

250 years of *The Annual Register*

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The Annual Register was first published in 1758, under the editorship of Edmund Burke (who was a mere 29 years old at the time!). In the long period which has passed since then, *The Annual Register* has recorded and commented on some of the epoch-making events in the history of the world. For example, it signalled at once the far-reaching significance of Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown in 1781: 'The surrender at Yorktown may be considered as the closing scene of the whole continental war in America...[When] we consider the effect this revolution may have on the political state of the whole human race, we shall in every respect find it extraordinary.' This was a remarkable feat of vision – how many observers at the time grasped that the political future of the human race was at stake at Yorktown in 1781?

A century and a half later, when Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933 *The Annual Register* noted that: 'The complete Nazification of Germany was only carried out by merciless persecution of all those of diverging views. For dealing with the masses of prisoners special concentration camps were opened.' This showed a grasp of the importance of the concentration camps which was by no means universal. In 2001 the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York evoked the comment that: 'The first year of the twenty-first century was defined by the events of a single day: 11 September. The extraordinary terrorist attack on the USA and the consequences which flowed directly and indirectly from it gave the year its focal point and secured its place in history.' This observation was only the beginning of a penetrating discussion of these intensely dramatic events, placing them in their historical context.

But *The Annual Register* has also been concerned with other matters, less dramatic but still part of human experience. Let us take for example these remarks in 1780 on the literary education of women: 'There are many prejudices entertained against the character of a learned lady; and perhaps if all ladies were profoundly learned, some inconvenience might arise from it; but I must own it does not appear to me that a woman will be rendered less acceptable by the world...by having employed the time from six to sixteen, in the cultivation of her mind.' *The Register* also kept an informed eye on scientific matters, and in 1794 drew attention to the publication of *Zoonomia*, by Erasmus Darwin – a book which, as we now know, foreshadowed the idea of evolution which was to be brought to fruition by his grandson. On a very different front, the writer on productions in the theatre in 1955 observed that: 'Outstanding among them was the year's most surprising play-going adventure, *Waiting for Godot*, a piece which lay outside all categories and defied all attempts at definition.' It still defies them, and has become part of theatrical history.

When Burke wrote his Preface to the first *Annual Register*, he was conscious that he was making a contribution to history, writing that he had 'united into one consecutive narrative' the events of the war then being waged across the four quarters of the world, in a manner attractive to the cultivated and interested reader of the time. It was a bold claim, which he and his successors have fully made good. Two centuries later, the historian Asa Briggs wrote that 'For two hundred years *The Annual Register* has

provided a sustained and successful example of the writing of contemporary history'. This remains true, through many changes in its content, format and editorial methods. Poetry was granted much space in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and then dropped out. The recording of interesting and unusual events – the *faits divers* of the time – which was prominent in the eighteenth century later disappeared in favour of more solid, though sometimes less appealing, fare.

The Register has become less forthright in its language and opinions. In 1808 Napoleon was still called by his Corsican name of Buonaparte, and plainly described as a 'perfidious and insolent oppressor'. Balance, discretion and detachment are now the order of the day, with a loss in colour but a gain in impartiality. The geographical range of *The Register's* coverage has changed enormously. In the eighteenth and for much of the nineteenth centuries, it was mainly devoted to British and European affairs, though these were stretched a long way, so that South America was included under the heading of European history. Coverage is now worldwide, far-reaching in its interests and careful in its perspectives.

As a result of these changes, *The Annual Register* (now *The Annual Register of World Events*) has never lost its appeal to a wide variety of readers. It is a resource for working historians of all kinds and at all levels, from the first-year student to the most learned researcher; it is a solid and reliable work of reference; and it still offers enlightenment and pleasure for the general reader with an interest in the past. In my own experience, I found *The Register* an invaluable companion in writing a book on *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe*, providing a basis of chronology and opening up different interpretations to be tested and developed. Recently, my role as a representative of the Royal Historical Society on the Editorial Board has revealed new aspects of the rich panorama displayed by *The Annual Register* throughout its long history. The marvellous array of 250 volumes is available in many libraries, while ProQuest has also made the whole run of *The Register* available in an online version, providing the opportunity for readers almost anywhere to pursue specific subjects or keywords in a way previously beyond the reach even by the most laborious research. The value and fascination of *The Annual Register* are as great as ever; and it is now more widely accessible than at any previous time.