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# Teaching writing as public work: John Macmillan Brown and 'practical' composition

Abstract:

John Macmillan Brown, Professor of Classics and English at Canterbury College, was one of the first teachers of writing in a New Zealand university. Here I examine how his composition pedagogy offers a relationship between English instruction, academic success, and professional and public life, which remains relevant and provocative today. I suggest that the move away from Macmillan Brown's pedagogy can be located in a history of student writing in the New Zealand university and its increasing marginalisation, as a result of limited teaching resources and the challenge of instituting a liberal arts model for university education. Acknowledging the complexity of Macmillan Brown's 'practical' pedagogical project, I also suggest that attention to such teaching might put pressure on histories of the university that prioritise the development of research capacity, and can serve to denaturalise and explain some of our present-day assumptions about the teaching of writing and literacy in the university.

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Keywords:

Writing – Composition instruction – Writing instruction – Pedagogy – John Macmillan Brown – History of the New Zealand university

**1.**

In his memoirs, John Macmillan Brown provides us with what is, to my knowledge, the first account of the teaching of writing in a New Zealand university. Having arrived in New Zealand in order to become Professor of Classics and English at the newly established Canterbury College in 1874, Macmillan Brown describes resolving in 1880 to make his 'chief aim the teaching of the art of writing English', in the manner of some of his teachers at Glasgow and Oxford – because his students, 'raw untrained material in this pioneering settlement of New Zealand', included many 'who would be incapable of putting their thoughts into everyday English' (Brown 1974: 92). This teaching is as much a public concern as an academic one, for Macmillan Brown, especially as more than half his students are not planning to pursue a degree, many are potential primary and secondary school teachers, and many are professional people who could not attend many classes but came to what he called his 'composition or laboratory class and essay class' (109). He writes:

> Most of those who came to my classes, though they knew the rules of grammar and the meaning of words, were incapable of accurate and idiomatic expression. Nor were they able to think out any subject in a systematic and logical way. I therefore instituted not only an essay class (which would do its work in my lecture room so that I might know that all the essays to be compared were written without the aid of books and under similar conditions), but also a special weekly lecture on a subject connected with the books set for the degree course in the university. In this they would have material well arranged and logically or imaginatively thought out – ample enough to let each choose his own course for his essay. Lastly I began a composition class in which I could teach practically, as in a laboratory, the art of accurate and idiomatic English. Singularly enough I found that this always had the most numerous attendance. All the professions seemed to be conscious that this supplied what they most needed (92–3).

We might initially read Macmillan Brown's pedagogy as concerned with literacy standards and conservative in that sense, even if innovative in its delivery. This pedagogy, however, is so attentive to students' positions – their compromised access to the university and public discourse – that it seems already oriented towards something more expansive than policing a standard.

In another section of the *Memoirs*, Macmillan Brown describes his pedagogy in some detail. He corrects students' essays, not only noting 'faults' but rewriting the faulty sentences, and then writes what he calls a 'full criticism' of every essay, taking into account the student's previous work – and needless to say becomes overwhelmed by the time he has done 140 or 150 of these at a time (109–10). He reviews and organises the types of faults, and collects examples of good writing from the students, too, so he can lecture on these examples at the next class meeting, naming only the student writers he praises; naturally, the number of such students increases over time (110–11). His students translate long complex sentences into more concise modern prose, and write sentences around synonyms to mark the distinctions, and learn to analyse examples of great prose to improve their own style (110–11). He has his students write original compositions in-class, providing prompts but an openness to 'any form they liked, sonnet, epigram, lyric, story or dramatic scene', and then these

compositions form the basis of the next class discussion, with students choosing those pieces they deem 'first-class' (110). Jane Stafford notes the possible influence of Macmillan Brown's pedagogy on his student Apirana Ngata, who, in Stafford's reading, deploys and adapts poetic forms likely learned in Macmillan Brown's classes to his own political ends (see Stafford 2007: 160–66).

Macmillan Brown, then, appears both to encourage his students to experiment with form, and to think of themselves as a community of writers – in this sense I would argue his teaching offers standards for public discourse but also projects a public as something participatory, something to be remade through textual practice. He sees his work as crucial to students' development as both professionals and citizens, and although his students may have been more concerned with the former, judging by their attendance, this does not prevent Macmillan Brown from trying to teach from 'where they are' towards a larger public good.

Macmillan Brown is notable for his arguments concerning the integration of teaching and research, and that English, and English composition, should be central to the whole idea of university education – and he appeals to American models to make these arguments, placing the production of an active citizen-subject at the center of the university's work. In his 1908 book *Modern Education*, he argues that the key problem for the university, in addition to poor teaching methods, is the need for the institution to be research-oriented and knowledge-generating – in order to teach students 'to find out for themselves,' rather than have them simply absorb the old knowledge of the professors, and having the high school curriculum reiterated (Brown 1908: 40). While specialisation is necessary, particularly in relation to the primary industries and in order to solve the country's problems, Macmillan Brown reserves the end of his pamphlet to argue for the importance of general education, the true purpose of the university, and to warn that 'the general aim is apt to be lost in the special' (43); he appeals to American models:

> The large American universities make English a compulsory subject for all those who are being trained in their professional and specialist departments. But it goes without saying that it is not English treated philologically, a subject no more worthy of being made the basis of culture than Sanskrit. It is English literature and composition, i.e., English as a 'humanity' and as the practical art of expression, English as a revelation of life and character by its greatest authors, and English as a training in the ready and correct manipulation of ideas and phraseology, in oral or written form. No professional man, no specialist, no citizen, no citizen of the world, but has need of these (42).

Perhaps of particular interest to our current moment, with its expansion of opportunities for civic action through writing in digital environments, are Macmillan Brown's deep reflections on how education might address the opportunities offered by the expansion of the press in his time, and particularly how the mass of untrained journalists might more clearly work in the service of society. He was greatly concerned with the morality of the press, and its independence from commercialisation, as he saw the popularity and proliferation of journalism in the country as placing such writing even above religion in its centrality to people's everyday lives. Accordingly, Macmillan Brown proposes a kind of pedagogical

innovation that involves trying to actively change the communication culture – a new form of rhetorical education that offers students the rhetorical practices that might permit them to have influence in public life. In *Modern Education*, he argues for journalists' special training – even a training college devoted to journalism – as Arts courses are too diverse for journalists' purposes: instead, English composition, 'the manipulation of expression … should be the beginning and end of the course' – and 'not one, but four or five expert teachers, would be needed for it' (16).

Here, in this account of the five teachers he imagines would provide the ideal journalists' training, we glimpse what Macmillan Brown's writing classes may have valued. One teacher deals with grammar and error; one with teaching multiple styles and their uses through analysis and imitation. Another addresses logic and arrangement, complete with 'the arts of abbreviation and expansion' and 'emphasis' and 'perspective' (16). A fourth teaches the fundamentals of reporting, from observation to interviewing, and the study of human nature involved therein; and the last teacher instructs in the kind of versatile reflection necessary for the composition of longer pieces (16). And the journalists' education does not stop here. Macmillan Brown recommends, essentially, a liberal education in addition to this detailed work in composition – lectures on the sciences, the arts and art criticism, literature and history, economics and civics, statistics and modern languages, and how to use libraries and books for research purposes (16–17).

These brief accounts of Macmillan Brown's pedagogy qualify Carol Bond and Jane Robertson's account of early teaching at Canterbury, part of their history of the relation between teaching and research, in which they argue that teaching only becomes dynamic when a research paradigm takes over the university:

> Barnett (2003) notes that the Oxbridge tradition was largely a teaching tradition. Unsurprisingly it was the conditions for teaching that were of greatest concern in the early years at the University of Canterbury. However the teaching ideal was constrained by multiple layers of governance, lack of finance, and the pressures inherent in needs of the local community. Academics were marginalised by the separation of key aspects of their work. They were also situated quite literally at the 'edge' in terms of distance from the academic 'heartland' in the northern hemisphere (see Altbach 1998). Evidence suggests that these conditions *supported and reinforced a form of instruction that militated against the development of reason, the use of imagination, and inquiry*. As conditions changed and research became established, research and teaching were acknowledged as co-dependent – teaching was informed by research – research as knowledge was transmitted. Access to the 'heartland' was made easier through the use of technology and accessible air travel. By the last phase, research at Canterbury had become – 'the dominant project of university life' (Barnett 2003, p. 147). (Robertson & Bond 2005: 529, my emphasis)

While Robertson and Bond's account of the development of research capacity is nuanced, this focus on research-influence – dominant in the present day, and thus an understandable focus – may sideline other measures with which to value the work of university teaching, and obscure its complexity. We might, alternatively, see the history of the university as a history of teaching practices as much as a pre-history of

the research university; as Linda Ferreira-Buckley has suggested, for example, we can explain the marginalisation of the 'rhetorical past' in part by looking at the university's movement to become 'more engaged with research and less centred in pedagogy' (1998: 200). In a more recent article, Robertson (2007) offers a more complicated view of the research-teaching relation, discussing the variation across disciplines in regard to how research and teaching missions interrelate (see 'Beyond the "Research/Teaching Nexus"'). The specificity of this analysis offers some opportunity to refocus attention on how teaching is in itself an innovative field that can blur more or less with the field called 'research', and indeed illuminate research. Teaching in Robertson's account introduces students to 'disciplined' thinking in a range of ways and encompasses a variety of understandings of disciplinary knowledge. Robertson argues that awareness of such variation

> requires us to question the extent to which a generic model of 'good' pedagogy runs the risk of homogenising teaching and learning, of failing to value ontological/epistemological variation and complexity. It points to a dislocation between institutional rhetoric and certain local, disciplinary discourses/practices as well as to the limitations of an institutional discourse that privileges uniformity. (553–554)

This is of particular salience in the New Zealand context of significantly centralised oversight of curriculum and pedagogy, unlike, for example, in the United States (see Emerson & Clerehan 2009: 171).

**2.**

Some scholars have tended to read Macmillan Brown's teaching practice as part of a history of the teaching of literature in the colony such that the writing instruction becomes more anomalous than provocative. In her account of Macmillan Brown's career and influence, 'The Encyclopaedic God-Professor: John Macmillan Brown and the Discipline of English in Colonial New Zealand', Erica Schouten notes that Macmillan Brown's use of literary texts as models for students in his composition classes, rather than treating such texts as 'sanctified', suggests 'his allegiance to the Scottish rhetorical method of literary study'; she argues that Macmillan Brown also maintained Arnoldian sentiments about literature's moral force – although he placed this moral influence in the context of religion's losing influence, and the classics' distance from the experience of the modern 'common' man (2005: 115–16). Thus, Schouten argues, Macmillan Brown is a proponent of both a practical English studies – given the importance of journalism and the reading public in an outpost of Empire – and one that invokes high ideals.

The binary of practical and idealistic seems misleading as a way to describe Macmillan Brown's pedagogy, however, if we are concerned to locate his work in a Scottish teaching tradition. At least, the term 'practical' – which shades into 'useful' (114) and 'instrumental' (115) for Schouten – does not necessarily acknowledge the complexity of his attention to language in use. Rather than reducing literature to the level of popular discourse, as Schouten argues Macmillan Brown does to reconcile his conflicting views of English studies, we might understand his idea of 'practical'

teaching as a high calling, as one to do with elevating popular discourse. His 'practical' composition instruction imagines a critical space in the university, and even if it is framed in terms of the development of colony and empire, we can still appreciate the sense of educating for civic action. As Robert Crawford has argued, at this time the domains of creative writing, criticism, and composition were not distinct – and awareness of their historical interrelation might reframe debates about divisions within English departments today ('Scottish Literature and English Studies' 1998: 242–44). As Stafford's example of Ngata and Macmillan Brown's own account of his 'original' students suggest, Macmillan Brown's pedagogy of creative imitation was not so inflexible as to demand rigid mimicry, and nor was it as simple as Schouten suggests (115) – indeed it took as its ultimate object the development of an as-yet-undetermined public culture. Likewise, while his aims for journalism might have 'practical' dimensions (Schouten 2005: 119), the profession – which with its porous borders seems almost disturbingly accessible to anyone who wants to write, for Macmillan Brown (1908: 15) – is for Macmillan Brown the most important for society's moral and intellectual wellbeing, making this 'practicality' of some complexity and consequence.

Indeed, Chris Worth argues in his discussion of Macmillan Brown's teaching of literature, '"A centre at the edge": Scotland and the early teaching of literature in Australia and New Zealand', that the writing pedagogy is in part what marks out this teaching as something other than a straightforward imperial project: Worth writes, 'the initial development of literary education in the southern colonies was marked by a robust validation of rhetorical composition and philosophic thought, as opposed to cultural refinement or national myth-making' (1998: 207). For Worth, while this teaching propagated 'ideas of tradition and Englishness', it also supported emerging 'antipodean literary cultures' which were not strictly English, and which defined themselves 'by both their relationship to the metropolitan centre and their difference from that centre' (208). While Worth's attention to Macmillan Brown is relatively brief, his sense that in Macmillan Brown's educational 'experiment' the 'practical' cannot be extricated from the ethical and the civic is salient (219–20). This 'practical' work on the part of Macmillan Brown might be less anomalous, too, if we had a fuller account of the history of writing instruction in this place, and the teaching traditions that have been taken up and transformed.

Ferreira-Buckley reminds us that 'early educators read belletristic rhetoric more complexly than we do: they conceived of taste as an intellectual faculty that disciplined the mind as well as the heart and inculcated civic and personal virtue' (1998: 200). In his discussion of high school education in *Modern Education*, Macmillan Brown invokes the strength of the Scottish system for its inculcation of literature and culture beyond the three Rs – before the humanities became overtaken with parsing, analysis and philology (1908: 35). Macmillan Brown argues that English

> as a literary and humane study … develops all the faculties and every side of the nature, it fills the mind, it enriches the vocabulary and power of expression; and properly taught, as supplying themes for composition and debate, it is one of the finest educational means of conserving individuality, of evolving the capacity and the desire

> for self-education, and of giving that plasticity to environment which should be the paramount aim of all teachers (36).

His explicit way of naming this form of English is 'the practical or laboratory treatment', as opposed to the 'purely linguistic' (36). Elsewhere Macmillan Brown describes the 'higher faculties' as 'practical reason' and 'practical imagination', as opposed to simply the exercise of memory and recital under exam conditions – and he claims that high schools have the advantage over universities in that 'the art of composition is practically taught, – the truest application of laboratory practice to a literary subject' (40). I am drawn to Macmillan Brown's way of talking about the purpose of teaching English – as engendering not a particular kind of student subject so much as 'capacity', 'desire', 'plasticity': a series of potentialities. And I am drawn to his sense of composition at the center of this work: his comprehensive idea of student writing, which encompasses what students need to participate in society, in relation to new communication technologies and public forums, and in the context of professional aspirations and demands – but with a sense of communal interest at stake, and, lastly, in an educational institution that operates to some degree on democratic principles – or at least where those democratic principles are openly discussed in relation to literacy. This rich history might help us push against a narrow notion of literacy standards, or literacy as a 'problem', and allow us to think seriously about what it might take to articulate the same kind of vision today.

**3.**

Of course, there is much about Macmillan Brown's moment in history that is strikingly different from our current one – not least perhaps, as Worth notes, his Social Darwinist views (1998: 221), and certainly the state of New Zealand higher education: the size and diversity of the student population and the curriculum, the depth of the university's research imperatives, and the complexity of its administration, to name the most obvious dimensions. The path from his moment in the history of education to our own is relevant to our own thinking about student literacy, however. While we could cast the movement away from his version of what 'English' is as part of an existing history of English Studies, we might also cast it into a history of student writing in the New Zealand university and its increasing marginalisation.

I would argue this is the result of two structuring conditions of higher education in New Zealand from its inception. Firstly, the New Zealand university seems to have always existed in tension with a notion of higher education for civic or public purposes, namely, a liberal arts model. What versions of this broad-based degree existed in New Zealand disappear in the early twentieth century (see, for example, Beaglehole's *The University of New Zealand: An Historical Study*). By 1925, the Royal Commission investigating university education notes that the professional schools attract more full-time students, while students working towards the BA or BSc are largely part-time. Their report attributes the relatively small number of full-time students to public misunderstanding – which equals commodification – of university degrees:

> the popular view [is] that a university is a place which students attend merely to secure degrees which have definite occupational values … the late President Wilson, formerly head of Princeton University, pointed out that a university was not to be regarded as a department store where a student came to purchase with the smallest outlay of time and money some definite commodity. The ideal was a university with the twofold objects of 'the production of a great body of informed and thoughtful men, and the production of a small body of trained scholars and investigators' (1925: 16).

From Macmillan Brown's *Modern Education* in 1908 to the lectures of the Chancellor of the University of New Zealand, David Smith, in the 1950s, there is admiration for and flirtation with the tempting commitment of American programmes of general education, but this does not take hold, and the research mission of the university only goes from strength to strength, particularly after World War II (see, for example, Robertson & Bond). This elusive notion of public or civic purpose drives a back-and-forth debate between the merits of broad access (for the social good) and high standards (for the benefits of specialised research) for the university. The kind of explicit link between the English curriculum and the state of society that Macmillan Brown offers has weakened by 1959, when the Association of University Teachers of New Zealand tries to make an argument for the national interest in higher education, in *The Crisis in the Universities: Some Facts and Figures.* The report foregrounds the practical usefulness of universities, in that they produce the necessary teachers, doctors, lawyers, and engineers without which New Zealand society could not maintain its standard of living, but with a caveat:

> yet these services show only one aspect of their work in the community – the essential material fruits of university education. The Universities do not aim to produce narrow specialists, but men and women who can apply their highly specialised training all the better, because they possess a rounded education for living. We need men and women who not only do specialised work well, but also know the meaning of their work in terms of life and history (1959: 4).

The report then goes on to argue for this well-roundedness emerging not as a consequence of teaching or research – after all, no liberal model is present, in this domain of specialised knowledge – but as a consequence of the social environment universities provide for young people. As universities allow young people from various disciplines to interact, students 'become aware of the complexities and the harmonies and disharmonies of interests and disciplines which weave the larger pattern of human life' (4–5). This fascinating argument for liberal education without, well, liberal education is complemented by an argument for universities' value in terms of cultural nationalism, where New Zealand universities have produced the artists, writers, musicians, and – unexpectedly – typographers, who have developed the nation's talents. Even an argument for the crisis of teaching and learning in the nation's institutions holds on to the value of liberal education in this way, even though the infrastructure for that education does not exist, and the mere environment of universities is all that can be counted on to produce it, out of the control of any teacher (who presumably would be concerned with specialised research). Perhaps most telling is that the value of liberal education is cast in terms of professional work – that is, rather than some kind of civic or intellectual capacity constituting the

ultimate value, this education is important as a means of understanding one's work – and even if that work is creative, it's in the nation's interest. A small coda to this strand of university history is the recent introduction of minimal general education requirements at several institutions: an intriguing new invocation of liberal education.

The second condition I would suggest is that the New Zealand university seems also to have always been straining at the limits of its teaching resources. Certainly Macmillan Brown felt this strain, and numbers of students have been ever increasing since his time, with regular moments of significant expansion. The 1925 Royal Commission raises the debate over whether to restrict admission or increase staffing, to raise standards and lower pressure on overworked instructors: 'intimate teaching and discussion in the tutorial class or the laboratory' must be preferred to large lectures, which 'can never in themselves do much to produce the highly trained mind which is one of the objectives of university teaching' (1925: 15). In the *Report*'s view, the research mission of the university is inherently connected to its teaching role: 'The function of a university is not so much to conduct researches as to train students to that inquiring attitude of mind which inevitably makes them investigators' (74–5). However, at the time, the emphasis on examinations and the fact that many students were part-time meant that in practice this ideal was seldom met.

In 1926, the University Teachers' Association of New Zealand published a memorandum for presentation to the Minister of Education, entitled *Some Aspects of University Teaching in New Zealand*. The memorandum detailed the increase in university student numbers in the four Colleges of the University of New Zealand since the turn of the century – from 800 students in 1900, to 2257 in 1914, to 3822 in 1920, to 4236 in 1924 – and the resulting complexity of administration and pressures on teaching staff (1926: 12). Of particular note is the discussion of growth in class size, with 'many classes in the Colleges numbering from 100 to 150 students each at the pass stage alone', in the context of increasing diversity of subjects taught, most particularly an increase in the teaching of social and health sciences (12). The Association notes the problematic position of teaching assistants, the 'sub-professorial' staff whose services are more and more necessary, and whose abilities, skills, and responsibilities are increasingly required to be more advanced and specialised, given the increase in the numbers of students, but who are paid as little as £400 per annum, and have no opportunity for career progression: 'the positions are really blind alleys' (12–13). Originally 'the marking of papers', along with 'supervision of laboratory work', was the purview of these teachers, but increasingly they are responsible for 'complete charge of the teaching in some divisions of their subjects' (12). It is evident, then, that Macmillan Brown's teaching practices cannot be sustained largely because of institutional conditions, and so the fading away of the first New Zealand model of the teaching of composition becomes part of the story of these strained conditions.

**4.**

Why should we pay attention to this historical figure, in thinking through the possibilities of present-day composition studies in New Zealand? Perhaps most

obviously, paying attention to this history alerts us to the fact that there is a history – that in developing composition studies in this place, we do not start from a blank slate, or from a straightforward importation of American practices or traditions. Secondly, it is striking that many of the challenges university teachers face today have always or long been with us, at least in terms of the history of the university in this country; that is, a history can serve to denaturalise and explain some of our present-day assumptions about the teaching of writing and literacy in the university. I also hope to suggest the importance of historical perspective in developing present practice. As Stefan Collini has argued, many arguments against neoliberal university reform lack impact because they rest on an ahistorical notion of the 'idea' of the university that ignore the conditions of its formation and the constraints under which it has operated, rather than taking into account the diversity of functions of the institution: 'it is no good just saying that universities are autonomous bodies and what goes on inside them is no business of the state's' (2003: 6). History makes evident that there was never a golden age of university teaching in New Zealand, where small classes and ample resources enabled a democratic educational project independent of students' professional ambitions or national economic goals. And thirdly, Macmillan Brown's pedagogy is notable in itself in a broader history of the teaching of composition, and offers a relationship between English instruction, academic success, and professional and public life, which remains relevant and provocative today.

By attending to pedagogical practice, and to institutional dynamics between teacher and student, I also hope to counter in a small way the marginalisation of teaching in the New Zealand university, by representing it with a kind of detail that it is not usually accorded, and declaring it to be creative, innovative, and self-conscious within constraints; while teaching is conditioned or constrained by policy, it is always more than those constraints. Educational research in writing studies began in earnest in New Zealand in the 1980s, alongside a crop of new courses in university English Departments and elsewhere; today, new courses are still emerging, sometimes tied to majors in writing. As universities argue for more public investment, paid back by the institutions' contributions to key industries and the commercialisation of research, we might look to a 'history of composition' in New Zealand to ask questions about investment in the public itself, and the 'quality' of undergraduate education. In this version of English studies, where teachers look to shape public culture through their students' work, composition is not a remedial project, but a civic, intellectual project. As our field grows here, we might explore other ways to connect whatever versions of composition studies develop here to a long history of teachers and teaching, and innovation despite constraints. This has been a significant strategy in American composition studies, which as we have seen even in Macmillan Brown's time was a productive foil for work in New Zealand. In naming this teaching and learning as part of composition studies' history, we advance it in the present as not only an emerging area of scholarly work, but as another argument for valuing the public work of the university in this place.

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