

From the SDUK to the Passmore Edwards Settlement: Widening Access to Education in Bloomsbury

Rosemary Ashton

The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (which flourished for twenty years, from 1826 to 1846) was established to bring instruction to a

Despite the precaution, however, the Society immediately attracted negative attention from establishment commentators. This was because its founder members were well-known for their activities on behalf of the reforms I have just outlined. Many of them were also prominent among the founders of the University of London (later UCL), soon to open in Gower Street to students of all faiths and none who were prevented from graduating at Oxford and

Hecate: and in every one of his three forms he is *bifrons*, like Janus; the true Mr Facing-both-ways of Vanity Fair. My cook must read his rubbish in bed; and as might naturally be expected, she dropped suddenly fast asleep, overturned the candle, and set the curtains in a blaze.'³

The book was published in 1831, just after the 'learned friend', who is, of course, Brougham, had been made Lord Chancellor in Lord Grey's incoming whig government. Brougham is the head of the 'Steam Intellect Society', an inspired nickname for the SDUK, connecting as it does the emerging network of railways with the dissemination of knowledge among the population at large. Brougham was also the author of the sixpenny treatise on hydrostatics published by the Society's Library of Useful Knowledge in 1827 which sent the cook to sleep in *Crotchet Castle*.

The remark about Brougham's ability to 'handle every branch of human knowledge' combines admiration on Peacock's part with a distrust of Brougham's sheer facility which was shared by his enemies and friends alike. For Brougham conducted a number of high-profile careers simultaneously – active reforming MP, Lord Chancellor in the whig administration of 1830-4, principal actor in the affairs of the University of Oxford

/-274.0(8)6.

ultra-conservative press, were given frequent favourable coverage in *The Times*.

He was eminently caricaturable; his long upturned nose was a useful feature, as was the pronunciation of his name. He often appeared in cartoons as a broom wearing a lawyer's wig and gown, or as the new broom which would 'sweep away' injustices in the law. His sounding sentences in courtroom and Commons chamber became catchphrases. Take, for example, the famous speech in the House of Commons in January 1828, in which he attacked the appointment of the Duke of Wellington as Prime Minister. This was not a time, he said, for the soldier to be prominent in modern society. *The Times* reported his speech on 30 January: 'There was another person abroad, - a less important person, - in the eyes of some an insignificant person, - whose labours had tended to produce this state of things. The schoolmaster was abroad (cheers and laughter)! And he trusted more to him, armed with his primer, than he did to the soldier in full military array, for upholding and extending the liberties of his country. (Hear.)'⁵ From then on, cartoons showed Brougham as a schoolmaster, his chief prop being now a birchbroom for chastising wayward pupils.⁶

Faced with the near-simultaneous founding of the Mechanics' Institute, the SDUK, and the University of London, Tories and churchmen launched their attacks on a kind of composite entity with Brougham as its nerve centre. These progressive institutions, with their stated aim of widening participation, the first two in basic, the third in higher education, were presented as a danger to society, encouraging the masses to aspire above their station, at a time when political reform including the progressive enfranchisement of the working man was also on the national agenda.

Winthrop Mackworth Praed's poem, 'The London University. A Discourse delivered by a College Tutor at a Supper-party', published in the

⁵ *The Times*

Morning Chronicle in July 1825, shrewdly foresees the crude objections which were soon to be made in earnest in some quarters to the new University, namely that, in tandem with the SDUK, it will teach the working class academic subjects and not only that but will also, for good measure, encourage religious scepticism:

**Ye dons and ye doctors, ye Provosts and Proctors,
Who are paid to monopolize knowledge,
Come make opposition by voice and petition
To the radical infidel College...**

**But let them not babble of Greek to the rabble,
Nor teach the mechanics their letters;
The labouring classes were born to be asses,
And not to be aping their betters.⁷**

By 1828-9, when Henry Heath and his brother William published drawings entitled 'The March of Intellect', that phrase, along with 'the march of mind' (as in Peacock's chapter title), had become a rallying cry for reformers and an ironic catcall for opponents of reform. Henry Heath depicts an ape-like worker lounging by his fireside reading a book 'dedicated to the Majesty of the People'. His brother William's drawing shows all sorts of 'impossible' new machines, including a vacuum tube, flying machines, and balloons to remind people of the boom and bust which occurred with the rise of joint-stock companies investing in railway and other innovations in the 1820s, followed by the financial crash of 1826. (The University of London was established as a joint-stock company, and was greeted suspiciously, as we can see in Robert Cruikshank's cartoon of July 1825 of Brougham selling shares around town.⁸) Other cartoons depict labourers disastrously neglecting their daily work while burying their noses in instructive books published by the SDUK.

⁶ For cartoons and caricatures of Brougham, see M. Dorothy George, *English Political Caricature 1793-1832* (Oxford, 1959) and *Hogarth to Cruikshank: Social Change in Graphic Satire* (London, 1967).

⁷ *Morning Chronicle*, 19 July 1825.

⁸ See George, *English Political Caricature*, p. 212.

The Society, in undertaking the publication of its sixpenny treatises in the Library of Useful Knowledge from 1827 and its remarkably successful *Penny Magazine* from 1832, intended to bring knowledge to 'uneducated persons' and also to 'reduce the price of scientific an

Library of Entertaining Knowledge in 1828 to complement its Library of Useful Knowledge. The new treatises offered instruction on practical subjects in an anecdotal style. Those on brewing, insects, and birds were popular, as was George Lillie Craik's two-volume work, *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties* (1830-1), an account of the successful overcoming of educational disadvantages or disabilities by a number of ordinary people which was reprinted several times over the next few decades and was a direct predecessor of Samuel Smiles's enormously popular

The SDUK voted itself out of existence in 1846. It had succeeded in its aims, and was no longer needed as it had been twenty years previously, when major political and social reforms had not yet been won. The Steam Intellect Society had associated itself with progress and, despite the sneers of those opposed to reform and the undoubted susceptibility of the Society to parody, it played a significant part in the progress of nineteenth-century education.

How can we measure its significance? The extremely rich SDUK archives in UCL Library's Special Collections show sales figures in the tens of thousands, indicating that the treatises and magazines were widely read in those days before universal school education.¹² The impact of the Society's publishing activities can also be judged by the number of its imitators. Realising that the reading public was expanding dramatically, the long-established firm of John Murray started its Family Library series in 1829 in direct competition with the Libraries of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge. The British Library catalogue reveals a great many cheap magazines with 'penny' in the title springing up in imitation of the *Penny Magazine* in the years immediately following its introduction, in places from Norwich to Ireland to Malta, and from special interest groups incl

2.9(t)-1.9(i)23.0(e)-3

letters from grateful readers and from regional organisers of Mechanics' Institutes. Many of the working men whose lives were celebrated in Smiles's *Self-Help* had educated themselves by reading SDUK publications. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* has 81 names associated with the Society, mostly as contributors, but some as working-class readers who went on to be successful.

One such man, John Passmore Edwards, born in Cornwall in 1823 to

