

THE VERNACULAR IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ANGLOPHONE COLLEGES

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IN THE SPRING OF 1860, a special hearing in Canada's House of Assembly in Quebec heard Egerton Ryerson hurl impassioned accusations against Toronto's University College. Ryerson, former president of Victoria College, former editor of the Methodists' *Christian Guardian*, and, since 1844, superintendent of education for Canada West, attacked University College leaders as "advocates of a reduction, of a puerile system which has never invigorated the mind, or raised up great men in any Country." He charged University College with following the "proceedings of the educational Institutions of the new and Western States of the neighbouring Republic" (Hodgins XV, 264).

The chief spokesman for University College was Daniel Wilson, a Scot from the University of Edinburgh, since 1853 the Professor of History and English Literature in Toronto. Wilson's journal records the Scot's affront at Ryerson's attacks: "A more annoying and distasteful controversy could not well be conceived, conducted as it was with an amount of vulgar personality inconceivable to educated men at home. At first I was simply disgusted with the whole business, but being compelled to go into it I plucked up heart of grace and found some grim satisfaction in mauling the unscrupulous assailants of our College militant." (Langton 80)

The bitterness of the 1860 hearings was sown in the birth of the first Anglophone colleges in the post-revolutionary colonies of British North America. Ironically, that bitterness masked a deep philosophical agreement between both Ryerson and Wilson, an agreement that would develop openly in the decades after 1860, eventually producing a narrow but hardy English studies curriculum in Anglo-Canadian liberal college education. But intense passion separated English from Scottish values generally in higher education prior to 1860.

By the eighteenth century, Oxford and Cambridge had rejected the formal study of English language and literature, turning their backs on England's renaissance affirmation of the vernacular. Richard Altick's history of reading in England argues that after the restoration of the British monarchy an upper class consensus kept the masses "ignorant of their letters" to insure national stability. (31) Such a policy led not only to control of the press but also to a perpetual supply of cheap labour in an expanding industrial economy. This attitude was formally implemented at Oxford and Cambridge by the 1662 Act of Uniformity, which restricted college education to Church of England members. Soon political influence of the wealthy helped them gain access to the reduced number of church livings for their sons. This situation, combined with the inability of the poor to afford adequate classical schooling for their sons, led Oxford and Cambridge to become not centres of academic excellence but finishing schools for Anglican gentlemen (Stone 36-40). This upper-class attitude toward education in the last decade of the seventeenth century is reflected in the views of John Locke, philosopher and member of the Royal Society:

For who expects that, under a tutor a young gentleman should be an accomplished critic, orator, or logician; go to the bottom of metaphysics, natural philosophy, or mathematics; or be a master in history or chronology? Though something of each is to be taught him, it is only to open the door that he may look in, and, as it were, begin an acquaintance, but not to dwell there. ... But of good breeding, knowledge of the world, virtue, industry, and a love of reputation, he cannot have too much; and, if he leaves these, he will not long want what he needs or desires of the other.
(qtd. in Meiklejohn 29)

The upper-class fear of mass literacy burgeoned after the French Revolution. Even S. T. Coleridge held that majority view in 1816. Though everyone might be taught to read the Scriptures, he held, that was sufficient for the labouring masses: "more than this is not perhaps generally desirable. They are *not sought for in public counsel*, nor need they be found where politic sentences are spoken. It is enough if everyone is wise in the working of his own craft: so best *will they maintain the state of the world*" (qtd. in Altick, 144n). For Locke, a gentleman need not have a thoroughly trained mind or a ready tongue or pen; for Coleridge, education of the masses, especially education in traditional rhetorical skills, posed a positive danger.

Oxford and Cambridge continued to reject the study of English through most of the nineteenth century. Bishop Richard Whately's famous *Elements of Rhetoric*, first published in 1828, was written to help floundering young clerics who had not learned to preach while at Oxford (Ehninger ix-x). Formal rhetoric belonged to the study of Classics, in which composition was studied in Greek and Latin. English composition was thus incidental to classical studies; English literature, distinct from rhetoric, was simply not a part of the curriculum. The study of English, both in

language and literature, was considered utilitarian and middle-class, a view reinforced when English literature was first introduced in English Mechanics' Institutes, where it developed as "the poor man's Classics." (Palmer 78)

After the American Revolution, English colonial leaders in British North America infected higher education with England's sectarian elitism. Anglo-Canada's first two colleges, both founded by the Church of England, reflected the upper-class prejudices of the homeland. Both colleges were established not by governors from London but at the prodding of newly arrived United Empire Loyalists. Especially in Halifax, the elitist attitude of the English ruling body reflected contempt for the colonists. In 1790, Bishop Charles Inglis, a Loyalist, wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury about Governor Parr:

He holds literature in great contempt, and often hints that it does great hurt to mankind. . . . It is with difficulty that I can get him and the other Governors [of the proposed college] to meet on any business relative to [the College] and when met, the business goes on heavily. At present I seem to roll a Sisyphean stone.

(Vroom 25)

King's College finally opened at Windsor, Nova Scotia in 1802. Statutes passed the following year reflect the fearful, exclusivist mentality of the college governors:

No member of the University shall frequent the Romish mass, or the meeting Houses of Presbyterians, Baptists, or Methodists, or the Conventicles or places of Worship, or any other dissenters from the Church of England, or shall be present at any seditions, or rebellious meetings. (11.4)

Though not explicitly named, the principles of the new "revolted colonies" to the south were equally as dangerous as dissenting worship:

No member of the University shall hold, maintain, or teach, any atheistical, deistical, or democratical doctrine, or any principles contrary to the Christian faith, or to good morals, or subversive of the British Constitution as by Law established. (11.3)

Given Tacitus' observation that oratory does not flourish in autocratic societies, it is not surprising that King's College had no formal course in rhetoric in the vernacular.

The King's College curriculum reflected the Oxford emphasis on classical learning. The 1803 statutes provided for five professorships: Divinity and Hebrew, Mathematics, Natural Philosophy and Astronomy, Moral Sciences and Metaphysics, and Classics (Grammar, Rhetoric and Logic). In Classics, first-year students studied Rhetoric and Logic daily. The statutes did not prescribe the authors for Rhetoric, but standard authors were Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian, read in the original language. The vernacular was not totally ignored, of course; it was studied as a by-product of this classical curriculum. Weekly themes alternating between Latin and English were required, as were declamations in both languages, and recitations in Latin, Greek and English. The statutes, however, reflect that an

Oxford patina, not excellence in classical knowledge, drove the curriculum of King's College: "In these Declamations, Recitations, and in all other exercises, in which the Students read aloud or speak in public, great attention shall be paid to their pronunciation, that they shall avoid all Provincial accents, and other improprieties, and shall deliver themselves with correctness, and with proper emphasis" ("Exercises" 4). King's historian, F. W. Vroom notes that Alexander Croke, one of the college governors, even insisted that the lecture in Logic be given in Latin, as was customary at Oxford. Vroom notes, however, that "the folly of it was soon apparent" (50). The curriculum at the other early Anglican colleges was also heavily classical, like that at Windsor.

THE SOCIAL AND CURRICULAR restrictions of the Anglican colleges produced a predictable reaction among non-Anglicans. In the Maritimes, Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists opened their own schools, and in Upper Canada the Presbyterians established Queen's College at Kingston and the Methodists, Victoria College at Cobourg in 1842, a year before King's in Toronto matriculated its first students in 1843. Methodist and Presbyterian opposition to the Anglican position was strong from early in the century right through to the 1860 hearings. The Presbyterian traditions were rooted in Scotland, and the Methodists' traditions, in middle-class England and America, but the Methodists also had strong Scottish ties. Methodist and Presbyterian curricular interests and attitudes toward the use of the vernacular, therefore, had roots in the Reformation, especially in sixteenth-century Scotland.

Universal education marked John Knox's reformation in Scotland, for Knox held that all citizens should be educated to read and discuss the Scriptures in the vernacular. Unlike the liturgically-oriented worship of the Church of England, Scottish Presbyterianism affirmed strong preaching, which itself educated the Scottish masses. This Scottish emphasis on a practical education led to repeated attacks on the southern universities from the beginning of the nineteenth century onward. In 1809, *The Edinburgh Review* reflected, "What ought the term University to mean, but a place where every science is taught which is liberal, and at the same time useful to mankind. Nothing would so much tend to bring classical literature within proper bounds, as a steady and invariable appeal to utility in our appreciation of all human knowledge" (qtd. in Sanderson 37-38). Emphasizing the democratic nature of the Scottish system as late as 1889, Lyon Playfair, reformer and University Member of Parliament, scorned the elitism of the southern university systems: "The English Universities ... teach men how to spend £1,000 a year with dignity and intelligence while the Scotch Universities teach them how to make £1,000 a year with dignity and intelligence." (qtd. in Anderson 35)

The University of Edinburgh acknowledged the importance of studying the vernacular when it established a Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in 1762. From 1759 onward, Hugh Blair, minister of St. Giles Church, had lectured on rhetoric in English. When finally published, his lectures were printed in over one hundred full or abridged editions and sold throughout Britain and North America. Not Blair, however, but Adam Smith, was the first to use the vernacular to teach rhetoric. Smith gave a series of public lectures on the subject beginning in 1746, before moving on to Glasgow in 1851 to teach Logic, also in the vernacular. In succeeding years, it became common to teach English composition as part of the Logic class, with rhetoric and belles lettres tending to focus on oratory and literary analysis, both matters focusing on "style," especially on "taste." Also highly influential in Scotland were three books on the philosophy of rhetoric and on pulpit oratory by George Campbell, Principal of Marischal College. Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) was published in twenty-one major editions and, like Blair's lectures, was also widely read in American and Canadian colleges in the nineteenth century.

As mentioned, Methodist attitudes toward rhetoric and poetics in the vernacular also had both indirect and direct roots in Scottish traditions. In England, when the religious non-conformists or insufficiently wealthy were barred from Oxford and Cambridge, they turned for higher education to academics, known as dissenting colleges, established first by Puritans after the 1662 Act of Uniformity. Quite naturally, the predominantly Calvinist dissenting colleges, cut off from English learning, fostered close ties with Scottish universities, especially in rhetoric. It was common for eighteenth-century students of dissenting academics to go to Scotland for the last year of their M.A. studies to gain Scottish degrees (Miller 54). By the late eighteenth century, however, many of the dissenting academy students were Anglicans, perhaps without sufficient funds to be comfortable at Oxford or Cambridge, or perhaps preferring the practical education in law, medicine, business, or the liberal arts taught in the vernacular. Joseph Priestley, who began teaching Language and Belles Lettres at Warrington College in 1762, for instance, emphasized the utilitarian value of college education. Dissenting colleges, for Priestley, filled the gap between the universities as they existed, and the "education for the counting-house, consisting of writing, arithmetic, and merchants' accounts" (qtd. in Miller 58-59). The utilitarian nature of Priestley's vision later influenced Jeremy Bentham, who "attributed his basic political ideal of the greatest good to the greatest number to his reading of Priestley." (Miller 59)

American Methodism also influenced the Wesleyan assembly in Canada. But American rhetorical traditions at the end of the eighteenth century also derived largely from the dissenting academics and from Scotland. The first native American rhetoric text was that of John Witherspoon, an Edinburgh graduate and the first president of Princeton University. Under Witherspoon, students studied English

in all four years, culminating with Witherspoon's own lectures on rhetoric and moral philosophy. This Scottish practicality meshed well with the philosophy of the dissenting academies, which also found its way into the American college curriculum. One of the most popular rhetoric texts in pre-revolutionary America was *A System of Oratory*, by John Ward or Gresham College in London. While Gresham College itself was a foundation for public lectures (Miller 51), the classical theory of rhetoric presented in English in Ward's system paralleled closely the rhetoric taught in many dissenting colleges.

Given their emphasis on an education that combined liberal concerns with practical matters, Presbyterians and Methodists in British North America rejected the Anglicans' emphasis on the classical languages in both poetics and rhetoric. Under the leadership of Glasgow-educated Thomas McCulloch, the Scots established their first school at Pictou, Nova Scotia, in 1816. This too was an academy, since the legislative council in Halifax refused permission for a degree-granting college, thereby forcing Pictou graduates to sail to Scotland to write graduating examinations. In 1838, McCulloch left Pictou to become the first president of Dalhousie College in Halifax, an institution founded twenty years earlier by George Ramsay, ninth Earl of Dalhousie. Affronted by the English exclusiveness of King's College, Ramsay, a Scot, chartered a college modeled on the system of democratic access and practical learning in his native land. Unfortunately, his college had not yet opened when Ramsay was called from Halifax. Given the Council of Twelve's opposition, the college languished for two decades. When the college finally did open, President McCulloch strongly affirmed the Scottish position in learning generally, and in language specifically:

But that boys should in Halifax or elsewhere spend six or seven years upon Latin and Greek and then four more in college partly occupied with the same languages is a waste of human life adapted neither to the circumstances or the prosperity of Nova Scotia. . . . If Dalhousie College acquire usefulness and eminence it will be not by an imitation of Oxford, but as an institution of science and practical intelligence.

(qtd. in Harris 33)

In his 1855 inaugural address as president at McGill College in Montreal, J. W. Dawson, a graduate of Pictou Academy and of the University of Edinburgh, agreed with McCulloch. Though Dawson considered the classics important, they were not to displace English language and literature:

The philosophical study of its grammar and philological relations, the principles of style and composition, the critical examination of its highest literary productions, and the history of its literature, are of paramount importance to men in any profession or occupation that may at any time require them to speak in public, or to write their mother tongue. (17)

The Scottish tradition in British North America, therefore, emphasized learning in English and about English. From mid-century on, this curriculum included both

English literature and rhetoric. The classics were important for culture and for developing the mind, but insufficient in themselves for an education suited for colonial realities.

The strongest reaction to the classical Anglican curriculum came from Egerton Ryerson, the first president of the Methodists' Victoria College. Also in an inaugural speech, in 1842, Ryerson addressed the curricular question relating to rhetoric and the vernacular:

After much reflection on the subject, it is my strong conviction that the absence of an English Department in our Collegiate Institutions of Learning in this Province, would be a defect of an injurious character. Why there should be provision for the teaching of dead and foreign languages, and none for the teaching of our own vernacular tongue, is a phenomenon for which I can assign no reason but custom and prejudice. To teach the English Language through the medium of a Latin Grammar, appears to me to be little less rational, than to teach Latin through the medium of a Greek or Hebrew Grammar. (10)

Ryerson then extolled the virtues of rhetorical study. "The art of speaking and writing with purity, propriety, and elegance is of the highest importance," he stated. "Knowledge itself cannot properly be said to be power, without the appropriate power to communicate it." (18)

IN THE POLITICS OF EARLY Canada, therefore, differences in culture between the ruling Anglicans and other English-speaking settlers included differences in attitude toward a study of the vernacular. Hence the issue of language inevitably erupted in the 1860 hearings about University College, even though those hearings ostensibly focused on lack of state funding for denominational colleges. The funding differences themselves were a legacy of the founding of King's College in Toronto in a time when the Anglicans viewed their institutions not only as religious but as part of the secular state as well. As representative of the successor of King's College, Daniel Wilson thus represented the privilege of the erstwhile Anglican elite, notwithstanding the fact that Wilson was a Scot, with decidedly Scottish attitudes toward education and the vernacular. The two chief adversaries in the hearings thus opposed each other as a result of history rather than educational philosophy.

In an attempt to gain the upper hand in the debate, and undoubtedly as the result of his position among Upper Canada's elite by virtue of his position as superintendent of education since 1844, Ryerson took a much more traditional position than he had at the inauguration of Victoria College in 1842. He chastised Wilson and University College for a flexible attitude toward options in the curriculum, as well as for including English literature in the course of studies. He then praised

the method that had produced famous Anglican-educated men of England. A professor of the English language, argued Ryerson, should “teach Greek and Latin . . . in the spirit of a sound philology, exhibiting the words, the imagery, the Philosophy, the Literature, the very spirit of Greece and Rome in most that is refined, noble, elegant and beautiful in our own Language and Literature.” The Burkes, Peels, Macaulays and Gladstones studied language and literature this way, blustered Ryerson, “and not by attending such Lectures as Doctor Wilson’s, or studying his chosen Text-book, Spaulding’s English Literature, — the standard Text-book of Seminaries for young ladies as well as of Grammar Schools.” (Hodgins XV, 292). Ryerson conveniently ignored the fact that Spaulding had written his textbook while in the famous Edinburgh chair of rhetoric, first occupied by Hugh Blair, whom Ryerson had praised in his 1842 inaugural. Wilson, in turn, vilified the Oxford system upon which the original King’s College, the predecessor of his own University College, had been modeled: “The English Universities under their old rigid system turned out a class of educated men; but the Scottish system . . . has made an educated people; and the latter I conceive is what Canada desires.” (Hodgins XV, 297) In the exigencies of debate, both Ryerson and Wilson found themselves forced to extremes that undercut their own institutional histories, and passion often overruled reason.

The 1860 clash turned emotional partly because a rational argument would have shown agreement on most issues between Wilson and Ryerson, especially on the importance of training in the vernacular. A stronger tie than attitude toward the vernacular, however, also united Ryerson and Wilson. That bond was Victorian Protestant Christianity, a bond which also included the Anglican church. The decades to follow would affirm this common bond between the Victorian Protestant churches, thereby leading to a common curriculum, especially strong in its attitudes toward the vernacular. The precipitating factor for this unity was a growing secularism that in 1850 had led to the Anglican’s loss of King’s College in Toronto, and in 1859, the loss of King’s College in Fredericton. In the early and mid-Victorian period, this growing secularization was fueled by nineteenth-century geological findings and supported by German higher criticism of the Bible. Growing doubts about the traditional Christian faith were then brought to intense focus by Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. The resulting cultural ferment threatened the Christian philosophy common to all Anglo-Canadian institutions, church-sponsored as well as independent. In Victorian Canada the fight against secularized science and skepticism would not be won by an assault on geology, higher criticism or Darwinism, however, but by a redefinition of the Christian faith. This redefined faith would merge with a new vision of English culture to produce a revolutionary college curriculum in the vernacular. This curriculum would appeal so powerfully to the Anglo-Canadian psyche developed in the turmoil of the nineteenth century

that it would influence Anglo-Canadian higher education throughout the next century.

The new philosophy that Protestant Victorians in Canada accepted as the answer to skepticism derived from the University of Glasgow, where Edward Caird developed a neo-Hegelianism that dissolved the conflicts of science versus scripture into an all-energizing Being, encompassing both reason and traditional concepts of God. Caird's principle of a spiritual immanence in all existence was broad enough to embrace even Darwin's theories of evolution. The leading neo-Hegelian in Canada was John Watson, a Glasgow graduate, who brought Caird's philosophy to Queen's University in 1872. Watson soon gained both national and international fame. Historian A. B. McKillop argues, however, that Watson's impact in Canada was not due to his brilliance alone: Watson's "career was simply part of a larger reorientation of the Canadian academic community towards idealism as the philosophical creed most acceptable as an antidote for scepticism and as a social ethic adequate to suit the needs of the late nineteenth century." (195-6)

THIS TURNING FROM TRADITIONAL Christian dogma toward a secularized philosophical idealism in Canada coincided powerfully with a refocusing of the English studies curriculum that had developed in Canada by Confederation. Though Anglicans still clung to their classical curriculum through most of the 1870s, after Confederation the Scottish influence had led to English programs that balanced rhetoric with the study of English literary texts in all the major non-Anglican colleges. However, both the Scottish and Anglican programs ended abruptly in the 1880s, beginning with the arrival of the first generation of English specialists in Canadian colleges. The reason for the change was not English as a specialty, however, but the intellectual conditions in society that gave impetus to English as a specialty.

The emerging emphasis on philosophical idealism was now reinforced by the work of Matthew Arnold. In an attempt to deal with "the melancholy, long withdrawing roar" of England's Sea of Faith ("Dover Beach"), Matthew Arnold offered England its own historical literature as a new "spiritual standard of perfection" that could be fostered in the vernacular as well as in the classics. Arnold praised Shakespeare and the English poets as men of genius who offered "the best that has been thought and known in the world" (*Culture and Anarchy* 475). Arnold's affirmation of English literature quickly caught the imagination of the public. Though Oxford and Cambridge initially resisted teaching either composition or literature in the vernacular, by century's end that attitude had changed. Terry Eagleton finds the perspective of Victorian England reflected in the inaugural speech of George Gordon, an early Professor of English literature at

Oxford: "England is sick, and . . . English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature has now a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State." (qtd. in Eagleton 23)

Gordon's focus is instructive, not only for Oxford, but for Canada as well. In the 1880s, the new curriculum in all Anglo-Canadian colleges, both Scottish and English, turned sharply to English literature alone, placing rhetoric in a decidedly secondary position. This curriculum sought the ideal in literature, just as Watson's philosophy sought the ideal in life. So powerful was this idealist emphasis, and so deeply rooted in the historic Protestant psyche, that the survey of British literature "from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf" (Frye xi) remained the backbone of English studies in all Anglo-Canadian colleges for over a century, extending even to the present. The new curriculum in English, of course, affirmed the historic non-utilitarian philosophy of the English university system, so with the new curriculum came England's elitism. In establishing literature as a guarantee against "philistinism," associated with materialism, Arnold elevated literature above the rest of the curriculum. Rhetorical theory and practice became associated not with the mind and spirit but with philistine pursuits. In 1904, Queen's Professor of English, James Cappon, like John Watson, a student of Edward Caird, stated baldly that students could become good speakers and debaters, and even good writers, "without more than the A B C of a literary education" (195). Cappon scorned the rhetorical theory of Alexander Bain, a leading Scottish thinker whose rhetorical philosophy focused on psychology relating to the senses. Cappon charged that Bain's rhetoric derived from "the point of view of the narrow and materialistic school of philosophy . . . a point of view utterly discarded by all great literary men, Ruskin, Arnold, Carlyle, Emerson" (1890, 9). This anti-philistine attitude toward the practical, rhetorical aspects of study in English carried forward into the twentieth century. A reluctance to teach speech and composition, apart from marginal comments on student papers in literary criticism, thus characterized English programs in Canada from the 1890s through to the 1970s, and it still dominates English offerings in many programs today.

The battle between English and Scottish attitudes toward the vernacular, therefore, strongly fought in the first half of the nineteenth century, was dissolved in the attempts of Protestantism to meet the forces of secularism and materialism in the second half of the nineteenth century. In that battle, the Scottish emphasis on the practical advantages of the vernacular over the classical languages initially won the field, as, first rhetoric alone, and then both literature and rhetoric in the vernacular entered the curriculum. But the Arnoldian emphasis on poetic and belletristic literature, supported by an all-embracing neo-Hegelian idealism, returned Oxford's historic emphasis on ideal liberal culture to prominence, thereby eclipsing the emphasis on rhetoric so strongly affirmed by Scots and Methodists

alike prior to 1880. The result was a century of English studies that privileged poetics and the belles lettres over rhetoric in both oral and written forms. In a great Canadian compromise, the Scots won the right to the vernacular, but the English kept their elite emphasis on liberal culture unrelated to the practical exigencies of life.

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