

Constructing a new university tradition: the curious emergence of "democratic intellectualism" as the distinctive mark of the Scottish universities in the 19th century

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A royal commission on the Scottish universities, the first on higher education in Britain in the 19th century, was appointed in 1826 and reported in 1830. Its report provides an unparalleled critique, carefully framed and intelligently incisive, of the state of the five Scottish college-universities which had been founded in the 15th and 16th centuries. It is a good starting point for our search after the principles and ethos of "democratic intellectualism" which has been claimed as a singular, ancient and distinctively Scottish inheritance - distinctive, especially, in any comparison with Oxford or Cambridge or Trinity College, Dublin, within the United Kingdom. And the commissioners themselves, in 1826-30, were sharply and sensitively aware of the distinctiveness of what they found, and were heartily in favour of retaining it where it clearly supported the national interest. Indeed, the universities were - as they noted - above all, national assets:[1]

There are few National Institutions of long-standing which have been more powerfully modified by the circumstances of the country than the Universities of Scotland; and they have undoubtedly been gradually adapted in an eminent degree to the particular demands upon them, arising from the circumstances of the people for whose benefit they were designed...

So, then, the universities had "adapted in an eminent degree" and it is plain from the volumes of evidence which the commission took, that these adaptations had mostly taken place comparatively recently - over the two generations or so since the mid-18th century. Thus, while modern commentators such as George Davie,[2] and especially his followers,[3] have wanted to stress the long-term stability and the antiquity of the universities' inheritance in curriculum and teaching styles in the early 19th century, the commissioners were notably aware of the relatively recent character of so many of the changes which had overtaken them. The colleges had been especially sensitive and responsive to popular pressures on them since the 1750s: and of that the

commissioners approved - with slight misapprehensions only where professorial interests had tended, on the back of customer-demand, to overcome or thwart the wider national interest. The commissioners were also aware of the fact (which Davie *et al* ignore) that the changes made since c1750 had not been adopted uniformly in all the colleges, and there was always the danger that an overbearing local self-interest be found acting against that national interest. Thus the two Aberdeen universities and St Andrews had developed (e.g. had 'modernised' their curricula) in generally similar ways, more adventurously than the much larger universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, while Edinburgh and its town council overseers had been following a path which saw it drift further away from its once-shared roots with the others. In effect, the customer-bases of the five universities had distinctive characteristics and were sometimes driving developments which might not always be judged as being for the common good. Nonetheless, it was certainly still true that, as a group, the Scottish universities were very distinctively and recognisably Scottish; and that distinctiveness was founded essentially in their "democratic intellectualism" (a term not coined, it should be noted, until the 1930s). What, then, did the commissioners uncover which can highlight and help us to define that concept? The main attributes were without doubt the astonishingly wide and open access to university studies in Scotland in the 1820s.

There were, first of all, no marked religious constraints on enrolment or attendance. The Scottish universities were no longer "ecclesiastical institutions". There were no religious tests on students at matriculation; appointments to all university offices were open to protestant laymen, except for professorships in Divinity; hardly any vestiges were left of the once-expected "communal or corporate" attendance at college chapels on Sundays, and there was minimal (and generally avoidable) religious observance on weekdays. Students of all sectarian affiliations and none, from Scotland, from other parts of the UK and from abroad, happily sat together on the college benches.[4]

Secondly, attendance on university courses in Scotland was remarkably cheap, and thus very widely attainable. Matriculation and class fees were very low, and numbers of small bursaries or scholarships (to cover a four-year Arts course) were available, mostly awarded by open competition. The last remains of expensive collegiate living and dining had also disappeared by

the late 18th century - and with this any real institutional "discipline" over students, save what was still exercised in the classroom. Those attending universities in Scotland were or could be, very unusually in the UK, all but "anonymous", their formal contacts in college being mainly confined (sometimes only fleetingly) to a succession of individual class-teachers and to a few chosen fellow-students.

Again, the fact that all the Scottish universities were located in towns - albeit, both St Andrews and King's College in Old Aberdeen in very small burghs - had its impact too. With collegiate living at an end, it had become common for substantial numbers of students to stay (very inexpensively) at home with their parents, and thus remain under *their* general supervision; others, distant from home, readily enough found cheap lodgings (which they might well share with non-university and non-academic companions). Considerable numbers of the urban middle-classes expected to send their sons to the local university: so that geographical accessibility as well as cheapness - allied to an underlying cultural motivation - made university attendance in Scotland a common experience among 'respectable' urban youth in New Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Outside the main towns, the same cultural and practical (occupational) drives operated - with parents scrimping to pay for their able sons to go to college, to advance themselves socially through an extended education, perhaps looking to unload them during the six-month college-sessions on long-suffering relatives who had migrated to or near university towns.

This openness of access took on particularly Scottish forms in other ways. There were very few, and even then very unimportant, connections between particular schools and particular colleges - there were no reserved places, few or no special arrangements. There were no entrance examinations - at least before Marischal College in New Aberdeen hesitantly introduced one in 1825 - and thus no effective means of testing prior learning except, only incidentally, through bursary competitions. There was, of course, a formal course-structure, a listing of classes to be taken successively over a period of four years' study, but by the late 18th century this was imposed by necessity only on those few students who held bursaries. True, students intending to follow their Arts studies with courses in medicine or divinity had guidelines from those

professions about what was required or heavily recommended among the Arts classes. But for the great bulk of those attending the universities, from mid 18th-century onwards, there were really no effective regulations to constrain them in their choice of classes or to dictate the order in which they decided to take them. They had before them a menu of professorial lecture-classes, and they could - cafeteria-style - choose more or less as they pleased, given the restraints of timetabling. Their 'contracts' for study, such as they were, were made with individual professors; their choices were generally not questioned, nor whatever combinations of classes were chosen - since it was accepted that these were likely to depend more on their own (and their parents') interests and on their presumed occupational value than on any sense of 'academic fitness' as might be outlined or implied, for instance, in some highly-structured and universally-applied degree-course.

Furthermore, there were no age-barriers, or indeed any barriers, to enrolment in classes, especially in the large universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, other than the appropriate payment of class-fees to the professors. And no surprise was aroused if would-be students had taken a long break in their studies, perhaps years after they had left school or after an earlier period of college-attendance. The only consideration of importance to the professor, apart from the vital assurance that his fees would be paid in full, was whether they were "gowned" students or not. Gowned students were bursars; for them and for all those who also intended to follow the full and regular four-year course (with or without a view to graduation), the university regulations were supposed to ensure that greater care and effort was taken in their teaching, in their class-examination and in their general oversight. The remaining (occasional) students, who had no intention of taking a full graduating course, generally did not want to be bothered by any of the catechetical, tutorial-type classes which supplemented the lecture-hours or wish to fulfil oral or written tasks set out in the class-requirements for regular students; the occasionals, to the delight of most professors, brought no administrative demands with them.^[5] Hence, the age-range in any class might be very wide, for there were often many older men in attendance along with youths straight from school. Some in these older groups might be former students returning to prepare themselves for professional studies; or they were men who had at last struggled - from employment as teachers or shepherds or mechanics - to gather sufficient money to begin a university course; or were men

on half-pension from the army keen to expand their knowledge and skills in, say, subjects related to engineering; or they were perhaps trainees in merchant-houses released daily or as required by their employers for the lecture-hours of a particular subject such as political economy.

The commissioners summed up very well the extraordinarily varied clientele which had become so characteristic of the Scottish universities by the 1820s but which had been entirely unknown to them a century before:[6]

The Universities of Scotland have always embraced students of every variety and description; men advanced in life, who attended some of the classes for amusement or in order to recall the studies of earlier years or to improve themselves in professional education, originally interrupted; or persons engaged in the actual occupations of business, who expect to derive aid in their pursuits from the new applications of Science to the Arts; or young men not intended for any learned profession, or even going through any regular Course of University Education, but sent for one or more years to College, in order to carry their education farther than that of the schools, before they are engaged in the pursuits of trade or commerce. And all persons may attend any of the classes, in whatever order or manner may suit their different views and prospects. The system of instruction by a course of elaborate lectures on the different branches of Science and Philosophy, continued daily for a period of six months, is admirably calculated to answer all the objects which such persons have in view, as well as to afford much useful instruction to regular students.

All these, of course, in addition to (and in Edinburgh and Glasgow much more numerous than) the more 'normal' intake of students direct from schools. The laxity the commissioners discovered in the professoriates' applying older regulations, and the bewildering variability in the student body, made them pause at first; but they seem quickly to have concluded that, when university systems had so successfully 'adapted' to meet the acceptable demands of the society they were there to serve, and these adaptations were so apt and reasonable, then they should be welcomed.

Aware that by far the largest number of paying customers in the universities attended no pre-ordained degree course, but were choosing at will from all the available classes (including additional, non-curricular, 'private', and more advanced classes) and with professorial incomes almost wholly dependent on individual students' fees, the commissioners were rightly wary of suggesting any changes or reforms which would interfere with the flow of paying students into the colleges. While they made particular efforts to see to it that the regular and gowned students were given proper attention and better supervision, no attempt was made to discourage the flood of occasional students. Their report, in fact, extolled the existing system and argued strongly against any attempt to introduce unnecessary and harmful restrictions: for example,[7]

To impose one particular course and plan of study upon all students, or indeed to require the observance of any rules whatever on the part of [occasional students], would clearly be destructive of the usefulness and prosperity of the Scotch Universities, and be injurious to the interests of society. We are satisfied that no objects which could be obtained by such a change, in academical discipline or in a more systematic arrangement in the mode of teaching, or in the appearance of more of a parade of Schools of Learning, could compensate for the extensive mischief which any changes, subverting the state of things we have now described, would necessarily occasion...

The existing structure, and its merits, were not of any long-standing. In the early 18th century the Scottish universities had been small, were over-ridden with the effects of a meanly-applied patronage system, had been too much in thrall to religious (and sectarian) interests and were then only just beginning to wrench themselves away from an inhibiting inwardness. Within a century, though needing some reform, they had become liberal, popular and useful to the nation. Strange to say, it had been one very uncomfortable but ever-lasting "traditional" feature which had actually forced on the changes the commissioners had welcomed. The Scottish universities had long been miserably poor, with none of the vast endowed wealth of Oxford and Cambridge. As a result, by the 18th century they had become increasingly dependent on royal handouts - for basic repairs to otherwise ruinous buildings, for adding a little here and there to meagre salaries in modest compensation for the ravages of inflation, for establishing a very few new professorships,

and so on. Never-ending financial privation reached a new crisis point by mid-18th century when student numbers, never sufficient to offer a good living, dropped again - but for readily discernible reasons this time.[8]

The three smaller colleges, in Old and New Aberdeen and in St Andrews, found themselves losing potential and desperately-needed students to both public and private schools, some calling themselves academies, which were introducing elaborate courses in "modern" and utilitarian subjects; and, as alternatives to moribund university studies, were forming two-year advanced courses, which were advertised as coherent, useful and more intellectually demanding than college courses. In Aberdeen particularly, in both Marischal and King's Colleges, the response was to reform - to seek out those aspects of current university studies and living, which parents and their student-sons seemed to find so off-putting. Old regulatory constraints of all kinds were examined and, if not rejected, made less offensive. College-living and college-dining, as we have noted, were phased out; and further reductions in student costs were made, among other changes, by reducing the length of the session. But the new challenge from the academies gave a special place to changes in the curriculum, and to the regulation of the order of studies. The ancient curriculum was recast, with the descriptive sciences preceding all the "sciences of mind". Even that did not satisfy the principal of King's College and University in 1760, who warned that further change was necessary for survival and then for growth:[9]

It is well known that Students do attend the Universities with many Views. And now that Education is put on a more rational and useful footing, there are many Students who know nothing of either Latin or Greek. Their plans and schemes for Life do not depend on the knowledge of these Languages, and yet by attending other classes they may learn a great deal of useful Knowledge. And therefore the Principal apprehends that it is highly inexpedient, as well as unreasonable, to think of fixing down one uniform and determined scheme of education, so as to oblige every individual Student to learn the same things. The Genius and capacity of the Student, his situation and connections in Life, and the Views and inclinations of his Parents and friends must be regarded, and a great deal of Latitude must be allowed on these Accounts.... But if things are carried so

far, as to say, that no Student shall be allowed to learn Mathematics or Philosophy unless he learns Hebrew and Greek and French and Latin etc., we expose our Authority to contempt, and instead of establishing an useful plan, we do all that we can to defeat the purposes of a free and of a Liberal education.

In Glasgow and Edinburgh, serving much larger populations, there was no such critical push to reform, or at least to do so publically and formally: changes of the kind we have noted took place, but by stealth. The effects by the 1820s were much the same - if the old curriculum was formally retained for the bursars, most students chose their classes without much interference; and the introduction of part-time study in Divinity, for instance, was so liberating that it virtually removed the need for personal attendance on the professors' teaching; the commissioners, meanwhile, complained loudly that Edinburgh had jettisoned almost all worthwhile regulation of courses, of teaching and of examination of students, save by a few worthy professors who retained some remnants of conscience towards their students' best interests.

The changes in the course of the 18th century had far-reaching consequences. The rise in student numbers, allied to the lack of assessment of previous learning in enlarged classes and to the lack of effective regulation of an order of study, enforced the practice of teaching from the elements (from 'first principles', as it is sometimes regarded) throughout the curriculum. That seems to me to have arisen from very practical considerations (of the unready state of a great many of the learners) rather than out of any fine philosophical idealism about teaching-styles, despite what Davie has argued. The same question is raised by the claim that Scottish professors' teaching was emphatically generalist rather than specialist (contrasted with the classics teaching of Oxford and mathematical teaching in Cambridge) but that takes no account of the advanced teaching in particular subjects which was widely available in Scotland, in additional classes (for additional fees!) in the universities, or sometimes (taught by the same professors or their stand-ins) in private classes outside the university precincts. Teaching from first principles, generalist approaches to learning, above all the opening of university classes and thus of the instructions of professional university teachers to all and sundry, at very limited cost, have all been highlighted as the marks of "democratic intellectualism" in Scottish higher education in the early 19th

century - and so they were. But they were not well-nurtured inheritances from a distant past. Rather they were constructed in their own interests by the professors of the later 18th and early 19th centuries, who thereby pulled off a very clever trick indeed: for they converted a new practice into an ideal, and found it then transformed for posterity into a tradition. To have created an educational tradition which happened so neatly to coincide with their own economic advantage was a truly remarkable feat.[10]

Footnotes

1. *Report to His Majesty by a Royal Commission of Enquiry into the State of the Universities of Scotland* (PP, 1831), 8.
2. George Elder Davie, *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and her Universities in the nineteenth century* (Edinburgh, 1961).
3. See C. Beveridge, R. Turnbull, *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture* (Edinburgh, 1989); and especially Andrew Lockhart Walker, *The Revival of the Democratic Intellect: Scotland's university traditions and the crisis in modern thought* (Edinburgh, 1994). For a critical assessment of Davie, see R. D. Anderson, *Education and Opportunity in Victorian Scotland: schools and universities* (Oxford, 1983; repr. Edinburgh, 1989).
4. *Report into the Universities*, 8.
5. D. J. Withrington, "The Scottish Universities: living traditions? old problems renewed?" in L. Paterson, D. McCrone (eds), *Scottish Government Yearbook 1992* (Edinburgh, 1992), 132-33.
6. *Report into the Universities*, 9.
7. *Ibid.*, 9 - 10.
8. See D.J. Withrington, "Education" in N.T. Phillipson, Rosalind Mitchison (eds), *Scotland in the Age of Improvement: essays in Scottish history in the eighteenth century* (Edinburgh, 1970, 1998), 174 et seq.
9. Quoted in *ibid.*, 190 - 91.
10. Withrington, "Scottish universities", 138.