New College Examination Results in the Nineteenth Century: From 'Uninspiring Indolence' to 'Academic Preeminence'

In 1682 antiquarian Anthony Wood observed that New College fellows were 'much given to drinking and gaming and vain brutish pleasure. They degenerate in learning'.[1] Not much had changed by the time Philip Shuttleworth took his BA in 1800, then became a tutor, and finally warden in 1822. Shuttleworth described a college in which there was 'the total absence of any machinery of education' and found it hard to stamp out 'uninspiring indolence'.[2] Shuttleworth did try to change the college but despite his best efforts to improve academic standards—by increasing the stringency of the internal examinations and encouraging undergraduates to sit university examinations—little changed in the almost 20 years he headed the college. Penry Williams noted 'cautious progress towards improvement of academic standards' after the departure of Shuttleworth in 1840 but the progress must have truly been 'cautious' because historian H. A. L. Fisher described the college of 1850 as a 'society at once contracted, indolent, orthodox and obscure'.[3] New College could not really be considered a serious academic institution, unlike Christ Church, Oriel, and Balliol 'where examinations and their modification became a major preoccupation of college tutors.'[4] Former warden Alan Ryan characterized the state of the college in these words: 'It is less helpful to see New College in 1850 as a nascent institution of higher education than to see it as a corporate land owner whose revenues were by statute and tradition devoted to training and paying for the personnel of the Established Church'.[5]

Why was academics at New College in such a parlous state?

First, the founding statutes set the size of the fellowship at 70, composed of about 20 undergraduates with the remainder being senior fellows, with an additional ten 'Singing Chaplains'.[6] Only three of the senior fellows had tutorial duties. Even if the senior fellows did not pass their time in 'drinking, gaming, and vain brutish pleasure' neither did they spend it in academic pursuits. They were more interested in discussing financial issues which were more germane to their creature comforts. For example, when it became clear that new scholarships could only be funded if fellows were willing to take a reduction in their renumeration, they declined to do so. The major preoccupation of the senior fellows was in securing a college living, that is, securing a parish, which would provide a much more comfortable living than a college fellowship and, importantly, allow for marriage. Until the 1870s, college fellows could not marry (except heads of house and professorial fellows). Because of the relative lack of interest in academic pursuits, the college was unprepared for the new competitive environment introduced by the 1850 Examination Statute. Williams argued that this was so because 'the existing system of teaching—if it can be called that—was wholly inadequate for Honours work.'[7]

Thanks to Michael Stansfield for very helpful comments.

[1] William Poole, 'Learning', in *New College*, ed. Christopher Tyerman (London: Millennium Publishers, 2010), pp. 64–71, at p. 64.

[2] Penry Williams, 'From the Reformation to the Era of Reform, 1530–1850', in *New College Oxford 1379–1979*, ed. John Buxton and Penry Williams (Oxford: The Warden and Fellows of New College, Oxford, 1979), pp. 44–71, at p. 67.

[3] Alan Ryan, 'Transformation, 1850–1914', in *New College*, ed. Buxton and Williams, pp. 72–106, at p. 72.

[4] M. C. Curthoys, 'The Examination System', in *The History of the University of Oxford: Vol. VI, Nineteenth-Century Oxford, Part I*, ed. M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 339–74, at p. 341. See John H. Jones, 'Balliol: From Obscurity to Pre-eminence', pp. 174–82, for the rise of Balliol in the 19th century, and K. C Turpin, 'The Ascendency of Oriel', pp. 183–92, for the decline of Oriel, both in *History of the University of Oxford*, ed. Brock and Curthoys.

[5] Ryan, 'Transformation', p. 80.

[6] On singing chaplains see Daniel Carey, 'Edmund Hakluyt: New College Singing Man, Tutor, and Younger Brother of Richard Hakluyt', *New College Notes* 4 (2013), no. 7.

[7] Williams, 'From the Reformation', p. 65.

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Second, the college's intake of students was not only restricted to members of Winchester College but further restricted to the scholars of the college, and scholarships were awarded not on the basis of intellectual achievement but through patronage.[8] Founder's kin could also claim entrance to New College and, like the scholars, being a kin-of-the-founder did not necessarily signify academic excellence.

Third, unlike undergraduates at other colleges, undergraduates at New College sat college examinations not University examinations to take a degree. This exception was obtained by the founder, William of Wykeham, and allowed scholars of New College to take 'all and every the degrees or degree to be granted in the said University, without supplicating in any way, or under any form, the aforesaid House of Congregation'.[9] As a consequence, New College set its own standard for the granting of a degree, and its students were largely isolated from the examination statutes of 1800 which had introduced Honours, significantly increasing the importance of examination success and increasing the quality of tutoring demanded in the colleges and University.[10] It was not until 1834 that New College renounced its privilege to set its own degree examinations but even so, as we shall see, New College students were very slow to take up the challenge of sitting and gaining Honours in University examinations. The vote to relinquish the privilege was won narrowly, 20 in favour and 15 opposed, so there was plenty of opposition to change in the college.[11] This opposition from tutors may explain why students were slow to embrace University examinations, but a much more likely explanation is that it was much riskier to sit University examinations than it was to sit New College examinations. Before 1800, failure in University examinations was rare but after the Examination Statute of 1800 the failure rate increased from five per cent in 1800–1810 to 25% by 1850.[12]

New College awakens

Rashdall and Rait claim that it was under the wardenship of James Sewell (1860–1903) that New College was transformed from 'a small and close corporation into the largest college but one in Oxford'.[13] Large but perhaps not the best. However, Alan Ryan disagrees. In his view, Sewell did not drive change but nor did he obstruct it.[14] The awakening that occurred was due to both external and internal changes. The Examinations Statute of 1850 'seriously raised the bar' of the performance required in examinations to such an extent that matriculations fell, suggesting that the more rigorous standard discouraged prospective students from applying to Oxford.[15] The curriculum was also broadened to include natural sciences, jurisprudence, and history, English language and literature, modern languages, and PPE. To attract the sons of the emerging professional classes, the importance of family and personal connections was declining, and 'proven intellectual worth' was increasingly important in securing a career.[16] One could prove 'intellectual worth' by performing well in university examinations, and university enrolments increased dramatically after 1860. Student and national

[8] ibid., p. 77.
[9] Hastings Rashdall and Robert S. Rait, *New College* (London: F. E. Robinson, 1901), p. 220.
[10] Curthoys, 'Examination System', p. 341.
[11] Williams, 'From the Reformation', p. 67.
[12] ibid., p. 344.
[13] Rashdall and Rait, *New College*, p. 227.
[14] Ryan, 'Transformation', p. 85.
[15] L. W. B. Brockliss, *The University of Oxford: A History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 378.
[16] Joyce Senders Pederson, 'The Reform of Women's Secondary and Higher Education: Institutional Change and Social Values in Mid and Late Victorian England', *History of Education Quarterly*, 19 (1979), 61–91, at p. 85.

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newspapers, magazines, and reviews discussed examination success with great frequency and examination success was seen as a sign of 'professional masculinity'.[17]

The college responded to this new emphasis on academic excellence by, in 1861, increasing the difficulty of the entrance examination 'with a view to accepting as commoners none but men qualified to read for an Honours School'.[18] The number of undergraduates was increased from the original 20, but lack of funding made the awarding of scholarships, which were now competitively awarded, a slow process. By 1873 there were 75 undergraduates, 225 by 1884, and 300 by 1914. [19] The quality of matriculants was further improved by instituting the recommendations of the University Commission of 1850 to weaken ties to Winchester, the admission of commoners, and the opening of fellowships and scholarships to open competition which improved the academic quality of the fellowship and undergraduate body. Winchester also improved the quality of its teaching, and from 1854 awarded scholarships by competition and abolished founder's kin, improving the academic quality of students coming from Winchester. With the increase in the size of the student body and the need for examination success, the college began to appoint fellows who saw 'teaching and research as the career of a lifetime rather than something to be undertaken while waiting for a parish', and many incumbent fellows resigned.[20] Establishing of the Tuition Committee in 1870 further signalled the importance the college placed on undergraduate teaching. The one area where the college lagged behind the University was in diversifying the composition of the fellowship away from what Poole called its classical base. Fellows in chemistry and biology had been appointed before the First World War, but a physics fellow was not appointed until 1925 and the first fellow in English not until 1939, despite the fact that the School of English Language and Literature had been established in 1883. Until after the Second World War undergraduates still overwhelmingly read Literae Humaniores, law, or history, the latter subjects first examined in 1852–3.[21] It is not clear whether the composition of the fellowship dictated the subjects read by undergraduates, or the preferences of undergraduates, but the former is the more likely to be the case.

Historians of the college agree that once change was forced on the college, it was eagerly embraced, and improvement in the academic standing of the college quickly followed. Ryan stated that 'results obtained in final honours schools suddenly improved quite strikingly in the late 1840s and early 1850s', and Warden Hayter remarked that immediately after World War One the Schools results were 'impressive'.[22] As we shall see below, even though more students sat university examinations in the 1840s and 1850s and recorded the colleges first Firsts, the 1870s was the decade in which the college fully embraced university examinations.

Examination success comes to New College

Although New College students did not need to sit University examinations until 1834, several did so. In 1807–8, Peter Penson took a Second in Lit. Hum. The next student to show up in Class Lists was in 1811–12, when Robert Walker also took a Second in Lit. Hum. However, he was 'below the line' in the Second Class, a grouping which would become Third Class Honours in 1825. James Walker, who also took a Second in Lit. Hum., was the only student to appear in the Class List between

[17] Paul R. Deslandes, 'Competitive Examinations and the Culture of Masculinity in Oxbridge Undergraduate Life, 1850–1920', *History of Education Quarterly* 42 (2002), 544–78, at pp. 544–5.
[18] Rashdall and Rait, *New College*, p. 227.
[19] Alan Ryan, 'The Modern College Since 1850', in Tyerman, *New College*, pp. 46–53, at p. 49.
[20] Ryan, 'Transformation', p. 74.
[21] See Poole, 'Learning', p. 71.
[22] Ryan, 'Transformation', p. 84; William Hayter, 'New College Between the Two World Wars: Introduction', in *New College*, ed. Buxton and Williams, pp. 107–111, at p. 107.

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1812 and 1826. In 1826–7, Thomas Tyler became the first New College student to be awarded double Honours: a Second in Lit. Hum. and a Third 'In Disciplinis Math. et. Phys.' (mathematics and physics).

As mentioned above, even though New College students could take the University examinations after 1834, and were encouraged by Warden Shuttleworth to do so, very few did. In the 1830s, only six students were awarded Honours, an improvement over the first decade of Shuttleworth's rule when only three students achieved Honours. Results were not spectacular—no Firsts in the 1830s. Most results were Thirds and Fourths, which were seen by examiners as 'a degradation rather than a distinction'.[23] In the decade after Shuttleworth's departure in 1840, 23 students were awarded Honours with three achieving Firsts. Henry White distinguished himself by earning a First in 1842 in Lit. Hum and a Second in mathematics and physics.

In 1852 Jurisprudence and History was added as a School, and Charles Rice took a Fourth. As noted by Alan Ryan, the 1850s saw some improvement over the previous decade with 32 students being awarded Honours including four Firsts and eleven Seconds, but also five Thirds and ten Fourths. In 1853, the college had spectacular success with N. C. Wingfield and J. White both taking Firsts in Lit. Hum., but Wingfield was not yet done. He took a Second In Disciplinis Math et. Phys. in the following year. The 1850s were rounded out with another First in Lit. Hum, awarded to L. J. Lee.

The college's efforts to increase the seriousness of its students were rewarded in the 1860s with 55 being awarded Honours, including twelve Firsts. The 1870s saw dramatic improvement when 223 students were awarded Honours, including 54 Firsts. The dramatic increase in Firsts was due to two factors: a trebling in the size of the college and an increase in the percentage of students sitting for Honours rather than a pass degree. Balliol still dominated the ranking of colleges based on total number of Firsts, but New College challenged Christ Church for second place.

Jurisprudence and History were split into two Schools in 1872–3. New College students were awarded three Firsts and two Seconds in the new History School, and, in 1874–5, New College claimed two of the 19 Firsts awarded in Jurisprudence, the only college to gain more than one First. Theology was introduced in 1870, and G. K. Turner was awarded a Second, but in 1883–4 the college gained two of the eight Firsts awarded in theology, and in 1884–5 two of 11 Firsts.

Although the 1870s marked a turning point for the college in terms of examination success, there were still some undistinguished results. In 1876–7, New College students were awarded three of 11 Fourths in jurisprudence and four of 14 Fourths in history. Although two of 12 Firsts in Lit. Hum. were awarded to New College students in 1879–80, so were four of 19 Fourths awarded that year.

In the 1880s, there were still years of mixed success. For example, in 1884–5, the college's students earned seven of 28 Firsts in Lit. Hum. but nine of 28 Thirds, but overall the college performed very well. The 1880s finished with a flurry of examination success: five of 22 Firsts awarded in Lit. Hum., two of eight in mathematics and physics, one of three in law, and two of six Firsts in history. In the 1880s, New College surpassed Christ Church in the total number of Firsts, and in the 1890s challenged Balliol for the largest number of Firsts. New College students were awarded 77 Firsts in the 1880s and 87 in the 1890s. In the 1880s and 1890s, Christ Church students were awarded 53 and 54 Firsts, respectively, and in the 1890s Balliol students were awarded 98 Firsts. New College had arrived as an academic powerhouse.

The Magic of the First

Firsts have always been highly prized. In early reports of examination results, focus is often exclusively on the number of Firsts and the 'First of Firsts', the college with the most Firsts. Even

[23] Christopher Stray, 'From Oral to Written Examinations: Cambridge, Oxford and Dublin 1700–1914', *History of Universities* 20 (2) (2005), 76–130, at p. 98.

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today, there is a fascination with the number of Firsts. A reading of *New College Record* from 1975 to 2022 is replete with wardens' reports of the number of Firsts achieved and the college's position in the Norrington Table—which is heavily influenced by the number of Firsts. For example, in 1975–6, the warden reported a 'rather disappointing 13 Firsts only in Finals'. His disappointment is understandable because the number of Firsts was one fewer than the number awarded in 1884 when the college was much smaller. However, the next year saw an improvement to 18 Firsts, with 'the College coming third in Finals after Univ and Balliol in numbers'. By 1980, results had improved significantly, although the performance of 25 Firsts was described by the warden as 'not unsatisfactory' and the following year as 'not discreditable'. In 1983, the 'College record in Schools was less notable than in most recent years' with only 16 Firsts in Finals. In 1998, 'academic performance [was] still not what it ought to be', and the warden lamented that the examination results had been noted by *The Times* as showing that age and wealth do not guarantee top examination results.

In 1964, the Norrington Table shifted the focus of examination results away from Firsts alone to encompass all classes of Honours. Sir Arthur Norrington, President of Trinity (1954–1970) introduced the Norrington Table. In the original Norrington Table, a first-class degree scored three points, a second-class degree two points, and a third-class degree one point. From 1986 a First was worth five points, a Second Class Division I three points, a Second Class Division II two points, and a third-class degree one point. Scores for each college were calculated as a percentage of the maximum possible score and then colleges were ranked by score to produce a 'league table'.[24] The Norrington Table gained wide acceptance, although some noted that it had drawbacks. In 2011, Warden Price noted 'the volatility of the [Norrington] Table and bunching near the top are notorious', yet in 2013 gave his stamp of approval to the table, stating 'the Norrington Table does unequivocally establish a pecking order based on degree results, top loaded by giving an extra point for a First'. Warden Price was correct in his summation that the Norrington Table is accepted as establishing a 'pecking order of colleges'. However, it should not be. It is a fatally flawed summary of examination results and does nothing other than establish a top group of colleges—which includes New College—and a bottom group.[25] Also note that a First is worth two more points than a 2:1 in the Norrington score, not one.

Wardens now noted not only the number of Firsts achieved but also the college's position in the Norrington Table, that is, its place in the 'pecking order' of colleges. In 1980, the warden noted that the college 'considerably improved on its last year's performance, being placed third, below Univ and Hertford'. In 1998, the college was 'a third of the way down the usual league tables' (although there existed only one table for colleges at Oxford). In 2002, the acting warden was able to trumpet the college's success in the Norrington Table (third) but to also 'express some skepticism about the value of such league tables.' But better to be at the top rather than at the bottom! 2005 was not a good year with the warden declaring that the college 'was certainly at least ten places too low'. The number of Firsts was healthy but the college had 'slipped at the bottom range'. In 2009, the college was a 'more than respectable fifth' in the Norrington Table 'but given the quality of intake could be higher'. Warden Young addressed the volatility of ranking in 2022 when he wrote that 'academically, we admittedly lost a couple of places in the Norrington Table, but still remain at the top end—where we want to be'.

[24] For a detailed analysis of the Norrington Table see Dennis A. Ahlburg and Brian P. McCall, 'The Norrington Table: What Can it Tell Us, If Anything?', OxCHEPS Working Paper, University of Oxford, (11 June 2018).
[25] See ibid. for an investigation of the numerous flaws in the Norrington Table and why it should be ignored.

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SUMMING UP THE 19TH CENTURY

How should we evaluate the college's record of final examination achievements in the 19th century? One obvious measure is the number of Firsts because of its historic place in discussions of final examination results. On this metric, steady progress was made, especially from 1870 onwards. From 1807 until the early 1840s, no Firsts were achieved, then a humble three Firsts were recorded in the 1840s and four in the 1850s. The number increased to 12 in the 1860s, 54 in the 1870s, 77 in the 1880s, and 87 in the 1890s. This translates into 0.3 Firsts per year in the 1830s and 0.4 in the 1850s. In the 1860s, the record was 1.2 per year, 5.4 per year in the 1870s, 7.7 per year in the 1880s, and 8.7 per year in the 1890s—hardly stellar compared to numbers of Firsts now achieved each year.

The increase in Firsts was accompanied by an increase in the size of the college and the percentage of students sitting Honours. As noted, the college grew in size from 75 students in 1873 to 430 today, so the growing number of Firsts could just reflect an increase in the number of students. But it did not explain the entire increase. The college trebled in size between the early 1870s and early 1880s but the number of students awarded Honours increased four-fold. In 1873, the college achieved 0.53 Firsts per student in college. In 1884 this number had improved to 0.62 per student. To put these numbers in perspective, in 2019 there were 0.11 Firsts per student. So, performance did increase. Perhaps a better measure is Firsts per student awarded Honours. For the 1840s and 1850s, 13% of students awarded Honours achieved a First.[26] In the 1860s it was 22% and in the 1870s it was 24%. There was a slight decline to 18% in the 1880s and 1890s but still above the 14% awarded to students of all the undergraduate men's colleges.[27]

Clearly, the fellows and students of New College moved on from drinking, gaming, and brutish pleasures to academic success, or learned to balance them much better than in the early centuries of the college's history. The 19th century opened with the college's being an academic irrelevancy and closed with its being an academic powerhouse which it is to this day.

Dennis A. Ahlburg
Visiting Fellow, Oxford Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies
New College, Oxford

Distinguished Professor of Economics Emeritus
Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas

[26] A better measure would be Firsts per student sitting examinations (which would include failures to achieve Honours). I found this data for the University from 1807 up to 1872, but I was unable to find data by college on numbers sitting examinations.

[27] The examination results for the women's colleges are not included in this study because the first two were not founded until 1879. Women's examination results were included in the *University Gazette* under 'Unofficial Notices' until 1910. From 1911 until 1952 they were included in the Schools List but after those of males.

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