

The President's Column



Photograph © Alastair Levy

The last three months have provided me with some wonderful opportunities to catch up with HA members. In April I got as far as Carlisle, one of my favourite places, to talk to the Cumbria branch and in May I went to Grimsby, where the branch was celebrating its 50th birthday with a rather large and delicious cake! In June I was at the mid-Lincolnshire branch where the arrival of the Olympic flame was eagerly anticipated. The annual conference in Reading last May was also a great chance to find out more about the activities of our members and I enjoyed meeting so many of you there. David Cannadine's lecture attracted a large audience keen to find out about his thoughts on 'the Right Kind of History'. But all of the HA's constituencies were well served with talks on primary and secondary history, a heritage strand and the general history talks. I greatly enjoyed hearing Dr Frank Tallett speaking about his research on the Military Revolution in early modern Europe and I gained lots of new insights from him for teaching my students.

The highlight in July was the award of the HA's Norton Medlicott Medal for 2012 for services to history to Bettany Hughes. She is in very good company, as previous winners include David Starkey, Lisa Jardine, Michael Wood and Eric Hobsbawm. It is a thoroughly well deserved award. Bettany is such a wonderful communicator and advocate for history. She gave us a sparkling lecture about the collaboration between television and history, which she thinks is experiencing a 'golden age'. She also told us a number of astonishing things, including the fact that in 2000 she became the first woman

to present a television series on history with *Breaking the Seal*. She ended her talk with a toast 'to peace, to life, to love'. I was also delighted that the HA made awards of honorary fellowships to some of our staunchest supporters. If you have never attended the award evening, do join us next year. You can also read more from Bettany in her splendid article in this issue of *The Historian*.

In June I attended the 'Fairfax 400' conference at Leicester University celebrating the 400th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Fairfax, Commander in Chief of the New Model Army. As his most recent biographer, Dr Andy Hopper, reminded us, Fairfax is often overshadowed by the reputation of his subordinate, Oliver Cromwell. Yet, it was not until June 1650, nearly 18 months after the execution of Charles I, that Cromwell took over as leader of the parliamentary forces. Fairfax has sometimes been portrayed as weak and vacillating, because he refused either to attend the king's trial or to halt it by force. In contrast, Andy told us that Fairfax was capable of acting decisively as a military leader and was responsible for some of Parliament's most notable victories. Other speakers explored the crisis of conscience that the regicide provoked in Fairfax and which haunted him until the end of his life.

I was speaking about Fairfax's wife, Anne, who has had a rather bad press over the years. Contemporaries blamed her for persuading her husband to retire from public life, and her character has been judged negatively on the basis of some exceedingly ugly portraits of her. She is nevertheless a fascinating figure. In his *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, the Earl of Clarendon claimed that Anne twice interrupted Charles I's trial to challenge the charges against him. As I researched the evidence, though, I found that many of the claims against her did not hold good. I think Anne's story would make an excellent case study of the way in which some historical judgements are made on very little evidence. The only contemporary account, from 1649, about Anne's outburst in court simply states that an 'unknown, malignant' woman called out, but she was soon silenced. It was only after the deaths of Anne and Thomas Fairfax that the story took on its final form. One account published 30 years after these events even claimed that Anne had shouted that Oliver Cromwell was a traitor, which seems most unlikely to me.

Similarly, the surviving portraits of Anne do not seem to depict the real woman. We have two quite different and highly unflattering engravings of her from the nineteenth century, but neither of these resembles an earlier painting said to be of Anne. A miniature portrait, apparently of Anne, in the Royal Collection at Windsor depicts her as a winsome and attractive young woman. I shall certainly be doing further research over the summer to find out more about the real Anne Fairfax. I wish everyone an enjoyable summer and I look forward to meeting more HA members at branch events in the autumn.

Jackie Eales