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## THE NEWBOLT REPORT AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ENGLISH STUDIES IN THE ENGLISH UNIVERSITIES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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### ABSTRACT

English studies as a fully fledged independent subject could gain its place into the syllabus of English Universities after much struggle. It was only after the Newbolt Committee Report was commissioned by the Board of Education that the importance and necessity of English as a subject was recognized and acknowledged in England. Before the Report, English as a subject was chiefly studied in relation to History, Philology or Language. English studies never had the status of an independent subject. Initially beginning from the nineteenth century onwards various factors contributed to the rise of English in England which provided the impetus for the recognition of the subject into the university curriculum. Although English first was taught in Kings College in 1831 focus was mainly in rhetoric and philology and not much importance was given to literature. It was the Report that formally recognized the poor condition and status of the subject within the universities and emphasized the dire need for change in the approach towards it. This paper thus tries to explore the significance, contribution and importance of the Newbolt Committee Report in acquiring significance of English Studies within the Universities curriculum. Also this paper will also try to highlight the various factors and conditions which initially helped English to develop as subject of study and presently made it possible to occupy its position as a central discipline in the humanities.

Keywords: English studies, Philology, rise of English, History, language.

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The acclamation of English studies as a privileged academic subject was confirmed in the nineteenth century England only after it was included as courses in the Oxford and Cambridge Universities. At the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign neither Oxford nor Cambridge considered English Literature in their curricula and their students were required to express allegiance to the Church of England as a condition of entry which did not provide any scope for English

studies to flourish as a discipline which Peter Barry calls the 'monopoly' of the church (*Beginning Theory*, 17) that provided hindrance towards its development. The radical breakthrough was the shift from religious to secular thought which divorced educational institutions from religious ties.

One of the many reasons for the rise of English studies in England during the nineteenth century was the failure of religion in providing consolation as

its own foundation began to tremble with the beginning of a new scientific worldview and social disruption brought by the Industrial Revolution. Terry Eagleton writes, "If one were to asked to provide a single explanation for the the growth of English Studies in the later nineteen century one could do worse than reply: "the failure of religion" (" The Rise of English" 20). English literature was also seen as the moral and aesthetic guide for the nation, echoing Mathew Arnold's emphasis on mixing of moral culture with aesthetics and his vision that British cultural ideals were embedded within it and the appreciation of literature should supplant religion in providing spiritual nourishment in an industrial life. Also literature was thought to ease the masses from any "political bigotry" and "ideological extremism" or any kind social unrest by communicating to them the "universal human values" through the "softening" and "humanizing" effect of English which would "...nurture in them a spirit of tolerance and generosity" (Eagleton, 22-23). Again in the twentieth century the inclusion of English literature in the syllabuses of Oxford and Cambridge was re-affirmed by the Newbolt Report under the chairmanship of the poet Sir Henry Newbolt, President of the English Association, which highlighted the importance and necessity of English as a subject of study and made it clear to offer English as an essential subject at all levels of education.

In the year 1921, *The Teaching of English in England* was published, generally called as The Newbolt Report, which was commissioned by the Board of Education to enquire into the state of English teaching in England which can be considered as the first significant state policy commentary in British history to officially reflect the place of English in the education system. After the First World War, the English people re-evaluated their education system and called for immediate changes within the system that would upsurge a national consciousness of pride in the language and culture and "if cultivated by the study of English, it could provide the basis for a lasting national identity" (Chris Baldick, 90). According to the report, this sense of urgency for national pride and unity could only be fulfilled by English which was seen

as the repertoire of culture and value; at the same time it also stressed the role of the subject in the improvement of the education system as stated, in the Report "in this country we have no general scheme of education"( *The Teaching of English in England*,5). The Report also affirms the high position English Literature occupies in terms of knowledge:

... we state what appears to us to be an incontrovertible primary fact that for English children no form of knowledge can take precedence of a knowledge of English, no form of literature can take precedence of English literature: and the two are so inextricably connected as to form the only basis possible for a national education.(14)

The Report described English as the, "keystone"(5) of education, "a matter of the most vital concern, and one which by its nature, take precedence of all other branch of learning" (10). It also helped to conceptualized that English was to unite the people of England by blending all the disparate interest within the nation and was considered as the "healing balm" and "social glue" for the nation( Andy Goodwyn, "English and Literacy in Education" 17).Moreover the gruesome barbarism after the Great war, the nation needed to reconsider their national identity in terms of a shared culture and language which would enhance their strength as a nation:

This immense importance of the native language for the purposes of the humane culture, which is the highest object of a University, must henceforth be frankly recognised in English Universities... Our language and literature are a great source of pride and may be made as great as a bond of national unity as those to the French. (202)

In the chapter on Universities, the report stated that the university is the "apex of the educational edifice" (195) and declared English as the universal subject, as irrespective of any subject a student takes "he will need fullest command of the highest resources of his own language... to make it a possession of his own" (199) ; and insisted that it must occupy a central place on University curriculum:

English then is needed in every faculty. It is the one subject which for an Englishman has the claim of universality. Without it he cannot attain to full powers either of learning or of teaching in any. We should like to see this officially recognised... It is one of the greatest subject to which a university can call its student.(200).

Although English as subject was offered for study in 1828 itself it was mainly the study of language, English literature as such was taught first at the King's College in London after its establishment in 1831 but whatever was taught in the name of the subject was mainly rhetoric with emphasis on historical and philological studies and not much of development was made in the field of literature ( Barry,18). The Report mentioned the poor status of the discipline within the Universities and the dire need for change into the entire system of approach:

...English had no position at all at the Universities...English was in fact not a part of the ordinary and recognised studies of a University. If any graduate or undergraduate studied Chaucer or Shakespeare... he did it of his own motion and not as a part of any recognised course included in the studies of a University.(197)

The committee emphasized the nation's present need for a liberal kind of education which was not possible because of the dominance of the Greek and Latin Classics which was not easily available or rather inaccessible to all the masses, as the Report states:

The idea of Liberal education is either altogether ignored or struggles feebly for the right of existence; and even where it still lives, there is a single depreciation of the value of English literature for such a purpose. By the traditions... the Latin and the Greek classics are far more estimated.(12)

English literature as such, could be effective as the substitute discipline that would serve as the, "similar and sufficient channel of supply which is within the reach of all without distinction"(14). Even the most fervent proponents for university English literature in

the late nineteenth century such as John Churton Collins had agreed that their subject would have the fervor of serious scholarship if only read alongside the classics( Alexandra Lawrie, *The Beginning of University English*, 152) and so it was not possible to discard altogether the much revered Greek and Latin in the scholarship field. In their complete acknowledgement of the seriousness of the matter, the Newbolt Committee suggested that although the knowledge of classic would no doubt be beneficial to the students but, "the ideal would not be attained. Indeed, the ideal includes a great deal beside Greek and Latin"(211) and therefore they, " can only recommend that, whether in addition to Classics or in substitution for them, weight should be given in the examination to a knowledge of one or more foreign literatures, so far as they are related to our own" (211-12). The committee evaluated, "the knowledge of English" (14) and English literature as fundamental basis of all education in general and claimed that "the real power of literature is still to be revealed as teachers and educationist must find its true value and promote it" ( *The Newbolt Report*, 340, as quoted in " English language and literature in the UK education system" by Antonie Kelly). Alexandra Lawrie also says that back in 1880's, Collins already claimed that drawing comparison with English literature would "rejuvenate a putatively moribund subject" and would also contribute in lending "greater complexity to the analyses of Greek and Latin by Classics student" (153). Echoing Collin's claim, the Newbolt Report, also stressed the value of English in University curriculum and the aid that vernacular texts can give in understanding the Classics:

We should like to see it expressly laid down that a candidate for Honours in a Classical school, should have opportunities of illustrating his studies of the poetry or prose, the history or law or philosophy, of Greece and Rome, by their English parallels or derivatives and that such illustration should have weight with the examiners in deciding his class. We believe that such a regulation would not only be a just recognition of the importance of English and of the fact that all

foreign literatures are best approached by an Englishman through English, but would bring added life and new interest to the Classical "Schools" and classical studies.(209)

The committee also refute many dogmas that had haunted the English studies for many decades, that it was a "soft option" calling the charge "untrue" and "danger imaginary"(203).In it's defense it says:

...it is pure delusion to suppose that the fact that a boy or a man knows enough English...leaves him nothing hard and difficult to learn when he comes to study English Literature. On the contrary, the very fact of that elementary difficulty being absent in this subject should enable a student of English Literature to face problems and difficulties which he often has hardly time to attempt at the literature..(203)

The report dismissed this as a "bogey", for the subject demanded "prolonged and laborious study and will at least start its candidate on a path which followed to the end, leads to such knowledge of English Literature as Bently or Jebb possessed of Greek."( 204, as quoted by Lawrie, 154)

Another misconception associated with English is that it is often treated as a branch of History or Sociology, the Committee asserted that instead of seeing it adjunct to any other subject it should be regarded as an autonomous subject and acknowledge it's uniqueness as a form of art and richness of knowledge, "Literature is an art and art is different from either science or speculation, the mainspring of philosophy"(206).

At the same time, the Report also addressed the debate whether universities should have a Joint School of Literature and Language or divide it into two separate ones, the Committee opted for a single school but also made it clear that while teaching language, it shouldn't be confined to the study of only "philology - that is etymology, morphology and phonology"(Lawrie, 156) and phonetics such that the, "the outlook was scientific rather than literary, and who handled linguistic problems in the spirit of the chemist or the physicist"(217). This problem occurred

because of the influence German philology at that time and hence "too little attention had been paid to syntax and too much to separate words. Historical grammar and history of the language ought not be regarded as a philological side of the study distinct from the history of literature" (218). And the study of English language through the analyses of "semantics - or study of meaning" was as important as that of "origins, structure or grammar"(226).

The Newbolt Report offered a historical survey of English as a discipline and provisions laid out by university English teaching and lamented the subject's struggle for acceptance in the universities boldly stating, "First of all the "School" or "Schools" of English language and Literature should rank at every English University as at least the equal of any Arts "School" " (201). It argued vehemently about the state of negligence of English as a discipline and insisted on building it into a total education experience and how the nation's need for a liberal kind of education can be fulfilled only through the rich culture and language of the British heritage. The position of English as a university subject was raised and acclaimed notably due to the efforts of the Newbolt Committee and their Report. It covered the whole range of education, from elementary school and universities and argued that the understanding of literature should have a central role in the whole education system of England (*Encyclopedia.com*). And nevertheless, English was established firmly in the ancient Universities namely Oxford and Cambridge after the publication of the Report, for it was in 1926 at Cambridge that I.A Richard and his colleagues would revolutionize the subject with their "Passage of English Prose and Verse for Critical Comments" (Lawrie, 160). It can be said that it was only after the First World War, that the country of England re-assessed their "sense of national pride, for which literature was a standard bearer"(Chris Baldick,94) and which led to the publication of *The Teaching of English in England* in the year 1922, which caused English Literature to thrive in the universities before which it had been seen as imitations of Classics chiefly used in relation to History or Sociology or Language and English Studies

was transformed from an amateurish subject to a highly professional field of enquiry as well as scholarship and occupying at present state as a central discipline in the humanities.

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