

*Postgraduate English Journal*, No. 36 (Spring 2018)

**Sheila Cordner. *Education in Nineteenth-Century British Literature: Exclusion as Innovation*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016. ISBN 978-1-4724-6747-8.**

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It scarcely requires an invocation of Charles Dickens's Thomas Gradgrind to remind us that nineteenth-century pedagogies were focused on cramming, on rote learning at the expense of imaginative and fruitful engagement with the great works of the past. Sheila Cordner's *Education in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* acknowledges that schooling is always a means to an end; education can also offer rewards, albeit less tangible ones, such as a rich sense of inwardness.<sup>1</sup> Both, indeed, are useful, although the former would provide the means to pursue the latter and the latter demands a degree of luxury that the former might give. Clearly there is a balance to be struck.

Cordner's work considers "an influential group of writers—all excluded from Oxford and Cambridge because of their class or gender—who argue extensively for the value of learning outside of schools altogether".<sup>2</sup> They are "educational outliers" who sought in their fiction to resist and critique elite institutions and pedagogies, and in doing so offer alternative methods of learning to the quasi-cult of "cram". Current notions of the elitism of education largely spring from the pedagogical hegemony associated with schools like Eton and universities like Oxford and Cambridge. The autodidacticism promoted by the authors examined by Cordner—Jane Austen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Thomas Hardy, and George Gissing—provides a precious counterblast to such hegemony, and her book serves as

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<sup>1</sup> Sheila Cordner. *Education in Nineteenth-Century British Literature: Exclusion as Innovation*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016. p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. i.

a useful guide to some of this literature, creating a similar kind of study to Patrick Brantlinger's *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, Dinah Birch's *Our Victorian Education*, and Mary Hammond's *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England, 1880-1914*, while learning from social historians like Jonathan Rose.

Despite what the blurb might indicate, the concentration here—and Corder is explicit about this—is on Oxford University, not Cambridge. This allows her to hone her examination of both university education and the autodidacticism promoted by the four writers under scrutiny; however, as she also points out, women's colleges and mass education schools tended to adopt the Oxford system of pedagogy, so she is also exploring more than a single university.

The first chapter examines some of the work of Austen, largely concentrating on the novelist's ironic tone. A narratological methodology would have given weight and nuance to the overarching structure of the chapter. What is especially refreshing here, however, is Corder's interest in the author's less canonical works, especially the *History of England*, which presents a Fielding-esque challenge to authorial omnipresence and allows Corder to demonstrate what Austen learnt from the periodical, *The Loiterer*, founded by Austen's eldest brother James (a generous excerpt constitutes one of the four appendices). The previous, general ascription of Austen's irony has been a re-appropriation of the sombre, sermonising tone of Samuel Johnson's essays and essayistic prose. This additional focus is then used to shed light on the canonical novels, most prominently and successfully *Mansfield Park*, in which the Bertram sisters are expected to educate themselves only so that they may secure a decent marriage. Fanny Price opts instead for "scrambling" her education, acquiring knowledge that is "self-directed and hands-on".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Corder, *Education*, pp. 22-3.

The next chapter, on *Aurora Leigh*, though short, is a vital mid-nineteenth century addition to the study. Barrett Browning's "headlong reading" technique develops beyond Austen's scrambling by appealing to a wider audience. This is essentially an experiential approach to reading designed to encourage openness to other people.<sup>4</sup> It is here that Corder begins to discuss working-class readers, although her use of Jonathan Rose's important study/compendium, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, is somewhat limited. While it is true that some working-class and lower-middle-class readers challenged the bourgeois culture that indoctrinated them, many of them used this to integrate and become part of the hegemony rather than resist it.<sup>5</sup>

The third chapter, on Hardy, focuses on *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, *Jude the Obscure*, and Angel Clare in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. It is here that we get a truly tangible sense of what a full education outside of an institution might look like. Corder does not shy away from biographical criticism throughout, but it is most powerful here, not least because Hardy's autodidacticism is the ultimate antidote to any institutionalised education, no matter how elitist. Beyond observing that Hardy paints a bleak picture of autodidacts struggling to enter elite establishments, she further notes that the institutions are missing out on the 'intellectual hunger' of such men as Jude Fawley.<sup>6</sup>

The final chapter, on Gissing, explores his roles as an excellent student denied the academic life and as an incredibly enthusiastic educator. Corder offers too much basic explanation, and not enough rigorous explication, of certain passages from Gissing's letters and fiction.<sup>7</sup> Such filler in a short monograph is cause for concern, as are descriptions of what the chapter is going to examine appearing halfway through that chapter.<sup>8</sup> Corder's focus is

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<sup>4</sup> Corder, *Education*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85, p. 88, and p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

on *Thyrza*, which is a particularly apposite choice given the theme of the monograph, although there is no acknowledgement on her part that this is early Gissing, an author who had two distinct phases in his career: the early working-class novels and the later novels of middle-class society. An examination of *Born in Exile*, for example, a novel from the latter part of his career, would have added nuance and weight to the general argument and provided the chapter with more solid material. She also discusses the “Woman Question” without reference to one of the most important studies on the subject, *George Gissing and the Woman Question: Convention and Dissent*, edited by Christine Huguet and Simon J. James and also published by Routledge. All that said, she relates Gissing back to the other authors in a meaningful and satisfying manner, showing how Gissing extends in particular the work of Hardy: Hardy identifies outlying *individuals*, whereas Gissing shows intellectual outliers to be members of a *group*, not quite outliers and not quite part of elite establishments.

The conclusion provides some analysis of Virginia Woolf’s less well-known writings, followed by a brief look at *The Girton Review* and, zipping forward in time, Willy Russell’s *Educating Rita*. The stress here is on women studying within elite organisations yet still feeling like outsiders. Her focus, in terms of nineteenth-century readers, is marginalised communities and groups – working/lower-middle classes and women – so the conclusion is well-suited to the narrative arc of the book. Cordner could have discussed Woolf’s personal education—her friends and family included many superb intellectuals—in the main text, but instead she includes this in a long footnote. A propos, the quality of the footnotes and editing is remarkably high.

Overall, there is a fine sense of balance in this work: there are two female authors and two male authors, there is an equal weighting between the first half of the nineteenth century and the second half, there is the right amount of discussion of student life at Oxford compared to the discussion of authors’ works, and so forth. It is somewhat surprising,

however, that, in a book on elitism in the nineteenth century, there is no discussion of Darwinism or Darwin's pernicious offshoot, Herbert Spencer. Furthermore, there is no discussion of a non-canonical writer. The Education Acts of 1870/1 crucially heralded the age of the bestseller, in part a reflection of the new readership available to authors and their publishers; therefore, analysis of, for example, Marie Corelli's *The Mighty Atom* (1896) and *Boy* (1900), which both examine problems inherent in late-Victorian pedagogies, would have lent more credibility to the argument. Of course, the nineteenth century, taken as a whole, encompasses such economic, social, political, and literary upheaval that any study, particularly one of slightly more than one hundred pages, must inevitably fall short in certain areas. It is to Corder's credit that there is much inspiration here for new research to be undertaken.