Cromwell’s place of birth, that she accessed his voice and interiority and composed the novel’s opening line, “So now get up”. Mantel delighted the audience by revealing that the eagerly awaited third novel, The Mirror and the Light, will close with Cromwell similarly warily recognising their similarly entwined rise to prominence unravels, awaiting the executioner’s axe. Wolf Hall covers Cromwell’s rise under Thomas Wolsey, his orchestration of Henry’s divorce of Catherine of Aragon and subsequent marriage to Anne Boleyn in 1533. Bring up the Bodies opens with Cromwell ascendancy and charts the collapse of Henry’s marriage to Anne Boleyn, her assassination by Jane Seymour and Cromwell’s coolly legalistic and ultimately brutal machinations to oust Boleyn at the king’s behest, which culminated in her beheading in 1536. At the event at Friends’ House in December 2014, Mantel discussed how Boleyn and Cromwell warily recognise their similarly precarious positions as social climbers in a world delineated by inherited wealth and power, although Boleyn is hungry for status while Cromwell focuses on the acquisition of power. Ultimately, their entwined rise to prominence unravels and is replaced by a fierce, and ultimately bloody, enmity.

Mantel was unwilling to concede to the commonplace that the historical novel, long a critically disdained genre, reflects a less mechanical process whereby the voice, consciousness and worldview of a character is accessed, putting Mantel ‘right there in the scene’. The novels have been duly praised for their vitality, suspense and the thrilling sense that history is still unfolding, demonstrating Mantel’s extraordinary talent for historical ventriloquism. This was the fourth Man Booker event at Birkbeck – previous speakers include Sarah Waters, Kazuo Ishiguro and Alan Hollinghurst – and followed Mantel’s Orwell lecture at Birkbeck in 2007. In Japan, Birkbeck staff also met prospective students and spoke to agents working to recruit students. Mr Hamil said: “There is deep affection for Birkbeck among our alumni in South Korea and Japan. They really appreciate Birkbeck’s heritage and achievements to the widest cultural intelligence. They were overwhelmed by the hospitality we were shown during the trip.”

The tour was organised by the Department of Management, the International Office, and the Development and Alumni Teams. In addition to Mr Hamil, Birkbeck’s Tricia King, Professor of Strategic Engagement and Recruitment, Matt Dean, Head of Marketing and Recruitment (International), and Luisa Barbaro, Alumni Engagement Manager, took part. Birkbeck would like to thank the alumni from South Korea and Japan for their help and wonderful support during the visits.