

Masters of Grammar: A Forgotten Degree

by Nicholas Groves

In the late 1960s, the degree of BEd was invented.¹ It was awarded to high-performing students at teacher training colleges who had the three-year CertEd, and who were asked to stay on for a fourth year. Later, it was awarded as the default qualification, the pass BEd replacing the CertEd, and the BEd(Hons) taking the fourth year. It caused much looking down noses as ‘not a proper degree’—largely as it was taken through training colleges, and not in a ‘real’ university.² With the demise of teacher training colleges, it has since died; all intending teachers now graduate with a BA or BSc.

It had a medieval predecessor, however. In the Middle Ages, it was assumed that masters of grammar schools would be Masters of Arts (MA). But by the mid-fourteenth century, there was a shortage of graduates willing to go into this kind of work, and many of those who wished to do so were unable to complete the full Arts course. So both English universities introduced qualifications for intending non-graduate schoolmasters, which were less difficult to attain.³ Each university went about it in a different way.

At Oxford, the chancellor issued a licence to those intending to teach in the grammar schools in the city.⁴ This was seen as a useful qualification to have, as it implied approval by the University, and thus many schoolmasters, who had no intention of teaching in Oxford, came up to apply for it. Between 1509 and 1536, forty-eight applicants were admitted. It was, strictly, merely a licence to teach grammar (the MA was a licence to teach all the seven Arts), but it was perceived as a degree by its holders—and even by the University: it is referred to as *gradus* more than once. There is a case of one applicant in 1514 who applied for it as he

¹ There had been an EdB at the Scottish universities, but this was a one-year postgraduate course.

² There were exceptions: New Hall at Cambridge admitted undergraduates to read for the BEd in the 1970s.

³ Orme, *English Schools*, p. 151.

⁴ This was a right originally granted to the chancellors by their diocesan bishops (Lincoln for Oxford, Ely for Cambridge), and later seen as inherent in the chancellorship. This right also inhered in Cathedral Chapters. See Cobban, *Medieval English Universities*, p. 68.

said he needed a degree to qualify for a job he had been offered.⁵ Those who were admitted were given the title of Master of Grammar (MGram), or, occasionally, BGram, on account of its limited scope and lowly status. It was certainly not merely a case of applying for the licence and getting it; applicants had to say how long they had studied and taught grammar, and then perform some exercises: lecturing in public on a book of Cicero or Sallust, for example, though it could be as little as compiling some verses in praise of the University.

At Cambridge things were a little more demanding. The chancellor had never issued licences to teachers, and the University met the need for a less rigorous curriculum for schoolmasters by setting up a formal course, under an appointee of the Archdeacon of Ely; he became effectively the head of the ‘faculty’ of grammar, and some MGrams had been produced under his supervision before the formal course was set up.⁶ The grammarians were thus part of the University, but also, unlike other members, not exempt from diocesan control. Candidates were expected to have taken part in three public disputations, and to have delivered thirteen lectures on Priscian’s *Constructions*. Three MAs then had to attest to his ability, knowledge, and standing. After admission to the degree of MGram,⁷ he had to spend a year of regency,⁸ teaching in the University: more lectures on Priscian. Despite its rigour, there were some fifty applications and admissions between 1500 and 1548.

In 1439, William Bingham founded God’s House specifically for those studying for the MGram, ‘to alleviate the famine of grammar masters in the country and in the English Universities by the training of undergraduates ... with a view to their becoming teachers in England’s languishing grammar schools’.⁹ Although there was provision for some of the Arts curriculum to be covered, the aim was the MGram. However, by 1451, the emphasis had shifted towards the Arts course, and the Grammar subjects (rhetoric, logic, and grammar) were taught only as needed. Clearly the original objective of the College was unattractive to prospective students, and changes were made to allow them to study for the BA.¹⁰ A high percentage of members whose later careers can be traced held Divinity degrees, which implies they held the MA.¹¹ The College was refounded in 1505 as Christ’s College.

⁵ Orme, *ibid.*, p. 152.

⁶ Leader, *History*, p. 114. ‘Glomery’ is a medieval corruption of ‘grammar’. Students for the MGram were known as ‘glomerelli’.

⁷ Thus providing a precedent for the modern ‘enhanced first degrees’ of MChem, MMath, MPharm, etc.

⁸ The MA spent three years of regency.

⁹ Cobban, *Medieval English Universities*, p. 196.

¹⁰ Cobban, *Medieval English Universities*, p. 197. A later parallel may be drawn here with Homerton College.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

In the sixteenth century, the supply of graduate schoolmasters once again improved, and the MGram fell into desuetude. At Oxford, only four or five were admitted after 1536, the last admission being in 1568. At Cambridge, the last was in 1548.

Some Masters of Grammar, instead of keeping schools, ran what might be called ‘remedial’ grammar hostels at the Universities: some boys had not made sufficient progress in grammar when they came up, and so they would attend one of these. Not all MGram holders were aspirant schoolmasters: some seem to have come from within the student body, having chosen to take the grammar course in order to teach in a school or the University, rather than the full Arts course.¹²

Their exact status is somewhat hazy: they appear to have operated under the ægis of the Faculty of Arts, although not to have been full members of it: this was certainly the case at Oxford.¹³ In this respect, they parallel the later Bachelors and Doctors of Music: graduates, but not members, of the University.¹⁴ These degrees first appear in the later fifteenth century, and were awarded more as a recognition of a successful career in music rather than as result of university study, although matriculation was always required. The fact that the MusBac and MusDoc became fully recognized degrees, while the MGram died out, may well be due principally to the decreased demand for the MGram, but also possibly because music was one of the quadrivial subjects required for the MA,¹⁵ while grammar was merely one of the trivial subjects required for the BA.¹⁶

It is not possible to ascertain what, if any academic dress they wore.¹⁷ There were certainly admission ceremonies, and there is the well-known fact that at Cambridge in the sixteenth century, the birch was seen as a symbol of the degree, and the newly admitted MGram had to ceremonially flog ‘a shrewd boy’ as part of the his inception.¹⁸ Cambridge, as has been noted above, awarded an actual degree of MGram, and thus it must have had some form of dress. We may perhaps draw another parallel with the musicians, who simply adopted the dress of the other lay faculties (Laws and Medicine). As they operated within the Faculty of Arts, I would therefore suggest that the holders wore the robes of either the MA, or, given their low standing, possibly the BA. Further weight is lent to this theory by the fact

¹² Cobban, *English University Life*, p. 154.

¹³ Leader, *History*, p. 115.

¹⁴ Unless of course they also held the MA. This seems never to have happened with the MGram.

¹⁵ Arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy.

¹⁶ Logic, grammar, and rhetoric.

¹⁷ None of the standard works mentions them.

¹⁸ Maybe this constituted the *Acta!* ‘Shrewd’ means naughty. It is good to record that he was given 4*d.* for his pains.

that holders of the BD, LL.B, MB, and initially MusB, as well as the SCL,¹⁹ used the robes, not for their degree—there were none—but of their standing within the Faculty of Arts.²⁰

At Oxford, it was rather different, as it was not a degree *strictu sensu*, but a licence to practise,²¹ but the confused perception of its nature may have led to the permissive (or even required) wearing of academic dress. Again drawing a parallel from the SCL, which used the BCL gown with no trim, and the blue BCL hood without fur, maybe they used the BA gown, and the black BA hood with no fur – the old ‘undergraduate’ hood, still in use until the late nineteenth century. On the other hand, they were regarded as the equal of a BA, and were in a kind of sub-faculty of the Faculty of Arts, so they may have worn the BA robes.²² Academic dress was notoriously fluid before about 1500, and shape and cut were of more import than colour.

One further complication is that, at the monastic schools, boys who had completed the grammar course successfully, were apparently admitted to the status of ‘bachelors’.²³ These schools were certainly not universities, and this lends weight to the theory that degrees are in fact generic, and not specific to a particular university.²⁴

Alongside the academic MGram, the universities were also providing courses in the *Ars Dictandi* and *Ars Notaria*. These were practical courses in the arts of letter-writing and drafting official documents, and in the professional needs of notaries, but did not lead to any kind of official qualification. The subjects were never taught formally in England—at Bologna, for example, ‘Dictamen’ reached the status of a full faculty—but it is tempting to see this as a forerunner of the MBA!

¹⁹ Student of Civil Law. Well known at Oxford, and Hargreaves-Mawdsley treats of its special robes there on p. 91 of his *History of Academical Dress in Europe*; Cambridge also awarded this distinction (with this abbreviation, not, as might be expected, LL.S): holders wore the BA robes.

²⁰ As is well known, the Cambridge BD is the old non-regent MA hood. It was this ‘sharing’ of hoods that outraged Franklyn and set him on his merry way in the 1930s, with the faculty-colour-based revision, which has no historical basis (on this, see further Christianson, ‘Lined with Gold’, *Transactions of the Burgon Society*, 5 (2005), p. 81, n. 10.

²¹ Not to be confused with the Licentiate degree used in France.

²² Leader, *History*, p. 115.

²³ Orme, *English Schools*, p. 101.

²⁴ See further, Cox, ‘Lambeth Degree Academical Dress’, *Transactions of the Burgon Society*, 5 (2005), p. 69.

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