

## The Modern Humanities Research Association: A Brief History

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The Modern Humanities Research Association is today the leading British-based learned society representing the language-based arts disciplines apart from the British Academy itself. Since its academic editors and charity trustees devote their energies to the well-being of the Association and the production of its publications on a purely voluntary basis in addition to their regular employment as university teachers and researchers, the Association enjoys its reputation for scholarship of the highest quality free of state finance and governmental interference, in a condition of intellectual and moral integrity no longer shared by the British university sector as a whole.

The MHRA was founded as the Modern Language Research Students Association in 1918 in Christ's College, Cambridge, in the rooms of Dr Brian W. Downs, a College Fellow who in 1956 as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge again showed his support for modern languages through his involvement as a founder of the International Conference on Scandinavian Studies, soon to develop into the International Association for Scandinavian Studies. On the occasion of the 1918 foundation Downs, together with a small group of colleagues, felt that, at a time when the modern and medieval languages and literatures were still seeking to establish themselves beside the established discipline of Classical studies, with even English occupying a relatively subordinate role, an association of scholars dedicated to the modern languages on an interdisciplinary basis with its own publication could play a part in furthering their interests and giving them respectability among the much longer established humanities subjects. As explained by John H. Fisher in his address to the American Branch of the Association in 1971, these younger faculty members and graduate students argued that the way forward for the subject lay not in 'philological study of the modern languages pursued in imitation of the classics, nor in inspirational teaching in the Arnoldian tradition, but rather [...] in research to learn more about literature and language and in the publication of this research for the benefit of other scholars', and in the conviction that research improves teaching. The term 'modern humanities' was adopted soon afterwards in 1918. It was intended to embrace the European-tradition languages and literatures including English, in contrast to the term 'modern languages' in Britain and British-tradition universities restricted to modern foreign languages, excluding English, which is almost always established in its own school or department, a historical differentiation which has merely been reinforced in recent years by the alarming relative decline in student numbers where the non-English languages and literatures are concerned. The term 'modern humanities' is nowadays obsolete if it was ever used to any substantial extent, an understandable confusion among enquirers as to whether the Association includes the disciplines of history, art history, education, philosophy, and music among its objectives (which it does not), and even as to whether its members are humanists in the philosophical sense (which they may or may not be), or pursue a humanely ethical investment policy. This leads the executive in a sense to deplore the name of the Association which nowadays would never have been chosen for a modern languages society, while at the same time proudly assuming that most English specialists and modern linguists at least in the traditional British universities have some idea of the nature and function of the MHRA. But the early change of name appears to have been due to no particular ideology - indeed the founders of the MHRA did not conceive of themselves as a pressure group for their subject in

general, in the same way as the early members of the Modern Language Association of America - but merely to avoid confusion with the (British) Modern Language Association, a society founded in 1893 and representing the interests of teachers of foreign languages in the British secondary school system.

The founders of the MHRA appreciated from the outset what large numbers of modern foreign linguists have subsequently learned only with difficulty and to their own cost, that the subject of modern languages as a whole is most likely to prosper when individual language areas within the university institution co-operate rather than set themselves up in chauvinistic competition with each other. A statement about the Association's aims, which was reprinted for many years in its *Annual Bulletin*, asserts that 'our purpose is to encourage and promote advanced study and research in the field of the modern humanities, especially modern European languages and literatures (including English). We are concerned to break down the barriers between scholars working in different disciplines and to maintain the broader unity of humanistic scholarship in the face of increasing specialization.' At the same time this idealism was tempered with a very practical view of the means of achieving these aims. As early as the second general meeting of the Association it was affirmed that publication of research was, together with recruitment of members, the best way forward, and the fledgling Association began to give financial support to, and in 1922 took over editorial control of, the *Modern Language Review*, already published by Cambridge University Press since 1905 on behalf of the (British) Modern Language Association. The appointment of successive editors of the highest calibre in the different language areas effectively ensured the survival of the journal and its development as the best-known British-based quarterly periodical dedicated to the modern languages, including English. This position has been unchanged in the history of the MHRA, which has always regarded the *Modern Language Review* as its flagship journal, and the first priority in the competition for the Association's resources. A typical annual volume today includes some 1,184 pages, each issue divided more or less equally between English, the Romance, the Germanic, and the Slavonic languages and literatures. A substantial proportion of pages, typically about half, are dedicated to book reviews.

The early members of the Association also knew that a major aid to scholarship in the relatively young discipline would take the form of bibliographies, and these have always maintained a high profile in the publishing portfolio. The *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature* was launched in 1921 with the almost impossible object 'to list annually all scholarly books and articles concerning English and American language and literature published anywhere in the world'. In spite of repeated difficulties in finding scholars willing to give up voluntary time to serve as contributors to the work, it has survived both the information explosion since the 1960s and the bureaucratization of the profession in many English-speaking countries which has led to an artificial devaluation of the value of important research-supporting activities such as bibliography, review, and editorial activity. After the usual setbacks encountered in harnessing the electronic technology, the work is now available to subscribers in online format, for the whole back archive, as well as in the traditional printed text.

The need for bibliography was recognized for the modern foreign languages also. In order not to compete with individual national bibliographies, *The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies*, founded in 1930, sets out to be an annual critical bibliography of work done in a range of languages and literatures, including Medieval Latin, Neo-Latin, French, Provençal, Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese, Latin-American,

Italian, Romanian, Welsh, Breton, Irish, Scottish Gaelic, German, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Czech, Slovak, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Serbo-Croat, and Bulgarian. Here the narrow definition of 'modern languages' as meaning foreign languages to the exclusion of English is reaffirmed, but this has a rationale in the separate existence of the *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature* and in the fact that a similar critical bibliography for English, *The Year's Work in English Studies*, is edited by a different society, the English Association.

In the years immediately after the Second World War and into the late 1960s the MHRA was energetically renewed and expanded, in particular by the dynamism of one man, Dr Stanley C. Aston, Fellow of St Catharine's College, Cambridge. The building up of contacts resulted in a flourishing American Branch which, however, has not survived more recent changes in professional attitudes among the younger generation, nor the increasing emphasis on the publishing, as distinct from the social, role of the Association. Thanks to Stanley Aston the MHRA was one of the founder member-associations of the International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures (FILLM) reconstituted after World War II under the aegis of the International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies (CIPSH), the non-governmental organization responsible for representing the humanities at UNESCO. Stanley Aston was for many years concurrently active as Secretary-General, and later President, of the FILLM, and this connection appears to have made its mark on the constitutions of both the FILLM and the CIPSH, for it appears that the electoral system of vice-presidents of both these bodies, in which an appropriate proportion of the office-bearers retire at each general meeting and the remainder are permitted to serve another term or two terms respectively, was modelled on that of the MHRA and adopted by the more international bodies on Aston's recommendation. It is of course the case that Stanley Aston himself was too strong-willed to appreciate that illness and death among the vice-presidents can play havoc with such carefully designed systems of rotation! The activities of the MHRA surely exemplify the point that the real business of scholarship is carried out at the lower points in the UNESCO pyramid and ultimately by individual scholars. While the great differences in size, administration, and function of the member-associations of the FILLM are in one sense an obvious source of strength, but no less obviously can cause difficulties, since those who are active in the management of the very large overarching associations such as the Modern Language Association of America and the International Comparative Literature Association with their regional and thematic sub-groups have quite different perceptions of our subject, and quite different activities to organize, from those involved in the smaller and more specialist societies. As a multidisciplinary society the MHRA has some characteristics of both the larger and the smaller bodies, and at the same time has some fundamental differences from all the rest, but also a history which in some respects links it as closely to the FILLM as any other member-association.

By the early 1960s the three publications were well established and well respected, and the *Modern Language Review* in particular, which published normally in English but also the occasional article in French, enjoyed a growing international reputation as the leading British journal to embrace all the major modern European-tradition languages. The Association, however, faced a fundamental problem as regards its future, one which many smaller societies in the humanities have subsequently faced. In tandem with the publications, which for their management required a competent editorial team rather than a learned society as such, the MHRA was carried forward by an ethos of collaboration and, indeed, conviviality among

colleagues in the field, and indeed other similar bodies might have survived thus long as types of Oxbridge gentlemen's drinking clubs without any serious academic purpose whatever. Such a picture of the MHRA would at any time have been a caricature, but it remains true that a nowadays old-fashioned form of networking by like-minded scholars of largely similar social background was a major factor in the role of societies of this type. With the enormous expansion of the profession from the 1960s and its subsequent bureaucratization and indeed professionalization in a negative sense, this kind of network has lost its purpose. Coupled with this was the fact that individual members of MHRA received the *Modern Language Review* in return for their subscriptions, together with the possibility of obtaining the other publications at no less favourable discounts. In other words, the publications were effectively provided to members at the charge of the Association, which thus had very little prospect of building up its own funds even if such mercenary considerations had ever crossed the minds of its gentleman-scholar founders, which seems unlikely.

But in the new climate a drive for individual members, with the implication that membership of the MHRA conferred on them some peculiar advantages that modern linguists who were not members did not possess, became ever more unrealistic. Faced with the same situation, in North America the Modern Language Association opted for a new role, ensuring the benefits of size and relative wealth but arguably jettisoning an emphasis on the highest scholarly standards at any cost by transforming itself into a labour union for the profession and rewarding its members with a range of professional services including the possibility of employment and a guarantee of a viable income. The MHRA was centred in the United Kingdom, but embraced internationalism as fundamental to the discipline, and included a modest but significant percentage of overseas members. The comparable transformation of the MHRA, which unlike most of the other overarching international associations did not see the organization of conferences as part of its inherent role, was directed not towards a political and professional forum for modern linguists, but rather towards an enhanced emphasis on the potential publishing role of the Association. The decision was taken in 1963 to take the actual publishing function of the then three periodicals away from Cambridge University Press and into the hands of the Committee of the Association which would publish in its own right; the subscription for individual members was now linked to receipt of the *Modern Language Review*; and, provided that no financial advantage accrued to the Committee members, they were able, through registration of the Association as an unincorporated charity, to exploit the charitable (not-for-profit) status of the Association for purposes of tax exemption..

This decision for fundamental change, which accompanied and initiated the dynamic Honorary Treasurership of Roy Wisbey (Honorary Secretary 1960-63; Honorary Treasurer 1963-2001), loyally supported throughout this whole period by the Assistant Treasurer, Mrs E.J. Wisbey, proved correct because it coincided with the beginning of the huge expansion in university institutions in Western countries from the late 1960s on. The MHRA adopted a realistic pricing policy - something until that date done astonishingly rarely by academics managing learned societies - which involved charging the market value, including a small profit, for trade sales, mainly to libraries and subscription agencies; allowing a small discount to institutional members, effectively major university libraries which took all three publications and paid in a single lump sum in advance of publication; and charging substantial sums for back runs of the periodicals, which when purchased by new libraries in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in a major source of income. Together, these measures made it possible for the heavily discounted price charged to individual scholars to continue,

but this has not been sufficient to enhance membership among the younger generation: too often one hears the comment that *Modern Language Review* is so readily accessible that there is no purpose in its purchase by an individual for the occasional article, or even that nowadays the rooms of academics no longer contain sufficient shelving to house a long periodical run. Any additional benefit of membership of an Association such as the MHRA is perceived, in terms of career advancement, as negligible.

Although the membership list still includes several hundred subscribing individuals, the MHRA today in some respects resembles a small university press rather than a learned society as generally understood. Nevertheless, the Committee maintains the spirit of a charity providing support to the subject, and although by managing the Association as a business this object can be pursued more effectively, academic criteria remain paramount in all decision-making and the increased wealth of the Association since the 1960s has been applied to that end.

The substantial expansion of the publications began in 1971 with the launch of the *Yearbook of English Studies*, originally conceived as an outlet for the many additional articles and reviews in the field of English which could not be accommodated in the *Modern Language Review* without distorting the subject-balance within each issue. While the text and format follow exactly those of the *Review* so that material can be switched from one organ to the other as necessary at the production stage, the *Yearbook* has gradually become a journal with its own character, and in particular each volume contains a body of commissioned essays relating to a specific theme. English language and literature as an academic discipline in the universities has enjoyed considerable success in upholding its position at a time when other humanities subjects and the modern foreign languages in particular appear under serious threat. This has led to an increasing quantity of research in English and to the decision to go over to a biannual format for the *Yearbook*. The year 1970 saw the launch of the series *MHRA Texts and Dissertations* which seeks to be a prestige series for the publication of carefully selected dissertations of especial merit by younger scholars. Some sixty-one volumes to date have been substantially subsidized by the Association, an exemplary illustration of its achievement of its charitable objects. Increasing production costs which have repeatedly seemed to make these books unviable – as is the case with single-author monographs on specialized topics in the modern languages field in general – were some years ago offset by the benefits of the new technology and the requirement that the authors, whose dissertations are of course nowadays always available in electronic format, submit their text in camera-ready copy according to specified guidelines. This in turn has been succeeded by in-house production which assumes submission of near-perfect copy in electronic form.

Ever since its foundation the MHRA has appointed an annual President of distinction from one of the language areas represented on a rotating basis. The function of the President is purely honorific, with the important exception that he or she delivers a Presidential Address to the Annual General Meeting, reigning as ‘king for a day’. The Address is then published in the *Modern Language Review*. Otherwise the Association avoids organizing conferences. An exception occurred in August 1968 when a Jubilee Congress was held with speakers of distinction, and it was felt appropriate to publish the papers. This book, *The Future of the Modern Humanities*, appeared in 1969 and became the first in a prestige series of book publications, ‘Publications of the MHRA’, which has now reached 16 titles. From 1978 the Association agreed to take over the publication of the quarterly *Slavonic and East European Review* on behalf of the University of London School of Slavonic and East

European Studies, and from 1984 made a positive commitment to a so-called minority language with the launch of the annual *Portuguese Studies*, the sixth journal in the publishing portfolio which after the twenty-year editorship of Professor Helder Macedo retains its link with the only independent British Department of Portuguese at King's College London and will shortly move to biannual production. A general service to scholarship is provided by the *MHRA Style Guide* (in its first five editions *MHRA Style Book*), a manual of English style for authors and editors based on British usage. This is deliberately intended to be shorter and more manageable than its American counterpart, the *MLA Style Manual*, but changes in usage and above all in authorial practice resulting from the impact of the new printing technology have resulted in a substantial revision. The name change reflects the fact that the *MHRA Style Guide* is now available both in printed form and online.

Conscious of its need, as a registered charity, to answer to a wider public than its own membership, the Association has also for the past 15 years administered a Research Associateships scheme. Since a small voluntary society cannot hope to compete with state and other large-scale funding bodies, nor can it cope with vast numbers of applications, the awards may be applied for, not by potential graduate students, but only by the academic directors of appropriate corporate ventures in areas such as major critical editions, bibliographies, or lexicographical projects. The successful applicants then appoint the graduate or postdoctoral Associate in conjunction with the Committee of the Association. During the period of these awards two, and in recent years three or four, have been appointed each year, and many of the young Associates have subsequently found that the work provided a bridge to their entry into more permanent membership of the academic profession.

The growing volume and complexity of the Association's affairs, which for some years past have included the employment of a small number of full-time and half-time staff both in the central publishing and distribution area of the Treasurer's Department and also on specific academic projects such as the collection of data for the *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature*, besides a host of casual secretarial assistants, together with problems relating to investment management, the administration of intellectual property rights, and contractual arrangements for publication in both traditional and electronic format in collaboration with commercial partners, made the academic volunteers who have managed the Association over the years without the legal protection of limited liability vulnerable to unforeseen disasters. Accordingly, in line with other similar voluntary bodies, the MHRA, previously an unincorporated charity, was on 2 October 1997 incorporated in England as a charitable company limited by guarantee. In practice this has resulted in minor administrative changes but not, it is hoped, in any long-term change to the essential academic ethos of the Association and least of all to the quality of its publications which continue to flourish and are currently illustrating the latest development in a period of rapid and exciting change as they begin to be disseminated to subscribers in on-line electronic and CD-ROM versions as well as in the traditional printed format, the uncertain future of which, as for all academic publications in humanities subjects, is perhaps today the most vexed question in our field as a whole.

For many years those closely involved with the Association's business had been aware that, while the maintenance of the regular periodical production of the journals and bibliographies must remain the Association's core activity, an obvious lacuna in the publishing programme was represented by the need for an outlet for single-author monographs and comparable collective volumes, a type of book which has become almost commercially unviable in the specialized world of the modern

languages in particular. In 2004 the Association grasped the opportunity to acquire the prestigious series title *Legenda*, hitherto heavily subsidized by Oxford University. Some twenty annual volumes are envisaged. This venture, which is undertaken in partnership with Maney Publishing of Leeds and London, includes the related journal *Oxford German Studies*, already a yearbook of national significance of which it is intended to raise the profile further, not least through a move to biannual production in an enhanced format. The Association's intimate relationship with Maney's dates back to the crucial decision to publish in its own right in the 1960s, and has subsequently reflected most of the cataclysmic changes which have impacted both on the learned societies and on the printing and publishing industry in the past generation. Whereas the Association once relied on Maney's for the hot-metal typesetting of its journals and books and tended to manage its whole subscription basis, for individual and institutional members, and trade customers, through the energetic dedication of its own Assistant Treasurer, the current pattern is for Maney's to act as publishers in terms of the service provided by their subscription and distribution network while, in days of increasingly efficient desktop production methods, the Association increasingly delivers its own electronic copy in more or less final form, insisting on authors and academic editors producing high-quality text in the first instance and drawing on the services of a number of freelance copy-editors under the overall supervision of its own Publishing Manager. A further new venture, reflecting a scholarly demand for editions of important works not represented in the catalogues of the major commercial publishers in the field, and partly aimed at a possible student market, is the initiation of a series MHRAs Critical Texts which will exploit the savings available through digital printing technology.

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