PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By SIR H. I. BELL

14 *July* 1948

IT has been usual to begin the Annual Address with a notice of the losses by death suffered during the year and a welcome to the newly elected Fellows. During the past year five of our Fellows have died. The latest to be taken from us, and the youngest among them, was Professor Saxl, whose death is a loss all the more sensible because he was but fifty-eight and seemed to have before him years of fruitful work. His peculiar combination of gifts, the wide range of his scholarship, which included fields unfamiliar to many of us and gave him a comprehensive survey over many branches of learning rare indeed in these days of increasing specialization, and the tireless and self-sacrificing energy with which he devoted himself to everything he undertook, made him a specially valuable member of our company.

The others were all men well advanced in life, though they had not ceased to be active in their respective spheres. It is, for example, only a year and a half ago since Dr. Hutchinson, pursuing an interest in the 'metaphysical' poets of the seventeenth century which had long held him, published his *Henry Vaughan*, a work likely to remain for many years, if not for ever, the last word on the life of the Silurist. He was a fine and meticulously conscientious scholar, sparing no pains in the pursuit of accuracy and completeness; yet he was no mere researcher but (though as a rule he kept this side of his talent very much in reserve) a sensitive and understanding critic of literature.

Section VII has lost two distinguished philosophers. Professor Whitehead, 'the latest and greatest of the Cambridge Platonists', as *The Times* obituary called him, who had for many years lived and worked in America, found his main interest (if I may again quote *The Times*) 'in the "no-man's land" between mathematics and philosophy', and it was this combination of two different disciplines which gave to his impressive achievement in philosophy its special quality and value. Professor Prichard, an Oxford philosopher ten years younger than Whitehead, also came to philosophy from the side of mathematics, but his chief preoccupations were ethics and the theory of knowledge.

Lastly, in Dr. McLean we mourn an outstanding Orientalist,

of whose learning and diligence an enduring memorial survives in the Cambridge edition of the Septuagint, edited by him in collaboration with A. E. Brooke. This was his true life's work, but it did not exclude much other activity, in Syriac studies, as a busy college lecturer and tutor, and from 1927 to 1936 Master of Christ's College, Cambridge.

Of the six Corresponding Fellows whose deaths are recorded I can speak only of Professor Cumont, a much-loved scholar to whose learning and critical perspicacity we owe work of the highest value in the field of ancient religion. His *Égypte des Astrologues*, though but a by-product of his industry, is a brilliant demonstration how much of value for social and economic history can be extracted from so apparently unpromising a source as the writings of the ancient astrologers. He was particularly interested in Mithraism and the Zoroastrian mages. I have been told that when the University of Yale began its excavations at Dura-Europos he was invited to join the expedition but declined on the score of age, adding, however, 'If you find a Mithraeum I will come.' In due course arrived a telegram from Rostovtzeff, 'Mithraeum found. Come at once.' And go he did.

Thirteen Fellows have been elected this year. They are distributed over nine of our ten sections, and their ages range from forty-three to seventy-two. The Academy is sometimes criticized on the grounds, first, that the names of certain distinguished scholars are missing from its roll of Fellows, and, second, that a particular field of scholarship is inadequately represented there. To the first criticism it is relevant to reply that the Academy cannot force its Fellowship on anyone, and if critics miss the name of this or that scholar whose merits amply justify election, that may be not because he would not have been welcomed among us, but because he declined nomination.

The second criticism has more substance and indicates a defect from which a body like ours inevitably suffers. Our rules require that proposers and supporters of any candidate for election should have personal knowledge of his work. That is certainly right and proper; but the consequence is that a scholar working in some remote and highly specialized field, or in one not well represented among us, is in danger, however great his claims, of being overlooked. The problem is not easy of solution; the most effectual remedy is variety in the composition of the Academy. This consideration should, I feel, be borne in mind when estimating the claims of candidates for election, and I venture to

suggest that if in any year a Section has to choose between two candidates of approximately equal merit it should normally give preference to the one most likely to bring to our deliberations a new point of view.

Another criticism brought against the Academy, both from within and from without our ranks, was referred to in my address last year. It is that our publications in the field of scholarship are wholly insufficient, indeed, unworthy of a body like ours; it has even been unkindly suggested that the main official function of Fellows is to write obituary notices of one another. The fact that our publications compare but ill, both in bulk and in variety, with those of many similar bodies abroad must be admitted; but I would suggest that our critics have not sufficiently considered, or are imperfectly acquainted with, the circumstances to which this state of things is due. Our financial resources have always been quite inadequate to the full purposes of an Academy. Special foundations have, it is true, enabled us to publish more than would otherwise have been possible. I had occasion recently to look through the list of Schweich Lectures, and I was much impressed by the amount of solid and productive scholarship to be found in this series. It must, of course, be admitted that these volumes concern one limited field of learning only.

Our *Transactions* consist mainly of lectures given under various foundations and memoirs of deceased Fellows. Of the lectures some, no doubt, have been of an occasional kind and of no more than ephemeral interest, but there are others, and not, I think, a small number, which are real enlargements of knowledge or provide a new and permanently important treatment of some particular theme. Nor have the *Transactions* been confined to these elements. They include also valuable studies on a diversity of topics; and if such studies are not numerous enough the fault lies largely with Fellows themselves. Limitations alike in the length and in the number of articles which can be accepted in any one year must, no doubt, be imposed for financial reasons, but there is a constant invitation to Fellows to submit any contribution of moderate length which they have available. Those who fail to do so cannot reasonably complain that our record of publication is inadequate.

Furthermore, as I pointed out last year, the Academy does a great deal in the way of subventions to outside undertakings, many of which could not have been carried through or must have been seriously curtailed without our assistance. It has, indeed, been alleged that this is a mistaken policy; that instead

of being given so freely to external bodies our resources should be used to finance publications under our own auspices. The question is certainly arguable in the abstract on either side; but a point overlooked by critics is that most of the money given by us in subvention of other bodies was received from the Government on the express understanding that it should be so employed. This is, in fact, one of the ways in which the Government gives to humane learning such patronage as it affords, using the Academy as a channel for its benefactions.

Nevertheless, it is certainly desirable that we should ourselves bring out more works of solid research, like the old series of 'Social and Economic Records', and I am glad to be able to say that preparations are already being made for an edition of the important Cotton MS. Julius E. i. A committee has been formed to consider the whole question of publication, and proposals which might be useful to this committee are invited. If the circumstances justify it the Council may feel that the time has come to appeal to the Treasury for an increased grant on this score.

I must now turn to another subject. I referred last year to the Council's intention of sending to Germany a delegation to investigate the present condition of German scholarship. It proved possible to carry out this scheme, and Sir Charles Webster and I went out in the latter half of September. Owing to circumstances for which we were not responsible we were unable to extend our stay much beyond a fortnight. In the time available it was not possible to visit the American Zone as we had intended, and even in the British Zone our tour had to be curtailed. We did, however, spend a week at Berlin, where we had an opportunity of attending a two-day conference of University Control Officers, and we visited the Universities of Göttingen, Bonn, and Cologne, making moreover a one-day trip to Mainz in the French Zone to inspect the University recently established there under French auspices. I should like here to express our gratitude to the Foreign Office, which arranged our visit, to the Education Department of the British Element in the Central Control Commission, whose guests we were, and to the French authorities at Mainz for their generous hospitality.

I think that on the whole the visit was amply justified, though the total impression we brought back was rather of the formidable difficulties to be faced than of any clear plan for overcoming them. As a mission of good will and an effort towards restoring the shattered fabric of international co-operation it

was undoubtedly successful. Several of the scholars we met spoke of the 'spiritual isolation' in which they had been living, and everywhere we were received with great cordiality, with expressions of gratitude, and with such hospitality as the difficult circumstances of the time permitted.

For the rest we felt, as I have said, that German scholarship faces, and must for some time to come face, the most formidable obstacles. One of the greatest is the want of books. Many German libraries have been destroyed, in whole or in part, so that even older publications are now inaccessible, and recent works are mostly unknown to German scholars, isolated as they have so long been from the West, and are quite unprocurable even when known. Something can be done by the method of exchange, and I would suggest to British colleagues that there is no better way of helping the cause of international solidarity than to send copies of their publications to individual scholars or (which is the preferable course, since the benefit is then shared) to university libraries in Germany.

Books are not the only medium of exchange. Personal visits of British scholars to Germany and of Germans to Britain may do much to re-establish the fraternity of scholarship. It was a great service that Sir Ernest Barker rendered recently by spending a year as a professor at Cologne, and doubtless many of you have read with interest the article on his experiences which he contributed to *The Times*. I rejoice to know that a number of young German scholars are to spend a year working in British universities. In no way so effectually can they learn something of what academic and other democracy means in practice; and it would be insular self-conceit to imagine that we, on our side, have nothing to learn from them. Above all, such exchanges may help towards international understanding and reconciliation. It would, indeed, be unjustifiable optimism to suppose that hostility between nation and nation will automatically diminish with closer mutual acquaintance. Proximity has been as frequent a breeder of quarrels as distance. Yet it is undeniably true that mutual ignorance is a very fruitful cause of international enmity, and the meeting and intercourse of congenial minds, with the enthusiasm of co-operation in common pursuits, may forge links which, though they are between individuals rather than peoples, will powerfully help the cause of peace.

The paper shortage is even more acute in Germany than with us, so much so that some students find it impossible to procure exercise books in which to take notes of lectures, or paper on

which to write their theses. Housing, clothes, and food are all insufficient, and a high proportion of students, if one can judge from the results of a questionnaire at Cologne University, suffer from malnutrition.

It was not, however, with education as such but with scholarly research that we were concerned, and I will say no more on the former topic, nor on certain disquieting political trends discernible in some student circles, themes which have already been treated by others. We were pleased to find that scholarly work on the highest level has been resumed and that such undertakings of international importance as the *Corpus Inscriptionum*, the *Wiegendruckkatalog*, the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, the Berlin dictionary of Egyptian, the *Kirchenväterkommission*, Pauly–Wissowa, and the Latin *Thesaurus* are being actively carried on with a resolution and an organizing capacity which reflect the greatest credit on German scholarship in these difficult times. Learned periodicals temporarily suspended, like *Klio*, are being restarted, and new undertakings are to be inaugurated. The difficulties for the scholars concerned are no doubt great, not merely from the factors to which I have referred, but also from the claims of teaching. As with us, the number of students has greatly increased, partly from a cause alluded to by Mr. Birley in his admirable address, *The German Problem and the Responsibility of Britain*, a reluctance to face the immense task of reconstructing the shattered economy of Germany, with its ruined cities and general collapse of the machinery of government, and a half-conscious effort to escape from the pressing realities of the moment into the shelter of academic life. At Mainz, a university opened as recently as May 1946, there are already over 5,000 students. Yet there has been no corresponding increase in the teaching staff; indeed there has been a diminution, owing to the necessary process of denazification and the disappearance of many professors murdered or exiled by the Nazis. Thus the increase in lecturing, seminar, and tutorial duties means less time for research; and owing to the catastrophic decline in the standard of education under Nazi rule (more than one of the professors we met mentioned this factor, and indeed referred to the *Verwilderung* of the student body) this teaching is often of a somewhat elementary kind.

There is, besides all this, a fear, for the most part unspoken but none the less perceptible, of what the future holds in store, as the shadow of totalitarianism spreads once more across Europe. That is, indeed, an apprehension which we must all of us share.

In the present year we have seen a great and long-established European university subjected to rigid regimentation, many professors dismissed on purely political grounds, and academic liberty severely curtailed. In country after country freedom of speech, of the press, and even of independent thought is being threatened by régimes which will tolerate no deviation from the prescribed party line. Against such tendencies it is the plain duty of all who value the integrity of scholarship to protest in no uncertain terms. Liberty is to scholarship, as to art and letters, the very breath of life, and any attempt by governments to force upon scholars or artists or thinkers a foreordained pattern not only threatens the quality of their work but will in the end imperil the very fabric of true civilization.

But external tyranny is not the only danger. An even deadlier one is enslavement to our own theories and prejudices. A government can prevent a man from publishing or speaking what is distasteful to the authorities, but it cannot compel him to see truth as falsehood and falsehood as truth or to think along lines which are repugnant to his own judgement. Subjection to a ruling theory may deprive him even of this liberty. Doubtless we all of us know the tendency to let a view once formed colour our approach to new evidence, the impulse to burke or ignore or twist whatever runs counter to the thesis we are maintaining. This is no new thing; it is a danger which has threatened man's thought since thinking began. I cannot but feel, however, that it is peculiarly characteristic of our own times, when *parti pris* bids fair to be reckoned a virtue and many people seem to regard an open mind and the objective evaluation of evidence as a positive misdemeanour, a taking refuge from the stern realities of our workaday world in some ivory tower of idealism, a betrayal of whatever political cause we happen to favour. Of so perverse a view it is difficult to speak in measured terms, for it strikes at the root of all honest thinking. It is equally pernicious from whichever quarter it comes, whether from the right or from the left. *Das Kapital*, for instance, is no doubt a very much better book, and one of immensely more enduring significance, than *Mein Kampf*, but it is, no less than the latter, the work of a fallible human being, and to treat it as an inspired Gospel, an eternally valid pattern to which the whole of history, philosophy, aesthetics, and indeed the pattern of all our thinking must be made to conform is to commit an intolerable treason against the living spirit of man. The totality of truth is too vast and the human spirit too subtle, fertile, and adventurous to be confined within

the strait jacket of any formula. It is the duty alike of each individual one of us, if we value the tradition of disinterested scholarship, and of bodies like the Academy, to oppose to all such tendencies an unyielding opposition.

I fear I have been betrayed into an emphasis of statement and a sharpness of tone not perhaps wholly suitable to a Presidential Address. But these are days very disquieting to all who set store by the values of European civilization, and at a time when the ἄδικος λόγος is pressed upon us so speciously and by so many voices it behoves what I cannot but regard as the δίκαιος λόγος to raise its voice a little.