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## **Writing the European History of English Studies**

*Balz Engler*

Until recently, the notion that the academic subject called 'English' had any sort of history would have seemed rather odd. Hadn't it always just, well, existed? ... 'English' seemed to be just *there*: as natural as Syrup of Figs or Marmite, and as volcanically cleansing or as briskly bracing as either to the costive national soul. Gloomy siftings of the details could be dismissed as further evidence of a crisis.

This observation by a British academic who has done important work in the history of English studies is of interest for at least three reasons. It suggests that for long English as a subject has had little awareness of its own history, that its 'naturalness' has been taken to be quintessentially English, and that an interest in its history has been supposed to be a sign of crisis. Not surprisingly the quotation comes from the review of a book claiming that all this may be wrong (Hawkes 1999: 23 on Crawford 1998).

In many places, the history of English as an academic discipline is still not part of its make-up, in the way this is the case in anthropology, for example, where the history of the subject is often taught as part of introductory courses. Where such an awareness has developed in recent years, especially in England, it has usually been in the debate about the ideological mission of English. Reference to history has therefore often been made in a polemical spirit, and restricted to England and the period since the First World War, the period in which English acquired the form being questioned (e.g. Eagleton 1983; Doyle 1986 and 1989; Hawkes 1986).

Elsewhere, the history of English studies has been neglected. English, like other foreign languages, has also served ideological purposes: but it has usually drawn its legitimacy from serving the community by training professionals (teachers, translators, diplomats, etc.), from facilitating the exchange between cultures, and from promoting the critical awareness a comparative perspective makes possible. In such a scheme the history of the discipline does not have an important place. Where

people study it at all, [end of 1] they may well do it as part of studying the cultures of Britain and the United States and therefore focus attention entirely on these countries. They may then content themselves with books like Stephen Potter's *The Muse in Chains* (1937), DJ. Palmer's ground-breaking *The Rise of English Studies* (1965) or Chris Baldick's *The Social Mission of English Criticism*. These books create the impression that the origins of English are to be found in England, confirming allegiances that academics in the field may have had in any case.

This version of things has, of course, been powerfully questioned in recent years by Robert Crawford (1992, 1998) and others. Crawford's claim that 'English' was invented in eighteenth century Scotland in an attempt to position the country in a newly-emerging Britain, is important in defining the Scottish role towards England today. And even though this may not affect the history of English elsewhere, it does make clear that the English origins of the discipline need to be questioned. Indeed, it can be shown, as this collection of essays does, that *the history of English as a university discipline is not only a British, but a European one.*<sup>1</sup>

In writing about the European history of English Studies, the following questions immediately arise: Why should we concentrate on Europe? What do we understand by English Studies? And: What kind of history are we interested in?

Choosing Europe as the field of study has three reasons. The most important is certainly that English as a university discipline is the result of developments in several European countries, and that these also influenced the way English was institutionalised in England. Especially the exchange between England and Germany, terminated by the First World War, is of interest here. Secondly, the perception of this international dimension has been made easier by the gradual emergence of Europe as a cultural and political entity. In the field of English, this was marked by the foundation of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) in the late 1980's, significantly on the basis of an English initiative and first contacts with German Anglistik (see the contribution by HansJürgen Diller to this volume). Finally, writing history means not only recording events, but shaping a narrative of the past from them, from a specific perspective, determined in turn by one's interests. The articulation of a European identity is such an interest, and it has guided the editors and those who have contributed to the volume within the framework of ESSE.

The notion of English Studies is surprisingly difficult to define. It certainly means different things in different places. In some countries, especially English-speaking ones, 'English' refers exclusively to the study of [end of 2] literature(s), not only English, but also American, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, Australian, New Zealand, Black British, and (as the euphemism goes) emerging ones. This may increasingly be complemented by aspects of cultural studies. Elsewhere, literature and linguistics are both integral parts of 'English' and, as this tends to be the case where English is a foreign language, applied linguistics and language learning will, to different degrees, belong to it as well. Again, the degree of variety possible in this has become clearly visible in the European context, especially at the conferences of ESSE. There is a sense of belonging to the same field, but also an awareness that this does not mean sharing the same methodologies and the same objects of study, or even the same notion of what constitutes 'English' as a discipline.

At a time when, as somebody once only half-jokingly suggested, the collaboration between scholars in acoustic and physiological phonetics may be considered interdisciplinary, the status of 'English' is uncertain. A definition may have to be in terms of what one is not. As H.G. Wells brilliantly put the case (though for a different field and in terms we can no longer share):

[The botanist] has a strong feeling for systematic botanists as against plant physiologists, whom he regards as lewd and evil scoundrels in this relation: but he has a strong feeling for all botanists, and indeed all biologists, as against physicists, and those who profess the exact sciences, all of whom he regards as dull, mechanical, ugly-minded scoundrels, in this relation: but he has a strong feeling for all who profess what he calls Science, as against psychologists, sociologists, philosophers and literary men, whom he regards as wild, foolish, immoral scoundrels in this relation ... (1967: 322)

What people in 'English' share in the end, is their interest in things done in and with a specific language. Beyond this and only to the limited extent of making family resemblances in Wittgenstein's sense possible, they share certain journals they consult, certain conferences they attend, certain kinds of texts they study, certain methodologies they use or are at least aware of, certain authorities they quote. And they share a history.

The *interest* in the history of a discipline, as the quotation at the beginning suggests, usually arises in crises of legitimacy, at moments when accepted verities begin to be

questioned, when the discipline has to defend or to reposition itself. In the process the questions that need to be answered will also gain sharper definition: and we may also notice that answers may be more complex or uncertain than we wish them to be. Because of different needs and interests histories will also come in different shapes. They may [end of 3] be local and personal, but possibly claim more general significance for the place where they are set, like E.M.W. Tillyard's *The Muse Unchained* on the beginnings of English at Cambridge, or Alois Brandl's autobiography *Zwischen Inn und Themse*. They may give an account in terms of the personalities who represented the field, as McMurty's book on the first professors of English in England, or they may be institutional (of which more below), like the accounts of Finkenstaedt (1983) for Germany and of Graff (1987, 1989) for the United States.

Such histories define their scope, implicitly or explicitly, against an opposite. Becoming aware of what this may be can also help us in sharpening our perspective. It may be a specific university against other places of higher education, personalities against the cultural and political conditions of their age, a nation against others, a region – Eastern or Western, Southern or Northern Europe – against others. If Europe is the focus, the opposite is bound to be the United States; if it is the Western world, the other is bound to be the 'Orient'. If, on the other hand, the history is supposed to be that of the 'English' community, it will define itself against other academic communities, like that of the Classics (see the contribution by Monterrey in this volume), or one outside academia.

What we should like to see, and what we should like this volume to contribute to, is an institutional history of English in Europe. This is not the place to discuss definitions of *institution*; one from a dictionary may be sufficient: 'social practices that are regularly and continuously repeated, are sanctioned and maintained by social norms, and have a major significance in the social structure' (Abercrombie 110). These social practices make it possible for individuals to contribute (as much as the other way round). They have a tendency to perpetuate themselves – as has often been observed, the first aim of any institution that has established itself is to ensure its continued existence.

Histories written from within an institution tend to take these social practices for granted and focus on phenomena that change them. The institution is viewed as an autonomous system reproducing itself, in a manner that reminds literary historians of a formalist account, like that of Shklovskii. Thomas Kuhn's sociological account of the

history of science, which has been so influential in the humanities, also follows this pattern; and it may be useful to remind ourselves of its advantages and limitations.

Scientific communities – in our case we should, with considerable hesitation, posit 'English' as forming one – are defined by the paradigm its members follow, certain shared methodologies that allow its members to pursue what he calls 'normal' science, characterised by extending the [end of 4] application of these methodologies to more and more problems. On the way, the paradigm begins to show certain previously undiscerned weaknesses, and has to be adapted, specified, complicated to remain valid. This in turn gradually leads to the paradigm losing its persuasiveness, based on the beauty of relatively simple rules to be followed. The community will get into crisis. Out of this crisis a new paradigm will arise – a practice that can deal precisely with the problems that have most stubbornly resisted the previous one (it may not be able, on the other hand, to solve others that the previous one could deal with, but people do not notice this at the time). This account has been so attractive to people in the humanities because, not being based on the idea of progress towards some grand unified theory, it is close to what they can observe in their disciplines.

It has at least two serious disadvantages: First, it takes for granted the continuing existence of a scientific community, which may be transformed, but does not break up; this, however, is precisely what seems to be happening all the time. Secondly, it considers the crises as entirely due to problems of the paradigm: but at least in the humanities external pressures are often responsible for the transformation, the break-up or the *creation* of a scholarly community.

In any case, the moment of institutionalisation is of particular interest, because it is then that both the scholarly and the external factors are most influential and most clearly visible. This moment is also of interest, because it is then that certain practices are established that determine the manner in which new issues, arising later on, can be addressed. In the case of English Studies in Europe these moments of institutionalisation, and the external pressures at work then, are largely responsible for the similarities and differences between various countries. Whereas in England the factors behind the movement for English Studies, as Baldick points out, were 'extension teaching, the colonies, and women's colleges' (72), i.e. factors creating social cohesion and political order, elsewhere it was the need to train professionals, especially foreign language teachers at an advanced level – under different ideological restraints and for different purposes.

In establishing chairs, departments and schools, not only present needs and predominant philosophies of higher education will be taken into account. The shape of the institution will also be determined by those to be attracted as teachers: and these will bring along their own notions of what the discipline should be. In a department dealing with the culture of another country, and to a certain degree also representing it, its culture of higher education will also influence the way the discipline is practiced.<sup>2</sup> Where the framework for a new discipline has to be created, the model of other disciplines, e.g. [end of 5] the Classics or existing foreign language departments, will be influential – in being followed or in being rejected in a specific manner.

English studies then is different according to different social, political and economic conditions in different countries – as the contributions to this volume show. Generalising from these conditions, three persistent conflicts may be perceived, between autonomy and public service, between mother tongue and foreign language, and between European and global cultural integration.

The first conflict, between *autonomy and public service*, is the most general. As has been indicated, in most European countries English as a university discipline was introduced because there was a need for academic professionals, especially school teachers at the upper level, trained by the universities in the same way as lawyers, doctors, chemists, etc. English was therefore heavily dependent on the school system it served, which is organised differently in different countries, and in which English may be the first or second, possibly even the third, foreign language. Depending on the prevalent notion of education at the time of institutionalisation, the subject could be more or less academic. Looking at nineteenth-century textbooks for German students, one can see that their training was nothing but academic. On the other hand, more recent methods of teaching languages may tempt school authorities to think that teachers only need a smattering of applied linguistics, with the result that universities are no longer considered the right places for teacher education. To the extent that this public service is in the foreground, the discipline will be dominated by external forces, by measures imposed on it by politicians, by local, regional, and national needs, and it will view its success in terms of serving these.

However, as soon as the discipline has been institutionalised, as soon as there is an opportunity of becoming part of a universal scholarly community in the Enlightenment tradition, different criteria come into play. The pursuit of knowledge, the development of a critical

stance, will become central. Success will now be marked by publications addressed to this scholarly community, and by the status of scholars at international conferences. Subtle (and not so subtle) tensions may develop between what members of the institution do in teaching and what they do in research.<sup>3</sup> As soon as the discipline has established itself, the *conflict between doing English where it is the mother tongue and where it is a foreign language* becomes visible as well. Those doing English in an English speaking country find themselves, along with their colleagues in History and Sociology, at the centre of cultural debate, on the site where cultural meanings are formulated, enforced, and displaced. [end of 6]

Doing English elsewhere is in many respects different, even if we discount the challenge of English as a foreign language. Ideological and political issues will be fought over in History and Sociology, and, like in the English-speaking countries, in the departments where the traditional national literatures are taught. English departments, on the other hand, tend to be rather more quiet places. They may try to keep up British traditions of pragmatism and enlightened compromise, possibly in a hostile environment. They are usually more quiet places because they find themselves on the margins of public debate.

This difference of perspective between doing English in an English-speaking country and doing English elsewhere is crucial. In English-speaking countries it may be taught without much reference to other literatures, languages, and cultures. Elsewhere English will always be viewed against other languages. But the two perspectives, mother-tongue and foreign language, cannot simply be put beside each other either. The foreign perspective will always include the English perspective as well, if only because much of the secondary material used is written from an English-speaking perspective, and because the scholarly community is dominated by Anglo-American voices.

The third conflict, of *European versus global cultural integration* is restricted to where English is not the mother-tongue. Unlike French, Chinese, Russian, and Spanish (to name just the other official languages of the U.N.) English is becoming a global *lingua franca*, as Latin used to be in Western Europe. This does not only show in the way English for many has become a second language through popular culture (music and film), but also by how words and concepts from English have entered other languages, especially in the areas where innovation is strongest. Should those doing English in Europe support this trend or resist it? And as far as European integration is concerned, to what extent should their loyalty be to the

European variety of the language (which itself is increasingly affected by American English)? And to what extent may British English just stand in for the global (American) variety? Whose purpose should we be serving in teaching English?

The development towards global English is largely due to the influence, at important moments in history, of two empires, the British and the American one. Britain as a trade partner played an important role in the establishment of English as a university discipline before World War I. This role was complemented by that of England as the origin of a literature, especially in the shape of Shakespeare, that had been instrumental in emancipating Europeans from a feudal political order, represented by French classicism. [end of 7] Individual countries had their specific additional reasons: In Germany, for example, there was a sense of shared linguistic roots, and of admiration for a model of one's own colonial aspirations.

The influence of the United States in Europe (and on English Studies) became powerful in the twentieth century in the wake of the two World Wars, a symbolical moment being Wilson's insistence on the Treaty of Versailles being in English. Especially after World War II, and in the Cold War this influence became persuasive, and led to the establishment also of new English departments (as, for example, in Spain).

The complex relationship between the cultures of Britain and the United States, with the United States rightly claiming English culture (as for example Shakespeare) as part of its own heritage, and with Britain claiming a special relationship with the United States, has produced a situation where confusing links and moves become possible. American cultural influence strengthening the position of the English language may be used to promote British culture as a European alternative (a move also seductive to people still living with the memory of a British empire).

All I could do here was to sketch some of the issues that should be addressed in writing an institutional history of English studies, not only on a European, but also on a national or local scale. Many of them are taken up in the articles that follow and in the European survey that concludes this volume. But, as we have pointed out in the preface, much work remains to be done, and we hope that the work presented here will encourage more scholars to become aware of how history defines their position in the field, and to contribute to its investigation. It may therefore be fitting to end with the questionnaire that we have prepared for this purpose:



## Questionnaire

The following list of questions (and suggestions) may be of interest to you if you consider investigating aspects of the history of English studies in your own professional sphere.

*Which area do I want to deal with?*

It may be a good idea to begin with things close to you, putting them in a wider national and international context: (a) your own department, (b) your own [end of 8] scholarly interests, (c) your own professional organisation, (d) an influential personality, (e) the careers of the graduates of your university, (f) journals, specialised publishers, series of publications.

*Where do I find material?*

We tend to be text-oriented and therefore look for answers in written or printed sources. There are relatively few studies in the area (see bibliography). But you may find important material in university catalogues and regulations, in introductory books, and in university archives. Just because the institutional history of English studies has been neglected in research, another source may be more important: retired colleagues and old graduates. You will find that they are pleased to answer your questions: they may, however, have a personal interest in presenting their version of the story. It may be useful to read up on oral history.

*Are there issues of particular European relevance?*

Topics where the international (European) exchange/transmission of ideas was intense or problematic may be of particular interest. There may be crucial moments or periods in the national history of English which are of European interest (e.g., Anglo-Saxon studies in the Third Reich).

*What were the issues leading towards the institutionalisation of English studies?*

*When were the first professorships, first chairs, first courses, first departments founded?*

*What were the motives for creating them? How were things done?*

*How was the institutionalisation of English studies related to that of other language disciplines (classical studies, mother tongue, dominant foreign language[s])?*

*From which other disciplines did scholars move into English studies? How did courses of study develop?*

*How have political and cultural contexts affected the development of English studies: (e.g., international trade relations, the role of the British Council and other similar institutions, etc.) [end of 9]*

*What has the influence of neighbouring disciplines been?*

*How have specialisations developed? (linguistics, literary studies, etc., possibly also topics specific to your country)*

*Who have the eminent representatives in your field of interest been? What have their achievements and their backgrounds (training) been: What have their main channels of publication been? What have their principal contributions to European (or international) scholarly developments been?*

*How do developments in your area (specialty, country) compare with those in others?*

*What has the role of women been (as students and teachers)? When were they first admitted to university studies?*

## **Notes**

1 The only previous attempt to collect material towards such a history is Finkenstaedt and Scholles 1983.

2 To give just one example: When the Basel English department moved in the 1930's, its head, Henry Lüdeke, tried to make it, as he reports himself, a centre of scholarly and social life in the Anglo-Saxon tradition with the beneficial side-effect that fewer books disappeared from its library. (Haenicke 273).

3 Here and in the following I have used material first presented in Engler 1990: 79-85, and 1995: 47-49. [end of 10]

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