

# Gordon Graham's *Universities: The Recovery of an Idea*\*

or

## Symptoms of the Academic

*In case you think we want to conceal the sound of an axe grinding . . .* In his Introduction, Gordon Graham makes some remarks, intended to be cautiously unflattering, about Ian Robinson's and my book *The New Idea of a University*: he thinks we constantly run the risk of falling into the trap of dangerously romanticising British universities, may be charged not wholly inaccurately with deploring the present and lamenting the past, and be plausibly said by our critics to fall into the camp, pigeon-hole and bracket of the "traditionalist" etc. . . .

Ordinary thinking man—unacademic but still thinking—may (or may not) look before he leaps to judgement; Gordon Graham, typically, looks and doesn't leap at all (but lets you know that, he could, if he would):

He is not, for the moment, directly, concerned with the justice of the complaint that the British University, having once been possibly the best in the world, is now at most second rate, only with observing that the complaint has been made. (p. 14)

He won't, here, inveigh against† modularisation, "even if there is reason to". (p. 52)

Although it can be reasonably asked, in his view, whether such a course as Hotel Management—to cite a plausible example—has sufficient intellectual substance to warrant a place in a university, that is not to say it hasn't. (p. 55)

Although he has various reservations about the particular forms university assessment has historically taken, the important thing to stress is that nothing has been said here against the idea of assessment as such. (p. 60)

It can, of course, be asked whether "research" is an essential university function but as it is not, in fact, asked widely ("seriously"), the question is idle and consequently not one he shall inquire into. (p. 61)

In a great many important respects, universities now behave and conceive of themselves as businesses, with products, customers, logos, corporate images and the rest—something which would have been universally regarded as quite out of place only a very short time ago. Some people resent and ridicule this new way of thinking and speaking; others adopt it with almost slavish enthusiasm. A judicious assessment of it is only to be reached with difficulty through the "'on the one hand this, on the other that' approach". It may be true that the new way of speaking is cumbersome, ugly and unhelpful and that it seems to have been adopted uncritically and from indifference; that does not mean, however, that saying, dispassionately, whether it is appropriate to a university or not is anything but hard; nor does it mean that it is not a genuine indication of a change that is necessary. The accusation can be reasonably levelled at some critics who deny its appropriateness that they seemingly fly in the face of reality. Many of their opponents, on the other hand, make the mistake of thinking that businesses is really and truly what universities are. There is solid reason to conclude then that, while it would be wrong to refuse to go far enough in modelling universities on business, commerce and industry, to go too far would be wrong too. (pp. 95–7)

Was the printed page ever filled up to less purpose?

Although Gordon Graham calls his book *Universities: the Recovery of an Idea* (and has a portrait of Newman filling its front cover) . . . the thing above all he doesn't leap to say is what the *Idea* is. He promises a book about an idea, and supplies one about organisation, government, finance and anything-but.

Why? Because—weird as it might seem to outsiders—he teaches *in* a university. He is an academic, and therefore afraid. What of? What not? Of anything, everything. Cross-garters, hot pokers, things that go bump in the night. The academy—which is called an ivory tower by outsiders—is, to many in it, a dangerous place, full of man-traps and banana skins. (They're out to get you there.) So, alert and wary, the academic author, venturing out (of his

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† Of course, outside the academy, no one does 'inveigh against' things any more. But inside they do or, at least, are said to by others, and then are conscious of being thought to have something to blush for—for having strayed from the "'on the one hand this, on the other that' approach."

study, into print), looks before and after (and to the side); and, seeing no way of safely speaking of ideas, sticks to material arrangements instead.

Though, there again, just to *ignore* the *Idea* might be risky too. It's a matter of finding the right way to approach it. Mustn't review it (like a mere reviewer). And mustn't revitalise it (as if, in an excess of conviction, one believed it). But, since it isn't wholly without topicality, perhaps, from time to time, in the chapters that follow, one might . . . um . . . *refer* to it—parts of it—as something worthy of being . . . um . . . referred to.

But even that isn't without its dangers. Although one is ready to run the risk of saying that some rival or other has run the risk of falling into some trap or other, what one won't run the risk of saying is that some rival or other *has* fallen into some trap or other. That *would* be falling into a trap. The thing is, not to be pinned down. Not to blunder straight ahead, to a conclusion but to carefully pick one's way between the pitfalls to the right and the prat-falls to the left. One sees (and shows that one sees) this side of the question and that, and, from high above both, does justice to—that is, sees the objections to—each.

Some might plausibly be thought by their critics (of whom one might, or might not, oneself be one) to occupy an identifiable camp, pigeon-hole, strait-jacket, bracket, position, dichotomy, or the like. Not one. Some might risk being charged, not wholly inaccurately, with naïve and unacademic emotionalism, with deploring or lamenting or romanticising, even (Senate forbid!) with inveighing against. (Oneself would rather be caught dogging.)

One's purpose is to draw attention to only, to explore, begin discussion of, examine, inquire, regard, sketch, consider, record, look at, review and, perhaps, set out not only certain questions but, if strength lasts (and the tea leaves look not unpropitious), some answers to them too (in a way that makes their debate more precise and, hence, more profitable). All the while showing that one sees the difficulty and the reasons for the difficulty, the complexity and the additional difficulty the complexity brings.

The range of tasks is daunting. Such their scope that to say the last word on any one impossible. But to offer a first? That might be worth sticking one's head above the parapet for. To attempt to relate the relatively abstruse to the relatively practical and to address the result in a sustained or measured way, with clarity and vigour, ah, now that *might* contribute something to ameliorate a confusion or a malaise. At any rate, it would be something reasonable to attempt.

God help us but what work of note—what *work* at all—can be done in such a spirit?

Newman's book isn't just about the thought proper to a university but is itself an example that justifies it. If Gordon Graham's book justifies anything at all, it can only be closing the university down. Graham invokes Newman—than whom no one speaks more plainly, more directly, more forcefully—and then writes a book of his own which couldn't be less plain, less direct, less forceful, more hopelessly niminy-piminy. (*And* has the nerve to say that Newman's language sounds odd to our ears!) He thinks he's got a purpose when he's scarcely got a drift. Better to yawn, sigh, cough, *scratch* than write such a book.

*Duke Maskell*