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Chapter 3 – Lorna Smith

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Colleagues in collaboration: the Members of Newbolt's Committee

[W]e cannot give a true idea of the man and his work without giving also some idea of the age in which he lived, the age that made him or that he helped to make. (Fowler 1908: 4)

The chapter aims to give a 'true' idea of Sir John Henry Newbolt by focusing on the colleagues who worked alongside him over the two years leading to *The Teaching of English in England* (1921) (hereafter, *Newbolt*).

Newbolt's 14-strong Committee included expert and experienced teachers, members of His Majesty's Inspectorate (HMIs) and academics. A good proportion were also published authors: between them they had already written novels, poetry, literary criticism and – crucially - articles and books on English pedagogy. Their work collectively presents a humane, child-centred view in which the personal development of the individual is fundamental; and oracy, reading and writing are promoted as essential, interwoven components in a celebration of language and literature. There was, then, apparent consensus on The Committee about both the role of English in education and of what the subject should consist, even though their views ran counter to those of contemporary conservative traditionalists who favoured a knowledge-based approach to English (based on the Classics) involving recall of authors' dates, the rules of grammar and figures of speech, and writing exercises consisting of explicit rehearsal of adult expression and imitation of the 'greats' (Shayer 1972).

I argue in this chapter that Newbolt, in a bid to promote English as the 'keystone' (1921: 5) of education, selected his Committee highly conscious of their positioning. *Newbolt* contains unmistakable echoes of Committee members' previous publications such that, far from pioneering a progressive, creative, inclusive view of English, the report reinforces ideas that had been circulating in some English circles for the preceding twenty years.

Accordingly, I begin my story of The Committee and their influence by tracing the history of English in the years leading up to *Newbolt*.

English from 1900-1920

At the turn of the twentieth century, subject English was in its infancy: Oxford had opened a School of English in 1893, while Cambridge did not follow suit until 1917 (Shayer 1972; Medway *et al.* 2014). Both universities offered courses focused on English literature.

At the time (as today), a minority of children from middle class homes attended fee-paying grammar or independent schools; their English teachers were university graduates who taught, typically, a diluted version of their degree course. The vast majority of children — the offspring of the working class — were educated in maintained public elementary schools (Aldrich 2005), taught by non-specialist teachers with a teaching certificate. Thus, English provision differed according to the type of school. Either way, however, practice was generally 'stagnant' (Medway *et al.* 2014: 3).

Perhaps in recognition of this 'sorry plight' (Shayer 1972: 2) and galvanised by the Education Act of 1902 which raised the universal school-leaving age from 10 to 14 (Aldrich 2005; Gillard 2018), came two innovations. First, the Board of Education (the forerunner to the Department for Education) published *Suggestions for the consideration of teachers and others concerned in the work of public elementary schools* (1905), including a chapter focusing specifically on what and how to teach English. It was so popular that it went through several reprints and grew into a series known — by dint of the colourful covers — as the Blue Books (Smith 2018). Then, 1906 saw the establishment of the English Association (EA) by a group of teachers and academics. Intended to serve teachers in grammar and independent schools — perhaps as a response to a perceived need for the professional and pedagogical guidance that *Suggestions* provided their elementary school colleagues — the EA was clearly both popular and active, running regular conferences; it was also relatively prolific, publishing around 50 pamphlets between 1907-1921 on topics pertinent to English teachers (archive.org/details/pamphletsonteach00engl). What is significant here is that, notwithstanding the differences between the types of schools they were designed to support, the tone and content of *Suggestions* (1905/1912) and the EA pamphlets is very similar. To cite just one example, *Suggestions* recommends a child has 'liberty of expression' (1905/1912: 22) to ask questions of the teacher *as well as* respond to a teacher's verbal questions; a few

years later, Miss Gill advocates the same: ‘What the children *want to know* is of much importance’ (1909: 2, emphasis original). This indicates early interest across the class divide in developing a child-centered, personal-growth, humane model of English, based on classroom discussion, copious reading of the child’s own choice, and freedom of expression in writing; and this developed throughout the next decade (Shayer 1972; Smith 2018).

The context for the Report

In 1918, as World War 1 was approaching its end, Britain was counting both the human cost of the conflict — two million British soldiers were dead and 1.5 million wounded (Herbert 2018) — and the economic cost: debts ran at 136% of the Gross National Product (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk). Unemployment was high and public spending had been slashed. However, a more democratic society was beginning to emerge: propertied women over 30 were given the vote, the strict class hierarchy was dissolving, and the working class began to be employed in white collar jobs. Education was recognised as central to Britain’s future. It was against this backdrop that the EA staged a major conference — and there is a tentative optimism in the Chairman’s insistence that English is the vehicle through which a peaceful, humane society might be achieved:

The moral of the war was, not that they should develop trade, but that they should develop humanity. A chief burden in maintaining and keeping uppermost the spiritual element in man must rest... more upon the teaching of English and English literature than upon any other subject. (English Association 1919: 3)

It is very probable that Newbolt, an active member of the EA — he went on to become its President in 1928 — would have heard these words¹.

Newbolt was middle class, the son of a country vicar; he won a scholarship to read Classics at Oxford. He was a lawyer, novelist, historian and civil servant, but is

¹ Newbolt does not appear to have addressed the conference, however, as his name is not included in the proceedings (EA, 1919).

best remembered today as a poet. It was perhaps the fame of Newbolt's patriotic poems, together with his role in the War Propaganda Bureau, that led to his being commissioned, in May 1919, to chair the Departmental Committee Appointed by the President of the Board of Education to Inquire into the Position of English in the Educational System.

Introducing The Committee

It is not clear how The Committee was chosen: Newbolt does not make explicit the process of selection. One obvious connection is that at least six of The Committee, including Newbolt, were active in the EA (as their publications attest).

However, to understand their collective work, I suggest that it is helpful to know something more of Committee members' individual contexts. Their respective professional backgrounds, roles and authorship are therefore summarised in Figure 1, before I go on to make some observations that appear significant in the creation and content of the Report.

	Name, dates & Age in 1919, when work began on the Report	Education	Qualifications where known and professional roles	Indicative publications (* indicates out of print and no copy available in preparation of this chapter; # indicates numbered EA leaflet)
1	Sir John Henry Newbolt 1862-1938 (57)	Clifton College; Corpus Christi, Oxford	LLD, D Litt Poet, novelist, lawyer. Brought into War Propaganda Bureau 1914, later Controller of Telecommunications at the Foreign Office. Knighthood 1915. Chair of the Committee.	(1892) ' <i>Vitai Lampada</i> ' (1906) 'The Old Country' (1909) 'The New June' (1910) 'Drake's Drum' (1911) 'The Twymans: A Tale of Youth' (1914) 'Aladore'

- 2 Mr John
Bailey
- 3 Miss K.M.
Baines
- 4 **FS Boas** Clifton First honorary general (1896) 'Shakespeare and
College; secretary of the EA His Predecessors';
1862-1957 Balliol, (became President numerous further
(57) Oxford 1944). publications on
Career in academia and Shakespeare and other
education, including: C17th authors.
Professor of English (1914) 'Wordsworth's
Literature, Queen's Patriotic Poems and their
College, Belfast. Significance Today'
Inspector of (EA#30)
English, London County **(1919) 'Teachers of
Council Education English: Some of their
Department 1905–1927. difficulties and
later Vice-President, opportunities'**
Royal Society of
Literature, 1945.
Awarded Royal Society
of Literature Benson
Medal 1952.
OBE in 1953.
- 5 Miss H.M.
Davies
- 6 Miss D.
Enright
- 7 Prof. Clifton Founder of Historical (1900) 'Oliver Cromwell
Charles H. College; Society. and the Rule of the
Firth Balliol, Regus Professor of Puritans'
Oxford Modern History at
1857-1936 Oxford.

	(62)			(n.d. (pre-1911)) 'John Bunyan' (EA#19)*
8	J.H. Fowler	Teacher at Clifton College ² .	Author of various books on English Literature; member of EA.	(1902) 'A first course in essay-writing' * (1908) 'English Literature in Secondary Schools' (EA#5) (1909) 'Tennyson's English Idylls and Other Poems' (1915) 'School Libraries' (EA#33)
9	Miss L.A. Lowe			
10	Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch 1863-1944 (56)	Clifton College; Trinity, Oxford	Prolific writer of fiction (nearly 40 published novels and short stories), criticism and poetry. Various roles in academia, including King Edward VII Professor of English Literature at Cambridge from 1912.	(1896) 'Poems and Ballads' (1900) Editor: 'The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1900' (1918) 'Studies in Literature' (1920) 'On the Art of Reading'
11	George Sampson		25 years' experience in elementary schools.	(1922) 'English for the English' (1918 - 1941) 'Cambridge Readings in Literature' series

² I have been unable to ascertain whether he was a teacher at Clifton College in 1919. He proudly refers to 'what I have done at Clifton' (1908: 6) and notes elsewhere he has worked at both a day school and a boarding school (1910).

12	Caroline F.E. Spurgeon 1869-1942 (50)	Cheltenham Ladies' College; University of Dresden; Kings College	Litt D. Founder member of the EA. Professor of English at University of London from 1913. Expert on Chaucer and Shakespeare.	(c. 1918) 'Poetry in the Light of War' (EA#36)* (1935) 'Shakespeare's Imagery'
13	Miss G. Perrie Williams 1889-1958 (30)	Sorbonne Université	South Wales organiser of the Women's Land Army; later, Head of the day continuation school at Debenham's. Chief external examiner for several Welsh county education authorities.	(1918) 'Welsh education in Sunlight and Shadow'*
14	J. Dover Wilson 1881-1969 (38) J. E. Hales	Lancing College; Gonville & Caius, Cambridge	Academic, critic and educationalist. HMI; posts at various universities inc. Professor of Education, King's College, London. Editor in Chief of the <i>New Shakespeare</i> series (working alongside Quiller-Couch). HMI. Secretary to the Committee.	(1911) 'Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan Prose' (1916) 'Poetry and the Child' (EA#34) (1921 – 1969) <i>Editor</i> . 'The New Shakespeare' (series)

Table 1: Membership of The Committee, in the order presented in the Report.
*Blank fields indicate information unknown. **Bold** indicates works later discussed.*

The Committee comprised eight men and six women, a remarkable gender balance at a time when female suffrage had only just been granted. I have not yet been able to discover anything about the Misses Baines, Davies, Enright and Lowe. Caroline Spurgeon and Gwladys Perrie Williams, however, appear strong feminist role models. Spurgeon was the first Professor of English at the University of London, and only the third female professor in Britain. She founded the International Federation of University Women as a contribution to the peace effort alongside her 'intimate friend' Virginia Gildersleeve, believing that 'the women of the world could make change by talking to and learning from each other' (www.brightonourstory.co.uk). Perrie Williams too was an independent woman — while Head Mistress of the day continuation school in London after the war (and, presumably, during her work with The Committee), she financially supported her husband, who was studying for the bar (Williams 2001). She was committed to advancing the cause of women, calling for post-war reforms so that Welsh education could build 'anew on sounder and juster lines,' including gender equality (1918 *in* Williams 2017: n.p.). The presence of such role-models perhaps anticipates *Newbolt's* ambition to transform English teaching in some girls' schools from 'unscholarliness, superficiality, second-hand knowledge and... [the subjugation of their] critical and reasoning faculties', to that which fosters instead their 'independent judgement' (1921: 101).

Perrie Williams was possibly the youngest member of The Committee. Almost all the others whose ages are known are over 50. This suggests, then, that they were experienced and well-established; they had entire careers to draw upon, valuable funds of knowledge.

Professionally, The Committee included those familiar with the work of elementary schools (including HMIs) and teachers from grammar and independent schools. In fact, given that some EA members were HMIs (including Dover Wilson), it is perfectly possible that the anonymous *Suggestions* were written by those the same individuals, or at least that they were in conversation with each other, which reinforces the notion that debate about English took place across the various settings.

One possible criticism is that The Committee was a relatively closed circle. Beyond the EA connections, there is a certain quasi-nepotism in that four members (including Newbolt himself) were schoolmates at Clifton College, and one (Fowler)

taught there, while Quiller-Couch (one of Newbolt's Clifton peers) had included Newbolt's poetry in his *Oxford Book of English Verse* (1900). Clifton College (founded in 1862) was, however, unusually progressive. For instance, Fowler (1915) describes the Library Committee, responsible for the selection of new purchases, as including the Head Master, nine or ten teachers and seven sixth formers, thus suggesting active encouragement of student voice; while Boas describes the 'electric atmosphere' engendered by the 'men of exceptional literary gifts' who had taught him at Clifton, and notes that it was not surprising that Cliftonians went on to become 'some of the best-known poets and men of letters of to-day (*sic*)'. Boas acknowledges that he was fortunate to have attended such a school, stating his aspiration that the same opportunities should be available at 'much humbler educational institutions' (1919: 7). This democratic, inclusive theme runs through individual publications by Committee members and *Newbolt* itself.

My approach

The first four texts I discuss below were all published prior to the Report³, while Sampson was probably writing the fifth (1922) in parallel with his Committee work. I address them in chronological order because the intertextuality — their relationship to each other — is relevant. The documents respond and 'speak' to their predecessors, so understanding the full story behind *Newbolt* relies upon critical chronological awareness of them all. I concentrate on these texts that predate *Newbolt* (rather than Committee members' subsequent publications) to emphasise how it drew from its antecedents. Key shared themes are:

- that English is central to a broad, balanced education;
- that national unity and a non-elitist society could be forged through the celebration of a shared language;
- that aesthetic, creative and imaginative experiences are vital to the nurturing and growth of individuals;
- that civilised, humane relationships depend upon such an education.

³ Since it has proved impossible to access the works of Firth, Spurgeon and Williams that pre-date the Report, I have been unable to include them.

Texts in time: the forerunners to the Report

1. I begin with *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250–1900* (Quiller-Couch 1900), a book that sold nearly half a million copies and, in its ‘knapsack’ edition, was carried to the trenches. Quiller-Couch’s choices arguably influenced the public’s taste in poetry for decades to come.

In the preface, he stresses that the adjective ‘English’ of the title refers to the language in which the verse is written, not the country of its source: ‘Nor have I sought in these Islands only, but wheresoever the Muse has followed the tongue which among living tongues she most delights to honour’ (1900, n.p.). Although this could indicate a privileging of the English above other languages, Quiller-Couch appears actively to resist overt patriotism and imperialism by emphasising that the poems are drawn from across the world (the selection includes works by Yeats and Poe, amongst others).

He goes on to state his ambition both ‘to serve those who already love poetry and to implant that love in some young minds not yet initiated’ (n.p.), which indicates a desire to reach those who had not benefited from an education such as his own. He even updated antiquated spellings in order not to discourage new readers, despite knowing some purists would balk – although his democratic message is rather undermined when he switches to Greek to note that he hopes the book ‘has made the Muses’ access easier when, in the right hour, they come to him to uplift or to console’ (n.p.).

This irony notwithstanding, Quiller-Couch’s internationalist and democratic tone prefigures the inclusive theme of *Newbolt*, which recommends that children become ‘bi-lingual’ (*sic*) in their local dialect and ‘standard English’ (*sic*) (1921: 67). The recognition of dialect acknowledges the importance of personal identity; the need to learn Standard English was not for ‘social superiority’ (67), but because English had by then been voted the international language by the Northern Peace Union: it was therefore important that English children could speak a standard version in order to communicate with their European neighbours. This suggests an ambition that international travel (whether for commerce or tourism) — or at least dialogue with international visitors to England — was something for which all children should be prepared, and demonstrates *Newbolt*’s vision of a then undreamt-of future for working class children.

2. Fowler, writing one of the earliest EA publications, *English Literature in Secondary Schools* (1908), follows Quiller-Couch in refusing to glorify England or the English. His essay discusses the superiority of French essaying and journalism, suggesting that English was in a poor state because teachers were poorly-trained and the traditional Classics-based approach was unsuited to English.

Fowler's message is that subject English is about 'seeing life steadily and seeing it whole'; accordingly, for instance, parsing of literary extracts is unhelpful, as that prevents full 'consideration of the author's style and method, his aim and achievement... [which is] far more essential and far more truly educative' (1908: 2). This notion that English is central to a full, meaningful education is reflected in *Newbolt's* repeated assertion that English is the 'only basis possible' for a 'universal, reasonable, and liberal' education (1921: 348).

Fowler is also critical of the content of English examinations. He argues that their old-fashioned content, and reliance on what is most easily assessed (rather than what is valuable or useful), make them unsuitable vehicles through which 'the average Englishman may attain to... an understanding and love of his national literature' (1908: 2). Fowler's fear is echoed by *Newbolt*: 'there is the danger that a true instinct for humanism may be smothered by the demand for definite measurable results, especially the passing of examinations' (1921: 55).

Fowler wants the 'average' student both to be able to achieve in examinations and appreciate literature for its own sake. He argues that to study literature is not 'unmanly' but 'the best possible preparation for the study of the sciences and for the needs of practical life;' it should be valued for 'its power to enlighten and to uplift', and because 'literature is a help to [students] in their own lives' and, through empathetic understanding, their 'help to the lives of others' (1908: 7). He thereby offers a view of English that fosters personal growth, develops humane relationships and is necessary to all spheres of life, a theme that is later picked up by *Newbolt* which argues that English is:

...the channel for formative culture of all English people, and the medium of creative art by which all English writers of distinction, whether poets, historians, philosophers or men of science, have

secured for us the power of realising some part of their own experience of life. (1921: 12).

I now turn to the contributions of two Committee members who presented at the 1918 EA conference.

3. In *Teachers of English: Some of their difficulties and opportunities*, Boas admits that English in some classrooms — lacking the excitement of science or the thrill of foreign languages — is ‘resisted’ by students (1919: 5). Nevertheless, he goes on to make an impassioned argument for English as a unitary subject in which oracy — a ‘necessity’ (1919: 8) — has equal status to reading and writing. He calls for teachers in all types of school to be free to develop a curriculum not limited to the mere ‘beggarly elements’, but a ‘diverse’ and ‘balanced’ offer that will prove inspirational:

We know now that the English curriculum of a school must be an organic thing, that it must grow from within, adapting itself to individual needs and conditions, and must not be dictated from without... [A teacher should] feed and train the imagination of his pupils, guide them to what is beautiful, and make them capable of enjoying it rightly. (1919: 8)

Boas here borrows the nutrition imagery previously used by Matthew Arnold (1869) which is then picked up again in *Newbolt*: ‘the spirit makes its growth from what it feeds on’ (1921: 337).

4. The humanist theme is continued by Dover Wilson in *The Teaching of English in the New Continuation Schools* (1919): for him, English and humanism are virtually synonymous. He sees English is ‘a subject including the whole of English culture — in a word... Humanism’ (1919: 30). He argues especially for students to understand ‘language as an instrument and as a living thing with a history’ (1919: 31) through active oral work (‘especially... speech and debate’), written work including ‘variety of theme, of vocabulary, of treatment — descriptions, narratives, dialogues, and attempts at verse’, and literature of the student’s choice on ‘subjects in which they were really interested’, both classic and contemporary. In this way, he suggests,

students gradually understand that 'The study of English literature is bound up with the study of reality [through] emphasizing (*sic*) the connexion between reality, and vision' (1919: 34). He concludes:

English, properly taught, is then no soft option, no substitute for any harder or more fruitful subject. It quickens and inspires to the healthy functioning of every faculty of mind and will and spirit. It is the best clue to an understanding of the national life, but it is, above all, for English boys and girls, the most profound and indispensable part of that education in the humanities which is to lead to the full development of the individual for the service not merely of the State, but of mankind. (1919: 34)

In painting English as the means through which children learn to know themselves, and know and contribute to the world, he again foreshadows *Newbolt*, where similar points are oft re-stated: English is 'the true starting point and foundation from which all the rest must spring' (1921: 14); it is both 'the very stuff and process' and 'the principal method' of education (56); an education through English should 'bridge social chasms which divide us' (1921:6), leading to 'national unity' (1921:14) and international concord⁴.

5. George Sampson published *English for the English* (1922) a year after The Report. Its humanist, democratic, child-centred themes are strikingly similar. Sampson states that 'Education is a preparation for life, not merely for a livelihood, for living not for a living' (1922: 4), a phrase that recalls both '[Education] proceeds, not by the presentation of lifeless facts, but by teaching the student to follow the different lines on which life may be explored and proficiency in living may be obtained (*Newbolt*, 1921: 8) and 'Education is preparation for life, not merely for livelihood' (316). The near-identical phrasing suggests that Sampson was actively contributing to *Newbolt* when engaged with his own writing (or, at least, reflecting immediately upon it).

⁴ See Gibbons, this volume.

Sampson, however, adopts a more strident and overtly political tone in his monograph than would have been possible for the official report of The Committee. He calls for a 'bloodless revolution' to overturn dull, traditional ways so that the result of education is not that children '*know something*' but '*be something*' (1922: vi; emphasis original). He asserts that he is more interested in children's 'souls' than their 'heads' (1922: vii) and — perhaps controversially — tackles the class divide head on: 'Harrow is allowed to make men: Hoxton has to make hands' (13). As an elementary school teacher, it is these children of the working class, destined for unskilled jobs, for whom he fights: 'it is the purpose of education, not to prepare [these] children for their occupations, *but to prepare children against their occupations*' (10, my emphasis). He sees English (literature especially) as crucial in enabling them to transcend the humdrum and 'awaken [them] to any creative fullness of life' (14). *Newbolt* had put it more simply: 'Above all, the children should discover the delight of books (1921: 83).

Worthy Witnesses

There is insufficient space here to discuss the Witnesses consulted by The Committee in any depth. It is worth observing, however, that the 100-plus individuals involved, a third of whom were women, represented a variety of types of school, government departments, and commercial and industrial firms (listed in Appendix 1 of The Report). This suggests that The Committee sought out progressive, inclusive and creative perspectives. Among the experts invited are, for example, Greening Lambourn (Head Master, East Oxford Council School) and author of another *Poetry and the Child* (1919); Philip Hartog, whose *The Writing of English* (1907) is considered by Shayer to be an 'excellent book, putting grammar firmly into perspective' (1972: 24); and Professor Edith Morley, Professor of English Language at University College, Reading, who presented a paper entitled *Literature as a Humane Study* (1919) at the EA conference.

Concluding thoughts

I have argued in this chapter that *Newbolt* promotes a child-centred, humane unitary English as central to the development of individuals and the future prosperity of the nation. *Newbolt* had deliberately chosen for his Committee a body of professional

experts; well-qualified, respected, experienced and influential practitioners. *Newbolt* thereby capitalised on existing funds of knowledge and built on already-established notions of the subject. In this way, The Committee's work could be said to have been created from the bottom up, nurtured through practice established in the English classrooms of progressive teachers, honed through academic debate. The Report was embraced by many in the profession and ensured that English was 'well set for the decades ahead' (Shayer 1972: 74).

The Committee's approach set the tone for subsequent major reports on English. Bullock (1975), Kingman (1988) and Cox (1989) also established panels of experts, with Bullock's and Cox's respective committees consulting particularly widely: each conferred with hundreds of individuals whose names and roles, listed in the Appendices of their reports, indicate they were leaders in their fields. These reports, too, were widely accepted by the profession (Marshall, 2000).

However, in a shift of emphasis and approach, the current National Curriculum (DfE 2014) was developed through a different, 'top down' approach. Its authors are unknown; consultation was minimal; expert guidance was ignored (White & Brown 2012; Wintour 2012) and many English teachers are unhappy with the result (Yandell & Brady 2016; Bomford 2018). It is to be hoped that, when the time comes to review it, the modern equivalent of the President of the Board of Education is brave enough to follow his predecessors in establishing a committee of expert English teaching professionals to re-imagine the English Curriculum.

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