

John Ruskin and the Two Cultures Debate: Victorian Art Education in the University Extension Movement

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Abstract

The idea of 'University Extension' had first been proposed in 1850 by William Sewell, a senior tutor of Exeter College, who wrote to the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University and suggested the establishment of local institutions directly associated with the universities. Sewell maintained that the universities accordingly could not only educate the masses but also could be 'the great centres and springs of education throughout the country.' Although this proposal was rejected on financial and personnel grounds, the discussion on opening the intellectual door of the old institutions to those who could not afford higher education subsequently continued until the comprehensive scheme of University Extension started in Cambridge, under the leadership of James Stuart, in 1873. The successes of the Working Men's College, which was established in 1854, and the Elementary Education Act in 1870 enabled the University Extension Movement to take this first step forward.

Both educational schemes, the Working Men's College and University Extension, were based on 'liberal education.' The College announced that '*human* studies' should form the primary part of its education. University Extension also emphasised humanistic teaching to nurture citizenship endowed with intellectual and moral excellence. The government's education policy, however, inclined more to technical education. The implementation of the Technical Instruction Act in 1889 impinged on the endeavour to promote the humanities. The debate over 'useless humanities vs profitable science,' or the Two Cultures Debate, also kindled discussion on the meaning of art education in the University Extension Movement and other adult education schemes. There were active discussions in the Movement trying to maintain the position of art in the humanistic curriculum for workers, and John Ruskin's educational philosophy was often referred to in support of such arguments.

This paper will focus on John Ruskin's legacy at the time of this educational shift in the late Victorian era.

Keywords: *University Extension Movement; John Ruskin; Art education; The Technical Instruction Act; the humanities in adult education*

The University Extension Movement: The Idea of Opening Up the Universities

On November 26, 1850, William Sewell, a senior tutor of Exeter College, wrote a letter to the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University on matters concerning the extension of the University, or 'subjects on which I am convinced there is among us one common feeling of interest, and desire to do right'.¹ Attached was a paper transmitted to the senior tutors of the university by the commissioners appointed by the Queen enquiring into the state of the University of Oxford. The paper expressed the 'Desire to Extend the Privileges and Advantages of the University System of

Education as widely as possible' (Sewell, pp. 6-7). This idea was not solely based on the philosophy of *Noblesse Oblige*. Rather, bringing the University to the masses would also give employment opportunities to many fellows of the Colleges who were not engaged in tuition and were being forced to leave the University in search of other occupations. The idea was to open 'Academical Institutions' throughout the country, by establishing 'Professorships, Lectures and Examinations *leading to Academical honours*' (Sewell, p. 8; emphasis in the original). These Institutions were expected to be strictly analogous to the already established Universities. The paper concluded that 'the Universities would become, as they ought to be, the great centres and springs of education throughout the country, and would command the sympathy and affection of the nation at large [...] '(Sewell, p. 11).

Although this suggestion was rejected on financial and personnel grounds, the discussion of opening the intellectual doors of old educational establishments would continue. In 1855, Lord Arthur Hervey suggested that universities should tie up with Mechanics' Institutes, Athenaeums and similar literary institutions which were offering lectures and intellectual pleasure to the working classes. Indeed, already by the middle of the century there were quite a few educational institutions throughout the country catering to the intellectual desire of the working classes. The lectures offered by those institutions were, however, of 'desultory and unconnected character' and suffered from having defective materials and unfit lecturers.² Thus Universities had the potential to offer a systematic course of lectures taught by capable professors. Hervey, like Sewell, emphasised '[t]he importance to the Universities, considered as centres of learning and science in combination with Revealed Truth, of embracing an opportunity of so greatly extending their sphere of action, and increasing their hold upon the affections of the people at large'.³

In 1854, the first liberal-arts college for working men, the Working Men's College, was opened in London. It had constantly increased the number of its students and developed its educational scheme with the support of faculty members such as John Ruskin and his Pre-Raphaelite protégés. Despite this, the University Extension scheme had to wait more than 10 years to follow this precursor in opening the doors of universities to those outside of their walls.

In the early summer of 1867, James Stuart (1843-1913), an assistant tutor at Trinity College, Cambridge, who would be the first Professor of Mechanism and Applied Mechanics in the University in 1875, was asked by the North of England Council for Promoting the Higher Education of Women to give a series of lectures that autumn to ladies in Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, and Leeds. The initial objective of the Council was to improve the education of women, especially those who wished to be governesses and school-mistresses. The request was made that he should give a set of lectures in each of these cities on the theory and methods of education. Accordingly, Stuart gave a set of weekly lectures for eight weeks on the history of astronomy in each of those cities. This teaching experience enabled Stuart to establish the pedagogy of adult education, such as planning syllabi to help students prepare for the course, advising students to make notes after each lecture, and making them write papers. In addition, he distributed a book list before the course started and provided the audience with an opportunity to pose questions after the lecture. He was overwhelmed by the 'considerable amount of excitement [that] prevailed on the impropriety of a number of young ladies asking question of, or being questioned by, a young man [...]'. Faced with this problem, he resolved it by preparing three or four questions in print with the statement that if answers were sent to him by post, he would return them corrected in the next lecture. The response was, once again, overwhelming; from four centres consisting of approximately 600 students, he received about 300 answers.⁴ Another important aspect of his lectures was his chosen theme: in his biography, Stuart mentioned that he chose astronomy because it was 'the only really complete science'.⁵ Regrettably, no detailed account of the contents of his lectures has survived. In contrast, his lectures in the summer 1868 to an audience composed chiefly of artisans working on the London and North-Western Railway at Crewe were

later published in 1883 under the title, *A Chapter of Science: or, What is a Law of Nature?: Six Lectures to Working Men* (Fig.1). In those six lectures, first he defined their purpose: '[t]he true object of all education is to help people to think for themselves. To think well we must think clearly'.⁶ Thus, he emphasised the importance of observation, forming a theory, carrying out analysis, and conducting experiments. Furthermore, he explained the historical background of the theme, and the relation of the natural science to religion and 'God'. In other words, he taught science from the perspective of liberal arts education. We may reasonably assume that the lectures for the North of England Council given a year before would have been delivered with the same educational conviction.

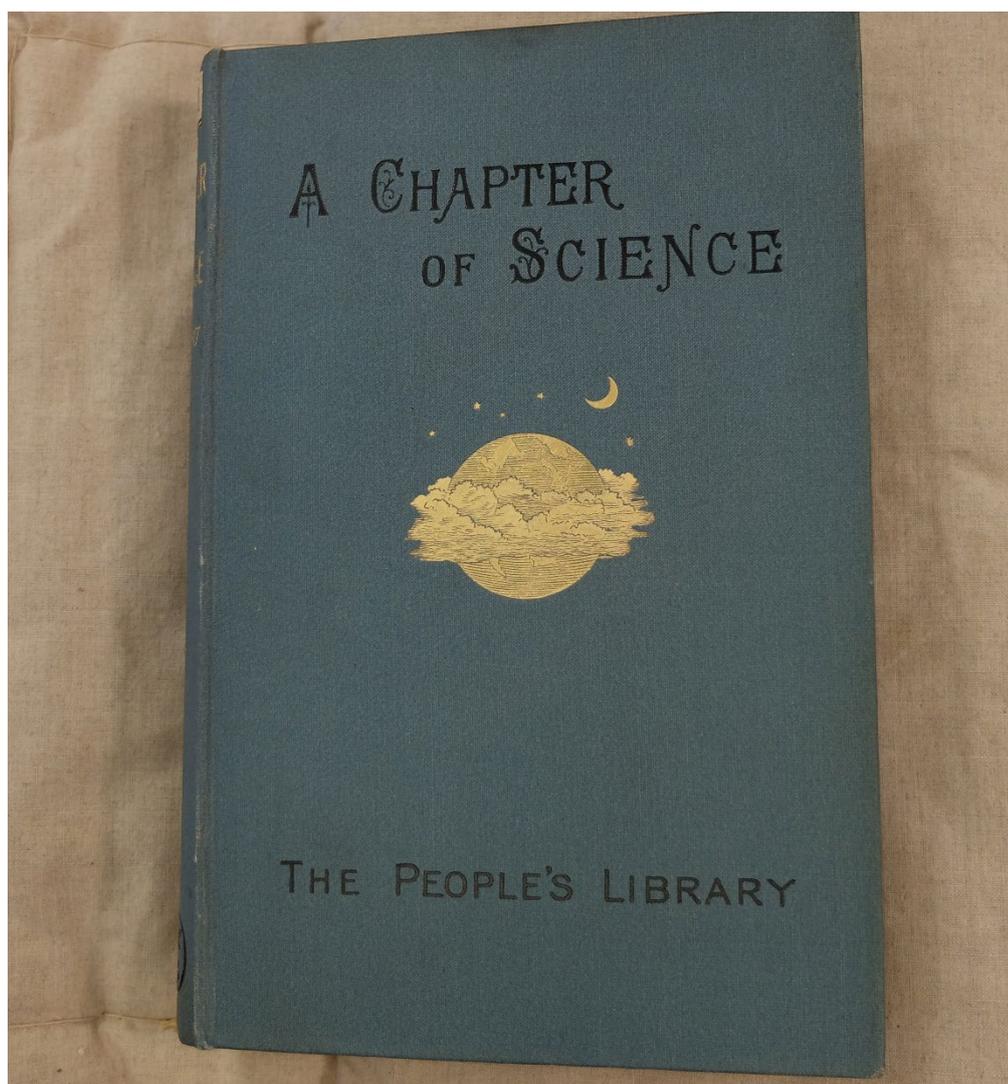


Figure 1: *A Chapter of Science: or, What is a Law of Nature?* by James Stuart

These experiences of teaching impressed upon Stuart the need for better education for adults from all classes and helped to initiate the University Extension Movement.

On November 23rd, 1871, Stuart wrote a letter addressed to the resident members of the University of Cambridge promoting University Extension. In this letter, he delineated the teaching schemes he had already experimented with in 1867, consisting of syllabi, essays and question sessions. Stuart also proposed adding conversation sessions before and after each class. He believed that the universities should open up both their education and their endowments to all

women. To support this idea, he specifically made reference to those women attending the classes of the North of England Council by quoting the testimony of the Council:

“Our classes are attended on the one hand by ladies who have left school, and on the other hand by governesses, schoolmistresses, and those engaged in, or intending to engage in teaching, who are enabled thereby to acquire a higher kind of instruction than has been hitherto open to them. A higher standard of what is to be aimed at in teaching is thus diffused, and we have evidence of the good effect in schools of the continuance of the system, which thus no less indirectly than directly raises the standard of education in our district.”⁷

As with Hervey, so too Stuart pointed to the fellows who were supported by the University without teaching any classes. Obviously they had become a burden on the University’s finances. The University Extension lectures at local towns would offer a way to make the best of existing intellectual human resources. Moreover, at the end of the letter, he noted the fact that many of the various schoolboards throughout the country had had no connection with the University and suggested that some steps should be taken for the University as a body to make the Universities ‘truly national institutions, and to be no less beneficial to them than to the country’.⁸

Stuart’s letter was well-timed considering the Elementary Education Act had been implemented only the previous year (1870). The interest in national education that was then circulating clearly paved a way for the Universities to take the first step in joining the movement. Responding to this letter, Cambridge appointed a Syndicate on February 23rd, 1873, to investigate the question that Stuart had posed. It subsequently reported in the Easter Term that it would support tentative lectures and classes. This project eventually developed into a joint-action undertaking by Oxford, Cambridge and London Universities in the Metropolis. Thus started the University Extension Movement.

John Ruskin as a Symbol of the University Extension Movement

Stuart drew inspiration for the Movement not only from the lecture series for the North of England Council in 1867, but also from a particular meeting with John Ruskin. He had met Ruskin many times but it was also in 1867 that he came to know him familiarly for the first time. On one occasion, he visited Ruskin at the museum which he had given to the city of Sheffield. There Ruskin showed Stuart beautiful items that he had donated. Ruskin confessed that it was not without feeling some pain and grief that he had parted with those things, but added ‘[t]here is only one giver who is a real giver and that is the man who gives his best.’ Quoting this remark of Ruskin’s, Stuart asserted as follows: ‘Now not only has this movement [that is the University Extension Movement] been inspired with this idea but it has been its *raison d’être*’.⁹ This particular incident was reproduced in his memoir, *Reminiscences*, published in 1911.

John Ruskin, an established art critic, had turned out to be an inspiring educator by the time Stuart put the Movement into action. After having taught drawing classes at the Working Men’s College, he was to be appointed as the first Slade Professor at Oxford in 1869, and later would found the Ruskin School of Drawing in Oxford in 1871.

Just as Ruskin was a source of inspiration for the University Extension, so too he became a symbol of the Movement in the 1890s. In April 1896, an essay from the *Westminster Gazette* was published in *The University Extension Journal*. It tells the story of four passengers seated in the same railway carriage starting out from Oxford. Strangers to each other, they tried to kill the time by guessing each other’s occupation. One was a commercial traveler while the narrator of the story was an Oxford undergraduate, both of whom were easily identified by their belongings and mannerisms. Another was a philanthropist, as was accurately guessed by the narrator,

working for the League for Promoting Charity Among University Men in the East End. However, nobody guessed the occupation of the fourth man who was sitting in the far corner:

There was nothing obviously to mark him. His luggage was considerable. A bag, an umbrella, a fur coat, an air-cushion, a rug, a flask, a packet of sandwiches, a Bradshaw, a wooden case labelled “glass,” a book of Ruskin’s, and a volume of Stubbs, lay round him on the seat. The labels on his bag bore many names—Carlisle and Canterbury, Durham and Penzance.¹⁰

Before joining the conversation, he kept his silence and studied the papers on his knees. And he gave the other passengers some clues by answering certain questions: he travelled a thousand miles a week; he was engaged in public work day and night; he was a Don in lucid intervals; he addressed meetings for at least four hours every day; and he spoke to all classes of people about almost everything. He alighted at Leamington. While everybody was shouting out this gentleman’s possible occupations from the window of the moving train, an inspiration seized the narrator and he thrust his head out of the window and hollered: ‘You’re a University Extension Lecturer.’ He saw the gentlemen faintly nod.¹¹

The readers should focus on the properties of this man. He had a book of Ruskin’s and a volume of Stubbs. The latter is William Stubbs (1825-1901) who was appointed as the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford in 1866 and remained in the position until 1884. The aforementioned volume of Stubbs must have been one of the three volumes of the *Constitutional History of England* (1874-1878), which established his name as an authority on history, but we are not sure what the ‘book of Ruskin’s’ was. It could be one of his works of art criticism published in the 1840s and 1850s, such as *The Modern Painters*, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, or *The Stones of Venice*, or of social criticism, such as *Unto this Last*, which was published in book form in 1862. At least, these two belongings, one pertaining to art and the other to history, became the strong core identity of the University Extension Lecturers.

The Two Cultures Debate and John Ruskin

This short story brings us to the debate that started in the early 1890s. In 1889, the Technical Instruction Act was passed and the following year saw the enactment of the Local Taxation Act. With the introduction of these two acts, funds flowed into the County Councils for educational purposes and gave a tremendous impetus to educational schemes. As the name of the act suggests, the Technical Instruction Act focused on the promotion of technical and scientific subjects that could be applicable to industry, thereby leading to employment. This legislation precipitated the establishment of Technical Instruction Committees resulting in the rapid development of technical institutions across the country. This in turn affected the University Extension Courses as a system of adult education in its curriculum and its subsidy.

Both educational schemes, the Working Men’s College and University Extension, were based on a liberal education. The Working Men’s College, as the precursor, announced that ‘*human studies*’ should constitute the primary element in the education that it offered.¹² University Extension also emphasised humanistic teaching to nurture citizenship endowed with intellectual and moral excellence. The Acts of 1889 and 1890 brought about active discussions concerning the identity of the University Extension scheme as a liberal arts institution.

Here again, to support the humanities in adult education, Ruskin’s definition of art and his educational tenets from his drawing class in the Working Men’s College were relevant. While teaching at the College, he repeatedly defined his class as ‘the most *useless* of any in the College.’ He asserted, however, that it was meant to teach students how to observe their surroundings correctly, and to refine and increase the ‘pleasure we take in looking at common things’.¹³ This

power to observe correctly should be developed through drawing, and the skill of design should follow based on this firm foundation. It is well known that, on account of being strongly against the South Kensington System, the government art education scheme that focused on utilitarian skills in manufacture design, Ruskin took up his drawing class at the College on a voluntary, non-paid, basis.

By the time that the Technical Instruction Act had been passed, Ruskin's health was already seriously deteriorating, making him unable to lead the discussion in support of art education as part of liberal arts study. Still, his aesthetical arguments regarding art and architecture were taken up by his followers and shed new light on the humanities. For example, in the annual address to students of the London Society on April 3rd, 1897, the Bishop of London called on his audience to learn the history of the country by looking at their surroundings more minutely, specifically referring to Ruskin in doing so:

There is a certain difficulty in studying a thing which is too near us, and we probably lose the impressions of the particular place in which we live, because habit has rendered us so accustomed to the sights with which we are surrounded that we cease to ask ourselves any questions about their meaning. I remember a saying of Mr. Ruskin, that he supposed there was not one out of every thousand of the people who passed by the Banqueting Hall of Whitehall who saw that the style of that building was different from that of the buildings that surrounded it. And I presume that in London this is absolutely true, because of the masses of people who pass along the streets very few are susceptible to what is about them [...]. (my emphasis)¹⁴

This remark by Ruskin was quoted from one of his lectures delivered at Oxford on November 1870 and later included in *Aratra Pentelici* (1872) as 'Of the Division of Arts'. Ruskin maintained that 'I suppose, there are very few now even of our best trained Londoners who know the difference between the design of Whitehall and that of any modern club-house in Pall Mall,' and he argued that nothing but 'time and education' can develop the aesthetic faculty to appreciate architecture as a physical thing.¹⁵

While the Technical Instruction Act focused on art applicable to industries, the supporters of the humanities articulated art as being part of the liberal arts. In the article 'University Extension and the Study of Art,' G. Percival Gaskell criticised the training offered in most Art Schools, with their essentially practical bent, for depriving students of the opportunity to reflect on the wider and more 'humane' side of art in its relation to life and thought. While the importance of literature and history was often emphasised in the Two Cultures Debate, Gaskell tried to appeal this 'humane' side of art:

Now, if we have no perception of the beauty and significance of nature and the things around us, we can have none for art, and if we make no attempt to cultivate our faculty of receiving fine and accurate impressions through the sense of sight, we are in great danger of dulling that faculty, if not of actually allowing it to become atrophied.¹⁶

Asserting that 'fine art does not appeal to the senses alone, but to the intellect through the senses,' Gaskell quoted Ruskin as follows: 'Ruskin has said—"Indeed I know many persons who have the purest taste in literature, and yet false taste in art, and it is a phenomenon which puzzles me not a little; but I have never known anyone with false taste in books, and true taste in pictures"''.¹⁷

With this in mind, Gaskell praised the teaching of art in the University Extension, which made no attempt to teach art practically but instead focused on principles and the history of art, because the art of a nation can yield its history better than its written records can. At the same time, the history of art and the study of the art of past masters themselves provoke great interest

and highlight the importance of the legacy of civilization and culture. Thus, Gaskell concluded that the methodical and organic courses of the University Extension system ‘may be made a great means of public enlightenment on matters relating to art’ by cultivating the perception of beauty, and the appreciation of the craftsmanship of great artists together with the study of their works in relation to history.¹⁸

Just as with the great masters of art who Gaskell believed connected perception, skills, and history, John Ruskin, through his writings and action covering a wide-range of perspectives, kept offering a variety of defenses and counters to aesthetical, social, and economical arguments. Furthermore, all through the Victorian Age and well into our own time, he has been turned into a diversely symbolic figure that represents many convictions and credos. At the end of the nineteenth century, Ruskin was certainly a figure who stood against the trend toward practical and utilitarian education, as exemplified by a University Extension lecturer in the carriage of a train from Oxford who could be identified by his books. Ruskin’s book (*Art*) and Stubbs’ volume (*History*) stood as symbols of the Humanities.

Notes

1. William Sewell, *Suggestions for the Extension of Universities; submitted to the Rev. the Vice-Chancellor*, Oxford: Baxter, Printer 1850, p. 3. Hereafter cited in the text.
2. Lord Arthur Hervey, *A Suggestion for Supplying the Literary, Scientific, and Mechanics’ Institutes of Great Britain and Ireland with Lecturers from the Universities*, Cambridge: Macmillan & Co., 1855, pp. 7-8.
3. Hervey, *A Suggestion*, p. 19.
4. James Stuart, *Reminiscences*, London: Printed for Private Circulation at the Chiswick Press, 1911, p. 162.
5. Stuart, *Reminiscences*, p. 158.
6. James Stuart, *A Chapter of Science: or, What is a Law of Nature?: Six Lectures to Working Men*, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, [1883], p. 5.
7. James Stuart, *A Letter on University Extension. Addressed to the Resident Members of the University of Cambridge*, Cambridge: Printed by C. J. Clay at the University Press, [1871], p. 6.
8. Stuart, *A Letter on University Extension*, p. 8.
9. James Stuart, *An Inaugural Address Delivered at the Opening of the Third Series of Vacation Courses of Study at Cambridge, July 26, 1892*, Cambridge: University Press, [1892], p. 6 (emphasis in the original).
10. ‘A Dialogue of the Day: In a Railway Carriage [From the *Westminster Gazette*]’, *The University Extension Journal*, vol. 1, no. 7, April 1896, p. 106.
11. ‘A Dialogue of the Day’, p. 106.
12. F. J. Furnivall, ‘History of the London Working Men’s College’, *The Working Men’s College Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 21, September 1, 1860, p. 146 (emphasis in the original).
13. ‘News’, *The Working Men’s College Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 23, November 1, 1860, pp. 177-178 (emphasis in the original).
14. ‘Annual Address to London Students. The Bishop of London on “The Study of a Country”’, *The University Extension Journal*, vol. 2, no. 17, May 1897, p. 115.

15. John Ruskin, 'Of the Division of Arts', *Aratra Pentelici* in E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 20, London: George Allen; New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1905, pp. 217-218.
16. G. Percival Gaskell, 'University Extension and the Study of Art', *The University Extension Journal*, vol. 2, no. 17, May 1897, p. 124.
17. Gaskell, 'University Extension and the Study of Art', p. 124 (His quotation of Ruskin is from *The Elements of Drawing* in *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 15, 1904, p. 226).
18. Gaskell, 'University Extension and the Study of Art', p. 125.

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