

The New Idea of a University

The Objects of the College shall be to provide ... all branches of a liberal education

University College of Swansea Charter and Statutes as amended June 1993

[Universities] began, as is well known, with their grand aim directed on Theology,—their eye turned earnestly on Heaven. And perhaps, in a sense, it may be still said, the very highest interests of man are virtually intrusted to them. ... what is the nature of this stupendous universe, and what are our relations to it, and to all things knowable by man, or known only to the great Author of man and it. Theology was once the name for all this; all this is still alive for man, however dead the name may grow! In fact, the members of the Church keeping theology in a lively condition—(Laughter)—for the benefit of the whole population, theology was the great object of the Universities. I consider it is the same intrinsically now ...

Thomas Carlyle, *Inaugural Address*, 1866, pp. 11–12

But the religious virtue of knowledge was become a flunkie to the god of material success.

D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*,
ed. Mark Kinkead-Weekes (Penguin edn, 1995, p. 403)

The land was lurching like a galleon steered by a drunken helmsman into the Gothic night of materialism and mailed ballyhoo. The humanities were spat upon; the Arts trampled under foot, the historic sense spurned and ridiculed—in all these haunts of Instruction—those warehouses of the trades and paid sciences. ... The literary and historic professoriate were all but starved; but they had a specially endowed Window Dressing Faculty with twenty-four branches all of whose professors lived on the scale of Hollywood Stars. It was insupportable.

Ford Madox Ford, unpublished novel *Professor's Progress*, 1939,
quoted in Arthur Mizener, *The Saddest Story*, 1971, p. 458

THE NEW IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY

Duke Maskell
&
Ian Robinson

*Lost was the Nation's Sense, nor could be found,
While the long solemn Unison went round.*

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Preface

Anecdotes and Judgement

THIRTY YEARS AGO, snootiness about American secondary and higher education was widespread in Britain. The USA was frequently used in British academic circles as a cautionary example. Mass-market culture and television-addiction were thought to have reduced the number of potential American students at the same time as their universities were being swamped by too many students. There, we thought, was the blackboard jungle: the schools had no safeguards like the nationwide standards enforced by our excellent HMIs and visible in our O- and A-level. In the richest nation on earth, students were not properly supported by the state and many had to spend time that should have been given to reading working their way through college. The USA had far too many degree-granting bodies, with the results that there were no common standards and an American first degree often meant nothing; real university work was not started until the postgraduate level, where it could be delayed even longer by things called ‘taught masters degrees’. Even research work was probably vitiated by over-specialization and subordination to the department programme of some high-powered professor; but a PhD was necessary because without one work in a university was not obtainable. American academics were often without any security in their posts and were constantly pressured to publish. Our own thorns being different, these were all things we thought we had to be on guard against.

How has it happened then that we have firmly established in Britain exactly the situation we used to attribute (rightly or wrongly) to the USA? Liberal education in England may survive in the twenty-first century, not very conspicuously, at two universities. In Wales (which we know) liberal education has no prospects, and we are not optimistic about its chances in Scotland or Ireland. We think this matters.

* * *

Much of this book is what the social scientists sometimes call ‘anecdotal’: if we can suggest why this is a proper mode of argument part of our work is already done. History is always anecdotal. Statistics, maps, charts come in, but a genuine history is the story of the public experiences of some representative individuals. We think our anecdotes are representative. We write straight out

of first-hand experience of a very few institutions and of one subject, the one that used just to be called English. Literature itself consists of anecdotes raised to the level of art. Novelists do not write about life in general, or when they do their readers lose interest, but we are certainly not going to admit that literature is not thinking; our leading example of thought about education is a novel. Literary criticism normally works by comment on well-chosen quotation which by its nature is selective. A critical book rightly practises criticism.

It is also because we are offering criticism that we sometimes write in the first person singular, sometimes in the first person plural. The book is ours, a joint effort for which we are jointly responsible, but different parts arise from different individual experiences, about which we can only speak individually.

I nevertheless had some embarrassment at making detailed public criticisms of colleagues with whom I have worked for many years in reasonable harmony and sometimes friendship, for judgements they made in the reasonable expectation of confidentiality. When, however, they agreed to award high classes for theorizings of a kind I demonstrate below to be intellectually disreputable, the primary university obligation to the pursuit of true judgement had to override ordinary professional reticence. I am grateful, nevertheless, for my participation in university work, and I could not have survived so long had it not been possible for most of my time.

I stuck it out, doing what I could (I say with a clear conscience), but in the end I took 'voluntary redundancy' as the alternative to 'constructive dismissal', a device that would have enabled me to argue to an 'industrial tribunal' that I had been appointed as a lecturer in English Language and Literature, but was now required to acquiesce in the awarding of degrees in nonsense.

Our next step, as people still believing in liberal education, had to be to write this book.

Our hope must be that there are enough survivors of the educated class who have kept their heads down, or joined us in redundancy, to recognize the truth of what we say. We even hope that they can be persuaded to raise their heads, and make a difference. Barefaced power is important, but the educated do have great advantages in forming opinion.

I.R.

October 2000

GENERAL NOTE

Newsletter and *Newyddion* refer to the in-house journal of the University of Wales, Swansea, formerly the University College of Swansea.

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