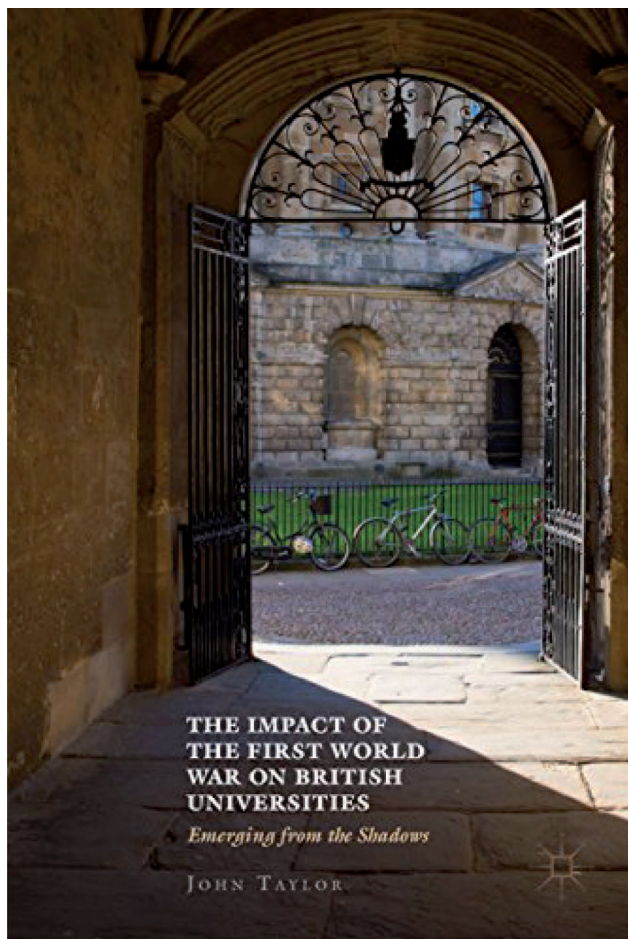


Book review

Paul Temple* – *UCL Institute of Education, UK*

The Impact of the First World War on British Universities: Emerging from the shadows, by John Taylor

London: Palgrave Macmillan; 2018; 356 pp; ISBN: 978-1-137-52432-4 (hbk); ISBN: 978-1-137-52433-1 (ebk)



On the centenary of the 1918 Armistice, I attended a memorial event held in the former Dover Marine railway station. This striking example of early twentieth-century railway architecture has a remarkable history: between 1915 and 1919, it is estimated that 1.26 million wounded soldiers, mostly stretcher cases, returned through the station from France, to be taken by train to hospitals around Britain. Although this is but one detail of the larger catastrophe of the First World War, both the extent of the human suffering and the staggering logistics focused on this single place brought home for me the transformative power of that war: no one, surely, who witnessed year after year the events on the Dover quayside could remain unchanged.

I had this visit in mind when reading John Taylor's meticulously researched account of British universities in this period. One of the key events described in Taylor's book is what he identifies as one of the most important meetings in the whole history of British higher education. This was held on 23 November 1918 – but building on planning going back to the beginning of that year when the outcome of the war was by no means certain – between the chairman of the Advisory Committee on University Grants (advisory to the Treasury, dating from 1906), Sir William McCormick, and its influential secretary, Alan Kidd, and a group of 32 university heads, with the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Bonar Law) and the President of the Board of Education (Herbert Fisher). Kidd's briefing paper for the meeting raises matters that would not look out of place in a similar document today: the scale of university expansion; the balance between science and technology and 'subjects of a generally humanistic nature' in an expanded system; how to widen access to higher education; and how to increase the number of university staff (p. 134). The two groups meeting ministers that day would in the following year form, respectively, the University Grants Committee and the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, both of which would be central to British higher education policy for the remainder of the twentieth century, creating essentially the system that Britain has today.

The study of history usually involves identifying continuities and discontinuities. Continuities are certainly present in Taylor's account, but, as he observes, the men (and of course they were all men) sitting around that table had no doubt that the Britain of 1918 was not the country it had been four years earlier, and that higher education now needed to change to reflect this new reality. As well as a new awareness about the significance of science and technology brought about by the war, Kidd's briefing paper argued that: 'There is accordingly a demand that university education should be made accessible to a much larger proportion of the population ... by providing scholarships and maintenance allowances' (p. 134). More broadly, Taylor notes that the war had created new expectations of the state, both within government itself and in the wider country. From 1916/17, a view developed that there should be, as Taylor puts it, 'no return to the *status quo ante*' (p. 329) – a sentiment that would no doubt have been endorsed by those aware of the seemingly interminable tragedy playing out on the Dover quayside.

What emerged from the 23 November meeting was an acceptance that a significant and continuing degree of public funding of universities was both desirable and necessary: as the Principal of the University of Edinburgh put it, 'the development of the Universities, no less than their maintenance, is a national duty ... and it is a national benefit' (p. 147). A mixed economy for university funding, drawing on public and private money, would be needed. What had developed during the war was a better understanding of the contributions of universities to economic competitiveness: as the Principal of Edinburgh put it in closing his speech, 'The Universities should be sustained and developed because they are potential creators of national wealth' (p. 149). Taylor does not say if he thinks this was the first time that higher education had been described in exactly these terms, but it must certainly be a very early example of the rhetoric that has served universities so well down the intervening years.

The position of staff members with foreign nationalities has today, unfortunately, become a live issue in British universities. In 1914, most universities had some German members of staff, who had often spent most of their careers in Britain. In at least some cases, the university authorities seemed to do their best to treat these people humanely, even in one case in the face of what could have become a lynch mob outside the house of a German professor of Oriental languages at University College Aberystwyth.

While not going that far, the University of Edinburgh Court did not distinguish itself in 1914 by informing staff with German nationality that it was 'desirable that [they] should resign the posts held by them in the University' (42). At Leeds, the professor of German discovered that becoming a British citizen did not prevent him from being in effect run out of town, with the university reluctantly acquiescing: it did not help that the events in question coincided with the Battle of the Somme.

Future authors writing on British universities during the First World War and immediately after will be deeply indebted to John Taylor for his tireless work in sifting through years of university council and senate minutes and presenting to us the nuggets of gold that he has found in them. While most scholars of British higher education appreciated that important changes were brought about by the First World War, this book, by giving us the texts of reports, detailed accounts of decisions and the actual words of many of the key actors, brings these changes to life. Modern British higher education began in 1918.