

ALIVE – AND STILL KICKING: THE RHS AT 150

By Margot C. Finn

Marking and reflecting on the Royal Historical Society's major anniversaries has not typically been a function of our *Transactions*. In his presidential address of February 1918, C. W. C. Oman unsurprisingly made no mention of the Society's fiftieth anniversary. Noting that he was employed at Whitehall in three different types of war work and had read only one book of history in the past year, Oman identified himself 'as one of the much-cursed tribe of censors' employed by the government to police dissemination of contemporary historical records, and proceeded to use this vantage point to reflect on what we now term 'fake news', that is 'the genesis and development of Rumours, Reports, and Legends of a false or exaggerated sort, during times of military or political crisis'.¹ Like Oman before him, R. A. (Robin) Humphreys, president of the Society at its centenary in 1968, failed to note this milestone in the *Transactions* – indeed, no presidential address from 1968 was published by the Society, with *A Centenary Guide to the Publications of the Royal Historical Society 1868–1968* instead appearing to mark this anniversary.²

Ian Archer's '150 Years of Royal Historical Society Publishing' in this volume thus represents an innovation – one that merits being read alongside both the articles here (drawn from our past year of public lectures and symposia), and also our new anniversary blog, *Historical Transactions* (<https://blog.royalhistsoc.org/>). Archer's survey, informed not only by our archive and publications but also by his many years of sterling service for the Society as a literary director, provides several salutary reminders that the RHS is not now as pioneering as we may wish to think. He observes that women historians were prominent in the Society's publications – winning two-thirds of the RHS Alexander Prizes between 1898 and 1917 and accounting for 40 per cent of published papers in the 1920s, for example – long before the advent of second-wave feminism. Furthermore, earlier incarnations of the RHS (like the Society in 2018)

¹ C. W. C. Oman, 'Presidential Address', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, fourth series, 1 (1918), 3.

² Alexander Taylor Milne, *A Centenary Guide to the Publications of the Royal Historical Society 1868–1968: And of the Former Camden Society 1838–1897* (1968).

aspired to reflect global rather than only national histories: Robin Humphreys, significantly, was the founding director of the Institute of Latin American Studies during his RHS presidency – alerting us to more diverse organisational and disciplinary histories than we typically acknowledge. The scope of the articles in the 150th anniversary *Transactions* is thus pleasing but perhaps not path-breaking in its wide range. Taking readers from late twelfth-century France and Scotland through the social and cultural histories of the Catholic Reformation and seventeenth-century English gender relations, it considers the material, military and revolutionary histories of India, Japan and Russia before grappling with twentieth- and twenty-first century socio-economic and political discontent, respectively, in Northern Ireland and North America.

This is not to underplay the distance the RHS has travelled since its foundation, or the further distance it needs to travel in the next decades. In his preface to the first volume of the *Transactions*, published in 1872, Charles Rogers described the Society's aims as 'the reproduction and illustration of rare historical tracts, and the recovery, from recondit sources, of materials which might illustrate the less explored paths of national and provincial history'.³ Just as the geographical and methodological scope of this volume demonstrates that 'national and provincial history' no longer suffices for the RHS, so too the programme of activities that feed into our publications no longer fits this narrow mould. Supporting excellence in historical scholarship remains at the heart of what we do, but we are (I hope) now increasingly aware of the danger of mistaking exclusivity for excellence. The development of public history (and the award of our 2018 Public History Prizes), the proliferation of online resources (including the Society's *Bibliography of British and Irish History*) and the advent of open access publication (soon to become the RHS's key mode of disseminating early career researchers' books) all register our commitment to render the 'recondite' discoverable by an expanding community of historical practitioners. The research the Society's working groups on race, ethnicity and gender equality have been conducting throughout the 150th anniversary year has provided repeated, often painful, reminders of why access and inclusivity both matter in historical practice, and are often so difficult to accomplish in institutions in which historical teaching and research are conducted.

Managed variously by amateur and professional archivists, librarians, museum experts, publishers and historians (almost all unpaid for their labours and wearing multiple hats whilst balancing too many plates), the RHS has soldiered on over a century and a half. Ian Archer

³ Charles Rogers, 'Preface', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, old series, 1 (1872), 3.

quotes G. R. Elton's complaint of 1973, after assuming the presidency, that the Society's 'Victorian hangover is powerful, manifest and stifling'. Today, that legacy is to be sure still manifest, but arguably it is far less powerful and less stifling, as well as increasingly understood to have been more nuanced, contradictory and dynamic than Elton supposed. The 2018 *Transactions* – like the anniversary blog, public lectures, regional visits and symposia, publication and public history prizes, grants for early career historians and policy interventions – demonstrate forcibly that the RHS is much more than alive and still kicking as it exits its sesquicentennial year.