BOOK REVIEW

Education in Nineteenth-Century British Literature: Exclusion as Innovation by Sheila Cordner (Routledge, 2016) 172 pp., hardback, $190.00

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Sheila Cordner's perceptive analysis of nineteenth-century British literary outsiders centers on the idea that an engaged imagination begets sensible, self-directed judgment. Formidable figures, like Jane Austen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Thomas Hardy, and George Gissing, whose exclusion from universities distanced them from their counterparts, are read alongside watershed Acts of Parliament to disclose how the consensus on education that prevailed among Britain's ruling classes in the early and mid-nineteenth century encountered swift opposition in a group of novelists whose intellectual fervor enlivened the resistance against standardized learning. Spanning five meticulous chapters and a brief coda, *Education in Nineteenth Century British Literature* (2016) provides remarkable insights into the controversies surrounding formal education and the subsequent efforts to promote national literacy across social classes in Victorian England. Building on foundational scholarship regarding the effects of mass literacy on the reading public – such as the works of Jonathan Rose, Patrick Brantlinger, and Kate Flint – Cordner's project underscores the influence of key historical events in shaping the evolution of British literature and, in particular, higher education.

Throughout the book, Cordner's approach is inherently pedagogical, blending literary and historical analysis to evoke a sense of experiential learning – a phenomenon she identifies as central to the novels she studies. Each chapter highlights the role of dialogue as a tool for nurturing students' self-discovery, contrasting it with the superficial knowledge often lauded by established institutions. *Education in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* begins by exploring the intricacies of Victorian educational discourse. Chapter one examines the dominant rhetorical influences shaping both popular and elite educational systems of the century. It illustrates how the repetitive nature of institutional learning for privileged men often hindered educational opportunities for women and the working classes. Through a blend of historiography outlining

the conformist cultures of Oxbridge and references to Parliamentary legislation, Cordner connects these currents in nineteenth-century thought and politics with the ironic perspectives of writers who strove to dismantle authoritative educational models.

The impulse to indoctrinate, or, better yet, 'train' a mind through a series of inherited axioms, had a steep and protracted history, as Cordner systematically shows. This impulse came to a head in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, precisely at a time when a sudden yet pervasive desire to ‘educate’ women and the working classes began to foment. Discerned apprehensively by some and deemed of the utmost necessity by others, individuals from unexpected corners of Victorian society – most notably, the vociferous Thomas Carlyle – were skeptical of measures adopted by influential seats of learning that relied exclusively or heavily on students’ preparation for exams. As early as 1829, we learn that figures cut from a similar cloth as Carlyle would lament the abolition of earlier styles of instruction that flourished in previous epochs, consisting of a degree of fluidity and innovation which was not discernable even in the faintest traces of the mechanistic, industrialized pedagogy that came to dominance around the first quarter of the century. To a greater extent than Carlyle, however, the writers whose work Cordner examines cultivated extraordinary means of circumventing the mind-numbing conditions of prescribed learning across gendered and class divides. In Cordner's view, they aimed to achieve this by ensuring that such resources were abundantly available within their satirical narratives.

Consider the case of Jane Austen. In Chapter Two, Cordner elaborates on Austen's early ventures into historical nonfiction, otherwise known as her ‘juvenilia’, as well as her mature novels. These works encourage self-directed learning, allowing readers to form their own judgments about the protagonists' or heroines' exuberant circumstances. Such introspection, although adversarial to dominant strains of pedagogy for women at the time, could, in fact, lead to forms of intellectual freedom marked by one’s refusal to conform intellectually. Unlike the Bertram sisters in *Mansfield Park*, for instance, who passively acquire knowledge in line with close relatives' notion of a ‘socially successful marriage’, characters embodying Austen's philosophy of self-directed learning, such as Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* and Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, actively carve out space for purposeful action and thought. Drawing from these and numerous other examples found in Austen’s fiction, Cordner argues that

embracing the satirical structure of an Austen novel enables readers to set aside learned preconceptions. This, in turn, opens the door to fresh understandings of 'truth', 'meaning', or 'self' – a process Austen fittingly describes as 'scrambling'.

In Chapter three, Cordner revisits the question of exploratory self-study through Elizabeth Barrett Browning's concept of 'headlong reading' (p. 46). This form of embodied knowledge prompts readers to consider literature's capacity to liberate us from entrenched academic traditions. In Barrett Browning's spasmodic poem of 1856, *Aurora Leigh*, the titular speaker implores interlocutors to discover meaning in the soul-stirrings evoked by the poem's imagery of biophysical processes such as breathing and pulsating. Aligning partially with the Romantic ideals of self-education articulated by Wordsworth and Rousseau, Aurora's approach demands complete immersion in a text or one's surroundings. More explicitly, Barrett Browning's headlong reading promoted experiential modes of teaching and learning – as witnessed in the advocacy work of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Clara Collet – involving tactile encounters with the material world that fostered deeper intellectual and empathic commitments (pp. 45-46).

In a particularly stimulating section titled 'Book Learning and Belatedness,' Cordner contrasts this with the rigid education system at Oxbridge, where male students often struggle to break free from past intellectual traditions. For instance, Aurora's cousin Rodney, educated at Oxbridge, 'lives by diagrams, / And crosses out the spontaneities / Of all his individual, personal life / With formal universals' (quoted in Cordner, p. 47). In contrast, Aurora and the working-class Marian avoid this sense of unoriginality, opting instead for vibrant self-education in their pursuit of experiential learning. It's unsurprising that Barrett Browning's innovative novel-poem found explicit reference in the advocacy of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Clara Collet, who raised awareness of discriminatory policies against women in the workforce and academia. While acknowledging the practical limits of their idealism – specifically, applying literary principles to the public sphere – Cordner persuasively argues for the adoption of Barrett Browning's experiential methods by passionate teachers, both then and now.

Chapter four considers Hardy's dark comedy, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), arguing that the novel accentuates the voice of the working-class protagonist, Jude Fawley. His deprivation and exclusion from established scenes of learning shape his view of education as 'an essential part of the human experience'

(Cordner, p. 59). Much like Marian in Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Jude experiments with unorthodox strategies to acquire practical wisdom for everyday life; these strategies also serve as a means of creative self-expression. Nevertheless, when individuals *like* Jude enter the academy, their creativity and independence of mind are markedly susceptible to classist doctrines, operating as tacit guidelines for survival in such unforgiving environments. It's interesting that Hardy chose to write about this subject at the tail end of the nineteenth century when education reform had already swept the nation. Cordner explains, 'By the time Hardy was writing, the Education Act of 1870 had paved the way to more widespread elementary education for the masses'. Consequently, 'The working classes could pursue higher education at schools such as the Working Men's College or through university extension' (p. 59). What's unusual about Hardy's critique, then, in comparison to other writers discussed in this study, is the extensive attention devoted to the solipsistic experience of an under-resourced figure whose life – partially based on Hardy's own – allegorizes the consequences of nearly a century's worth of misguided educational reform.

From this perspective, Jude epitomizes a familiar archetype from nineteenth-century literature, popularized by Dickens: the grossly underprivileged yet aspiring young man. However, in Cordner's account, Jude stands apart. He diverges notably from his contemporaries, particularly those who, through impeccable timing and success in mastering rote memorization for examinations, secured a university education – whether at the newly formed Working Men's and Women's colleges or through university extensions at Oxford and Cambridge. Jude's circumstances therefore hold a distinct, albeit negative, value, as they allow us to witness (and lament) the reality that despite the century's 'progress' in literacy and widespread education for the masses, many students found themselves left behind, their 'unbounded curiosity' stifled by the entrenched legacies of elite education (pp. 59-60).

The book's concluding chapter elaborates on how George Gissing's long-neglected body of work advances a dialectical, nondualistic perspective on the educational debates that bookended the nineteenth century. Cordner maintains that 'Gissing's work … departs from the emphasis on the binary between those who can easily be identified as insiders of educational institutions and those who are clearly outsiders' (p. 83). As a de facto insider whose knack for institutional learning belied his middling social status, Gissing's trajectory as a scholarship student produced vibrant source materials that later inspired his unique vision of

higher education, both in Britain and eventually the United States. His work stands apart from that of Austen, Barrett-Browning, and Hardy, not solely because of the era in which he wrote – on the cusp of the twentieth century – but more importantly, due to his idiosyncratic use of parodic gestures and juxtaposition, which offered a fresh perspective on progressive and egalitarian education in the new millennium.

Relics of earlier teaching methods, like Mrs. Ormonde's rural classroom depicted in *Thyrza* (1887), are juxtaposed with the idealist curriculum of Oxbridge-educated Egremont. The latter must undergo a process of unlearning to connect with students from lower social classes, whose prior experience doesn't align with his outdated procedures. Cordner argues that Gissing's ironic style, characterized by a recurring schism between working-class and upper-middle-class characters, underscores the peculiar sociological experience engendered by Britain's 'democratization of education' in the nineteenth century (p. 82). This experience involves nontraditional, alienated intellectuals caught between two worlds and striving to participate in the customs of their born-affluent counterparts. Cordner points to 'accidental' encounters with literature as a primary vessel for such mingling across social classes – a condition that becomes possible to envision with Gissing as the poet laureate of such communal imaginings (p. 94).

If there are any limitations to this study, they are discernible in the coda on Virginia Woolf. This section lacks a thorough analysis of Woolf's educational background and social milieu, as well as her pacifist-feminist project. While Cordner's conclusion is effective as a critique of Bloomsbury-style decadence, it deviates from the theoretical core of her monograph, which traces literary resistance to stifling academic conditions of the nineteenth century. This shift in critical attention may be necessary to demonstrate how resistance to prescribed educational models in Britain waned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coinciding with increased accessibility for previously marginalized students. Ultimately, this study offers invaluable resources for varied audiences: undergraduates seeking context for authors, graduate students writing on education in the nineteenth century, and educators sensitive to the demands of an increasingly diverse global student body. Reflecting on Cordner's contribution highlights its growing significance not only to Victorian studies but also to the relatively young field of Critical University Studies, which raises awareness of

inequities plaguing contemporary universities. Such research would benefit immensely from examining the tradition delineated by Cordner.