

# Introduction

At Madingley Hall, home of the University of Cambridge Institute of Continuing Education, there is an unfinished portrait of the founding father of university extramural studies, James Stuart. It shows him as still a young man, serious and thoughtful: his brow is somewhat furrowed. That the portrait, by Hubert von Herkomer, is unfinished seems appropriate, for the work that Stuart began one hundred and forty years ago is not yet complete. Today, indeed, the principle that universities should see access to lifelong learning by part-time adult students as an obligation or, at least, as more than just an opportunity for public engagement is one few vice-chancellors would fight for. Changing priorities in higher education and in government policy have seen to that.

In Part 1 of *Extramural* I offer a personal and polemical view of the evolution of extramural studies from the missionary enthusiasm of James Stuart to the present time, when departments of continuing education are closing at an unprecedented rate. Stuart was a remarkable man — not least because he was able, when still only thirty years old, to persuade Cambridge University to embark on a programme of social and educational intervention which had national and international consequences. In ‘By extension: a Cambridge perspective’ I trace Stuart’s influence in the work of later educationalists and cultural commentators such as Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart. In doing so, I explore the whole idea of liberal education as applied to lifelong learning.

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, Richard Hoggart lamented the way extramural departments were giving in to ‘the overweening demands for proved cost-effectiveness and for a vocational slant at the expense of those kinds of study which were undertaken for the love of God and the development of the personality’. He followed this lament with a challenge to universities:

Vice-Chancellors should take time off from the endless struggle with resources and with the undeniable need to protect their best internal departments as well as they can, so as to renew their sense of a need outside the walls which has never gone away and which has in some sense represented the best in university ideals.<sup>1</sup>

This leads me to ask what sorts of idealism is needed by those who teach in adult higher education. Is this idealism different from that of mainstream academics teaching standard-entry undergraduate and graduate classes, whose priority may more often be to publish than to teach, and for whom imperatives such as the Research Excellence Framework and the Impact Agenda loom all too large?

Nothing convinces me more strongly of the value of continuing education than the commitment and enthusiasm of the students themselves. At different points in *Extramural* I include comments from my own students, who speak eloquently of what lifelong learning means to them:

Lifelong learning is, I believe, a founding principle in any society that wishes to invest in its population, especially as maturing citizens exert greater influence over the shape of that society. Odd, it seems, that at the very age of maturity — with all the responsibilities that entails — the entitlement to learning appears to fall away.

The speaker here is Anil, a student who has attended my courses in Literature over several years. It has been a feature of most of the classes with whom I have worked in the past dozen years that they rapidly develop a cohesion that makes them very effective learning groups, supporting each other and creating an atmosphere of shared commitment. Sometimes I have launched a discussion and then stood back, watching and listening as a class teaches itself. No matter how disparate the educational background or experience of the students, no one is made to feel inadequate: the students encourage and challenge each other. It is also fascinating to watch how groups that have studied together, sometimes for a number of years, welcome and involve newcomers: I have never seen a student feel unwelcome or excluded.

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1 Richard Hoggart, 'Foreword' to McIlroy, J and Spence, B *University Education in Crisis* (University of Leeds: Leeds Studies in Adult and Continuing Education 1988) pp.v–vii

Every academic subject has its particular virtue; but it is rare, I find, for a student not to pick up quite quickly the defining contribution of English as a discipline of thought. Anil again:

The particular importance of literature must not be understated. What is it? I believe literature reflects a uniquely human obsession with enquiring about and understanding the world around us, and specifically our instinctive urge to peer into the minds of others. Literature expresses like nothing else the incalculable complexity of our experience, and the reading of literature is enriched by the widening of these individual experiences. The study of literature, then, enables us to construct and test theories about the lives of others in parallel with the daily analysis of our particular, individual situations.

I discuss and illustrate this in the second section of Part 1, 'On course: teaching literature in lifelong learning'. The teaching on which I focus here is all to do with working with groups of students and getting over time to know them well. By contrast the lectures, essays and reviews in Part 2 were all originally prepared for general audiences — that is, audiences that would certainly include those with specialist or expert knowledge, alongside others having little or no prior acquaintance with the subject at all. Such a description, of course, nearly always fits an open-access class or group of continuing education students. The difference is that these audiences are not my students: they do not know me, nor I them. The lectures cover a wide range, historically and in terms of subject — from Tom Paine in the eighteenth century to Alan Bennett in the twenty first. The contexts in which the lectures were delivered were different each time, and I preface each one with a brief account of where, why and when.

One thing they all have in common, though, is that I use quotation a lot in my lectures, unashamedly. I do this partly because students find it reassuring: they do not have to worry I'll assume they know the texts so well that quotation is superfluous. Partly it's because I always engage in close reading in my lectures: I don't want students to deal in vague generalities, so their arguments, like mine, must be rooted in the texts we are discussing. I want them to see that it is by close reading that texts force us to ask the questions that provoke further questions that lead to deeper understanding. Close reading, as Stefan Collini has argued,<sup>2</sup> is inseparable from hard thinking, and literature deserves our full attention.

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2 See Part 3 below, p. 167

The lectures in Part 2 are followed by a small selection of essays and reviews. Much of my own teaching and research has focused, throughout my career, on the literature of the Great War, and in particular on some of the lesser known contributors to that war. My postgraduate research was on the poet and novelist Richard Aldington, and I believe strongly in supporting the small societies and fellowships that have sprung up to promote or sustain the reputations of the writers of the Great War. 'Poets need friends' is a mantra I often repeat, and groups such as the Friends of the Dymock Poets, the Edward Thomas Fellowship, the Siegfried Sassoon Fellowship, the Wilfred Owen Association and the Ivor Gurney Society offer practical friendship on a number of levels. The essay on Edmund Blunden was commissioned by the Edmund Blunden Website, the first instance (to my knowledge) of a virtual community of Friends of a particular poet. The review of a book about the Marlowe Dramatic Society in Cambridge was written for the Newsletter of the Rupert Brooke Society.

It is a point literary historians will need to ponder that several of these societies have been founded in the past twenty years or less: further evidence of the undiminished afterlife of the Great War. The people who join such societies are very often the same people who participate in continuing education programmes. It is interesting, too, that these societies and fellowships are nearly always run from outside, not within, universities — though they may have strong support from individual academics. They represent a striking new dimension in the evolution of extramural literary study.

Much of my teaching in continuing education has centred on new (often very new) works of fiction, and the last piece to appear in Part 2 is a previously unpublished review of a controversial 2009 novel by Jill Dawson, *The Great Lover*, about an imagined relationship between a Fenland servant girl and Rupert Brooke. This is a book by a writer who herself lives in the Fens and has written previous novels with a Fenland setting. I grew up in the Fens myself, and one of the attractions of Cambridge for me has always been that it is a fen-edge city. From the window of my attic study in Madingley Hall, I look north and east to the straight-edge skyline which includes (on a clear day) Ely Cathedral. Some of the most rewarding courses I have taught have been about the Fens, their literature and their architecture. I like standing in flat landscapes — whether here, in Holland and Germany, on the Veneto or even in Cambodia — and once wrote thus about them:

### **In Praise of Flat Landscapes**

Nothing so flat will move the man who loves mountains alone,  
 But even he, if he lie on his back on the bank of the dyke  
 And look up for the larks or watch the willow wands  
 Dipped and silvered by a moment of wind,

Even he with his head for heights might concede  
 Flat landscapes do not threaten and glower as mountains may;  
 No, they command a stillness, they are the earth at rest,  
 Set free at last from the weight of the sea.

Flat landscapes are generous: their arms stretch out,  
 Their soil gives richly, their skies are measureless.  
 They enrage the world in a rush with its ceaseless chatter,

But those who will walk all day on the line of the land,  
 Defining their place in a flat landscape,  
 Will never say twice flat landscapes are dull.

Part 3 of *Extramural* is a selection of postings from my blog, 'World and time'. I began to write this blog in August 2009. From the start it was designed to promote the courses and programmes being offered by the Institute of Continuing Education, but this was only part of its purpose. I wanted to make a record of the things that interest me in the context of my work and my teaching; at the same time I was keen to explore new ways of presenting my thoughts on books and writers, on poetry, on architecture, on Cambridge and Madingley, on the university and lifelong learning — on all of these things. My readership was to be open access, just like the classes I teach. I have tried over the past two years to make no assumptions about what would or would not interest them; it would be my job to make what is of interest to me of interest to anyone who found themselves — by accident or design — reading *World and time*.

More personal and less formal than lecturing, closer in fact to an essay or a monologue with the potential to turn into a conversation, the blog works best when it is prompted by some event that has just happened, some book I've been reading, some lecture I've just delivered or class I have taught. I once heard U.A. Fanthorpe introduce herself

to a student audience as ‘a practising poet — that is, I’m still trying to do the job better.’ Though I never knew any poet with less cause to be modest than Ursula Fanthorpe, in the same spirit I consider myself to be a practising blogger.

The selection from *World and time* which makes up Part 3 of *Extramural* is divided into sections as follows:

- 3.1 About Madingley
- 3.2 On lit. crit. and teaching literature
- 3.3 Concerning E.M. Forster
- 3.4 On writers, mostly novelists

The pieces are not necessarily presented in chronological order, but I give the date of posting for each one.

A key idea informing the teaching of literature and running through *Extramural* is the idea of a community of literature to which readers and writers can equally belong. All literature involves a dialogue with the past — the writers of the present always consciously or unconsciously talking to those who have gone before — and it is part of the job of teaching literature to help students tune in to this dialogue. To illustrate this idea of a community to which readers are invited to belong the image of a hand being held out from writer to reader is sometimes used, as for example by Alan Bennett in his play *The History Boys* (2004) where Hector, the eccentric English teacher, explains to one of his pupils:

The best moments in reading are when you come across something — a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things — which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.<sup>3</sup>

I refer to this passage twice during *Extramural*, once in the lecture ‘Literature Now!’ and again in ‘Alan Bennett and *The Habit of Art*’. On both occasions I also refer to a commentary on the passage by the writer Blake Morrison. Indeed the hand reaching out to clasp another is a powerful image both about literature and in literature, and I discuss it again, in a different context, in Part 1 when exploring

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3 Alan Bennett, *The History Boys* (London: Faber and Faber 2004) p.56

its use by Seamus Heaney in a poem of his which discreetly echoes a poem by John Keats. Making these connections is one of the purposes, as well as one of the pleasures, of literary study.

It will be obvious, I hope, both from what I have already written and from what follows, that I have found working and teaching in continuing education intensely rewarding. I have great admiration for many of my colleagues and for my students; all of them, directly or indirectly, have contributed to this book, and I am grateful.

Madingley Hall, 17 August 2011.

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