'Illusions and Delusions' and Beyond:

Fifty Years of Experimental Psychology at Oxford

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THIS month Oxford will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the formal incorporation of Psychology into its spectrum of academic departments. In 1936 the University decided to found the Institute of Experimental Psychology. Yet only three years previously an article by William Brown, the Wilde Reader in Mental Philosophy, had castigated Oxford for turning its back on Psychology and despaired of there ever being a Psychology course for undergraduates in this University. In the 11 May 1933 issue of the *Oxford Magazine* he wrote resignedly that 'psychology has encountered more difficulty in breaking away and finding its own level in Oxford than in any other university . . . Oxford is the only great university in the world which still has no laboratory in experimental psychology.' Cambridge, he noted, had appointed a Professor of Experimental Psychology, and 'in any University in the world except Oxford, psychology may be taken as a separate subject, and examinations are set in that subject. . . . At Oxford the only way a student can show his knowledge of psychology is indirectly in some of the "Greats" papers,—and he does so at his peril.' (He himself had followed that course but remarked, 'I do not think it helped me at all.')

The fact that Oxford changed its mind three years later must have been a pleasant surprise for William Brown and might have irritated as well as surprised some others who had been involved in the fate of Psychology in Oxford. The first time that the subject actually became related, albeit in a somewhat negative way, to a named post here was in 1898, with the appointment of the first Wilde Reader in Mental Philosophy, G. F. Stout. Henry Wilde was careful to try to keep the Reader well away from experimental studies. His reasons are not altogether clear; it may have been that Cambridge (especially James Ward) was flirting with the idea of a laboratory of psychophysics, i.e. the study of sensory detection and perceptual estimations. That proposal had generated some notable opposition there, including the remark from a Cambridge mathematician that it 'would insult religion by putting the human soul in a pair of scales'. Cambridge did create a Lectureship in Experimental Psychology and Physiology of the Senses in 1893, and appointed W. H. R. Rivers to it. But he had to wait another four years before getting a single room, and he was also occupied with holding a similar post, simultaneously, at University College London. Not much of a threat there, not yet. In any case, Rivers soon became attracted away to Anthropology after his important work in New Guinea.

Wilde's idea was far removed from the Cambridge Lectureship, if not from Rivers's anthropological excursions, and he may also have been bothered (as was William James at the same time) by the establishment of laboratories of 'microscopic' experimental psychology in Germany and America—a species that is now extinct. Wilde's bequest, embellished in the Statutes, required that 'the Reader shall from time to time lecture on the illusions and delusions which are incident to the human mind. He shall also lecture, as far as may be practicable, on the psychology of the lower races of mankind, as illustrated by the various fetish objects in the Anthropological Museum of the University and in other Museums.' Needless to say, these statutes have since been changed. Wilde stipulated that the Reader should 'study the human mind based on observation and experiences as distinguished from Experimental Psychology'. The conditions of appointment were explicit and unambiguous: such study should be 'exclusive of methods of experimental psychology'. This restriction too has been removed, and the Wilde Reader is now as free as anyone else to do psychological experiments.

The first two Readers were recruited from Cambridge. The first remained here for only five years. The second was a polymath and intellectual giant who remained somewhat longer. William McDougall, however, refused to be bound by the terms of the Readership, which had not by then been changed, and was an ardent and highly effective experimenter. He made important and pioneering contributions to colour vision, attention, motor skills, and mental testing (which he applied to military purposes in World War I). He also wrote several important and influential text-books covering a very wide range of areas in Psychology. But for several years he was not a member of any college and, worse still, had to depend for laboratory space on the charitable support of other departments, mainly of Physiology (in which McDougall arranged to hang a brass plate to mark his own laboratory as the 'Dept. of Psychophysics'). Wilde was said to be incensed and tried, unsuccessfully, to have McDougall dismissed. However, when McDougall returned from his wartime duties, he apparently found it difficult to reclaim his laboratory space, and he left Oxford embittered in 1920 for Harvard. (There he was also reported to be rather disgruntled, and remained for only one year before proceeding to Duke, where one of his best-known students later was J. B. Rhine of parapsychology fame.)

McDougall was pessimistic and cynical about prospects for Psychology at Oxford. In 1926 he wrote in the Preface to one of his textbooks that 'as regards psychology itself, I obstinately continue to be optimistic. . . . I carry this optimism very far. I anticipate that at no distant date, perhaps before the end of the century, even the University of Oxford may begin to take an interest in the human mind, and may set her hallmark upon psychology by giving it a recognized place among her studies.'

McDougall had a number of colourful students who had come through the 'Greats' route, among them Cyril Burt, J. C. Flugel, and William Brown, all of whom had also been John Locke scholars. William Brown, whose *Oxford Magazine* article we have already mentioned, succeeded McDougall to the Wilde Readership in 1921. He tried valiantly to persuade the University to establish an Institute of Experimental Psychology, at first without any success

or even any evident support. However, one of his patients, Mrs. Hugh Watts, in 1935 donated £10,000 to the University to establish such an Institute. Her letter and cheque arrived without any embellishment or legal instructions, bearing simply the return address of a London hotel. When we later wished to name the second Chair of Psychology after her, and thought it proper to obtain the consent of members of her family, it was necessary to advertise in the personal columns of *The Times* to locate them; we succeeded.

It was Mrs. Watts's gift that apparently prompted the University to act, and it created the Institute the following year, with Brown as Director and William Stephenson of Corpus as Assistant. Indeed, the University generously used her contribution to establish a trust fund, the interest of which is still available for incidental expenditures (although this represents today but a small fraction of 1 per cent of the non-academic budget). The new Institute of Experimental Psychology was located at 34 Banbury Road, in a small building that had formerly been the St. Giles' School. The Rockefeller Foundation provided some equipment. The following year there were a few research students, but still no courses for undergraduates. A diploma course began soon afterwards, but because of the war it soon ended. In 1942 all teaching ceased when William Stephenson left for war duties. The General Board salved its conscience for this early casualty by inviting 'observations' from a Committee for Psychology. At the end of the war, in 1945, Brown resigned from the Directorship of the Institute and was succeeded by Stephenson, with Oliver Zangwill as Assistant Director. In the following year Brown gave up the Wilde Readership, and soon afterwards was succeeded by Brian Farrell.

Psychology had still not achieved the status of a subject thought suitable for undergraduates here in 1945, thereby distinguishing Oxford in one more way from other leading universities of the world. But the report of the Committee for Psychology in 1943 had lodged a strong case, and the anomalous position of Oxford was perhaps particularly obvious to returning servicemen. The Report of the Committee had, after all, 'welcomed the evidence provided by the Royal Navy, the Army, and the Royal Air Force for the considerable use made of psychology in selective, as distinct from curative work, and of the demand that is likely to arise for the services after the war'. It may also have been important that Cambridge had long since taken the step without any obvious harmful consequences; indeed, its Professor was held in high regard. There was a series of lively debates in Congregation, which led eventually to the establishment of P.P.P. in 1947. Two Lecturerships were created (filled by B. Babington Smith and C. Oldfield). The first Professor was George Humphrey, Professor of Psychology at Queen's University, Ontario, a Canadian who had studied Greats here and was tempted over from St. John's in Cambridge, where at the time he was Dominions Fellow. (Humphrey later said that he first learned of Oxford's interest in him when he read of his appointment in *The Times*.) And some years later, in 1969, a single-subject honours school of Experimental Psychology was added to P.P.P., an event which finally brought Oxford Psychology into line with other British universities.

The founding of P.P.P. by no means removed serious practical problems. The Banbury Road building was tiny and ill-equipped, even with the motley cluster of small temporary huts behind it. The first Professor's office was a converted outside lavatory. Being summoned to a meeting with him was an ordeal. Things improved in 1958 with the move to a superior Victorian house at 1 South Parks Road, which had an even more varied collection of garden huts, together with out-stations in Keble Road. Finally, in 1971, a move could be made to purpose-designed quarters (actually, thirds) in the present large building shared with Zoology. At that time we also decided to change our title from 'Institute' to 'Department'.

Thus McDougall's forecast of very little progress was falsified at least fifty years before his predicted deadline. Oxford came late to Psychology, and vice versa, but the Oxford department can claim to be one of the leading ones in the world. In the recent *T.H.E.S.* survey of university psychology departments ours was rated so far ahead of every other department in the U.K. that even we were tempted to accept the judgement of such a dubious rating method. The Department is crammed with research students (more than sixty), with active laboratories studying the whole range of McDougall's very broad Oxford interests (but not his later ones). Sizeable numbers of undergraduates are admitted each year and it is difficult to believe that it was not always like this at Oxford. Our undergraduates seem to be well appreciated by employers and the profession. The department is handsomely supported to the tune of more than £600,000 per year by research councils and other outside bodies, and it is funded by the University as a laboratory science. McDougall would be surprised, Brown bemused but pleased, and perhaps even Wilde would no longer be irritated.

Gallery

Beckett at 80, as Paris sees him.