

A warm welcome to everyone and thank you for attending this Annual General Meeting over the lunch hour.

As is customary at these AGMs, Sarah Bowskill, John Fisher and I will deliver our reports as SLAS Secretary, Treasurer, and President, followed by Jasmine Gideon as BLAR editor. We realise that time is tight and promise to be brief, so as to allow for any additional matters to be raised under AOB before the various panels resume at 2.15.

It would be impossible to start my report without remarking once again that 2014 marks the 50th anniversary of the Society, or thanking Jasmine Gideon for putting together an extraordinarily imaginative programme of events, starting with the special panel on Wednesday evening looking back over 50 years of Latin American Studies in the UK (for which we are grateful to all participants). The panel was not the only ‘first’ at a SLAS conference, for this also the first time that SLAS has held its annual conference in London, that we have had two keynote speakers at conference, and that three institutions – Birkbeck, the Institute of Latin American Studies, and the Institute of the Americas at UCL – have come together to make that possible. It is also the first time that three sister associations and leading institutions in Germany, France, and the Netherlands have convened panels reflecting on the current state of Latin American Studies in their respective countries. From the presentations and the discussions that followed it is clear that we face many similar challenges as 21st-century Latin Americanists, and we hope that this conference will mark the beginning of a conversation between us on the ways in which we might, for instance, be able to facilitate collaborations on European funding bids, and on the thorny question of open access.

The SLAS committee has kept a close eye on developments relating to open access over the past year. In April I attended a seminar hosted by Taylor and Francis that brought together funders (HEFCE, RCUK), academics, and learned societies for a wide-ranging discussion of the implications of OA. For the learned societies, particularly the small and medium-sized societies dependent on journal subscriptions for most of their income – that includes us – the principal issue of concern was the effect that a decline in revenue would have on the events and activities which they – and we – support. In October we responded to the HEFCE consultation on ‘Open Access in the post-2014 Research Excellence Framework’, and note that HEFCE has this week published its policy document, which we will be considering as a committee in due course.

In light of the concerns expressed by so many societies and many of our own members at last year’s conference, we invited Tom Pater, our key liaison at Wiley Blackwell until this year to our June committee meeting, where various scenarios were set out and possible strategies for the future were considered. The message Tom delivered to us, however, was that the changes were unlikely to have a serious impact on BLAR, at least in the short term, and so long as no more than 10% of authors opted for the Gold OA route.

Wiley’s annual report for 2013 bears out that advice, and shows BLAR to be in a healthy state. Highlights include an overall renewal rate of 99% (compared with 94% in 2012, and an average renewal rate of 96% for the humanities and social sciences); full text downloads from the journal have increased by 10% over the year (145,393 from 131,738); downloads from Latin American countries have increased by 56%, although admittedly this was from a low base of under 1,700; and BLAR is now available in over 5,000 institutions in the developing world. While in 2013 BLAR has not been affected in any meaningful way by Open Access requirements, this is not to say that we can afford to let down our guard on this issue.

For now, however, the Annual Report gives a further cause for optimism, in that it shows that in 2013 the membership of SLAS rose by nearly 11% compared with 2012, and by just under 8% compared with 2011. The most significant and striking growth is among student members, where membership has risen by 31% from 2012 (and by 20% from 2011). The 50th anniversary conference has probably contributed a little to this (we have approximately 300 delegates attending), but it is no doubt primarily attributable to the fact that SLAS continues to support postgraduate students through a variety of grants, and to the ever-growing resources offered, and activities and events organised by, PILAS, the postgraduate branch of SLAS.

In 2012-13 the PILAS committee comprising postgraduate students from Liverpool and Lancaster and led by Sarah Parry organised a successful conference, at which Emeritus Professor Doreen Massey delivered the keynote lecture, and also brought PILAS into the 21st century, setting up a blog and a Twitter page. The blog and Twitter page have continued to thrive since the running of PILAS was handed over to a new committee, consisting of Jose Angel García as President and a team of postgraduates from Sheffield, Leeds, and Durham. In November the new PILAS team organised a 'British Library Resources Orientation' day which included a visit to the Mexican gallery of the British Museum and a talk by archaeologist Elizabeth Baquedano, and the 2014 conference, in Sheffield, is due to take place on 12-13 June. The call for papers remains open until 14 April, but we know that the theme of the conference is 'Where is Latin America Heading?' and that Diego Sánchez Ancochea and Ronaldo Munck are confirmed as keynote speakers. We thank the members of the 2012-13 and 2013-14 PILAS committees for all their work on behalf of the postgraduate community, and wish the 2013-14 committee luck with the June conference, and look forward to reading their report on it in due course.

My colleagues on SLAS Committee and I have also continued to work on behalf of our community in other ways as well. In July and January, Nina Laurie and I attended meetings of UKCASA – the coordinating committee of area studies associations – and I also participated in the Standing Conference, the forum for centres for Latin American Studies in the UK. And, following an approach from the University Council of Modern Languages, we have recently become an associate member. At a time when modern languages are facing difficulties nationwide, this is clearly an important link for both sides, and I will report on any new developments at the next AGM.

One further task that falls to the SLAS President is to line up venues for future conferences. I can announce that Patience Schell will be organising SLAS 2015, and that it will take place next April in Aberdeen (precise dates will shortly be posted on the website). We can also announce that the venue for SLAS 2016 will be Liverpool, and that that conference will mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the then Centre for Latin American Studies.

One of our key tasks for 2014-15 will be to update the SLAS website. Those of you who have mobile devices will no doubt have seen the improvements that have been made to the newsletter, thanks to efforts of Christy Palmer who maintains all our systems. We would now like to take advantage of changes to some of our grant schemes to review the website content. Should any of you have suggestions for content you would like to see included, please feel free to contact either me, or any of my committee colleagues.

Finally, on behalf of the whole Society, I would like to thank Jasmine, Mariana, the NomadIT team, and all the student helpers for delivering what is proving to be a memorable conference. I would also like to thank colleagues at ILAS and the Institute of the Americas for hosting the keynote lectures, and of course to the panellists who participated in the special session on Wednesday evening. I end with some final words of thanks, this time to my colleagues on SLAS committee for

their support, and particularly to Nina Laurie who stands down after two years of dedicated service. Her experience and her wisdom have been a great asset to SLAS.

All that remains, then, is for me to thank you all again for coming to the AGM, and to say that I very much hope that you enjoy what's left of this excellent conference.

Caroline Williams
SLAS President, 2013-15