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**The Canary in the Coalmine:
Classics, Wales and
the Assault on the Humanities**



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Introduction

The ‘Canary in the Coalmine’ is a phrase well-known in regions where coal (the fuel of the first industrial revolution) has long been mined. Coalmines in South Wales and the North-East of England could produce dangerous fumes, which can kill. A buildup of dangerous gases could (and did) cause explosions which could (and did) result in numerous fatalities. Humans however are not very sensitive to such gases – canaries are. Miners in these regions in the 19th and 20th centuries began to take canaries with them down the coalmine. If the canary died you knew you were in trouble.

We all know that the Humanities are under assault in universities across the world. These attacks come from both the political right and the political left, that is from the Anti-Woke and the Woke. The attacks from the left mainly take the form of attempts to cancel academics whose views some people object to (such as Nigel Biggar’s views on the British Empire); those from the right (at least in the United States) seem to be attempts to exert direct political control over the curriculum (witness the recent actions by the legislature of the State of Texas). As many have pointed out, these attacks from the right are incoherent; they present two contradictory arguments.

One argument imagines the humanities to be both powerful and dangerous, while the other sees humanities education as irrelevant and a waste of time. Both cannot simultaneously be true. (Rogers 2025)

President Trump’s attack on the universities of Columbia and Harvard (amongst others) have a high media profile. But the assault on the Humanities – and what they represent – began long before Trump (Ando 2025). In the USA Martha Nussbaum in Chicago has been warning us about this since 2010 (Nussbaum 2024)¹; in the UK Marina Warner has been equally prophetic (Warner 2014; 2015). There is a pattern to such attacks – the assault on the Humanities begins with an attack on the Classics and the study of Religion, and then moves on to Modern Languages. Classics is the canary in the coalmine whose death in universities portends something catastrophic.

High profile politicised attacks are not however at the root of the problem that the Humanities now face. For these high-profile political attacks, being overtly political, inevitably become part of a more general discussion undertaken in the public sphere. They can therefore be argued against – in the public sphere – in newspapers and other media. It is curious how few university leaders have joined this debate – I can think of only one (Campbell 2025). For the real threat to the Humanities comes neither from left-wing activists nor from right-wing politicians. It is more insidious; it comes from within. The threat is in origin bureaucratic and managerial; it has been initiated from within universities by those who call themselves academics but who have forgotten what the word ‘academic’ means. This threat is covert, more diffuse and more difficult to counter than direct political attacks. It hides in the shadows, cloaks itself in ‘confidentiality’ and works through bureaucratic and procedural norms. It

¹ 1st edition published in 2010.

springs from a widespread mis-conception about what universities are or should be. Both on the Republican right in the USA and the Blairite (now Starmerite) left in the UK the primary purpose of universities is (it is believed) to act as ‘technology incubators’ and so to serve the Economy (Ando 2025; Nussbaum 2024). In the UK this conception was codified (and so made explicit) in the Browne review of 2010 (Browne et al. 2010).

‘The Economy’ is of course something that is never fixed – and if securing ‘our economic future’ means sacrificing civilisation itself, then many politicians seem happy to comply. In the UK the leaders of both the Conservative and Reform parties (both on the political right) have both denounced humanities degrees as being surplus to economic requirements. On the Woke (that is the authoritarian) left the attack comes from social justice warriors who are impatient with such things as scholarship (or accuracy); they simply want universities to implement Justice Now. Of course left and right differ about towards which ends they seek to use universities as means: these could be technology for the military-industrial complex or for the economy; medical advances for the health of the nation; mitigating measures to deal with climate change; or social justice for the oppressed. That both the ‘economic’ and ‘social justice’ arguments are largely *instrumental* – both see knowledge as a *means* to fulfil more important *ends* – is no coincidence. That knowledge might be an *end* in its own right (that sense must first be separated from nonsense if we have any hope of reaching the truth) does not seem important to either side. To witness the disastrous effects of an unholy alliance between economic (business) instrumentalists and social justice warriors you need go no further than to look at what has happened to the university of Tulsa (Katz 2020). Here a very lively centre of the liberal arts that served the people of Oklahoma has been hollowed out. We are left not with a university but a facsimile thereof, an obedient lickspittle to American corporatism.

The humanities, one might object, are not the Classics. True. Yet the Classics are essential to the humanities. For one thing, being concerned with the language, literature, art, archaeology, history and culture of the ancient world they are inherently interdisciplinary and indeed provide a model (in microcosm) for the liberal arts. For another, at the core of the Classics (and the related fields of Religion and Theology) is a concern with meaning in general, and the meanings of words in particular. The philology and etymology of two different Greek words for love (*agape* or *eros*) is as directly relevant to modern debates about sex, love and the family as it is to Christian theology.

If Classics is the canary, then Wales in general (and Cardiff in particular) is the coalmine where the first such canary in the United Kingdom has now been laid to rest. To explain this requires some background to how Higher Education has developed in Wales. But before we do that, we need to remind ourselves how and when universities began, and what they are for.

Universities: Their Origin, Nature and Purpose

Like all worthwhile institutions, universities have a long history. Current university managers will tell you that the nature of universities have changed – as societies change, so should universities, to meet the needs of the age. If the age demands we serve the Economy, and Employment, that is what we must do. If the age demands that we engage in ‘trans-national education’, where the requirements of Kazakh oligarchs trump those of the people of South Wales, then that is again what we must do. They have a point – but a very weak one.

In Western Europe at least, universities begin in Medieval times, the first being Bologna in the 11th century. The two ancient English universities, Oxford and Cambridge, are (outside Italy) some of the oldest we have; the three medieval Scottish universities (St Andrews, Aberdeen and Glasgow) are too of a respectable antiquity. These universities have a distinctive character that reflects both their origins and the culture of the nation which they served. So Scottish universities, for example, after the Reformation developed a distinctive emphasis on Aristotelian ethics linked to a Calvinist theology – a fact which (indirectly) explains much of what was distinctive about the Scottish Enlightenment (MacIntyre 1988, 209-80). English universities developed as collegiate institutions, where power (and responsibility) was dispersed between the university and its constituent colleges. Over time loyalty to college came to trump loyalty to the university as a whole – this is in part an explanation of the eclipse of English universities by Scottish ones in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

What caused this eclipse? The colleges of Oxford and Cambridge became rich and complacent. Scottish universities remained more focused on the core values of their institutions, namely to discern truth from falsehood. For universities, if they are to remain true to their calling, should not just change with the times according to the desires of politicians, bureaucrats or ‘stakeholders’. They have a mission – one to discern the truth about things, wherever it is to be found. Discerning what is true and what is false requires more than the application of scientific methods to solve problems in the natural world. The first task – especially in the Humanities – is to distinguish sense from nonsense – in disciplinary terms to separate out philosophy from sophistry (to use Martha Nussbaum’s distinction; Nussbaum 1999). Universities are as much custodians as innovators – they have to have retain a deep sense of institutional memory embedded not in bureaucratic rules but in a more general understanding of what the institution is for. They have to understand the past in order to have a clear view of the present, and to plan for the future. And they have to be – as they were originally in medieval times – primarily associations of people who share the same vocation, whether as scholars, teachers, scientists or students. That vocation is principally an *academic* one – a term which I will clarify below. That is, teaching is not simply an exercise in instilling ‘skills’ – it has a moral dimension. Universities should exemplify the academic virtues of moral vigour and intellectual seriousness and instil these qualities in their students. Students need to acquire the habits of judgement and discretion as much as learning

what is required of their field of study. Without these qualities, however prestigious they may seem or however successful they become -if they become some kind of supermarket for the acquisition of skills (however useful they are deemed to be for 'the economy') then they are not universities at all but polytechnics (places where 'many skills' are taught, to view it etymologically).

These key features were clearly present in the medieval university and in early modern ones (such as Edinburgh). The Prussian re-invention of the university as an institution that focused primarily on research in the 19th century did not change the primary vocation of what universities were for. Expanding the frontiers of knowledge did not entail the abandonment of the primary purpose of distinguishing between sense and nonsense, truth and falsity. The research university made a late appearance in Britain and Ireland. In Wales (and Ireland) it took the distinctive form of a federal university, with a distinctive academic culture.

The University of Wales: Classics and Religion in a small country

Though Wales was effectively conquered by the Plantagenet kings of England in the 13th century it has never really been English. Wales did not really have any seats of higher learning until the 19th century – clever Welsh students generally went to Oxford. The first such seat was at Lampeter, originally founded as a theological college for the Anglican Church – a church which in Wales was bi-lingual in English and Welsh. Classics in some form was taught at Lampeter since its foundation in 1822. The real development in universities in Wales took place in the late 19th century. First Aberystwyth (1872), then Bangor (1881) and Cardiff (1883) appeared initially as self-governing colleges, and then after 1893 as constituent parts of the federal university of Wales; Swansea (1920) and other colleges with a narrower focus (such as a college of medicine, or science and technology) developed as constituent colleges along the same lines. These colleges and the university as a whole had a specific remit to serve the people of Wales; Cardiff's was to serve the people of 'South Wales and Monmouthshire'. Cardiff's statutes begin with a ringing endorsement of academic freedom that could have been written by John Stuart Mill. When I joined what had by then become the University of Wales, College of Cardiff in 1990 this federal character was still apparent. In the 1990s I and my colleagues in Ancient History (which was all that was left of Classics after the Barron reforms) would, at some point in May, go to meet colleagues from Lampeter, Bangor and Swansea at Gregynog. Gregynog was (and is) a country house in mid-Wales given in the early 20th century to the University of Wales precisely to foster a sense of belonging to a wider academic community that was distinctively Welsh. Here I met John Ellis Jones for the first time, the world's only Welsh-speaking Classical archaeologist and a pioneer in the study of Greek houses (Jones et al. 1962; 1973) and of the Lavrion silver mines (Jones 1982). John was at that time sustaining the teaching of Classics almost single handed in Bangor. At these meetings everyone understood that discussion about aca-

demical matters entailed discussion about ends as well as means – no academic discussion could be purely technical.

You might not think that Bangor was ever a very distinguished seat of learning. If so you would be mistaken. Before John Ellis Jones it had had a distinguished representative in R.E. Wycherley, whose *Stones of Athens* (Wycherley 1978) has served as an excellent introduction to the archaeology of Classical Athens for many generations of British and American students. The aim in Bangor was not to acquire prestige but to spread learning of the classical world through teaching and scholarship. The best-known alumnus of classics at Bangor was R.S. Thomas, a poet whose elegiac view of the retreat of Welshness in the face of a rapaciously capitalist Anglophone modernity remains a major cultural force well beyond Wales. At the time there remained an understanding that Welsh families – particularly Welsh families who are working class or from ethnic minority backgrounds – are close-knit. Students from these families are reluctant (or often simply unable) to study far from home. If a Classics department closes, then these potential students get a clear message: this subject is not for the ‘likes of you’.

Bangor then illustrates a truth that today’s managerialists have forgotten: small academic institutions can have big effects, provided they keep to true to their vocation. Examples abound, but I would say that the British School at Athens (which I had the honour to direct between 2002 and 2007; www.bsa.ac.uk) or the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield in Yorkshire (whose alumni have had a disproportionate and positive effect on both religion and politics in South Africa; <https://mirfield.org.uk>) both illustrate this point. The academic culture that these meetings at Gregynog fostered was collaborative and congenial; and it was distinctively Welsh. This academic culture informs my most useful book (Whitley 2001), *But now it has almost entirely disappeared*. How has this come about?

Partly what has happened in Wales is a product of forces that can be experienced across the globe. Political elites everywhere are hungry for new technology – because technology in particular (rather than knowledge in general) is a source of power. In Britain there are very specific reasons that have produced a managerial elite that is contemptuous of scholarship and interested only in what can be measured. It began with the establishment of the Research Assessment Exercise (now the Research Excellence Framework) in the 1980s, originally intended just as a simple test of whether academics were actually publishing anything. It has now become a great engine of intellectual conformity. It generates dishonest claims about books and articles (in my field very superficial and poorly-researched archaeological and historical syntheses with very grandiose claims) to be world beating. At the same time, a succession of governments encouraged intense competition between institutions on the fallacious grounds that knowledge was a kind of market. Institutions that had been polytechnics were allowed to call themselves universities from 1992 onwards – even though their founding principles (polytechnics existed to provide an education in skills) were quite different. The top-down managerialism of the Blair govern-

ment (with its emphasis on ‘inclusion’, ‘relevance’ and ‘impact’) from 1997 onwards fostered the emergence of a managerial elite who acted as if nothing that was not measurable had any real value. This managerial elite became obsessed with their institution’s place in the worldwide university rankings and devised a series of top-down incentives to improve their institution’s chances. Any system can be gamed, they thought; so much effort was put into gaming the system. Student evaluations ceased to be a conversation between students and academics and became a top-down method used by managers to exert greater control. Since neither knowledge nor the long-term value of books and articles are things that, in themselves, can really be measured, managers looked to proxies that can (such as research-grant income and the like). The 2010 Browne report (Browne et al 2010)² on Higher Education cemented these changes in its claim that the real value of knowledge was to be found not in knowledge but in ‘the economy’.

These forces produced a generation of managers who knew the price of everything and the value of nothing. The federal University of Wales effectively disappeared in the first decade of the new millennium, brought low by ambitious vice-chancellors impatient with what they saw as an impediment to ‘growth’. Growth of a kind was to come in the form of Big Shiny Buildings from about 2010 onwards. The coalition (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) government’s re-structuring of university finance now focused on the ‘consumer’ (i.e. the students). The expectation was that a ‘market’ in Higher Education would encourage competition and improve ‘quality’. Initially the £9000 fee per student per year produced a financial bonanza, which university managers preferred to spend on construction. Examples abound, but the one I objected to was the Spark/sparc building in Cardiff which cost something around 100 million pounds³. Its intention was to serve as a bridge between the social sciences (particularly economics) and entrepreneurs/businessmen – it would ‘spark’ innovation. It has not succeeded in this aim and has never had more than 20% occupancy. And it left a huge hole of debt.

Big Shiny Buildings were also useful to increase what managers were really concerned about – namely prestige. Knowledge became something that could be leveraged in the pursuit of prestige – and with prestige came money. And prestige could make a manager’s career. The Spark/sparc building was as instrumental in one pro-Vice Chancellor’s obtaining a position of leadership in a distinguished Scottish university as it was in increasing Cardiff University’s burden of debt.

The senior managers who brought about these changes continued to be considered – or at least to call themselves – academics. The word ‘academic’ occurs sixteen times in the Browne report (Browne et al 2010). That universities were essentially academic institutions – charities concerned with knowledge not businesses in pursuit of profit – is not an idea that can be found

² This was intended to apply only to England, but has in practice also been adopted in Wales almost by default.

³ Cf. <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/campus-developments/projects/spark>.

in this report. It was an adjective that the authors of the report felt had to be added as necessary decoration (as in ‘academic community’). Did they know what it means?

What does ‘Academic’ mean?

The great philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre died in May 2025. In his most influential work *After Virtue* (MacIntyre 1985, 1-5) he imagines a future world where the tradition of scientific investigation has been lost; science was deliberately destroyed and later generations argue over the meaning of such things as ‘neutrinos’, a term which is placed on an equal footing with ‘phlogiston’, in the hope of reconstructing the ‘scientific method’. Later (MacIntyre 1985, 111) he discusses the people of Hawaii in the late 18th century who were very much exercised about things they considered to be ‘taboo’. When asked by Captain James Cook and others what the word ‘taboo’ meant, or why one should not do things which were ‘taboo’, they were unable to provide any clear answer – only to insist that one should not do anything that is ‘taboo’.

I have good reason to think that members of Cardiff University’s University Executive Board (UEB) no longer understand what the word ‘academic’ means. This became apparent during the consultation process for the ‘Academic Futures’ document (no author 2025). In February 2025 I attended a meeting billed as ‘academic futures’ or ‘academic and financial sustainability’ – a Q & A session chaired by a Pro-Vice Chancellor and member of the UEB. He talked for 30 out of the 45 minutes about finance (not about anything academic). So I asked him ‘You mention the word academic a lot, but talked entirely about finance. So can I ask you – what do you mean by the word academic? And could you answer with reference to the term’s etymology?’. His answer was simply an admission that he (a professor of law) did not know what the word ‘etymology’ meant (there followed numerous jokes in the audience about insects). He did not even attempt to provide an answer to what the term ‘academic’ might refer to. Members of Cardiff’s UEB can no more define ‘academic’ than eighteenth-century Hawaiians could define ‘taboo’.

So perhaps I should provide a definition with reference to the term’s etymology. The phrase ‘Grove of Academe’ is not a metaphor but a metonym. It refers to a grove near Athens sacred to the hero Akademos⁴. In the fourth century BC the philosopher Plato set up a cult association in the Academy to continue the enquiries set up by his mentor Socrates, who had gone round Athens asking awkward questions (what is courage? What is justice?). That is to say, the Academy was devoted to the discussion of ends as much as means – ends could not be taken for granted. Later, others (such as Aristotle) were to establish other philosophical schools (Aristotle’s was the Lykaion – Lyceum, French

⁴ About whom nothing is known – he is not a hero of epic. The Academy itself has been extensively investigated by several generations of Greek archaeologists; the most useful synthetic studies are by those of my colleague Alexandra Alexandridou (a professor at the university of Ioannina); see Alexandridou (2018).

lycée) just outside the walls of Athens in the shadow of Mt Lykabettos. The Academy continued Socrates' practice of dialectic – of enquiring into the meaning of words, particularly the values that words encode. This practice – the Socratic method – remains an inspiration for all the ideal of a liberal education worldwide (Nussbaum 2024, 47-77).

Academic then refers primarily to the habit of mind that continually asks awkward questions about ends as well as means. Academic theology is thus heir to this tradition, and Classics and Ancient History study the conditions that made such enquiry possible. This tradition was revived in Western Europe⁵ by the founding of universities, starting with Bologna in the 11th century. This tradition is key to the main task of universities – to distinguish truth from falsity, and sense from nonsense. Universities have to be concerned with ends as much as means.

The word 'academic' only became widespread in public discourse from the late 19th century onwards (when disciplines in the Humanities such as Classics became more sharply defined; see fig. 1). From this some might want to argue that the meaning of the words 'academic' and 'university' change according to the needs of the times. This is the Humpty-Dumpty position⁶ – that words only mean what someone intends them to mean – meaning is enforced through the exercise of power. Words contain no memory and need no etymology.

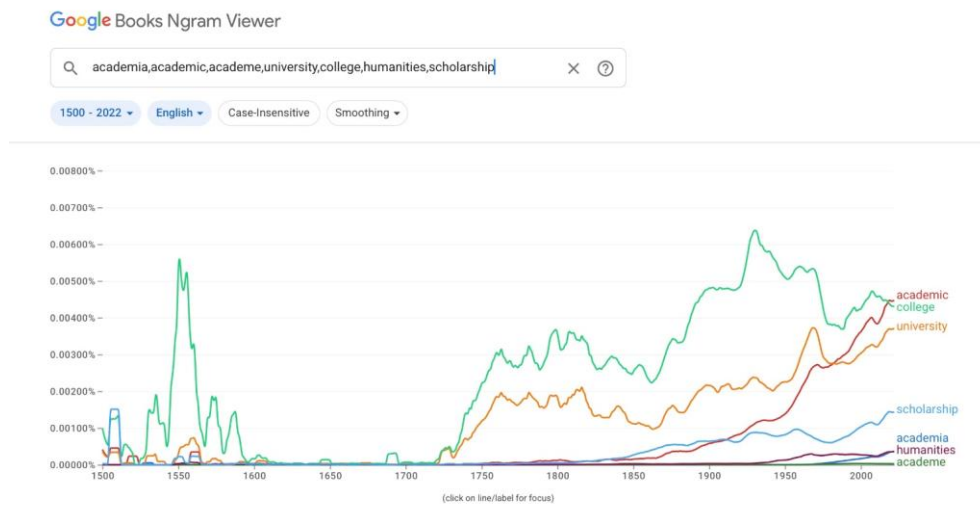


Figure 1: Google books Ngram search for frequency of the term 'academic', 'academia' and other related terms between 1500 and 2022 in books and articles written in English (courtesy Rachel Fulton Brown, University of Chicago).

⁵ I will not deal here with the possibility of universities existing in the Islamic world (in Cairo and present-day Morocco) nor in Byzantium, both cultures also being heirs to Greek antiquity.

⁶ The reference is to *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.

To managerial elites concerned with status (including their own) the word ‘academic’ retains a certain cachet (just as the word ‘taboo’ did in 18th century Hawaii). Managers still like to think that they are academics and that what they do (even and perhaps especially when they are eviscerating the humanities) is somehow ‘academic’. The plan for the abolition of the teaching of Ancient History and Religion at Cardiff University put forward by the UEB (No author 2025) is entitled ‘Academic Futures’, and the term ‘academic’ occurs 174 times. It has no more meaning here than it did in the Browne report; its use is entirely decorative. In June of this year this plan was adopted by Cardiff University’s Council.

Most of the actual content of the document concerns finance. And it is true that universities in the UK are under great financial pressure. The fees paid per student have been frozen, the market for overseas students is shrinking. Managers would like you to believe that universities are simply responding to external problems for which they are not responsible. There is no acknowledgement in the ‘Academic Futures’ document that the financial problems have been caused by debt produced by too many Big Shiny Buildings of uncertain purpose; nor of the dysfunction created by a ballooning bureaucracy with numerous ‘bullshit jobs’ (such as a whole cadre of non-academics whose job, it seems, is to teach academics how to teach; Husein 2025). It is a thoroughly dishonest document.

The document promised a bright ‘academic’ future and made some grandiose claims about being a ‘global’ university. Most of the humanities departments would be grouped together under the umbrella of ‘Global Humanities’. This new package would attract better (‘high tariff’) students – that is students with better qualifications. Do these claims stack up? Do the new plans address the ‘Globe’ as it is rather than as managers would like it to be?

High Tariff Students Taking Global Humanities?

The UEB argue that the new degrees in ‘Global Humanities’ will attract ‘high tariff’ students – students with better qualifications than those Cardiff University currently attracts. They argue that better students will come because the range of modules (courses) offered in the Humanities will be fewer in number and less specialised in content. They will be modules informed by less expertise. Is this really what attracts the best students? The proposal moreover does not say where these students will come from, nor does it say anything specific about its mission to the people of South Wales. For the removal of ancient history and religion will substantially diminish the range of subjects (and modules) taught under the umbrella of ‘Global Humanities’. The proposals assume that future students will be working within a largely Anglophone Globe, and one where the secularising trends witnessed in Western Europe in recent decades will simply continue and spread worldwide. They assume a world where religion and the legacy of the ancient world do not matter. This of course is not an idea that any reader of Tom Holland’s *Dominion* (Holland 2019) could possibly entertain. Any future student who has had these prejudices re-inforced in the

course of their ‘Global Humanities’ degree will be very poorly equipped to deal with the world as it is (rather than as they would like it to be).

Let me provide some illustrations. Recently (in 2025) we have had a change of popes. The pope is the acknowledged leader of 1.4 billion Roman Catholics, as well as a leader who has great influence on other Christian denominations, on other religions and on the world. The ceremonies involved in this change had clear messages for the wider world. In neither of these ceremonies was English much in evidence – though the music and its resonances were central. In the funeral of Pope Francis, the ceremony was mainly in Latin (including the Gospel reading about ‘feeding my sheep’), much Italian, some German (neither of which will be taught in Cardiff under the new proposals); a large part was in ecclesiastical (essentially New Testament) Greek⁷, in a part of the service which clearly and effectively reached out to the Orthodox tradition of Christianity. In the accession of Francis’ successor, the new Pope Leo XIV (though a native English speaker) avoided English and spoke in Italian, Spanish – and Latin. Subsequent services have underscored his love of this language, and his understanding of Roman Catholic Christianity as a living tradition, one where institutional memory is central.

How would a future graduate of ‘Global Humanities’ understand this transition, and its significance? Bluntly she would not; she would know neither Italian nor German; she would be at a loss with the ancient languages and miss out the political significance of the use of Greek (both language and liturgy) in a Roman Catholic service. The experience of 1.4 billion members of the human race would be closed to her, and she could have no understanding of the importance of religion to these people.

For what could a degree in ‘global humanities’ possibly contain if it is not to embrace the experience of Catholic Christians? It would have only the sketchiest knowledge of languages, and of forms of human experience alien to the average Anglophone. If this student had no religious allegiance or experience whatsoever she would gain none through Global Humanities. What then could this degree scheme possibly contain? A clue might be provided by the words that crop up in ‘Academic Futures’ (no author 2025). It is difficult to comment on these as they contain nothing concrete. But there are recurrent terms -- innovation (six times) and innovative (four times - in which respect, it is unclear); and efficiency (six times -- with respect to what – also unclear); and professional (22 times). These words are taken to be (uncritically) relating to something good or worthwhile – what is innovative, efficient and professional must also (unproblematically) be good.

These are certainly the key buzzwords of managerialism, which has long been the principal ideology (one might say theology) of the University Executive Board of Cardiff University. Insofar as there is any content it is contained in these words. Innovation is good; efficiency is good; professional conduct is

⁷ Teaching of any form of ancient Greek was stopped by managerial diktat last year, as was the teaching of Latin, Sanskrit and Hebrew. How such a loss complies with the injunction to ‘decolonise the curriculum’ I really do not know.

good. I disagree. None of these terms is unambiguously good. An example may illustrate this point: faced with what they saw as the ‘Jewish problem’ in the 1940s, the National Socialist government of Germany embarked on a very innovative and efficient programme of extermination, conducted very professionally (as anyone who has watched the *Zone of Interest* will appreciate). Perhaps a graduate of ‘Global Humanities’ will be similarly innovative, efficient and professional in how they conduct themselves in later life.

I have raised this example to show what happens when cultural memory is deliberately effaced. Universities cannot survive without institutional memory – which is contained not so much in formal records kept by Registry as in the stories that academics and other members of the university (from students to porters to cleaners) have to tell about themselves and the institution for which they work. These must relate to the founding principles of the institution. In Cardiff they are contained in the narrative art that decorates the main building of College. These contain allusions to the Classical past (inscriptions in Greek), and so to the tradition of enquiry that begins in *The Academy* (the original *Academy*). If you break with that tradition, you no longer have a university but an institute – or a UINO (University in Name Only).

In the 1940s C.S. Lewis provided a cautionary tale of what happens when institutional memory is effaced by managerialism. I refer first to his extended essay, *The Abolition of Man* (Lewis 1943) and second to his novel, *That Hideous Strength* (Lewis 1945). In the latter, the (fictional) university of Edgestow is almost swallowed up by the newly established National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments (N.I.C.E), run along strictly managerialist lines. The kind of contempt for scholarship that I have personally experienced from members of the UEB is echoed in that novel by member of the N.I.C.E., who despise the Classics and indeed any form of cultural memory. Anything, indeed, that stands in the way of what is INNOVATIVE, EFFICIENT and PROFESSIONAL.

It should surprise no-one therefore that, when (in June 2025) the only properly constituted academic body in Cardiff University (the Senate) considered the ‘Academic Futures’ plan (no author 2025), not a single member of Senate either voted for it or spoke in favour of it (Shipton 2025a). When it was put to Council (the supreme ‘legislature’ of Cardiff University) this united academic view was comprehensively sidelined. The proposals for this dystopian, and largely humanities-free, ‘Academic Futures’ were approved. And students from working or ethnic minority families in South Wales got the message: these fields (Ancient History, Classics and Religion) are not for the likes of you.

We already have a pretty good idea of what this ‘academic future’ will be. It has already happened elsewhere to the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma. It is top-down corporate managerialism of the kind C.S. Lewis was talking about. This has been succinctly summed up by the classical scholar Jacob Howland (in conversation with A. Katz 2020):

Essentially, the goal behind the restructuring of TU [Tulsa University] is to transform students into this standardized product. According to Howland, the ideal future TU students will be «individuals ground down smooth into workers and managers who will fit interchangeably into a globalized and digitalized system of production. This endeavor requires new levels of behavioral conditioning, which is quite adequately supplied by the imperatives of progressive ideology».

The path put forward in the ‘Academic Futures’ document was not the only possible way of cutting costs. Cardiff’s financial situation was by no means the worst in the Russell Group; and Cardiff could have followed the lead of Durham University, in pruning its bureaucracy before looking at its range of teaching provision. That they did not do so represents an ideological choice – and a very sinister one at that.

Lewis’ Conditioners are already with us. They’re killing the Humanities on purpose (Adler 2025). That the best moral philosophers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum) are or were also classical scholars; that their philosophy is informed by history and has implications for practical reason is no motive for managerialists to desist in their attacks. It is rather a further incentive for these elites to target the Classics first. Classics exists to keep scholarship alive and to keep kindred disciplines honest. Once they come for the Classics and Theology, they will come for Modern Languages, and then Archaeology, Music, History and English. Nothing truly academic will remain⁸.

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⁸ *Acknowledgements*. I would like to thank colleagues both in Cardiff and in the University of Chicago for comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I shall not name them as they are both living and working under the cosh of philistine and pharisaic managers. To name them would be to expose them to various forms of intimidation (e.g. Cardiff’s ‘dignity at work’ policy) to which, sadly, British academics have now become far too accustomed.

About the author. James Whitley has taught and researched at Cardiff University since 1990. Between 2002 and 2007 he was Director of the British School at Athens, and from 2008 until 2025 was professor of Mediterranean Archaeology. He then was cancelled (see Shipton 2025b) by university managers.

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– The Canary in the Coalmine: Classics, Wales and the Assault on the Humanities

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ABSTRACT

Classics are essential to the Humanities. The worldwide assault on the Humanities from both the 'Woke' left and the anti-Woke right often targets the Classics first. This article concentrates on Wales. Classics (together with the study of religion and theology) has gradually been eradicated from the constituent colleges of the University of Wales since the turn of the millennium. My piece focuses in particular on recent changes at Cardiff University, where cuts have targeted Ancient History and Religion/Theology. The removal of these subjects represents a victory for an instrumentalist view of knowledge that runs against the founding principles of the institution.

KEYWORDS

Wales, Classics, Cardiff, Religion, Theology

SOMMARIO

I classici sono una componente essenziale delle discipline umanistiche. L'attacco su scala mondiale alle *Humanities* condotto tanto dalla sinistra 'woke' quanto dalla destra 'anti-woke' prende spesso di mira innanzitutto i classici. Questo articolo si concentra sul caso Galles. A partire dall'inizio del millennio, i classici (insieme allo studio della religione e della teologia) sono stati gradualmente eliminati dai college che compongono l'Università del Galles. Lo studio si concentra in particolare sui recenti cambiamenti avvenuti all'Università di Cardiff, dove i tagli hanno colpito la storia antica e la religione con la teologia. L'eliminazione di queste materie rappresenta una vittoria per una visione strumentale della conoscenza che contraddice i principi fondanti dell'istituzione.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Galles; Classici; Cardiff; Religione; Teologia