H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

R. D. Anderson. *British Universities Past and Present.* London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006. ix + 241 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85285-347-1.

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Published on H-Education (June, 2011)

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British Universities: A Call to Return to Ivory Towers

Robert Andersonâs *British Universities Past and Present* is a thought-provoking addition to narratives treating the evolution of British universities and their relationships with broader society. Anderson ambitiously traces the emergence of universities from the high Middle Ages to their position in the late twentieth century through a substantial number of government reports, acts of Parliament, and statistical analysis culled from the nineteenth through the twenty-first century. In addition, he supplements his discussion of the thirteenth through the eighteenth century with a healthy sampling of secondary literature. The purpose is more than didactic. The thrust of Andersonâs argument in this monograph is mostly within the realm of policy regarding higher education in contemporary Britain rather than an in-depth historical analysis, per se. He urges readers to learn from the financial systems of the past as well as the roles teaching and research played in higher education. Positioning tradition as the model of what universitiesâ goals for society and their relationship with the state should be, Anderson champions privately funded, autonomous institutions whose emphasis is teaching and transmitting culture from one generation of upper-middle-class citizens to the next with minimal instrumental value. While noting British universitiesâ long-held role in political and professional training, Anderson disparages the sometime evolution of these institutions into research-heavy, state-subsidized polytechnics or vocational schools for the masses.

Belying his predominant interest in the contemporary university system, Anderson begins his monograph with a brief discussion of the founding of the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, respectively, through the scholastic developments of the eighteenth century. He claims that these institutions provided the model for subsequent British universities; were mostly interested in intellectual training rather than promoting original thought; and, that they were largely privately funded. While always providing servants for the secular state and the church, as the majority of graduates went on to either legal or ecclesiastical professions, medieval universities as Anderson portrays them were independent entities until the Tudor-Stewart period. Only with the institutional visitations, first imposed by Henry VIII in 1535 to enforce curricula changes in accordance with the monarchâs personal religious and political views, did universities lose their autonomous character and begin to resemble pawns of the state. Patriotic tendencies were reinforced with the proliferation of colleges during the Tudor period. Once the equivalent of schools for post-doctoral fellows, these quickly evolved into on-campus housing in which university fellows morphed into glorified nannies, tutoring elite and upper-middle-class undergraduates while providing moral models of sociable behavior. Only when this system was firmly established in the eighteenth century–a period Anderson notes coincided with intellectual stagnation–did state involvement subside until the mid-1800s, when universities became

secular institutions.

Condensing six centuries into fifteen pages, Anderson minimizes attention to the fact that the private donors to universities in the early era were often members of the aristocracy. Thus a good portion of university funding was provided by the rough equivalent of the modern state. Moreover, he neglects information regarding the composition of early universities as guilds, thus eliding the historical significance of this factor in terms of what he considers autonomy. He also fails to note that, whereas the majority of universities were provided with papal protection and charters as orthodox promoters of church dogma and cannon law, the oldest university in England–Oxford–was only guaranteed protection from the state, despite continued efforts to the contrary. Because other universities were awarded a papal charter, and all were administered by Catholic ecclesiastics, a significant factor Anderson does not take into account is the medieval church as a transnational political entity which enforced conformity in educational enterprise as much as religious practice. His discussion would be well supplemented with A. B. Cobbanâs *The Medieval Universities: Their Development and Organization* (1975).

Regardless of these caveats, Anderson well establishes his view of what a traditional university entailed. His advocacy of universitiesâ autonomy, privatized funding, and role as transmitters of heritage carry through to his subsequent discussion. The central six chapters provide an in-depth description of university reforms and changing ideas as to the function of the university in nineteenth-century Britain. Here, Anderson contends that Oxford and Cambridge provided the standard in higher education which other institutions attempted to imitate even as intellectual rigor was declining.

The Oxbridge model maintained the social hierarchy through enrollment demographics and graduatesâ entry into the professions and ruling elite who then subsidized alma maters through alumni grants and the passing of parliamentary acts for blanket funding. Unlike colleges emerging elsewhere in Britain, Oxbridge favored classical subjects and denounced general vocational and technological training for their ungenteel utility. This tendency was often seen by the upper echelons of society as a benefit to the state in the years of emerging nationalism–the promotion of a collective culture. Nevertheless, newer universities established in the Victorian era critiqued the inefficient role of the colleges and disconnect between societal needs and Oxbridge education. Instead, they promoted research and vocational training in the humanities and sciences for greater numbers of the middling and working classes in what they deemed as both a truer reflection of the nation and a more beneficial program for the populace. Although the intellectuals John Newman and Thomas Huxley engaged in the above debate during the nineteenth century–the former promoting culture, the latter utility–their views did not receive considerable attention until the inter- and post-war periods.

Anderson devotes the final five chapters to university development in the twentieth century, illustrating how Huxleyâs view gained increasing favor in the early-to-mid-twentieth century. He evidences rising political interest in scientific and technological innovation as, quite literally, weapons of nationalism in warcraft and international cultural currency. These movements spurred a rapid growth in university expansion and a move toward greater amounts of state funding for education on all levels, with the exception of secondary schooling, and for every socioeconomic class. Rather than adhering to the staid Oxbridge model of disdain for instrumental knowledge, autonomy, and private funding, universities in the twentieth century became quite the opposite.

Reform came in spurts. According to Anderson, the effectual blight of the traditional university system was the 1963 âRobbins Report.â While this report proposed general rather than specialized instruction as a response to the gross damages incurred by instrumental research in the wake of the Second World War, it afforded all technological schools the label of university, as well as free admission and a yearly stipend for room, board, and supplies to all who passed the general entrance exam. As a result, Anderson claims, the Robbins Report diminished the prestige of other universities; prompted lax competition and the threat of a disgruntled, educated populace in a saturated market; and incurred an unsustainable bill for the state. Although the British government has since reformed the university system to include a share of cost for studentsâ fees, and there remains a tier system of education which invidiously categorizes universities, Anderson advocates for further reform of the Robbins Report program. In the concluding chapter, he urges that institutions return to what he contends is their traditional role as autonomous, privately funded, teaching institutions which are not so much interested in the acquisition of a job as a result of education but in cultural retention and enlightenment. How exactly universities should go about this is not evident.

British Universities Past and Present is an expertly

researched monograph of the evolution of the education system in England and Scotland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet, Anderson does not make his case as strongly in regards to medieval and early modern developments which are pivotal to his claim of what exactly the traditions of British universities entail. Moreover, it hardly seems appropriate to attach the title *British Universities* to a text which devotes limited space to Welsh or Irish institutions or to the role of women in university life. Indeed, Anderson fails to consider human agency at large in his attempt to establish university autonomy. He does not include the perspective of any British citizens external to the system and few within– there is no indication as to the opinions or educational ambitions of university students and only a few thoughts of the professors or dons. Nevertheless, *British Universities* serves as an essential reference for various parliamentary acts and intellectual trends within the last few centuries.

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Citation: Natalie E. Latteri. Review of Anderson, R. D., *British Universities Past and Present.* H-Education, H-Net Reviews. June, 2011.

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