring a disproportionate share of our funds. The Cambridge Agriculture team, after ten years of successful pioneering work, will be disbanded at the end of this month, on the recommendation, in fact, of its own executive committee. The Review Committee has, in my view, displayed a commendable combination of powers of penetrating scrutiny, unswerving scholarly values, pursuit of justice, and balanced judgement. The advice of the Committee is being fully implemented by Council. Council has accepted a proposal that not more than 5 per cent of the total sum available for Academy Major Projects in any one year should be available to Bentham and to the Greek Lexicon respectively.

This review has been a salutary exercise which should probably be repeated every second or third year. Initially it has given a jolt to chairmen of supervisory committees, especially those who have not been in the habit of meeting regularly, and I would hazard a guess that as a result our publication in 1977 and 1978 will be somewhat more substantial than recently. We are asking chairmen of all supervisory committees to be much more specific in their reports that are put before Sections each [89] January, so that progress can be properly gauged and any proposed departure from the original terms of reference fully discussed. It is interesting to note that, following our review, the UAI has put in hand a similar reappraisal of its own projects.

One of the less spectacular, but fundamental, achievements of the year just ending is the complete revision of our by-laws. The

revised text, which was approved by the Privy Council and came into force yesterday, is authoritative, up to date and, I hope, shorn of anomalies. There was in this matter full consultation with the Sections, which, to give an example, were virtually unanimous in asserting the view that residence, not citizenship, should be the criterion for election for an Ordinary Fellow. The Academy owes much to Mr Justice Megarry and to Professor S. F. C. Milsom, whose advice on drafting was important at every stage. Copies of the new by-laws are available here, and the text will be printed in the next edition of the Academy's *Yearbook*.

Though this did not technically await the Privy Council's approval of the by-laws, we have today elected an Honorary Fellow. The last such election was in 1954, and for the past two years we have had no Fellows in this category on our books. This seems to me a somewhat sparing exercise of our powers. We have taken power to elect up to three candidates in any year, providing that the total number of Honorary Fellows does not exceed twenty. I would not wish in any way to suggest that the high honour we have paid Dr Walter Pagels should be debased through a sudden rush of creations to fill our permitted number (*pace* James I and other later, even less restrained, dispensers of honours); but I should like to invite Fellows to turn their thoughts to possible exceptionally highly qualified candidates; and, if they think of anyone worthy of keeping Dr Pagel company, to send their suggestions to me.

Already the first British Academy/Wolfson Fellows are either settled in their chosen research centres in France, the German Federal Republic, and Italy, or are about to begin their visits. As was anticipated, progress has been less swift with the first scholars from Western Europe coming to Britain; but we have a few candidates of high calibre, and next year we should have more. Then, too, the scheme will be extended to Belgium, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia. The Academy is much indebted to the Wolfson Trustees for their generosity and far-sightedness in funding this series of valuable awards to promote research in history, law, economics and political studies, and to foster closer academic links between Britain and Western Europe among [90] young scholars. Applicants to our Thank-Offering to Britain Fund Fellowship, if numerically fewer than before, were of so high a standard that the Committee made two major awards. There are signs that both in Britain and on the Continent young men and women are cautious

about spending long away from their own universities, in case faces are forgotten when posts are to be filled – out of house, out of mind. Perhaps this is inevitable in our present financial weather; yet it is somewhat short-sighted, and we must, I think, appeal to universities and other institutions to avoid this deplorable attitude.

Continental academies in general have rather lavish endowments for medals and prizes. The British Academy, by contrast, until recently has had but three prizes and three medals, not all of them awarded each year. In recent weeks there have been two developments: first, on the advice of the Charity Commissioners, a second Rose Mary Crawshay Prize will be founded from next year, and, like the first, which we have today given to Mrs Hilary Spurling, will be given for an outstanding published critical work on English literature, with preference to a study on the Romantic poets; it will also be confined to women.

The second development is the gift by Mrs Winifred Allen and her sons to establish an annual Derek Allen prize to commemorate our sometime Secretary and late Treasurer. She wishes this award to be open to scholars of any nationality, for an outstanding published work in one of the fields in which Derek Allen was especially interested. Mrs Allen has suggested that in one year the prize should be in Musicology and the next in Celtic Studies or Numismatics. Council has gratefully accepted this generous gift and arranged for a committee to devise arrangements so that the first award can be made in 1977. This will form a most appropriate memorial to this widely loved and deeply regretted Fellow. Perhaps the Academy might ponder whether, in addition, there might not be devised a medal fitting. Perhaps the Academy might ponder whether, in addition, there might not be devised a medal fitting to honour a numismatist – especially since Derek Allen, like Frederic Kenyon, had the kind of fine head that would appeal to an engraver.

I should also add that we have this year embarked on an experiment, to be continued in 1977 and 1978, with the Cromer Greek Prize Fund. Council accepted the recommendation of a subcommittee of Section V that the Academy should use the fund to meet the travelling expenses of boys and girls attending the summer schools in classical Greek organised by the Joint Association of Classical Teachers. Such use of the fund is well [91] within the terms of reference of the Trust Deed and should go far to foster the study of Greek Language, Literature and Civilisation.

This scheme owes much to our colleague Professor Eric Handley. I am glad to report that there has been a truly remarkable response from the schools, which would surely have pleased Lord Cromer.

You will see from the new by-laws that the Fellowship Standing Committee is now properly part of our constitution. In the past year it has again made careful surveys of those fields that are not the primary business of any particular Section, or form a minority interest within a Section. This year the Committee has paid particular attention to Byzantine studies, bibliography, and criticism and, for the first time, has also considered candidates for the Corresponding Fellowship. There is more work to be done, not least in the area of foreign languages and literatures, and I doubt whether we have yet exhausted musicology, sociology, the history of science, lexicography, and, later perhaps, linguistics and non-experimental varieties of psychology. Membership of this Committee changes each year to ensure that new ideas are discussed, although next year we are again fortunate to have Mr Stuart Hampshire as chairman. Once again, I invite Fellows who have in mind particular fields of knowledge, or particular candidates, to write to the Secretary.

The Secretary has touched on our responsibilities for the Schools and Institutes. It was in 1952 that the Academy began, through its then Secretary, to act somewhat as a minute UGC, in negotiating separate grants with the Department of Education and Science for these bodies, and then for the ones that were subsequently founded. Gradually the Academy's Council became involved in their estimates and in the manner in which the actual sums were apportioned to competing claimants. A quarter of a century ago the largest government grant amounted to no more than 25 per cent of the Schools' total income, but today the position is very different, and even the best-endowed relies on its government grant for 95 per cent of its funds. Individual Fellows have always played, and still play, a leading part in the management of these bodies and, of course, the most recent of them were founded through Academy initiative.

Working through their estimates for the new triennium, Council came to the conclusion that it could not escape a greater degree of responsibility for the Schools; and here I would emphasise that we have always treated the total for the Schools, Institutes and Societies as something quite distinct [92] from our own government grant. We have been trusted to present the financial requests with which

we are satisfied, and, accordingly, we must be prepared to accept some degree of public accountability ourselves for their financial affairs. The Academy has always respected the autonomy of these bodies, though their total independence is necessarily limited by our control of the purse strings. We have, accordingly, established a standing committee for the Schools and Institutes comprising the Officers of the Academy, the Chairman of Section 10, and a number of outside experts in particular fields – yet individuals without any favourites – who can look at the many problems facing the Schools, give the Academy independent advice on their financial needs, and, at the same time, advise the separate committees of management over matters of administration, budgets and so forth. In some cases, such as the British School at Rome, the new committee may suggest a new structure for the governing body; for others it may make suggestions for improved arrangements for the conduct of business. I am glad to say that Lord Brimelow, formerly head of the Diplomatic Service, Sir Toby Weaver, formerly of the Department of Education and Science, and Sir Eric Roll, Chairman of S. G. Warburg and Co. Ltd, have agreed to help us by serving on this new body. Lord Brimelow is conscious of the role these Institutes play overseas (and it is not just a matter of keeping up with the Germans or the French), Sir Toby Weaver is a doyen of academic administration, and Sir Eric Roll is an eminent former civil servant, at present a Director of the Bank of England, Chancellor of the University of Southampton, holder of other responsible posts and a most respected financial expert. All three will, I feel sure, provide invaluable advice.

I believe this new body's activities will considerably strengthen the Schools and their reputation, will help to establish norms for salary levels and conditions of service for the Schools' staff, which at present are far from uniform, and will make it far easier for the Academy to put the strongest possible case to the government for securing adequate financial provision at a crucial time for these bodies, which are so much troubled by the falling exchange rates for sterling.

I come to what is perhaps the most important topic of all. From the outset the Academy has welcomed the proposal of the University Grants Committee that it should administer an additional research fund in the humanities, to enable individual scholars to pursue their work. When in the past there have been [93] sugges-

tions for establishing a separate 'Humanities Research Council', we have never taken a dog-in-the-manger attitude, but when asked whether we should be prepared, if invited to do so, to take aboard additional tasks in the interests of research, we thought it right to make clear that we should willingly cooperate in this matter.

The new scheme, which has been discussed by all the Sections, has, as you know, certain limitations. Not all disciplines are included: economics and other social and political studies, and possibly law, to the extent of their inclusion within the purview of the SSRC, will be excluded; so, on the grounds of expense, will archaeological fieldwork and the analysis of finds in laboratories. Applications are to be limited to persons holding university posts; hence private scholars and those who have retired are, unfortunately, not eligible. We were led to believe that the Department of Education and Science would make a substantial addition to the UGC grant. This, we were given to understand a few days ago, cannot, in the straitened financial circumstances of the moment, be expected, at any rate this year. In consequence, no applications from Northern Ireland or from polytechnics, which are outside the UGC's area of responsibility, can at the moment, so it appears, be considered, so long as this situation continues. We regret this consequence, but it is not within our power to prevent it. Let us not, however, dispute these limitations; rather, let us rejoice at what is to be included. By routing applications to the most appropriate fund the Academy can ensure, at a most difficult time, the best use of all available resources for research in the fields of the humanities.

From the start, with my fellow officers, I have been at pains to point out that the Academy will be required to present separate accounts and reports in connection with its administration of U.G.C. 'small grants', and also the additional work both for its staff and for the specially designed subcommittees of Sections will be a fresh, and not inconsiderable, burden. The frontiers between eligibility for the UGC fund and that for the Academy's normal research funds may, in the case of the smaller grants, turn out not to be altogether easy to draw, either in theory or in practice. Yet these problems are, in my opinion and that of the Council, and, I believe, of the Sections, soluble; and this honourable and necessary task is one which we could not conceivably refuse to perform. We believe that the Academy has been approached because the UGC and, we hope, the Department of Education and Science respect its

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judgement, [94] recognise its impartiality, and applaud the standards it endeavours to maintain. I do not doubt that we shall encounter criticism, if only because applications are likely to exceed very considerably the total sums which we will have available. But I believe that, were the Academy to decline this responsibility for what could be, in effect, a very small-scale council for the humanities, this would augur ill for our future. If we undertake the administration of this new scheme and make a success of it, this will constitute a genuine service to learning and to the nation, not less important because it is voluntary and modest in its budget. Details and, it may be, some issues of principle still remain to be settled with the UGC. Later this afternoon we shall have an opportunity of discussing particular features of this new, reduced but, in the opinion of the Council and the Sections, exceedingly valuable and welcome scheme.

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