A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH FACULTY

Remembering his undergraduate days at Oxford in the late 1950s, Alan Coren recalls the 'true happiness in life' which marked those years. Studying English involved 'nothing more arduous than sitting under a tree and reading books that one would otherwise have read for pleasure, and, at the end of three years, showing off about them to grown ups.'

English studies at Oxford were not always marked by such serenity. Helen Gardner, who held the Professorship of English from 1966 to 1975, noted in her Inaugural Lecture that 'It cannot be said that the origins of the Oxford English School were entirely happy.' Indeed, the pleasure involved in reading English so evocatively portrayed by Alan Coren was often used to discredit a subject whose beginnings at Oxford were bitterly disputed. Though English studies were established in London (at University College –then known as London University- and at King's College) in the 1820s and 30s, the Oxford English School was established as late as 1894, after decades of controversy.

The Oxford English School came into existence as a result of a number of pressures, which came both from society at large, and from the closed and largely conservative inner circle of colleges and dons. The first of these pressures was the spectre of the French Revolution and a more or less stated fear of violent class struggle among the upper echelons of English society. Education in general was in much greater demand in the nineteenth-century than it had been previously, and many (most notably Matthew Arnold) saw the promotion of the study of English in both schools and adult teaching institutes as a means of keeping a class-ridden society united by a sense of belonging to a common nation and a common literary tradition. In addition, with rapid industrial and technological changes underway, the need was felt for a civilizing counterweight to the dry knowledge required by working life in an industrialized society. The workers themselves, who had been receiving education in Mechanics' Institutes throughout the country since their foundation in the 1820s, were increasingly demanding instruction in English Language and Literature as a kind of food for the soul more accessible and more immediately pleasurable than the more traditional grounding in the classics –which was being imparted with decreasing levels of success across the nation's schools. For the same reasons, the University Extension Lecturing movement, whose purpose was to make higher education available to the working classes, began to offer English classes alongside its other more traditional subjects.

As all this was going on, another important factor in the rise of English studies was at work: the status of women was changing. The Victorian ideal of women as carers and educators, as humanizing mothers to the nation's children, still held hard, but more and more women were finding employment, and one of the rare fields which was open to them was that of education (though the profession of university teaching remained a man's privilege for decades). Entrusting the teaching of English Language and Literature to these women was seen as an ideal way of combining their employed positions as school-teachers with a subject which was seen as intrinsically civilizing. From the late 1870s, Oxford held special English examinations for women seeking qualifications for such employment –but these were external examinations only, and distinct from traditional Honours Examinations. When the School of English was finally founded in 1894, women who had been studying for these exams under the aegis of the Association for *the* Promotion *of the* Education *of* Women in Oxford , poured in, vastly outnumbering the male students of the school for the first decade of its existence.

The third factor in the increasing demand for higher education courses in English Language and Literature came from the India Civil Service. In 1855, the Civil Service of the East India Company decided to set public examinations for the selection of candidates to some of its

most lucrative posts. These were intended to ensure that the Service's representatives abroad would be familiar with the language and literature of their country, and be able ‘to show the extent of their knowledge of our poets, wits and philosophers'. The impact of this decision was felt in Oxford, where dons noticed that their best students –who should have been absorbed in preparation for that nineteenth-century gem in the Oxford academic crown, classical ‘Greats'- were being distracted by preparation for these new examinations.

With all these groups clamouring at the gates of Oxford and Cambridge for the provision of instruction in English (and vitally needed university-trained English teachers), a debate began to rage within Oxford as to whether an English School should be set up, and if so, as to how it should be organized, taught, and examined. The first problem to contend with was the contempt in which English studies were held at the university. Seen as the ‘soft option', a woman's subject, and the ‘poor man's Classics', it was derided for its supposed lack of substance, and for the problems it was thought to present in terms of assessment. E. A Freeman, an opponent of the proposed School, warned of devoting an Oxford institution to ‘mere chatter about Shelley': ‘There are many things fit for a man's personal study, which are not fit for University exams. One of them is “literature” (…) we cannot examine in tastes and sympathies'. In fact, even some of those who stood up for the School defended it in derogatory terms. Thus, it was argued that an English School would not interfere with the ‘Greats' School and, furthermore, that ‘it would be really advantageous if it drew off the weaker candidates.' Similarly, one commentator recommended the School on the condescending grounds that ‘ the women should be considered, and the second and third-rate men who were to become schoolmasters.'

As debates about the suitability of establishing an English Honours School went on, those in favour of the School were failing to arrive at any satisfactory agreement as to how such a School should be organized and what its main emphases should be. John Churton Collins, an Oxford graduate and University Extension Lecturer who campaigned ceaselessly through the 1880s and 90s for an Oxford English Honours School, envisaged a School which would rest firmly on the foundations of ‘Greats' (with students having to sit Classics Moderations exams before being allowed to join the English School), but differentiate itself from Philology – already heavily represented at Oxford. When, in the eye of the storm, the Merton Professorship of English Language and Literature was established in 1884, Collins hoped to see a ‘literary' man appointed to act as a counterweight to the already existing Chair of Anglo-Saxon (which had been in place since as early as 1795). But it was a German-trained philologist, A . S. Napier, who was appointed. Collins reacted in a passionate manifesto, ‘ The Study of English Literature' (1891), in which he called once again for an English School which would allow for the study of literature as well as language, and which would see English set firmly in the context of Greek and Latin as well as other Modern European Languages.

When the School's existence was finally written into the University Statutes of 1894 and the first exams held in 1896, the course was heavily biased on the side of language and philology. One anonymous pamphlet presented itself as

A Perilous Protest

Against

Certain Lewd Fellows of the Baser Sort, banding

Themselves together under the name of

‘Philologists'.

It opens with a plea for students to be able to choose to focus on either English Language or English Literature:

The school of English Lang. and Litt.

In our opinion should be split,

For he who has the sort of wit

To score a bit on English Litt.,

Is not, egad, the kind of man

To babble Lithuanian.

The course remained largely unchanged however, and, faced with the indifference of Oxford colleges and very small numbers of students (most of whom were women), the School only just survived its first few years. In the first decade of the twentieth century, things improved under the Professorship of Walter Raleigh. In 1909, an English Fund was set up at his instigation. This enabled the foundation of a Faculty Library in 1914. The library's collection was housed near Blackwell's on Broad Street to begin with, before moving to the attics of the Examination Schools, and finally to the St Cross Building, which provided the room needed for expansion, and where it is still to be found today. With the Bodleian close at hand and the gradual development of individual college libraries, this development made it possible for Helen Gardner (Professor of English Literature, 1966-75), to assert that ‘anyone reading English at Oxford, whether undergraduate or graduate, has more access to books than in any university I know of here or abroad.' The School derived additional strength from the unusually high number of graduates carrying out research within the Faculty from its very earliest days. Good relations were fostered by Faculty members with the Bodleian Library staff and this soon led to the emergence of a strong bibliographical critical tradition in Oxford.

After the First World War, the English School grew dramatically as a result of a general resurgence of interest in English culture. Literary criticism came under the influence of new schools of thought in other areas of knowledge, most notably psychology and sociology. But the real post-war revolution in English studies came from Cambridge and the 1920s and 30s school of ‘practical criticism', which took shape under I. A Richards and F.R. Leavis. Works became ‘texts' or ‘objects', and literary criticism was said to verge on the scientific. Cambridge still retains its theoretical bias, while the Oxford School retains a penchant for the historical, the textual, and the bibliographical. In the first part of the century, many of the School's members were involved in the compilation of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (then known as the *New English Dictionary*).

In the wake of the Second World War, the Faculty mushroomed again. Professionalization continued, with graduates and professors at Oxford coming under increasing pressure to publish at all stages of their career. A hundred critical theories (structuralism, deconstruction, postmodernism, feminism, post colonialism) contended for attention. In 1967, Helen Gardner hinted at the desirability of interdisciplinary approaches, and at undergraduate level, these were encouraged by the foundation of Joint Schools degrees: English can now be read in conjunction with Classics, Modern Languages, and Modern History . In 1992, Terry Eagleton (then Thomas Wharton Professor of English Literature) called for an even greater accommodation of interdisciplinary interests, especially at graduate level, noting that ‘much of the most interesting postgraduate work in the humanities now being carried out here is departmentally vagrant, constantly transgressing subject-areas.'

By the 1950s and 1960s, English studies no longer bore the academic stigma of being thought of as a ‘soft option'. Martin Amis, who studied English in the 1960s, was a feverish, if

irregular, worker. He remembers ‘working practically around the clock' in preparation for Prelims (first-year examinations). But as he himself acknowledges, with the work of the English student comes the ‘unique freedom of Oxford ': ‘you don't have to account for more than, say, ninety minutes a week for eighteen weeks a year. That's about three days out of three years of your life.' If the flocks of poets and writers that have, in the course of the last century, come out of the Oxford English School are anything to judge by, it is a freedom that is often put to excellent literary use.

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