

# Languages Britain – The Leathes Report (1918) in its time, and ours

Richard Smith, University of Warwick

# Introduction: re. 'in its time, and ours'

One connection between history and memory is via consideration of anniversaries ('memorialising')

'Remembering' World War I as a case in point ('Remembrance Sunday')

A foil for reflection on current concerns (with a focus on present and near future, i.e. an emphasis on 'in our time') – but also an opportunity for deeper historical awareness: (reconstructing a past event 'in its time' (in its own context, attempting to avoid anachronism)

and/or tracing the present back to the past [history 'in' the present] and recognising historicity of our own understanding [the present 'in' history] (both of these: 'in its time, and ours')

‘Memorialising’ two significant World War I publications:

1918 – The ‘Leathes Report’ (a substantial government report on the position of modern languages)

1917 – *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages*  
(Harold E. Palmer)

# 'Global ELT': four phases

**1917** – *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages* (Harold E. Palmer)

>>25 years: **1942** – publication of *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary* in Japan (A.S. Hornby et al.)

>>25 years: **1967** – IATEFL founded

>>25 years: **1992** – *Linguistic Imperialism* (Robert Phillipson)

>>25 years: **2017** – a high point of ELT spread and yet critique of narrowness of ELT??

# MFL in Britain (McLelland 2017)

1918 – Leathes Report

>>50 years: 1968 – Committee on Research and Development in Modern Languages (CRDML) first report

[1997 – approx. high point for GCSE numbers → decline since then / 2002 National Languages Strategy]

>>50 years: 2018 – moves towards new National Languages Framework / Strategy??

# 'Classics transformed' (Wray 1998)

**1919** – Oxford & Cambridge abandon compulsory Greek for entrance (end of period of 'Victorian Hellenism')

>>40 years: **1960** – Oxford & Cambridge abandon compulsory Latin for entrance

[1970: Cambridge Latin course – rejection of formal grammar]

>>28 years: **1988** – National Curriculum makes no reference to classics

>>30 years: **2018** – ?

A longer and broad view: from the 'trivium' (grammar, logic, rhetoric) dominating the school curriculum to relatively little 'language focus' now in British schools?

(though this needs to be seen with caveats in mind of state vs. private, expansion of 'languages for all', and consideration of possible strengths of literacy and English *language* instruction in British schools)

# The 'Leathes Report' (1918)

[Leathes, S. et al.] (1918). *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister to Enquire into the Position of Modern Languages in the Educational System of Great Britain.* London: His Majesty's Stationery Office.

Available via ProQuest U.K. Parliamentary Papers Online



What is the Leathes report, and why does it deserve attention, in general terms?

COMMITTEE TO ENQUIRE INTO THE POSITION OF MODERN  
LANGUAGES IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF  
GREAT BRITAIN.

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REPORT

OF THE

COMMITTEE APPOINTED BY THE PRIME MINISTER

TO ENQUIRE INTO THE

POSITION OF MODERN LANGUAGES

IN THE

EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF GREAT BRITAIN.

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Presented to Parliament by Command of His Majesty.

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# Parts A. to J., 82pp. (divisible into four?)

A. Work of the Committee

B. History of the Study of Modern Languages

C. Neglect of Modern Studies

D. The Value of Modern Studies [to be focused on]

E. Relative Importance of the Several Languages

## F. Means of Instruction (pp. 22–51)

The Schools

The Universities

Other Means of Instruction

G. Supply and Training of Teachers for Schools

H. Method

I. Examinations

J. Conclusions and Recommendations (pp. 59–82)

[including Reservations and Appendices]

Why does it deserve attention?

‘the first detailed examination of modern languages in British education from primary to university, as well as adult education’ (McLelland 2018)

‘responsible for moving from the teaching of ancient languages in schools such as Greek and Latin to modern European languages’ [Wikipedia]

? [it was happening anyway]



# The Leathes Report 'in our time'

- a foil for reflection on our own troubled times?
- assertion of value of modern language study at a time of crisis [crisis for Britain? Crisis for ML?]
- ML for the 'national interest' [but do we favour nationalism?]
- identification of a broad conception of 'modern studies', beyond language and literature, of current relevance?
- [my own particular interest]: advocacy relating to 'educative value' of modern language study

[My main interest: 'educative value' of ML – Why this interest? Cf. narrowly focused ELT making inroads into public education systems, e.g. in Latin America]

From the report:

#### D. The Value of Modern Studies

- (i) Business Value
- (ii) Increase of Knowledge
- (iii) Knowledge concerning Foreign Countries and People
- (iv) Value for the Public Service
- (v) Value as a Means to General Education and Culture

'Languages teaching in schools has and should have a disciplinary and educative aim'

Seeing educative value / 'General  
education and culture' 'in its own  
time'

# Sir Stanley Mordaunt Leathes (1861–1938)

- British poet, economist, historian and senior Civil Service administrator, son of a Hebrew scholar
- Educated at Eton, studied Classics at Trinity College, Cambridge
- 1892–1903: Lecturer in history at Trinity College
- 1900–1910: Various posts in highest echelons of the Civil Service
- 1901–1912: Co-edited the *Cambridge Modern History*
- *1913: What is Education?*
- 1910–1927: post of ‘First Civil Service Commissioner’ (rather like ‘Head of Human Resources’ of Civil Service)
- served as Chairman of various government committees on special questions, including the committee on modern language teaching

One of four committees set up around this time – also Science, English and Classics

Pro-science campaigners citing apparent German superiority in science and technology due to technical education vs. humanistic campaigners: ‘What are we fighting *for?*’ (an ideal of life – freedom, democracy, etc.) (Wray 1998: 266).

Leathes: ‘Ideal of humane learning’ /’ means to general education and *culture*’ (in a particular sense)!

‘culture’ – ‘one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language’ (Raymond Williams – *Keywords*, 1976)

It has changed in meaning over time

There’s an emphasis in Leathes on a social – perhaps elitist – and educational sense of ‘culture’ via modern language study [becoming ‘civilized’ or ‘cultivated’] as opposed to the post-1945 anthropological sense (as in ‘appreciating a foreign culture’)

D(v) follows four sections on practical ends – ‘in order to live well, it is first necessary to live’

‘to neglect the practical ends of education is foolishness; but to recognise no other is to degrade humanity. Moreover, it is to ignore a most powerful motive.’

‘compelling interest’ ... ‘can only be aroused when the language is recognised as a means to higher ends’

‘We are, and must be, concerned with Modern Studies as an instrument of culture; and by culture we mean that training which tends to develop the higher faculties, the imagination, the sense of beauty, and the intellectual comprehension.



# A tradition of emphasis on ‘language as a means of mental culture’?

Claude Marcel (1853) *Language as a Means of Mental Culture and International Communication*

Leathes Report – section D (v): ‘Value of Modern Studies as a Means to General Education and Culture’ (1918)

Eric Hawkins (1984/1987) *Awareness of Language: An Introduction*

# LANGUAGE

AS A MEANS OF

## MENTAL CULTURE

AND

## INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION;

OR

MANUAL OF THE TEACHER AND THE LEARNER OF LANGUAGES

BY

C. MARCEL, KNT. LEG. HON.:  
FRENCH CONSUL.

"L'étude des langues est la première et la plus indispensable de toutes  
les études."—P. H. SUZANNE.

"Les méthodes sont les maîtres des maîtres."—TALLEYRAND.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:  
CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.  
1853.

# Awareness of Language: An Introduction

ERIC HAWKINS

# Concluding reflections – in relation to the conference theme

Closeness of this strand of ‘language as a means of mental culture’ to one interpretation of the OWRI project aims?

*Language Acts and Worldmaking (AHRC Open World Research Initiative)*

\* A major project aim is to ‘transform modern language learning by foregrounding language’s power to shape how we live and make our worlds’

(‘in our time’)

- Memorialising: anniversaries can provide a good foil for reflection on current practice, but dangers of anachronism
- (here) my interest in *educational* value of modern language study

(‘in its time’)

Gaining new insights from rediscovery of *alternative* forms of thinking – here, ML as a ‘means to general education and *culture*’ [with a distinctive meaning of ‘culture’]

( ‘in its time, and ours’)

Not just considering events in isolation (from the present and from one another) but identifying traditions and tracing strands of thought into our own time (or not, as the case may be), we can see history as a complement to and/or extension of memory, reviving what’s lost from memory

Here, I’ve focused on the idea of ‘language as a means to mental culture’, which may have been obscured due to increasing focus on practical skills and an anthropological view of culture (cf. communicative and intercultural competence))

One consequence: seeing ourselves as part of history – through historical *research*, highlighting the historicity of our current understandings.

After all, if we *are* the stories we tell ourselves, then the stories about the profession that we tell constitute who we are as language teachers, and set our future directions

Historical research can enrich and provide perspective on the stories we tell ourselves, and thus enrich our current and future professional lives