
Reviews

The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature, and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain. By Guy Ortolano. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009. 295 pp. ISBN 978-0521892049, £55.

When C.P. Snow delivered the Rede Lecture at Cambridge University in May 1959 on 'The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution', he launched a phrase, and perhaps even a concept, on what has proved to be a global career. Half a century later, the notion of 'the two cultures' is still regularly invoked to focus a variety of concerns about disciplinary specialization and the relations between the sciences and the humanities. But Snow's original lecture actually addressed a much wider range of issues—questions about the benefits or otherwise of industrialization, about the role of expertise in the formulation and execution of political policies, about the relations of 'advanced' to 'developing' countries, and about the nature of 'progress' and 'modernity'. In the years immediately following its publication, the lecture attracted a vast quantity of comment from around the world, and its success propelled Snow—former scientist, influential scientific administrator, prolific and increasingly successful novelist—to a new level of intellectual celebrity.

However, the response to his lecture took a new and much more combative turn when the literary critic F.R. Leavis delivered his Richmond Lecture, also in Cambridge, in February 1962 on 'Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow'. Leavis's lecture, also immediately published, was widely seen as an unpardonably *ad hominem* attack on Snow's standing, but Leavis believed that only by demonstrating the nullity of Snow as thinker and writer could his function as what Leavis called a 'portent' be properly understood: what did it portend about the sorry state of British culture that it could take a third-rate figure such as Snow as any kind of guru, at once major novelist and authority on science, when, as Leavis argued (surely correctly), he was neither. Leavis's attack was in turn widely denounced as well as (rather less widely) defended, and so his and Snow's lectures became the centrepieces of what has ever since been referred to as 'the Two Cultures controversy'.

In his careful and exceptionally well-researched book, Guy Ortolano tries to reconstruct a series of contexts that made this controversy a microcosm of the cultural politics of post-war Britain. Taking the contrasting positions of Snow and Leavis as his organizing axes, he explores the differences between the

'technocratic liberalism' represented by the former and the 'radical liberalism' espoused by the latter. He then pursues these contrasts through a series of widening contexts: the politics of university expansion (he has some excellent material on Snow's role in helping to establish Churchill College in Cambridge to educate an elite of scientific leaders); rival understandings of the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution; debates about Britain's 'national decline'; anxieties about the role of the former imperial power in a rapidly decolonizing world; and the rise and fall of what he calls the 'meritocratic moment' in British society in the three decades after 1945.

Ortolano argues that the configuration of the controversy needs to be understood primarily in ideological rather than disciplinary terms. This was far from being a conventional left-right clash: both Snow and Leavis can be seen as kinds of meritocratic liberals, but they differed in their assessments of the merits of contemporary industrialized society and its managerial political culture. Snow followed the logic of his 'behind closed doors' vision of effective political action (as well as his own insatiable hunger for gongs of all sorts) by briefly becoming a minister in Harold Wilson's 1964 government, with a seat in the House of Lords. Leavis clung defiantly to his conception of himself as an intransigent 'outlaw', denouncing an almost terminally corrupt society and falling back on the insights into 'finer living' to be gleaned from a small handful of literary masterpieces.

Ortolano's book is clearly written and constantly exhibits meticulous scholarship; he synthesizes an impressive range of existing secondary work on the period, and he makes good use of his extensive archival material, especially the rich deposit of Snow papers at the Harry Ransom Center in Texas. It has to be said that his interpretation of the controversy itself is not particularly novel, and so such originality as the book possesses comes more from his assiduity in pursuing alleged linkages, some of them more persuasive than others, with the larger themes in British history during this period.

The more fundamental reservation one may have about the book, however, concerns his use of the antithesis between Snow and Leavis as the structuring principle for each chapter as well as the focus of the overall argument. For the fact is that this was an episode whose terms and significance were largely set by Snow: Leavis certainly became the most notorious of his public interlocutors, but there were many others. Moreover, Snow operated in the public domain and in 'the corridors of power' (a phrase he coined) in a way in which Leavis never aspired to do. It is noticeable that Ortolano's sources are far more extensive for Snow than they are for Leavis, and that his efforts to connect Leavis to the worlds of politics and policy in which Snow moved do seem a little strained. Conversely, it has to be said that the 'two cultures' controversy represented the peak of Snow's career and his chief claim on the attention of later generations: it was only one, relatively minor, episode in Leavis's career, and his work as a literary critic was and has remained incomparably more interesting and important than Snow's machinations and lucubrations. Ortolano makes a brave stab at summarizing Leavis's critical positions, but these passages feel rather dutiful and superficial compared with his nuanced and shrewd accounts of, say, Snow's attempts to orchestrate support among social

historians or his relations with the gathering of scientific advisors to the Labour Party in the late 1950s which became known as ‘the Gaitskell Group’.

The Two Cultures Controversy provides a full and persuasive account of Snow’s public roles during his years of fame and a thoughtful exploration of the ramifications of the debate surrounding his celebrated lecture. On these grounds, it will be of considerable value to cultural, educational and political historians of the period, as well as of interest to a wider readership curious about the origins and continuing significance of a famous phrase.

University of Cambridge

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STEFAN COLLINI

sc107@cam.ac.uk

Life on Air: A History of Radio Four. By David Hendy. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007. xiv + 518 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-924881-0, 25 (hardback), 978-0-19-955024-1, £14.99 (paperback).

If any part of the BBC can be said to have kept faith with the Reithian code of ‘educate, inform and entertain’, then it must be Radio 4. David Hendy’s book tells in skilfully marshalled detail how the favourite radio station of the British middle class has, over four decades, weathered internal faction-fighting, political intimidation, managerial bullying and the tough love of its all-too-devoted listeners to arrive in the new century with much the same remit as it started out with: a rich mix of talk-based programming, combining varied pleasures with a judicious degree of uplift and resistant to both elitism and ratings-chasing.

Yet as Hendy makes clear, its survival in this form was far from inevitable, and resulted more from stalemate between the contending forces that would have pushed it in other directions than from any deliberate policy. A product of the reorganization of radio in 1967, itself a reflection of cultural upheaval, Radio 4 inherited a tweedy Home Service culture in which producers addressed each other by their surnames—like a ‘good regiment’, according to Robin Day—and a middle-aged, middle-class, middle-brow ethos which was badly at odds with the times, but was already changing in a more informal direction. Unlike Radios 1, 2 and 3, Radio 4 had no prescribed niche remit: the last remnant of Reithian mixed programming, but without the cultural and moral certainties of Reith’s time, it had nothing to give it a clear direction. This was a strength as well as a weakness. It meant that Radio 4 was subjected to endless buffeting by the changing external cultural and political climate, but it also justified broadcasters in seeking a wide range of styles, voices and content in addressing a society which was increasingly defined in terms of its diversity rather than its core values. Cultural disunity, Hendy argues, was essential to Radio 4’s mission, as was the ‘brute force of monopoly’ which Reith had enjoyed. If it had been dependent on advertising, it would have had to seek a far tighter and