

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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3 July 1980

THE two most important events in the history of the British Academy during the last twelve months were the signing of the cultural agreement between the Academy, the Social Science Research Council and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the Symposium on 'The Emergence of Man' jointly organized by the Academy and the Royal Society.

Until a year or two ago it seemed unlikely that friendly and fruitful relations would be established between Western scholarship and that quarter of the human race which lives in China, except under conditions stringently limited by the Chinese. That situation is being transformed. It was clear to the Academy delegation which visited China last October that the government of China is now highly critical of some of the most distinctive features of the 'cultural revolution', notably the revolution's hostility towards historical studies and methodical education. Not only our delegation, but also those of us who welcomed the Chinese delegation to Britain in the spring, were deeply impressed by the dramatic terms in which the current repudiation of the cultural revolution is expressed, by the ease with which a community of approach to the problems of scholarship can be established, and by the salutary shocks received by those of us whose assumptions about China were too rigid and simplistic. The agreement was formally signed here on 16 May. Our gratitude is due to all those who worked so hard for it, and not least to Sir Alec Cairncross, who took over the leadership of our delegation to China at very short notice through the illness of Sir Isaiah Berlin.

The joint symposium with the Royal Society took place on 12 and 13 March. It is sad that Professor McBurney, who took a prominent part in its organization, did not live to see the lecture room at the Royal Society filled to capacity, a meeting-ground for archaeology, anthropology, anatomy, and genetics. The papers were contributed by speakers from many nations, some of the evidence they presented was fresh from the ground, and fundamentally new interpretations of the evidence were discussed in

terms intelligible to scientist and scholar alike. No one who was there will ever forget Mrs Leakey's photograph of a certain pattern of protohominid footprints which irresistibly challenges any historian to construct a hypothesis—one might say, a scenario—which would explain it. Another such symposium, on the psychological mechanisms of language, for which Professor John Lyons is the organizer on our side, is planned for 1981.

We began the year with misgivings about our financial prospects. When the budgets of research councils, in company with many other categories of public expenditure, were being cut, it seemed improbable that historical, literary, and philosophical studies would be let off lightly. In the event, we have every reason to be very well content with the allocation made to us by the Department of Education and Science. It has not only absolved us from making any reduction in our normal activities but has even permitted us to implement an extension of activities already planned.

Among our Schools and Institutes abroad, the Institute at Amman has now achieved independent status. You will not, I think, expect me to explain why the work of our Institutes in Tehran and Kabul has been severely curtailed.

In addition to our exchange agreement with China, two more agreements have been signed: with Spain and with East Germany. In this connection I must emphasize that neither in Western nor in Eastern Europe do visits in accordance with formal exchange agreements represent the total of our scholarly contacts. For Eastern Europe we must add the grants made to British scholars attending conferences, especially in Poland. As for Western Europe, the great majority of visits are in fact assisted by grants from the Small Grants Fund or from our general Research Funds. During the last year more than fifty such grants have been made for visits to France alone, independently of our exchange agreements with the CNRS and the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

Coming nearer home, it is particularly gratifying that our grant allows for the rent which we must pay for the new premises into which, as the Secretary has told us, we may hope to move by the end of 1981. When the possibility of acquiring new premises arose, we were advised that it would be necessary for us to petition the Privy Council for an amendment to Article 1 of our Charter, which, as it stood, forbade us to take and hold lands and tenements exceeding an annual value of £2,000. Such a petition obviously required a General Meeting and did not lie within the competence of Council. We were however advised that Council could ask the

Privy Council for an amended Bye-law permitting it to summon General Meetings other than the Annual General Meeting. This was granted, and the first such General Meeting was held on 26 March; and it agreed to petition for an amendment to the Charter. The provision for more than one General Meeting a year is thus a spin-off from our increasing dissatisfaction with our present premises. It is, in my view, extremely useful to have such provision made in our Bye-laws, but it is certainly not Council's intention, and I do not imagine that it ever will be, to call General Meetings except for rare and compelling reasons.

We are not wholly dependent on the DES, and I must acknowledge a particular debt of gratitude to the Leverhulme Trust, which has agreed to extend the Leverhulme Visiting Professorships scheme for a further period on a new basis: two such professorships each year will be tenable in countries other than China and those East European countries with which we have exchange agreements. In addition, the Leverhulme Trust has agreed to fund two visiting Fellowships each year in South-East Asian studies, in association with our Institute in South-East Asia.

I began this address by picking out two events as the most important of the last year. I do not, however, imagine that when you converse about the Academy's affairs during the next few hours or the next few days you will devote more time to China or the Emergence of Man than to the item of business which immediately preceded my address. Concerning as it did the conduct of a distinguished scholar outside the realm of scholarship, it was, I imagine, the most bitterly divisive question ever to be debated by our Annual General Meeting. On the rightness or wrongness of our decision I do not propose to say one word. It is my business to defend that decision against any criticism which may be voiced by press or public, and I regard it as inappropriate to express my own opinion so long as I am President. But in speaking to a gathering of people every one of whom is concerned with some aspect or other of human history the bland pretence that nothing out of the ordinary has been stirring the Academy during the last six months would be worse than inappropriate; it would be anti-historical.

It so happens that the case which we debated, irrespective of personalities and particularities, raises large issues, some of them quite familiar to Council, the Overseas Policy Committee and other committees of the Academy in connections which at first glance might seem to have little to do with the conduct of a Fellow. I am going to say something about those issues.

Foremost among them is the simple question: What is the Academy? A few years ago, meeting in the street a newly-elected Fellow, I said, 'Congratulations!', and he replied, with a narrow-eyed smile, 'Ah! On election to the club, you mean'. The joke made me shiver (jokes sometimes do), and I was sorry that the analogy with a club had even entered his head. We don't elect people because we like them or expel them because we dislike them. Equally, election to a Fellowship is not just the equivalent of a degree or decoration. One of our Bye-laws imposes upon us certain duties, which now entail the administration of a substantial amount of taxpayers' money.

Yet we are not an organ of the state, and our relations with the state contain all the subtleties, inconsistencies and uncertainties which seem to most people brought up in this country part of the order of nature but have never prevailed for long in more than a fraction of the inhabited world. Of all the barriers of mutual incomprehension which divide one kind of country from another, none is more striking than that between countries which recognize and punish an offence called 'slandering the state' or 'insulting the nation' and countries which regard such a legal concept as absurd. Most of us have spent many a happy hour slandering the state, while administering the disbursement of the two million pounds a year with which it now entrusts us. That is characteristic of a civilized society, and incomprehensible to the uncivilized.

If there is anyone anywhere who expects us to do what we are told to do by the Foreign Office or by any other organ of government, that is to be regretted, but there is little we can do about it except avoid any gratuitous fortification of such of an assumption. It so happens that the Foreign Office is unfailingly helpful to us; but it is not impossible to imagine circumstances in which we might insist on doing for academic reasons something which there were strong non-academic reasons for not doing. Occasions have also arisen in the past, and still arise, on which one interest or another wishes the Academy to adopt a posture of protest against the government, which is assumed, whatever its political complexion, to be, *qua* government, philistine. Now, it is clear that a vigilance which leads to timely representations can be very effective, and an excellent example is afforded by the evidence given to the Serpell Committee on archaeological aspects of the Ordnance Survey. There are, however, many issues of public concern, affecting libraries and museums, upon which an agreed Academy view may be unattainable; and there are many causes about which our indignation is solicited. We have to

be a little choosy: prompt to object, certainly when the objection is generated within one or more of our own Sections, but wary of indiscriminate opposition to all economies and rationalizations.

The burden of my argument is that an academy is not a club, or a learned society, or a degree-awarding body, or an organ of administration, but *sui generis*, and if we value our independence we cannot escape the consequent burden of working out our own principles of conduct. Indeed, we have borne it this afternoon.

So much for our relations with the world outside. I want in conclusion to say something about our relations with one another. During the last six months I think that my most melancholy experience has been receiving letters which contain sentences beginning with the words, 'I can't understand how . . .' or 'I don't understand why . ..'. My immediate impulse was moralistic: it's our *job* to understand. When I caught myself framing the words, 'I don't understand how anyone can say without shame, "I don't understand"', I judged it was time to stop moralizing. But the point is: should we not take it for granted that no two people have exactly the same priorities? And is it so hard to live with other people's priorities?

One advantage—possibly illusory; I don't know for sure—of preoccupation with ancient history is that distance and the absence of involvement can sharpen and clarify issues. To that end I propose to use a story which was part of classical Athenian tradition. The story may be false, but the fact that it was told is important. The story is that during the Persian invasion of Greece one Athenian citizen, exercising his normal right as a member of the citizen-assembly, decried the possibility of effective resistance and argued that surrender to the Persians should be seriously considered. His fellow-citizens picked up stones and pelted him until he was dead. When the news spread, their wives gathered at his house and stoned to death his wife and children. This story is not told by an anti-Athenian historian seeking to debunk the Athenians' regard for the virtues of their ancestors; nor is it told with shame, as a warning, but with pride, as a stimulus to defence of the city's independence. It is abhorrent to me personally, and what makes it so is not the impact of rock upon bone (to which any student of human history must soon become inured), but the punishment of a man for saying openly what he truly thought and the punishment of innocent people (his family) for someone else's act. Some of you may find it abhorrent for a different reason, the clear implication that law and justice are not ends but means, and may therefore on occasion be discarded when better means

present themselves (a notion, incidentally, which we often accept without question when mercy is the alternative means). About seventy-five years after the alleged incident, Socrates, according to another story, found himself for an awkward twenty-four hours chairman of the assembly and confronted with the noisy claim that the citizen-assembly had an absolute right to do whatever it wished. He refused none the less to put to the vote a proposal contrary to law. An interesting range of different priorities is embodied in those data about Athenian tradition and our reactions to them. I would like to think that none of us has any difficulty in understanding any of those priorities.