

# The history of English studies

*By Peter Barry*

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It is difficult to understand liberal humanism (that is, the traditional approach to English studies, see the Introduction, pp. 3-4) without knowing something about how English developed as an academic subject. So this is the topic of the next few pages.

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The multiple choice questions below indicate the scope of what is touched upon in this section. Underline what you think are the right answers before reading further, and then correct your answers, if necessary, as you read on:

To explain the rise of English studies we need to indicate briefly what higher education was like in England until the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The short answer is that it was a Church of England monopoly. There were only two universities, Oxford and Cambridge. These were divided into small individual colleges which were run like monastic institutions. Only men could attend them, of course, and students had to be Anglican communicants and attend the college chapel. The teachers were ordained ministers, who had to be unmarried, so that they could live in the college. The subjects available were the classics (ancient Greek and Latin literature), divinity (which was taken by those seeking ordination) and mathematics. Anyone who was Catholic, Jewish, or Methodist, or atheist was barred from entry, and hence, in effect, barred from the professions and the Civil Service. As far as higher education was concerned, then, you could say that right up to the 1820s, the organisation of higher education had not changed since the Middle Ages.

Many attempts were made to reform the situation, expand higher education, and introduce practical subjects into the curriculum, but they all came up against entrenched conservative forces. The breakthrough came in 1826 when a University College was founded in London with a charter to award degrees to men and women of all religions or none. From 1828 English was offered as a subject for study, and they appointed the first English Professor of English in 1829. However, it was not really English as we know it. It was mainly the study of English language, merely using literature as a source of linguistic examples. English literature as such was first taught at King's College, London (another college of what later became London University) beginning in 1831.

In 1840 F. D. Maurice was appointed Professor at King's. He introduced the study of set books, and his inaugural lecture lays down some of the principles of liberal humanism; the study of English literature would serve 'to emancipate us ... from the notions and habits which are peculiar

to our own age', connecting us instead with 'what is fixed and enduring'. Maurice regarded literature as the peculiar property of the middle class and the expression of their values. For him the middle class represents the essence of Englishness (the aristocracy are part of an international elite, and the poor need to give all their attention to ensuring mere survival) so middle-class education should be peculiarly English, and therefore should centre on English literature. Maurice was well aware of the political dimension of all this. People so educated would feel that they belonged to England, that they had a country. 'Political agitators' may ask what this can mean 'when his neighbour rides in a carriage and he walks on loot', but 'he will feel his nationality to be a reality, in spite of what they say'. In short, learning English will give people a stake in maintaining the political *status quo* without any redistribution of wealth.

You can see from this that the study of English literature is being seen as a kind of substitute for religion. It was well known that attendance at church below middle-class level was very patchy. The worry was that the lower classes would feel that they had no stake in the country and, having no religion to teach them morality and restraint, they would rebel and something like the French Revolution would take place. The Chartist agitation of the 1830s was thought to be the start of this, and the first English courses are put in place at exactly the same time.

The conventional reading of the origins of the subject of English is that this kind of thinking begins with Matthew Arnold in the 1850s and reaches its height with the publication of the Newbolt Report on the Teaching of English in England in 1921. It is evident from material like Maurice's inaugural lecture that this was happening much earlier. However, I do not accept the simplistic view that the founders of English were motivated merely by a desire for ideological control. This was undoubtedly one of their motives, but the reality was much more complicated. There was, behind the teaching of early English, a distinctly Victorian mixture of class guilt about social inequalities, a genuine desire to improve things for everybody, a kind of missionary zeal to spread culture and enlightenment, and a self-interested desire to maintain social stability.

London University degrees were taught by external licence at university colleges in major industrial cities - Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, and so on, all these places eventually becoming major universities in their own right. Hence the spread of the subject at degree level throughout the country. However, Oxford and Cambridge were suspicious of the new subject of English and held out against it, Oxford until 1894 and Cambridge until 1911.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century there was vigorous discussion and campaigning to establish a Chair in English at Oxford. In 1887 the first attempt was defeated largely because of a speech in the Convocation by the Professor of History, Edward Freeman. Freeman's speech is another key document: it touches upon several problems in English which are still unresolved. He said:

We are told that the study of literature 'cultivates the taste, educates the sympathies and enlarges the mind'. These are all excellent things, only we cannot examine tastes and sympathies. Examiners must have technical and positive information to examine.

This is a problem which has never been entirely solved in English. What, exactly, is its knowledge component? As a way of attaching specific and technical information to the study of English, early supporters had advocated the systematic study of language, but early advocates of English wanted to separate literature and language study, so that the one could be done without the other. Freeman's famous response was: 'what is meant by distinguishing literature from language if by literature is meant the study of great books, and not mere chatter about Shelley?' Freeman won the argument. Literature had to be studied along

with language, otherwise it would not be an academic subject at all. So when the English course was finally set up at Oxford in 1894 it contained a very heavy element of historical language study - Anglo-Saxon, Gothic, Letto-Slavonic, Middle English, etc., from which it has still not managed to free itself.

A greater sense of direction was given to English in the Cambridge English school in the 1920s. Because Cambridge English was the most recently founded, dating only from 1911, it had the least weight of tradition to fight against, so change was relatively easy. The engineers of this change were a group of people who began teaching at Cambridge in the 1920s. They were: I. A. Richards, William Empson, and F. R. Leavis.

I. A. Richards was the founder of a method of studying English which is still the norm today. Firstly, it made a decisive break between language and literature. Richards pioneered the technique called Practical Criticism (the title of his book in 1929). This made a close study of literature possible by isolating the text from history and context. Instead of having to study, say, the Renaissance period as a distinct historical moment, with its characteristic outlook, social formations, and so on, students could learn the techniques of practical criticism and simply analyse 'the words on the page'. The gain from this was that it was no longer possible to offer a vague, flowery, metaphorical effusion and call it criticism. Richards argued that there should be much more close attention to the precise details of the text.

A second Cambridge pioneer was a pupil of Richards, William Empson, who presented his tutor with the manuscript of the book which was published in 1930 with the title *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. This book took the Richards method of close verbal analysis to what many felt to be an extreme. Empson identified seven different types of verbal difficulty in poetry (which is what he meant by ambiguity) and gave examples of them, with worked analyses. Another Cambridge critic, F. R. Leavis, said in a review that it is a highly disturbing book because it uses intelligence on poetry as seriously as if it were mathematics. Not everybody liked this ultraclose form of

reading. T. S. Eliot called it the lemon-squeezer school of criticism, and his own critical writing is always on a much more generalised level.

The last of these Cambridge pioneers was F. R. Leavis, probably the most influential figure in twentieth-century British criticism. In 1929 he met and married Q. D. Roth, subsequently known as Q. D. Leavis. He had written his doctoral thesis on the relationship between journalism and literature. She had written hers on popular fiction. These were revolutionary topics, and a certain excitement and glamour attached to this couple in the 1930s. In 1932 they founded an important journal called *Scrutiny* and produced it together for twenty-one years. As the title implies, it extended the 'close-reading' method beyond poetry to novels and other material.

Leavis's faults as a critic are that his close readings often turn out to contain lengthy quotations on which there is surprisingly little comment. The assumption is that the competent reader will see there what Leavis sees. As has been said of him, he often gives the impression that he is analysing the text when he is really just paraphrasing it. Secondly, his approach to literature is overwhelmingly moral; its purpose is to teach us about life, to transmit humane values. His critical terms are never properly defined. He famously refused the invitation offered by the critic Rene Wellek in the 1930s that he should 'spell out the principles on which he operated in a more explicit way than hitherto'. The result was one more degree of isolation for literary studies. In the period of its growth just surveyed, it claimed independence from language studies, from historical considerations, and from philosophical questions. The consensus which held the subject together from the 1930s to the 1960s rested upon the acceptance of these demarcations. The 'project' of 'theory' from the 1960s onwards is in essence to re-establish connections between literary study and these three academic fields from which it had so resolutely separated itself.