

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By J. H. CLAPHAM

9 July 1941

FIRST, let me thank the Academy for renewing to me the honour—great, as it was originally completely unexpected—of election to the Presidency. There are names enough on our list of Presidents of a kind to make any occupant of this chair both conscious of his own inadequacy and determined to maintain its influence and dignity, so far as in him lies.

The Report which is in your hands tells almost everything that there is to tell of the life of the Academy in these days so unpropitious for free learning and free thought. It tells of our Lectures maintained; of the various learned enterprises which it is our privilege to assist carried on, all things considered, with considerable success: of our government grant restored to the extent of half its normal amount, with the express duty of using it—as we naturally wish to see it used—for keeping those enterprises alive, if sometimes in a state of suspended animation. It tells also of the damage, happily slight, to our headquarters here done by enemy action. Perhaps for the first time we are properly grateful for their low level, their solidity, their imperfect fenestration—as the architects say. The Report also records exchange of friendly greetings and expressions of resolve between the American Council of Learned Societies and ourselves; and the noble appeal addressed to the Academies of the world, dated 2 November 1940, ἐκ τῆς ἱερᾶς πόλεως—pardon my schoolboy Greek accent—ὅπου ἐγεννήθη ἡ ἀρχαιοτάτη τῶν Ἀκαδημιῶν τοῦ κόσμου.

And in the Report you will find what a committee of ours has done for alien, but friendly, scholars interned; also the count of our losses and our gains—ten Fellows or retired Fellows, one Honorary Fellow, and three

Corresponding Fellows lost to us by death; nine Fellows and four Corresponding Fellows gained by election. Before I touch the memory of the dead, may I welcome—though some time after their entry—the living, half of whom as it happens are personal friends and so doubly welcome. It is not, I think, a President's obligation to speak of all our losses: obituaries by hands more competent than his will appear in time. But a few names I cannot pass by—Henri Bergson, an almost perfect embodiment of French learning, French culture, and of the finest qualities of that other race against which the powers of evil especially rage; Viscount Wakefield, our benefactor; two original Fellows, Sir Henry Maxwell-Lyte and Sir James Frazer, who need no praise from me or any of us, whose departure leaves the Academy with but one original Fellow on its roll;¹ and that great and modest scholar and public servant, killed by the enemy in his home with his wife and son, whom I will still call—because that name best describes him—Josiah Stamp.

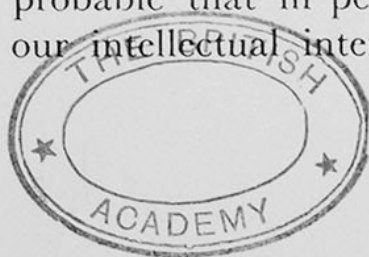
On one aspect of the elections, which you have completed to-day, I should like, if I may, to comment. You have chosen ten ordinary Fellows. Their average age I note is 53·6 and two are still in their forties. Both facts are very welcome to me. A society such as ours is in some small danger of becoming a collection of men who have done their best work, and earned their honours, and may not be disposed or perhaps able to take a very active part in its affairs. Elderly we must be because of the nature of our studies. They will tell you in the Royal Society that a mathematician or physicist may be elected really young; for the young make great discoveries in those fields. But a zoologist or geologist or botanist does well to gain election in his forties; since achievement deserving recognition normally comes later with them, as it does with us. The fact that our numbers are much smaller than those of the Royal Society is a further handicap to early election.

¹ Since lost to us by the death of Sir Arthur Evans.

Research tells me that our Secretary and the late Provost of Eton, Montague James, were both elected at about forty. Having known them both, I conclude that scholars fit to be chosen earlier will always be singularly rare. But I am sure that, if the vitality and influence of the Academy are to be maintained and to increase as they should, an average age of election not above fifty ought to be aimed at. It is for the Sections, if they agree with this policy, to supply the Council and the Annual Meeting with candidates of appropriate immaturity.

I am eager that the Academy should include a full group of men young enough to see visions and act on them, because if it does it may in time play a most important part in the life of the country. As societies, and above all as English institutions, measure their lives it is still very young indeed. Moreover, its less than forty years' life has now been twice broken by war. To-day, as twenty-five years ago—perhaps even more than twenty-five years ago—our younger, and many of our older, Fellows are diverted from their scholars' tasks to work more urgent and, for the time, often far more important. This double interruption has retarded our growth, not in numbers but in vigorous coherent activity, and the growth of any influence that we may be entitled to exert.

At this moment the President and Secretaries of the Royal Society are members of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the Cabinet. Speaking to the Parliamentary Scientific Committee some months ago, one of them—Dr. A. V. Hill—expressed the hope that ‘in some form or other this function, no less necessary in peace-time, would continue after the war’. He added—and this is why I quote him—‘could not a similar provision be usefully made now for those complementary studies which the British Academy represents?’ We can give far less useful advice to a government in time of war than our colleagues of the Royal Society; but it is probable that in peace, scattered and divergent though our intellectual interests



are, we might as a body have some suggestions to make or information to supply that would be of use to those who direct the state.

I throw out the notion, still vague and unshaped, as Dr. Hill threw it out, with no certainty that it will fall on fertile soil and no absolute certainty that it is itself fertile. At least I find it attractive and worthy the consideration of the Academy.

But our main duty now, I take it, is not to speculate on our future utility to the state, but to keep our own several lamps of learning trimmed until the day again breaks. Some are of the age, or have the qualifications, which call them to give their whole time and all their energies to direct public service. All of us, whatever our age, are naturally taking part in such forms of service as we are called to or for which we can usefully volunteer. But sometimes I seem to notice among men of learning a very comprehensible, but, as I dare to think, mistaken anxiety to fill their time with official work because it is official and without asking whether the particular post might not be held as well—and with greater social utility—by a barrister short of briefs or a stockbroker bombed out of Austin Friars. We scholars do some things admirably; not all things.

Our activity in our own fields may be cramped by the hiding away of our materials. To concentrate on even our favourite line of work may not be easy, and there is a sort of intellectual asceticism which makes one sometimes hesitate to attempt it, simply because the work is itself recreation. Why should I write about metres, or decipher inscriptions, or speculate on the origins of institutions—happily—when men are dying and civilization is in peril? Well, men were always dying and civilization has often been in some peril, yet we did these things. Greater dangers have not made them unworthy. As for happiness, I know that many professional soldiers and others are now happily at war; and when thinking of inaccessible mate-

rials I recall my stout old friend, Henri Pirenne of Ghent, a Corresponding Fellow of the Academy, who in the last war wrote a good book in captivity—and from memory. Nothing has moved me more of late than the arrival from unoccupied France of a number of a journal in which I am interested, issued this year. Much concentration and much faith in the scholar's duty to his calling must lie behind that issue. So let us return to our metres, our inscriptions, our institutions—so far as public duties permit—and wait for the dawn. Even if it were to be the night in which no man can work, a thing I do not greatly fear, we could still carry on up to sunset.