

From the Archive

**The 1949 'Palace
Revolution' at the
British Academy**

At the meeting of the British Academy's Council on Wednesday 6 February 1949, an early item of business was the 'Secretaryship'. The minutes record:

The President reported that at an informal meeting of some of the members of the Council who had sent in suggestions on the subject it was decided to recommend that Dr. Mortimer Wheeler be invited to accept the appointment.

After discussion this recommendation was unanimously approved. ...

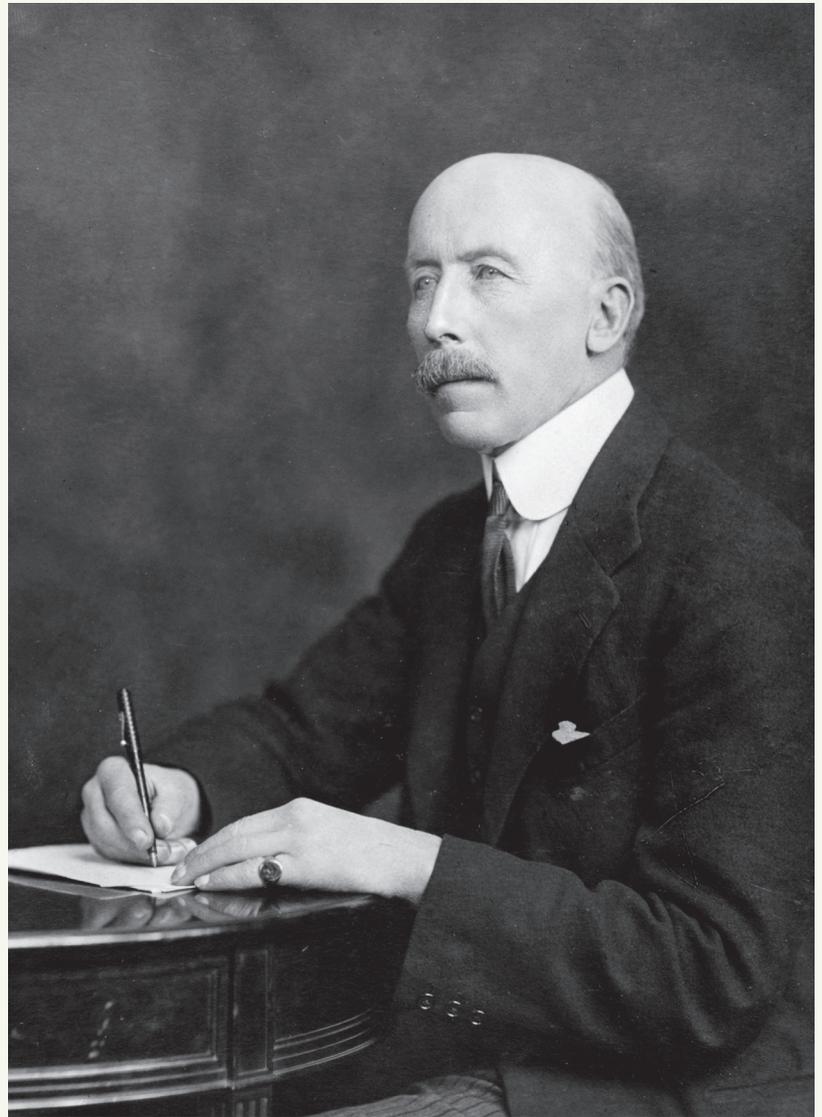
It was further suggested that Sir Frederic Kenyon should continue as Joint-Secretary for a time to carry on the more formal business of the office and to assist Dr. Wheeler in taking over the more responsible duties.

The man identified as the appropriate successor to take over the running of the British Academy, Mortimer Wheeler FBA, later wrote:

Exactly what happened I cannot record at first hand; I was not at that time a member of the Council and had indeed been an absentee-Fellow overseas since my election. But reliable report had it that at a meeting of the Council early in 1949 there had been a Palace Revolution. Sir Charles [Webster], unable to contain his impatience, had demanded uninhibitedly a change in the Academy's administration, and Kenyon with characteristic coolness and courtesy had taken the point. He expressed his intention to resign the Secretaryship forthwith and to look round for a successor.

Wheeler wrote those words in 1970, in *The British Academy, 1949–1968* – his own rather self-congratulatory memoir of his time as Secretary. His characterisation of what happened as being a 'Palace Revolution' is a little unfair to his predecessor, Kenyon, in that the minutes of the previous Council meeting in October 1948 clearly record that 'The Secretary asked permission to retire from the Secretaryship, or at any rate from the more responsible part of its duties'. So there was no actual need for a *coup d'état* to replace the head of the administration.

But the British Academy certainly needed shaking up. Sir Frederic Kenyon, 86 years old at the time of the February 1949 Council meeting, had been Secretary of the British Academy since 1930 – when he had taken on the role as he was about

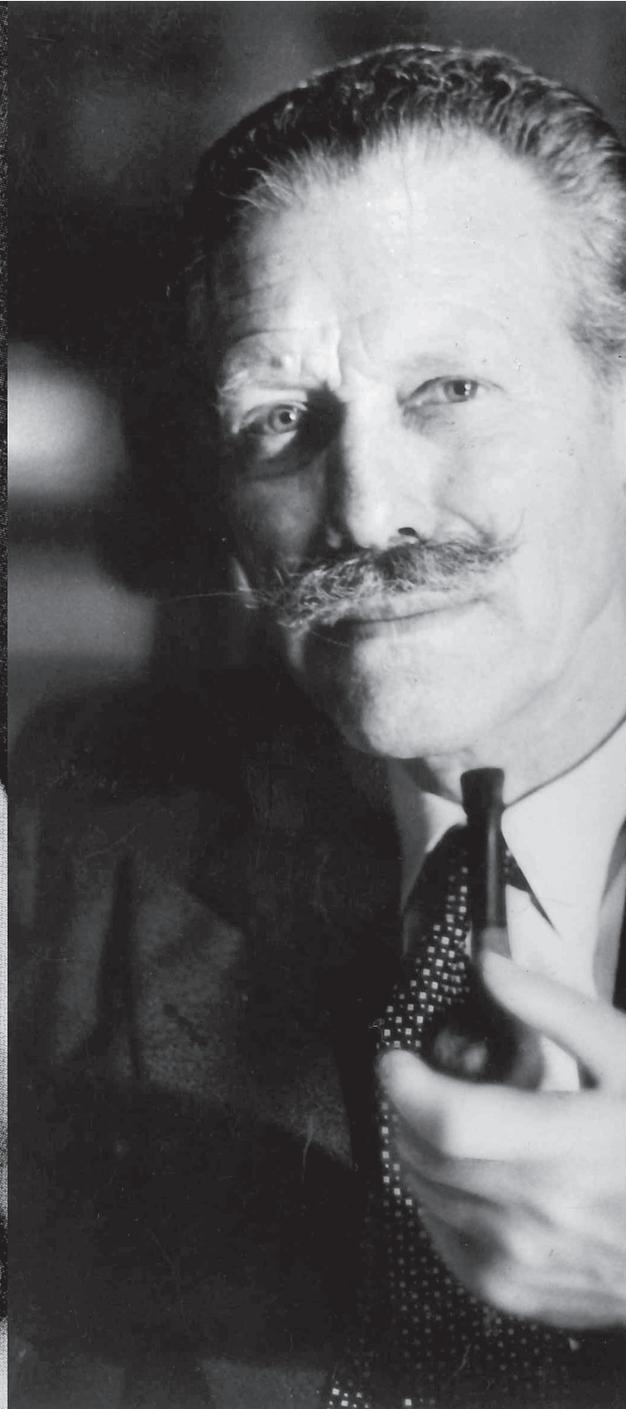


Frederic Kenyon FBA, Secretary of the British Academy 1930–1949.

to retire as Director of the British Museum. It can be conceded that fate had been unkind to Kenyon: the Academy's modest annual grant from government had been cut during the economic crises of the 1930s and then again during the Second World War. But in truth Kenyon lacked the networking skill and showmanship of the first Secretary, Sir Israel Gollancz, who had conjured resources for the Academy in its earliest years. And the perception had grown that the institution lacked vitality. Indeed, in his July 1948 Presidential Address, Sir Idris Bell acknowledged the existence of a 'criticism brought against the Academy, both from within and from without our ranks, ... that our publications in the field of scholarship are wholly insufficient, indeed, unworthy of a body like ours; it has even been unkindly

suggested that the main official function of Fellows is to write obituary notices of one another.' Or as Wheeler later put it bluntly: 'In effect, the Academy was at a standstill'.

But a saviour was at hand. To quote Wheeler again, 'In the ranks of the Council there was one member who saw more clearly than his colleagues: an honest, sociable, fearless, scholarly, internationally-minded son of Lancashire, the historian Charles Webster. That name should be written large in the annals of the Academy.' Sir Charles Webster had himself only been appointed to join the British Academy's Council at the October 1948 meeting, but he clearly threw himself into the pressing issue of the Secretaryship. According to his obituarist (Sir George Clark FBA, who was a witness to the events),



Charles K. Webster FBA, President of the British Academy 1950-1954, and Mortimer Wheeler FBA, Secretary of the British Academy 1949-1968, shared an interest in reforming the British Academy – and in pipe smoking.



for this 'one piece of business which was necessarily done behind closed doors ... Sir Charles Webster was the driving force. His cheerful energy, his considerateness and his single-minded attention to the interests of the Academy earned their reward.'

The reward was Mortimer Wheeler. After service in the Eighth Army commanding an anti-aircraft brigade, followed by senior archaeological responsibilities in India, Wheeler had returned to London in 1948. The Council meeting on 1 June 1949 began with a discussion of the initial length of Wheeler's term of office and of his salary, and confirmation that Sir Frederic Kenyon would continue as Joint-Secretary 'for a time'. Then Wheeler joined the meeting. He later wrote, 'looking round the table, [I] had no difficulty in seeing what was wrong.' The minutes reveal that Wheeler had come armed with a list of 'three matters which he had in mind', and which reveal his priorities for change. He wanted 'an Advisory Committee of Fellows in or near London to assist him', which was clearly intended to provide more incisive decision-making than Council itself provided; a membership of five was agreed – including Webster. Wheeler wanted to increase the staffing of the Academy – which at that time consisted of just one person, a Miss Doris Pearson. And he wanted 'an urgent application to the Treasury for an increased grant'.

The Advisory Committee met on 23 June 1949, and it drafted an agenda for change. It recommended fresh approaches to the Academy's traditional lecture programme and the publication of papers in the annual *Proceedings of the British Academy*. It raised Miss Pearson's salary, and lined up the recruitment of a Miss Molly Myers to assist her (Wheeler 'stole' her from an Egyptologist in Oxford). The Committee bemoaned 'the inadequacy of the present rooms of the Academy' in Burlington Gardens, and agreed to explore the possibility of a better home within Burlington House. But the item that was 'discussed at length' was 'the present financial position of the Academy': how could the Academy position itself better to get more money from the Treasury, either as a channel for funds to other learned societies, or for the support of 'specific pieces of work'.

When the full Council met again for a 'special meeting' on 13 July, it adopted the recommendations of the Advisory Com-

mittee almost verbatim. And the minutes reveal that the designation of Sir Frederic Kenyon as still being Joint-Secretary had already been abandoned – though he retained for now his position as Treasurer.

The changing of the guard was complete when Council put forward Webster to be the new President of the British Academy in the summer of 1950. And this time it was Mortimer Wheeler who had done the plotting. 'I was still a new boy at the Academy, and conferred privately with my oldest friend, Sir Alfred Clapham, who was a member of the Council. I put to him the name of Sir Charles Webster, leader of what I have called the Palace Revolution, on the double or alternative plea that Webster was plainly a man of courage and initiative, and/or that he would be something of a nuisance otherwise than in the presidential chair; to which he was duly and very properly elected.' Wheeler and Webster 'became the closest of friends', and together they 'shared revolutionary ideas' and 'hatched dreadful plots'.

Mortimer Wheeler's time as Secretary of the British Academy, from 1949 to 1968, did prove to be transformative. The Academy's events and publications activities blossomed. Its ability to fund research, particularly in the humanities, expanded dramatically. And it was eventually able to move to better accommodation in Burlington House.

According to our current President, Sir David Cannadine, 'The "Palace Revolution" of early 1949 is truly a milestone in the history of the British Academy, which owes Mortimer Wheeler a great deal. The issues he faced are recurring ones, and we are determined to meet them with the same energy and ambition in our time as he did in his own day.'

Text by James Rivington