Museums, Lyceums, Athenaeums and Mechanics' Institutes

WALLACE KIR SOP

For Rod Home

The question at the heart of this paper is whether nineteenth-century British mechanics' institutes were a more or less conscious adaptation or development of late-eighteenth-century French musées, lycées and athénes. My interest in this question has come from two apparently distinct areas of research: on the one hand I have long been interested in the musées (later renamed lycées, then athénes, for reasons set out below) that were established in Paris and in some French provincial, and even colonial, towns in the decade before the Revolution. Indeed, more than twenty years ago I gave a talk to a group of historians of science on the Musée de Paris, an institution associated with Antoine Court de Gebelin (1725–84), whose massive and ultimately unfinished treatise Le Monde primitif analysé et comparé avec le monde moderne (1773–82) was the object of one of the century's most complicated and best documented subscription-publication enterprises. Gebelin has occupied me in one way or another since 1987, so it was natural to examine his involvement with the musée movement. On the other hand I have been dabbling for even longer in the history of print culture in Australia in the nineteenth century. For anyone interested in library provision in this country mechanics' institutes are inescapable, just as diligent tourists can hardly fail to see their present and past buildings in towns, villages and mere hamlets all over the place. It was not an accident that Melbourne was host to "Mechanics' Worldwide 2004: Buildings, Books and Beyond: The First International Conference of Athenaeums, Endowment Institutes/Libraries, Literary Institutes, Lyceums, Mechanics' Institutes, Mercantile Libraries, Philosophical Societies, Schools of Arts & Working Men's/Women's Institutes." It has been claimed that of approximately four thousand such bodies set up—essentially in the English-speaking world, but with St. Petersburg as a rare Continental exception—almost one thousand were in the State of Victoria. The very names chosen reflect a diversity that was not merely terminological but also suggestive of my question, one that is perhaps unavoidable for someone whose professional and research life has been divided between the French- and English-speaking spheres.

I cannot pretend to have found a fully satisfying answer, but I shall present a case that argues that the two apparently distinct phenomena need to be viewed together in ways that are ignored, for example, in standard works like Thomas Kelly's monograph on George Birkbeck (1776–1841). Although labels are not unimportant,
they are only part of the story, which has to pay due attention to a context between 1750 and 1850 that encompasses such things as industrialisation, the inadequacy of traditional educational institutions, the first push towards consumerism, and what can be crudely called the beginnings of modernisation. It is necessary to look first at the creation of musées and lycées in France, then at the emergence of mechanics' institutes from the 1820s on, before turning to the evidence I have suggesting that there were more or less conscious links and influences. The presentation will be unavoidably schematic, bearing in mind that the secondary literature on mechanics' institutes, even in Australia, is now quite substantial. For the connections between the two movements it is also a matter of pointing to searches that still need to be undertaken.

Historians of science since the Second World War have scrutinised the activities of some of the lycées because such figures as Antoine François de Fourcroy (1755–1809) and Antoine Lavoisier (1743–94) lectured at, and supported, these institutions. A characteristically careful article by the late Bill Smeaton on the early years of the lycées,3 the same author's book on Fourcroy,4 and the two volumes of Lucien Scheler's *Lavoisier et la Révolution française,*5 indicate—and reproduce—the sources for study of the role played by major savants in two of the relevant societies "frequented [in Smeaton's words] largely by members of the beau monde, for the study of science was a fashionable pursuit in the dying years of the monarchy."6 Half a generation later Roger Hahn's monograph on the Paris Academy of Sciences between 1666 and 1803 discussed the multiplication of amateur societies interested in scientific lectures and exchange in the 1770s and 1780s. Hahn notes the difficulties in documentation: "Because they were often short-lived, unaffiliated, voluntary associations, they have left very little trace on the pages of history. Only a few are still known, although they once existed in great abundance."7 The situation is, in fact, quite uneven. Some bodies have remained little more than names, while others are attested by prospectuses, reports, lecture programmes, journals and published collections of papers, as well as by some archival material. Court de Gébelin's correspondence is a major source for the vicissitudes of his Musée de Paris along with his succession papers.8 There are thus ways of approaching what was, again in Hahn's phrase,

8 See Wallace Kirsop, "Cultural Networks in Pre-Revolutionary France: Some Reflections on the Case
"high-level adult education in all subjects of general interest to the upper classes of Parisian society."

It is hardly surprising, given the greatly increased interest in cultural history in the last generation, that others have begun to reassess the musée movement. Daniel Roche’s massive 1978 thesis on provincial academies and academicians does not neglect the parallel institutions that were founded in Bordeaux and Toulouse in particular. The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment deals with the new societies, from the first (Pahin de La Blancherie’s correspondence bureau and journal Nouvelles de la République des Lettres et des Arts (1779–88)), on to the musées and lycées, in a chapter entitled “Masculine Self-Governance and the End of Salon Culture.” In the Habermas perspective of the public sphere, there was, for Goodman, a retreat from erstwhile government by salonniers to the marginalisation of women in the 1780s and 1790s. Some caution is needed in accepting this thesis; just as one cannot join Robert Darnton in putting all musée members in Grub Street, as he did in his celebrated article on “The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France.” The most recent, measured synthesis is by Hervé Guénot, an expert on Pahin de La Blancherie (1752–1811). He is right in stressing the diversity of the movement and its durability, since the successor of the most important Musée/Lycée survived until 1848 and even had Auguste Comte as one of its lecturers in 1829–30. Other scholars have pursued the strong Masonic links of many musée members, both in Paris and in the provinces. Court de Gébelin’s leading role in the famous Loge des Neuf Sœurs is an appropriate pointer to this trend.

The associations were thoroughly embedded in the evolving society of the time and subject to all the shifts of regime between the 1780s and the 1830s. This alone explains many of the changes of name. When the Musée de Monsieur was relaunched in 1785 as the Lycée, its programme explained that musée, which designates a collection of natural history specimens and antiquities, is a less suitable title than lycée, a place where lectures on scientific and literary subjects are delivered. The
The old official academic institutions were abolished in 1793, before they were later reformed and eventually incorporated in the Institut, helping to account for the new-found curiosity of the scientific elite. Politically determined change was de rigueur in this period. The Lycée became the Lycée républicain and then, when the word lycée was reserved in 1802 for Napoleon I's newly constituted secondary schools, there was a switch to Athénée. After the Restoration this was coupled with the adjective royal. When the secondary-school lycées reverted to being collèges for a while this did not affect the old-style musée or lycée. In this apparent muddle there was constant faithfulness to a terminology derived from Classical Antiquity and much in favour in the second half of the eighteenth century. In itself this could also be a source of confusion, since the words museum, lyceum and atheneum were being used elsewhere in Europe to distinguish different sorts of institutions and even publications.

It would be a mistake to see the societies as merely subject to fashion. In the Year IX (1800/1801), courses had to be listed strictly according to the Revolutionary calendar, as in another ephemeral publication derived from the Adanson archive. On the other hand, Moreau de Saint-Méry arranged to have reprinted by no less a person than Bodoni a speech he had given to the Musée twenty-one years before. Its preservation was thereby ensured, but even the Musée de Bordeaux put out in 1787 a quite sumptuous volume of papers delivered to it. In other words at least some of these associations were determined to leave their mark.

Collectively what did the musées and lycées stand for? In some cases they can be seen, in Hahn’s words, as “waiting rooms” for people aspiring to election to the regular academies. As we have noted, eminent academicians did not necessarily disdain to belong to some of these institutions—or to pocket quite generous fees for lecturing. However, most members, men and women, were of less exalted intellectual standing. They were comfortably off (the subscription fees guaranteed this), so there is no obvious parallel to later institutions aimed at the respectable working class. None the less, musées and lycées clearly included the “aspiring” groups of late-Enlightenment France. Not for them the sclerotic Church-controlled collegial University with little or no room for modern subjects. These were people curious about the sciences and the humanities. La Harpe’s Lycée—a vast literary history—was, after all, the most

Melbourne) was part of the archive of the naturalist Michel Adanson (1727–1806), who was intensely interested in the musées and lycées. A critical reader as always, he did not fail to write “charlatan” in the margin (ibid., 12) opposite the name of Philibert Commerson (1727–73), the naturalist on Bougainville’s voyage to the Pacific. (See Figs. 1–2.)

18 *Programme du Lycée républicain, pour l’an 9 de la République française. Seizième année lyonnaise* (Paris: de l’imprimerie du Lycée républicain, [1800]), [15–16]. (See Figs. 3–4.)

19 *Discours sur l’utilité du Musée établi à Paris, prononcé dans sa séance publique du 1er décembre 1784, par M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry, ex-Secrétair perpetuel de ce Musée* (Paris: Bodoni, 180). (See Fig. 5.)

20 *Recueil des ouvrages du Musée de Bordeaux, dédié à la Reine. Année 1787* (Bordeaux: de l’imprimerie de Michael Raele, 1787). (See Fig. 6.)

enduring product of the society of the same name. The members were mostly not academic professionals, but were avid consumers—the word needs to be stressed—of culture. The 1788 printed catalogue of the Lycée library is quite strangely eclectic, running from scientific works to novels. Lectures, libraries, laboratories, collections of curious objects, but also entertainment, these are some of the constants of the better-off institutions. Court de Gébelin ruined himself fitting out his Musée de Paris in the Rue Dauphine. But he wanted, as they all did, an agreeable place to meet, to hear music and to encounter learned and interesting foreigners. Here were minds that were prepared to be open and critical. It is small wonder, then, that part of the clientele did belong to Darnton's low-life of literature. The locations, notably near the Palais Royal, are also telling. This is modern France—by no means lagging behind Britain—curious about technological advances and perfectly well attuned to entrepreneurship (Charles-Joseph Panckoucke, the greatest bookseller/publisher of the age, is a fine example of this). In short, here is an effective expression of one of the two Frances of the last century of the ancien régime.

The history of mechanics' institutes is even more complex than that of musées, lycées and athénées. To date it has tended to be written a little myopically, with scant attention to antecedents and parallels outside the English-speaking world. The founder, and later the patron and inspirer, of mechanics' institutes was George Birkbeck, first in Glasgow at the very beginning of the nineteenth century (at Anderson's Institution, now the University of Strathclyde) and then in Glasgow and London in the 1820s. The international movement took off in that decade, spreading to the United States of America and even to Australia—Hobart Town—almost immediately. Just as Birkbeck's claims to have been the originator have sometimes been challenged, it is not difficult to see other influences, often local ones, at work. Industrialisation, urbanisation and the gradual increase in basic literacy all help to explain the push for educational opportunities for the operatives of the new factory economy and for the less privileged groups in society. However, it would be rash to speak of "democratisation" or of "worker autonomy" in an area where researchers like Marc Askew and Brian Hubber, working on nineteenth-century Victoria, have been more inclined to suspect social control. There were frequently tensions between

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23 See Marc Askew, "The Diffusion of Useful Knowledge: Mechanics' Institutes in Nineteenth
PROGRAMME
DU LYCÉE

Établi sous la protection immédiate de Monseigneur
de Monseigneur Comte d'Artois.

Depuis que les hommes jouissent de quelque considération parmi les hommes, de nombreux établissements publics ont été formés pour l'instruction de nos premières années, et les amours de cette espèce ont affamé des distinctions honorables; aussi les secours ont été prodigués à l'enfant, et les mémoires à l'âge avancé; mais c'est lors de cette borne, dans toute l'Europe, l'institution des Gouvernements. On dirait que les hommes, à la fin de leur éducation, savent tout ce qu'ils doivent savoir en

Figure 1. Michel Adanson's copy of the 1785 Programme

Figure 2. Adanson's condemnation of a rival in 1785
the middle-class supporters and promoters of the institutes on the one hand and
the intended beneficiaries on the other. In many places exclusion and resistance
rather than inclusion ended up being the fate of bodies created with high ideals.
Different national or regional cultures played their part in the choices made and
the directions taken. Pam Baragwanath’s *If the Walls Could Speak: A Social History
of the Mechanics’ Institutes of Victoria* documents the fate of hundreds of Institute
buildings that were transformed into local halls, council chambers, public libraries,
theatres, universities or totally obliterated. Some, like the Trades Hall, the Melbourne
Athenaeum—Victoria’s oldest, set up in 1839—and the Ballarat and Prahran
Institutes, have survived in their different ways to bear witness to a nineteenth-
century cultural crusade that drew its strength from community involvement.

The paradox of a world craze tempered by specific needs and aspirations helps
to explain the diversity of names chosen for these institutions. In the United States
of America there were some mechanics’ institutes—indeed there is still one in San
Francisco—but, mostly, there were lyceums springing from the movement started
by Josiah Holbrook and chronicled by Carl Bode in his *The American Lyceum: Town
Meeting of the Mind*. In Britain there was perhaps greater variety, with School of
Arts having some favour, not least because the designation was used in Edinburgh
as early as 1821. In Australia mechanics’ institutes were preferred in Victoria, while
schools of arts predominated in New South Wales. With divergent government
policies and legislative provisions it is hardly astonishing that the Australian history
has to be envisaged State by State. Athenaeum was a common term in New Zealand,
whereas it was relatively rare in Victoria, although one can cite places like Elmore
and Lilydale. Museum, on the other hand, does seem to have been confined to
the meaning we commonly give it. In all this one can sense the prestige of ancient
models, of Aristotle and Hadrian, but also a broad Enlightenment search for
alternatives to the colleges and universities dominated by the Church of England
and mired in sloth and servile attachment to a classical culture judged irrelevant to a
modernising society. It was not an accident that Nonconformists, Scots and Radicals
were so prominent in the mechanics’ institute movement.

Historians of science do not need to be told of all the ways in which people
sought to break away from the conservative hold of Oxford and Cambridge, the
Inns of Court and the London hospitals. Scotland and the Continent were, and
continued to be, valuable resources, but reform at home was also necessary. Alongside
University College, London, the Royal Institution, the British Association for the
Advancement of Science and other ambitious attempts to open out tertiary education

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Century Victoria* (master’s thesis, Monash University, 1982) and Brian Hubber, “Public Libraries and
24 Pam Baragwanath, *If the Walls Could Speak: A Social History of the Mechanics’ Institutes of Victoria*
25 Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind*, 2nd ed. (Carbondale, IL: Southern
**PROGRAMME DU LYCÉE RÉPUBLICAIN**

*Pour l'âge de la République française.*

[Numerous subjects are listed, including:

- Physique
- Philosophie appliquée à la morale
- Histoire naturelle
- Anatomie et Physiologie
- Langue française
- Mathématiques
- Philosophie appliquée à la morale
- Chimie
- Physique
- Lettres et Sciences latines

**ORDRE ET DISTRIBUTION DES COURS**

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**Figure 3. Adanson's copy of the Programme of 1800**

**Figure 4. Syllabus for 1800-1801**
and to promote research, the mechanics' institutes have to be seen as the popular arm of a campaign to provide a better-trained workforce for new manufactures. Libraries, laboratories, collections of museum objects, lecture series on technical, but also on literary topics, these were the vehicles chosen to bring enlightenment to artisans and shopkeepers. The means were remarkably similar to those employed for more exclusive groups in the French musées, lycées and athénes. The perils, too, were not dissimilar.

The degeneration of Australian schools of arts into places where one borrowed cheap novels, played billiards (and, I suspect, occasionally frequented S. P. bookies) has become a cliché. There were, of course, exceptions, but declining government support, economic depressions—in particular that of the early 1890s—and a reduced subscriber base all took their toll. Yet the public lecture was always an ambivalent phenomenon, instructional but also entertaining. The records of Victorian institutes show the quite large sums paid to professional touring lecturers for their performances. Armed with lantern slides and the apparatus for spectacular experiments they were the nineteenth century's purveyors of "infotainment." We are back in the world of commercial exploitation: consumption of a recognisably modern kind.

The published discussions of mechanics' institutes and the non-English-speaking world look downstream. We are told that Charles Dupin (1784–1873) was interested in the English innovation from his vantage-point at the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers and that he applied it successfully to promoting technical education in France. Was no one aware of the ways in which the British were bringing to an admittedly wider public what had been attempted in France from 1780? Was French amnesia matched by British ignorance of potential earlier models on the other side of the Channel?

Let us admit from the outset that the French had no exclusive proprietary right to words like athenaeum and lycée. The Americans came to be quite fond of them. Subscription libraries, which were known as Library Companies in the eighteenth century, assumed the style of Athenaums in the early nineteenth, as in Boston and Providence, Rhode Island. Before Holbrook's movement, lycée was occasionally used as a title for scientific and literary societies, in Delaware in 1798 and, more significantly, in the New York Lyceum of Natural History from 1817. Should we suspect some French influence in this?

It is useful to recall the extent of American elite contacts with France after the War of Independence. Three future Presidents, Thomas Jefferson and the two John Adams, father and son, frequented the shop of Jacques Froulclé, a fairly obscure bookseller on the Quai des Grands Augustins who was guillotined in 1794.26 More important in this context, Benjamin Franklin was fêted by Court de Gébelin's

DISCOURS
SUR L'UTILITÉ DU MUSEE
par M. Moreau de Saint-Méry.
À PARIS,
CHEZ THEBAUD, 1786.

M. L. E. MOREAU DE SAINT-MÉRY,
MARQUIS DE SAINT-MÉRY,
MINISTRE DE LA SEINE PROFESSEUR
ASSISTANT DE L'ÉCOLE DES ARTS.

À BORDEAUX,
DE L'IMPRIMERIE DE NICOLAS FAUC.

Figure 5. Bodoni reprint of Moreau de Saint-Ilery's Discours

Figure 6. 1787 edition of papers given at the Musée de Bordeaux
Musée de Paris, and "La Société Littéraire de Boston" was listed among the corresponding members in 1785. Networks and interlinking memberships were also reinforcements of the flow of information about learned societies. The jurist Guillaume Grivel (1735–1810), Vice-President of the Musée de Paris in 1785, was a member of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. John Adams knew Gebelin well and read him assiduously late in life—as marginalia in his copy of the *Monde primitif* in the Boston Public Library show beyond doubt. The musée and lycée project was therefore familiar to some people on the Western side of the Atlantic, something to be expected given Gebelin's missionary zeal.

For Britain and London the evidence is less conclusive, despite Gebelin's many long-standing contacts with the Huguenot diaspora. One of the London correspondents of his Musée de Paris was Jean Hyacinthe de Magellan (1723–90).

The printed report of the February 1784 meeting of the Musée de Paris mentions an imitation in London. This is also referred to in the 1784 *Prospectus* by Anton Benedetto Bassi for an Orleanist literary Lycée de Paris. It has to be the institution publicised by the future Revolutionary Brissot de Warville and the ostensible sponsor of the *Journal du Lycée de Londres* and the *Tableau de la situation actuelle des Anglais*, dated 1784–85 and almost certainly printed in the latter year. However, it seems that no meetings effectively took place at 26 Newman Street, off Oxford Street, and Brissot's grandiose plans were soon halted by his difficulties with the law on both sides of the Channel.

What is sure is that the historian and controversialist Catharine Macaulay, now enjoying renewed interest through Michèle Le Dœuff's work on women philosophers, was a correspondent—the only one in England!—of the Musée de Bordeaux. This is one more reason to be cautious about the thesis concerning the eclipse of women from the public sphere in France towards the end of the eighteenth century.

The words *museum* and *lyceum* are used in other ways too in England, but it is not always easy to track the relevant institutions down in London guide books.

28 Ibid., 45.
31 *Lycée de Paris. Club littéraire qu'on va former dans les bâtiments nouveaux du Palais Royal ...* (Paris, 1784), 6: "Londres même vient dernièrement d'accueillir le projet d'un Français qui a annoncé le *Lycée de Londres* [London itself has recently welcomed the plan of a Frenchman who has announced the creation of the *Lycée de Londres*]."
34 *Recueil des ouvrages du Musée de Bordeaux*, 420.
Where Paris publications gave plenty of space to culture, British ones seem to be obsessed with hackney-cab fares! What was the "New Lyceum" or "Lyceum of Arts, Sciences and Languages" where Giovanni Antonio Gallignani, progenitor of famous Paris booksellers and publishers, gave twenty-four lectures on the Italian language in 1795? We know more about the "European Museum," King Street, St. James Square, "instituted for the promotion of the Fine Arts, and the encouragement of British Artists" despite the extreme rarity of its lists of pictures deposited for sale. The history of the Lyceum Theatre near the Exeter Change in the Strand is also well attested, but more particularly for the period in the nineteenth century when it became a regular licensed establishment. Earlier it was the scene of popular "infotainment" like waxworks, as we are reminded in Pamela Pilbeam's book on Madame Tussaud and the History of Waxworks. Once again there are links with the Palais Royal, the site of the first recognised arcade and the fountain-head of modern shopping culture. Intellect and commerce are perhaps not strange bedfellows.

To go beyond these indications would be difficult without scouring further through newspapers—the editorial pages and the advertisements—and correspondence. However, I hope that I have made some sort of provisional case for attaching mechanics' institutes in all their forms to a wider and older context of popular instruction and entertainment.

Postscript

In the three years since this paper was first presented, I have encountered new documents and have had to try to answer questions and objections about its underlying thesis. It can easily enough be conceded that George Birkbeck's project was wider and more inclusive than anything being attempted in France before the Revolution. Birkbeck himself, as an earlier biographer than Kelly notes, not only

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35 Twenty-four Lectures on the Italian Language (London: Printed for the Author, 1796). The author's address is given as "No. 3, Little Brook-Street, Hanover-Square." The Guildhall Library was kind enough to draw my attention to two advertisements in The Times, 17 February and 14 April 1795, indicating that the institution was under the patronage of the Prince of Wales and directed by Gallignani himself. It was located in the Assembly Rooms, Hanover Square, and offered courses in European languages, astronomy, chemistry and experimental philosophy, as well as conducting an "Academy of Music." Gallignani had taught languages in Paris previously and was to return there later in the decade.

36 See The Plan and New Descriptive Catalogue of the European Museum ... (London: J. Smeeton, 1804). There were many such catalogues issued between 1801 and 1819. I am grateful to Burton B. Fredericksen of The Getty, Los Angeles, for information on a phenomenon of considerable interest to students of provenance.


went to Paris in 1802 after the Peace of Amiens, but also had a visit in Glasgow round 1809 from “a professor of the Paris Lyceum” who was keen to see something like the “Mechanics’ Class” adopted in France. It is also necessary to draw attention to the substantial literature on scientific lecturing and teaching in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.39

The Revolution itself brought to France an impetus to democratise cultural and intellectual life, witness André Pierre Ledru’s proposal for a public library in Le Mans that would be open to all the inhabitants of the town, including artisans and even ploughmen.40 In this sense the lively political ferment moved the debate to a new plane that the British were to reach more gradually and deliberately in the early decades of the nineteenth century and to make the basis of their public-library system in 1850.

Monash University, Melbourne

39 See, for example, Metropolis and Province: Science in British Culture, 1780–1850, ed. Ian Inkster and Jack Morrell (London: Hutchinson, 1983), and Ian Inkster, Scientific Culture and Urbanisation in Industrialising Britain (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 1997).

40 André-Pierre Ledru, Essai sur l’établissement d’une bibliothèque dans la ville du Mans (Le Mans: Imprimerie de Pivron, 1791), 18.