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Efficiency and Counter-Revolution: Connecting University and Civil Service Reform in the 1850s

Historians have often commented on the close links between the processes of university and civil service reform in mid-nineteenth-century England, both in terms of the individuals involved and the ideas promoted.¹ Despite the work of scholars in recent decades who have discovered conservative (or even counter-revolutionary) motivations behind reforms traditionally seen as progressive and modernising², university and civil service reform have largely remained untouched by these discussions. This is arguably because changes introduced within the civil service and at Oxford and Cambridge have been seen as primarily affecting the political and social elite who are not considered to have posed a serious threat to the establishment. This stands in sharp contrast with processes of franchise reform, factory and sanitary reform, which have often been interpreted as attempts by the British establishment to placate working-class demands and stave off social and political unrest.

Given, however, that Charles Trevelyan (co-author of the famous Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854) cited the 1848 revolutions as a primary spur for the mid-century civil service reforms³, more attention needs to be paid to the impact of revolution on the continent and to the fear of discontent at home. There has been some discussion as to whether civil service reform might have been aimed in part at diffusing working-class (Chartist) and radical middle-class criticism of the government,

¹ See e.g., J. Hart, 'The Genesis of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report' in G. Sutherland, ed. *Studies in the Growth of Nineteenth-Century Government* (1972), pp. 63-81; W.D. Rubenstein, 'The End of "Old Corruption" in England, 1780-1860', *Past and Present* ci (1983), 55-86.

² See e.g., R. Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes eds. *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780-1850* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 33; see also Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?: England 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006).

³ *Second Report of the Civil Service Inquiry Commission; with Appendix* (1875), p. 100.

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particularly the corrupt workings of the patronage system.⁴ While there is no doubt some truth in this, the counter-revolutionary significance of civil service reform did not lie primarily in its role as a symbolic gesture to convince working and middle-class critics that the corrupt ways of the past were being abandoned. Far more than this, Northcote and Trevelyan were keen to ensure that in future the civil service would function as an effective tool in the fight against the revolutionary threat from below. The 1840s and 1850s was a period in which the responsibilities of the civil service (along with those of the state in general) expanded considerably with civil servants (particularly those belonging to the new ‘itinerant class’⁵ of factory inspectors, school inspectors and Assistant Poor Law Commissioners) taking a much more active part in various aspects of government.

In order to secure an effective and trustworthy service, it was crucial to exercise a stricter control over who was selected. The old patronage system with its ties of favour and kinship was simply too unreliable, often resulting in the appointment of individuals who were either incompetent or were considered to be of dubious moral character.⁶ By contrast, Northcote and Trevelyan argued that recruiting civil servants by means of a competitive academic examination would work much more effectively to select the right kind of people. The examination to decide who would obtain the most responsible posts in the service was biased heavily in favour of those who had received an elite education at Oxford and Cambridge. As this article will suggest, a closer inspection of the proposed examination scheme, reveals a specific privileging of those who had

⁴ For the most recent example, see e.g. J. Greenaway, ‘Celebrating Northcote-Trevelyan: Dispelling the Myths’, *Public Policy and Administration* ix (2004), 1-14.

⁵ See e.g., A.P. Donajgroski, ‘Social Police’ and the Bureaucratic Elite: A Vision of Order in the Age of Reform’ in A.P. Donajgroski, ed. *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain* (1977), pp. 51-76.

⁶ See e.g., *Remarks by Capt. H. H. O’Brien, R.A., on Sir Stafford Northcote’s and Sir Charles Trevelyan’s Report upon the Reorganization of the Civil Service*, BL Add. 44580 § 103 *Gladstone Papers*, cited in E. Hughes, ‘Sir Charles Trevelyan and Civil Service Reform, 1853-5’, *The English Historical Review* lxiv (1949), 72.

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completed the recently reformed classical studies course at Oxford, known as ‘Greats’.⁷ This is particularly noteworthy given the important socialising function which was widely held to attach to ‘Greats’; the course had itself been recently redesigned with a view to countering the destructive influence of Tractarianism upon the Oxford undergraduate body in the 1840s and to securing the loyalty of students once more for the university and the establishment. By ensuring that many top-grade civil servants had followed a course of education, separate from the rest of the population, and had experienced a special form of elite socialisation, the reformers hoped that such men would actively identify with the state and work diligently to defend it at a time of social and political upheaval.

A few historians have indeed suggested that there may have been conservative motivations behind the changes called for by Northcote and Trevelyan. Most recently, John Greenaway has argued that an important aim of the reforms was to placate growing working-class and radical middle-class anger about civil service patronage which many saw as forming part of the corrupt aristocratic establishment.⁸ In his opinion, Northcote and Trevelyan ‘saw the reform of the civil service as a means of stabilizing the polity and removing the pressures for undesirable radical or populist politics.’⁹ This is the interpretation which Greenaway places on Trevelyan’s admission in the course of his evidence before the 1875 Playfair Commission that the primary spur

⁷ For more information about ‘Greats’, see R. Jenkyns and O. Murray, ‘The Beginnings of ‘Greats’, 1800-1872’ in M.G. Brock and M.C. Curthoys eds., *The History of the University of Oxford*. Vol. VI: *The Nineteenth Century Part I* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 513-42; W.H. Walsh, ‘The Zenith of ‘Greats’’ in M.G. Brock and M.C. Curthoys eds., *The History of the University of Oxford*. Vol. VII: *The Nineteenth Century Part II* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 311-326.

⁸ See e.g., Greenaway, ‘Celebrating Northcote-Trevelyan: Dispelling the Myths’, 1-14; J.R. Greenaway, ‘Parliamentary Reform and Civil Service Reform: A Nineteenth-Century Debate Reassessed’, *Parliamentary History* iv (1985), 157-69.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

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for the civil service reforms were the continental revolutions of 1848. ‘The revolutionary period of 1848 gave us a shake’, he recalled, ‘and created a disposition to put our house in order, and one of the consequences was a remarkable series of investigations into public offices, which lasted five years, culminating in the Organisation Report.’¹⁰ In a similar way, Thomas Osborne has stressed the extent to which Northcote and Trevelyan had recourse to a ‘technology of publicity’ in what he describes as ‘an attempt to inscribe the domain of the public into the acts of the government’ and silence critics of the patronage system.¹¹

Such arguments may be viewed as refinements of an interpretation of civil service reform first put forward in the mid-1980s by the Marxist historian Peter Gowan. Gowan described the fear of democracy and working-class revolution as ‘the issue that obsessed the Victorian ruling class, and structured the evolution of the Victorian and post-Victorian state.’¹² For him, the Northcote-Trevelyan Report represented ‘an astonishing planning achievement.’¹³ Above all, the language of openness and merit, which was such a marked feature of the Report, was designed to silence criticism from both working-class and radical middle-class circles. Inspired by a ‘Coleridgean conservatism’, which opposed democracy but remained ‘profoundly committed to the idea of the state as a community of individuals and classes bound together by *consent*’, the reformers worked hard to give the impression that the civil service was no longer dominated by a corrupt aristocracy.¹⁴ The proposed changes included in the Report were

¹⁰ *Second Report of the Civil Service Inquiry Commission*, p. 100.

¹¹ Osborne, ‘Bureaucracy as a Vocation: Governmentality and Administration in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, 304.

¹² P. Gowan, ‘The Origins of the Administrative Elite’, *New Left Review* 1:162 (March-April 1987), 33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

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to help bring about ‘a new balance between the classes and a new harmony that would stem the threatening democratic tide.’¹⁵

The perceived excesses of civil service patronage had certainly been a popular complaint among radical middle-class circles since the mid-1840s onwards, in particular, among members of the various Financial and Administrative Reform Associations, which sprang up in these years.¹⁶ For some, there was a real fear that the radical middle class, who felt themselves excluded from civil service careers by the patronage system would take some form of direct action against the government, perhaps joining cause with the Chartists. Although Lenore O’ Boyle has concluded that the problem of an overproduction of educated men in England in the first half of the nineteenth century was ‘neither widespread nor severe’¹⁷, it is possible to identify many at the time who believed increasingly that such a situation existed. Against the background of the continental revolutions of 1848, the promoter of colonisation, E.G. Wakefield, spoke of the ‘political danger’ represented by the high number of educated middle-class men in England, who, due to a lack of connections, could not find appropriate positions. ‘Thus we have considerable numbers capable of exerting the power which knowledge gives’, he wrote, ‘who are dissatisfied with their lot, and prone to attribute its evils to the actual order of things political.’¹⁸ Furthermore he mentioned that this problem had ‘lately obtained the notice of conservative statesmen’, which might suggest a connection between fears about the possibility of middle-class activism

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶ Greenaway, ‘Parliamentary Reform and Civil Service Reform’, 159-61.

¹⁷ L. O’Boyle, ‘The Problem of an Excess of Educated Men in Western Europe, 1800-1850’, *The Journal of Modern History* xlii (1970), 484.

¹⁸ E. G. Wakefield, *A View of the Art of Colonization, with Present Reference to the British Empire; in Letters between a Statesman and a Colonist* (1849), pp, 72-3.

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and the civil service reforms.¹⁹ When asked for his opinion on the Northcote-Trevelyan proposals, the Dean of Carlisle wrote in a similar vein of the benefits of open competition for the educated middle-class without connections. Such changes were necessary, he declared, in order to prevent the formation of a ‘large and important class of dangerous and discontented men.’²⁰

There is, moreover, a strong emphasis in the Report upon the openness and accessibility of the new system of recruitment. In particular, there was a need for civil servants to be seen to serve the public interest.²¹ The reformers argued that the civil service must become more like the so-called ‘open professions’ where ‘a man’s success...depends upon his obtaining and retaining the confidence of the public.’²² More telling still, they admitted that an important factor driving the need for reform was the fact that ‘the public service suffers...in public estimation.’²³

Yet the idea that the sole or even chief counter-revolutionary significance of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report lay in its recognition of the need to improve the public image of the civil service is difficult to sustain. Despite the language of openness and merit which coloured the Report itself, it was clear to many at the time and subsequently that the reformers, in the words of J.M. Compton, ‘had delineated a hierarchy within the civil service parallel to the social and educational hierarchy in the country at large.’²⁴ The praise heaped on a university education in the Report and the domination of the examination scheme drawn up by Benjamin Jowett, fellow and tutor of Balliol College, Oxford, by university subjects made this abundantly clear. Nor were

¹⁹ Ibid., 73-4.

²⁰ *Papers Relating to the Re-Organisation of the Civil Service*, p. 46.

²¹ See e.g. *Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service*, p. 3.

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ Ibid., 4.

²⁴ J.M. Compton, ‘Open Competition and the Indian Civil Service (1854-1876)’, *English Historical Review* lxxxiii (1968), 266.

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the reformers themselves shy of admitting this either in private or in public. Best known, perhaps, is Gladstone's remark in a letter to Lord John Russell in January 1854 that the system of 'open competition' would tend to 'strengthen and multiply the ties between the higher classes and the possession of administrative power;' indeed, that it would 'give them a command over the higher parts of the civil service, which up to this time they have never enjoyed.'²⁵ Similarly, Robert Lowe, a key player in the mid-century reforms, confessed quite openly before the 1873 Select Committee on Civil Services Expenditure that the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms had been designed to ensure that 'people in the higher class [of civil servants] should be persons who have received a different sort of education' from those in the lower grades. When asked to clarify this remark, he stated, 'The sort of education I mean is the best education that England affords; the education of public schools and colleges and such things, which gives a sort of freemasonry among men which is not very easy to describe, but which everybody feels. I think that is extremely desirable.'²⁶

Now such a statement could be interpreted as a straightforward desire to preserve class interests and to exclude the middle and lower classes from the civil service which many at the time saw as a bastion of the social and political elite. Yet while this no doubt had a role to play, we should consider other possible explanations. In the light of Trevelyan's comment in 1875 that it had been the continental revolutions of 1848 which had provided the main spur for the civil service reforms which followed, I would like to explore the possibility that as well as improving the public image of the service, an important aim of the reformers had been to transform the civil service itself into a solid

²⁵ BL Add. MSS. 44291, ff. 93-103.

²⁶ *Third Report from the Select Committee on Civil Services Expenditure; Together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index* (printed 25 July 1873), p. 238.

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bulwark of the state in a time of trouble and civil servants into efficient and reliable agents in the fight against the perceived threat of revolution from below. This was certainly the view held by the American civil service reformer, D.B. Eaton, in his important and relatively neglected study of the English civil service in the late 1870s, during the completion of which, he corresponded several times with Trevelyan about the aims behind the mid-century changes. Following their communication, he concluded that the reformers' work had aimed not

merely to remove administrative abuses; but...was expected to strengthen the very bulwarks of the government and to aid in averting the grave perils which between 1830 and 1848 had threatened the thrones of all the leading nations of Europe...What, therefore, was in form, only a salutary method of administration, was in intention, and in broad effect, a conservative force in government – a barrier against republicanism...an antidote against revolutions.²⁷

Historians have long acknowledged the importance of the civil service for the successful defence of Britain's interests abroad. This was perhaps most clearly displayed in the embarrassing mistakes made in various departments of the civil service which led to the late and inadequate supplying of Britain's troops in the early days of the Crimean War, a scandal which provoked much anger among MPs and led many to call for a wholesale reform of the civil service.²⁸ Yet it was not simply abroad that civil servants were being called upon to play new and challenging roles. At home too, they were assuming a variety of new functions and responsibilities, many of which concerned the defence of the state against the perceived threat of revolution from among the lower classes. Insofar as historians have looked at this, attention has focused on the new class of 'itinerant' civil servants who travelled around the country and had regular contact with working-class men and women. Here, A.P. Donajkowski has drawn

²⁷ D.B. Eaton, *Civil Service in Great Britain: A History of Abuses and Reforms and their Bearing upon American Politics* (New York, 1879), pp. 60-1.

²⁸ See e.g., *Hansard* (HC Deb 8 Feb. 1855 vol. 136 cc. 1379-91; HC Deb 10 July 1855 vol. 139 cc. 675-744).

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particular attention to factory and prison inspectors and Assistant Poor Law Commissioners. Such men, he argued, were able to act as a form of ‘social police’, keeping the government abreast of developments in working-class areas.²⁹

We tend to think of the civil service today as a purely administrative body, largely disconnected from the sphere of political action. Trevelyan, however, described the reforms he proposed as ‘genuine elements of national power’, whose ‘invigorating influence’, if adopted, ‘will be felt through every vein of the body politic.’ For him, the effective functioning of the civil service, could mean the difference between the establishment being overthrown by a revolution from below or not. ‘The action of government mainly depends upon the composition and regulation of the civil...establishments’, he wrote.³⁰ During the main years of Chartist activity, civil servants were increasingly finding themselves on the front line. Many itinerant civil servants (in particular, Assistant Poor Law Commissioners) were attacked by Chartists all over the country in the late 1830s and 1840s.³¹ The fact that the civil service supplied a significant proportion of the 40,000 special constables somewhat hastily enrolled to deal with the Chartists in the spring of 1848 no doubt also contributed to the feeling that the service was on the front line against the popular uprising in Britain. Indeed, as far back as 1842, leading civil servants and government ministers had been working hard to cope with a wave of strikes organised by the Chartists as well as threatened demonstrations in the capital. The then Home Secretary, Sir James Graham, reported that in August 1842, when the strike-wave was at its height, he and the civil servants at

²⁹ Donajgrodski, ‘‘Social Police’ and the Bureaucratic Elite: A Vision of Order in the Age of Reform’, pp. 51-76.

³⁰ Charles Edward Trevelyan, ‘Thoughts on Patronage’ (17 Jan. 1854), Gladstone Papers, BL Add. MSS. 44333 f. 91; reproduced with slight alterations in [Charles Edward Trevelyan], *Our Civil and Military Establishments* (1855). For the close connections between the civil service and parliamentary politics in the mid-nineteenth century, see Greenaway, ‘Parliamentary Reform and Civil Service Reform’, 157.

³¹ M. Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester, 2007), p. 23.

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the Home Office worked ‘without a spare moment’ to prevent what he termed ‘the mad insurrection of the working classes’.³²

The Chartist uprising of 1848 had left a deep impression on Trevelyan as we learn from his semi-official correspondence,³³ where he expressed his fears that a continental-style revolution might break out ‘nearer home.’³⁴ As his correspondence reveals, his anxiety was shared by other top civil servants and government ministers. In a letter to his brother-in-law, T.B. Macaulay, on 3 April 1848, Trevelyan wrote that ‘Sir G. Grey is anxious to have some sound, striking, popular argument to counteract the Chartist poison’ and asked for Macaulay’s help, stressing ‘the duty of everybody [to do] his utmost to save our institutions.’³⁵ In another letter three weeks later to Sir James Stephen, his plans seem to have become more concrete. He asked Stephen to contribute a couple of articles to ‘a popular weekly newspaper’ called ‘Voice of the People’ which he had helped to set up ‘with a view to disseminate correct opinions among the working classes’.³⁶ In other words, the Treasury saw the Chartist uprisings as presenting a direct threat to the civil service and took active measures to combat the spread of their ideas among the working classes. The idea that a desire to render the civil service a more effective instrument in the fight against Chartism had been an important aim of Trevelyan’s also gains weight from the attention paid to it by Dorman B. Eaton in his study of the English civil service published in 1873 after extensive consultation with Trevelyan. ‘Between 1840 and 1848’, he wrote,³⁷

³² Ibid., 224.

³³ See e.g. C.E. Trevelyan to Earl of Arundel (11 Apr. 1848) Bod. MSS. Film 1190; C.E. Trevelyan to Lt. Col. Jones (11 Apr. 1848) Bod. MSS. Film 1190; C.E. Trevelyan to Major H. Trevelyan (3 Apr. 1848) Bod. MSS. Film 1190.

³⁴ C.E. Trevelyan to Lt. Col. Jones (11 Apr. 1848) Bod. MSS. Film 1190.

³⁵ C.E. Trevelyan to the Right Hon. T.B. Macaulay (3 Apr. 1848) Bod. MSS. Film 1190.

³⁶ C.E. Trevelyan to Sir James Stephen (25 Apr. 1848) Bod. MSS. Film 1190.

³⁷ Eaton, *Civil Service in Great Britain*, p. 60.

many monster meetings were held in Great Britain, by which the public peace was threatened and serious anxiety was caused. Responding to armed revolution on the continent for popular rights in 1848, the “Chartists” organizations and other republican sympathizers, with their demand of “universal suffrage, the ballot and annual parliaments” alarmed all England by their lawless and revolutionary action. It was under such a state of affairs that British statesmen, sustained by the better public sentiment, carried forward five years of investigations into the methods of government.

As well as carrying out their various professional and administrative duties efficiently, civil servants at home and abroad were increasingly looked to as important agents in the fight against social and political disorder. As such, it was vital that in future men should be recruited who felt an instinctive loyalty to the traditional order, who had learned the importance of duty and self-sacrifice and who, through their shared education and socialisation, would represent a cohesive bastion of the British elite at a time of social and political upheaval. The character of civil servants had arguably never been so important.

This is, moreover, an easy conclusion to draw from the Northcote-Trevelyan Report itself. The damning judgement which its authors pronounced on the character of civil servants has rarely been taken as evidence of serious concern by historians. Usually, it has been seen either as an invention (or at least a gross exaggeration) on the part of Trevelyan, forming part of a strategy to win public approval for the changes proposed in the Report.³⁸ While there is no doubt an element of truth in this, I would suggest that the concern displayed about the character of civil servants should be taken more seriously given the new responsibilities which many, particularly in the higher grades of the service, were undertaking in relation to the defence of the state. It ought also to be observed that the complaints made in the Report itself (for example, that civil service

³⁸ See e.g., Gowan, ‘The Origins of the Administrative Elite’, 31, J. Ruth, *Novel Professions: Interested Disinterest and the Making of the Professional in the Victorian Novel* (Columbus, Ohio, 2006), p. 87.

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places were ‘chiefly desired...for the unambitious, and the indolent or incapable’³⁹) were replicated almost exactly in Trevelyan’s private papers and correspondence⁴⁰ which would suggest that he meant them sincerely.

This fear about the moral character and general reliability of civil servants at a time of social and political uncertainty was, I would suggest, one of the chief reasons for the interest of reformers in tying the education of the higher class of civil servants more firmly to the universities and, in particular, to a training in classical studies. A similar logic operated in the reform of the Indian civil service (ICS). At the end of the eighteenth century, there had been considerable anxiety about the reliability and effectiveness of civil servants in India, following reports of several men abandoning their posts for the native religion and way of life.⁴¹ Many in the East India Company and in the government were convinced that the previously favoured policy of ‘Orientalisation’, according to which the best training for ICS. men was an immersion in native Indian languages and customs, was responsible for this. To avoid future desertions, the East India Company’s Court of Directors transferred the training of ICS. probationers from the college at Fort William in Calcutta to Haileybury in England in 1806, where Trevelyan himself was trained. Here, in addition to learning the native languages of India, future civil servants were to be exposed to a thorough training in Christian morality and ethics as well as a strong emphasis on the Greek and Latin classics in order to strengthen their reasoning powers and enable them to resist the temptations of native Indian culture. ‘In short’, as Thomas Osborne has argued, ‘the

³⁹ *Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ See e.g., Trevelyan’s comments upon the complaints made about the Report’s proposals by Captain H.H. O’Brien: ‘The idle and useless, the fool of the family, the consumptive, the hypochondriac, those who have a tendency to insanity, are the sort of young men commonly *‘provided for’*, as the term is, in a public office.’ Cited in Hughes, ‘Sir Charles Trevelyan and Civil Service Reform, 1853-5’, 72.

⁴¹ Osborne, ‘Bureaucracy as a Vocation: Governmentality and Administration in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, 299-300; A.T. Embree, *Charles Grant and British Rule in India* (1962), p. 190.

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purpose was to establish a common culture of officialdom, separated from those who were governed, a homogeneous class of experts with a common ruling identity.’⁴²

This was clearly also the aim behind the recommendation, much favoured by the 1854 Macaulay Committee (of which Benjamin Jowett was also a member), that I.C.S. men should undergo a thorough training in classical studies at the English universities before departing for India.⁴³ ‘The duties of a civil servant of the East India Company are of so high a nature,’ the Committee’s Report explained, ‘that in his case it is peculiarly desirable that an excellent general education, such as may enlarge and strengthen his understanding should precede the special education which must qualify him to despatch the business of his catchery.’⁴⁴ It was this recommendation that led Sir Charles Wood, President of the Board of Control, to order the closure of Haileybury College in November 1854. Instead of the ‘raw young men’, whose moral and intellectual immaturity in the home service had been condemned by Trevelyan⁴⁵, the Indian civil servant of the future was to be ‘the gentleman graduate, the distinguished product of a liberal education, mature of judgement and with established roots in English society.’⁴⁶ In other words, there was an important precedent in the case of India for falling back on a traditional classical education when fears about the reliability of civil servants arose;

⁴² Osborne, ‘Bureaucracy as a Vocation: Governmentality and Administration in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, 299-300.

⁴³ See P. Vasunia, ‘Greek, Latin and the Indian Civil Service’, *Cambridge Classical Journal: Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* li (2005), 35-71.

⁴⁴ *Report, dated November 1854, on the Examination of Candidates for the Civil Service of the East Indian Company...* (London, 1855), p. 10. These sentiments had been expressed by Macaulay in a speech before the House of Commons on 10 July 1833. ‘Look at every walk of life’, he declared, ‘at this House, at the other House, at the Bar, at the Bench, at the Church, and see whether it is not true that those who attain high distinction on the world were generally men who were distinguished in their academic career...it would be difficult to find a better test of their fitness than their classical acquirements.’ See T.B. Macaulay, *The Miscellaneous Writings and Speeches of Lord Macaulay* (London, 1889), p. 565.

⁴⁵ See e.g., *Gladstone Papers*, BL Add. MSS. 44333 § 198.

⁴⁶ Moore, ‘The Abolition of Patronage in the Indian Civil Service’, 246-57.

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moreover, it was a precedent with which all the reformers, especially Trevelyan and Jowett, would have been familiar.

It might well be argued that the responsibilities entrusted to an Indian civil servant were much greater than those with which a clerk in the home service was invested. Certainly, the powers held by ICS men were considerable; after serving for a few years in an assisting capacity, civil servants in India were trusted with the political and financial government of large swathes of territory. Arguably, the security of British rule in India lay primarily in their hands. Yet in drawing the comparison, we should also remember the many new and important responsibilities being taken on by civil servants in the home service in these years.

Further evidence that Northcote and Trevelyan were primarily concerned with recruiting civil servants of a higher moral character was their decision to privilege not merely those who had enjoyed a university training in classical studies, but those who had successfully completed the reformed classical course at Oxford, known as ‘Greats’.⁴⁷ Now, while this obviously has much to do with the fact that the man responsible for drawing up the examination scheme was Benjamin Jowett, tutor and fellow of Balliol College, and a leading reformer of the ‘Greats’ syllabus, it must be remembered that Jowett was deliberately selected for this purpose by Northcote and Trevelyan. Moreover it was the changes he had helped to bring about at Oxford which recommended him for

⁴⁷ It may reasonably be asked why candidates who had already proved their ability in ‘Greats’ had to be re-examined in the same subjects to gain a place in the civil service. Although, as this article argues, the primary motivation which led Trvelyan and Northcote to propose the reforms they did, was to secure a certain type of man (ideally, one who had been successful in ‘Greats’), they could not afford to overlook the necessity of an additional examination for entry into the service in their case; the reformers stood under considerable public pressure from working and radical middle class circles, including utilitarian reformers, led by Edwin Chadwick, to do away, once and for all, with corrupt patronage in the distribution of civil service places. In this context, the symbolic importance of an open competitive examination, through which all candidates must pass, was simply too great.

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the task. As we shall see later, a chief aim of the reformed ‘Greats’ course had been to produce men of sterling moral character, conscious of their duty to queen and country. Such an aim had been considered particularly important against a background of growing student disobedience and rebellion which had been developing under the influence of John Henry Newman and the Tractarian movement since the late 1830s.

This privileging of ‘Greats’ in the civil service examination, however, is a fact little acknowledged by historians;⁴⁸ and at first sight, the decision by Jowett to separate the examination into four schools: (i) Classical Literature, (ii) Mathematics and Natural Science, (iii) Political Economy, Law and Moral Philosophy and (iv) Modern Languages and Modern History, would seem to contradict this as would the proviso that all candidates must pass in two schools. Yet when we consider the spread of subjects in detail, it becomes apparent that candidates from Cambridge would have found it substantially more difficult to obtain the highest marks in such an examination. Cambridge students would naturally have chosen the second (mathematical) school out of the two compulsory options. Despite the greater prominence which the natural sciences enjoyed at Cambridge, the majority of students would still have been unlikely to possess a profound knowledge of any single science. Moreover which second school would they have chosen? Degree courses involving the study of law, modern history and modern languages were as recent and undeveloped at Cambridge in 1854 as they were at Oxford despite recent curriculum reform at both universities. Unless they were both accomplished mathematicians and classicists, those who wanted to win the highest

⁴⁸ For the view that the civil service reformers aimed to encourage the ancient English universities to broaden their curricula, see R. N. Soffer, *Discipline and Power: The Universities, History and the Making of an English Elite, 1870-1930* (Stanford, CA., 1994), pp. 15-16. **An exception may be found in the work of Roger K. Kelsall, who concluded that there was a deliberate favouring of Oxford ‘Greats’ in the decades following the implementation of the Northcote/Trvelyan reforms. See R.K. Kelsall, *Higher Civil Servants in Britain: from 1870 to the Present Day* (London, 1955), p. 61.**

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places in the examination would have had to resort to a ‘crammer.’ Oxford students, by contrast, the vast majority of whom were still reading classics in 1854, would have fared substantially better. They would have been able to take not only the first school of Classical Literature without stepping outside their area of expertise, but the third school as well; for Political Economy, Roman Law, and Moral Philosophy, above all, formed part of the reformed Oxford ‘Greats’ syllabus. In comparison, the Classical Tripos at Cambridge was still almost entirely literature-based and did not include substantial elements of history, law or philosophy.

Tellingly, the case is similar when we consider the examination scheme drawn up by the 1854 Macaulay Committee for the future selection of Indian civil servants. It was not simply university men who were favoured, nor even those who had read classical studies; once more, it is possible to identify a clear bias towards those who had completed the reformed ‘Greats’ course at Oxford. There was a particular emphasis on those subjects which formed key components of the ‘Greats’ curriculum: ancient history, moral philosophy and Roman law. In the Greek and Latin papers, for example, exercises would not be limited to translation and composition (which would have treated classicists from Oxford and Cambridge equally) but were to include a separate ‘paper of questions which would enable [candidates] to show their knowledge of ancient history, both political and literary.’⁴⁹ In addition, there was to be a separate paper on the Moral Sciences, a summary of which (even down to the particular emphasis on Bacon) reads like a breakdown of the last two years of study for an Oxford ‘Greats’ student. ‘The subjects which fall under this head,’ the Report commented, ‘are the elements of moral and political philosophy, the history of the ancient and modern

⁴⁹ *The Selection and Training of Candidates for the Indian Civil Service*, p. 26.

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schools of moral and political philosophy, and the inductive method, of which the *Novum Organum* is the great text book.’⁵⁰

‘Greats’ subjects were also disproportionately weighted in the breakdown of marks for the different papers included in the examination. The allocations of marks are even more significant when we take into account the fact that there was no limit to the number of papers a candidate could sit and that, therefore, every mark counted. A number of historians, most notably, Clive Dewey, have analysed the breakdown and have concluded that it in no way privileged classics above other subjects. ‘For an examination supposedly designed to attract Oxbridge graduates,’ he wrote,⁵¹

Macaulay’s scheme made surprisingly few concessions to the courses of instruction they actually pursued...[T]he I.C.S. examination allocated only 19 per cent of the maximum possible marks to classics and 20 per cent to mathematics. No classic or mathematician could hope to pass Macaulay’s examination by virtue of his excellence at classics or mathematics alone, however highly-developed.

In actual fact, mathematics, with a total of 1000 possible marks, amounted to only 14.5 per cent of the total marks available (6875). The percentage which Dewey attributed to classics is also erroneous. Even if we follow Dewey’s definition of classical studies as the Greek and Latin languages only, they would constitute 22 per cent of the total marks available, not 19 per cent; moreover, if we adopt Jowett (and Oxford’s) understanding of classics as incorporating not only linguistic and literary study, but also ancient history, moral philosophy and Roman law, we see that an Oxford classicist could in theory (by taking not only Greek and Latin but also moral sciences) accumulate some 2000 marks, a far more impressive 29 per cent of the total available. Here, the contrast with Cambridge is sharpest. Moral philosophy had never constituted an essential element of the Classical Tripos; indeed it was only acknowledged in the

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵¹ Dewey, ‘The Education of a Ruling Caste’, 269.

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Cambridge examination system in 1851 with the creation of a separate Moral Sciences Tripos; in this form it remained largely separate from classical studies at the University. Thus Cambridge classicists would only have been able to achieve a maximum of 22 per cent of the total possible marks without stepping outside their own subject area, while Oxford 'Greats' men, by contrast, would have been able to achieve a maximum of 29 per cent. With mathematics alone, Cambridge's most prominent subject, candidates could look forward to achieving only a mere 14.5 per cent of the total without resorting to a 'crammer.'

In the remainder of the article, a possible interpretation of this decision to privilege Oxford 'Greats' will be suggested. It was not that there was anything wrong with the Cambridge classical course or that graduates of Cambridge were not wanted as candidates for the civil service. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, there were simply far more Oxford men involved in civil service reform than those who had studied at Cambridge and they would obviously tend to favour their own *alma mater*. The crucial figure here was of course Benjamin Jowett, who not only played a leading role in the reform movement at Oxford but was also a key figure in civil service reform. He had been a member of the 1854 Macaulay Committee which recommended competitive examination as the new mechanism for the recruitment of Indian civil servants and had exercised a considerable influence upon the scheme of examination set out in the Committee's Report.⁵² In addition, it was a letter by Jowett, appended to the Northcote-Trevelyan Report, which Trevelyan described as 'the practical application' of the

⁵² See *Civil Service of India. The Selection and Training of Candidates for the Indian Civil Service* (1876), pp. 24-30.

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reformers' plans.⁵³ Jowett had even been offered the position of civil service commissioner (along with an Oxford friend of his, Frederick Temple), but had refused at the last moment.⁵⁴ Northcote himself had been a member of the Oxford University Commission of 1850 as had Francis Jeune, Master of Pembroke, whose views were deliberately solicited by Northcote and Trevelyan. In addition, Northcote enjoyed close relations with the Oxford Tutors' Association, a body active in the reform of the university. He had also been an exact contemporary of Jowett's at Balliol. In parliament, moreover, the keenest supporter of Northcote and Trevelyan's plans was Gladstone, himself a graduate of Christ Church and M.P. for Oxford University. By contrast, few leading civil service reformers were graduates of Cambridge or those otherwise associated with the university.⁵⁵

Even more revealing, however, are the links with Oxford visible in the practical details of the proposed reforms. In the course of the letter which was attached to the Report, Jowett admitted to having drawn extensively on his own experience as a university examiner.⁵⁶ Northcote and Trevelyan likewise dwelt at length on the special importance of Oxford and its examination system for their proposed reforms in their private correspondence.⁵⁷ When writing to Gladstone in November 1854, Northcote referred, for example, to the '*testamur*' of the future civil service examiners and to the 'Class' and 'Pass-work' they would be called upon to undertake.⁵⁸ Nor was the resemblance with the Oxford system lost upon those who were asked to comment on the Report's findings. Thus William Spottiswoode remarked that for the purpose of

⁵³ C.E. Trevelyan to W.E. Gladstone (18 Jan. 1854), *Gladstone Papers*, BL Add. MSS. 44333 § 95.

⁵⁴ *Gladstone Papers*, BL Add. MSS. 44334 § 184.

⁵⁵ Cambridge graduates were more prominent among those involved with Indian Civil Service reform including three members of the Macaulay committee, Macaulay, Baron Ashburton and Henry Melvill.

⁵⁶ See e.g., *Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service*, pp. 24, 31.

⁵⁷ See e.g. C.E. Trevelyan to Dr Jeune (20 Mar. 1854), *Gladstone Papers*, BL Add. MSS. 44333 § 279.

⁵⁸ S. Northcote to W.E. Gladstone (10 Nov. 1854), *Gladstone Papers*, BL Add. MSS. 44216 § 254.

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obtaining the best men for the civil service ‘no better general scheme could be suggested than that given by Mr. Jowett in his letter, and founded upon the present system of examination at Oxford.’⁵⁹ In his comments on the proposed reforms, Francis Jeune declared that if successful they would transform the civil service into an ‘imperial university’ on the model of Oxford, where the principle of open competition, ‘the system of examinations and honours,’ is ‘what really constitutes the university.’⁶⁰

The second reason for the bias towards Oxford ‘Greats’ lies in the fact that it had itself been recently reformed, largely in response to what many considered the development of a similar crisis relating to the character of students at Oxford as was now being faced in the civil service. Those involved in the reform of Oxford’s curriculum and examination system in the 1840s and early 1850s have been seen (like the civil service reformers) as aiming merely at a more efficient, meritocratic system with the introduction of new degree subjects in modern history and law and the natural sciences.⁶¹ Yet the story of reform at Oxford, from the introduction of competitive examination in 1800, has always been to some extent connected with the anxieties of senior members regarding the political and religious orthodoxy of the undergraduate body. Moves which were hailed at the time (and have since been hailed) as modernising and progressive were often driven, in part, by a conservative desire to prevent undergraduates being unduly influenced by dangerous ideas.⁶² In the early 1840s, when the campaign for a substantial broadening of the traditional classical syllabus as well as

⁵⁹ *Papers Relating to the Re-organisation of the Civil Service*, p. 10.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶¹ See e.g. R.D. Anderson, *European Universities from the Enlightenment to 1914* (Oxford, 2004), p. 195; P. Slee, ‘The Oxford Idea of a Liberal Education, 1800-1850: The Invention of Tradition and the Manufacture of Practice’, *History of Universities* vii (1988), 64.

⁶² See e.g., S. Rothblatt, ‘The Student Sub-culture and the Examination System’, p. 283, L. Stone, ‘Social Control and Intellectual Excellence: Oxbridge and Edinburgh 1560-1983’ in N. Phillipson, ed. *Universities, Society, and the Future : A Conference Held on the 400th Anniversary of the University of Edinburgh, 1983* (Edinburgh, 1983), pp. 22-3.

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the introduction of some modern subjects gathered pace within the university, many saw the greatest threat to the loyalty of the undergraduate body as being represented by Tractarianism. By this point, the Tractarians, led by John Henry Newman and E.B. Pusey, had achieved an unprecedented popularity among junior members.⁶³ Although at first viewed as a conservative force, the movement came, within a few short years, to be seen as the locus of a revolutionary youth movement encouraging undergraduates to rebel against the university authorities and abandon their loyalty to church and country by converting to Catholicism.⁶⁴

The influence of Tractarianism reached a high-point in the mid-1840s, in the years immediately preceding the conversion of Newman to Catholicism in 1845. In 1843, Pusey, who was, at that time, Professor of Hebrew, was banned by the Hebdomadal Board from preaching at Oxford for two years after it was decided he had spoken approvingly of Catholic doctrines in a recent university sermon. This judgement was greeted by widespread dismay from many of his undergraduate supporters. Several violent protests were organised, mostly at graduations and other university ceremonies in the Sheldonian Theatre which led to the rustication and banishment of a number of students from Oxford for between two and five years.⁶⁵ Erstwhile supporters of the Tractarians such as William Sewell urged undergraduates to restrain their behaviour and remember the obedience they owed to their tutors and other senior university members.⁶⁶ Following even more violent protests in late 1844, when a prominent Tractarian, W.G. Ward, was publicly stripped of his degrees for publishing his pseudo-

⁶³ P.B. Nockles, 'Lost Causes and...Impossible Loyalties': The Oxford Movement and the University' in Brock and Curthoys eds., *The History of the University of Oxford*. Vol. VI, pp. 232-3.

⁶⁴ [R. Congreve and J.B. Blackett], 'Oxford and Dr. Hampden', *British and Foreign Review* xv (1843), 171.

⁶⁵ See e.g., G.R.M. Ward and J. Heywood eds., *Oxford University Statutes* vol. 1 (2 vols., 1845), Appendix p. 300.

⁶⁶ W. Sewell, *The Duty of Young Men in Times of Controversy* (Oxford, 1843), p. 3

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Catholic work, *The Ideal of a Christian Church*, Oxford's former Vice-Chancellor, A.T. Gilbert, confessed his fear to C.P. Golightly that 'these reckless men will bring a visitation upon the university, if they are not stopped'.⁶⁷ Indeed, widespread calls for a parliamentary commission to investigate the situation at Oxford were exactly what followed the outrage which greeted Ward's degradation.⁶⁸

Yet there were also many within Oxford who were working to counter the influence of Tractarianism. Many internal critics such as Benjamin Jowett and A.P. Stanley as well as those calling for parliamentary intervention shared the belief that changes to Oxford's curriculum and examination system were necessary in order to break the influence of the 'Newmanites'. Over the course of nearly fifteen years since they had first risen to popularity in the early 1830s, the Tractarians had become associated with a narrowing of the university curriculum to facilitate a particular focus on poetry, both classical and religious, and on various aspects of academic theology. Indeed, many among their critics saw them as having perverted the traditional classical curriculum in order to help win undergraduates for their cause. The most common complaint was that they discouraged students from engaging with those subjects which most required independent thought and provoked engagement with the modern world, above all, the critical study of ancient (and modern) history and philosophy. Writing to his close friend and fellow reformer, Ralph Lingen in September 1846, Jowett declared his wish to put a stop as fast as possible to 'the puerilities of Oxford'.⁶⁹ Above all, he found the Tractarian preference for poetry and composition intellectually unmanaging. What 'a soil', he complained, 'for maggots and crotchets of all sorts, fostering a sort of weak

⁶⁷ A.T. Gilbert to C.P. Golightly, (20 Sept. 1844), cited in Nockles, 'Lost Causes and...Impossible Loyalties', p. 258.

⁶⁸ See e.g., *Hansard* (HC Deb 10 Apr. 1845 vol. 79 c. 404).

⁶⁹ Balliol College Library, *Jowett Papers*. I.F.1/7. B. Jowett to R.R.W Lingen (22 Sept. 1846).

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cleverness, but greatly tending to impair manliness, straightforwardness and other qualities which are met with in the great world'. By contrast, he insisted that the value of an Oxford degree should lie in 'the experience of life gained...and the consequent improvement of character'.⁷⁰ This necessitated the permission of a certain degree of freedom to undergraduates both in the subjects they studied and in the surveillance exercised by college tutors.

In this respect, Jowett identified himself as a 'humble imitator of [Thomas] Arnold'⁷¹; and in many ways, it was Arnold's vision of classical studies, developed during his time at Rugby which inspired Jowett, Stanley and the other Oxford reformers. Indeed, an admiration for Arnold and attendance at Rugby school connected many members of the reform movement with one another.⁷² Famously, Arnold's ideal combined the study of the ancient and modern world; for him it was the perfect means of cultivating both moral and intellectual strength. The critical study of ancient societies, particularly their political developments, brought to light important lessons for the modern politician. For Arnold, fifth-century Athens and the high Roman Empire represented the greatest achievements of humankind so far. Following this logic, Arnold and his Noetic friends at Oxford (including Richard Whately, Renn Dixon Hampden and Baden Powell) had successfully campaigned for the inclusion of an element of critical historical study in the examinations for the BA degree in 1830. Yet when revolution broke out in France the same year and Catholic Emancipation and the Reform Bill precipitated a crisis at home, the Noetic reform programme lost much of its former support and was to be replaced in a few short years by the deeply conservative

⁷⁰ Ibid., 279-80.

⁷¹ Ibid., 53.

⁷² A.H. Clough, A.P. Stanley, John Conington, Richard Congreve and W.C. Lake had been at Rugby under Arnold. A.C. Tait and Frederick Temple had both been at Balliol before teaching at Rugby. Jowett called himself a 'humble imitator' of Arnold in 1849 and Stanley was his biographer.

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stance of Newman and Pusey. Under the influence of Tractarianism, no changes to the traditional classical syllabus were to be contemplated and a romantic notion of childhood was praised as the ideal undergraduate character. Writing in 1843, the liberal reformer, Herman Merivale, complained that the cultivation of ‘piety and obedience’ among undergraduates had been placed before the acquisition of ‘objective knowledge’.⁷³

Nor were Jowett, Stanley and the other reformers alone in their view that Tractarianism had emasculated the traditional university curriculum. Writing in the *British and Foreign Review* in July 1843, Richard Congreve and J.B. Blackett complained that ‘Oxford is daily becoming more and more a mere school of theology, and so is forfeiting every pretence to the name of a University...Theology and its concomitants absorb nearly the whole industry’ of the place.⁷⁴ When W.D. Christie called for a parliamentary commission to visit Oxford in the House of Commons in 1844, one of the main reasons he gave was the unprecedented influence which the Tractarians had gained over the student body in recent years. ‘On their first arrival in Oxford’, he declared, undergraduates are made

the early victims of an ever-watchful proselytizing zeal—and which threatens to absorb every member and every function of the University in the vortex of theological controversy, and to blight for ever, with its all-withering influence, in Oxford, the peaceful happiness of those years of college education which our memories and imaginations combine to paint to us in colours so fresh and fair.⁷⁵

The reforms which were introduced at Oxford around mid-century (both internally and as a result of the visit of the Oxford University Commission in 1850) are usually seen as marking the end of the monopoly of classical studies. They did indeed see for the first time the introduction of Final Honour Schools in mathematical and physical

⁷³ [H. Merivale], ‘The Late Dr. Arnold’, *Edinburgh Review* lxxvi (1843), 375.

⁷⁴ [Congreve and Blackett], ‘Oxford and Dr. Hampden’, 171.

⁷⁵ W.D. Christie cited in *Hansard* (HC Deb 10 Apr. 1845 vol. 79 c. 407).

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sciences, natural sciences and jurisprudence and modern history. Yet although an emphasis on such subjects was crucial to overcoming what was widely seen as the Tractarian fascination with the medieval past, there was no simple replacement of the old, classical syllabus with modern studies. Indeed, the university statute of 1849, which saw the introduction of modern degree subjects for the first time, also required all students to first pass in 'Greats' - the Final School of *literae humaniores* or classical studies. It also witnessed a creative reform of the traditional classical curriculum in an attempt to make it more intellectually demanding and relevant to the future careers of undergraduates. This was the system which would a few years later be made the basis of the proposals for new entrance examinations for the Indian and home civil services.

The changes introduced in 1849, designed in large part by Jowett, Stanley and the other reformers, went a long way towards putting the Arnoldian vision of classical studies into action. In future, the purely grammatical study of classical authors, composition, translation and the reading of poetry would be strictly limited to the first two years of the degree course and would be assessed in a separate examination at the end of the students' eighth term. This then left the final two years of the degree free for an in-depth critical study of the works of ancient historians and thinkers. Students would, moreover, be encouraged to read the works of modern historians and thinkers in conjunction with the ancient texts. As W.H. Walsh, has written, such an arrangement ensured a consideration of 'philosophical ideas for their own sake, rather than as a mainly textual and historical study of what ancient writers had to say on the subject, as in the study of philosophy as part of the classical tripos at Cambridge.'⁷⁶ In this way, those subjects, which were considered more challenging were to be introduced

⁷⁶ Walsh, 'The Zenith of 'Greats'' in Brock and Curthoys eds., *The History of the University of Oxford*. Vol. VII, p. 312.

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gradually in stages as the student progressed through the course and matured intellectually.⁷⁷ Another reason which many felt to lie behind the Tractarians' success in winning over undergraduates and interesting them in religious controversy was that the students had simply had too much time on their hands. This was an important reason for the introduction of an additional examination ('Moderations') at the end of the second year, a change which Jowett had been advocating for some time.⁷⁸

By the early 1850s, then, there was a strong conviction among many of those involved in the reform of Oxford that the reinvigorated 'Greats' course would do much to promote moral and intellectual maturity in those who completed it, an ability to think critically and come to independent judgements based on rational inquiry.

When we read the Northcote-Trevelyan Report, the appeal of the reformed 'Greats' course is clear, for what they were seeking most in future civil servants was a well-developed moral and intellectual capacity. Under the patronage system, they complained, '[t]hose who enter generally do so at an early age [and] are thereby relieved from the necessity of those struggles which...fall to the lot of such as enter upon the open professions.' As a result, such men have had 'but limited opportunities of acquiring that varied experience of life which is so important to the development of character.'⁷⁹ Privately, Trevelyan commented that it was too often the case that when they 'do rise [by seniority] to the discharge of responsible functions, the exercised mind & matured judgement are entirely wanting.'⁸⁰ Similar opinions were expressed in many of the replies given by those men whose views had been directly solicited by Northcote

⁷⁷ Jowett, 'The Second Examination', Jowett Papers, II.E.3/1.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ *Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service*, p. 5.

⁸⁰ Marginal comment on letter from J. Ball, MP (24 Feb. 1854), cited in Hughes, 'Sir Charles Trevelyan and Civil Service Reform. 1853-5', 213.

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and Trevelyan. Sir James Stephen, formerly Under Secretary of State for the Colonial Department, declared that the majority of civil servants ‘usually entered...office at the age of 18 or 19, coming direct from school, and bringing with them no greater store of information, or maturity of mind than usually belongs to a boy in the fifth form at Eton, Westminster, or Rugby.’ ‘Finding themselves engaged in the actual business of life,’ he explained, ‘they assumed that their preparation for it was complete; and (as far as I can judge), they never afterwards made or attempted any mental self-improvement.’⁸¹

Northcote and Trevelyan were equally clear on the need to maintain discipline among the young, newly appointed civil servants and to find a way in which ‘regular habits may be enforced’.⁸² This was, moreover, one of the chief aims of the Oxford reformers and the revitalised ‘Greats’ course offered itself as an ideal training for civil servants of the higher class. As Trevelyan wrote to Gladstone, the universities were to become the ‘seminaries of training and discipline for the civil service of the State’.⁸³ Northcote, who had himself read ‘Greats’ at Balliol, showed himself similarly convinced of the peculiar moral and intellectual benefits of an Oxford classical education. Responding to an inquiry by the Tutors’ Association about the possible advantages of an Oxford education to civil servants in 1853, he declared:⁸⁴

I attribute my own success, such as it has been, entirely to the power of close reasoning which a course of Thucydides, Aristotle...&c., engenders or develops [sic], and to the facility of composition which arises from classical studies. There is nothing that can compensate for the want of being able to follow out a train of reasoning, rejecting immaterial and irrelevant issues, and keeping close to the matter in hand.

⁸¹ *Papers Relating to the Re-Organisation of the Civil Service*, p. 74.

⁸² *Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service*, p. 8.

⁸³ *Gladstone Papers*, BL Add. MSS. 44580 § 103.

⁸⁴ Rogers, Northcote, R. Palmer, Tinney, W. Palmer, Childs and Gidley, ‘Suggestions Respecting the Conditions under which University Education may be made more Available for Clerks in Government Offices...’ (1854), 83.

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Many of those whose opinions Northcote and Trevelyan had sought on civil service reform also placed a clear premium on classical studies for its ability to refine both character and intellect. G.E.L. Cotton, Master of Marlborough College and one-time colleague of Thomas Arnold at Rugby, devoted considerable space to extolling ‘the peculiar advantages of classical study, or the effect of ancient literature on the taste and judgment, and of philology and grammar on the reasoning powers.’ In his view, there was no other subject (or indeed set of subjects) which could so successfully promote the development of what he termed ‘general ability.’ ‘If a man’s mind has been strengthened by a careful training in the course now followed by the most successful students at the universities [i.e. classics] and public schools’, he declared, ‘the acquisition of technical knowledge necessary for his particular office will be speedily accomplished.’⁸⁵ Rev. W.H. Thompson, Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge, agreed. ‘Great importance should attach [in the examination] to the accuracy and elegance of translation from the classical writers’, he wrote, ‘for no exercises afford a better test of natural acuteness and refinement of mind than these.’⁸⁶

Even more important for those advocating the benefits of classical studies was their potential value for those working in positions of national importance such as civil servants. Here, the insights afforded by ancient history (a particular strength of the reformed ‘Greats’ syllabus) were stressed in contrast to those provided by purely literary and philological study. ‘Even the most determined advocate of a utilitarian education’, wrote Cotton,⁸⁷

must allow the advantage of studying ancient history generally, as a picture of a political and social drama of which we can see the beginning, the course, and the catastrophe; and of Roman history in particular, as that in which the history of

⁸⁵ *Papers Relating to the Re-Organisation of the Civil Service*, p. 60.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

all ancient nations ended, and from which all modern history has sprung. The writings of Thucydides and Tacitus on the one hand, and of Niebuhr, Arnold, Thirlwall, and Grote on the other, are no mere magazines of antiquarian information, but contain political and social lessons applicable to all times.

What has been suggested here is that the decision to frame the examination schemes for both the home and Indian civil services around the Oxford 'Greats' course was a strategic one, designed to secure candidates with particular moral and intellectual qualities which, it was hoped, would render them trustworthy and effective civil servants at a time of increasing uncertainty.

This is not to say of course that there were not dissenting voices. By no means all those consulted by Northcote and Trevelyan advocated the favouring of classical studies, in general, or of Oxford 'Greats' in particular. Some of the strongest opposition came from leading utilitarian reformers such as Edwin Chadwick, Commissioner of the Board of Health, when the Northcote-Trevelyan report was published. In his comments on the Report, Chadwick asked what particular advantages a civil servant would gain from 'several years passed in the university learning the classics...instead of being in the field...learning by actual practice.'⁸⁸ 'No merchant or banker,' he continued, 'would require his clerk to undergo an initiatory examination in the *Antigone* of Sophocles' when the most desirable skills were 'good handwriting, a familiarity with common arithmetic, and common forms of business and accounts, and the power of writing correctly in [one's] own language.'⁸⁹ Similar views were expressed by leaders of the Administrative Reform Association, founded in 1855, against the background of the supply scandals of the Crimean War. Like Chadwick and the utilitarians, its leaders

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

argued for the application of business methods and training to the civil service, even putting forward a rival examination scheme in December 1855.⁹⁰

It should be remembered that it was not only the threat of democratic revolution which Northcote and Trevelyan were seeking to counter with their reform proposals; they were also designed to oppose plans put forward by utilitarians like Chadwick, who advocated placing the various departments of the civil service under the control of independent boards of commissioners and inspectors. Such proposals, they feared, if acted upon, would lead to the development of a continental-style bureaucracy in England, a system which many at the time associated both with the autocracy of *ancien regime* monarchies and with the revolutionary government of France.⁹¹ Indeed, Northcote, Trevelyan and Gladstone intended the reformed civil service to act as a bulwark of the state against a variety of threats. Through the securing of university-trained men, in particular, those who had successfully completed the ‘Greats’ course at Oxford, the reformers sought not merely to strengthen the civil service, but parliament as well. As Trevelyan wrote to John Delane, editor of the *Times*, the reformed civil service ought to act as a school for budding politicians.⁹² In this sense, as J.R. Greenaway has pointed out, the discourse of civil service reform dovetailed with plans for the reform of parliament. As such, the Northcote-Trevelyan proposals are best described as ‘liberal conservative’ in nature – in that they sought to remove the abuses of the old regime while avoiding the extremes of radical democracy and utilitarianism.⁹³

The significance of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report is strengthened by the fact that developments in the following decades saw many of their recommendations put into

⁹⁰ J. Greenaway, ‘British Conservatism and Bureaucracy’, *History of Political Thought* 13:1 (1992), 137.

⁹¹ Greenaway, ‘British Conservatism and Bureaucracy’, 132.

⁹² C. Trevelyan to J.T. Delane, BL Add. 44333. F. 138. Cited in Greenaway, ‘Parliamentary Reform and Civil Service Reform’, 163.

⁹³ Greenaway, ‘British Conservatism and Bureaucracy’, 131, 151.

practice. In the period after the introduction of competitive examination for the home civil service, with the famous Order in Council of 1870, men trained at Oxford and Cambridge did indeed come to dominate among those who successfully gained entry. Harold J. Perkin has written that the two universities ‘came to exercise a near-monopoly of the new administrative grade of the civil service.’⁹⁴ Moreover, subsequent changes to the civil service examinations reinforced the aims of Northcote and Trevelyan. When, for example, the lower age limit for taking part in the home civil service entrance examination was raised from 18 to 22 in 1895, this had the effect of practically excluding all non-university men, who usually could not afford to wait until that age before beginning a career.⁹⁵ As a lecturer at Cambridge observed in a letter to the editor of the *Saturday Review* in March 1902, ‘We find that every year since 1892 all the successful candidates, with scarcely an exception, have been trained at some university, and the large majority, something like 75% on average, at Oxford or Cambridge.’⁹⁶ The story is similar when one looks at the Indian Civil Service. In the first five years after the first I.C.S. open competition in 1854, over 60% of all successful candidates had attended either Oxford or Cambridge. Although this figure was to decline in the 1860s after the age limit for sitting the examination was progressively lowered, by the final years of the century, the I.C.S. too was heavily dominated by Oxbridge men.⁹⁷ Indeed, things had progressed so far by the time of the MacDonnell Commission in 1913 that one of the commissioners, the educationist, Graham Wallas, observed that only a man

⁹⁴ H.J. Perkin, ‘The Academic Profession in the United Kingdom’ in B.R. Clark ed., *The Academic Profession: National, Disciplinary and Institutional Settings* (London, 1987), p. 18.

⁹⁵ Kelsall, *Higher Civil Servants in Britain*, p. 60.

⁹⁶ [A Cambridge Lecturer], ‘The Universities and the Civil Service Examinations’, *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 93:2421 (22 March 1902), 366.

⁹⁷ Mrinalini Sinha singles out the Public Service Commission of 1886 as marking the point at which ‘Oxbridge’ domination of the civil service in India’ was secured. See M. Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995), p. 9.

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who had performed well in Oxford 'Greats' could reach the 6000 mark total in the entrance examination for the home civil service without needing to step outside of his degree subjects. 'He and he alone', he declared of the 'Greats' man, 'of those who take the various honours courses in the universities is in that position.'⁹⁸ The fact that the changes proposed by Northcote-Trevelyan in 1854 had gained such widespread acceptance by the early years of the twentieth century, reflects the growth in the intervening years of what Greenaway has termed the 'consensual conservative attitude towards bureaucracy'⁹⁹.

Many historians have sought to connect the processes of university and civil service reform in mid-nineteenth-century England. This has most often been based on the assumption that both reform movements formed part of a wider set of progressive, modernising changes and the rise of merit as an ideal in public life. Although scholars have increasingly seen alternative conservative motivations behind other famous reforms of the early and mid-nineteenth century, including franchise, sanitary and factory reform, few have looked at civil service reform in this way. This is mainly because the changes proposed in the Northcote-Trevelyan Report have been seen as affecting the sons of the political and social elite who presented no threat to the traditional order.

Although Trevelyan identified the 1848 revolutions as a crucial spur behind the mid-century civil service reforms in his evidence before the Playfair Commission in 1875, this has frequently been overlooked or else not taken seriously by many historians. At most, the Northcote-Trevelyan Report has been seen as representing an attempt to

⁹⁸ *Royal Commission on the Civil Service. Appendix to the Third Report of the Commissioners. Minutes of Evidence, 10th October 1912 – 13th December 1912. With Appendices* (London, 1913), p. 227.

⁹⁹ Greenaway, 'British Conservatism and Bureaucracy', 141.

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counter working-class and radical middle-class criticism of the patronage system through the emphasis it placed on a new policy of open access and appointment by merit. As this article has suggested, however, the counter-revolutionary significance of the Report lay not primarily in any effort to win over public opinion, but rather in the attempt to create a civil service that would function as a strong and reliable bulwark of the state in times of social and political upheaval. We should not take the language of ‘openness’ in the Report too literally. Northcote, Trevelyan and the other reformers did not. It was a useful rhetorical device, which may have helped to improve the public image of the civil service; yet as the reformers themselves admitted in their private correspondence, the real aim had been to strengthen the hold of the ‘higher classes’ (to quote Gladstone) on the administration of government.

Moreover it was not simply the sons of the political and social elite that the reformers wished to see in leading civil service positions, but more specifically, university-educated men, in particular, those who had successfully completed the recently reformed Oxford ‘Greats’ course. The favouring of ‘Greats’ men in the schemes drawn up for the examination of candidates for both the Indian and home civil services has not been noticed before. Given the prominent role of Benjamin Jowett in composing both schemes, the bias towards ‘Greats’ may seem hardly surprising. Yet we must remember that Jowett’s assistance was deliberately solicited by the civil service reformers. As graduates of Balliol and Christ Church respectively, Northcote and Gladstone may simply have preferred advisors from their old *alma mater*. As we have seen, however, it is likely that the recent changes to the syllabus and examination system at Oxford, introduced partly with a view to countering the growing influence of Tractarianism upon the student body, had an important role to play.

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‘Greats’, as reconceptualised by Jowett and the other university reformers, was, above all, designed to produce men of character, with a strong sense of duty to queen and country and a loyalty to the established political and social order. Through exposure to a careful selection of classical and modern texts, undergraduates were taught the dangers of extreme forms of government, both tyranny and democracy, and were encouraged to take to heart the dictum of Aristotle that virtue lies in the golden mean. It was precisely such men – loyal, reliable and hardworking, who were desired in the higher class of civil servants at a time of considerable political and social instability in England.