

## The Life of Learning

*In the fifth British Academy Lecture, delivered on 20 November 2001, Past President of the British Academy Sir Keith Thomas FBA considered the historical role of scholarship in national life. In the edited extract below, he describes some of the public and personal imperatives that ruled the life of learning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.*

In early modern England, the wisdom to which the learned devoted their attention had three main ingredients – Christianity, classical antiquity and the English past. In all three areas of inquiry it was axiomatic that the purpose of scholarship was public utility. It was meant to be useful, not just to artists and writers, but to men of action. As the first Camden professor told Oxford University, the principal end of history was not knowledge or contemplation, but practice. Protestants disliked the contemplative ideal, which they associated with monks and popery, and they regarded self-indulgent research for private amusement as reprehensible: a scholar should not just think of ‘the sweetness of his studies’ and ‘his own quietness and pleasure’. He had a duty to publish his results, so that others might benefit. John Foxe applauded the ‘great and manifold fruits which daily ensue by the studies of good men, to the public utility of the commonwealth’, while the learned bishop Edward Stillingfleet was praised for putting his knowledge to use, rather than ‘heaping up a vast mass of learning, and then lying buried... in the midst of it.’

Scholarly reading tended to be pragmatic and purposeful. Excerpts were copied into commonplace books and used as maxims at time of need. Public figures often took advice from scholars; Sir Robert Cotton was repeatedly asked to assist Jacobean policy-makers by examining the medieval past for useful precedents. Antiquarian learning was of practical value in the exploitation of landed estates; the Anglo-Saxonist, William Somner, found that, ‘upon the great questions of descent of families, tenure of estates, dedication of churches, right of tithes, and all the history of use and custom, he was consulted as a Druid or Bard’. Scholarship, in short, was not supposed to be an end in itself. Those who devoted their lives to learning were expected to produce results which would be of assistance to others. Scholars were not like modern Fellows of the British Academy, writing to impress each other. They were more like the *ulema* of learned Muslims, ready at times of crisis to make public pronouncements on pressing issues.

The avowed purpose of study was the recovery of useful wisdom from the past. If it was not useful,

there was no point in pursuing it. Late in life, Ussher told John Evelyn that he regretted having lost so much time in the study of oriental languages, because, ‘excepting Hebrew, there was little fruit to be gathered of exceeding labour; that besides some mathematical books, the Arabic itself had little considerable’. John Worthington, Master of Jesus College, Cambridge, confessed that his enthusiasm for Arabic, Persian and Coptic had cooled when he discovered that, in the absence of printed books, they had to be studied in manuscript, and that, anyway, ‘there was no treasure of things to be come at’. Sir Thomas Pope Blount thought that the time others had spent, laboriously deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics, was completely wasted, since all they contained were ‘childish fooleries’.

There was little notion here of exploring past societies for their own sake, little concern with cultural history or historical ethnography. John Lightfoot reconstructed the world of ancient Judaism so as to understand the Old Testament; John Selden studied Hebrew marriage because he wanted to reform the English law of divorce; and John Spencer examined Jewish law so as to illuminate the ten commandments. None of them was interested in Jewish culture as such. Among

The British Academy Lecture was established as a new series to address a wider audience than the purely scholarly and to advance public understanding of the subjects which the Academy exists to promote. In general, the chosen subject alternates between the humanities and the social sciences.

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Previous British Academy Lecturers were Professor Christopher Ricks FBA, Lord Runciman, currently President of the British Academy, Sir Geoffrey Lloyd FBA, and Professor Amartya Sen FBA.

English orientalists, Edward Pococke seems to have been exceptional in admiring Arabic poetry for its own sake, but his essential reason for studying the subject was religious. In the later seventeenth century, Arabic learning declined, because its astronomy and mathematics were becoming out of date, while its potential for Biblical study seemed to have been fully exploited by the Polyglot Bible. Anglo-Saxon studies went into a similar decline when the Church of England no longer needed their support.

It is hardly surprising that so much learned work in this period was related to immediate issues of a theological kind, since scholars were highly dependent on the Church's patronage. Promising boys from humble origins were spotted by local clergy or gentry and sent to university. After that, they might stay on for a time with a college fellowship. But such posts were poorly paid, incompatible with marriage and essentially temporary. Some scholars might eventually become heads of colleges or hold a professorship. Others sought employment in noble or gentry households as tutors, secretaries or librarians. Most fell back on some form of ecclesiastical preferment. The support of appropriate kinds of scholarship was one of the Church's accepted objectives; and a blind eye was turned towards incumbents who, like Bentley at Hartlebury, left their pastoral duties to a curate, while they got on with their learned work. The best scholars could hope to become bishops; and bishops in turn maintained young scholars in their households. Supported by the Church, they inevitably deployed their learning on its behalf, turning away from the classical scholarship on which they had been reared to concentrate on theology, patristics and church history.

The alternative source of patronage was the nobility and gentry, many of whom had excellent libraries and were seriously interested in historical learning. Most of the county and family histories were written by gentlemen with private means or by antiquarians enjoying their financial support. Here too, though, there was a distinct agenda. The authors of such works acknowledged their debts to their patrons in their prefaces and dedications, and flattered them by narrating the noble deeds of their ancestors and the history of their families and estates.

Without an interested patron or a bookseller willing to take the financial risk, works of learning would remain unpublished. Joshua Barnes, Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge, was reduced to

persuading his rich wife to finance his edition of the *Iliad* (1710) by assuring her that it was written by King Solomon. Much antiquarian scholarship was the work of well-to-do lawyers and heralds, who combined research with their professional duties; and the greatest scholars tended to be financially independent. Sir Henry Spelman published his historical glossary, *Archaeologus*, at his own expense; he had been a lawyer before taking up learning at the age of nearly fifty. John Selden was steward to the Earl of Kent and, when the Earl died, was supported by his wealthy widow. John Aubrey's financial affairs fell into utter confusion, but he somehow managed to afford to pursue his idiosyncratic, but brilliantly original, programme of research into biography, archaeology and folklore. There were a few autodidacts of humble status, like Henry Wild, 'the Arabic tailor' from Norwich, who taught himself nine learned languages, or John Bagford, the London cobbler, who became the leading authority on the history of early printing. But most scholarship was firmly in the control of the university-educated and their patrons: the Church and the gentry.

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For the ruling establishment, scholarship possessed an obvious utility: political, religious and social. The motives of the learned themselves, however, were more mixed. The biographer of Europe's most celebrated scholar tells us that Joseph Scaliger 'wanted fame and honour more than truth'. Emulation was basic to the educational system of the time and students were brought up to be highly competitive. The young John Milton believed that 'a desire of honour and repute, and immortal fame' was 'seated in the breast of every true scholar'; while the great eighteenth-century orientalist, Sir William Jones, wrote of 'the one thing which I desire to distraction, glory. Glory I shall pursue through fire and water, by night and day.' This was an age when the learned figures of Europe were publicly celebrated, their presence sought at royal courts and foreign universities, their effigies painted on library friezes and their careers lauded in works of reference. Inevitably, many sought learning in the hope of immortality. 'I am quite satisfied,' Richard Porson would say, 'if, three hundred years hence, it shall be said that "one Porson lived towards the close of the eighteenth century, who did a good deal for the text of Euripides".'

Yet most of those who followed the life of learning seem to have done so because of its intrinsic attractions. They were drawn to it by what they

called their 'natural genius'; only subsequently did they develop a religious or political justification for their work. 'The extreme pleasure I take in study,' wrote Thomas Hobbes, 'overcomes in me all other appetites.' Anthony Wood regarded the study of antiquities as 'his natural genius and could not avoid it'; it was 'the happiness of his life' when he was admitted to Arts End in the Bodleian. Future scholars often revealed themselves in their childhood, like Humphrey Wanley, who at an early age developed a passionate interest in deciphering old manuscripts. Such people were driven less by any sense of social utility than by the 'delight' their studies brought them. Others studied because doing so took their minds off less agreeable matters and compensated for personal frustrations.

In savage foot-notes on unjust editions  
He timidly attacked the life he led.

(W.H. Auden, 'A.E. Housman', 1938)

Scholarly labours were conventionally described as 'herculean'. William Dugdale, who said that his 'delight' in his work carried him through all discouragements and difficulties, could work for thirteen hours without stopping. The Cambridge orientalist, Edmund Castell, put in up to eighteen hours a day on his *Lexicon Heptaglotton*. Twelve to sixteen hours was standard. To avoid falling asleep, John Pearson worked in a cold room, with a blanket over his shoulders. Some read and wrote standing up. Henry Hammond seldom ate more than once in twenty-four hours and was content with four or five hours' sleep; he perused a book when walking and a servant read to him while he was dressing.

It was an accepted classical doctrine that the desire for knowledge was a natural appetite and its pursuit the highest form of human activity. The intensity and precision of philological and antiquarian studies in early modern Europe far exceeded anything required for immediate application; and there were always scholars who pursued recondite topics for their own sake. Even those whose motives were more practical found, ironically, that the ultimate effect of their labours was to invalidate the original purpose of their inquiries. For the more they discovered about the classical or medieval periods, the more exotically different did the past appear and the harder it became to draw analogies with the contemporary world. This was the great transformation in historical scholarship. The past, which was originally studied for the precedents it could afford and the lessons it taught, gradually came to be perceived as an independent cultural domain, too alien to offer immediate guidance and too coherent to permit exemplary fragments and maxims to be pulled out of their original context. In the early modern period, this new attitude co-existed with the older one. The same antiquaries who tried to draw lessons from the past also demonstrated its irredeemable otherness. In the end it became apparent that historical erudition had to be appreciated for its own sake or not at all.

Sir Keith Thomas was President of the British Academy from 1993 to 1997. Formerly President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, he is currently a Fellow of All Souls.

The full text of this Lecture will be published in the *Proceedings of the British Academy* volume 117.