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Birkbeck 1823-2023 and the future of lifelong learning. [Review]

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Abstract:

Joanna Bourke's 'Birkbeck' charts the eventful progress of the London Mechanics' Institution from its foundation in 1823 through its incorporation as Birkbeck College with the University of London to its pre-eminent position as a provider of part-time University education today. The history of Birkbeck presents a window on higher education and lifelong learning within a wider social context. In particular that history rehearses debates – still hugely relevant today – regarding what should be taught, to whom and who should decide.

Keywords:

Birkbeck; 'mechanics' institution'; 'lifelong learning'; 'continuing education'; 'University of London'.

A review of contributions to the first 40 volumes of this journal published earlier this year (Holford et al., 2023) identified three topics which delineate fundamental debates within lifelong education: 'citizenship and its learning; learning in, through and for work; and widening participation and higher education.' In all three, at least in England, Birkbeck College - founded in 1823 as the London Mechanics' Institute - has been a leader. All three have also been contentious both in theory and practice throughout the institution's history.

Beginnings

The London Mechanics' Institute (LMI) was not the first such institution but it is arguably the most significant. Movements for working-class access to knowledge gathered speed in the late 18th century Britain. Alongside mutual improvement societies were disparate technical institutes including Glasgow's Andersonian Institute where George Birkbeck taught from 1796 (before moving to London in 1804) and where the first conflicts over issues of control between its managers and members of the Mechanics' Class led the latter to secede and to form a separate body, the Glasgow Mechanics' Institution, in early 1823. The same year two political activists, Thomas Hodgskin and J C Robertson, moved from Edinburgh where another mechanics' institution (MI) known as the College of Arts had just been established, to London.

Here they launched their journal, the Mechanics Magazine in which the first formal proposal for the LMI was made.

Joanna Bourke's *Birkbeck* charts the eventful progress of the LMI from its foundation through its incorporation as Birkbeck College with the University of London to its pre-eminent position as a provider of part-time University education today. That history in many ways presents a window on higher education and lifelong learning within a wider social context. In particular it rehearses debates – still hugely relevant today – regarding what should be taught, to whom and who should decide.

The LMI's inaugural meeting in late 1823 in the Crown and Anchor Tavern (now replaced by coffee bars) in London's Strand was stormy. Hodgskin had called for an institution controlled by its students and dedicated to collective emancipation through an understanding of the political economy of capitalism. The Utilitarian social improvers who responded recognised the need for working-class education and of the capital's booming economy for a scientifically literate workforce, but it was to be an education focused on individual advancement. They won. George Birkbeck was the mediator, ensuring the LMI's early survival. His influence is reflected today in the College's unique position as a provider of part-time evening university education and also, in the words of perhaps its most celebrated academic, historian Eric Hobsbawm, in its breadth of curriculum and tolerance of the heterodox. Without George Birkbeck, Hodgskin (described by Karl Marx as 'one of the most important modern English economists') would not have been allowed to lecture; his Popular Political Economy would not have been published and Marx's Capital might well have taken a different form. The Utilitarian liberals responded, not least Henry Brougham (later Lord Chancellor) with his Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK). Battles over the content, constituency and control of education; between 'merely' useful and 'really useful' knowledge continue to the present day.

Bourke's *Birkbeck* is an extraordinarily detailed and insightful account, written with love and commitment; a long way from the dry chronologies that so often characterise institutional histories. Every page engages with the wider educational and political context. At the same time people – staff and students – are central to the narrative. The former include not just academics and administrators but others critical to the functioning of any institution, such as 'Ma' Francis who ran the refectory; the latter, a host of student luminaries from Ramsay MacDonald, Britain's first Labour Prime Minister, to James Lovelock, originator of the Gaia hypothesis that our planet is a self-regulating system. Another student was William Joyce, a leading fascist who attended his first class in military uniform sitting in the front row with a rifle across his knees, gained a first class honours degree in English and subsequently as 'Lord Haw-Haw' during the 1939-45 War broadcast 'Germany Calling' to demoralise British troops and civilians - for which he was subsequently convicted of treason and executed.

The LMI admitted women in 1830, more than a decade before any similar institution, though initially only if chaperoned by a male and not as full members until 1896. By this time Birkbeck College had become a magnet ‘not only to female students but also to progressive, early feminists.’ One such was Edith Lanchester, an early activist within the Social Democratic Federation (SDF, Britain’s first socialist party) and a prominent suffragist particularly following her abduction and incarceration in a mental institution for refusing to marry her lover. In 1827 George Birkbeck had permitted women to attend his anatomy classes. Six decades later Lanchester’s attendance at such classes (and her employment drawing diagrams for lecturers) was still regarded as scandalous. Others included Annie Besant, author of The Gospel of Atheism and a leading advocate of birth control, her prominence such that the College authorities removed her name from the list of graduating students and were then forced to reinstate it; and Marie Stopes, author of the sex manual Married Love (1918), her name until recently memorialised in the international NGO promoting contraception and safe abortion facilities in some 37 countries.

Other ‘minoritised’ communities receive due attention, including those oppressed by the structures of ‘race’ and ethnicity such as student Marcus Garvey, their oppressors such as Sir Fiennes Barrett-Lennard (briefly a lecturer at Birkbeck) who as Chief Justice of Jamaica, imprisoned Garvey for contempt of court but also confiscated the property of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and ‘Bertie’ Hines, Birkbeck’s first Black professor.

Social life features prominently, including anecdotes from the staff and student common rooms and accounts of Birkbeck sports activities - and sex lives. In places — for example the ritual of students rags or ‘Joy-Nights’; ‘a negotiated inversion of staff-student relations in an institution that was markedly hierarchical’ though happily one that seems to have been confined to the inter-War period — these read like extracts from a public school or Oxbridge memoir. One chapter recounts the history of the College’s theatre, ‘one of London’s great attractions’ which hosted figures such as George Grossmith (father and son), Charles Dickens Jr., Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. Another emphasises the centrality of art and architecture to the College since its foundational years, highlighting the contributions of the maverick celebrity painter Benjamin Robert Haydon and the architectural historian Pevsner together with more recent initiatives in film, photography and other creative arts including the modernist 2007 Birkbeck Cinema.

Inevitably there are elements in Birkbeck which are contentious. Bourke challenges recent historians of education (the most prominent of whom, Brian Simon, is not mentioned in her account) that echo contemporary criticisms of mechanics institutions such as the declaration of the People’s Magazine in 1841 (the year of George Birkbeck’s death) that they were ‘traps to catch the people...and prevent their attaining a knowledge of the true cause of their miserable

and degraded state.’ In 1844 Friedrich Engels in The Condition of the Working Class in England denounced their teaching as ‘tame, flabby, subservient to the ruling politics and religion’, delivering a ‘constant sermon upon quiet obedience, passivity, and resignation’ to the existing order of things. For this reviewer the LMI’s history, until at least the third quarter of the nineteenth century, was as much about containment as enlightenment. Two significant episodes, each deservedly given a chapter in Birkbeck were the Birkbeck Schools and the Birkbeck Bank.

The schools (there were eventually seven of them in London) were launched in the premises of the LMI in 1848, as the ‘spectre’ (of communism) was ‘haunting Europe’ and the threat of Chartism had yet to become a distant memory. The initiative of William Ellis, one of the early sponsors of the LMI, they were indeed radical: like the LMI they were secular, rejected rote learning in favour of a participatory dialogue (ridiculed by Charles Dickens in Hard Times) between teacher and pupils, taught personal hygiene as well as more conventional topics, to girls as well as boys; and they (at least nominally) eschewed corporal punishment. They were challenged both from within the Church and by other schools who saw their interests threatened. But they were also 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’ and to submit to the laws of ‘social economy’ (the antithesis of Hodgskin’s political economy) as a necessary condition of economic prosperity and of their own betterment. Following the 1870 Education Act, some became local authority Board schools; others collapsed. One, praised in the Illustrated London News (1867) for teaching ‘the truths of social and moral science’ counteracting restrictive practices of trades unions ‘thwarting the conditions of general well-being’ survives today: Birkbeck College still appoints a governor. It has been suggested that — particularly through their influence on the introduction of civics into elementary schools during the 1890s — Ellis’s schools were the parent of citizenship education today. Contemporary opinion went even further: for one writer in The Times in 1873, Ellis was ‘the founder’ of social science.

The Birkbeck Bank was founded (as the Birkbeck Land and Building Societies) a short time afterwards by Francis Ravenscroft who entered the LMI as a student in 1848 and, largely through Ellis’ patronage, became Chair of its management committee a few months later. It was designed initially to provide the Institutes’ members with the opportunity to benefit materially - a house and (for men) a vote - from their endeavours. Like the LMI itself the Bank received criticism, not least from Engels, who, a quarter-century after his attack on mechanics’ institutes, chose the Birkbeck as the focus of his attack in The Housing Question (1870) on those who saw building societies as a solution to the problem of inadequate housing, arguing that they were relevant only to those who already enjoyed financial security their chief aim

being 'always to provide a more profitable mortgage investment for the savings of the petty bourgeoisie, at a good rate of interest and the prospect of dividends from speculation in real estate.' Today the insecurity of mortgage and credit card indebtedness, alongside the hegemony of a modern version of Ellis' social economy, are major disincentives to political action.

The success of the Birkbeck Bank – and Ravenscroft's support – underpinned the move of the LMI (by this time renamed the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution but, like the Bank, generally known as 'The Birkbeck') to its second home nearby in 1885. Its old premises were demolished and replaced by the Bank's new premises, described by the Architectural Review as 'the greatest single extravaganza of central London' and by Nikolaus Pevsner, Birkbeck's first Professor of Art History, as a 'phantasmagoria'. By the end of the century, the Bank had grown to become one of the largest such bodies in Europe, playing a significant part in transforming the suburban landscape of London as it did so. Its collapse in 1911 is immortalized (as the Grubbs Fidelity Fiduciary Bank) in Walt Disney's 1962 film *Mary Poppins* and it reverberates today in decisions as to whether customers or shareholders should take precedence in compensation arrangements following the failure of financial institutions.

Birkbeck University

Until Bourke's *Birkbeck*, although published histories of the College feature the name of Francis Ravenscroft, the connections with the Birkbeck Bank, Land and Building Societies are rarely mentioned. C Delisle Burns' (1923) centenary history of Birkbeck College does so only once, declaring that 'Except in name, the Institution and the Bank were quite unconnected.' However it is clear that the use of Birkbeck's name was more than merely promotional and that the Birkbeck Institute and 'the Birkbeck' had a close relationship in more than name. For more than a third of a century, from the latter's formation in 1851 until 1885, the two enterprises shared the same premises, had overlapping governance and provided reciprocal benefits; financial on the one hand and ideological on the other. Burns' reluctance to elaborate on the relationship was almost certainly to do with any potential stigma associated with the Bank's collapse. 'The Birkbeck' had only in 1920 been admitted to the University, the outcome of a long campaign, interrupted by the First World War. It was still on probation, in part due to the opposition of Kings College as a consequence of which it had to restrict its teaching to the evening (it remains a requirement that no daytime programmes may be offered which are not also delivered in the evening) and when in 1925 that probationary period ended, a further one was imposed with a condition that new premises 'worthy of the College' should be acquired. Construction of Birkbeck College's present building in Malet Street was interrupted by the Second World War during which its then home was itself bombed but remained 'open' (the only London college to do so) and teaching continued.

Both World Wars transformed the lives of Birkbeck staff and students and are given separate chapters in *Birkbeck* in which political and social narrative is accompanied by individual accounts – of those who fought (and in many cases died) and others who remained, many throwing themselves into voluntary war work. Other chapters – the core of the book – chronicle the contributions and context of a huge numbers of others. Two of the most interesting chapters document the attraction of Birkbeck to Marxists, socialists and other radical intellectuals during what Bourke describes as the ‘heady years’ from the 1940s to the early 1970s. Both Hobsbawm and molecular biologist and polymath J D Bernal are considered in some detail, amongst what is necessarily a selective list of other communists including P M Blackett, Jim Jeffrey, John Hasted, Alan Mackay, physicist David Bohm, economist Ben Fine and classicist Geoffrey de Ste Croix author of *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981). All are given due recognition for their academic achievements as well as their political commitment in making links between past and present, science and socialism, theory and practice.

Due attention is also given to other key individuals including Rosalind Franklin, pioneer of X-ray diffraction analysis of viruses and our understanding today of molecular genetics; mathematician Roger Penrose ‘inventor’ of black-holes for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize – ‘the most important contribution to the general theory of relativity since Einstein’; and Andrew Booth and Kathleen Britten, pioneers of the development of digital electronic computers in what was the first academic department in the UK devoted to computing: their work underpins a good deal of what we take for granted today, whether using our smartphones or pondering the wider possibilities of artificial intelligence (AI). Lesser figures also appear such as philosopher Roger Scruton, described by Bourke as ‘the nemesis of all things progressive.’

One fascinating chapter describes the collaboration of Hasted and Bohm in a major programme of research into the paranormal, including clairvoyance, telepathy, teleportation and the supposed ability of some gifted individuals to bend spoons and forks through the power of thought alone. Although finally debunked (though Hasted clung to the notion that there was more to the world than dreamt of in conventional science or socialist philosophy) Bourke shows why the possibility of paranormal phenomena should have appealed to these two physicists given the (dialectical?) possibilities of quantum mechanics at the time.

Beyond the Boundaries

Next to its admission as a College of the University, one of the most significant but relatively short-lived episodes in Birkbeck’s history has been the fusing of Birkbeck with the (federal) University of London’s Department of Extra-Mural Studies. DEMS had functioned as an

important adjunct to Birkbeck from the start, particularly in the Arts, in pioneering ‘new’ subject areas (its Mary Kennedy was the first ever full-time university tutor in women’s studies) and acting as a feeder of students from marginalized communities. Charged with reflecting the scholarship of the University to a wider London public, DEMS emerged from the London Society for the Extension of University Teaching (LSEUT) established in 1879 (some half-century before Birkbeck’s accession as a College of the University) by which time Birkbeck itself, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm had been ‘taken over and diverted’ from the initial vision of its founders, becoming a ‘school for technicians’. LSEUT’s teaching was based on the ‘top down’ Cambridge model of peripatetic lecturers; but by 1900 (by which time LSEUT had become an official Board within the University) it had been joined by ‘tutorial classes’ anticipating the ‘Oxford’ tradition of negotiated syllabi and participatory learning.

The result was an expanding programme, delivered by two ‘responsible bodies’ under the 1926 University of London Act. The ‘Extension Section’ delivered a programme comprised mainly of accredited Certificates and Diplomas – everything from archaeology to religious studies, and it included several relatively autonomous vocational units, notably in nursing, in social work and in transport studies. The other, the ‘Tutorial Classes Section’ focused principally on non-accredited classes and covered an even wider range of subjects, mostly delivered in conjunction with what was then a strong network of local branches of the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA, founded in 1903) as well as with trades unions, local community organisations and third-sector organisations. The programme expanded rapidly following the 1944 Education Act and more so following the 1973 ‘Russell Report’ on adult education. Major growth in conventional ‘academic’ studies was accompanied by new industrial and trades union work (boosted by the 1974 Employment Protection Act which provided for paid educational leave for adults) prison education, and vocational courses for a range of specialist career development including adult educators, social workers, nurses and magistrates.

By the late 1970s however, the landscape of higher education was changing, not just for extra-mural ‘outreach’. Birkbeck College was particularly affected and *Birkbeck’s* penultimate chapter ‘Containing the Crisis’ rehearses challenges that have played out with variations in every institute of adult and higher education throughout the UK. The College has survived, but the consequence has been an increasingly instrumental approach to education, with, most importantly, its work with local authorities, trades unions and other adult education bodies such as the WEA, effectively obliterated.

Despite Margaret Thatcher’s professed support for lifelong learning when Education Secretary (1970-74), policies under her premiership (1979-90) involved what Bourke rightly describes as an ‘assault on Birkbeck and other institutions of Higher Education’ involving

‘market-driven policies of privatization, deregulation, managerialism, and commodification.’ A requirement to charge non-EU students the ‘full economic cost’ of their education was accompanied by a decision that a part-time undergraduate was ‘worth’ just half of a full-time student. Previously it had been 80% (Birkbeck undergraduate degrees typically taking four years rather than the ‘full-time’ three). Colleges of London University became increasingly autonomous. For DEMS, in addition to government funding cuts, its constitutional position as the only teaching unit of the University’s largely administrative (and weakening) federal centre made it isolated.

In 1988 DEMS joined Birkbeck, becoming the Centre for Extra-Mural Studies (CEMS), one of seven (later five) restructured ‘resource centres’ within the College. Its programme, in terms both of subjects, student numbers and of full-time equivalent (fte) grant, was significantly bigger than that of the College to which the amalgamation brought important additional funding. Ironically, this produced something a resurgence of the founding spirit of the College. Bourke cites a commentator in the early days of the LMI who observed approvingly that the LMI’s students flourished because they were ‘active searchers’ rather than ‘passive recipients’ of knowledge. But (she continues) this tradition had been dropped when Birkbeck became part of the University of London and sought to emulate the teaching practices of other colleges. CEMS championed a more participatory model of learning but proved too entrepreneurial for some conservative departments (and a useful focus of innovative projects for the College) and it began to develop independently as a ‘mini-university’ within Birkbeck.

The squeeze on lifelong learning continued however. New funding arrangements meant that only assessed courses were eligible for Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funding. The CEMS response was ‘mainstreaming’. Henceforth all courses had to have defined ‘outcomes’ and be measurable in terms of assessed work. This led to a growth in Certificates and Diplomas and the final collapse of the old ‘tutorial class’. At the same time the long-standing partnership with local education authorities and the WEA declined. In 1999, ten years after DEMS incorporation, CEMS became the Faculty of Continuing Education (FCE) initially comprising two schools (of Social and Natural Sciences and of Arts and Cultural Studies) combined in 2002 into a single School of Continuing Education (SCE) and five years later in 2007 renamed the Faculty of Lifelong Learning (FLL).

This coincided with the removal of government funding for equivalent or lower level qualification (ELQ) students: funding per student was henceforth restricted to those who did not already possess a qualification at (or higher than) that for which they are registered. This had a damaging effect on all Birkbeck subject areas, particularly in the arts, but was crippling for extra-mural work. In 2009, over a century-and-a third after the establishment of LSEUT and after 20 years of semi-autonomous existence as a ‘mini-university’ within Birkbeck College,

FLL, the most recent (and shortest lived) incarnation of the London Society for the Extension of University Teaching was finally assimilated into a new Birkbeck ‘SuperSchool’ structure and a short-lived era of outreach beyond Birkbeck’s campus was over. At the same time an even shorter one began. In the autumn of 2007, Birkbeck expanded its teaching in a new, state-of-the-art building in Stratford, East London, an area with the lowest higher education participation rate in London. Over 1,300 students enrolled, one quarter of whom were under 25 and 55% identified as Black or minority ethnic; the corresponding figures for the Bloomsbury campus were 14% and 24%. However ‘Birkbeck East’ subsequently struggled to attract students: in 2021, Birkbeck sold its share of the project to the University of East London.

Despite these setbacks, Bourke’s conclusion is upbeat; that Birkbeck enters its third century ‘in confident stride’. Auguries include its purchase of Student Central (the old London University Student Union building) next door, increasing the College’s teaching space by 25%, and the increasing proportion of full-time students (now 45% by fte). Unhappily, that confidence has been not a little undermined by events subsequent to *Birkbeck’s* publication. A crisis affecting the whole of university education (the wider world of adult education having collapsed more than a decade ago) is manifest in Birkbeck by a major decline in student numbers, a deficit of £9.5 million, and proposals by senior management to cut 140 academic and administrative staff across the college. Unsurprisingly, alongside participation in major (and ongoing) industrial action across the university sector over pensions, and pay and conditions, these plans have been opposed by Birkbeck’s trades unions, with the University and College Union (2022) passing a motion of ‘no confidence’ in the College’s senior management. *Birkbeck’s* author has herself taken early retirement and David Latchman, Birkbeck’s vice-chancellor, retires at the end of the year.

What the future holds – not just for Birkbeck but for the wider world of lifelong learning - is difficult to predict. What is clear is that there will be changes. Already the instrumentalist approach initiated by Thatcher and continued under subsequent administrations (Labour and Conservative) which has already resulted in the death of the ‘liberal ethic’, is intensifying. ELQ has been replaced by new funding baselines for student outcomes including ‘Condition B3’ (student continuation, completion, degree outcomes and subsequent employment or postgraduate study) quite inappropriate to any model of part-time flexible lifelong education.

The changes from Birkbeck’s ‘traditional’ learning model are emphasised in the College’s five-year corporate strategy ‘Vision 2021-26’ – a ‘*a fundamental rebasing exercise*’ which outlines ‘*a transformation in what we offer our students and our staff, through changes to our working environment and organisational practices*’ including the need to ‘*Provide high quality, flexible education through a blend of inspirational face-to - face events and modern*

digital learning’ and (in a passage which many staff fear hides coded messages) *‘Empower staff through increased flexibility in working practices, a sector leading commitment to equality and diversity, clarity and transparency over workload expectations, and simplified administrative, management and decision-making processes.’*

As other contributors to this journal have documented (Callender, 2011; Tuckett, 2017) so much of the post-1945 growth in life-long education has already been lost, not least in Britain. Nevertheless it would be a tragedy if Birkbeck University of London, successor to the 1923 London Mechanics’ Institute, were to disappear; another nail in an already pretty full coffin. To say the least: the future is uncertain.

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