

# British Academy Review

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# The British Academy

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The British Academy, established by Royal Charter in 1902, is the United Kingdom's national academy for the promotion of the humanities and social sciences. It is funded by a Government grant, through the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

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# Mario Vargas Llosa, in conversation

*At a British Academy event held on 6 June 2012, Nobel Laureate  
Mario Vargas Llosa discussed his latest novel with Professor Efraín Kristal  
and Professor Michael Wood FBA.*

## Efraín Kristal

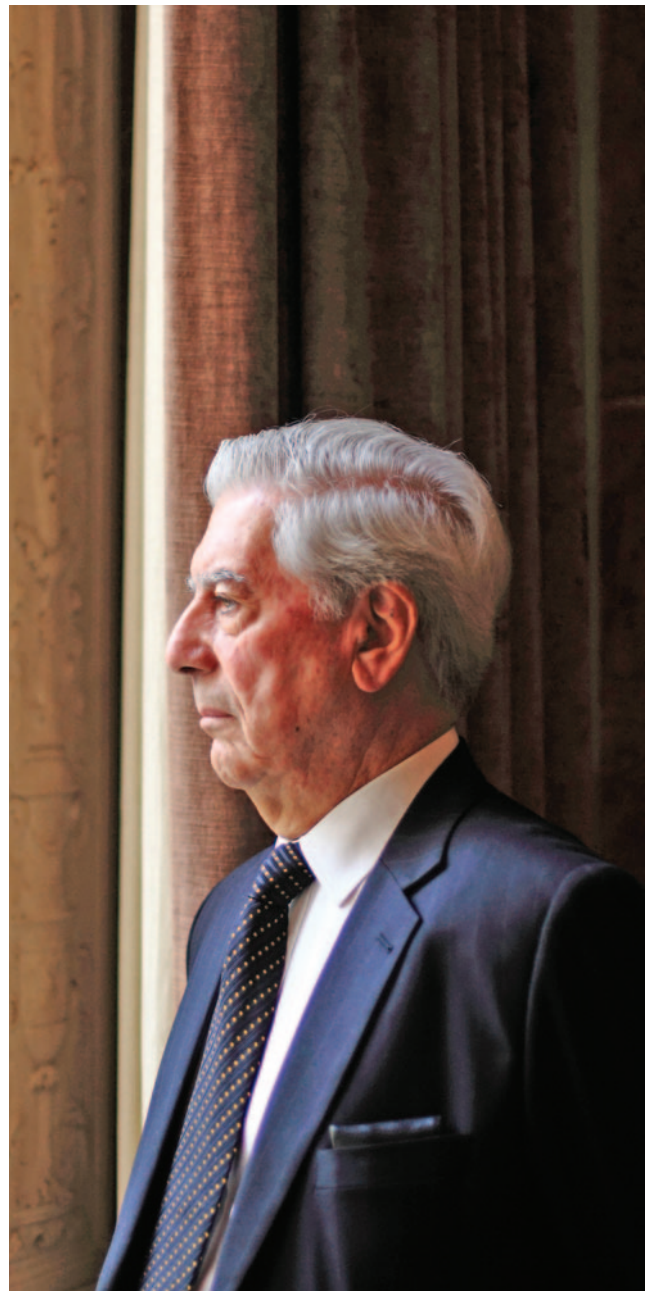
I would like to begin by asking you about the creative process behind your most recent novel, *El sueño del celta* (2010) – now published in English in 2012 as *The Dream of the Celt*. In a couple of interviews you had talked about the research you were doing on the Congo and on Belgium, and you had written some articles on Leopold II, so there was a lot of speculation about a new novel by Mario Vargas Llosa on Leopold II. When the novel came out, it was focused on a different historical character, Roger Casement. How did your interest in Leopold II develop, and what transformations took place so that the hero of the novel became Roger Casement?

## Mario Vargas Llosa

The origin of my novels has always been very mysterious for me. Something suddenly provokes a kind of curiosity about someone or something, and then little by little all this produces a kind of necessity and urgency to write a novel based on these experiences. In this case, *The Dream of the Celt*, the origin was a new biography of Joseph Conrad, of whom I am a great admirer. I discovered that the first person that Conrad had met when he went to the Congo was Roger Casement, a British subject who had already been there for eight years.

Roger Casement had a great influence on Conrad: he opened Conrad's eyes to what was going on in the Congo. Conrad probably held the standard European view of imperialism and colonisation – that it was something positive, which brought civilisation, commerce, Christianity, modernity to barbarous people amongst whom slavery and human sacrifices were common. Roger Casement gave Conrad a very different idea: he explained to Conrad all the atrocities that were being committed by the Belgian colonisation. This was very important for the change in vision of Conrad, and it produced his masterwork, *Heart of Darkness*.

I became very curious about Roger Casement. I discovered that he had been in the Amazon region – in Peru, Brazil, Columbia – and that he had been very active in denouncing all the crimes that were committed both in the Congo and in the Amazon region. He had a very adventurous life; he was like a great character in a novel. It was in this way that suddenly I discovered that, without knowing, I had already been working on the embryo of a novel.



*Mario Vargas Llosa.*

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## Efraín Kristal

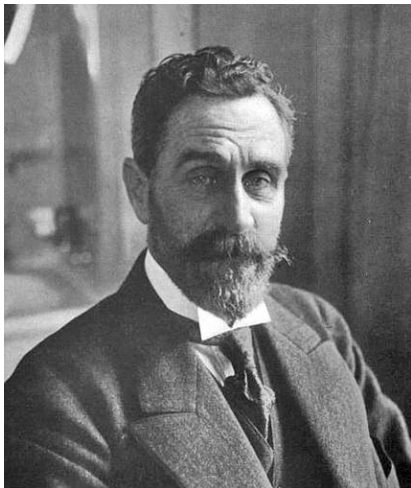
As part of your writing process you often travel, and in the case of this novel one of your trips was to the Congo. How did that trip affect the writing of the novel?

## Mario Vargas Llosa

Very much. I went to Boma, which was the capital of the Congo during Roger Casement's days. It has not changed much: all the Belgian buildings are in total disrepair, but they are still there. You get a very interesting idea of what it was like there: how the Europeans were just a fistful of people, completely isolated in this enormous world, how life contrasted for them there, and the nostalgia they felt for Europe. It was very helpful.

The catastrophe that is the Congo today – total anarchy, civil wars, a society deeply disrupted by the lack of a state and a lack of institutions – is something that comes from the times of Roger Casement, as a consequence of the kind of colonisation that the Belgians imposed in the Congo. I think it is one of the saddest countries in the world.

What was very sad for me was to discover that nobody remembers Roger Casement in the Congo. I remember one night drinking cachaça – the Spanish Ambassador had organised a meeting inviting people from the university, intellectuals – and no one knew about Roger Casement, a man who had concentrated 20 years of his life to document all the atrocities that were committed there, and who had fought so decisively to change things for the Congo. It was different in Iquitos, in Peru. I discovered one day, to my surprise, a very small street called Roger Casement – I could not believe my eyes. I asked people there, 'Do you know who Roger Casement was?' No one knew, but at least they had one street in Iquitos called Roger Casement.



*Roger Casement (1864-1916), the subject of Mario Vargas Llosa's 'The Dream of the Celt'.*

## Efraín Kristal

For many of your novels you do an extensive amount of research, but the research is often a springboard that allows you to invent. What were the aspects of Roger Casement's life that you needed to invent?

## Mario Vargas Llosa

I like this question a lot, because I would like to emphasise that the book is a novel; it is not a history book, it is not an accurate biography of Roger Casement – it is a novel. That means that there are more fantasies, more imagination, than historical memory. It is true that I do a lot of research for my novels, but not as a historian would do his research, not to find true facts that I would describe in the book. For me, the research is to familiarise myself with the environment that I want to invent in the novel. It is to make me feel more secure, less insecure, and less uncertain about what I am going to write. It is also to have inspiration: the research is always very useful to give me ideas, characters, anecdotes, situations.

The research is a very personal kind of research. I am not trying to find what is true. In this novel, as with other novels based in history, the basic historical facts are there; I have respected the basics, but I have changed many things. I have invented characters. The historical characters I have treated like literary characters, changing episodes, even changing personalities. In the case of Roger Casement, there are so many dark episodes in his life, that leaves the writer a big field to invent, to fill the gaps of his life with fantasy, with imagination. In those cases I have always tried to invent things that could be possible in the context of his life.

## Michael Wood

Would you give us an example of an outright invention?

## Mario Vargas Llosa

We do not know the kind of life that he had in the three months that he was in Pentonville Prison. The only testimony is of the executor: in his memoirs he said that the most courageous person that he had hanged, and apparently he hanged a lot, was Roger Casement. That is the only testimony. Everything that happens in Pentonville Prison in my novel is invented.

## Michael Wood

The visits, the conversation?

## Mario Vargas Llosa

I went to visit the prison, and so I had an idea of the kind of life that those condemned to death had. It was total isolation; he could not talk with anybody. Even the guardians were forbidden to talk to him. This gave me an idea of the kind of life that he probably had, but everything is invented in this part of his life.

## Michael Wood

In the admirable tentacle structure of the novel, we are in the prison all the time.

## Mario Vargas Llosa

This is 'the present' of the novel, yes.

## Michael Wood

We get flashbacks to the Congo, and then to the Amazon, and to Ireland and Germany. But there is a constant return to this prison, which he is in for a relatively small number of days. Did you think of that structure early on, or did it come to you later?

## Mario Vargas Llosa

The structure always comes after. In the beginning I do research, I take a lot of notes, and I start to write episodes. Then suddenly the episodes coalesce and produce a kind of structure. It comes afterwards, never at the beginning. I remember, many years ago, hearing a French novelist, Alain Robbe Grillet, say, 'In most of my stories the first idea is not a character, not an anecdote or an argument; it is a form, it is a way of organising, for example, the point of view, or the time structure'. For me that was unbelievable, because I have never had this kind of abstract idea first. No, for me the beginning is always a character or a story, an episode, and then the structure is something that transpires out of the story.

## Michael Wood

The title of the book is very beautiful, because it means many things. *The Dream of the Celt* is a poem that Roger Casement was intending to write. The dream of the Celt is the dream, but his dream changes all the time. There is a very interesting connection between this novel, and the previous novel, *The Bad Girl*, in the sense that you have characters who always seem to be running away from something and who seem to need to reinvent themselves and are seeking to find a meaning to their lives that is elusive to them.

## Mario Vargas Llosa

I am always fascinated by people who dream and try very hard to incarnate their dreams; people who try to make possible the impossible. These kinds of adventurers are fascinating for me, and I think they reappear constantly in my novels. Roger Casement more or less represents this kind of person. He had a dream and, at the same time, he was a very practical, realistic person. He tried very hard to materialise the dream: first fighting against the Belgians in the Congo, then fighting against the rubber owners in the Amazon, and then trying to materialise the independence of Ireland.

He was a dreamer in the sense that his dreams were very far away from the real world. He made many mistakes, but in general he was an idealist, he was a very ethical man; he tried to be very coherent with his ideas, he organised his life in order to materialise his dreams. At the same time he was a hero, but a very human hero. We have the idea that heroes are perfect people, and they are not. He is the personification of the human being who is a hero in certain aspects of his deeds and actions, and a very imperfect man in other aspects of his life. It is because he is so human that he is controversial.

His case is very interesting, because he is a hero that

nobody entirely accepts. He is rejected for many reasons. Even people who were very close to what he wanted, are very reluctant to accept him, because of all the contradictions there were in his life. For me, this is what makes Roger Casement a real human being.

## Michael Wood

You conjure very well through these prison scenes how difficult it gets for him the closer it gets to the present. For the dreamer in the Congo and the dreamer in the Amazon, the dreams are not so problematic: they are human, they are noble, they are fighting against corruption and torture. The Irish question is a much more complicated affair: he has to be a hero on the one side and a traitor on the other.

## Mario Vargas Llosa

Even in the Congo and the Amazon cases he had to face great opposition; he was against the government. Leopold II, who probably perpetrated the first genocide of the 20th century, was a very clever man, and he had created this myth about himself as the great humanitarian of the time. That is the reason why, in 1885 in Berlin, 14 countries gave Leopold II the Congo as a gift, in a conference where no African was present. Those countries were so convinced that Leopold II was a great humanitarian who wanted to eradicate slavery from Africa, who wanted to eradicate human suffering, that they gave him – not Belgium, but *him* – the Congo as a gift.

When Roger Casement started to denounce the atrocities in the Congo, he was against the government. It was very difficult. All the machinery of Leopold II was put into action immediately, and so there was enormous opposition to what Roger Casement was doing. He was not alone, of course, but in the beginning the movement was very small, so he needed great courage.

It is true that in the Ireland case his position was very complicated, because he was a kind of national hero in England. The British Government had sent him to the Amazon, because he was considered a great humanitarian; he had been ennobled. To conspire against England during the First World War was very complicated.

## Michael Wood

Conspiring against England is fine; it is conspiring *with* the Germans that was the real problem.

## Mario Vargas Llosa

The big surprise for Roger Casement was when he went to see the Irish prisoners of war in Germany with the idea to form this legion to fight for the independence of Ireland. He discovered that practically all of the prisoners were against him; that they preferred England to Germany. It was quite natural: they had been fighting them, they were dying, so it was difficult to convince them that the real allies of the Irish were the Germans. He was very naive. I think this big disappointment was very instructive, because my impression is that in that moment he was a fanatic; he had become a fanatic nationalist. I think this



*Mario Vargas Llosa, in conversation with Professor Efraín Kristal and Professor Michael Wood FBA, at the British Academy event, 6 June 2012.*

disappointment showed to him that, even in such clear cases as colonialism and nationalism, the reality was not black and white; that there were nuances, and you should try to adapt these ideas to the real world.

I think the relationship that he had with the leaders of the rebellion is fascinating. At the beginning he was totally thrilled by these young people who were preparing this upheaval, and he thought that there was a real chance for a military victory, particularly if Germany attacked England simultaneously with the rebellion. Then, when he talked with the leaders of the upheaval, he discovered that they knew quite clearly that there was no chance of victory; that this upheaval was planned like a biblical sacrifice to produce martyrs. Most of them were fanatically religious people convinced that the only way in which the independence of Ireland could become a popular course was with martyrs, as it was in the case of Christianity.

He was terrified when he discovered that, and that is the reason why he came up with another very naive idea that he could stop the rebellion. He thought that he could stop it; that he could convince the leaders of the upheaval that they should put an end to this conspiracy. The paradox is that he was captured and that the English thought that they had captured the leader of the rebellion. British intelligence was convinced that he was the leader of the rebellion, that he was coming to lead the rebellion, and that is probably the reason why he was hanged. Actually he had come to stop the rebellion.

### **Michael Wood**

It is a tragic story.

### **Mario Vargas Llosa**

A tragic hero, very full of contradictions, of errors, but I think this is much more real than the stereotypical idea we have of heroes, who are always right, never wrong.

### **Michael Wood**

There is something very touching about the way you have portrayed all his errors, which are not hidden in your book – his naivety and follies. There is something about the vulnerability of that man waiting to die, which is full of dignity and makes him a hero.

### **Mario Vargas Llosa**

I think he was a tragic person, because there was this other personal aspect in him, which was his homosexuality. We must remember that at that time it was a crime; you were sent to prison if you were discovered as a homosexual. For him to be a homosexual probably was living in permanent tension with fear, with frustration, and that is the context in which we must place the famous Black Diaries.

### **Michael Wood**

They were thought to be invented for a long time, were they not? They were thought to be a plant.

### **Mario Vargas Llosa**

There is still this controversy. People believe that this was a fake produced by British intelligence to discredit him, and there are some historians who still defend this thesis. But for me, this is very improbable. I do not think there was enough time to produce a fake of this magnitude, because the Black Diaries are enormous, and most of them match with real life. Maybe there was some manipulation. What I think is that he probably wrote the Black Diaries, but it was impossible that he lived all the experiences that he described in the Black Diaries – given the kind of society in which he lived. For example, in Boma in the Congo, the European community was so small, everybody knew what everybody did. I think it was totally impossible for him to have the kind of experiences that he described.



On the other hand, the Black Diaries are written in a way that is a contradiction with what his personality was. All the testimonies about his person, his manners, were of a very polite, very elegant person – shy, discreet, and delicate in conversation. One of his friends said that each time he heard four-letter words he blushed. It is difficult to match that with the way in which these Black Diaries are written – the obscenities, the four-letter words, and particularly the vulgarity in the description of the sexual episodes. You get the impression that he wrote all this because it was the only way in which he could live these kinds of experiences. Because it was impossible in real life to have these excessive experiences, he wrote them, as novelists do.

### Michael Wood

What a terrible thing: to be condemned on your imagination and not on your real deeds.

### Mario Vargas Llosa

There is one question: if he was going to Germany to conspire against Britain, how could he abandon these Black Diaries in his apartment in London? Why did he not destroy them? I suppose the reason was because they were fantasy. He did not take seriously something that was not serious; it was a kind of perverse personal trick that he had with himself. He probably never imagined that these would become public, and that they would be so destructive to his personality.

There will never be a definite solution to this controversy. Certain people want these Black Diaries to be true, and some want them to be a fake.

### Efraín Kristal

When you wrote *El paraíso en la otra esquina* (2003) – published in English as *The Way to Paradise* – this wonderful novel that juxtaposes the lives of Paul Gauguin and Flora Tristan, you chose to focus on the last couple of years of Flora Tristan's life, the period in which she was seeking a depth for a political programme. I cannot help but see some echoes of your own memoir, *A Fish in the Water* (1993), when you ran for the Presidency of Peru. Is this another unconscious thing, or were you thinking about her political ideals and programmes after having had such an important political experience yourself?

### Mario Vargas Llosa

I was very much taken by the personality of Flora Tristan, who was an extraordinary character, but particularly by her two last years, in which she was very ill. She knew that her great goal in life was impossible to realise. In spite of all this, she started this incredible journey, which was, for her, the beginning of the world revolution. She was alone. She was very popular among the workers, who she considered a major instrument for the revolution. But she was hated by the wives of the workers, because they considered that she distracted them from the family. Despite these obstacles she started the world revolution by

herself. These two last years of her life are extraordinary, because it was by force of will that she managed to survive. I privileged this part of her life because the courage and idealism of her character were more visible.

### Efraín Kristal

In your work as a writer, there is a very intense dialogue with other works of literature. Sometimes the dialogue is hidden, and sometimes it is explicit. In recent years there are hints that Russian literature seems to matter to you in a particular way. For example, in *The Bad Girl*, one of your characters is a translator, who translates Russian literature, and gives pride of place to Chekov and to Bunin as his favourite writers. Why did you decide to underscore Russian literature in that novel?

### Mario Vargas Llosa

I admire Ivan Bunin very much. I think he was a very great writer, and he wrote about these terrible times in which society was changing completely. A sensible writer would not avoid commitment to the changes, but at the same time, if he was totally lucid about what was going on, it would be also impossible for him not to detect, in all these general, idealistic transformations, the symptoms of something terrible that could come as a consequence. This was the case with Ivan Bunin. His stories express the nuances in the revolution that in the future would become the total contradiction of what the revolution was trying to achieve.



Flora Tristan (1803-1844), the socialist and feminist writer and activist who appears in Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Way to Paradise*.

These nuances are so important, particularly in times in which everything seems to be black and white. Even in periods of general enthusiasm in which unanimity seems to be achieved, one of the great functions of literature is to make people aware of a possible error in this enthusiasm, to make people aware that reality is never totally clear and absolute.

### Michael Wood

Can I ask what you are working on now?

### Mario Vargas Llosa

I am working on a novel, but I am still at the beginning, so I cannot say much, because I do not know exactly what will happen. It is a novel set in Peru. Peru in the last 12 years, since the collapse of the dictatorship, has been experiencing an economic boom: it has been improving very rapidly, the middle classes are growing dramatically. All this is producing a lot of benefits to the country, but also problems: urbanisation, for example, has produced the kind of crime that is a very important protagonist of daily life, the drug problem is enormous, and all this has changed life in the cities. It is a novel in this context.

This context is changing the relationship between the capital and the provinces, the cities of the interior, which are growing, sometimes more rapidly than the capital. This is producing all kinds of challenges for the country. I am

fascinated with all these changes. I spend only three months a year in Peru, and I go every seven or eight months, and the changes are so dramatic in the last years. That has given me an idea for a novel about the change in Peru.

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Mario Vargas Llosa was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2010. *The Dream of the Celt* was published in June 2012 by Faber and Faber.

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Efraín Kristal is Professor and Chair in the Department of Comparative Literature, at UCLA, and co-editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Mario Vargas Llosa* (2011).

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Michael Wood is Charles Barnwell Straut Class of 1923 Professor of English and Comparative Literature, at Princeton University, and is a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy.

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The British Academy event was held on 6 June 2012. A video recording of the whole conversation can be found at [www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/MarioVargasLlosa.cfm](http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/MarioVargasLlosa.cfm)

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# Why is Dickens so popular?

At a British Academy event held on 8 February 2012 to celebrate the bicentenary of Charles Dickens's birth, **Professor John Carey FBA** discussed the author's enduring popularity.



'Dickens' Dream', painted by Robert William Buss in 1875 (Charles Dickens Museum, London). The dozing author sits in his Gad's Hill Place study, surrounded by many of the characters he had created. Image: Wikipedia Commons

Dickens created characters who have become part of the English language. Very few authors have done that; Shakespeare and Dickens have. Dickens has Pecksniff, Oliver Twist, Micawber, and Scrooge – who I suppose is the favourite. (In a recent *Oxford Times* poll on Dickens characters, Scrooge came out on top. I imagine this is Ebenezer Scrooge in his unreformed state, not once he had become soft and amiable.)

But I would argue that Dickens has remained popular for another reason: because he was not an intellectual. Dickens's likes and dislikes were those of the man on the Clapham omnibus; they were the likes and dislikes you would hear in a pub.

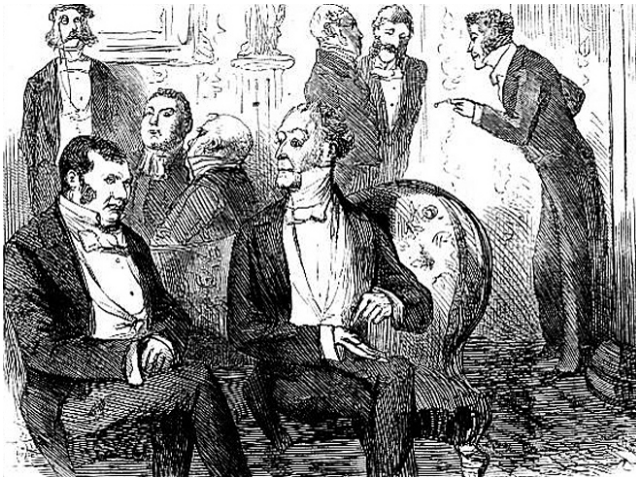
## **Dickens's dislikes**

First of all, he disliked politicians very much indeed. He had, of course, been a Parliamentary Reporter, so he spoke from experience. He says in *Hard Times* that the House of Commons is 'the national cinder-heap' and Members of Parliament are 'national dustmen'. The rituals of

Parliamentary procedure were, he thought, ridiculous. He says, in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, that no medicine man could produce anything 'so supremely ludicrous as the two Masters in Chancery holding up their black petticoats and butting their ridiculous wigs at Mr. Speaker'.

He also disliked bureaucracy and red tape. In *Little Dorrit* he created the Circumlocution Office, which anticipated Kafka. The Circumlocution Office depicts the Civil Service as an elaborate and costly mechanism for not getting anything done. He complained that the British Government was an extensive network of parasites and extended across the globe. Mr Gowan in *Little Dorrit*, we are told, belonged 'to a legation abroad' and 'died at his post with his drawn salary in his hand'.

Dickens had no love for aristocrats, for entitled people. In *Little Dorrit* we have Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle and all the lesser Barnacles, clinging to privilege as barnacles do. I think Dickens would be astounded to know that we still have an Honours List and still call people Lord This and Lady That. He thought it was a lot of nonsense and flummery. He might be quite surprised and quite



'The Merdle Party.' Illustration by Sol Eytinge Jr for an 1871 edition of 'Little Dorrit', showing Mr Merdle, members of the Barnacle clan, and lords of the Circumlocution Office. Image: scan by Philip V. Allingham, available from 'The Victorian Web'.

disappointed that we still have a monarchy. In 1840 he wrote that he longed for 'a democratic, kingless country, free from the shackles of class rule'.

He disliked rich people, city men and bankers very much. He said the kind of people you see at city dinners were 'sleek, slobbering, bow-paunched, over-fed, apoplectic, snorting cattle'. Mr Merdle, the great financier in *Little Dorrit* who ruins thousands of investors and eventually ruins himself, cuts his throat in a hot bath – and Dickens says it is like a sarcophagus: when the water has drained away, there is 'the body of a heavily-made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, mean, common features'. So much for bankers.

Arty people also came in for criticism – people who would go into raptures over paintings, sculpture and music. Dickens was what arty people would call a philistine. In Italy he saw the sculptures by Bellini and said they were like 'breezy maniacs'. Amy Dorrit, in *Little Dorrit*, is shown the great paintings in Venice and they leave her cold: Amy Dorrit is not an art fancier, she is an ideal human being. In *Household Words*, Dickens launched a famous attack on the Pre-Raphaelite school of painting, which was sparked by Millais's painting of *Christ in the House of His Parents*: it is, in fact, a kind of philistine manifesto.

He mocked portrait art. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Twemlow, a relative of Lord Snigsworth, has a full-length portrait of the 'sublime Snigsworth over the chimneypiece, snorting at a Corinthian column, with an enormous roll of paper at his feet, and a heavy curtain going to tumble down on his head'. I believe the only painters or artists who appear in the novels are Miss LaCreevy in *Nicholas Nickleby* who is a miniature painter, and Mr Gowan in *Little Dorrit*; Miss LaCreevy is ridiculous and Gowan is a shady poseur.

Music gets the same treatment. Almost all the musicians in the novels are dingy failures, from the feeble Felix Nixon in *Sketches by Boz* who plays the flute, to Frederick Dorrit, William's brother, who plays the clarinet in a small theatre orchestra. The only exception to this procession of failures is John Jasper, the cathedral organist in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, who is positively evil.

Dickens mocks people who pride themselves on their exquisite sensitivity, like Mrs Wittiterly in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Mrs Wittiterly lies prostrate on a sofa and her husband explains that she is so excited by opera, drama and the fine arts that it has taken the strength from her legs; she is a martyr to sensibility. That is rather like Camilla in *Great Expectations*, whose husband says her feelings are so powerful that they 'are gradually ... making one of her legs shorter than the other'.

Politicians, bureaucrats, aristocrats, financiers, rich businessmen and arty people – Dickens disliked and distrusted them all. One might add lawyers to that list, whom he detested, and religious people – or people who pretend to be more religious than others, whom Dickens presents as canting humbugs, like the evangelical Stiggins in *The Pickwick Papers*.

### Dickens's likes

What then did Dickens like and what was he imaginatively excited by? I would say that he was imaginatively excited by the sort of thing that intellectuals and other educated people considered wrong or indecent. That means: crime, violence, murder, detectives, public executions and corpses – particularly corpses.

Whenever he was in Paris, he says he was drawn as if by an invisible force into the morgue where the bodies fished from the Seine were laid out. He even went there on Christmas Day to see the corpse of an old man, with water dripping off the corner of his mouth making him 'look sly'. On other visits there were other corpses, all rapturously described: a corpse lying in a corner 'like a heap of crushed, over-ripe figs'; and a big dark man, disfigured by the water in a way that made him, 'in a frightful manner, comic'. That is a telling moment – corpses are comic as well as horrible in Dickens. And so too are funerals and undertakers: Mr Sowerberry, the undertaker in *Oliver Twist*, uses a snuff box which is 'an ingenious little model of a patent coffin'. Corpses tread that borderline between farce and nightmare where Dickens's richest imaginings happened. *The Pickwick Papers* did not start to sell until Dickens introduced Sam Weller, his first great comic creation. Sam specialises in comic corpses. He tells the story of the man who gets caught up in his own patent sausage-making machine: it only comes to light when a customer finds trouser buttons in the sausages.

This kind of indecent and funny mix-up of corpse and sausage is like Dickens's own memory of what he was like as a child, before his imagination was dulled by adult prejudices and decencies. He remembered being taken by his mother to see a neighbour. The neighbour had given birth to quintuplets, all of whom had died. Dickens says, 'I was introduced to the five deceased young people, lying side by side on a clean cloth on the chest of drawers, reminding me, by a homely association, of pigs' feet as they are usually displayed in a neat tripe shop'.

Corpses intrigue him because they are human and not human at the same time. In that respect they are like waxworks, ships' figureheads, Punch and Judy puppets, or like the dolls that Jenny Wren makes in *Our Mutual Friend*.

Creatures in the shape of humans who are not human crowd Dickens's novels: sometimes they are sinister and sometimes funny. The first waxworks in the novels are Mrs Jarley's in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Nell has never seen a waxwork and she asks Mrs Jarley, "Is it funnier than Punch?" "Funnier!" said Mrs Jarley in a shrill voice. "It is not funny at all. ... It's calm and – what's that word again – critical? – no – classical, that's it – it's calm and classical ... and so like life, that if wax-work only spoke and walked about, you'd hardly know the difference." Waxworks of course are still popular – hence the crowds who visit Madame Tussauds.



'Mrs. Jarley's waxwork.' Illustration by Hablot Browne (Phiz) for *The Old Curiosity Shop*, showing Mrs Jarley instructing Little Nell in her duties.

The waxwork and the corpse come together in Dickens's greatest imaginative creation, at least for my money, Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. Miss Havisham sits in the ruins of her bridal gown, beside the great wedding cake with spiders running in and out of it. When Pip first sets eyes on Miss Havisham, this is what he thinks: 'Once I had been taken to see some ghastly waxwork at the fair. Once I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress. Now, waxwork and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me.'

Death, like corpses, can be funny in Dickens, or deeply pathetic. The pathetic deaths are famous: Joe the crossing sweeper in *Bleak House*, and Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. However, funny deaths are almost as common – such as Jingle's story in *The Pickwick Papers* about the man who commits suicide by sticking his head in a mains water pipe, leaving a full confession in his right boot.

Physical violence, like death and corpses, can also be funny or terrible for Dickens. Either way he finds it irresistible. Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is his masterpiece of comic violence: a monster, a dwarf with a giant's head. He eats hard-boiled eggs, shells and all. He bites his fork and spoon until they bend. He drinks boiling spirits, bubbling and hissing, straight from the saucepan. He

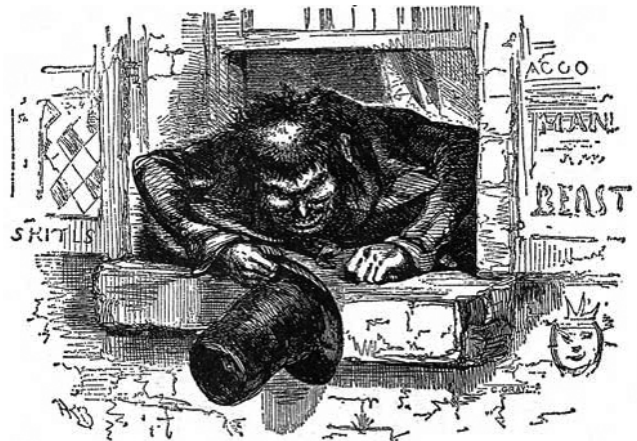
The grotesque Quilp, illustrated by Hablot Browne (Phiz) for *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

pinches his wife black and blue and bites her. He keeps a huge wooden figurehead of an admiral in his room, and diverts himself by driving red hot pokers through it. In other novels, Quilp's demonic, comic, ferocity becomes serious and tragic. Take the Gordon Rioters in *Barnaby Rudge* as an example. When they set fire to Haredale's house, they seem to go crazy: 'There were men who rushed up to the fire and paddled in it as if in water. On the skull of one drunken lad, who lay on the floor with a bottle to his mouth, the lead from the roof came streaming down in a shower of liquid fire, melting his head like wax'.

It is the imaginative excitement of violence that makes Dickens try to get inside the minds of murderers, such as Jonas Chuzzlewit. That wish to get inside the head of a murderer, and feel what it was like to murder, impelled Dickens to include the murder of Nancy by Bill Sykes in *Oliver Twist* in his public readings towards the end of his life. He did it against the advice of his friends and his doctors. It was terrifying to watch; audiences were shocked and Dickens was dangerously excited: his pulse went up from 72 to 112 as he performed it.

So we see how ambivalent Dickens is and how he changes from funny to serious about corpses, death and violence. In that respect he was less uncommon than he thought. Seeing the funny side of terrible things was, and still is, very human. It is one of the things that makes him popular. He thought of it as being particular to him – almost as if he were two people and mentally unstable. He thought it was part of what made him an artist. When he left his wife, he wrote to his friend John Forster that it was because of 'the wayward and unsettled feeling which is part (I suppose) of the tenure on which one holds an imaginative life'. So he is wayward and unsettled, being now one kind of person and now quite another.

In the context of violence, although he is fanatical about violence, he is also fanatical about order and legality. Dickens was a great admirer of the police force; he used to join them on their night patrols of thieves' dens and brothels. He enjoyed the firm way they dealt with offenders. Inspector Field of the police was his hero and friend: he becomes Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House*. Seeing legality enforced is maybe what drew Dickens to public executions. He was fond of criticising people who went to watch them, but he went to watch them himself out of the same curiosity. He went to see a man guillotined in Rome,



## WHY IS DICKENS SO POPULAR?

he went to see a man beheaded in Switzerland, and went to see the murderer Courvoisier hanged in London. Executions were attractive to him because they satisfied his desires both for violence and for order and legality. They marked a moment where a living human being turns into one of those inanimate likenesses of the human body, like a waxwork, that his imagination was excited by.

You feel this particularly when you read his account of the execution of Mr and Mrs George Manning, who were hanged on the top of Horsemonger Lane Gaol in 1849. Afterwards he comments on the different appearance of the two bodies. The man's, he said, was 'just a limp, loose suit of clothes, as if the man had gone out of them'. But the woman's was 'a fine shape, so elaborately corseted and artfully dressed that it was quite unchanged in its trim appearance as it slowly swung from side to side'. So Mrs George Manning, on whom Dickens based Mademoiselle Hortense, Lady Dedlock's maid in *Bleak House*, becomes with the aid of her corsetry an intriguing human shape – like those that people still flock to see at Madame Tussauds.

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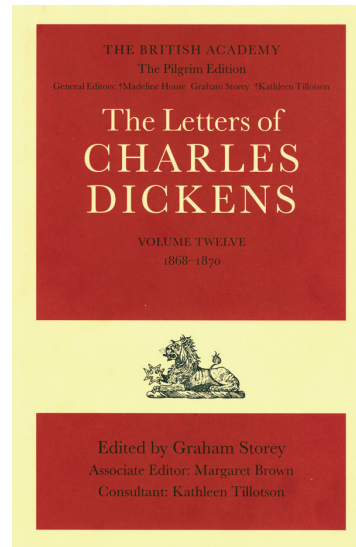
Charles Dickens was born on 7 February 1812. On 8 February 2012 at the British Academy, Professor Carey discussed the question 'Why Dickens?' with Dr Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, Fellow and Tutor in English, Magdalen College, Oxford. Audio recordings of the full conversation can be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/)

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*A major British Academy Research Project, completed in 2002, produced a definitive 12-volume edition of 'The Letters of Charles Dickens'.*

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# D.H. Lawrence's poetry and the senses

*The Chatterton Lecture on Poetry given by Dr Santanu Das in December 2010  
was formally published earlier this year. In the following essay, Dr Das pays particular  
attention to the poem 'Bavarian Gentians'.*

IN HIS BEST-KNOWN POEM, written in Sicily in 1920, Lawrence's lord of life – his 'Snake' – softly slips into our view:

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall  
in the gloom  
And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied  
down, over the edge of the stone trough  
And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,  
And where the water had dripped from the tap, in  
a small clearness,  
He sipped with his straight mouth,  
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his  
slack long body,  
Silently.

('Snake', *Complete Poems*)<sup>1</sup>

We read again, to be freshly startled. The strangeness of this single sentence lies only partly in the celebrated kinaesthetic shiver it sends across its own slack long body, with the free verse rhythms lengthening and tightening over the seven lines. More intimate, almost prehensile, is the way individual words are felt round, slightly shifted. 'Slack' is not just introduced as a noun ('slackness'), but placed in such a way that an attribute becomes a visual shape and an object, lending body to the burst of colour and touch in the second line. Aurally, the word palpitates with its linguistic neighbours as Lawrence delves into the heart of prosody, the relation between sound and sense. Equally delicate is his handling of the word 'soft'. In a narrative drama between reptilian softness and stony hardness, 'soft' in its passage from adjective to adverb moves within the field of tactile vision from body texture ('soft-bellied') to physical action ('Softly drank'). Lawrence uses repetition to play on both sameness and difference. 'Soft' is a word that he, like Keats, would turn to and turn round repeatedly, from the opening word of 'Piano' to describe his mother singing, to its incantatory use in the short story 'The Blind Man', to the 'softness of deep shadows' that he feels envelopes him as he lay dying in

1929.<sup>2</sup> The word cuts not just across the five senses in Lawrence. It reveals his peculiar talent for articulating the submerged world of emotion that clings around colour, shape and movement. 'Softly drank': is 'softly' the imagined sound of the snake drinking or a glimpsed movement of its forked tongue or the tenderness of the observer's mood? 'It is the hidden *emotional* pattern', Lawrence wrote, 'that makes poetry, not the obvious form'.<sup>3</sup>

'I paint as I see as I feel' noted Paul Cezanne who, among the modern painters, most engaged Lawrence. If Lawrence admired Cezanne's ability to make our imagination 'curve', as he once noted, 'to the back of presented appearance', such moments abound in his own poetry. As the snake leaves, he writes: 'And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and entered farther'. Phrasal or rhythmical parsing cannot get us the full distance. 'Snake-easing his shoulders' is an act of linguistic inspiration. The shape-shifting shows a relish as much for reptilian movement on the ground as for how words curve around the hyphen, the line and our mental retina. Such moments abound in his poetry. A mosquito sails like a 'dull clot of air'; 'the night still hangs like a half-folded bat'.<sup>4</sup> In the last simile, Lawrence plays with Keats's 'soft incense [that] hangs upon the boughs', but Keatsian synaesthetic intensity is evolved into a perceptual expansiveness. If Keatsian music seduces us to receive, Lawrentian imagery startles us into perceiving. In a letter to Edward Marsh on 18 November 1913, he wrote that he read his poems as 'a matter of movements in space [rather] than [as] footsteps hitting the earth'.<sup>5</sup>

D.H. Lawrence the novelist needs no introduction, but Lawrence the poet seems to have largely disappeared. But he started and ended his career with verse, writing some 750 poems. While such bulk necessarily makes for great unevenness, his successful pieces remain among some of the most remarkable poems of the 20th century, with admirers ranging from Auden and Larkin to Hughes and Plath. Just two years after his death, Anais Nin noted that 'Lawrence in his poems closes all his human senses, in

<sup>1</sup> 'Snake', *Complete Poems*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (London, 1964), p. 349. Page references in the text are to this edition (abbreviated as *CP*).

<sup>2</sup> 'Shadows', *CP*, p. 727.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Edward Marsh, 18 November, 1913, in James T. Boulton (ed.), *The Selected Letters of D.H. Lawrence* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> 'Mosquito', *CP*, p. 332; 'Twofold', *CP*, p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Edward Marsh, 18 November, 1913, *Letters*, p. 67.

order to live for one moment in the senses of the animal'. Even T.S. Eliot – his most famous detractor – conceded that he had 'a descriptive genius second to no writer living': 'he can reproduce for you not only the sound, the colour and form, the light and shade, but all the finer thrills of sensation'. What will concern me here is this 'sensuous' Lawrence of Nin and Eliot. However, rather than viewing his poems as near-transparent envelopes of sense experience or palimpsests of synaesthesia, I see his nature poems as providing some of the most playful and elaborately *staged* investigations into what he called 'sense awareness' of the natural world. What is the literary shape of such awareness, as it brushes against the materiality of language, and what is its relationship to poetic form? There is a related query. Does the sensuousness of the lyric enable this frequently unhappy man to do things – both artistically and psychologically – not possible for the novelist or the critical thinker?

Lawrence's celebration of the senses has been too grand for its own good. To him, they were the only antidote to the excessive self-consciousness of modern times. He wrote about them all his life: from the pseudo-scientific solar plexus and lumbar ganglions of *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) to the celebration of touch in the posthumously published *Etruscan Places* (1932). But he never gave us any coherent theory. For him, 'sense' is seldom sensuousness or even the five senses. It is more of a restless, almost promiscuous verb, lunging forward like the long, naked arm of his blind hero Maurice to 'know' a man, woman or flower with what he called 'intuitive touch'. In spite of his gospel of 'blood-consciousness', the ultimate object of his touch is not the body, as it is often with Keats or Owen, but 'vibrations', the 'vital flow' between people and their surroundings in a 'circumambient universe'.<sup>6</sup> Grope, grasp, reach, stroke are verbs he uses obsessively, perilously, as if their repeated handling would give him access to some secret knowledge. For what he wants to touch is human feeling; 'Tenderness' was his initial title for *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. 'Sense-awareness' to Lawrence, is that 'great depth of knowledge arrived at direct, by instinct and intuition, not by reason':

Instinct makes me sniff the lime blossom and reach for the darkest cherry. But it is intuition which makes me feel the uncanny glassiness of the lake this afternoon, the sulkiness of the mountains, the vividness of the near green in thunder-sun, the young man in bright blue trousers lightly tossing the grass from the scythe, the elderly man in a boater stiffly shoving his scythe-strokes, both of them sweating in the silence of the intense light.<sup>7</sup>

The consciousness here is acutely phenomenological – consciousness *of* the world and its objects – but it is inseparable from the inner world of emotion. The palpability of the prose seems to be the linguistic equivalent of the art of Cezanne who, according to

Lawrence, tried to displace 'our present mode of mental-visual consciousness' with the 'intuitive [consciousness], the awareness of touch.'<sup>8</sup>

The above description also suggests an intensity of absorption in the landscape that goes beyond the prevalent discourses of organicism. 'There seemed no flower nor even weed' wrote Jessie Chambers – his teenage sweetheart and the Miriam of *Sons and Lovers* (1913) – 'whose names and qualities Lawrence did not know.' Nature provided this deeply unhappy adolescent a refuge from the turbulence of his family-home and the tensions of the coal-mining society. Like Paul Morel's attempts to capture the 'shimmering protoplasm in the leaves',<sup>9</sup> the description is not just an overdose of Victorian aestheticism or French impressionism but an act of defiance against the slag-heaps and ash-pits of his native Eastwood.

Lawrence would often mention 1912 – the year when, having met Frieda Weekly, he left Nottinghamshire for Europe – as marking a distinct break in his life and writing career. But it was the publication of *Birds, Beast and Flowers* in 1923 that signalled a new direction for his poetry. The volume comprises a loosely connected sequence of poems he wrote between 1920 and 1923 during his travels in Europe, or in Ceylon, Australia and New Mexico, about the natural world – the pomegranate, the grape, the turkey-cock or the kangaroo. The volume has attracted some distinguished writing, often from critics who are poets themselves. Joyce Carol Oates and Sandra Gilbert read these poems as late romantic quests for 'otherness', while the novelist Amit Chaudhuri finds in them a more modernist 'jazz-like' quality.<sup>10</sup> While such readings are powerful and suggestive, they tend to polarise Lawrence as the Orphean visionary or the postmodern bricoleur. Moreover, within Anglo-American modernism, there is often a curious reluctance, almost an embarrassment, in admitting what makes *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* so immediately thrilling: its exuberant delight in the sensuous plurality of the natural world, heaving with living, growing, moving things. But what makes the volume so difficult to grasp is Lawrence's equally exuberant delight in the sensuous world of myth, symbols and language. His creatures are hybrid creations who have their one foot firmly planted in the natural world, while the other strides the imaginary universe; there is often a frisson between a perceptual delicacy and a performative excess. The romantic/textual debate is played out in the poetry itself through the constant shiftiness of his images and metaphors: if the underlying impulse is an epistemological quest, Lawrence takes equal pleasure in the linguistic performance of knowing.

In his celebrated essay, 'Poetry of the Present', Lawrence speaks about the need to break the 'lovely form of metrical verse' and get away from the 'gemlike lyrics of Shelley and Keats'. For unlike those poets of eternity, he wants to capture 'the insurgent naked throb of the instant

<sup>6</sup> 'Morality and the Novel', *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers*, ed. Edward D. McDonald (1936; Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 527.

<sup>7</sup> 'Insouciance', in Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (eds), *Phoenix II* (London, 1978), p. 534.

<sup>8</sup> 'Introduction to these Paintings', *Phoenix*, p. 579.

<sup>9</sup> *Sons and Lovers*, ed. Blake Morrison (Harmondsworth, 2006), p. 176.

<sup>10</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, *Hostile Sun: The Poetry of D.H. Lawrence* (Los Angeles, 1974); Sandra Gilbert, *Acts of Attention: The Poems of D.H. Lawrence* (1975; Carbondale, 1990); Amit Chaudhuri, *D.H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* (Oxford, 2002).



moment'.<sup>11</sup> But the throb of the moment is always complex, fusing sense experience, thought and feeling, as he elaborates in his introduction to the translation of Giovanni Verga's *Cavalleria Rusticana*:

When we are thinking emotionally or passionately, thinking and feeling at the same time, we do not think rationally: and therefore and therefore and therefore. Instead, the mind makes curious swoops and circles. It touches the point of pain or interest, then sweeps away ... [It] stoops to the quarry, then leaves it without striking, soars, hovers, turns, swoops, stoops again, still does not strike, yet is nearer, nearer, reels away again, wheels off into the air, even forgets, quite forgets, yet again turns, bends, circles slowly, swoops and swoops again, until at last there is the closing in and the clutch of a decision or a resolve.<sup>12</sup>

The imagination here is remarkably physical. The motion described is very different from that described by his poetic forebears: it is neither that of Shelley's skylark nor that of Whitman's eagles 'in turning twisting clustering loops'. Instead, it describes the movement of Lawrence's bat: circular, repetitive, prehensile. The verbal drama is accretive rather than conjunctive, as the verbs swoop and circle through the nervous procession of commas.

Such movement is perfectly captured in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* through the expansiveness of free verse and the technique of what he called 'continual, slightly modified repetition'.<sup>13</sup> The sensuousness of his early verse is extended into a lingering act of sensing. In poem after poem, a word, an image or a metaphor is repeated as the free verse gropes, stanza after open-ended stanza, around an object, trying to tease out the manifold ways in which it changes in the field of perception or unfolds in our consciousness. It is a poetry of halts, jerks and fresh beginnings. Formlessness becomes the form of this sort of investigation. Lawrence's loose stanzas, fractured syntax, fresh beginnings, and repetition seem to convey a mind feeling and sensing through language rather than finished thought or sensation. A typical example is 'Bare Fig Trees':

Fig-trees, weird fig-trees  
 Made of thick smooth silver,  
 Made of sweet, untarnished silver in the sea-  
 southern air –  
 I say untarnished, but I mean opaque –  
 (CP, p. 298)

Or, in the poem 'Humming-Bird' – 'In that most awful stillness, that only gasped and hummed,/Humming-birds raced down the avenues' (CP, 372) the sound of 'hummed' seems to produce the visual object – 'humming bird' – so that imagination and rhythm can now race ahead. But such 'unfinishedness', such verbal humming or hammering, is also a cultivated style. Rather than a variation of a late-Romantic visionary quest or a textual

strategy, his nature poems provide some of the most elaborate and intricate *stagings* of sensing how to sense through the folds of language. This is strikingly evident when Lawrence is most palpably Keatsian, as in 'Grapes':

Look now even now, how it keeps its power of  
 invisibility!  
 Look how black, how blue-black, how globed in  
 Egyptian darkness  
 Dropping among his leaves, hangs the dark grape!  
 (CP, p. 286)

With Lawrence, repetition with variation is not a stylistic tic, but an infinitely receptive tuning-fork he sets up to sense the vibrations between the natural object, our affective consciousness and the linguistic world. The intimacy in the above lines is very different from the synaesthesia of Keats, whose 'globed peonies' and 'Joy's grape' hover in the background. Instead, we have a drama of deferral, in the way 'invisibility' takes on colour and shape through the blue-black 'globed' darkness to the 'dark grape'. Such 'close-up' views of fruits and flowers are often complemented by very precise description: 'four-sepalled calyx' ('Figs'), medlars with crowns ('Medlars and Sorb-Apples'), 'many-cicatrised frail vine' ('Almond Blossom'), 'rose-red, princess hibiscus, rolling her pointed Chinese petals' ('Hibiscus and Salvia Flowers'). A look at some hitherto unknown sketches in his college notebook is revealing: the biological drawings of different fruits and flowers such as the horse chestnut, artichoke, tulip or the pea pod show his intimate familiarity with these items (Figure 1). It is from this precise biological knowledge that Lawrence usually proceeds so that the dozens of flowers, fruits, seeds and leaves that populate his verses never really lose their materiality in spite of their various symbolic associations. An example is 'Pomegranate', the very first poem in the volume; for Lawrence the fruit is both sexually suggestive ('Rosy, tender, glittering within the fissure') and a critique of perfection, and yet stickily, stubbornly it remains a pomegranate.

Phenomenology, it is often said, begins in a sense of wonder. Elaborating on Edmund Husserl's theory of 'imaginary variations' in her foreword to *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature* (1998), Judith Butler notes that what the phenomenologist seeks to know of an object is not 'a list of its features' but rather to tease out 'the variety of perspectives' by which it might be constituted or known in the field of perception. What we have in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* is a dual process, as Lawrence presents us with the 'actuality' of natural objects as well as with a web of possibilities – perceptual, symbolic, mythic – through which they enter our consciousness and acquire meaning. But there is another dimension too: the sensuous world of poetic language. In poem after poem, an adjective, an image or a metaphor is repeated, rolled, slightly shifted, as he feels and thinks through its shape, sound and texture as carefully as around a peach, an almond-tree, a turkey-cock or a mountain lion. Throughout the volume there is a

<sup>11</sup> 'Preface to the American Edition of New Poems' in Richard Ellis (ed.), *The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence* (Ware, 2002), pp. 615, 618.

<sup>12</sup> *Phoenix*, pp. 249-50.

<sup>13</sup> 'Prologue' to David Farmer et al. (eds), *Women in Love* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 486.

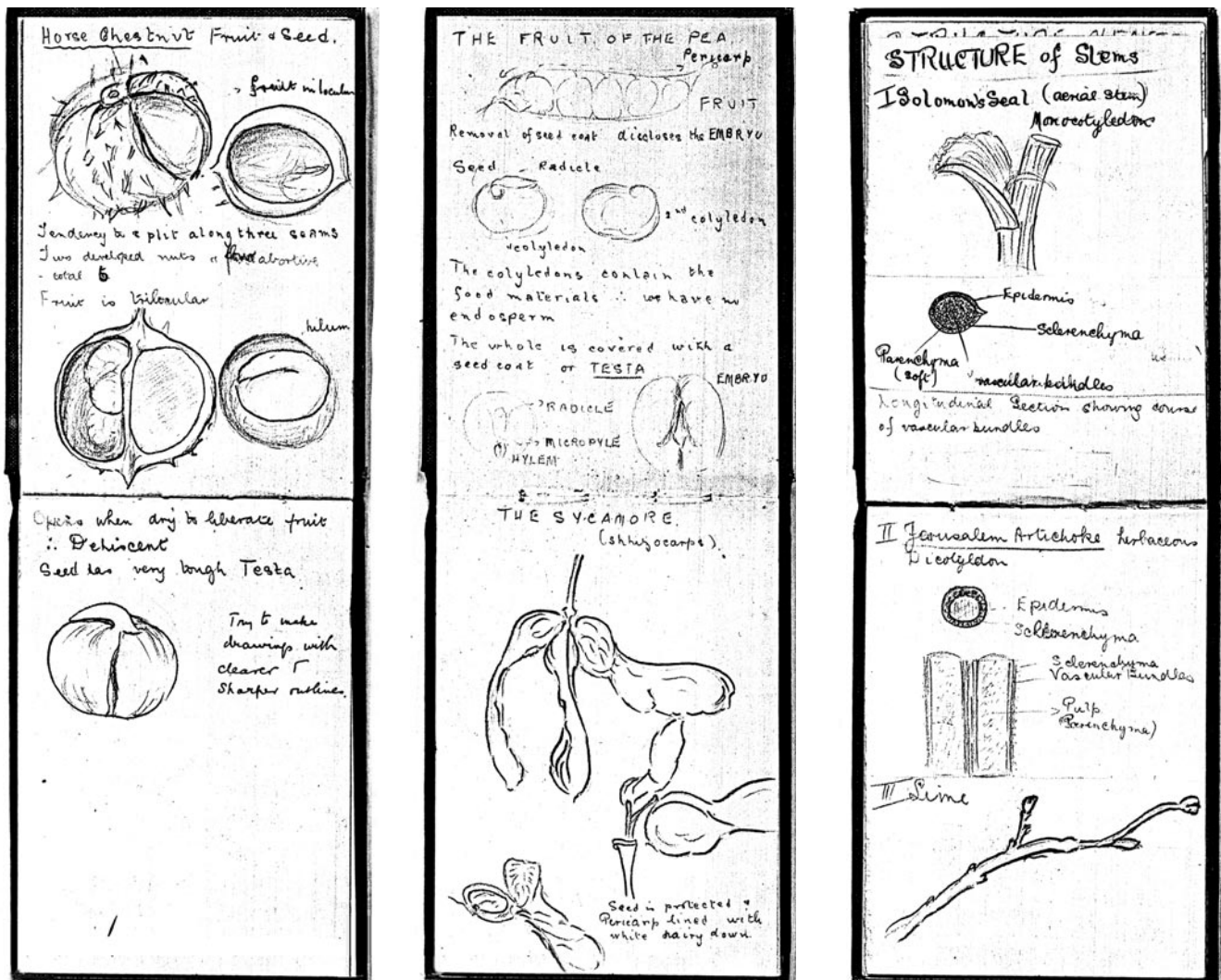


Figure 1. Sketches from Lawrence's 'University Notebook', Manuscript and Special Collections, University of Nottingham, La B 224. Reproduced with the kind permission of Manuscripts and Special Collections, University of Nottingham.

double movement as words and objects circle around each other and images breed fresh images.

Throughout *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, there is a sense of exuberance and delight that we do not find even in his greatest novels. Why? In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul chastises Miriam: 'I do not talk to you through the senses'.<sup>14</sup> The problem actually lies more with Paul than with Miriam, but it is also a function of the genre: can the form of the novel, enmeshed in the human, ever solely speak through the senses? *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* allows Lawrence the privilege denied by his novels. Published just one year after *The Waste Land*, the volume had so much to forget: the nightmare of the First World War, the banning of *The Rainbow* in 1915 or the expulsion from Cornwall in 1917. The lyric enables Lawrence to talk through the senses without the 'emotional rut'<sup>15</sup> created by human relationships and the social world of novel; living with and writing about birds, beasts and flowers become acts of

psychic reparation. If critics have noted the intensity of historical and political thinking that goes on in the poems, what equally interests me is what happens to such discourses when fitted into lyric form and stripped of their narrative context? The ideal companion that Birkin desires in *Women in Love* becomes the kangaroo, the he-goat or the turkey-cock; the fraught wrestling match between Gerald and Birkin becomes the light-hearted horse-play between Lawrence and the mosquito. If Lawrence's misanthropy affects the quality of the novels in 1920s, his poems explore a range of issues playfully and lightly, without the psychic mess. Female sexuality, the site of such ambivalence in *Aaron's Rod*, is celebrated with warmth through the imagining of a fig or a peach. In his fiction, descriptions of sex are often turgid but in the poetry, sex produces a lyric magnificence comparatively rare in early 20th-century poetry as he imagines sea-whales making love: 'And they rock, and they rock, through the sensual ageless ages/ on

<sup>14</sup> *Sons and Lovers*, ed. Blake Morrison (Harmondsworth, 2006), 285.

<sup>15</sup> 'Future of the Novel' in *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. Bruce Steel (Cambridge, 1985), 155.

~~It starts of grace.~~ Glory of darkness

Blue and dark

Oh ~~the~~ Bavarian gentians, tall ones  
 make  
 making a ~~magnificent~~ dark blue gloom  
 in the sunny rooms

~~It is dark~~  
 Depth of colour They have added blueness to blueness to blueness, until  
 it is darkness; Oh you, <sup>beauty</sup> ~~glory~~ of darkness Oh, it is dark  
 blue joy and the glory of my soul and the door is open  
 is in you, <sup>Bavarian</sup> ~~dark~~ gentians to the depths  
 your dark blue gloom is so noble!

How deep I have gone  
 dark gentians  
 since I embarked on your dark blue fringes,  
~~in your marvellous dark blue godhead~~ to Hades.

how deep, how deep, how happy!

What a ~~happier~~ journey for  
 how happy to sink my soul  
 in the blue dark gloom  
 of gentians here in the sunny room!

Flowers and men.

Flowers achieve their own ~~godhead~~ floweriness <sup>to Pluto</sup> and it is a miracle.  
 Men don't achieve their own manhood, <sup>alas, oh alas! alas!</sup> and it is a disaster.  
 to his bridegroom  
 in the dark

It is so blue, it is so dark  
 in the dark doorway  
 and the way is open

Oh, I know -  
 Persephone has just gone  
 back  
 down the ~~trickery~~  
 trickery gloom  
 of dark blue gentians

Figure 2. Manuscript version of 'Glory of Darkness', Notebook 1 (9.3). Reproduced with the kind permission of Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.

Bavarian Gentiains<sup>16</sup>

+

Not every man has gentians in his house  
in Soft September, at slow, sad Michaelmas.

Bavarian gentians, big and dark, only dark  
~~darkening~~ <sup>at the day-time, for</sup> ~~and~~ ~~sharp~~ ~~like~~, ~~sharp~~-like <sup>with the</sup> ~~for~~ ~~Smoking~~ ~~blueness~~ ~~of~~ ~~Pluto's~~ ~~gloom~~,  
ribbed and torch-like, with their <sup>blaze</sup> ~~blaze~~ ~~of~~ ~~darkness~~ ~~spread~~ ~~blue~~  
~~sharp~~ ~~erect~~ ~~in~~ ~~very~~ ~~erect~~  
~~long~~ ~~and~~ ~~erect~~ ~~and~~ ~~father~~ ~~leaf~~ ~~dark~~ ~~sharp~~ ~~cofes~~  
~~of~~ ~~pure~~ ~~blue~~ ~~darkness~~,  
torch-flower <sup>of</sup> ~~the~~ ~~blue~~ ~~smoking~~ ~~darkness~~, Pluto's dark-blue <sup>days,</sup> ~~days,~~  
and burning <sup>with</sup> ~~dark~~ ~~blue~~ ~~power~~,

black lamps from the halls of Dis, burning dark blue,  
giving off darkness, blue darkness, as Semeter's pale  
lead me then, <sup>lamps give off light,</sup> ~~lead the way.~~

Reach me a gentrain, give me a torch!

let me guide myself with the blue, forked torch of  
this flower

down the darker and darker stairs, where blue is darkened  
on blueness

<sup>even</sup> ~~to~~ where Persephone goes, just now, <sup>from</sup> ~~to~~ the frosty September  
to the fightless realm where darkness is <sup>upon</sup> ~~awakened~~ ~~the~~ ~~dark~~  
and Persephone herself is but a voice

or a darkness invisible unfolded in the deeper dark  
of the arms Plutonic, and pierced with the passion  
of dense gloom,

<sup>among</sup> ~~the~~ ~~splendour~~ ~~of~~ ~~torches~~ ~~of~~ ~~darkness~~, shedding darkness in the  
~~the~~ ~~lost~~ ~~birds~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~dark~~ ~~room~~ ~~the~~ ~~gloom~~.

Figure 3. Manuscript version of 'Bavarian Gentiains', Notebook 2, Folder 9.4. Reproduced with the kind permission of Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.

the depths of the seven seas,/ and through the salt they reel with drunk delight.' ('Whales Weep Not!', *CP*, 694)

Many of these issues come together in his late, celebrated poem 'Bavarian Gentians'. It belongs to a group of poems, referred to as *Last Poems* that Lawrence composed in two notebooks a few months before his death on 2 March 1930. By 1925, Lawrence knew he had tuberculosis, and by 1929, when 'Bavarian Gentians' was written, he knew he was dying. The poem went through several drafts, the first begun in September 1929, when Lawrence was very ill, in the Bavarian Alps. Lawrence's sister, who came to visit him, writes of how 'Lorenzo lay in a bare room with some pale blue autumn gentians as the only furnishing'. The initial draft, now housed in the Harry Ransom Research Centre, University of Texas, Austin, consists of two poems, one in ink and the other in pencil (Figure 2). It almost records him in the act of sensing, moving from visual impressions in the ink version on the left ('Blue and dark / Oh Bavarian gentians, tall ones') to sensuous and mythic intensification in the pencil version on the right ('Oh, I know – / Persephone has just gone back / down the thickening thickening gloom / of dark-blue gentians to Pluto') (*CP*, 958-9) – to the thickening of language itself in the final version.

Let us first consider the final, revised version of the poem (Figure 3):

Not every man has gentians in his house  
in Soft September, at slow, sad Michaelmas.

Bavarian gentians, big and dark, only dark  
darkening the day-time, torch-like with the  
smoking blueness of Pluto's gloom,  
ribbed and torch-like, with their blaze of darkness  
spread blue  
down flattening into points, flattened under the  
sweep of white day  
torch-flower of the blue-smoking darkness,  
Pluto's dark-blue daze,  
black lamps from the halls of Dis, burning  
dark blue,  
giving off darkness, blue darkness, as Demeter's  
pale lamps give off light,  
lead me then, lead the way.

Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!  
let me guide myself with the blue, forked torch  
of this flower  
down the darker and darker stairs, where blue is  
darkened on blueness.  
even where Persephone goes, just now, from the  
frosted September

to the sightless realm where darkness is awake  
upon the dark  
and Persephone herself is but a voice  
or a darkness invisible enfolded in the deeper dark  
of the arms Plutonic, and pierced with the passion  
of dense gloom,  
among the splendour of torches of darkness,  
shedding darkness on the lost bride and  
her groom.<sup>16</sup>

In *Apocalypse*, written in the same year, Lawrence notes how he had the Bible 'in his bones' for he was sent every week to Sunday school and to chapel: 'Language has a power of echoing and re-echoing in my mind. I can wake up in the middle of the night and hear things being said. The sound itself registers'.<sup>17</sup> If the Harvard-educated Eliot, with his High Church snobbery, had patronised Lawrence's 'hymn-singing mother', her son would powerfully demonstrate what Eliot, some 10 years later, would describe as the 'auditory imagination' in poetry, that reaching for sound and syllable below conscious levels of thought. For the 'darker and darker stairs' down which the reader is led here is an auditory staircase, as Lawrence obsessively feels round the word 'dark', not just as noun, adjective, symbol, metaphysic but as a charm. Language becomes tactile, just as Persephone becomes a voice 'enfolded' in the deeper dark.

The heavily revised version shows that, rather than a shaman chanting his death-chant, Lawrence can also be *il miglior fabbro*. One crucial change is from 'sheaf-like' to 'torch-like': it is the fulcrum on which the poem turns. The imagery of the torch has powerful biographical resonances. As he imagines his own death as an underground descent, he would have remembered his actual descent into the Etruscan tombs in 1927. In *Etruscan Places*, he recalls how 'the lamps [shone] and guided the way'.<sup>18</sup> And in September 1928, he imaginatively revisits the underground world of his collier-father in his painting 'Accident in a Mine' (Figure 4), which shows three naked miners crowding around an injured comrade with a lamp. It is rather heartbreaking to think of Lawrence drawing these muscular, naked men just two years before his death as his own body started wasting. In both poem and painting, death, darkness and lamps come together in an underground drama. But, within the poem, 'torch' is a sensory switch-point, connecting the dark-ribbed flowers to the mythic splendour of the lamps. Consider how this sense-word 'torch' proceeds – from a twice-repeated simile for the flower ('torch-like') through the lyric urgency of 'Reach me a gentian, give me a torch' to a twice-repeated metaphor (torch-flower) to suddenly become the most vivid object – torches of darkness – inscribing a visual paradox at the heart of the poem. Similarly, under the rhythms, there operates a complex pattern of sounds: from assonance to extended spondees (dark-blue daze) to intricate negotiations with his poetic forbearers. For the

<sup>16</sup> Quoted from *Last Poems*, ed. Richard Aldington and Giuseppe Orioli (Florence, 1932), p. 21. There is critical controversy regarding the 'final' version of the poem. The version reproduced below is the one regarded as final by Aldington and Orioli, and also by Vivian de Sola Pinto in *CP*

(p. 697).

<sup>17</sup> *Apocalypse*, ed. Mara Kalnins (Cambridge, 1995), p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> *Mornings in Mexico and Etruscan Places* (London, 1956), p. 131.



Figure 4. *Accident in a Mine* (September 1928), oil on canvas, 40.6 x 33.1 cm.

poem is also a hushed echo-chamber. If the sibilance of 'Soft September' brings in the autumnal Keats, can Milton be far behind? But Samson's lament for the 'blaze of noon' is turned into the celebratory 'blaze of darkness' as blindness is turned into insight, Miltonic 'fall' into an underground quest for his dark god. But the most intricate negotiation is with Whitman whom Lawrence called 'that great poet, of the end of life'. If 'Bavarian Gentians' is often compared with 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed', there is a deeper, aural connection with Whitman's 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'. There, the sea lisps to the poet 'the low and delicious word, death': 'And again death, death, death, death.' Lawrence, facing death itself, cannot face the word and would instead repeat 'dark'. In his biography, *D.H. Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider* (2005), John Worthen notes how Frieda one day heard Lawrence saying to himself: 'I can't die, I can't die, I hate them too much'.

His mother similarly hated the thought of her death, even when she was in great pain. As her son imagines his death, he would have been thinking of his mother's and

colour gives us a poignant textual clue. The gentians are 'dark-blue'. If critical ink has been spilt over the colour of flowers in Lawrence's room, more striking is the fact that the first time the words 'dark' and 'blue' come together is in his elegy 'Bereavement':

My mother had blue eyes,  
They seemed to grow darker as she came to the  
edge of death

And I could not bear her look upon me

(*CP*, p. 868)

If, taking an established biographical approach, we link Lawrence's Pluto to his coal-darkened father, and following the textual lead, connect Persephone to the mother, is Lawrence revisiting the primal scene? What excites Lawrence about the Pluto-Persephone myth, as some critics have noted, is the narrative of marriage and sexual violence. In a different version of the poem, Lawrence writes: 'Pluto as he ravishes her once again / and pierces her once more' (*CP*, 960). Does this sexual antagonism and violence go back to 'Discord in Childhood', to memories of parental fight, only to be repeated in his own relationship with Frieda? '[Our marriage] has been such a fight' Lawrence writes in 1916. Or is there a more immediate explanation? The great irony in Lawrence's life is that he had put all his belief in the body, and yet it is his body that had failed him. There are biographical suggestions that, from 1926, Lawrence was impotent. 'I have no desire any more' he writes in the poem 'Desire goes down into the Sea' (*CP*, 454), and from around 1927 Frieda turns

to the young handsome Italian officer Angelo Ravagli. Is sexual crisis here being turned to a fantasy of sexual violence, the linguistic thrust of 'pierces her once more'? Or, given Lawrence's occasional longing for death in the *Last Poems*, is there a masochistic *jouissance* as, Persephone-like, he imagines himself being ravished by his dark god? Or is it a comment on artistic form, his idea of Heraclitean strife and reconciliation lying at the heart of the creative process? In 'Study of Thomas Hardy' (1914), he writes: "It is most wonderful in poetry, this sense of conflict contained within a reconciliation ... the resistance and response of the Bride in the arms of the Bridegroom".<sup>19</sup> The phrase returns at the end of the poem: 'shedding darkness on the lost bride and her groom'. The conflicts are gathered into sensory paradox: 'torches of darkness shedding darkness'. Is 'shedding' not another sense-word? It combines with darkness through alliteration and visually as homonym ('shade') and works metaphorically as touch. More importantly, it makes our imagination curve, from sense to feeling, from myth to elegy, through that one, desolate adjective: 'lost'.

<sup>19</sup> *Study of Thomas Hardy*, pp. 90-1.

Loss is what Lawrence's 'Last Poems' are about, as he writes one self-elegy after another. In these poems, Lawrence does not take refuge in organised faith or abstract mysticism, but in the two things he loved most all his life: the sensuous world of nature and the sensuousness of language. They come together in his penultimate poem – the magnificent 'Shadows' – as he imagines again his death:

And if tonight my soul may find her peace  
in sleep, and sink in good oblivion,  
and in the morning wake like a new-opened flower  
then I have been dipped again in God, and  
new-created.

...

And if, as autumn deepens and darkens  
I feel the pain of falling leaves, and stems that  
break in storms  
and trouble and dissolution and distress  
and then the softness of deep shadows folding,  
folding  
Around my soul and spirit, around my lips  
so sweet, like a swoon, or more like the drowse  
of a low, sad song  
singing darker than the nightingale, on, on to  
the solstice  
and the silence of short days, the silence of the  
year, the shadow,  
then I shall know that my life is moving still  
with the dark earth, and drenched  
with the deep oblivion of earth's lapse and renewal.

(CP, pp. 726-7)

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On 9 December 2010, Dr Das gave the Chatterton Lecture on Poetry, on "'Where the night still hangs like a half-folded bat": The Poetry of D.H. Lawrence'. An audio recording of the lecture can be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/events/2010/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2010/)

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A longer article based on this lecture, on 'Lawrence's Sense-Words', was published in *Essays in Criticism*, 62:1 (January 2012), 58-82.

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# IN BRIEF

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THE BRITISH ACADEMY has a varied programme of public events, for communicating scholarship or for engaging in issues of topical debate. Audio or video recordings of the following items from the Spring and Summer 2012 programme can be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/)

## ***What it means to be human***

On 8 March 2012, the British Academy and the Royal Society held an evening panel discussion to explore the boundaries of human nature. The panellists were Professor Colin Blakemore FRS (University of Oxford), Professor Robin Dunbar FBA (University of Oxford), Professor Ruth Mace FBA (University College London), and Professor Mark Pagel FRS (University of Reading), and the occasion was chaired by the President of the Royal Society, Sir Paul Nurse. Explaining the power of the modern human brain, Professor Dunbar said that ‘It is only when you get up to very high orders of intentionality that you can do cultural things on a scale which suddenly opens up new windows of opportunity, whole new vistas.’



## ***Public service broadcasting***

On 25 April 2012, the British Academy Policy Centre launched a report on *Public service broadcasting's continued rude health*, by Chris Hanretty. The issues were debated by

Professor Ian Christie FBA (Birkbeck, University of London), Mr David Elstein (former Chief Executive of Channel 5), and Professor Jean Seaton (University of Westminster). According to Professor Christie, ‘No single strand of broadcasting exists in isolation. It is a field of choice, a matrix, in which the remote control is king. Broadcasting is an ecology, where changing any part can have unforeseen and quite profound effects on the rest.’

## ***Ben Jonson: a re-assessment***

On 30 April 2012, Professor Ian Donaldson FBA (University of Melbourne), Professor David Bevington FBA (University of Chicago) and Professor Martin Butler (University of Leeds) discussed how our appreciation of the life and work of Shakespeare’s contemporary, Ben Jonson, has been changed by the appearance of both a major new biography and a comprehensive new edition of his works. The new edition arranges Jonson’s work in chronological order, rather than (as has been the traditional manner) by genre. Professor Donaldson revealed that ‘the Ben Jonson that emerges from such an arrangement is a busier, more versatile, more socially engaged, more variously faceted author’ – but also ‘a less stable, less consistent Ben Jonson’.

## ***Language, community, identity***

On 11 May 2012 a panel discussion – jointly organised with the Philological Society, and held as part of the British Academy’s Languages and Quantitative Skills Programme – considered how language interacts with concepts of community and identity. The panellists were Professor Wendy Ayres-Bennett (University of

Cambridge), Professor Jenny Chesher FBA (Queen Mary University of London), Dr Devyani Sharma (Queen Mary University of London) and Professor Dennis Preston (Oklahoma State University), and the discussion was chaired by Professor Peter Trudgill FBA (University of Agder).

## ***Gay marriage***

On 29 May 2012 – at a time when the government was holding a public consultation on ‘Equal Civil Marriage’ – Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch Kt FBA (University of Oxford) chaired a panel discussion on ‘Gay marriage: prospects and realities’: ‘it’s our job to bring calm, reflective discussion to a nation which is always running to catch up with itself’. The panellists were Professor Leslie Green (University of Oxford), Melanie McDonagh (*London Evening Standard*), and Dr Giles Fraser (former Canon Chancellor of St Paul’s Cathedral).

## ***Ancient myth and the modern novel***

On 5 July 2012, Professor Edith Hall (King’s College London) discussed the use of classical myth with three contemporary writers: Tom Holland, author of *Persian Fire*, *Rubicon* and *Sleeper in the Sand*, and the presenter of BBC Radio 4’s *Making History*; the Serbian Aleksandar Gatalica, whose *Death of Euripides* addresses the tragic 20th-century history of eastern Europe; and the Indian writer Ardashir Vakil, author of *Beach Boy* and *One Day*. As part of the discussion, Professor Hall challenged participants to identify a myth that captured the global financial crisis.



# Music in Venetian art: seduction and spirituality

*A new British Academy publication studies 'The Music Room in Early Modern France and Italy'. In this edited version of one of the essays, Professor Patricia Fortini Brown discusses how the ambiguous nature of music in Venice was reflected in its art.*

**B**Y THE EARLY 16th century, as Venetian patricians turned away from active engagement in trade, they began to develop a more refined lifestyle, in which music played an increasingly important role that was reflected in a number of works of art. A connoisseur, in all likelihood a Venetian nobleman, could invite friends into his study to admire the *Fête Champêtre* (Musée du Louvre, 1508–9), his new painting by Titian of two young men about to play beautiful music with two nude nymphs in a rustic concert in the countryside. Alternatively, Carpaccio could sketch an informal concert taking place in what appears to be the study of a prelate – an intimate music room equipped with a virtual chamber ensemble, including a music book, a bow and viola da gamba, and a tambourine in the background; a recorder and a cornett

on the ledge in the foreground; and musicians playing a rebec and a pair of lutes (Figure 1). The drawing, now in the British Museum, is a singular, but faint, echo of the undepicted studios of music later described by Francesco Sansovino, well stocked with ancient and modern instruments, as well as music books. The humanist Fra Sabba da Castiglione wrote that some gentlemen delighted in adorning their homes 'with musical instruments, such as organs, harpsichords, monochords, psalteries, harps, dulcimers, *baldose*, and other similar things; and others with lutes, violas, violins, lyres, flutes, cornets, trumpets, bagpipes, *dianoni*, and other similar things'. He noted that 'such instruments are most delightful to the ear and greatly refresh the mind, for, as Plato said, they record the harmony that is born from the



Figure 1. Vittore Carpaccio, *Musicians*, drawing, c.1510. British Museum, London. Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum.

movements of the celestial spheres, also they are very pleasing to the eye’.

And yet, uncertainty about the subject of Carpaccio’s drawing highlights the labile moral status of music. An early identification of the work as a rendering of St Jerome observing a concert of angels was rejected when scholars observed that two of the musicians were female. Michelangelo Muraro then suggested that the sketch depicted the Temptation of St Jerome, looking back nostalgically on his carefree, irreverent youth. The British Museum sidesteps the moral issue, labelling the work as ‘A monk and three musicians in a room, with vessels on a shelf behind’.

Venetian commoner, Irene was neither a lady of the court nor the sheltered female offspring of a noble Venetian family. Her father died when she was only 3 years old, and she was raised under the supervision of her maternal grandfather, Zuan Paolo da Ponte. He encouraged her to develop her talents, with instruction in painting from no less than Titian and music lessons from two professional musicians, the lutenist Bartolomeo Gazza and Ippolito Tromboncino, a composer of frottole, who instructed her in singing and in playing the lute and other stringed instruments. Irene was said to sightread perfectly and sang so delightfully that Queen Bona of Poland, on a visit to the family castle in Spilimbergo, rewarded her with a costly



### **Music in family life**

With growing prosperity music became a part of everyday family life. Domestic account books frequently record payments for music lessons, usually for boys, along with dancing, writing, and arithmetic, beginning at the age of 7. Titian documents the musical literacy of young boys in his *Portrait of Two Young Brothers of the Pesaro Family* (Private Collection, Scotland). There were also talented girls like Irene di Spilimbergo (1538–59). Born to a Friulian nobleman and Giulia da Ponte, the daughter of a wealthy

Figure 2. Ludovico Pozzoserrato, *Concert in a Villa* (detail), c.1580s. Galleria Giorgio Franchetti (Ca’ d’Oro), Venice. Photo: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY.

golden chain. Irene’s biographer, Dionisio Atanagi, wrote that her ‘fixed ambition was to assure that in the activities she undertook, there would be no woman superior to her, thus she heard praise of other women with virtuous envy’. And yet, significantly, he stressed further that Irene always behaved with the ‘decorum [appropriate] to a gentlewoman and maiden’. Also significantly, perhaps, in her posthumous portrait by a follower of Titian, she is not

shown holding a paintbrush or a musical instrument, but a laurel wreath, while a unicorn – symbol of her virginity – reposes in the landscape behind.

Over the course of the 16th century, from the concerts held in noble houses to more intimate family music-making such as the scene captured, exceptionally, by Leandro Bassano (*Concert*, Uffizi, 1592), the air of the Venetian palace was filled with the harmonious sounds of the human voice and – the inventories tell us – a wealth of instruments: harpsichord, clavier, spinet, organ, viola da gamba, lute, harp, cittern, cornett, theorbo, and flute, to name only a partial list. Bassano portrays four generations of his own family, featuring two young women, one playing the spinet and the other the lute, accompanying the others, as well as the family dog, in an evening chorale. As has often been noted, the painting is a quintessential statement of family harmony, solidarity, and continuity.

### *Danger to decorum*

And yet, at the same time that music was cherished for its spiritual enlightenment and its central role in family congeniality, it was also suspect because of its seductive sensuality. A villa scene by the Flemish artist Lodowijk Toeput, also known as Lodovico Pozzoserrato, makes the point. While the setting is signorial, the activities in the foreground of both humans and the family pets border on the licentious, with decorum slipping away into abandon to the accompaniment of a chamber ensemble (Figure 2).

Indeed, music could be dangerous, as well as delightful. Pietro Bembo, in his discourses on platonic love, wrote that when two lutes are in tune with one another, when one is played the other responds in sympathetic vibration, that is, the same pitch without being touched. He makes the analogy with two lovers who though distant are joined in the sweetest and most perfect harmony. But there is an edge here. The operative word is lovers. When Bembo's 13-year-old natural daughter Elena begged for lessons on the monochord, he refused, saying that she was too young and that musical performance was the business of vain and flighty women. Bembo cautioned: 'It would give you little pleasure and fame if you were to play badly. But in order to play well you would have to spend ten to twelve years without thinking about anything else. If your friends want you to play for their pleasure, tell them that you do not want to become ridiculous, and had better remain satisfied with letters and needlework.' Aretino went further, declaring that sounds, songs, and letters were the keys that open the gates of a woman's chastity.

Stefano Guazzo in his *Civil Conversation*, a treatise on manners published in Brescia in 1574, propounded a class-based curriculum for girls. Singing and dancing were appropriate in the education of young girls who would be noble ladies at court, but were not to be encouraged in a private home: 'If fathers wish to marry their daughters to those who are not consumed by the smoke of music or the odour of poetry, they would be advised to keep them occupied with the woolwinder and household goods, rather than musical instruments.' And yet, what was so dangerous about the strumming of a lute?

### *Music and the courtesan*

One problem was that music-making had also become associated with a sphere that existed alongside the wholesome domesticity that we see in Bassano's paintings: that is, with the extra-curricular world of the courtesan, as attested by a number of prints by Giacomo Franco (Figure 3) (and perhaps also by Pozzoserrato's painting). The courtesan was, strictly speaking, a whore, but one who enjoyed a special status because of exceptional beauty, charm, intellect, or talent. Indeed, courtesans were often indistinguishable in public places from noble matrons, and many were excellent musicians. This perhaps created a slippage that moralists found problematic.

Writing nearly a century later, the Englishman Thomas Coryat would praise the beauty of the courtesans of Venice and their 'infinite allurements', adding that 'such is the variety of the delicious objects they minister to their lovers, that they want for nothing tending to delight. For when you come into wone of their Palaces ... you seeme to enter into the Paradise of Venus. For their fairest roomes



Figure 3. Giacomo Franco, engraving from *Habiti delle donne venetiane* (*Costumes of Venetian Women*), c.1592. Photo: author.

are most glorious and glittering to behold.’ He continues: ‘I have here inserted a picture of one of their nobler Cortezans, according to her Venetian habites, with my owne neare unto her, made in that forme as we saluted each other.’

After describing her artfully painted face and elaborate hairdo, Coryat cautioned: ‘Though these things will at the first sight seeme unto thee most delectable allurements ... she will endeavour to enchant thee partly with her melodious notes that she warbles out upon her lute which shee fingers with as laudable a stroke as many men that are excellent professors in the noble science of Musicke; and partly with that heart-tempting harmony of her voice’ and advised that she was also ‘a good Rhetorician, and a most elegant discourser, so that if she cannot move thee with all these foresaid delights, shee will assay thy constancy with her Rhetoricall tongue’.

Several courtesans would exhibit considerable musical and literary talents. Paola Provesin, one of the last of the great Renaissance courtesans, lived in an apartment on Piazza San Marco rented from the Procurators by the nobleman Tommaso Contarini. He paid not only for her rent and living expenses, but also for her instruction by masters of music, painting, and poetry. The inventory

made at the time of her death in 1638 contained thirty paintings, one listed as ‘portraits in a concert of music’ – one thinks of the many paintings of musical muses by Tintoretto. Indeed, Paola’s rooms were filled with books of music and a veritable orchestra of musical instruments: a spinet and a harpsichord, both painted with fillets of gold, six theorbos described as old, and another of ivory, as well as an ivory lute, and another theorbo and another lute, each with its case, and a large harp. In her will, Paola had ordered all of her worldly possessions to be sold, with the proceeds given to charity. Her music may have been profane, but her life is a testament to the capacity of music not only to enchant and to seduce, but also to enlighten and to elevate the soul.

### Interpretation

The multivalent status of music – a symbol of harmony both divine and sexual – has made the interpretation of such paintings as Titian’s several versions of Venus and a musician a cottage industry for art historians. Are these works, as Erwin Panofsky saw it, allegories about the superiority of vision over hearing and the Neoplatonic notion of ascent, wherein the contemplation of earthly beauty leads to the contemplation of the divine? Or are they simply celebrations of sensual love, as others would have it, with the courtier’s musical performance a prelude to the act of love by wooing the woman through the power of music? Present interpretations tend to reject the either-or approach and celebrate the complexity of Titian’s vision, which embraces values both high and low, both spiritual and profane.

What then are we to make of Bartolomeo Veneto’s *Woman Playing a Lute*, of a century earlier (Figure 4)? Wildly successful, the panel survives in no fewer than 21 versions. The lutenist’s coy demeanour and direct gaze are suggestive. Her music has been variously identified as a secular *canzonetta* and as a spiritual *laude*. But who is the lady? Her features and corkscrew ringlets are strikingly similar to those in a painting by the same artist of a young woman whose exposed breast and myrtle crown earned her labels ranging from a courtesan, to an allegory of Flora, the goddess of spring, to a portrait of Lucrezia Borgia, to a bride, to an idealised woman with a sensual attitude (*Flora*, Frankfurt, Städelsches Institut). The actual identity of the lute player is equally opaque. Despite her resemblance to the lady known as ‘Flora’, she has been identified



Figure 4. Bartolomeo Veneto, *Woman Playing a Lute*, 1520. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 5. Paolo Veronese, *Allegory of Music*, 1556. Biblioteca Marciana, Venice. Photo: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY.

by some as Cecilia Gallerani, mistress of Lodovico il Moro, by others as a woman in the guise of St Cecilia, and yet by others as simply a 'bella donna'. And yet, we cannot be certain in either case. These are ladies of ambiguous status, akin to the ambiguous status of music.

The issue may be summed up by Veronese's *Allegory of Music*, one of 21 roundels painted for the ceiling of the new Biblioteca Marciana (Figure 5). Vasari described it as

a representation of three young women, the most beautiful playing a large viol da gamba and regarding the keyboard, listening with her ear down. One of the others is playing the lute, while the third is singing from a book. Near them is a

wingless cupid playing a harpsichord, to show that music gives birth to love, or rather that love is always associated with music, and that is why cupid is wingless. He there introduces Pan, the god of shepherds ... with his pipes, an instrument, as it were, dedicated to him by the famous pastoral poets.

Adjudged the best roundel of the ceiling in a competition judged by Titian and the architect Jacopo Sansovino, the painting brought Veronese his own prestigious gold chain as a reward. A subtle balance of the sensual and the spiritual, it may be seen as a consummate symbol of harmony and concord. And as in the paintings by Titian and many others,



Professor Patricia Fortini Brown was awarded the Serena Medal for Italian Studies in 2011. She is pictured here at the awards ceremony in October 2011, with Professor Sir Adam Roberts, President of the British Academy.

musical performance is not confined to a closed interior space, but extends into a garden beyond. In Venetian art as in Venetian life, music bridged the unbridgeable: between humankind and nature, between heaven and earth, between the sacred and the profane.

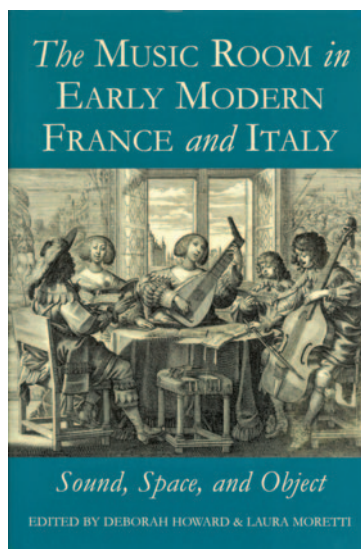
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*The Music Room in Early Modern France and Italy: Sound, Space, and Object*, edited by Deborah Howard and Laura Moretti (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, 176), was published in June 2012. Further information can be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/)

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# Celebrating women in the humanities and social sciences

*For just over a century, International Women's Day has celebrated women and their achievements. Professor Pat Thane FBA and Professor Lisa Tickner FBA, who both participated in a British Academy event to mark International Women's Day on 8 March 2012, honour the female figures in the humanities and social sciences who continue to inspire them.*

## **Pat Thane on Barbara Wootton**

Barbara Wootton (1897–1988) grew up in an academic family in Cambridge. She had a rather oppressive mother who gave Barbara a lifelong hostility to bullying women – notably Margaret Thatcher, whom she met late in her career in the House of Lords, when she was Baroness Wootton, one of the first life peeresses. Her mother insisted that Barbara read classics at Girton College, Cambridge. While she was there, during the First World War, she married Jack Wootton who was on leave from the services. Sadly he died 36 days later. Barbara was shattered and took time out from Girton, but she gained the strength to resist her mother and on her return insisted on studying economics. She was awarded a starred first, but of course could not receive the degree at Cambridge at that time – Cambridge did not get around to giving degrees to women until 1948, though they were able to take exams and appear in the class lists.

After a period at the London School of Economics, Barbara returned to Girton as a lecturer. She was the first woman to lecture in economics at Cambridge in the 1920s, but, again, because Cambridge did not formally acknowledge the existence of women in the university, she

had to lecture in the name of a man – the economist Hubert Henderson. To Henderson's credit he volunteered for the role to enable her to give some lectures and insisted that the University should add, in brackets, that his lectures would be delivered by Mrs Wootton. John Maynard Keynes rightly described this as a disgraceful slight to women.

After women partially gained the vote in 1918, Barbara joined the very active campaign in the 1920s to assist and encourage women to use the vote to redress the multiple gender inequalities they suffered. She was one of the first female magistrates to be appointed and the youngest of the first cohort. This had only become possible in 1920. She was appointed in 1926, aged 29 and still too young to vote – it was not until 1928 that women were able to vote at age 21; it was 30 until then. She remained a magistrate for 40 years. Along with other women – including the feminist and Independent MP, Eleanor Rathbone and the penal reformer and Principal of Somerville College, Oxford, Margery Fry – she played an important part in reforming this crucial part of the justice system, which had become rather moribund by the 1920s. These women insisted on a greater professionalisation and training for the role, and helped to make it respectable again.<sup>1</sup>

Another notable first for Barbara was that she became one of the first Baronesses when women – following another long campaign – were at last appointed to the House of Lords in 1958. She was the first woman to sit on the woolsack as Deputy Speaker in 1967. A passionate believer in social equality and a lifelong Labour supporter, she was not the first or the last person to think that the constitution of the House of Lords, as



Figure 1. Barbara Wootton appeared on 'Any Questions?' at Nantyglo Community College and Sports Centre Complex, March 1974. Left to right: Owen Edwards (BBC), Barbara Wootton, David Jacobs, Enoch Powell, John Cole. Photo: Girton College Archives.

<sup>1</sup> Anne Logan, *Feminism and Criminal Justice: A Historical Perspective* (London: Palgrave, 2008).

she put it, was totally indefensible in a democracy: 'No one in his senses would invent this present House if it did not already exist'. However, she believed that, though an imperfect political system, the Lords had its uses and provided a position that could be used for good – and she tried.

She carried out her academic research and writing in parallel – holding an academic post at Bedford College, one of the women's colleges of the University of London – and maintained a close relationship with public service from the 1930s until her death in the 1988. She saw academic research and public policy as inextricably related, and believed passionately that academic expertise should be directed to the promotion of human welfare and provide a clear evidence base for public policy. Among other things, she worked with William Beveridge during and after the Second World War to fashion Labour's post-war full employment policy.

Barbara was an outspoken opponent of the dominance of abstract theory and detachment from empirical social problems evident in much research in the social sciences. This was an issue of very active and acrimonious debate in the 1950s and 1960s (as of course it still is to some degree). Some social scientists strongly resisted the idea that their work could be, and perhaps should be, useful in the making of public policy.

Her public and academic interests interconnected most closely on issues of criminal justice. As well as working as a magistrate, she was a member of four Royal Commissions (on Workmen's Compensation, 1938; the Press, 1947; Civil Service Pay and Conditions, 1953–5, which successfully recommended equal pay in the civil service; and on the Penal System, 1964–6) and four departmental committees. The first of these committees was the Committee on National Debt and Taxation in 1924. She later chaired a Home Office Sub-committee on Hallucinogens and in 1968 the 'Wootton Report' recommended that cannabis should attract lesser penalties than harder drugs, a recommendation which was implemented. She complained of the lack of evidence underlying the existing penalties for drug use, as with so many other areas of public policy. Barbara also chaired the committee that proposed Community Service Orders as an alternative to prison, which was implemented in the 1970s, and of course is still with us. She had long been critical of purely punitive sentences, which she believed the evidence showed too often only led to further offending, and she saw ways to achieve reform and



Figure 3. Lisa Tickner's mother, Doris Warton, in the 1930s.

rehabilitation of criminals rather than pure punishment. All of this formed the focus of her book *Social Science and Social Pathology* published in 1959.

Similarly, Barbara was relentlessly critical of orthodox economists' explanations of wage inequalities as purely the product of market forces, making no allowance for social and cultural forces, for example in explaining the gross gender inequalities in pay. She discussed this in her book *The Social Foundations of Wage Policy*, which was published in 1955 – a time when there was a very active women's equal pay campaign, and the year equal pay was finally conceded in the public sector (following the report of the Royal Commission, mentioned above, in which she participated), to be implemented gradually over five years.

She was also a founder member of the Abortion Law Reform Society in the 1930s, a supporter of unilateral disarmament, a supporter of the Homosexual Law Reform Association, both in the 1950s, and long an opponent of capital punishment. She was active in most of the major liberal causes of the mid-20th century.

Barbara Wootton was a remarkable woman who played a significant part in the long, slow, still incomplete process of equalising opportunities for men and women in Britain. I think she deserves to be remembered far more widely than she is.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 2. Virginia Woolf in her mother's dress, published in 'Vogue', 1926. Photo: Maurice Beck and Helen Macgregor.

### Lisa Tickner on Virginia Woolf and Nancy Spero

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941)

I thought I'd start with mothers. Isn't it the mother – or whoever stands in place of the mother – who first 'inspires' us, in the etymological sense of breathing life into us? I don't mean physically, in giving birth to us, but by responding to our looks and gestures and so confirming in us the sense that we exist.

When it comes to inspiration in adult life, mothers can be complicated. Virginia Woolf was photographed (Figure 2) in her mother's dress for *Vogue* in May 1926 (she was writing *To the Lighthouse*, with its portraits of her parents Leslie and Julia Stephen as Mr and Mrs Ramsay). My mother, Doris Warton, was photographed on her motorbike at some point in the 1930s (Figure 3), an image that

<sup>2</sup> For more detail see Ann Oakley, *A Critical Woman: Barbara Wootton, Social Science and Public Policy in the Twentieth Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).



has always been astonishing to me because so totally out of character with the woman I knew: an asthmatic, an arthritic, and an Olympic-class worrier. (Truly, as Judith Arcana says in *Our Mothers' Daughters*, our mothers come to us from a place where we didn't know them.)

Woolf famously claimed that 'we think back through our mothers if we are women', seeing the tradition of 'great male writers' as a source of pleasure but not of help. She meant elective rather than natural mothers, in whom the nurturing roles might be reversed. Feminine creativity required the murder of 'the Angel in the House', the internalised imago of her dead mother, Julia, a paragon of purity, deference, and chronic unselfishness: 'If there was chicken, she took the leg. If there was a draught, she sat in it'. In a fit of rage, Woolf throws her inkpot at her and kills her, though she died more than once, since 'it is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality'.

In that marvellous essay, *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf insisted on the importance of 'five hundred a year and a room of one's own'. In *Three Guineas*, she deplored the tendency to skimp on the girls for the sake of 'Arthur's education fund' ('a voracious receptacle'). My mother – a martyr to housework and her back – was not, in this sense,

my inspiration, but she did instil in me the belief that women should be educated and independent, perhaps all the more strongly because she was not in a position to be either. There was no competing 'Arthur' – I was an only child – but there was no money either.

Woolf was my inspiration as a young woman, and in the 1970s I bought the volumes of her collected letters and diaries one by one from the Flask Walk bookshop as fast as reviewers turned them in. She seemed to cast through muddy waters a penetrating light – 'of course', one thought as one turned the page – and the elegance of her prose shaped, but did not disguise, the anger that fuelled it.

What Woolf called 'the battle of the Royal Academy' was one among many, as women fought their way into institutions hitherto reserved to men (and as Germaine Greer points out, got in as the men were getting out, setting up brotherhoods and other kinds of antibodies). I was at art school in the 1960s, but it was really the next generation of women that grew up as it were *with both parents*, able to 'think through their mothers' as well as the fathers who'd taught them in the past – and able for that very reason to *use* the work of fathers and brothers for their own ends.

***The sociologist, economist and social reformer Beatrice Webb was the first woman to be elected a Fellow of the British Academy, in 1931. Her life and work were celebrated in a British Academy biographical memoir, from which the following extract is taken.***

[S]he was exceptionally sensitive and highly strung, with an artist's eye for the subtleties of individual character, and an unusual power of expressing them. The imagination to which collective humanity is as real and moving as individuals who are seen is not a common faculty. She possessed it to an extraordinary degree. 'To me', she once wrote, after quoting some lines by Sir Ronald Ross, the discoverer of the cause of malaria, 'a million sick have always seemed actually more worthy of sympathy than "the child sick in a fever" preferred by Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh'. Her early contacts with scientists strongly influenced her thought; but it was her imaginative grasp of the lot of unknown lives, rather than intellectual curiosity, which first turned her to sociology.

Once sure of her vocation, she mastered its methods by a long and painful conflict, disciplining her intellect and canalizing her emotions with an intensity of effort which, to judge by her diary, sometimes brought her near despair. Her touch of ascetic austeri-ty, as of a Puritan casting behind him all impediments to his quest, was partly the legacy of that early struggle to subdue herself, partly the expression of a philosophy which disliked emphasis on the externals of life – luxury, ostentation, and the claims of pampered classes to special consideration – both as bad manners and as a source of social corruption. Her demands on brain and will were exacting; but she was not of the reformers who are intolerable in private life, nor did she, as some observers thought, live solely for

her work. She diffused warmth, as well as light, and was quick, amid all her preoccupations, to offer sympathy, encouragement, and wise counsel to individuals in need of them. Acquaintances, to whom her intellectual eminence meant little, described her as the kindest woman they had ever met. She thought companionship the most delightful form of happiness, and welcomed it with open arms.

'Beatrice Webb, 1858-1943', by R.H. Tawney FBA  
(reprinted from *Proceedings of the British Academy*,  
29, 1943, pp. 307–308)



(Martha) Beatrice Webb (née Potter), Lady Passfield.  
Photo: unknown photographer, matte bromide print on card mount, c. 1940; NPG P1292(63) © National Portrait Gallery, London.



Figure 4. Nancy Spero in her studio, 71st Street, New York, 1973. Photo: Susan Weiley, courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

#### Nancy Spero (1926–2009)

Nancy Spero became an artist when that was still something of a struggle. Like Woolf she was angry and, with much less decorum but no less elegance, channelled that into her work. Woolf talks of a social occasion on which she was cornered by a man: ‘he could only say, “I-I-I” it must be I’. Spero, living in Paris with three children, felt that ‘I didn’t have a voice. I didn’t have an arena in which to conduct a dialogue. I felt like a non-person, an artist without a voice’.

In the early 1960s what she called these ‘strange creatures’ emerged in her work, screaming with their tongues sticking out, ‘saying “merde” and “fuck you”’. The Angel in the House would not have approved.

In 1965, back in New York, Spero’s rage was channelled outwards into the protest against the Vietnam War. She had found her community now. She began scribbling, with a kind of calligraphic fluency, a series of gouaches figuring the sexualised violence of the war. She later recalled that:

I wanted to make images to express the obscenity of war, the collusion of sex, male power and the power of the military. I started working rapidly on paper, angry works, often scatological...Phallic tongues emerge from human heads...human bodies dragged through mud...I used a lot of bloody colours and spit. The paintings are fragile but they are very angry...The act of erasing bodies was so violent that the paper was shredded. I rubbed away at the paper but to get it to shred I had to spit on it.

The process was violent, in other words, as well as the image.

Opposition to the Vietnam War gave her that ‘arena in which to conduct a dialogue’ that she’d looked for. What she evoked were the forms of psychic aggression

Figure 5. Detail from ‘Artemis, Acrobats, Divas and Dancers’, Nancy Spero’s mosaics installed in 2004 at the 66th Street/Lincoln Center Subway Station, New York.

understood in Kleinian analysis in terms of the ‘rage against the mother’. But what inspired her was the work of a man, the French writer, Antonin Artaud, which enabled her to find her voice. Claire Pajaczkowska once said that she felt recognised by this work: that it brought out the worst in us – the sadism and sexuality – but that she felt known by it at quite a deep level, that the work understood her. Isn’t this what we look for – in our mothers and our sources of inspiration – to be recognised and understood by them?

By the 1970s, Spero had decided to use only images of women – her ‘reservoir of poses’ – from a riot of different cultural contexts. She aimed, she said, to ‘universalise the female’, so that man was no longer the measure of all things, so that images of women could speak to the generality of the human condition. Technically, she was brilliantly subversive. She wanted ‘to make little things, with bite’. So just printed paper, quite fragile, unframed, pinned to the wall – a conservationist’s nightmare – but then *Notes in Time* (1979) is 210 feet long. And that’s before later projects in which her lexicon of images was printed over columns and under domes and in subway stations across Europe and America. Get out at 66th Street in New York some time, near the Rockefeller Centre, and look at her mosaics (Figure 5).

Spero died in 2009 aged 83. As a person, she was humorous, generous, courageous and ingenious in the face of pain and disability. She had to be, because she was crippled with arthritis and in and out of hospital in her final years. She could do celebration and *jouissance* too, but the world of sexualised violence, to which she bore witness, hasn’t gone away – perhaps can’t go away. War is unique to humans, like language, like cooking. (Animals fight, but animals don’t have wars.) Juliet Mitchell argues that ‘The Law of the Mother’ prohibits the killing of siblings but that war is the organised, ‘legitimated’ breaking of that taboo. It can and will slide into acts of ‘illicit’ murder, torture and rape. Spero, a mother and an artist, says ‘Not in my name’. Her work reminds us that a creative response to war and violence is also uniquely human. There is a Latin tag that was for obvious reasons her sort-of motto: *dum spiro spero* – as I breathe, I hope.





Figure 6. Fellows of the British Academy who participated in the panel discussion. Back row (left to right): Professor Nicola Lacey, University of Oxford; Professor Uta Frith, Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience; Professor Christine Chinkin, London School of Economics; Professor Marina Warner, University of Essex; Professor Pat Thane, King's College London. Seated (left to right): Rt Hon Baroness Hale of Richmond, Justice of the Supreme Court; Professor Anne Phillips, London School of Economics; Professor Lisa Tickner, Courtauld Institute of Art.

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Pat Thane is Research Professor, King's College London; Professor Emerita of the University of London; and a Fellow of the British Academy.

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Lisa Tickner is Visiting Professor, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London; Professor Emerita of Art History, Middlesex University; and a Fellow of the British Academy.

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The British Academy panel discussion on 'Celebrating women in the humanities and social sciences' was held on International Women's Day, 8 March 2012. Audio recordings of the contributions can be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/)

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# The function of the financial services sector

July 2012 saw the publication of the final report of 'The Kay Review of UK Equity Markets and Long-Term Decision Making'.<sup>1</sup> At a British Academy Forum in January 2012, **Professor John Kay FBA** queried the effectiveness of the financial services sector in satisfying the needs of the wider economy

## **Production vs 'rent-seeking'**

Economic progress everywhere depends on the extent to which entrepreneurial energy goes into production and innovation, rather than to wealth appropriation and 'rent-seeking'. How much effort do people devote to growing their own crops and managing their own livestock? And how much to stealing other people's crops and livestock, or taking a share in the produce that other people cultivate? This is one of the oldest questions in economic history. The effective support of productive activity over rent-seeking is the most important measure of the quality of economic institutions.

It is quite difficult to maintain the balance in favour of productive and innovative activity, and most countries through most of history have not been very successful. If the robber barons who built castles on the Rhine to collect tolls from passing river traffic had devoted the same entrepreneurial energy to seeking out new trading opportunities, the industrial revolution might have happened earlier than it did. The modern problem of rent-seeking takes different forms in different parts of the world. It takes one guise in China, with the curious role of the institutionalised Communist Party; a different version is found in sub-Saharan Africa, largely characterised by essentially kleptocratic states, and much the same structure of political organisation is found in Russia and several other parts of the former Soviet Union. In south-east Asia there is crony capitalism, and a different variant of crony capitalism created economic meltdown in Iceland and Ireland. These are all versions of the same problem: failure to manage the balance between rent-seeking and productive activity.

The economic success of western Europe and North America has come through relative success in controlling rent-seeking. In modern western economies there have been two main channels for rent-seeking. One is the use of large corporations to exercise economic and political power for the aggrandisement of individuals who control

them. The second is engagement with the mechanisms of democracy by concentrated producer interests or by groups of organised workers to subvert the mechanics of the state in order to extract rents for the benefit of those particular groups.

## **Financial sector**

The economic history of the last 30 years has been the story of a moderately effective drive against the second kind of rent-seeking, Britain has been at the forefront of attacks on the power of regionally concentrated producers to secure subsidy or protection for uncompetitive industries, and the ability of organised labour, especially in the public sector, to achieve pay, conditions and staffing levels well above the rates needed to attract capable employees. Simultaneously, there has been a rise, or perhaps revival, of the first type of rent-seeking, the use of large corporations as vehicles for wealth abstraction by controlling individuals and their supporters. The financial sector has become the principal focus of the most aggressive rent-seeking behaviour in modern economies. People who have the entrepreneurial drive and selfish character to be effective rent-seekers have tended to congregate in the City of London and on Wall Street, and the scale of rewards that are derived there has attracted many more.

The crash of 2007-8 was a direct consequence. As the financial sector has expanded in the western world, a series of crises has followed. These crises have all been very different in proximate form, while all having similar fundamental underlying causes. There is a common character to the Asian market debt crisis of the mid to late 1990s, the new economy bubble at the turn of the century, and the growth and subsequent collapse of the securitisation of credit from 2003 to 2008. Some asset mispricing occurs in particular markets. Herding behaviour exaggerates that mispricing, as capital and traders are attracted to the profits created by asset



<sup>1</sup> [www.bis.gov.uk/kayreview](http://www.bis.gov.uk/kayreview)

overvaluation. Then the mispricing is abruptly corrected, imposing large collateral losses not just in the financial sector but in the non-financial economy, and governments have intervened to mitigate these consequences by providing large amounts of public money to the financial system. That public money has essentially provided the fuel for the next market crisis. That is what we did after 2008, with inevitably the same results, and the next version of the same cycle may not be far off.

### **Regulation**

It is understandable that people should react to these developments by saying that what we need is more regulation. But the problem we had in the years before 2007 was not that we did not have regulation – financial services is a heavily regulated industry. The problem was that the regulation we had was useless, or worse. One of the principal drivers of the creation of complex financial instruments was regulatory arbitrage – the construction of securities which have the same economic substance but more favourable regulatory treatment, while many of the problems emerged in vehicles which had been constructed to fall outside the scope of any regulatory supervision.

Responses to the crisis are characterised by a dual form of regulatory capture. There is the familiar form of such capture: regulators come to see the health of the industry through the eyes of established firms in the industry. It is difficult for regulators to see things in any other way, because that is where industry-specific expertise lies.

In financial services we have a second, and in some ways graver, form of regulatory capture: the growth of a very large regulation industry. This consists of regulatory agencies themselves, of people in regulated firms who are employed in compliance activities, and a large intermediate group of advisors and consultants. This industry has become large, and its interest, as with most industries, is expanding the scale and profitability of its

own activities. The outcome is a regulatory activity that is at once extensive and intrusive, growing in scope and intensity, and yet largely ineffective, as repeated scandals demonstrate.

### **Secondary markets**

In my view what we need is not more regulation. In many areas we probably need less regulation. What we have currently is a financial services sector that supports large volumes of secondary market trading, but which is not very good at meeting the rather modest needs of capital for new businesses and new investment of a modern economy. Non-financial business is now much less capital-intensive than it was when the institutions of the modern market economy were developed. But the mechanism we have is still bad, particularly in western Europe, at generating funds for early stage businesses, the main area in which fresh capital is required to support productive and innovative activity.

Instead we observe an almost unbelievable volume of trading in secondary markets, and a payments system that is far inside the frontiers of what is technologically possible. The needs of the non-financial economy for financial services, although real and important, are modest: a certain amount of seedcorn financing, and a cheap and efficient and quick payment system – there is not much more to it than that. That is not what we are providing, nor is it the direction in which we are travelling. A financial system far larger than we need has created business cycles of increasing amplitude. We face the danger – familiar whenever society loses control of a group of rent-seekers – that the oligarchy which benefits from rent accumulation goes on entrenching its own power and scale, until the point at which it provokes a crisis that is social and political as well as economic. That is the depressing outlook which we face following the ineffectual political responses to the crash.

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Professor John Kay is an economist and a Fellow of the British Academy.

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On 26 January 2012, a British Academy Forum, held in association with the Social Market Foundation, considered 'The Politics of the Market after the Crash'.

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# ‘Nudge’ and beyond: behavioural science and public policy

ON 14 JUNE 2012 the British Academy Policy Centre hosted a conference on ‘Nudge and beyond: Behavioural science, public policy and knowing what works’. The event was organised in partnership with the Cabinet Office’s Behavioural Insights Team. That Team was set up in July 2010, and its work draws on insights from the growing body of academic research in the fields of behavioural economics and psychology which show how often subtle changes to the way in which decisions are framed can have big impacts on how people respond to them.

The conference featured speakers chosen for their excellence in research and experience in applying behavioural insights to such varied areas as crime, energy use and public health. The keynote speech was delivered by Professor Richard Thaler, co-author of the enormously influential book *Nudge*.<sup>1</sup> He discussed some ways in which the ‘nudge’ agenda has been developing.

## *Make it easy*

The first of Professor Thaler’s ‘nudge mantras’ is ‘Make it easy’. ‘If you want somebody to do something, remove the obstacles that prevent them from doing it. The Families’ Tax Credit was the opposite of “make it easy” – any time your income changes, be sure immediately to fill in six

forms and send them to the right place. That is not “make it easy”. This sounds banal, but when we start with “make it easy” it is amazing how many good ideas come from that phrase.’ For example, he discussed how people’s interaction with government can be eased if forms are ‘pre-populated’ with information that government already holds about them.

## *Smart disclosure*

Indeed, the focus of Professor Thaler’s speech was on the benefits of making information more freely available – ‘smart disclosure’. It was the release of data originally assembled as a US Department of Defense initiative that enabled the commercial development of GPS (Global Positioning System) – now perhaps a \$100-billion-a-year business in the US alone. Using the underlying data made publicly available in the National Digital Forecast Database, private-sector companies can provide US farmers with highly specific weather forecasts. And in San Francisco, where city authorities have put up in the Cloud Wi-Fi network the GPS-generated data on where all their buses and trains are, a smart phone app called Routesy tells you when the next bus is coming. Both the Obama Administration and the UK’s Coalition Government have embraced the notion of opening up publicly held data.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. *Nudge, nudge*. Rohan Silva (Senior Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister at No. 10 Downing Street), Professor Richard Thaler, and Lord Gus O'Donnell (former Cabinet Secretary) share a joke at the British Academy Policy Centre conference on 14 June 2012.

<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (2008). Richard Thaler is Ralph and Dorothy Keller Distinguished Service Professor of Behavioral Science and Economics at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

<sup>2</sup> From a Memorandum on ‘Transparency and Open Government’ issued on 21 January 2009 (the day after President Obama’s Inauguration): ‘Information maintained by the Federal Government is a national asset.

My Administration will take appropriate action, consistent with law and policy, to disclose information rapidly in forms that the public can readily find and use.’ From the Coalition’s ‘Programme for Government’ (May 2010): ‘We will create a new “right to data” so that government-held datasets can be requested and used by the public, and then published on a regular basis.’

### *Choice engines*

But smart disclosure can also aid consumer interaction with the private sector. In their book *Nudge*, Thaler and Sunstein talked about 'Humans' and 'Econs' – 'Humans being us, and Econs being the imaginary creatures in economics textbooks.' For Econs, choice is a good thing. But Humans have to deal with the real world, and the world is getting complicated. There is now enormous proliferation of choice in areas such as telephone calling plans or mortgages or credit cards – and the details of those schemes are so complicated that they can no longer be explained clearly in plain English – so that customers cannot work out whether they have the best deal. Professor Thaler argued: 'Since we cannot do plain English disclosure with complicated products, let us use electronic disclosure. In my ideal world, consumers should be able to know how much they are going to pay, and they should have machine-readable access to their own usage data.' Consumers could then upload a file of their own data to a third-party website which would act as a 'choice engine'. Consumers already make wide use of travel websites: 'I would like to make choosing calling plans, mortgages and credit cards at least as good as buying airline tickets and hotel rooms. This turns consumers into Econs: we are almost like Econs when we find a ticket from London to Chicago.' Firms would no longer be able to get market share through obfuscation.

Indeed, Professor Thaler went on to suggest that similar electronic disclosure should be available for investors in mortgage-backed securities. 'One of the reasons for the financial crisis, of which there are too many to list, is that those mortgage-backed securities were opaque. They were opaque even to professional investors. They were thousands of slices of mortgages, and nobody knew exactly what was in there, except possibly the rating agencies – and we know how well they did at assessing the risks. If we make transparent what is in that security, then

Figure 2. Dr Ben Goldacre (*Guardian*) launches the 'Test, Learn, Adapt' report, which advocates the use of field experiments to make policy better.

any geek with a PC can be a rating agency, and if we have enough geeks, we do not need rating agencies. In a perfect world, rating agencies would be out of business five years from now.'

Professor Thaler summed up his presentation as: 'Smart disclosure is the modern tool for the modern world.'

### *Randomised controlled trials*

One of Professor Thaler's mantras for those investigating the use of 'nudge' principles is 'We cannot do evidence-based policy without evidence.' Other speakers at the British Academy Policy Centre's conference stressed the importance of persuading politicians and officials that they need to conduct randomised controlled trials to test ideas, rather than simply rely on received wisdoms or anecdotal evidence. And several presentations provided examples of such research work. Indeed, the conference was used as the occasion to launch the Behavioural Insights Team's report *Test, Learn, Adapt: Developing Public Policy with Randomised Controlled Trials* (published June 2012).



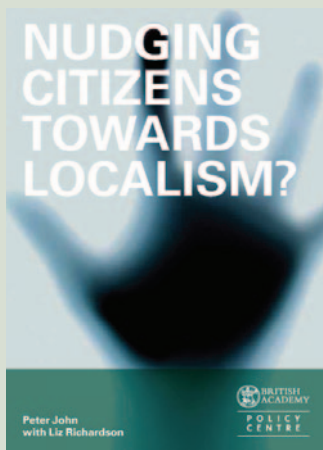

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The British Academy Policy Centre conference on 'Nudge and beyond: Behavioural science, public policy and knowing what works' was held on 14 June 2012. Video recordings of the sessions can be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Nudge-and-beyond.cfm](http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Nudge-and-beyond.cfm)

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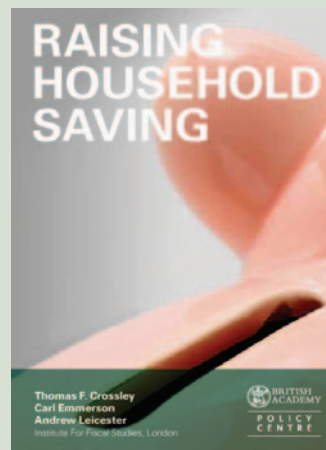
## The British Academy Policy Centre and 'nudge'

*The British Academy's Policy Centre was established in September 2009; it is supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. It has produced a number of 'nudge'-related reports and submissions.*



*Nudging Citizens Towards Localism?* was published by the Policy Centre in May 2012. The report, written by Peter John and Liz Richardson, examines the tension between the two separate agendas of behaviour change and localism. Is it the case that, by promoting both, the Coalition government runs the risk of only achieving moderate success in both? Is positive behaviour change best achieved through central government action – as the 2011 House of Lords report implied – or at local level? The report concludes that what we lack is enough evidence on what works. There are some great examples of good practice at local level, and a particular effort at national level to understand behavioural insights. But we need to expand the evidence base to pave the way for a more sustainable decentralised government, where nudges to achieve policy ends are applied to both local policymakers and to citizens.

All these reports and submissions can be found via : [www.britac.ac.uk/policy/policy-centre-reports.cfm](http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/policy-centre-reports.cfm)



The Policy Centre commissioned the Institute for Fiscal Studies to look at what is and is not known about the effectiveness of policies to increase household saving. The resulting Policy Centre report *Raising Household Saving* was launched in February 2012, and offers a critical review of the literature in four main areas: financial incentives; information, education and training; choice architecture or 'nudge'; and social marketing. Although household saving has been on the agenda for policymakers for some years, the evidence base is lacking – and needs to be addressed.

The Policy Centre submitted evidence to the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee's inquiry on **Behaviour Change**. The first response (October 2010) looked at psychological evidence on interventions, classification of behaviour change interventions, and the ethics of such policies; the second (January 2011) looked at how to change the way people travel.



Figure 3. Participants at the 'Nudge and beyond' conference in June 2012: Professor Peter John (right; University College London), author of the 'Nudging Citizens Towards Localism?' report; and Professor Nick Chater (left; Warwick Business School) who was on the report's steering group



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# Chambers of Commerce: from protesters to government partners

*On 15 February 2012, a British Academy event, entitled 'From Protesters to Government Partners: Chambers of Commerce 1767-2012', discussed the history of chambers of commerce and also their role in UK public policy in the context of the Coalition Government's Local Enterprise Partnerships.*

*Professor Bob Bennett FBA summarises the history and discussion.*

**T**HE CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE are among the oldest business organisations in the western world. Yet their early history and reasons for foundation have been little understood. Historians have devoted excessive attention to the short-lived national body, the General Chamber of Manufacturers (1785-7), largely because its central figures of Josiah Wedgwood, Matthew Boulton and Thomas Walker were great publicists. But there were other local bodies that preceded and continued after the period of the General Chamber, and it is these that sustained developments and laid the foundations of the modern system of chambers.

These local chambers were the subject of the British Academy's seminar, which took the new book *Local Business Voice* as a starting point, and then looked at the historical, political and contemporary challenges of government partnering – through contributions by Martin Daunton FBA, Wyn Grant, Martyn Pellew and myself. Chaired by Sir Peter Hall FBA, the discussion also benefited from contributions by Andrew Lansley MP speaking in a personal capacity drawing from his time as Deputy Director General of the chambers' national association.

Beginning in Jersey, Guernsey, New York, Liverpool, Manchester, Charleston and Staffordshire over 1767-1774, then Quebec (1776) and Jamaica (1778), the chambers sought an essentially local voice in decisions at Westminster. Over 1783-7 they were followed by Glasgow, Birmingham, Dublin, Belfast, Edinburgh, Leeds, Waterford (Figure 1), and Philadelphia and Boston, as well as other local committees. They were a new force in what we would now call 'business interest representation'. Chiefly their concerns were trade and treaties, taxes, currency, tariffs and bounties; but also local navigation, harbours, postal services, roads, gaols and industrial patents. In this they were no more than another group of petitioners and memorialists, following established routes of lobbying government. What makes their early history interesting is the way in which they linked traditional petitioning to an ambitious reform agenda, and adjoined lobbying to a bun-

dle of business services. These motivations have proved to be durable underpinnings.

## *Reform and anger*

In the foundation period of chambers, local business leaders were rarely among the political elite of local corporations. Although most chamber members were freemen and hence electors, few made it to the common councils of local corporations. The control exerted by the pre-Reform state was pervasive, ensuring that localities returned pro-government MPs. In the colonies and Channel Islands, state control was attempted through governors and their influence on Assemblies. Many committed to the prosperity of their localities naturally felt anger at their exclusion. But circumventing government control was only possible with both a local organisation and a sympathetic supporter in Westminster. The early frictions are clearest in Liverpool, where the corporation attempted to kill off the efforts to establish a chamber. The local mayor was accused of 'breach of faith', 'calumny' and 'spreading abuse' against the chamber's leaders. The corporation went on to form its own rival committee of trade. Liverpool chamber only succeeded over 1774-96 because it had sympathetic MPs to present their interests, to whom it had provided electoral support against established corporation 'families'.

Elsewhere, chambers sought to circumvent incompetent governors and other government minions to develop routes to get their interests heard. With the American Rebellion in 1775-6, the chamber leaders resisted military repression of Americans, and the chairs of the Liverpool and Manchester chambers were leading campaigners for concessions. In the colonies, the New York and Charleston chambers tried to mediate between rebels, British governors and military commanders. During the American War, the Jamaica chamber took on the organisation of convoys, and Quebec sought to manage commercial arbitration to wrest control from French juries. Hence, for all these chambers there was a mix of anger at actions by the state,

with efforts at practical commercial contributions to overcoming difficulties. From an early stage, therefore, there was a mix of 'business representation' with forms of business services.

### *The service mix*

The chambers of commerce are almost unique among business organisations in the extent to which they were, and are, suppliers of business services as well lobbyists. Historians have tended to dwell on protectionist combinations and cartels, and early commentary by Redford, Bowden, Clapham, Ashton, Beresford and others has been taken into modern texts, producing considerable confusion about what early chambers were doing. There has also been an over-emphasis on the early Commercial

Committees/Societies of Birmingham and Manchester, which in many ways were the exceptions.

The more general picture is shown in Figure 2. This traces the product life cycles of the services that chambers have been offering since their outset. As with most local initiatives, the history of chambers is replete with local variety and contingency. But the general patterns are clear. The early chambers were bodies that not only voiced interests but also supported their local business community by providing a portfolio of services. As Martin Daunton noted in the panel discussion, this made them somewhat distinct from most sector trade associations. The initial chamber portfolio embraced representation, commercial dispute arbitration, provision of information and news, and, in over one half of cases, the provision of a commercial coffee house, hotel or library/reading room.



Figure 1. *The Waterford chamber of commerce building, continuously occupied since 1815.*

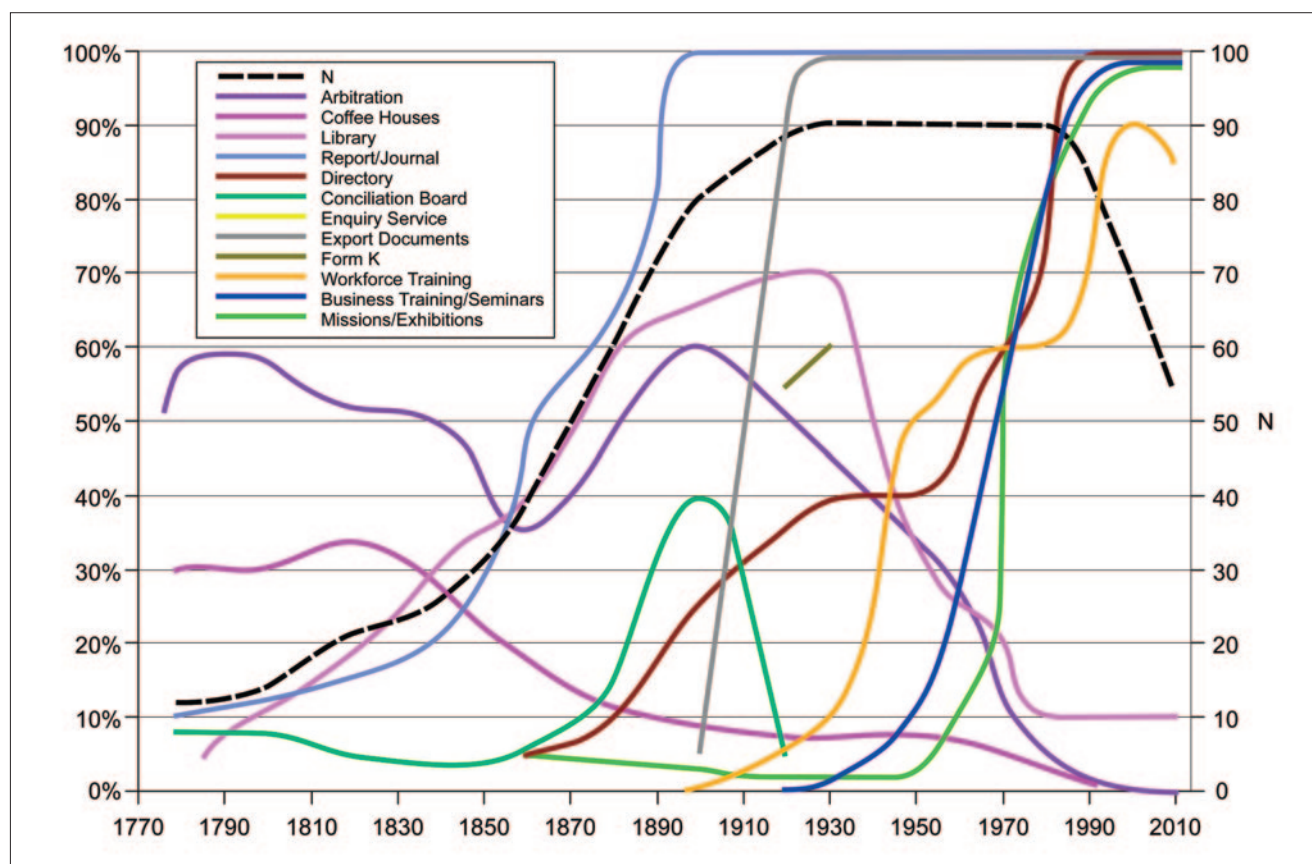


Figure 2. *The evolution of chamber services in Britain and Ireland: the percentage of chambers offering a given service at each time; lobbying, undertaken by all chambers for all periods, is not shown. N refers to the number of chambers in the sample.*

Renting their 'own rooms' or taking on a whole building provided a focus for activity and a physical presence. It allowed projection of an alternative and more supportive power than that of the local corporation or governor. But most of all it was a meeting place and milieu for discussion. In New York, the founding articles required a room for conversation with 'a porter to make up the fire' and 'bread and cheese, beer, punch, pipes and tobacco, provided at the expense of the members present'. Glasgow's Tontine Hotel, closely interlocked with the chamber, was a place where 'every man meets his friends, ... learns whatever is new or interesting at home or abroad, in politics, commerce; and often in literature'. Tontine and debenture models were used to finance these buildings, with wide support from subscribing members. Waterford's building, acquired by debenture for £3000, shown in Figure 1, is illustrative of the whole model. This is the oldest surviving building continuously occupied as a chamber of commerce, since 1815. It occupies one of the most prominent positions in the Georgian city, across the head of a T-junction facing the quays about 100 metres away. On its ground floor the offices were sublet to the Harbour Board and to the Ballast Office. Its entrance contained boxes and bags for receiving the members' mail which was then taken to departing ships. In the premier first floor rooms were the chamber's coffee and meeting rooms with newspapers, journals and library. The upper floors were managed as a 'commercial hotel'.

Many parts of the early service portfolio survived into the late 20th century, as shown in Figure 2. However, over 1870-1910 a new mix was added, with trade missions, export document certification, more general information and enquiry support, promotional directories, wider publications, and a few labour conciliation Boards. After the 1970s the portfolio widened further, with missions and exhibitions, management and workforce training, and more general business advice services becoming prominent. The result, as indicated in Martyn Pellew's presentation at the seminar, is that modern chambers provide a wide range of 'local business support services'.

### **Partnering government**

A local body providing a broad range of support to local businesses is of value not only to the businesses themselves, but as a community support for economic and civic needs. Whilst this was based originally on providing an alternative to projections of the state, it was inevitable that chambers became involved as partners of the state. This became prominent during 19th-century municipal improvements, where often the chamber leaders and corporation leaders were one and the same. The chambers sponsored improvement Bills and a range of initiatives such as technical schools, school and college prizes and scholarships, welfare and housing schemes, 'place promotion' and tourism.

Over 1898-1917 chambers also became the first 'corporatist' partners of the UK government, becoming the entire membership of the Advisory Committee on Commercial Intelligence, drawn from 16-18 of the main chambers. This had a significant role in trade, treaty and tariff negotiations. But their formal national committee presence was largely removed during the main corporatist period of the 1960s and 1970s, under the National Economic Development Council and Industrial Training Boards, with the CBI and sector bodies taking on the most substantial roles. Wyn Grant commented in the discussion that this may have been a benefit to them, since it certainly 'tainted' the then CBI.

However, rather than corporatism, the main role of chambers as government partners has been as providers of business support services. As governments have become concerned with policies to improve economic performance and international competitiveness, they have often sought to draw on the expertise of business organisations. Chambers first became involved over 1917-37 through disseminating intelligence about foreign business opportunities, using consular reports (and 'Form K', shown in Figure 2). But their main role has been since the 1980s. They have been partners in government urban regeneration initiatives, workforce and manager training, helping the unemployed into training and jobs, and supporting interventions to improve business performance. Chambers were natural partners in the increasing range of local initiatives developed by the Thatcher-Major and then the Blair-Brown governments. This produced a bewildering array of local bodies whose acronyms have had to become familiar to those who research this field: LENSs, EBPs, NSTOs, BiTC, LEAs, TECs, LECs, CCTEs, LLSCs, SFS, RDAs, LSPs, and Business Link. All of these have had a majority or significant chamber presence.

None of these government initiatives has proved durable. The resulting instability has presented considerable challenges for chambers, as well as other partners. Moreover the process of partnering itself has become so extensive that it has challenged the core missions of many partners. For UK chambers, at the peak of this process in 2001, 75% of their total income came from various government contracts. This has had a profound influence on the membership. If government was prepared to pay so much to support chamber activities, albeit ones often marginal to business concerns, then why should the members? This 'Samaritan's dilemma' is familiar in other walks of life. For chambers, when combined with instability of the actual programmes and continuously modified geographical boundaries over which they operate, it appears to be the main cause of significant lapsing from membership, with a shift to an historically high rate of turnover of membership since 1990.

### ***Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)***

The UK Coalition government in 2010 scrapped most predecessor initiatives and introduced LEPs – the latest in the surfeit of acronyms. These are bodies within which local partners are expected to come together and develop a strategy for their areas on which to base their bids for govern-

ment funds, chiefly the £2bn Regional Growth Fund and Enterprise Zones that give tax discounts. Like previous government initiatives, chambers have to be involved. As the voice of local businesses and provider of a major range of business services they cannot avoid participation, but many doubt the durability of LEPs will be greater than earlier initiatives.

The discussion at the British Academy's meeting suggested that chambers certainly offer to LEPs great advantages: of an accessible, open and representative economic force, with committed members concerned about their local communities. However, LEPs offer few resources, little influence over the main strategic questions of transport and planning policy with which businesses are most concerned, and they come with a lot of tensions between partners that have to be managed. There might be scope for LEPs to develop significant inputs via the government's 'localism' programmes, as commented by both Peter Hall and Andrew Lansley, to get local people working together on a common agenda. Indeed, Lansley argued that LEPs should aim to build a local capacity between partners that can tie each new government initiative into what local partners aim for as the long term durable agenda for their area.

Whatever the future of LEPs, the discussion at the Academy saw nothing to prevent the continued vibrant life of local chambers, provided that they continue to adapt. In a period of austerity the greatest challenge of adaptation is the need to focus on their members' concerns. If partnering government was necessary, perhaps even sometimes desirable, and certainly unavoidable, it must be strongly linked to the core economic concerns of the membership. Chambers, like any voluntary organisation, and like the British Academy itself, ultimately only survive through their internal solidarity, not on the whim of the next ministerial initiative.

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*Local Business Voice: The history of chambers of commerce in Britain, Ireland and revolutionary America, 1760-2011*, by Robert J. Bennett was published by OUP in October 2011.

Also by Bob Bennett, *The Voice of Liverpool Business: The first chamber of commerce and the Atlantic Economy 1774 – c. 1796* was published by the Liverpool Chamber in 2010. Both were supported by British Academy Small Research Grants.

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An audio recording of the panel discussion held on 15 February 2012, including the contribution by Andrew Lansley, can be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/)

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# Integrity and quality in universities: accountability, excellence and success

ONORA O'NEILL

## Diversity in universities

In the backs of our minds most of us treasure images and ideals of what a university should be. We may have in mind the universities of medieval, renaissance or Enlightenment Europe; of collegiate Oxbridge; of the Humboldtian University aspiring to *Lernfreiheit und Lehrfreiheit*; of Cardinal Newman's idea of a teaching university; of the American liberal arts colleges; of the great civic universities; of contemporary globally significant research universities with splendid graduate and professional schools, their sights firmly set on innovation and impact beyond their walls.<sup>1</sup>

Universities are now hugely diverse, not only in size, funding and governance, but in other more substantive respects. They teach and do research in different areas, to differing standards, and in differing proportions. They differ in the proportion of their activity that is laboratory based; in the proportion of their students who are residential; in the proportion who are mature (in a bureaucratic sense!); in the proportion who study whatever counts as 'full time';<sup>2</sup> in the proportion who work while studying; indeed in the proportion who work while studying what counts as 'full time'; in the proportion of their budgets devoted to research; in the proportion of their students who complete their courses; in the extent to which they deploy distance learning; in the



academic standards attained by their applicants and graduates; and in the subsequent success – or otherwise – of their graduates. All of this is without touching on the murkier worlds of corporate universities<sup>3</sup> and franchised campuses, let alone the flourishing and surprisingly overt market in fake university diplomas and credentials.<sup>4</sup>

There is corresponding diversity in the modes of governance used in universities. Governing boards may be controlled by states or cities, by Churches, by self-perpetuating trustees, by the body of academics, or now even by companies. Funding may be supplied by taxpayers, by student fees, by research contracts, by charitable endowment or alumni giving – or by a mix of these. Diversity and complexity are evident in all directions,

Given the diversity of institutions and of their aims and activities, it is hard to say anything systematic about university governance, and its success or otherwise in securing excellence in universities. So I shall concentrate on university *accountability*<sup>5</sup> and *excellence*, with a brief preliminary explanation for this choice of focus.

Governance, taken in the large sense, comprises the totality of systems by which institutions – for present purposes, universities – organise and control their activities. Accountability organises ways of monitoring the standards to which universities and their component institutions, staff and students carry out the tasks that are assigned to them,

<sup>1</sup> For thoughtful reflections on the extent to which we can still take a common view of what universities are or should aspire to be, see Stefan Collini, *What are Universities For?* (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Apparently a dwindling number of hours per week in US and UK universities. For evidence on the US, see Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago, 2010); and for the UK, see successive HEPI reports, beginning with Bahram Bekhradnia, Carolyn Whitnall and Tom Sastry, *The academic experience of students in English universities* (Higher Education Policy Institute, October 2006) and followed up in subsequent years.

<sup>3</sup> Hamburger University, the McDonalds training institution, has a number of 'campuses', but the joint provision model under the auspices of a university is more common – for example, Harrods has set up a degree

course for its staff in conjunction with Anglia Ruskin University. See <http://business.anglia.ac.uk/harrods.cfm>

<sup>4</sup> See [www.diplomaxpress.com](http://www.diplomaxpress.com). The website is evidently committed to truth in advertising, and offers 'TRUE authentic quality fake diplomas, fake degrees, and fake transcripts' and promises the more energetic – or perhaps the more gullible! – options to 'choose your own grades, GPA, classes, major, and more!'

<sup>5</sup> For more complete discussion of this approach to accountability, see Onora O'Neill, 'Gerechtigkeit, Vertrauen und Zurechenbarkeit', in Otto Neumaier, Clemens Sedmak and Michael Zichy (eds), *Gerechtigkeit: Auf der Suche nach einem Gleichgewicht* (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2005), 33–55.

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and seeks to hold them to account for the standard to which they do so. It combines retrospective and disciplinary aspects of governance, dealing both with recording and incentivising compliance and standards – and with detecting and penalising failures. Some aspects of university accountability are similar to those in other large organisations: there is nothing very distinctive about securing financial accountability in universities.

But other aspects of university accountability are highly distinctive, and of particular interest. How should universities be held to account for the quality and integrity of their teaching and research? A century ago, securing quality and integrity would have been seen mainly as matters for individual academics, for professional bodies (particularly in certain subjects), for academic departments and senates, generally operating under a degree of state or Church oversight. However, liberal ideals of university autonomy and academic freedom were already widely accepted, and this has not changed during the 20th century.<sup>6</sup> Changes in the views of university accountability across the last 30 years do not, I think, signal any general rejection of liberal views of university autonomy. In many university systems, academics still control significant aspects of student access, determine and deliver the syllabus, examine students and award credentials. They also control the conduct of research, admission to research training, and the publication of research reports. All of these activities would be compromised without the constant contribution of individual scholars and scientists.

Yet, since the late 20th century, we have seen huge changes in the forms of accountability to which universities are subject. These changes constitute a rather clumsy attempt to achieve accountability for the greatly increased public revenues supporting teaching and research while maintaining respect for academic freedom and university autonomy.

### ***The new accountabilities: quality control***

These different forms of public accountability are based on quite controversial innovations in quality control. It may seem that universities cannot be made accountable for the quality of what they do unless those who hold them to account can determine what they do and produce. If that were the case, public accountability would indeed undermine and corrode academic freedom. The results might be highly damaging.

The currently received view, however, is that it is possible for external bodies to hold universities to account for the quality of their teaching and research without compromising academic freedom and integrity. This is typically done by looking at rather *abstract aspects of university performance* that, it is supposed, can be objectively measured and recorded, while leaving universities and academics a large degree of control of the *content of the*

*syllabus and choice of research topics*. A central characteristic of these approaches to accountability is that they purport simply to measure what universities and academics choose to do. This supposedly leaves universities and academics free to make academic choices, while providing objective evidence of their success – or lack of success.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the abstract characteristics typically measured and recorded in order to secure accountability, without undermining academic freedom, are genuinely quantitative – staff/student ratios, laboratory and library provision, numbers of students, numbers of students completing courses of study, numbers of overseas students recruited. Yet even in these cases it is often hard to be sure that the metrics used give accurate, let alone comparable, measures. For example, it may make a large difference whether a university counts numbers of employed staff or numbers of full-time equivalents, and the calibration of what counts as *full time* is likely to vary in ways that reflect employment law and local needs. Even these genuinely quantitative measures usually create problems, and they ignore many substantive aspects of teaching and research that affect the quality of what is done.

However, other widely used approaches to quality assessment purport to measure, yet they lack genuine units of account, and they ignore much that matters but is not readily counted or measured, let alone compared. For example, some metrics tally the number of students who drop out,<sup>8</sup> or who get less good degrees,<sup>9</sup> or who are in employment a certain time after graduation.<sup>10</sup> All of us know how unreliable and incomplete the evidence for these *ostensibly* numerical measures can be, and the real difficulty of telling what is going well and what less well. For example, is it a good or a bad sign if a university that admits students with adequate but not excellent preparation, then graduates a high proportion of those students? Are they admirably making more good bricks with less straw, or are they short-changing their students and society at large by awarding credentials to students of limited achievement?

The same is true of the many research metrics devised in recent years. Research productivity measured by numbers of publications has risen hugely – but metrics for research quality remain controversial. Increasing productivity has little value unless quality is maintained or improved. Yet many metrics for research quality measure quantity rather than quality. Where research metrics are closely based on rigorous peer-reviewed publication and journal rankings, measures of productivity may have some objectivity, but there are widespread worries that while some metrics are adequate indicators for some sorts of work, they may not offer reliable or valid measures of quality for others.

The complexity of the situation is increased when universities and academics respond rationally to the fact that aspects of their performance are being measured, and to the knowledge that their scores may affect their funding and future, so modify what they do. For example, if rates of

<sup>6</sup> There are of course still sporadic demands even in liberal societies that universities provide specific sorts of instruction, or that universities do, or do not do, conduct research in certain areas.

<sup>7</sup> Of course there are many complaints that the use of these measures of quality changes distorts or damages what universities and academics do.

<sup>8</sup> Is dropping out just failure to sit exams? Or failure to attend? Or is it formal withdrawal?

<sup>9</sup> Comparisons are particularly hard in this area – particularly if some universities permit students to extend their time of study and others do not.

<sup>10</sup> Employment statistics depend on the quality of alumni and student records, and are seldom up to date.

completion are treated as an important criterion for funding higher education, universities will clearly make efforts to ensure that fewer students fail or flunk: the obvious move is to ensure that more pass their exams. Of course, this can be done creditably by improving teaching and motivating students – but there are other less desirable and cheaper ways of improving scores, for example by lowering pass marks, or making courses and examinations easier. There is sadly quite a lot of empirical evidence that academics and students are tacitly colluding in adopting a less demanding view of study: doing so may suit both parties if students want a credential more than an education and academics want less teaching so that they are free to do more research.<sup>11</sup>

Once aspects of academic performance are deployed for purposes of accountability, behavioural effects such as these are very likely. Indeed, from the point of view of the public funders who hold universities to account, changing behaviour is the aim. Systems of accountability are *meant* to create incentives for those held to account to do better. However those incentives are sometimes perverse: academics and students may be ‘gaming the system’, seeking to deliver better scores on the performance indicators, even if they cannot produce a better performance.

### ***From metrics to rankings***

All of these problems are exacerbated when scores on various metrics are combined to create league tables. This art form is meant to provide a simple view of the *relative* quality of universities, or of university departments, and is now done on a global scale. But *any* way of combining scores on these questionable indicators to create rankings and league tables involves many contestable assumptions in addition to those already made by choosing specific metrics.<sup>12</sup>

None of this daunts those who seek to hold universities to account by constructing rankings. In the last decade, two global ranking systems have emerged: the Shanghai Jiaotong University academic ranking of world universities (ARWU),<sup>13</sup> and the *Times Higher Education* world university rankings.<sup>14</sup> As is well known, these league tables have not ranked many European universities in the top 50 global universities, apart from some in the UK, where there have been demanding quality assessments systems both for research and for teaching for some decades. The EU is now considering developing a more differentiated ranking that will, it is supposed, rank different aspects of universities separately, rather than providing a single composite ranking. Presumably the hope is that the distinctive excellences of many European institutions will then be duly acknowledged.<sup>15</sup> This proposed new ranking goes by the

imaginative name *U-Multirank*.<sup>16</sup> Needless to say, *U-Multirank* has received cogent criticism, in particular in a 2010 report of the *League of European Research Universities*.<sup>17</sup>

My own view is that while the proponents of *U-Multirank* evidently hope to devise a metric that acknowledges the diversity of European universities by ranking different aspects of universities separately, the outcome (if it is funded) will disappoint. It will reproduce the very failings that are said to mar the present league tables. For anybody who thinks it advantageous will be able to aggregate the separate scores to create a unitary league table, just as the aggregated scores of current league tables are now commonly disaggregated by the public relations departments of universities in order to publicise the more favourable aspects of their scores. Once comparative measures of university performance are compiled, it is easy to combine them in various ways to create rankings, and once that is done it is easy and tempting for institutional leaders and others to claim that carefully selected rankings should be viewed as the central and objective measures of institutional quality.

### ***Excellence and success***

Metrics and the league tables created out of them are supposed to provide objective measures of the quality of universities, which can be used in the first place to compare and to rank, but also to penalise and reward. When connected to funding decisions, they provide potent measures of accountability. Yet league tables are not, in my view, useful ways of judging university excellence. The very diversity of universities, and the fact that ranking is a high stakes affair that matters *all too much* to university administrators, and indeed to academics and students, paradoxically ensures that the league tables will *not* offer good ways of holding universities to account: they hold universities to account for *achieving or appearing to achieve* some *comparative* success. But that success is not always evidence of excellence, and excellence is not always reflected in rankings in league tables.

Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* begins with the famous words

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.<sup>18</sup>

In the following chapters Aristotle investigates the goods at which we aim, and argues that they are not unitary. In Chapter 6 he concludes that ‘good is said in many senses’: there are many *aretai* or *excellences*, but there is no

<sup>11</sup> See Arum and Roksa, note 2.

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion of the use of school rankings in Harvey Goldstein and Beth Foley, *Measuring Success: League tables in the public sector* (British Academy Policy Centre report, 2012), available at [www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Measuring-success.cfm](http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Measuring-success.cfm)

<sup>13</sup> Shanghai Jiaotong University <http://www.arwu.org/index.jsp#>–

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/>

<sup>15</sup> For example, the fact that there are excellent institutions that concentrate just on teaching (the French *grandes écoles*) or that only do research would not then lead to a poorer ranking.

<sup>16</sup> The U-Multirank project was initiated and funded by the European Commission (DG Education and Culture), and is not yet complete. See <http://www.u-multirank.eu/>

<sup>17</sup> *University Rankings: Diversity Excellence and the European Initiative*, League of European Research Universities, Advice paper June 2010. It includes the following caustic remark: ‘... another expensive tentacle of the audit culture? Is there evidence that there is a lack of “transparency” about HEIs in Europe that inhibits either potential students or potential collaborators in making sensible choices that is sufficient to justify creation of a costly and time-consuming enterprise?’ [http://www.leru.org/files/publications/LERU\\_AP3\\_2010\\_Ranking.pdf](http://www.leru.org/files/publications/LERU_AP3_2010_Ranking.pdf). And see also *The Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe* (27th Report of European Union Committee, House of Lords, March 2012, HL Paper 275).

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. D. Ross, I I, 1094a.

overarching excellence to which all others are subordinated.<sup>19</sup> However, if excellence is not unitary, compiling measurements (of variably quality and comparability) into league tables raises distinctive and difficult questions.

Excellence is surely a noble aim for universities – as for other institutions and activities. However, since there are many excellences, and since those of universities vary with the activities they undertake, it may be hard to measure how good a university is, or to determine how much better it is than another university. Once we acknowledge the plurality of excellences that universities may seek, we can no longer imagine that those who seek excellence can simply aim to do better than other universities, although that can (but need not) be one of the results of striving. Where standards are low, even the most successful may be less than excellent; where they are high, even those of great excellence may not be the most successful.

A good reason for taking the Aristotelian conception of excellence seriously is that we are not then compelled to see the pursuit of excellence as a *zero sum game*: we can imagine, indeed encourage, a world in which all universities do excellent teaching and research. By contrast, we cannot even imagine a world in which all universities are equally successful in teaching or research, since success, unlike excellence, is a *positional good*.

### ***Conclusion: Limits of extra mural accountability***

These rather depressing reflections on current fashions for university accountability are not an argument against measuring achievement and success. There are often good reasons to do so. But if there are good reasons to do so, I suggest that it would be better to measure only what can be measured with reasonable accuracy – not necessarily with precision – and to refrain from measuring matters that can be manipulated or massaged by those who are to be held to account.

For some time it has struck me as surprising that we learn so little about universities from the league tables, and that we seldom see scores on various useful measures that are not open to manipulation. I have come to suspect that this may be because universities and academics – and perhaps the public at large – prefer *not* to have accurate information. Such information might after all show up realities that many would prefer to cloak. It might show up real differences in quality.

It is noticeable that educational achievements that can be measured with reasonable accuracy are seldom included in

rankings and ratings. For example, it would be useful to know how hard the students at a given university work – but this is not generally done (we know in the UK – but not from the league tables – that students doing certain degrees, such as medicine at Cambridge, or at Imperial, work about *three* times the number of hours per week of the average British student). It can be useful to know how competently students speak and write the language of instruction – both at registration and at graduation: and this can be done; but is seldom done. (This struck me because we do it at the University of Sharjah, of which I am a Trustee, which is a university in the Gulf with English as the medium of instruction: TOEFL scores, *administered independently of the university* provide us with a reasonably reliable measure.) It can be useful to know how many pages of written work a student produces in a year or semester, and how many of these pages receive detailed comment and feedback from instructors: this is highly variable between universities, yet is wholly ignored by standard metrics of university excellence. It looks as if the enthusiasts for metrics and quality assessment may be reluctant to measure matters that are educationally revealing. Similar points can be made about research metrics, where counting the number of outputs (e.g. publications, or specifically peer-reviewed publications per annum) at least provides a measure of diligence. However, these metrics are respected only to the extent that they shadow serious, and time-consuming, academic judgement – for example the judgements that go into the evaluation of grant proposals and peer review for publication.

It is, I believe, still far from evident that the complex extra mural loops of accountability that have been constructed in recent decades achieve their supposed objectives. Many do not measure university excellence in convincing ways; some divert academic and institutional time and resource in ways that detract from excellence. At their worst, they create perverse incentives. Even when they do not do so, they divert attention from excellence to comparative success defined in narrow ways. Are these the best way of holding universities to account that we can imagine or devise?

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## FROM THE ARCHIVE

# Winston Churchill and the British Academy

Sixty years ago the British Academy elected Prime Minister Winston Churchill as an Honorary Fellow.

But this was not the first time that Churchill had been considered for election to the Academy. In 1938, Churchill's name had been put forward as a prospective 'Ordinary Fellow', i.e. a Fellow elected for his own distinction as a scholar. However, although Churchill had received the

almost unanimous support of the Academy's History Section, he did not survive Council's final pruning of the list of candidates.

This decision prompted a former President of the British Academy, the historian H.A.L. Fisher, to write a letter of complaint to the Academy's Secretary, Sir Frederic Kenyon (Figure 1). As well as bemoaning what he saw as an

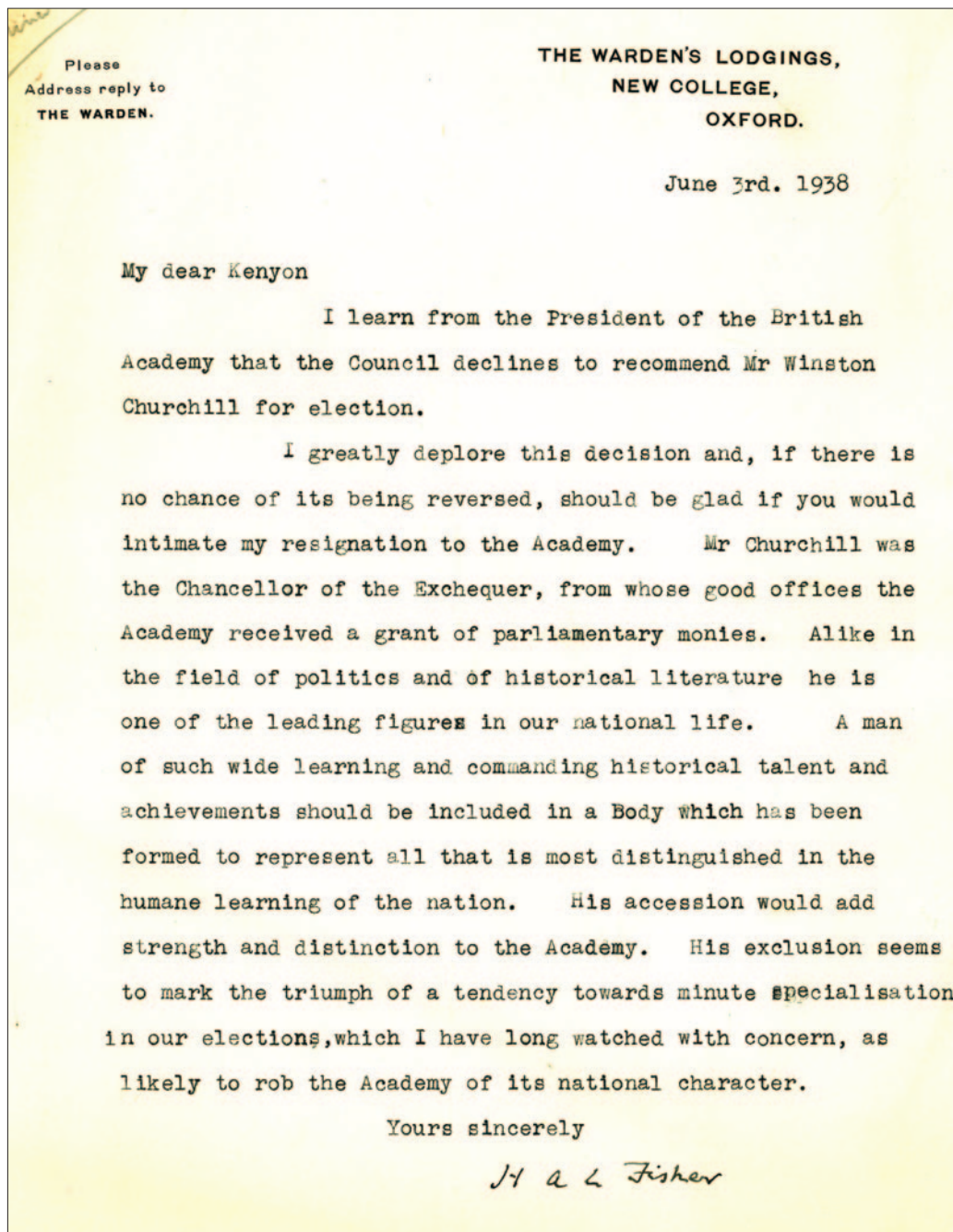


Figure 1. H.A.L. Fisher  
FBA to Sir Frederic Kenyon  
FBA, Secretary of the  
British Academy, 3 June  
1938.

Private.

1 June 1939.

Dear Sir,

I am desired by Mr. Winston Churchill to thank you for the honour you have conferred upon him by your invitation of May 25, to submit himself for election as a Fellow of the British Academy.

Mr. Churchill regrets that in the present circumstances he fears he is too fully occupied to avail himself of your courtesy.

Yours faithfully,



Private Secretary.

Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, G.B.E., K.C.B.

Figure 2. Winston Churchill's private secretary writes from Chartwell to Sir Frederic Kenyon FBA, 1 June 1939.

increasing and unwelcome tendency towards 'minute specialisation' in elections to the Academy's Fellowship, Fisher recalled Churchill's role in sustaining public funding for the work of the British Academy. For the first 22 years of its existence, the Academy did not receive any regular grant from public funds. It was not until February 1924 that the first government grant to the Academy was approved by HM Treasury. Churchill became Chancellor of the Exchequer in November 1924. Not only did he continue the financial support established by his predecessor, but he was also able to arrange for rent-free accommodation 'in recognition of the position of the Academy and its services to the nation' – the Academy moved into its first permanent home, in Burlington Gardens, in 1928.

A special meeting of Council was convened on 13 July 1938 to discuss the matter. The meeting concluded that the Council would record 'an unanimous opinion that Mr Churchill's candidature should be presented again next year'. The History Section again put forward his name in 1939, and this time the Academy's Council resolved to recommend him for election as a Fellow. However, Churchill felt compelled to decline the offer because he was at that time 'too fully occupied' to take on the responsibilities of Fellowship (Figure 2).

In 1952 the Academy celebrated its Fiftieth Anniversary. At the beginning of the year Council plotted to use the occasion of the Anniversary dinner at Goldsmith's Hall on 6 June 1952 'for the introduction of a new and outstandingly distinguished Honorary Fellow' – the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. In February Churchill replied: 'It is with great reluctance that I have come to the conclusion that the pressure of my public duties would not allow me to accept an invitation which in other circumstances would be very agreeable.'

Although disappointed not to have Churchill as a guest at the dinner, the Academy nonetheless decided to ask Churchill to accept the Honorary Fellowship. The President, Sir Charles Kingsley Webster, wrote to him: 'By the Rules of the Academy Honorary Fellows are elected on the nomination of the Council at the Annual General Meeting, and the Council would wish, if you are so good as to consent, to put forward the date of the Annual General Meeting from July, when it is generally held, to June 4th, so that your acceptance could be announced at the Celebration on June 6th.' This time Churchill was happy to accept the honour, 'provided that it does not involve me in any duties or obligations' (Figure 3).



10, DOWNING STREET,  
WHITEHALL, S.W.1.

6 April, 1952.

Dear Sir Charles Webster,

Thank you for your letter of March 20. I am indeed complimented that you wish me to accept the Honorary Fellowship of the British Academy, and, provided that it does not involve me in any duties or obligations, I shall be happy to do so. I am sorry to have to make this stipulation, but I am sure you will understand my reasons.

I should not have any objection to my acceptance being announced on June 4, as you suggest.

Yours sincerely,

*Winston Churchill*

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Sir Charles K. Webster, K.C.M.G., M.A.,  
The British Academy.

Figure 3. Winston Churchill writes from 10 Downing Street to Sir Charles K. Webster, President of the British Academy, 6 April 1952. The letter's black border marks the death of King George VI in February 1952.