Edited by James Morwood

The Teaching of Classics

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

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First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Palatino, *System* QuarkXPress®

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 52763 5 paperback

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the following for permission to reproduce photographs:

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PART I The historical context and classics in the curriculum

1 Classics in the curriculum up to the 1960s

Christopher Stray

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, classics was firmly embedded in the schools and universities of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland (which had just joined the Union). It is worth emphasising just how it was embedded. First of all, this was no system of education like those of France or Germany, where centralised control had produced state-run systems of schooling. In England, this did not appear until 1870 for elementary schools, and 1902 for secondary schools. Secondly, knowledge of Latin, and even more of Greek, was an important marker of social status. From the middle of the eighteenth century, a wave of protest against the domination of secondary schooling by classics had led to the foundation or revival of schools teaching English, accountancy, surveying and other practical subjects. But the expansion of middle-class numbers and power after the industrial revolution gave a boost to the declining rural grammar schools which became what we know as the Victorian public schools, led by the Rugby of Thomas James (1778–94) and the Shrewsbury of Samuel Butler (1798–1836).

Through the nineteenth century, as successive waves of newly aspirant groups struggled to assert their social status and distinguish themselves from their inferiors, further groups of schools were founded – many as proprietary schools, whose owners held shares and secured preferential entry for their sons. All this activity went unexamined by the state until the Royal Commissions of the 1860s, beginning with the Clarendon Commission of 1861. Having investigated the nine leading schools, the Commission reaffirmed the central role of classics in the education of English gentlemen, but suggested that its share of the curriculum might be reduced to about three-fifths. A later Commission on endowed schools (Taunton, 1864) looked at the 800 or so grammar schools and found that while some local parents wanted a more practical curriculum, many of them were keen to retain classics, which was seen as a sign of social status. The Commission recommended three grades of schools marked by differences in leaving age and the amount of classics taught.

Meanwhile the classical curricula of the two ancient universities had developed in different ways from their Renaissance origins. Oxford was dominated by classics, which was tested in a university examination founded in 1800 and whose climax after 1850 was the course in Literae Humaniores (Greats). This was a broadly conceived course which included ancient history and ancient (and modern) philosophy, but marginalised literature.[1] Cambridge, which had since the Newtonian days of the eighteenth century been dominated by mathematics, set up the Classical Tripos in 1822. This examination was only available to honours men in maths, and such restrictions were not completely removed until the 1850s. The reforms of the 1870s, which introduced specialised courses in a new Part II of the Tripos, went with an intellectual style of solid but circumscribed effort. The Oxonian ethos, in contrast, was one of effortless superiority and high-flown thinking – a style which matched its continuing involvement with national politics and the empire, a field where Cambridge had a much lower profile.

By 1900 new universities had been founded, in London, Durham and the industrial midlands and north. All taught classics (or rather 'Greek and Latin'), but some concentrated on science and technology and also offered English and modern languages. The map of knowledge was changing. The less complacent supporters of classics recognised that their subject now had to be fought for, and the battle was opened with the passage of the 1902 Education Act setting up municipal secondary schools. As John Postgate of Cambridge warned in November 1902, 'It is clear that classics will not be allowed to retain the lion's share which has been theirs in the past, and the question is, how much we must struggle to retain.'[2] The standard public school curriculum was based on large quantities of grammar learning and repetition, followed by constant practice in Latin and Greek composition, in prose and verse. The work was largely linguistic, with very little discussion of literary value. How was this to be cut down while remaining effective? And effective for what?

Those who advocated reform rather than retrenchment were divided. The moderates urged a reduction in the amount of composition – what was needed was to read the ancient authors, not to imitate them. A few radicals offered to reinvent the classical curriculum. Notable among them was W.H.D. Rouse, who became headmaster of a declining grammar school in Cambridge, the Perse School, in 1902. Inspired by reforms in modern language teaching, he determined to teach Latin and Greek by speaking them. This was, he claimed, not only a desirable return to the Renaissance world when Latin was a medium of communication, but also an efficient way of learning – it would bring proficiency more quickly, so leaving time for other subjects. Rouse and his pupils, and the Association for the Reform of Latin Teaching (ARLT) he founded in 1913, made a considerable impact on the Board of Education and on teaching manuals. Many teachers who tried to use the direct method, however, found that it demanded more knowledge of the languages than they possessed.[3] A broader-based defensive body, the Classical Association (CA) of England and Wales, was founded in 1903, a year after its Scottish counterpart. It built bridges with politicians and attempted to link school and university classicists, though in time the latter came to dominate its activities.[4]

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[1] Philosophy moved out of the Faculty of Literae Humaniores in 2001.

[2] J.P. Postgate, 'Are the classics to go?', *Fortnightly Review* 72 ns (1902), 866–80.

The hard thinking occasioned by the First World War generated fierce debate. Scientists argued that better provision for science education rather than classics would have helped to win the war; humanists replied that the war was fought for moral ends, and that these were the province of the humanities, and classical civilisation their great exemplar. The four committees on Science and Modern Languages (both 1916) and on English and Classics (both 1919) all made demands for their own subject areas; the Board of Education responded in the 1920s by withdrawing from full curricular prescription and leaving supply and demand to solve the problem. The specialised curriculum characteristic of twentieth-century British schools and so unlike others was firmly launched.

Within this curriculum, the fates of Latin and Greek were very different. The Classics Committee, which reported in 1921, had found that while Latin was taught to nearly 45 per cent of pupils, the comparable figure for Greek was less than 5 per cent.[5] Latin, which had always had a broader social base than Greek, became the acceptable face of classics, the symbolic exemplar of the academic world of the grammar school. In an inter-war world of competing extremisms, totalitarian and fascist, it represented the right thinking of the orderly, self-controlled citizen. Greek was more ethereal, more exciting, more dangerous. It was taught largely in the public schools, which clung to 'full classics' – Latin, Greek, ancient history – rather than a single specialism. (It was notable, however, that a few girls' schools took the bold step of starting Greek before Latin.) By the 1950s, the classical course inherited from the nineteenth century and gradually attenuated rather than reformed was becoming fossilised. New courses based on intelligent reading rather than the rote learning of grammar had appeared, the best known being *Latin for Today*, a course developed in the USA in the 1920s and adapted for English schools in 1933. But they had a limited impact on the large numbers of pupils who struggled through compulsory Latin courses, leaving them as soon as they could. The situation was made worse by the fact that the platoons of teachers employed included many whose knowledge and qualifications were very limited. In the 1950s, Her Majesty's Inspectors of Classics agonised in private over the irreconcilable tension between the twin aims they ascribed to Latin teaching: the humanistic (what were the Romans like? what was their literature about?) and the disciplinary (grammar as an unrivalled means to mental training, a training which could be transferred to other subjects).

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[3] For Rouse and his campaigns, see C.A. Stray, *The Living Word: W.H.D. Rouse and the Crisis of Classics in Edwardian England* (Bristol Classical Press / Duckworth, 1992).

[4] A centenary history of the Classical Association, including an account of that of its elder Scottish sister, is provided by C.A. Stray (ed.), *The Classical Association: the First Century 1903–2003* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

[5] *The Classics in Education* (HMSO, 1921), 43–6.

The wartime debates over reform in the organisation and curricula of schools ended in a veiled reassertion of hierarchy in both areas. The grammar schools were protected by selective entry and by the residual definition of secondary modern and technical schools. The new GCE examination (1951) took specialisation to new heights. Recruitment to Latin rose in absolute (though not relative) terms, on the back of a general expansion of secondary schooling. The demand for 'compulsory Greek' from Oxford and Cambridge had been abandoned after the First World War, to be replaced by compulsory Latin. Now the tide began to turn, as the Cold War fuelled demands for science education, and at the end of the 1950s, the ancient universities ceased to demand Latin from all students.

The impact of these decisions emerged clearly in the next few years. The numbers of entrants for O level Latin and Greek dropped immediately, to be followed by A level numbers. Many teachers held to their belief in the immortality of a subject which transcended time and place, but were persuaded to debate options other than a last-ditch reassertion of tradition. The Classical Association's booklet *Re-appraisal* (1962) reflects, largely in ways which now seem complacent, some of the contemporary discussion. Behind the scenes, reformers were trying to find a way to break through complacency to new modes of organisation and of teaching. The Joint Association of Classical Teachers (1962), largely engineered by John Sharwood Smith, brought together the CA, the ARLT and the smaller Orbilian Society in a slightly uneasy but increasingly firm alliance. JACT promoted discussion of problems and solutions, and encouraged debate through its journal *Didaskalos* (1963–77), which Sharwood Smith edited.[6]

The 1960s also witnessed a direct attack on a central cause of continuing hostility to classics: the O level Latin course. Initial moves to produce a new course were led by Charles Brink, Professor of Latin at Cambridge. A German Jew, Brink had been trained in the austere continental tradition and had taught at schools and universities in Oxford, Liverpool and Cambridge. Though personally devoted to the higher reaches of linguistic scholarship, he could see that radical change was necessary if the universities were to continue to receive a supply of competent students. His campaign led to the support of his university and of the Nuffield Foundation, and in the later 1960s to the production of linguistic and non-linguistic courses by the Cambridge School Classics Project.

The crisis of the 1960s belonged to a wider climate of change which included student revolts and educational reform, abroad as well as in Britain. Rethinking was the order of the day, and Latin discipline and the courses claiming to produce it were easily, and commonly, seen as the lingering symbols of an old order on its last legs. For teachers brought up to believe that life was essentially stable, and that classics embodied eternal symbols of stable value, the collapse of compulsory Latin and the declining recruitment which followed it were existential shocks difficult to comprehend. But for those who did not retreat into the mechanical reassertion of traditional slogans, the decade offered a chance to rethink and to explore not only new ways of teaching, but their own subject. A text could now be read not just as a corpus of linguistic phenomena, but as the artful construction of human beings with literary and cultural ends, created in social and historical contexts. Such approaches, developed by scholars like John Sullivan and Kenneth Quinn, reached schools though Maurice Balme and Mark Warman's *Aestimanda* (Oxford University Press, 1965). On a different front, a transformation of ancient history and classical civilisation courses was attempted under the leadership of Moses Finley. This American Jewish economic historian had, like Charles Brink, a width of experience which enabled him to see the English situation in perspective. The JACT ancient history A level course he masterminded threw a great stress on the use of evidence, though this radical thrust was weakened by the reluctance of examiners to penalise good traditional answers. Overall, then, the 1960s were for classicists a time of shock and dismay, yet also of opportunity and radical reform in their subject.

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[6] The final volume (1977) was edited by Robin Barrow.