

WILLIAM WHEWELL: AN ANECDOTE

Ian James Saunders

In *Contrebis* v40 2022 Christopher Stray has given a detailed account of the early and under-researched education of the ‘Lancastrian Polymath’ William Whewell (Stray 2022). Stray summarises Whewell’s subsequent and impressive academic achievements in this passage.

“William Whewell (1794–1866) is one of Lancaster’s most famous sons and one of the ‘Northern Lights’, talented boys from the north of England who rose to academic success at Cambridge. His fame rests on his achievements as England’s last great universalist: a polymath who studied and wrote on astronomy, tides, mathematics and moral philosophy, composed poems in Latin and translated Plato into English. Having begun his undergraduate career at Trinity College in 1812, he rose to become Master of the College, the largest, richest and most famous in Cambridge, from 1841 till his death in 1866.”

In *Chambers’s Encyclopedia* of 1868 there is an amusing anecdote that displays both Whewell’s polymath abilities and his robust nature in academic discussion (Anon. 1868; Espinasse 1877). The author of this passage is unknown, but it could be the Rev. W. J. Edlin, M.A., the Chaplain at Whewell’s Trinity College Cambridge, who is a listed contributor. Whewell had died only two years previously. The punctuation is as in the original.

“He was nowise superficial, like many pretenders to encyclopædic knowledge; he was really master of all that could be learned on a great many subjects. It has been said of him, ‘knowledge was his forte, omniscience his foible;’ but it is absurd to suggest that a man can have and strain after too much knowledge, if it be, as his was, thorough knowledge. His chief ambition was to grasp, survey, and coordinate the sciences, and he did excellent service, both to science and history in the effort to gratify it. The task suited one of his extraordinary acquisitions, good sense, and philosophic comprehension. Had he been a man of more imagination and ingenuity, he might, of course, have been better employed in endeavouring to advance some single science. As he was, this was beyond him: he made some original investigations; but the results must be pronounced unimportant.

“W. was a large, strong, erect man, with a red face and a loud voice. He was an effective preacher and lecturer, though in both characters wanting in that ‘something’ which wins and rivets the hearer. He was accused of being arrogant; and his general bearing gave colour to the charge. A story, long current, may be told as illustrating at once his varied knowledge and his personal relations to his brother Fellows. He used so to overwhelm with his learning the company at the Fellows’ table and the Combination Room, that a conspiracy was formed to put him down. Some Fellows got up a knowledge of Chinese music from scattered articles in old reviews, with which they assumed he would be unacquainted. They then made Chinese music the subject of, as it were, a casual conversation at the table. For a time, contrary to his usual habit, he took no part in the conversation. When they had about exhausted themselves, however, he remarked: ‘I was imperfectly, and to some extent incorrectly, informed regarding Chinese music when I wrote the articles from which you have drawn your information,’ They were caught in their own trap, and had, as on other occasions, to submit to be instructed.”

References

- Anon. (Edlin W J ?) 1868 “William Whewell” entry in *Chambers’s Encyclopaedia: a dictionary of universal knowledge for the people*. London and Edinburgh, Vol. X, 167–8
Espinasse F 1877 *Lancashire Worthies*. 2nd series. London: Simpkin Marshall, 368–9
Stray C 2022 A Lancastrian Polymath: the Early Education of William Whewell. *Contrebis* 40, 81–8