

## **From the SDUK to the Passmore Edwards Settlement: Widening Access to Education in Bloomsbury**

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The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (which flourished for twenty years, from 1826 to 1846) was established to bring instruction to a mass readership.<sup>1</sup> Its main founder was Henry Brougham, later baron Brougham and Vaux, who collaborated with a number of fellow educational reformers, many of them whig MPs, others prominent lawyers and educators. They included James Mill, Zacharay Macaulay, Lord John Russell, and George Birkbeck, founder in 1823 of the first London Mechanics' Institute. The extension of education to all classes and all ages was the larger aim of this group of reformers, some of whom - Brougham, Birkbeck, and Macaulay – had also started a society to encourage the spread of infant schools in 1824. The SDUK had its offices in Bloomsbury and was led by people who lived or worked in the area.

The plan was to exploit recent advances in printing and distribution by publishing cheap, informative works to 'supply the appetite which had been created by elementary instruction' (through infants' schools) and 'direct the ability to read to useful ends'.<sup>2</sup> It was agreed that the Society's publications would avoid party politics and religion, for two main reasons: 1) in order to appeal to the widest audience, and 2) to avoid controversy among its members, who, though generally agreeing on questions of political reform, represented a broad spread of religious affiliation, from non-believers to liberal Anglicans and dissenters of various kinds.

It was a sensible precaution to steer clear of party politics at this period of agitation for the repeal of Catholic disabilities, the fair apportionment of electoral seats to enlarged cities like Birmingham, the sweeping away of rotten and pocket boroughs, the extension of the franchise, and the overhaul of the legal system, culminating in the passing of the Reform Act of 1832.

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<sup>1</sup> See Rosemary Ashton, article on the SDUK in *Oxford Dictionary of Biography* (2004).

Despite the precaution, however, the Society immediately attracted negative attention from establishment commentators. This was because its founder members were well-known for their activities on behalf of the reforms I have just outlined. Many of them were also prominent among the founders of the University of London (later UCL), soon to open in Gower Street to students of all faiths and none who were prevented from graduating at Oxford and Cambridge by their inability to subscribe to the articles of the Church of England. Birkbeck, Macaulay, Mill, and Lord John Russell were among several men who served on the committees of both institutions, and Brougham was the chairman of both the SDUK and the first council of the university. He was therefore the chief target of attacks by a range of anti-reform commentators, including members of the Tory government, the two ancient universities, and the bishops and clergy of the Church of England.

The SDUK and Brougham are prominent among the many signs of the times chosen for amusing attack by Thomas Love Peacock in his satirical novel, *Crotchet Castle* (1831). Peacock brings together in a country house a number of people with clashing views on topical and controversial matters. These include a transcendental poet [Coleridge] who argues with a Benthamite political economist [J. R. McCulloch, professor of political economy at the University of London and an active member of the SDUK]. Chapter 2, entitled 'The March of Mind', opens on the following scene:

**'God bless my soul, sir!' exclaimed the Reverend Doctor Folliott, bursting, one May morning, into the breakfast-room at Crotchet Castle, 'I am out of all patience with this march of mind. Here has my house been nearly burned down, by my cook taking it into her head to study hydrostatics, in a sixpenny tract, published by the Steam Intellect Society, and written by a learned friend who is for doing all the world's business as well as his own, and is equally well qualified to handle every branch of human knowledge. I have a great abomination of this learned friend; as author, lawyer, and politician, he is *triformis*, like**

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<sup>2</sup> Meeting of SDUK, as reported in *The Times*, 19 May 1828.

**Hecate: and in every one of his three forms he is *bifrons*, like Janus; the true Mr Facing-both-ways of Vanity Fair. My cook must read his rubbish in bed; and as might naturally be expected, she dropped suddenly fast asleep, overturned the candle, and set the curtains in a blaze.'**<sup>3</sup>

The book was published in 1831, just after the 'learned friend', who is, of course, Brougham, had been made Lord Chancellor in Lord Grey's incoming whig government. Brougham is the head of the 'Steam Intellect Society', an inspired nickname for the SDUK, connecting as it does the emerging network of railways with the dissemination of knowledge among the population at large. Brougham was also the author of the sixpenny treatise on hydrostatics published by the Society's Library of Useful Knowledge in 1827 which sent the cook to sleep in *Crotchet Castle*.

The remark about Brougham's ability to 'handle every branch of human knowledge' combines admiration on Peacock's part with a distrust of Brougham's sheer facility which was shared by his enemies and friends alike. For Brougham conducted a number of high-profile careers simultaneously – active reforming MP, Lord Chancellor in the whig administration of 1830-4, principal actor in the affairs of the University of London, eloquent lawyer on the northern circuit, and from 1825 lord rector of the university of Glasgow. As the banker-poet Samuel Rogers apparently said when Brougham left a country house party they were both attending, 'This morning Solon, Lycurgis, Demosthenes, Archimedes, Sir Isaac Newton, Lord Chesterfield and a great many more went away in one post chaise'.<sup>4</sup>

Brougham's influence, particularly with the *Edinburgh Review*, which he had helped to found in 1802, and *The Times*, whose editor Thomas Barnes was a friend, ensured that his doings were always in the news. Thanks to Brougham, both the new University and the SDUK, though attacked in the

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *Crotchet Castle* (1831, reprinted Penguin, 1969), pp. 133-4.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Greville diary, 2 January 1828, *The Diaries of Charles Greville*, ed. Edward Pearce with Deanna Pearce (London, 2005), pp. 21-2.

ultra-conservative press, were given frequent favourable coverage in *The Times*.

He was eminently caricaturable; his long upturned nose was a useful feature, as was the pronunciation of his name. He often appeared in cartoons as a broom wearing a lawyer's wig and gown, or as the new broom which would 'sweep away' injustices in the law. His sounding sentences in courtroom and Commons chamber became catchphrases. Take, for example, the famous speech in the House of Commons in January 1828, in which he attacked the appointment of the Duke of Wellington as Prime Minister. This was not a time, he said, for the soldier to be prominent in modern society.

*The Times* reported his speech on 30 January: 'There was another person abroad, - a less important person, - in the eyes of some an insignificant person, - whose labours had tended to produce this state of things. The schoolmaster was abroad (cheers and laughter)! And he trusted more to him, armed with his primer, than he did to the soldier in full military array, for upholding and extending the liberties of his country. (Hear.)'<sup>5</sup> From then on, cartoons showed Brougham as a schoolmaster, his chief prop being now a birchbroom for chastising wayward pupils.<sup>6</sup>

Faced with the near-simultaneous founding of the Mechanics' Institute, the SDUK, and the University of London, Tories and churchmen launched their attacks on a kind of composite entity with Brougham as its nerve centre. These progressive institutions, with their stated aim of widening participation, the first two in basic, the third in higher education, were presented as a danger to society, encouraging the masses to aspire above their station, at a time when political reform including the progressive enfranchisement of the working man was also on the national agenda.

Winthrop Mackworth Praed's poem, 'The London University. A Discourse delivered by a College Tutor at a Supper-party', published in the

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<sup>5</sup> *The Times*, 30 January 1828.

*Morning Chronicle* in July 1825, shrewdly foresees the crude objections which were soon to be made in earnest in some quarters to the new University, namely that, in tandem with the SDUK, it will teach the working class academic subjects and not only that but will also, for good measure, encourage religious scepticism:

**Ye dons and ye doctors, ye Provosts and Proctors,  
Who are paid to monopolize knowledge,  
Come make opposition by voice and petition  
To the radical infidel College...**

**But let them not babble of Greek to the rabble,  
Nor teach the mechanics their letters;  
The labouring classes were born to be asses,  
And not to be aping their betters.<sup>7</sup>**

By 1828-9, when Henry Heath and his brother William published drawings entitled 'The March of Intellect', that phrase, along with 'the march of mind' (as in Peacock's chapter title), had become a rallying cry for reformers and an ironic catcall for opponents of reform. Henry Heath depicts an ape-like worker lounging by his fireside reading a book 'dedicated to the Majesty of the People'. His brother William's drawing shows all sorts of 'impossible' new machines, including a vacuum tube, flying machines, and balloons to remind people of the boom and bust which occurred with the rise of joint-stock companies investing in railway and other innovations in the 1820s, followed by the financial crash of 1826. (The University of London was established as a joint-stock company, and was greeted suspiciously, as we can see in Robert Cruikshank's cartoon of July 1825 of Brougham selling shares around town.<sup>8</sup>) Other cartoons depict labourers disastrously neglecting their daily work while burying their noses in instructive books published by the SDUK.

<sup>6</sup> For cartoons and caricatures of Brougham, see M. Dorothy George, *English Political Caricature 1793-1832* (Oxford, 1959) and *Hogarth to Cruikshank: Social Change in Graphic Satire* (London, 1967).

<sup>7</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 19 July 1825.

<sup>8</sup> See George, *English Political Caricature*, p. 212.

The Society, in undertaking the publication of its sixpenny treatises in the Library of Useful Knowledge from 1827 and its remarkably successful *Penny Magazine* from 1832, intended to bring knowledge to ‘uneducated persons’ and also to ‘reduce the price of scientific and other useful works to the community generally’.<sup>9</sup> The early treatises, mostly of thirty-two pages, gave up-to-date accounts of various scientific subjects. Some were written by established experts (David Brewster on optics, for example), but most were by rising stars who were taking up the first professorships at the University of London, men like the botanist John Lindley, and Augustus De Morgan, the brilliant Cambridge graduate who was appointed to the chair of mathematics at the age of twenty-one. The early treatises sold between 20,000 and 25,000 copies each, and the *Penny Magazine* 200,000 in its first year.<sup>10</sup> A *Penny Cyclopaedia* was started in 1833 by the Society’s enterprising publisher, Charles Knight, who himself took many of the financial risks involved in adding new titles.

The ‘march of mind’ was becoming an observable fact. In chapter 8 of *Crotchet Castle* the resident clergyman, when arresting a common thief, addresses him in striking fashion:

**‘Confess speedily, villain; are you [a] simple thief, or would you have manufactured me into a subject, for the benefit of science? Ay, miscreant caitiff, you would have made me a subject for science, would you? You are a schoolmaster abroad, are you? You are marching with a detachment of the march of mind, are you? You are a member of the Steam Intellect Society, are you? You swear by the learned friend, do you?’<sup>11</sup>**

The success of the early publications and requests from members of Mechanics’ Institutes across the country encouraged the SDUK to add a

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Address of the Committee’, 1 June 1843, in the SDUK papers in the De Morgan Collection, Senate House Library.

<sup>10</sup> Preface to bound Volume 1 of *Penny Magazine* (1832), in UCL Library Special Collections.

Library of Entertaining Knowledge in 1828 to complement its Library of Useful Knowledge. The new treatises offered instruction on practical subjects in an anecdotal style. Those on brewing, insects, and birds were popular, as was George Lillie Craik's two-volume work, *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties* (1830-1), an account of the successful overcoming of educational disadvantages or disabilities by a number of ordinary people which was reprinted several times over the next few decades and was a direct predecessor of Samuel Smiles's enormously popular *Self-Help* (1859). In chapter 33 of *Pickwick Papers* (1837), Dickens has Sam Weller's father, on seeing his son struggling to compose a valentine in a pub in Leadenhall Market, say:

**'But wot's that you're a-doin' of? Pursuit of knowledge under difficulties, Sammy?'**

**'I've done now,' said Sam, with slight embarrassment; 'I've been a-writin'.'**

**'So I see', replied Mr Weller.**

By the late 1830s, the Society was in a precarious financial position. It had overstretched itself in starting new publications. Subscribers were falling off, either over disagreements about editorial policy or because they thought their work was done. The end of the Society was hastened by the wildly ambitious plan to publish a universal biographical dictionary on the model of the French *Biographie universelle*. Seven half-volumes of this ill-fated *Biographical Dictionary* struggled into existence between 1842 and 1844, covering between them the letter A. It would be another forty years before the much less ambitious, yet still huge, *Dictionary of National (not Universal) Biography* would begin publication, taking sixteen years to complete and coming out in sixty volumes (and nearly killing its chief editor, Leslie Stephen, in the process).

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<sup>11</sup> *Crotchet Castle*, p. 193.

The SDUK voted itself out of existence in 1846. It had succeeded in its aims, and was no longer needed as it had been twenty years previously, when major political and social reforms had not yet been won. The Steam Intellect Society had associated itself with progress and, despite the sneers of those opposed to reform and the undoubted susceptibility of the Society to parody, it played a significant part in the progress of nineteenth-century education.

How can we measure its significance? The extremely rich SDUK archives in UCL Library's Special Collections show sales figures in the tens of thousands, indicating that the treatises and magazines were widely read in those days before universal school education.<sup>12</sup> The impact of the Society's publishing activities can also be judged by the number of its imitators. Realising that the reading public was expanding dramatically, the long-established firm of John Murray started its Family Library series in 1829 in direct competition with the Libraries of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge. The British Library catalogue reveals a great many cheap magazines with 'penny' in the title springing up in imitation of the *Penny Magazine* in the years immediately following its introduction, in places from Norwich to Ireland to Malta, and from special interest groups including Sunday School and Temperance societies. The Chambers brothers, William and Robert, young publishers in Edinburgh, started their equally successful *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* in the same year as the *Penny Magazine*, enthused to do so by their admiration for the SDUK.<sup>13</sup> The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), perhaps affronted at the SDUK's imitation of its use of initials, also set up a cheap *Saturday Magazine* in 1832, choosing the same day of the week as the *Penny Magazine* for its publication day.

That SDUK publications really did reach working people we know from the Society's papers preserved in UCL Special Collections; these include

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<sup>12</sup> See also Monica C. Grobel, 'The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge 1826-1846 and its relation to adult education in the first half of the XIXth century, alias "The Sixpenny Science Company" alias "The Steam Intellect Society"', University of London MA thesis, 4 volumes (1933).

letters from grateful readers and from regional organisers of Mechanics' Institutes. Many of the working men whose lives were celebrated in Smiles's *Self-Help* had educated themselves by reading SDUK publications. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* has 81 names associated with the Society, mostly as contributors, but some as working-class readers who went on to be successful.

One such man, John Passmore Edwards, born in Cornwall in 1823 to poor parents, taught himself from cheap books and rose to become a wealthy newspaper proprietor in London. Fittingly, he in turn put some of his enormous wealth into educational projects. In 1890 he established with Mary Ward a settlement for the education of local working people and the safe play of poor children in Bloomsbury, first in University Hall (now the Dr Williams's Library) on Gordon Square, then in 1897 in a specially designed building on Tavistock Place, the building now known as Mary Ward House. Mary Ward – granddaughter of Dr Arnold of Rugby, niece of Matthew Arnold, and author of one of the best-selling novels of the nineteenth century, *Robert Elsmere* (1888) – used her considerable powers of persuasion to liaise between the eleventh Duke of Bedford and Passmore Edwards.<sup>14</sup> She got the former to donate the land and the latter to put up the £14,000 it took to erect the building, which was designed in Arts and Crafts style, both functional and aesthetic, by two young Bloomsbury architects, A. Dunbar Smith and Cecil Brewer. The Settlement represented the beginnings of the play centre movement, with gymnastics, dance, and singing on the children's curriculum, while the facilities for adults included free legal advice, classes in academic subjects, chess, art, and cookery, a library, and access to lectures in the Great Hall. There was a coal club and a mother-and-toddler club. In 1899 the Settlement opened the first school for disabled children in the country.

This forerunner of our modern day nursery schools and after-school clubs for children complemented the Working Men's and Women's Colleges,

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<sup>13</sup> See Sondra Miley Cooney, article on William Chambers in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

established in the 1850s and 1860s (also in Bloomsbury). Together they carried on institutionally the efforts of the SDUK seventy years earlier. We know that Passmore Edwards, growing up the son of a carpenter in the 1820s in a village near Truro, had little school education beyond the age of ten or twelve. We also know, from his autobiography, *A Few Footprints*, published in 1905, and with additions in 1906, that he enhanced his education by reading the SDUK's publications. His second chapter is entitled 'Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties', and he explains how he got learning:

**When I was about twelve years of age, the only London periodical that came into the village was the Penny Magazine, published by Charles Knight, and that was taken in by my father. I well remember the number that contained a biographical sketch with portrait of John Hunter. The article began somewhat in this way – 'John Hunter, the greatest anatomist of modern times'. I asked my mother the meaning of the word 'anatomist', and she told me to consult the dictionary. I did so, and got a little wiser.... I read on and on, with the dictionary as tutor, and got sufficiently interested in the subject to feel boyish flutterings of ambition to become known and useful in some way myself. From that time – 1835 – to the present – 1905 – I have nurtured a similar desire, which time does not wither nor changing circumstances modify.**<sup>15</sup>

By the time Passmore Edwards helped establish the Settlement, he was himself a Bloomsbury resident, as Mary Ward had been for ten years; he lived in Bedford Square and she – until 1892 - in Russell Square.

His is only one story, but it is a resonant one for those of us engaged in an investigation of the progress of education in nineteenth-century Bloomsbury. The work of the Passmore Edwards Settlement, later renamed the Mary Ward Settlement and, since 1982 the Mary Ward Centre, now housed not in the Tavistock Place building, but in Queen Square, carries on to

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<sup>14</sup> For Mary Ward, see John Sutherland, *Mrs Humphry Ward: Eminent Victorian, Pre-eminent Edwardian* (Oxford, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> John Passmore Edwards, *A Few Footprints*, second edition (London, 1906), pp. 6-7.

this day, offering classes to local residents and beyond in all sorts of subjects, and with a free legal advice centre still attached. Its inspiration, the SDUK, for all its earnest title and overreaching ambition, was an important instrument for educational reform and progress. It deserves to be better known, and by digging deep in the special collections at UCL and the Senate House Library, we hope to make it so as part of the Bloomsbury Project.