A NOTABLY ABSENT MIND

Michael D. Stevenson
Schulich School of Business, York U. / Russell Research Centre, McMaster U.
Toronto, on m3j 1p3 / Hamilton, on l8s 4m2, Canada
stevenm@mcmaster.ca

Stefan Collini. *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain.* Oxford and New York: Oxford U. P., 2006. Pp. x, 526. isbn 0–19-929105–5. £25.00; us$45.00.

Stefan Collini's *Absent Minds* provides an intriguing analysis of the question of intellectuals in Britain during the twentieth century, examining "the ways in which the existence, nature, and role of intellectuals have been thought about and argued over" (p. 1) and addressing the popular notion that British intellectuals have been "peculiarly unimportant or even non-existent" (p. 3). For the most part, Collini convincingly demonstrates that this "absence thesis" is without merit and that Britain has enjoyed a distinguished tradition of intellectual activity, even in relation to countries—particularly France—where intellectuals have been viewed to have assumed a more prominent position in a nation's social and cultural affairs.

Collini divides his book into five sections. In the first, he provides a detailed overview of the historical evolution beginning in the early nineteenth century of the term "intellectual" as a noun in the English language; Collini also argues that *Absent Minds* adopts the cultural sense—and not the sociological and subjective senses—of this term and focuses on leading thinkers "who deploy an acknowledged intellectual position or achievement in addressing a broader, non-specialist public" (p. 47). The second and fifth sections of *Absent Minds* document the vigorous debate that occurred during the twentieth century about the role of intellectuals in British society. In this period, Collini examines a number of case studies—from the pre-World War i journal *New Age* to the bbc's Third Programme—to demonstrate how the domestic claims of British exceptionalism became more prominent as the century progressed. Collini devotes the third part of his book to a discussion of the "absence thesis" within an international framework by examining the historical status of intellectuals in Europe and the United States. In many of these countries, Collini identifies a strikingly similar attitude that viewed intellectuals as "'backward', 'marginalized', or simply 'absent'" (p. 217). Collini notes that some of these attitudes were also in play even in France, although the role of intellectuals in French society was defined almost exclusively in political terms after the Dreyfus Affair.

The most interesting section of *Absent Minds* is the fourth, in which Collini

provides detailed biographical portraits of five prominent Britons who commented negatively about intellectuals or who refused to consider themselves members of a distinct intellectual elite. T. S. Eliot is used as an example of the amateur social critic who viewed British intellectuals as being unworthy of claiming cultural authority. R. G. Collingwood is characterized as an intellectual manqué whose professorial cackling was largely ineffective in influencing contemporary opinion. Collini saves his sharpest rhetorical barbs for George Orwell, an "antique moralist" (p. 372) whose indiscriminate criticism of the left-wing intelligentsia was primarily responsible for negative public attitudes towards intellectuals in Britain in the middle of the twentieth century. A. J. P. Taylor is portrayed as an intellectual gadfly who largely abandoned his professional historical vocation in favour of pursuing journalistic celebrity. Finally, the career of A. J. Ayer is analyzed to illustrate Ayer's consistent refusal to espouse authoritative truths.

Russell scholars will be somewhat surprised that Bertrand Russell is not featured more prominently in *Absent Minds*. With the exception of some isolated references scattered throughout his text, Collini devotes fewer than five pages of sustained analysis (pp. 120–4) to Russell's often contradictory attitudes towards intellectuals after the First World War. Although Collini explicitly states that he will be "more than usually unmoved by readers or reviewers who complain that this or that important figure is absent from its pages" (p. 8), his decision to emphasize other British intellectuals at Russell's expense is disappointing. Nonetheless, Russellians will find much useful and detailed material in *Absent Minds* concerning a host of individuals with whom Russell interacted during his life, including H. W. Massingham, T. S. Eliot, G. M. Trevelyan, and A. J. Ayer.

In sum, *Absent Minds* is a superb, well-written book with few discernible flaws. Collini readily admits that his selection of figures and topics discussed in the book can be viewed as "arbitrary or indefensibly idiosyncratic" (p. 11), and the book is based exclusively on published sources. Collini is also repetitive in a few places of his text, and he consistently steers a course slightly to the left of the ideological centre. But these minor issues do not detract from the impressive nature of this study. Collini has tackled a complex subject in an imaginative and compelling fashion, and *Absent Minds* will only enhance his reputation as the leading scholar of British intellectual history.