

David Masson, Pedagogical Reform, and the Victorian Novel

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David Masson's literary eminence can scarcely be overstated: he was the first editor, from 1859, of *Macmillan's Magazine*, a position he held for nearly a decade; a professor for over forty years, first at University College London, and then the University of Edinburgh; and throughout this he remained a public intellectual via his prolific output as a critic and biographer. His long list of publications suggests a capricious and broad intellectual range, with book-length studies on topics including Milton, Thomas De Quincey, Romantic poetry, and contemporary novelists. This open-minded approach to subject and genre will form part of the focus of this essay, which highlights two key aspects of Masson's career. First, I will examine Masson's critical writing on the novel and the position afforded to this genre on his university syllabuses; and second, I will focus on Masson's pioneering work in promoting higher education for women.

When Masson, a graduate of the universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh, moved to London in the 1840s, he was introduced to the foremost literary figures of the day by influential fellow Scotsman Thomas Carlyle. The reviews and articles Masson was subsequently commissioned to write for leading publications such as the *Athenaeum* and the *British Quarterly Review* marked him out as a highly astute literary critic – a reputation that secured his appointment, in 1852, as Professor of English Language and Literature at University College London, replacing the poet Arthur Hugh Clough. In 1859, while still at University College, Masson was appointed editor of a new publication, *Macmillan's Magazine*, the first of the mid-century monthly shilling periodicals, launched just ahead of the

Cornhill and *Temple Bar*. Masson remained there as editor until 1868, but moved to the University of Edinburgh in 1865 to take up the position of Regius Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature.

Masson's posthumous reputation largely stands on his Milton scholarship. His multivolume study of the poet, the first volume of which was published in 1859, was a landmark piece of literary scholarship that confirmed Masson as one of the most important historians and critics of the Victorian age. Masson's work on Milton was part biography, part history. The hallmark of his style was to examine writers as products of their social environment; therefore, readers of each of his biographies were offered as much (if not more) in terms of historical context as literary analysis. Recent Milton scholars, among them William Riley Parker, Christopher Hill, and A.N. Wilson, have suggested that Masson's *Life of John Milton* should still be regarded as an outstanding resource on the poet (Wilson 197).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given this widespread admiration for his work on Milton, many of Masson's other books have tended to be overshadowed, yet his *British Novelists and their Styles*, which was also published in 1859 and which consisted of four lectures originally delivered to the Philosophical Institution of Edinburgh the previous year, warrants further attention for several reasons. Broadly speaking, criticism of the novel in the mid-nineteenth century tended to be confined to reviews in magazines and periodicals, but full-length book studies devoted to the form were still scarce. The novel was felt then to be less respectable than the older literary forms of drama and poetry. This was in part due to its extreme popularity and the uneven quality of much of the fiction being produced at the time, the majority of which tended toward escapism, romance, and sensationalist stories for women. Serialization was also becoming the norm, contributing to the idea that fiction writing was commercial – a trade rather than an art. Yet a distinct demarcation was also being established between tawdry railway fiction read by the masses (penny dreadfuls and yellow-backs, for instance), and the critically acclaimed fiction from authors such as Walter Scott and Jane Austen. By the 1820s and 1830s a critical apparatus had been developed within which to address this latter type of novel in serious-

minded terms, with thoughtful and provocative discussion of new fiction becoming increasingly frequent in the new magazines established during these decades.¹ William McKelvy has outlined some of the other stages toward re-positioning the novel as a critically respected genre at this time: this included the publication of Scott's *Waverley Novels* in forty-eight volumes between 1829 and 1833, and the fifty-volume series *The British Novelists* (with editor Anna Letitia Barbauld's introductory essay "On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing"), which was first published in 1810 and reissued in 1820. As McKelvy has noted, major historical surveys of English literature were also being published, which included lengthy discussion of the novel – most prominently Robert Chambers' 1835 *History of the English Language and Literature*, Thomas Budd Shaw's *Outlines of English Literature* (1849), Clara Balfour's 1852 *Sketches of English Literature*, and William Spalding's *History of English Literature* published the following year. Yet these surveys were not, of course, solely devoted to that genre, and Masson's volume, a book-length study of fiction from its earliest forms up until the present day, can therefore be seen as an important milestone in the establishment of the genre as a major area of critical inquiry.² A reviewer of the volume in the *North American Review* was making precisely this point when he remarked that "We need, above almost everything else, a critical history of narrative fiction [...] we need to show that the novel demands vindication, not upon separate and exclusive ground, but upon the ground occupied by all poetry, and all the arts of beauty" (Brooke 468-69). This article will demonstrate that as well as fulfilling this function, Masson's book was also symptomatic of the progressiveness that came to characterize much of his academic career.

The published lectures were structured chronologically, with the first tracing early forms of the novel and its beginnings as the "prose counterpart to Narrative Poetry," and in Masson's view, at its best, as the "prose counterpart of the Epic" (*British* 2). Masson also made strident claims in this lecture for the novel being socially useful – an effective form for "continuous reasoning or explication," able to enact "efficient action in existing social controversy" (17) and the "administration of correctives to

existing opinion" (18). The remainder of this first lecture was devoted to tracing the novel's development from early prose narratives in ancient Greek and Latin literature to later European writers such as Boccaccio, Vasco Lobeyra, Cervantes, the French *trouveurs*, and Sir Thomas Malory. The sixteenth century then saw the inculcation of the "Political Allegory" – Thomas More's *Utopia* and Bacon's *New Atlantis* being two examples – and thereafter Sidney's *Arcadia*, the "first sustained and scholarly prose-fiction, but also one of the earliest specimens of its capacity for refined and artistic prose of any kind" (61). Masson identified Sidney as "one of the most heroic and accomplished spirits of a heroic and accomplished age" (61), before providing a plot summary of *Arcadia*, a work "full of fine enthusiasm and courtesy, of high sentiment, of the breath of a gentle and heroic spirit," of "sweet descriptions," "stately moral rhetoric" (65), "musical arrangement of cadence" (65-66) and "ideality" (67). *Pilgrim's Progress*, for Masson, marked the authentic emergence of the novel, while the period that followed was "an age of Whiggism and Toryism," a more cynical, cerebral era "in which one had done with 'the sublimities,' and winked when they were talked of" (76).

In Masson's second lecture he focused on British eighteenth-century novelists – Swift, Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne, each of whose works were seen as products both of a particular historical moment, and of their author's biography. This heavily biographical approach might be said to resemble that of Sainte-Beuve, for whom an author's life provided an ideal starting point for understanding the work under review. Masson could almost be speaking for both himself and Sainte-Beuve when he remarked, at the end of this second lecture, that "the deepest literary criticism is that which connects a man's writings most profoundly and intimately with his personality, conceived comprehensively and with central accuracy" (149). In fact by this stage of the book Masson's description of his own critical approach feels strikingly redundant, because these priorities are traceable on practically every page. In this second lecture, for instance, he suggests that the "complicated and bustling activity" of eighteenth-century public life was "favourable to the increase of Prose

Literature as regards relative quantity" and to the development of "new and special prose forms" (86). Defoe, a "political pamphleteer" who had been "in prison and in the pillory," used his "knowledge of low English life" in his fiction, "framing imaginary histories of thieves, courtesans, buccaneers, and the like, of a kind to suit a coarse, popular taste" (95). Smollett's *Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, meanwhile, is "the record of the leal-hearted Scot's last visit to his native land" (107). Fielding was a "manly great-hearted fellow"; Smollett was "often wrong and always irascible," but he was also "as proud, warm-hearted, and mettlesome a Scot as had then crossed the Tweed" (133), and worked "incessantly and laboriously to prevent the world from being a shilling the worse for him" (134). Given these details of their lives, Masson urged, "it can hardly be supposed [...] that the novels which the men wrote could be intrinsically immoral" (134), yet the "unwholesome atmosphere" in which they were writing (138), with its "highwaymen," "stupid country justices," the "brutality and tyranny of men in office," the "nests of thieves," "Draconic state of the laws," and "executions," could not help but color their work (139).

The third lecture, "Scott and his Influence," is in many ways little more than an appreciative nod to Masson's Edinburgh audience, yet we also see there an intense convergence of the priorities and approaches that governed Masson's literary criticism, and which also shaped the lectures he gave at Edinburgh University: the sense that historical context and the writer's biography might offer the interpretive key to any given text; the survey-type approach that allowed for succinct discussion of countless authors; and above all the appreciative (rather than evaluative) tone he used when appraising a work. One of the final passages of the Scott chapter, which also resembles very strongly the rhetorical style of Masson's close friend Carlyle, illustrates several of these aspects: "Caledonia nursed *him*, and he has repaid the nursing. And this man was born amongst *you!* This city gave him birth. All Scotland claims him, but *here* he had his peculiar home. Nor was he *ultimus Scotorum*, nor the last of the men of Edinburgh. You have since had among you, born among you or naturalized among you from other parts of Scotland, other specimens of the national breed – Jeffrey, Chalmers, Wilson, Miller, Hamilton" (205).

It is Masson's final chapter in the volume, "British Novelists since Scott," that is of most relevance to the present discussion. It was there that he marked himself out a pedagogical innovator, by staking his claim for reading, analyzing and teaching modern fiction. He divided modern novels into thirteen categories, including novels of manners and society (Mrs. Gaskell, Allan Cunningham, Maria Edgeworth, Harriet Martineau, Theodore Hook), supernatural novels (Mary Shelley, Bulwer Lytton, Douglas Jerrold), criminal novels (William Harrison Ainsworth, Bulwer Lytton again), military and naval novels (G.R. Gleig, Charles Lever, Captain Marryat, James Hannay), the art and culture novel (Goethe), the fashionable novel (Disraeli, Mrs. Frances Trollope), and the historical novel (Wilkie Collins, Charles Kingsley, Thackeray, Dickens). After writing appreciatively about each of these categories, Masson ventured that if the novel's current standing was to be maintained, then the "three kinds of intellectual exercise which make up total literature" – history, philosophy and poetry – should be given a more prominent role (293). Regarding the first, he recommended that novelists introduce more of a sense of epic breadth rather than restrict themselves solely to love plots. In terms of philosophy, he suggested finding more of a balance between the "speculative spirit" and the "best results of speculation" (296) – that is, between doctrine and imagination, edification and entertainment. Finally, he urged that contemporary novels offer more sense of a poetic vision, with "representations of the grand, the elemental, the ideal" (302) – whether natural scenes such as "the sea restless to the horizon, and rolling its waves to the beach" and "the sun majestic in the heavens, and the nocturnal glory of the stars" (304), or moral issues: "Birth, Life, Death; Labour, Sorrow, Love, Revenge; the thought of the Whence, the thought of the Why, the thought of the Whither" (305). Aside from these possible improvements, the modern novel, as Masson saw it, was in a healthy state: popular, critically acclaimed, and diverse in form and content.

As noted above, the relative scarcity of book-length critical studies of the novel at this time renders the publication of Masson's volume a noteworthy event. But it is the inclusion specifically of contemporary

novelists within his final lecture that marks this book out as particularly unusual. A general unwillingness to consider the work of living writers – those continuing to produce new work – was common among academics during this period. While George Saintsbury, Masson's successor to the Edinburgh chair, wrote numerous literary surveys around the end of the century, he refused in each of them to consider the work of writers who were still alive, reasoning that critical opinion needed time to settle on which among them had produced books of lasting value. Only then, when posterity had confirmed their inclusion into the literary canon, would it be sensible to offer lengthy critical evaluations of their work. This lent Saintsbury's surveys a rather skewed vision and perspective. His 1896 *History of Nineteenth Century Literature*, for instance, included a section on "The Novel Since 1850," with discussion of George Eliot, Wilkie Collins and Robert Louis Stevenson, but no mention at all of Thomas Hardy, George Gissing or George Meredith. In Saintsbury's role as prominent public intellectual and arbiter of taste he appeared to be wary of pronouncing final judgment on an author whose later work might invalidate this assessment. Surprisingly, for one of the foremost critics and academics of his generation, he was nervous about misapprehending the contemporary literary scene. Masson, on the other hand, clearly felt under no such constraints: all authors, ancient or contemporary, were considered fair game.³

Masson's broad-minded attitude toward novels and new writing should be seen within the larger context of the discipline. The study of English literature as an academic subject was still relatively new by this stage: Oxford and Cambridge would not establish it as a degree until 1894 and 1917 respectively, although other universities (London and Edinburgh among them) had created chairs of English much earlier. The subject's prolonged exclusion from the ancient English universities was rationalized in various ways: the study of vernacular literature was considered by some to be superfluous, given that students could presumably read these texts in their leisure time; the classroom and lecture hall, it was argued, should be devoted to more serious disciplines such as classics and math. It was also felt to be unclear what might be included on an English literature syllabus, and how

texts would be assessed without descending into mere “chatter about Shelley,” as Oxford history professor Edward A. Freeman famously declared in 1887 (564). And if literary texts in general were considered by the academic old guard to be unworthy of serious scholarly attention, novels were entirely beyond the pale – contemporary fiction even more so. Even those willing to look back having Shakespeare and Milton on the university curriculum, such as Matthew Arnold and John Morley, were horrified at the suggestion that the Victorian novel might also warrant serious study. Later in the century, as arguments for and against an Oxford English School reached fever pitch, the firmest advocate for the new subject, Extension lecturer John Churton Collins, omitted novels from his model syllabus. An important consideration, therefore, given this widespread unease about the study of modern novels, is the question of whether Masson was willing to include them on his curriculum. Was the endorsement of Victorian fiction, offered so readily in *British Novelists*, carried over into his university lectures? George Boulukos has suggested that there was a clear demarcation between Masson’s extramural lectures (published as *British Novelists*) and his university work: “while Masson may imply that certain novels are worthy of, even require, specialist intention, he never directly advocates (or enacts) their incorporation into the University curriculum” (370). According to Boulukos, Masson deemed it “entirely appropriate” that novels should remain the “subject matter of popular – rather than academic – lectures” (370).

Yet this assumption about Masson’s curriculum must be weighed against tangible evidence contained within the university calendars. This gives us a much clearer sense of how Masson’s Edinburgh syllabus looked, and what position, if any, the novel was afforded. Masson’s course (which remained much the same throughout his time at Edinburgh) was spread over two terms: during the autumn two parallel lecture series were offered, one on the “Principles of English Style and Composition, with the relative portions of the Ancient Rhetoric,” and the other, “the Literary History of the British Islands as far as to 1250, with special attention to the Anglo-Saxon Literature, and with a view of the History of the English Language from its Anglo-Saxon stage to the beginnings of the present English” (*Edinburgh 1893-94* 81-82).

At some point during the session there was also a section devoted to composition skills, with "brief written exercises to be done by the Students in the Class-room" and prizes awarded for "merit in Essay-writing, in addition to the general Class-Prizes" (82). The second term's lectures covered "the History of English and Scottish Literature from 1250 to the present time," divided into six time periods, with smaller subdivisions within each for different types of writing (82). The sixth and final section of this second-term lecture block covered the period "From 1789 to the present time, or from Wordsworth and Scott to Tennyson and Browning" (82). Student lecture notes taken from the session 1878-79, and now housed in the University archives, reveal that Masson then divided this section into four categories: historical literature, expository literature, oratorical literature and imaginative literature. That final category, which was further subdivided into poetry and prose, involved discussion of novelists, including some authors (such as George Eliot) who were still alive, as well as recently deceased writers including Charles Kingsley, the Brontës, Thackeray, and Dickens.⁴

Within these lecture notes we can again trace Masson's tendency to discuss writers as products of their historical context, to introduce biographical detail, and to offer descriptive, rather than evaluative, readings of the texts. But the further point to be made here is that Masson afforded considerable time in his lectures to the modern novel, and a glance at his examination papers suggests that questions on the genre were also included there. One of the questions on the English literature paper for the 1892-93 session asked students to "Write a brief note on any *six* of the following characters," followed by a list taken from works by Meredith, Thackeray, Dickens, and Scott: Dugald Dalgetty, Nevil Beauchamp, Gradgrind, and Becky Sharp (*Edinburgh 1893-94* 164). Another question from that year's exam paper asked them to write specifically about contemporary novelists: "Characterise the style of any one of the following, and attempt a comparison with that of any other in the list: – R.L. Stevenson, Rider Haggard, Hall Caine, Rudyard Kipling, Thomas Hardy" (166). A question the following April asked students: "Where do you meet the following characters?" (167), before giving a list of characters from novels by Thackeray, Trollope, and Dickens.

Many of the exam questions, of course, were focused on the topics and authors we might reasonably expect to see – such as English poetry pre-1700, Aristotelian rhetoric, Chaucer, and Shakespeare. Yet novels were certainly not overlooked. For Masson, discussion of the modern novel could sit comfortably beside the more canonical texts.



Masson's singular and open-minded approach to teaching is evident throughout his academic career – most notably in his promotion of higher education for women. The Edinburgh Ladies' Educational Association (later renamed the Edinburgh Association for the Higher Education of Women), established in 1867 and firmly supported by Masson, can be seen as part of a larger network of reform, with educational authorities coming under increased pressure to make university-level education available to women across the country. To take some contemporaneous developments: Queen's College for Women had been established by F.D. Maurice in London in 1848 (with Charles Kingsley as the first Professor of English), the Ladies' College in Bedford Square was founded the following year, Westfield in 1882, and Royal Holloway in 1887. Meanwhile, the first women's college at Cambridge, Girton, was established in 1869, and Newnham in 1872, while at Oxford Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville were both founded in 1879, St. Hugh's in 1886, and St. Hilda's in 1893. London University opened up its degrees to women in 1878, and University College, at that time a teaching institution only, permitted women to take its classes the same year.⁵ The founders of the Association recognized that Edinburgh was still some way behind its fellow universities, and that pushing for equal educational opportunities for women was likely to provoke a reactionary response among the University authorities; instead, it was agreed that it would set the groundwork for future reform by organizing courses of lectures, of university-level standard, to be taught by Edinburgh professors. Masson offered to give a trial run of thirty lectures on the "History of English Literature" during the session 1867-68.

The Association had calculated that eighty students needed to sign up in order to cover costs, but these expectations were far exceeded: between 400 and 500 women attended the first (free) sample lecture and 265 then enrolled for the full course, at £2 2s for the lectures, plus an entrance fee of five shillings for entrance to the library and reading room (Crudelius 8). Further courses were organized for the following year – among them Logic and Mental Philosophy, Mathematics, Botany, and Experimental Physics. Students were encouraged to sign up for several courses over successive sessions, emulating the variety and length of a university undergraduate curriculum. Incentives were offered for them to stay on: after successful completion of seven courses they were awarded a Diploma of the Association, described in the 1885-1886 calendar as the “nearest equivalent possible at present to the University degree of Master of Arts” (Calendar 27). Masson’s daughter Flora was among the first to be awarded one, in 1874. Closer scrutiny of the English literature course Masson taught to female students will allow us to assess whether the pedagogical level was indeed on a par with the university. His Association lectures began with the “Principles of Style and Composition,” before looking at the “Principles of Literature in each of its leading kinds, – as Historical and Descriptive Literature, Expository or Didactic Literature, Poetry and the Literature of Prose Fiction, &c., illustrated by reference to the more important English examples” (Calendar 28). The lectures then offered “A view of the History of English Literature from 1688 to the present time” (28). The course structure therefore closely resembled Masson’s undergraduate syllabus, with that same focus on composition, the emphasis on historical overview, and the further division into smaller generic categories within each time period, such as expository literature, oratorical literature, prose fiction, and so on. The examination questions, too, were very similar in form and content to those set before undergraduate students.

At the end of Masson’s first course of lectures in April 1868, female students were asked to “Describe generally the Pamphlet Literature of the time of the Long Parliament and the Civil Wars; and, in connexion with

this, say something as to the origin and early history of English Newspapers and Periodicals” (First 15). Masson’s male undergraduates the same session were asked to “State briefly what you know as to the origin and early history of newspapers and periodical literature in Britain” (*Edinburgh 1868-69* 166). Another exam question from that session required undergraduates to “Name the chief Scottish *historical* writers, and the chief Scottish *philosophical* writers, of the eighteenth century” (*Edinburgh 1868-69* 165), just as female students were asked “What authors of chief note did Scotland contribute to the general list of the eighteenth century?” and “What had been peculiar in the separate course of Scottish literary history before that time?” (First 15). These examples highlight the considerable crossover between the two syllabuses; although this might not be altogether unexpected, given that Masson was teaching the courses at the same time, it does however establish that extramural female students were being taught and assessed to the same academic standard as undergraduate men. Masson was confident that they were as intelligent and committed as his matriculated students.

The first end-of-session report Masson filed on the work of his female students appeared to back up this claim: the essays and exam scripts, he wrote, were “in the highest degree satisfactory,” giving “ample reason to conclude that [...] there are in the community a sufficient number of ladies perfectly well prepared, by prior culture, by interest in the higher studies, by already formed habits of thought, and by persevering willingness, to take advantage of the most highly organized means of instruction accessible anywhere within the country” (Masson, “Report” 13). Given Masson’s unalloyed support for this scheme more generally, it might be constructive to look at the presumably less biased account offered by Alex Nicolson, an examiner from the philosophy department at Edinburgh, who was invited to audit the exam scripts. He too “read them all with great satisfaction” (Nicolson 13), and compared them favorably with those of male undergraduate students: the essays written by the women, he felt, were “*more succinct and to the point*, with less verbosity and longwindedness for the mere display of knowledge, or clouding of

ignorance, and also, in the best of them, by more entire freedom from confusion or error" (14). His general assessment of the work was similarly laudatory, offering a considerable boost to the Association's longer-term goal of opening up the doors of the University to women: "I have no hesitation in saying that not only would any of the ladies whose papers I have looked at, pass in the department of English Literature for the degree of M.A., but that some of them would probably take a high place among the candidates" (14).

The consistently high academic standards achieved by students within the Association lent weight to the campaign to allow women full student status, by demonstrating to University authorities that women were as academically capable as men, and were willing to sign up for a systematic, longer-term course of study. Masson continued to champion them in this cause: in 1889, when the Commission under the Universities (Scotland) Act was investigating university education in Scotland, he successfully persuaded commissioners to admit women as university undergraduates. The first female students entered the University in 1892, with commissioners also recommending that Association certificates be accepted as the equivalent of a degree. Female students were quick to convert their certificates to University qualifications, with eight women graduating with a degree the following year.



David Masson had a significant impact on literary criticism and pedagogical spheres. As professor for over forty years, in London and in Edinburgh, his enormously popular lectures provided students with a firm grounding in literary history, but also encouraged them to apply their critical skills to the work of contemporary writers. An estimated five thousand students (Smith, "Masson, David Mather") were taught by Masson during his three decades at Edinburgh, lending his subject a welcome degree of consistency – a notable contrast to the dramatic clashes taking place at Oxford and Cambridge, both of which debated the merits of literary study until well into the next century. But perhaps Masson's work in promoting higher

education for women will come to be seen as his most enduring legacy. When the first hall of residence for female students of the University of Edinburgh was established in 1896 it was decided to name it Masson Hall in recognition of his support, and to this day the University awards the David Masson Scholarship to a female graduate embarking on further study in the arts.

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Notes

¹ Rebecca Edwards Newman has noted that “From the mid-1820s, middle-class magazines exhibited an intensifying interest in the various forms of prose fiction, fuelled equally by their own role as carriers of short and serial fictions, and as commentators on the parameters of the novel. As part of this engagement, magazines began to articulate for their audiences an array of categories and value-judgements that would influence perceptions of the novel’s development for the rest of the century” (70). Among the magazines Newman cites are *Blackwood’s*, the *Athenaeum*, the *Metropolitan*, and *Fraser’s*.

² Hugh Murray’s 1805 *Morality of Fiction* and John Dunlop’s three-volume *The History of Fiction* (1814) were also important studies in this area, yet Masson’s book stands apart from them for several reasons. Dunlop took no account of contemporary authors; his book stopped short of the nineteenth century. Murray’s study focused on poetry as well as prose, and the discussion was nowhere near as extensive or as detailed as Masson’s. Masson’s position as a university professor also lent his book that crucial element of institutional authority.

³ It is worth noting here that Masson’s predecessor at Edinburgh, W.E. Aytoun, also offered some discussion of fiction in his lectures. However, Erik Frykman has suggested that this was often negative: Aytoun complains of “careless composition in contemporary writers” (53), their “looseness and lack of artistic unity” (56). Frykman concludes that “Masson’s approach is very different and his analyses of the authors treated rather more penetrating than anything Aytoun attempted” (66).

⁴ This information is taken from student lecture notes dating from the academic session 1878-79.

⁵ Students across the country would enroll for classes at an affiliated institution (University College being one of them) before entering for London University's degree-level examinations.

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