

CHAPTER 2

Which elite? Whose university? Britain's civic university tradition and the importance of place

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Abstract

By any accepted measure, Britain's universities have been the universities of an elite. But Britain did not have one elite; nor a single university system. In this essay, I attempt to go beyond a narrow focus on Oxford and Cambridge and to examine how the civic – or 'redbrick' – universities operated. They were, I argue, the product of a particular sort of social elite: the urban middle class of mid- to late-nineteenth century Britain. They thus reflect the fact of a divided social elite in Britain. Whilst Oxford and Cambridge were for the aristocracy, the Anglican, and the landed; the universities of the great industrial cities were intended to cater to a very different constituency. But – and this is worth stressing – it was an elite constituency nonetheless. For our purposes, this draws attention to the need for historians to recognize the existence of multiple, competing elites; and to explore what impact this has on their universities. Secondly, and still more importantly, these civic foundations foreground a theme all too often ignored in the history of universities: the importance of place. The story I set out is about geography just as much as it is history: about elites concentrated in and controlling different parts of the country and different cities, and producing different sorts of institution as a result.

Key words: University, Britain, Elite, Geography, Place, Students, Oxbridge, Redbrick.

By any accepted measure, Britain's universities have been the universities of an elite.¹ In the nineteenth century, somewhat fewer than one per cent of the eligible age group attended university. Thereafter, it's true, there was expansion of provision – but it was slow and fitful, and comparatively limited, rising to three per cent in 1950, four per cent by 1960, and eight per cent by 1970. It was not until the 1980s that Britain really entered the age of mass higher education (Halsey 2000). Moreover, throughout the period I shall focus on for the majority of this essay – between 1850 and 1980, say – the mission of Britain's universities was almost always articulated in terms of unabashed elitism. Both those who urged expansion and those who feared it; those who defended the universities and those who attacked them, all did so on the assumption that they existed to train a specially-selected elite: the 'leaders of tomorrow', as it was so often put (Anderson 1992).

In international terms, of course, this does not make Britain look very unusual. Its participation rates in 1900 bear comparison with those of other European countries, and even in 1950 it broadly matched Germany. If the expansion that followed was not as great as some – and certainly did not equal America's, which reached a participation rate of 35 per cent by 1970 – then nor was it wildly out of line with that of France, for instance (Halsey 2010; Ringer 2004; Thelin 2011). As this conference so amply demonstrated, the notion of a university system run by and for elites is hardly specific to Britain in the modern age.

Nonetheless, it is worth remarking that British historians and – still more – British sociologists, educationalists, politicians and policy-makers have been peculiarly obsessed with what they have seen as the peculiarities of British universities, what we might call a sort of higher-education *Sonderweg*. Since the 1960s in fact (if not before), there has been a broad consensus that Britain's universities have

1. The best single-volume introduction to this is Anderson 2000.

been too exclusive, too removed from the realities of life, too much the creatures of an elite. This has had historiographical effects; but it has also helped to shape policy. The massive increase in student numbers from the 1980s onwards; the erosion of any distinction between universities and technical colleges or polytechnics; simultaneous attacks on university autonomy and attempts to create a dynamic market in higher education: all these recent and on-going developments owe much this myth about British university exceptionalism (Whyte 2015).

Historians of the right, like Martin Wiener, have argued that the universities perpetuated an aristocratic ethos which was profoundly at odds with the modern world – and especially with the modern, industrial and commercial world (Weiner 1981). Historians of the left, like Corelli Barnett, have similarly argued that British universities failed to match the innovation, inclusivity, or dynamism of their continental counterparts (Barnett 1985). That both Weiner and Barnett were acknowledged influences on government ministers in the 1980s and 1990s makes sense: they were arguing for an established consensus; a widely-held belief that Britain's universities were not only peculiarly elitist, but peculiarly backward-looking, unable to escape the influence of aristocratic Oxbridge (Annan 1982; Rustin 1986).

There are many ways to challenge this consensus. We might, for instance, point to the European comparisons I have already made, which show a somewhat different story, one that makes Britain more like its neighbours than its critics suppose. We might also point out that higher education is not confined to universities alone, and note that, from the late-nineteenth-century onwards, the most tremendous growth in tertiary teaching and learning took place in technical colleges (Argles 1964). By 1967, for instance, there were about 200,000 university students and another 179,000 at a bewildering range of different sorts of non-university institution (Halsey 2000, 225, 231). The history of these technical colleges and vocational training centres has barely been written – though most are now in fact universities themselves, and although, in their early years at any rate, they offer a very different, non-elite story of higher education to the one that is usually told (Pratt 1992).

In this paper, however, I want to stay with the elites and with the

universities, but to look at a very different range of universities from the ones that have usually been studied. The writings of Weiner, Barnett and the others; the views of politicians, journalists, and other commentators; even the research of sociologists and educationalists: these have tended, disproportionately, to focus on England's two ancient universities – Oxford and Cambridge. For Scotland, of course, we have the work of Robert Anderson, which has called into question a series of lazy assumptions and hazy myths about higher education north of the border (Anderson 1983). But in England and Wales, the institutions which by 1900 provided university education for the majority of students remain quite remarkably under-studied.² Looking at these civic universities, I would argue, provides an alternative history of British higher education whilst also helping us to consider what it is we mean by elite universities and what we might mean by the term “elite” itself. It suggests that critics have been right to see the British system as elitist; but they have been wrong – because too simplistic – in their characterization of both the British elite and the British university system.

Finding Redbrick

My paper grows out of a decade-long research project on the civic universities, funded in part by the Leverhulme Trust. In the book that resulted, I traced the history of Britain's civic universities from the 1780s until the present day (Whyte 2015). These “Redbrick” universities, as they were called, have been neglected by historians. Indeed, mine is the first full-scale study for 60 years. Yet as I have sought to show, these foundations – in Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, and elsewhere – formed an important aspect of Britain's higher education; an alternative model from that of the two ancient English universities: arguably the model to which all Britain's universities have come to cleave in the present day. In a sense, I suggest, all the 132 universities, all the 2.3 million students currently studying in England and the numerous students and institutions in

2. Key introductions to this theme include Jones 1988, Sanderson 1988, Shattock 2002.

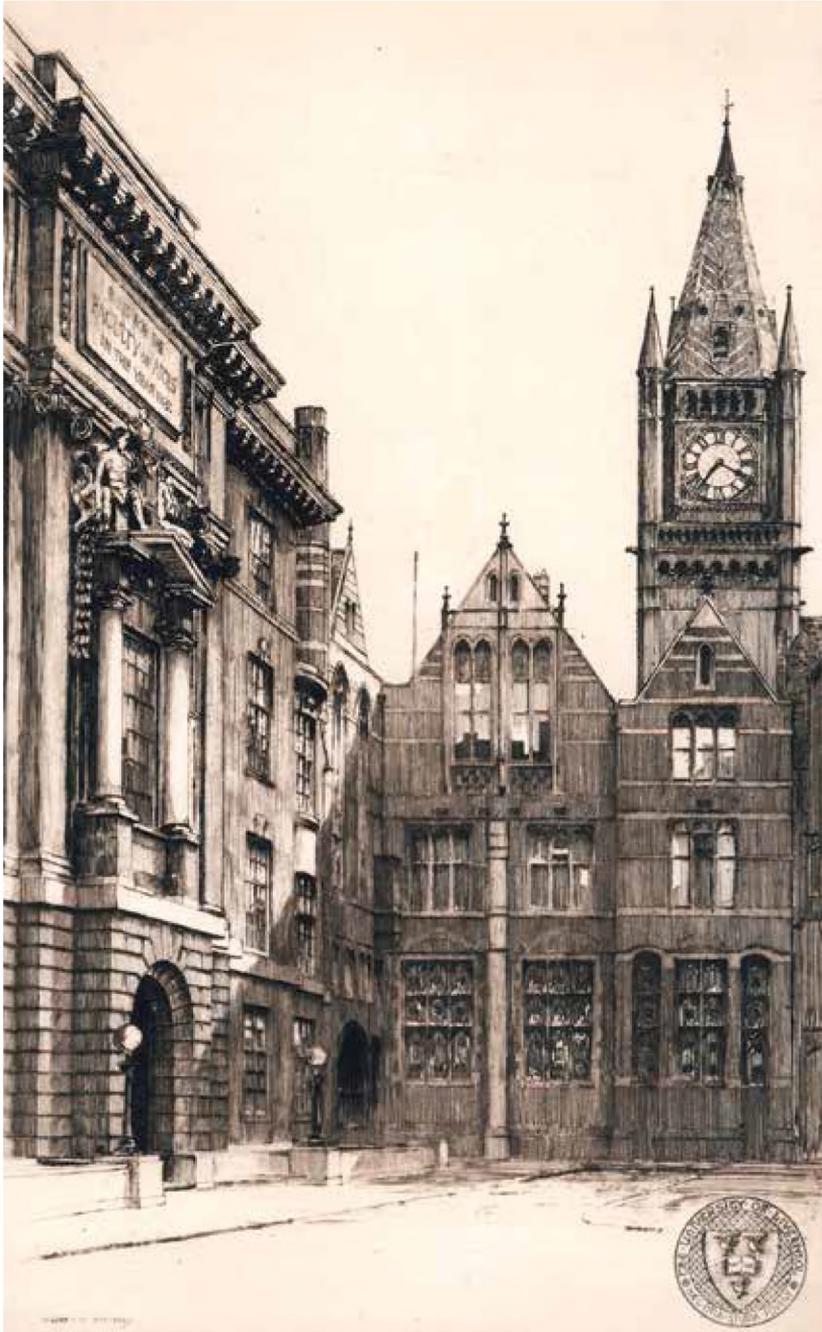


FIGURE 1: Redbrick University: Liverpool.

Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, share a similar experience of the university: one shaped above all else not by Oxbridge but by Redbrick.

This would have seemed unlikely in 1850, of course. Then, Oxford and Cambridge were truly dominant. In simple numerical terms, they educated almost all the university students in England (Brock and Curthoys 1997; Scarby 1997). The recently-founded University of Durham was all-but moribund; the federal university of London, another establishment of the 1830s, was struggling to graduate more than a few dozen students each year (Andrews 2016; Willson 1995). In Scotland, there were, it is true, no fewer than five older, larger, more inclusive institutions; but, as Robert Anderson has shown us, they too were being reformed in the image of Oxbridge, as Scots commentators feared that their graduates could not compete with students from the south (Anderson 1983).

By 1980, by contrast, the civic universities were in many respects dominant: they were the largest part of the university sector, with the most students, the most staff, and – collectively – the most income. Although, as we shall see, new universities had been founded in the 1960s, the old civic powerhouses in the great industrial cities had borne the brunt of expansion: Leeds grew from just over 3,000 to just under 10,000 students in the decade from 1963 to 1973 (Gosden 1975). Manchester went from around 5,000 to almost 15,000 at exactly the same time, becoming known as the ‘empire on which the concrete never set’, as it built big to respond to change (Pulland and Abendstern 2000, 265). Even Oxbridge was reshaped in the image of the civics, as the historian Denis Mack Smith observed: “During the last twenty years”, he wrote, in 1953, “the older universities have both of them moved far towards Redbrick, a direction symbolised by unexciting and efficient laboratory architecture” (Mack Smith 1953, 54.).

The decades after 1980 would see the Redbrick model predominate further, as the other part of the higher education sector – the Polytechnics established in the 1960s – were transformed into civic universities themselves (Shattock 2012). Their models in this were the old Redbrick foundations, not even older Oxbridge. Thus, for instance, at the University of Staffordshire, one of the first wave of

new universities in 1992, the question being asked was one familiar to the historian of Redbrick, because it was exactly the same one that had been asked for more than a century: 'What is a civic university – and how can we be it?'³

This is a tremendous historical change – a change, I should emphasize again, that has been bafflingly and almost wholly ignored by the majority of writers who continue to be obsessed by Oxbridge. But it is a change that conceals important continuities. One of those continuities is the fact that transformation of Britain's university system was driven by institutions which owed a common debt to their nineteenth-century heritage. These remained civic universities even when part of an expanding national system. The second continuity was the issue with which I began this presentation: the composition of the study body.

It's not simply that these students were an elite – whether at Oxbridge or Redbrick – in comparison with the vast, overwhelming majority of their age cohort, be it the 99 per cent excluded from university in the 1850s and 60s, or the 92 per cent excluded in the 1960s and 70s. No: there was another, even more important, sense in which these universities were elitist; the fact that the social origin of their students remained exclusive.

This was obviously true of Oxbridge, with its links – some of them institutional – with the upper classes, the aristocracy, and the public schools. It's worth remembering, after all, that King's College Cambridge was founded to educate Etonians, whilst Winchester was a feeder school for New College, Oxford. Until the reforms of the 1850s, too, all scholars of my own college, St John's in Oxford, were directly appointed by their own school – Merchant Taylors in London, without the college having even the power of veto, much less the final choice; and it was only scholars, of course, who could become fellows (Brockliss 2016; Leedham-Green 1996).

What's more remarkable, however, is that even as it expanded, even as it transformed Britain's higher education, Redbrick too remained socially exclusive. Indeed, up until 1980 – when changes in British secondary education began to have a countervailing effect,

3. Interview with Paul Richards (deputy-vice-chancellor) 21 December 2010.

at least on the two ancient universities – the trends suggest that whilst Oxford became home to an ever-broader social constituency, the civic universities continued to cater much the same sorts of people. Data on this are hard to come by, but student financial support figures do give something an approximate figure. It's notable, therefore, that the end of the 1920s, for example, 53 per cent of civic university students were in receipt of some sort of financial aid, compared to 38 per cent at Oxford and Cambridge. By the mid-1930s, however, the figures were 46 per cent at Redbrick and 43 per cent at the ancient universities (Whyte, 2015). They appear to have continued to diverge thereafter. Indeed, by the 1960s, one of the leading civic institutions – Birmingham – was, in the words of its historians, faced by a student body which was 'the most select in the University's history' (Schwartz 2000, 385).

Explaining elitism

How do we account for this elitism? What explains this story of remarkable change and yet striking continuity? The answer, I would argue, is that continuity and change are in this case linked – indeed, they're causally connected. This is important for historians of British higher education, and – I should like to argue, for British historians more generally, especially those who (like me) want to challenge the existing assumptions about Britain's higher education failings. But, for our purposes, as part of this project, such a story tells us something useful about elites, about universities, and – above all – about elite universities. In particular – and this is what I will focus on for the remainder of this essay – it raises central, definitional, questions: firstly, the nature of elites; and secondly, the place of these elites and their universities. I shall take each in turn.

In the first place, it's worth remarking that the civic universities were the product of a particular sort of social elite: the urban middle class of mid- to late-nineteenth century Britain. Far more homogenous than the bourgeoisie of earlier decades, less riven by the divisions of politics and faith that motivated the creation of two rival London colleges (one Whig and secular, in UCL; one Tory and Anglican in King's), the middle class dominated the towns and cit-

ies of Victorian Britain – and created institutions which reflected their values and their power.⁴ Universities were just a part of this, and relatively small part at that. Indeed, whole cities were rebuilt in the years after 1850 as the broad streets and squares, town halls and municipal libraries, museums, art galleries and the rest still testify.

A good case study of this process at work can be found in Bristol in the decade after 1865. Here, as the urban historian Helen Meller has shown, was an ‘urban renaissance’; one driven by an ambitious, upwardly-mobile, bourgeois social elite – an elite which had seized control of municipal life. The result was not just a very different sort of politics, but also a very different sort of town, as Bristol gained new galleries, concert halls, museums, and public spaces: all of them built by and for the bourgeoisie. Amidst all this building, Meller concludes that the founding of Bristol University College marked a climax of the “cultural renaissance” (Mellor 1976, 62).

The same was true, as Simon Gunn has noted, of Manchester, where the future university – Owens College – became a permanent feature on tours for visiting dignitaries: a symbol of the city’s culture and of the class that had built it (Gunn 2000, 231). Indeed, this was a pattern found all across England, Wales, and even in Scotland, where the establishment of the University of Dundee served a similar purpose (Southgate 1982). And if course, this was not simply a symbol: it was also an important way of educating the children of these civic elites for future leadership. “It is necessary”, wrote the historian Goldwin Smith in 1878, “that the chiefs of English industry should have culture” (Smith 1878, 89). Universities were the result. And, to return to Bristol, what is striking is quite how open these elites were in defending the elitism of the institutions they had established. ‘It is for us, the middle class ... to resolve that we will, instead of falling into the back rank, maintain our position of influence in the country,’ argued the Liberal MP Samuel Morley at a meeting held to create the University of Bristol. ‘This we can only do by promoting the culture and intellectual advancement of our sons and daughters’ (*Report* 1874, 41).

4. On the division in London, see Thompson 1990; on the middle classes in nineteenth-century urban Britain, see Morris 2000 and Trainor 2000.

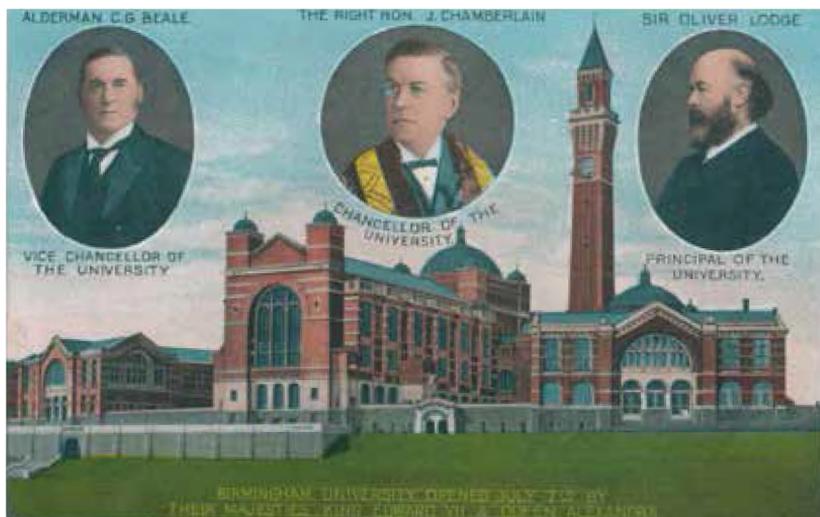


FIGURE 2: Civic University: Birmingham.

Thus – to return to return to the theme of the conference and this volume – we can see that the civic universities founded in the nineteenth century reflect the fact of a divided social elite in Britain. Whilst Oxford and Cambridge were for the aristocracy, the Anglican, and the landed; the universities of the great industrial cities were intended to cater to a very different constituency. But – and this is worth stressing – it was an elite constituency nonetheless. As W. D. Rubenstein has shown, Britain’s very wealthiest in the nineteenth century were sharply divided: on the one hand, there was an Anglican elite, based in the south and drawing its resources first from land and then from finance. This was the Oxbridge elite. But there was another elite too: every bit as a wealthy and every bit as socially superior; an elite based in the north and in the midlands; an elite which drew its resources from manufacturing and commerce (Rubenstein 1977).

This helps to explain the paradox once noted by Sheldon Rothblatt, the peculiar fact that in the nineteenth century, Britain had ‘two cultural and intellectual centres’: one based in London and Oxbridge, but the other to the north (Rothblatt 2006, 138). It also helps to explain why the civic universities were much more than the

cheap imitations of Oxbridge that their critics like Martin Wiener have wrongly described them as being. For our purposes, it draws attention to the need for historians to recognize the existence of multiple, competing elites; and to explore what impact this has on their universities.

Secondly, though, and still more importantly, these civic foundations foreground a theme all too often ignored in the history of universities: the importance of place. The story I've been telling is of course about geography just as much as it is history: about elites concentrated in and controlling different parts of the country and different cities, and producing different sorts of institution as a result. But universities are themselves places – indeed, as the writer Christopher Driver once put it, 'Universities are, before anything else, places: populated packages of bricks and concrete and Gothic mouldings and flowering shrubs, set down in a particular park, suburb, or city, at the bidding of a particular civilisation, to grow up in their own way' (Driver 1971, 33). That insight has been enormously important to me in my recent research – it lies at the heart of my last book, and informs my next project on the material history of universities – and it is important here and now too.⁵

For these universities – these places – were not just built by a particular elite, they were built in the image of that elite: mirroring the houses, the other public buildings, and expressing the particular aesthetic of the elite who constructed them. This is why they became synonymous with a particular style of architecture – why they became known as "Redbrick" universities. So it was that Alfred Waterhouse – the great civic architect of Manchester – was responsible for the universities of Manchester, Liverpool, and Leeds. Waterhouse was, as they noted at the time, 'a gentleman already well known in Manchester for the ingenuity and convenience of his plans and the elegance of his designs' (Manchester University Archives 1868/9, 112). He was thoroughly trusted by the elite who were already using him to rebuild the city, constructing town-halls, town-houses, court-houses, and other monuments of civic life (Cunning-

5. The forthcoming book is *The University: a material history*, for Harvard University Press.

ham and Waterhouse 1992). The university, in that sense, was just another monument to the triumph of a particular local elite.

This architecture was deliberately different from that used by London or neo-Renaissance Oxbridge. The former had embraced neo-classical styles from the start, with University College London, in particular, seeking to evoke ‘a palace for genius ... where future Ciceros should record their influence of that incitement which Tully declares he felt at Athens, when he contemplated the porticoes where Socrates sat’ (F. A. Cox, quoted in Bellot 1929: 48). At the two ancient universities, by contrast, the later nineteenth century was characterized by a Renaissance revival, a deliberate attempt to escape Gothic forms (Whyte, 2006). The self-conscious adoption of an eclectic Gothic style; the embrace of red brick, terracotta, and faience; the traceried windows and ornamented door-surrounds: all this was intended to be utterly distinct. That they became known as “Redbrick” universities was, in that respect, both apposite and a recognition of just how distinctive their architecture actually was (Whyte, 2006b).

And this architecture was not just intended to mark these out as a very particular sort of university, the product of a special sort of local patriotism (Whyte, 2011). It was also designed to exclude locals who were not part of the elite. In his work of memoir, *The Classic Slum*, for instance, Robert Roberts recalled his uncle, an impoverished wheelwright, going to visit the newly-founded Salford Technical Institute – now the University of Salford – in the 1890s. Looking at the tall, imposing, red-brick and terracotta building, he was clear. This “wasn’t for people like me” (Roberts, 1971). And he was right: that was indeed, the impression it sought to convey. Take the University of Cardiff, for example. Here was a building – an institution, a place – defined by exclusion, for as the architect put it, the building was intended to be a place “from which the public can at will be wholly excluded, save for a narrow peep through iron screens just to whet the appetites” (Caroë 1909-10, 23-4).

These origins – in a particular sort of elite and in a particular sort of place – help explain why it was that the civic universities remained middle-class institutions. They were the product of a distinct set of circumstances, elite universities for a particular elite. And they created institutions which functioned as – and were seen as – welcom-

ing for only a very small section of the community. That helps to explain the continuities, not least in the social origins of the students which attended them.

The legacy of Redbrick

The patterns which characterized the nineteenth century continued long into the twentieth century, with working-class students always a minority and often regarded as problematic as a result. One response was the establishment of residential accommodation – the halls of resident which became such a familiar and important part of civic university life. Not least of their attractions was the belief that residence would socialize – and civilize – their inhabitants, inculcating bourgeois values (Whyte, 2013). Offering corporate life and collegiate discipline, combined with the material conditions of middle-class existence, these halls were intended to turn the impoverished into elite. In this context, even the soft furnishings could be thought of as instruments of social transformation, for, as the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals declared in 1948, “thick pile carpets have a remarkably civilising effect on students” (CVCP 1948, 46). In that way, even new developments – like the halls – can be understood as the outworking of older ideas, not least ideas about the values and virtues of an educated elite.

In many respects, this continues to be the case; indeed, as British higher education has expanded, so it has come to reproduce the Redbrick model (Whyte 2015). The creation of nearly twenty universities in 1960s (Beloff 1968; Burgess and Pratt 1970); the conversion of scores of former polytechnics, teacher-training and technical colleges in the 1990s (Scott 1995): each development – no matter how apparently dramatic – simply served to confirm the importance of the Redbrick university model, not least its architectural example. Both waves of expansion involved building; and both waves of new universities thus came to build exactly the sorts of monumental structures that had characterized the Redbrick tradition. The styles may have varied; but the ambition and the intention did not. “The polytechnics come to the new sector with a range of immediate handicaps”, wrote one commentator in 1992. “Most do not *look* like

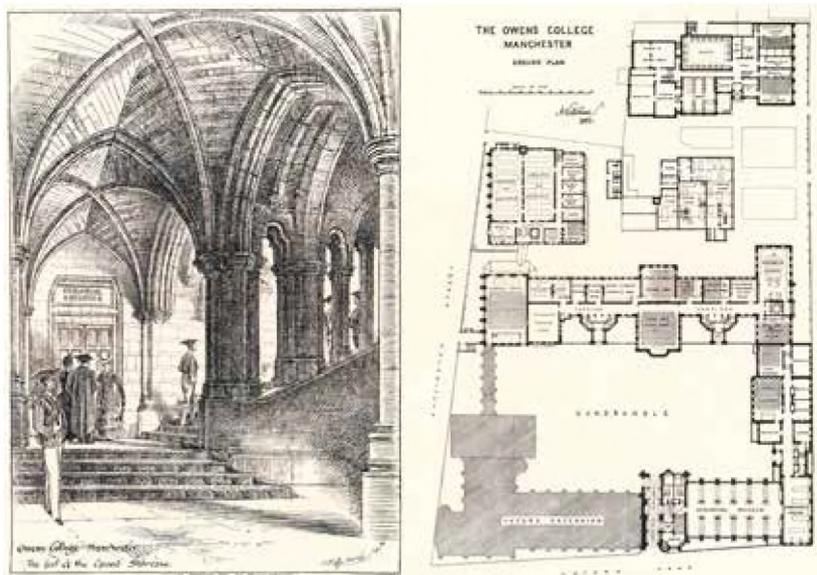


FIGURE 3: Gothic University: Manchester.

universities; environmentally many remain a quantum leap from a university campus culture” (Price 1992, 247). Small wonder the creation of new universities resulted in a slew of masterplans and expensive edifices; small wonder, too, that between 1990 and 1995 British higher education spent no less than £1 billion on student residences alone (Blakey 1994, 77).

This surprisingly stable sense of place has been matched by a remarkably stable student body. For despite the rhetoric about equality and access to university, it must be said that the expansion in provision has not been accompanied by social transformation (Mandler, 2015). Rather, as other, younger institutions have increasingly come to imitate older foundations, so the bourgeois inspiration which animated the Redbricks has become near universal, creating what one commentator – the well-placed journalist-turned-vice chancellor Peter Scott – has termed “a middle-class mass system” (Scott 2005, 73). Each expansion, indeed, has simply served to increase the percentage of middle class children who move on to higher education without significantly advancing the prospects of those

lower down the social spectrum (Boliver 2011). There are many reasons for this – not least the fact that educational inequality reflects widening social inequality (Choudry et. al 2010; Reay et. al 2009). But the fact that British universities – even the newest of the new universities – remain wedded to and modelled after the Redbrick tradition has also proved off-putting for many.

The strength of this tradition has left a higher education landscape that is deeply unappealing to precisely those people who need most encouragement to apply to university, as recent research has shown. “What’s a person like me going to do at a place like that?” asked one typical student on a visit to King’s College, London (Reay et al. 2011: 864). Similar emotions were expressed by another aspirant undergraduate visiting the dauntingly neo-classical UCL and the shiny new LSE: “wonderful but just very off-putting”, she observed; “they are both very rich universities, not really my sort of places” (Reay 2003: 308). That the imposing campuses of Redbrick and its imitators have never felt like the sort of places that are open to everyone tells us much about them, much about the impact of place, and much about elites in modern Britain.

Conclusion

What I have argued in this paper is that the civic universities of Britain were not just imitations of Oxbridge. Indeed, they owe their origins and development to a very different sort of environment. They cannot be explained, indeed, without reference to a very different elite: the (predominantly) northern, non-conformist, middle-class elite who dominated civic life in the late nineteenth century and built universities to reflect – and to perpetuate – this dominance. The model they developed has, however surprisingly, survived the expansion of higher education which characterized the later twentieth century, reproducing institutions – places – which share a family resemblance. They are, as a result, elitist; even if the elite they sustain is bourgeois instead of aristocratic. Such a conclusion raises questions about the idea of “an elite”; it suggests we much always be attentive to the multiple elites which modern societies create. It also draws attention to the geographies of elitism, be they national, local,

or very highly localized. Universities are places before anything else: places which exclude as well as include; places which articulate ideas and identities; places which have a life of their own.

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