

# Snowflakes, an Educational Problem

by Michael Curtis



**Where are the snowflakes of yester-year?** Why can't they behave? Will they straighten up and fly right, will they straighten up and stay right?

In January 2018 the Oxford English Dictionary added to its normal definition of what has traditionally been a flake of snow, a feathery ice crystal. Now the OED snowflake is an overly sensitive or easily offended person or persons who believe they are entitled to special treatment on account of their supposedly unique characteristics. Life for them comes, or should come, with trigger warnings, safe spaces, and no platforms. Trigger warnings are needed to alert people that a

text or image may be disturbing or upsetting. These were proposed at Cambridge University about reading Shakespeare because of the mention of sexual violence in some of his plays. Those safe places must be established so students can get together without being exposed to ideas and language that makes them feel uncomfortable. No platforms ensure that a person or organization is denied a space to utter undesirable utterances.

The term “snowflake” has become more used and popular since the 1996 violent film, *The Fight Club*, starring Brad Pitt and Edward Norton. The author of the scenario claims he coined the word, believing that students today are more easily offended than in the past. The context is the passage, “You are not special. You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake.” Irrespective of the origin of the term, it has been widely invoked by the discontented students in universities in the U.S. and the UK. But in counter attack, it is also used for evident parody as displayed in November 2019 by a fake ad posted by the Oscar Café Bar in Dublin.

The ad stated the Bar was currently recruiting for an experienced snowflake, self-entitled, over sensitive, self-righteous, and passionate who has the ability to find and take offence for the most innocuous things imaginable. The candidate does not need to be able to work as part of a team, as some of the best work will be done alone, anonymously, and from the successful candidate’s bedroom. The ideal candidate should possess no willingness to consider controversial or opposing views.

Evidently, the ideal snowflake can come speaking any language. In Britain, foreign students at Cambridge University have made clear that the world cuisine dishes the colleges offered were nothing more than cultural appropriation and were offensive. Pembroke College, Cambridge, in 2017 reviewed its menus after foreign students complained the food that was served “misrepresented” their foreign culture, especially Jamaican

stew and Tunisian rice, which were not typical of the dishes they ate at home. The students demanded Pembroke stop mixing mango and beef, and calling it "Jamaican stew." The College responded, and menus were changed because it wanted, "all our students of diverse background to feel a valued part of our community."

Reviewing some of the recent activities in contemporary universities there should be no shortage of candidates for those willing to work in Dublin. To appreciate the current educational and intellectual climate it is worth examining of attitude of the malcontents, somewhat akin to the unfortunate presidential candidate Beto O'Rourke who "want to be in it, I was born to be in it." They are eager to assert themselves, to protect the abused from further harm and disinformation, and to guide the indifferent whose only interest in danger is to sit on a rocking chair.

In a number of college institutions, starting with the University of Manchester student union, snowflake students have asked audiences at presentations to use "jazz hands" instead of the usual clapping which it says causes anxiety for some. This is a form of British sign language using hands extended with both palms waving at shoulder height and fingers sprayed, pointing at the actors. The union argues the use of "jazz hands" encourages an environment of respect. The union argues in addition that students with autism, sensory issues, and deafness, have been discouraged from attending events because of loud clapping.

At University College, London, a group of students at the student union called for the removal of the wooden statue of Phineas Maclino, a member of the Black Watch, a Scottish branch of the British army, that had been brought to the campus in 1900 to celebrate the British victory at Ladysmith during the Second Boer war, 1899-1902. The statue, once a mascot, and which is encased in a protective glass box in the student pub, is being removed because it is a reminder of the

“racially prejudiced policies of British colonial rule.” The events of the British-Boer conflict, it was argued, are not moments to be celebrated today. One expects historical ignorance from these snowflakes in at least two ways. The brutal behavior of the Boers is unmentioned. The statue is wrongly identified as a Jacobite Highlander, since the Jacobite rising was crushed in 1745, and the statue is of a Highlander 150 years later.

The private U.S. Williams College, an institution noted for being an early proponent of the movement to end slavery, and long prominent in liberal arts, is being boycotted by students objecting to the choice of books by the English Department, as well as supporting colonization. For the snowflakes, the literature of peoples of color effectively has been given second class status in the department. The English courses do not and should focus on racial issues, but white authors are more frequently assigned than non-white authors. The snowflakes see the curriculum as whitewashed and they will boycott all English department courses that do not engage substantially with race. They also called for the appointment of four people to teach courses in African-American, Latinx (Latin American), Native American, and Asian-American literature.

Literature has also been a problem for activists at Manchester University. They defaced a copy of Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “If,” and replaced it with a poem by Maya Angelou, symbol of black and brown voices. Kipling is termed a racist, standing for the opposite of liberation, empowerment, and human rights. He was the author of the poem, “The White Man’s Burden,” and for the snowflakes other works that sought to legitimize the British empire’s presence in India. No doubt the issues of race and empire are burdens for Kipling, but he did believe in the mission of civilization, and sincerely if inaccurately that the colonizers will improve the life of the colonized.

Students at Hughes Hall, a constituent Cambridge college, have

been crying foul. As a result, the college removed from the wall of its dining room a 17<sup>th</sup> century painting, *The Fowl Market* allegedly by the Flemish artist Frans Snyders, because it was supposedly offensive to vegans and therefore sensitive to those who do not enjoy eating meat. The painting includes a collection of dead animals, including a swan, boar, deer, and various game birds, strong up on hooks. The painting had been on loan from the Fitzwilliam Museum and was returned to it.

The curators carrying out the move, explained that many people are turning to vegetarianism and veganism as a political choice as much as a dietary one, and “we should rethink our relationship with animals and their treatment in an industrialized world.”

They did not suggest what that relationship should be, but the “Snyders,” which in fact is a copy of the original which is in the Hermitage in St, Petersburg, was replaced in the dining room by a work by Damien Hirst. This is a highly colorful 2017 work with a long, curious title, beginning, “*Beautiful Teeth Clenching Jaw Muscles...*” The Hirst may not be to everyone’s taste, but it does not induce moral anxieties resonating around diet, self-image, or over-consumption.

Goldsmiths College, London, has become a no burger institution in its attempt to save the planet. In 2019 it banned the sale of all beef products in campus food outlets, cafes and shops, in response to calls for tackling the climate emergency, stating we should be more environmentally friendly. It argues that the environmental impact of beef is greater than that of any other meats, chicken or pork. It is also trying, as are other Universities, Sheffield, Manchester and Cardiff, to eliminate single use plastics, and adding an extra levy on the sale of bottled water.

At Syracuse University a movement called NotAgainSU was annoyed at the inadequate response of the university and its chancellor Kent Syverud to a student of color being called the

N-word. They stormed the campus gym and held a sit in and refused to leave until all 19 of their demands were met. On November 21, 2019, the chancellor agreed with 16 of the 19 demands. Unsatisfied with a victory, the students then called for his resignation, apparently because he had not directly negotiated with them, but had sent a representative.

Maybe most offensive is the attributing, according to Kyle Kusz associate professor of kinesiology (sic) at University of Rhode Island of remarks about Tom Brady, New England Patriots quarterback, who many consider to be the greatest quarterback of all time. Kusz explains the popularity of Brady, winner of six super bowl championships. and four MVP awards, is due to racism, to white rage and white supremacy, and sees him as a man who sold his soul to the devil decades ago. For the snowflakes, Brady represents the emergence and valorization of a white masculinity, an unapologetic embodiment of upper-class white exceptionalism and manly omnipotence. But none of the Dallas Cowboys, or Pittsburgh Steelers, or Miami Dolphins, are likely to be susceptible to this deluge of misinformation.

However, the activities of the snowflakes indicates the educational system needs serious reviewing, so that the sense of entitlement, narcissism, and adherence to identity politics does not become the norm. Snowflakes are lightweight, but collectively they can become a blizzard.