Examining Greek History in Victorian Manchester

Peter Liddell

1. The beginnings of Ancient History at Manchester

ONE WAY TO analyse the modern development of Ancient History teaching is to examine the history of the teaching of the subject at an institutional level. There has been some interest in this subject in recent scholarship but it has focused chiefly upon developments in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. This paper looks at the nature of ancient Greek history in the predecessor institutions to the University of Manchester. Owens College, Manchester was founded 1851 as a college affiliated to the University of London; it was awarded university status in 1880, and between 1884 and 1903 it formed part of a federal institution which comprised also University College Liverpool and the Yorkshire College of Leeds. In this paper, I draw upon C19th examination papers, which are bound as appendices to the John Owens and Victoria University Calendars: these are plentiful and easily accessible, and are a revealing barometer of the state of Ancient History in C19th Manchester and offer insight into real and perceived connections between the study of Ancient History and developments in the outside world.

When Owens College was founded, the Report of a Committee of the trustees for Educational Purposes under the Will of the Late John Owens on the General Character and Plan of the College set out its subjects of study. Classical literature was at the top of the list; history, on the other hand, was not considered as a subject in its own right but merely as a subsidiary to the study of classical literature. Nevertheless, in 1851, J. C. Greenwood, author of Elements of Greek Grammar (1857), was appointed Professor of Languages and Literature of Greece and Rome and also of History.

2. Early Examinations: Athens, Democracy and Empire

In July 1851 students sat the first Ancient History examination at Owens College under the title 'Early Greek and Persian History', a title which betrays the centrality of book 1 of Herodotus' Histories. The questions required candidates to sketch character descriptions and to demonstrate knowledge of the succession of monarchs and empires, geography, topography and historical chronology, but two questions suggest background preoccupations: 'State some of the leading provisions of Solon's legislation. Its date. How far is it true that Solon was the author of the Athenian democracy? By whom, and when, was this constitution further developed?' (question 4); 'Shew how great were the services of Athens to Greece in these struggles with Persia. Contrast the spirit displayed by Sparta both during and after the war' (question 9). The pro-Athenian implications of these questions correspond with the new world of pro-Athenian, pro-democratic, Greek history which had emerged with the publication of the histories of Edward Bulwer Lytton (1837) and George Grote (1846).

The next examination in Greek History - after a year's gap for a Roman paper - was sat in 1853, and asked questions on the development of Athenian democracy, the 'services of Athens' to Hellas, the Persian Wars, the Peloponnesian Wars, fourth-century diplomatic history, the rise of Macedonia; students were asked to provide career sketches for Pericles and Demosthenes, a final geographical question required the student to draw a map of Greece 'inserting the names of the principal states, and of the most important rivers' (22). Questions on both Ancient History and literary subjects in this era were sometimes topical: in the 1854 Senior Greek Class examination, the set book was Demosthenes 20 Against Leptines, and two of its questions suggest that there was perceived relevance to contemporary developments in the Crimea: 'How much corn did the Athenians annually import from the Euxine? What calculations have been in part founded on this passage as to the population of ancient Attica?' (question 18); 'By what other name was this Bosporus known to the ancients? Give its modern name, and that of Theodosia: and describe accurately the position of these towns. When, and by whom, were they founded? What was the ancient name of the Crimea? Of Perecp? Of Balacira?' (question 19). Other questions appear to have been relevant to Britain's imperial experiences: in the 1855 paper, the student is asked to explain how the Athenian Empire justified itself (5): this was
perhaps pertinent to problems facing the British at the time after the Eureka Rebellion of 1854.

The papers of the 1850s and 1860s generally require students to describe and explain historical events and phenomena, to explain change over time, to give details of political antiquities, the role and significance of individuals, and to assess the value of pieces of historical evidence. Scholarship papers were sometimes more sophisticated, asking students to compare Greek and Roman politics (as did the Victoria Scholarship papers for 1855) or even to adduce 'any historical analogy' to illustrate the significance of Draco's legislation (Victoria Scholarship for 1873).

3. The Ward era: cultural progress, narrative, and geography

Adolphus William Ward was appointed Professor of Ancient and Modern History and English Literature and Language in 1866, he became Principal in 1890. Of the Chairs in Ancient and Modern History at Manchester he was the first to have taken a scholarly interest in Greek History in its own right. Between 1867 and 1873 he translated Curtius' Griechische Geschichte, a translation which he declared 'like its German original, [was] designed for popular use' (Norse, first vol., 1873). Indeed, the John Owens Calendar for 1874-5, under the notes for the Victoria Scholarship, says that this translation was included as a set book, alongside Grote's History of Greece, Herrmann's Political Antiquities of Greece, and Tozer's Geography of Greece.

Mid 19th histories of Greece held up Athens in the Periclean era as a model of cultural progress as well as democratic experiment. It is no surprise therefore that the papers of the 1870s exhibit an interest in questions of social and cultural significance. The 1875 Elementary Greek History paper asked 'What great literary and artistic achievements rendered Athens illustrious in its [Pericles'] age?'. At the same time, Athens was not the only area of focus, and during Ward's time, students were frequently required to show knowledge of other parts of the Greek world. The 1887 Victoria Scholarship paper required them to 'Describe the situation of Samos, and state what you remember of the part played by her in the history of ancient Greece'; the 1883 Scholarship paper asked its candidates 'What do you remember concerning the history of Crotce up to the extinction of its independence, and concerning its institutions in particular? Draw a rough map showing the general maritime situation of the island'. Specialist courses were examined on aspects of history outside Athens: the Tyrants of the 7th and 6th centuries BC in 1885, the Thcan Supremacy in 1886, Spartan institutions several times (1877, 1886, 1890), and the history of Sicily in 1875, 1885 and 1874.

While some of the questions in the Sicilian papers pointed to the significance of Greek contact with non-Greek peoples, papers devoted to the peripheries of the Greek world were rare but not unknown: in June 1867 there was a paper on the History of Carche, though of course this was examined on the basis of the classical sources, while in 1882 the Bradford History Scholarship was examined on the 'Inner History of the Persian Empire from Cyrus the Great to Darius Codomannus'.

A considerable proportion of the early courses on Greek history seem to have been based upon narrative survey. But there were other approaches undertaken at the same time. There was a tendency from the 1860s for examinations on Athenian history to concentrate on issues other than those concerned with narrative alone: in 1868 students sat an exam on the 'History of Athens to the Close of the Peloponnesian War', and they were asked to draw a map of Attica, to assess the significance of particular myths, to explain various political antiquities, the financial system, and political parties. In 1888, BA History papers were sat on 'The Periclean Age of Athens' and in 1882 a paper on 'The Two Attic Naval Confederations, their antecedents and results'.

The papers illustrate that a great deal of interest was taken in the relationship between geography and history. Students were often required to draw maps sometimes of relatively obscure regions such as the coast of Thrace and the Chalcidian peninsula (1864), the shores and islands of the Aegean (1866). The interest in geography was promoted by Ward, who is said to have been fond of travelling and walking in Greece, it is plausible that students would have made use of Smith's Student's Ancient Geography, published in 1863. Between 1875 and 1877, there was an exam set for a Political Geography prize, which in 1875 divided into two parts, a General Paper which asked questions like the following: 'How would you define the objects of Physical as distinguished from those of Political Geography?', and a special paper, which was focused on Greece from the archaic period to its early nationhood. From the time of the foundation of the Victoria University in 1880, an examination in 'General History and Geography' was commonplace.

It is highly likely that the study of historical political geography was thought to provide a background which would be of use in a career in the diplomatic or colonial services. This made the approach to Ancient History seem modernist and led to an emphasis on the similarities between antiquity and modernity. Nowhere is this modernist tendency more clear than in the Langton Fellowship examination of December 1878, which offered students the opportunity to write an essay on 'Democracy in ancient and modern history'. It is plausible that Ward was behind this approach: as he wrote in the Guardian obituary to E. A. Freeman on that man's legacy, 'no one would now draw an arbitrary line between ancient and modern history, or dispute the unity and continuity of history'.

4. Interest in new scholarly developments

The study of Greek history at Manchester in these years seems to have been welcoming to new scholarly developments. Excavations in Greece and epigraphical discoveries make an impact in the papers of the 1880s: in 1881 the Extra Ancient History paper asked students to 'Write a short history of the citadel and the fortifications of Athens in connection with the general progress of the City in the historical period'. Knowledge of inscriptions, enabled for students by the publication of E. L. Hicks' Manual of Greek Historical Inscriptions in 1882, is expected in the same era: in the Victoria University special paper on the Two Attic Naval Confederations, students were required to 'Give some account of the documentary evidence to be found in the so-called Tribute-lists, and indicate its value for the history of the First Attic Naval Federation'. In a second paper, students were asked to 'Examine the evidence on the question as to the date when the Second Attic Naval Confederacy was formed: who were its members, and what is known as to the order in which they joined it?'. One wonders whether the discovery in the early 1850s and the publication of an accessible edition of the inscribed Charter of the Second Athenian Confederacy (now RO 221/IG II 2 43), as no. 81 in Hicks' Manual was significant in the formulation of this question. But interest in inscriptions was not limited to those of the Greek world: the 1882 Bradford Scholarship paper on the history of the Persian Empire asked students to compare Herodotus' account of Persian religion with that in the Behistun inscription, a document that had been known to scholars since the 11th century.

Ward was probably instrumental in the drive toward introducing the results of archaeological and epigraphical publications to the study of ancient history, this tendency was intensified by the appointment in 1889 of the epigrapher (and clergyman) E. L. Hicks to the post of Lecturer in Classical Archaeology. Hicks had come to Manchester by 1887 as Principal of Hulme Hall, and offered from 1889-90 a series of lectures open to the general public on Classical Archaeology and in 1890-1 a series on 'Greek Inscriptions, as illustrating Greek Political Antiquities'.

The Student's Ancient Geography, published in 1863.
On the whole there is no clear pattern of change in terms of the periods of history that were studied. From as early as the 1850s, Greek history to the death of Demosthenes was regularly examined. Little attention was paid to Hellenistic history; there was no course dedicated to it in 19th Manchester, though its study was conjoined to earlier periods from about 1890: in 1890 the Greek History for ordinary honours Paper II was Greek History from the outbreak of the Ionian revolt to the dissolution of the Achaean League; but most emphatically Hellenistic was Tait's 1890 Ancient Greek History class which examined the period of Greek History from Locstra to the dissolution of the Achaean League.

5. Then and Now

This short survey demonstrates how many of what are now considered to be virtues of the study of Ancient History had a place in the Victorian teaching and examining of Ancient History. Close attention to the sources, constructive comparison with the modern world, awareness of social and cultural as well as institutional histories, consideration of the peripheries of the Greek world, and knowledge of geographical factors and integration of newly discovered evidence were all important. Teachers of Ancient History like Ward and Hicks reacted relatively quickly to developments in scholarship and the outside world both as a way of demonstrating their awareness of progress in the development of the subject and, like the earliest teachers of Ancient History at Manchester, in order to demonstrate also the practical relevance of the subject to the understanding of contemporary political events. Questions about the nature of democracy, empire, and cultural change remain as critical to the study of ancient Greek history now as they were then. But there are also important differences between the focus of Ancient History then and now: examinations in Ancient History at University level are nowadays often characterised by an open-endedness which encourages the candidate to combine knowledge, critical awareness, and mental agility and the ability to construct an argument. The pointed, prescriptive focus of the Victorian papers is quite different, however, as Polly Low shows in her article on 'Teaching by Testing', a factual background is still today seen as one of several fundamentals to the training of the ancient historian.

Peter Liddell
University of Manchester

Notes
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