

Finding the first thesis

When Library archivists set out to locate and digitise the very first LSE PhD thesis, they quickly discovered that things were not as simple as they first seemed: what counts as a thesis? And what makes a thesis an LSE thesis? **Jon Adams** investigates.

LSE has been admitting doctoral students for over a century, and a copy of each PhD thesis is held by the Library. There are now more than 6,000 theses held in the archives. This represents a vast amount of effort – millions of hours of labour, yielding around 500 million words. Not counting appendices. Not counting graphs. Not counting all the edits, deletions, scrapped chapters, dead ends and false starts. The sheer volume of data is bewildering.

But it is work that, for the most part, will never be seen. For although anyone can access the theses, few do. In part, this is because a thesis is an examination rather than a publication. But it is also because the process is relatively laborious: the theses are held in special collections – you have to physically visit the library and request a volume. In order to improve access, archivists at the Library have begun a project to digitise the theses and provide a searchable electronic resource.

The process is time-consuming and expensive, so there are no immediate plans to digitise the entire collection. For the meantime, only a selection of theses will be digitised. The decisions here will be led by individual departments, who have been asked to nominate the most 'historically significant' theses their students have produced. 'Significance' isn't a simple metric. Significance isn't coextensive with correct, and for more recent theses, significance may be hard to assess. Plenty of works that have later proved to be significant have been neglected in their time.

This neglect isn't always myopic: sometimes, significance arises as a function of a subsequent development. In light of what transpired, how loaded with significance the following two theses, both from 1936, now seem: *League of Nations and the problem of a universal peace organization*, by Georg Schwarzenberger, and *Sociological function of intellectuals in modern society: a study of some social movements in post-war Germany* by Richard John Baker. What suggestions, what solutions might they have offered?

There will also be theses that are significant for reasons extrinsic to their content, and it was with this in



“ Smart young women were drawn to an institution that at least offered them the opportunity to receive a degree ”

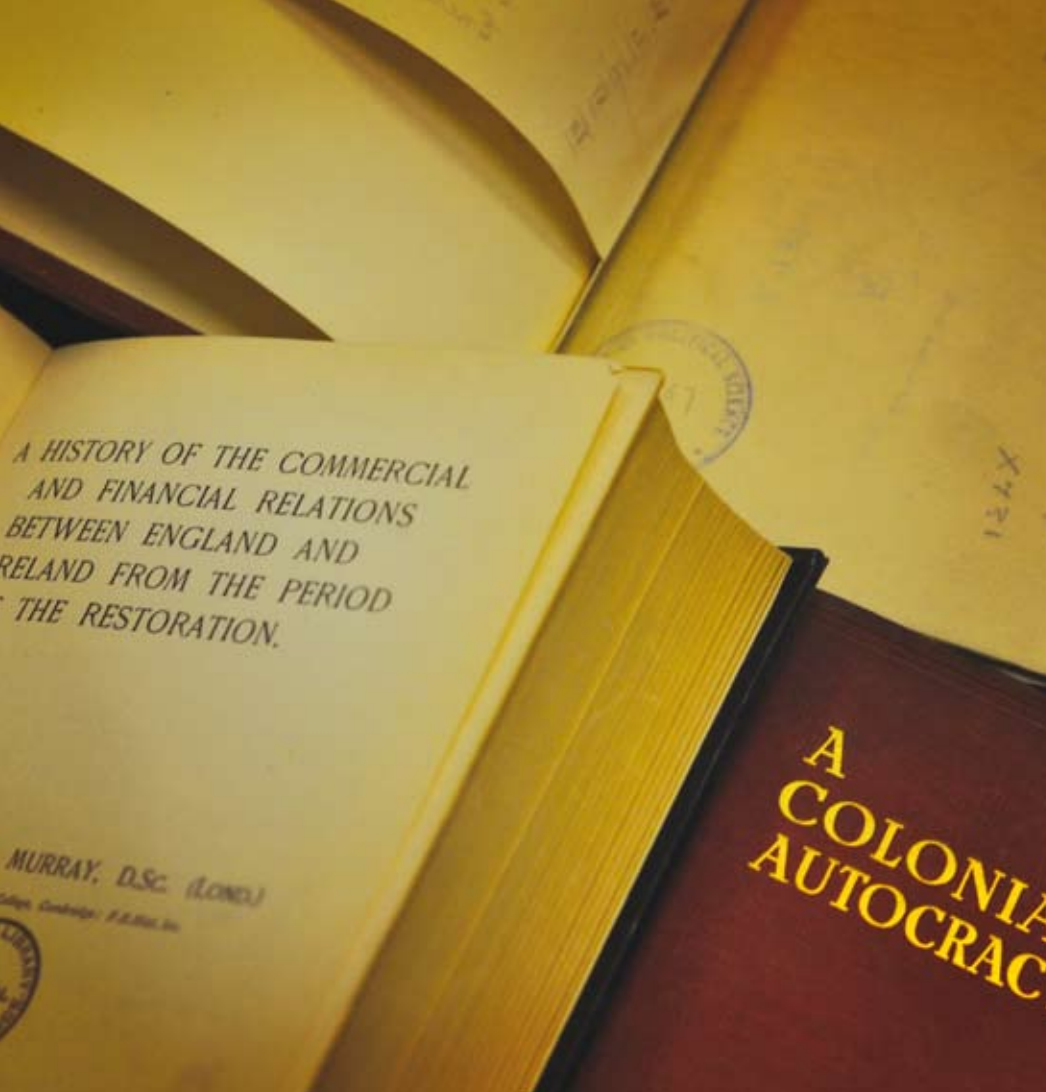
mind that, in addition to the departmentally nominated theses, the archivists decided to digitise the very first thesis. Thesis No.1 of 6,000.

It is a simple idea, but the task has proved surprisingly difficult. The first problem is deciding what counts as a thesis. The PhD thesis as we know it today is usually 80 to 100,000 words, bound into a single volume. We tend also to identify the thesis with the degree – students refer to their theses as their PhDs. But the thesis was traditionally just the final part of the qualification – one became a candidate for the degree when only the thesis remained to be written. Sometimes, there is no thesis at all: a collection of outstanding papers could qualify a student for a doctorate – a practice which continues in, for example, mathematics and physics.

So the question of which was the first thesis peels away from who was the first doctorate. Not only are there problems with the category of 'thesis' but there are – especially in the early years – students who conduct research at the School, and are 'supervised' by teachers at the School, and yet are enrolled at a different institution and officially obtain their degree from there. These problems are further compounded because LSE's extended nascency makes it difficult to ascribe institutional affiliation during those first years.

Initially, the School – and it really is just a School, not a university, nor even part of a university – offers a selection of evening lectures on topics that will be of use to workers in the city. There is a library, and it grows quickly, with 10,000 books by the second year. By 1898, the School has established a Research Department which offers methodological training and an environment in which the student can 'carry on their work under the supervision of one or more of the lecturers'.

But LSE is still a minor institute: it cannot award degrees. Writing in 1900, the School's first director, William Hewins, sympathises with his students: 'They have pursued their studies, many of them have undertaken a very severe course of training, sacrificed their leisure and involved themselves in considerable expense in order to attend regularly the lectures and classes at the School;



but at the end of their course they have so far had no certificate, diploma, or degree which they could produce as evidence of their attainments.'

So although students have been conducting research within the School since 1895, LSE awards them no degrees. Hewins speculates that if LSE could grant degrees, they 'will undoubtedly be held in high estimation'.

In 1898 the University of London Act establishes a Faculty of Economics and Political Science, and admits LSE as a School of the University in that faculty. So only after 1900 is LSE finally able to grant degrees. If a line must be drawn it makes sense to draw it here. But unfortunately, it is still not immediately clear which is the first thesis.

The oldest thesis held in the archive is Gilbert Slater's *Enclosure of common fields in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries* from 1905. But Slater's is not the first thesis from the School. The 1934 Register lists three earlier 'higher degrees': two from 1903 and one from 1904. These have been slightly harder to track down.

The 1904 thesis turned out to be in the Library after all. No copy was stored with the other theses as it seems to have appeared directly as a book: *The Council in the Marches of Wales* by Caroline Skeel was published as part of Girton College Studies in 1904, although the title page clearly indicates that the volume is a 'Thesis approved for the Degree of Doctor of Literature in the University of London'.

Skeel had taken a first on the historical tripos at Girton College, but Cambridge would refuse to grant degrees to women until 1948. So in 1901, Skeel enrolled as a history postgraduate at LSE – partly to secure the qualifications that Cambridge wouldn't grant her.

The School surely benefited from the gender politics at Cambridge: smart young women were drawn to an institution that at least offered them the opportunity to receive a degree. This helps to account for a gratifying feature of the Register: the anachronistically large proportion of female students. Hewins makes a show of this in the *Calendars*, proudly noting that: 'The School has always been open to men and women without distinction.'

It is appropriate, then, that the next earliest thesis is also from a Girton alumna: Amy Harrison is named as the recipient of two consecutive studentships in 1900 and 1901. During this same period, Harrison is listed as a lecturer, one of only 15 teaching staff (the convention of using graduate students for teaching duties seems to be already in place). And in 1903, the now-married Amy Spencer is awarded a DSc (Econ) from the University of London.

So we have a period of research, followed by the awarding of a doctoral thesis. And, as with Skeel's thesis, the product is published as a book: *The History of Factory Legislation* appears in 1903. It is obviously an impressive

achievement, but it is a problematic candidate for 'earliest thesis' as Harrison is not the sole author: Beatrice 'Betty' Leigh Hutchins is also listed on the title page. In addition, the book seems to have been part of an agenda that predated Harrison's enrolment: Hewins mentions the title in 1896 as slated for future publication in a series called *LSE Studies in Economics and Political Science*.

There was one further candidate for Thesis No.1: a beguiling reference to 'Alice Radice' listed as earning a DSc (Econ) in 1903. Initial searches failed to locate any such person. But further checking reveals that a 24 year old Girton alumna called Alice Effie Murray came to LSE in 1901 to pursue research, and in November 1903, married a C A Radice. And indeed the Library holds a volume by Alice Murray. *History of the Commercial and Financial Relations between England and Ireland from the Period of the Restoration* appears in September 1903, in the same series as the Harrison and Hutchins volume.

School director Hewins confirms in his preface that this volume was indeed Murray's doctoral thesis, and is even helpful enough to add: 'She was one of the two women students who were the first to obtain the doctorate in the Faculty of Economics.' So the 'first' thesis is tied between two works and three authors. The first three doctorates the School awards – to Murray, Harrison, and Skeel – are all women, and each publishes her thesis as a book. The only slight disappointment for the Library's digitisation project is that Google Books has already scanned all three. ■



Jon Adams is a former research officer on the 'How Well Do "Facts" Travel?' project at the School and is currently producing online videos for LSE Communications.

© IMAGES: JON ADAMS

First doctorates

1903: Alice Radice née Murray

1903: Amy Spencer née Harrison

1904: Caroline Skeel

1905: Gilbert Slater

First theses

1903: Murray – *History of the Commercial and Financial Relations between England and Ireland from the Period of the Restoration*

1903: Harrison and Hutchins – *The History of Factory Legislation*

1904: Skeel – *The Council in the Marches of Wales*

1905: Slater – *Enclosure of common fields in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries*