

## Chapter 2

# Leavis: Life, Work and Heritage

### 2.1 Student, Nurse, Researcher (1914–1924)

Frank Raymond Leavis was born on 14 July 1895, the son of a relatively prosperous, respected and free-thinking (agnostic rationalist) Cambridge shopkeeper (the shop sold pianos and other musical instruments). Leavis attended the Perse School and had a happy and outwardly uneventful childhood. An accomplished athlete as a boy, he was nonetheless barred from competitive sports by his father on ethical grounds. When the First World War arrived Leavis was a first-year undergraduate of History at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Refusing active combat on grounds of conscience, he suspended studies and volunteered for the Friends Ambulance Unit where he was a nursing orderly on the ambulance trains in northern France (not a stretcher bearer as once popularly believed). Leavis's exposure to the conditions of technologised warfare proved decisive. It left him psychologically and physically traumatised, with what would be now be recognised as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, including insomnia, digestive problems and a stammer. Leavis took up long distance running on his doctor's advice and acquired a reputation for physical prowess and a love of outdoor activities. On his return in 1919 at the age of 24 he had transferred to the recently created English Tripos—'fashioned in wartime and partly because of the war' (MacKillop 1995: 51). Tragedy struck a further blow when Leavis's beloved father was killed in a road traffic accident during his final examinations. He was awarded a first only after a behind-the-scenes acknowledgement of mitigating circumstances by his supervisor Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (known as 'Q'). Leavis registered for the then 'new' Ph.D. in English, receiving his doctorate in 1924 for a thesis on 'The relationship of journalism to literature: studied in the rise and earlier development of the press in England'. A further breakdown had been narrowly averted during his studies when his supervisor, evidently acting *in loco parentis*, had intervened to narrow the scope of what was an over-ambitious initial topic.

The remarkable rise of Cambridge English during this post-war period (Collini 1998), under the aegis of figures such as I. A. Richards, author of *Principles of literary*

*criticism* (1924), which marked the creation of a new school of practical criticism applying empirical psychology to investigate the states of mind induced by literature, was to some extent the effect of circumstance and serendipity, as Leavis later acknowledged: ‘it was a favour of the gods that gave such a start to Cambridge English’ (Leavis 1969: 15). In a very short time those involved at the start of Cambridge English had to discover the limits and potential of their role and develop ways of working with others. Lecturers and students had an opportunity to learn collaboratively, rather than be told, what to do. This became a standard for Leavis of how teaching, learning and academic practice at their best could be. It was also an omen when the experiment proved not to be scalable. As Leavis later reflected, ‘the promise of the start was accidental; the hostility that killed the promise (in 1926, with the establishment of the Faculty) gives us the academic ethos we must count on, and the spirit that, miracles aside, will be strong in the use of the institutional machinery, of the influence and the power. ... Here we have the attitude that... I assume to be the right one: a non-acceptance of defeat’ (Leavis 1969: 21).

## 2.2 Teacher, Critic, Editor-Publisher (1925–1962)

Leavis launched himself into teaching at Cambridge in a spirit of energetic optimism. Following a period of freelancing, he was appointed to a probationary lectureship in 1927, largely owing to the personal intervention once more of ‘Q’. Two years later he married Queenie Dorothy Roth, one of his former students, and they went on to have three children. She would also become his closest literary collaborator in a partnership that was personally and professionally mutually supportive and protective to a remarkable degree. From the start Leavis’s championing of the modern met with hostility from institutional colleagues who regarded him as a rule-breaker, even corrupting. In 1925 word went round about his being a ‘pornographer’ after he applied unsuccessfully to the Home Office to import the then banned Joyce’s *Ulysses* for study purposes (Leavis 1974: 97–99). The intervention of the British Home Secretary to persuade Cambridge to pull Leavis into line could easily have stopped the young academic’s career dead in its tracks.

In 1932 Leavis was appointed director of studies at Downing College, although he was not to have a full-time, pensionable university post until his fifties. (Q. D. Leavis was never to receive official recognition from Cambridge for the teaching and supervision she conducted over many decades.) Blocked prospects, institutional discouragement, ostracism and the financial hardships arising from these were to become a cause of continuing bitterness for Leavis, leading to the later claim that he and his colleagues were Cambridge in spite of Cambridge (Leavis 1986: 222).

Also in 1932 Leavis joined the editorial board of the literary critical journal *Scrutiny* and became its guiding presence and voice. The quarterly was the brain-child of a group of postgraduate researchers centring on the Leavises’ household, largely building on the ‘literary sociology’ of Q. D. Leavis’s *Fiction and the reading public* (1932), a *succès d’estime* written up from her Ph.D. thesis. *Scrutiny*

ran for over 20 years, closing only when the Leavises reluctantly concluded that its nucleus of unpaid collaborators had been dispersed irrevocably as a result of the Second World War. During the 1930s *Scrutiny* was outspoken in its criticism of Marxism and Marxist fellow-travellers and of the class-insulated dilettantism of the Bloomsbury Group and this fierce independence from orthodoxy and unorthodoxy alike won it no friends in the educational and literary establishments, a number of whom nonetheless borrowed surreptitiously from it (see Watson 1977). The journal's readership extended well beyond numbers sold and it was particularly influential in the compulsory and adult education sectors and overseas (Mulhern 1979; Hilliard 2012). *Scrutiny* significantly provided Leavis with a route to publication and his contributions formed the basis of a number of influential literary critical books by him, among which were *New bearings in English poetry* (1932), *Revaluation* (1936), *The great tradition* (1948), *The common pursuit* (1952) and *D. H. Lawrence: novelist* (1955). Taken together these represented Leavis and *Scrutiny* at their apogee of influence and provided a radically revised chart of the literary canon based initially on isolating the innovative achievements of modern poetry. Later on Leavis, influenced by his wife's research interests, had placed greater emphasis on developments in prose fiction, relying less on traditional ideas of genre as on a hybrid, genre-spanning concept of 'the novel as dramatic poem'.

During the latter part of the Second World War, when debates about future social reconstruction were at their most intense, Leavis was keen to seize the moment and *Education and the university* (1943), first published as a series of articles in *Scrutiny*, was optimistic, bold and forward-looking. In this compact volume Leavis spent less time on arguing over philosophical fundamentals and more on outlining a raft of suggested practical changes to methods of teaching, learning and examination at undergraduate level. In its central chapter Leavis sketched out a surprisingly eclectic, wide-ranging interdisciplinary syllabus for English studies in which History and foreign literatures played a major part. He severely criticised the use of unseen end-of-course examinations, as a form of game-playing: 'That this is the way of working... the examiner and the supervisor know as well as the candidate. For the examiner the knowledge is depressing' (Leavis 1943: 50). At this time it was revolutionary (it perhaps still is) to argue that unseen examinations are not tests of intelligence but serve only a limited number of practical purposes such as the testing of memory, problem-solving skills and command of propositional knowledge (Entwistle & Entwistle 2003). Many of Leavis's alternative ideas for teaching and assessment (small group study, project work, book reviews) were novel at the time but are now much more widely accepted (Jarvis 1995). Leavis, however, was seldom satisfied at the way in which others subsequently put into practice these and similar ideas for student-centred and more autonomous methods of learning. As Bell (1988) comments, 'he spent the early part of his career wishing to "modernise" the study of literature and the latter part of it opposing the form of that modernisation when it occurred' (9).

The closure of *Scrutiny* in 1953 effectively removed the main vehicle for initial publication for Leavis although he continued to write for several other outlets. With the exception of the book on Lawrence in 1955, composed mostly of *Scrutiny*

essays, Leavis's major publications ceased for a period of a decade. Meanwhile, his academic responsibilities ranged over student recruitment and admissions, teaching and examining, research supervision and serving on Faculty committees.

## 2.3 Teacher, Prophet (1963–1978)

At about the time Leavis was due to retire from his Cambridge post in 1962 he had delivered a private lecture attacking cultural Philistinism in the shape of the 'sage and mastermind' C. P. Snow. Three years previously Snow's (1959) *The two cultures*, delivered as a Rede Lecture at Cambridge, propounded the thesis of two mutually uncomprehending cultures, the arts or humanities on the one hand and the sciences on the other (Snow clearly regarded the latter as the more socially and politically beneficent). Leavis was concerned about Snow's growing reputation outside as well as inside the academy, notably on sixth-form school students quoting Snow in their entrance exams, and he felt that some drastic revisionary criticism was called for. The lecture once published quickly polarised opinion and the ensuing controversy in Britain and the USA (Ortolano 2005), notably the accusation of unpardonable academic manners over the lampooning of Snow as novelist, was to dog Leavis for the rest of his career. The lecture did, however, give Leavis an entrée to a much wider audience and he proceeded to direct its attention in a series of addresses, lectures and publications to what he saw as 'lethal developments' in higher education; these included university expansion for its own sake, the prioritisation of social sciences over English in humanities funding, the teaching-research divide (dismissed as a cliché), and the potential for collusive alliances between academics and student politicians advocating for 'participation'.

The student unrest of the 1960s distressed Leavis who was unable to see past what struck him as wanton vandalism: for him the 'student-intellectuals' were buying all too confidently into the assumptions of the hierarchies they opposed (Leavis 1972: 163–198). New generations of students often failed to appreciate just how radical an educator Leavis had been. He was once taken to task by a student in a lecture theatre at this time for, by his own account, 'my declining to take up the subject of the suffering Mexican peasant when my explicit subject for the short hour was the university in industrial England' (Leavis 1972: 166). The irony is that Leavis was no stranger to what are now called multi-culturalism and post-colonialism or to Mexican peasants. In the 1930s, in *Culture and environment* (Leavis & Thompson 1933) he had recommended Stuart Chase's *Mexico* (1931), about changing social conditions among the Mexican peasantry, for close study in sixth forms.

Downing English had proved very popular and successful with students down the years, much to the annoyance of Faculty colleagues who accused Leavis of creating a fifth column. The failure to secure the future of his fiercely defended approach to teaching at Downing following his retirement created a rift between him and members of the remaining team and led him eventually to resign his fellowship with the College. The offer of a chair at the University of York in 1966 provided Leavis with an opportunity to pursue his teaching, research and writing

interests in what proved to be a congenial and lasting partnership at a new (in both senses) university.

Increasingly isolated as ‘the heretic who ... survived’ (Leavis 1974: 87), Leavis distanced himself from potential allies on the Left and in the burgeoning field of Cultural Studies (Inglis 1993), preferring the intellectual corroboration he found in the margins of philosophy (R.G. Collingwood, Michael Polanyi, Marjorie Grene), and taking up the cudgels with ‘Wittgensteinians’, ‘linguisticians’ and a number of cultural targets which included the BBC, the Arts Council and metropolitan literary journalism, all of the latter regarded as having succumbed to the levelling-down effects of mass culture.

A certain narrowing of interest was reflected in a prose style of increasing self-reference or, alternatively, self-reflexivity (see Chap. 7). At the same time, a corresponding depth of concentration allowed Leavis to revisit authors such as Dickens (Leavis & Leavis 1970), Eliot (in Leavis 1975) and Lawrence (Leavis 1976) in books which carried an urgent, more prophetic tone. Important statements of his position on higher education and other socio-cultural issues appeared in *English literature in our time and the university* (1969) and *Nor shall my sword* (1972). If Leavis was sometimes ploughing old furrows in this period he sowed the seeds of some novel philosophical investigations into the nature of language and human creativity. He continued to resist assimilation of his views to philosophy, however, and regarded his stance as ‘anti-philosophical’, even as he resorted to philosophical *bricolage* to express them, coining terms such as *Ahnung* and ‘*nisus*’ derived from Collingwood and other sources to describe the dynamics of creativity. Throughout this period Leavis was still teaching, corresponding prolifically, and issuing a steady stream of new and recycled literary and social criticism. Characteristically Leavis stopped teaching in 1977 not because he had run out of things to say but only because he lacked the physical means as a result of a debilitating aphasia (see Layram 2011: 10 March 1977) to say them.

Leavis collected a number of honorary doctorates and was made a Companion of Honour in early 1978. A few months later he died in Cambridge. Q. D. Leavis died in 1981.

## 2.4 Intellectual Affinities

Where does Leavis sit in the history of thought about higher education in Britain? Leavis located himself as a social and educational thinker in an English tradition running from Coleridge through Newman, Arnold and Ruskin to what was then the present in Lawrence and Eliot. In this genealogy Arnold has a central role (Leavis 1982: 53–64). Arnold’s *Culture and anarchy* (1869) was the classic mid-Victorian statement putting the case for ‘high’ culture in an age of commerce and waning religious faith. Leavis’s *Mass civilization and minority culture* (1930) and *Culture and environment* (Leavis & Thompson 1933) had offered to update and extend Arnold’s critique of cultural Philistinism by stressing a number of unprecedented developments of the machine age: levelling-down, substitute living and the

debasement of culture—all of which were linked to the encroachment of instrumental reason on all aspects of life through the complex of assumptions, beliefs and behaviours Leavis would call ‘technologico-Benthamism’ (Leavis 1972: 111). This mind-set does not ‘admit any other kind of consideration, any more adequate recognition of human nature and human need into the incitement and direction of our thinking and effort [than] technological and material advance’ (Leavis 1972: 78).

This critique underpinned his ferocious attack on Snow and his opposition to the Robbins Report on Higher Education (1963) on the grounds that both prioritised the sciences as an engine of economic growth while side-lining the humanities. Leavis derided the Report’s espoused aim of higher education as ‘the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship’ (Robbins 1963: 7) as window-dressing and he regarded his later social discourse, from the 1960s on, as a kind of ‘higher pamphleteering’ against this and related developments, in the tradition of Arnold and Ruskin (MacKillop 1995: 375). This intellectual lineage is the one in which the majority of his critics in Britain—for example, Bell (1988), Robinson (2001) and Storer (2009)—situate Leavis as educator and cultural critic, in which he may be viewed with equal justification as an exponent of ‘anxious conservatism’ (Scruton 1985: 118), ‘radical earnestness’ (Inglis 1982) or a hybrid of the two in ‘English prophecy’ (Robinson 2001).

## 2.5 Ortega y Gasset: Leavis’s Distant Cousin

What of other, more distant connections? The European educator and cultural critic who is, in my mind, closest to Leavis is the practically contemporaneous Spaniard Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955). Ortega is perhaps best known in Anglophone countries for texts such as *The revolt of the masses* (La rebelión de las masas) and *Mission of the university* (Misión de la universidad), both published in Spain in 1930 (Ortega y Gasset 1930a, b) and widely translated, the latter of which states the case for an elitist modern version of education at perhaps its most radical, intelligent and humane. The commonality with Ortega did not escape Leavis’s attention. Whereas other critics of cultural crisis and decline, such as Spengler, vanish from Leavis’s writing after the 1930s, Ortega is being cited by Leavis in an epigraph in his final book *Thought, words and creativity* (1975: 7). Ortega was a reformist who opposed revolutionary action and both right- and left-wing authoritarianism, as did Leavis during the 1930s. Both, ironically, would attract the label ‘reactionary’. Ortega’s disdain for ‘mass man’ caused him to loathe collectivism and to espouse the individual above all as change agent. Leavis, who had established his political credentials by engaging with Marxist theories of bourgeois rationality (Horkheimer 1993), also firmly resisted any hint of assimilation to ‘collectivist ideologies’ (Leavis 1972: 41), holding to the view that ‘Psychology is individual psychology and is still that in its dealings with individuals in mutual relation’ (Leavis 1972: 17).

Ortega’s was a strong conception of university reform which, like Leavis’s, focused significantly on mission and purpose: ‘the root of university reform is a complete formulation of its purpose. Any alteration, or touching up, or adjustment

about this house of ours, unless it starts by reviewing the problem of its mission—clearly, decisively, truthfully—will be love's labours lost' (Ortega 1930b: 27–28). Leavis was equally concerned with what he called “the essential university-function”—a phrase and a purposive conception that, with the new, the unprecedented, human crisis in view, I suppose myself to have originated' (Leavis 1982: 179) (See Chap. 6).

In pursuit of their respective conceptions of the university Leavis and Ortega were propelled in different ways to collaborative projects. Yet both found compromise with other people difficult because of the sheer strength of their personalities and convictions (Harding 1984)—for Leavis, creative strength depended on a certain level of ‘intransigence’ (Leavis 1982: 40). Perhaps on account of this both struggled in compensatory ways with an ideal of creative collaboration, the paradox being that for Leavis the further this ideal receded from reality the more articulately expressed its groundings became. Ortega insisted that we perceive reality only from the perspective of our own lives, ‘perspectivism’ (Ilundáin-Agurreza 2013), although this does not result in solipsism: non-egotistic, non-relativistic truth is attained by the sum of perspectives of all lives. Leavis too dwelled on the agon of personality and impersonality (Bell 2007) although his deliberations and convictions were seldom as dark as those of Ortega: ‘We recognise “egoism” and “egotism” at once as pejorative terms but the phrase “*le moi haïssable*” [Pascal's ‘detestable self’] intimates that the state of having an individual identity is a state of balance between pejorative possibilities’ (Leavis 1986: 296).

## 2.6 Leavis Studies

By the 1970s Leavis's influence if not reputation had begun to wane, as the arrival of ‘theory’ challenged ‘criticism’ in English and Cultural Studies and as university expansion brought more and more diverse critical voices into the arena. In this changed environment Leavis's concern with value judgment and a carefully restricted canon, together with an avowed anti-Marxist stance, looked *passé*, prompting the Marxist critic Terry Eagleton (1996: 27) to remind students of English that they were ‘card-carrying’ Leavisites whether they knew it or not. Francis Mulhern's *The moment of ‘Scrutiny’* (1979), appearing the year after Leavis's death, had already provided what remains a definitive account of the journal, written from a Marxist perspective. An important milestone in the revaluation of Leavis came not from politics, however, but from the confluence of philosophy and literature. Michael Bell's *F. R. Leavis* (1988) made a compelling case for a parallel between Leavis's conception of language and that of Heidegger. The next year a comprehensive bibliography by Baker et al. (1989) of both the Leavises' writings appeared. Gary Day's *Re-reading Leavis* (1996) interrogated Leavis through the lens of post-structuralism and vice versa to uncover some unlikely similarities and differences, not all to Leavis's disadvantage. Books by Samson (1992) and McCallum (1983) stressed contradictory elements of Leavis's thinking. A staunch defence of Leavis's critical values against ‘theory’ came from



an unlikely quarter in Film Studies, in Robin Woods' *Hitchcock's films revisited* (1989). The centenary of Leavis's birth in 1995 saw several publications of a historical or biographical nature (see Chap. 7). Latterly there has been a revival of interest in Leavis's literary criticism, notably in its historical, modernist underpinnings, for example in Richard Storer's *F. R. Leavis* (2009).

As a thinker on social and educational issues, Leavis suffered a more immediate posthumous decline in interest and recovery has been more gradual, for example with Guy Ortolano's *The two cultures controversy* (2009), Christopher Hilliard's *English as a vocation* (2012) and the critical re-issue of Leavis's (2013) *Two Cultures?*. While theorists and critics of higher education continue to use Leavis as a historical reference point, few have dwelled at length on his educational ideas; works by Maskell & Robinson (2001) and Storer (2009) are notable exceptions. Meanwhile, Leavis's work continues to attract the interest of philosophers (Scruton 2000; Moyal-Sharrock 2013; Harrison 2014).

Much Leavis archival material is dispersed among universities in the UK and the USA. Despite growing availability of primary documents, however, there is a considerable amount about Leavis that we do not know. Leavis was a prolific letter writer, and only a fraction of his correspondence has been collected and published (Leavis 1974). Some of this is in university archives such as at Reading and York but much remains in private hands. Ian MacKillop's (1995) unauthorised biography *F. R. Leavis: a life in criticism* provides the first extensive, scholarly account, superseding Ronald Hayman's *Leavis* (1976), but it omits some episodes in the life and seems in part to have been written, however understandably, to spare the sensitivities of the living; what must have been the full complexity of the man somehow eludes the biographer. Leavis awaits his Ray Monk whose *Ludwig Wittgenstein: the duty of genius* (Monk 1991)—a distinctly Leavisian sub-title—provides a model of scholarship and vitality *vis-à-vis* a multifaceted and challenging personality that one would wish to see being brought to bear on Leavis. Memoirs and recollections of Leavis meanwhile continue to appear in posthumous papers, journalism, essays and social media (see Chap. 7).

For a number of decades the University of York has administered the Leavis Fund for undergraduates, postgraduates and academic staff to support their research and in 2013 the University's Langwith College inaugurated its Leavis Room for students. Downing College, Cambridge, followed with its own Leavis Room in 2015. Since 2013 there has been a UK-based Leavis Society (*leavissociety.com*), independent of the Leavis Estate, with representatives in the USA, Canada, India and China. The Society organises international conferences and gatherings of scholars and provides online information and resources about F. R. and Q. D. Leavis. In China in recent years there has been much interest in Leavis and the Cambridge English School among doctoral and post-doctoral researchers; remarkably, Leavis's early cultural criticism was translated into Chinese as far back as the early 1930s (Cao 2013).

Several key critical texts by Leavis have since been re-issued under the imprint of Faber and Faber, an irony that would have amused Leavis and his long-standing 'opposition in person' T.S. Eliot who as editor-director at Faber declined to print



the one publication he had commissioned from Leavis. The entirety of *Scrutiny* is now freely available online at [unz.org/Pub/Scrutiny](http://unz.org/Pub/Scrutiny) and a bibliography of Leavis's primary publications and selected secondary literature can be found at [leavissociety.com/bibliography](http://leavissociety.com/bibliography).

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