

What Is a History For? Stefan Collini's *Literature and Learning*

- Stefan Collini, *Literature and Learning: A History of English Studies in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2025. 656 pp. [Price: GBP 35.00]. ISBN 9780198800187.

Is there a way to meaningfully review Stefan Collini's post-retirement magnum opus, *Literature and Learning*, without exposing one's own prejudices and commitments? Probably not. And any choice as to what to say about this magisterial work faces what emerges from the book as its key theme, that any narrative of what »English Studies« is, how it has come about, what it means, is liable to be a simplification, and to miss the trees for the forest. Having suggested that *that* is the book's central theme, I feel the urge to say: that's probably also wrong, and oversimplifies Collini's dense, complex history. In the end, I am a baffled fan of this book, and perhaps it is helpful to trace out both elements of this relationship, the bafflement and the fandom.

Collini sets out the goals of his book fairly straightforwardly. It »attempts to describe – and by means of thick description, to help to explain [...] how English did [...] establish itself within British universities so successfully that it could sometimes be spoken of by the beginning of the 1960s as the ›central‹ subject in those institutions – even, in some hard-to-define way, as central to the culture at large« (2). There are at least two aspects of this self-description that are useful to explore here. First, its focus on description and the relationship to explanation, which is to say its method. Second, the way this is a history that ends in the 1960s. In a too simple way of speaking, I want to trace my fandom to the first, the bafflement to the second. And while I will return to the second issue much further on in some detail, it does bear noting, for now, that this bit of information about the book's range does not make it to the book's title.

As far as the first point is concerned, this is, essentially, where the book situates its own claim to being revisionist. In place of tidy, often teleological narratives, it offers an exhaustive, sometimes exhausting, sometimes frustratingly episodic, often illuminating set of potted histories, of universities, of key scholars, of what Collini calls »forms« – all of these very much among other things. The view Collini's book adopts is kaleidoscopic. As each chapter turns over to the next, a new image emerges that does not fully supplant, does not fully line up with the last, but also is not fully new, nor fully unfamiliar. Scholars and institutions reappear, threads of analysis are picked up, assertions return in a slightly different guise, mesh with the previous and set up the next. As Collini notes, this is by design: »This book takes a deliberately more disjunctive and episodic approach,« which Collini understands to be conducive to reducing any senses of telos, of unbrokenness, of »seamless continuity,« and specifically, as an effort to »not let those familiar words« of his title (history, English Studies, Britain) »drug our perceptions and responses into a state of anachronistic insensibility« (10).

There is much to commend about Collini's book. There is a true wealth of information on the development of English Studies in every chapter, from the usefully revisionary portraits Collini offers of F.R. Leavis and I.A. Richards (both of which are treated in their own sections, but revisions of whose impact are spread throughout the book) to the institutional details that he uncovers. The book itself successfully instantiates what it appears to also want to foreground narratively: that no single story of English Studies in Britain can capture the way in which the discipline exhibits something like a combined but uneven development often overshadowed by

neater narratives of this or that theory's ascendancy. Coming out of the book, after what felt like a shorter read than it actually was, that strikes me the most: the purpose of this history of English Studies appears to be to say, in quite a lot of words, that it's virtually impossible to speak about »the« history of English Studies – and so »a« history must suffice.

Given that setup, it is perhaps surprising much of this book is eminently readable – that, indeed, the book is eminently readable as a book, not just an assortment of chapters. About the middle of *Literature and Learning*, Collini notes about the writing of W.P. Ker, one of the »lesser lights« of early English Studies in Britain: »the book is far from being a compendium of dry-as-dust scholarship, for all its formidable learning« (284). The same goes for Collini's own book. There is the occasional arch commentary on colleagues, both long dead and still living (Terry Eagleton comes in for several); snide asides that leaven the genuinely dry descriptions of examination regimes; and a facility with language that Collini has, of course, long honed. And it is formidably learned, this book, equally adept at bringing together two centuries' worth of books and articles which relate to *Literature and Learning*'s broad range of concrete interests as well as the archival discoveries that deepen the insights gleaned from these previous discussions.

Collini, as we have seen, is overt about the point that he dislikes the too-neat stories that some have written about English. It's not always entirely clear who told these stories – who Collini is reacting against – but we may take that as read. When he does quote, as in the case of his discussion of the role of I.A. Richards, it's to his credit that the kinds of statements that have been made in previous histories of English about the Cambridge don really sound absurd, given everything Collini can trace. One thing that does emerge from reading this volume – and it bears saying again, *for me* – is that those involved in English Studies have always told stories about its nature, about the dominants which they see at work in specific moments, which they seek to dismantle or promote. To refuse to tell this story is, on the one hand, a laudable attempt at letting in more confusion where clarity simply does not exist. On the other hand, it can come close to an abstention from the historian's responsibility to analyze and integrate. What happens when you do *not* tell a story? In a way, I want to say, you leave open the question of what this ambitious project is *for*. Not so much as a matter of authorial intention, of course: Collini makes amply clear why he writes, what purposes he pursues, and so on. Still, the question that I am left with is: why? And what now?

It's difficult to say anything about Collini's book without attending to the meaning, the sheer scale of the minutiae that, harshly, we might say clutter the book; more charitably, that give it its historical heft. Collini's book is, for all its attempts at fragmenting the narrative, a positivist venture. The focus is on description, and the chapters tend to function as potentially standalone histories – say, of »The English Association,« or »The Newbolt Report.« From the mass of accumulated information, a sense does emerge of ongoing strands of development, of processes of professionalization, of the ways in which trends in the discipline coalesced institutionally to make a field, to go on to form versions of what Collini, drawing on Thomas Kuhn, calls »normal science.« Much, still, simply appears to be missing. There is remarkably little in here of politics beyond the institutions themselves, of the wider cultural shifts in the United Kingdom, of connections between changing public reading and the perception of the role of English, even; not nothing, but little. There is very little, in a book on professional English Studies, about publication, and the forms in which academic work is undertaken. Collini discusses numerous academic monographs for what they say; some, though perhaps again too few, for how they were published and marketed – or for why, in the first place, they were written. Is that because publication does not matter? At one point, Collini writes: »Many teachers of the subject had little time or incentive to publish serious works of scholarship,« and continues in the next

paragraph with: »Nonetheless, a considerable number of such works were published each year« (398). This is, again, a perfectly positivist-historical, descriptive point to make, but it is still frustrating. What did the protagonists of this history do their writing for, then – if they had neither time nor incentive? What does it mean, for a history of English Studies, that what remains of these protagonists tends to be their writing? What, indeed, is the role of publication, understood more broadly, for the discipline's history? William Empson, notes Collini in the same section, does not make a splash with *Seven Types of Ambiguity*; but later, Collini says that »[I.A.] Richards had built up a significant profile outside Cambridge, particularly with *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Science and Poetry* (1926)« (480). Is this idiosyncratic? Is it because Richards wrote for a public audience? If so, how does writing for a public audience compare to the scholarly works of others? What, concretely, the demands of publishing, the motivations of publishing, or the different forms of publishing did for English Studies remains underexplored throughout, I think. There is some work on different kinds of publication, too – journals are mentioned, for instance, though the specific shape of the article published therein does not – but for something now so central to the discipline, attention to publication remains episodic.

Perhaps a little too much work is left to the reader, in general; to the volume's credit, it can be done, and the sense of accomplishment upon finishing the book also stems from this. Too often, though, I think the purpose of all the details Collini has unearthed is left unclear. In his discussion of the development of English Studies at Cambridge, for instance, Collini spells out at some lengths the concrete examination topics in the changing Tripos and the degree programs offered, and this borders on the parodic. »Thus, the really revolutionary aspect of the 1909 proposal [on the BA in English language and literature] was to allow students to proceed to a degree by taking Section A2 after having taken section A, which would mean that Cambridge students could get a BA in English language and literature without having to do compulsory Anglo-Saxon, comparative philology, and so on« (197). It's not a rhetorical gambit if I ask (here as elsewhere): what is gained, by whom, for what, by learning that the *outcome* – which, I would agree, figures meaningfully in a history of English Studies in Britain – was created by exactly this *procedure*, so that the details here matter? Later on, a page lists the concrete examination topics of the University of Manchester's English Honours degree, a list then summarized by Collini, the upshot being that »students were expected to learn and regurgitate a great deal of factual information« (412). It may seem churlish to complain, facing a book of over 600 pages, about a single page's worth of potentially unnecessary ballast. But I think not: it's somewhat symptomatic. The problem, perhaps, is that Collini writes with an enthusiast's aesthetic. Throughout the volume, arcane university procedure, or some sideline question, will get introduced, often with the note that it is necessary to know this in order to understand a larger point. It is not always clear that the larger point really needed the sideline question, however. For instance, again in discussing Cambridge University's adoption of an English Tripos in 1917, Collini spends a paragraph describing the way this would happen, procedurally, in the university's governing board, including a voting procedure for contentious measures. This seems to set up a description of such a contentious vote, but when the book gets around, three pages later, to that moment, the board simply accepts the new Tripos without a vote. Much of the jargon required to catch Cambridge's specific administrative procedures ends up simply lending local color (200-203). As a reader, I thought it passing strange; as a scholar with some archival experience, I feel like I understand what's going on here: so much of the archive is new and interesting, so much feels like it should be put somewhere. The kaleidoscopic nature of the book makes it easier to justify this; who knows what turn of the glass will let what information shine? But it comes at the expense of selection, and a more streamlined sense of why we should be reading this history.

That question is not helped by the book's somewhat odd choice of scope – indeed, in some ways, I would say, it's directly tied to Collini's choice to end his history in the 1960s. If it's churlish to suggest that there are a few single pages that might have been excised from the book without loss, it must be nearly as churlish to ask a history about its choice of timeframe. Histories are often (merely) positivist enterprises, attempts to generate knowledge about the past, without ulterior motives, more or less arbitrarily bounded. But in this case, I hope the question may be permitted. I suggested above that we need to talk about the scope of this book, a scope which Collini defends only in passing, early on, and then, curiously, simply by citing an earlier historian of literary criticism to the effect that »the 1950s appear to mark the end of an epoch that commenced with the founding of English studies« (11). At the very end of the book, he returns briefly to the scope of his work, noting that »over the past sixty years, English has changed enormously from the subject described in this book, but through all those changes it had, until very recently, retained what looked to be a substantial and secure place in higher education.« The book more or less explicitly sets apart, then, three periods. First, our current one, in which English Studies appears to be in a crisis that mainly reflects its decline from an established subject to a »kind of rentier discipline« (597) – the moment in which he writes. Second, a long, sixty-year stretch in which the established discipline reigned over academic culture, but which he does not discuss. Finally, the period which is the actual topic of his book, a book that charts »how ›Eng Lit‹ came to enjoy remarkable cultural and institutional recognition« (598). If there is a way in which English, as I've quoted Collini saying above, was »central to the culture at large,« this was its moment: replacing the Classics as something like a default course of studies at the university, foundational in making British students understand themselves as inheritors of a rich literary-cum-national tradition. *Literature and Learning*, in other and no doubt too simple words, is a history of the rise of English Studies. But, by design, the »how, « in practice, is purely descriptive, which would be less of an issue, I think, if it was purely descriptive in a genuinely holistic sense (if such a thing is possible). But it is not that. It's a history, if you like, of various things that happened in a wide professional and proto-professional sphere around »English Studies,« from which, alas, it's not in fact clear that a causal »how« emerges. At any rate, it is not clear to me. After 600 pages, I confess I do not have a sense even of a possible forest, for all the trees Collini points out. To be sure, a better reader than I might have been able to get that sense, or might simply accept that it's just trees all the way down. That better reader might also then be able to say, with more confidence than I have, what this book is, concretely, for: what the revisions to our account of the rise of English Studies help us understand. But I don't think it takes a better reader than I am to see that this lack of conceptual clarity would still be a problem for the book, even if you could make everything in its history up to 1960 cohere.

Collini's book ends on what I think is a revealingly ungrammatical sentence. »It will be for others to describe how the discipline adapted to changed conditions in the late twentieth century« – so far, so good – »as well as continuing, we may hope, to flourish in the coming decades of the twenty-first century in new and perhaps as yet unthought-of forms« (598). Two points to finish this review, then. As I have said, any history is, of course, free to select its own boundaries, including where it concludes. *Literature and Learning*, however – and again, to my mind – does not conclude so much as end. Several times during the final chapter, »Doubts,« Collini throws a spotlight on developments in the later 1960s and 1970s that, rightly, he judges to be important – such as the explosive growth of the academic journal landscape (593) – but that lie beyond the scope of the book. In so doing, Collini in fact provides yet another reason to question this scope. »English,« Collini asserts at one point, »may have reached a kind of apogee in the 1960s« (559). And there can be no doubt that Collini cites quite a few instances of writers asserting its importance, and its place in a changed education system. The book describes this situation, as also noted above, with a greater amount of suggestions about the causal

relationships in getting English Studies to take this place than actual arguments for the concrete ways it did. Collini's own cautionary prose (»may«; »a kind of«) seems to hint at an unease on this point. And I would add: even if in the 1960s, English Studies did have its apogee – so what? Who is that history of the rise of English for? What, besides all the things we've learned, have we learned?

And this makes me return to the grammar of the final sentence. I might be less inclined to make an issue of this but for the fact that Collini's late-uttered hope for the discipline's continuing into our future sits not just grammatically, but conceptually uneasily at the end of this book. It looks odd after all the descriptive detachment of the book, and in light of his unwillingness to tell a story. Why *should* English Studies continue to flourish? The sentiment's ungrammatical attachment to the rest of the sentence leaves the discipline's »continuing« curiously disembodied, without a grammatical or agential subject. For a book that's been so involved in the institutional nitty-gritty, the individual personalities that drove it, and the constant negotiations around its cultural and national value (including being fairly clear-eyed about how it was bound up in British imperialism), both of these issues are passing strange. They are stranger yet because the concern for the future of the discipline is disconnected from any information about the present of the discipline, and the ways it has come to be in the place it is now. We do not get a good sense from Collini, I think, why we might think that English's »apogee« in the 1960s was in any sense a »good« thing, and consequently, why we are expected to think that its continuing existence would be good is even more mysterious. The danger of not telling a story here is that you also do not give much of a rationale for why we should care. The danger of ending it in the 1960s is precisely that this moment lies before a moment of »stocktaking« that, as Collini points out, in large parts was »registering the unease« with the »scale of English's academic success and cultural prestige« (583). That same moment was also (something Collini does not discuss) at the cusp of the major expansion of the universities, in Britain as elsewhere. Say what you will of the years since 2000, the previous forty years no doubt brought a major effort at democratizing access to higher education, and in some ways, at least the hint of a flourishing of English Studies beyond cultural elites. Does the state of the discipline of English Studies in 1960, and its history up until 1960 or so, offer us any kind of guidance into why English should »flourish in the coming decades of the twenty-first century«? I am almost tempted to say: let's hope not.

Literature and Learning is great at correcting some commonplaces about the history of English Studies in Britain, without really making much of a case for why (except on principle) they require correcting. It'll be a mine worth digging into for countless researchers interested in tracing a story of English Studies. It assembles a different and intriguing mosaic of the pre-1960 history of English Studies to end in the same place where we've already been. And admittedly, that is a harsher conclusion than it should be, for all the interest to be had in it.

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