
Peter Hennessy

Lord Peter Hennessy of Nympsfield FBA is Attlee Professor of Contemporary British History at Queen Mary, University of London. A video of extracts from this interview can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/prosperingwisely/hennessy



Q What was the initial spark that first made you want to work in and study history, and particularly history of government?

Peter Hennessy

I can date my surging interest in history to Christmas 1958 when my sister Kathleen, who was indeed a history teacher, bought me R.J. Unstead's *Looking at History* as a Christmas present. I thought that was fabulous. I think I was pretty well attuned – the grey cells were lined up before that – but that is the moment I can date it to, because I still have it. I read it to my grandsons. It was a combination of not a word being wasted in terms of explanation and context, and beautiful diagrams. Monasteries: the monastic bit really grabbed me as a Catholic boy. In fact, I wanted to be a monk – until puberty, which soon took care of that. So I think I can date it to 1958.

But I became a historian by trade by accident. After university, I fell into journalism, which I did for 20 years – and had a great time. But I always had a yen for the archive. The 30-year rule documents, the classified state papers, were released every 1 January, and the hacks would all go down in late December to read them. I did that for *The Times*. I loved doing that. When I came to write books, on Whitehall and government, in fact it was an accumulation of the journalistic notebooks really. I also wanted the paper trail, and because I am a nerd, I also had to put footnotes in. So when I decided in my early to mid-forties that it would be nice to get an academic life before the grey cells deteriorated, I had sufficient books, with footnotes – because of 'nerdery' – to give me the chance of getting a job. So it was all a happy chapter of accidents.

¹ Peter Hennessy, *Cabinet* (1986); Peter Hennessy, *Whitehall* (1989).

Q What are the differences between being a journalist commentator and an academic?

Peter Hennessy

They come at the same thing from different angles. In journalism, you would try to penetrate a Cabinet Committee or two – in the days when it was difficult to see what they were really up to, as opposed to what they were saying they were up to. The use of history came in there, because you knew how the system of government worked from those old 30-year-old files – the Cabinet Committee structure, the way Number 10 related to the other departments, and so on. So all of that helped. The thrill of the chase as a journalist was hourly sometimes, whereas the thrill of the chase for a scholar is a bit more measured than that, but it is the same instinct: the curiosity to find out.

There are two things that link it all. One is a passion for gossip. I would define contemporary British history as gossip with footnotes, to be honest. The other is to belong to the Max Bygraves school of history: 'I wanna tell you a story.' So when you have all of this stuff – some of it may be very arcane (Cabinet Committee minutes are not the stuff most people throb on) – the desire to convert it into a story that will travel to a wider readership, and help explain how the government behind the scenes works, not the froth but the heavy duty stuff, was quite a compulsion.¹ I wouldn't say that it amounted to a mission statement, because that would make me sound like a management consultant – which wouldn't do. But it's a pretty strong compulsion nonetheless.

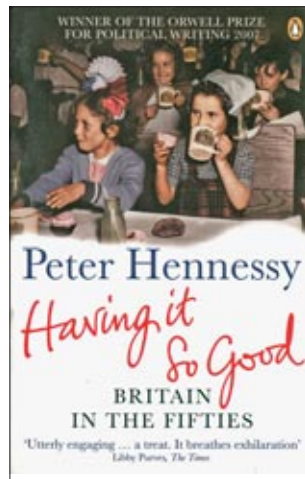
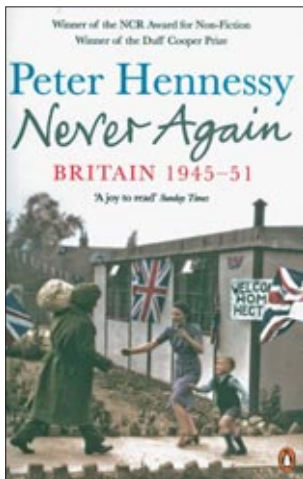
It's all linked by the key to everything: Einstein's notion of 'Never lose a holy curiosity' – that's what he said in pretty well the last interview he gave in 1955. We exist to help take care of the curiosity of the species. It's rather a grand way of putting it. But if you've had the fires of curiosity lit inside your own set of grey cells – by teachers, family or circumstance, happenstance, whatever – it's a kind of sacred silken duty to pass it on. That's what gets us out of bed on a wet Monday in February. It's what gets *me* out of bed on a wet Monday in February. So, curiosity is the spur and the spark.

Q What is the work that you are most proud of?

Peter Hennessy

You know, I have no idea. I think it is probably the general histories of post-war, post-1945 Britain. I have written two of a planned five: I have done ones from the '40s up to the '50s,² and I am working now on the '60s. This seems to

² Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-51* (1992); Peter Hennessy, *Having it So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (2006).



have helped as well as intrigued those who lived through those years – and not just them, because of course students read it. What is very nice is what Melvyn Bragg calls ‘generational kinship’. I have discovered that there is an enormous amount of generational kinship in those books. The test of a book like that is to have people who lived through it, including those who were on the inside in government, say, ‘Do you know? That is just how I remember it. But heaven’s above, I never knew that. How did they keep that secret for so long?’ So that, maybe, is the patch of the scholarly terrain that has mattered most. It is impossible to judge the impact that you have. And those that claim to have had impact, you have to take very, very cautiously.

Q

Who do you think you are writing your books for?

Peter Hennessy

That’s a really interesting question. When I was on *The Times* in the old days, we were taught to write for the clever sixth former who had bags of curiosity but no prior knowledge. So everything had to be explained within itself. That has never left me. If what I and my colleagues have written goes into the sixth forms and is absorbable, that is terrific. Yet at the same time it must not be oversimplified or over touched up, and you have got to reconcile all that. So the wider audience really does matter.

The other one that is quite an obvious audience is Radio 4 – which is the nation thinking aloud together. If your material is transmittable that way, not necessarily a documentary or Radio 4 discussion, but in nicely polished bits for the *Today* programme – the megaphone of the nation – you are on the way. But it is serendipitous; you have no idea where it is goes. All sorts of unexpected people said, ‘I have read this that you have written’ and so on. I mean, it is very touching. It goes much wider than the obvious.

The other place where you see it incarnate is the literary festivals, which are everywhere. There is a tremendous appetite for political history and contemporary British history, which is very, very heart-warming. It meets the

human desire to make sense and to put a bit of a pattern on your own experience, the times you live through. As well as the individual patterns, there are collective patterns – changing consumption patterns, and all the rest of it. That’s the nerve that we touch. And that’s a high utility – a very, very high utility, overall. But again, it is almost impossible to know where it goes.

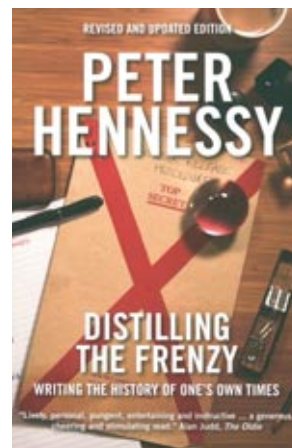
Q

Is it a utility that should be publicly funded?

Peter Hennessy

If somehow there wasn’t enough money to keep in being the human and institutional infrastructures that you need to create this serendipitous product, that nation would be scoring a very considerable own goal. Again, the most important bits of it are immeasurable. But, if that is the argument – if that utilitarian argument ever prevailed – we would be a shrivelled, meagre little nation, wouldn’t we?

We live in a country to which I am absolutely devoted, but at the moment it tends to look for things to fall out over rather than to fall in about. One of the virtues of arts and humanities is that it does teach people that nothing is quite that simple, that primary-colour approaches are not that wonderful, and that scapegoating other people is not wise. Also, in my particular bit – the history of our country, Europe and the world – to explain just how the outcomes have come out the way they have, and why, is a great advantage in a country that’s a bit scratchy with itself.³ That’s not a heroic manifesto, but it’s an indispensable one.



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I’ll tell you what the test is for me as a university teacher. If the students don’t do a Masters degree, let alone a PhD, and never do a course again, but if they want, in 20, 25 or 30 years’ time, to devote a bit of their best leisure time and surplus money to buying the latest book in that bit of the historical training that most

excited them, to read it for pleasure and instruction, our lives have not been in vain. It is the ultimate performance indicator, and it is the only one I believe in.

There is a tremendous appetite for contemporary British history. It meets the human desire to make sense and to put a bit of a pattern on your own experience, the times you live through.

³ Peter Hennessy, *Distilling the Frenzy: Writing the History of One’s Own Times* (2012, revised edn 2013).

Q

How are the humanities and social sciences of value to policy-makers?

Peter Hennessy

The wide answer to your question is to be found, I think, in John Buchan's memoirs – John Buchan of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. In there, there is this sentence which intrigues me and inspires me to some extent: 'In the cycle in which we travel we can only see a fraction of the curve.' A considerable part of the curve goes back centuries. It applies to us as individual human beings, and it certainly applies to those in authority. If those in authority do not take careful note of how we got to where we are, they are flying blind, they are flying without radar. I'm not a 'history repeats itself' man. I'm a Mark Twain man. Mark Twain said, 'History doesn't repeat itself but sometimes it rhymes.' That is of enormous value to policy-makers. Those who say that it is all in the past, and the past is only an object lesson in how not to do it, need help. They need arts and the humanities more than anybody else.

In fact, I don't split off arts and humanities from sciences at all. As a historian, unless you have a sense of the Carl Sagan/Martin Rees territory – the cosmos, how we got here from various explosions of stellar ash – you have no idea, no conception of the passage of human history. I never separate off the sciences. That's why Einstein is the link with all of us. It's the curiosity that takes different forms in different people. But if you have uncurious people in authority, you are in trouble in a society.

Having said all that, you have got to make it as easily absorbable as possible. Now that might sound patronising – I do not mean it to – but you have to write it in such a way that it tingles a bit in the old curiosity, and goes into the hippocampus – the memory bit of the brain. Those in authority are very busy people. They are hugely overburdened and overladen. I remember Jim Callaghan saying to me once – he was one of the three post-war prime ministers who had never been to university (the others were Churchill and John Major) – 'When you go in to Number 10' – and I think he also meant big departments of state – 'you don't get much time at all really. And unless you have got some accumulated reading, some intellectual baggage, you're in trouble'. The real collective product that academics put out is of maximum

Election night, 6 May 2010.



The collective product that academics put out is of maximum value when would-be permanent secretaries and ministers are in their earlier professional formations, when they can accumulate it. A lot of them are not going to have time to read more than one side of A4 when they are in power.

value not just when would-be permanent secretaries or cabinet ministers are students, but in their earlier professional formations when they can accumulate it. A lot of them are not going to have much time to read more than one side of A4 when they are in power. So you need to give them as rich a compost as you possibly can, against which they can set things for the purposes of context. Now, this is all very difficult to measure. But like all the most important things in life, it is beyond metrics.

Q

Can you provide an example of how your own work has helped decision-makers?

Peter Hennessy

I suppose if you pin me down and ask if I had helped a bit, I can give you one example because it is public. It was in the run-up to the 2010 election. There was a feeling that there might be a hung result – the polls suggested there might be. (I did not think there was going to be, because I am a terrible forecaster.) We had a conference on transitions at the Ditchley Foundation, with people from Canada, the United States and elsewhere – from places that had done transitions, and places that have proportional representation, where they have to do brokerage politics before they can form an administration. Out of that came a desire to write down the constitution on what the Queen does and does not do in circumstances of a hung parliament. I can tell you this because the Cabinet Secretary of the day made it public to a Commons select committee. In mid-February 2010, over a 90-minute sandwich lunch in the Cabinet Office – which is the way the Brits do their constitution, eccentrically you might think – we worked out what the constitution was on hung parliaments, and the Queen's prerogative to appoint a prime minister, and all that. We agreed a draft, which then went public to a select committee, in time for the 2010 election, where to my surprise it turned out to be pivotal – well, the parliamentary arithmetic was pivotal.

I think five or six of us outside scholars – lawyers, historians, public policy people – together with the Whitehall people, the Palace, and the Cabinet Office – had come to this written version of what was laying around in fragments of past practice and precedent. We had put it all down on a bit of paper. Those of us that had to go on the television to be the impersonators of the British constitution (the Queen cannot go on telly, you see),⁴ first

⁴ For example, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCufiTe-p4o

for the exit poll and then, it turned out, for a further five days, we would have been stuffed without that bit of paper. Politicians are exhausted. They are desperate. They either want to cling on to power or they want their one chance of power in their age-group to come to them. And they are prone to say very silly things about the British constitution, which slips through their fingers like mercury. So having that bit of paper, which the scholars had helped formulate, in the television and radio studios turned out to be absolutely critical. So that's an example of where tremendously nerdy bits of scholarship – you don't get the hosannas of a grateful nation for working on the British constitution, I can tell you – on that occasion rather mattered.

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Can you talk about your book *The Secret State*?⁵

Peter Hennessy

One very important aspect of the contemporary historian's craft is catch-up history. Those of us who are children of the Cold War – children of the uranium age, the first generation to grow up in the shadow of the mushroom cloud, my age group – knew very well that the state had to be prepared for the worst, and it had to go to the abyss in terms of thinking about what the Third World War might mean and also the deterrence mechanisms you needed to prevent it. The state had to consider, if it did happen, how it would continue in some form – bunkers where the ministerial decision-takers would go – and all the rest of it, and the nuclear release drills. Now all of this, for obvious reasons, was immensely highly classified during the Cold War, and the bulk of it could not be released. The intelligence perceptions, analyses and assessments that fed into it could not be released under the normal 30 year cut-off.

So after the Cold War was over, and when we had an immensely sympathetic minister in William Waldegrave – the Minister for Open Government in the Cabinet Office, a scholar himself – we had what we christened the Waldegrave initiative, where he set up a process of re-reviewing these documents that had been retained longer than 30 years. Within six years, just under 100,000 files had come out, some of a sensitivity that took my breath away. That process has continued. It was a new currency with which contemporary British historians could trade. That is what documents are really: currency. It enabled us to fill in these huge gaps in our knowledge of the state – the secret state. Also, the makers of the post-9/11 secret

state – because we have a career civil service thank heavens, which is not politicised – had been formed in the Cold War. So it was the same set of people – their younger versions – that drew the lessons from the Cold War: protective mechanisms that we needed for the era of terrorism of the kind that we have been living through.

All of this was fascinating, and it still happens. We are still getting, from time to time, breathtaking cataracts of documents of a sensitivity that you would not believe. For example, in the early part of 2013, we had the first batch from the hottest set of files the Cabinet Secretary ever had. Being Whitehall, they call it the Cabinet Secretary's 'Miscellaneous Papers'. But this is the stuff that burns through the cardboard, and was so hot it could not be left in the regular files. We had a tranche of it from the late '30s up to 1951. A lot of it is intelligence-related of course, and material dealing with the Abdication. But also we had the files of what is known as PUSD – the Permanent Under Secretary's Department, which is the Foreign Office euphemism for the bit of the Foreign Office that deals with the Secret Intelligence Service. Some of it I did not expect ever to see because of its sensitivity, and yet it is there.

So this is relatively easy to convert into books that go to a wider audience, because people get excited by that. There is more fantasy per square inch about the British intelligence world than anything except the British Royal Family. So there is always an immense market for that. But the impulse for *The Secret State* for me was catch-up history, plus giving the people who had served the King and the Queen with immense distinction in intense secrecy – they couldn't even talk about it at home – their place in the historical sun, once it was safe to do so. We are cryogenicists, because those files are frozen history, and what we have to do is warm them up a bit so they begin to twitch, and then the diaphragm starts heaving and they talk to you and you can talk back. To make that work, you have to have a pretty good feel and knowledge for the formation of the

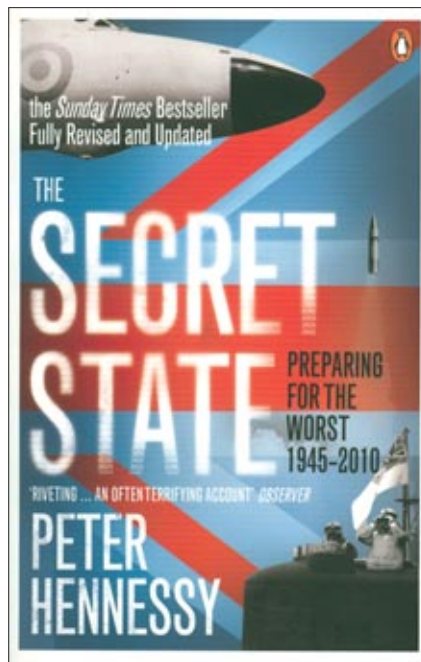
people who wrote those files and the context in which they wrote them. To bring all of this to the collective memory of the nation, we put it together in such a form that it gets up and rises, and walks to the wider audience.

The Cold War slice is particularly fascinating to me because of being a child of the uranium age.

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It's John Le Carré territory.

Peter Hennessy

His word power outguns mine by a factor of heaven knows what!



⁵ Peter Hennessy, *The Secret State: Whitehall and the Cold War* (2002); reissued as *The Secret State: Preparing for the Worst 1945-2010* (2010).

Q

What are the comparisons between what the government had to do behind the scenes then and what it has had to do post 9/11?

Peter Hennessy

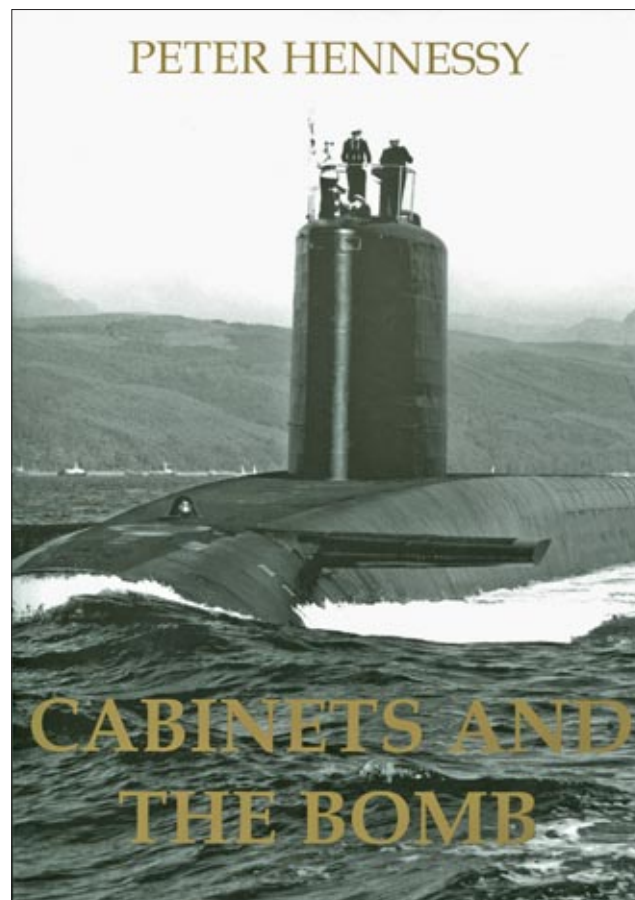
The intelligence services had no legal position. They were creations of the royal prerogative. Until 1989, with the Security Service Act, MI5 had its own statute. The Secret Intelligence Service did not even exist officially in peacetime until it was officially outed in 1992 during the Major government. And there was not a whisper of its files; if you did find something, it was in other departments' documents by accident. The cover story in Gloucestershire, when I grew up, about the Government Communications Headquarters was that it made crystal sets, so we had a long way to go to catch up. But the intelligence world has been increasingly subject to statute. When I was a young man on *The Times*, MI5 and MI6 shared one lawyer. When he came in to see the editor, William Rees-Mogg, the word would go round the newsroom, 'The ghost has come to see William' – all very dramatic. Now, however, there are lots of lawyers and all that world has changed.

The comparisons between the Cold War secret state and the post-9/11 one are interesting. The first big one is this. In the intelligence world, they battle all the time with secrets and mysteries. During the Cold War, secrets were things you could get, with a lot of effort – order of battle, or the performance of a particular piece of military equipment. Mysteries were the intentions of the Soviet politburo – very hard to get, even if you had had human agents close in; certainly not something you could get by technical means. In the post-9/11 world, there is no mystery about the intentions of al-Qaeda and its associates. The mysteries/secrets thing has been reversed. So the whole of British intelligence has had to adapt to that.

The other factor that came strongly out of the Cold War and World War II intelligence picture, once we had the files (indeed before that, because people had talked about it), was the great British advantage in the intelligence world of separating the providers of intelligence and the producers of the intelligence picture on the basis of that product, from those who decide what to do when given that material. Some would say the Iraq experience showed that this absolutely crucial distinction – which was developed in World War II and continued right through the Cold War – had temporarily broken down, and there have been great efforts to restore it since. In that debate about Iraq and intelligence, however, it was crucial to know what the governing norms were – not just the statutes – of the divisions of labour within the secret world. You can do that only by having a pretty good sense of the nature of intelligence provision and what was done with it in the past from 1939 onwards. I really think that had high utility.

Another example from the Cold War. As a country, we get very neuralgic about nuclear weapons. Of all the

nuclear weapons-possessing states, we have mini-breakdowns when it is a question of carrying on or not, or upgrading a system. There is a lot of paper trail in the National Archives, particularly now the Cold War is over, of how previous generations took those decisions and what the factors were, and the vectors of forces that played on them. Here at the British Academy, we had a fabulous seminar one evening, with senior politicians who had taken decisions, the civil servants who had advised them, the scientists who had provided the briefings on what was possible and what wasn't, as well as the scholars. We put it together as a non-partisan contribution: it was not advocating stopping, carrying on, or anything else. We put it together as a book called *Cabinets and the Bomb* – the primary material, with commentary and the fruits of the seminar – to feed in some good historical material to the continuing debate.⁶ I think that has a high utility because, when they sit there in those Cabinet Committee rooms, there are the wraiths of the past in the room saying, 'My heavens, you are going through the same agonies as we did.' Senior officials and ministers always have to be reminded that they are not alone in the room. There are these ghosts saying, 'Here we go again. Rather you than me.' We are the providers of the words of the wraiths.



This documentary history of Britain's nuclear deterrent was published by the British Academy in 2007.

⁶ The 'Cabinets and the Bomb' workshop was held at the British Academy in March 2007. Peter Hennessy's documentary reader, *Cabinets and the*

Bomb, was published in November 2007. www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/cabinets_and_bomb.cfm

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Is such a role affected by your entering the House of Lords?

Peter Hennessy

There is a problem for me now in the nuclear debate because, since going into the House of Lords, I have had to say what my own views are about nuclear weapons – whether we should carry on or not. If you take a public job, which is what a cross-bench peerage is, you cannot mumble and you cannot dissemble. If you have views, you have to explain them. I hope I am as detached as I still can be, but you cannot do that if you have a role in public life. You cannot just stand back and say, ‘No advocacy either way.’

Explanation is critical. That is really what it all comes down to. Unless you have people whose trade is explanation on the basis of evidence, you really have diminished the supply of material and knowledge that decision-takers need before they go over the threshold and make the final outcome.

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Is it also the function of the historian to inform more widely?

Peter Hennessy

If, in an open society and democracy, the public is denied the chance of casting an informed vote, that’s an own goal of mammoth proportions.

The political parties are indispensable, but they operate by mobilising prejudice more successfully than the competition. They are indispensable and many of them are

really wonderful people. But the careful use of evidence is not at the top of their hierarchy of needs. So you have to have somebody to say, ‘Wait a minute. It’s not that simple’; or ‘We’ve been here before. Just think a minute.’ What disturbs politicians’ atoms is knocking the competition for six; whereas, if anything disturbs the scholars’ atoms, it is the quiet rustle of an archive.

Q
What did election to the Fellowship of the British Academy mean to you?

Peter Hennessy

Election to the British Academy was wonderful, because it was a surprise. It is all the sweeter if you cannot apply for it and you do not know it is coming. It’s one of the great joys in life. One must not be obsessed with the approval of one’s peers, but if the peers think you are a bit of alright, a little glow comes to brighten one’s world, to put it mildly. Also, they are great company. Some of the Fellows of the British Academy are the most terrific purveyors of gossip – sometimes it reaches weapons-grade gossip. They are great company. You join a Fellowship in every sense.

The British Academy is crucial because it’s the gold standard. If you’re asked to be a Fellow of the British Academy, you swoon. You can’t say that about many invitations in life, can you? Also, it’s a setter of tone and pitch, right across the whole set of disciplines, because of the extra work it does – not just the creation of Fellows.