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R. L. Archer

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

THE DAWN

ENGLISH education is very old—older than the State, older than every national institution save the Church. Yet so completely had its antiquity been forgotten that, till a few years ago, it was believed to go back only to the Renaissance. Mr Leach has changed all this: we now know that the supply of grammar schools was greater, in proportion to the population, in the Middle Ages than at any subsequent period up to the Education Act of 1902. The past has come to its own again; and there is some danger that we may under-rate the work of more recent times. Institutions are not like plants which grow from a seed into a pre-determined shape: they are transformed into something radically different by a creative period, and such a period was the nineteenth century. The mediaeval State did not spontaneously develop into modern democracy, but was reshaped by the ideas of the French Revolution: mediaeval religion did not evolve into the beliefs held by the majority of Englishmen to-day, as Newman claimed that it developed into modern Romanism, merely by making explicit what had previously been implicit. Both State and Church have been changed by the influence of new ideas; and these new ideas have been due to original thinkers, to the influence of other nations, and to the effects of changes in one compartment of life upon another. So it has been with education. If we took away either from present-day educational ideals or from their realisation in schools and universities all that is due to influences which have become operative since 1789, how little would be left as an inheritance to the twentieth century from the eighteenth! A mere enumeration of these modern influences would be a long task. Changes in political and religious thought, changes in social life and

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[More information](#)

aspirations; the French Revolution and the Liberal movement; Evangelicalism, the Oxford movement, and Broad Church views; the discoveries of modern science; the Industrial Revolution, and the revolution in means of communication; the fuller understanding of ancient thought, the growth of national self-consciousness, and the altered outlook on the universe created by modern geology and biology; the increasing knowledge of hygienic and psychological principles; a fuller consciousness both of the value of the individual and of the possibilities of the State:—all these influences have been brought to bear on education either for the first time or with increased force during the last hundred and thirty years.

There is a peculiar difficulty in studying a recent period that these broad influences may elude our grasp. We may lose the wood in the trees. Particular events, acts of parliament, prominent individuals, may attract our attention too much. The very nearness of the period makes the details stand out too closely; we may fail to appreciate the general structure of the building. But it is only by recognising the broad influences that we are able to interpret as well as to know past events, and it is only by interpretation that we can use the past as a guide to the future.

This danger of laying over-much stress on events which can be named and dated is particularly insidious in the present case because it tends to put State action in the forefront of the changes which have taken place in education during the last century. State action is now peculiarly in favour; and large numbers of persons are brought into contact with education as holders of administrative posts or as members of administrative committees. They are therefore inclined to look at education as a machine built by the State and driven by the bodies controlling local government. The history of education, provided it be truly the history of education and not the history of educational legislation, should help to rectify any such one-sided view. It should reveal the vitalising forces which were the true source of educational energy; it should endeavour to establish the extent to which education has been affected

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

i]

THE DAWN

3

by the work of individual men and women; it should show by what forces legislators and administrators have been driven.

A study of English higher education in the nineteenth century involves then keeping the balance even between three kinds of topic; intellectual and social movements which have affected education, the work of individual endeavour, and the action of the State. Three of the chapters which follow take great movements as their starting-point. Two¹ of them are concerned with the intellectual movements which affected the two great divisions of study, the humanities and the natural sciences; one² deals with movements which are more of a social character. The humanistic movement in education which revived the older universities and schools was a meeting-point of the new political, religious, and aesthetic enthusiasms of the early part of the century; the scientific movement in education which created new subjects of study and new institutions to teach them was the outcome of the great advances in science itself. The social movements produce their effect later, and we have grouped them round the well-known names of Matthew Arnold, Ruskin, Maurice, and Kingsley. In the early part of the period these movements were brought to bear on education almost entirely by the creative genius of individuals; and four chapters are devoted mainly, but not entirely, to their work. In each case one or two individuals have been peculiarly originators, though many persons have taken a share in the building. These chapters³ deal with the revival of the public schools in the thirties and forties, the creation of new types, the work of individual endeavour in boys' schools after the middle of the century, and the reform of girls' and women's education. Finally the part played by the State is examined in two chapters⁴, of which one deals with the reform of old institutions as a result of the Royal Commissions which sat during the fifties and sixties, and the other with the great extension of educational facilities

¹ chs. II, v.² ch. VII.³ chs. III, IV, VIII, IX.⁴ chs. VI, XII.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

by more recent legislation: and another chapter¹, on popular and technical education, is largely of the same character².

It may be well to indicate at the beginning the part which the reader will probably judge at the end that each of these three factors has played. The State cannot create ideas, and rarely has it been the first agency to realise them in concrete institutions. Its main function has been to multiply copies of the successful experiments which have been made by individuals. Though a State official who was also a creative genius in educational matters is conceivable, no example can be produced from English history during the nineteenth century³. The creative work of devising new types of educational institution, new curricula, and new methods of teaching and government has been mainly the work of individuals, such as Birkbeck the founder of Mechanics' Institutes, Maurice the author of the Working Men's College, Hogg the originator of polytechnics, Thomas Arnold who discovered how the elder boys could transmit the headmaster's influence to the younger, Thring who discovered how the aesthetic and practical subjects could be made a vehicle of education, or Miss Beale the creator of the first public school for girls⁴. State-created institutions have been either copies or failures⁵. But the individuals who built up the institutions have been largely inspired by ideas which originated outside the scholastic circle; hence such men as Ruskin or

¹ ch. x.

² The chapters on Welsh education (xi) and on changes in curriculum and method do not fall under any of the three headings.

³ Matthew Arnold seems to "prove the rule." He was an educational official and he was a great force in changing educational ideals: but he exercised his main influence not through what he did as an inspector, but by his leisure occupation as a literary critic!

⁴ If the volume took in elementary education, we should add the names of Robert Owen, Dr Barnardo and Baden-Powell (Froebel and Montessori being foreigners).

⁵ Had it not been for "schools of science" the last two words could be omitted, as there is nothing distinctive in any other State-created institution.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1]

THE DAWN

5

Huxley claim as large a part in the history of education as the great teachers or founders of schools and colleges.

Probably the nearest approach which the State has made to originality in the sphere of education is to be found in the activities of the various Royal Commissions. Not even the most pronounced individualist would deny the capacity of the State to choose a number of the most thoughtful men in the country, to induce them for a limited time to devote their concentrated attention to a particular topic, and to give them facilities for collecting all available evidence and for coming into contact with all opinions worth having. It is probable too that these bodies of enquirers reached conclusions in their corporate capacity which no single member would have attained for himself. But it must be remembered that such conclusions only crystallised the thought of half-a-century on the problems concerned; and that their effect was produced quite as much by their influence on public opinion and through the subsequent action of individuals as through the legislative and administrative changes to which they gave rise.

* * * * *

A comprehensive glance at the state of British universities and secondary schools between 1789 and 1815 reveals one outstanding feature. They do not reflect any ideals of their own age. No new driving power had come to them for a century and a half. To understand them we have to go back to the Renaissance. As early as the first half of the seventeenth century there had come a loss of faith in the educational ideals of classical humanism; by the second half of that century intellectual and moral enthusiasm was exhausted; and low-water mark was reached in the middle of the eighteenth century. After that point moral energy was gathering power, but it was still unable to cope with the tremendous force of inertia. Existing higher education, then, at the beginning of the nineteenth century represented tradition. It was there because it had been there for two centuries and no one had arisen to alter it.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

We will consider the state of the universities first. In the days of Queen Elizabeth they seemed about to enter on a period of new vigour. These hopes were not destined to be fulfilled. Many explanations have been given. Controversialists¹ in the first half of the nineteenth century found the reason in the changes which took place in their constitution, by which the powers hitherto exercised by the whole body of resident masters of arts were transferred to a council of heads of colleges. Others, anxious to point a moral to modern times, have explained it as due to State intervention. The dissipation of energy in religious controversies has been put forward with a greater show of probability as the reason. None of these explanations appears to go to the root of the matter. A system of studies which possessed an inherent vitality should have been able to offer a more vigorous resistance to external circumstances. A fervid belief in the worth of classical pursuits would not have allowed itself to be overwhelmed by religious quarrels. We are more likely therefore to find the true explanation of the stagnation which crept over the English universities in some lack of stimulating power in the new curriculum. Two features give us the clue. The first is the *exclusiveness* of humanism. Its literary ideal appealed only to the few. In spite of its claims to be a guide of life, it never touched the hearts of Englishmen. It did not, like the older Scholasticism, offer a rational explanation of the universe which would support their religion. Content was entirely subordinate to form. There was no study of ancient history. Classical scholarship advanced, but it was left to the Germans of the late eighteenth century to discover the true significance of Greek literature. The second feature is the character of post-Renaissance philosophy. The universities, when they abandoned Scholasticism, did not, as a thorough-going humanism might have done, abandon philosophy. Nor did they even give up Aristotle: for it was a canon of Renaissance teaching that all knowledge worth acquiring

¹ *E.g.* Sir William Hamilton whose articles are collected in his *Discussions*, 1852.

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R. L. Archer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I]

THE DAWN

7

was contained in the ancient writers. They merely substituted the genuine Aristotle for scholastic Aristotelianism. The recognition of a single writer as the infallible standard of philosophic, and for a time even of scientific, truth substituted a more rigid authority for that measure of originality which, within fixed limits, stimulated the student of scholastic philosophy. The Middle Ages trained the undergraduate in original speculation, though they forbade him to use the power which they had given him; the Renaissance Aristotle dulled his mind by bidding him blindly accept the written text. A revival could only come with a new inspiration.

The loss of intellectual interests made the way easy for a lowering of the moral tone. The "poor scholar" had nothing to attract him to the university. His place was taken by the sons of the aristocracy whose interest in study was small. In the Middle Ages the nobility had been the exception, middle class students abounded, and the children of the labourer were not unknown. In the course of the eighteenth century, the poor boy came to be regarded as a tolerated addition: he was often a "servitor," and was bitterly conscious of being among his social superiors. The land-owning class were regarded as the natural denizens. They entered the university, not to feed on solid intellectual food, but to enjoy a costly luxury. While they were there, they naturally did what other young men of their class were doing elsewhere. So far from being formed by the ethos of the university, they brought it its ethos. It was merely the atmosphere of the London coffee-house transferred to Oxford or Cambridge. Extravagance, debt, drunkenness, gambling, and an absurd attention to dress became the special forms of irregularity favoured by the gentlemen commoners, whose ranks were swollen by the *nouveaux riches* at the end of the century. Even fellows of colleges spent much of their time in the tavern. Work ceased at dinner time, which meant eleven o'clock at the beginning of the century, and two or three hours later at the end. By the middle of the century the interest in his pupils which the better type of tutor still

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

displayed in the days of Whitefield and Johnson had vanished.

The intellectual decadence was greater at Oxford than at Cambridge. Vicesimus Knox's account of the tests for the Oxford degree is well-known¹. In form they were a combination of the mediaeval disputation and an oral examination. There were three stages: the first constituted the candidates "sophs," the second conferred the bachelor's degree, and the third the master's. For the sophomore test two candidates were paired off as "opponent" and "respondent" in a disputation. The arguments, Knox tells us, "consisted of foolish syllogisms on foolish subjects" of which the candidate knew nothing, "handed down from generation to generation on long slips of paper." Armed with these the two disputants betook themselves to a "large dusty room" where "not once in a hundred times does any officer enter; and, if he does, he hears one syllogism or two and then makes a bow and departs." For the rest of the time the candidates read a novel or carved their names on the desks. Passing was a matter of course. The bachelor's degree involved a *viva voce* examination; but this was conducted by three masters of arts of the candidate's own choice, and it was "considered good management to get acquainted with two or three jolly young masters of arts and to supply them with port previous to the examination." It was indeed usual to obtain little cram-books containing "forty or fifty" traditional questions on each subject and to spend three or four days in memorising them, and there was a perfunctory construe of a passage from a classical author; but the turning of familiar English phrases into Latin which ended the proceedings seems merely to have fulfilled the rôle of the satyric play which followed an Athenian trilogy. "I have known," says Knox, "the questions to consist of an enquiry into the pedigree of a race-horse." The test for the master's degree involved both a disputation and an examination, which were no better than those at the earlier stages, as well as a "declamation." Originally the M.A. degree had

¹ *Essays, Moral and Literary*, vol. 1, Essay 77.

Cambridge University Press

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R. L. Archer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I]

THE DAWN

9

been at the same time a license and an obligation to teach within the university, and the declamation was the proof of the candidate's ability to lecture. In Knox's day, however, "it was always called a wall lecture, because the lecturer had no other audience than the walls," though he "gets a sheet or two of Latin from some old book" to read should the proctor come in. Knox is clearly no favourable critic, but he is supported by the evidence of men of such different standpoints as Gibbon, Adam Smith, Malmesbury, and Eldon, while no effective defence has ever been put forward. If we wish to picture Oxford in the year when George III ascended the throne, we must imagine a university in which professors had ceased to lecture, where tutors regarded an enquiring student as a nuisance, and where work was the last thing expected.

Cambridge never sank quite so low as Oxford, and the revival came earlier. The causes of decay were the same; but Cambridge received a stimulus from the genius of Newton which Oxford lacked. It may be observed in passing that the call of Bacon, the herald of experimental science, did not seriously affect either university; for the non-mathematical sciences had no point of contact with the old curriculum, nor did they satisfy the demand for logical certainty, to which four centuries of training in dialectic had habituated the academic mind. But mathematics was part of the old quadrivium, and its development and application supplied just that stimulus which was suited to the time. It proceeded on strict syllogistic lines, yet it was progressive and yielded new truths; further, it gave a comprehensive explanation of the material order of the universe through astronomy, which men had in different directions been long seeking. Unfortunately Newton lived in a slack age and three-quarters of a century was needed to reveal the full force of the new driving power. But by the second half of the eighteenth century mathematics was established as the dominant study in Cambridge. This necessitated the substitution of a new type of exercise for the old disputation and between 1766 and 1833 the modern type of written examination was

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

gradually evolved. In 1800 Oxford adopted the same kind of test, and the revival of the university was believed to date from that event. Later, the written examination, which originated simply as the easiest means of testing the power of solving mathematical problems, was everywhere adopted as an educational panacea.

Since the system was long regarded, not merely as a sign of returning life, but as its cause, it is desirable to trace its growth a little more fully. Dr Jebb of Trinity describes it as it existed in 1772¹. Disputation and examination were still combined, and the latter was mainly oral. The disputations were begun in the second term of the candidate's last year, when the "moderators," as the examiners were called, conducted them on five afternoons a week. The candidates received a fortnight's notice. One acted as "respondent" and three as "opponents." The respondent submitted in advance three propositions which he was prepared to maintain, and read a short Latin thesis on one of them. He then disputed with his three opponents in turn, the discussion commencing in strict syllogistic form, but "sliding into free and unconfined debate" as it proceeded. Marks were recorded, on the strength of which the candidates were divided into groups for the examination. This was conducted in English. All candidates were questioned orally on the first six books of Euclid, elementary algebra, trigonometry, mechanics, hydrostatics, astronomy, and optics; and "a very superficial knowledge in morality and metaphysics" was expected, involving a few questions on Locke, Butler, or Clarke. The colleges took a share in the examination, each appointing one of its tutors as "father." The university moderators and the college fathers met at breakfast and dinner to discuss the merits of the candidates, the best of whom were eventually divided into three classes. The best twenty-eight usually formed the first two classes, Wranglers and Senior Optimes, and the next twelve the Junior Optimes. The system was obviously not the farce which Knox describes at Oxford;

¹ Whewell, *A Liberal Education*, Part 1, chapter 3, sect. 1, §§ 192–209.