
James Elwick is a historian of biology who has already published on Herbert Spencer and the history of British life sciences (Styles of Reasoning in the British Life Sciences: Shared Assumptions, 1820–1858 [Pittsburgh, 2007]). Nevertheless, Making a Grade: Victorian Examinations and the Rise of Standardized Testing is about neither eugenics nor the history of mental testing. Its main focus is the development of a broad infrastructure for examinations during the second half of the nineteenth century in England (repercussions for British colonies are mentioned only briefly). Testing, understood as a bottom-up governance system, situates the book within a historiographic tradition that goes back to Foucault’s Discipline and Punish (1975), followed by Nikolas Rose’s work on “Calculable Minds” (History of the Human Sciences, 1988, 1:170–200). The chapters apply Ian Hacking’s “looping effect,” Theodore M. Porter’s concept of a “thin description” (Osiris, 2012, 27:209–226), and the notion of tests offering “neutral” and “objective” assessments.

The book offers an overview of the rise of “Victorian examination mania” (1846–1895). Over the three parts of the book, the author switches perspective. In the first part, Elwick nicely frames his study within the opposing liberal and conservative trends of the time that were pulling education in different directions. Following a liberal policy of “payment by result,” the book takes the examinations organized by the Science and Art Department in the 1850s (during the height of popularity of exams) as its anchor. Exams in classics, science, fine arts, and mathematics were seen as objective evidence not only of students’ knowledge and their level of intellectual and moral preparedness to enter higher education, but also of teachers’ and schools’ “efficiency.” The reader learns of each step in the manufacturing of a grade and the expansion of the system into “a gigantic examination network” (p. 36).

The second part focuses on how examiners created and managed exams, passing from oral interrogations to standardized written exams. The involvement of some distinguished scientists hired as examiners, such as Alfred Russel Wallace, John Tyndall, and Thomas Henry Huxley, is explored along with their personal motivation. Elwick shows us how the use of statistics enabled teachers and administrators to compare and rank test scores by subject (sub-test), individual, and school. Finally, the third part presents the examinees’ perspective. Candidates had to prepare for the exams, often with the help of a coach. We can read the intimate thoughts of some examinees facing the exam with expectation and, often, with great anxiety.

The historical account includes analysis of the looping effect, offering insight into the various strategies used by examinees to pass exams, as well as those adopted by test administrators to prevent cheating. The awarding of numerous certificates acknowledged merit, entitled the candidate as well as his teacher to financial support, and became socially visible reinforcement for the system itself.

Elwick describes the institutionalized examination process as self-perpetuating and self-enhancing: exams became a necessary tool within a policy pursuing “free trade in education.” Due to its technical sophistication and mechanical standardization of the procedure and the quantitative outcome it provided, the logic of the system started to impose its own rationale. The strict rules and high pressure to perform well often elicited learning focused purely on passing the test, as well as motivation to break the rules. Thus, the book aims to show how examinations often appeared first as “cameras” to neutrally record achievement, and then “became engines” (p. 138), acting on people’s reactivity. In view of the information available, however, it seems more accurate to say that the mass examinations in England were officially promoted as “objective” assessments throughout the whole time period (and beyond), while at the same time they were also expected to act as “engines”; the publicizing of exam results was supposed to stimulate competition and lead to higher performance at all levels, among individuals, teachers, and coaches, and among schools.

The exams compared individuals by taking into account only one variable—their answers to the questions—while ignoring other human differences such as sex, age, or ethnic origin. This fact soon turned
out to help certain previously overlooked groups, such as candidates from British colonies (like India) or women, to enter British higher education. The book explains the importance for marginalized groups of being treated under the same conditions (same questions and gradings) and dwells on a positive effect the examination discipline had for them.

Despite the book’s skillful narrative and undoubted merit, experts in the history of education will probably notice some shortcomings. Making a Grade is based on some archival material, but it is sometimes difficult to see what this material really adds to the cited historiography (e.g., the works of Ruth Barton, John Roach, Christopher Stray, Gillian Sutherland, and Andrew Warwick). Moreover, Elwick does not look beyond the British case: he omits comparing the English systems to other institutional examination models of the time, such as the German Abitur, and the French system is only briefly mentioned as an anti-model.

What the author does add are some rough generalizations which are captivating but also problematic; not because they are counterintuitive, but because they are not sufficiently backed up by the research presented in the book. This happens, for example, when he labels Victorian examiners as “anti-anthropologists” and “anti-ethnographers,” arguing that the thinning and flattening undertaken by these historical actors was “the only way to make possible, on a mass scale, descriptions that can be taken as trustworthy and used to make decisions by non-experts outside that system” (p. 137). The reader might wonder if this relates to Christian Lundhal and Florian Waldow’s remark on psychometrics providing a “quick language” (Comparative Education, 2009, 45: 65–385), reducing complexity by creating shared terminology and making a smooth transmission of information possible within the educational field. More than once, sections and chapters finish with such suggestive and challenging claims. It is precisely at these points that the reader may become excited and no doubt would like to see more arguments and documental evidence, as well as an explanation of what exactly is entailed. Hopefully, Elwick or some other historian will take up further work at these points where this interesting book leaves us.

Annette Mülberger

Annette Mülberger, Professor in Theory and History of Psychology at the University of Groningen, has worked on the history of intelligence testing and how testing practices circulated around Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She is also a member of the Institute for History of Science at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.


Andrew Fiss’s engaging history of mathematical culture in nineteenth-century U.S. colleges describes the ways students and teachers engaged mathematics in and through performance. As a category of analysis and a historical theme, “performance” is capacious: it encompasses a wide range of educational activities that happen in the classroom (reading textbooks aloud, chalkboard demonstrations), as well as student activities that happen beyond it (engaging in rituals, singing songs, staging plays). As a history of mathematical education, the book emphasizes how changes in ideas about teaching math altered what students actually did in college classrooms. Over the course of the nineteenth century, as the goals, contexts, and population of American higher education changed, students variously recited from texts, disciplined their minds, worked their brains to a “sweat,” demonstrated visually on blackboards, or simply tried to endure standardized tests. Educators and textbook writers took inspiration from a range of sources in the formation of mathematical pedagogy—including physical culture and military education—to make students “exercise,” “drill,” and otherwise “perform” mathematics. Using creative readings of textbooks and archival