

THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY, MALTA, 1975

by R.J. BECK

WHEN John Milton came to consider what should be the subject of the great work that he intended to leave to aftertimes, so written that they would not willingly let it die, he rejected a nationalistic poem on King Arthur in favour of the more universal topic of the Fall of Man – *Paradise Lost*. Many of my more illustrious predecessors on this rostrum have chosen to relate the invariably fascinating story of how their particular subject was born and flourished in this country and this University. But the history of English as a university subject in Malta is for the most part dull; and when it is not dull – as at the time of the so-called Language Question – it is politically controversial. I have therefore decided to follow the example of Milton rather than that of my distinguished colleagues and talk, not about the growth of English in this University, but about my idea of what a university should be, and do; first in general terms and then with particular reference to the here and the now. And I hope that what I have to say will prove of interest and value to you all, teachers, administrators, and students, however much you may disagree with me at times – as it is only just and right that you should.

I am not by any means the first to have considered the Idea of a University. In 1854 that eminent but undervalued Victorian, John Henry, later Cardinal Newman, was appointed Rector of the new Catholic University of Dublin. He wrote and lectured a great deal on the subject, publishing his collected thoughts under the title which I have gratefully borrowed for this oration. Here is a brief extract from his book which has great relevance to my present purpose:

The University is the place in which the intellect may safely range and speculate, sure to find its equal in some antagonist activity, and its judge in the tribunal of truth. It is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, and discoveries verified

and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous, and terror exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge. It is the place where the professor becomes eloquent, displaying his science in its most complete and most winning form, pouring it forth with the zeal of enthusiasm, and lighting up his own love of it in the breasts of his hearers. It is a place which wins the admiration of the young by its celebrity, kindles the affections of the middle-aged by its beauty, and rivets the fidelity of the old by its associations. It is a seat of wisdom, a light of the world, an Alma Mater of the rising generation. It is this and a great deal more, and demands a somewhat better head and hand than mine to describe it well . . . I am asked – continues Newman – what is the end of university education, and of the liberal knowledge which I conceive it to impart: I answer, that what I have already said has been sufficient to show that it has a very tangible, real, and sufficient end, though the end cannot be divided from that knowledge itself. Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward. What the worth of such an acquirement is, compared with other objects which we seek – wealth or power or honour or the conveniences and comforts of life – I do not profess here to discuss; but I would maintain that it is an object in its own nature so really and undeniably good, as to be the compensation of a great deal of thought in the compassing, and a great deal of trouble in the attaining . . .

A University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, and at refining the intercourse of private life. It is the education which gives a man a conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant. It prepares him to

fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility.

You will appreciate immediately that much of what Newman said 120 years ago with Ireland in mind still has validity for Malta in 1975. A University is a place where the young mind is trained by contact with minds of equal and superior intellectual calibre, by disputation with your tutors and argument with your contemporaries. And two things you must learn: first, to dispute as vehemently as you please, but without acrimony or descending to personalities; secondly, the thoughts, arguments, and convictions must be your own. There is far too much plagiarism in this University – paragraphs copied verbatim into essays from second-rate books that you pray your tutor has not read; lecture-notes taken down as though they were dictation, learnt by heart on the very threshold of the examination hall, and faithfully but often irrelevantly regurgitated in answer to a slightly different question.

This originality of mind and independence of thought is the greatest gift a university has to offer. Once you have it, you can turn your hand to anything – or, in Newman's words, 'fill any post with credit and master any subject with facility.' There is a slowly-dawning realisation in the modern university that many of its graduates will take up non-specialist posts; and it must prepare them to fill such posts more efficiently than non-graduates, in addition to providing for the vocational, professional, and specialist students about whom I shall have something to say later. The actual subject you are reading here is of secondary importance, for a university's first task is to teach you *how* to think, not what to think. This is the great difference between school and university, and the transition of attitude sometimes proves difficult. The gap between sixth form ending and university beginning should be narrowed as far as possible: certainly nothing should be done to widen it. One more step towards encouraging this vital independence of mind in the Maltese student I should clearly like to see – some measure of residential tertiary education. Not merely does it stimulate the mind; it teaches tolerance of the views of others, improves the civic sense, and builds up something that we have not yet developed here sufficiently to satisfy me, at least – a sense of institutional loyalty. I know that practical economics, the smallness of the island and the easy accessibility of the Univer-

sity, even the strong beneficial influence of Maltese family life are against me here; but I am not convinced that a hostel for Gozitan students and summer-course students is beyond the bounds of economic possibility. As for this all-important sense of belonging, I do say, in all humility, that I – and some of my colleagues here today whom I could name – feel a pride in, a loyalty to, and a deep and lasting love for their own old university that I do not see to the same extent among the rising generation. I have lived in Malta long enough – over 15 years now – to know you capable of fervent loyalties – to country, party, village, society or football-club; let some of it rub off on what Newman calls in the extract your Alma Mater – there is room in my heart for thee.

Of course, you cannot do everything for yourselves, and no-one expects you to. I am sure my academic colleagues were impressed by Newman's acumen when he described the university as 'the place where the professor becomes eloquent, displaying his science in its most complete and most winning form, pouring it forth with the zeal of enthusiasm, and lighting up his own love of it in the breasts of his hearers.' The annual reports of external examiners, scholars of international repute who moderate all aspects of our degree examinations – these reports speak for themselves. We have nothing to be ashamed of here. Our very smallness is an advantage. The troubles in jumbo-universities abroad are in many cases caused by the lack of contact and thus of understanding between the teacher and the taught. Let us therefore rejoice that we can still manage to hold tutorials at almost every level in almost every subject; for this is where a student's individual problems can receive attention – and an academic stitch in time saves many more than nine later. From these closer contacts we come to know each other better; and, once again in all humility I can say that in the area of staff student relations this is the best university I know.

This quality of teaching and level of degree performance is not achieved by a professor's thinking a professorial chair is something to sit in and have a prolonged siesta. Newman rightly describes a university as 'a place where inquiry is pushed forward and discoveries verified and perfected', and any academic teacher worthy of the name must constantly strive to keep abreast of new

developments in his subject and to preserve academic contacts abroad and make new ones by attending conferences and visiting libraries. Our geographical position and the fact that we are a country with only one university make these overseas contacts even more vital; we must maintain our position as a small though prominent member of the international community. I must here pay tribute to the dedication of some of our researchers, who battle on in the face of great difficulties, and also to the University Library, which provides a Wellington-boot service on a shoestring budget. And since, as Dogberry says, comparisons are odorous let me here mention the other members of the Administration who smooth our path and yours, even to those kind gentlemen who now subtract our monthly contributions to P.A.Y.E. on behalf of the Inland Revenue.

From Newman's Idea of a University we have evolved a picture different in many ways from his, a picture of a modern university resting on three pillars – teaching and learning, research and administration. Nor we can fully accept in this day and age Newman's contention that 'knowledge is its own end'. For many of the Faculties in a modern university – the majority in number if not the largest in student numbers – knowledge must be a means to an end as well. Many of you are here to master the material of a profession: to save lives and ease pain; to design houses and build bridges; to defend the innocent and prosecute the guilty. And even in the non-professional Faculties a new need is being felt and a new catchword going round – 'relevance'. The end-product – that is the graduates – of a university must bear some relation, both qualitatively and quantitatively, to the manpower needs of the country whose taxpayers have given them their university education. A university's research, too, should be directed towards a relevant end – to give a simple example from my own subject, we should encourage M.A. theses with titles like, 'The Problems of Teaching the English Language in a Maltese Context'. This relevance is in its own way an ideal as difficult of realisation as any of Newman's; for the changes in manpower demand that may take place while the student is in a university-pipeline at least three years in length are many and varied.

I would not have you think that as an Arts man I am entirely out of sympathy with Newman's contention that knowledge is its own

end: we all know the glow of satisfaction that comes from learning something for its own sake and not for 'the wealth or power or honour' it can bring. 'Oh what a wealth of profit and delight is promised to the studious artisan'. Where we in 1975 must part company with Newman is in his view of the nature of a university's student population. It is easier to regard knowledge as an end in itself when the spectre of Social Assistance is not sitting at the university exit. Because university education was not free nor open to all in Newman's day, the people who could benefit from it naturally took a different view of it. Since 1971 University education in Malta *has* been free, but it is still not open to all. The eldest boy in a large family, however intellectually able, may be forced by economic conditions to find a job immediately to help out the family finances in these days of rising prices. We – and I mean all of us, with institutional unity and determination – must work together to have a Grants System introduced. By the application of a graded scale of payments, no Maltese boy or girl who possesses the academic potential and paper qualifications necessary to enter university – and on these qualifications I would insist to my last breath – no boy or girl, I say, who would benefit from a university education must be denied the chance of receiving it. Thus and only thus will *my* Idea of a University for contemporary Malta be realised – equality of academic opportunity for the suitably qualified, irrespective of class, colour, creed, or economic circumstances.