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The New Idea of a University

By Ian Robinson, Duke Maskell

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Something has gone deeply wrong with the university - too deeply wrong to be put right by any merely bureaucratic means. What's wrong is, simply, that our official idea of education, the idea that inspires all government policies and 'initiatives', is itself uneducated. With the growing emphasis in higher education on training in supposedly useful skills, has the very ethos of the university been subverted? And does this more utilitarian university succeed in adding to the national wealth, the basis on which politicians justify the large public expenditure on the higher education system? Should we get our idea of a university from politicians and bureaucrats or from J.H. Newman, Jane Austen and Socrates? The New Idea of a University is an entertaining and highly readable defence of the philosophy of liberal arts education and an attack on the sham that has been substituted for it. It is sure to scandalize all the friends of the present establishment and be cheered elsewhere.

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Editorial Review

Review

"People within higher education will empathise with the disenchantment of the authors at the current state of universities in Britain."

(Richard Race *British Educational Research Journal*)

"The value of the book is in getting the reader to consider what, in the twenty-first century, the nature of a university should be. Also, to question just how a utilitarian university succeeds in adding to the nation's wealth, the basis on which huge amounts of public expenditure on higher education is justified."

(David Thompson *Educational Review*)

"Blunkett should read this book ? but he won't."

(Peter Mullen *The Spectator*)

"Perceptive, vicious, and often hilarious polemic."

(Stephen Burwood *Journal of Applied Philosophy*)

"This wonderful book should make the powers that be stop and think."

(Chris Woodhead *Sunday Telegraph*)

"May well become a seminal text in the battle to save quality education."

(Anthony Smith *Times Higher Education Supplement*)

"I think a serious claim could be made that it is the single most important essay published on the university system in the past twenty years."

(Mark Le Fanu *Cambridge Quarterly*)

"*The New Idea of a University* is a question we ought to have debated 10 or 15 years ago and still avoid."

(John Clare *Daily Telegraph*)

"A severe indictment of the current state of British universities."

(Oxford Magazine)

About the Author

Ian Robinson is Professor of Medieval History at Trinity College, Dublin.

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Preface: Anecdotes and Judgement

Ian Robinson

Thirty years ago, snootiness about American secondary and higher education was widespread in Britain. The USA was frequently used in British academic circles as a cautionary example. Mass-market culture and television-addiction were thought to have reduced the number of potential American students at the same time as their universities were being swamped by too many students. There, we thought, was the blackboard jungle: the schools had no safeguards like the nationwide standards enforced by our excellent HMIs and visible in our O- and A-level. In the richest nation on earth, students were not properly supported by the state and many had to spend time that should have been given to reading working their way through college. The USA had far too many degree-granting bodies, with the results that there were no common standards and an American first degree often meant nothing: real university work was not started until the postgraduate level, where it could be delayed even longer by things called 'taught masters degrees'. Even research work was probably vitiated by over-specialization and subordination to the department programme of some high-powered professor; but a PhD was necessary because without one work in a university was not obtainable. American academics were often without any security in their posts and were constantly pressured to publish. Our own thorns being different, these were all things we thought we had to be on guard against.

How has it happened then that we have firmly established in Britain exactly the situation we used to attribute (rightly or wrongly) to the USA? Liberal education in England may survive in the twenty-first century, not very conspicuously, at two universities. In Wales (which we know) liberal education has no prospects, and we are not optimistic about its chances in Scotland or Ireland. We think this matters.

Much of this book is what the social scientists sometimes call 'anecdotal': if we can suggest why this is a proper mode of argument part of our work is already done. History is always anecdotal. Statistics, maps, charts come in, but a genuine history is the story of the public experiences of some representative individuals. We think our anecdotes are representative. We write straight out of first-hand experience of a very few institutions and of one subject, the one that used just to be called English. Literature itself consists of anecdotes raised to the level of art. Novelists do not write about life in general, or when they do their readers lose interest, but we are certainly not going to admit that literature is not thinking; our leading example of thought about education is a novel. Literary criticism normally works by comment on well-chosen quotation which by its nature is selective. A critical book rightly practises criticism. It is also because we are offering criticism that we sometimes write in the first person singular, sometimes in the first person plural. The book is ours, a joint effort for which we are jointly responsible, but different parts arise from different individual experiences, about which we can only speak individually. I nevertheless had some embarrassment at making detailed public criticisms of colleagues with whom I have worked for many years in reasonable harmony and sometimes friendship, for judgements they made in the reasonable expectation of confidentiality. When, however, they agreed to award high classes for theorizings of a kind I demonstrate below to be intellectually disreputable, the primary university obligation to the pursuit of true judgement had to override ordinary professional reticence. I am grateful, nevertheless, for my participation in university work, and I could not have survived so long had it not been possible for most of my time.

I stuck it out, doing what I could (I say with a clear conscience), but in the end I took 'voluntary redundancy' as the alternative to 'constructive dismissal', a device that would have enabled me to argue to an 'industrial tribunal' that I had been appointed as a lecturer in English Language and Literature, but was now required to acquiesce in the awarding of degrees in nonsense. Our next step, as people still believing in liberal education, had to be to write this book.

Our hope must be that there are enough survivors of the educated class who have kept their heads down, or joined us in redundancy, to recognize the truth of what we say. We even hope that they can be persuaded to raise their heads, and make a difference. Barefaced power is important, but the educated do have great advantages in forming opinion.

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Randy Hunter:

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