

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By SIR GEORGE CLARK

9 July 1958

NOW that we have made our elections, approved the accounts, and passed a resolution, the business of the session is over. For the fourth time I have the privilege of addressing you from this chair, and I must begin with a familiar topic. Once again, after a period of suspense, Her Majesty's Government granted the full amount for which we applied for the maintenance of our existing activities; but, in the difficult conditions of last winter, nothing could be provided for new developments. We fully understand that it was impossible to make an exception in our favour from general rulings which affected many other institutions equally with ourselves. In our discussions with the Treasury the public value of our work was never called in question in any way. Indeed it was so fully appreciated that we may hope, in a more affluent future, to go forward where for the present we are halted. We hope it will be understood that, in the nature of our functions, an undertaking is not made less desirable by being novel, but may well be more urgently necessary than some other which is already established and cannot be retrenched.

Many things have contributed to make our relations with the Treasury satisfactory. One among them is the high standard of the preliminary work done for the Council in the office here on the estimates which we submit on behalf of seven important institutions, the five British schools overseas, the Egypt Exploration Society, and the Council for British Archaeology. We owe a great deal in this matter to the firmness and judgement of our Secretary. This is the last of my annual addresses, and I have no wish to offer advice on the conduct of business with which I shall not be actively concerned; but perhaps I may express the hope that it will not be long before a larger staff will be available, to carry on this and the other affairs of the Academy in more adequate quarters. My personal gratitude to the Secretary, the Assistant Secretary, and the other ladies who work here is the greater because I know how much inconvenience they have to suffer. This year I would specially mention Miss Myers, to whom the Council has had occasion to express its thanks for her services during a period of special stress.

The Vice-Presidents, the Treasurer, and the Foreign Secretary have also, as always, earned my sincere thanks and those of the Academy. Since he now retires from the office of which he has been the first holder, I must put it on record that Sir Charles Webster, in spite of his other burdensome engagements, has solved one of our problems, and materially relieved the other officers, by showing how a Foreign Secretary can deal as an expert with a crucially important department of our work.

There is every reason to suppose that our work will become more varied and more specialized. You will have observed in the Annual Report, in the twelve lines of a modest paragraph numbered 14, that we were able to answer an inquiry from one of our most distinguished learned societies, the Royal Historical Society, about the use of pro-print. When I call it a modest paragraph I do not mean only that it is short and unobtrusive; I mean that it scarcely indicates how much labour was involved in preparing this answer. We have also paid some attention, though not in such a way as to justify any mention in the Report, to a much larger technical question, that of the distribution, storage, and cataloguing of microfilms. For the present we have no proposals to make, but if, as seems likely, it becomes necessary for this problem to be dealt with comprehensively, the Academy may well be able to render services to the libraries and other bodies which it immediately concerns.

This is not the only problem which may be set for us by the mechanization of scholarship. Some of our Fellows, for instance in Section IX, have long been on terms of familiarity with calculating machines. Machinery is now coming to be applied to some of the tasks which seemed least likely to find any use for it. The British Museum has acquired a Collating Machine, a daughter of the machine at the Folger Library in Washington, by means of which, in the first eighteen months of its use, several hundred new variant readings were discovered in the first Folio of Shakespeare. This machine is much simpler than some that may be expected to make their appearance, and even than some that already exist. A few months ago I was startled by reading a newspaper headline: 'Electronic Computers will search the Archives'. I found that the article thus announced was a forecast of the arrangements of the projected national lending library for science, in which 'all the catalogues of books and the records of the people who have borrowed them will be stored on magnetic tape and searched by electronic computers'. Nor was this the most surprising of the technical inventions there predicted.

I understand that there are scholars among us who find these developments disquieting. I have heard it said that most of us were trained in a technique which, in principle, did not advance beyond that of Captain Cuttle, to overhaul the book and when found, make a note of. If that is indeed so it is natural that we should feel a reserve like that expressed in Captain Cuttle's dictum about scientific instruments: 'It's a fine thing to understand 'em. And yet it's a fine thing not to understand 'em. I hardly know which is best.' But the machines have come to stay, and more of them will come; we have no choice but to make the best use of the opportunities that they offer.

To take one small example: if our Council were asked to allow any of our lectures to be made accessible to the world by broadcasting or television, I do not imagine that it would hesitate to agree in principle. It might have to consider some subsidiary questions such as those of copyright, but, since some of our lectures have been printed from the beginning, and there has been at least one press photograph of a lecture here in progress, there would hardly be a new point of principle to discuss. The immediate issue might only lie between wider and narrower, more and less effective, dissemination. The technique of dissemination must indeed, in the long run, influence the content of that which is disseminated. Broadcasting and television, like writing and printing and typewriting before them, open up new possibilities, but they also have their own limitations. The academic lecture itself can compass more in some directions and less in others than its predecessors the sermon and the forensic speech. It arose when conditions made it possible to gather a suitable academic audience in one room. The literary standards to which each of the various types of lecture conforms have been shaped by long experience and are constantly adjusted to varying circumstances and needs.

I notice that some other bodies comparable with ours have been considering recently whether the lecture is as useful as it formerly was and whether they should not drastically reduce their lecture-programmes. For reasons which I shall give I do not think there is any need for us to consider such fundamental questions; but it may be of interest if I draw attention to some other matters connected with our lectures.

We have, indeed, reduced their number in recent years, but only for a reason of financial necessity. Our regular lectures are paid for by separate trust funds, and these, like most other endowments, have diminished in value. In order to maintain a

tolerable level of remuneration for the lecturers we are compelled to space out the lectures more widely in time. Some of those which were originally annual are now delivered only every second year. There are, however, some new foundations, and this is significant: it provides definite evidence that important bodies of opinion still regard the lecture as a valuable means of furthering our purposes. It has fallen to my lot to preside over the first Dawes Hicks lecture, the first Chatterton lecture, and the first Maccabaeian lecture. Among the pieces of business now pending is a tentative offer of a benefaction for a lecture in yet another field.

Altogether we have fourteen endowed lectures, differing not only in their subjects and their frequency but in the kind of treatment which has become traditional for each of them. The Schweich foundation's courses, each of three lectures, have provided a little library of authoritative books on Biblical subjects, almost all intended for the use of specialists. The Shakespeare lecture, the Warton lecture, the Master-Mind lecture, and some of the lectures in the other series, attract hearers from a much wider public. Some of the lectures are illustrated by lantern-slides or gramophone records: we have not ventured further than that. I need not discuss the selection of our lecturers, because all readers of our *Proceedings* know what good reason we have for being satisfied with it. But I ought to explain how it comes about that we also have good reason for satisfaction with the attendance at these lectures. Our lecturers find that they are addressing those whom they would wish to see before them here, and this does not happen by accident. That our audiences are good not only in numbers but in quality results from an excellent system of issuing tickets for each lecture to those who are most likely to appreciate it. If this system has a defect, it is that of making demands on our silent staff.

In one respect our practice is perhaps unusual: our lectures are not followed by any discussion. I have heard of discussions that were held in some of the sections in the early days of the Academy, and I do not know exactly why they were discontinued. Members of the audience who wish to offer comments or corrections can certainly offer them in other ways. I have the impression that discussion, formal and informal, is very active in the British universities and one of them seems to use it in the process of education more than any other university in the contemporary world. Moreover, our learned societies provide for it generously. Our own reason for dispensing with it may,

however, simply be that we cannot collect our audiences at any time of day when they can be conveniently kept together for longer than one hour.

In at least one continental country the standard duration of a lecture is, or was, two hours, with a half-time interval for refreshment. In 1921 an eminent historian and literary man, a native of such a country, wrote a review of an English book, which has been reprinted in his collected works.¹ The book reproduces a special course of lectures given, each by a different lecturer, in a university, dealing with medieval contributions to modern civilization. The reviewer made a remark which, whether it is just or not, might be equally applied to the many similar books that have appeared and are still appearing. 'For such profound questions', he wrote, 'neither the form of a series of lectures nor that of co-operative scholarship is adequate. They are specially inadequate if the contributors adhere to the current English type of lecture, with laconic turns of wit, an occasional anecdote, and here and there a quotation from some fashionable writer.' We must always welcome criticism of habits which we take for granted, but, so far as the Academy is concerned, I cannot convince myself that we ought to take this deeply to heart. The lecture of one hour, preferably interpreted as fifty minutes, still seems to be a most useful medium, so adaptable that it serves equally well for a closely-reasoned philosophical argument and for a graceful rhetorical exercise. The facetious and the topical may be unbecoming; sitting in this chair I have perhaps once or twice thought of the words 'ornari res ipsa negat, contenta doceri'; but the wise teacher need not reject the accepted devices for keeping his hearers awake.

Will you forgive me for having spoken at such length about a minor matter? On the day when I was elected a Fellow of the Academy, Dr. Mackail, who was then the President, addressed it in stately language on 'the grave duty and high privilege which rests on the Academy and includes all its functions', namely 'the maintenance of the standard of learning and guardianship of the continuity of civilization'. He spoke of the danger of a general relapse into barbarism, and he judged that it was not lessening at that time. During the long intervening years we have lived our daily lives in the shadow and the light of such thoughts as those. Experience has made us academic men not less but more assured that our own vocation, to the practice of

¹ Johan Huizinga, *Gezamelde werken*, ii (1949), 535.

thought and scholarship in the service of truth, is imperative. The same experience has schooled us in co-operating among ourselves and in co-operating with allies outside our doors. Our Academy need not be backward in claiming its share of the credit for the splendid vitality of civilization in this troubled age.

The time has come for me to surrender the responsibilities which you have committed to me. I am indeed glad to hand them over to a successor who has rendered conspicuous services to learning and to the wider freedom which it both needs and upholds. If he were here I could assure him that his new office has many amenities. Those of which I am most conscious at this moment spring from the happy personal relations of our society. I have enjoyed much undeserved indulgence here, and, may I say, sustaining friendship. For these, and for the great honour you have done me by entrusting me with this office, I thank you with all my heart.