



Presidential Address to the British Academy, 1978

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*The east wing of Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1,
home of the British Academy during IB's presidency*

THERE IS a school of fish – so that most eminent biologist, Sir Bernard Katz, informed his audience at a recent dinner of the Royal Society – which inhabits the South Pacific. It surfaces from the depths in vast numbers, only once a year, for the purpose of spawning. After this act it disappears into the waters and is not seen by a human eye until the following year, when it performs this function once again. There may be those who think that the British Academy has a certain similarity to this school of fish (whose name, to my sorrow, I cannot recollect) – that, in short, elections of Fellows and Honorary Fellows are its central function; that besides this it has but little to do. I should like to dispel this illusion, under which even a Fellow or two may labour.

1. The first duty of every Academy is to encourage learning. In addition to the provision of lectures on its own initiative and in cooperation with other learned bodies at home and abroad, its programme of publication of works of scholarship, as well as

hospitality and assistance to overseas scholars and the like, the Academy has grown to be, in the course of the last few years, a (if not the) major grant-giving body in the field of the humanities. Our awards of grants for research activities have followed the pattern of previous years: we shall by mid July have spent something just under £340,000 in response to applications. Of this, just under 50 per cent has been given to individual applicants; some 30 per cent to our own Major Projects; and a little over 20 per cent to institutions – societies, joint projects, research projects of British Schools and Institutes, and Learned Journals. In addition to this, there is, of course, the general maintenance grant to British Schools and Institutes abroad, to which something over half of our total Government grant is, as hitherto, devoted. The fact that a slightly smaller proportion (compared to previous years) of our total Government grant has been used in this way is due to the fact that the welcome addition to our resources of the Small Grants Fund has somewhat raised the total spent (as was intended by the IIGC) on grants to individual applicants in this country.

[2] As a result of the new procedures adopted this year, all Academy research awards are now to be administered by the Research Fund Committee on the recommendation of the Sections or their grant Subcommittees. Overseas awards are no longer to be a separate category handled by the Overseas Policy Committee and will fall to the Research Fund Committee, which will continue to meet four times a year to consider the recommendations of Sections and their Subcommittees on all applications from individual scholars for their private research. Applications for grants for the Academy's Research Projects and to support Learned Journals will continue to be considered once a year by the full Sections in January. Applications from groups, institutions, societies, expeditions etc. will be considered once a year by the full Sections in March/April and thereafter by the Research Fund Committee.

Grants of up to £500 to individual scholars are to be made outright on the recommendation of a Section Subcommittee; such awards will be reported to the Research Fund Committee. Applications for grants over £500 and for projects on which a Subcommittee has expressed reservations or has set a low priority will be referred to the Research Fund Committee for further consideration.

Finally, the secretariat is now authorised to make supplementary grants of up to £200 when, on completion of a project, an applicant can show that he has seriously underestimated the costs of his research.

With the forthcoming fusion of all applications for grants involving foreign travel, and the very welcome raising of the limit of grants made from the Small Grants ('UGC') Fund from £1,000 to £2,000, a more rational system of grant-giving is being achieved. Centralisation in academic bodies can go too far: but, in this case, it does not seem to me to be doing so; the experience of this year seems to show that even if the burden on the Research Fund Committee has increased, the results justify the reorganisation of our procedures. The special funds, which operate under the specific rules of the trusts, foundations and bequests which govern them, add pleasing diversity to the pattern, which is doubtless salutary to any organisation in danger of addiction to bureaucratic symmetry at the expense of the variety of life and learning. At present, I am happy to say, we do not seem to be in any danger of excessive uniformity.

2. The Committee to review the activities of the Academy's own Major Projects, under its Chairman, Sir Alfred Ayer, will, [3] it is hoped, look upon these inevitably costly but valuable projects with the same sharp and critical eye – it is greatly needed – as its commendably just, stern and rigorous predecessor.

3. I should like to record our continuing appreciation of the fact that our needs and our work have, as in past years, received understanding from Her Majesty's Government, and in particular from the Department of Education and Science. If we have not received all that we have asked for, we fully realise that this is due to the financial pressures under which the Department is working.

I should also like to express our gratitude to the charitable foundations which have supported our work, in particular the Leverhulme, the Wolfson and the Wates Foundations, which have generously sustained some of our most valuable activities. And while I speak of gratitude, may I acknowledge the great debt that the Academy owes to Mr John Carswell, who stepped into his post in difficult conditions and whose imperturbable good sense, sagacity and devotion have proved to be unique assets to us; and to his deputy, Mr Peter Brown, for the remarkable effectiveness and good humour with which he continued to shoulder the burdens cast upon

him by the sad death of Dr Neville Williams before Mr Carswell took up his office; and to all their colleagues, who, gravely understaffed, have performed valiantly and successfully in the face of expected and unexpected difficulties.

4. Let me now come to some of the problems which should occupy the attention of the Academy: accommodation is the severest of these. There seems to me to be no doubt that the conditions in which the administrative staff have to work are becoming literally intolerable, and that something will have to be done about this in the very near future. There is also the problem of our publications, and one or two other matters of concern with which the Secretary will deal in detail in his report.

5. Let me say something about the issue of our numbers. Today, the number of Ordinary Fellows is 395, but this number includes Senior Fellows (known, we recently learnt, in the Royal Thai Academy as ‘million-year-old turtles’, a class I myself propose soon to join). If we exclude Senior Fellows, the total is 302, which includes three Fellows by Supplemental Charter. Corresponding Fellows number 256: the total number of Corresponding Fellows in 1970 was 127; which indicates that [4] the growth of this last category, if it continues at the same rate, will soon outstrip that of Ordinary Fellows. We have (unlike the Royal Society), as yet at any rate, imposed no theoretical limit on the number of Corresponding Fellows, as there is on that of Ordinary Fellows, but in view of these statistics there is a clear case for at least enjoining upon the Sections a fairly drastic self-denying ordinance in the matter of the election of Corresponding Fellows – that, at any rate, is the view that Council has taken at its last meeting, and we could discuss it later this afternoon. Perhaps the Fellowship Standing Committee, under its new Chairman, Professor Obolensky, could be invited to look at the overall pattern of the Academy’s Fellowships as they have developed over the years.

6. While on the subject of categories of Fellows, I should like to say something about the class of Honorary Fellows. As Fellows will know, there has been some discussion in Council, and at the General Meeting in 1977, of this category, and, in particular, of what the criteria for the selection of candidates for election to it should be. Council set up a small subcommittee to consider this matter, with Professor H. L. A. Hart as Chairman and including Sir Ernst Gombrich, Lord Robbins and the Secretary. The subcommittee has

recommended four criteria,¹ the satisfaction of any one of which would, in their view, qualify a candidate for consideration. The Council has considered and approved this recommendation, which will be submitted to the General Meeting today. If the General Meeting approves of it, the substance of the recommendation, that is, the criteria, will be incorporated into the rules by which elections are regulated. It is hoped thereby to increase the number of Honorary Fellows from the present number, which is precisely one.

7. And while we are discussing Fellowships, it seems to me right to speak of a member of the Academy who, although not a Fellow, has played as important and intimate part in its [5] affairs as anyone I can think of. I refer, of course, to Miss Molly Myers, our greatly loved and irreplaceable Principal Assistant Secretary. Nora Molly Myers's career began during the last war, during which she was engaged on secret work at the Cabinet Office, and there displayed those high standards of punctiliousness, accuracy, order and discretion we came to know so well and value so highly. The period immediately after the war found her at Oxford, in the Ashmolean Museum, working for Miss Margerie Taylor and Sir Alan Gardiner, for many years a Fellow of this Academy. In 1949 Mortimer Wheeler, on becoming Secretary of the Academy, was casting about him for help in propelling the Academy into new ways, and managed to obtain her services on condition he did not steal her. He did, of course, steal her, and she remained to become the backbone of our administration until she retired thirty years later, this Easter. She had in that time sustained no fewer than four of the six Secretaries we have had since our foundation. What the Academy owes her is unique.

She knew Fellows individually better than any living person. She understood them, their qualities, their tastes, their needs better than

¹ (a) Statesmen or leading public figures who had themselves either done distinguished work in the Academy's field of interest or promoted or advanced the causes for which the Academy had been founded.

(b) Scholars of outstanding academic distinction who were ineligible for election to Ordinary Fellowship on grounds of age.

(c) Distinguished natural scientists whose work also had a bearing on the humanities or social sciences.

(d) Those who by benefaction and demonstration of their interest in the humanities or social sciences – both elements being essential – had conspicuously contributed to the objects for which the Academy existed.

anyone else. The organisation of the work of the Sections, the entertainment of academic visitors, receptions, the Annual Dinner – indeed, the entire social life of the Academy – were largely maintained and promoted by her. Fellows invariably sought advice from her in all kinds of formal and informal ways, and always obtained it; she carried on the work of the admirable Miss Pearson with a degree of skill, efficiency, charm, and a capacity for firm, all but unalterable and virtually infallible decision, and brought to everything a wonderful style and elegance; for all of this the Academy will for ever be grateful to her. She declined all honours, and expressed a firm wish that her departure should not be marked by any ceremony, and we could not but respect her request; but the Fellows expressed a spontaneous wish to subscribe to a gift which she was prevailed upon to accept, and which I hope gave her some pleasure. The *Stimmung* of the Academy will never be quite the same without her.

8. I turn now to say one or two things very briefly about our overseas activities and relations with the learned world abroad. We are now a party to no fewer than eight cultural agreements, and moving towards a ninth, which brings scholars to this country and gives our own scholars access to countries in Eastern Europe which are difficult to visit except with official or [6] semi-official sponsorship. This is the fruit of the policy which our Foreign Secretary has so patiently pursued, in the face of a good many difficulties, for the last decade. I doubt whether the visit, to take one example, of Professor W. E. Butler to Ulan Bator would have been practicable without it. Much good is done by these visits, and a great deal of useful work is done during them. Experience has taught us that great care must be exercised by all parties concerned in joint exchanges, that only suitably qualified scholars whose purpose is bona fide research are nominated and sponsored.

Such precautions are certainly taken by us. Official cultural agreements of this type, while they facilitate exchanges, also necessarily canalise and limit them, because academies or other bodies of a public character must carry a high measure of responsibility for the persons nominated and sponsored. Where this is the only way, it must be followed; but much freer exchanges are possible among the countries inheriting the liberal tradition, and we are taking steps to encourage closer, less formal, scholarly relations

with France, Spain, Italy, Switzerland and other countries which, like us, hold that learning has no frontiers.

In this connection I should perhaps also comment on the difficulties which some of our scholars visiting Eastern Europe under cultural agreements have experienced in gaining access to archives. On occasion curtains have been drawn across material which one could hardly believe could contain anything deleterious either to the security or to the reputation of the nation concerned. We are generous in giving access to our own archives. We can reasonably ask other countries to be a little less restrictive in the interests of international scholarship, and I am glad to say that recent conversations with Romania have opened up some hope of progress. Similarly, and I say it with deep regret, we deplore the obstacles that we have at times encountered to direct or personal contact with distinguished scholars abroad, even, on occasion, those who are Corresponding Fellows of the Academy.

One other overseas matter. I am glad to say that, largely owing to the magnificent efforts of Dame Kathleen Kenyon – no one who has the slightest acquaintance with her could have had any doubts about their outcome – provision has been made for the founding of a British School at Amman, bringing the number of British Schools and Institutes abroad into double figures. Council has appointed an interim committee to plan the new School and its constitution.

[7] 9. Finally, there is one particular action of the Academy on which I should like to dwell a little, since it seems to me to carry certain general implications. There is a province of learning to which we have given active support: that of papyrology; in particular to the elucidation, editing and publication of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri, a branch of learning in which our country enjoys a deservedly high reputation. That vast deposit continues to yield treasures, one of which will be a feature of the next volume of our *Proceedings*; and I do not doubt that there is more to come which will shed fresh light on our knowledge of the ancient world. Much hard work and inspired scholarship, and many thousands of pounds of the Academy's resources, have been devoted to this enterprise: skill, time and money, I am sure you will agree, well spent.

It was therefore with deep concern that we heard, at the turn of the year, that one of the two academic posts on which this enterprise fundamentally depends would soon fall vacant, and, because of the acute financial difficulties under which University College, London

is compelled to work, might not be filled. Professor Eric Turner, whose brilliant mastery of this field commands international admiration, will, of course, remain in our midst as a guide and counsellor; but the prospect that his retirement from his Chair, and the withdrawal of the regular contribution from his college, should interrupt, and perhaps end, the great scholarly tradition which he did so much to sustain seemed to us quite appalling; indeed, unthinkable.

I am glad to say that, in consultation with University College, a way has been found of avoiding this. Plans for appointing a successor to Professor Turner are in hand, and for the next two or three academic years we, at the Academy, will assume the responsibility for funding the vital work of technical support for that post, hitherto given by Dr Cockle at University College, to whose staff he will, we are assured, in due course return. He will be very welcome as a member of the Academy's staff while he is with us, even though he will continue to work in his old quarters in Gower Street.

I have said a good deal about this because the peril to the Oxyrhynchus Project, now happily averted, is a very good example of how small but important areas of scholarship can be suddenly withered by the frost of economy to which all universities are now inevitably exposed. It is not for the Academy; even if it had the resources, to intervene in the painful but necessary processes by which universities exercise this [8] autonomy in a period of financial pressure. Unpleasant, often bitter, decisions are constantly having to be made, and they must be made by those whose duty and right it is to make them. What we can do, however, is so to guide our research grant policy as to conserve, so far as possible, small, endangered species of scholarship, where the quality is high; and invite universities, in reaching their decisions, to take note of this. Our resources are not great, but the sums involved are at times relatively small. I do not think our research grant policy over the next five years can be better guided than by giving priority to helping those specialities which may not be in fashion, or possess obvious and immediate social utility, or be in public view, but in which really distinguished work is being, or can be, done by scholars of high talent and gifts both of imagination and of learning, respect for which is one of the marks of a self-confident civilisation. Such

enterprises possess a national and international value out of all proportion to their size and cost.

10. In this connection I should like to remind you that some twenty years ago, under the Presidency of Sir George Clark, a committee was set up by the Council of the Academy to enquire, with the help of a grant generously provided by the Rockefeller Foundation, into the condition of research in the humanities and social sciences in the United Kingdom. Continuing under the Presidency of Sir Maurice Bowra, this committee, on which I was privileged to serve, took evidence from British scholars and representatives of learned institutions, and several of its members travelled to a number of European countries and to the United States, to enable the committee to inform itself about the activities, the successes and failures, of research institutes and other facilities for humane learning at home and abroad. The committee produced a report which was published and put on sale at a modest price. It was not uncritical of existing arrangements, and it made recommendations. It favoured, as far as I can remember, the setting up of relatively small research units in university towns – or at any rate, not too far from them – as it was thought that connection with universities would be of value both to the researchers and to the universities. These recommendations were not, I think, implemented, largely for the usual financial reasons; but the report played a crucial part in inducing the Treasury to make its first substantial grant to the Academy, which enabled our Major Projects, and a good many other of our research activities, to [9] be set up, and marked a most important stage in the progress of the Academy – certainly the most important single step in its development since the First World War.

It seems to me that further progress along these lines could be made if the funds were available. Our new Secretary spoke to me some months ago about the possibility of following the example of the Royal Society and of the various Research Councils in the natural and social sciences, in setting up research posts in fields of knowledge which seemed to them growing points, or in special need of original thought. And, indeed, one or two Fellows of the Academy made similar informal suggestions in the past year or two. It seems to me improbable that we shall in the foreseeable future dispose of the kind of resources that would enable us to emulate the great scientific establishments, which dispose of funds far vaster

than we can hope to get. Nevertheless, it is perhaps not altogether beyond the bounds of possibility that, if a milder financial climate ever sets in in this country, we might be enabled to create, if not Professorships, at any rate research posts at the level of Readerships and under, of a temporary and rotating kind, to be attached to universities or other centres of higher learning; to do this if – and, of course, only if – some topic in the humanities appears to us to offer promise of rich harvest if adequately cultivated, and if, and only if, exceptionally gifted investigators can be encouraged to undertake such work.

At any rate, it seems to me right that we should allow our imaginations to dwell upon such possibilities, for this is surely one of the two principal purposes – with that of giving due recognition to intellectual distinction – for which we exist. I can here only express the hope that opportunities of progress in this direction may soon occur, as they may, if only the Academy sets itself to look for them with a will. As was said by someone² not long ago, ‘Miracles do occur, but one has to work for them very, very hard.’

11. There is one thing of which I feel sure: there is no man better fitted to appreciate the value of the disinterested pursuit of humane knowledge than my successor, Sir Kenneth Dover, who is a shining example of what can be achieved in this field, a Greek scholar of the purest water. His achievements are recognised in every part of the world in which classical scholarship is known. I have no doubt that the Academy will, under his most benign, enlightened and distinguished Presidency, advance securely towards the advancement of learning.

29 June 1978

² Chaim Weizmann: see PI 95, UD 125, etc. The exact wording varies.