Interview
Chris Wickham

This is the latest in a series of interviews with Fellows of the British Academy, showing leading humanities and social sciences academics at work.

Chris Wickham is Chichele Professor of Medieval History at the University of Oxford. At the Annual General Meeting on 17 July 2014, it was announced that he had been awarded the 2014 Serena Medal, 'for eminent services towards the furtherance of the study of Italian history'.

What was the initial spark that first made you want to work in and study medieval history?

At the age of nine, I wanted to be a palaeontologist. My parents thought it would be a good idea to show me what palaeontology was really like. So they got the son of a friend of theirs, who was doing geology at University College London, to take me to a quarry and show me Jurassic rocks. This was very exciting. We went to the quarry, he showed me all the different layers of Jurassic rocks, and he explained to me how you could date all the layers by different kinds of ammonite. You could see evolution happening as the ammonites changed. I said, 'That's really very interesting. But where are the dinosaurs?' He said, 'No, you never get any dinosaurs. It's always ammonites. Ammonites are where palaeontology is.'

So then I decided that I would be a historian instead. Slowly medieval history became more interesting, partly because it was obscure. When I got to university, I discovered that *early* medieval history was even more obscure. And when I chose graduate work, *Italian* early medieval history seemed to be even more remarkably obscure, because almost nobody in the country knew anything about it. Of course I discovered that there were plenty of Italians who knew about it, and that being obscure was anyway not the most important thing, but by then I had made my choices.

I was very lucky in choosing Italy, because I liked Italy. It has a very interesting political culture, and in the 1970s the left was moving forward dramatically. It was an exciting time, and I was very keen to immerse myself in that kind of Italian world as much as I could.

What is different about studying history in another country?

It became clear to me that people who study in another country are divided into two groups. One group really want the other country to behave a bit like Britain, and the issues they look at are British issues. The other group want to immerse themselves in the culture of the country they are studying, and to deal with the history of that country in as local a way as they possibly can. I always was – and still am – 100 per cent in the second group.

This is partially phoney. I can't pretend to be an Italian, and no Italian thinks I am Italian. But it allows you to look at both Italy and your own country with a degree of distance that you wouldn't get in any other way. There is, for example, a very strong group of French historians who study Italy: they all have the ability, when they look back on the history of France, to look at it from the outside, as though they are looking at a foreign country. That is a good thing to be able to do, and I'm keen on doing it myself.

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You are interested in history 'from below'.

I have always been interested in history 'from below'. It's where most people live. If between 85 and 95 per cent of the population of medieval Europe are peasants, it doesn't seem reasonable to me to restrict yourself to the study of the other tiny percentage – although of course that is where the historical documentation is. That's true everywhere: even if you look at the society of the village, you will find that you are looking at village elites rather than the poorest villagers.

But you can still look at history from the bottom upwards. In fact, you can't not do so. Even if you are only interested in kings, you still have to look at the way they act in the framework of the society they are operating inside. They can't control everything, and the things they can't control are dependent on the behaviour of everybody else – the 85 or 95 per cent – as much as on their own behaviour. You just have to study the whole thing.

Which piece of work of yours is your personal favourite?

My favourite book is called *Courts and Conflict in Twelfth-Century Tuscany*.[1] It is an attempt to write a history of law and legal procedures in the 12th century through practice, through court case analysis. It looks at what it is that people are really doing when they go to court, how they argue, how they try to convince other people that they are right, and what kind of grounds they're using to try to convince people. I thought this was a good way of getting inside people's mind-sets. And Tuscany of that period had court documents, sometimes very detailed ones, with witness transcriptions in some cases.

I tried to do the book using the 'extended case method', which was developed in the 1950s by Max Gluckman, a British social anthropologist.[2] You follow, as much as you can, the history of the people in that court case beforehand and after, if you have the evidence. It is an attractive way of writing a book because you can tell stories. Stories are attractive things to tell, and they are about really quite small-scale events – 'Who cut down this tree?' It allows the reader to choose whether to focus on the stories or the argument; but you can develop the argument through the stories as well.

What does the study of these different types of community in early medieval Italy tell us now?

The number of people who really care what happened in the village of Tassignano in the 1160s is pretty limited – and possibly was limited even in the 1160s. However, this kind of study shows that everything is complicated in every period. To get inside such a subject you have to use the same sorts of techniques that anthropologists use, in order to produce – in many cases quite creatively, because you are working with medieval documentary sources – a sense of the way that people operate and deal when they have different sorts of social and political values and constraints. The ability to do that is something that is useful for anybody. It would be possible to do a doctorate on that kind of subject, and then go into modern politics and find that an understanding of the way in which people have to deal within particular sorts of constraints is helpful there too. Knowing how history works in that kind of complicated way is a guide to social action now.

Historians often go on about the strangeness of the middle ages. That is a bit of a trap. But there *is* a sense in which the 980s is a very difficult period to get your head around and everybody's values are all different: you have to engage in complicated imaginative reconstructions. However, it is important to recognise that the same is true for the 1980s: the same kind of imaginative reconstructions are necessary, even when you think you can remember the period. If you work on the assumption that people behaved then much the same as they do today, you are going to get the 1980s wrong. That is something that medieval historians know automatically, and it's a useful guide for everybody else.

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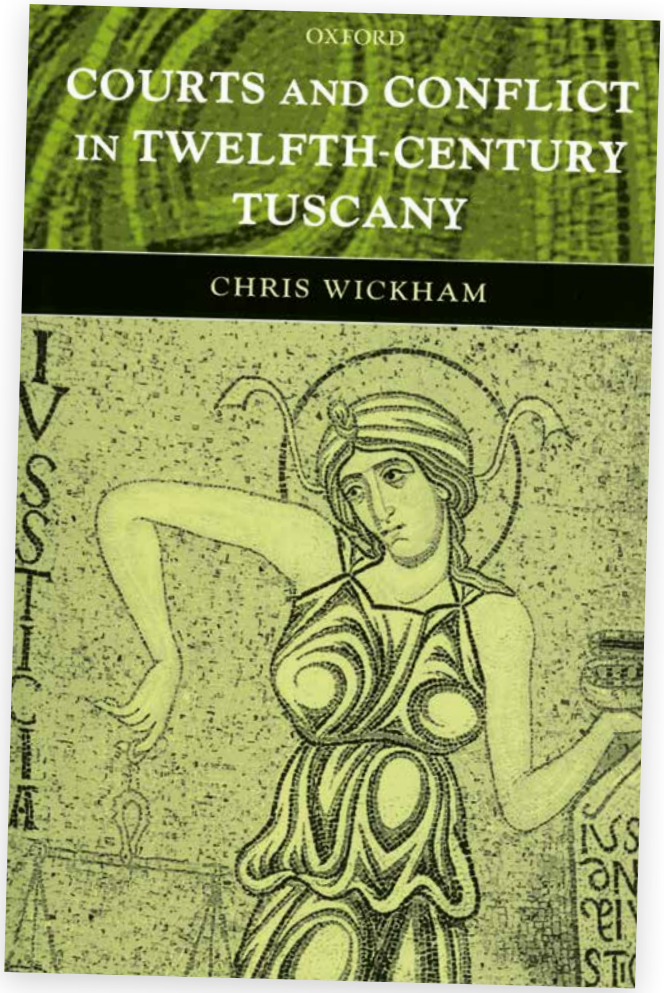
1. Chris Wickham, *Courts and Conflict in Twelfth-Century Tuscany* (2003), originally published in Italian as *Legge, pratiche e conflitti: Tribunali e risoluzione delle dispute nella Toscana del XII secolo* (2000).
2. Max Gluckman was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1968.

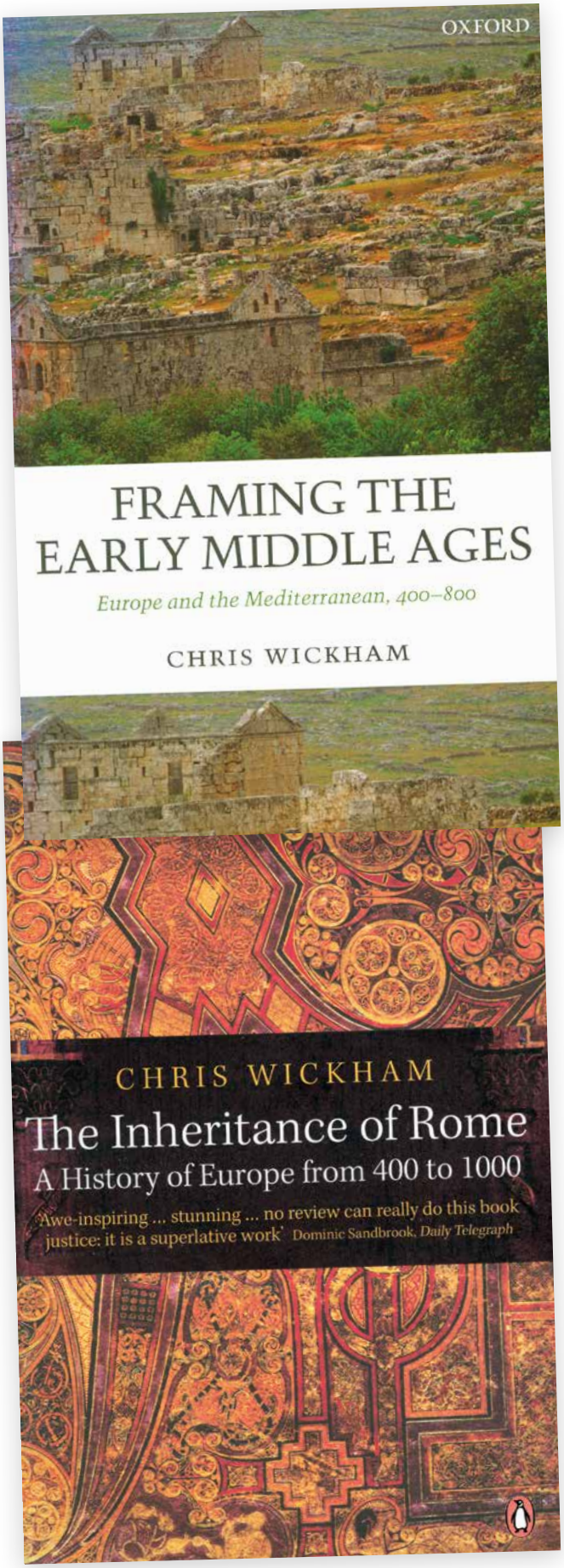


You're interested not just in writing history, but in writing about the writing of history. In your book *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, you sought to produce 'a set of interpretative paradigms' for the historical study of this period.[3] Why is it important that historians should pay attention to the theory of studying history?

History is the least theoretical of all disciplines, I believe. It is possible for historians to live their entire lives and never read a book of historical methodology (although these days there are lots of compulsory undergraduate courses on it). There is a belief among some historians that they don't really have a methodology: 'It's just me and the sources.'

One of the things that I regard as axiomatic is that we're all operating inside interpretative paradigms – of the type described by Thomas Kuhn in science (e.g. Newtonian physics versus Einsteinian physics).[4] Historians have their own interpretative paradigms. And sometimes you do get paradigm shifts in history, like when Lewis Namier and Bruce McFarlane destroyed

3. Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800* (2005). The preparation of this work was aided by a British Academy Research Readership, held in 1997-99.
4. Thomas Kuhn, author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) which coined the term 'paradigm shift', was elected a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy in 1990.



constitutional history by pointing out that people actually engaged in practical action rather than passing statutes.[5]

However, it is very difficult to have very effective paradigm shifts if people don't know what paradigms they are operating inside. Therefore it seems to me quite important for historians to interrogate what it is they're doing, and figure out what their basic assumptions about the nature of history are. Those assumptions don't necessarily have to be mine. But I've gone on about theory because it's important to introduce a bit of theory to the discipline. Of course, not all historians are naive about this; the cutting edge has never been naive. But particularly in a period like now where nobody really knows where the cutting edge is, it's important at least to get one's own theoretical perspective straight.

You edited for the British Academy a volume of essays entitled *Marxist History Writing for the Twenty-First Century*.[6] What place does Marxism have in the study of history now?

Since it is not terribly morally challenging to say that feudalism is an unfair political system, it is actually possible to acknowledge that 'lords exploit peasants' without regarding yourself as a political radical. So there is a good deal of implicitly Marxist analysis of the middle ages in every historian, of any persuasion.

But one has to recognise that Marxism has gone out of fashion. To an extent, this is because social history and economic history in general went out of fashion. Social history is coming back, so maybe certain sorts of slightly more explicit Marxist presuppositions will come back as well.

The advantage of the Marxist paradigm is that it covers an awful lot of bits of history. It doesn't cover gender; it's not very good on religion. But it covers an awful lot of the rest in an exploratory paradigm, which you can then test. You may test it to destruction, but at least you can test it. It is ambitious, and its ambition is one of its important selling points.

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In the Penguin History of Europe series, you published the volume, *The Inheritance of Rome*.[7] How different is it writing history for a wider readership?

You can't take things for granted. You can't take for granted the fact that your readership is going to be fascinated with knowing whether the aristocracy was richer in one part of what is now France than in the next door province. To put it crudely, it is probably necessary to tell more stories, but I don't think that is a problem in itself.

The challenge is to get people to run along with your account. It could be a political narrative, it could be a

5. Lewis Namier was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1944; Bruce McFarlane was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1964.
6. Chris Wickham (ed.), *Marxist History Writing for the Twenty-First Century* (British Academy Occasional Paper 9; 2007). The volume arose from a conference entitled 'Marxist Historiography: Alive, Dead, or Moribund?', held at the British Academy in November 2004.
7. Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (2009).

following through a problem. And then you bring them up short and say, 'What is this really all about? Why does this matter? What is the important thing here?' The key to writing for a wider audience is to get people to see what the important thing is in as approachable way as you can.

Are there popular misconceptions about the medieval world that need correcting?

It is certainly possible to show that the medieval world is more complicated. It is possible to show that people were less brutish, less 'superstitious', and less 'medieval' than it is thought they were. I have always intended to do that type of reclamation work. The medieval period isn't interesting because people are really dreadful to each other and will die at the age of 25. The medieval period is interesting because people are thinking and behaving differently, and it is possible to talk through why that is.

There is also a popular interest in the medieval that is in part romantically based – swords and sudden death. One of the things that characterises some people's interest in the medieval period is fantasy games – updatings of the old *Dungeons & Dragons* tradition. The television series *Game of Thrones* is a very good instance of the kind of way in which popular interest of the middle ages can be brought out. My students all watch it: they're all interested to know if I think that it represents or misrepresents the medieval period. It *does* represent the medieval period quite well in some respects: people behaving badly without a lot of technology. There are fewer dragons in the actual middle ages, one has to recognise that. But apart from that, it is certainly no less true to life than the sex romps in *The Tudors* television series, which is also enthusiastically watched by history students. So I am rather a fan of *Game of Thrones* in that it gets people interested in the medieval period. And they can then still stay interested in *Game of Thrones*, while also being open to learning that the medieval period is slightly different.

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What is your next project?

The next big thing I want to do is a study of economic change in the 11th-century Mediterranean. That will allow me to do some of the things that I enjoyed most when I was doing *Framing the Early Middle Ages* – in other words, having an excuse to wander around the Mediterranean for work purposes when it really feels like pleasure.

This project is going to be much more focused on the logic of the economic system that is in operation in the 'long' 11th century (i.e. 950–1150). That's to say, it's not just *Framing 2*. One of the things that has begun to preoccupy me is the fact that nobody really has a very clear idea of what a medieval economic logic might consist of. Looking at a period where there is plenty of evidence for economic change, including important archaeological evidence, is a good basis for looking at the problem carefully and comparatively.

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Why should the study of medieval history be supported by public money?

There are a lot of clichés that people use about history: 'If you don't understand the past, you are condemned to repeat it', and so on. But clichés tend to have traction because they aren't false. Anyone who thinks that they can operate in the modern world without understanding its historical origins is deluded.

The medieval period is simply part of that. It is another form of delusion to think that you only need to start in 1800, or you only need to start in 1500. You have to understand the whole lot.

Take the example of people who study the medieval caliphate. About 15 years ago it might have been thought that studying the medieval caliphate had all the significance of a gardener working on a national azalea collection. However, now it becomes clear that if you actually want to understand what is currently happening in Syria and Iraq, then you have to know what a caliphate is, how it worked, what kind of power it has in certain versions of Islam. Suddenly that form of knowledge becomes relevant.

You can't predict these things in advance. This is a clear illustration of the fact that you can't say 'We have decided that only history after 1800 matters to anybody, and so the medieval period can wander off into some distant oblivion.' Different parts of the present have links with a whole range of different parts of the past. Many of the most powerful modern nationalist myths – the English belief that they have the oldest and firmest nation-state, or the Spanish belief that they are on the front line with Islam – go straight back to the middle ages. The medieval period lies at the origin of modern myth-making. One of our tasks is to simply show the emptiness of some of these myths.

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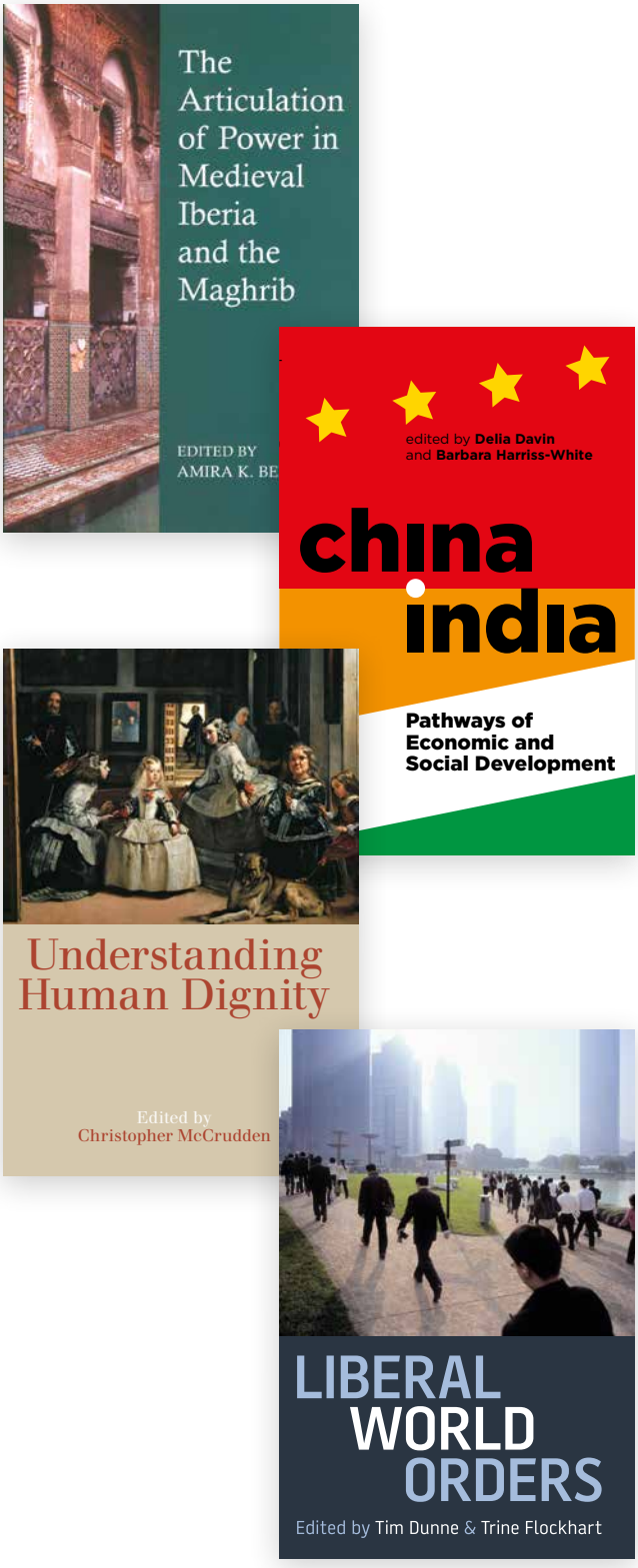
You were elected to the Fellowship of the British Academy in 1998. And from 2009 until July 2014 you have been the Vice-President responsible for the British Academy's academic publishing programme. What role does the British Academy have in the overall scheme of academic publishing?

The British Academy publishes in several distinct areas, and in each of them it has an important role. It publishes the first books of people who have been British Academy Postdoctoral Fellows – i.e. early career academics – which is an extremely valuable thing to do. It publishes volumes arising from British Academy Research Projects which have been running for a long time – like the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin*, which has just been completed.[8] That whole endeavour took 100 years, but actually the second half of the dictionary was finished in the last 10 years or so, in an impressive run of publishing activity. It is important that someone publishes this sort of thing, and the British Academy is in a good position to do so.

We also publish a lot of collaborative volumes of essays in the *Proceedings of the British Academy* series, which often arise from conferences. What we have insisted on is that

8. See pages 46-53 of this issue for 'Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources'.



Four of the thematic volumes of essays published in the *Proceedings of the British Academy* series in 2013-14.

More information can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/proceedings

each volume has a really significant, strong introduction which aims to show how the volume can change the field. This insistence has been very good for representing the wide forms of knowledge that fall within the Academy's disciplines, and helps ensure that the volumes constitute significant scholarly interventions. I am proud to have been part of that.

What particular changes have there been in the publishing programme during your five years in office?

Everything has become more electronic: that is the major difference. We now publish an online open-access *Journal of the British Academy*.[9] We have become much more aware of the advantages and necessities of the online world. Many of our volumes are now made available electronically through 'British Academy Scholarship Online', which sits alongside the outputs of other academic publishers within the 'University Press Scholarship Online' service run by Oxford University Press.[10] That is a very good location for us. It allows people to become aware of our publications much more easily, and that has a considerable future.

Your publishing role at the British Academy resulted in your becoming engaged in the whole debate about 'open access' in academic publishing. Why is this issue important?

Once materials are published electronically, people often start to question why they should be paid for at all. Academics always knew they had to go into a library to find scholarly books and journals. However, if those academic publications are made available for you to read on screen, you may wonder why you still have to be a member of a university library in order to get access to them. Of course, the library has paid a subscription to enable that screen access. But the idea that things can be made open for everybody begins to gain ground, and you can see why.

The government in the last three years became very interested in open access and its possibilities. As a result, the various funding bodies for research and for universities began to issue policy statements intended to promote open access to academic publications. The British Academy was one of a number of bodies that started to see some dangers in the proposals.

Publishing is not free. Somebody has to pay for it. And people who believe publishing costs nothing are essentially naive. One of the dangers about believing that publishing can and should be free is that you start to feel that the traditional publishers of scholarly books and journals are in some sense attempting to con the public and should be undermined, by-passed, or abolished in some cases. That doesn't seem to us to be a good result. In fact, jeopardising the existence of academic journals is a terrible result: if research is simply posted online, you don't have anybody acting as a gatekeeper to help tell you if it is good or bad – you would have to read and check it

9. www.britishacademy.ac.uk/journal
10. British Academy Scholarship Online can be found via www.britishacademypublications.com

all yourself, and that would be a lot of unnecessary work. And just believing that everything will turn out alright in a new way of working is fantasy.

So the British Academy has sought to influence the decision-makers by drawing attention to the likely negative consequences of specific proposals. In some cases we have been reasonably successful – although the debates are by no means closed.[11]

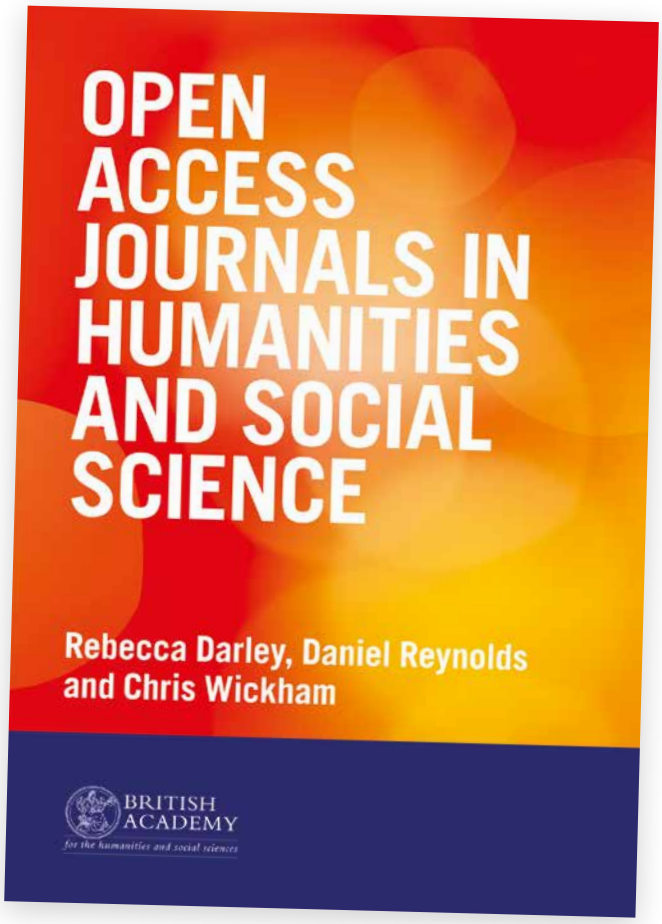
In April 2014, you produced a British Academy report on open access. What has been the significance of that?

The British Academy's contribution has not only been to present arguments, but also to collect data – which often enough is not being collected by anybody else – in order to show that the issues being debated are more complicated than people think.

With two research assistants – Dr Rebecca Darley and Dr Daniel Reynolds – I have written a report on open access in the humanities and social sciences, which has focused on journals.[12] It has shown that different disciplines have different relationships with open access: so it is certainly not a case of 'one size fits all'. It has shown that some disciplines have a greater opening into the international world, where open access has taken different forms from what it takes in this country; so it would be a pointless idea to attempt to impose a UK model on the rest of the world (which is where 94% of all publishing happens). But it has also shown that some of the threats to journals are not as great as journal publishers have thought. So it is not by any means a report that aims to undermine current open access debates. There are some respects in which the proposed eco-system for open access, as it is now turning out, is going to be much less negative than some people feared. That is a useful conclusion to bring out.

The exercise threw you into the middle of academic and conventional politics – you even found yourself in front of a Commons select committee. Do you have any observations arising from that experience?

Certainly appearing before the House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee in April 2013 was fun. For a start, Parliament is quite an interesting building. Although the select committee was probably not interested in the same things as most of the people asked to give evidence, it did get a lot of people to attend. So had the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, which had met in January 2013. And it got a huge number of people to send in viewpoints. The thousand pages of written evidence that people presented to the select committees form one of the most important and useful guides to what people think about open access that exists anywhere in the world. From that point of view, it was very useful, even if the politicians have rapidly moved on to other things. Apart from that, I found – as I have found inside universities – that one of the key parts of all political action is figuring out whom you can do a deal with, and how. They weren't inside the Commons select committee, but several people who were there then are indeed people you can deal with.



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What are the sorts of things that the British Academy should be doing now?

The role that the British Academy has steadily taken up in producing evidence-based but relatively neutral reports about issues of public interest is a very good one indeed. The British Academy has a lot of smart and well-informed people in it. Part of the problem about public debate is that it is often not well-informed. One of the reasons why it's not well-informed is that nobody really knows where to go and get reliable data. And people need to know what the consequences of their actions will be; they don't always have people who are going to tell them. That is something the Academy can usefully do; and the more it continues to do it, the more useful the Academy will be. Apart from just getting on and writing world-changing books and articles, of course.

11. More information on the British Academy's contributions to the debate on open access can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/openaccess

12. Rebecca Darley, Daniel Reynolds and Chris Wickham, *Open access journals in Humanities and Social Science: A British Academy Research Project* (2014). The research behind this report was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).