

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
BY SIR MAURICE BOWRA

11 *July* 1962

IN the past year the British Academy has lost in Sir Charles Webster not merely a past President and a scholar of high distinction and wide renown, but a wise counsellor and a most loyal friend. As President, he did much to extend our activities and to make them known both at a national and at an international level, to form closer and more lively relations with other learned bodies, and to make some useful changes in our own constitution. To the end of his life, even when his health was beginning to fail and he could no longer rely on his former unquenchable robustness, he kept a friendly, even fatherly eye on us and was always ready with sage advice or new ideas for varying our routine or increasing our usefulness. He could be delightfully outspoken in his criticisms, but he never hurt even the most sensitive feelings, and his complete honesty was matched by a generous heart and a helpful sympathy for the work of other men. He was not one to confine himself to the society of scholars. He liked to mix with men of affairs and of action, and from his knowledge of them he shed his own powerful illumination on the past. It was true to his character that in his will he left, subject to a life-interest, his fortune to the Academy for purposes of travel abroad and entertainment at home. Both causes were dear to his heart. He liked to converse with scholars at international gatherings, and he liked to entertain them in his own country. When in due course the Charles Webster Fund is established, it will be a delightful reminder of this powerful and productive scholar whose abundant humanity cheered and encouraged many other scholars, of whom by no means all were of his own age or worked in his own field. He kept to the end the simplicity and the confidence of that world before 1914 in which he was born and bred and whose fine qualities he embodied in the most human and forthright way.

For the past seven years the Academy has been enabled by the generosity of an anonymous benefactor to hold an annual dinner at which the attendance has steadily increased since the start. This benefactor has handsomely offered to extend his gift for another seven years, and at the same time he has agreed to allow me

to reveal his identity. To Dr. A. L. Goodhart we are incalculably beholden for something which has been of the greatest benefit to us both as individuals and as a corporate society. Before his gift Sections might meet separately in a tea-shop to discuss matters of immediate interest, but such occasions were seldom enlivening or even beneficial. The annual dinners have on the contrary been unusually enjoyable and, more than this, they have served two special purposes. First, they enable Fellows to meet one another at a more informal level than is possible at lectures or meetings of Sections. Names with which in some cases we have been familiar only from books and periodicals take on flesh and blood and incite a more human and more intimate interest. In this heart-easing conviviality specialists in one subject talk freely to specialists in another, and both parties are enriched by it. Secondly, we have been able in a modest way to make some of our activities known to persons who have hitherto been inadequately informed about them and may even have wondered what they are. A learned society like ours needs friends who may not indeed share all our interests but think that it is right that we should exist, and for this they need information about us. The Academy has in the past been a little too ready to hide its light under a bushel, and though modesty is a becoming virtue, an excess of it tends in the end to depress rather than to cheer and unduly neglects that element of wordly wisdom which even scholarship needs in the struggle for survival. The annual dinner is a delightful means for breaking our customary unobtrusiveness and for allowing us to exchange in congenial circumstances our views of what we do and why we do it.

At the same time the Pilgrim Trust has, after a year's interval, renewed for three years its grant of £2,000 a year for the assistance of research. In the past this grant has been of the greatest value in helping a number of separate projects over a very wide field, and there is no doubt that it will be of equal value in the future. We have followed a policy of giving relatively small grants from it and have thereby enabled much to be done that might otherwise not have been attempted. Often enough even a small grant makes all the difference to a scholar pursuing a private project from limited resources. It may enable him to acquire photographs or photostats, to visit sites or museums or libraries abroad, to secure a certain measure of technical assistance in matters beyond his own scope, to carry out other minor tasks which would otherwise fall on his own purse. Moreover, the mere fact that a scholar has the support of the British

Academy means that his work is known to be reputable and necessary and he is less likely to fail when he appeals for support from other bodies able to give it. Even members of university staffs, who are expected to do research as part of their duties, do not easily get support from their universities, and are driven either to pay their own way, which may well be difficult, or to abandon what means a lot to them and is indeed one of the first calls on their time. We all know of cases in which admirable projects have been starved for lack of funds, and one of our aims is to try to prevent this, though we know that anything we can do is bound to be on a small scale. The various projects financed by the grant from the Pilgrim Trust have revealed how much good work is being done, often under hampering conditions, and how urgent is the need for a centralized system by which scholarly projects can be helped and encouraged and financed.

This whole question is treated in the report of our committee into the needs of research in the Humanities and the Social Sciences. This committee was set up by my predecessor Sir George Clark, who served on it throughout its deliberations and gave generously of his insight and his wisdom. It was financed by the Rockefeller Foundation, whose generosity enabled some of our members to visit not only a number of European countries but also the United States. The report, which was published last autumn by the Oxford University Press, was indeed a co-operative work, in which all the members of the committee had a part and in the end displayed a unanimity which concealed no compromises but genuinely reflected what, after long discussion, the individual members thought. We were much helped by our Secretary, Mr. R. H. Hill, whose unobtrusive efficiency averted the all-too-familiar perils which threaten the orderly presentation of a mass of disparate material. I am sure that other members of the committee shared my own experience in finding its meetings happy, instructive, and profitable. We discussed many matters with an easy frankness, did not hide our own preferences or doubts, and were ready to listen to arguments from each other and to adjust our own preconceptions to them. We realized that the claims of the Humanities cannot, financially speaking, be compared with those of Natural Science, which calls for elaborate and expensive apparatus and is often eager for quick results in immediate issues of technology or politics. But what struck us most forcibly and determined our conclusions is that in Great Britain research in the Humanities is far less well endowed than in France or Germany or Holland. In all of these countries a

central body finances the conduct and publication of scholarly work, initiates new projects, and enables co-operative schemes on a large scale to be put effectively into action without waiting for private benefactors or courageous publishers. A central body of this kind not only sees that the Humanities do not starve, but is able incidentally to avoid the wastage and neglect which are inevitable in our own haphazard methods. Our contention in the Report was that such a body is urgently needed in this country and that, if something of the kind is not started soon, irreparable damage will have been done and the study of the Humanities will fall lamentably behind that of other civilized countries. The case for such a central body is all the stronger at the present time when the huge expansion of educational facilities makes it more than ever necessary for proper attention to be paid to research, since research is the living centre from which knowledge at all levels ultimately flows and is indispensable if this knowledge is to be kept fresh and lively and inspiring and in touch with contemporary needs.

The publication of the Report coincided, as we had feared it might, with one of those all-too-common periods when our national economy, after promising happy prospects of immediate prosperity, is found to be in the doldrums and excites despondency and alarm, with the usual accompaniment of unwillingness to spend public money on more than the most obvious necessities of national survival. This was discouraging, but we felt that, since ours was a long-term project and we could afford to wait for its full results, we should none the less get into touch with the Treasury about it. A small deputation, consisting of Sir George Clark, Professor E. R. Dodds, the Secretary, and myself, saw Mr. Henry Brooke and some of his officials. They admitted generously that research was indeed indispensable to the study and teaching of the Humanities and had on the whole been neglected and could with good reason be helped. At the same time they pointed out that the Social Sciences were in a more privileged position than other branches of humane learning and could probably be left to their present resources. There is truth in this, and we did not deny it, though I am inclined to think that help given to the Social Sciences might still profit from the advice and help of some central research body. This is in no way inconsistent with the suggestions of the Treasury, and there we may happily leave it. Mr. Brooke then made a pertinent and important point. He suggested that there was in fact no need to create a new, independent, central body, such as we had

suggested in the Report, since the work could be done equally well and at considerably less expense in overheads by the British Academy itself. This was a point which the committee had considered at some length, and when it decided that there should be an independent body, it was largely from modesty and from a desire to avoid any imputation that we were primarily interested in looking after our own interests. But once Mr. Brooke made the proposal, its advantages were manifest. The British Academy could create an adequate machinery for such new tasks if it increased its staff and its premises, and to neither of these is there any insuperable obstacle. Indeed, as is well known not only to ourselves, our premises are already too small, and in the building which contains our offices there is plenty of space which could without difficulty be converted to extended uses. Coming from so high and impartial a source, Mr. Brooke's suggestion removed such doubts as we may have had about our own fitness to administer a research fund and we expressed our agreement with it.

These conversations were not only friendly, but encouraging, and though we recognized that we must not press our case too strongly and would be wise to wait until the Treasury had settled more urgent problems, we were not without hope of a successful outcome. In the meanwhile we held ourselves in patience for some months. Now, I am happy to say, good news has just reached us. The Treasury has announced its intention of giving to the British Academy for general research in the Humanities a starting figure of £25,000 a year with the intention of raising it soon to £50,000 a year. This is indeed a most satisfactory outcome of our efforts and a most welcome token of official appreciation of our work. We are all deeply indebted to Mr. Brooke and his officials for their generous grasp of our needs and their humane response to them. Our task now is to see that the money is fully and justly used. We must devise the right means for its existence to be known to scholars and for its fair and effective distribution. It must clearly be given where it is most urgently needed. We shall have to make some changes in our own administration so that this large and important new duty is carried out with due care and consideration. It is not for me to make suggestions at this moment, though naturally I have given some thought to the matter and hope to be ready before long with some proposals. Fortunately, we have already had some experience in dealing with the benefaction from the Pilgrim Trust, and this may help as a pilot scheme towards the far bigger scheme which now lies before us. I have no doubt that we shall

learn from experience and establish our own precedents and guiding rules, and I look forward with pleasurable excitement to the increased services to learning which are now in our power.

In our attention to important and urgent plans like that which I have just described it is easy to forget our own little problems, but there is one on which I must say a few words. It is obvious that in the world of learning different subjects will from time to time vary in the quantity and the quality of those who pursue them and that now one subject will make great strides, now another. This raises a local problem for ourselves. The Academy is divided into eleven Sections, which aim between them at covering the whole sphere of the Humanities. We are not tied to this number, and in recent years we have added at least one new Section. If a new subject arises and flourishes, we have a machinery ready to look after it. Nor do we insist that a Fellow shall be confined to one Section only. If he works in more than one field we recognize that he should belong to more than one Section and a large number of Fellows do. So far our machinery is adaptable and realistic. But a problem has arisen to which it is not easy to find a solution. As one subject flourishes, another may decline, and this raises two questions. First, it is clear that in some Sections the supply of good candidates for Fellowships is now so large as to create a bottle-neck, and to make it difficult for some good scholars to be elected until they have reached almost advanced years. This is much to be regretted. We need young Fellows, not merely because they deserve election, but because they know about fields of study which may be relatively unfamiliar to their elders and because they often represent the vanguard of new inquiries. Yet at present in some Sections they are almost inevitably condemned to wait for recognition until their work has reached a mature stage and perhaps lost some of its first fire and vigour. The natural answer is that we should elect them on their merits and pass over older people who deserve less well than they. Yet this is not easy. There is always a chance that some of us, deeply absorbed in our own spheres may know little about the younger generation, and sincerely feel that their elders, being better known to us, are actually better. At the least this calls for a close scrutiny of suggestions for Fellowships and the recognition that, as we grow older, we may be cut off from certain developments in our own subjects, and should therefore keep our eyes open for those who are working in less familiar and less exploited fields.

This raises a second question. Since there is an undoubted bottle-neck in one or two Sections, should not the total membership of the Academy be increased? This has happened more than once in our history, and our total of 200 Fellows, excluding Senior Fellows, is of course much smaller than that, for instance, of the Royal Society, which has in fact no fixed total but controls its membership by electing a fixed number of new Fellows every year. This is clearly a matter to which we must give serious thought, but at the start we should be unwise to come to a quick decision. It would be most undesirable if the Academy were, by increasing its numbers, to lower its standards. Other societies have done so, often with regrettable results, and have in consequence lost much of their former prestige. It may be that in the end we shall think it right to do so, especially as the creation of new universities and the expansion of old in this country may mean that the total number of well-qualified scholars is likely to grow. Yet I am not convinced that this is the right thing to do now, and I must record my doubts. It is true that in a few subjects the number of scholars with good claims to be made Fellows of the Academy is growing, but it is also true that in other subjects it seems to be decreasing, and, so far as I can see, the total number of qualified candidates is not in fact bigger than it was ten or fifteen years ago. In so delicate a matter I can do no more than offer a few words of advice. First, if a Section is really convinced that it has a growing number of proved candidates, it should put their names forward with its full and considered opinion of them. There is no need to think that this will be thought greedy or grasping, so long as a good case is made. Secondly, if a Section thinks that it is short of candidates, it should be perfectly frank about it and not think that it ought to put forward names in which it has no great confidence, just to keep itself going. In fact in the last two or three years at least some Sections have exercised a noteworthy self-control in this matter, and they are much to be praised for their loyalty to their standards. Thirdly, the Council has in the last resort to decide between competing candidates. It takes great care with this and does its best to base its decisions on full information, but of course its chief source of information comes from the Sections themselves. May I suggest that this could be fuller than it sometimes is, since the more the Council knows about the candidates, the more likely it is to make the right decisions about them?

With this speech I conclude my four years of Presidency of the British Academy, and though I do it with relief, I do it also with

regret. I have found the work much more exciting than I expected, and at times enthralling. I am delighted to have been concerned with the opening of two more British Institutes oversea and with the publication and happy issue of our report on research in the Humanities. I have also much enjoyed the more ordinary activities such as taking the chair at some remarkably good lectures and trying to improve, by various means, our methods of supporting scholarship. I have throughout received unstinting and ungrudging help from all our staff. Though it is small and inadequately housed, it does its work with unfailing good temper, skill, and imagination. It is particularly good at foreseeing possible obstacles and surmounting them before the President is even aware of them. My greatest debt is to our Secretary, whose gift for turning ideas into fact awakes my admiration and my delight and with whom I have enjoyed many hours of enlivening and enlightening companionship. I am hardly less indebted to Miss D. Pearson and Miss M. Myers and all who work for us in the office. I am confident that my successor will find nothing to complain of in them and very much to admire and to praise. I wish him as happy a time as I have had myself and good luck in his undertakings.