

A Williamite Reprobate? Edward Nares and the investigation of his failure in 1832 to deliver his lectures

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SUMMARY

An earlier article in Oxoniensia directed attention to the autobiography of Edward Nares (1762–1841), Regius Professor of History from 1813, a manuscript work acquired by Merton College in 1960.¹ Valuable additional material on Nares's academic career can be found in the University Archives. This reveals that in 1832 he was questioned on his repeated failure to deliver his lectures. The context of this failure is revealed by Nares's autobiography to have been one of lack of interest from the students, disappointed ambition and scholarly activity.

Nares's autobiography reveals that in the early 1820s he became totally disillusioned with lecturing:

Early in the Lent Term 1821 I went to Oxford as before to discharge the duties of my Professorship; and when I got there found I had no chance of having any duties to discharge; several names indeed put down to attend my lectures, but when I came to fix the days and hours of attendance, no appointments I could make would suit the parties; other more essential studies and engagements interfering. A terminal lecture I read as usual – I mention these things to show, that it was through no neglect on my part, that the Professorship of Modern History has become so useless; Before I had it, it was almost a sinecure, and when I obtained it, changes had taken place in the University, calculated to engage more than ever before, the attention of the young men – In the meanwhile the removal of my family to Oxford,² and providing for the duties of my parish in my absence, absorbed the whole amount of my salary, and the abundant hospitalities of the place added much to our expences – for though the Heads of the University entertained us, we had many to entertain in return, and among the junior members – particularly the young noblemen of Christ Church all of them by relationship or acquaintance with Blenheim.³

Nares's complaint about attendance at lectures reflected developments in Oxford teaching. As an excellent recent thesis has pointed out, 'Professorships had been founded to encourage research and teaching in the developing disciplines which lay outside the formal curriculum . . . The enforced concept of intermediate examinations and compulsory college lectures left the Professors' lecture rooms empty.'⁴

This was indeed the case, as Nares's autobiography reveals. In November 1819 he:

returned again to Oxford, to read another terminal lecture, with no expectation of its being of any possible use, or advantage to the junior members of the University, but to show my willingness to

¹ J.M. Black, 'A Regency Regius: The Historian Edward Nares', *Oxoniensia*, lii (1987). See also G.C. White (ed.), *A Versatile Professor* (1903); J.M. Black, 'A Georgian Fellow of Merton: The Historian Edward Nares', *Postmaster* (1987), 53–9.

² Nares resided generally at his living of Biddenden (Kent).

³ Merton College Library, Nares Autobiography, volume II (hereafter Merton E.2.42), 260. Nares's first wife was Lady Charlotte Spencer, daughter of George, 4th Duke of Marlborough.

⁴ P. Slee, *History as a Discipline in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge 1848–1914* (Ph.D., Cambridge, 1983), 23–4. I would like to thank Dr. Slee for lending me his copy of his thesis.

discharge such duties of my Professorship, as were imposed upon me . . . Early in the year 1820 I went again to Oxford with my family – having no class for my Lectures on History, I read a course on Political Economy, and a terminal lecture as usual . . . In February 1822 I again carried my family to Oxford, with little or no prospect of having a sufficient class to read to . . . In February 1823 I went to Oxford, but being very doubtful of having much to do there I did not take my family with me . . . I found so few names entered to attend my lectures, and those uncertain, as not free from engagements, that after exhibiting myself again in the public schools, I determined to return home, where I arrived February 20th nor do I find that I went to Oxford any more that year.⁵

In the mid-1820s Nares's position as a lecture deteriorated further, and he was attracted increasingly to scholarly work and to a change in position.⁶ He failed to win the wardenship of Merton in 1826 and the Lady Margaret Chair of Divinity in 1827,⁷ and in 1832 he was still Regius Professor. It was at this point that his failure to deliver lectures was raised by the Vice-Chancellor, the Rector of Exeter. Much of the correspondence does not appear to have survived, but the University Archive contains material preserved by the Vice-Chancellor. On 31 January 1832 Nares wrote to him from Askam Tadcaster:

Having an opportunity of sending this to Oxford by a private hand, I beg leave to acknowledge the favor of your last letter. I trust that in about a fortnight from this time I shall be at Oxford, and in the way of personally communicating with you upon all points concerning the Professorship of Modern History. In the mean time I shall endeavour to procure from Kent the warrant of appointment at present in my possession. I concluded that some copy, or an actual duplicate, must already be in the archives of the university, but this not appearing to be the case from the tenor of your last letter, I shall certainly spare no pains, to put you in possession of it, as soon as it may be possible, when I may also have an opportunity of communicating to you all I know about it.⁸

Poor health, concerning which Nares provided copious details, delayed the meeting,⁹ but on 22 March Nares wrote requesting an appointment for the following day.¹⁰ No record of this meeting appears to have survived, but on 24 March Nares wrote to the Vice-Chancellor concerning the appointment of those who were to teach foreign languages, ending the letter:

I will assuredly procure a copy to be sent to you of my warrant of appointment, and only reserve the original till I can communicate with Government, on any stoppage of the Salary; which I think may, in my case, happen, and that I may be called upon to account for my apparent delinquency.¹¹

On 26 March he was at last able to send the Vice-Chancellor a copy of his conditions of employment. Writing that day from London he offered a long defence of his activities:

I now send you a perfect copy of the rules and regulations 'respecting the Professor of Modern History and Languages', which I always supposed to be quite as well known to the heads of the University as to myself. I had indeed no idea, that a duplicate could be wanting at Oxford. It must read, at first sight, as a heavy charge against, not myself only, but against those also on whom the responsibility was thrown of enforcing compliance, and levying penalties incurred; on the Treasury itself indeed for paying the stipend, without the sanctions required; but I can assure you no impediment of that nature has ever been thrown in my way or even hinted at, tho' I made no secret of the regulations; nor have I ever found that the Professors stipend has been in the smallest degree augmented by fines formerly exacted, though I am certain I could name a time (long past) when the professorship was as nearly as possible a sinecure; if it is rendered so at present, it is under circumstances much more creditable to the University (at least), for I may venture to assert, that the

⁵ Merton E.2.42. 258–9, 261.

⁶ *Ibid.* 265–8.

⁷ *Ibid.* 268–9.

⁸ *Bodl.*, Oxford University Archives, WPB/11/3, No. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.* No. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* No. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.* No. 5.

young men are too constantly engaged in higher pursuits, to be able to afford time, either in the michaelmas or Lent term, for attendance on 20 Lectures, on a subject comparatively so light and unacademical as modern History – especially in the present condition of things, when books applicable to such studies are so plentiful, and libraries of all descriptions so accessible. For some time I compiled with all the rules, and at so great expence by the removal of my family, hire of extensive lodgings, and payment of a curate at home, as to exceed the income, and certainly without any material benefit to any member of the University, being sometimes unable to procure any class, and at the best so uncertain a one, that long before I could get through 20 Lectures, many were called away to college collections, public examinations, or to attend upon private tutors. After 14 years service in the above manner, I thought it but fair to solicit a removal by *professional advancement*; the answers I received from Sir R. Peel, the Duke of Wellington, His Majesty, and more recently Lord Grey, I took an opportunity of showing you, and I cannot but feel that they were such as to deter me from proposing any unconditional resignation, though I have always been ready to acknowledge, and careful to observe, the things might be better, if the Office were bestowed on some resident member of the University. If my health were as good in winter as it commonly is in the summer, I could still go through a course in michaelmas or Lent term, if a steady class could be obtained, but experience has proved to me, that in the present state of the university it is not at all to be expected; The original purpose of the Professorship having been long abandoned by the government itself, as may be seen by reference to the charter of institution in the University archives – If expected by the Treasury, or House of Commons, to surrender the Professorship, or *stipend*, the above is the account I have to give, and I hope it may be done, without injury to those who might look to succeed me, in case of a vacancy.¹²

Further justification followed when he actually sent a copy of the regulations on 29 March:

That I may not make the frank too heavy I beg leave to add a few remarks here. Though I send only a copy of the rules I am far from designing to withhold the original if wanted for public purposes. I only wish to retain it for the present in case government should actually stop the stipend, in which case I should like to state that I had once complied with all the rules, and only become remiss, upon the ground of ill health in winter, and the rather *encouraged prospects* I had of a *removal*. I must repeat however that I was quite unaware, that the rules were not fully known at Oxford. At the *Treasury* they were certainly known. When I was first appointed, I offered to procure certificates from the Vice Chancellor but it was judged unnecessary, and except occasional arrears, sometimes of many quarters, the stipend has been paid ever since without enquiry.¹³

The enclosed 'Rules and Regulations respecting the Professor of modern History and Languages' were undated. Viscount Sidmouth, whose name was appended to them, was Home Secretary at the time of Nares's appointment as Regius Professor:

The Professor of Modern History to reside three months within every year in the University on pain of forfeiting one pound per Diem for every day short of ninety days actual residence within the year.

The Professor to read a solemn Lecture in every Term, in the natural Philosophy school at twelve o'Clock on Thursday in the second week of full term, or on the next day if Thursday be a Holiday – Notice to be given of the Day and Hour when the Lecture is to be read, at least three days before, by a printed paper to be sent by the Professor to every Head of a House and to the dining halls and common rooms of every College and Hall in the University and by notice affixed to the usual places.

If the Professor omits reading any one of these solemn Lectures or to give such notice as aforesaid of the day of reading to forfeit ten pounds – but nevertheless the Vice Chancellor to permit the Professor (on particular emergencies) to alter the day or hour, so that the abovementioned notice be always publickly given.

The solemn Lectures to treat of some subject comprised under the following heads

viz:
 1st Method of reading Modern History,
 2nd Political biography
 3d Political Economy
 4th Diplomacy or International Law
 etc. etc. etc.;

¹² Ibid. No. 6.

¹³ Ibid. No. 7.

The Professor to read a course of Lectures once at least in every year, either in michaelmas or Lent term – the course to consist of not fewer than twenty Lectures, and to be read either in some public room belonging to the university, or within some College or Hall, but on no account in any private house in the Town, and that not more than three Lectures to be read in any one week.

No greater sum than one guinea for each course to be taken from each person that shall attend. Public notice of the commencement of each course of Lectures to be given at least ten days before, in both the Oxford newspapers, (if two shall continue to be published) and by printed papers sent to every head of a house, and the dining hall and common rooms of every College and Hall, as in the case of solemn Lectures.

The Penalty for omitting to read a course of Lectures within the year in the manner and with the notice abovementioned to be one hundred pounds. If such omission be repeated in the following year, the whole stipend to be then forfeited for that year, and in this case, no part of the stipend to be again received by the Professor till the duty shall have been actually performed.

The onus probandi in all cases to rest on the Professor, and his stipend not to be paid without a certificate from the Vice Chancellor that he has discharged his several duties, according to the established regulations, and incurred no forfeiture within the year, or if any . . . have been incurred, that the reasons of them and the precise amount be distinctly stated in the certificate.

No penalty to be remitted in any case unless clear proof in writing be given to the Vice Chancellor that the omission was occasioned by inevitable accident, and not by any neglect on the part of the Professor, in which case such omission and the cause of it to be distinctly stated in the certificate.

The amount of all penalties incurred and not remitted as abovementioned to be received by the Vice Chancellor; and a separate and particular account of the same to be always stated by him to the Delegates of accounts at their annual audit. The monies to accumulate only till they are sufficient to purchase one hundred pounds stock in the three per cent consols, the same to be by them funded from time to time, and the dividends thereof to be applied solely to the augmentation of the Professors stipend, in order to counteract the deductions therefrom on account of taxes etc. and the depreciation of the value of money.

Teachers of Languages to be in number two, appointed by the Professor and remunerable by him, to receive twenty five pounds per annum each from him as at present, merely by way of honorary retainer.
Sidmouth¹⁴

The last item in the file was a letter to Nares from the Vice-Chancellor, endorsed 'not sent':

I beg leave to acknowledge the safe receipt of the copy of the document relating to your Professorship, as well as your letter which enclosed it – I have not yet read the *Regulations*; and as it is not likely that I should wish to make any comments upon them, I will only say that I doubt not the copy will be a sufficient substitute for the original, until you are satisfied that you can spare the latter without injury to your interests.¹⁵

This appears to have been the end of the matter. Nares's apology may well have been accepted as satisfactory. The government certainly had more important problems to attend to in 1832. Furthermore, similar difficulties with attendance at lectures attended William Smyth (1765–1849), Regius Professor of History at Cambridge from 1807 until his death. Indeed in 1837 Smyth, who had lost his fellowship at Peterhouse in 1825, when he inherited real property, gave up lecturing on a regular basis, and in 1847 he retired to Norwich.¹⁶ Such problems were not restricted to History. Natural Science lectures were also poorly attended.¹⁷ Whatever Nares's faults, he cannot be fairly condemned for failing to deliver his lectures and for losing enthusiasm for his journeys to Oxford. The fault was rather that of the latter's curriculum and of the failure to adapt it to the academic staff available.

¹⁴ Ibid. No. 8.

¹⁵ Ibid. No. 9.

¹⁶ K.T.B. Butler, 'A Petty Professor of Modern History: William Smyth, 1765–1849', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, ix (1948), 217–38.

¹⁷ See op. cit. note 4, 26.