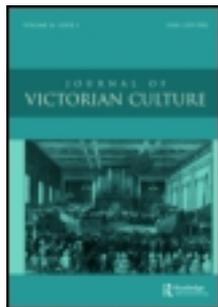


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### The Victorian University and Our Own

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## The Victorian University and Our Own

*Carol T. Christ*

The Victorian period, in both England and America, saw the establishment of many new colleges and universities. In 1836, the King ended the monopoly that Cambridge and Oxford had over the awarding of university degrees by granting a royal charter to the University of London, which had begun offering university-level instruction in 1826. Owens College, Manchester (later to become the centre of the federal Victoria University in combination with university colleges in Liverpool, Leeds, and Sheffield), admitted its first class in 1851; in 1851, John Henry Newman went to Ireland to establish a Roman Catholic university in Dublin. The University of Bristol opened in 1876; Mason College of Science, which became the University of Birmingham, in 1880. University colleges were also founded in Hull, Southampton, Reading, Nottingham, Exeter, and Leicester. Between 1848 and 1871, the first women's colleges were founded at Oxford and at Cambridge. During those same decades in the United States, many new colleges and universities were established, most notably the state land grant universities authorised by the Morrill Act of 1862 and many of the major women's colleges, including Smith College, of which I serve as president, which opened its doors in 1875.

This great expansion in higher education brought significant intellectual questions to the forefront of writing and debate. Who should be educated? What was the value of higher education? What should students study? What were the relative claims of the classics, of modern literature, of theology, of science? Much Victorian writing on these questions has for its context the founding of these new colleges and universities. John Henry Newman wrote *The Idea of a University* as a series of discourses and lectures, defining the values and aspirations of the new Catholic college that the Pope had asked him to establish in Dublin. Thomas Henry Huxley delivered 'A Liberal Education; And Where to Find It' to the South London Working Men's College in 1868; he delivered 'Science and Culture' at the opening in 1880 of Sir Josiah Mason's Science College in Birmingham. Matthew Arnold composed 'Literature and Science' in response to Huxley; it was the principal lecture that he delivered on his lecture tour of America, from October of 1883 to March of 1884. Many of the stops on that tour were colleges and universities, a significant number in the early years of their history.

On his tour of the United States, Arnold stopped to lecture at several of the new women's colleges that had just opened their doors – Wellesley, Vassar, and Smith. He was impressed by the students, and

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when he came to revise 'Literature and Science,' he inserted a sentence about women's study of Greek: 'Women will again study Greek, as Lady Jane Grey did; I believe that in that chain of forts, with which the fair host of the Amazons are now engirdling our English universities, I find that here in America, in colleges like Smith College in Massachusetts, and Vassar College in the State of New York, and in the happy families of the mixed universities out West, they are studying it already'.<sup>1</sup> In his biography of Arnold, Park Honan observes that in this lecture tour, concentrating so heavily on colleges and universities, Arnold influenced American higher education at an important moment in its development.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the way had been paved, in some cases, by careful attention to Arnold's ideas as the curricula of America's new colleges were being developed. When Smith's President Seelye introduced Arnold, he said that the occasion was particularly gratifying to him because he had consulted Arnold's essays on education when he was planning the curriculum for the new college, which had opened its doors only eight years earlier.

In reading Newman, Huxley, and Arnold in the early years of the twenty-first century, it is striking how many of the questions that concerned them still occupy us as leaders of colleges and universities: the claims of the humanities, the place of science and scientific education, the relation of science and religion, the definition of a liberal education and its relationship to the professions, the range of disciplines to be included within the university and their connection to one another.

Despite the influence that Matthew Arnold's ideas had upon the shaping of the curriculum in nineteenth-century America, they have aged less well than those of Huxley and Newman. Although Arnold's defense of the value of studying humane letters still rings true in its emphasis on their nurturing our instinct for beauty and our instinct for virtue, his opposition and subordination of the sciences to the humanities creates and sustains a sense of two oppositional cultures that colleges and universities have increasingly sought to bridge and integrate. Arnold's brilliance as a rhetorician – his ability to caricature a point of view with a quotation or an anecdote – makes his arguments about the relative value of fields of knowledge seem reductive. In 'Literature and Science', for example, he uses the following quotation from Darwin to represent scientific knowledge: 'our ancestor was a hairy quadruped furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in his habits' (64). In making claims for the humanities, Arnold identifies his scientific opponents with a conception of mankind that is less than human, trivialising the

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theory of evolution. Furthermore, Arnold's conception of culture as an abstract and absolute value has been subject to decades of critique, from the publication of Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* a half century ago.

The work of Huxley, on the other hand, seems strikingly current in the arguments it makes for the essential role that science must play in a liberal education. In 'A Liberal Education; And Where to Find It', Huxley offers a parable of a world in which life, fortune, and happiness are all dependent on knowing the game of chess. He likens science to chess, and makes a passionate plea that the foundation of education be what he calls '*Erdkunde*', knowledge of the earth, 'of its place and relation to other bodies; of its general structure, and of its great features – winds, tides, mountains, plains: of the chief forms of the vegetable and animal worlds, of the varieties of man'.<sup>3</sup> At this moment in history, with our acute awareness of the critical role that science plays in virtually every sphere of human life, Huxley's arguments for science education are remarkably resonant.

Of all the Victorian texts concerned with higher education, however, Newman's *The Idea of a University* is the most comprehensive and influential, as modern scholars of higher education have long recognized.<sup>4</sup> Newman's eloquent defense of knowledge as an end in itself and his definition of a liberal education have been absorbed into the ways in which many liberal arts colleges and universities define their mission and purpose. Newman's seventh discourse, in which he considers knowledge in relationship to professional skill, has a striking similarity not only to the substance but to the language of contemporary debates about the utility of a university education. Newman prefaces his argument by imagining a challenge from a man of the world: what is there 'to show for the expense of a University; what is the real worth in the market of the article called 'a Liberal Education?''<sup>5</sup> Newman gives an answer to this question similar to the one you would hear today: that a cultivated intellect, because it is good in itself, brings power and grace to every work and occupation (126), and that, if a practical end must be assigned to a university education, it is to train good members of society (134).

More surprising, because less common in the ways in which contemporary colleges and universities define themselves, is Newman's argument about the range of studies that universities should offer. He argues that they must offer what he calls 'the whole circle' (76). For Newman, the word 'university' conveys the belief that there is a totality to knowledge and that the aim of education is to teach comparison, discrimination, judgment of relationship. Individual disciplines grow

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by completing, correcting, and balancing one another (75). Even though students cannot pursue all the subjects that are open to them, they profit by learning from a faculty who, 'zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, are brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation' (76). Newman urges intellectual generosity, a live and let live attitude, for he feels the pursuit of knowledge needs 'elbow room' (358), a claim that he makes with particular force in regard to the relationship between science and theology. Newman's argument about the value of the pressure of disciplines upon each other offers a striking contrast to the more oppositional thinking of Huxley and Arnold on the relative claims of science and literature. Newman seems more timely today, as we contemplate the insight disciplines provide each other.

For Newman, however, the aim of the university is not scholarship but teaching; its object is 'the diffusion and the extension of knowledge rather than the advancement' (xxxvii). The place for scientific and philosophic discovery is the academy, and Newman distinguishes the intellectual labour of the two. The title of the portion of *The Idea of a University* that contains Newman's principal arguments about its mission and purpose is 'University Teaching Considered in Nine Discourses'.

Teaching in Newman's university was designed for a particular audience – the Catholic youth of Ireland. Newman's idea of a university is very much about access, for a population that had been denied it. 'Robbed, oppressed, and thrust aside, Catholics in these islands have not been in a condition for centuries to attempt the sort of education which is necessary for the man of the world, the statesman, the landholder, or the opulent gentleman' (xlii). Newman's emphasis in *The Idea of a University* on the ideal of the gentleman obscures the fact that his university project is in fact a democratising one, extending education to those who had not enjoyed such advantages. In this, he is more similar to Huxley than to Arnold, and very much part of the nineteenth-century movement, in England and the United States, to extend access to higher education, a movement that continues today.

The purpose of the education that was Newman's mission to provide the young Catholic men of Ireland was personal transformation. Education, Newman argues, 'implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character; it is something individual and permanent, and is commonly spoken of in connection with religion and virtue' (86). It creates a habit of mind that lasts through life 'of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation,

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and wisdom' (76). Newman even argues that students teach each other, quite apart from any instruction that they receive from their professors:

It is seeing the world on a small field with little trouble; for the pupils or students come from very different places, and with widely different notions, and there is much to generalise, much to adjust, much to eliminate, there are inter-relations to be defined, and conventional rules to be established, in the process, by which the whole assemblage is moulded together, and gains one tone and one character (111).

This character – which becomes the character of the institution itself – provides a double source of strength to the student, both in the stamp it impresses on his mind and the bond it creates between him and others, effects that are shared by the authorities of the institution. Here, Newman says, is 'real teaching' (111). Newman's powerful concept of the individual and the social value of institutional culture builds upon his sense of Oxford and Cambridge and the social identity they bestow; he seeks to duplicate it for a democratic purpose. This understanding of institutional identity – what he calls a 'self-perpetuating tradition, or a *genius loci*' (111) – offers a profound insight into the ways in which colleges and universities define their cultures and convey social benefits through them. Newman's experience – the deep love he had for Oxford, the benefit he took from it, and then his conversion to Catholicism – gave him the perspective of both an insider and an outsider. He understood the progressive force one might harness in building a university culture like that of Oxford for a population that had little access to educational opportunity.

On the face of it, the Victorian novel seems to have little to do with the debates about higher education important to Newman, Arnold, and Huxley. Colleges and universities seem present in Victorian fiction in only the most glancing of ways, yet because so many Victorian novels concern young men and women discovering and shaping their adult identities, they have more relevance to debates about higher education, both then and now, than might first appear.

The novel to which I have returned most often in my work as president has been George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, a book with which John Henry Newman has a surprising connection. Many scholars believe that the model for the character of Casaubon is Mark Pattison, one of the young men in Newman's circle at Oxford who felt a particularly keen sense of betrayal at Newman's conversion. Pattison's scholarly career at Oxford and his failed marriage to an idealistic woman twenty-seven years his junior (who later became Eliot's friend) gave Eliot materials for her novel. Given these materials, it is not surprising that

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university learning does not fare well in *Middlemarch*, and not only because of the caricature that Casaubon provides of scholarship. In his first speech of the novel, Mr. Brooke connects his superficial mélange of intellectual interests to his time at Cambridge ‘when Wordsworth was there’.<sup>6</sup> After failing his university examinations, Fred Vincy realizes he has no vocation as a clergyman. The Reverend Farebrother finds a more genuine intellectual life in his study of natural history than in the ministry, for which he went to university. Eliot tells us that Lydgate’s studies in London, Edinburgh, and Paris depart from the medical instruction received by the graduates of Oxford and Cambridge, and Will Ladislaw, having declined his cousin Casaubon’s offer to study at an English university, studies first at Heidelberg, then travels abroad to attain ‘culture’, and finally abandons formal education to pursue journalism and politics. Yet the questions that characterise Victorian debates about the university – the relative claims of the classics, theology, and the sciences and the power that each offers to interpret the world – provides one of the book’s underlying themes, despite the fact that the novel is set some thirty years before those debates were current in Victorian England. Casaubon, Lydgate, and even Ladislaw each looked to a single sphere of knowledge to provide a key to understanding a universe of diverse phenomena – a key to all mythologies, a primitive tissue, a kind of Arnoldian culture. Eliot is sceptical of such totalising projects that exclude other perspectives upon phenomena; she is at heart a pluralist. But like Newman, she makes knowledge the instrument of personal transformation, ‘an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character’. *Middlemarch* uses debates about the claims of different spheres of knowledge to illumine the theme of vocation. Each of the young characters of the novel is in that decade of young adulthood, into which university education falls, when men and women choose a life’s work and shape an identity through it. Eliot claims that the story of vocation has as much drama and passion, frustration and failure as the story of courtship: ‘Is it due to excess of poetry or of stupidity that we are never weary of describing what King James called a woman’s “makdom and fairnesse”, never weary of listening to the twanging of the old Troubadour strings, and are comparatively uninterested in the other kind of “makdom and fairnesse” which must be wooed with industrious thought and patient renunciation of small desires?’ (141–42, Ch. 15). The relative claims of classics, theology, natural history, the arts, and medicine all have to do with what they offer the novel’s young characters by way of education, in Newman’s sense – the formation of character through habits of mind. Because

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I am the president of a woman's college, Eliot's portrayal of women within this story of vocation has particular resonance. Dorothea's blind choice of vocation as amanuensis and helpmate to Casaubon suggests a frustrated ambition for a life of meaningful work, and the attribution of Mary Garth's book, 'Stories of Great Men, taken from Plutarch', to her husband Fred reflects ironically upon men's presumed ownership of classical knowledge.

In reflecting upon modes of intellectual understanding, Eliot has a perspective similar to Newman's. Individual disciplines, like the egoism of individual perspectives represented in her famous metaphor of the candle and the pier glass, in which the candle makes the scratches appear as if they were a concentric arrangement, can create false consonance. For Eliot, as for Newman, education teaches comparison, discrimination, relationship, in which individual modes of understanding complete, correct, and balance one another. A variety of perspectives builds appreciation of complexity, deeper understanding of difference, and, ultimately, sympathy. Eliot shares a sense with Newman of the value of intellectual generosity and the growth in understanding that results from the pressure of disciplines upon each other. Although colleges and universities are distant from the setting of *Middlemarch*, Eliot's portrayal of intellectual understanding in the evolution of her young characters has deep resonance with Newman's idea of a university.

The one Victorian novel set in the shadow of the university and haunted by it is, of course, *Jude the Obscure*. It represents the tragedy that motivates Newman's project – the young man 'robbed, oppressed, and thrust aside', who cannot enter the university to which he aspires. When Jude first arrives in Christminster, he peoples the lonely streets with luminaries of the past, none more real to him than the Tractarians, Newman chief among them. The end of the novel, when Jude lies dead with the sounds of the ceremony for the awarding of honorary degrees floating in the window, seems a stark rebuttal to the democratic project on which Newman and many of his contemporaries embarked, of extending higher education to those who had been denied it. But the story of Jude confirms the aspiration, one for which we still labor.

(Smith College)

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**Endnotes**

1. *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R.H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974), 10, 71.
2. *Matthew Arnold: A Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 399.

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3. *Science and Education: Essays* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896), 109.
4. See particularly Frank M. Turner, 'Newman's University and Ours,' in John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 282–301, and Sheldon Rothblatt, *The Modern University and its Discontents: The fate of Newman's legacies in Britain and America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
5. *The Idea of a University*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 116.
6. *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 16 (Chapter 2).

## Old Phrases and Great Obscenities: The Strange Afterlife of Two Victorian Anxieties

*Peter D. McDonald*

[Criticism] obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever.<sup>1</sup>

I think the test of obscenity is this, whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall.<sup>2</sup>

The repercussions of these two pronouncements, which redefined the relationship between the Victorian state and the field of culture, reverberated well into the twentieth century. Matthew Arnold's testy call in 1864 for the 'English' to establish a tradition of 'real criticism' in order to determine and promote 'the best that is known and thought in the world' not only made its mark on Victorian debates about culture, democracy and education.<sup>3</sup> It laid the foundations for the move towards the public patronage of literature and the arts in mid-twentieth-century Britain, contributed to the thinking behind the formation of the BBC in the early 1920s (via Lord Reith) and the Arts Council two decades later (via John Maynard Keynes), and influenced the teaching of English literature in universities throughout the Anglophone world for over a century (via F. R. Leavis). The 'test of obscenity', which Sir Alexander Cockburn proposed as Chief Justice in 1868 during the *Regina v. Benjamin Hicklin* case, proved no less consequential. Initially designed to protect what Cockburn called 'the public mind' of Victorian England, it shaped the laws against obscene publications, again throughout the Anglophone world, and dominated