

'Mines of Gold on Parnassus'? The Value of a University

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Introduction

When the 'idea of science, method, order, principle and system; of rule and exception, of richness and harmony' came to the highly trained intellect of the 'patron saint' of Irish universities, he was discoursing on the idea of a university in 1852.¹ John Henry Newman held that the training of the intellect for its own sake was the purpose of a university education. Today this might seem a little high-minded, outdated and even misguided. But we, as part of the university community of today, still owe it to ourselves, and so to society, to scrutinise constantly not only our own lecturing and research, but also to look to the wider purpose of what we are trying to achieve as a university. For that purpose a well-trained intellect—trained in knowledge, method and order—is still as important today as it was a century and a half ago.

Beginnings

A powerful intellect presided when the 'Royal College' at Maynooth, County Kildare was founded in 1795. The establishment of the College was an 'Irish solution to an Irish problem', a British solution to an Irish problem, and a British solution to a French problem. The Revolution rendered the French clergy's allegiance to Rome unacceptable. This technical problem meant the Irish Catholic Church, and specifically its bishops who were loyal to Rome, needed a congenial place to train young men for Holy Orders. Although William Pitt, the British Prime Minister, was opposed to the freedoms for Catholics proposed by the Lord Lieutenant, Fitzwilliam, and while Edmund Burke remained true to Fitzwilliam, he was never disloyal to the Prime Minister, who rewarded him with the establishment of the College at Maynooth. In fact, it is due to the presiding intellect of that conservative radical Burke that Maynooth was founded at all. In addition, the British did not relish the importation of French revolutionary ideas into Ireland, or anywhere else in the Kingdom for that matter. After all, it was only in 1791 that Theobald Wolfe Tone, a graduate of Trinity College Dublin, had helped to found the Society of United Irishmen to fight for 'Catholic Emancipation' and parliamentary reform. Maynooth was controversial from the start: by its own lights Catholic and loyal to the crown, conservative, yet in the very fact of its being established, revolutionary: it was a loyal institution for a potentially disloyal group. The College was under suspicion by the government of aiding and abetting the revolutionaries in Kildare in 1798.² However, even though Burke wanted lay members on the Board of Trustees of the College he was entirely against placemen from Dublin Castle in the same positions. He wrote to Rev. Thomas Hussey, the first President of Maynooth, in 1795:

I hear and I am extremely alarmed at hearing, that the Chancellor, and the chiefs of the benches are amongst your Trustees. If this be the Case, so as to give them the power of intermeddling, I must fairly say, that I consider, not only all the Benefits of the institution to be wholly lost—but that a more mischievous project was never set on foot.³

The delicate balances that characterised the foundation of the College made the early years difficult ones. However Maynooth flourished mainly because of its importance

in the public life of Ireland and subsequently achieved a worldwide reputation through its graduates.

Mindless Reform

Where do we go in Maynooth now? How do we recognise, value and preserve this reputation and broaden it? Since the admission of lay students, both male and female, in the middle of the last century, and the Universities Act at the end of the century, Maynooth has shown that it is capable of, and open to, reform and change. However, the mindless reform now being carried out in our universities is a euphemism for internal budgetary struggles between individuals and departments—an anathema in a collegiate institution. Maynooth University has values inherited from its previous incarnations worth preserving for future generations. These values include respect for meticulous scholarship, combined with a respect for the individual student whoever he/she is. We must build on established strengths in Arts and Classics rather than on conjectures regarding what subjects might cause economic growth. While the most powerful push for 'change' in Irish universities comes from the Sciences, there is a conspicuous absence of an evidence-based foundation for the changes. Figures from the OECD Review of higher education here show that Ireland has a much higher proportion—more than double—of graduates in mathematics, science and technology per 1000 inhabitants in the 20-29 age group, 23.2%, than the EU average of 9.3%.⁴ If the perceived need is more funding for science and technology to get more graduates to drive 'economic growth', even though the number of graduates in these disciplines is proportionately more than double the EU average, then the drive for this funding should be based on open and honest principles. There is, of course, no evidence that the study of the Arts and Social Sciences in Ireland by highly qualified school-leavers has restricted our economic growth one iota.

Minding our Business

Maynooth retains its small collegiate atmosphere even though student numbers have vastly increased in the last decade. The Universities are essentially teaching institutions. Research is of great importance also, for without it, lectures lack depth. The joy of research: investigation, classification and discovery, colours and adds weight to all good lecturing. But the universities are not primarily research institutes. To use Newman's terms, the university diffuses and extends knowledge. It is 'a place of teaching and universal knowledge'.⁵ There are excellent state research institutes catering for advanced studies: EPA, HRB, ESRI, IPA, and IIRS to mention but a few. The undergraduate and her/his academic welfare must be the most important issue we face. The face to face meeting of student with student and student with lecturer, tutor, or professor to discuss academic matters, whether during the formal 'contact hours' or outside them, is still a major part of the educational experience that Maynooth University offers. I would be loath to see that disappear. This valuable relationship between student and teacher cannot be detached, a kind of 'intellectual pattern', capable of being decoded, or in the modern speak: evaluated, assessed, or counted through mentoring schemes, assessment exercises, or other pseudo-scientific tests. The relationship essentially is one between individuals and their relations to one another; it is not about *things* in a closed relationship to other *things*, which may be measured in this way. There has to be space for that open ethos to be cultivated in the university, because, if we do not do it here, where will it prosper? The university is a designated space, erroneously and pejoratively betimes called an 'ivory tower', made to nurture this ethos: namely to advance the rigorous pleasures of learning and

discovery in a system that obviously values the individual scholar, whether student or lecturer, and which does not try to measure the immeasurable. This is our duty. This is what the taxpayer is paying for. This is why they trust that their eighteen-year-old sons and daughters will imbibe the true values of a university education, fitting them with the skills to tackle the many opportunities now open to them.

In doing this, the performance of the university will be properly measured. In this ideal university our cultural inheritance will be both protected and interrogated to help us achieve respect in the world. One of our most recent Nobel Prize winners, Seamus Heaney, recently proposed that the function of the university is to attempt:

to enlarge and refine our understanding by asking us to search out and take possession of the sum of our knowledge and then to re-search it, press upon it in order to make it yield up further meanings.⁶

Conclusion

To re-search, to encourage method and order, to find harmony and richness in all the areas of knowledge the university professes to teach, must be the aim of a university education at Maynooth. Maynooth is particularly strong in the area of the Liberal Arts where this aim can be most effectively followed, because disinterested study of literature and languages is the core of the study of Arts. In 2005, for the first time, entry points to study Arts were higher than in the other universities, telling us what the students want:

For the first time ever, entry points for NUI Maynooth in Arts now exceed those for other leading universities, indicating the increasing popularity of the university for the study of Arts.⁷

While a good dose of Latin grammar for the student, which was Newman's prescription for inculcating order, might seem absurd today and not what the student wants, it is still true to say that this principle of order is what is in the gift of all subjects in the university ideally to impart. The cultural inheritance of which the university is guardian can be achieved through knowledge of, and proficiency in, the grammar of any language. The Latin and ancient Greek languages especially, and the *mentalité* of the people who spoke and wrote them, and the use to which subsequent generations put this inheritance enriches our understanding of ourselves. By study of the Classics, History, Literature we can begin to re-search ourselves. Such study is the launching pad from where we can contribute fully as citizens to inventing Ireland. To answer the question posed in the title of this paper: the gold mined on Parnassus is the gold of knowledge, and therein is the true value of a university.

¹ Newman, J. H., *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated*. Edited, with introduction and notes by I. T. Ker. (Oxford: OUP, 1976), *Preface*, p. 12.

² Chambers, L., *Rebellion in Kildare, 1790-1803*. (Dublin: The Four Courts Press, 1998), p. 118, quoting a contemporary report to the government by one J. McClelland on the reasons for the rising in and around Maynooth, citing the 'intemperate spirit' of the inhabitants of the region, and blaming the College for increasing this 'spirit' among the people.

³ Burke, E., *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*. T. Copeland, ed., (Cambridge: CUP, 1958-78), vol. VIII, p. 263; and Cruise O'Brien, C., *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke*. (London, 1992), p. 523.

⁴ *Review of National Policies for Education: Review of Higher Education in Ireland*. (September 2004), p. 12, n. 17.

⁵ Newman, op. cit., Preface, p. 5.

⁶ Heaney, S., 'Us as in Versus: Poetry and the World', pp. 49-66 (dated 16 September 1999), in Curtis, R., *When Hope and History Rhyme: The NUI Galway Millennium Lecture Series*. (Dublin: The Four Courts Press, 2002), p. 60.

⁷ Press Release, NUTM, 22 August, 2005.