Should We Notice Researchers Outside the University?

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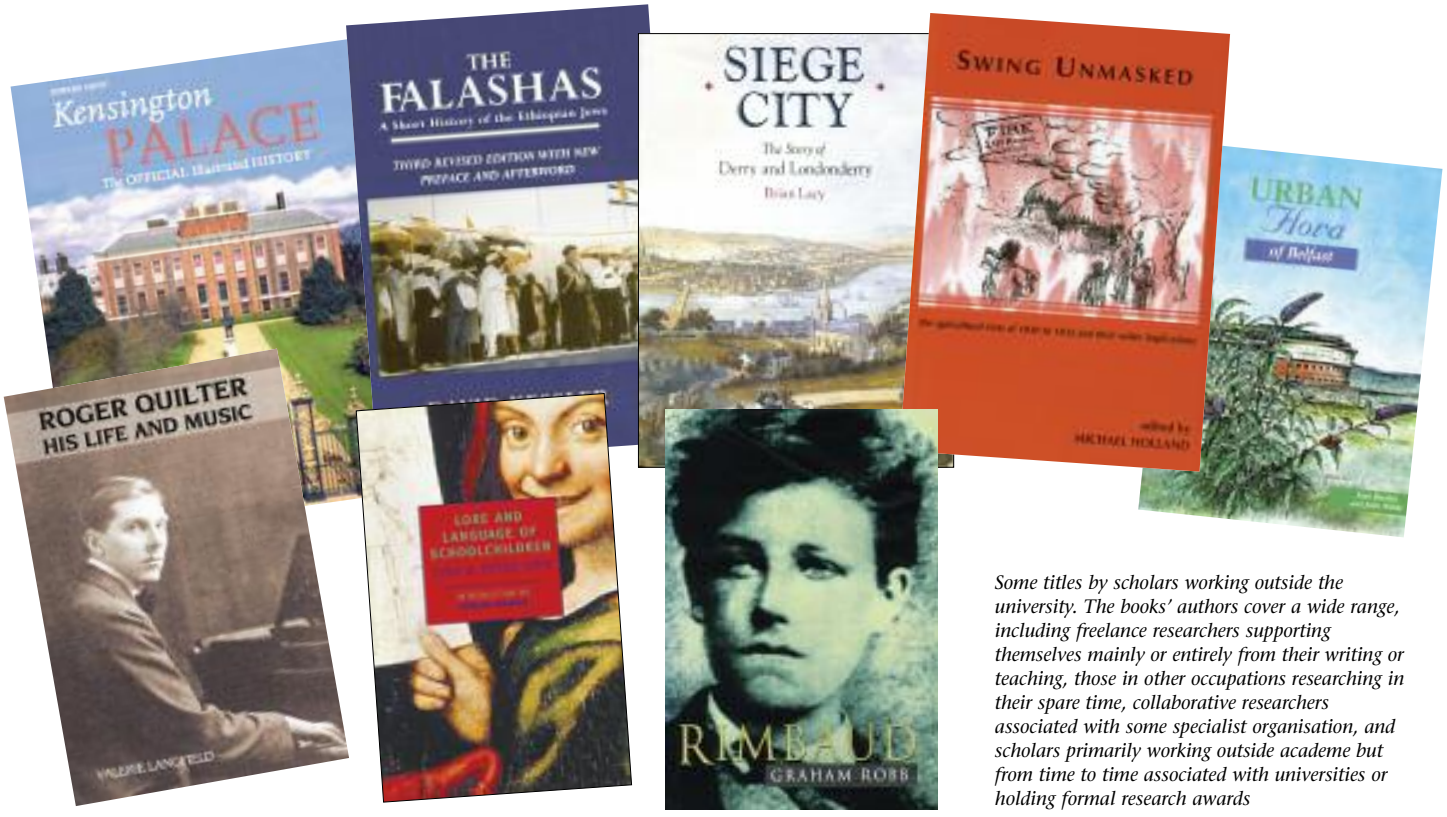
THE PRIME CENTRES for generating and authorising knowledge are the universities – or so anyway it is widely assumed. The university is '*the* key knowledge-producing institution', as a familiar phrase has it, holding a near monopoly over the 'ownership and transmission of established knowledge, and validation of new knowledge'.[1] In today's Britain visibility for university research is guaranteed by government financing policies, not least through the highly publicised official Research Assessment Exercises where higher education institutions compete among themselves, propagating the impression that research is quintessentially conducted within university walls. An influential report asserts categorically that assessing universities' and colleges' research provides 'comprehensive and definitive information on the quality of UK research in each subject area' and thus captures the 'UK research system' as a whole.[2]

But is this analysis justified?

The question is of some moment given the debates now raging about the role of universities in this age of greater access, of interactive web communication, of the modern 'knowledge society', and (arguably) of the plurality and challengeable status of knowledge. For what is so often omitted from these far-ranging debates is precisely the substantial presence of researchers working *outside* universities whose contribution to knowledge-creation is sometimes as serious, original and carefully-tested as that of academics.

Some instances leap to the eye once you start looking. Industrial firms, government, research institutes, think tanks, Royal Commissions, survey organisations, newspapers, broadcasting – all are settings in which research takes place. And besides those more professional environments are the huge numbers of independent researchers whose activities may well be familiar to many readers. Freelance writers produce acclaimed biographies and histories while family historians crowd local record offices and expertly tap the web. Up and down the country skilled bird watchers chart and investigate bird migrations and ecological patterns, natural history societies document and classify botanical species, and amateur archaeologists join in major contributions to our knowledge of the past. Not only are detailed excavations undertaken and written up by local societies but there have also been striking national projects. One such was the massive archaeological survey *The Defence of Britain* coordinated by the Council for British Archaeology between 1995 and 2002. During that time some 600 largely amateur researchers recorded details of nearly 20,000 twentieth-century military sites, in the process revolutionising our understanding of British anti-invasion defences.[3] And in the



Some titles by scholars working outside the university. The books' authors cover a wide range, including freelance researchers supporting themselves mainly or entirely from their writing or teaching, those in other occupations researching in their spare time, collaborative researchers associated with some specialist organisation, and scholars primarily working outside academe but from time to time associated with universities or holding formal research awards

field sciences generally – in botany, geology, ornithology, palaeontology, agronomy, and many others – amateur and professional researchers have long interacted or merged, and do so still with the more 'amateur' end of the continuum by no means always the less significant.[4]

History is another rich field for independent researchers, both individual and team-based. Sometimes this has involved working at a local level but with wider relevance, well illustrated in the research into the agricultural disturbances of 1830–32 (the 'Swing Riots') which notably extended and enriched Hobsbawm and Rudé's earlier account.[5] This was a collaborative research project initiated and managed by members of the Family and Community Historical Research Society, with academic advice and editing by a freelance historian. It was carried out by a geographically scattered network of 41 independent researchers, members of the Society, working on local records in England, Scotland and Wales and communicating their findings through email.[6]

Work by non-university researchers in fact spans an astonishing range. It runs from local history to entomology and microscopy, cartography to seismology and theology, philosophy to contemporary history and current affairs. Astronomy, zoology, geography, literary analysis, folklore, analyses of space data – all are carried forward by researchers from outside academe as well as within it. The *Scientific American*'s 'Amateur Scientist' columns regularly document innovative projects and instrumentation, and thousands of expert amateur astronomers work in global research networks in partnership with the professionals. Modern communication technologies open new opportunities for collaboration, and for interaction among what has been called the new breed of 'pro-am' enthusiasts.[7] The open-source Linux system was famously forged collaboratively by thousands of fellow enthusiasts, as were the Firefox browser and Moodle virtual-learning environment. Meanwhile internet publications are being constructed by contributors from variegated backgrounds, both specialist and other, and bloggers actively build and debate knowledge on the web.

Why do accounts of knowledge creation so frequently ignore these non-university researchers? One reason perhaps lies in their diversity. They are scarcely an easily identifiable or uniform sector, shading as they do on one side into hobbyists and dabblers, on another into fully committed researchers, sometimes with university connections or aspirations. The boundaries between 'amateur' and 'professional', 'independent' and 'institutional', 'work' and 'leisure', are in any case notoriously – and perhaps increasingly – murky and elusive.

But probably just as important are the ideologies and hierarchies surrounding the concept of knowledge and its creators. Both 'research' and 'knowledge' – value-laden terms indeed – can be used to convey implicit messages about the status of particular forms of inquiry and who should control them. I well recall the neat rhyme about the nineteenth-century master of Balliol I heard circulating in Oxford in the mid-twentieth century:

> I'm the Master, Benjamin Jowett
> There's no knowledge but I know it.
> I am Master of this college
> What I don't know isn't knowledge.

The precise coverage of what counts as 'knowledge' may have changed since Jowett's day. But comparable definitions still draw us unawares to notice some things (and some people), but not others.

Thus something labelled 'amateur' – unpaid, outside the official statistics – is regularly brushed out of the 'real' research world. So too with the extensive production of knowledge in industrial settings, obscured by the constant thrust to set the university researchers at the centre of the picture. 'Knowledge-transfer' is mostly publicised as *from* academics' research *to* production sites (not the other way round), and business as the *recipient* of the 'knowledge and expertise that universities and colleges create and accumulate'.[8] British universities nowadays lean towards re-defining 'research' as constituting only those outputs likely to earn them high grades in the official Research Assessments, in effect ruling out everything (and everyone) else as not 'really' research.

Bird watchers at Cley. (Courtesy Dawn Balmer/BTO).

The long tradition of amateur natural science continues in the present as tens of thousands of amateur ornithologists conduct fieldwork, take part in surveys in cooperation with the British Trust for Ornithology, organise individual projects, and contribute to new advances in macroecological research.[13]

Changing and contested definitions of what counts as knowledge and who is entitled to capture it are nothing new. But in considering the current paradigms, it is worth recalling that it has often been those *outside* established institutions that have taken the lead in exploiting new technologies, methods, or fields of study. To mention just one example among many, the now internationally known research on the culture of children by the independent scholar Iona Opie developed almost wholly outside the universities. Working together with her husband Peter she produced a string of pioneering publications, not only on nursery rhymes but, in the great quartet between 1959 and 1997, on children's lore and games more widely. Their collections and commentaries were based in rigorous and almost unbelievably comprehensive research not only from documentary sources but also from first-hand fieldwork using unobtrusive conversation and observation with children in playgrounds and streets all over Britain. Material was collected from 5000 school-

children for one book, 10,000 for the next, supplemented by correspondence with thousands of teachers and others throughout the country. When the Opies were conducting this then-innovative research the topic of children's culture was scarcely if at all recognised as fit subject for university interest. It is in large part due to their pioneering work *outside* the walls of academe that it has now become established *within* them.

From 'science' in the nineteenth century (classed as lacking the mental rigour of established disciplines like classics or mathematics) to more recent fields like astrophysics, African literature, oral history, popular music, women's studies, dance studies and much else, the founding scholars in fact commonly started outside conventional curricula and recognition. Amateurs and outsiders can venture, riskily, beyond disciplinary prescriptions and regurgitations to strike out in new directions.

In the current regime, then, should we be asking whether the extramural researchers are sometimes less fettered than those constrained within the universities? Some of the most creative research, it has been suggested, may now be coming from beyond academe, in places where the heterogeneity of knowledge production can have full play rather than, as Peter Scott puts it, in settings 'from which all forms of contestation that do not conform to scholarly and scientific practice are excluded'.[10]

Not that researching outside academe is always easy. Independent researchers can have problems accessing the kinds of funding, libraries, labs, equipment, networking or even in some cases electronic databases that come more freely to those signed up in the university sector. The plethora of special-interest associations and networks give some support, some of them straddling university walls, and individuals sometimes find backstairs ways into university resources. Others tap the marketplace through writing, teaching or consultancy. The British Academy has a reasonable record here, sometimes electing independent researchers as Fellows (Iona Opie in 1998 for example) or encouraging them to apply for certain research grant schemes. But many official bodies take a different line, and confine their recognition and resourcing to researchers within the university sector. Support for the free pursuit of knowledge celebrated in many university visions is not always readily extended to the active world of researchers outside the university walls, and in general the dominant ideologies and conditions are inimical to, at best negligent of, their needs.

Some non-university bodies organising or sponsoring research.

One key question will no doubt be nagging at many readers – the credibility of this extra-mural researching. In the absence of the tried and trusted standards of university endorsement can we really take this externally conducted work seriously?

This is a complex issue which there is not space to pursue very far here.[11] But it should at least be said that, contrary perhaps to expectation, these extra-university knowledge processes are not necessarily merely idiosyncratic or without their own forms of validation and checking. The criteria and frames of reference may often be implicit rather than verbalised, and applied in variegated and often multiple and overlapping ways. And – as within universities too?… – some researchers are clearly vastly more competent and conscientious than others. But amidst the diversities particular fields develop relatively shared standards and expectations, responsive to accreditation brought by specific people, locations, topics, methodologies, or outcomes. The 'publics' and audiences looked to are diverse: sometimes large and active, perhaps practising similar pre-publication refereeing as for any academic-generated offering; sometimes small in-groups who nevertheless provide their own stamp of authority. Many familiar patterns in fact emerge. Among them are an emphasis on acquiring appropriate expertise (learning on the job, sometimes, rather than paper accreditation); on public communication and scrutiny; and on recognition through significant others (sometimes small scale and individual, sometimes formally constituted societies and groups).

Is there after all a radical distinction here from the similarly complex legitimising processes within university settings? Academic practices around the authorising of knowledge are diverse too, again shaped through multiple and sometimes disputed overlapping interests, not excluding the commercial, research-funding and governmental bodies to which researchers can find themselves answerable. Inside as without academe, scrutiny by 'peers' can mean self-referencing insider networks and expectations, supported by selective knowledges and personnel. Validation through making public also looks more slippery now that the pre-screened authorising of hard-print publication – that long-respected vehicle of academic endorsement – can be bypassed by post-publication assessment on the web. Are we, as Ronald Barnett asks,[12] on the verge of a new kind of public and more dialogic space, building and establishing knowledge through debate?

I end up doubtful of whether there really is some marked divide between the processes of knowledge creation outside as against inside the universities. Variegated as both are, they overlap in personnel, fields, ethics, procedures, and in the multiplicity of authority sources to which they appeal. It is true that it would be misplaced either to denigrate the procedures of university-based researchers or to exaggerate those of independent scholars – they are highly diverse after all, some indubitably less careful or committed than others. But it is emphatically not a case of uniformly uncontrolled, haphazard and irresponsible investigators outside universities as against accountable, organised and high-minded researchers within.

Universities will doubtless continue as powerful nodes for the generation, accumulation and evaluation of knowledge, and rightly so. But if there is after all no clearly distinguishable boundary between researchers outside and within academe, then capturing the full range of today's knowledge creation can only be accomplished by going beyond partial and restrictive definitions, and setting universities in this wider context. We need to include in the current debates the immense realm of active players *beyond* university walls, not just in industry, commerce, or think tanks, but in homes, in charities, in associations large and small, in informal groupings and networks – the whole complex spectrum of extra-university researchers. Uneven and sometimes wild no doubt – is that always so untoward? – they play a major role in both extending and consolidating our contemporary world of knowledge.

The issues discussed here were the subject of a public panel discussion, 'Who's Creating Knowledge? The Challenge of Non-University Researchers', held at Queen's University Belfast on 14 March 2007 in partnership between the British Academy, Queen's University Belfast and the ESRC Festival of Social Science. The event was a partial repeat of one of the same title held at the Academy on 27 June 2006, of which an audio recording is available at

http://britac.studyserve.com/home/Lecture.asp?ContentContainerID=116

Notes

1 As expressed (somewhat sceptically) in Peter Scott (ed.) *Higher Education Re-formed*, 2000, p. 191; Stephen McNair, 'Is there a crisis? Does it matter?', in Ronald Barnett, and Anne Griffin (eds) *The End of Knowledge in Higher Education*, 1997, p. 36.

2 *Review of Research Assessment: Report by Sir Gareth Roberts to the UK Funding Bodies*, 2003, pp. 2, 5.

3 See www.britarch.ac.uk/projects/dob/index.html

4 Elaborated in H. Kuklick and R. E. Kohler (eds) Science in the Field, special issue, Osiris Second Series 11, 1996 (see esp. p. 5).

5 E. J. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing*, 1969.

6 Michael Holland 'Swing revisited: the Swing project', *Family and Community History* 7, pp. 87–100; Michael Holland (ed.) *Swing Unmasked. The Agricultural Riots of 1830 to 1832 and their Wider Implications*, 2005; *The Swing Riots CD-ROM*, 2005 [searchable CD-ROM database with detailed findings, for further information see www.fachrs.com/swing/SwingCD.htm].

7 Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller, *The Pro-Am Revolution. How Enthusiasts are Changing our Economy and Society*, Demos, 2004.

8 J-P. Gaudillière and I. Löwy, I. (eds) *The Invisible Industrialist. Manufactures and the Production of Scientific Knowledge*, 1998, p. 5; Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Council Briefing*, 54, 2004, pp. 1, 2.; see also Michael Eraut, *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence*, 1994.

9 Their many books include *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, 1959, *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, 1969, *The Singing Game*, 1985, *Children's Games with Things*, 1997.

10 In D. Warner and D. Palfreyman (eds) *The State of UK Higher Education: Managing Change and Diversity*, 2001, p. 200.

11 Discussed further in Ruth Finnegan (ed.) *Participating in the Knowledge Society: Researchers Beyond the University Walls*, 2005, esp. pp. 10ff.

12 Ronald Barnett, 'Re-opening research: new amateurs or new professionals?', in Finnegan, *Participating*.

13 Jeremy J. D. Greenwood, 'Science with a team of thousands: the British Trust for Ornithology', in Finnegan, *Participating*.