

Introduction. The invention of the don

‘It may be said with deliberation, and without fear of contradiction from any competent authority, that in Mr Mark Pattison the University of Oxford has lost by far the most distinguished of her resident members.’¹ So wrote the *Saturday Review* in August 1884, on the death of the rector of Lincoln College. This was a strong assertion to make at a time when the University housed Benjamin Jowett, Max Müller and John Ruskin, but the spirit of the remark was echoed in other obituaries in the national press, and it captures the extraordinary reputation Pattison enjoyed at the end of his life. He occupies a shadowy presence in Victorian studies today, but his contemporaries would have been surprised to find that his intellectual distinction has been lost from view by historians. In his last decade he enjoyed nationwide renown for the exceptional qualities of his mind; and that renown reached continental Europe too. Even his antagonists recognized that they were dealing with a man of rare ability. Jowett, who was more aware than most of his personal deficiencies, could nevertheless call him a genius.²

Pattison lived through a formative period in the history of the modern university in England, and in his person he embodied many of the transformations that occurred in the half century he spent at Oxford. To re-trace his life and thought is therefore to explore through the eyes of a key figure the elements of that transition to the modern university: the secularization of intellectual life, the emergence of the professional academic, and the challenge posed by the emergent German idea of the university to the traditions of English university life. When Pattison arrived at Oxford as an undergraduate in 1832, the University’s chief purpose was to provide a gentlemanly education for intending clergy. As many as a half of Oxford

¹ *Saturday Review*, 2 August 1884.

² Benjamin Jowett to unknown correspondent (either Lady Airlie or Lady Abercromby), 27 July 1884, and Jowett to Morier, 22 Oct. 1876, Jowett papers, Balliol College, Oxford, I F 2/40, and III M67.

undergraduates would go on to take holy orders, whereas law, the next most popular profession, claimed just one in twenty.³ The college fellows were themselves mostly required to be in holy orders, and they thought of themselves as clergy rather than as academics in the modern sense.⁴ They were not required to be resident; and those who were resident thought of this as a pleasant interlude in their lives until a college living fell vacant and they could therefore afford to marry – at which point they would be forced to resign their fellowships, which were held on condition of celibacy. There were a small number of professors – twenty or so – and they were allowed to marry, but these were not regarded as full-time posts requiring residence in Oxford. They might well be held in plurality with other offices, as Richard Whately, for example, combined the professorship of political economy with the archbishopric of Dublin. There was, in other words, no concept of an academic profession as a lifelong vocation: only about one college fellow in eight would spend his entire active career in Oxford or another university.⁵ The religious and ecclesiastical character of the University was, moreover, reasserted by the Tractarian Movement which dominated Oxford's intellectual life, and Pattison's too, for a decade and a half after his matriculation. There was little notion that a university existed for the purposes of research or the advancement of knowledge. There was not even an academic division of labour, for all students who sought honours followed the same classically based curriculum, and all tutors taught all parts of that limited curriculum. The written examination was introduced for the first time in the revised Examination Statute of 1830. Pattison's cohort would be one of the first to experience what has become a *sine qua non* of the modern university.⁶

By the end of Pattison's life, young men who were elected fellows of colleges mostly expected to pursue academic careers. In the last two decades

³ M. C. Curthoys, 'The careers of Oxford men', in M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys (eds.), *Nineteenth-Century Oxford*, Part 1 (Volume VI of *The History of the University of Oxford*) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 503.

⁴ In 1840, 60 per cent of fellows were in holy orders, and another 30 per cent were required to proceed to ordination if they wished to retain their fellowships. Lay fellows were chiefly concentrated in All Souls and Merton: M. C. Curthoys, 'The "unreformed" colleges', in Brock and Curthoys, *Nineteenth-Century Oxford*, Part 1, p. 180.

⁵ A. J. Engel, *From Clergyman to Don: The Rise of an Academic Profession in Nineteenth-Century Oxford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 286.

⁶ Written as well as oral exercises formed part of the examination process prior to this reform, but each candidate was examined separately. The first printed examination papers in *Literae Humaniores* were used in Easter term, 1831: M. C. Curthoys, 'The examination system', in Brock and Curthoys (eds.), *Nineteenth-Century Oxford*, Part 1, p. 347. See also Christopher Stray, 'From oral to written examinations: Cambridge, Oxford and Dublin, 1700–1914', *History of Universities* 20.2 (2005), 76–130.

Introduction. The invention of the don

3

of the century, a clear majority of those elected to college fellowships would go on to spend their entire professional lives in universities.⁷ The ecclesiastical character of the University had largely been eroded: colleges were still required, under the terms of the Universities Tests Act of 1871, to provide religious instruction and daily chapel services, but religious tests were abolished and colleges statutes had been redrafted in the aftermath of the Oxford and Cambridge Universities Act of 1877 to reduce the number of clerical fellowships. Fewer than a third of dons elected in the wake of these reforms were in or proceeded to take holy orders.⁸ The marginalization of religion in an increasingly secular University was symbolized by the foundation, in the year of Pattison's death, of 'Dr Pusey's Library' (later Pusey House), the aim of which was to serve as a focus for theological study and the Christian life within the University.⁹ Fifty years before, Pusey and Newman would have assumed that these were integral dimensions of the work of a college, rather than a differentiated need to be met at the edges of the University's life. At the same time, academic specialization took root: in 1864 classical Greats lost its compulsory status, and in 1882 faculties were created (or re-created) and endowed with control of the honour schools within their subject areas.¹⁰ The examination system, still experimental when Pattison was an undergraduate, would, in the course of his lifetime, not only transform Oxford but reshape civil society throughout the advanced nations. Oxford itself houses a giant monument to this system, for the University's largest single building project in the nineteenth century was the construction of the Examination Schools on the High Street, completed to the designs of T. G. Jackson between 1876 and 1882 at an eventual cost of over a hundred thousand pounds.¹¹ In the words of G. M. Young, England was marching 'through the gateway of the Competitive Examination . . . out into the Waste Land of Experts, each knowing so much about so little that he can neither be contradicted nor is worth contradicting'.¹²

⁷ Engel, *From Clergyman to Don*, p. 286.

⁸ A. G. L. Haig, 'The church, the universities and learning in later Victorian England', *Historical Journal* 29 (1986), 187, correcting an incorrect figure given by Engel, *From Clergyman to Don*, p. 286.

⁹ Peter Hinchliff, 'Religious issues, 1870–1914', in M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys (eds.), *Nineteenth-Century Oxford*, Part 2 (Volume VII of *The History of the University of Oxford*) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 107.

¹⁰ Curthoys, 'Examination system', pp. 352–3, 355.

¹¹ Peter Howell, Oxford architecture, 1800–1914', in Brock and Curthoys, *Nineteenth-Century Oxford*, Part 2, p. 749.

¹² G. M. Young, *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 160.

This period of reform was decisively important in the history of European universities. Today we take the university's existence for granted. The western university as it took shape in its modern form in the course of the nineteenth century has been exported to the rest of the world too, because it was seen as an integral component of what a modern society should be.¹³ Universities in former European colonies in Africa and Asia were moulded on the pattern of their European counterparts, borrowing a classification system invented in nineteenth-century Oxford and Cambridge and adopting forms of academic dress which trace their origins back to scholars' robes in medieval Europe. Yet things might have been very different. We can imagine different modes of professional training than full-time education beyond the age of eighteen, but even if we accept that model, why does it follow that the institutions entrusted with this 'higher' education should also assume the very different function of 'research' – the discovery of new knowledge? At the beginning of the nineteenth century no university conceived its central purpose in this way, and as demands for institutional provision for research grew in the nineteenth century, there were many who believed that this function did not properly belong with universities at all, but could be more effectively performed by specialized institutions such as academies. Had universities not developed in such a way as to appropriate the role of pushing back the frontiers of knowledge they would not today possess anything like the cultural centrality they do enjoy.

Indeed, an observer of European universities at the time of Pattison's birth in 1813 might reasonably have seen them as part of Europe's *ancien régime*, destined to be swept away by the revolutionary wave inspired by the enlightened and critical spirit of the previous century. For universities were privileged corporations – the Latin word 'universitas' signified a guild or corporation – of exactly the kind that was under attack in the age of Enlightenment and revolution. They also had a limited curriculum, mostly confined to law, theology and medicine, that was typically studied through time-honoured textual authorities, and this was precisely the kind of deference to hallowed authority that Enlightenment *philosophes* aimed to sweep away.¹⁴ French universities were indeed dissolved by the National Convention in 1793, as embodiments of the 'spirit of corporation' that was

¹³ Edward Shils and John Roberts, 'The diffusion of European models outside Europe', in Walter Rüegg (ed.), *Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Volume III of *A History of the University in Europe*) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 164.

¹⁴ L. W. B. Brockliss, 'The European university in the age of revolution, 1789–1850', Brock and Curthoys (eds.), *Nineteenth-Century Oxford* Part 1, pp. 84–9.

Introduction. The invention of the don

5

the enemy of the ‘career open to talents’, and they did not regain an autonomous institutional standing until the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ Instead, at Talleyrand’s instigation, the French Republic set about creating the network of professional schools which have remained a distinctive feature of the landscape of higher education in France. Reformers elsewhere, and not least in Germany, sought to follow France’s lead. The Revolutionary and Napoleonic era saw the number of universities in Europe slashed from 143 to 83.¹⁶ By the end of the eighteenth century, in the words of one historian, ‘most European governments now viewed the university as a terminological anomaly’.¹⁷

That the European university survived, and in the end prospered, was essentially due to the distinctive German response to the French-inspired assault on the university. ‘The institution ultimately survived on the Continent’, Brockliss has written, ‘because the Germans invented the research university’.¹⁸ Challenged to justify the purpose of the university in the face of these attacks, German philosophers from Kant onwards asserted that the university must claim a higher dignity than mere professional training, which might indeed be more efficiently performed in specialist institutions. The Prussian government had declared in 1770 that ‘the ultimate purpose of the universities is the instruction of youth. A professor of a university has fulfilled his office satisfactorily if he thoroughly teaches the youth what is known and discovered in his subject.’¹⁹ By contrast the idealists maintained that the university’s higher purpose lay in the pursuit of knowledge as something intrinsically desirable, and not for the practical benefits it offered. It would not be true to say that the new University of Berlin, founded at the instigation of Wilhelm von Humboldt in 1810, marked the triumph of the research ideal, for German universities remained chiefly focused on professional training. But the new university attracted scholars – such as Hegel in philosophy and Ranke in history – who did not regard themselves as mere teachers, but stood at the forefront of new work in their fields. This was the idea of the university which, more than any other, transformed the functioning of learning and higher education in nineteenth-century Europe.

¹⁵ George Weisz, *The Emergence of Modern Universities in France, 1863–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), especially pp. 134–61.

¹⁶ Walter Rüegg, ‘Themes’, in Rüegg (ed.), *Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, p. 3.

¹⁷ Brockliss, ‘European university’, p. 101. ¹⁸ Brockliss, ‘European university’, p. 103.

¹⁹ Brockliss, ‘European university’, p. 104.

The English universities – and there were only two – were not immune to the attacks directed at their counterparts on the continent. The English Enlightenment was moderate in comparison with its French analogue, but in eighteenth-century England too there was a battle of the ancients and the moderns, an identifiable antagonism between the polished intellectual world of metropolitan letters and the supposedly pedantic academic mind of Oxford and Cambridge: polite learning versus clerical antiquarianism. For Gibbon, the clerical dons of Oxford and Cambridge were men ‘whose manners are remote from the present world, and whose eyes are dazzled by the light of philosophy’.²⁰ Something of this antagonism survived into the nineteenth century. Reformers such as the associates of the *Edinburgh Review* continued to see Oxford and Cambridge as an *ancien régime* right up to 1850, when the Whig prime minister Lord John Russell, a graduate of Edinburgh, set up a Royal Commission to enquire into the affairs of the University of Oxford. In the first half of the nineteenth century Oxford and Cambridge were socially privileged but would not generally have been regarded as the intellectual power-houses of the nation.

By the 1880s the standing of European universities had been transformed. Far from appearing to be anachronisms, they were increasingly regarded as central institutions of modern society. In England, Oxford and Cambridge had attained a position of intellectual ascendancy which they would continue to enjoy for most of the twentieth century.²¹ We should not exaggerate the extent of the transformation: even by the end of the nineteenth century a sizeable minority of fellows of colleges were not engaged in educational work, and ‘university teacher’ did not become a census category until 1921.²² Universities remained largely independent of the state: royal commissions instigated reform at Oxford and Cambridge, but in Pattison’s lifetime there was no state funding for English universities.²³ Nevertheless, it is difficult to find, at least before the end of the twentieth century, a single period of fifty years in which English universities

²⁰ Quoted by T. W. Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 65.

²¹ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 19, 22–3.

²² Collini, *Public Moralists*, pp. 206–7.

²³ The only exception to this is the University of London, established as a state-supported institution in 1836. But it was simply an examining and not a teaching body: Sheldon Rothblatt and Martin Trow, ‘Government policies and higher education: a comparison of Britain and the United States, 1630–1860’, in Colin Crouch and Anthony Heath (eds.), *Social Research and Social Reform: Essays in Honour of A. H. Halsey* (Oxford: Clarendon 1992), pp. 194–5.

changed more fundamentally than they did in the half-century Pattison spent at Oxford.

These changes have been traced in detail by a number of historians since the study of the history of universities began to flourish in the 1960s. Arthur Engel and Sheldon Rothblatt have published detailed studies of the making of the academic profession with particular reference to Oxford and Cambridge respectively.²⁴ More recently, Michael Brock and Mark Curthoys have brought the eight-volume *History of the University of Oxford* to completion with two rich and authoritative volumes on nineteenth-century Oxford.²⁵ The European University Association has sponsored a collaborative four-volume *History of the University of Europe*, attracting contributions from a host of grandes. Historians today, following the ‘cultural turn’, ask a further set of questions about how the ‘self-fashioning’ of identities: how did the dons of this transitional period ‘imagine’ the academic profession as a lifelong calling? How did they ‘perform’ what was essentially a new social role? Pattison was crucial to this self-fashioning of the don. He seems to have conceived the idea of a life devoted to learning at a remarkably early stage, and, moreover, always saw the university as the proper environment in which to nurture such a life. In his posthumous *Memoirs* – which, for good or ill, shaped the way he has been remembered – he unambiguously represented his life as a life consecrated almost from the outset to the academic life.

Ask any group of half a dozen academics what the academic life means to them, and you will surely get seven or eight different answers.²⁶ There are the researchers, the teachers and the administrators, the public intellectuals and the pastoral tutors. There are the lone scholars, for whom the essence of the academic life is the day spent in the library or the archive; and there are the entrepreneurial professors of rodomontade, whose time is spent in writing grant applications. Some see themselves as educating an elite, whereas others are social engineers who wish to remedy the defects of secondary education and to use the university to combat social inequalities. Most of these types have their prototypes in the nineteenth century. As the university context was transformed, so academics at Oxford and Cambridge had the opportunity to reimagine what it meant to be a don. This was the era which saw the invention of the tutorial as the centrepiece

²⁴ Engel, *From Clergyman to Don*; Sheldon Rothblatt, *The Revolution of the Dons: Cambridge and Society in Victorian England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968).

²⁵ Brock and Curthoys (eds.), *Nineteenth-Century Oxford*, Parts 1 and 2.

²⁶ Some of the varieties of donnishness are explored by Noel Annan, *The Dons: Mentors, Eccentrics and Geniuses* (London: HarperCollins, 1999).

of an Oxford education, and this was accompanied by the emergence, in the wake of Newman, of the pastoral conception of the don. Some college fellows saw their role as akin to that of schoolmasters, and indeed in the later Victorian period it was quite possible to move from a mastership at a public school to a fellowship at a college, from a fellowship of a college to the headship of a school, or from the headship of a school to the headship of a college.²⁷ Colleges generally thought it desirable to have one or two tutors at least who would maintain close relations with the undergraduates, and not just their own pupils, perhaps by means of a sustained interest in the rowing club or other college sports. Former schoolmasters were thought particularly good at performing this role. Others, such as Benjamin Jowett at Balliol, revelled in the opportunities they had to train their pupils for examination success and to form the governing elite. Jowett and his like were not hearty, schoolmasterly dons, for they assumed that the governing elite should also be an intellectual elite. But they took 'usefulness in life' as the measure of their success, and construed their role as shaping men who would go out into the world and be worldly successes.²⁸

Pattison was not a great university reformer, as Jowett and Sidgwick among his contemporaries could justly claim to be. He was no administrator, and declined the opportunity to act as Oxford's vice-chancellor when it was his turn. He shaped no institution which serves as his memorial. He matters because he stood for a particular vision of what it meant to be a don, and this was grounded in a sense that the university had a noble purpose to serve. He was quite clear what distinguished his vision from Jowett's. 'The separation between Jowett & myself consists in a difference upon the fundamental question of University politics – viz. Science & learning v. School keeping. Two men who are opposed on this point, cannot, as things are now, be in sympathy on any other.'²⁹ He was harsh in reducing Jowett's conception of his role to school keeping, but what emerges strongly from this quotation is not just his animosity towards his great rival, but also his sense that the University was riven by conflicts

²⁷ On the experience of former headmasters as college heads, see M. C. Curthoys, 'The colleges in the new era', in Brock and Curthoys, *Nineteenth-Century Oxford*, Part 2, pp. 128–9. In 1886, however, Henry Sidgwick complained of 'the snub given to academic work' when the headmaster of Harrow was translated to the mastership of Trinity College, Cambridge: Sheldon Rothblatt, *Tradition and Change in English Liberal Education: An Essay in History and Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 183.

²⁸ Annan, *The Dons*, p. 62.

²⁹ Pattison to Meta Bradley, 22 May 1881, Pattison papers, Bodleian Library, MS Pattison 121 ff. 129–30.

Introduction. The invention of the don

9

over the very nature of the academic vocation. Pattison had a much more vivid sense of that vocation than any of his contemporaries. The academic vocation was a calling to the lifelong task of mental cultivation for its own sake.

Where did this conception of the academic vocation come from? It strongly resembles the idea of the philosophical life expounded by the German idealists and neohumanists – by Kant and Fichte, Schleiermacher and Humboldt. Pattison made a number of visits to German universities from the 1850s onwards, was certainly influenced by Fichte's writings on the vocation of the scholar, and became known as a proponent of the German idea of the university. But this study also highlights an enduring influence about which Pattison was distinctly more ambivalent: that of the Oxford Movement (Tractarianism) in general and of Newman in particular. This might strike the reader as surprising. The Tractarians were resolute in their defence of the local traditions of Oxford against the invasion of German scholarship, which they regarded as rationalist in temper, and against the institution of a professorial mode of instruction. Their leader, Dr Pusey – himself a professor, although he eschewed the title – thought that there was something idolatrous about the attempt to magnify professorial teaching.³⁰ Today, the Humboldtian idea of the 'research university' continues to be contrasted with Newman's tutorial conception of the university: indeed, the current vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford has made this point more than once in his public pronouncements on the 'conceptual foundations' of today's 'research-led' universities.³¹ But there were more similarities between Humboldt's and Newman's visions of the university than this account suggests, and Pattison was led to his own distinctive understanding of the academic life through his profoundly important encounter with the Oxford Movement in the 1830s and 40s.³² At the end of his career he was, though an Anglican priest, a thoroughly secular don; but his donnishness was permanently shaped by the clericalism of the Tractarians. On the mantelpiece of his study he kept, to the end of his life, a framed photograph of Newman.³³

³⁰ W. R. Ward, 'From the Tractarians to the Executive Commission, 1845–1854', in Brock and Curthoys, *Nineteenth-Century Oxford*, Part 1, p. 328.

³¹ John Hood, Sir Robert Menzies Oration on Higher Education, University of Melbourne, 11 October 2001, quoted in *Oxford Today* 17.1 (Michaelmas 2004), 14.

³² R. D. Anderson, *European Universities from the Enlightenment to 1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 197.

³³ [T. F. Althaus], 'Recollections of Mark Pattison', *Temple Bar* 73 (1885), 32.

Pattison is important because no other British thinker has reflected so compellingly and with such seriousness on the nature of the academic vocation and the proper purpose of a university. In the last twenty years British universities have undergone an upheaval comparable in scale to that which the ancient English universities experienced in Pattison's lifetime. But whereas Victorian university reform was nourished by a remarkable quality of reflection on what universities were for, university policy today is apparently pragmatic and unenlightened by any philosophical consideration of the purpose of the 'higher education sector'. 'Research' is more important to universities than ever before, and claims a larger share of their budgets; but one can hardly imagine that Pattison, the apostle of the 'endowment of research', would have been gratified by the outcome. A 'vibrant research culture' dominated by monitoring of 'outputs' and by research projects with discrete 'aims and objectives' as required by funding bodies would have seemed to him just as alien to the philosophical life as were the endless board and committee meetings and the examination and prize-awarding culture of Victorian Oxford; 'all the objects of science and learning, for which a university exists, being put out of sight by the consideration of the material means of endowing them'.³⁴ The urge to be busy – whether in marking scripts and attending examination boards, or in giving an endless round of international conference papers and completing the latest research outputs – is always, Pattison would have thought, a betrayal of the academic's vocation to *think*. He was too much of an idealist, and too easily repulsed by pragmatic compromise, to be an effective reformer; and he offered no practical blueprint for change. His insistence on the spiritual and ascetic aspects of the academic's vocation seems remote from today's concerns. But in his ability to articulate an ideal of academic life he had a prophetic quality which remains as resonant today as it was to the Victorians. He warns us not to become so caught up in the machinery by which academic life is conducted that we forget the ends for which it exists.

There is a literature on Pattison, but it belongs essentially to the 1950s and 60s, and is dominated by the work of two memorable Oxford college heads, John Sparrow and Vivian Green.³⁵ There was no hagiographical 'life and letters' published in the shadow of his death: his widow, who quickly

³⁴ Mark Pattison, *Memoirs* (London: Macmillan, 1885), p. 90.

³⁵ John Sparrow, *Mark Pattison and the Idea of a University* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); V. H. H. Green, *Oxford Common Room: A Study of Lincoln College and Mark Pattison* (London: Arnold, 1957); V. H. H. Green, *Love in a Cool Climate: The Letters of Mark Pattison and Meta Bradley 1879–1884* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).