

The President's Column



Photograph © Jason Dodd

My programme of branch lectures has now started in earnest, as I visited Swansea in February and Chichester in March to talk about the 'Monstrous Regiment of Women'. This is the title of John Knox's diatribe against female rulers published in 1558 and it is a very appropriate topic in this diamond jubilee year marking the Queen's sixty years on the throne. Knox's patriarchal objections to reigning Queens were, of course, largely refuted by the successes of Elizabeth I's 45 year rule. As readers of *The Historian* will know, the 1950s were hailed as a 'New Elizabethan Age' with composers, artists, poets, and playwrights all poised to rival the cultural achievements of the first Elizabeth's reign. The coronation in 1953 was celebrated by Benjamin Britten's new opera 'Gloriana' about Elizabeth I's stormy relationship with the Earl of Essex. At the same time, the conquest of Everest by Edmund Hillary and Tensing Norgay recalled the explorations of Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh. This early optimism was tempered, though, by Britain's decline as a world power in the twentieth century. Yet the Queen can look back on some significant personal achievements. She has successfully maintained her role as a constitutional monarch over a long period. Her experience of the premierships of Churchill, Macmillan and Thatcher has been valued by recent prime ministers, and she is widely seen as a unifying force amongst the countries of the Commonwealth. By 2016 she will have beaten Queen Victoria's record breaking reign of nearly 64 years, giving plenty of time to plan a renewed round of celebrations.

In March I also visited the recently revived and now thriving HA branch in Glasgow to talk about the attitudes of the English Parliamentarians to their Scottish Covenanting allies in the 1640s. The alliance gave rise to what I take to be the first outbreak of

political correctness in Britain, as the Parliamentarians took steps to punish anyone who traduced the Scots. Royalist clerics, who had preached against the Covenanters as rebels, suddenly found themselves in danger of losing their livings once the Long Parliament met in November 1640. As the debate about the union has recently come so sharply into focus, the topic naturally provoked a lot of questions. As President, it has been extremely rewarding for me to visit three such lively and well attended branches, and to hear about the work that the local committees carry out on behalf of the HA.

I was also delighted to attend the final round of the Great Debate at Merton College, Oxford, on 10 March to hear 24 young historians talk about 'why does history matter to me'. All of the participants had done so well to get to this stage and they all gave such well researched and carefully constructed talks. I was immensely impressed by their presentations and I can see many of them having future careers as teachers, lecturers and even television pundits! They should all be warmly congratulated. The audience also learned so much from the variety of topics that were covered. These included Anne Boleyn, the history of hearing aids, the 1981 Brixton riots, and the Great Ormonde Street hospital. I was also interested to hear about the Cavell Van, the train van used to transport Edith Cavell's body back to England after her execution in 1915 in Belgium. The van has been restored and is now exhibited at Bodiam station. As a child in London, I often passed her statue bearing her inspiring words: 'patriotism is not enough'. I have always viewed her as a great heroine for helping allied soldiers to safety without concern for her own life.

The Great Debate is a wonderful aspect of the work of the HA in encouraging younger people to take a rigorous interest in History. The winner of the Great Debate was Arianna Azari, who spoke about the 'Dutch Hunger Winter' of 1944-5, when her own grandparents had faced starvation. Her talk was a great example of how personal experiences are more than mere anecdotes, they contribute vastly to our wider understanding of historical events. All of the talks, including the one on John Hume by the runner up, Jill Luke, can be viewed on the HA website. I will be visiting the Cumbria, Grimsby and Lincolnshire branches in the next few weeks, and there is also the annual conference in Reading, where I will be talking about Charles I's public image. I hope to see many of you at the conference and I will look forward to meeting you there.

Jackie Eales