

## FROM THE ARCHIVE

# Winston Churchill and the British Academy

Sixty years ago the British Academy elected Prime Minister Winston Churchill as an Honorary Fellow.

But this was not the first time that Churchill had been considered for election to the Academy. In 1938, Churchill's name had been put forward as a prospective 'Ordinary Fellow', i.e. a Fellow elected for his own distinction as a scholar. However, although Churchill had received the

almost unanimous support of the Academy's History Section, he did not survive Council's final pruning of the list of candidates.

This decision prompted a former President of the British Academy, the historian H.A.L. Fisher, to write a letter of complaint to the Academy's Secretary, Sir Frederic Kenyon (Figure 1). As well as bemoaning what he saw as an

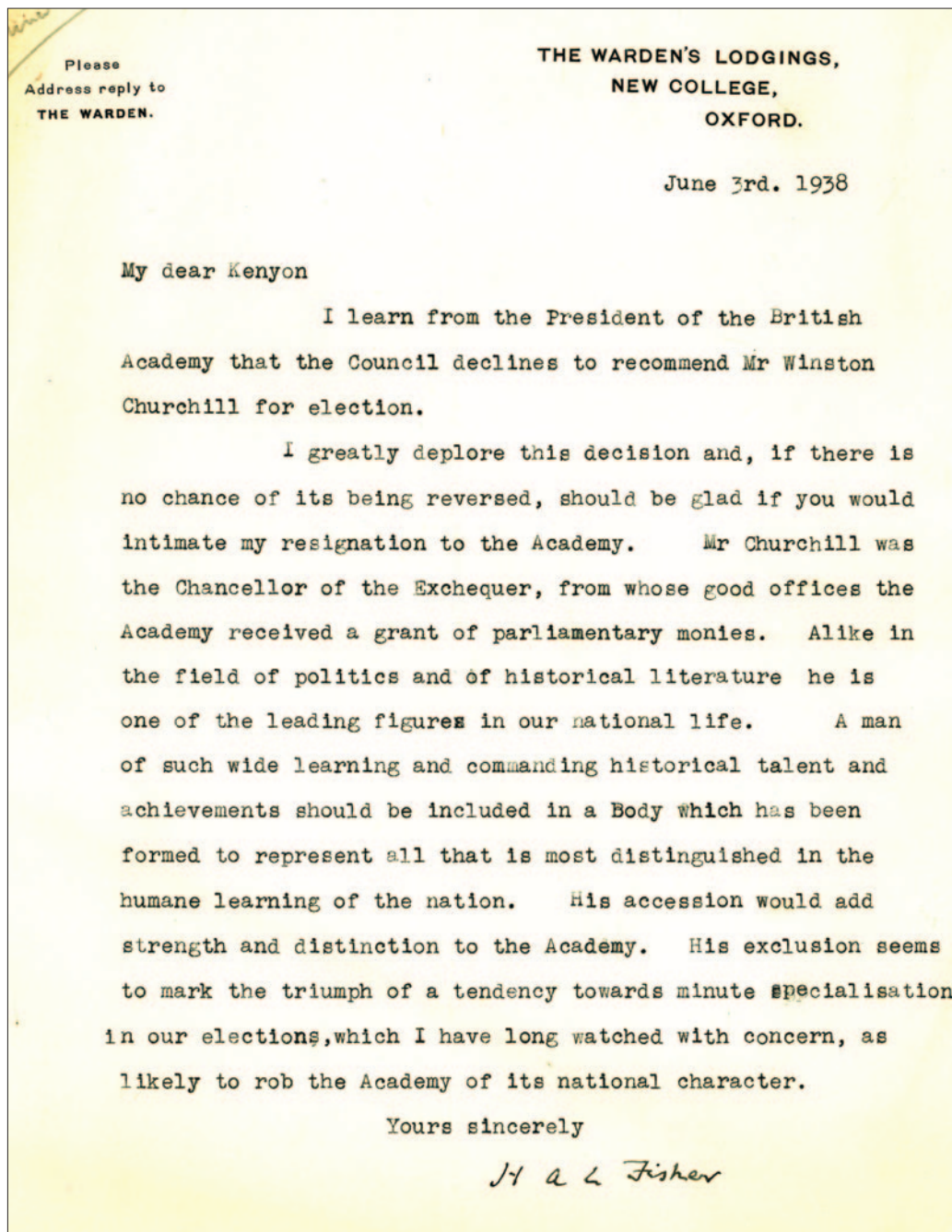


Figure 1. H.A.L. Fisher  
FBA to Sir Frederic Kenyon  
FBA, Secretary of the  
British Academy, 3 June  
1938.

Private.

1 June 1939.

Dear Sir,

I am desired by Mr. Winston Churchill to thank you for the honour you have conferred upon him by your invitation of May 25, to submit himself for election as a Fellow of the British Academy.

Mr. Churchill regrets that in the present circumstances he fears he is too fully occupied to avail himself of your courtesy.

Yours faithfully,



Private Secretary.

Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, G.B.E., K.C.B.

Figure 2. Winston Churchill's private secretary writes from Chartwell to Sir Frederic Kenyon FBA, 1 June 1939.

increasing and unwelcome tendency towards 'minute specialisation' in elections to the Academy's Fellowship, Fisher recalled Churchill's role in sustaining public funding for the work of the British Academy. For the first 22 years of its existence, the Academy did not receive any regular grant from public funds. It was not until February 1924 that the first government grant to the Academy was approved by HM Treasury. Churchill became Chancellor of the Exchequer in November 1924. Not only did he continue the financial support established by his predecessor, but he was also able to arrange for rent-free accommodation 'in recognition of the position of the Academy and its services to the nation' – the Academy moved into its first permanent home, in Burlington Gardens, in 1928.

A special meeting of Council was convened on 13 July 1938 to discuss the matter. The meeting concluded that the Council would record 'an unanimous opinion that Mr Churchill's candidature should be presented again next year'. The History Section again put forward his name in 1939, and this time the Academy's Council resolved to recommend him for election as a Fellow. However, Churchill felt compelled to decline the offer because he was at that time 'too fully occupied' to take on the responsibilities of Fellowship (Figure 2).

In 1952 the Academy celebrated its Fiftieth Anniversary. At the beginning of the year Council plotted to use the occasion of the Anniversary dinner at Goldsmith's Hall on 6 June 1952 'for the introduction of a new and outstandingly distinguished Honorary Fellow' – the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. In February Churchill replied: 'It is with great reluctance that I have come to the conclusion that the pressure of my public duties would not allow me to accept an invitation which in other circumstances would be very agreeable.'

Although disappointed not to have Churchill as a guest at the dinner, the Academy nonetheless decided to ask Churchill to accept the Honorary Fellowship. The President, Sir Charles Kingsley Webster, wrote to him: 'By the Rules of the Academy Honorary Fellows are elected on the nomination of the Council at the Annual General Meeting, and the Council would wish, if you are so good as to consent, to put forward the date of the Annual General Meeting from July, when it is generally held, to June 4th, so that your acceptance could be announced at the Celebration on June 6th.' This time Churchill was happy to accept the honour, 'provided that it does not involve me in any duties or obligations' (Figure 3).



10, DOWNING STREET,  
WHITEHALL, S.W.1.

6 April, 1952.

Dear Sir Charles Webster,

Thank you for your letter of March 20. I am indeed complimented that you wish me to accept the Honorary Fellowship of the British Academy, and, provided that it does not involve me in any duties or obligations, I shall be happy to do so. I am sorry to have to make this stipulation, but I am sure you will understand my reasons.

I should not have any objection to my acceptance being announced on June 4, as you suggest.

Yours sincerely,

*Winston Churchill*

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Sir Charles K. Webster, K.C.M.G., M.A.,  
The British Academy.

Figure 3. Winston Churchill writes from 10 Downing Street to Sir Charles K. Webster, President of the British Academy, 6 April 1952. The letter's black border marks the death of King George VI in February 1952.