

## The first modern university

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# **The First Modern University: The University of Birmingham**

**James Arthur**

## **Abstract**

The University of Birmingham was planned, advanced and established with both national and German models of a University in mind. Civic reasons for the planning of the University need to be viewed within a broader motivational context. Even with a strong sense of civic place the University was conceived as a modern University with multiple founding visions. The set-up goals shifted as the size and complexity of the University increased and early ideas of social mission were either restricted or largely absent in practice. The paper examines the nature of the original institutional commitment to the ‘civic’ dimension of the University between 1900 and 1914 and highlights the many tensions that emerged between the growing academic standing of the University and its continued enthusiasm for the City and regional links.

## **Introduction**

The paper focuses on the first ‘Civic University’ – Birmingham. It uses the extensive collection of Joseph Chamberlain’s papers in the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham as well as the various University annual reports and calendars and the *Times Newspaper* Archive to illustrate the founding purposes advanced for the establishment of the University. These primary sources help highlight some of the early ambiguities, contradictions and tensions surrounding the foundation of the University and throw light on the idea of Birmingham conceived as a ‘Civic University’. The article also builds on the work of key authors in the field and argues that the new University was not founded with a social purpose as one of its priorities. It is recognised at the outset that the literature on the history of civic universities is sparse. This paper seeks to examine the founding purposes of the University of Birmingham through the lens of the four descriptors of a ‘Civic University’ described below between 1900 and 1914 which was the period of Joseph Chamberlain’s Chancellorship of the University.

Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914) was a self-made and successful business man who acquired a fortune manufacturing screws in Birmingham, but he never attended University. He rose to national prominence as a British politician and Statesman and was the leading and most fervent imperialist in his day. While Chamberlain believed that Birmingham lay at the heart of the Empire his loyalty to Birmingham represented only one ‘local patriotism’. He was just as concerned about Durban as he was about Birmingham. He believed, according to Schwartz (2011: 90) that: ‘The means by which radical working people could overcome their political

and social exclusion, and truly become an active and leading spirit in the nation was.....for them to participate in the business of empire. He determined to universalize ‘Birmingham man’ as the model for the true imperial citizen of the future. ‘Birmingham man’ and the empire he represented, Chamberlain believed, *were* the future.’ In other words his imperial imagination trumped geography.

His politics shifted from the radical wing of the Liberal Party to an alliance with the Conservative Party. Newsome (1997: 233) describes how he ‘represented in his person the civic pride and assured municipal status of a city which, by the mid-Victorian period, had come to occupy the place which had hitherto...belonged to Manchester’. Politically, Birmingham had what was called the ‘caucus’ which was an association of Non-conformist middle-class citizens with a controlling representative committee, with branches in every ward in the City, to ensure only Liberal candidates would be elected to promote pre-agreed programmes of reform. Chamberlain became its leader and was elected Mayor of Birmingham in 1873. Chamberlain was inspired by the ‘Civic Gospel’, a phrase that was coined by the Birmingham Non-conformists Robert Dale and George Dawson who argued that improving the conditions of the people in the City had both moral and religious worth (see Briggs, 1952). What emerged was a new municipal activism premised on the idea of service to the citizens of the City. Chamberlain adopted this secularised religious motive as part of his ideology, but many of his political and civic schemes were more entrepreneurial than socially reforming in character and reflected the activities, concerns and power of a bourgeois local elite. He was largely responsible for the creation of the first ‘Civic University’.

### **The Idea of the ‘Civic University’**

The word ‘civic’ is ambiguous and assigning it to a particular category of University has added to the ambiguity. The English ‘Civic Universities’ were founded at the beginning of the twentieth century originating out of a multiplicity of interests and agendas. Different layers of founding visions can be detected which led to ambiguity, contradictions and tensions in the original conceptions of a ‘Civic University’. The ‘Civic University’ in this paper refers to what are often called the ‘Civics’: Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield and Bristol – all Universities founded in a City and within a distinct civic political locality. It is useful to begin with a short outline of what was meant by the term ‘civic’ in connection with the founding of a University in the early twentieth century. A number of overlapping and broad conceptions of the ‘Civic University’ run together in this formative period in their establishment and are worth noting.

First, the phrase ‘Civic University’ was coined by R. B. Haldane<sup>1</sup>, the champion of a national system of provincial universities open to all (Briggs, 1991: 286). Haldane was responsible for popularising the term while the early pioneers of the new Universities did not use the phrase in their early advocacy of them. Haldane emphasised that these new Universities should be provincial, non-collegial, teach practical subjects and not attempt to reproduce Oxbridge – a limited vision, but one that Haldane believed to be achievable. The term was often used in a pejorative sense to distinguish these new Universities from Oxford and Cambridge. The new

Universities, acutely aware of their self-image, clearly felt that they lacked status, reputation and tradition. They were originally viewed as provincial and parochial and the most common use of the word 'civic' indicates what is municipal and local as contrasted with political and national. It is perhaps why Joseph Chamberlain, the most influential of the founding fathers of the University of Birmingham, never employed the use of the phrase. The Principal of the new University, Oliver Lodge (1931), refers to the 'Civic University' in his autobiography, but this is using the phrase well after the foundation.

Second, 'civic' referred to the University in its locality – the City. There was a strong sense in what the University might become, at least initially, - a City focused University which sought to encourage a sense of civic pride in its establishment. Civic also expressed the University's connection with the political locality or civic community. Some local politicians and trade unionists, particularly members of the Labour Party, believed that if these new Universities became embedded in the life of their Cities they would help promote citizenship and civic education through an active engagement with the local people – perhaps even hoping that the urban based University would articulate a mission of social responsibility for the locality. Others felt that it ought to have a 'civilizing mission' or would be concerned with the 'making of citizens'.

Third, the idea of the 'Civic University' rooted in a particular region was seen as contributing to the local economy through teaching technical skills and engaging in relevant scientific research required by local industry. The term was associated with recruiting local students for the purposes of professional formation. The 'Civic University' was therefore associated with vocational identity and was often argued for as being critical to a City's economic future. The tension here lies in the purpose of a University – is it to service local industry or to pursue and transmit knowledge?

Fourth, for some the notion of 'civic' did not preclude the idea of the 'Civic University' acting as a bridge to the national and international. As these new Universities established their identity the 'Civic' gradually became less prominent and the national and international dimensions became the more dominant themes.

These four descriptors of what were eventually called 'Civic Universities' demonstrates that there was no single purpose described for these new Universities and that they lacked in their foundation unity of purpose. The Civic University was conceived as a catalyst for a City's role in national life, as a bastion of existing social structure, as a champion of a new social structure and the University as a weapon of economic competition. These ideas of a Civic University were sometimes in alliance and on other occasions in conflict with each other. Many of the multiple missions advocated for these new Universities were essentially a series of hopes and expectations. The foundation of a University in a City was not of course a guarantee of economic or social success. Indeed, it did not even ensure a strong long-term connection between the University and the City. The local University could become an alternative source of authority in the City and did not necessarily promote social, cultural, or civic educational activities. The University could become divorced and unknown to many of the people in the City. Each 'Civic University' had a different experience of engagement with

their City, but in summary a ‘Civic University’ in 1910 was commonly understood to be a University situated in and supported by a City’s political elite, offering vocational and applied courses for local industry and people for the benefit of the region. This description of a ‘Civic University’ is limited and does not capture the full potentiality or challenges of the first ‘Civic University’ at Birmingham.

### **Chamberlain’s ‘New Experiment’**

From the outset Birmingham was conscious of its lack of status and tradition and of course it’s lesser relationship and standing to Oxford and Cambridge. The University was mocked in the first year of its creation in the local newspaper with ‘They give degrees for making jam, Liverpool and Birmingham’ (*Birmingham Daily Post* 14<sup>th</sup> October 1901) and the University of Oxford refused to recognise Birmingham degrees (Pietsch, 2013: 456). Chamberlain (1899) was clear that Birmingham was a ‘new experiment’ in higher education and that ‘Our general idea is that a local University cannot under any circumstances...compete in the slightest degree with Oxford and Cambridge. We cannot give the special advantages which are offered by the older Universities and we shall deal with a class which is very different from that from which they draw the great bulk of their students’. Nevertheless, Birmingham was not intended as an egalitarian institution as it ‘remained a bastion of the bourgeoisie’ with working class students unable even to afford the stipulated clothes for students (Whyte, 2015: 172). In a speech to the new governors of Mason University College Chamberlain declared that he wanted a local University established ‘to meet the requirements of the district’ (*The Times Newspaper Archive* 14<sup>th</sup> June 1898). Chamberlain (1899) sought a Principal of this ‘new experiment’ of ‘sufficient academic distinction and social standing’ and most of the academic staff was to be drawn from Oxbridge. His expectations were clear: ‘The promoters hope and intend that it shall take a new and distinctive part in the higher education of the country and especially that it shall assist all who are destined to hold important positions in connection with our Trade and Manufactures to avail themselves of the most recent discoveries of science and apply them to the development of our national industries’ (Chamberlain 1900). Chamberlain, however, made few references to any social mission of the University.

Five years later in a speech as Chancellor of the new University Chamberlain (1905) announced that Birmingham would also provide a ‘liberal education to many who wanted it, but could not attend Oxford or Cambridge’. In the same speech he made clear that Birmingham’s future and it’s ‘special *raison d’etre* was to teach, as it had never been taught before, science, and also to proceed in the work of scientific research’. It is curious that none of the arguments or rationale for a ‘liberal education’ promoted by John Henry Newman, that other famous resident in Birmingham and whom Chamberlain knew, in his *Idea of a University*, were employed. Chamberlain had in mind a more utilitarian view of a University and for him a modern University implied an instrumental view of teaching and knowledge. In place of Newman, Chamberlain looked for inspiration from Germany’s Wilhelm von Humboldt’s stress on the union of specialised teaching and research (see Muller-Vallmer, 2011). In contrast Newman held that it is an error to suppose that ‘the end of education is merely to fit persons for their respective stations in life – to teach them their several trades, and put them in the way to rise in the world’ (see Arthur and Nichols, 2009: 153). It is

interesting that there were ‘parties in Birmingham (the University) pulling in different ways’ (see JC12/1/1/23 1<sup>st</sup> April 1920) on the nature of a University in the first few years.

Chamberlain wanted a modern University that would impress both students and all those who visited. First, the site of the University was to be moved from the City to the leafy environs of Edgbaston, the preferred suburb of the wealthy. Second, Chamberlain chose the leading architects of the day to design the new buildings because they would draw national attention to the project (Ives, 2000:116). This emphasised the prestige of the new University buildings by ensuring that the best known architects were employed (Lowe and Knight, 1982: 82). Aston-Webb, the lead architect had previously worked on the grand Royal Naval College at Dartmouth. He commented at the start of his new commission: ‘Our old Universities are the result of centuries of care and labour and cannot be reproduced’ (Whyte, 2015: 172). So while the new University was to be self-consciously modern and offering self-evidently modern subjects the buildings were to be designed in a much older style than anything that existed at Oxford or Cambridge. The design chosen was Neo-Byzantium and he copied some of the features of the newly opened Westminster Cathedral in London. This has led some critics to suggest that Birmingham was attempting to ape the status of Oxbridge (Lowe and Knight, 1982: 81-91) by replicating the need to build grandly and in an ancient style which appears to conflict with the idea of a modern University with modern applied subjects. Chamberlain believed that good buildings would produce good people (Whyte, 2015: 166) – a reference to the possible ‘civilising mission’ of the new University.

Another tension appeared to be Birmingham’s insistence that Oxford and Cambridge were not the model on which it would build the ‘new experiment’, but rather the model was the medieval Scottish Universities. The Principal, Oliver Lodge made clear that the new University would be modelled on the Scottish Universities - three of which had been founded by Papal Bull, including the University of Glasgow whose charter was given by Pope Nicholas V in 1451. However, Lodge referred to them as the ‘ordinary university type’ and was impressed by their ability to combine professional training with liberal arts (Poynting, 1910: 6). Chamberlain, who had been Rector of the University of Glasgow between 1896 and 1899, frequently made the case that English cities, unlike Scottish cities, lacked a University linked to them. In a public speech in Birmingham in favour of establishing a University of Birmingham he pointed to Scotland where four Universities existed for a population of less than 5 million had ‘created an interest in the spread and diffusion of knowledge which had characterised that country for many years, and which enabled Scotland, in spite of the comparative smallness of its population, to take a most prominent part in the history of the UK and the government of the British Empire (hear, hear)’ (*The Times Newspaper Archive* 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1989: 13.). Chamberlain had very ambitious goals for his ‘new experiment’, but the tradition and identity of his new institution was not to be entirely civic or modern. The University was built on a grand scale in order to impress, the students were to be drawn from the middle class and many staff from Oxbridge (Cuthroys, 2000: 497), the model used for the governance of the University was based on the medieval Scottish Universities, and the civic dimension of the University did not identify the local people, but the civic and business elite of the City.

The University faced some opposition at the outset from Labour councillors on the City Council and trade unionists who complained that the University did not admit poor students and they questioned the value of the University to the City of Birmingham (Ives *et al*, 2000: 136). Sheffield University College also experienced similar difficulties with its local council concerning financial support (see Mathers, 2005). Access to the University was certainly limited as was any idea of the social responsibility of the University to the inhabitants of the region in which it was located. Chamberlain's ambitious programme of renewing civic life in order to create a civic minded populace was inspired by the 'Civic Gospel', but it did not appear to extend to the purposes of the new University. The University did establish a joint committee with the Workers' Educational Association in 1909 and provided free evening classes and a diploma for workers, but this was extremely limited in scope and the University sought to encourage working class participation by discouraging the attendance by the middle class of the City who dominated these extension classes (Roberts, 2003: 78 and 89, and see Ranahan, 2011). The early pioneers did not articulate or prioritise social objectives as part of their advocacy of these new Universities, which gives rise to a query about the extent to which these new Universities should have been directly concerned with the 'making of citizens'. It could be argued that it was not part of their aims, values or purposes and to look for evidence in this area is not only out of place, but was in fact never in place. It is true that building citizenship might have resulted from the indirect consequences of the study, life and work in these new Universities, but not as a specific objective in the founding purpose.

In this sense the University of Birmingham did not follow the Scottish model of a University. Unlike the University of Glasgow, Chamberlain's 'new experiment' did not encourage the same social diversity of the student body nor offer enough bursaries for poor students to attend despite Andrew Carnegie's large donation of £25,000 specifically to educate poor students in the City (see Chamberlain, 1899b). Scottish Universities, as Anderson (1995: 24) describes, admitted large numbers of working class students<sup>2</sup> and had a more interactive relationship with their local City at all levels – they possessed a more egalitarian spirit. They were open, diverse, democratic, useful and relevant to the modern world. They were also more cosmopolitan and pluralistic institutions in contrast to Oxbridge Colleges (Arthur and Nicholls, 2009: 137). There was a real link between the intellectual life and the practical life in a Scottish University at this time. Nevertheless, at least the rhetoric of the new Principal at Birmingham echoed the Scottish model when he said 'You cannot make it too widely known that our new University dignity is not to be used to exclude or deter anyone from coming to this free and open College' in his first address to the students in November 1900. Many members of the University community and local notables, such as Neville Chamberlain, were members of eugenics societies in the early years of the University's foundation. They discussed schemes for the eugenic regeneration of British society through selective breeding. The meeting to establish a branch of the Eugenics Education Society took place at the University with many prominent University medical and education staff present. Oliver Lodge, also a member of the Eugenics Education Society, chaired one of the subsequent lecture meetings<sup>3</sup>. This commitment to eugenics by the members was, they believed, aimed at the betterment of the poor.

As the University of Birmingham expanded in the pursuit of research excellence it became gradually less relevant to its geographical position. A number have argued that it became less of a 'new experiment' in higher education and rather more associated with the Oxbridge model. Jones (1988) points to the creation of a self-contained student community divorced from the City as evidence of a move away from the idea of a 'Civic University'. Indeed, Oliver Lodge's address to the first group of students in 1900 appears to suggest that he thought of them as a special group not connected with the City or region from where most of them had come. He had erected the first purpose built student union. Barnes (1996: 305) notes that the 'Civic Universities' were 'defined and re-defined – first as pioneering alternatives to England's medieval institutions, then as second class substitutes'. Moore (1992: 189) complained that the story of the 'Civic University' is a sad one 'for they never escaped the ancient idea of the university'.

### **The 'Civic' Dimension of the University of Birmingham**

All the 'Civic Universities' sought local support for their establishment for as Moore (1992) says 'the idea of a civic University, situated in the heart of a great city, orientated towards the practical and the modern, is enunciated, together with a reassurance that the modern university can combine modernity with a respectful sense of the past'. Chamberlain was clear – 'local needs must have local teaching...the new University must be for Birmingham and the district for the great population within 30 miles radius of which Birmingham had to lead the way' (*The Times Newspaper Archive* 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1989: 13.). In a speech to the annual meeting of the Mason University College court of governors he argued that in the face of commercial competition from the continent and the United States, he looked to the new University of Birmingham to sustain the 'commercial and industrial position of the district by applying knowledge' (*The Times Newspaper Archive* 19<sup>th</sup> January 1900: 8.). In such a way Chamberlain and others appealed to local business and prominent people for financial support for the 'new experiment'. Local councils in the region around Birmingham were also expected to support the new University and Birmingham City Council led the way by placing the new University on the support of the rates. As Whyte (2015: 172) notes 'It was a local University, drawing its students, its identity, and much of its funding from amongst the local people'. Chamberlain (1900b) was confident that 'we shall go with good hope to the neighbouring councils' to raise the necessary finances for the new University. In a speech to the University (see JC12/1/1q/37 15<sup>th</sup> May 1905) he was confident that he could engender a 'local patriotism' for the new University.

The University's finances were precarious by 1913 by which date 21.5% of the University's income came from the local Council having increased from 13% in 1900 (Ives, 2000:136-7). Many of the Councils in the area also provided bursaries and grants to students who attended the University and this income was crucial to the survival of the University. Labour opposition councillors in Birmingham however strongly opposed the University's attempt to increase the rates by one penny in 1911 for the University. They felt that the University already cost too much to the City and that it did not 'foster democracy within the City' (see Ives, *ibid*). One Labour candidate in the local election of November 1911, Fred Hughes, made clear that 'I shall not vote in favour of any increased grant to the university from the

city rates, at least till the university has shown that the money already granted is being used to bring its advantages within the reach of the working class' (Roberts, 2003: 85). A Liberal candidate, J. L. Yates, opposed rate support for the University altogether. Further grant aid from the City was forthcoming and the University agreed in February 2013 to fund 15 scholarships in return for £15,000 a year indefinitely (Roberts, 2003: 85). However, it is not clear whether any of these scholarships were given to working class students. The University continued to experience difficulty in securing adequate financing on a stable and long-term basis. Interestingly, Collini (2012) noted that it is not possible to identify the distinctive character of a University by looking at the local funding of a University – which he says was always a temporary model of funding however critical it was to the actual establishment of the institution.

Chamberlain encouraged local firms and industries to donate and establish courses and departments relevant to their business (Ives, 2015: 143). However, despite these local links, both mining and business courses had few students – the first mining course in 1902-03 had only eight students. There were also few students in the Faculty of Commerce and by 1908 only 15 had graduated. The University certainly attempted to meet the needs of some of the growing manufacturing trades. This was reflected in the friezes high above the main door of the Aston Webb building with a celebration of the industrial achievements of central England, including scenes of patent-making, pipe-laying and cable-laying. There was a conscious effort at this early stage to link academic values to business and to be strongly pro-commercial in contrast to Oxbridge (Sanderson, 1988: 96). It could be argued that the University belonged to the local elite of the City, but with the poor of the City helping to pay for it (see Powell and Dayson, 144-145). It was certainly part of Chamberlain's construction of a liberal civic politics and all the decisions were taken by those who occupied positions of wealth and influence in the City. The curriculum of the University did not provide a civic education and while night classes were arranged there is little evidence that these extended to the poor by way of their attendance (see Ranahan, 2011). The academics, it was claimed 'left aside' the everyday concerns of the City 'in order to pursue their own research' (Benneworth, 2013:145). The Birmingham Settlement, a wealthy women's group established in 1899 to work with poverty in the City in its widest sense, also worked with the University of Birmingham, but efforts were limited to providing accommodation and placements for social work students on training courses (see Glasby, 1999). The group effectively facilitated a degree of 'civic engagement' for the University or alternatively as Silver (2007: 542) argued what is being highlighted is 'the impact of social change on higher education, not vice versa'.

### **A Modern University**

The notion of a 'Civic University' implied an instrumental approach to learning with a local emphasis on the needs of local business. Degrees in applied science and commerce were some of the first degrees offered. A practical orientation was also encouraged in training professionals for the local community. Sciences, engineering, mining, metallurgy, medicine and education were all inherited courses from the pre-existing Mason University College which had been largely vocationally based. However, Chamberlain while promoting local links to industry understood that the pursuit of knowledge and excellence in research should

not be bound by a specific place or location. Indeed, offering courses to local students is not equal to engaging with the local community. Nevertheless, the School of Medicine was intended to raise the health of the local population, but it was not always clear that a course completed at the University would lead to a position in some of the other professions. Schwarz (2004) has questioned the often asserted link between the increase in student numbers and the growth of the professions. He indicates that unless students came with family connections in the local industries it was unlikely they would be employed on graduation from Birmingham. This was not the case in the Department of Education. It is worth looking at the work of the Department of Education in some detail to examine how it promoted professional education in aid of the local community.

The Department was a founding department of the University in 1900 having been established in 1894 in Mason College. The key aim was to develop an educational ladder for local pupils from elementary school to University. This was vital for the University's future since only an increase in local secondary schools would result in more students taking higher exams and eventually increasing applications to the University. For these reasons the Department of Education had been supported and endowed by Non-Conformist liberal civic leaders and in 1900-1901 had 114 students (78 women and 36 men). The total full-time University student population was 678 students, which meant that one sixth of the full-time students of the University resided in the Education Department as well as the overwhelming number of women students. Education was part of the Faculty of Arts and dominated student numbers here. Without these education students the Faculty was not viable. Many of the subjects in the new University were considered 'masculine' which resulted in the Faculty of Arts having most women – almost all in education. The Education students were vital for the development of the Faculty of Arts and they provided valuable funding to the University through their local council grants, fees and scholarships.

In the report of the Principal in 1901-1902 there is a record of the recruitment to the first Professor of Education which is worthy of note in relation to the civic links with the City. It states that although two academics applied – 'it was felt that there was need for a man who was thoroughly in touch with schools and who has a practical grasp of the problems which are pressing for solution in the scholastic reforms that are now possible and urgent'. Alfred Hughes was appointed and became the University's inspector of local schools and a member of many City education committees, including Chair of the City Council's Higher Education Committee<sup>4</sup>. He subsequently became Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Registrar of the University. There was clearly active civic engagement here as well as a constant annual supply of university trained and educated primary and secondary teachers into the City's schools. However, after the First World War the University became more research focused and the Education Department emphasised a more research orientation with less emphasis on local links. The education of elementary school teachers was discontinued, which further disconnected the University from the City.

It is important to realise that the University of Birmingham's connection with the schools in Birmingham was crucial to its expansion. As Schwarz (2004: 959) notes 'The alliance was not between the professions and the universities; it was between the universities and the

secondary schools. The ‘modern’ Universities were caught at both ends. Without a great expansion of secondary schools they could not expand their intake and without a greater willingness by the professions to take graduates there was little incentive for school leavers who did not want to teach, and were not particularly good at the pure sciences, or inclined to take up engineering or medicine, to go to university’. Therefore, the growth of secondary school provision was a pre-condition for the expansion of the University.

### **A Broader View of the Civic University**

Chamberlain spoke of local links and local benefits of the University almost in the same breath as he discussed Britain’s commercial position in the world and the maintenance of industrial and military power. The role the new University of Birmingham could play in the world was articulated from the very first. Competition with Germany was one of the main motivating factors for arguing for a university in Birmingham. German Universities were looked upon as the ‘model of everything in the way of educational organisation and progress’ (*The Times Newspaper Archive* 14<sup>th</sup> June 1898: 10) and Chamberlain was keen to replicate the chemical laboratories of the German Universities in Birmingham with State financial support (*The Times Newspaper Archive* 21<sup>st</sup> December 1895 ‘State Aid to University Colleges’). It should be noted that there is little or no reference to the University of London being a model in the archives at Birmingham even though London also promoted laboratory science and had civic and national roles. Chamberlain’s friend, Haldane in a speech in Liverpool on ‘The Function of a University in a Commercial City’ (*The Times Newspaper Archive* 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1901: 6) noted that Britain was losing the commercial advantage to Germany and the US and he discussed the importance of German research on brewing, dye and explosives manufacture which had made great progress at Britain’s expense. In a subsequent letter to Chamberlain, Haldane encourages him to design a practical plan ‘with the special character of the Midland industries in view’ and he notes that the ‘Birmingham Charlottenburg should have its own special characteristics’ (*The Times Newspaper Archive* 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1901: 6) The Charlottenburg reference was to the Science and Technical University in the Charlottenburg district of Berlin. It was the model of this particular science based University that Chamberlain had in mind when he promoted the establishment of the new University of Birmingham.

Chamberlain (1899c) used the German model and its successes in higher education to argue for State aid for his ‘new experiment’ at Birmingham. In a letter from a treasury official dated 18 March 1899 it was suggested that State aid would only be available if the University of Birmingham was considered a national institution ‘whose benefits were not confined to any particular locality’. Chamberlain therefore promoted the ‘new experiment’ as a local and national institution that would benefit the whole country. Appeals for money for the development of scientific facilities were made on the need ‘to beat the Germans’ (Roderick and Stephens, 1975: 85-86). Chamberlain was a tireless fundraiser for Birmingham and in a letter to the *Times* of 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1902 he wrote that ‘University competition between States is as potent as competition in building battleships, and it is on that ground that our university conditions become of the highest possible national concern’ (Armytage 1955: 247). Chamberlain also met the Prime Minister in July 1904 to lobby for State aid to

Universities on the basis that they would ‘return a splendid dividend’ (*The Times Newspaper* Archive 16<sup>th</sup> July 1904, ‘State Endowment of Universities’).

The older model of higher education that the pioneers of the University of Birmingham constantly referred to was based on the Scottish Universities. Chamberlain, the Governors of Mason University College and the first Principal of the University of Birmingham made numerous references to Scottish Universities as the model to be followed – although the German model of a scientific University appears to be the critical model that was actively intended, but nonetheless never completely realised on the ground. Chamberlain skilfully used his Scottish links to secure donations to establish the University of Birmingham. Andrew Carnegie gave £50,000, Lord Strathcona £25,000 (see Chamberlain, 1899d) while Haldane offered political advice and encouragement. The University’s statutes were based on those at the University of Glasgow, but only one Scottish professor was appointed in 1900 – John Henry Muirhead<sup>5</sup> as the first Professor of Philosophy of the University – although he had been appointed to a Chair in 1897 in Mason University College. His appointment was the closest the University came to fulfilling civic responsibilities and encouraging and promoting civic education in the City. He published and lectured widely on ethics, character and citizenship<sup>6</sup> in and out of the University. Muirhead took a great interest in the poor in the City and his chief interest lay in the application of his philosophy to practical questions, especially of social reform. He personally, as opposed to any institutional commitment, visited local factories, campaigned for better housing and set up schools for the poor.

## **Conclusion**

The phrase ‘Civic University’ has travelled conceptually from a derogatory term, to being a respected term for a University, and finally to a more ambiguous term in modern times. Civic in the sense of being defined as local appears to have been a contradiction even in 1900 when Chamberlain never intended the University to be solely a local matter. He was criticised for opening the University up to those from beyond the Midlands and suffered even more personal criticism for having a large number of Japanese students in the Faculty of Commerce (Ives, 2000: 137). In building the Great Hall at Birmingham Chamberlain did not think of Birmingham’s past, but of modern Universities in Germany (Ives, 2000: 117). On Chamberlain’s 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday celebrations the *Times* notes that his involvement in founding the University was his ‘crowning effort so far as the City is concerned’ and ‘will be looked upon by future generations as the most valuable of all his services to Birmingham’ (*The Times Newspaper* Archive 9<sup>th</sup> July 1906). However, Chamberlain’s ‘new experiment’ was looked upon by the Labour movement and by trade union leaders in the City with suspicion.

Shils (1988: 210) argues that ‘no university can be truly local as knowledge, the essential tribute of a University, must be offered to all parts of the world. So whilst Universities may offer their instruction to mainly local residents, or give local instructions beyond regular courses, or make their libraries or sporting facilities available to the locality, make legal and medical advice available to the community and perform research for and give advice to local industries and local government and bodies, it would be a mistake to consider a university a local institution in the way that local government or civic associations are’. Birmingham

combined these key purposes of a University in the founding vision – to aid the local community, but simultaneously to bridge the local, national and international. However, there appears to be an inverse relationship between the academic standing of a University and its enthusiasm for local links which led to a slow divorce of the University from the City. This is why concerns were expressed by local councillors even in 1900. The civic link, especially in financing the University, was essential to Birmingham's establishment, but not to its future expansion.

The conceptual currents of the early nineteenth century produced many ideas of what a 'Civic University' might look like - institutions of modernity which de-emphasised, at least to begin with, the model of a liberal education enunciated by Newman. Birmingham had emphasised Humboldt's science teaching and specialist research rather than Newman's idea of critical citizenship as the aim of a University education. However, it is important to realise that Newman emphasised science teaching as the Rector of his University at Dublin and established there strong scientific departments (Arthur and Nichols, 2009: 167). He was not against the utilitarian objectives of a University in terms of specialisation or in providing professional and vocational studies and it is why Collini (2012: 48) notes that Newman's intention in his *Idea of a University* was to 'scare off the proponents of utility'. Newman did oppose an excessive emphasis on knowledge as productive and useful, but he wrote in the *Idea* that 'nothing can be more absurd than to neglect those matters which are necessary for (a student's) future calling' (see Ker, 1976: 140). Newman also understood the social function of a University and the need for informed and critical citizens. Birmingham's efforts in connecting with the City's social agenda, with the exception of Muirhead and perhaps Hughes, were few. It raises the question of whether any 'Civic University' at the time had underlying social values as part of their foundation purposes. What positive social convictions did they embody? In terms of social mobility the University of Birmingham was so conscious of its status that few working class students managed to secure admission until after the end of the Second World War. It had little understanding of its social responsibilities to the City beyond serving the elite classes in the region. Any broadening of participation in higher education was restricted to middle class students and added to what Gunn (2000:26) called the 'local, public bourgeois culture' in Birmingham.

Its original goal was to replicate the German scientific University, particularly the one established by Humboldt in Berlin, but instead its promoters preferred to speak of the model of what they termed the 'ordinary university type' such as the University of Glasgow. These conceptual currents produced a set of challenges and tensions for the new University of Birmingham – initial rejection of the liberal education Oxbridge model, embracing the German science and technology model and admiring the Scottish model of combining the intellectual life and professional education. These three University models have elements in common and all can be seen in the foundation visions for the new University. All three models coexisted and interlocked with each other influencing concrete objectives in a fluid way. None alone were a serious depiction of the reality of the University of Birmingham on the ground. Which one influenced decision-making at any particular stage differed over-time,

but the University had been given the space to develop in its own way in a state of steady change.

Birmingham as the first 'Civic University' is perhaps more accurately described as the first modern University. The civic dimensions largely concerned financing the University, especially the applied science courses through local business donations, student fees and local council grants. As government funding became more readily available after the First World War the University shifted its founding purposes to a more comprehensive University model with a growing emphasis on the arts and social sciences. While located in a large urban City Birmingham had a necessarily complex relationship with the region balancing varied sets of contradictory concerns, interests and agendas. There are many academics who say that Birmingham and the other 'Civic Universities' abandoned the idea of a new model of a modern University to copy Oxbridge (see Barnes, 1996, Cunningham, 2009, Jones, 1988, Lowe and Knight 1982, and Sanderson 1988). The University community at Birmingham appeared to have become at a very early stage more disconnected from the City and region despite the various professional training offered to its professional classes (Aston, 1994: 579) and regardless of Oliver Lodge's intention, in his first address to students in 1900, that science students at Birmingham should study the arts as part of their preparation to be graduates. However, even in the goals set forth by Chamberlain for his 'new experiment' there was an intention and argument for Birmingham to be a national and international modern university. The idea of a 'Civic University' was transmuted in such a way that some local and regional interests became displaced as the University grew in complexity. Even the Scottish model, much loved in the rhetoric of the early promoters, was often assimilated to the idealised representations of Oxbridge. In summary, Birmingham was, as Silver (2007) notes, 'on the run with social purpose in pursuit'. However, in truth the University of Birmingham could point to a number of foundation visions as it sought to bring together, over time, the sciences and social sciences, the arts and humanities, and the professions. Today, the leadership of the University is a force which drives a strong re-connection with the City with its avowal: 'The global University at the heart of an ambitious City'.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> R.B. Haldane (1856-1928) was a prominent Scottish member of the national Liberal Party and friend of Joseph Chamberlain. He used his many positions in Government to promote provincial universities and developed a philosophy of what a 'Civic University' ought to be over a period of ten years culminating in his 'The Civic University' (London: John Murray) speech at the University of Bristol in 1911. He is widely seen as the person who led the national movement to establish 'Civic Universities' in England to 'ensure that the highest, most noble forms of life could flourish in the provincial towns of England'.

<sup>2</sup> Working class students increased from 18.6% in 1860 to 24% in 1910 at the University of Glasgow – see Knowx, W.W., *A History of the Scottish People: The Scottish Education System 1840-1940*, accessed from SCRAN. The University of Birmingham had below 2% in 1910. The bequest of Andrew Carnegie in 1901 guaranteed the fees for students of Scottish birth attending Scottish Universities (Anderson, 1991: 230-6).

<sup>3</sup> *Eugenics Review* 1910 Vol. 2 No. 2 and *Eugenics Review* 1914 see also *The New Scientist*, 27<sup>th</sup> April 1978, p. 223 for a discussion of eugenics at this time with Oliver Lodge mentioned as a follower.

<sup>4</sup> Birmingham City Archives SON Box 1, 1906, Box 4, 1907, and Box 5, 1908.

<sup>5</sup> For his biography see Mason University College Magazine, No. 4 Vol XVI March 1898, p. 1. There is one other academic worthy of mention in regard to their social concern for the people of the City and that is the first

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female to be appointed as a history lecturer in 1905 – Rose Sidgwick. She worked with the Workers Educational Association in promoting workers education in the City, but only had limited success.

<sup>6</sup> C. J. H. Muirhead (1918) *Social Purpose: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Civic Society*, London: Allen Unwin. Muirhead lectured the education students of the University and assisted with night classes. See also J. H. Muirhead, (1942) *Reflections of a Journeyman in Philosophy on the Movements of Thought and Practice in his Time*, (ed.) by J. Harvey, London: Allen and Unwin.