

DAVID CANNADINE

... on the appeal of the 19th century, on writing contemporary lives, and on becoming the British Academy's 'Brexit President'



Sir David Cannadine is Dodge Professor of History at Princeton University. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1999, and became President of the British Academy in July 2017.

What are the origins of your interest in history? Was it always inevitable that you would be a historian?

There was nothing inevitable about my becoming an historian, but when I was growing up in Birmingham, I was lucky enough to be taught by an inspiring schoolmaster, called Graham Butler. He captured my imagination for the subject, I applied to read history at Cambridge, and I have been Clio's disciple ever since. But that's only part of the story. The Birmingham into which I had been born was still recognisably Joseph Chamberlain's city, at the centre of which was a wonderful ensemble of 19th-century civic buildings – the Reference Library, the Midland Institute, the Town Hall, the Art Gallery, the Council House and Mason College. This meant that I grew up in what would be in retrospect the last decade of the extended Victorian world, much of which was demolished during the 1960s, as everyone seemed to be talking about building the 'new Birmingham', which was all plate glass and concrete. Yet at just the time that much of the 19th-century

infrastructure, and not just of Birmingham but of all our great Victorian cities, was being torn down, the study of 19th-century history began to take off, at the hands of such scholars as Asa Briggs, Robert Blake, Eric Hobsbawm, Ronald Robinson and Jack Gallagher. This meant that I also grew up in a world where historians of exceptional academic distinction also believed that their subject was an essential part of the nation's public culture, and that their prime task was to write for a broad audience – a view that I wholeheartedly share.

In the 1980s and 1990s, you wrote quite a lot about class – including your 1997 Raleigh Lecture in which you describe different ways of defining class¹ – in particular the aristocracy. Where did your interest in aristocrats come from?

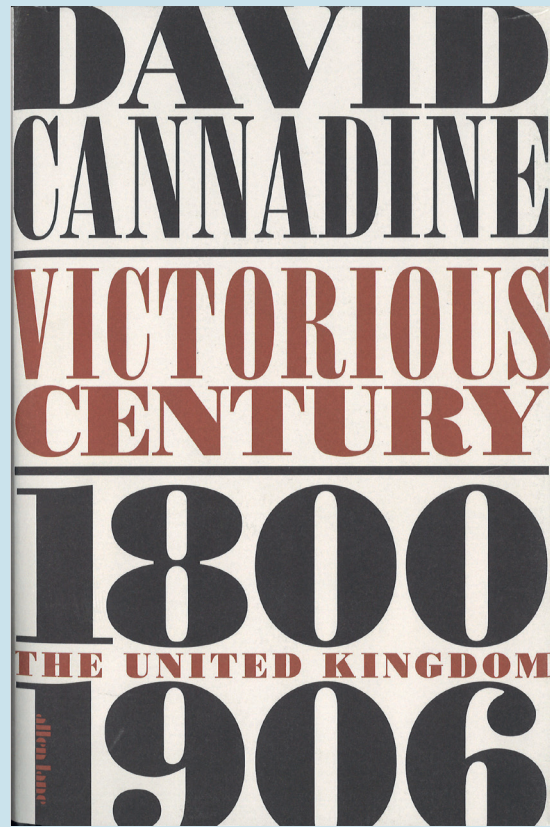
It was partly that a great deal of the historical writing produced during the 1960s was devoted to the middle classes (especially by Asa Briggs) and the working classes (most famously in the case of E.P. Thompson). But with the exception of Michael Thompson's pioneering book on *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, the aristocracy had received far less notice. But my interest in the sub-

1. David Cannadine, 'Beyond Class? Social Structures and Social Perceptions in Modern England' (Raleigh Lecture on History 1997), *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 97, 95–118. See also David Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (1998).

ject was also aroused because Birmingham boasted a very genteel suburb, Edgbaston, much of which was owned by the Calthorpes – an aristocratic family with an estate and a grand house at Elvetham in Hampshire. But that aristocratic way of life was made possible, not by agricultural rentals drawn from the countryside, but by the ground rents drawn from Birmingham, and I was intrigued by what seemed to be that paradox and contradiction. So when I moved on from Cambridge to Oxford, I did my doctoral work on the Calthorpe family and the development of Edgbaston, and that turned out to be a very rewarding subject.² And once I had done with them and with that, I also knew that I should try to write a bigger and broader work, exploring how the grandees and gentry across the British Isles had fared across the century from the 1880s to the 1980s. The inspiration for that book also came from Lawrence Stone's magnum opus on *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*, partly because I thought it an extraordinary work of scholarship, but also because I took time out from Oxford, while a graduate student, and spent a year working with him at Princeton.³

You have now just published *Victorious Century*, a volume on the 19th century in the *Penguin History of Britain* series.⁴ What was the attraction and challenge of writing that?

At some point during the 1990s (it really was that long ago), Peter Carson, who was then in charge of Penguin Books, decided that it was time to re-do the *Pelican History of England*, because many of the books in that series were by then getting on for 50 years old, and were beginning to show signs of their age. He asked me to be the General Editor, and I thought I could hardly take that job on without undertaking to do one of the volumes myself. And since I was able to persuade Peter Clarke to do the 20th century, that rather left me with the 19th, which in any case I was only too happy to do. But it took me far longer than ideally it should have done, because other things came up which needed my attention first, such as my biography of the American banker, politician, plutocrat and philanthropist Andrew W. Mellon.⁵ Penguin were exceptionally patient and forbearing, and the book was eventually



published this September, dedicated to the memories of Asa Briggs and Peter Carson. I was sorry that neither of them had lived long enough to see it appear, but in every other way, the book was enormously enjoyable to write. I wanted to try to catch the many contradictions and paradoxes about the British 19th century: on the one hand a time of progress and plenty and power, but also a time of deep insecurity and constant anxiety. I also wanted to give appropriate attention to Ireland, which is why I began the book, not with the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, which is the conventional starting point for many histories of 19th-century Britain, but with the Act of Union with Ireland in 1800. By starting the book at that time, and with that legislation, I was able to treat the British 19th century in what I like to think is a slightly new way. And for many governments then, Ireland was something of a nightmare, just as Europe has become so for many of their recent successors.

2. See David Cannadine, *Lords and Landlords: The Aristocracy and the Towns, 1774–1967* (1980).

3. See David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (1990); David Cannadine, *Aspects of Aristocracy: Grandeur and Decline in Modern Britain* (1994).

4. David Cannadine, *Victorious Century: The United Kingdom, 1800–1906* (2017).

5. David Cannadine, *Mellon: An American Life* (2006).

You have written a lot about how history should be done. In a lecture you gave, ‘What is History Now?’, as part of the Academy’s centenary celebrations in 2002,⁶ you talked about how, ‘instead of seeing our audience as being either professional or lay, we might consider what Stefan Collini calls the “academic public sphere” which is neither exclusively academic, nor inclusively generalist, but something in between.’ Is that what you are aiming for?

Yes. Of course, I write for my fellow academics, and *Victorious Century*, like all my books, is heavily and appreciatively indebted to the work of my professional colleagues. But I also write for the undergraduates to whom I have spent much of my life lecturing, who form a large part of that ‘academic public sphere’ when they grow up.

In a British Academy event in March 2016, ‘Does Good Policy-Making Need Historians?’, you discussed your own experiences of trying to influence policy. You contrasted what you thought had been a success, in terms of helping to get the ‘30-year rule’ changed, with the book *The Right Kind of History*, which was not so successful in achieving its aims.

I thought that both the 30-year rule report, most of which I wrote,⁷ and the book on history and its teaching in schools,⁸ made their cases with enormous evidential plausibility and argumentative conviction. The case for reducing the period under which most public records were embargoed was a very good one, not least because that was what virtually every other country in the western world had decided to do, which meant that there was no point in the British government trying to hold a line that had already been given up elsewhere. In the case of the teaching of history, it was equally clear that something needed to be done. Across the whole of the 20th century, there had been constant complaints that most people did not know enough history, for the very simple reason that insufficient time was given to it in the classroom, and the subject has never been made compulsory to the age of 16. The big challenge, then was to think of ways of teaching more history, rather than to keep tinkering with the curriculum, which has never been the real problem.

In the case of the 30-year rule, the recommended changes were carried in the so-called ‘wash-up’

legislation passed just before the General Election of 2010, reducing the time that most official documents were embargoed from 30 years to 20. But it was touch and go almost until the last minute, and it was largely thanks to lobbying of MPs and peers by Paul Dacre, who was the chair of our committee, that the necessary legislation was passed. This was a good outcome, but when it came to our recommendations on the teaching of history, we were much less successful. Despite the compelling evidence we had marshalled, the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, decided that he would not increase the number of hours assigned to teaching history, nor make it compulsory to 16, but instead he would change the curriculum, thereby doing the very opposite of what we had recommended. I concluded from these two rather different encounters in the corridors of power that, if you wanted to change things, the deployment of persuasive evidence was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of doing so. (Although I still cherish the hope that one day, another Secretary of State for Education will read *The Right Kind of History*, and implement its recommendations rather than do the opposite.)

In October 2014, you became editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB).

Rather like becoming President of the British Academy, this was something I never expected to happen. Like many historians, I had used the *ODNB* and its predecessor a great deal, so it has been a part of my academic life for a very long time, and I had reviewed the volume that covered the 1960s for the *London Review of Books*. I had also hugely enjoyed producing two entries for the *ODNB*: on G.M. Trevelyan, about whom I had already written a biography,⁹ and on Noel Annan, by turns an academic proconsul and a latter-day Whig grandee, as well as being an under-appreciated historian of ideas and institutions. I was also a friend and admirer of Colin Matthew, the founding editor of the *ODNB*, and his successor, Brian Harrison, both of whom were also Fellows of this Academy and very distinguished historians of modern Britain. Moreover, the British Academy had played a significant role in making the new *ODNB* possible, particularly through the efforts of Sir Keith Thomas, who was both the chair of the finance

6. David Cannadine, ‘What is History Now?’ in *The Promotion of Knowledge: Lectures to mark the Centenary of the British Academy, 1902–2002*, edited by John Morrill (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, 122; 2004), 29–51.

7. *Review of the 30 Year Rule* (report of a review chaired by Paul Dacre; 2009).

8. David Cannadine, Jenny Keating and Nicola Sheldon, *The Right Kind of History: Teaching the Past in Twentieth-Century England* (2011).

9. David Cannadine, *G.M. Trevelyan: A Life in History* (1992).

committee of Oxford University Press (OUP) and President of the Academy.¹⁰ So when, to my astonishment, I was invited to edit the *ODNB*, I thought this was something to which I could not possibly say no.

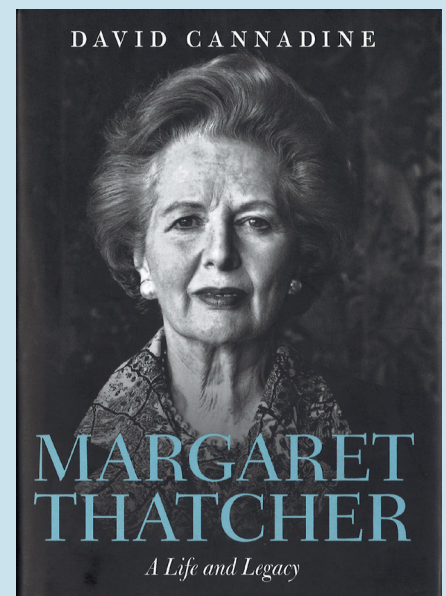
The arguments for redoing the *DNB* and its 20th-century Supplements had been very strong. Much more was known about many of the people who were in the original *Dictionary* than when those entries had been written. Some of the lives were excessively hagiographical, such as the entry on Queen Victoria. And there was a significant under-representation of women and of business-people, which the *ODNB* has tried to remedy and rectify. It also differs from its predecessor in that the prime mode of delivery is no longer the bound blue volumes, but is online. This means that through library subscriptions we can reach a much broader readership than the original *DNB* ever did, and we can also keep updating and improving our entries as new material comes in. Yet there are also continuities: for example, the challenges of trying to write about people relatively recently deceased, some of whom remain very controversial. Our rule is that four years must elapse after the death of someone we would wish to include, in the belief that a more even-handed verdict can be reached by then than in the immediate aftermath of their demise. The value and wisdom of this rule was well demonstrated in the case of Jimmy Savile, where the entry as it finally appeared was very different from what it would have been had it been written immediately.

In your own entry for Margaret Thatcher, which has been separately published in book form,¹¹ you have not shied away from reaching preliminary judgments about her.

Part of the interest was that it would mean writing the life of someone whose period of power I had myself lived through and could vividly remember, which meant the entry was a piece of contemporary history of the sort I had never written before. I had also reviewed Hugo Young's splendid biography of Thatcher, which came out when she was still in power, so I already had some preliminary views about how to write a biography of her. And the invitation to write about the 1980s, her decade of power, not so much as personal memory, but rather as a period of historic time, was impossible to resist. Perhaps to the surprise of some readers,

the book version begins with an act of homage to another 'Mrs T' – Mrs Thurman, who was the headmistress of my Birmingham primary school. She was a Conservative, a Christian, and elegantly turned out. She had a very intimidating personality and a terrifying temper. She was a simply brilliant headmistress. In many ways, Mrs Thatcher was Mrs Thurman multiplied by a hundred (or perhaps a thousand), and knowing Mrs Thurman gave me a sort of instinctive feel for Mrs Thatcher, which many academics did not have.

The length that was suggested for the original *ODNB* entry was 25,000 words, but in the end, I needed 33,000 words to get the job done, which makes it the third longest entry after Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth I, and slightly longer than Churchill's, which I was slightly sorry about. But even so, it was a challenge to get the proportioning right, in terms of her journey from Grantham to Westminster, from becoming an MP to being elected party leader, then dealing with her three very controversial administrations, then her rather sad decline and afterlife, and then some form of appraisal. There was the challenge of how to strike the right balance between the public and private lives, and there was also the issue of her gender. And since she had relished confrontation, and despised consensus, there was a further challenge in trying to reach some sort of balanced and even-handed verdict. In the concluding section, I tried to present the case that can be made for her – that she was the saviour of Britain, who beat the Argentinians, tamed the unions, pioneered privatisation, foresaw the end of the Cold War, and raised Anglo-American relations to a level not seen since the days of Roosevelt and Churchill. But I also put the case against, namely that she was a hard-faced, narrow-minded, provincial ideologue, with very little sympathy for the people whose livelihoods were wrecked by de-industrialisation,



10. Sir Keith Thomas was President of the British Academy, 1993–97. Over a number of years, the British Academy provided significant financial support to enable the new *Dictionary of National Biography* to be undertaken (beginning with £250,000 in 1992–93), and in recognition of this the Academy's name appears on the title page of the print edition.

11. David Cannadine, *Margaret Thatcher: A Life and Legacy* (2017).

who wrecked a civic culture and a sense of national identity, and who was emphatically on the wrong side of history in the case of German re-unification and the ending of apartheid in South Africa. Having presented these differing views, I have left it to readers to make up their own minds.

In the concluding session of the Academy's 'Governing England' conference on 'Devolution and Identity in England' on 5 July 2017, you had a discussion with Peter Hennessy about English identity in the light of devolution and Brexit. How can historians help provide a narrative of what has been happening at this time of confusing change, when it seems that established certainties are in question?

In one of the lectures I give at Princeton to undergraduates, I make the case that history is the best antidote to the temporal parochialism that assumes that the only time is now, and to the geographical parochialism that assumes that the only place is here. It reminds us that things have not always been as they are now and that they will not stay the same as they are now; and it also reminds us that other people in other places see and do things differently from how we ourselves see and do things. Among many other things, I firmly believe that history provides perspective and proportion, and we could do with rather more of that at the moment than in fact we are getting.

In the specific case of devolution, we should remember that there is nothing absolutely perpetual, preordained or perennial about the United Kingdom as it at present exists. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was only created in 1800, which means it is a less venerable national construct than the United States, and most of Ireland left that Union in the early 1920s. This in turn means that the current constitutional arrangements are just the latest iteration of a union that has constantly evolved and changed over the centuries. And it is the job of historians to point this out: to provide the context in which those in power make and take decisions, in the hope that they will listen, and take and make better decisions as a result.

As for Brexit: we should never forget that one of the reasons for creating what began as the Common Market was to try to ensure that France and Germany would not go to war again, as they had done twice during the first half of the 20th century, and with catastrophic consequences. Since 1945, Europe has not torn itself apart, and the Common market and, subsequently, the EU certainly deserve

much of the credit for that. We should also remember that, from a specifically British point of view, joining the Common Market was presented as the solution to problem to which Dean Acheson drew attention, namely that 'Great Britain has lost an Empire and has not yet found a role in the world.' Joining the Common Market, and staying in the EU, was the best deal available for a post-imperial Britain, and it also gave us greater continuing influence in Washington than we otherwise might have had. The danger has to be that all of this will unravel when Brexit happens.

In another line in your 'What is History Now?' lecture, you say of historians that 'We are the sceptics and the disbelievers, constantly in rebellion against the tyranny of present-day opinion.'

That phrase is taken from *Freedom and the Historian*, Owen Chadwick's inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History in Cambridge, in the course of which he urged that one of the purposes of studying history is 'to free us from the tyranny of present-day opinion'.¹² It's an earlier version of my point about perspective and proportion. What may seem to us now to be preordained, self-evident and an improvement on everything that has gone before, will not necessarily be seen like that by future generations. Let me give another example. In an interview in connection with his book *Man and the Natural World*, Keith Thomas ventured the opinion that, at some future date, eating meat might be outlawed, and everyone would become vegetarian, and that in turn would mean that any historical figure who had eaten meat would henceforward get less sympathetic treatment. Put the other way, this would mean that the most esteemed prime minister from earlier times would suddenly become the vegetarian Andrew Bonar Law, who can hardly be said to be in the first rank of British statesmen.

You are now President of the British Academy. In your address to the Academy's Annual General Meeting,¹³ you pointed out that you will be the Academy's 'Brexit President'. What can our disciplines specifically bring to the issues surrounding Brexit?

Part of the difficulty is that we do not quite know what the issues are, beyond the fact that Whitehall and Westminster seem preoccupied with the Brexit negotiations to such an extent that a great deal of routine business is either interminably delayed or not getting done at all. But it is also that the level of discussion of the issues, by both the government

12. The Revd Professor W.O. Chadwick OM KBE was President of the British Academy, 1981–85.

13. www.britishacademy.ac.uk/address-president-elect-david-cannadine-2017

and the opposition, seems to be conducted in an exaggerated, over-simplified, polarised way. Yet the background to Brexit is much more complex than merely the result of a single referendum, and very few of the people who are involved in these negotiations seem aware of that. The most important thing that anyone involved in the Brexit negotiations, or, indeed, anyone who cares about the issue, ought to do, is to read Ian Kershaw's forthcoming book, *Roller-Coaster*, which is a brilliant history of Europe from 1950 until our own times. That's just one example, and in the interests of full disclosure I must declare that the book is the final volume of *The Penguin History of Europe* of which I am general editor.¹⁴ But in any case, Ian's forthcoming book is just one example of the work that Fellows of the Academy do, as historians, sociologists, lawyers, philosophers, political scientists, and experts in international relations, that offer powerful insights and profound perspectives on the present uncertainties and discontents that Brexit has generated.

There is also a specific set of concerns about higher education, in terms of (for example) the relations between British universities and EU funding sources, and of EU citizens working in Britain and what their future is going to be; and many of these matters are raised by other articles in this issue of the *British Academy Review*.

But although Brexit is thus a major source of interest and concern for the Academy, and for many reasons, I also think it is very important that during my Presidency, and perhaps even beyond that, we must not allow Brexit to take over the Academy completely, in the way that it seems to be in danger of taking over the whole of British government. Even as these negotiations go on between London and Brussels, towards an outcome that no one can yet safely or certainly predict, we must at the same time continue to keep working at all the other important things that we do. It is going to be a very busy four years.

More generally, you have talked about what the British Academy can do in a more general, public intellectual role. You have quoted Hugh Dalton saying of John Maynard Keynes that he 'taught us to combine reason with hope'. What is the role of the Academy in espousing values like that?

In a world of fake news, crassly over-simplified binaries, and limited attention spans, we have to do better at proclaiming the values that we stand for

As my predecessor, Nicholas Stern, has very eloquently stated, we live at present in a deeply vexed nation and a seriously troubled world. He knows that as an economist; I know that as a historian. If we are to have wise and well-informed policies, or wise and well-informed public understanding of the issues, then the humanities and the social sciences have a vital part to play. In a world of fake news, crassly over-simplified binaries, and limited attention spans, we have to do better at proclaiming the values that we stand for, not because they are good for us, but because they are essential for the good of society as a whole. That is the big challenge for the Academy in the current environment – to make a case that is

not seen to be self-serving, but is, on the contrary, motivated by a broader concern for the health and well-being of society as a whole. For if we are to deal with the mega-issues that are heading our way so rapidly, from global warming to robotics, ageing societies to artificial intelligence, there needs to be a greater degree of respect for evidence-based learning, for truth, reason and ideas, and a greater eagerness on the part of policy-makers to engage with those who are the experts on these and other subjects of such vital contemporary concern.

You are a longstanding contributor to *A Point of View*, broadcast on BBC Radio 4. In August 2016, you did another series on Radio 4 – *Prime Ministers' Props*. Is the BBC an example of a cultural institution that the British Academy should be doing more with, as a channel for communicating?

I am sure that is right. The BBC is one of the great cultural organisations of this country, and you only have to live and work in a nation that has no BBC, to realise how much it is envied and admired. I am a very strong believer in the Reithian ethos of enlightenment, entertainment and education, and I hope the Academy and the BBC may be able to collaborate to a greater degree than we have managed to achieve thus far. When, as they often are, the Reith Lectures are concerned with the humanities and social sciences, the Academy would be an obvious place to host them. Across the more than hundred years of its existence, the Academy has numbered among its Fellows many of the biggest brains with many of the brightest ideas, who have transformed the ways in which we apprehend and understand the world. What a marvellous

14. Ian Kershaw discusses his previous volume in *The Penguin History of Europe – To Hell and Back: Europe 1914–1949* – with Diarmaid MacCulloch in *British Academy Review*, 26 (Summer 2015), 26–34.

series that would make for Radio 4. And I am eager to discuss the possibility of an annual series of BA/BBC lectures on the humanities or social sciences, like those that the Royal Institution puts on at Christmastime every year for the natural sciences. After all, there are many exceptionally accomplished television performers among our Fellowship. So there are lots of exciting possibilities to explore with the BBC, which would be to our mutual benefit, and I am very eager to be doing so.

Does your own transatlantic perspective, as Dodge Professor of History at Princeton University, give you an enhanced sense of the need and potential to engage with partners abroad?

I have probably spent as much of my professional life working in the United States as in the United Kingdom, and many of the Academy's Fellows live and work abroad, from Amartya Sen in North America to Ian Donaldson in Australia. And almost all our 300 Corresponding Fellows obviously live abroad, many of them in the United States. This means that, while we are called the British Academy, there is a very real sense that, in terms of our Fellowship, we are actually a global organisation. It's also the case that our research institutes, in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, are a further indication of our range and reach. And our project on the Future of Corporation, and the successor we are developing on the Futures of Democracy, are explicitly conceived of in global terms. Engaging with our global Fellowship, exploring global issues, and seeking global funding will all be high priorities during my Presidency – and, I hope, beyond.

Following up on the word 'funding', how does the British Academy need to be strengthened to be in a fit position to take on the various roles that you are describing for it?

I would not want to suggest that everything comes down to money – least of all in an organisation devoted to the life of the mind and the well-being of society. But money does matter, and although the government treats us generously, it is not a wholly satisfactory position to be as dependent on Whitehall funding as we are. Our independence is an essential part of our reputation, and it would be very good to be able to fortify and consolidate that independence by having a more diverse income stream than we have at the moment.

Raising money for an endowment, which is just about the hardest thing to do, would be a terrifically good thing. And we also need to raise money to buy down and extend the lease of our premises at Carlton House Terrace, which would give us a stronger sense of permanence and free up some of our annual income that at present goes to pay the rent. Those seem to be practical steps we could take, which would strengthen the Academy's position financially and, as a result, strengthen its independence.

I am hoping to make some progress while I am President, but four years is not a very long time when it comes to raising money, and I am very conscious that all Presidents build on the work of their predecessors. It is a cumulative process, but we have momentum, the trajectory really is onward and upward, and I am eager – and determined – to ensure that that continues. ■