

Philosophy at University College London: Part 1: From Jeremy Bentham to the
Second World War

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I'm quite often asked to give talks but I'm rarely asked to talk about the philosophy department. In fact I can only remember being asked to do this once before: to College Council very soon after Malcolm Grant was appointed as Provost. On that occasion I decided to tell a cautionary tale: painting a picture of the brilliance of the department in the late 1970s – second in the country only to the very much larger department at Oxford; how it was all ruined in the early 1980s by a wave of cost-cutting measures in which all the then internationally known members of the department left; and how it has taken twenty-five years to come close to recovery. This seemed to go down well on the day, but I can't say that I won the longer term argument about the imprudence of cost-cutting.

For this talk I was, at first, at a bit of a loss to know what to talk about. One possibility would be to try to describe the research that currently takes place in the department. But this idea didn't appeal. Philosophers tend to work on their own, and so we don't have research groups, as such, or collective projects. We have 15 members of the department, each engaged on their own research. Also, every time I try to summarize their work my colleagues tell me that I have misunderstood it. So that would be a frustrating and unrewarding way of spending our time.

Luckily, a few months ago I came across something that forms the basis of a more interesting story. A former head of department, and Reader in Philosophy – in fact my first undergraduate tutor – Johnny Watling, sadly died a couple of years ago, and we have been thinking about putting some sort of collection of his works together. This led me to look at some of the old departmental files, and in one I found a history of the department written probably in 1927 or 1928 by George Dawes Hicks, then Professor of Moral Philosophy. A photocopy of the handwritten manuscript – the original is in the College archives – was in an old file. It tells a fascinating story of the fortunes of the Philosophy department over the first hundred years of the life of the university.

I realised after reading it I could give a talk based on the idea of ‘three myths about Philosophy at UCL’. Shortly after I started preparing this talk I had the good fortune to find another paper, by a contemporary American historian, Jeff Lipkes, which discusses a ‘contested election’ for the Chair of Philosophy at UCL in 1866. In fact this paper was delivered the recent conference here at UCL on John Stuart Mill. From these sources, as well as the 1911 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannia (parts of which are now available electronically on Wikipedia) it is possible to build up a rich picture of the squabbles and eccentricities of the early days of the department. There are also some interesting things to be said about its middle years, before the second world war, which I shall also cover here.

I mentioned three myths. The first is the myth that Jeremy Bentham was the first professor of philosophy. No one here, surely, would make that mistake, but many overseas visitors assumed that this must be the basis of the extremely well-known

connection between UCL and Bentham. What a pity, though, that it isn't true.

Bentham was already 80 years old when the first Chairs were appointed in 1828, and had only four more years to live. Could it be that UCL has been rather opportunistic in exploiting this connection? Perhaps, perhaps not. He did, after all, leave us his papers – or at least they have found their way here – and his auto-icon, of which we will be hearing more shortly. So, anyway, that is the first myth, and it is easily dismissed.

Nevertheless given Bentham's inspiration and encouragement, and the fact that the major founders of UCL had serious interests in philosophy – James Mill and George Grote both publishing philosophical works - it would be natural to suppose that philosophy would, nevertheless, have had a central role to play in the life of the university from the start. Indeed on our departmental website we say: 'The teaching of Philosophy at UCL began in 1830 with the appointment of a Professor of Logic and the Philosophy of Mind. The founding principles of the College, and its early connections with Jeremy Bentham and the Utilitarian movement, gave particular importance to the subject.' But there is an interesting anomaly here. If Philosophy was going to be so important, why did teaching of it not start until 1830, when the teaching of other subjects began in 1828? The second myth, which I will explore shortly, is that Philosophy had a central place at UCL from the start.

The third myth is broader, and of more general interest. From where we stand now, we tell a story of UCL as a place liberated from religious dogma. After all, it was the first institution in England where students could register for a degree without first having to swear to the articles of the Church of England. Immediately known as a 'Godless Institute', UCL has always had a reputation as being anti-religious.

Unfortunately for the philosophy department, this is also false. UCL was founded as home for those of any religious belief or none. Not only had atheists, Catholics and Jews been excluded from Oxford and Cambridge, but also nonconformists, who were also divided between themselves. As Jeff Lipkes reminds us, adapting a phrase attributed to Voltaire, England was a country of only two sauces but 29 different Protestant sects. At its foundation UCL contained an uncomfortable alliance of people united only by the belief that being a member of the Church of England should not be a pre-condition of a university education. This included a range of nonconformists as well as radicals opposed to religion. The struggle between these groups was played out in the early history of the Philosophy Department.

So to return to the beginnings. In 1827 two chairs were advertised: one in the Philosophy of Mind and Language; one in Moral and Political Philosophy. It is said that no candidates of any distinction applied. The name of Thomas Southwood Smith – a friend and follower of Bentham - was put forward for the Chair of Moral and Political Philosophy, but he was not elected. That was probably just as well. Although he had been a Unitarian minister, he was, in 1827, a physician at the London Fever Hospital. That same year he published a pamphlet entitled ‘The Use of the Dead to the Living’ arguing that rather than waste dead bodies by burial, they should be used for medical research. As far as I can tell this was his only publication at that time. A few years later Southwood Smith carried out a public dissection of Bentham a few days after his death, and produced Bentham’s ‘auto-icon’. Soon he became famous for *A Treatise on Fever*, published in 1830, and became a major figure in health reform. But there seems to be no evidence that he made any contribution to philosophy.

Concerning the Chair of Mind and Logic, Dawes Hicks says the following: “For the other chair the name of the Rev. John Hoppus was seriously considered; but, in consequence of Grote's opposition on the ground that in an unsectarian institution a minister of religion could not fitly occupy a chair of *philosophy*, no recommendation was made.” So when the College opened neither Chair was filled.

The following year, an attempt was made to fill the Chair of Moral Philosophy. Charles Hay Cameron, a friend of Grote was put forward. Cameron is best known now for being the husband of pioneering photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, and a subject for some of her photographs, including one in the Getty Museum, in which he resembles an Old Testament Prophet. He became a respected and influential colonial administrator in India, and a law commissioner. Although he had a reputation as a philosopher, and was called such by Tennyson (also a subject of Julia Cameron's photographs) his philosophical output seems to have been thin. Apart from some legal and administrative writings, the British Library lists just one philosophical work for him. Printed for private circulation in 1835 was a work called ‘Two Essays: On the Sublime and Beautiful, and On Duelling’. But in any case, he was not elected on the grounds that ‘there can be no teaching of ethics except on a religious basis’, according to Zachary Macaulay, a member of Council.

So there we have the glorious foundation of the philosophy department. The appointment to the Chair of Mind and Logic opposed, because the candidate was a minister; the appointment to the Chair of Moral and Political Philosophy opposed, because the candidate was not religious. Those, at least, are the grounds that have filtered through to the surface, although we need to remember that in any case, the

three candidates: Hoppus, Southwood Smith, and Charles Hay Cameron, were hardly an inspiring group, as far as their proven philosophical merits are concerned.

However in 1830 Hoppus – a Congregational Minister - was put forward again and elected by the Committee at a meeting from which Grote was absent. Grote was so disgusted by this outcome that he resigned. But finally the Philosophy Department was founded with one Professor, and there was no appointment to the other Chair at that time. Hoppus, like many of those who were to follow him, had received his philosophical education in Scotland. Until the Second World War every Professor of Philosophy at UCL received at least part of their education in Scotland or Germany. Indeed the fledging University of London seemed almost a Scottish colonial outpost.

Looking at Dawes Hicks' manuscript it is unclear whether there is a distinction to be made between the Professor and the Department in these early days. Hoppus gave an extensive series of lectures, and it appears that no one else taught Philosophy. Hoppus held the post for 36 years. During this time, according to Dawes Hicks, he published no works of Philosophy, although he had written one monograph, on Bacon, prior to appointment. Dawes Hicks tactfully explains that there were no Philosophy journals in the English language at that time, and that it was very hard to publish a monograph (although we have to note that John Stuart Mill had no trouble doing so at around the same time, and found plenty of places, such as the Westminster Review, to publish shorter works). Dawes Hicks paints a picture of a diligent lecturer, devoted to his students, setting them regular tasks of producing essays based on his lectures. And indeed one such student notebook still exists in an archive of music manuscripts in the

British Library. John Curwen, advocate of the sol-fa system, was a student of Hoppus and this notebook is preserved among his archive.

This picture of Hoppus contrasts with a more famous one, propagated by the College's first historian, Bellot: that Hoppus was a disastrous choice, who almost killed the study of Philosophy in the College. He "used to walk into college regularly at his appointed time," a former student recalled, "with the manuscript of his lecture in his hands, and a book and a newspaper under his arm. He took his seat in the little lecture room that used to be opposite the Council Room door. After his first or his second lecture he seldom had a pupil; because, burying his face in his manuscript, he mumbled so that only an acute ear could catch much of what he said, and those who caught something called it rot. But, nothing if not conscientious, pupil or no pupil, he sat out his hour, reading his book or his newspaper when alone, his manuscript, if any one came in... One day a new student, not very conversant with the topography of the college, wandered by mistake into Professor Hoppus's lecture room... Down went the newspaper, out came the manuscript. But when the professor's head was buried in its leaves, the student discovered his mistake and left, silently and unobserved. For once the Lecture was read through...(J. B. Benson, "Some Recollections of University College in the Sixties," ms, UCL Spec. Col., cited by H. Bellot, *University College London, 1826-1926* (London: U. of London Press, 1929), p. 111.]

This, though, is a recollection from the 1860s, close to Hoppus's retirement. Benson, the student whose recollections these were, did not join UCL until 1864, later becoming a member of UCL Committee 1907-22 and Fellow of UCL. One hopes that

Hoppus's earlier days were not like this. After all, Hoppus has a dozen or more sermons preserved in the British Library, as well as his lecture notes, and one supposes that he must have been capable of more inspiring delivery. I should add that Hoppus did publish at least one work while Grote Professor: *The Crisis of Popular Education*, in 1847, in which he argues against the established church controlling national education. This was to be a recurring theme emerging from people associated with the department. One later student John Clifford (1836-1923), a nonconformist minister and writer, was a vocal opponent of the 1902 Education Act, which required state supported schools to provide denominational teaching. In December 1922, the year before his death, Clifford received his fifty-seventh summons to appear before the magistrates for refusing to pay his education rate.

One further comment in Dawes Hick's manuscript is worth noting. 'From 1842-3 till 1859 the examiners never changed: they were W.T. Buchan, a police magistrate (who also did duty in classics), and Rev. Henry Alford, afterwards Dean of Canterbury.' A somewhat peculiar arrangement, by the sound of it.

Hoppus retired in 1866, and James Martineau, regarded as one of the leading philosophers in England, applied for the vacant post. [nb Most of what follows in the next paragraphs is a summary of Lipkes' paper on this topic] Martineau was the brother of the now better known liberal thinker Harriet Martineau. In his early days he had been a minister in Dublin and elsewhere, and at the time of his application was Professor of Moral Philosophy at Manchester New College, which had moved from Manchester, via York to London, and indeed in 1857 was located in Gordon Square, in University Hall (which presumably is now Dr Williams' Library). By then

associated with UCL, but offering instruction only in Theology and Philosophy, Martineau had, it appears, been drawing students away from Hoppus. In 1859, though, he also became minister at Little Portland Street Chapel.

By the time of Hoppus's retirement, in 1866 Martineau had written a large number of religious texts, but little if any Philosophy, although he had a reputation as an authority on Kant, Spinoza and others. Later he would write several works that made an impact: he is said to be one of the first philosophers to understand the significance of Darwin's work (there is a letter from Darwin to Herbert Spencer congratulating him on an article written in reply to Martineau), he wrote a study of Spinoza, and a two volume work *Types of Ethical Theory*. Henry Sidgwick would later publish lectures on the ethics of Green, Spencer and Martineau.

At the time, though, the pressing issue, of course, was that Martineau was another religious minister. Martineau's application was strongly opposed by Grote, who tried to establish the principle that no minister should hold the Chair in the Philosophy of Mind and Logic. This motion was narrowly defeated, but so was Martineau's appointment, even though it had been unanimously recommended at a previous stage. However the issue gave rise to soul-searching and a wide public debate – apparently reaching the daily and weekly press - about what it meant to be a secular institution. Was it a matter of appointing someone irrespective of their religious views – as the non-conformists argued – or a matter of appointing one who did not professionally advocate any particular religious views – as the radicals argued? Was UCL neutral in respect of religion, or opposed to it? Council divided on this issue.

Martineau approached John Stuart Mill to write a recommendation. This may have been J.S. Mill's only contact with the department (although he attended some of John Austin's lectures on jurisprudence in the law department). Mill replied to Martineau declining the request, not on the grounds that there was a better candidate on the philosophical merits but for what may seem rather dubious reasons. Essentially, Mill told Martineau that he would rather see the alternative candidate appointed because this other candidate shared more of Mill's views, and such views rarely received a public airing. Apparently Hoppus's supporters wanted to use this letter as if it were a testimonial, but Mill became very irritated, and refused this too; for rather obvious reasons.

Instead of appointing Martineau, the College appointed George Croom Robertson, aged 24 and with outstanding recommendations from Bain and several German scholars. However he was clearly a big risk, having submitted only two works in support of his application: a manuscript review of Molesworth's edition of Hobbes, and a printed paper in which he summarized Kant's view of Swedenbourg. Hoppus, who read through all the submissions of the candidates, and wrote a detailed assessment, was not impressed by Croom Robertson, and actually preferred a third candidate, Inglesby. Augustus de Morgan, the distinguished mathematician and logician, resigned his Chair in disgust at the College's treatment of Martineau. This was a resignation on principle: he had no personal acquaintance with Martineau.

But if the nonconformists had won the first round in 1830, with the radicals defeated them in the second, in 1866. Grote consolidated the victory in 1871, by dying, and leaving money to endow the Chair of Mind and Logic, on condition it was not held by

a religious minister; if so the interest would be held over and added to capital. The money, however, was not immediately available as Grote had given his wife a life interest in his estate. However she relinquished this in 1875, this before her death, and thus the Grote Chair of Mind and Logic was created, and indeed a few hundred pounds of the current Grote Chair's salary is still paid from this source.

George Croom Robertson seems to have been a huge improvement over Hoppus. He was an enthusiastic and inspiring teacher. Volumes of his lectures were published in 1896, edited by a former student, Caroline A Foley (later Rhys Davies) who also wrote an account of his teaching which was published in *Mind* in 1893, shortly after his death at the age of 50, from a kidney disease which had been plaguing his health for some time. (Quinton in *Mind* 1976). *Mind*, which was the first English language journal of philosophy, was a very important part of Croom Robertson's life: he was its first editor, appointed in 1876, by Bain, its founder and patron. (For this reason it is particularly pleasing that the editorship of *Mind* returned to UCL from 2000-2005, with Michael Martin's appointment.) Like Croom Robertson's teaching, *Mind's* mission was to advance both Philosophy and Psychology, and indeed at this time there was just one department to cover both subjects. Apart from his teaching and editorial work, Croom Robertson's further output was not substantial. However he did publish an excellent short book on Hobbes, which until fairly recently included the best available account of Hobbes's life, and is still worth reading. Others of his works were collected after his death, and edited by Bain and Whittaker, published in 1894 under the somewhat ghoulish title *Philosophical Remains*. It must have been a sad task for Bain to edit a posthumous volume of his the works of his student and protégé.

Croom Robertson, who had held the Chair for around 25 years, was succeeded by James Sully, who like Croom Robertson was born in 1842. Hence Sully was 50 years old when he took on the Chair in 1892. Sully's memoirs, entitled *My Life and Friends: A Psychologist's Memories* run for 11 chapters before, in the 12th, of 13, he reaches his appointment to the Grote Chair. That chapter is called 'Slackening the Pace' and is filled as much with memories of travels to Switzerland as work at UCL. Sully had certainly achieved a great deal before taking on the post. For example in 1884 he published *Outlines of Psychology*, said to be the first British Psychology text. However, whether or not he really was slackening the pace, Sully made substantial contributions to UCL, founding a psychological laboratory in 1897, as well as producing numerous works in psychology. One of these, *Studies in Childhood* (1895), which is a diary of his own son's upbringing, has recently been reprinted. Sully, it seems, was the spiritual father of UCL's Psychology Department, although at his time Philosophy and Psychology were united in a single department, and remained so probably until 1928. Sully's memoirs complain of the burden of having to travel extensively through London to fulfil his duties, and this contributed to his retirement in 1903 after only 11 years in post. Sully's friends included George Elliot who features both in a pen portrait and an engraving in his memoir.

In 1903 Sully was replaced by the relatively little known Carveth Read. Read published a number of works, including *The Metaphysics of Nature*, published in 1905, and on *Natural and Social Morals*, published in 1909. His work *Logic: Deductive and Inductive* has recently been reprinted. In his later years he also wrote more anthropological material, including a book called *Man and his Superstitious* (1925), which has also been reprinted.

Carveth Read, however, persuaded the College to appoint a Professor of Moral Philosophy, and so for the first time the original conception of the Department was fulfilled. George Dawes Hicks was appointed to this post in 1904. He is sometimes incorrectly referred to as the Grote Professor, but this was not his initial appointment, and was never given this title. Indeed it may be that he was not entitled to hold it, as he had been yet another nonconformist minister, in Islington for a few years either side of the turn of century. When Carveth Read retired in 1911 the Psychologist Charles Spearman was appointed Grote Professor of the Philosophy of Mind, to be understood as being an appointment in Psychology. Spearman had been at UCL since 1907, when appointed Reader in Experimental Psychology. Abraham Wolf, who had been teaching in the department since 1899, was appointed Reader in Logic and Ethics around this time.

The Department underwent significant change in the decade following the first world war. In 1919 a new Department of the History of Science was founded under the leadership of Abraham Wolf, who in 1922 was appointed Professor of Logic and Scientific Method. By the end of the 1920s Psychology split off too. With the loss of Spearman and Wolf the department must have been a shadow of its former self. Spearman made many contributions to psychology, particularly in the measurement of intelligence, being the founder of the idea of the 'g' factor, or general intelligence. He remained Grote Professor until 1928, but stayed at UCL until 1931. Wolf published a major *History of Science, Technology and Philosophy in the Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century*, published in two volumes in 1935 and 1938, and

recently reprinted, and available at vast expense, in three volumes (1998). Wolf published many other works.

The name Dawes Hicks is still known, but he is only occasionally referred to now in the philosophical literature. He endowed scholarships at UCL which still generate a worthwhile annual income of left his library to the University. He also endowed named lectures in the History of Philosophy, starting in 1954, which are given at British Academy. In the year of his retirement, 1828, Dawes Hicks published *Ways Towards the Spiritual Life*, and then several more books, including a study of *Berkeley* (1932) and *The Philosophical Basis of Theism* (1937).

Dawes Hicks' manuscript mentions a number of students in the department who went on to be figures of public note. They include the journalist and essayist Walter Bagehot, early editor of the *Economist*, John Neville Keynes, father of John Maynard Keynes, and Morris Ginsberg, who went on to be a highly regarded Professor of Sociology at the LSE. Particularly interesting are the female students, and here one can reasonably have high expectations, especially in the early days. Given that opportunities for women were so limited one might expect the cream of the generations to have enrolled at UCL. And there were, indeed, women of achievement, although perhaps not household names.

Croom Robertson's students included Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys Davids (1857-1942). We have already noted that she was the editor of Croom Robertson's lectures. Later she became known as a scholar of Indian Philosophy and translator of many texts from the Pali language. Others mentioned are Laura Archer Hind, who was the

translator of Goethe's *History of Garden Art*, and Sophie Bryant 1850-1922, the first woman to obtain a doctorate in England (in Philosophy) (1884). She became Headmistress of North London Collegiate School. She died in mountaineering accident 1922, at age of 72.

Most interesting is Nathalie Duddington, a student of Dawes Hicks. Writing about her, Dawes Hicks complements her for advancing philosophical literature. She was the translator, he notes of two substantial works of Russian Philosophy. He then adds that she has written 'papers of her own on philosophical subjects'. Here, though, the manuscript is particularly interesting. Generally it is neatly written, and contains very few corrections, but just before the words 'papers of her own' the word 'original' then followed by 'pap' were written and then crossed out. I don't know whether Dawes Hicks thought that she was recycling ideas of others but for some reason he clearly changed his mind about calling the paper 'original'. So I was delighted to find that Nathalie Duddington's 1919 paper in *The Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 'Our knowledge of other minds', has recently been picked up in the literature. One commentator says of it: 'wonderful essay claiming that "our knowledge of other minds is as direct and immediate as our knowledge of physical things." Argues that all inferential accounts fail. Some nice criticisms of a strict Russellian notion of acquaintance, too--it's a mistake to think that acquaintance entails infallible, complete knowledge.' However after this Nathalie Duddington seems to have turned her attention to translation and she translated many works from Russian, including Pushkin and Tolstoy, many of which are still in print. She also wrote some student works on the Russian language.

Possibly Dawes Hicks could not bring himself to call Duddington's work original for he himself had criticised Russell's theory of sense-data in a review of *Problems of Philosophy* published in *Mind* in 1912, and Russell replied in 1913, and it may be that Duddington recycled some of his ideas and arguments. Later, in 1938, Dawes Hicks published a collection of essays entitled *Critical Realism, Studies in the Philosophy of Mind and Nature*. Roy Wood Sellars, writing in *Mind* in 1959 points out that he himself first used the term Critical Realism in 1908, and distinguishes his use of the term from that of Dawes Hicks, which, he implies involves an extreme behaviourism, which is one, perhaps uncharitable, way of reading Duddington's position on other minds.

In 1928 Dawes Hicks retired and Spearman relinquished the Grote Chair. The Scottish Philosopher John Macmurray was appointed. Macmurray became well-known for a series of radio appearances, from 1930 onwards, and wrote a number of books on religion and social philosophy. Hence between the two world wars the main Professors of Philosophy in the Department were both heavily influenced by religion: the revenge of the non-conformists. Macmurray left UCL in 1944 to take a Chair at Edinburgh, apparently saying 'what can one think of a University that declined to give David Hume a Chair but gave me one?' Interest in Macmurray smouldered on after his death in 1976, but he became, very briefly, an intense object of interest, including from the national press, in 1997 when Tony Blair wrote the introduction to a collection of Macmurray's writings, writing the following: "John Macmurray is not one of the twentieth century's most famous philosophers. This is surprising. Actually his work is more accessible, better written, and above all far more relevant than most

of what I and many others studied as hallowed texts at university. I also find him immensely modern... in the sense that he confronted what will be the critical political question of the twenty-first century: the relationship between individual and society" (Tony Blair, Prime Minister of England, "Foreword" to Philip Conford, The Personal World: John MacMurray on Self and Society. Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1997). Blair became interested in MacMurray not while at Fettes College in Scotland, as some people initially assumed, but because of the influence of an Australian mature student he met at Oxford, called Peter Thomson, who introduced Blair to Christian Socialism, and its major thinkers.

The degree to which Blair really did follow Macmurray is a matter of debate, and papers were written suggesting that Macmurray would have detested Blair's views. It seems that Blair has not recently repeated his indebtedness. However, Macmurray's reputation appears to have survived his brush with Blair. In May 2006 the University of Aberdeen is holding a conference entitled 'Scottish and Irish Thought in the Era of John Macmurray: a symposium to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the death of the Scottish philosopher, John Macmurray (1891-1976).'

The Second World War obviously had its effect on the department, and A.J. Ayer, on taking the Grote Chair in 1945, remarks on what seemed to be a department that barely existed, which was to a degree true. Ayer had to build a department virtually from nothing. This post-war story, however, is for another time.