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978-0-521-55888-4 - The Correspondence of Alfred Marshall, Economist: Volume 1.
Climbing, 1868–1890: A Royal Economic Society Publication

Edited by John K. Whitaker

Excerpt

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LETTERS 1–332

1. To the *Cambridge University Gazette*, 2 December 1868¹

*The Previous Examination*²

A time when the overcrowding of the Senate House by the Candidates for the Previous Examination is attracting attention is singularly appropriate for raising the question whether there is any one type of Examination which can satisfy the various requirements of all classes of men in the middle of their University career. Mr. Sidgwick has suggested (*University Gazette*, No. 3), that to the present Pass Examination there should be added an Examination for Honours in Elementary Mathematics.³ I want to go a little further.

I should like that beside the 'Previous' Pass Examination there should be a 'Previous' Honour Examination in Latin, and a 'Previous' Honour Examination in the applications of Elementary Mathematics to Physical Science: that for either or both of these, any one who chose might be a candidate: that it should not be required of Candidates for any Tripos, except the Classical, to have gone through the 'Previous' Pass Examination, provided they had taken Honours in the former of these two Examinations: and that the same exemption should be granted to Candidates for any Tripos except the Mathematical, provided they had taken honours in the latter of them. A man, who failed in one of these Honour Examinations, might either receive a 'Certificate of satisfaction' from his Examiners, or be compelled to go through the Pass Examination of the succeeding year.

It seems to me scarcely possible to overestimate the benefit which the adoption of some such scheme as this might confer on men of nascent energy, by saving them from the intense demoralisation of deliberately and elaborately doing things badly for the sake of a rambling Pass Examination.

Mathematical men are, I think, often deeply injured by the systematic superficiality of their Classical studies. If the time which they spend on Latin and Greek were concentrated on Latin alone, it would in most cases enable them to read Virgil and Lucretius with ease and with pleasure, and to obtain much of that culture which arises from a real acquaintance with the great minds of a great nation. With regard to their own subject, they are taught to consider as mere cram a knowledge of the language of any new method of investigation without a thorough grasp of the idea of that method. Yet the University course

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compels them, their Schoolmasters, and their College Tutors to conspire together in order that they may attain some verbal knowledge of two languages, even where there is no hope that they will ever acquire any grasp of the ideas, to the expression of which the chief value of the languages is owing. Can such a practical lesson be without effect on their Mathematical studies; and on their future life? Let any one look at the present 'Accidence Paper.' Let him reflect that, for many at least of those Mathematical men who do not intend to take Holy Orders, it represents, not the means to, but the absolute end of, their Classical study; and let him say whether its grittiness does not set his teeth on edge. A Mathematical man who devotes much time to his Classical 'Subjects' may be thereby compelled to forego the acquisition of a new scientific method, besides losing places in his Tripos. In exchange he is enabled to 'get up' some extra pages of a Latin or a Greek book and to learn aorists⁴ a few more aorists, genders, and genitive cases. He reads his author too slowly and painfully to be able to enter into his spirit: he might have entered into the spirit of the method which he loses. Can his private tutor be blamed for hinting to him that it is only virtue that can be its own reward, and for exhorting him not to allow his Classics to interfere more than is absolutely necessary with his 'work.' But, if he were likely to read Latin in that liberal and appreciative manner which an Honour Examination can foster, different advice would often be given; even if it were only with a view to that freshness which a man would bring back to his Mathematical work after an intelligent contact with a mind like that of Lucretius. Nor would the pupil feel that in following such advice he was sacrificing his material interests.

The effects of an Honour Examination in the applications of Elementary Mathematics to Physical Science would be for the present more limited; but they would be similar in kind. A knowledge of Algebra may be thorough without being extensive. Most Classical men are compelled to attend lectures on Algebra for a whole year. These in general teach them scarcely any new methods, suggest no new ideas, are barren of practical results, and often, by their endless manipulations of unmeaning symbols, weary them into a hatred or a scorn of Mathematics. It would be, I think, much better if those who, on coming up, have a sound, though limited, knowledge of elementary Algebra and Trigonometry were encouraged to go on at once to Mechanics and Hydrostatics. A hope of being speedily initiated into the chief methods by which the world has attained its present knowledge would be to a large class of Classical men an irresistible attraction, even if their labours were not to be directly required. Nor does it seem to me that so high a training of the reasoning faculties can be so easily obtained in any other way. It is difficult to say what should be the exact limits of the examination. But, I think, some such a book as that of Mr. Balfour Stewart on Heat, which is singularly rich in methods and in results, might well be added to the list of subjects proposed by Mr. Sidgwick.⁵ Taking favourable cases, and assuming unnecessary analysis to be rigorously excluded, I am even sanguine

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enough to hope that a labour no greater than is demanded for the present ‘Three Days’ course⁶ might suffice for attaining (with or without the aid of the Differential Calculus) a thorough grasp of the Principle of the Conservation of Energy, the connecting link between the Physical Sciences.

Setting aside, however, the cases in which there exists an enthusiasm for this kind of knowledge, or even a strong interest in it, much may be expected from the scarcely lower motive of an honest shame. There is a growing tendency to expect from either sex, and from every rank in life, some knowledge of the more prominent physical phenomena. The cook, who insisted on filling the kettle quite full of water ‘for fear the steam should have room to get in and burst it,’ is considered to be behind her age. There are, perhaps, many graduates of Cambridge who could not explain clearly why her caution was at once unnecessary and futile; but the number of those who are not ashamed of such ignorance is rapidly diminishing. It seems to me to be very important that the University should take advantage of, and guide this tendency. At present some men read painfully a little dry Mathematics, then forget them, and afterwards read casually some popular works on Natural Phenomena works which are often bad, and always hampered by the want of Mathematical Symbols. Instead of this, men might be led, by a course which would not only interest them, but also afford intellectual training of the highest possible type, to a real insight into the main principles of Physics. An intelligent curiosity thus once excited would be continually stimulated by various occurrences in after life. And, so far at least, the direct influence of the University on their habits of thought would not cease when they left its walls. The proposed Examinations might be made subservient to this great object in other ways, particularly through their relations to the smaller Triposes.⁷

Alfred Marshall.

¹ *Cambridge University Gazette*, 2 December 1868, p. 67. The *Gazette*, published weekly in term time between October 1868 and December 1869, was established to provide a vehicle for the circulation of University news and the discussion of University issues. A bound set is preserved in the rare-book room of the Cambridge University Library.

² The Previous Examination or ‘Little Go’ had to be passed by all undergraduates. It was normally sat (in the Senate House) in the fourth term of residence (the Michaelmas term of the second year) and covered a Greek Gospel, both a Latin and Greek classic, Paley’s *Evidences of Christianity*, the first three books of Euclid, and elementary arithmetic. Those studying for an honours degree in one of the ‘Triposes’ were also required to pass in ‘Additional Subjects’ which were mathematical in character—a feature favouring candidates for the Mathematical Tripos. Honours candidates were permitted to take the Previous Examination after two terms of residence providing that all parts were sat at the same time. Reform of the Previous Examination and of the Ordinary BA which was taken by the large lump of undergraduates not attempting honours—the so called ‘Poll men’—were perennial Cambridge issues. For details see Denys Arthur Winstanley, *Later Victorian Cambridge* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1947), pp. 144–84. Also see Christopher Brooke, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, vol. 4, 1870–1990 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993).

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³ Henry Sidgwick, 'University Legislation,' a letter published by the *Cambridge University Gazette*, 11 November 1868, p. 22. Sidgwick proposed replacing the 'additional subjects' of the Previous Examination, taken on a pass-fail basis, by a new examination in 'Elementary Mathematics, pure and applied' that intending Tripos candidates could attempt for classified honours as well as for a pass.

⁴ The inclusion of this word was probably a printer's error.

⁵ Balfour Stewart, *An Elementary Treatise on Heat* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1865). Sidgwick's letter had suggested the following topics: 'Euclid, Algebra, Trigonometry, Statics, Hydrostatics, Dynamics (with some Conic Sections), and easy Astronomy.'

⁶ The 'Three Days' were the examinations in the Additional Subjects of the Previous Examination.

⁷ The smaller Triposes at this time were the Moral Sciences (1848), Natural Sciences (1848), and Law and History (1868). The two long-established large Triposes were the Mathematical and the Classical, the former being the more prestigious and competitive.

2. To the *Cambridge University Gazette*, 9 December 1868¹

The Previous Examination

Mr. Sidgwick in his letter on University Legislation² calls attention to the probable diminution in the number of those who can venture to carry on two separate studies to the end of their University career, and to the general tendency to specialisation which exists here as elsewhere. It is to be expected, and, I think, to be wished, that the smaller Triposes should increase in size and in number at the expense not only of the Poll but of the last class in the Mathematical and in the Classical Tripos.

History does not indeed point out a better preparation for any future study which a man will have leisure and inclination to pursue than a successful course through one of our great Triposes. They afford to Cambridge a singular power of testing and of promoting thoroughness in one pursuit; and hence, by inculcating a hatred of unthoroughness in all pursuits, of doing what art can do to create genius. A man however who has been in the last class of one of these Triposes, if he does not adopt a scholastic life, frequently settles down at once to practical work: having no interest in the knowledge which he has acquired here, he makes it his first business to forget it: and he has not learnt while here to look at his own special pursuit from the point of view of a genuine student. His mental growth in one direction may have been considerable. And there is one direction in which, if his habits of thought had once begun to extend, they would have been likely to have been fostered by the circumstances of his daily life, and to have been serviceable to the world. But these directions are not the same. The increase of competition and the growing allurements of ephemeral literature render it daily less easy for him to make it a part either of his business or of his pleasure to overcome the difficulties which lie at the commencement of a new line of study. The spontaneous development of a new form of intellectual energy is a very hard task. It is probably altogether too hard for him. About

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the principles and the history of his profession he knows nothing, and he cares nothing. The old channels of his thought are cut off: no new ones are formed: and he stagnates. The number of those, who think that the intrinsic values of Classical or Mathematical studies are sufficient to compensate for such a result as this, is rapidly diminishing. And there is a growing feeling here and elsewhere that Cambridge may safely defy any University in the civilised world to produce a set of men who, without being specially idle or specially stupid, have made less of their advantages than these men. Occasionally one hears similar remarks applied to men who have taken somewhat higher degrees than these.

The four Minor Triposes which we already have, (to say nothing of those in Theology and in Modern Literature and History, which we probably soon shall have), might be wonderfully effective in removing this reproach, if the University encouraged men to read for them.³ But the University does not.

A man on coming up frequently does not know what his future career will be: he is perhaps unwilling to lose the credit of his school work: if ambitious, he does not like to content himself with the scanty honours of a Small Tripos: and he most probably decides, rightly enough under the circumstances, to read for one of the others. And thus, if after all he is but an ordinary man, and if his life is not a scholastic one, he probably becomes narrow and lethargic in his intellectual habits, in consequence of the difficulties which the University threw in the way of his obtaining some special teaching in addition to his general training.

There seems to be only one way of removing these difficulties without interfering with the interests of any of those men for whom an almost exclusive devotion to Classics or to Mathematics might be ultimately advantageous. And that is by instituting some such Honour Examinations in the middle of the University course as those which I proposed last week. A man would then be able to carry out during the first half of his time here one or both of the chief branches of his school work. Meanwhile his social habits would be formed without danger of his being brought under the influence of a professional clique. At the end of it he would receive from the University a certificate of his preliminary training, which would be of use to him in after life, and fully satisfy his just ambition. He would then know tolerably well his wishes, his prospects, and his powers: and he could then choose the Tripos for which he should read. If he elected to continue his Classical or his Mathematical studies, he would certainly be in no worse a position than he would have been under the present arrangement. But if not, he might, under the guidance of a Minor Tripos, devote his whole energies to obtaining a sound knowledge of the principles of the subject in which he was most interested. Under this new *régime* indeed there would be such an improvement in the number and in the calibre of the candidates for the Minor Triposes, that the name itself would almost cease to be appropriate.

I must not stray into a discussion of the position which the proposed

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examinations would take as preparatory for these Triposes. But Mr. Sidgwick, while urging the importance of preliminary training in Elementary Mathematics, makes special reference to one of them—the Moral Sciences Tripos. In relation to it, he insists on the direct benefit of some acquaintance with the subject matter of Mathematics.⁴ I should also lay special stress on the indirect benefit of a training in scientific method, in spite of the authorities ‘which can be quoted against me.’ Doubtless, scientific methods may be misapplied. But it is a coincidence which cannot be altogether devoid of significance that, on the one hand, most of those who have created epochs in the study of mind have had some acquaintance with mathematics, and many of them have been great mathematicians; and, on the other hand, the authorities referred to have been in general better qualified to exemplify than to detect that one-sidedness which arises from the inability to apply a scientific method to those cases in which it is wanted.

There remains a point of some practical importance. I would suggest that, in order to induce classical men to take an interest in the ‘Previous’ Examination in Latin, it should be joined to an Examination in Greek; and that two lists should be published—one representing the marks for Latin alone—the other, those for Latin and Greek together. Either list might be divided into three classes, each containing three or more divisions. A similar arrangement might, if necessary, be applied to the Previous Examination in Mathematics. These two examinations would then absorb a very large number of University and College examinations, and save examiners and examinees much unwholesome work.

In conclusion I cannot do more than hint at the use which they might subserve, in case it should ever be judged desirable to include in either of the main branches of our University studies a greater variety of subject matter than could be conveniently represented in one Tripos.

Alfred Marshall.

¹ *Cambridge University Gazette*, 9 December 1868, p. 55.

² See [1.3].

³ There appear to have been only three minor Triposes at this time: see [1.7]. Perhaps Marshall was counting the medical degree. A Theology Tripos was established in 1871, Triposes in Semitic Languages and Indian Languages in 1872, and the Law and History Tripos was divided into two separate Triposes in 1873. For details see Winstanley, *Later Victorian Cambridge* [1.2], pp. 185–209.

⁴ Sidgwick had stated in his letter [1.3] that ‘the importance of this preliminary training in Elementary Mathematics can hardly be exaggerated; and any development of new triposes will only make it more felt. As a teacher of Moral Sciences I feel it most strongly. One of the most important branches of Moral Sciences is the enquiry into the nature and conditions of knowledge; which, without such preliminary training, runs great risk of degenerating into shallow dialectics.’

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[More information](#)3. To the *Cambridge University Gazette*, 14 April 1869¹*The Previous Examination*

While some modifications in the rules for the Previous Examination are under discussion, I wish to suggest, as a step in the right direction, a small change with regard to it. I propose that there be added to it a Latin paper of a somewhat higher type than those which it now contains: that this be a voluntary paper; but that no knowledge of Greek be required from a man who passes in it. If this be done, mathematical men will be enabled to spend on English and Latin literature that portion of their time and energy which they now devote to Greek accident and Greek vocabularies. But further, University men have not been less severe than others in their criticisms of those parents who are more anxious about the number than the thoroughness of their daughters' accomplishments. Yet, since the compulsory examinations at Oxford and Cambridge² necessarily direct the teaching in the best schools, or at all events in the best parts of them, a parent is forced, often against his will, to make his son 'accomplished,' after some fashion or other, in each of two dead languages, or to forego the advantages of a really good school education for him. By taking the step which I have suggested Cambridge would abdicate her share in this tyranny.

I cannot however abstain from again expressing the opinion that nothing short of University Honour Examinations in the middle of our course can encourage a man while here to devote himself mainly to that pursuit which directly, or indirectly, will have the most influence on his thought in after life; while he yet gives to some second study enough time and energy to obtain a thorough grasp of it. Nor does it seem that the growing evils of College Examinations can be checked in any other way.

Alfred Marshall.

¹ *Cambridge University Gazette*, 14 April 1869, pp. 125–6.

² These compulsory examinations were the Previous Examination in Cambridge and Responsions in Oxford. Each required both Latin and Greek.

4. To the *Cambridge University Gazette*, 10 November 1869¹*The Previous Examination*

To the scheme for putting the Previous Examination for Honor men in their second term, the objection is much urged that all the advantages which would be thus gained would be increased by putting it at the end of their first term. It is assumed that it could not be put at the beginning of their first term, because their Tutors would be unable to guarantee that the candidates they sent in for it were *bonâ fide* Honor men. Means however are required of enabling Tutors to

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form a rough estimate of their pupils' abilities before lectures begin. The *special* College Examinations for this purpose would be superseded if the Previous Examination took place very early in October and all Freshmen were recommended to go in for it. It would only be necessary to publish a list of those who passed in all the subjects, 'additional' as well as 'ordinary;' but an account of the letters which their pupils had obtained in the various subjects would be sent privately to the several Tutors. A trifling redistribution of funds would be required; but labour would be saved to the University educational body as a whole. The already heavy clerk's work of the Senior Examiner would be increased; but this would be taken off his shoulders by the Vice-Chancellor's clerk, whose appointment is, we hope, to follow on, if it does not precede the abolition of Vice-Chancellor's dinners. The education of the schoolboy and the employment of the Poll-man would not be interfered with; but the University would no longer declare that a diffused mediocrity of attainments was a worthy object to which to direct the energies of the Honor man even for one term. At the same time any change that placed the Pass Examination earlier in the course would render it more easy and more necessary to have in the middle of the course Honor Examinations, which would stamp with public recognition any *thorough* mathematical or classical work which a man had done up to that time.

Alfred Marshall.

¹ Printed with other letters on the topic, *Cambridge University Gazette*, 10 November 1869, p. 226.

5. To the *Cambridge University Reporter*, 22 February 1871¹

Celibacy in the University

Mr Morgan has done good service by pointing out some of the effects of the rules which enjoin celibacy on Fellows.² I wish to approach the subject from a point of view somewhat different from his.

The working of our University institutions seems to be as follows. We elect to Fellowships each year a number of students selected by a method which is, or by slight modifications may be made, at least as good as any other. A very large portion of the very ablest of these, if estimated by a Tripos standard, and probably a still larger portion if estimated by a broader standard, go out of residence almost immediately. One of the chief motives in most such cases, and in many almost the sole motive, is the hope of winning a position in which they will be able to marry. Of those who remain probably not one fourth devote themselves deliberately to a celibate life, or look forward with confidence to being able to marry without abandoning their studies for some practical work, in most cases that of a parish priest. Their position is similar to that of a farmer who has a short lease and who expects no compensation for improvements. A

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man wearied with teaching, fascinated by the excitements of term time and the allurements of vacation, must have a strong interest in his study, if, with small prospects of developing its results, he lays the laborious basis of that thorough knowledge which can be fully acquired only in a lifetime. In what proportion of cases is this done? How far is it true that but few mathematical teachers have read much beyond the text-books which they teach; and that it is difficult to find men competent to lecture on the subjects recently introduced into the Tripos? How far is it true that the reason why original questions are not more often set in the higher subjects at present in the Tripos, is that but few examiners have obtained the grasp of these subjects which would be derived from an extensive mathematical reading? How far is it true that, putting aside mere compilations, the contributions to classical and mathematical literature which issue from Cambridge are but few in number, while the brilliancy of those few serves but to show how much may be effected in a life deliberately devoted to study? How far all this is true I do not know; but I have heard it often asserted; and it cannot be wholly false. In so far as it is true, how far is it due to our system? and how far would the evil be removed by that remedy which Mr Morgan proposes, namely the simple abrogation of the rules relating to celibacy?

Let us look at the effects of such a change. The privilege would enable many very able men to continue very important work. On the other hand it would in many cases fall to those who would never have obtained their present posts had the abler men who have made way for them known that this privilege would be granted: posts which it might be possible to fill, after the concession of the privilege, with men of first-rate ability. Moreover, if this change were made, vacancies would be diminished in number, while the value of the Fellowships would be increased. The pursuit of Tripos success would be even more intoxicating than now; the tendency to reaction after it even greater than at present: and there would be no possibility of removing those who fell into comparative lethargy.

If we are to have many married lecturers we must, I think, follow to some extent that portion of the German system which has reference to the appointment of teachers; and which, whatever the other portions of the system may be, appears to be much more successful than our own. The rough test which an examination at the age of twenty-one or twenty-two can afford, should be used to confer the means and privilege of studying and teaching here only for a limited number of years. A second and later selection must decide who are to have the privilege of adopting for life the profession of a Cambridge student and teacher. The first election is guided by definite examination results: and is thoroughly well conducted by the comparatively unprofessional bodies who now elect. But the second election could be based on no such test; and it would be a great advantage if it were conducted by a body who had some special knowledge of the branch of learning which it was supposed the candidate had advanced or was likely to advance. Such a board would be a University board: and thus the Fellows of

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Colleges would be saved the experience, painful in a large College and very painful in a small one, of having to decide in doubtful cases whether to pass a sort of vote of want of confidence on a very intimate friend. What title this second election should confer is a matter of indifference. But the person so elected would be required besides performing College duties to deliver lectures on that particular branch to which he had devoted himself, lectures which would form part of an organised system for the whole University.³ Besides retaining his Fellowship independently of marriage he would receive a fixed annual sum from College or University funds: while yet, as in Germany, part of his income would depend upon the number of his hearers; and he would be kept to his work by the competition of younger lecturers. At the age of, say, fifty-five he would be compelled to retire unless he received special permission to hold his post for some years longer. A liberal retiring pension would be provided for him. The funds for this and other purposes would be obtained from the diminution in the number of Fellowships which would be rendered feasible by the rule by which the tenure of all Fellowships, as far as granted by the first election, would be limited to, say, ten years from the B.A. degree.

If this plan were adopted, the ablest men would in general feel that their best chance of obtaining early a position in which they could marry would be by staying in Cambridge and devoting themselves to some special study. In their first stage they would have every motive that hope and fear can give to be vigorous in their work. And in their second when lecturing on that particular branch of their subject which they had by this time mastered and were now engaged in extending, they would be likely to feel an interest, an enthusiasm in their lectures which cannot be attained in any other way whatever.

Alfred Marshall.

¹ Printed on pp. 205–6 of the *Reporter*, 22 February 1871. The *Reporter* commenced publication in 1870 independently of the University, following the pattern established by the *Gazette*. After its first two years it became the official organ of the University and ceased to publish letters apart from those included in the authorized record.

² Henry Arthur Morgan, *The Tenure of Fellowships Considered Especially with Reference to College Tutors and Lecturers* (Privately printed, Cambridge, 1871). This pamphlet by a Fellow of Jesus College was summarized on p. 207 of the *Reporter*, 22 February 1871. It emphasized that the bar to marriage of Fellows meant that experienced College Tutors or Lecturers could rarely be retained, and that an occupation viewed as merely temporary gave little incentive to improve performance.

³ At this time the system of University Lectureships and Readerships had hardly begun. Only the Professors held University, as opposed to College, appointments.

6. To the *Cambridge University Reporter*, 1 March 1871¹

The Previous Examination

Much has been written recently upon the details of the Previous Examination. Perhaps many plans in the legislation of recent years would have been avoided