

The British Academy

(originally published: ALLEA Biennial Yearbook 2006)

Introduction

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and the social sciences, and combines three main functions:

- As an Academy composed of senior scholars throughout the UK it plays a leadership role in representing the humanities and social sciences nationally and internationally;
- As a learned society, it seeks to sustain the health and promote the development of the various academic disciplines that make-up the humanities and social sciences; and, taking advantage of the wide range of interests of its Fellows, to encourage inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches to scholarship; and
- As a grant-giving body, it facilitates the research of individuals and groups of scholars, sustains the work of a number of research institutes and societies at home and abroad, and supports research initiatives of its own.

The British Academy came into existence as an independent private society in 1901, and was formally incorporated and established by Royal Charter in the following year as The British Academy for the Promotion of Historical, Philosophical and Philological Studies. Its objects were therein stated as being 'the promotion of the study of the moral and political sciences, including history, philosophy, law, politics and economics, archaeology and philology'. In its Centenary Year of 2002 the Academy received a Supplemental Charter amending its objects, which are now, in more modern language and more economically expressed, 'the promotion of the study of the humanities and social sciences'.

More elaborately and in the language of such public statements, the Academy now aims:

- To provide leadership in representing the interests of research and learning nationally and internationally;
- To give recognition to academic excellence and achievement;
- To support research of the highest quality;
- To help outstanding researchers to reach their full potential and thereby develop research capacity in the UK;
- To communicate and disseminate new knowledge and ideas;
- To promote international research links and collaborations, and broaden understanding across cultures;

- To oversee the work of Academy-sponsored institutions at home and abroad and their role in broadening the UK's research base;
- To contribute to public debate, foster knowledge transfer, and enhance appreciation of the contributions of the humanities and social sciences to the nation's intellectual, cultural, social and economic health and prosperity.

Origins and development

The establishment of the British Academy needs to take account of the history of the Royal Society, founded in 1660 and referred to in its (second) 1663 Charter as 'The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge'. During its earlier history, in electing to its fellowship, the Society embraced a somewhat wider definition of what later came in English to be called 'science'. Subsequently, with the 'professionalization' of science, came a narrowing of focus, encapsulated in the title of the 1984 history of the Society in the 19th century, 'All scientists now'. Professionalization was not confined to science, however, and the 19th century saw a flowering of specialist learned societies, in subjects such as language, history, economics, anthropology, and oriental studies - but with no overarching body such as in other countries formed their national academy. Towards the end of the 19th century a number of leading scholars had begun to consider whether such a body ought to be brought into existence.

Coincidentally, there were moves on the continent of Europe to create an International Association of Academies, and representatives of the leading European and American Academies met in Wiesbaden in 1899 to carry forward the idea. The new Association was intended to have two sections, the one for natural science, the other (in effect) for human and social science. It was there recognised that whereas the Royal Society could admirably represent Great Britain in the natural sciences it was not competent to do so in other disciplines. The Society therefore took the initiative in writing to a number of leading learned societies, inviting them to take the necessary steps to create a suitable representative body; and this provided the immediate impetus for the establishment of the British Academy (albeit after a good deal of discussion about whether the Royal Society should not itself be expanded to cover the full range of subjects embraced by the German word *Wissenschaft*).

The foundation of the British Academy received a good deal of public attention (although many early commentators, misled by the model of the *Académie*

française, were disappointed to discover no literary figures in its membership who would act as custodians of the English language, but only scholars). The chief problem for the Academy at the outset was that it had no money (other than the modest subscriptions of its members), no premises and no staff. The Government of the day made it brutally clear that it was not minded to help. Consequently, the Academy's beginnings were modest - it might even be said, inglorious.

The first Secretary of the Academy, (Sir) Israel Gollancz, however, was particularly successful in attracting donations and endowment, mostly from generous figures within the world of Anglo-Jewry, as a result of which various named lectures were established, which have continued to this day, delivered by many scholars of great distinction, from Britain and from overseas. These, together with other papers, were subsequently published within the Proceedings of the British Academy, established in 1905 and again continuing to this day (the most recent volume in 2006 is numbered 135). The Proceedings also contain memoirs of deceased Fellows, which cumulatively constitute a remarkable record of British scholarship in the 20th century. Other publications - such as the series of Social and Economic Records - added up to a programme decent in quantity and of unquestionable quality. In other areas of activity the Academy did what it could to contribute to national and international research projects and enterprises, and to re-present British scholarship in international settings.

A modest breakthrough occurred in 1924 when funds first became available from the British Treasury, at the level of £2,000 per annum. The grant was initially made on the condition that none of it would be spent on the Academy itself, and it was allocated in small sums to the support of a variety of external research activities. The grant came under threat of diminution or suspension at times of national emergency, and was actually reduced to £1,000 during the 2nd World War. In the meantime the Academy acquired its first paid employee, in 1928, on a half-time basis, full-time from 1930. Until 1949 there was no other member of staff.

In the post-war world it was widely acknowledged that the British Academy was suffering from serious shortcomings, and (as one President expressed it) failing to 'enjoy that reputation or that place in the national life which such a body might rightly claim'. The situation began to take a turn for the better, largely through the energising efforts of a buccaneering Secretary (1949-1968), the archaeologist R.E.M. (Sir Mortimer) Wheeler. During his period of office the Academy became the channel for public support for various overseas British Institutes and other organisations, and its own grant-in-aid increased dramati-

cally. New lecture series were begun, new overseas Institutes launched, new long-term research projects embarked upon; and increased money became available for research grants and overseas exchanges. Nor was this by any means all dependent on public funds: private foundations and individuals played a significant part.

In 1961, with crucial support from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Academy published a report on Research in the Humanities and the Social Sciences, which advocated *inter alia* a central national agency for allotting research funds. The Government's response was to say that, while provision for the social sciences was under consideration elsewhere (the Social Science Research Council came into existence in 1965), for the humanities 'There was no need to create a new independent central body... since the work could be done equally well by the British Academy itself with considerably less expense in overheads.' New money was promptly forthcoming.

Increasingly the Academy came to be regarded as a *de facto* research council for the humanities, a development that was not wholly welcome in all sections of the research community, since arguably it prevented the full and proper needs of that community being recognised and met, while also distorting the Academy's structure (by privileging the humanities over the social sciences) and its proper role. Nevertheless, advances were made through the 1970s and 1980s, generally welcomed: the transfer of funds from the University Grants Committee to establish a Small Grants Fund in Humanities, the cornerstone to this day of the edifice of Academy research support; the launching of research posts for scholars in mid-career, freeing them from teaching and administration for a period (with both public and private funds); and the establishment of three-year postdoctoral fellowships. More controversial was the decision in 1983 to take over the running of the national scheme for postgraduate studentships in the humanities, supplemented a few years later by a scheme for largely vocational bursaries. The Academy preserved and developed the awards which were under threat, but it acknowledged that this should properly be research council business.

The campaign for a Humanities Research Council, both externally and within the Academy, continued during these years with varying intensity. The Academy had gained experience of project funding from the 1970s onwards with the adoption of some 40 long-term Academy Research Projects. In 1987 a generous grant from the Leverhulme Trust allowed the proposition to be tested that there was unfulfilled demand for 'Group Research', and the evidence was overwhelming. The Academy produced a series of papers and reports to Government advocating a free-standing Humanities Research Council, and by

1994 seemed to be on the brink of success. But hopes were dashed, and in reaction the Academy moved to create the Humanities Research Board of the British Academy, at arm's length (a solution referred to internally as 'Austria-Hungary'). This provided a temporary solution and the Board soon won the confidence of the community; but it was hampered as ever by shortage of funds. The 1997 Dearing Report on Higher Education, to which the Academy submitted powerful evidence, renewed the thrust, and the immediate outcome was the transformation of the Academy's Board into the Arts and Humanities Research Board (1998), whose co-founders and co-funders were the Academy and the Higher Education Funding Councils. This eventually, in April 2005, became the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

These developments have produced a satisfying symmetry. The British Academy now stands alongside the Royal Society as one of two principal national multi-disciplinary academies, completing the ring of 'science'. It also stands in relation to the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the (re-named) Economic and Social Research Council as the Royal Society does in relation to the scientific research councils pursuing distinctive agendas appropriate for an academy. All these organisations now come under the oversight of the Government's Office for Science and Innovation and derive their public grants from the national Science Budget.

Structure and membership

The initial Bye-Laws of the Academy specified a limit of 100 members (Ordinary Fellows) and the Charter named the initial 49. As well as a few 'persons distinguished in political life', they included such eminent scholars as the legal historian F.W. Maitland; the classicist, R.C. (Sir Richard) Jebb; the ancient historian J. B. Bury; the archaeologist A.J. (Sir Arthur) Evans; the anthropologist J.G. (Sir James) Frazer; the editor of the Dictionary of National Biography, Leslie Stephen; and the economist Alfred Marshall. The first round of elections in 1903 took the number to 71. 100 soon proved too limiting and successive increases were provided for - to 150 in 1921, 175 in 1946 and 200 in 1952. In 1953 change of a different kind was introduced, when Fellows aged 75 were treated as supernumerary (Senior). In 1965 the maximum was again raised, to 300. In 1973 the age at which Fellows became Senior was reduced to 72, and in the following year the maximum was increased to 350. In 1989 there was a further reduction in the age at which Fellows became Senior, to 70. Finally, in 1992 the numerus clausus was abolished, and instead up to 35 elections per

annum of scholars under the age of 70 are now permitted. In addition, up to three scholars over the age of 70 may be elected to Senior Fellowship.

The Academy's present electoral policy is to maintain an even balance between the humanities and social sciences (because of past policies, the stock of Fellows is still weighted in favour of the humanities). After elections at the Annual General Meeting of 2006 the total number of Ordinary and Senior Fellows stood at 851.

The Founding Fellows were organised in four Sections: I. History and Archaeology; II. Philology (Oriental, Biblical, Classical, Medieval, Modern); III. Philosophy (Logic, Psychology, Ethics, Metaphysics, etc.); and IV. Jurisprudence and Economics. Over the next century the Section structure changed, by division, new creation and occasionally amalgamation, such that there are at present 18 Sections, grouped in two divisions, Humanities and Social Sciences as follows:

- H1 Classical Antiquity
- H2 Theology and Religious Studies
- H3 African and Oriental Studies
- H4 Linguistics and Philology
- H5 Early Modern Languages and Literatures
- H6 Modern Languages, Literatures and other Media
- H7 Archaeology
- H8 Medieval Studies: History and Literature
- H9 Early Modern History to c1800
- H10 Modern History from c1800
- H11 History of Art and Music
- H12 Philosophy

- S1 Law
- S2 Economics and Economic History
- S3 Social Anthropology and Geography
- S4 Sociology, Demography and Social Statistics
- S5 Political Studies: Political Theory, Government and International Relations
- S6 Psychology

As well as Ordinary Fellows, the Academy elects Corresponding Fellows from amongst scholars overseas who have attained high international standing. Up

to 12 may be elected each year, and following the 2006 Annual General Meeting there were 304 Corresponding Fellows.

There are also 18 Honorary Fellows (maximum allowable 20), either persons of academic distinction in fields other than the humanities or social sciences whose work has a bearing on those disciplines; or leading figures or philanthropists who have themselves done distinguished work or advanced the causes for which the Academy was founded.

Governance

The Academy is governed by an elected Council and the Fellows assembled in general meeting. The Council is composed of the President (from 2005 the philosopher, Baroness (Onora) O'Neill), who normally holds office for four years; six Officers, who may serve for up to seven years, responsible respectively for finance, international relations, publications, research programmes, meetings and activities, and sponsored institutes and societies; and fifteen ordinary members serving a three-year term of whom two are selected as Vice-President, the one for the humanities and the other for the social sciences. The Annual General Meeting of Fellows approves elections to the fellowship and to office within the Academy.

There is a full-time permanent Chief Executive and Secretary who heads an administrative staff of c 35.

Activities

The Academy organises its current work within four main programmes:

- Research;
- International and Institutional;
- Publications and Activities; and
- Fellowship.

Research

The Academy's research support is intended to complement the provision of the relevant research councils, not to duplicate it. This is interpreted as meaning that support should go to individuals for their personal research (as opposed to institutionally-based projects supported by the research councils).

There are four main areas of support offered, for grants, posts, projects and research-related studies.

617 'small grants' (up to £7,500) were awarded in 2005-06 to UK-based scholars, typically for travel to libraries and archives, often overseas, or to facilitate the work of small networks of scholars; 50 'larger grants' (up to £20,000 of direct costs) for self-contained programmes of research, primarily pilot projects and field studies; and 1,000 conference grants, of which 800 enabled scholars to read an invited paper overseas, and 200 were to bring key speakers to events in the UK.

As for posts, the flagship programme is for three-year postdoctoral fellowships. The scheme is highly competitive, and there are regularly 500 applications or more for about 35 awards annually. Since the scheme was introduced in 1986 over 600 people have held these fellowships, and the overwhelming proportion have gone on to establish a successful career in universities.

The Academy supports about 40 long-term research projects intended to make available fundamental research tools of benefit to a wide range of scholars. They include corpora of Episcopal acts and Anglo-Saxon charters, sculptures, town maps, medieval library catalogues, editions of literary correspondence, early English church music, sources of African history, dictionaries, databases, prosopographies etc. Possibly the most ambitious is a project launched to mark the Academy's Centenary, entitled 'From Lucy to language: the archaeology of the social brain', bringing together archaeologists, evolutionary psychologists, social anthropologists, sociologists and linguists to reconstruct our ancestors' social lives and behaviour from the archaeological evidence. Between 1992 and 2004 the British Academy was closely associated, in partnership with the Oxford University Press, with the financing and production of *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

In recent years the Academy has sponsored and published a series of research-related studies on such subjects as the contributions of the arts, humanities and social sciences to the nation's wealth under the title (drawn from Adam Smith) of 'That full complement of riches'; E-resources for research; copyright and research in the humanities and social sciences; and (ongoing) peer review.

International and Institutional

International

International scholarly relations have been at the heart of the Academy's business from its foundation - witness its membership of the International Associa-

tion of Academies (see above) and subsequently. From the 1960s onwards formal contacts with other academies, notably in central and eastern Europe and east Asia, have been established, providing a channel for academic exchange and, latterly, joint projects and the facilitation of person-to-person links and networks. These Agreements have been supplemented with others with a wide variety of research organisations elsewhere, so that in total the Academy now maintains links with forty partner organisations. In certain parts of the world the Academy has less well-developed contacts, and recently it created a series of area panels to advise on the development of relations, and the creation of links, structures and programmes which would promote UK research on the area, and encourage the development of collaborative research.

The Academy continues to represent UK scholarship in international organisations and forums, for example the Union Académique Internationale, the European Science Foundation, ALLEA and the International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies. It also keeps a close eye on research policy with the European Union and contributes as effectively as it can via papers and submissions to the development of the EU's Framework Programmes.

Institutional

In 1950 the Academy took over responsibility for channelling public funding to certain British institutions overseas. These then numbered six. Other institutions were added to the list in subsequent years, usually in large part owing their foundation to the Academy's initiative. In 2006 the Academy was responsible for allocating grant-in-aid to the following:

The British Institute at Ankara
The British School at Athens
The British Institute in Eastern Africa
The British Institute of Persian Studies
The British School at Rome
The Council for British Research in the Levant

The British School of Archaeology in Iraq
The Egypt Exploration Society
The Society for Libyan Studies
The Society for South Asian Studies

The ASEASUK Research Committee for South-East Asian Studies

The Council for British Archaeology

The first six maintain premises overseas; the next five are UK-based societies, operating overseas; and the last is concerned with the promotion of the study, care and public knowledge of archaeology and the historic environment within the UK. The first ten exist to provide opportunities for British scholars to undertake original research and fieldwork in areas of major scholarly interest; the means of publishing and disseminating the results of that work; and, in the case of the first six, an academic base offering a range of scholarly and logistical support services, including accommodation, library, and archive facilities.

Publications and activities

Publications

The Academy has a flourishing publication programme and produces 20 or more volumes a year (27 in 2006). Mention has already been made of the Proceedings of the British Academy, and certain other publications. From the 1970s onwards there have been two principal expansions in the programme, the first when the work of Academy Research Projects reached publication, the second in 1992 when the Proceedings series was expanded to include volumes arising from Academy meetings and conferences. In addition there are separate series of British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship Monographs, acting as a showcase for work by outstanding younger scholars who hold or have held awards; 16 Centenary Volumes, intended to demonstrate the vitality of British scholarship at the start of the new millennium; and Occasional Papers on topics of current interest and public policy.

Activities

Apart from its lectures, which have already been mentioned, the Academy organises meetings of various kinds: firstly, and intended primarily for a specialist academic audience, ten or so scholarly symposia each year; and informal presentations, discussions and debates on a scholarly topic of current interest; and secondly, for a wider public (or publics), conferences, evening debates and conversations, intended to stimulate interest and debate in a specific subject within the humanities and social sciences. Some of these events serve to communicate the results of research funded or sponsored by the Academy to a

wider audience. Others take advantage of the presence of a leading scholar, or build upon a suitable research-related topic of the moment, in order to engage the interest and attention of the general public. Others ('specialist workshops') stimulate debate and exchange between practitioners in academia, business, government, law and the public sector.

Great importance is attached to providing information and access to research resources via the Academy's website¹ which regularly receives over one million 'hits' per month. The website not only provides information about the Academy and its activities, but also includes links to a very wide range of scholarly bodies nationally and internationally. In addition, a directory of internationally available online resources for researchers in the humanities and social sciences, PORTAL, is maintained. Launched to coincide with the Academy's centenary celebrations, it has been online since 2002. It regularly receives over 35,000 hits per month, and is visited by users on every continent and at all levels of education, including schools. More than 750 resources are currently listed and this number is expected to exceed 1,000 during the next year.

The Fellowship

Mention has been made above of the Academy's Section structure. Every Fellow belongs to one Section, or occasionally two. The Sections meet twice a year in order to conduct the rigorous business relating to new elections to the fellowship, and to the award of medals and prizes, and at other times in panels and sub-committees. Members of the Sections also serve on policy and grant-making committees, and assess all applications for research awards. They are turned to for advice on policy matters relating to their own subjects, and are encouraged to organise symposia and other meetings on the Academy's behalf. In all they help conduct a formidable quantity and range of business. It is not lightly said to new Fellows that they join a working academy and their election is not purely honorific.

The Sections are gathered into two Groups, composed of Section representatives, which have not only an important role in the electoral process but also conduct non-electoral business, providing advice to Council on policy issues and matters of particular concern to scholars in the humanities and social sciences, and liaising with such bodies as the Arts and Humanities Research

¹ <http://www.britac.ac.uk>

Council and the Economic and Social Research Council to promote the interests of their academic disciplines.

The Academy takes seriously the Objective 'to provide leadership in representing the interests of research and learning nationally and internationally' and to this end it has established a Policy Advisory Committee (PAC), reporting directly to the Council, composed of the President, Vice-Presidents, elected Officers and the Chairmen of the Humanities and the Social Sciences Groups. (This formalised previously ad hoc arrangements.) The intention was to draw upon the expertise within the Fellowship, and the PAC is careful to ensure effective lines of communication with the Fellows in their Sections and Groups. The Committee's brief is to take the lead in responding to consultation documents issued by external bodies on matters relating to the Academy's interests and to take the initiative in making representations in the name of the Academy to other bodies as appropriate.

Finance

The great proportion of Academy funds comes via a Government grant-in-aid: in the financial year 2006-07 it will amount to £18,085,000, rising to £21,385,000 in 2007-08. In addition the Academy administers funds supplied by other bodies, mainly private research foundations which have agreed to support certain activities; and it has some private endowment, usually funds donated for particular purposes (e.g. a named lecture). There is also an Academy Development Fund which is made up primarily of donations, a significant proportion of which are from the Academy's own Fellows. Finally, the Academy generates a certain amount of income from its own activities, principally for the use of its rooms by outside agencies, but also via sponsorship of events.

Premises

Throughout its early years the Academy had no home of its own (or paid administrative staff) and relied on the hospitality of other societies for holding its meetings. In 1928 'in recognition of the position of the Academy and its services to the nation' the Government 'agreed to assign it free quarters in Burlington House'. Around this noble courtyard were already housed the Royal Academy of Arts, the Royal Society and a number of learned societies. This promise was honoured by allocation of very restricted space in No 6 Burlington Gardens

nearby, which had to be shared with the Civil Service Commission. In 1968 the Academy at last entered its promised quarters in Burlington House, in the East Wing, which the Royal Society had just vacated, shared this time with the Chemical Society.

By the early 1980s the Academy had outgrown its allotted space, and took the opportunity to move in 1983 to a handsome but small house belonging to the Crown Estate in Regent's Park. 20-21 Cornwall Terrace, originally designed by the architect Decimus Burton in the 1820s, attached to but set back from the Nash terrace, was refurbished and reshaped to meet the Academy's requirements, with a new lecture theatre constructed behind. But as the Academy's work and responsibilities grew this home too became inconveniently cramped, and the decision was taken to find new, more spacious premises. In 1998, after further negotiations with the Crown Estate as the landlords, the Academy entered its present home, No 10 Carlton House Terrace, situated on one side of the Duke of York Steps, with the Royal Society on the other, overlooking St James's Park and Whitehall. Although the postal address is No 10, the Academy occupies most of No 11 also.

Carlton House Terrace was constructed between 1829 and 1832, part of the development of the area of London stretching from St James's to the Regent's Park to designs by the architect John Nash. No 10 was the private home of the Ridley family of Northumberland, landowners and coal magnates, until 1924. Sir Matthew White Ridley, 5th Baronet and 1st Viscount Ridley, Lord Salisbury's Home Secretary for 1895 to 1900, was born there in 1842. His son, the 2nd Viscount (1874-1916), undertook an extensive programme of renovation from 1904, engaging the well-known Edwardian architects, Detmar Blow and Fernand Billerey, who were responsible amongst other works for installing the grand French staircase with its black marble steps. The Ridley family coat of arms is still set in the marble floor inside the main entrance. During the First World War, No. 10 housed a Hospital for Wounded Officers. No 11's list of occupants was more varied but included the great Liberal statesman William Gladstone who lived there from 1856 until 1875. Gladstone's first period as Prime Minister lasted from 1868 to 1874, and his diaries reveal that the Cabinet met there occasionally.

After 1924 No 10 and the greater part of No 11 were combined (the architect Sir Edwin Lutyens is believed to have worked on the conversion) to form the premises of the Union Club, which remained in occupation until 1951. Thereafter the building fell into decline, in use as government offices. The Crown Estate eventually agreed to accept the British Academy as tenants, and

the Academy was responsible for a major refurbishment in the 1990s, undertaken by the conservation architects Fielden and Mawson.

The building has made possible a transformation of the Academy's activities, providing attractive space and facilities for its own committees, meetings and a much expanded programme of conferences and other events, and also for those of other learned bodies, so that it, together with the neighbouring Royal Society, serves as a major scholarly centre in the heart of London.