PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By SIR H. I. BELL

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IT is, I imagine, usual for a recently elected President of the British Academy to feel some trepidation as he rises to deliver his first Presidential Address, but few, if any, of my predecessors can have had equal cause with myself for apprehension. Indeed, when I consider the illustrious names which grace the Presidential roll I am tempted to ask myself what I am doing in this galley. Λαμπάδια ἔχοντες διαδώσουσιν ἀλλήλοις; but what if one of the torch-bearers should fail in his task and allow the torch which he carries to go out? I can but resolve so to bear myself in the office as not avoidably to betray the confidence you have reposed in me.

When Sir John Clapham gave his last address in 1945 he had just been re-elected to the office of President for the coming year. There seemed then no reason to doubt that he would again appear in this Chair, to deliver the annual address, in 1946; but that was not to be, and by his sudden and premature death on 29 March 1946 the Academy, in common with his College and University, lost a man, distinguished no less for conspicuous practical ability than for scholarship, who had served it faithfully and well. Elected when the war had already begun, he was called upon, owing to the exceptional circumstances, to serve for a longer period, no less than six years, than falls to the lot of most Presidents; but, though a man of many commitments, he cheerfully gave his unstinted service, a service the more valuable because of his experience in administration and practical affairs. His ability in this sphere might well have led him to choose a public career, but he preferred the life of a scholar, and, apart from a comparatively short period as Professor of Economics at Leeds, he maintained a continuous connexion with his own University of Cambridge, in which he was the first occupant of the Chair of Economic History, and for ten years was Vice-Provost of King's College. A good climber and an active member of the Alpine Club, excelling in games, a strong and efficient chairman of any committee, and for years a lay preacher, he was a man of many parts. Fortunately he lived to complete his great history of the Bank of England and his *Economic History of Modern Britain*, and to see the auspicious

beginning of the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, of which he was joint editor with Eileen Power.

Clapham was not the only eminent Cambridge economist among our Fellows to die since the last Presidential Address was given. In Lord Keynes the University lost a man whose reputation in this sphere was international, and who happily combined a singularly clear and masterly grasp of economic theory with a gift of lucid exposition, administrative talents of a very high order, and an exceptional aesthetic sensibility, which enabled him to render important services to the cause of the arts in Britain.

Another loss is that of Sir Herbert Richmond, who, after a distinguished career in the Navy, turned to the academic world and became Professor of Naval History at Cambridge, and later Master of Downing College. He also was a many-sided man, a talented draughtsman, a witty and brilliant conversationalist, the wielder of a pungent pen, and one who obtained a high rank alike as a practical sailor and administrator and as a writer on strategy and naval history. Endowed with a clear and critical intellect, he hated loose thinking, and could express his dislike with a trenchancy which must have cleared the air in many a controversy.

The losses which Cambridge and with it the British Academy have suffered in the sphere of history are indeed serious. Two occupants of the Chair of Medieval History, Professor Previté-Orton, for many years editor of the *English Historical Review*, and co-editor of the *Cambridge Mediaeval History*, who upheld a rigid ideal of exact scholarship, and his successor, Professor Brooke, particularly distinguished by his contributions to ecclesiastical history and with Previté-Orton co-editor of the *Cambridge Mediaeval History*, have died during the last year. Better known in the wide world than either was Professor Coulton, that learned medievalist and doughty opponent in any dispute, who might perhaps not inaptly be called *malleus clericorum*, so stoutly did he assail what he regarded as ecclesiastical perversions of history. The truth which he saw in these controversies was often not the whole truth, but it was rarely anything other than truth so far as it went, and opponents who ventured to dispute his facts were apt to find themselves in trouble, whatever justification they might have for challenging his general conclusions. Lastly, Professor Chadwick may not inappropriately be referred to here, so important and indeed epoch-making were his contributions to the history of literary development. Oxford historical

scholarship has suffered the loss of Sir Charles Oman, who had been a Fellow of the Academy since 1905; and since I began the writing of this Address comes the news that yet another eminent historian has been taken from us. Sir John Lloyd, of whom it would be no exaggeration to say that he had put Welsh historical scholarship on an entirely new footing, had carried far into the eighties of his life the zest and vigour and the intellectual fitness of youth, and had quite recently undertaken to act as consulting editor of the projected Dictionary of Welsh Biography.

In Professor Laird the Academy lost a Fellow who ranked high as a philosopher, a witty and productive writer on philosophic subjects, particularly in the sphere of ethics and the history of philosophy. Another outstanding philosopher whose death we deplore is Professor A. E. Taylor, well known for his valuable contributions to Platonic studies. Had Sir John Clapham lived to address us in 1946 it would have fallen to his lot to speak of him, as of Lord Keynes and others whose deaths were recorded in last year's report. One or two of these I must here mention, G. J. Turner, a learned legal historian, honourably distinguished for his work on the Year Books; Buckland, another eminent lawyer; A. G. Little, erudite and much-loved medievalist, *anima naturaliter Franciscana* as he might be called, whose memory his friends will long cherish with gratitude and affection; and Mackail, a humanist indeed, of a singularly gracious and attractive personality, to the reading, as an undergraduate, of whose *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology* and *Life of William Morris* I personally owe a great deal of both enjoyment and profit. Of one deceased Fellow, my friend and colleague Robin Flower, I cannot but speak with special feeling. His active mind and boundless energy enabled him to excel in many spheres. Poet, critic, charming prose-writer and lecturer, Celtic scholar, medievalist, palaeographer, with a wide and discriminating knowledge of English and other literatures, and an inspired translator, he seemed to have been specially chosen by destiny to produce that definitive history of Irish literature to the preparation of which he devoted himself for many years; but it was not given him to accomplish his task, and all that remains is the outline, I had almost said the programme, of his great undertaking.

A word or two should, I feel, be said about two or three Corresponding Fellows whose deaths have occurred recently. Two who were known to me personally were Ulrich Wilcken, the German, and Joseph Bidez, the Belgian. There is, I am sure,

no papyrologist in the world who does not feel a personal gratitude to Wilcken. He was not only himself the most eminent scholar in his own field; he was an ideal leader and director of papyrological studies, generous in help and encouragement to younger men, observing in his own work the most rigid standards of accurate scholarship but always reticent of unfavourable criticism towards anyone whom he saw to be making honest, however fumbling and uncertain, efforts to master the art of decipherment. I have always remembered, as exemplifying the internationalism of true scholarship, the remark made to me by a French friend, who, commenting on the happy mutual amity of papyrologists in general, added: 'I attribute it largely to the influence of Wilcken; he has always been such a perfect gentleman.' Of Bidez, another personal friend, I think with gratitude and admiration for his profound scholarship, his critical discrimination, and his unvaryingly generous kindness. I must mention also that great palaeographer, known to me less intimately, Professor Rand, who did so much to carry on the traditions of his master, Traube. This Address was already finished when the death was announced of yet another Corresponding Fellow, Professor Capart of Brussels, a distinguished Egyptologist to whose vision and enthusiasm was mainly due the establishment of the Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, an institution which has been and is of immense importance for Egyptological and papyrological studies.

As recorded in the Annual Report, the maximum number of Ordinary Fellows has been raised during the year to 175. As by resolution of the Annual General Meeting not more than five elections over and above those necessitated by death or resignation may be made in any one year, the full complement of Fellows will not be reached for some time. Meantime I must extend a hearty welcome to the fourteen Fellows elected to-day. Several Presidents have commented on the average age of newly elected Fellows; more than one has expressed the hope that the Academy in considering its elections would look for young blood. I cannot doubt that the suggestion is a good one, and rejoice to think that on the whole there has been a tendency in recent years to elect a larger number of comparatively young Fellows; though, of course, it would be regrettable if we were to discontinue the practice of filling some vacancies by the choice of older scholars who for one reason or another have not earlier received the honour of election. I find that, if my arithmetic is to be trusted, the average age of the Fellows elected to-day

amounts to a little under fifty-seven. This is a higher figure than was noted in 1944 by Sir John Clapham, namely 53·6, but I think he would have found it, in his own word, 'encouraging', for the list includes one Fellow of under forty, three more of under fifty, and again three more of under sixty.

When Sir John Clapham gave his last address in 1945 we were living in what he happily called 'a state of three-quarters peace'. The war in Europe was over, but hostilities continued in Asia and seemed likely to go on for months. The general assault on Japan was being prepared, and the atomic bomb had not yet been dropped on Hiroshima. The explosion of that small missile did more than destroy a great city; it brought home to men everywhere, as not even the previous horrors of the war had done, the extreme fragility of civilization and the likelihood that the powers over nature now in man's possession, unless controlled by a corresponding increase in his wisdom, may end by destroying civilized life, if not humanity itself.

Sir John Clapham, though he nursed no extravagant hopes, could at least look forward to giving his next address 'in a state of such total peace as six or more years of war may render possible'. The peace came; but it has brought disappointment. We have realized that it is easier to destroy than to rebuild; that we may dissipate in a few years material and spiritual treasures which it will take decades, if not centuries, to restore. Famine and misery have outlived the war which begot them; shortages in the necessaries of life—housing, food, clothes, fuel—continue to be acute in most European countries; in some, including our own, they have even been intensified. The paper shortage, which during the war was so serious a handicap to scholarship and education, is still a major problem. This is indeed a matter which concerns us closely and on which some action by the Academy might be advisable. Still more serious than these material difficulties, even than the lack of paper, are the spiritual results of the war. The unity which won victory for the associated nations has not outlived its occasion: mutual fears, suspicions, jealousies, and animosities embitter international relations, and already there are ominous signs that the Great Powers, too exhausted to contemplate immediate hostilities, are at least taking position for a third world war which, all agree, there is little likelihood that civilization could survive.

In such a world what place is there for a body like ours and for the interests which it represents? None at all, some would

assure us. Scholarship, learning, humane letters are doubtless an admirable adjunct to life in periods of peace and security; now they are an irrelevance. Leave your scholarly seclusion, these voices adjure us: while the ship of humanity is in waters so perilous there is no time for your studies; only such activities as have a practical bearing on the problems of the day and will help us to avert the coming catastrophe can be tolerated.

I do not think any Fellow of the Academy is likely to subscribe to such a view. Even if the malady of civilization be as grave as the diagnosis makes it, indeed all the more if the position is in truth desperate, Academies like ours call for our unhesitating support. Who can estimate fully the debt we owe to those fugitives from the unquiet contemporary world who, in monastic communities or remote villas and provincial towns, while ancient civilization and the Roman Empire were falling to pieces, preserved such precious relics of classical letters and learning as have come down to us? If we are indeed living, by the rhythm of history, in one of those ages which witness the end of a civilization and the re-establishment of a period of barbarism, it is surely incumbent on all who have the necessary equipment to keep alive what sparks of learning they can; and an Academy, which exists to organize and encourage humane studies, may be of inestimable help in their efforts. The British Academy, it is true, has been criticized on the ground that its own additions to learning compare unfavourably with those owed to many similar bodies abroad, and it may be admitted that, apart from its lectures (themselves surely not a negligible contribution), its publications contain all too few original studies; but a glance at the Annual Report, with its record of grants made to societies and individuals, of its successful efforts to secure Government support for archaeology, and of the work carried out by societies enjoying its support, will show that, despite the slenderness of its resources, it does much to promote (if I may be allowed a quotation from the marriage service) 'the mutual society, help, and comfort' of scholars and learned bodies working in widely differing fields.

But the time has not yet come to despair of the Republic. The catastrophe is not inevitable, and if it is to be averted there is work to be done which an Academy exists to do. Ancient civilization perished before the assault of barbarians from without the boundaries of the Empire; what threatens ours is the emergence of the barbarian from within. There has, during the present century, been a marked lowering of intellectual and moral standards. We hear to-day with hardly a tremor of basenesses and inhumanities

which half a century ago would have evoked horrified protests in every civilized country. There is observable everywhere a terrible coarsening and hardening of moral fibre. Slovenly usages of all kinds are corrupting one of the noblest parts of our British inheritance, the English language, and not English only; and with slovenliness in the use of words goes a slovenliness of thought which exposes whole populations to the sophistries of adventurers and charlatans. From friends in the educational world, whether in school or university, I hear constant complaints that the standard of scholarship is markedly lower than it was; and despite a gratifying increase in the demand for books and the success of extra-mural classes it may be doubted whether the education acquired is as solidly based as that, less widely diffused no doubt, of an earlier generation.

No doubt this state of things results in part from this very fact of a wider diffusion. It may be doubted whether more than a comparatively small minority of men are at any time capable of the highest cultivation. Certainly it is easier to preserve a high standard in a limited than in a wide community of culture, and the first result of any educational extension is inevitably a decline in quality. This, though regrettable, is no more than the price which must be paid for social justice; but it makes the duty of a body like ours the more urgent. In the circumstances, it may be necessary for the universities to accept, if only temporarily, some lowering of their standards: an Academy should make no such compromise. Its true function is to uphold, through all social and political vicissitudes, the austere ideal of excellence. Whatever the idols of the market-place may be, it at least can recognize no aims lower than the utmost attainable measure of truth and accuracy.

The wider diffusion of education is, however, not the only or the most disquieting factor in that deterioration of which I have spoken. There is a graver and an avoidable cause. During the last quarter of a century we have heard much talk of certain strange varieties of science and scholarship. Communist and fascist, proletarian and bourgeois science and scholarship—such are the demands which have been shouted into the ears of the contemporary world. These conceptions are an illusion. Science and scholarship may be good or bad, but they cannot aim at being anything but good science and good scholarship without some depreciation of quality. Here, in this confusion of voices, lies an obvious and crying duty of our Academy. It must take its stand immovably against all attempts to subordinate scholarship

to any ideal, any ideology as the current term has it, other than scholarship itself. Social, political, religious conceptions, however important as elements in the practical affairs of men, if introduced into the sphere of scholarship, can only confuse and deflect the efforts of the scholar. For it is truth which he would discover, 'to follow the argument whithersoever it leads us', as Plato said, and truth does not change its nature with the varying climate of political opinion. When the Rector of a famous German university proudly proclaimed that the era of disinterested science, of knowledge for its own sake, was ended, he was condemning not science but himself and the régime whose interests he was seeking to serve.

It is true, of course, that pure truth is not, and never can be, attainable by mortal man. We can never know the totality of facts; and the facts we do know require interpretation, a task for the fallible human judgement. The ripest scholar, the most penetrating thinker, can see but one aspect or certain aspects of the truth, and what he sees will be coloured by his personal idiosyncrasies, even if the influence of these show itself in a tendency to tilt the balance against his own natural prejudices. But it is the truth only that he seeks, and the attempt to conform his search to the demands of any ideology must be fatal to success.

Political loyalties are not the sole factors that disturb the objectivity of scholarship. There are also racial and national prejudices. That a man's nationality should affect even his work as a scholar is neither strange nor in itself a fact to be deplored. Nationality is a real thing; it colours all our activities, our method of approach to any question, the patterns of our thought, the subtleties of our feeling. A problem of scholarship is likely to be handled differently according as the scholar is an Englishman, a Frenchman, a German, or an Italian. This is so far from being regrettable that it may be a positive gain. Since truth has many facets and absolute truth is unattainable, it is desirable that a subject should be examined from as many points of view as possible. This is indeed the advantage of international cooperation in the world of scholarship; and probably we have all experienced the stimulation to be derived from the treatment by a foreigner, with a different approach from our own, of a question which we have ourselves studied. Of course, there are drawbacks in these national differences, possibilities of serious misunderstanding, of which a striking example is the dispute between East and West as to what constitutes a democratic régime; a dispute perhaps accentuated by deliberate political

propaganda, but in part at least due to a genuine difference in the use of the word 'democracy'. Even here we may find a certain advantage if it be only in the correction of a too one-sided view. I remember how startled I myself was, while a student in Germany, to discover that the Battle of Waterloo, which I had learnt at school to think of as a British victory won with some small help from the Prussians under Blücher, was regarded by German acquaintances as a Prussian victory, to which a minor contribution had been made by the British under Wellington. I venture to think that that view was farther from the truth than my own; but it did help to correct a bias on my side.

There are, however, very narrow limits to the utility which we can attribute to bias of this kind. Untold harm has been done by school text-books which express a selfish and lopsided nationalism, and when a dictator, like Mussolini or Hitler, sets out deliberately to inculcate a nationalistic view of history or politics the result will certainly be to embitter international relations and poison the very springs of truth for a whole generation. Against such perversions an Academy must stand uncompromisingly. Jealous as it may legitimately be for the honour and reputation of the nation it represents, it must remain faithful to its ideal of truth, and must be ready, with whatever authority it possesses, to protest against any governmental attempt anywhere to muzzle or to seduce the community of scholarship. To allow itself to be used for political ends as an organ of national propaganda would be to betray the very cause for which it exists.

But an Academy's functions in this sphere do not end with the defence of scholarly freedom. It is well qualified to make a more positive contribution to the mutual understanding of nations. Scholarship is essentially international; even in such studies as history, where nationalist trends have been particularly harmful, there is a common ground, the quest for an accurate view of events and the understanding of historical causes, on which the scholars of different peoples can meet. No one who has attended an international congress can have failed to be encouraged by the spectacle of men from nations divided, often, by ancient feuds, meeting amicably and with a common enthusiasm in the fellowship of letters. In my own sphere, I was much struck during the recent war to find with what veneration even papyrologists of countries occupied by the Germans continued to regard Wilcken, one of our own Corresponding

Fellows already referred to, who—*felix opportunitate mortis*—died in time to escape the final devastation of Berlin.

Here, in the election of Corresponding Fellows, lies one of the methods by which an Academy can help the cause of international goodwill. There are, of course, others: the promotion or support of international congresses, the welcoming and entertaining of foreign scholars, the interchange of publications, the presentation of complimentary addresses, and the like. Let no one think that these are trivialities—they may have an effect far beyond their apparent importance—nor that, because scholars are of necessity always a small body in any community, their influence must be small. The speculations of the philosopher, the theories of the economist, the opinions of the historian, have a habit of filtering down through the various strata of society till, in however changed and diluted a form, they reach the common man.

The opportunities of such entertainment as I have suggested are limited for our own body by lack of funds. That need not prevent us from contributing as much as our resources allow to the cause of international amity, and we may hope that our Government, which has recently shown an increased readiness to recognize that not only science but the arts and humane studies are important elements in the national life, will some day make it possible for the British Academy to compare less unfavourably in this matter with similar bodies abroad. The Council is at the moment endeavouring to arrange for the dispatch to Germany of a delegation charged with the duty of investigating the present position of scholarship and scholars in that country.

These, then, are the principal functions which I would attribute to an Academy: to be a centre and a rallying-point for the scholars of the country which it represents, stimulating research and honouring meritorious work by election to its ranks; to uphold unwaveringly the standard of scholarship, content with no ideal lower than the best that is obtainable; to oppose always and everywhere any attempt to subject scholarship to political, social, or nationalistic ends; and to form links with scholars of other lands, thereby contributing towards a better understanding between nations. However distressful the times, and whatever the dangers which threaten civilization, these are tasks which our Academy may be justifiably proud that it is privileged to perform.