History of Liberal Arts
and its Relevance to Tertiary Education Today

Workshop for the Centre for the Study of Western Tradition
Friday 10 December 2010

Programme

Herrad of Landsberg,
Hortus Deliciarum, c. 1185 (Plate XI)
10am: **David Daintree** (Campion College)

*Introduction: Centre for the Study of Western Tradition*

**10.15am: Constant Mews** (Monash University)

*Learning from the past: Hugh of St Victor and the evolution of the liberal arts 1100-1300*

This talk outlines the contribution to an overall vision of learning made by Hugh of St Victor (d. 1141) in his *Didascalicon*, in which Hugh explains how all the different liberal (and mechanical) arts relate to the overall goal of philosophy, namely the pursuit of wisdom. It also looks at what Hugh has to say about the relationship of the liberal arts to the insight gained from Scripture, and about the role of reading and meditation in the acquisition of wisdom. The talk then reflects on what happened to this vision of synthesis over the next century and a half as existing disciplines like dialectic experienced great development, and new Aristotelian texts became part of the curriculum.

**Respondent:** tba

**11.05am: Morning Tea**

**11.30am: Geoffrey Sherington** (University of Sydney)

*Whatever happened to the idea of a liberal education at the University of Sydney*

The recent proposals for academic re-structure at the University of Sydney brought forth ideas of a College of Arts and Science which could follow principles of a general liberal education on which the University was thought to be founded.

The idea of a liberal education in the English context was originally created around formation of character and sociability. In the mid to late nineteenth century this was transformed into aims associated with intellect and merit. This was all part of the transformation of the older universities of Oxford and Cambridge into institutions of teaching and examination. A symbol of this transformation is Newman’s classic text *The Idea of a University*, although ideas of a liberal education were carried throughout the Empire.

As inaugural Principal of the University, Oxford educated Professor John Woolley founded a liberal education on a general Arts curriculum with a specific focus on the classics. Associated with this curriculum were certain principles of teaching: the knowledge authority of the Professor; the primacy of the lecture as teaching method; and the importance of examination to test knowledge and reward merit. These principles continued into the twentieth century even while the ‘educational franchise’ was widened, the Faculty of Science was created, and such new professional schools as Law and Medicine were established. By the mid-twentieth century the idea of a liberal education had been stripped of its prior classical curriculum foundation. While maintaining the founding teaching principles, a liberal education had now more become associated with the notions of secular, critical and free enquiry as the basis for teaching and research.

The governing principles of a liberal education at Sydney were originally founded on the understanding that the University would continue to cater for a student elite selected on meritocratic principles. The emergence of the mass multi-versity after the Second World began to undermine these principles and assumptions. By the 1970s, not only had the authority of the professoriate as knowledge authority been challenged but there was continuing critique of the lecture as prime teaching method, while continuous assessment came to supplant the annual exam. Finally, the emergence of the idea of the university as a corporate enterprise tended to undermine the values of secular, free and critical enquiry which had once provided the basis for continuing the ideals of a liberal education.

In this context, any revival of a liberal education at Sydney remains uncertain, even though remnants remain in a number of the specialist disciplines particularly in the Faculty of Arts which was the foundation faculty.

**Respondent: Alan Atkinson** (University of New England)
This paper explores the principle and theory of integration in liberal education by considering the relationship between the unity and diversity of the disciplines (or liberal arts). The paper asks how disciplines relate to one another and to the larger whole of which they form the parts. It suggests that to believe in integration is to believe that education is directed towards identifiable ends (immediate, proximate and final). The paper considers the relationship between these respective ends and then, through the insights of writers including Mark Van Doren, Christopher Dawson, Alasdair MacIntyre, Etienne Gilson and the theological movement known as “Radical Orthodoxy, considers various perspectives on, and challenges raised by the notion of integration.

Respondent: Luke Holohan (Campion College)

Humanism culminated as a cultural and literary force in 15th and 16th century Renaissance Europe in line with the period’s enthusiasm for classical literature and art, beginning with the search in the early 15th century for the texts of classical Greek and Latin authors. From then on Latin, and to a lesser extent Greek, dominated the curriculum of secondary and tertiary education in Europe, and wherever the European colonising powers took their culture. And that included Australia. Since the Second World War, numbers of students in Latin and Greek have steadily declined: there are obvious socio-economic and scientific reasons for this, such as the rise of more “modern” subjects, particularly the physical and social sciences. But numbers are now steady, and in an encouraging counter fashion subjects like Ancient History in NSW and Classical Studies in Victoria and New Zealand are growing apace, reflecting community interest in a knowledge of the ancient Mediterranean civilisations, which are so much at the basis of Western culture. This paper will attempt to analyse numbers of students in all of these subjects in Australian and New Zealand schools and universities, to see what the trends are.

Respondent: Nicholas Hardwick (Toula Museum of Australia Inc.)

In The Glass Bead Game Joseph Knecht is forced to contemplate the reality that all human attempts to capture the eternal in human institutions must ultimately confront the flux and flow of time that is History. Nothing, not even something as beautiful as the Glass Bead Game, lasts forever.

The heyday of the ideals of the liberal education was the nineteenth century when reforming universities sought to find their place in the new bustling commercial world that followed in the wake of the industrial revolution. Newman’s case for the University acknowledged that part of the problem was the emerging world of ‘Literature’, which sounds eerily like the forerunner of our own mass media. In colonial Australia another Oxford man, Charles Badham pitted the ‘culture’ of the university against the superficiality of commercial civilisation.

Even at its height liberal education was intended for the elites, for the men who would be able to counter the stupidity of the ill thought out ‘opinions’ of the age. Now that we live in age in which the word ‘democracy’ is above criticism we laugh heartedly at that caricature of the sort of individual that liberal education produced in the shape of Sir Humphrey Appleby.

The ebb and flow of history has not been kind either to liberal education or to its ideals. The disciplines of the nineteenth century, meaning Classics, barely survive in the modern university. The
Disciplines of the early twentieth century, History, English and Philosophy have been hollowed out and eviscerated through a desire to be relevant and because they no longer know what they should be doing. ‘Commercial civilisation’ and ‘literature’ would seem to have won a stunning victory.

As Knecht discovered through his conversations with Father Jacobus there is no escaping the flow of History. Perhaps we now stand as Cassiodorus did in the sixth century surveying the almost final ruin of the Roman world.

The point is that Liberal Education has always been a holding operation meant to soften and ameliorate the worst excesses of the world created by commercial civilisation. If anything it has an even greater imperative to perform that task today than it had in Newman’s day. Even in the face of History we have no option but to continue doing what we love.

**Respondent: John Schuster** (University of Sydney)

3.50pm: Afternoon tea

4.20pm: Susanna Rizzo (Campion College)

*Conclusion: Centre for the Study of Western Tradition*

5pm: Refreshments

6pm: Dinner