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'Really useful' knowledge? The London Mechanics' Institution and the struggle for (independent) working class education

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This is a discussion paper an unreferenced summary of which was carried in Post-16 Educator, no. 76 (July-September 2014) pp 18-20.

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‘An Address was published by Messrs Robertson and Hodgskin, in the Mechanics Magazine, October 1823; and the call was answered promptly by Dr Birkbeck himself, and other friends of education, as well as by master mechanics and workmen of the metropolis.’

Brougham, H. Practical observations upon the education of the people, (Richard Taylor, London, 1825).

[To George Birkbeck] *‘is undoubtedly due the honour of having originated the system of scientific instruction in a form accessible to the working classes. But the honour of establishing the London Mechanics’ Institute [...] must be shared by the editors of the Mechanics’ Magazine, Messrs. Robertson and Hodgskin.’*

Hole, J. An Essay on the History and Management of Literary, Scientific and Mechanics Institutions (Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, London, 1853):8

‘Even amongst contemporaries there was much dispute as to who should have the honour of being regarded as ‘founder of the Mechanics’ Institutes’ ... A similar doubt exists regarding the origin of the London Mechanics’ Institution. The claim of George Birkbeck to be regarded as the founder is now enshrined in the title of Birkbeck College, but contemporary records cast considerable doubt on the correctness of this tradition.’

Kelly, T. The Origin of Mechanics’ Institutes. British Journal of Educational Studies 1, 17-27 (1952).

Abstract

The London Mechanics’ Institute (LMI), founded in 1823 was not the first such institution, but by general consent it was the most important. The institutional history of the LMI (and of the subsequent growth of mechanics institutions and associated bodies) is relatively well known, in outline at least. However the LMI’s origins were controversial and contested at the time and subsequent accounts have tended to ignore the fundamental issues of principle - focused on constituency, curriculum, and control - that surrounded them. This paper revisits the events surrounding the formation of the LMI in 1823-4. It concludes that whilst the question of precedence may be resolved by provisionally describing J C Robertson and Thomas Hodgskin as *‘founders’* of the Institute which George Birkbeck *‘inaugurated’* the more important issues of collective vs. individual models of *‘self-help’*, of *‘useful’* versus *‘really useful’* knowledge, of what working-class education might be and whether it can ever be *‘independent’* are still with us, two centuries on.

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Introduction

George Birkbeck is widely proclaimed (not least in the college of London University which today bears his name) as the founder of the London Mechanics’ Institution (LMI). But Birkbeck’s entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography states that Birkbeck ‘*inaugurated*’ the LMI, the ‘*founders*’ of which were Thomas Hodgskin and Joseph Robertson.¹ That distinction is more than one of mere precedence. Behind it lies a conflict about the purpose and governance of working-class education which has dogged it from the start.

The LMI was not the first such institution, but by general consent it was the most important. It was²⁻⁴ and is^{5, 6} recognised as an early milestone in the struggle for post-school education for the ‘lower classes’ and the model for a movement which spread rapidly, not just in Britain, but beyond, particularly in Australia and North America.

The Mechanics’ Magazine proposal – and the response

The initial proposal for a mechanics’ institute in London was made on 11 October 1823 by J C Robertson and Thomas Hodgskin in the Mechanics’ Magazine, which they had launched that August. Aimed at the literate working class under the slogan ‘knowledge is power’, this cheap scientific weekly was the first of its kind and was highly successful.

Hodgskin and Robertson had met in Edinburgh where they had been politically active. Robertson had already secured recognition as the (pseudonymous) co-author of the Percy Anecdotes⁷, a popular illustrated serial collection of miscellanea. Committed to popular science (and to a successful publishing venture) Robertson also wanted to break into the ‘closed shop’ of London patent agents and perhaps also to forestall a proposal to create a new institution under the control of the rival London Journal of Arts and Sciences.⁸

Hodgskin’s aspiration was more ambitious however – no less than working class emancipation, in which education would play a key role. After an impoverished and joyless childhood Hodgskin had been sent aged 12 to sea where he was appalled (and politicised) by the arbitrary and brutal regime. His pamphlet An Essay on Naval Discipline⁹ written following his court-martial and dismissal from the Navy for (probably deliberately) ‘losing’ a prisoner who was about to be flogged, brought him to the attention of radical circles in London, including Francis Place, a moderate and manipulative radical who engineered him a job as a parliamentary reporter for the Morning Chronicle.

Hodgskin and Robertson appealed to the ‘mechanics’ of London to form an Institution along the lines of that recently established in Glasgow by students who had broken away from Anderson’s Institution (established in 1796 for the education of the ‘unacademic classes’ and where Birkbeck had taught from 1799 until 1804, when he moved to London) following disputes over control. The founding mission of the LMI as articulated in the Mechanics Magazine would be to make working men acquainted not only with ‘*the facts of chemistry and of mechanical philosophy*’ but also ‘*of the creation and distribution of wealth.*’ The institution and its curriculum would be under the control of the workers themselves: ‘*The*

*education of a free people, like their property, will always be directed most beneficially for them when it is in their own hands. [...] Men had better be without education [...] than be educated by their rulers; for then education is but the breaking in of the steer to the yoke.*¹⁰

The response to the appeal was immediate. It came from individual ‘mechanics’, those (like Place) who saw themselves as their representatives and from prominent social improvers. Birkbeck was one of the first of these and he brought with him other influential supporters including Henry Brougham (later to become Lord Chancellor but then a prominent barrister who had made his name successfully defending the publishers of an article attacking the brutality of flogging in the army from a charge of seditious libel).

The LMI was launched in December 1823 following a series of meetings attended by as many as 2,000 people. Guarantees of support – and cash – poured in from an unlikely variety of sources left, centre and even right-of-centre. William Cobbett gave £5 ‘as a mark of my regard for and attachment to the working classes of the community, and also as a mark of my approbation of any thing which seemed to assert that these classes were equal, in point of intellect, to those who have the insolence to call them the ‘Lower Orders. Sir Francis Burdett, MP for Westminster donated an impressive 1,000 guineas. Lord Byron promised £50.¹¹

On the right – and particularly from the Church - reaction was mixed. The St James’ Chronicle ranted ‘A scheme more completely adapted to the destruction of the empire could not have been invented by the author of evil himself, than that which the depraved ambitions of some men, the vanity of others, and the supineness of a third and more important class, has so nearly perfected’ St James’ Chronicle May 1925.^{quoted in 12)} The Minister of Laura Chapel, Bath declared that education ‘is beginning to take a false direction. It is attempted to be made too scientific and philosophical, instead of being chiefly moral and religious. [...] The most suspicious feature... consists in the total independence of all such undertakings on the assistance or co-operation of the upper orders. [...] ‘If the education of the labouring orders is not to produce confusion and jealousy, it ought to harmonise with that of the upper classes of society. [...] Lectures and institutions which tempt the labourer or mechanic to leave his home and family are at best of very dubious advantage; I should prefer the simplest improvement gained by his fire-side, and in company with his wife and family, to the most ostentatious meetings of the London Institution.’¹³

Others preferred an accommodation. Whilst Robert Owen gave £10 so did William Wilberforce despite his opposition to any education for artisans which left them ‘ignorant of the grounds on which we rest the Divine Authority of Christianity’.¹¹ Meanwhile London employers broadly welcomed an initiative which promised to increase the skills base of their potential workforce. Amongst them the brewers Whitbreads and Truman Hanbury contributed 50 guineas each ‘though probably more with the mechanics’ brand loyalty than their political convictions in mind.’¹¹

Utilitarianism ascendant

Disputes around constituency, curriculum and control – who the new institute was to be for, who should manage it and what it should teach – accompanied it from birth. ‘The early history of the Mechanics’ Institutes, from the formation of the London Institute in 1823 until the 1830s, is a story of ideological conflict. [...] The crucial conflicts took place on the questions of control, of financial independence, and if so whether or not the Institutes should debate political economy (and, if so, whose political economy).’¹⁴

The immediate issue concerned whether or not the new Institute needed its own premises. For some months after its foundation, the new Institute had no home. Temporary offices were established at Furnival’s Inn. Popular lectures and classes on arithmetic, language and music held at the Monkwell Street Chapel and at the houses of members.

Eventually, in 1824 suitable premises were found at 29, Southampton Buildings (in Chancery Lane, Holborn) with adjacent land which could be built on. Hodgskin and Robertson objected to the leasing of expensive premises on the grounds that the Institution would be dependent on the rich, who alone could provide the necessary funds. They argued that the Glasgow Institute had managed to remain independent of wealthy benefactors and the new LMI should do likewise.

In the end pragmatism trumped principle: *'money talked'*.⁶ Hodgskin and Robertson who had initially put forward the initiative for a London Mechanics' Institute were *'out-manoeuvred and out-financed'*.¹⁵ They lacked influence and patronage; George Birkbeck had already secured guarantees of support – and money and was able to provide it. Moreover the new Institution attracted support well beyond the class of literate manual workers whom Hodgskin and Robertson had seen as its main constituency. In addition to ambitious and upwardly mobile managers, the Institute also attracted small tradesmen and 'white-collar' workers who formed an increasing proportion of the City's changing occupational structure.

On 2nd December 1824 the foundation stone for new lecture theatre was laid at Southampton Buildings, Holborn; this opened in July the following year. Robertson refused to attend, declaring in the Mechanics' Magazine that *'the Committee of Management is an illegal usurpation, elected contrary to the laws, and acting in defiance of them'*; of the members of the new Institution *'certainly not more than one half are of that class of persons for whose special benefit the Institution was founded'* and the foundation stone to be laid would be *'but the foundation of a load of debt'*. *'The Institution, in short, has become a Mechanics' Institution only in name.'*¹⁶

The process seemed to bear out the fears of Cobbett, who said that he had given his £5 *'as a mark of my regard for and attachment to the working classes of the community, and also as a mark of my approbation of any thing which seemed to assert that these classes were equal, in point of intellect, to those who have the insolence to call them the 'Lower Orders'*. Cobbett added: *'But I was not without my fears, nor am I now without my fears, that this institution may be turned to purposes extremely injurious to the mechanics themselves. I cannot but know what sort of people are likely to get amongst them. [...] Mechanics, I most heartily wish you well but I also most heartily wish you not to be humbugged which you most certainly will be if you suffer anybody but REAL MECHANICS to have anything to do in managing the concern.'*¹⁷

Robertson, Hodgskin and others who had initially put forward the initiative for a London Mechanics' Institute were defeated; In the words of Eric Hobsbawm (who joined Birkbeck College as a young lecturer in 1947 and who was its President from 2002 until his death in 2012) the Benthamite radicals *'took over and diverted'* the LMI.¹⁸ *'The original founders were pushed aside'*¹¹ and *'control passed to the middle-class supporters whose ideology also dominated the political economy of the syllabus.'*¹⁴ Birkbeck's own biographer describes how most mechanics' institutes fell largely *'under the control of the moneyed classes, and became props of orthodoxy and respectability instead of independent working-class organisations.'*¹⁹

In fact the Whig patrons and benefactors of the LMI were less concerned with who managed the LMI (or who its students were) than with what it taught. Even Brougham – well after funds had been committed to the new buildings – was happy for the new Institute to be autonomous – if not in finance then at least in respect of its management. In an address dedicated to George Birkbeck he declared how *'the extraordinary success of the new Institution [the LMI] which now places it at the head of all such establishments, may chiefly be ascribed to its administration being in the hands of the men themselves.'* *'Any Meddling'* with institutions providing education for adults he declared *'would be perilous to civil and religious liberty.'*²⁰

The Utilitarian liberals had no problem with the 'facts' of science, but their ideas about the 'facts' regarding the creation and distribution of wealth were very different from Hodgskin's. Very different too was their vision of the consequences of education for the 'mechanics'. Both were based on 'self-help', but for Hodgskin, self-help meant collective action to secure fundamental social change; for the Utilitarians sobriety, thrift and individual self-improvement were the route to personal advancement and social progress.

By 1825 Hodgskin and Robertson, having instigated the idea of an Institute, regarded it as a lost cause, whose existence depended on the 'great and the wealthy'. Robertson severed all links with the LMI but continued to criticise it from the pages of the Mechanics Magazine. Hodgskin severed his links with the Mechanics Magazine possibly because his political articles were not seen as aiding its circulation, and became editor of a more specialist (and short-lived) journal, The Chemist, one of the first to present science in class terms. On its collapse he focused on his political and educational work and with the support of Birkbeck, continued to lecture at the LMI. His first lectures - published as Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital (under the pseudonym of 'a Labourer') contain a manifesto for education as the stimulus for social change: *'As the labourers acquire knowledge, the foundations of the social edifice will be dug up from the deep beds into which they were laid in times past, they will be curiously handled and closely examined, and they will not be restored unless they were originally laid in justice, and unless justice commands their preservation'*.²¹

Hodgskin's views were in sharp contrast to those of Henry Brougham who, prompted by the formation of the LMI published them shortly afterwards in manifesto form in his Practical Observations on the Education of the People (addressed in its subtitle to the working classes and their employers).²⁰ Brougham's message was very different to that of Hodgskin however; arguing that education – including cheap publications and libraries conveying 'useful knowledge' - would be conducive to *'the peace of the country, and the stability of the government'*.²⁰

Hodgskin's second lecture series (in 1827), again delivered with the support of Birkbeck and in the teeth of opposition, in particular from Francis Place, was on political economy. His lectures were published later that year, as were those of Birkbeck. They make an interesting contrast. Birkbeck's is a dense technical treatise on the operation of steam engines (written in conjunction with the engineers James and Henry Adcock).²² Hodgskin's, entitled Popular Political Economy. Four Lectures delivered at the London Mechanics' Institution²³ was widely read, and hugely influential.

Marx describes Hodgskin as *'one of the most important modern English economists'*²⁴. Popular Political Economy provided the basis for Marx's theory of surplus value and is quoted extensively in his notebooks, written between 1857 and 1858, in preparation for his 'Chapter on Capital'²⁵ (later edited by Engels as 'Volume 4' of Marx's Capital). Labour Defended - described by Marx as *'this admirable work'*²⁴ was particularly influential. Published in several editions it was followed in 1832 by The Natural and Artificial Right of Property Contrasted.²⁶ They brought a response, not least from establishment figures associated with the Mechanics' Institute including a counter-pamphlet The Rights of Industry, Capital, and Labour (addressed 'to The Working-Men of the United Kingdom')²⁷ often attributed to (by then, Lord) Brougham and which Marx describes as *'noteworthy for the same superficiality that marks all the economic productions of that windbag'*.²⁴

Utilitarian self-help; theory and practice

Brougham's own views on adult education were put into practice through his Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK) founded in 1826. Both the SDUK and its weekly Penny Magazine (launched in 1832 which achieved a circulation of some 200,000

copies) were relatively short-lived (the magazine and the Society were wound up in 1845 and 1848 respectively) but 'useful knowledge', pioneered in Birkbeck's own early lectures in Glasgow and promoted widely through the Mechanics' Institutes became a significant social movement, articulated most clearly in Samuel Smiles' Self Help (1859) and in the flood of similar titles that followed - Smiles' own were Character (1871), Thrift (1875) and Duty (1880) - underlying the construction of 'Victorian' values.

Engels had already by mid-century written off the mechanics' institutes as useless '*organs of the middle classes*', their teachings '*uninspired and flabby*.' Their purpose was to teach students '*to be subservient to the existing political and social order. All that the worker hears in these schools is one long sermon on respectful and passive obedience in the station of life to which he has been called. Of course*' he declared hopefully '*the vast majority of the workers will have nothing to do with these institutes*'.²⁸ The People's Magazine in 1841 declared: '*The 'Mechanics Institutions', with all other 'institutions' for the 'diffusion of knowledge' [...] are so many traps to catch the people [...] and prevent their attaining a knowledge of the true cause of their miserable and degraded state. We warn the people to shun all this as a pest.*'^{quoted in 29} A more common reaction — at least as far as the SDUK was concerned — was ridicule, with 'useful knowledge' parodied by advocacy of the 'really useful knowledge' required for working class emancipation.^{30, 31}

The Utilitarian versions of useful knowledge and self-help needed vehicles promulgate and demonstrate their benefits. It is unlikely that the LMI would have survived had it not been for the establishment, a quarter-century after the LMI itself of two other 'Birkbecks' – the Birkbeck Schools and a Birkbeck Bank, both sharing governance with the LMI. The first Birkbeck School was launched in the LMI's lecture theatre in 1848 by William Ellis, one of the LMI's powerful early patrons, targeted initially at the children of the LMIs members. By 1862 seven Birkbeck Schools were operating in London, together with a number more based on Ellis' principles in other parts of the UK. In a number or respects the Birkbeck Schools were hugely progressive. They were secular (the bible was excluded, with religion seen as a matter for parents, not for the school), usually for girls as well as boys, they avoided corporal punishment and they rejected rote learning in favour of teaching through a Socratic dialogue between teacher and pupils. And their curriculum - based on 'useful knowledge' - included physiology and personal hygiene.

Like the LMI in its early days the Birkbeck Schools were attacked by those who saw them as threatening the established fabric of society. But their principal feature was more problematic. 'Useful knowledge' focused on what Ellis called 'Social Economy' – teaching about economics, politics and social studies in direct opposition to Thomas Hodgskin's Political Economy. The schools taught 'the science of well-being' and were designed, explicitly, to train pupils '*in the various qualities which lie at the base of all social wellbeing - such as industry, knowledge, skill, economy, temperance, respect for property, and forethought*'³² and to submit to the laws of 'social economy' - 'the science of well-being' as a necessary condition of economic prosperity and of their own betterment.³³ 'Social Economy' (used by Ellis in preference to 'political economy' in that it more explicitly combined personal morality with the workings of commerce) was, perhaps inevitably, given its secular nature, based on 'natural' law – but a very different natural law (with a very different purpose) from that of Hodgskin.

The Birkbeck Schools were enormously influential in their time, praised by many 'progressive' thinkers and condemned by the right for threatening the hegemony of the Church schools. Their teaching methods — progressive for the times — were lampooned by Dickens in Hard Times, for their focus on 'facts' (neglecting the emotions and little better than the rote learning they challenged) and for their emphasis on individual self-interest, (rather than for the political content of their teaching). Their curriculum was attacked by the Church for its godlessness, though interestingly received little of the opprobrium aimed at the

'useful knowledge' of the Mechanics' Institutes. Most schools closed following the 1870 Education Act although one, in Parliament Hill (Camden) retains Ellis' name and the physical fabric of another survives in Dalston (Hackney).

A longer lasting -and for the LMI more significant- venture, the Birkbeck Bank grew out of the Birkbeck Freehold Land Society and a Birkbeck Building Society (BLBS) which were established in the premises of the LMI (and eventually took them over). Formed in 1851, shortly after the collapse of the Chartist Land Plan (formed to secure a County vote for those who could afford to purchase a 'forty-shilling' freehold) and aimed initially at students of the LMI and their friends the BLBS was one of the first of the new wave of building societies; access to a vote was a minor element in its appeal compared to the 'security' of a house and (later) the opportunity to speculate in property. Prior to its collapse in 2011 (and its assimilation into the London and Westminster Bank, now part of the Royal Bank of Scotland) 'The Birkbeck' grew rapidly to become for a time the largest building society or sixth largest bank in Britain and it helped to develop the suburbs of London. (Other land or building societies were launched in mechanics' institutes in Coventry, Hexham, Manchester, Peterborough, Stockport and Sheffield and many more mechanics institutes played host to savings banks although none were as spectacularly successful as 'The Birkbeck'). In 1866 the LMI was renamed the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institute (BLSI), presenting a coherent public face with the BLBS and Bank with which it shared its premises until 1885 when the Bank financed the construction of, and the BLSI's move to a new building nearby. Ten years later, in 1886 the Bank replaced the physical fabric of the old LMI building with a major commercial centre - a 'phantasmagoria'³⁴ its iconography (including busts of Birkbeck himself).described as 'a sort of pictorial Samuel Smiles.'³⁵ Ravenscroft's bust now sits in the Council Room of Birkbeck College's new 'new building' in Malet Street.³⁶

Conclusion

The LMI presents perhaps the first significant attempt to establish independent working class education (IWCE). The struggle for IWCE is often presented as beginning in the 1900s as a reaction (symbolised by the Ruskin College 'strike' of 1909) against the establishment-dominated university extension movement (from the 1870s) and Workers' Educational Association (WEA, founded in 1903).³⁷ The history of the LMI suggests that its roots are earlier. Birkbeck College's own centenary biographer, writing in 1923, describes the split as '*somewhat like our contemporary controversy on adult education between the Workers' Educational Association and the Plebs League.*'³⁸ However while the Plebs' League and its successor, the inter-War Labour College movement was a reaction against establishment control and domination of the syllabus, the 'takeover' of the LMI – and much of the subsequent history of mechanics' institutes after 1823 – was very explicitly a reaction to the perceived threat of IWCE.

In terms of the critical issues of curriculum, constituency and control, the LMI failed. Brian Simon declares that '*The story of the London Mechanics' Institution [...] provides an instructive example of the way in which Radicals, industrialists, and Whig politicians combined to turn what originated chiefly as a working-class institution to their own purposes.*'¹⁵ One question that arises is whether, without influential - and monied - patronage, it could have succeeded. In terms of the original vision for the LMI put forward by Hodgskin and Robertson this seems unlikely. Pragmatism triumphed over principle.

It seems likely also that the LMI's failure as an independent working class initiative '*was indirectly facilitated by the absence of any genuine popular philosophy of education which might have provided an alternative to middle class ideals of "instruction".*' Until Hodgskin (amongst others) promoted a movement for *really* useful knowledge '*The working classes had no distinctive educational ideology of their own.*'³⁹ Ironically an additional reason may have been Birkbeck's own friendship with Hodgskin and his tolerance of

unorthodox ideas: *'The dangers of depending on middle-class money were not immediately obvious, particularly because the chief financial backer, George Birkbeck himself, was so enthusiastic about the project and tolerated or sympathised with the heterodox.'*¹¹

Well-connected in liberal circles, Birkbeck was able to take the role of mediator. His only known political act was to second George Grote as MP for the City of London in 1823; he *'had no general social or educational policy, and he avoided wherever he could the disagreeable possibilities of an education which might have revolutionary consequences.'* Unlike Hodgskin, Birkbeck *'was not critical of social customs, and his speeches were generally suffused with a gentle glow of admiration for social rank, which was probably shared by most of the 'mechanics' and others to whom he spoke.'*³⁸ The description might apply to many of the LMI's successor staff and students today.

Whilst, with the ODNB, a concern with accuracy suggests that we should take issue with a description of Birkbeck as the 'founder' of the LMI, he undoubtedly played a crucial part in ensuring its early survival; and without him, Hodgskin's lectures would not have taken place and Labour Defended²¹, Popular Political Economy²³ and The Natural and Artificial Right of Property²⁶ might never have been written (but nor might Brougham's SDUK or the tens of sad little pamphlets from its stable). The stories of the foundation of the LMI, of the Birkbeck Bank, and the Birkbeck Schools are now 'just history' – a history from which, in most popular accounts, all traces of conflict have been excised.

Birkbeck's own role in the establishment of the LMI was undoubtedly central, and it is arguably appropriate that it be celebrated in the name of the LMI's successor. At the same time his tolerance of dissent helped to ensure that the LMI was never seriously threatened at least by internal discord. And Birkbeck's central role as an inspiration for the mechanics' institute movement through his lectures at Glasgow's Andersonian Institute some twenty years before the establishment of the LMI, is unassailable. But as Hole stated in 1853³ and Kelly likewise in 1952⁵, Birkbeck was not the 'founder' of the LMI. Yet neither Hodgskin nor Robertson are today mentioned in Birkbeck College's own accounts⁴⁰ of its foundation.

The issues of control in working-class adult education have never gone away although they are no longer a focus of adult education activists in the way they were during the Ruskin College 'strike' and for the inter-War Labour College movement.³⁷ They are kept alive by journals such as Post-16 Educator today.^{41 42} Challenges to curriculum continue to surface both on the part of adult educators⁴³ and (although this has yet to match the 'counter-course' movement of the 1970s), on the part of students themselves, as exemplified by the demands by the Post-Crash Economics Society at Manchester⁴⁴ and its counterparts at Cambridge Essex Glasgow LSE, Sheffield, SOAS and UCL, for a reform (and broadening) of the economics curriculum.^{See, e.g. 45} And the critical issues of collective versus individual models of 'self-help', of 'useful' versus 'really useful' knowledge, of what working-class education could be like, how to secure it, and how independent it should be (from the state or from other forms of patronage) are still current, two centuries on.

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