

‘Really useful’ knowledge?

Richard Clarke tells the story of the London Mechanics’ Institution and the struggle for (independent) working-class education. (A fully referenced version of this article can be downloaded from <http://tinyurl.com/krulqmg>)

George Birkbeck is widely proclaimed (not least in the college of London University which today bears his name) as the founder of the London Mechanics’ Institution (LMI). But Birkbeck’s entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* states that Birkbeck ‘inaugurated’ the LMI, the ‘founders’ of which were Thomas Hodgskin and Joseph Robertson. That distinction is more than one of mere precedence. Behind it lies a conflict about the purpose and governance of working-class education which has dogged it from the start.

The LMI was not the first such institution, but by general consent it was the most important. It was – and is – recognised as an early milestone in the struggle for post-school education for the ‘lower classes’ and the model for a movement which spread rapidly, not just in Britain, but beyond, particularly in Australia and North America.

The initial proposal for a mechanics’ institute in London was made on 11 October 1823 by J. C. Robertson and Thomas Hodgskin in the *Mechanics’ Magazine*, which they had launched that August. Aimed at the literate working class under the slogan ‘knowledge is power’, this cheap scientific weekly was the first of its kind and was highly successful.

Hodgskin and Robertson had met in Edinburgh where they had been politically active. Robertson had already secured recognition as the (pseudonymous) co-author of the *Percy Anecdotes*, a popular illustrated serial collection of miscellanea. Committed to popular science (and to a successful publishing venture) Robertson also wanted to break into the ‘closed shop’ of London patent agents and perhaps also to forestall a proposal to create a new institution under the control of the rival *London Journal of Arts and Sciences*.

Hodgskin’s aspiration was more ambitious however; no less than working-class emancipation, in which education would play a key role. After an impoverished and joyless childhood Hodgskin had been sent aged 12 to sea where he was appalled

(and politicised) by the arbitrary and brutal regime. His pamphlet *An Essay on Naval Discipline*, written following his court-martial and dismissal from the Navy for (probably deliberately) ‘losing’ a prisoner who was about to be flogged, brought him to the attention of radical circles in London, including Francis Place, a moderate and manipulative radical who engineered him a job as a parliamentary reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*.

Hodgskin and Robertson appealed to the ‘mechanics’ of London to form an institution along the lines of that recently established in Glasgow by students who had broken away from Anderson’s Institution (established in 1796 for the education of the ‘unacademic classes’ and where Birkbeck had taught from 1799 until 1804, when he moved to London) following disputes over control.

The founding mission of the LMI as articulated in the *Mechanics’ Magazine* would be to make working men acquainted not only with ‘the facts of chemistry and of mechanical philosophy’ but also ‘of the creation and distribution of wealth’. The institution and its curriculum would be under the control of the workers themselves: ‘The education of a free people, like their property, will always be directed most beneficially for them when it is in their own hands, [. . .] Men had better be without education [. . .] than be educated by their rulers; for then education is but the breaking in of the steer to the yoke’.

The response to the appeal was immediate. Guarantees of support – and cash – poured in from an unlikely variety of sources left, centre and even right-of-centre. The LMI was launched in December 1823 following a series of meetings attended by as many as 2,000 people.

Disputes around constituency, curriculum and control – who the new institute was to be for, who should manage it and what it should teach – accompanied it from birth. The early history of the Mechanics’ Institutes, from the formation of the London Institute in 1823 until the 1830s, is one of ideological conflict. ‘The crucial conflicts took place

on the questions of control, of financial independence, and if so whether or not the Institutes should debate political economy (and, if so, *whose* political economy)'.

The immediate issue concerned whether or not the LMI needed its own building. Hodgskin and Robertson objected to the leasing of expensive premises on the grounds that the institution would be dependent on the rich, who alone could provide the necessary funds. They argued that the Glasgow Institute had managed to remain independent of wealthy benefactors and the new LMI should do likewise.

In the end pragmatism trumped principle: 'money talked'. Hodgskin and Robertson who had initially put forward the initiative for a London Mechanics' Institute were 'out-maneuvred and out-financed'. They lacked influence and patronage; George Birkbeck had already secured guarantees of support and money and was able to provide it. Moreover the new Institution attracted support well beyond the class of literate manual workers whom Hodgskin and Robertson had seen as its main constituency. In addition to ambitious and upwardly mobile managers, it also attracted small tradesmen and 'white-collar' workers who formed an increasing proportion of the City's changing occupational structure.

On 2nd December 1824 the foundation stone for a new lecture theatre was laid at Southampton Buildings, Holborn; this opened in July the following year. Robertson refused to attend, declaring in the *Mechanics' Magazine* that 'the Committee of Management is an illegal usurpation, elected contrary to the laws, and acting in defiance of them'; of the members of the new Institution 'certainly not more than *one half* are of that class of persons for whose special benefit the Institution was founded' and the foundation stone to be laid would be 'but the foundation of a load of debt'. 'The Institution, in short, has become a Mechanics' Institution only in name'.

The process seemed to bear out the fears of Cobbett, who said that he had given his £5 'as a mark of my regard for and attachment to the working classes of the community, and also as a mark of my approbation of any thing which seemed to assert that these classes were equal, in point of intellect, to those who have the insolence to call them the "Lower Orders" ', but who added also 'But I was not without my fears, nor am I now without my fears, that this institution may be turned to purposes *extremely injurious to the mechanics themselves*. I cannot but know what sort of people are likely to get amongst them [. . .] Mechanics, I most heartily wish you well but I also most heartily wish you not to be

humbugged which you most certainly will be if you suffer anybody but REAL MECHANICS to have anything to do in managing the concern'.

Robertson, Hodgskin and others who had initially put forward the initiative for a London Mechanics' Institute were defeated. In the words of Eric Hobsbawm (who joined Birkbeck College as a young lecturer in 1947 and was its President from 2002 until his death in 2012) 'The Benthamite Radicals in London founded (or rather, 'took over and diverted') the London Mechanics Institution'. 'The original founders were pushed aside'. E. P. Thompson describes how 'Control passed to the middle-class supporters whose ideology also dominated the political economy of the syllabus'. Birkbeck's own biographer describes how mechanics' institutes became 'props of orthodoxy and respectability instead of independent working-class organisations'.

The Utilitarian liberals had no problem with the 'facts' of science, but their version of the 'facts' of the creation and distribution of wealth were very different from Hodgskin's. Very different too was their vision of the consequences of education for the 'mechanics'. Both were based on 'self-help', but for Hodgskin self-help meant collective action to secure fundamental social change; for the Utilitarians, sobriety, thrift and individual self-improvement were the route to social progress through personal advancement. It seems likely that the LMI's failure as an independent working-class initiative 'was indirectly facilitated by the absence of any genuine popular philosophy of education which might have provided an alternative to middle-class ideals of "instruction".' Until Hodgskin (amongst others) promoted a movement for really useful knowledge 'the working classes had no distinctive educational ideology of their own'.

By 1825 Hodgskin and Robertson, having instigated the idea of an institute, regarded it as a lost cause, whose existence depended on the 'great and the wealthy'. Robertson severed all links with the LMI but continued to criticise it from the pages of the *Mechanics Magazine*. Hodgskin severed his links with Robertson, possibly because his political articles were not welcomed as aiding the Magazine's circulation, and he became editor of a more specialist (and short-lived) journal, *The Chemist*, one of the first publications to present science in class terms. On its collapse he focused on his political and educational work and, with the support of Birkbeck, continued to lecture at the LMI. His first lectures – published as *Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital* (under the pseudonym of 'a Labourer') – contain a manifesto for education as the stimulus for social change: 'As the labourers acquire knowledge, the foundations of the social

edifice will be dug up from the deep beds into which they were laid in times past, they will be curiously handled and closely examined, and they will not be restored unless they were originally laid in justice, and unless justice commands their preservation’.

Hodgskin’s views were in sharp contrast to those of Henry Brougham who, prompted by the formation of the LMI, published them the same year in manifesto form in his *Practical Observations on the Education of the People* (addressed in its subtitle ‘to the working classes and their employers’). Brougham’s message was very different from that of Hodgskin, arguing that education – including cheap publications and libraries conveying ‘useful knowledge’ – would be conducive to ‘the peace of the country, and the stability of the government’.

Hodgskin’s second lecture series (in 1827), again delivered with the support of Birkbeck and in the teeth of opposition from Francis Place, was on political economy. His lectures were published later that year, as were those of Birkbeck. They make an interesting contrast. Hodgskin’s, entitled *Popular Political Economy. Four Lectures delivered at the London Mechanics’ Institution*, was widely read, and is quoted extensively by Marx, who used it as the basis for his labour theory of value, calling Hodgskin ‘one of the most important modern English economists’. *Labour Defended* – described by Marx as ‘this admirable work’ – was also highly influential and published in several editions. It was followed in 1832 by Hodgskin’s *The Natural and Artificial Rights of Property Contrasted*. They brought a response, not least from the establishment figures associated with the Mechanics’ Institute, including a counter-pamphlet *The Rights of Industry, Capital and Labour* (addressed ‘to The Working-Men of the United Kingdom’) often attributed to (by then, Lord) Brougham and which Marx describes as ‘noteworthy for the same superficiality that marks all the economic productions of that windbag’.

Brougham’s own views on adult education were put into practice through his Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK), founded in 1826. Both the SDUK and its weekly *Penny Magazine* (launched in 1832), which achieved a circulation of some 200,000 copies, were relatively short-lived (the magazine and the Society were wound up in 1845 and 1848 respectively) but ‘useful knowledge’, pioneered in Birkbeck’s own early lectures in Glasgow and promoted widely through the Mechanics’ Institutes, became a significant social movement, articulated most clearly in Samuel Smiles’s *Self Help* (1859).

Engels had already by this time written off the Mechanics’ Institutes as useless ‘organs of the middle classes’, their teachings ‘uninspired and flabby’. Their purpose was to teach students ‘to be

subservient to the existing political and social order. All that the worker hears in these schools is one long sermon on respectful and passive obedience in the station of life to which he has been called. Of course the vast majority of the workers will have nothing to do with these institutes’. The *People’s Magazine* in 1841 declared: ‘The “Mechanics’ Institutes”, with all other “institutions” for the “diffusion of knowledge” [. . .] are so many traps to catch the people [. . .] and prevent their attaining a knowledge of the true cause of their miserable and degraded state. We warn the people to shun all this as a pest’. A more common reaction – at least as far as the SDUK was concerned – was ridicule, with ‘useful knowledge’ parodied by advocacy of the ‘really useful knowledge’ required for working-class emancipation.

The LMI presents perhaps the first significant attempt to establish independent working-class education. In terms of the critical issues of curriculum, constituency and control, it failed. Brian Simon (probably the most prominent post-War British historian of education) declares that ‘The story of the London Mechanics’ Institution [. . .] provides an instructive example of the way in which Radicals, industrialists, and Whig politicians combined to turn what originated chiefly as a working-class institution to their own purposes’.

One question that arises is whether, without influential – and monied – patronage, it could have succeeded. The issues of control in working-class adult education have never gone away, although they are no longer a focus of adult education activists in the way they were during the Ruskin College ‘strike’ of 1909 and for the inter-war Labour College movement. They are kept alive by journals such as *Post-16 Educator* today. Issues of curriculum continue to surface both on the part of adult educators and (although this has yet to match the ‘counter-course’ movement of the 1970s), on the part of students themselves, as exemplified by the demands by the Post-Crash Economics Society at Manchester and its counterparts elsewhere, for a reform (and broadening) of the economics curriculum.

The story of the foundation of the LMI is now ‘just history’ – a history from which, in most popular accounts, all traces of conflict have been excised. Neither Hodgskin nor Robertson are today mentioned in Birkbeck College’s on-line history of its foundation. But the critical issues of collective versus individual models of ‘self-help’, of ‘useful’ versus ‘really useful’ knowledge, of what working-class education could be like, how to secure it, and how independent it should be (from the state or from other forms of patronage) are still with us, two centuries on.