The higher education of women in Ireland, an exclusively extra-mural undertaking for most of the nineteenth century, can be viewed as an important part in the continuum of educational reform which resulted in English Literature being considered a suitable subject for degree examination. Furthermore, since the education of women continued to be a segregated, unrecognised process, lectures and courses for women, not subject to university and degree-related strictures, became the proving ground for early canon formation in the literature of a language which, in Ireland, had only become the majority vernacular a generation or two earlier. This anomaly, the periphery (female and Irish) informing and altering the establishment (male and British), was the result of the cohesion of a number of forces and factors — but an examination of a group of public lectures devised for women seems an appropriate place to start.

The Dublin Afternoon Lectures on Literature and the Arts were held every spring from 1863 to 1868. They were delivered by most of the prominent men in the city, but were geared, most unusually, toward an audience comprised of gentlewomen and male civil servants. These lectures became an important link in the chain of nineteenth-century educational enfranchisement. The Afternoon Lectures had, as their subjects, material which would not become canonical for another generation or two, yet was considered not too ‘high brow’ for the sisters, daughters, wives and mothers of the small coterie of educated men who brokered cultural power in Dublin in the 1860s. To best understand, however, the impact and the origin of the Afternoon Lectures in Dublin, it is necessary to begin earlier in the century and in England.

In British cities, from as early as the 1820s, well-intentioned groups of educated men tried to lessen the educational gap which existed between themselves and the working classes. Later such experiments, of a lasting nature, like Birkbeck College of the University of London, institutionalised these efforts; and these are well-documented. However, less well-known are the many individual, recurring or fleeting series of lectures devised for working men in the decades between 1820 and 1860. These lectures usually had one of two general purposes. The first was a focus on practical skills and vocational training. Topics ran from the supremely practical (‘How to Plan a Productive, Balanced and Sightly Vegetable Garden’), to the self-improving (‘How to Learn Telegraphy’). The latter type of lecture was often a well-intentioned ‘come-on’ to working men who paid, often
quite dearly, for their lectures. Posters for these lectures were remarkably similar

to those seen in advertisements today offering the promise of lucrative jobs to those

willing to train or to retrain as computer 'programmers'.

But it is the second category of public lectures in the latter half of the nineteenth
century that is of greater import to anyone interested in either women's education

or literary canon formation, the public lecture which aimed at the development

of cultural awareness. Suitable subjects would have included an introduction to

the works of Dante, Shakespeare or Goethe. Cultural lectures could also be serial,
an attempt in some cases, at giving the lie to their facility - 'Italian Renaissance

Frescoes in Four Weeks', for instance.

The British model for such public lectures transplanted well to Ireland, but

only to parts of Ireland. Cities west of the Shannon, although they initiated series

of public lectures, failed to see such efforts take root. In part, this failure to thrive,

particularly in pre-famine Ireland, was due to the public lecture being English

in both its language and ethos. But in Dublin, parts of Kilkenny and Tipperary,

Drogheda, Dundalk, Belfast and several smaller urban centres in what is now

Northern Ireland, the English-speaking working population adapted readily to

the public lecture format. In Dublin, specifically, there were very successful

evening series of lectures sponsored by another thriving import, the working

men's societies, including the St Ann's Working Men's Club and the Mechanics'

Institute, located in Abbey Street.

The Dublin Mechanics' Institute was typical of self-improvement organisations

of the era, including a strong emphasis on moral education for the working man,
or more specifically the artisan classes, those with good basic skills, and a certain

amount of disposable income. Today's equivalent employment sector in Ireland

would be, perhaps, members of crafts unions. Working men paid disproportion-
ately large amounts to become members of its library at ten shillings a year and
to take training and/or scientific courses. But they also paid their money to

acquire a middle-class veneer with French lessons and dancing classes.

It is not surprising, then, that the range and stellar quality of the public lecturers

at the Mechanics' Institute attracted much attention in Dublin, particularly in

the contemporary press. But, and here is where the evolutionary process begins,
it seems the Mechanics' Institute's lectures, which ended in 1860, three years
before the Afternoon Lectures began, had failed to fulfil the specific needs of a
large and hitherto neglected group in mid-Victorian Dublin - the ladies.

The preface to the first series of The Afternoon Lectures (1863) acknowledges

this gap:

devotes considerable attention to the pitfalls and tragedies of such self-improvement efforts
through the years. 2 Seamus Duffy, "Treasures Open to the Wise": A Survey of Early
Mechanics' Institutes and Similar Organisations' in Saothar, xv (1990), pp. 39–47. 3 Two
valuable sources on Mechanics' Institutes are Kieran Byrne's 'The Mechanics' Institute in
Experience has shown that books are often laid aside by those to whom oral teaching is very acceptable; and while the libraries of Mechanics' Institutions have been comparatively neglected, the evening lectures of 'Young Men's Societies' have been thronged. No city has witnessed more happy results from these lectures than Dublin; [but] large numbers have had reason to regret that the hour and the place have been such as practically to exclude them ... [Thus] It was considered essential that the new lectures should be delivered in some suitable building of unsectarian or neutral character, on the south side of the city, and at an hour when ladies could conveniently attend, and when the daily occupations of persons engaged in the law courts and the public offices should have ceased.  

Thus the Afternoon Lectures were born, delivered in the theatre of the Museum of Industry on Stephen's Green, later the site of the Loreto Convent. As the building was very near the spot where Alexandra College for Women would open its doors midway through the Afternoon Lectures series, its female audience became assured. The Afternoon Lectures were given, for the most part, by members of Trinity College, but also by prominent clergymen, barristers and such notables as Samuel Ferguson and John Ruskin; and the lecturers' chosen subjects were scrutinised by a diligent committee, overseen by the Lord Chancellor and, at times, by the Provost of Trinity College. The committee did not, it seems, view its role as being merely to rubber stamp submissions. They continued to maintain a very paternalistic stance, similar to that exercised by the committee which administered the Mechanics' Institution, and indeed membership of the two committees overlapped significantly. Material deemed frivolous in nature or found lacking in sufficient moral rectitude was withheld as being unsuitable for the ladies, just as it had been considered to be inappropriate for presumably equally-impressionable working men. English Literature was to be the focus, although in some years the range was opened to include 'The Arts', thus allowing Ruskin, for instance, to speak on Architecture, and a returned civil servant to introduce 'The Native Literature of India'. 

In general the lectures were scheduled annually in spring so as to encourage large attendance in the mild weather and the longer April and May evenings. Lectures were designed to offer detailed information on subjects already somewhat familiar to the audience; and they were given by men whose names were recognised by all in the small world which was Dublin's middle to upper classes. There was a decided social quality about the material too, which was often introduced with a clever, well-rounded and gentlemanly preface, accompanied
by the sort of feigned apology, either for the speaker's lack of expertise or the
dryness of his subject, which is a feature not only of the period, but of the
specialised dynamic between male speaker and largely female audience.6

Thus, although the very first Afternoon Lecture, delivered by the Reverend
Edward Whately on the writings of John Foster, speaker of the Irish House of
Commons in 1800, got the lectures off to an atypical start, the audience was
described in the Irish Times of 6 May 1863 as 'highly fashionable'. After the success
of the first lecture, subsequent offerings were usually first described as having
drawn a 'crowded and fashionable attendance';7 and the presence of prominent
men and women was duly noted.

But perhaps the coverage in the Freeman's Journal of J.K. Ingram's subsequent
lecture on Shakespeare was more insightful, and helped to point the way toward
the future of lectures such as these.8 Here the writer applauds the choice of
English literature by the organisers as fit subject matter, and at that point still
rather a novel choice for a public lecture. The Freeman reporter, in a paragraph
which makes the late-twentieth century reader realise just how removed we are
from Ingram's audience, bemoans the fact that everyone was familiar with the
classics, but so many were ignorant of literature in their own language. (It is
interesting to note here that this report is written early enough that there is no
modern Irish 'angst' as to just exactly which language is being referenced.) The
reporter also congratulates Ingram for delivering a simple and organised lecture
which, though not above the capability of his audience, was also sufficiently
elevated to display his own talents. Later the lecture is described as 'intellectual
thinkings aloud' — a phrase offered completely unself-consciously, and with a
positive connotation which it could never carry today. Perhaps more pertinent
to the occasion, however, were Ingram's observations on Shakespeare as author
of vibrant and authentic female characters:

In the painting of female character Shakespeare is especially admirable. No one
has more exquisitely delineated those qualities of the heart which may be called
the essential and fundamental constituents of that character in its worthy types
— modesty, purity, tenderness, self-forgetting devotion. Nor has any one done
fuller justice to the true merits of the female intellect, its delicate grace, its fine
sagacity, its quick-glancing intuition. And his female portraits are marked by
the same nice discrimination as those of the other sex.9

A month later the Freeman reports more negatively of a survey of literature offered
in the series by Professor Rushton of Queen's College Cork: 'It was no small
journey, even in this age of special trains and electric telegraphs, to go from Geoffrey

6 See Professor Arthur Houston's self-deprecating remarks which introduce his lecture
on English drama, as reported in the Irish Times, 27 May 1863.    7 Irish Times, 3 June
1863.  8 Freeman's Journal, 16 May 1863.  9 J.K. Ingram, 'Shakespeare' in The Afternoon
Lectures, 1st Series, pp. 109–10. The lecture was also reprinted in detail in the Irish Times
of 16 May 1863.
of Monmouth to Wordsworth in Cumberland in an hour, and to stop at all the stations." Thus the Freeman gives voice to a recurring criticism of self-improvement lectures in the past: their tendency to sweeping subject. Yet the Afternoon Lectures, a cut above the rest, were in part designed to avoid this flaw.

In the same series there is an informative lecture, very typical of the age and striving to be canonical, delivered by the Reverend James Byrne and entitled ‘On the Influence of the National Character on English Literature’. This Arnoldian theory, as set out by Byrne, divides peoples ethnically into the quick-witted, pyrotechnical types which include Celts, and the slower-witted, more careful types which include Anglo-Saxons. After a long series of divisions, into those who deal with the world objectively or subjectively, and other rather arbitrary categories, Byrne constructs a familiar English literary genealogy from Spenser, through Shakespeare, Dryden, Cowper, and Burns to Wordsworth, and then proceeds to make the list contemporary with the inclusion of Tennyson as heir to an unbroken English tradition which he has just assembled. Byrne’s list is somewhat idiosyncratic, however, because it removes Milton, whom he considered to be too big and universal to be an English author; but Burns, whose Scottishness is conveniently minimised, becomes English because he favours detail, and that, according to Byrne, is an irrefutable English characteristic. Canonisation has, one fears, always been a suspect undertaking. The following excerpt from Byrne, which proceeds from his assertion that Shakespeare is the most English of English authors primarily because of his favouring of details, gives valuable insight into the racial and ethnic theories of the era and their rhetoric:

In Milton, on the contrary, there is a striking absence of English characteristics. There is no elaboration of details, no deficiency of general effect. His characters indeed are admirably drawn, and his descriptions shine with the light of genius, but we are struck rather with the poetry and truthfulness of the whole than with the life and fidelity of the particular touches. He had in common with all the born kings of human thought, the divine gifts by which they hold their universal and eternal dominion over the soul of man, but in him those gifts were specialised not as national but as individual.

What the 1863 Afternoon Lectures illustrated, finally, however, was that English literature was not, as yet, a distinct discipline. As a case in point, its final lecture, on English drama, was delivered by the Professor of Political Economy at Trinity, Arthur Houston, one of many specialists from other disciplines who contributed to this literary series. Indeed in subsequent years the range of literary lecturers and the scope of their primary disciplines continues to impress: a Q.C. on Sheridan, a dean on Wordsworth, an archbishop on the sonnet, and a professor of Civil Law on eighteenth-century German literature.

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Focusing somewhat differently, the second series of Afternoon Lectures, in 1864, featured Joseph Napier on ‘The Influence of Women on Literature’ – a stance obviously made attractive to most of the audience by his citing a long list of mythical and historical women who inspired great characters in literature, like Helen of Troy and Cleopatra. Napier also examined the tradition of the popular female writer from Felicia Hemans to Anna Jameson to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whom Napier had interviewed immediately before her death. His argument seems a particularly modern one at times:

We have had Woman sketched by our greatest poets, from Shakespeare to Tennyson, but woman’s account of Woman must be her own revelation. The song of the Troubadour, the romance of Chivalry, and many a tale has told of woman’s love and woman’s devotion, but we must have in her own living words, the sympathy, the tenderness, the self-sacrifice of her nature; the weakness that is strong, the gentleness that is earnest; the intensity of emotion, the quick and delicate perception of the true and right that is peculiarly her own.

The prevailing Victorian myths regarding women return, however, when Napier continues:

She is a help meet for man in the household, for the training of the young and the tender, and in all the offices that sanctify human affection; meet in the intercourse of life, to refine and chasten feeling; meet in both, to give to humanity its designed completeness. Therefore has she her proper sphere in literature, the character of which she has helped to purify and exalt in its leading departments.

But the lecturers’ subjects in 1864 did not pander entirely to the predetermined tastes nor did they coddle the sensibilities of the largely female audience. John O’Hagan, for instance, offered a rather demanding lecture on Chaucer as the common starting point in English literature even for non-specialists; but in an approach which was also common to the era, then proceeded to censor the Canterbury Tales for a female readership. While devoting much time to an examination of Griselda’s role in ‘The Clerk’s Tale’, and to praising the characterisation of Chaucer’s Prioress, O’Hagan disposes of the Wife of Bath peremptorily, as she is ‘drawn with too free a pencil to permit me here to dwell upon it’. The Wife of Bath, he warns his female audience, is ‘not only of the earth earthy, but with a thorough and undisguised contempt for anything but the earthy view of life’, and thus not suitable for reading nor for discussing in a public, and largely female, assemblage.
Several years later, in 1867, when the young Edward Dowden took his turn to deliver his Afternoon Lecture, he had already begun to serve as the first Professor of English at the newly-established Alexandra College for Women around the corner in Earlsfort Terrace. He was also to begin his Professorship at Trinity College within a few months. Dowden’s choice of topic for his Afternoon Lecture – ‘Mr Tennyson and Mr Browning’ – was typical for him at this stage of his career, being a contemporary choice. It was also a rather typical choice for the somewhat avant-garde Afternoon Lectures, which had included Arnold and Dickens as subjects deemed worthy for the largely female and totally non-degree-oriented audience. It should be noted, however, that none of these choices for lecture would have been considered appropriate within the Academy at the time, and here is where I would suggest that the girls meet the boys.

Tennyson and Browning, Dowden’s choice for the Afternoon Lecture series, were also subjects of his lectures at Alexandra College. In addition, Dowden lectured there on Walt Whitman whose poetry he loved, and Swinburne whose poetry he would grow to loathe. These latter choices were considered universally to be audacious, but especially so for female audiences. In fact the choice and range of lecture material on offer at Alexandra, as at the Afternoon Lectures, were considerably more modern and flexible than the syllabus Dowden was to create soon after at TCD. In this regard, however, the lecture series and the women’s college should not be considered as being in the forefront of liberal educational reform, but rather as remaining in Dowden’s mind, and in that of establishment Dublin of the time, part of the adult education movement; later, they were to prove a preliminary stage in the eventual granting of degrees to women, a concept to which Dowden was vehemently opposed. (Although he lived to see, in his words, ‘lasses as well as asses in my classes’.) In contrast to the variety offered the ladies at the Afternoon Lectures and at Alex in the 1860s, the gentlemen at TCD, for many generations, received lectures only on very major figures from Chaucer to Milton, some Shakespeare, and little else, as little else was considered worthy of degree study. In Trinity, Dowden, who had a predilection for broadening the range of reading and study of students to include modern and contemporary authors, was subject in part to the very strong and universal academic preference for the classical and the linguistic. Dowden did have difficulties establishing his discipline’s legitimacy against the charges of the classicists and antiquarians who held power in the college, but unlike some modernists at Oxford in the next decade or two, he never played the scientific/quantitative/linguistic card to validate

18 The 1867 and 1868 series of lectures were published together, in 1869, by London’s Bell & Daldy. 19 This jocular remark is made in a letter to a former student, William McNeile Dixon, who later held the Chair of English Literature at the University of Glasgow. See TCD MS 2259 McNeile Dixon Collection, no. 18, 18 December 1902. 20 Although Tennyson, Arnold and Ruskin were eventually included on the syllabus, there were no questions on any novels set for examinations, and only after 1905–1906 did any drama other than Shakespeare appear. See Terence Brown, ‘Edward Dowden: Irish Victorian’ in Ireland’s Literature (Mullingar, 1988), p. 47n.
his discipline. Thus at Trinity, and eventually throughout Ireland, there was preserved in English Departments a more literary, rather than linguistic focus. Instead of the syllabus in English emerging, as it did in Oxford, from within the university, and developing philologically, the Irish model can trace its origin, in part through Dowden, to the extramural lecturing tradition established first for working men, and later co-opted by women. This literary continuum, adapted for degree study, would in turn colour the curriculum choices made by the more than thirty former students, all male, whom Dowden lived to see appointed to chairs throughout the English-speaking world before his death.  

Dowden was a pioneer then, though hardly a feminist. Involved in educational forces outside the academy as a young man, he was never entirely in step with the establishment, literary or other, even from his early days teaching young women; and a study of his aberration from the norm in this regard gives a stronger understanding of what was the mid-Victorian norm in literary taste. Dowden also provides the literary historian with an interesting link in the formation of the canon - a link in which women's education, with its unlikely origins in the educational reforms geared toward working men, eventually links with a TCD-educated diaspora influential in canon formation, or at least in the formation of the academic curriculum in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand or, in short, the English-speaking world outside England.  

Dowden would continue throughout his long life to offer lectures, both within and outside his college, on recent and living authors. He also lived long enough to see included on the academic syllabus several of his favourite modern writers - like Shelley. At first these new authors and their works would appear, ironically enough, on the exam papers set by Dowden, only for the next generation of civil servants, not for those reading English in university. Eventually, however, writers like Shelley and Whitman and Swinburne would be considered suitable for study by all degree candidates, even the ladies, whose grannies, had they been among those young ladies who had attended the Afternoon Lectures or Alexandra College in the eighteen sixties, would have considered the modern academic syllabus in English literature to be decidedly ‘old hat’.