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**Adult education between the wars: the curious case of the
Selborne Lecture Bureau**

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Adult Education between the Wars

The curious case of The Selborne Lecture Bureau

Introduction

The story of British adult education between 1918 - 1939 tends to be told in terms of the rise of university extra-mural provision, including university extension, the development of the tutorial classes movement and of its vehicle, the Workers' Educational Association, and the push for state provision, most particularly by bodies such as the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (formed in 1921 as the British Institute of Adult Education). The period is often presented as a prelude to the institutionalisation of adult learning in the 1944 Education Act (addressed, significantly, to 'the people of England and Wales', not just to their children), which laid the basis for local education authority provision and for state funding to the 'Responsible Bodies' of the university and voluntary sector.

Within this narrative, it is sometimes recognised that many other organisations outside what Kelly¹ calls the 'charmed circle' of approved associations also had an important role to play. However, the organisations usually mentioned are generally confined to those consonant with the 'traditions' of liberal adult education, with its nineteenth century roots in mechanics' institutes, the development of the Labour College movement, cooperative societies, working men's clubs and religious organisations. Hardly any published work exists on the role of lecture bureaux and where the significance of other streams (for example, that of scientific and learned societies) is

¹ Thomas Kelly, *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain*, 3 ed. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1992).

acknowledged this is usually in passing and in parenthesis. Characterised then² as now³ as ‘auxiliaries’ or even the ‘remoter provinces’⁴ of adult education, the role of such bodies is not always acknowledged.

The Selborne Society was a significant provider of ‘extension’ lectures in the first half of the last century. However, the Society’s ‘Lecture Bureau Period’ period between the first and second World Wars has not to date been examined.⁵ One reason may be that to historians of conservation it is regarded (as it was by many contemporary members of the Society) as an unfortunate and regrettable deviation from the Society’s initial purpose - the Society did not start off (neither did it end up) as an educational organisation. Another may be because its particular brand of ‘recreational’ learning through single lectures has (probably rightly) been seen as lightweight and detached from ‘mainstream’ provision of the period and because its impact on the subsequent development of the latter was minimal. However, the Society’s provision over the inter-War period (for which its archive material is fullest) was significant. At its peak in 1927–1929 (when the Society acted as agent for the Empire Marketing Board) its programme was a significant parallel stream alongside that of bodies such as the Workers Educational Association (WEA) and the developing university extra-mural provision of the (Oxford) tutorial class and (Cambridge) extension movement. It met a demand for recreational lectures, supplying the demands of village clubs and womens’ institutes as well as of its own branches, prior

² W E Williams, *The Auxiliaries of Adult Education* (London: British Institute of Adult Education, 1934).

³ Peter Baynes and Harold Marks, 'Adult Education Auxiliaries and Informal Learning', in *A History of Modern British Adult Education*, ed. Roger Fieldhouse (Leicester: National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education, 1996).

⁴ Roger Fieldhouse, ed., *A History of Modern British Adult Education* (Leicester: National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education, 1996), Ch.3. 50.

⁵ Thanks are due to Roy and Rae Hall for access to the Selborne Society’s Ealing archives, to Gina Douglas, Librarian for those held by the Linnean Society, and to two anonymous referees for helpful and supportive criticism and suggestions. The ideas in this paper were first presented to a seminar of the [anonymised] in April 2005.

to the incorporation of ‘leisure learning’ in the alliance between local authorities and the voluntary sector that was formalised in the 1944 Education Act.

This paper starts by summarising briefly the origins of the Selborne Society in relation to those of its younger competitor, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and it compares their distinctive approaches to education. It then describes (and tries to account for) the Society’s conversion into a Lecture Bureau, its use as an ‘educational’ vehicle for the Empire Marketing Board, and its subsequent decline in the post-War period. It concludes by assessing the Bureau’s contemporary significance as an educational provider and its relevance to the history of British adult education. The paper is based on archive and other material of the period, in particular the Selborne Society’s Council minutes, reports, pamphlets and correspondence which are mainly to be found (together with the Bureau’s Lecture Lists for the period) in the archives of the Linnean Society in London.

Early days (1885 – 1914)

The Selborne Society arose from the merger in 1886 of two bodies established independently the previous year, the (Anti) Plumage League, a loose assemblage of women pledged to protect birds through ending the trade in feathers as adornments for women’s dress, and the Selborne League, formed to celebrate the memory of Gilbert White by campaigning for the ‘*preservation of birds, plants and pleasant places*’.⁶ The Selborne Society grew to become a national organisation (with some fifteen branches by the turn of the century spread from Brighton to Blackburn, in addition to its ‘Central’ branch) supported by a host of prominent intellectuals, aristocrats, churchmen and politicians. Two of its activists, (Sir) Robert Hunter and (Canon) Hardwicke Rawnsley,

⁶ Selborne Society, *Selborne Magazine*, May 1888.

joined with Octavia Hill in 1895 to form The National Trust as a legal entity to hold the 'pleasant places' that the Selborne Society sought to protect.

In 1889, four years after the formation of the Plumage and Selborne leagues, history repeated itself with the formation of two further local societies, the (Croydon) 'Fur, Fin and Feather Folk' and the (Didsbury, Manchester) Society for the Protection of Birds (SPB). Both societies were remarkably like the original Plumage League. They were for women only, closely focused on bird protection, and campaigned against the plumage trade. In May 1891 they too merged, to form a new body that retained the SPB's name and spread rapidly, soon overtaking the Selborne Society in size. The RSPB received its Royal Charter in 1904.

Today the RSPB and The National Trust are major organisations with considerable influence that extends beyond the UK. The Selborne Society is reduced to just a single branch in Ealing, west London. Prior to the First World War, however, the Selborne Society considered itself the senior body. Its leaders formed part of an 'invisible college' overlapping in membership with other organisations with similar aims and exerting considerable authority.⁷ Their attitudes to education, though, were very different. The National Trust at the time saw its role principally as a property-holding entity (and was not then concerned with building membership) and it largely eschewed any significant educational activity (including interpretation, inside as well as outside its properties) until well into the last decades of the 20th century. By contrast, both the Selborne Society and the SPB saw education as important, but in very different ways. This difference led to disputes between the two organisations and within the Selborne Society itself. The details of this conflict during the early years (1885 – 1914) of the (R)SPB and the Selborne

⁷ John Ranlett, 'Checking Nature's Desecration'; Late Victorian Environmental Organisation', *Victorian Studies* 26, no.2 (1983).

Society have been examined elsewhere,⁸ however a brief summary is necessary here as the basis for understanding the second phase of the Selborne Society's existence as a lecture bureau.

On its formation in 1886, the Selborne Society embodied several key strands of modern conservation: the protection of species, the preservation of their habitats, and an assertion of the intrinsic as well as instrumental value of nature. When formal rules for the Society were adopted, in 1888, a fourth object was added: education.⁹

In 1904, attempts were made by prominent members of the Society's Council to move education from the last of the Society's aims to the first. This was challenged by sections of the membership who saw the proposal as a dilution of the Society's founding purpose. The change was championed in particular by Wilfred Mark Webb, a long-standing member of the Ealing Branch of the Society and opposed unsuccessfully by Edward Alfred Martin of the Society's Croydon Branch. It was finally agreed at the Society's 1904 AGM at which Webb was elected as its new Secretary.¹⁰

There is an interesting comparison between W M Webb and A E Martin (the protagonists over the issue of education and the Lecture Bureau's formation) both in terms of personality and in their engagement with civil society. Both were committed to a long-standing tradition of science-based popular education as a driver of civic progress and were moved by the tradition of Gilbert White and the 'Selborne cult'¹¹ but in very

⁸ Richard Clarke, *Pioneers of Conservation. The Selborne Society and the (Royal) SPB* (London: The Selborne Society, 2004).

⁹ The four objects were; '[1] *To preserve from unnecessary destruction such wild birds, animals and plants, as are harmless, beautiful, or rare; [2] to discourage the wearing and use for ornament of birds and their plumage, except when the birds are killed for food or reared for their plumage [3] to protect places and objects of interest or natural beauty from ill-treatment or destruction; [4] to promote the study of natural history.*' Selborne Society, *Selborne Magazine* 1889, Appendix.

¹⁰ Selborne Society, 'Annual Meeting and Conversazione', *Nature Notes*, July 1904, 135.

¹¹ Donald Worster. *Nature's Economy: a history of ecological ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)

different ways. Webb's was an essentially conservative, Broughamite concept of 'useful knowledge' as a route to self-fulfilment. His association with the Society (or at least with Perivale Wood which became the focus of its endeavors in the post 1945 period) seems to have begun in 1875, when at the age of 7 he was shown a long-tailed tit's nest by a local naturalist. He subsequently became a vigorous advocate of outdoor education (within and without the framework of formal schooling) and more than anyone else was responsible for securing the wood as Britain's first educational nature reserve. However Webb rejected any form of oppositional social engagement, seeking instead the patronage of those in positions of influence; he was more than any other responsible for the fact that, at its peak in 1913, the Society could boast no fewer than 44 Vice Presidents including the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of London, the Duchess of Bedford, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, Sir Edward Grey, the Duke of Rutland, in addition to the Society's President, the Earl of Selborne and a host of lesser notables including Mrs G A Musgrave, the Selborne League's founder.¹² Moreover, apart from botanical surveys of the wood, Webb was a purveyor rather than originator of scientific knowledge; in addition to magazine articles and some popular science guides he was for a period proprietor and editor of a magazine entitled Knowledge.

Martin was (like Webb) a middle-class professional, the Superintendent of Croydon Post Office, which he ran with such efficiency as to leave him time for outside activities; these included a weekly natural history column for the Croydon Advertiser which he wrote at work. His publications include more than forty scientific papers, ranging from investigations into the formation of dew ponds, to studies of Anglo-Saxon remains around Croydon as well as a bibliography of Gilbert White.¹³ Various President

¹² Selborne Society *Minutes of Council* December 30, 1913

¹³ Martin's 1934 *A bibliography of Gilbert White* (London: Halton & Co) was republished with additional material by Dawsons of Pall Mall in 1970.

and Secretary of the Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society¹⁴ and a founding member of the South Eastern Union of Scientific and Philosophical Societies and (with William Morris) of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, Martin was a radical liberal. He campaigned for free access to libraries and parks, and led several 'citizens' actions' including removing fences and occupying open spaces threatened with development. Lilian Martin (Edward's wife) was an active suffragist and in Croydon at least there is evidence of overlapping membership between Fur, Fin and Feather Folk (and its successor the (R)SPB) and other networks of women involved in suffrage, temperance, and humanitarian (including animal welfare) movements.¹⁵

In effect, the conflict within the Selborne Society and between it and the RSPB represented two distinct streams in conservation. The RSPB's was essentially humanitarian in origin, with radical/ nonconformist/ feminist overtones. The other was science based, paternalistic and reformist; the Selborne Society sought to achieve its ends not by confrontation, but by education, influence and compromise. The SPB did not ignore the disputes within its sister society, with whom relations were by now distinctly cool. In 1904 the (now R)SPB publicly criticised the Selborne Society for abandoning its campaigning focus.¹⁶ Four years later, the differences erupted into open conflict. In 1908, the RSPB promoted in Parliament a Bill that would have virtually ended the import of wild birds or their plumage to Britain. The Bill was opposed by the Selborne Society (on

¹⁴ The CNHSS does not itself appear to have been a particularly 'progressive' organisation: A proposal in 1880 by Alfred Russel Wallace, a member (and co-discoverer with Charles Darwin of the principle of evolution by natural selection) to change the Society's rules '*omitting the masculine pronoun from the rule allowing a member to introduce a visitor*' which would have paved the way for women to be admitted to the society was defeated and it was not until 1913 that the first 'lady member' of the council was elected. (Letter dated 7 February 1913 from Frank Roberts of the CNHSS giving details on Wallace's connections with the society and his proposal that women should be permitted to join. Wallace collection, Natural History Museum, cat: WP1/8/36).

¹⁵ I am grateful to Pauline and Christopher Marstrand for access to their grandfather Edward Martin's papers and for personal recollections of him and of their mother Christobel.

the grounds that plumage imports could be of scientific interest and that education and voluntary agreements were the best way of protecting endangered species) and it was wrecked by the Society's parliamentary supporters, who assembled a coalition of millinery and scientific interests to establish instead a 'Committee for the Economic Preservation of Birds' (CEPB) under the Board of Trade. The Plumage Bill was not eventually passed until 1921, thirteen years after its introduction to Parliament, during which no significant voluntary agreement was secured in its place.

This is not to say that education was neglected by the RSPB. There was no mention of education in the SPB's 1891 Articles but educational work had, in practice, been a feature of the SPB's work from its inception. As early as 1895 the SPB, in its Fifth Report, announced the inception of a 'Lantern-slide and Lecture Scheme' with a *'fund to support it and also a Society library of lanternslides which can be borrowed'*.¹⁷ By 1896 the SPB's Sixth Report was able to announce that sixty- two lectures had been given, all supported by slides from the Society's collection. During this period, the Society also produced a series of educational leaflets, which were promoted widely. However, for the SPB such lectures and leaflets (along with ornithological research) were seen - and subsequently articulated in the objects of the RSPB's Charter¹⁸ - as a means to an end, not as ends in themselves.

By contrast with the RSPB, the lectures promoted through the Selborne Society tended increasingly from the start to become (together with social activities) the core activity of its constituent branches, and they could be on virtually any subject. The Central branch also had aspirations to learned society status. In 1913, the Council had tried to establish the Society as a scientific society or professional institute (with restricted

¹⁶ Society for the Protection of Birds, *Bird Notes and News*, July 1904, 36..

¹⁷ Society for the Protection of Birds, *Fifth Report*, (London: Society for the Protection of Birds, 1895).

¹⁸ Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, *Charter* (1904).

membership categories of Fellows and Associates)¹⁹ and had resolved, somewhat hopefully (and unsuccessfully) to follow the example of the SPB and to secure its own Royal Charter to enable it to do this.²⁰ Education provided an alternative focus for its ambitions. Lectures also brought in a significant income to the Society as they were ‘sold’ to branches from the central secretariat, which increasingly found itself acting as a lecture bureau.

In February 1914 the Society’s Council approved a proposal made by the Extension Lectures Committee for a handbook, which would give details of lecturers (who would pay to be included), their backgrounds, and of the lectures that they offered. Within a couple of months, the handbook – consisting of fifty pages – had been printed, circulated, and had already recouped its costs. The minutes also record concern that the lecture programme had grown to such a size that in *‘in the London County area, the society would have to be registered as an employment bureau’*.²¹ By 1915 the Extension Lecture Committee is referred to in Selborne Society documents as an ‘Agency’. As the educational ‘extension’ work grew, the activity and membership of the Society’s branches (as well as the circulation of the Selborne Magazine - one of the first British natural history periodicals) shrank. The Society’s activities became increasingly concerned with the semi-commercial provision of lectures and other activities including guided ‘rambles’ provided, for a fee, to its branches as well as to other bodies.

The Lecture Bureau (1918 – 1939)

Throughout the First World War, meetings of the Society’s Council were largely occupied with its conversion into a lecture bureau under the Companies’ Acts. By January 1918 this had been achieved. Beneath the Society’s Council, and in parallel with what

¹⁹ *The Times* 9 April 1913 p 6

²⁰ Selborne Society *Minutes of Council* February 25 1913

²¹ Selborne Society, *Minutes of Council* February 24 1914

remained of its network of local branches, two permanent 'Standing Committees' were established - an 'Extension Committee' charged with developing the Society's public programme and a Finance Committee, both with paid officers and support. Registered Offices (initially in Red lion Square, London, and subsequently in Ealing) were also the headquarters the Society's journals, in particular of the magazine 'Knowledge' (of which W M Webb was Proprietor),

One consequence was to accelerate the decline in the Selborne Society as a membership organisation, which had started before the onset of the First World War. During the 1920s and 1930s a number of former branches severed their links with the parent Selborne Society and became independent local natural history societies (some subsequently affiliated with the Wildlife Trusts movement). By the end of the 1930s, only two branches retained any significant membership activity.

In 1923, the Society carried out a paper reorganisation into no less than fifteen sections. In addition to the Lecture Bureau these included: *The Federation of Lecture Societies; The Lecturers' Alliance; The Union of Peripatetic Teachers; The Schools Lecture Circle; The Club and Institute Lecture Circles; Comrades of the Lens* and *The Film Library*.²² For all of them, the executive was a newly established General Purposes Committee. It seems likely that some of these 'sections' existed only in name, but not all of them were merely paper entities. Some proved enduring. 'Comrades of the Lens' was the name of the Society's amateur Cinematographic Section established in 1921.²³ The section appears to have remained active until the outbreak of the Second World War.

The mainstay of the Society throughout the whole of the inter-War period however, was the programme of outside educational lectures, now its principal activity.

²² Selborne Society Limited, *Minutes of Council* September 10 1943

For these, the Society paid the lecturer directly and charged the promoters, generally making a profit. In parallel with the lecture programme were rambles, initially provided for members, but subsequently advertised to the public. Membership declined further, the lecture and ramble programmes grew both in size and scope and were increasingly run as an entirely separate enterprise from what remained of the activities of the Society as a membership organization.²⁴ The emphasis on educational activities seems to have been due initially as much by financial survival as by higher ideals. Motivated to begin with by the need to keep the society solvent, the lecture bureau activity increasingly appeared to become a commercial end in itself. In 1921 a bonus system was introduced for the Society's chief officers; in 1923 this was confirmed as 15% of ramble profits and 25% of the Society's other net income including advertisement revenue.

In 1920, Sir Richard Gregory, Editor of Nature, agreed to join the Extension Committee and the Lecture Handbook was replaced by a 'Lecture List'. This was produced annually from 1921 until 1948. Initially at least, the programme showed steady growth. In 1920, 221 lectures were held, and there were 59 Rambles. In 1924 there were 532 lectures and 97 rambles; in 1925: 437 lectures and 99 rambles. In 1926, 107 rambles were arranged (of which six had to be postponed due to the General Strike)²⁵ together with 568 lectures. 372 of these were '*for Schools and more important lecture Societies*'

²³ A prominent early member was Oswald Mosley - in 1923 still a Labour MP. However Mosley does not mention this in his autobiography (there is little anyhow on this period in his life) and his interest in film and education seem incidental to his political ambitions.

²⁴ As the lecture programme diversified, the Society's rambles began to include urban visits as well as 'nature'. Punch ridiculed the Society's departure from its rural focus, declaring '*we shall be surprised if the Selborne Society ever looks at a mole or a starling again*' 'Rus in Urbe', Punch, or the London Charivari, Jan 29 1919..

²⁵ The Selborne Society's literature determinedly avoids engagement with social and political issues. However the WEA too refers to the Strike only obliquely as '*industrial troubles*' and only in connection with its consequences for the WEA's work; '*the year 1926-27 has in some respects been one of the most trying*' (WEA Annual Report for 1927, 5).

and 196 for 'Women's Institutes and bodies with slender resources'.²⁶ The Society's Annual Report for this year expressed regret that it had been impossible to organise lectures in prisons, despite interest from the prison authorities, because of their inability to pay even travelling expenses to lecturers.

In addition to supplementing opportunity for access to 'leisure learning' provided by the WEA and university extension, lecture bureaux may have afforded significant access to teaching for those who lacked the qualifications required for admission to the panels of 'mainstream' providers. They seem at least for some also to have been a vehicle for civic engagement. One example is Mary Crowle (nee Finucane) who joined the Selborne Society as a lecturer in the 1920s, in Bath. Born in 1874 in Brisbane, Australia, she married a naval officer and travelled widely, eventually settling in Plymouth where she was active in the suffrage movement, becoming a member of the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association by 1913 and the honorary secretary of the Plymouth branch in the following year. At the start of the First World War she worked as a nurse with the Red Cross and established a Ladies Rifle Club. She was one of the first members of the local branch of the Women's Police Force and began lecturing on the wartime contribution role of her native Australia. After the War she moved to Bath where she became a committee member of the Bath and District Women Citizens' Association and was elected to the Bath Union Board of Guardians. During the 1920s she became a Selborne Society Lecturer, and also broadcasted; in the 1930s she was active in the League of Nations Union.²⁷

Marketing Empire

In 1927 the lecture programme received a major boost following the decision of the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) to contribute half of the fees for selected lectures

²⁶ Selborne Society, *39th Annual Report*, (London: Selborne Society, 1926).

within the Bureau's programme and to launch a programme of free public lectures for which the Lecture Bureau would be the principal agent.

The EMB was set up in May 1926 as part of the official machinery of state as a response to the growing post-War depression and the withdrawal of the United States from any notion of regulated world trade. Its finances came from an annual Parliamentary vote and it was serviced by civil service staff. Its object was to promote the Empire as an entity and to promote its products – food and manufactures.²⁸ Its main activities were the sponsorship of scientific research, development of economic policy, and 'publicity'. In respect of the last, the EMB organised exhibitions, poster campaigns, shopping weeks, media (press and radio) promotions and lecture series. In addition to their specific content, this work was seen as part of an explicit programme of 'background' propaganda.²⁹ Adult classes were seen very much as part of its work. The EMB's 'educational' work predominantly used other organisations as their vehicle, including 'established' adult education institutions as well as those for whom education was a secondary purpose, such as training colleges, adult and army schools, cooperative societies, the YMCA, and Womens' Institutes.

²⁷ *Papers of Mary Beatrice Crowle, 1914-1966*. London: The Women's Library.

²⁸ Richard Self, 'Treasury Control and the Empire Marketing Board; the rise and fall of Non-Tariff Preference in Britain 1924-33' *Twentieth Century British History* 5 no.2 1994, 153-182.

²⁹ Major Walter Elliot, 'The Work of the Empire Marketing Board', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* LXXIX, no. 4101 (1931).

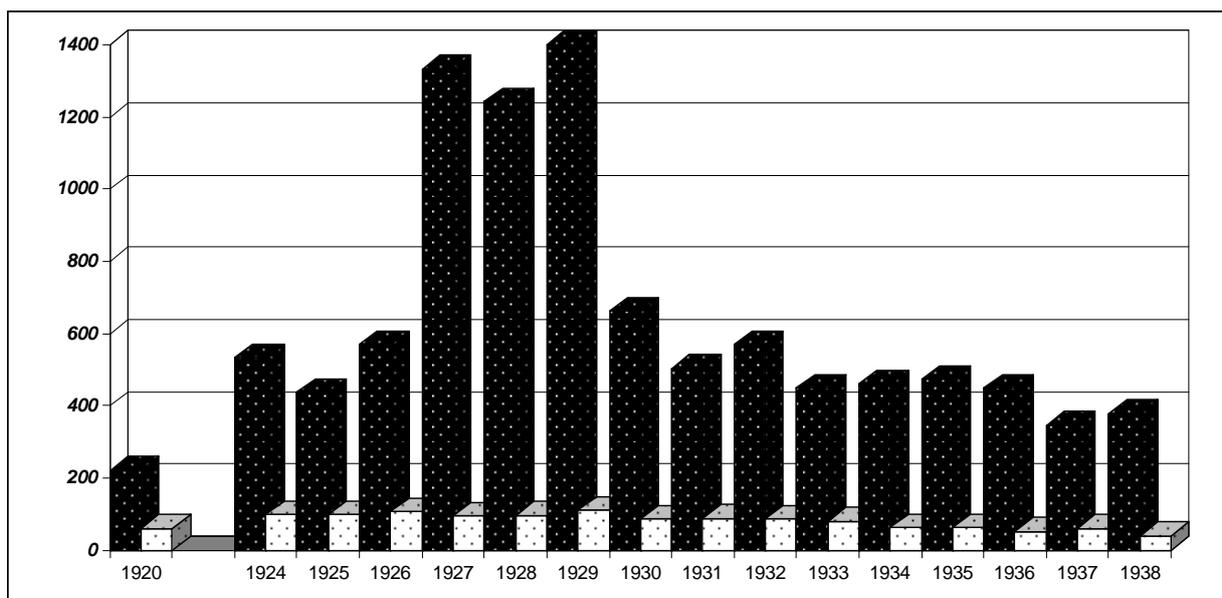
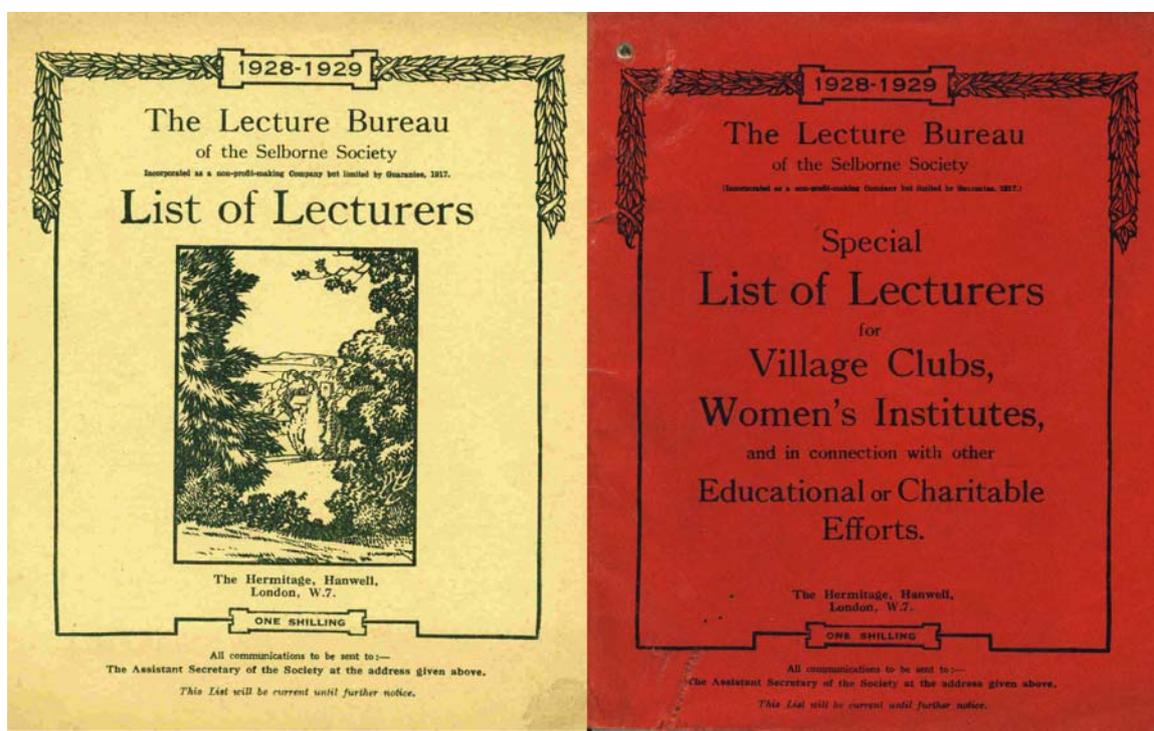


Figure i. The Selborne Society's lecture and ramble programme 1919-1939.

The Selborne Society's 'General Lecture List' for the next three years (1927-29) ran to over sixty pages and carried titles and brief synopses of lectures offered by some sixty lecturers together with their biographical details. In addition a separate *Special List of Lecturers for Village Clubs, Women's Institutes and in connection with other Educational or Charitable Efforts* was produced, 28 pages long and containing biographical details of 73 lecturers. In all, 1,332 lectures (and 93 rambles) were provided in 1927. In 1928 there were 1,242 external lectures (and 96 rambles) and in 1929, 1,400 lectures (including 241 on Natural History; many of the others dealt with travel and



exploration) and 111 rambles.³⁰

Figure ii. Front covers of the Selborne Lecture Bureau's 'General' and 'Special' lecture lists for 1928-29.

The EMB had its own section in the Selborne Society's 1928 Lecture List which announced '*These lectures, which are of the 'popular' type . . . deal, for the most part, with travel and life in various parts of the Empire and the majority of them are illustrated by lantern slides*'. The Board's subsidy to the Society for 1929 was £3,794.2s 0d. There seems to have been some flexibility about how it was used; initially the lectures subsidised by the EMB were advertised as free, however they were subsequently offered at half-fee. The Society's Annual report for 1929 declared '*. . . commission on the fees paid to it has helped the Society materially*'.³¹

British Empire Lectures
(General List).

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE DINNER TABLE.
CURIOSITIES OF CURRENCY.
THE NATURAL HISTORY OF MILK.

by Wilfred Mark Webb,
F.I.S., F.R.M.S.
(Staff Lecturer)

CANADA, FROM EAST TO WEST.
by A. Watson Bain.

MALAYA, THE MARVELLOUS.
by Hubert S. Banner,
B.A., F.R.G.S.

CYPRUS, OUR NEWEST COLONY.
by W. Bevan,
O.B.E.
(late Colonial Commissioner for Cyprus.)
(Horham)

OUTPOSTS OF EMPIRE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.
by Captain F. W. Chardin.
(Guildford)

THE INDIAN EMPIRE.
CEYLON.
by Lt.-Col. T. S. Cox.
(Sidcup)

vi

British Empire Lectures
(General List).

MESOPOTAMIA, THE CRADLE OF THE WORLD.
by Captain Alex. W. Cuninghame.
(Westbury)

PEPPER-POTS AND PALADINS, THE EVOLUTION
OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE.
COOKERY THROUGH THE CENTURIES.
HOUSEWIVES AND HERRINGS.
MAGICAL MILK.

by Professor J. R. Ainsworth Davis,
M.A., M.Sc., F.Z.S.

INDIA: ITS PEOPLES AND PRODUCTS.
by Mrs. Hilda Mary Dunn.

STOP! LOOK! LISTEN! (Canada).
THE ROMANCE OF EMPIRE.
by E. J. Golledge.

SIX THOUSAND MILES IN CANADA.
AUSTRALIA THE WONDERLAND.
THE ROMANCE OF THE MILK PAIL.
A PICTURE STORY OF THE MAKING OF THE
EMPIRE.

THE WHEAT-FIELDS OF THE EMPIRE.
THE SHEEP-FOLDS OF THE EMPIRE.
TEA, COFFEE AND COCOA.

by J. Nugent Harris.

vii

Figure iii. Specimen pages from the General Lecture List for 1928-29.

The decision of the Selborne Society to act as the EMB's agent may be put down to opportunism; the Society was already well connected with Board of Trade circles, since

³⁰ Selborne Society, *42nd Annual Report*, (London: Selborne Society, 1929).

³¹ *Ibid.*

its sponsorship of the CEPB more than a quarter of a century earlier. The EMB for its part no doubt saw a congruence between its own activities and the existing lecture programme of the Society, whose earlier dealings with the Board of Trade had attested to its status as a 'safe pair of hands'. Constantine has said of the EMB that it '*confirmed in the minds of the majority a world view, a broad conception of the nation's status and power in the world as the centre of a legitimate and uniquely favoured imperial system*'.³² Its activities were seen as sufficiently important for the EMB to feature in Stanley Baldwin's 1929 election manifesto, which declared that the EMB had proved its value *as a new agency of Imperial co-operation in many ways, and not least by its encouragement of scientific research both in Britain and in the Dominions and Colonies*'.³³ The Selborne Society's own focus on natural history can itself be seen as derived from imperial roots³⁴ and the history of its relations with the RSPB suggests that in its links with the EMB it was behaving politically true to form, even if the outlet for that political character had changed, from the protection of species and ecosystems, to the celebration and preservation of a particular social and economic order. If the RSPB represented the 'nonconformist' (humanitarian, reforming) strands of early conservation philosophy then the Selborne Society represented the 'establishment' (science focused, conservative) other.

Throughout this period, the linkages between the interests of the Selborne Society and wider issues in educational governance and culture are striking. 1926, the year of formation of the EMB, also saw the British Broadcasting Company (formed in 1922) become a Corporation. The success of radio broadcasting was accompanied by attempts to widen the impact of 'narrowcast' media such as film. The EMB is credited with

³² Stephen Constantine, 'Bringing the Empire Alive: The EMB and Imperial Propaganda 1926-33', in *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, ed. John M MacKenzie (Manchester UK: Manchester University Press, 1986), 224.

³³ Stanley Baldwin, *Election Manifesto* (London: The Conservative Party, 1929).

pioneering the educational documentary largely through the efforts of individuals such as John Grierson (who founded the EMB's film unit in 1928 before doing the same in 1933 for the Post Office where he made his most famous film, *Night Mail*).

The Selborne Society was by this time – amongst its many other activities – already championing the use of film in education. Its amateur Cinematographic Section was one manifestation; at the same time and in keeping with the tradition of diversification, the Lecture Bureau's lectures were soon joined by other educational ventures. One, encouraged by members' interest in film, was the promotion of movie films in school education.

By 1924 the Society had established a library of educational films, which could be hired for 5s each. In January 1924 The Times newspaper carried a report under the head of '*The Cinematograph In Education. Demonstration By Selborne Society*'. The problem, it reported, was that few schools possessed a film projector. To meet this need the Society had established a mobile '*operator with portable outfit to give demonstrations to such schools as desire to add cinematograph lessons to their curricula. Since March visits have been paid to 130 schools in all parts of the country*'.³⁵

The venture was successful and the cinematograph continued to be promoted by the Society (and the idea of the educational film library was subsequently adopted by the EMB). Ten years later (in 1934) The Times reported the Society's concern that new regulations which attempted to set standards for film (16mm) and film safety (non flammable) might limit their use.³⁶ Film was by now seen as a potentially important

³⁴ Richard H Grove, 'Colonial Conservation, Ecological Hegemony and Popular Resistance: Towards a Global Synthesis', in *Imperialism and the Natural World*, ed. John M MacKenzie (Manchester UK: Manchester University Press, 1986), 15-50.

³⁵ *The Times*, Monday 10 January 1924.

³⁶ 'The Film in Adult Education', *The Times*, Tuesday 27 November 1934.

educational medium, but its use was still inhibited by the lack of suitable apparatus; in 1935 there were still only 1,000 projectors in the 32,000 schools and colleges in Britain.

The period between 1927 and 1929 when the Selborne Society acted as the EMB's agent was the high point of the Lecture Bureau's provision. At its peak in 1929, around 2,400 lectures were promoted, to a total audience of more than 500,000 people, at a cost to the Board of £10,500.³⁷ By way of comparison, the WEA in the same year promoted a total of 2,077 courses attracting just under 39,000 students.³⁸ These courses were lecture series (each of between 6 and 24 meetings) rather than individual lectures; however the comparison serves to indicate something of the scale of the Lecture Bureau's operation.

³⁷ Constantine, 204.

³⁸ Workers' Educational Association, *Annual Report 1929*. The figures are for England and Wales, including 'Joint Committee' and other courses promoted in partnership with other bodies, and are for courses of between 6 and 24 meetings. Regular annual figures for single events such as day schools and lectures were not collected although a later figure of 'over three hundred Weekend and One-Day Schools attended by 16,600 people' (Workers' Educational Association, *This Speaks For Itself* (1939)) seems likely to be an underestimate.

paid for their entries), each with brief biographical details (and photographs). The 1937-38 prospectus (the last before the outbreak of War) lists some 50 lecturers, each with a small photograph, biographical notes and titles and synopses of the lectures on offer.

Lectures were on a wide variety of topics, well beyond natural history and indeed beyond 'science'; a high proportion of them were of a trivial nature compared to the content of 'mainstream' extension and tutorial classes. A few titles serve to give a flavour. Those offered by W M Webb include *'Buying a Wife'*, *'What can be done with a camera'*, *'The Curiosities of Currency'* and several under the title of *'Curiosities of Daily Life'* (including *'The Origin of the Hamper'* and the *'History of Punch and Judy'*). Lecturers included a number of women. A Miss Weeden-Cooke offers *'The Vestal Virgins, their Origin, Life and Homes'* whilst Miss I Cruttewell Abbott volunteers *'Beneath Big Ben'* and *'The Far East and its Problems'*.

Aftermath (1945 and after)

The Second World War dealt a mortal blow to the Lecture Bureau (and proved near terminal for the Society). During it, both the lecture and ramble programme of the Bureau continued, but at a much reduced level from which it failed to recover. By the end of the War, the Selborne Society's decline into obscurity had been such that its existence – let alone its survival - is ignored or dismissed by most historians. In fact it survived but by 1945 effectively only as two small branches, one for Middlesex and the other in the village of Selborne (the birthplace of Gilbert White) itself.

Webb, in his seventies, made an attempt to revive the Lecture Bureau, with activities modeled on its pre-War success. For example, the 1948-49 prospectus lists 20 lecturers, 10 of whom also appear in the 1937-38 Prospectus, offering almost identical wares. Thus, H Norman Edge has moved from Fakenham to Cumberland, but still offers four lectures, on weather and weather recording, on Ben Nevis and its observatory, on

Volcanoes and Earthquakes, and on *'Sun, Moon and Stars'*. Otherwise the prospectus and the titles and descriptions of lectures appears virtually unchanged. Miss Theodora Eyton-Jones (Mrs Leonard Patterson) still lists *'Changing China'* and *'China as I Knew It'*, but her lecture on *'Palestine Seen from Eastern Roofs'* is now titled *'Palestine Seen Again from Eastern Roofs'*. Captain L Greenstreet is still offering *'Two Years on the Antarctic'* and *'Shackleton's Last Voyage'*. Miss Olive Hicks still offers her programme of dramatic recitals. T Bowen Partington still advertises *'The real China'* but *'Ceylon, the Pearl of the Orient'* has been retitled *'Ceylon, the Pearl of the Indian Ocean'*. W M Webb (using the same photograph as in 1937) has added *'Frauds and Forgeries'* to his *'The Naturalist Lends a Hand'*, *'With Dame Nature as Godmother'* and *'A Year in the Bird Sanctuary'*. The appearance of timelessness was deceptive. The 1948 prospectus proved to be a last effort and by 1949 the Lecture Bureau ceased to exist.

The story merits a coda, however, because the Middlesex (Ealing) branch of the Society, did survive³⁹ (retaining the name of the Society as well as its archives and what little money there was in its reserves) through the dedication of a few remaining (and aged) members. Their efforts focused on the Society's reserve, Perivale Wood, in which the Society had had an interest since 1892 and which it had eventually purchased thirty years later. In 1958, the Society's aims were restated so as to return education to the last (in place of the first) of the Society's objects⁴⁰ whilst in addition to practical conservation work on the wood, the Society also restarted an educational programme. Much of this was directed at local schools, resulting into an influx of young people to the Society; whose school work was given a major boost in 1961 when the Carnegie Trust funded an ecological studies programme based on the wood. By this time however, it had already

³⁹ As did the Selborne branch, which focused increasingly over time on protecting and enhancing local amenities and the interests of residents, although celebration of Gilbert White was still retained as a subsidiary aim. It eventually separated from the Ealing branch in 1974 to become an independent 'Selborne Association',

become the focus for adult studies, including (from 1958) a programme of London University Extra- Mural Extension lectures. In 1974 the wood was declared a statutory Local Nature Reserve (LNR)⁴¹ and it continues today to be intensively used for field-based teaching at all levels, from primary to postgraduate.

In this way the (today, Ealing) Selborne Society occupies a small but stable local educational niche. It is a niche that – in contrast with the period before the First World War - complements rather than conflicts with the activities of the RSPB (which, with the The National Trust is today a major provider of informal adult education in its own right) and which is certainly very different from the aspirations of the Society's inter-War 'lecture bureau' period.

Conclusion; education, engagement and opportunism

The absence of detailed studies on the growth of lecture bureaux as a phenomenon makes it difficult to assess the significance of the Selborne Society in a wider context. Its work as a lecture bureau seems to harken back to the origins of adult education in the period when Gilbert White himself lived, in the widespread delivery of lectures (public and private, and mainly on scientific subjects) '*conducted by private lecturers on a subscription basis, mainly for middle-class audiences – the commercial and industrial community and their wives*'⁴² which were offered in London from the early eighteenth century. Itinerant lecturers had satisfied a demand for lectures, particularly on scientific subjects, since at least the early nineteenth century. The Times in 1815 mentions '*peripatetic philosophers, who give lectures for a guinea each course, in every village*

⁴⁰ Selborne Society, *Selborne Magazine* March 1958.

⁴¹ LNR is a designation under the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act providing for the establishment of reserves primarily for educational purposes. Prior to the 1980s the designation was rarely used; there were just two in the whole of the London area.

⁴² Thomas Kelly, 'The Origin of Mechanics' Institutes', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 1, no.1 (1952): 18.

near London'⁴³ and Kelly⁴⁴ suggests that their syllabuses and prospectuses were similar to what was later taught in Mechanics' Institutes, with which they coexisted. The distinction between entertainment and education was often blurred.⁴⁵ Stephens and Roderick emphasise the continuity of subject matter in the non-vocational lecture programmes of 19th century educational bodies and suggest that one reason for the enduring appeal of subjects such as natural history and geology (which dominated the Selborne Society's programme) was that they were seen as fit scientific foci for middle-class audiences, '*unlike mechanical engineering which was tied too closely to the self-educated and self-made men of the first Industrial revolution*'.⁴⁶ Lecture bureaux (including musical agencies offering speakers) advertised in The Times from the mid 1830s onwards. It is likely that by the mid 19th century commercial or semi-commercial agencies were a significant provider of lectures outside the more commonly recognised structures of adult education. By the time of the formation of the Selborne Society they had become established features of the educational scene.

Perhaps the most celebrated lecture agency of the inter-War years arose in 1930 from Christina Foyle's literary luncheons. However like the (larger) London: Lecture Agency (and its present-day successors) it had no pretensions to an explicitly educational function.⁴⁷ What was significant about the Selborne Lecture Bureau between the wars

⁴³ *The Times* 9 November 1815

⁴⁴ Thomas Kelly, *op cit*.

⁴⁵ Ian Inkster 'The Social Context of an Educational Movement: A Revisionist Approach to the English Mechanics' Institutes, 1820-1850' *Oxford Review of Education* 2 no.3 (1976): 277-307

⁴⁶ Michael Stephens, and Gordon Roderick 'Middle-Class Non-Vocational Lecture and Debating Subjects in 19th-Century England' *British Journal of Educational Studies* 21, no.2 (1973): 192-201

⁴⁷ It would be interesting to compare the development of lecture agencies in the UK with those elsewhere. In 1948, for example, a commentator wrote: '*Lecturing in the United States is, first of all, big business. ...There are a great number of agencies over the country, the biggest firms having field offices and field representatives strategically placed by regions...*'. Gerhart H. Seger, 'The Modern Lyceum' *The Antioch Review* 8, Spring: 1948. 99-106.

(and what makes it different from other lecture agencies of the period) was not just its standing and reputation in establishment circles, and, during the few years when it acted as agent for the EMB, the size of its programme, but its claims to an explicitly educational mission and its structure – at least initially, delivering lectures through local branches, in a manner analogous to that of the WEA. In respect of the latter however, its model was that of (Cambridge) ‘extension’ provision (and the Society used the term ‘extension’ to describe its activities, although they displayed little of the pioneering ethos of James Stuart) rather than the bottom up (Oxford) tutorial class movement and it was this, in part, that rendered it an appropriate vehicle for the activities of the EMB.

The Selborne Society in the inter-war period could be classified with the relatively large group of bodies which Lowe⁴⁸ terms ‘*other national organisations*’ such as the YMCA and YWCA – now termed ‘third sector’ organisations with their own department within the Cabinet Office.⁴⁹ However the character of its provision was very different from many of these bodies and, certainly contrasts with that of those organisations which came later to be regarded as ‘Responsible Bodies’ under the 1944 Education Act. It was motivated neither by philanthropic nor by explicitly ideological considerations, nor can it be characterised as driven by any clearly articulated desire for self-improvement on the part of those who formed the majority of its audiences, although elements of all of these were present.

This ex-centric (and in many ways, even in the inter-War period, marginal) position had, nevertheless, deep roots in nineteenth century (and earlier) traditions of ‘useful knowledge’ (*vide* natural history) as the alternative to social and political action. Whilst the Selborne Society’s 1928 Lecture List declared that its lectures ‘*are free from*

⁴⁸ John Lowe, *Adult Education in England and Wales - a Critical Survey* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970).

⁴⁹ DIUS, *Informal Adult Learning - Shaping the Way Ahead* (London: Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008).

*any political or direct advertising propaganda*⁵⁰ the EMB itself was very clear that its ‘educational’ work was not undertaken for its own sake but, rather, to promulgate a particular notion of ‘commonwealth’ and ‘citizenship’. Constantine has argued that, as ‘imperial propaganda’, the EMB’s work was conceived as part of an *‘antidote to the poisonous doctrine of socialism’*.⁵¹ However, much of the EMB’s educational output emphasised science, nutrition, health and hygiene, the virtues of outdoor recreation &c and might be considered entirely ‘progressive’ (although portrayals of industrial and agricultural production and working life, particularly overseas, could be criticised for sanitising exploitation and avoiding any mention of class or other antagonisms). The organisation itself was also a broad church. Members of its committees were chosen to represent a range of non party-political interests. The EMB emphasised ‘the need for planning’ particularly in comparison with the ‘Great Experiment’ of the Five Year Plan *‘now in progress in Russia... it is clear that the world markets will not continue half organised and half disorganised’*⁵² and it saw itself as having to explore ground that was still uncharted and work on a scale which no government had experienced except in wartime. Novelty and innovation afforded room for the heterodox, including socialists such as John Grierson.

The Selborne Society’s emphasis on knowledge and education in place of active campaigning meant that it was perhaps inevitable that, as Britain’s first national conservation organisation (in its early days seen alongside the SPB as a bird protection body, but with much wider aims of conserving all nature) it should revert to its roots in the tradition, symbolised by Gilbert White, of broad amateur enquiry into the natural and cultural landscape. Despite the Society’s origins, its educational programme was remarkably lacking in any clear focus. In general it would appear that the Bureau was,

⁵⁰ Selborne Society. *List of Lectures* (London: Selborne Society, 1929)

⁵¹ Constantine, 196.

simply, matching demand to the supply of lecturers. If there was any philosophical or ideological basis to the exercise (i.e. beyond survival as an organisation, and the relatively modest sums which key officers of the Society were paid) this seems likely to be little more than a vague notion of ‘education for citizenship’⁵³ which matched well with the broader mission of the EMB.

In contrast to the educational provision of campaigning NGOs such as the RSPB, to whom it was clear that education was ancillary to its central purpose, the Selborne Society came to see education as its *raison d’etre*. The Society’s focus moved inexorably from birds to natural history in general. From natural history it progressed on the one hand to science (including physics and astronomy) and on the other to geography, travel and antiquarianism. As it did so, it became a vehicle for delivery of the ‘educational’ output of a short-lived but extraordinarily influential enterprise, the Empire Marketing Board. By the start of the Second World war, the character of much of the Society’s provision can only be described as entertainment.

Ironically, in its revival in the 1950s and 1970s (and in its existence today) the Selborne Society represents a return to its nineteenth (and eighteenth) century roots in the tradition of naturalists field clubs and of scientific and philosophical societies.⁵⁴ Today of course, the Society’s output is far too small for it to appear amongst the 68 adult ‘voluntary’ providers of adult education listed in the NIAE (now NIACE) handbook. In part at least it is probably for this reason - its (inter-War) independence from ‘mainstream’ currents in adult learning and its present insignificance in this context, - that the story of the Selborne Lecture Bureau (like that of other independent lecture agencies) has been

⁵² Elliot 736.

⁵³ Derek Heater, *A History of Education for Citizenship* (London: Routledge, 2004), Andrew Lockyer, Bernard Crick, and John Annette, eds., *Education for Democratic Citizenship : Issues of Theory and Practice* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

⁵⁴ J W Hudson, *The History of Adult Education* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1851; reprint, 1969 London: The Woburn Press).

neglected. Yet at key periods the provision of these agencies (certainly that of the Selborne Society) has both reflected and reinforced a demand for recreational learning that has always existed in parallel with the more 'serious' endeavours of mainstream provision. The Selborne Society's increasing emphasis, from 1904, on education as an alternative to social action can be seen, in part, as a parallel process, and one antithetical to Tawney's 'radical tradition'.⁵⁵ An examination of the Selborne Lecture Bureau and its programme reveals a neglected current of adult education; namely 'recreational' lectures as a consumer product, reinforcing social norms, which contrasts with the conventional narrative of socially engaged adult learning 'from below'.

⁵⁵ R H Tawney, *The Radical Tradition*, George Allen & Unwin/ Pelican Books (Harmondsworth, Middx: 1964).