

# The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes

## Preface

This book proposes to enter the minds of ordinary readers in history, to discover what they read and how they read it (p1).

Memoirists are not entirely representative of their class whatever that class may be, if only because they are unusually articulate. A disproportionate books about the working class were written by skilled workers. Women account for only about 5 percent of the memoirists before 1870, rising to about 30 percent for the 1890-1929 cohort (p2).

Some autobiographical manuscripts were rejected by bourgeois publishers. While autobiographies tell us a great deal about the vital minority of self-improving workers, other sources offer a more representative portrait of the working class as a whole (p2).

The great strength of these memoirs is that they represent an effort by working people to write their own history. Tellingly, the working class wrote extensively about their reading, as if they were pointing the way for future historians (p2).

Reminiscences make possible a broader kind of reading history, which could be called a history of audiences. A history of audiences first defines a mass audience, then determines its cultural diet, and describes the response of that audience not only to literature, but also to education, religion, art and any other cultural activity (p3).

Reading is not limited to books. We also “read” classroom lessons, concerts, radio broadcasts, films, in fact all varieties of human experience. Broadly, an audience history asks how people read their culture, how they experienced education in the widest sense (p3).

This book tracks working-class responses to classic literature, informal education, fiction and nonfiction, dead authors, primary education, adult education, Marxism and Marxists, school stories, popular culture, and the avant-garde (p3).

It uses social surveys to measure cultural literacy, which in turn determines reading comprehension. And it uses library records to quantify reading habits. It chronicles the first generation of common readers who became professional writers (p3).

Critics repeatedly commit what might be called the receptive fallacy: they try to discern the messages a text transmits to an audience by examining the text rather than the audience. This blind spot is not easy to excuse or even to explain (p4).

If the dominant class defines high culture, then how do we explain the passionate pursuit of knowledge by proletarian autodidacts, not to mention the pervasive philistinism of the British aristocracy? Again and again we find classic literature embraced by working people who thoroughly lacked literary education (p5).

This book describes how people at the bottom of the economic pyramid appropriated the bible, Beethoven, the BBC, adult education courses, elementary school lessons, even the disciplinary thrashings administered by schoolmasters (p6).

All of these experiences required interpretation. The reader had to ask “What is it that’s going on here?”. How do we interpret not only books but all the raw sensory data that is constantly showered on us? Goffman developed the useful concept of the “frame”, meaning “the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events” (p6).

The frame does for the human mind what the program does for a computer. It determines how we read a given text or situation, whether we treat Alice in Wonderland as a bedtime story or a Freudian fable. Print rather than economics was the prime cause of the French revolution (p6).

Different frames will lead different readers to different readings of the situation, with radically different political results (p7).

Readers follow certain rules of interpretation - frames and these frames can vary from reader to reader. Readers can adopt any frame they choose, provided it produces some kind of meaningful reading, and provided the reader has learned the rules laid down by the frame (p7).

One cannot read Pilgrim's Progress as an allegory unless one knows what an allegory is. Since every literary work frames reality in a particular way, we can build up a repertoire of interpretive meanings simply by reading widely (p7).

The authentic value of a liberal education lies not so much in acquiring facts or absorbing “eternal truths” but in discovering new ways to interpret the world. The British class system had always drawn a sharp line between workers and thinkers (p7).

The founders of the Labor Party and other self-educated radicals realized that no disenfranchised people could be emancipated unless they created an autonomous intellectual life. Working people would have to develop their own ways of framing the world, their own political goals, their own strategies for achieving these goals (p7).

Authors are far more likely to inspire generations of readers, disciples, critics, and commentators if they produce novel, distinctive, provocative, even subversive ways of interpreting reality. That is exactly what autodidacts, struggling to make sense of it all, found in Shakespeare, Bunyan, Defoe, Carlyle, Dickens, and Ruskin (p8).

Classics appeal to diverse populations of readers because they are usually capable of diverse readings. Pilgrim's Progress was not always read through the frame of religious allegory. An ideology is a particular rigid frame. We must be willing to revise the frame in the light of new knowledge (p8).

We can get stuck in frames and judge everything by it, as in the old joke about the psychoanalyst who wondered what his doorman really meant when he said “Good morning”. If we cleave to a structure, or any other intellectual system to the point where we can no longer step outside it and assume another frame, then we are in the cage of ideology (p8).

Culture can liberate us from systems and system-makers by turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits. Far from reinscribing traditional ideologies, canonical literature tended to ignite insurrections in the minds of workers (p9).

Exposure to books sets off a debate in the mind, each volume offering another perspective, opening up a limitless cycle of readings and questionings. Rigid dogmas are more attractive to those with deeper scars. Victorian village children had to struggle with ponderous Victorian textbooks and their reading was

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constantly interrupted by chores. But they managed to extract from these volumes something relevant to their individual lives (p10).

For workmen, the expanding culture of print opened up new opportunities to write and act in the public sphere. The roots of autodidactic culture go back as far as the late middle ages. It reached its climax in 1945. Thereafter, the working-class movement for self-education swiftly declined, for a number of converging reasons. This is, then, a success story with a downbeat ending (p11).

## A Desire for Singularity

Plenty of people will try to indoctrinate the masses with the set of ideas and judgements constituting the creed of their own profession or party. Our religious and political organizations give an example of this way of working on the masses (p12).

Culture works differently. It does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; it does not try to win them for this or that sect of its own, with ready-made judgements and watchwords. It seeks to do away with classes (p12).

The great men of culture have been those who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that is harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professionally exclusive; to humanize it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and the learned (p12).

The primary objective of autodidacts is intellectual independence. For centuries autodidacts had struggled to assume direction of their own intellectual lives, to become individual agents in framing and understanding the world (p12).

There is nothing distinctly bourgeois in the desire for intellectual freedom. If anything, it may have been strongest in people who had spent their lives following orders and wanted to change that. More than a few members of the educated classes supported this movement, but many others treated it as a serious threat to their own social position - which, in an important sense, it was (p13).

A vernacular Bible threatened to break a clerical monopoly on knowledge, and throw scriptural interpretation open to artisans. Priests warned that they would be made redundant if, as one of them put it, "every lewde man is becomen a clerke and talkys in his termys" (p13).

There was a clear and fearful recognition that a vernacular Bible would allow room for any number of individual interpretations of scripture. Artisans were soon entering spiritual debates from all points on the theological compass (p13).

The growing interest in individual identity may be found on levels lower than where we have been accustomed to look. The autodidacts felt the learned classes were arrogantly enforcing a literal reading of the bible, and looked instead to the untutored common reader and welcomed the new fashion for silent individual reading (p14).

The elites feared the autodidacts, not because they were heretical but more threatening than theology was the fact that they were discussing outside of official channels, bypassing the clergy entirely. "Privy unlearned people were engaging in a monstrous new kind of speech" (p14).

Each of the autodidacts had his own Bible, and started discussing the passages among themselves to see whether the preachers had quoted them to the point, and accurately. They would also start to argue among themselves about the meaning of passages from the Scriptures - men, women, boys, girls, rustics, laborers and idiots (p14).

The bible could be a weapon against tyranny and economic inequality, and no revolutionary message was too extreme to be read into scripture. If it was sinful to worship graven images, some autodidacts leapt from that premise to condemn equally the "idolary" of wealth, the nobility, the King, Parliament, and even the bible itself (p15).

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Sixteenth century conservatives had correctly predicted that the publication of a vernacular bible would be a subversive equalitarian act. The danger was that ordinary people would enter into theological debates once reserved for the elite (p15).

Armed with the bible, radical autodidacts could beat academics at their own games. The bible ultimately contributed to pragmatism, lack of theory, the rise of empiricism. most importantly, it left a legacy of intellectual freedom that extended to all literate people (p15).

It is meaningless to speak of the “ideological work” performed by Scripture or any other text. texts do nothing by themselves. The work is performed by the reader, using the text as a tool. The bible alone offered plebian readers enormous latitude for individual interpretation and social criticism (p15).

As the range of books and periodicals available to the laboring classes expanded over the next three centuries, the scope for interpretive freedom would increase apace. In the eighteenth century, autodidact culture flourished especially in scotland, particularly among weavers (p16).

The clergy soon lost control to lay leaders, who urged converts to rely on their own individual interpretation of the bible rather than the guidance of ministers. These converts often felt a sense of sin not because they were deviating from clerical orthodoxy, but because they had not done enough to read and speak for themselves: they expressed shame at their illiteracy, their lack of serious reading, their inability to voice their theological feelings in public (p16).

In all parts of the kingdom, weavers were legendary for their habit of reading at the loom. in the large factories, weavers would discuss literature after work. They endeavored to form opinions by reading, as well as by frequent conversation, on some very metaphysical points connected with religion (p16).

Servility of the mind, the natural consequence of poverty and oppression, lost much of its hold. An attention to public affairs, a thing formerly unknown among the lower ranks, pretty generally prevailed. Not only the farmers, but many of the tradesmen, read the newspapers, and took an interest in the measures of government (p16).

Until the late nineteenth century, autodidact culture was an overwhelmingly male territory. Few working women would participate in adult education or commit their life stories to paper. Some feminist academics have argued that these women were practically silenced because nearly all the literature available to them was written by men and loaded with misogynist ideology (p18).

In his translations of Homer, Pope directly addressed the female reader, inviting her into what had hitherto been an exclusively masculine cultural realm. Acquaintance with the pleasures of high literary texts enabled women to take pleasure in their own intellectual powers, representing a form of critical empowerment rather than cultural acquiescence (p19).

Some church leaders favoured teaching the poor to read, but not to write. But together they were breaking into a literary sphere reserved for the educated classes. But plebian poets of both sexes were confined by their betters to the ghetto of folk poetry (p19).

Female autodidacts were held back not by the standard male authors, but by the scarcity of other female autodidacts as role models (p20).

Women as well as men looked askance at the female plebian intellectual. Self-education was an imperative for working men but not quite so important for their wives: “Education of the mind, when

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adapted to sex and circumstances, is both useful and becoming in a working-woman; and a well-informed and intelligent woman is a most interesting and pleasing object, but the seat of her strength is not in her head - but in her heart” (p20).

Ellen Johnston aroused suspicion from another quarter: “The girls around me did not understand, consequently they wondered, became jealous and told falsehoods of me... I was a living martyr, and suffered all their insults (p20).

Educated people commonly found something profoundly menacing in the efforts of working people to educate themselves and write for themselves. Culture was a force for equality and was destructive of ideology, including the ideology supported by the British class structure (p20).

That hierarchy rested on the presumption that the lower orders lacked the moral and mental equipment necessary to play a governing role in society. By discrediting that assumption, autodidacts demolished justifications of privilege (p21).

A Scottish cotton-spinner Charles Campbell earned 8 shillings to 10 shillings a week, but set aside a few pennies for a subscription library, where he read history, travels, and the English classics. He joined a club of twelve men, mainly artisans and mechanics, who met weekly to discuss literary topics (p21). He admitted that, without much education or guidance, they had to grope their way towards knowledge. Their aim, however, was not to get on in the world, but the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. The fact that labouring men were engaged in cultural pursuits that involved no monetary reward provoked intense suspicion (p21).

To accumulate books and to be supposed to know something of their contents, to seek friends, too, among literary and scientific men, was putting themselves on an equality with the educated, if not indeed assuming superiority (p23).

It is sometimes argued that the working-class pursuit of education was an accommodation to middle-class values, a capitulation to bourgeois cultural hegemony. Actually, it represented the return of the repressed. “Knowledge is Power” may strike us as a naïve Victorian slogan, but it was embraced passionately by generations of working-class radicals who were denied both (p23).

The free exercise of thought would have taught the autodidact self-dependence and moral elevation instead of selfish cringing crumb-picking (p23). Economic inequality rested on inequality of education, hence, monopolies on knowledge had to be broken by any means necessary (p24).

“What do the working classes want with education? The wealthier and employing classes thought that education would foment discontent”. Such attitudes survived well into the twentieth century. A Scottish kitchenmaid recalled her employer bristled when she confided that she had once aspired to attend university and become a French teacher. When the lady was assured that these plans had come to nothing for lack of money, her smile returned (p24).

Once she protested to the cook “I want a private life, a soul, in service, and once you’re in, you’ll never get out”. Ultimately she found some release in classical concerts and writing. Once she astonished herself when she entered a love story competitions in a Scottish weekly and earned four guineas. But the pursuit of a literary career entailed risks for a servant: one employer gave her an uncomplimentary reference because she spent too much time “scribbling” (p24).

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Dorothy Burnham, who grew up in an overcrowded house, and after her family disintegrated, a Catholic hostel, found her private life in Keats, Tennyson, and Arnold: “Communication between these poets and myself was instantaneous. I saw with delighted amazement that all poetry had been written specially for me. The poets helped me escape the demands of communal living which now, at thirteen, were beginning to be intolerable to me” (p24).

As a servant girl she took an evening class, though employers hardly approved of her intellectual pursuits: “What” And what do the likes of you want with learning? As well teach a monkey to type as try to educate the lower orders!” (p25).

Some employers were still trying to control their servants’ reading - for example, banning newspapers with the wrong political slant. But one could also find employers who gave servants theater tickets and allowed them the run of their libraries (p25).

But even the most liberal-minded could be nonplussed by a literary housemaid. “I once asked the lady of the house if I could borrow a book from her library to read, and I can now see the surprised look on her face. She said, “Yes, of course, certainly you can, Margaret,” adding “but I didn’t know you read” (p25). They knew that you breathed and you slept and you worked, but they didn’t know that you read. Such a thing was beyond comprehension. They thought in your spare time you sat and gazed into space. You could almost see them reporting you to their friends. “Margaret’s a good cook, but unfortunately she reads. Books, you know!” (p25).

Print is the technology of individualism. Print accelerated the disintegration of feudalism when it created the isolated thinker, the man with the book, and downgraded the network of personal loyalties which oral cultures favor (p25).

The benefits of print have been questioned by those who uphold the value of “rich oral traditions” but plebian observers who witnessed that change had no doubt that it represented progress. “Reading aloud was a new joy to me. Some of the articles I read from the local papers of the time must have been pretty poor stuff I suppose. But they went to my head like wine (p26).

I began to conceive that these words that I loved were more than pretty playthings: they were mighty levers whereby the power of the whole world could be more evenly and fairly distributed for the benefit of my kind” (p26).

William Johnson left school at age twelve, and then spent a lifetime pursuing further education via night classes and essay competitions. The breadth of his studies was astonishing: geology, agriculture, chemistry, physiology, English history, political economy, the cooperative movement, literature, and a reading knowledge of French and German (p26).

When Johnson said Knowledge is Power, he meant specifically the power to turn a fresh stream of ideas on our stock notions and habits. “This wide range of reading broadened my mind and gave me that capacity for looking at both sides of a question” (p26).

His fellow MP Charles Duncan invested his spare cash in books and urged workers to read the ancient classics, because otherwise they would be at the mercy of the educated classes: “The unread man has a narrow outlook, and easily goes astray; he is the sport of political tricksters and the tool for all knaves” (p26).

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The capitalists main object is always to keep the working man as much in the dark as they can. Many autodidacts began to feel impatient with the many stale saws and cliches that peppered working class talk (p26).

Salford workers would become markedly less deferential, more articulate, readier to debate politics and question the existing order. Many more books, periodicals, newspapers were to be seen in ordinary homes. The interests of working people of their daily pursuits kept minds busy upon matters obvious to the senses, while attention to opinions and ideas was discouraged (p27).

For men and boys, there was not much to do in the evenings except stand around outside the pub and try to be witty at one another's expense, or at the expense of any passers by - especially women - who might be considered safe game (p27).

The young men - the shyest creatures in the country, and the most sensitive to ridicule - found safety in comic songs which dealt with somebody's misfortunes or discomforts, in a humorous, practical-joking spirit (p27).

Some men were having children teach to them what they learned at school. Certainly the old concept for book-learning was dying out. There was a growing need and a realization to understand political affairs. Thanks to the cheap press - even if it was the gutter press - ideas and information about the whole world were finding their way into the cottages of the valleys (p28).

It was not greatly important that the information was less trustworthy than it might be. The main thing was that the rural village mind should stretch itself, and look beyond the village. Coal-heavers began to be surprisingly knowledgeable about working conditions, wages, royalties, transport and trade unionism in the mining industry (p29).

Unemployed laborers were discovering that unemployment is a world-wide evil, which spreads like an infectious disease, and may be treated accordingly. People began to fall into the momentous habit of thinking about abstract ideas which would have been beyond the range of their forefathers' intellectual power (p29).

These issues had shaken the rural poor out of their fatalism, and mobilized them in the 1906 election. "Men who had never before in their lives tried to follow a logical argument began at last to store up in their memory reasons and figures in support of a fascinating doctrine, and if they were puzzle-headed over it, they were not more so than their leaders" (p29).

The outcome of these mental struggles was, quite commonly, a critical attitude toward not only evangelicalism, but all received ideologies, including those of the militant left (p29).

The evangelicals preached that poor people should be satisfied with their lot. There is little else to be heard from the pulpit. Autodidacts never completely worked out the contradictions of christianity. What did remain was an unsectarian faith in education (p30).

"My uncertainty about the truth of religion not only increased my sense of its importance... but gave me a habit of thinking, a love of reading, and a desire for knowledge", said Uriah Plant, a wheelwright's son. "Tyranny and cruelty appear to be inseparable companions of religious power. All priests are the same" (p31).

Opposition to secular literature ran wide and deep among Anglican evangelicals in the first half of the nineteenth century. Those with predominantly working-class congregations tended to be the most hostile (p31).

Literature posed a real threat to christianity, which reckoned that all books, except such as they deemed to be religious ones, ought not to be read by young men. If young men did not unconditionally and at once, renounce all books, except such as they should approve of, he they were forever lost (p31).

Circuit preacher Joseph Barker found that theology simply could not compete with Shakespeare.

Shakespeare incited his appetite for poetry: Cowper, pope, dryden, goldsmith, thomson, and byron. Not only were they more interesting than the fifty volumes at Wesley's christian library, barker realised that the reason "I could not understand them was, that there was nothing to be understood. There was no light or truth in them" (p32).

When his superintendent searched his lodgings and found Shakespear and Byron , Barker was hauled before a disciplinary committee. "They talked to me about the danger of such books Barker refused to back down. Byron had intoxicated hm with the freedom "of style of writing, with the fervor and passionateness of his feelings, and with dark and terrible pictures which he seemed to take pleasure in painting" (p32).

It was impossible for the sould of man to answer the end for which it was created, while trammelled by human authority. "I saw clearly that if I was to do justice to truth, to God, or to my own soul, I must break loose from all the creeds of men's laws, and live in full and unrestricted liberty" (p32).

Some Methodist Sunday school teachers were still asking pupils in the last decades of the nineteenth century to consider the condition of their sould if they died while attending a theater. These attitudes changed dramatically toward the end of the century, thanks to several influences (p33).

Udenominated Board schools proliferated after the education act of 1870. English literature became the most widely taught subject when readings from Shakespeare, Milton, Defoe, and other "standard authors" were mandated for the higher grades (p33).

The parents of autodidacts blamed the board schools for undermining children's respect for their elders, and of course they were right. All non-conformist sects encouraged the habits of close reading, interpretive analysis, and intellectual self-improvement (p34).

MP John Johnson "found their teaching the strongest possible incentive to trying to improve myself not only morally, but mentally, and I took to it seriously with systematic study". A major impetus behind the late Victorian socialist revival was the "flight of emotion away from the service of God to the service of man" (p34).

Another paper, Great Thoughts, founded 1884, made the same impression on Edwin Muir while he was working in Glasgow as a clerk: "It was filled with a high but vague nonconformity, and tried to combine christianity with great literature" (p34).

Richard Pyre studied with an inspiring and progressive headmaster. "While the custodians of the true faith spoke of evolution as 'the gospel of dirt', he would exalt Darwin almost to the level of a Hebrew prophet (p35).

As a circuit preacher, Pyke introduced farmers to Milton, Carlyle, Ruskin and Tolstoy. The educated classes “feared the imaginative in literature and especially in fiction. By these standards of work that was personally liberating for many could be seen as socially dangerous and hardly ‘useful’” (p35). Evangelicals of the early nineteenth century equally distrusted literature, and for much the same reason. This sect was trying to convert the masses to their own ideology, and struggling to control the flow of information to the working classes (p35).

Their audience was, however, increasingly distracted by the growing availability of imaginative literature, which could not be contained in any ideological system. They denounced poetry and drama as unrealistic and amoral, favored the suppression of carnivals, and generally loathed the hard-drinking “non-respectable” poor (p35).

Because most literate working people had broader tastes in books and beer, they dismissed them as “human cattle”, save only a few enlightened souls who shared their opinions. Thomas Wooler published extracts from great authors following no consistent ideological pattern - Aristotle, Erasmus, Machiavelli, Thomas Moore, Holinshed, Shakespeare, Bacon, Marvell, Milton, Locke, Pope, Cowper, Goldsmith, Swift, and Johnson (p36).

Wooler was able to recognize the autonomous worth of literature because he was less interested in lecturing his readers and more willing to allow them to find their own salvation. He appreciated that literature was a means of expanding human freedom, and that freedom was intrinsically valuable (p36).

Dickens was hard to ignore: not only was he a genius and spectacularly popular, but he also called attention to the same social issues that Chartists had raised. Radical journals were now more free to publish but they were also in danger of losing their audience if they remained dryly political (p36).

The proliferation of cheap mass circulation general interest periodicals forced the chartist papers to leaven their editorial mix with imaginative literature. The Northern Star published Captain Marryat, Fenimore Cooper and Charlotte Bronte (p36).

And one could argue that Homer, Aesop, Socrates, Shakespeare, Milton, Defoe, and Johnson were all sons of the proletariat. Meanwhile, “knowledge chartists” made intellectual freedom their first political priority, calling for adult education programs and public libraries governed by the workers themselves (p36).

All that contributed to a growing sense within the Chartist movement that literature was compatible with and necessary to political liberation. Most autodidacts shared the habit of devouring any book that came to hand, and this indiscipline made it the best method of liberal education (p37).

Where a prescribed reading list might have reflected the biases of the compiler, improvisational reading offered them a broad knowledge of history, poetry and imaginative literature. The very fact that they read without any order or method forced their minds to exercise a ready power of arranging the information this desultory reading presented (p37).

“I would take a passage or an idea suggested from the author and endeavor to enlarge upon it. I found this enabled me to trace ideas in their connections, gave me a wider view of subjects, and a facility of expression in writing (p38)”.

The educated class agitated against pubs but the vital autodidact culture of early nineteenth century England had been largely in taverns: "A fondness for company, and a passion for speculative inquiry and discussion prevailed in taverns. All classes met there to compare notes and to hear individual remarks and criticisms (p38).

The power of fiction to instruct, the sources of the charm it exercises over the mind cannot be explained by any one dimensional political, utilitarian, or scientific calculus. Perhaps the secret of the charm of fictitious writing lies in the fact that it appeals to all the powers of the mind - the imagination, memory, reason, and morality (p38).

A great book is defined as one that astonishes the reader on many levels. Even literature that appeared to be safely conservative was potentially explosive in the minds of readers. This may seem counterintuitive (p39).

Contrary to all the intentions of the authors, classic conservative texts could make plebian readers militant and articulate. The most famous account of a menial laborer emancipated by an arrogantly elitist author was Catherine McMullen, the daughter of a washerwoman who had served time in a workhouse (p40).

In 1921 she was herself a workhouse laundress, struggling to improve her mind by reading T.P and Cassell's weekly. The magazine was full of literary gossip that made her aspire to be a writer. She visited a library for the first time in her life and borrowed a book (p40).

"Here began my education. I learned my first real history and geography. I would fall asleep reading letters and awake around three o'clock in the morning my mind deep in the fascination of this new world where people conversed, not just talked (p40).

Many autodidacts thought kings, lords and gentlemen had rights which it was folly or worse to question; but they also thought they had responsibilities which it was scandalous or worse in them to evade. Our understanding of a text is shaped by everything else we read. To put it another way, while the frame controls how we interpret information, that new information is constantly modifying the frame (p41). When the first large cohort of Labour MPs was elected in 1906, the Review of Reviews asked them to name the books and authors that had most deeply influenced them. Thirteen respondents mentioned Thomas Carlyle. Autobiographical evidence confirms that he had a huge following among autodidacts (p41).

Carlyle's ability to attract disciples from all points on the political spectrum, from Communists to Nazis, marks him as an author who might be turned to many purposes. It provided a gospel for self-improvers like Henry Jones who began his rise from a shoemaker's bench to professorship of philosophy (p42).

He read Sartor Resartus. "It was a case of love at first sight", he said. When he first encountered it he was baffled, his literary education having been limited to penny novelettes. But later in the midst of a speech to the YMCA's debating society "I found myself quoting from Sartor Resartus. This surprised everyone including myself" (p42).

For those who were struggling to rise out of the masses and establish an identity, Carlyle was irresistible. An Edwardian slumdweller spoke for many readers when he despised his job in a Birmingham factory. "V.W. Garratt surrounded his workbench with a barricade of boxes, set up a small mirror to provide

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early warning of the foreman's approach, and studied Sartor Resartus when he was being paid to solder gas-meter fittings (p42).

In retrospect he admitted that he deserved the sack, but Carlyle made him feel justified in taking advantage of his employer: "I was virtuously trying to overcome circumstance and to live up to the individualist's doctrine of forcing a way in life without too much moral scruple" (p42).

He felt the same contempt for his workmates: "To be oneself and unashamed in matters of dress, talk and action meant running the gauntlet of ridicule and tribal opposition. Much easier was it to fall into the rut and become moulded to mediocrity. After mass education in which the absorption of historical absurdities was more important than mental development, boys passed into the factories with minds ill-equipped to withstand the new environment" (p43).

Garratt escaped to an evening course in English literature, where he felt "like a child that becomes ecstatic with a fireworks display". Keats, Shelley, and Tennyson "swamped the trivialities of life and gave my ego a fulness and strength in the lustre of which noble conceptions are borne and flourish" (p43). He spent his free evenings in Birmingham's Central Free Library reading Homer, Epictetus, Longinus, and Plato's Dialogues, a classical education which further undermined his confidence in the status quo. "I began to wonder in what way we had advanced from the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome" (p43).

His reading of great books made it intolerable to continue as a cog in the industrial machine, so he became a journalist. Carlyle helped him break out from the factory, which he loathed not only for the dirt and poisonous fumes and low wages (p43).

What he resented most was the managing director parading "through the shops as if the workers never existed. In Sartor Resartus and other Everyman's Library volumes he found what he called "helps toward self-realization" (p43).

As a young South Wales miner, Edmund Stonelake who had never heard of the French Revolution, asked a bookseller for something on the subject and was sold Carlyle. At first it was hard reading, but eventually he extracted an entire political education from its pages: (p43).

"I learned the causes which fomented the minds of the people and gave rise to the revolution, how ferociously it was conducted, and how the proclaimed hero of today was carted away tomorrow in the tumbrils to a place where his noble head fell under the merciless guillotine (p44).

Keir Hardie remembered that a "real turning point" of his life was his discovery of Sartor Resartus at age sixteen or seventeen. He had to read it through three times before he understood it: "I felt I was in the presence of some great power, the meaning of which I could only dimly guess" (p44).

Carlyle's hero worship made him appear a proto-fascist in the eyes of many readers, including Joseph Goebbels, but it inspired Hardie to embrace the role of the Hero as Proletarian. From Carlyle, the working classes learned to hate shams. He exposed the ideological fascades of the class system, preached independence of mind, and offered a vision of economic justice (p44).

Helen Crawford, a baker's daughter from the slums of Glasgow married a clergyman and trained for missionary work, until her evangelism took a sharp left turn. Joining the militant suffragettes of the

Women's Social and Political Union, she smashed the minister of education's windows and spent time in Holloway Gaol, where she staged a hunger strike (p44).

She attributed her political awakening to Sartor Resartus, Heroes and Hero-Worship, Past and Present as well as Fr oude's biographical studies of both Carlyles. Everything she later read in Marx she discovered first in Thomas Carlyle (p44).

"He stripped naked the law, the Church and many of the fraudulent shams of his day. I was impressed with his denunciation of quackery masquerading as truth". Some working-class women found a feminist in Carlyle. Mary Smith was a shoemaker's daughter whose love of books was discouraged at every turn. At a Methodist school she was taught ladylike manners, embroidery and little else (p45).

"For long years Englishwomen's souls were almost as sorely crippled and cramped by the devices of the school room, as the Chinese women's feet by their shoes", she later protested. She found emancipation in Shakespeare, Dryden, goldsmith, and other standard male authors, whom she extolled for their universality (p45).

"These authors wrote from their hearts for humanity, and I could follow them fully and with delight, though but a child. They awakened my young nature, and I found for the first time that my pondering heart was akin to that of the whole human race." (p45).

By age twenty she had read and understood George Payne's Elements and Moral Science, Thomas Brown's Moral Philosophy, and Richard Whateley's Logic. "Emerson and Carlyle t henceforth became my two great masters of thought for the rest of my life. Carlyle's gospel of work and exposure of Shams, and his universal onslaught on the nothings and appearances of society, gave strength and life to my vague but true enthusiasm." (p45).

"They proved a new Bible of blessedness to my eager soul, as they did thousands beside, who had become weary of much of the vapid literature of the time" (p45). Carlylean hero-worship may strike us as rampantly masculine, but as Mary Smith wrote: "A woman without friends in the world, as I was, must harden herself to dare and endure much". Carlyle bolstered her mental independence, gave her the confidence to think and speak and write (p46).

When her employer warned her that Carlyle might be a dangerous skeptic, she brushed hm aside and boldly discussed her literary interests with his wife, proclaiming "Intellect knows no rank". She wrote poems , publishing them in the People's Journal and Casell's (p46).

And whe studied Fichte, Schiller, and Goethe. Later she campaigned for women's suffrage and the Married Woman's Property Bill, agitated against the Contagious Diseases Acts, and wrote on politics for a local newspaper (p46).

"It seems that from our earliest days we are striving to become articulate, struggling to clothe in words our vague perceptions and questionings. Suddenly, blazing from the printed page, there are words - the true resounding words that we couldn't find. It is an exciting moment. 'Who am I? The thing that can say I. Wo am I, what is ME?. I had been groping to know that since I was three" (p46).

She consumed Heroes and Hero-Worship, The French Revolution, and Sartor Resartus with the same intoxication. All of them resonated powerfully with the Victorian working-class ethic of self-education, which her father embraced thoroughly. Seven of his nine children won university degrees (p46).

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Not all working people viewed Carlyle as a man of the left. Sam Shaw, a Welsh farm laborer and coal miner, was driven into the ranks of the conservative party by the French Revolution, which made him suspect that socialist street orators were really “out for their own financial and political aggrandizement” (p46).

Secularist G. J. Holyoake denounced Carlyle as a racist and “the greatest ruffian in literature since the days of Dr. Johnson”, but he admired that “he had, like the doctor, the redeeming virtues of honesty and heroic love of truth” (p47).

“I had the feeling in me that the common people should not be driven, and the more Carlyle crowned and canonised a ruling class, the more I felt I was on the side of the common people (p47).

Robert Blatchford felt the same shudder. He found Sartor Resartus intimidating: “After reading the famous meditation on the sleeping city, I threw the book across the room. I felt I should never be able to write like that” (p47).

The Clarion succeeded because it was not all socialist propaganda: there were large helpings of literary criticism, and many readers were more interested in that part of the magazine. Blatchford realized that the emerging Labour Party had no single statement of ideology. Its doctrinal texts were nothing less than the whole cannon of classic literature (p48).

ILP leader J. Bruce Glasier proclaimed that Bunyan, Burns, Shelley, Byron, Aeschylus, Dante, Schiller and Les Misérables “all helped to rouse and nourish in me a passionate hatred of oppression and an exalting hope for the coming new era” (p48).

Most of his fellow Labour MPs shared his faith in the emancipatory power of literature. “I have a library of over 700 volumes boasted John Ward. “Reading changed the whole course of my life, for, let me tell you, twenty years ago British navvies were intellectually the lowest, as they were the physically finest, class in the country” (p49).

“They took absolutely no interest in public affairs or social matters, and so it was books and books alone that directed my thoughts towards progress and reform. There has since been a remarkable change in this respect. Today, navvies are amongst the keenest and most intelligent critics of political and social questions, and I am proud to think that my work amongst them has helped to awaken them from the mental torpor in which they were plunged” (p49).

Working men of this period observed a direct correlation between literary taste and political radicalism. “The intellectual awakening of the working class came with the spread of Socialism”, wrote London bookbinder Frederick Rogers. Before then, “the average workman, as I knew him, was not capable of sustained reading” (p50).

Robert Roberts likewise noted that the most literate workers - “Readers of Ruskin, Dickens, Kingsley, Carlyle and Scott” - were likely to be socialists: those who read only the racing papers tended to vote Tory” (p50).

James Murray found the same link between culture and socialism in his Glasgow carving shop: “Art, philosophy, politics, and Religion were all tossed around indiscriminately. Most workmates had Socialistic leanings and I was not long in observing those with the keenest minds were rabid socialists” (p50).

As J. R. Clynes argued, it was the mass circulation of the press that was doping the workers with trivia and distractions. Shakespeare, Balzac, William Morris, and Bernard Shaw would be no cure for labour unrest. Labour unrest would be increased” (p50).

The mainstream of the labour movement agreed that great art and literature had eternal value, and ought to be disseminated among the workers out of disinterested concern for truth, beauty, and higher morality (p50).

It was generally acknowledged that a knowledge of Shakespeare and Milton could make workers more aware and articulate in the political arena. Except on the more dogmatic Marxist fringes, literature was not solely judged for its propaganda value (p51).

When asked how books shaped him, Labor MP F.W. Jowett ranged widely: Ivanhoe made him want to read, *Unto this Last* made him a socialist, *Past and Present* made him think, *Vanity Fair* and *Les Miserables* thought him sympathy, and *Wuthering Heights* taught him respect for man and nature (p51).

There were Marxists like housepainter James Clunie who claimed to value literature solely “in support of the cause of labour and peace”, but in practice almost any book could be used for that purpose “the same way as a craftsman uses his tools” (p51).

It was the “stimulating anarchism of Walt Whitman and the prophetic works of Robert Burns” that made him rebel against the factory system. “Books to me became symbols of social revolution”, not just because they preached the right kind of left politics, but because they allowed working people to control their own minds” (p51).

Percy Wall, jailed for defying draft notices in the First World War, was inspired in part by a cop of Queen Mab owned by his father, a Marxist railway worker. “That’s what does all the mischief. Books”, a warder shouted at another working class CO. “If I had my way I’d burn them all” (p51).

He had a point: prison libraries could not be cleansed of politically questionable books without pulping the entire corpus of English literature. “We must all either work or steal, whatsoever we call our stealing. Most of the prisoners had really stolen far less than some of the people who were sending them to prison” (p52).

“No man needs knowledge more than he who is subject to those who have knowledge - and because they have knowledge. If there is one man in the world who needs knowledge, it is he who does the world’s most needful work and gets least return because he lacks knowledge” (p53).

Liberal educations proved more effective than straight indoctrination in making radicals because, frankly, it was more thrilling, more likely to generate the enthusiasm that mobilized students who changed the world (p53).

For Alice Foley the pursuit of knowledge was an act of rebellion against both her strict Catholic upbringing and the working conditions of her Bolton cotton mill. It was not only the monotonous labour, the wretched factory lavatories, the constant threat of automation and reduced wages (p53).

“Most resented of all was the lack of human dignity accorded to our status as “hands”. a system that reduced workers to “a cowed and passive community”. But these subservient days were occasionally shot through with moments of magic when the spirit of freedom and joy broke through (p53).

“As a member of a group of young socialists I hoarded my scanty pocket-money, amounting at that time to one penny in the shilling of factory earnings, so that I could afford with them the luxury of a monthly matinee” (p53).

We hived off to the Art Gallery, and over tea, brown bread, peaches and cream we animatedly argued and discussed the philosophy, art or satire of the productions. The whole outing cost five shillings each, but we returned home like exultant young gods, tingling with a thirst with the same naïve faith that if only sufficient human beings could witness good drama, and comedy it would change the world” (p53). A liberal education was not merely a means of achieving socialism: it was socialism in fact, the ultimate goal of politics (p54).

In London’s East End, the liberating power of literature was most effectively mobilized by the anarchists and their intellectual leader, Rudolf Rocker. For Rocker, all ideologies, even anarchism itself were subordinate to the great idea of educating people to think and work freely. Making it possible for the individual to develop his natural capacities unrestrained by hard and fast rules and dogmas (p55). Freedom is never attained; it must always be striven for. Consequently, its claims have no limit. Each generation must face its own problems, which cannot be forestalled or provided for in advance. The worst tyranny is that of ideas which have been handed down to us, allowing no development in ourselves, and trying to streamroller everything to one flat universal level (p55).

Rocker reversed the Marxian theory that culture is economically determined, arguing that all economic systems are culturally determined. Modern industrial society, for example, had been created by modern scientific culture, not vice versa (p55).

Culture was not, then, constructed by a particular class and cannot be judged from the point of view of class or of economic conditions. Therefore the injustices of capitalism would be abolished not by scrapping the Western cultural heritage, but by redistributing it to workers (p56).

What the human spirit has created in science, art and literature, in every branch of philosophic thought and aesthetic feeling is and must remain the common cultural possession of our own and all the coming generations. This is the starting-point, this is the bridge to all further social development (p56).

Immersion in Western culture could be immensely emancipating for the children of immigrants. Though Chaim Lewis attended a Jewish school in Soho, it was his English teacher “who jolted me out of my intellectual torpor. He traded with words: he blew the wind of rhythm into them. He caressed them to mean more than they said and made them sing as I never heard them sing before” (p56).

The books that do most to stretch children’s minds are the books that they don’t fully understand. Lewis enthusiastically embraced the literature of an alien culture. Even before he discovered the English novelists he was introduced to Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev and Pushkin by a Russian revolutionary rag merchant (p56).

For those who are not narrow academic specialists, reading in one literature can stimulate reading in another. Lewis’s training in English and Russian authors provided models of taste, cultural standards, and intellectual challenges which then led him back to find similar virtues in Yiddish writers (p56).

The autodidact’s mission statement was to be more than passive readers - to be active thinkers and writers. Those who proclaimed that ‘Knowledge is Power’ meant that the only true education is self-

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education, and they often regarded the expansion of formal educational opportunities with suspicion (p57).

So-called education can be used to produce slaves, soldiers, and snobs, as well as gentlemen. You can Bolshevize people by education, or you can make them into the perfect Nazi. Unless the intended victim has trained himself to think for himself (p57).

To preserve that independence, working people had to create their own network of informal self-schooling programs. This they accomplished by improvising a vast grass-roots movement, which had no central organization, but was a presence in hundreds of chapels and millions of kitchens (p57).

It touched more students than all organized adult educational institutions combined. It never had a formal title, but was generally known as “mutual improvement” (p57).

## Mutual Improvement

A coventry millworker once proclaimed that “The labor movement grew out of mutual improvement societies”. We have to be reminded of that because these institutions are scarcely mentioned in studies of labour history (p58).

The mutual improvement society was a venture in cooperative education. In its classic form, it consisted of a half dozen to a hundred men from both the working and lower-middle classes who met periodically, sometimes in their own homes but commonly under the auspices of a church or chapel (p58).

Typically at each meeting one member would deliver a paper on any imaginable subject - politics, literature, religion, ethics, “useful knowledge” - and then the topic would be thrown open to general discussion. The aim was to develop the verbal and intellectual skills of people who had never been encouraged to speak or think (p58).

There was complete freedom of expression, the teacher-pupil hierarchy was abolished, and the costs were minimal - about two shillings per member per year. In addition to the mutual improvement societies, the working class organized adult schools, libraries, reading circles, dramatic societies, and musical groups (p58).

They all belonged to the mutual improvement tradition, in that they relied on working class initiative rather than state provision or middle class philanthropy. Nineteenth century working men organized an array of friendly societies, clubbing together to offer basic health and unemployment benefits, savings banks, job referral services, and burial plans (p58).

A mutual improvement society could be defined as simply a friendly society devoted to education (p58).

John Crawford has located fifty-one Scottish working-class libraries founded by 1822, which charged annual subscriptions of six shillings or less, and were governed democratically, mostly without interference by the middle classes (p59).

Weavers had to be literate for their work and mining communities wanted an educated workforce. Both trades had a history of friendly society activity and self-education. Scottish miners lived in isolated villages with stable populations, and upheld strong traditions of working-class independence (p59).

The libraries acquisitions were decided democratically and they generally stocked the standard histories and travels, along with the Spectator and other periodicals, but not much poetry, fiction, science or religion (p60).

In the first years of the nineteenth century, shepherds in the Cheviot Hills maintained a kind of circulating library, leaving books they had read in designated crannies in boundary walls. The next shepherd who came that way could borrow it and leave another in its place (p60).

“After it became known that we were readers, the whole of our acquaintances, far and near, appeared eager to lend us books”. Mutual improvement was useful for acquiring and sharing knowledge, but it could not provide the privacy necessary for writing and serious study (p60).

Though committed to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, mutual improvement members often rose in the world, often into the ranks of journalism. The societies discussed topics such as “ought members of parliament be paid?”, “Is temperance better than total abstinence?”, “Ought capital punishment be abolished? and “Is novel reading beneficial?” (p61).

The mutual improvement societies often took the form of a more advanced level of Sunday School. The surge of political agitation after 1815 owed much to the “Sunday school of the preceding thirty years, which had produced many working men of sufficient talent to become readers, writers, and speakers in the village meeting for parliamentary reform” (p62).

Mutual improvement was not necessarily political: the early Scottish working class libraries generally avoided political books. The moral effects of this regimen of study were considerable. It induced men to read books, instead of wasting their time in public houses, it taught them to respect themselves, and to desire education for their children (p62).

They were compelled in the discussions to find reasons for their opinions, and to tolerate others. It gave a new stimulus to an immense number of men who had been but in too many instances incapable of any but the grossest pursuits, and in seeking nothing beyond mere sensual enjoyment. It elevated them in society (p62).

There was a dramatic “reformation in manners” among the lower classes, and this was not simply or even primarily a matter of aping the middle classes. It was a product of a grass-roots working-class struggle for mutual improvement (p63).

In the early nineteenth century, the middle classes associated mutual improvement with political agitation and radicalism, and not without reason. An agitation was raised by a few of the leading artisans for a mechanics institute. A room was taken over and opened three evenings per week (p63).

Most of the mechanics in the town joined. “It was the first time I had ever heard impromptu speaking out of the pulpit - my motions then being that such speaking was a kind of inspiration from God. My mind seemed to be awakened to a new mental existence; new feelings, hopes, and aspirations sprang up within me, and every spare moment was devoted to the acquisition of some kind of useful knowledge (p64).

Those who could read taught those who could not, and those who could cipher did the same for those less advanced. Many of the reading rooms also offered classes in reading, writing, and math, taught cooperatively by the members themselves or by professional teachers who volunteered their services (p65).

Working men do not like to be treated like children, to have the books they shall read chosen for them; and they naturally resist any attempt to set up barriers between themselves and other classes. If these reading rooms had accepted middle class help they might have lost their independence and, with it, their working-class followers (p65).

Though mutual improvement societies tended to be ephemeral, they were fairly easy to set up and answered a need for remedial education. The working men who created these schools earned not only an education, but tremendous pride and independence (p67).

“We met to discuss and criticise all things in heaven and earth, and sometimes even far beyond the universe. This habit was not born of our conceit - it was the pure birth of our simplicity. We could expatriate about the universe when an examination in the geography of England would have confounded us (p67).

We could discuss astronomy, imaginatively, when a sum in decimals would have plucked us from our soaring heights into an abyss of perplexity. We could discuss the policies of governments and nations, and the creeds and constitutions of churches, while we would have been puzzled to give a bare outline of our country's history (p67).

“No members of the Imperial parliament ever go with a prouder joy to their great house than we went on Saturday nights to our meetings. There was a hum, a bustle and an interest when we first met, as if the fate of the nation depended on that night's debate” (p68).

The chief ideologist of mutual improvement was Samuel Smiles. His *Self-Help* sold a quarter million copies by the end of the century and was translated into all major European and Asian languages. Smiles' philosophy was more than just a crude success ethic (p68).

He was a radical who favoured universal suffrage, had some sympathy with Chartism and the ten-hour work day, and strongly supported the co-operative movement and adult education. He condemned class-bound standards and denounced pure economic individualism as empty and selfish (p68).

In his vision, the working class would raise its educational and economic standards through its own cooperative efforts. A labour leader once warned Robert Blatchford away from *Self-Help*: “It's a brutal book; it ought to be burnt by the common hangman” (p68).

Blatchford, once he read it, found it “one of the most delightful and invigorating books it has been my happy fortune to meet with”, and seriously suggested it should be required reading in schools. He conceded that no socialist could be entirely comfortable with Smiles' individualism, but *Self-Help* also denounced the worship of power, wealth, success, and keeping up appearances (p69).

Smiles himself had second thoughts about the title: he wished he had done more to encourage altruism as well as self-reliance (p69).

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“There was a feeling at home that books were not intended for people like us, and were not actually necessary”, says George Gregory whose father was an illiterate somerset miner. Gregory had no access to serious reading matter until mid-adolescence, when a clerk introduced him to Self-Help (p69).

That book, he recalled in old age “has lived in me for more than sixty years. I was impressed by its quality for I had never touched a book of high quality. Such information stirred dormant powers in me. I began to see myself as an individual, and how I may be able to make a break from the general situation of which I regarded myself as an inseparable part” (p69).

Gregory returned to his old school for evening classes in chemistry, arithmetic, and mining engineering. “My mind underwent an expansion and ambition began to stir”. He became a socialist, a trade union organizer, a cooperative society manager, an anti-war activist, a branch secretary for the Worker’s Educational Association and for the League of Nations Union, a Congretional minister, and the owner of more than a thousand books. That is what self-help set in motion (p70).

Samuel Smile’s favorite working-class heroes were amateur scientists, who did real research with no money or training. They were remarkable for their ability to work in isolation. That impulse gave rise to a network of plebian circles devoted to natural history, predominatly in northern England (p70).

The plebian botanists built on a long tradition of popular herbalism and floriculture. Before science was professionalized at the end of the nineteenth century, working class naturalist societies were active participants in scientific research (p71).

Following the methodist model they organized themselves into groups of eight to forty members. The local societies were commonly based in pubs, which offered meeting rooms and housed specimens and libraries in return for a certain minimum purchase of refreshment (p71).

The pub setting, combined with high rates of female illiteracy, insured that these meetings were, with some exceptions, exclusively male. There were nearly fifty groups in and around london were working men and women were studying (p72)

“chemistry, geology, mathematics and astronomy with all the deliberation and c onfidence of old and experienced professors”. Mutual improvement was an evolving movement that changed in several directions over two centuries (p73).

In areas where public libraries were slow to penerate, notably the coal valleys of South Wales, miners made exeptional efforts to support their own libraries up to the mid-twentieth century. Political controversy found a home in mutual improvements socieities until around 1850, faded out in the mid-victorian years, and then revived in the 1880s (p73).

Women were mostly excluded from mutual improvement activities before the late nineteenth century. And mutual improvement socieites were important providers of adult remedial schooling until the 1870 Education Act (p73).

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One can trace some of these trends in the Gallatown Mutual Improvement Association founded in 1863. The members came from a range of social ranks - miners, handloom weavers, and potters as well as teachers and manufacturers (p73).

The first essays presented focused on elementary topics: Art, The Sheep, Coal, Good Habits, Paper, Water, The Power of Steam, The Eagle, The Seasons, Countries, Domestic Animals, The Late Flood of Sheffield, War, Gravitation, Strong Drink, The Bible, and Safe Company. Equally light subjects were selected for debate such as "They Eye and the Ear - Which Affords the Most Pleasure?" (p73).

Within a decade however, more controversial papers appeared on the agenda: Stability and Society, Primeval Man, Strikes, The Drinking Traffic, The Relation between Science and Scripture, Equality. The first generation held to the theology of their fathers, now biblical criticism and darwin were having an impact (p73).

The first paper on socialism appeared on the roster in 1887, and within a few years the members were discussing Home Rule for Ireland and Women's Suffrage. By 1891 there were presentations on the French Revolution and the Oppression of the Masses (p73).

In 1895 the all-male club voted twenty-six to fifteen to support a resolution for women's suffrage. The autobiography of miner Chester Armstrong densely chronicles the role of mutual improvement in transforming working class intellectual life (p73).

He grew up in a Cumberland village where there were few books other than the Bible, Pilgrim's Progress, Baxter's Saint's Rest, and other devotional volumes. All the same, mid-Victorian rural nonconformity provided a real foundation for cultural growth (p74).

His political consciousness was awakened by his father, a self-help Radical who read aloud the weekly paper, which brought home the horrors of the Afghan and Zulu wars. Armstrong relocated to Ashington, another mining town, where the mechanics institute was the only cultural resource (p74).

But in its library he discovered "a new world" and "a larger environment" in Defoe, Marrayt, Fenimore Cooper, Dickens and Jules Verne. As the population of Ashing ton grew, other cultural institutions blossomed: a co-operative society hall that featured political speakers, a harmonic society concert hall and orchestra, a Miners Association hall, a new library (p74).

In 1898, Armstrong organized the Ashington Debating and Literary Improvement Society, and his reading broadened out to Shakespear, Burns, Shelly, Keats, Tennyson, Byron, Whitman, Wordsworth, Scott, Robert Browning, Darwin and T.H Huxley (p74).

Robertson Nicoll's British Weekly had introduced him to a more liberal non-conformity that was hospitable to co ntemporary literature. The difficulty was that the traditional nonconformist commitment to freedom of conscience was propelling him beyond the confines of primitive methodism (p74).

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His tastes in literature evolved apace: Ibsen, Zola, Meredith, and Wilde by the 1890s and then onto Shaw, Wells and Bennett, and ultimately Marxist economics and Brave New World. For people accustomed to accepting dogmas handed down to them by churches, chapels, teachers, politicians, employers, mutual improvement provided invaluable training in forming and expressing opinions (p75).

“I was a silent member for a long time” admitted David Willox, a Weaver, “but latterly began to offer a few trembling remarks, principally of an enquiring kind. It was long before I ventured into the ocean of controversy. I was like a child learning to skate or slide upon ice” (p75).

“I kept pottering away about the margin of the lake to see what the ice was like before I would trust myself on the open sheet”. These miniature parliaments did much to build the confidence of future labour politicians (p75).

In 1910, on the floor of the Malton Mutual Improvement Society, chemist’s apprentice Philip Inman called for the abolition of the House of Lords. Thirty-six years later he was sitting in it (p75).

For E. H. Spencer, a Swindon factory worker’s son, mutual improvement provided all the intellectual stimulation he did not receive in teacher training. “The education of a pupil teacher in the eighteenth eighties was designed to enable a mediocre head master to prepare an unintelligent pupil teacher for a very easy examination” (p75)

“In history we just learned facts from a date book. Geography was a thing of names, meaningless, wearisome names, and our instructor was dull, stupid and conscientious beyond words”. It was a Young Men’s Friendly Society that “liberalized and awakened such a mind as I had” (p75).

A mix of students, workers, and lower professionals encouraged Spencer to read broadly and trained him in public speaking. There were some women in the group, but they were not yet bold enough to contribute to debates (p75).

Spencer went through a phase of regretting the lack of university education but he came to realize that mutual improvement had brought him in contact with a much broader section of humanity, and had prepared him to rise to the rank of Chief School Inspector for the London Education Committee (p76).

Mutual improvement drives home the lesson that no autodidact is entirely self-educated. He or she must rely on a network of friends and workmates for guidance, discussion, and reading material. Exclusion from those networks largely accounts for the scarcity of female proletarian intellectuals and autobiographers of the nineteenth century (p76).

Only as working women became more active in corporate bodies such as the Labor Party, the cooperative movement, trade unions, and mutual improvement societies did they begin to produce memoirs in large numbers (p76).

In the early Scottish workingmen's libraries between zero and 10 percent of members were women, and they had no role in governance. Later, mechanics institutions were open to women in a limited way. Where workingmen had access to education and women did not, communication between the two was likely to break down (p76).

One wife complained that when her husband brought home fellow students from the working men's college "These people would come, bow to us, say "How do you do?" when they came, and "Good night" when they left" (p76)

"all the rest of the time would be spent talking about things we did not understand. When she had the chance to attend college classes, even for a few months, she learned just enough to establish an intellectual rapport with her husband (p76).

There was no united female front on this issue and workingmen of the early nineteenth century rarely acknowledged women as intellectual equals or companions. They were liable to regard females as a distraction for men in pursuit of truth (p77).

Autobiographical evidence suggests that provincial groups were finally opening up by the turn of the century, but the women who joined them could still be treated with suspicion. Alice Foley recalled that her older sister Cissy - a suffragette, Labour Church member, and textile worker's union officer - found a circle of girlfriends in Bolton who met to discuss "politics, men, votes for women and culture" (p77).

Together they took an Oxford extension course on Robert Browning, and talked of William Morris and Karl Marx. Their mother dismissed them as "fuss-pots" indulging in "long-curtain" talk. "To replace short by long curtains was a sign of moving up the social scale", Alice explained (p77).

Deborah Smith, a Nelson weaver was raised by parents who were poor, illiterate, and not inclined to encourage education. Having had only a brief interval of half-time schooling as Secretary of the Nelson Women's cooperative Guild, initially embarrassed by her inability to write and spell (p77).

Nevertheless, the Guild, with its meetings and lectures "opened up a new life for me. I got new ideas, a wider view of life. It taught me to think for myself on all questions". She began reading poetry and, at age fifty-one, discovered her own spiritual longing in Tennyson (p78).

"Break, break on thy cold grey stones, oh sea/ Oh would that my tongue could utter/the thoughts that arise in me!". She had always hesitated to write about her own life, because she did not know "if anyone had an experience like mine" (p78).

The revelation that classic authors shared her thoughts liberated her latent powers of self-expression. "I began to realize the experience of the poets who had written such poetry, and I felt like getting in touch with them", she explained (p78).

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“We find that Art and Literature and Beauty are stored in our souls once that creative power gives them life”. She found that the class meetings did not welcome her questioning spirit. “Sometimes I gave them poetry, but one of our women said, we must have nothing but the Bible” (p78).

It was in reading circles that she found “The questions, the friendly discussions, the exchange of opinions about many things that all teach us to be tolerant”. Working class women had less opportunity to practice public speaking than their men, and here again the mutual improvement society proved invaluable (p78).

When Elizabeth Andrews, a Welsh miner’s daughter, prepared a paper for the Wesley Guild, the prospect of reading it made her physically ill, and the minister had to present it for her. Though she eventually became a suffragist and Labour Party organizer, the experience taught her “to be very patient and understanding when training women to take part in public work for the first time” (p78).

Since most mutual improvement societies are beyond the reach of historian detection, estimating their total membership is next to impossible. Nevertheless, studies focusing on all geographical areas have found impressively high levels of participation (p78).

Although the Working Men’s Club and Institute Union was primarily a social organization, it also made a contribution to mutual education. In 1874 it comprised of 312 clubs and 21 percent held classes in the arts and sciences, 33 percent sponsored lectures, and 64 percent held “musical and elocutionary entertainments”, and nearly all had lending libraries (p79).

By 1903 there were about 900 clubs with 321,000 members. Five hundred of those clubs had libraries with a total of 187,000 volumes, though mostly fiction was in demand. Some clubs staged theatrical productions, usually melodramas but occasionally Shakespeare (p79).

By their very nature, amateur theatricals were an exercise in mutual education. As one participant put it drama encouraged community and individuality. It demanded not the regimentation of the shop floor, but a more creative kind of collective action (p79).

The actor takes his place in the team, and passes on to self-expression, self-discipline and conscious cooperation with others. He finds perhaps for the first time, that he is doing something, is giving out rather than merely receiving impressions from others (p79).

Townsppeople bitterly opposed to each other in religion and politics could work together on a common project, and producing foreign plays broke through the provincialism of industrial towns. Those who were intimidated by a university-level extra-mural course might be more receptive to practical drama (p79).

Onstage, working people could enjoy an opportunity that they rarely had in life - to assume another role and express themselves to an audience. If they were not ready for that, they could always make costumes and build stage sets (p79).

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Recognizing this, settlement houses sponsored fringe theaters for local amateurs. Strictly speaking, settlement houses were not mutual improvement societies. They were university-sponsored institutions staffed by educated men and women (p80).

Alexander Hartog, an apprentice tailor said “It hit me then, and, even now as I look back, I still think “That twas the first time in my life I felt I was really were I belonged.” I was surrounded by people who were like myself (p80)

“They were searching, they were participating. In an atomospher almost of gaiety people were talking about their art and their pleasure and their activities”. With the same goal in mind, the YMCA, London Co unty Council Evening Institutes, and the WEA sponsored dramatic activities (p80).

Beginning in 1912, the Oxford and Bermondsey Shakespeare Society staged annual productions performed entirely by boys from one of London’s roughest districts. The producer admitted that “About 5 percent or less of our boy actors learn to appreciate the language of Shakespeare, but very few of them read, and hardly one writes decent English” (p80).

Their passion for drama, he argued “Lies in their keen enjoyment of the acting as a form of expression and legitimate self-display, and the intensely valuable training of the team spirit necessitated by everyone merging his own wishes and convenience in the requirements of the whole cast” (p81).

Even prison educators found that Shakespearean tragedy could reduce convicts to tears and provoke profound moral self-examination. The Board of Education reported “it was a common experience of one of the teachers to meet members of his class at Shakespear performances after their release” (p81).

One instructor found that Shakespeare dissolved the teacher-student hierarchy, even when the audience was literally captive: “It seems to me that we find in the plays, and particularly Shakespeare plays, a basis of common experience and common humanity which destroys any barrier erected by social conventions and differrences in educational opportunities (p81).

To break down the barriers separating different levels of employees, drama societies were sponsored by a number of progressive corporations, such as Lyons Teashops and cocoa manufacturers Rowntree and Cadbury (p81).

Shakespeare dominated the repertory of amatuer dramatic groups partly because his plays were labor intensive. Where most modern plays had small casts, Elizabethan drama offered roles to battaliions of actors, musicians, dancers, dressmakers, and set builders (p81).

That was a vital consideration when 400 people, with much enthusiasm and mixed talents, showed up at an organizational meeting. Said Gilbert Murray “The Merchant of Venice had been produced by a boy’s club in one of the worst parts of the East End, and the Shylock who had so thrilled me was a boy of 16 (p82).

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The *Andromache* had been given by a working girls' club in a very poor neighbourhood. And I thought of these boys and girls taking into their poor homes the beauty and splendour of two of the world's greatest masterpieces (p82).

If I had any doubt of the power of drama as an instrument of education in its highest sense, it was resolved that evening. Though the drama was a disciplined group activity, it offered the kind of intellectual stimulation and freedom that had always been the prime objective of autodidacts (p82).

R Gregson, a cotton mill worker turned factory clerk believed that knowledge was most valuable when acquired "as a by-product of one's own originality and special turn of mind. I know what a working class home life means with few outlets for emotional "release" save the "pub" or the "chapel" (p82).

"I know the mental apathy and the crippled spirit they engender. I have spent my life fighting against this state of mind and temper, both in myself and in my fellows. The working-man's instinct is to distrust beauty when he is made to see it (p82).

"Talk to him of what life means to you, and he will confide to his neighbour, behind your back, that you are a bit funny sometimes!". "Before a player can be anything but a stick", he went on "he must try, at the cost of violence to his timid reserve, to become someone else" (p83).

"He must conquer his inbred repression, rouse his dormant spirit, practice insight and understanding of the "other fellow", and the pleasure of this, the freedom and relief it brings in train, will result in the practice of the imaginative faculty off the stage as well as on" (p83).

As another workman put it "there's no use trying to be somebody else unless you try to feel what he feels". Said one of the actors in the *Merchant of Venice* "I've been miles away from myself tonight, and I feel pounds lighter for it" (p83).

Especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, after the achievement of mass literacy but before radio and television, working-class culture was saturated by the spirit of mutual education. Every day, information and ideas were exchanged in literally millions of commonplace settings - parlors and kitchens, workplaces and shops (p83).

Everywhere informal groups of militant workingmen, even from the London police force, came together for intellectual discourse. A circle of radical constables clubbed together to buy used BBC classical records from a Shaftesbury Avenue shop (p83).

They read Proust and Spengler, Macaulay and Gibbon, Tom Paine and Cobbett, Hume and Herbert Spencer. They never missed a Harold Laski public lecture. They went in a solid phalanx to hear Shaw, Belloc, and Chesterton debate at Kingsway Hall (p83).

And they formed an archeological group to look for relics of Norman and Roman London whenever they happened to have freshly excavated building sites on their beats. The tailoring factories of the Jewish East End offered the same kind of radical ferment (p83).

In the sweatshop Hymie Fagan was pleased to call “my university”, the shop steward introduced him to Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* and *The Iron Heel*, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, and the *Ragged Trousered Philantropists* (p83).

There were passionate and sophisticated shopfloor debates about Tolstoy, Gorky, Pushkin, Zola, Anatole France, Zangwill, Sholem Aleichen, religion, Zionism and the recent Russian revolution. Workers would reenact Morris Moscovitch performing a Yiddish Hamlet in the style of Henry Irving (p84).

Meanwhile, the second generation was making good use of the Whitechapel Public Library. It has acquired legendary status as a haven where Jewish slum kids could escape overcrowded flats and plunge into books, but there also study was a social activity (p84).

“It was not only a place where one could just about get an hour’s homework done in four hours, but a meeting place for boys and girls, recalled one member. “It was something like a drugstore without the coloured drinks” (p84).

“The girls of many different schools sat there and the boys of other schools helped them with their homework. There was much conversation and some rowdiness despite a stern librarian”.

By far the most pervasive form of mutual education was, quite simply, reading aloud. In pubs and on street corners, the communal reading of newspapers multiplied their audience far beyond their circulation figures (p84).

In workshops, one laborer commonly read aloud while the others divided his share of the work. Even the illiterate, the sight-impaired, and eternally busy housewives could share to some extent the world of print (p84).

All these influences combined to produce a shared literary culture in which books were practically seen as public property, before public libraries reached most of the country. It was a culture that extended even to Flora Thomson’s rural Oxfordshire (p84).

“Modern writers who speak of the booklessness of the poor at that time must mean books as possessions”, she wrote; “there were always books to borrow”. At home, besides the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress*, there were volumes that some neighbours had discarded when they left town: *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Cromm’s* fairy tales, *The Daisy Chain*, and Mrs. Molesworth’s *Cuckoo Clock* (p85).

Her uncle, a shoemaker, had once carted home from a country house auction a large collection of old books that no one would buy: novels, poetry, sermons histories, dictionaries. She read him *Cranford* while he worked in his shop, where he would discuss politics, science, and religion with locals (p85).

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Later, she could borrow from her employer, the village postmistress, Shakespeare, and Byron's Don Juan; as well as Jane Austen, Dickens, and Trollope from the Mechanics institute library. The women held parties where they sewed clothing for the poor while one of them read aloud (p85).

The penny reading, as it was called, was dying out in most parts of the country by the 1890s, but it was still popular in these rural villages. But a conspicuously precocious reader was likely to arouse resentment among the neighbours: (p85)

"None of their children had learned to read before they went to school, and then only under compulsion. There was a good deal of unkindness and jealousy among the parents over the one annual prize for Scripture. Those whose children had not done well in examinations would never believe that the success of others was due to merit" (p85).

"The successful ones were spoken of as "favourites" and disliked. The parents of those who had passed the examinations were almost apologetic. "Tis all luck" they would say. Their ideal for themselves and their children was to keep to the level of the normal. To them outstanding ability was no better than outstanding stupidity" (p86).

The great virtue of mutual improvement was a general sharing of knowledge, its greatest drawback was a corollary distrust of private study, which was regarded as selfish and unneighbourly. The mother of Ruth Johnson made it clear that reading was not only a distraction from housework, but unsociable as well (p86).

As a Lancashire millhand she "had become so habituated to the continuous clamour of the machines that, for her, silence had become almost an unnatural and unfriendly state. Silence should be devoted to speech, and not frittered away in a still deeper and uncommunicative void of book-reading" (p86).

The miner and novelist J. G. Greenwood aroused resentment among his workmates because he devoted mealtimes to reading rather than conversation. Communing with nature in search of poetic inspiration could generate an even greater hostility (p86).

As one sympathetic observer recalled, Alfred Williams, the poet of the Swindon railway works "was considered mad by those villagers to whom animals were just animals either of value or pests according to type" (p86).

"By most of his workmates in the forge he was not appreciated. His omission to join them in small talk while waiting between heats was construed by them as snobbishness". Any kind of serious writing involved prolonged solitude and rumination, and ran against the grain of working-class culture, as Margaret Thomson Davis discovered when she began her career as a novelist (p86)

"Writers were a different breed from us. They lived in a different world. Indeed it was hard to imagine such creatures existing in flesh and blood at all. They were so far removed from the tenement flat in the middle of Glasgow, in which we lived (p86)

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“For anyone in such an environment to have writing pretensions was treated with the utmost suspicion. More than that, it aroused in one’s friends, neighbours and relations acute embarrassment, shame, discomfort and downright hostility” (p86).

“There’s a lot more important things you could be doing than sitting there scribbling”, her mother scolded. “Give that floor a good scrub, for instance”. Her father complained of the cost of keeping the light burning at night, and was outraged when he found her using the typewriter he had on loan from his union for his work as branch secretary (p86).

When she announced her first acceptance from a publisher, her family responded with embarrassed silence, then resumed talking about the weather. “I felt terribly ashamed” she recalled. The unspoken belief had been confirmed, that there always had been something odd about me” (p87).

It was worse for one of her friends, an uneducated Irish laborer. When he shut himself in a bedroom to write, his anxious family held a conference and did everything to dissuade him. “There’s something far wrong with a man who writes letters to himself”, his brother exploded (p87).

“If you’d just been a pouf or a priest could have talked to you or one of us could have battered it out of you. But what the hell can anybody do about a writer?”. When he received his first check for a short story, his mother was convinced that he had committed some kind of fraud and insisted that he return it (p87).

And when a television play of his was reviewed “his mother was shocked and said that theirs had been a respectable family until then; never once had any of their names been in the paper”. Reading was acceptable provided it was a collective activity, as it commonly was in working-class homes (p87).

In the turn-of-the-century Bolton, Alice Foley was delegated to borrow books from the public library for her entire family. At home the books were doled out to her several brothers and sisters. But to her mother a roomful of children reading quietly was practically an insult (p87).

Her attitude was understandable; she was illiterate, and silent reading cut her off from literature. It was entirely different when her husband read aloud from Dickens and George Elliot, or when Alice offered to read *Alice in Wonderland*: (p87)

“To my surprise, mother entered quite briskly into the activities of the rabbit hole. From that time onwards I became mother’s official reader and almost every day I returned from school she would say coxingly “Let’s have a chaphur” (p87).

The tradition of collective reading pervasively reinforced the importance of literature and education, even in the many working-class families that were indifferent or even hostile to culture. “It would be easy to summarize my memories of home in one word - quarrels”, wrote Harry M Burton, in his memoir of a bleak London street before the First World War (p87).

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“We never bought a book, never went to an art gallery, a concert or a theatre, except to a pantomime”. His father, an irregularly employed housepainter, liked a “stirring novel” but nothing more challenging than Conan Doyle. “He had no use whatever for anything remotely approaching the spiritual in art, literature, or music, and he seldom took the trouble to conceal his contempt” (p87).

And yet the whole family read and, on some level, took pleasure in sharing and discussing their reading. His mother recited serials from the Family Reader and analyzed them at length with grandma over a cup of tea (p87).

When mutual improvement alumni graduated to the ancient universities, they were likely to be disillusioned. “I had been used to the informal learning situation provided by Mutual Improvement, and with the ample opportunities they provided for questions and discussion” explained ex-fitter and Oxford adult student John Allaway “and I was amazed at the formality of the university lecture system” (p88)

“the aloofness of the university from his students, the perfunctoriness of much of the teaching and the evident reluctance of many university teachers to answer questions or to allow themselves to be drawn into discussion” (p88).

When Derek Davies attended Oxford after the Second World War, “the elderly dons and their Edwardian attitudes consorted ill with the Brave New World I was looking for”. He achieved “emancipation” later, in the living rooms of his fellow schoolteachers.

“There I found, of ten without being able to analyse consciously the components, a style of living which rapidly became my ideal. There was talk and argument, and books and music, and pictures on the wall that clearly did something more than merely fill up space” (p88).

The universities did supply the privacy necessary for intensive study, which was in short supply in working-class homes. “Homework was a bit of a problem because our house was hardly ever quiet, and no one sat still for long” recalled scholarship girl Elizabeth Flint whose father worked a vegetable barrow in the East End (p88).

“Certainly, no one would alter their ways for the sake of homework. If they thought about it at all, which is doubtful, they would have regarded it as mild lunacy on my part” (p88).

As late as 1949, Jack Lawson could write: “A library for a workman means a corner in the kitchen or in the sitting room. It is a triumph when he gets a real bookcase or presentable bookshelves in a room apart from workday affairs (p88).

Every workman knows the stages and the progress from no books to books, from books in the kitchen to books in a separate room. These stages are the milestones of his life. Even when parents cleared the

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kitchen table and gave their children every encouragement, cramming for examinations could be an alienating experience (p89).

Dennis Marsden came from a solidly respectable, library-using family. His father owned an Esperanto dictionary, lectured on Malthus before a mutual improvement society, enjoyed Shakespeare, Jane Austen, the Brontes, Dickens, Hardy, Conrad, Galsworthy, and Palgrave's Golden Treasury (p89).

He had been an exceptional essay-writer in school before leaving at thirteen to work in the mills for five shillings a week, and he found a bitter-sweet satisfaction in the successes of the next generation. Of his fifteen children, nieces, and nephews, all but one passed scholarship examinations, most attended grammar school, five took university degrees, three others attended teacher training colleges, and one became a doctor (p89).

There was no caning at Marsden's grammar school, but there was relentless cramming. The fact that his parents sacrificed enormously for his education added to the psychological pressures, for they, aimed at nothing less than Oxford or Cambridge - "You show 'em, Dennis lad" (p89).

"This was a family effort", said Dennis, "but the divide between us was growing". When his brother only won a scholarship to Leeds University, his parents complained that he had spent too much time with his youth club (p89).

Marsden shut down his social activities and lived almost in "suspended animation, a kind of monastic novitiate. Only one of my close friends had any sort of relationship with girls. For the rest of us sex was confined to fantasy or lone visits to American musicals, which involved me very painfully at times (p89).

"I was emotionally frozen, and sex came to have two aspects for me. It was a danger to academic work. And more than that it was lower-class. For anyone who had spoken before a mutual improvement society, attended a WEA class, or read aloud bits from the evening paper in the kitchen, education was a social activity, not essentially different from the fellowship of the pub, chapel or trade union (p89).

Knowledge was something to be shared around. The scholarship student, in contrast, had to withdraw into a shell and hoard as much information as possible: "To ask for silence was to offend the life of the family, was to go against it in its natural moments of coming together" (p90).

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“So many learned the early habit of working with the wireless on and the family talking, of building a cone of silence around themselves. These long homework hours could generate hostility, misunderstanding, irritation and jealousy; and many mothers had to make a special effort to take it under their protection, to create a new rhythm around it” (p90).

Ironically, the conflicts worsened as educational opportunities opened up to working-class children. Mutual improvement societies enabled some of their alumni to rise out of their class, but they could at least feel that they had all helped each other in the disinterested pursuit of knowledge (p90).

By the mid-twentieth century, the proliferation of scholarships pressured bright students to abandon the ideal of cooperative liberal education for intense academic competition. Jeremy Seabrook was painfully sensitive to the change. His mother worked in a boot and shoe factory (p90).

“For her”, Jeremy said, “education represented the chance for working-class people to think for themselves and take control of their own destiny; by the time I came to be educated it had become a process elaborated specifically to avoid this” (p90).

“We went to the school she had attended thirty years earlier, but it was no longer a place where being clever was consoled with gold-embossed books. Cleverness had become something to be isolated and fostered, like a culture of bacteria, in a vessel free from contamination” (p90).

Exceptional students were now set apart in a classroom where “we underwent a programme of social rather than academic training. We were treated like postulants to a closed order”. Seabrook won his scholarship, but by then the glittering prizes were meaningless (p91).

When his teacher rewarded him with Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare, “I told her that I really didn’t like Shakespeare, but we needed a teapot stand” (p91).

## The Difference Between Fact and Fiction

Books were read similarly as fiction and non-fiction. The reader could simultaneously know and forget that fiction was fiction. As a boy, the poet John Clare consumed 6d romances of Cinderella and Jack and the Beanstalk “and great was the pleasure and pain, or surprise increased by allowing them authenticity, for I firmly believed every page I read and considered I possessed in these the chief learning and literature of the country (p93).

He also had a neighbour who “believes everything that he sees in print as true and has a cupboard full of penny books”. Why were even the most fantastic chapbooks commonly read as true? Consider the factor of intertextuality (p93).

If readers’ responses to one text are shaped by another the the second question any historian must ask is “What else were they reading?”. In this case, three books in particular stand out: the Bible, Pilgrim’s Progress, and Robinson Crusoe (p93).

In the memoirs of common readers they are frequently discussed together, and men from humble backgrounds such as miner’s MP Thomas Burt, remembered reading Pilgrim’s Progress or Robinson Crusoe as literal truth (p93).

By way of explanation, it is sometimes suggested that the credibility of a story can be enhanced simply by setting it in print. But if print inherently enhances credibility, why do more educated readers read it more skeptically? Something else is at work here. Fiction is a frame, a fairly sophisticated literary convention that must be learned. We are not born with this strategy of reading (p94).

In their first encounters with literature, the initial assumption of uneducated readers is that the stories must be true. That is the frame we all start with. A joiner’s son in an early nineteenth century Scottish village recalled the phenomenon when he read his first novel (p94).

“I literally devoured it. A new world seemed to dawn upon me. I was so green, so innocent. I may as well say so unsophisticated was I, that I believed every word it contained. I never saw a novel before. I did not know the meaning of the word “fiction” (p94).

“My little mind was in a state of unhesitating receptivity, and so deep an impression did this work make up on its fresh incipient tablet that even now I can hardly divest myself of that impression. It is with an effort that I can realise these characters are airy, mythical creations of his exuberant fancy” (p94).

It requires some training to distinguish fact from fiction, and still more training to distinguish fiction from lies. But all readers start with the assumption that all stories are true. How do they learn that some stories are not (p94).

That happens when one encounters two texts that cannot both be true. If a reader is exposed only to a limited range of texts, which basically agree with each other, then there is no basis for concluding that any of them are fiction (p94).

Common readers could read all these texts in the same way: as ripping yarns, but also as gospel truth. As a boy stonemason Hugh Miller first learned to appreciate the pleasures of literature in the “most delightful of all narratives - the story of Joseph” (p95).

Once Miller had learned to read scripture as a story, he soon found similar and equally gripping tales in chapbooks of Jack the Giant Killer, Sinbad the Sailor, Beauty and the Beast, and Aladdin. I next succeeded in discovering for myself a child's book, or not less interest than even the illiad." (p95). It was Pilgrims Progress, with wonderful woodcut illustrations. And from there it was a short step to Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver's Travels. When radical weaver Samuel Bamford first discovered Pilgrim's Progress, it impressed him as a thrilling illustrated romance. Then the "new testament became my story book, and I read it all through and through, but more for the interest the marvellous passages excited, than from any religious impression which they created" (p95).

At a bookshop he picked up stories about witches, Robin Hood, Jack the Giant Killer, St. George and the Dragon, and the History of the Seven Champions. Since these stories followed the same narrative conventions, there was no reason to doubt them (p95).

"For my part I implicitly believed them all, and when told by my father or others that they were 'trash' and 'nonsense', and 'could not be true', I, innocently enough, contrasted their probability with that of other wonderous things which I had read in books that 'it were a sin to disbelieve' i.e. the bible (p95). Soldier's son Joseph Barker likewise first read the Bible "chiefly as a work of history, and was very greatly delighted with many of its stories. One effect was to lead me to regard miracles as nothing improbable" (p95).

Consequently, his response to Pilgrim's Progress was the same: "My first impression was, that it was literal and true - that there was, somewhere in the world, a real city of destruction and a new Jerusalem" (p95).

Ghost stories, highwayman stories, fairy tales, Paradise Lost, and Daniel Defoe were all equally credible. "I was naturally a firm believer in all that was gravely spoken or printed", he recalled. "I doubted nothing that I found in the books. I had no idea at the time I read Robinson Crusoe that there were such a thing as novels, works of fiction, in existence" (p96).

Another reader of Bunyan and Defoe claimed that we "believed every fact we read as readily as if there had not been such a thing as fiction in the world. We never heard of people making books of things that were not true (p96).

The notion that there can be different versions of the same story - suggesting that no version is absolutely true - is again an acquired literary convention. Growing up in Colchester with access to few books besides an illustrated Bible and some children's chapbooks, laborers son Thomas Carter had no opportunity to learn that (p96).

Therefore he not only read revelations literally, he assumed that the books of Kings and Chronicles were "unconnected narratives of two distinct series of events. I was indeed, sometimes perplexed by the apparently repeated occurances of events so nearly resembling each other; nor could I perceive the exact design or bearing of these events; but I knew no one of whom I could ask for the needed explanation" (p96).

"I did not know that the poet's business is rather to present pictures of what ought to be than of what really is; and therefore I regarded Thomson's Seasons beautiful and impressive descriptions of rural life and manners as being strictly in accordance with existing realities" (p96).

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Those who only had access to a limited range of books, all of which offered the same view of reality, had no reason to doubt any of them. For the first time, newspapers were offering a competing source of information, and younger people who read these were inclined to question the Bible (p97).

It would be too simple, however, to say that they had become more critical and discerning readers, rather, there had been a transference of credulity from the word of God to the word of Journalists. Many villagers were prepared to admit that the “tale of Johah and the whale, for instance, took a good deal of swallowing. But the newspaper everybody believed in (p97).

‘I seed it in the paper, so it must be true’ was a saying calculated to clinch any argument”. When a reader first encountered something that did not square with Scripture, he might embrace it as a surrogate bible rather than treat both texts skeptically (p97).

That was the response to some working-class radicals to Darwin, and later to Marx. Even into the early twentieth century, many older working people had not learned a different method of reading. Thomas Jones recalled that his mother, a Rhymney straw-hat maker, “was fifty before she read a novel and to her dying day she had not completely grasped the nature of fiction or or drama” (p97).

When she read Tom Jones “She believed every word of it and could not conceive how a man could sit down and invent the story of Squire Allworthy and Sophia and Tom out of his head”. The less able the working class were able to read a book themselves, the greater was their desire to know its contents (p98).

As common readers read more widely, they generally learned to read more critically. Attending a performance of *The Merchant of Venice*, so gripped was John Clare by Portia’s judgement that he left from the box and assaulted Shylock. That was a common reaction among working-class audiences as late as 1900 (p98).

When the melodrama *Grip of Iron* called for someone to be strangled on stage, “Pandemonium broke out at times as the audience was, for the moment, convinced that he was being cruelly murdered. They became so perturbed and restless that, on occasion, the progress of the play had to stop to allow the hostile feelings to die down” (p99).

In one Pirandellian performance a local amateur, playing the villain in a melodrama, resisted furiously when arrested by a stage policeman, precipitating an actual brawl that was warmly encouraged by the audience and had to be broken up by genuine policemen (p99).

“Well it was real life to me, y’know” remembered a devotee of melodramas at the Britannia in Hoxton Street. In the theater as well, fiction is a convention that has to be learned. By 1900, thanks to compulsory education and cheap reading matter, even relatively unsophisticated readers knew not to believe everything they saw in print (p99).

The stage was a new medium for many Victorian working people: those who had migrated from rural areas, where there were no theaters, and those who grew up in nonconformist households, where plays were regarded as sinful (p99).

The audience had to learn first that the theater is make-believe, but even when they gave their intellectual assent to that proposition, they might still view the drama through the same frame that they viewed real life, and respond accordingly (p99).

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They had yet to master the very different frame that governed theater - the prohibition against talking during performances, the stricter prohibition against audience participation, the fiction performances of the "fourth wall" and so on (p99).

One can understand why so many radicals were convinced that Shakespeare would emancipate the working classes and why the early methodists feared that drama would subvert religious orthodoxy. In the cinema, working-class audiences commonly engaged in a running dialogue with the characters on the screen, carrying over the habit from theatrical melodrama (p101).

Silent movie titles would be read aloud by a chorus of children's voices, an effective lesson in literacy for their elders. "Films were still far too real for anybody to be cynical about them. It was the utterly convincing reality of these scenes which compelled us to behave as though we were at the point of joining in upon them (p101).

Stoker's son Emlyn Williams found the images on the screen more authentic than his neighbours: "It occupied the foreground of my life. Since 1913 films had opened with the censor's certificate, and one might assume that this would signal to an audience that what they were about to see was less than the unvarnished truth (p101).

As William's recalled "I never wondered what a censor was, it was merely a fatherly message: 'yes, your film is here, enjoy it'". In America under the New Deal, opinion polls revealed that radio enjoyed a much higher level of public confidence than the newspaper press (p102).

Students must now be warned that the Internet is not an impeccable source. Of course, the same process of textual interpretation could happen in the opposite direction. Readers might at first assume that everything should be read as fact, but once they mastered the concept of fiction, they could apply that frame to books that were supposed to be read as truth (p102).

Thomas Thompson, when asked by a clergyman why he read the bible, he innocently replied "that I liked the battle stories". The answer got him into serious trouble, but any good Sunday School teacher knew that the action heroes of the Old Testament could be as rousing as Charles Kingsley (p102).

In school, farm laborer Richard Hillyer enjoyed Scripture in the same spirit as *Black Beauty*, *Treasure Island*, the *Pickwick Papers*, and *Masterman Ready*: "If you liked books at all the bible was as exciting as any, it was so full of turbulence and strangeness. You could feel the heat of the desert, and hear the camel bells, as the caravans passed over the wild roads to ancient cities" (p102).

John Paton was raised in the Aberdeen slums on a diet of penny dreadfuls and he found similar thrills in the bible, at least in the earlier episodes. "I revelled in the same way in the bloodier scenes of the old testament while the moralities of the new testament made no contact with my mind" (p103).

One shop boy in Victorian London bought an illustrated Bible at a stall for 3d and then skipped the dull parts to "pick out chapters here and there that told of wonderful and magical things, like there are in the *Arabian Nights* and just as hard to believe in" (p103).

As children, Miller James Saunders and his sister enjoyed an old family History of the Bible, though "our attention was more taken by the pictures than the actual text. They may have been crude and original, but they were impressive, and we took our ideas accordingly (p103).

They particularly wondered how the whale swallowed Jonah, who was “dressed in suitable English costume”. It was some time before Jack Common realized that the real hero of the story was Jesus, not one of the kings or warriors (p103).

“Jesus in contrast looked crashingly dull. He was so stiff, starched and perfectly proper. I could imagine myself as David slinging stones at Goliath, or Samson tearing a lion into strips or Peter cutting off the ear of the servant of the high priest. These were all living men for me, but Jesus? No! He never came to life for me and never has” (p104).

Even an unillustrated bible could be read in a highly visual, cinematic fashion. What fascinated was not the tedious ceremonials of Leviticus, but the special effects of Ezekiel’s vision of the Apocalypse. When young, Frederick Rogers read not only the Bible as a thriller but also Pilgrim’s Progress: (p104)

“There is a dark street yet in East London along which I have run with beating heart lest I should meet any of the evil things Bunyan so vividly described. I made no distinction between Pilgrim’s progress and the bible. Both were simply exciting stories (p104).

In homes where fiction was banned, Bunyan could unintentionally offer the wonderful revelation that literature could appeal to the imagination. Elizabeth Rignall, a London painter’s daughter was not permitted to read anything else on Sundays, so she treated Pilgrim’s progress as a horror comic (p104). At age ten, Harry West, the son of a circus escape artist, read Pilgrim’s Progress merely as a great heroic adventure. Only later did he appreciate it as a religious allegory, and still later, after his exposure to Jung and Freud, he came to discover “it as one of the greatest, most potent works on practical psychology” (p105).

Pilgrim’s Progress was by far the most widely stocked work of fiction in the mid-nineteenth century prison libraries and one of the most frequently requested by prisoners. Though Bunyan was disseminated by the governing classes to make the working classes more deferential, he often had exactly the opposite effect (p105).

Emrys Daniel Hughes, son of a Welsh miner, first read Pilgrim’s progress as an illustrated adventure story. When he was jailed during the first world war for refusing conscription, he reread it, and discovered a very different book: (p105)

“Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s progress”, he said “was one of the great books that showed great understanding of the life of man, of his setting out on a long and dangerous journey and winning through ultimately to final victory and to the end of the quest” (p105).

For the founding fathers of the Labour Party, it was a revolutionary manifesto “to create a new heaven and a new earth”, to quote G.H. Roberts (p105). Scripture supplied a fund of imagery, allusions, parables, and quotations for the first generation of Labour party orators (p106).

Despite the disapproval of her comrade Palme Dutt, Helen Crawford found Communist propaganda in Scripture, which was certainly more palatable than Marx to the Scottish working women she addressed. According to her unauthorized version, “The lamb dumb before her shearers, represented the uncritical exploited working class” (p106).

The bible and bunyan, then , were both read through the same set of interchangeable frames: literal, fictional, allegorical, spiritual, political. Much the same was true of the one book that could match their readership (p106)

When adolescent school boys were asked to name their favorite books in an 1888 survey, Robinson Crusoe was the clear winner, with its derivative Swiss Family Robinson in second place. How was Defoe's documentary fiction actually read? "Now we are bound to see it as profoundly imperialist, both in Robinson's relations to Friday, and in the stimulus it gave young Englishmen to go out and join in the adventure of the British Empire" asserts Martin Greene (p107).

Though it seems absurdly racist today, "it has been read with enthusiasm by non-Englishmen. It was translated into every language from Ashanti to Zulu, and we hear more of the inspiration it gave coloured readers than of their revolt against it" (p107).

Crusoe presumes to own and trade human beings, though he knows from experience the life of a slave. For that sin he is banished to an island where division of labour has been completely abolished, where he received exactly the value of his own work (p107).

The shipwreck teaches him that money is worthless, that usefulness is the only measure of value. His attempts to convert Friday to Christianity backfire when the native poses the kind of innocent questions, "Why God no kill the Devil?", that expose the contradictions of Western theology, and force Crusoe to recognise that heathens are often more moral than Christians (p107).

Pat Rogers concludes that early readers of Crusoe "responded to the book as a story of survival, as an epic of mastery over the hostile environment, as a parable of conquest over fear, isolation, and despair" (p108).

For Thomas Spence and his followers, Robinson Crusoe had a radically egalitarian message. A Newcastle netmaker and schoolteacher, Spence argued that all land should be owned collectively by the parishes and leased out, with the rental income used to support social services (p108).

Robinson Crusoe made innumerable plebeian readers discontented with their station in life and eager to explore (p108).

For John Clare, it "was the first book of any merit I got hold of after I could read" and it set in motion an early ferment. At age twelve ploughboy John Ward said "I devoured - not read, that's too tame an expression - Robinson Crusoe, and that book gave me all my spirit of adventure which has made me strike new ideas before the old ones become antiquated, and landed me into many troubles, travels, and difficulties" (p109).

These included agitating against the British in Sudan, organizing a navvie's trade union, becoming a Labour MP, and building up a personal library of more than 700 volumes. Some landlubbers recalled that it made them want to run away to the sea (p109).

In the 1930s one old seaman claimed that nearly all English sailors used to read Robinson Crusoe: "I consider that Defoe sent more boys to sea than any other person who ever lived". It was Thomas Jordan's favorite book, read through in one sitting at the age of eleven. The promise of "faraway places fired my imagination" and ultimately inspired him, the son of an illiterate miner, to leave the pits of his Durham mining village and join the Army (p109).

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From there he went on to diligent reading on his own and studying with the Workers' Educational Association. The language of *Crusoe* might not be easy for children, but far from being intimidated, they often used it to expand their language skills. "I found it fascinating but difficult", remembered one handicapped boy (p109).

"The words I didn't understand I just skipped over, yet managed to get a good idea of what the story was about", wrote James Murray, the son of a Scottish shoemaker. "By the time I was ten or eleven years old I did not need to skip any words in any book because they then I had a good grounding in roots and derivations" (p109).

When asked by his schoolteacher which books they had read, Murray rattled off titles by Ballantyne, Kingston, and Dickens until "I realized the eyes of everyone in the room were on me. Some of the boys and girls had only written one book down, some had written two, a few had not read any books and were completely stuck" (p109).

*Robinson Crusoe*, it has been argued, appealed to a new middle-class reading public. Freed from manual labour, they found thrills and some nostalgia in the story of a man who could provide for all his survival needs with his own hands (p109).

That may be true, but laborers also identified with the story - because they were still doing that kind of work (p109). At the close of the nineteenth century, on a farm in the Derbyshire Peak District, *Robinson Crusoe* was read aloud every winter, and it never palled on the audience (p110).

It was even more popular than *Pilgrim's Progress*: "Christian on his journey met giants and evil men, but *Robinson Crusoe* fought against the elements, the wind and rain, lightning and the tempest, droughts and floods. He lived a life they could understand" (p110).

In a hierarchical and conformist society that offered little freedom for the laboring classes, *Crusoe* was reread as a fable of individualism. It showed what one working man could do without landlords, clergymen, or capitalists. *Crusoe's* reflections on the worthlessness of gold on a desert island spoke with particular force to an audience of rural laborers (p111).

Only one other author ever matched the steady and overwhelming popularity of Defoe and Bunyan. *The Pickwick Papers* by David Copperfield were among a Belfast Public Library's four most requested books. George Acorn, growing up in extreme poverty in London's East End, scraped together 3d. to buy a used copy of *David Copperfield* (p111).

His parents punished him when they learned he had wasted so much money on a book, but later he read it to them: "And how we all loved it, and eventually, when we got to little Emily, and how we all cried together at poor old Peggotty's distress! The tears united us, deep in misery as we were ourselves." (p111)

"Dickens was a fairy musician to us, filling our minds with a sweeter strain than the constant cry of hunger, or the howling wind which often, taking advantage of the empty grate, penetrated the room" (p111).

Most working people had to struggle with the art of recording their lives, and they cited Dickens, more than anyone else, as the man who got it right. "It seemed that the world he described was more real

than the world among us. Here was compensation for the things we missed, if you can be said to miss things of whose existence you are but faintly aware” (p112).

While the first wave of modernist critics was dismissing Dickens as a melodramatic caricaturist, working people were reading his novels as documentaries, employing the same frame that their grandparents had applied to Bunyan (p112).

The new testament taught the principle of forbearance and Dickens supplied the technique of it. Perhaps Dickens’s most important gift to the working class was the role he played in making them articulate (p114).

He provided a fund of allusions, characters, tropes, and situations that could be drawn upon by people who were not trained to express themselves on paper. For people who had never been taught ho to tell their own histories, Dickens supplied the necessary lessons (p115).

## A Conservative Canon

Alf Garnett and his American cousin, Archie Bunker, may be caricatures of working-class cultural conservatism but cultural conservatism is a real phenomenon in industrial societies. Literary canons may change over time but at any given point, the reading tastes of the British working classes lagged a generation behind those of the educated classes. A cultural conservatism often coexisted with political radicalism (p116).

Reading tastes among the affluent were quite up-to-date in the provinces as well as in the heart of the Caledonian metropolis. Leadhills, in contrast, was much slower to shift its collection from religion to fiction (p116).

At Wanlockhead, fiction would not overtake theology until the early twentieth century (p116).

Some Scottish working-class libraries banned fiction altogether, at least until the success of Sir Walter Scott forced them to change or die (p116).

In 1837 miners at Leadhills and Wanlockhead refused to accept George Combe's *Constitution of Man* because they considered it hostile to revealed religion. Combe was in fact a radical, dismissive of classical literature, and a vocal advocate of phrenology, scientific reason, shorter working hours, and female education (p117).

Janet Hamilton grew up among Scottish weavers who read newspapers together and discussed parliamentary politics, but whose reading was otherwise almost entirely theological. In her village, some religious periodicals circulated, but no secular magazines (p117).

When local workingmen, farmers, and schoolteachers set up a subscription library, half the books they voted to acquire were religious (p117). This attachment to religious literature held up the development of secular magazines. It took a generation of political activism as well as the popularity of Burns, Wordsworth, Byron and Scott - to prepare the working classes for Chamber's *Edinburgh Journal* and the *Penny Magazine* (p118).

Perhaps the most popular proletarian author of the century was Hugh Miller, a Scottish stonemason who achieved great celebrity as a geological writer. Miller's continuing popularity may be an indicator of persistent working-class resistance to Darwin (p118).

When Jim Bullock wrote an examination essay on coal formation, his father, a Yorkshire miner and Baptist fundamentalist, tossed the paper in the fire, appalled that his son's treatment of geology so clearly contradicted Scripture (p118).

Urban working class militants like T.A. Jackson had been promoting Darwinism as a weapon against evangelical religion - only to discover that they too were behind intellectual fashion. "The Darwinian battle had not only been fought and won for middle and upper class culture", Jackson observed, "the ultra-left were still irring beyond Darwin into neo-Lamarckism (p118).

In proletarian circles the fight still had to be won". As an apprentice, Jackson relied upon secondhand bookshops and cheap out-of-copyright reprints for his reading: "There was thus a perceptible time-lag between the culture of the reading section of the proletariat and that of the middle and upper classes" (p118).

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Before the First World War, elderly Lankarshire miners were kn own as “fourpenny professors” because they attended village schools at four pence a week and were solidly grounded in theology. But they rarely read daily newspapers or contemporary authors (p119).

There were still a few mechanical institute veterans who had never accepted fiction as “improving literature”. One of them was appalled to find his grandson reading a novel from a public library. The novel was Anna Karenina. “What are you doing with this trash? Read proper books, young man - proper books” (p120).

The high cost of new books and literary periodicals wa an obstacle to the working-class reader, but not an insurmountable one. Every industrial town of any size had at least one secondhand bookstall in the market square (p120).

First editions of books in nineteenth century Britain could be very expensive, but eventually they would pass out of vogue and end up in the 2d. bookstalls. A generation or two later they would become collectors items (p121).

Only in the intervening window of unfashionability would they be affordable for the working-class autodidact, whose reading would therefore always be a certain distance behind the times. Welsh collier Joseph Keating was able to immerse himself in Swift, Pope, Fielding, Richardson, smollett, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Keats, Byron, Shelly, Dickens and Greek philosophy (p121).

The common denominator of all these authors was that they were all dead. “Volumes by living authors were too high priced for me”, Keating explained. “Our school-books never mentioned living writers; and the impression in my mind was that an author’s work was all the better if he died of neglect and starvation” (p121).

Nineteenth century popular culture was dominated by one dead author in particular, and Victorian “bardolatry” was driven largely by working-class demand. A London reporter described the proletarian audience for an 1872 production of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s tale*: (p122)

“Without knowing anything of poetry they felt the wondrous power of the poet’s genius, and thefir flushed faces and brightened eyes betokened the thrill which some of the magnificent passages sent among them” (p122).

As one Birmingham reviewer noted in 1885: “The pit has had a dramatic education, and the pit knows at once what is good bad or indifferent. The criticism of the pit if rough and ready, is formed on a sound basis” (p122).

Before the cinema, caravans of barnstorming actors brought shakespeare to Durham mining villages, often using local talent for the lesser roles. “I knew several men who could recite long passages from Shakespeare’s plays impromptu at any time”, recalled Bradford millworker F.W. Jowett (p122).

“One man, a workmate of mine who could neither read nor write, never missed seeing a good play and could appraise the actors with sound judgement”. These enthusiasts were not crowding into the theaters out of deference to middle-class tastes (p122).

For many of them, Shakespeare was a proletarian hero who spoke directly to working people. One weaver’s son made that point by translating *The Merchant of Venice* into a Lancashire dialect. One ex-

ploughboy proclaimed: "It was Shakespeare who taught me to say, 'I am a true laborer: I earn what I eat, get what I wear, owe no man's hate, eveny no man's happiness, glad of other men's good'" (p123). The plays also provided a language of radical political mobilization. Jailed for incitement to riot in 1919, Manny Shinwell kept his spirits up by reading the plays and taking notes on them. on his release, his notebook was taken away and returned only after most of the pages had been removed (p123)

"Shakespearean quotations, together with my reflections on man's inhumanity to man, were doubtless regarded as dangerous material by the prison authorities". Reading Julius Caesar J.R. Clynes said "the realization came to me that it was a mighty political drama" about the class struggle, "not just entertainment" (p123).

According to his comrade Will Thorne, Clynes was "the only man who ever settled a trade dispute by citing Shakespeare". He had overawed a stubborn employer by reciting an entire scene from Julius Caesar (p123).

Robert Smillie, president of the Scottish Miner's Federation, felt that his lack of education hampered his trade union work, until Shakespeare exercised his powers of thought and expression. "It was a new and enchanting world. These tragedies and comedies, to an ardent young mind which had hitherto been cribbled, cabined and confined, caught and held in the iron clutch of the industrial machine were a sheer revelation (p124)

"Outside the boards of the Bible I know of no greater mental stimulus than Shakespeare". If Shakespeare still had a proletarian following in the nineteenth century, it melted away in the twentieth. In 1910 the Leicester Pioneer noted the trend, and placed the blame squarely on the mass media and public education: Working class people have been 'Daily Mailed'" (p124).

While the popular media distracted the masses from serious literature, a bureaucratized system of compulsory education reduced Shakespeare to tedious classroom drill. It was certainly hard for a classic drama to compete with popular fiction, the music hall, and the cinema (p124).

The same workers who read a radical political message into Shakespeare had hopelessly conservative tastes in stagecraft. Even Victorian critics complained about the stodginess of plebian audiences. They "preferred their Hamlet acted in a mannered, Dated way", observed Jeremy Crump, and reserved their greatest applause for warhorse soliloquies delivered with predicatable grandiosity (p124).

As melodrama and stage literalism went out of fashion, at least among middle-class sophisticates, working-class audiences would be left far behind. A cultural gap was opening up between the classes. Artist Frank Steel was not inclined to sentimentalize the Victorian era: at his workhouse school he had been force-fed moralizing tales designed "to induce in the plastic minds of dependent children a habit of humility that, however proper some may deem it to their 'station in life', is the greatest curse of the poor" (p126).

At the dawn of the twentieth century, when literary modernism was emerging, the self-educated had only just mastered the English classics. By the time the masses caught up with post-Victorian writers, literary elites had moved on to still more advanced authors (p126).

At that time, literary education of most working-class pupils stopped in the mid-nineteenth century or even, in some cases, the eighteenth century. Yet for those at the bottom of the social scale, the most old-fashioned literary canons could be terrifically liberating (p127).

What was dimly familiar to professional intellectuals was amazingly new to autodidacts. From a classroom library, a cowman's son borrowed a book by Tennyson, simply because it had "poet laureate" printed on the cover: (p127)

"The coloured words flashed out and entranced my fantasy.", He said. "They drew pictures in the mind. Words became magical, incantations, abracadabra which called up spirits. My dormant imagination opened up like a flower in the sun" (p127)

"Life at home was drab, and colourless, with nothing to light up the dull monotony of the unchanging days. Here in books was a limitless world that I could have for my own. It was like coming up from the bottom of the ocean and seeing the universe for the first time" (p127).

Later, at a second-hand stall, he bought a four-volume *Half Hours With The Best Authors*. He explained "The all important thing was that within the battered covers were bits and pieces from a vast range of literature, people I had always wanted to read, and others I had never heard of (p127)

"The dilapidated old book opened to me the sweep and grandeur of English literature better than most professional teachers would have done. It was literature itself, not talk of literature. It made its own impact, spread the goods out in front of me, and let me make my choice (p127)

Nobody told me what I ought to like, it was just there for me to like, if I wanted to". Racing to make up for educational deficits, autodidacts often resorted to prepackaged collections of the classics. Though canons can be changed, canonization is inevitable, given that we must choose among the millions of books available to us (p128).

It is easy to sneer at Lubbock's book list, but it was enormously popular among readers like Rolph's father, who was eager to make up for an education that had been denied him, and was not ashamed to ask for help in a roadmap (p129).

Without it he might never have gone beyond authors popular in his family circle. Lubbock's book list eventually brought T.A. Jackson to Marxism, although Marx was certainly not on the list "It rescued me from the notion that the only books properly to be called "good" were prose fiction, and such history and biography as could be read as if it were prose fiction (p129)

"It drove me into reading translations of the Greek and Roman classic authors I would never have faced otherwise. It started me off upon an intensive study of English poetry and it taught me that there were other branches of literature than prose fiction (p130).

"It taught me that Shakespeare was something much more than an old bore, invented to plague the lives of schoolboys. Jailed for incitement to mutiny, Communist J.T. Murphy was amused to find that the prison library barred subversive literature but permitted Macaulay's essay on Milton - "a most powerful justification of the Cromwellian Revolution" (p130).

"It is only necessary to transpose "bourgeois revolution" to 'proletarian revolution' and you can soon think you are reading an essay by Trotsky", he noted. In addition to reading from lists like Lubbock's, autodidacts could resort to inexpensive editions of the world's greatest books (p131).

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J.M. Dent's literary tastes were naïve, old-fashioned, petit bourgeois, and blindly worshipful; but he recognized early on that the great books were an engine for equality, a body of knowledge that anyone could acquire, given basic literacy and cheap editions (p132).

Modern and postmodern critics would be less enchanted with Everyman's library specifically and, more generally, the entire species of "five-foot-shelf" packaged classics. Their creators stand accused of neglecting authors who were female, non-Western, subversive, agant-garde, or otherwise "marginalized" (p133).

When Everyman's Library finally reached volume 1,000 in 1956, the editorial director was forced to concede that many of the victorial novelists, historians and materialist philosophers were obsolete. "Already during the fifty years of the library's existence it has been perfectly clear that the standards of 'immortality' have been changing" (p134).

Still, it would be unfair to criticize Everyman's Library for failing to anticipate the literary fashions of the late twentieth century. Compared with all the earlier series of cheap classics, it represented the most deliberate and inclusive effort to assemble a library of world literature (p134).

As for women writers, Everyman's library published the Bronte sisters, Jane Austen, George Elliot, Christina Rossetti, and introduced Elizabeth Gaskell's Cranford. A vindication of the rights of women was included, as was the autobiography of Elizabeth Blackwell, the trailblazing female physician (p135). By 1975 more than 60 million copies of 1,239 Everyman volumes were sold worldwide but we can only guess how many of them were bought by British working class people. Everyman sponsored essay competitions, and it is revealing that in 1913 it received 360 essays on the topic "The Life of a Teacher", compared with more than a hundred from miners on colliery life (p136).

The average labourer was probably more reticent about putting pen to paper than a schoolmaster or business man. The safest sumise is that the working classes bought a substantial fraction of everyman's print run, amounting to several million volumes (p136).

James Murray, a Glasgow woodcarver represented the kind of reader that everyman was trying to reach. He credited everyman magazine with "opening up an entirely new set of ideas to which I had previously been a stranger. I became familiar with the names and works of all the truly great authors and poets, and now I am thoroughly convinced that I had been misplaced in my life's work (p136).

Both publishers and readers had invested an enormous faith in the cheap classics, which might somehow abolish class and establish universal peace. In 1940, Ernest Rhys was still convinced that if the Nazis had only read Plato's Republic, Carlyle's French Revolution, John Locke, Abraham Lincoln, War and Peace, and the Federalist Papers, there would have been no war, and Germany would be a democracy in a united Europe (p136).

Proletarian cultural conservatism was also transmitted and reinforced by the first generation of schoolteachers called into existence by the Education Act of 1870. They themselves were often from working-class backgrounds, and what training they received was seriously obsolete (p136).

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Autodidacts were able to catch up quite quickly thanks in part to the popular press. By the end of the nineteenth century mass circulation newspapers were offering an outlet to innovative authors, thus making the literary avant-garde more accessible to general readers (p137).

An overdose of modernism, however, was likely to alienate the worker intellectual from his own class. Welsh Collier D.R. Davies had been raised to regard the stage as sinful, and it was with some guilt that he attended his first play at Miss Horniman's theater in Manchester (p137).

But when he returned to the mines of South Wales, his exposure to new cultural opportunities only served "to intensify my egotism and inflate my pride. Its net effect was to isolate me from my fellows. I now disliked and despised the people among whom necessity had placed me. A better education had made me less sociable" (p137).

His resentments turned him toward revolutionary socialism, and he escaped the mines to become a Congregationalist minister in Ravensthorpe. But the modernist social gospel he preached was only a means of keeping his own congregants at arm's length (p137)

"Inevitably, I was inwardly isolated from my people, and except for one or two, drifted away from them all. I lived in a world of my own - an abstract intellectual world. My gospel was nothing but a system of ideas to which the rank-and-file of my church did not respond (p137)

"Beyond these ideas I had nothing to say. I became more and more of a misfit. During the week I was invisible and on Sundays I was incomprehensible" (p137).

"I acquired the silly delusion of possessing the "artistic temperament". What that meant I never discovered, but it seemed to carry with it licence to disown my responsibilities. Moreover, it fostered my pride. It made me feel superior to kindly, decent people who, whatever their narrowness and provincialism, fulfilled their obligations in life, which was more than I was doing and more than most of the artists I met were doing" (p138).

A WEA class on the modern novel totally baffled N.B Dolan, a Scarborough trade unionist: "After two hours of hearing a lecturer who took for granted that each member of the class was well versed in Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, and D.H. Lawrence I left the room dazed (p139)

"Vague references to Freud and Behaviourism ran riot in my brain in bewildering confusion. The revelation of my colossal ignorance so stunned me that I did not even know how or where to begin. Moreover, the discussion afterwards gave me such a feeling of humiliation that I dared not even ask the lecturer for advice" (p139).

Dolan, could not in good conscience invite others to join the WEA, because "I do not want to choke them by bringing them into an environment of the middle class". In fact, Dolan's experience was not typical, WEA courses usually avoided avant-garde authors (p139).

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Yet it is revealing in his eyes that Freud, Woolf, Huxley, and Lawrence constituted bourgeois culture. Four years later WEA tutorial class students were asked to name one or more fiction writers whose novels they read frequently and enjoyed (p139).

Compared to the northern WEA student, cited previously, these Londoners had relatively advanced tastes. Eight of their twelve favourite novelists were actually living, and their favorite nonfiction authors were Bernard Shaw, Wells, A.S. Neil, and Freud (p139).

High modernists such as Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster, and Marcel Proust ranked at the bottom of the poll. But this poll group was unrepresentative of the working class. Nearly half of them were clerks, and all were metropolitan, more aware of modern literature than provincial readers (p140).

At the time, Hugh Walpole, Dickens, Hardy, Jane Austen and Wells were the most popular novelists in the Bristol public libraries. More significantly, the London students read book reviews. When asked which parts of the newspaper they read, book reviews were identified as a prime interest by 36 percent for men (compared with 15.5 percent for sports), and 47.9 percent for women (compared with 23.7 percent for the women's section) (p140).

The middle class were more likely to rely on reviews, reading lists, and catalogues: that is, guides to new or unfamiliar books. The working class most often selected books by author, that is, authors they had already read (p140).

Scholars on the left have again and again tried to recover lost plebian writers, only to find them disappointingly old-fashioned. In spite of its occasional political radicalism, Victorian working-class poetry was stylistically antiquated and generally expressed "conservative ideologies of temperance, stoicism, domesticity, religious devotion and quietism" (p140).

If the Great Proletarian Author was never found, it was not because there were no candidates for the role. The difficulty was that leftist intellectuals were looking for a modernist in overalls, and that combination was almost impossible to find (p140).

While working in the great railway factory at Swindon, Alfred Williams taught himself Greek and Latin. He mastered the Greek alphabet by chalking it up on machinery, and faced down a resentful supervisor who tried to make him erase it (p140).

In 1900, he began a Ruskin College correspondence course in English Literature, beginning with Bede and ending with Wordsworth. It was an astonishing feat of self-education - and it left out the whole Victorian era (p141).

As scholarship children assimilated a more modern outlook, they found themselves alienated from the conservative working-class culture that had nurtured them. When Kathleen Betterton entered Somerville College Oxford, she found herself academically prepared but culturally backward (p143).

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She discovered that her socialism was outmoded: she was still a follower of William Morris when Karl Marx was becoming fashionable at Oxford. As she caught up with her university friends, she grew ever more remote from her parents (p143).

On her visits home she was shocked to discover that “I hated more than ever the ugly working-class district to which I belonged, and I even began to hate the people in it - the women with their hair curlers, and bulging string bags, the stall-holders shouting raucously in the street-market, and the grubby babies left to howl in their prams outside the pub (p143).

“After Oxford, everything was so Ugly. I was incapable of fusing my disparate existences; the gap between them left me bewildered and resentful. Everytime I returned home I experienced the same confusion of feeling” (p143).

“At home, my tastes, my interests, even my voice, cut me off from the people about me. It was saddening and filled me with a vague sense of guilt, as though in some undefined way I had rejected my own class” (p144).

The guilt propelled her into leftist politics, but the ambivalence remained. She joined the Oxford Labour Club, ostensibly to reaffirm her loyalty to the working class, but on a less conscious level she was doing exactly the opposite - distancing herself from the Fulham Labour Party, where her parents had joined (p144).

That represented the plebian culture which she now found so backward. Even Ruskin College students now struck her as too serious and too proletarian. She preferred the “fluency, the superficial glitter” of Oxford undergraduates (p144).

When she chanted the “Internationale” with them, it was not simply a gesture of solidarity with the working class, “It was also a reaction against the correctness of my upbringing”. A generation later, Jane Mitchell would experience the same dissonance. Her father, a Glasgow lorry-driver and mother encouraged education, turned down the radio when it was time to do homework, and filled their home with old books (p144).

When she entered Oxford on a scholarship she felt no sense of social, economic or academic inferiority. “However, I began to feel myself at a considerable disadvantage because of the narrowness of my interests and experience” (p144).

She fell in with leftist students where she “was at first completely at sea and felt abysmally ignorant. I followed up references to unfamiliar authors and pondered on unfamiliar value-judgements.”. Her formal education had done nothing to prepare her for Suez, Hungary, Jazz, or the New Left Review (p144).

She quickly made up for lost time - “an intellectual explosion was taking place within me”. but joining the left wing of the labor party created friction with her parents. For her mother in particular, political discussion consisted of repeating what she had heard in Conservative newspapers (p144).

At the same time, she found my socialism as a source of pride, since it was for her a symbol of my having entered a society of intellectuals. If one did not come from a home environment where education was valued, the climb up the scholarship ladder would be even more disorientating (p144).

Ronald Goldman, was the son of a Manchester hatmaker and a narrowly religious woman who never engaged in conversation “I never recall anybody ever reading a book, nor there being a book in the house apart from a dusty Bible and a medical dictionary of almost equal ancient vintage” (p144).

He acquired an insatiable appetite for reading from his senior school, the public library, evening classes, and WEA courses, and found his intellectual home matriculating at Manchester University. But “It soon became evident to me that I was growing away from my home, despite the fact that I was militantly working class and politically active in left-wing politics” (p145).

“My time at home made me increasingly irritable because no one seemed to perceive why I wanted to read. When I attempted discussion my open questioning of every convention was simply not understood as an exploration of ideas, but was received by my mother with shocked outrage” (p145).

These generational skirmishes were part of a broad transformation of the left which began in the early twentieth century and is only now reaching completion. Within the Labour Party, the shift from a working-class self-educated leadership to a middle-class university-educated leadership brought with it a shift from economic protest to cultural protest (p145).

By now, the right has won the battle for privatization, lower taxation, and a hospitable climate for business; while multiculturalism, feminism, gay rights, and government support for the creative industries have become potent issues for the left (p145).

This change began with these scholarship children whose anger was directed primarily against a hopelessly bourgeois working class culture. No doubt they sincerely desired an end to poverty and fair shares for all, but Kathleen Betterton admitted that she had other priorities (p145).

What she really wanted was a socialism that would abolish “lace curtains and apidistras”.

## Willingly to School

The schools that served British working-class children in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been almost universally condemned by historians. They are consistently depicted as places of brutal discipline and rote learning where children were taught only the basics and trained to become obedient cogs in an industrial machine (p146).

This dismal portrait is, however, based almost entirely on information and impressions culled from official sources - from educational bureaucrats rather than their pupils. That is why this history is in need of revision (p146).

Administrative directives do not tell us what teachers actually did in the classroom, and government reports cast no light on the attitudes of the children. School inspector Edmund Holmes protested "The mind, the heart, the whole personality of the child was an unknown land which we were forbidden to explore. I took little or no interest in my examinees either as individuals or as human beings, and never tried to explore their hidden depths" (p146).

If we want to discover how late Victorian and Edwardian working-class children actually experienced school, we must consult them directly. Schools certainly were dismal places in the early nineteenth century. The Anglican National Society and the Nonconformist British and Foreign School Society created networks of voluntary schools (p148).

Large numbers of children could be taught the basics through the "monitorial system", under which each teacher recruited several monitors from among the older pupils, trained them in some very basic lessons, and then had them transmit what they had learned to the rest of the class (p148).

Of course, the quality of instruction was poor, and schools became the kind of educational factories satirized in *Hard Times*. The church schools naturally emphasized reading and religious indoctrination. Writing or any other form of self expression, was not encouraged (p148).

By the late nineteenth century, working class children were often taught by teachers from the same social background, who enjoyed some professional respect and who understood well the obstacles their pupils faced (p148).

Two-thirds of all working people who expressed an opinion in a survey remembered school as a positive experience, a slightly higher proportion than their more affluent contemporaries, and only about one in seven had unhappy memories (p149).

About 90 percent of working people who gave a response said that they had derived some benefit from their schooling, compared with 95 percent of the upper and middle classes. Only three respondents attended dame schools. "Dame school" is a generic term applied to any working-class private school (p151).

Not all of them were conducted by women: often they were a last resort for workingmen who accident, illness, or old age had rendered otherwise unemployable. Until the late nineteenth century, anyone could set up as a schoolmaster in his or her home and take in paying pupils, though inspectors protested that such schools were good for little more than child-minding (p151).

Once universal compulsory education was introduced in 1880, schools that did not meet government standards were shut down, and dame schools were swiftly harried out of existence. The verdict of working-class memoirists is not far short of unanimous: they did not mourn the passing of dame schools (p152).

According to John Askham, who attended a dame school “Learning was a secondary consideration; to be kept out of harm’s way and from troubling our parents were the main considerations.”. William Cameron, son of a mashman at a Scottish distillery, had a full nine years of virtually worthless schooling (p153):

“The teacher was an old decrepit man, who had tried to be a nailer, but at that employment he could not earn his bread. He then attempted to teach a few children, but for this undertaking he was quite unfit; writing and arithmetic were to him secrets as dark as death, and as for English, he was short-sighted, and a word of more than two or three syllables was either passed over, or it got a tmer of his own making” (p153).

With that intellectual training, Cameron spent much of his adult life as a beggar and died in the Glasgow Poorhouse. One Slaithwaite boy characterised his penny a week dame school as “a better than nothing institute” (p154).

Probably the greatest social service performed by dame schools was that they provided work for the otherwise unemployable. One Staffordshire workhouse boy at age nine was taught, or rather minded, by a woman who attended her washing while he studied on his own (p154).

He did some complicated sums but had no way of checking them, because neither his teacher nor her son could do any of them. His father decided that it was not worth the 4 pennies a week and sent him to work on a farm for £2 a year (p154).

George Lansbury was not so hard on his old teachers, who apparently did convey the basics of writing and arithmetic, but he did not regret the extinction of dame schools:

“Children of today, no matter where they live or what class they belong, ought to bless the memory of W.E. Forster who introduced compulsory education. School is now, 1928, a place, not for learning and discipline only, but for individual development. The teaching profession, taken as a whole, is one of which we are all proud (p155).

The enormous amount of voluntary work given by teachers in working-class districts teaching music, games, and sports for all kinds of girls and boys, is beyond all praise”. The 1870 education act produced a school building boom (p156).

Twentieth century architects and historians would denounce them as ugly run-down brick cubes, but for late Victorian children they were brand new and marvelously equipped. The daughter of a Chefield flatware stamper described her first class room as: (p156)

“sunless and gloomy because it overlooked a prison-like quadrangle surrounded by high buildings. But we did not need the sunshine, for we made our own. School was sheer bliss, and I could not wait to get there. By some miracle, the teachers had achieved a balance between formal and informal methods, a technique that could not be improved upon today, 1984, and we learned quickly” (p157).

In an advanced class at a London County Council school in the Surrey Docks district, John Edmonds had a teacher who gave students copies of textbooks to take home, taught them how to do research in a library, and brought in newspapers for information on current affairs (p157).

English literature was the subject most singled out for praise. One Essex headmaster, who read aloud from Macbeth, The Pickwick Papers, and the Water Babies, so profoundly inspired an ironmoulder's son that he spent the next forty seven years studying with the WEA "to try to catch up" (p157).

H. M. Tomlinson, a successful author and dockworker's son, credits his East End Board school with encouraging free expression in composition classes and giving him a solid literary footing in the Bible, Shakespeare and Scott (p157).

"I am trying to remember now just what I did learn". I knew roughly the shape of England; nothing about the United States, nothing about the railway systems of Europe. I learnt China had two great rivers, the Yangtsekiang and Hoangho, but which is which I can't remember (p158)

"I knew the shape of Africa and that it was an easy map to draw. I knew the shape of Italy was like a top-booted leg and that India was in the shape of a pear; but except that there had been a mutiny in that country, it was terra incognita to me (p158).

"whilst the schools were sadly overcrowded, with classes at a minimum of 50 scholars, and the equipment poor and insufficient, at least the teachers did their best for us" (p158).

Educational historians tend to assume that official curricula were actually carried out in the classroom, but students recall imaginative teachers who improvised. "With few exceptions the teachers were capable and imaginative", recalled Mark Grosse, son of a Jewish immigrant tailor. "They worked hard, for they were expected to teach all the subjects in the curriculum with the minimum amount of equipment and in the meanest accommodation" (p159).

In rural areas, where education had been particularly inadequate before 1870, the new generation of teachers could have a revolutionary impact. "We were taught direction and guidance. We were taught to use application and sense, and acquired the soundness, contentment, control and stability which most middle-aged people possess today" (p162).

"One advantage of leaving school at an early age is that one can read and study subjects of your own choice", wrote Frank Argent, son of a Camberwell laborer. Taking advantage of the public library and early penguins, he ranged all over the intellectual landscape: Freudian psychology, industrial administration, English literature, political history, Blake, Goethe, Nietzsche and Webbs (p162).

It prepared him for multiple careers as a trade union factory inspector, and a writer for taxi industry journals. Board school alumni could indulge their intellectual passions with far more freedom than the typical graduate student today (p163).

Once Richard Hoggart began studying English at the University of Leeds, he had to suppress his natural enthusiasm for the subject. "I could jump the fences as required and give a passable imitation of understanding", enough to get a First Class Degree, but he never really grasped Shakespeare until he found Macbeth in a North African Army barracks in 1942: (p163)

"It was as though, to get through to the point at university at which you sat those eight or nine papers you could not allow the force of the works to flood into you; you might be pushed off course. You did

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not for those three years dare to release yourself to the power of the works; you controlled your responses to them, almost unconsciously” (p163).

Of course, even students who praised their schools overall often admitted that certain subjects got short shrift: “Geography was a sketchy affair. History was a matter of battles and kings and trying to remember their dates. We’d hear, in passing, of certain villains who ‘rose up in revolt’. It was years before we realized they might have had a point of view” (p163).

There certainly were some pupils who found the classroom stifling, especially the endless lessons on copperplate. Edna Bold felt “incarcerated” in her Manchester board school: “Not for long could a creature withstand such confinement and the dust-laden atmosphere of the place. Visually, aurally, mentally stultified, the days passed featureless and painless. To love life, to live life was not the prime function of education” (p165),

Given the very large classes common in such schools, mass memorization was often the only workable teaching strategy. Jack Lanigan recalled that his overcrowded classroom accommodated five grades: “Under such conditions, each individual scholar had to learn how to concentrate on his own class and lesson, and shut his eyes and ears to what was taking place in the other classes” (p165).

Yet Lanigan concluded that the system, within its limits, worked: “I must admit I did not know of any children of my age who could not read or write, do arithmetic and know something about history and geography” (p165).

Another memoirist dismissed his Catholic school as “totally inadequate” but conceded that “although there were many ragged and neglected children in the poorer parts of large cities and towns in 1915, there were not many illiterates among the younger generations” (p165).

After 1950, old-age pensioners commonly insisted that they had actually received a better education than their grandchildren: “We were taught the three Rs, which is more than they are today” is a typical growl. Not all working class children disliked rote learning (p165).

For many it was both easy and fun. Children, young children in particular love habit formation and they like what would be regarded as drudgery by those older. They love to follow, adults love to lead”. To some modern theorists the chanting of mathematical tables is shocking (p165).

The son of a Devon farmhand wrote: “The drills I once thought tiresome, if not useless, were conditioning us into a work routine which we were going to need. I often feel that such discipline ought to be more in evidence today” (p166).

Jane Mitchell, a lorry-driver’s daughter remembered “It never occurred to me to question the purposes or methods that we were made to do at school. The stuff was there to be learned and we enjoyed mopping it up” (p166).

Memorization was not incompatible with creativity, an insight put into practice by Bert Linn, one of the most respected and innovative teachers at London’s Paragon school in the late 1930s. He taught poetry by giving each boy one line of verse to learn by heart, and then calling on them one by one to recite in order (p166).

“His methods may be frowned on today”, one of his admiring pupils conceded “Yet they were extremely effective instilling into so many of us boys from the grimy back streets of South London a love of poetry and fine writing which has enriched a lifetime” (p166).

“Bert would dissect a poem line by line, phrase by phrase, and even word by word. There are those today who say that you shouldn’t do that; that the work should be appreciated as a whole. Had Bert attempted this we quickly would have become bored with words and idioms we simply couldn’t understand (p167).

“As it was, we were able to eventually appreciate not only the final structure but all of the fine detail which went into building it. By working in this way he added enormously to our knowledge of our own great language” (p167).

Of course, many teachers did not range beyond the three Rs, but not always for want of trying. Robert Hayward, son of a Wiltshire farm laborer, recalled that his old headmaster honestly attempted to teach a broad curriculum, but was forced back on the basic skills his students would need to find work (p166).

“It must be confessed that we were an untalented lot, with just one or two exceptions, and trying to teach us to sing melodiously offered as much prospect of success as trying to teach the subject to a flock of geese (p167).

“Even now, over 60 years after, I feel sad for him when I think of the daunting prospect confronting him each Monday morning: rows of unwilling, untidy, unruly, grubby ignorant kids facing him with a surly expression, hating the prospect of five days confinement (p167).

“And to his eternal credit he achieved some success. He taught us to become good citizens by precept and example. I have never known any who did not grow up to be a credit to the school and the village, with a keen sense of social responsibility” (p167).

Newcastle Labour Politician T. Dan Smith explained why a strictly disciplined and inadequately equipped classroom could seem attractive to a slum child. “School, even though a sterile place as compared with today, was still an oasis in a grim social situation” (p167).

The board schools offered what many poor households did not: a structured learning environment, recognition of academic achievements, and sympathetic adults, not to mention proper heating, lighting, and plumbing (p167).

Lottie Barker worshipped her teachers because “They were always so kind to me. I know they appreciated the fact that I tried very hard, for one or the other would at times praise me. This I loved for at home I was always considered bad tempered, and try as I might I always seemed to get blamed for any mishap that occurred. No one at home encouraged me except perhaps in my cookery” (p168).

For the daughter of an unemployed painter, growing up in Derby between the wars, school was a haven from life on the dole: “I enjoyed the order and the routine of school days and hated weekends and holidays. They meant a repeat of the domestic rows that plagued our household and I was handed the responsibility for the care of the younger children (p168)”.

The headmistress was very strict but her heart was in the right place. All the children went hungry at times but I must have looked more hungry than the rest. She would often call me into her office on the

pretext that there was punishment ahead and then demand that I sit down and eat the sandwiches she had placed on her desk” (p168).

One out of six working class people said that corporal punishment was fair and necessary, compared with only one in ten middle-class respondents. The phrase ‘strict-but-just’ or words to that effect, is commonplace in workers’ memoirs (p169).

In working class communities there was a consensus in favor of corporal punishment in the schools. A 1949 Gallup Poll found that only 31 percent of adults were completely opposed to it, while 45 percent favoured it for both boys and girls (p169).

There would be outrage if the innocent were punished, of course, but few objected in principle. “If the lads went home and reported to their parents that a teacher had thrashed you, you booked yourself for another thrashing at home” (p170).

William Campbell’s mother ordered her reluctant son to mobilize his class mates against corporal punishment. Campbell organized fifty boys into a schoolyard demonstration, confronted the headmaster, and piped something about the strap being a tool of world imperialism (p170).

He was promptly nabbed by the ear and hustled off to his punishment, abandoned by his timorous followers. “We knew we deserved it and there were no hard feelings”, remembered a Battersea boy (p170).

Children might interpret an unwillingness to use the cane as a sign of weakness to be exploited ruthlessly. Flora Thompson recalled a young Oxfordshire teacher of the 1800s who lost completely the control of her pupils on her very first day, when she made the fatal error of telling them “I want us all to be friends” (p170).

These memoirists tend to confirm the common-sense notion that corporal punishment is traumatic only when it is sadistic and arbitrary, not when it is administered solely for violating a clear and reasonable set of disciplinary rules (p170).

There may have been some correlation between unfair caning and political ideology later in life. Punished for an offence he did not commit, C.H. Rolph never forgave or forgot: “It’s more than sixty years ago and I remember the whole thing with total clarity. From that day onwards I never had any faith in justice and am quite certain that I acquired a qualified contempt for “law and order” at the hands of one fatheaded and probably distracted schoolmaster” (p171).

That came from a man who made a career as a London policeman. Gladys Teal rebelled when she was caned on the hand for simple mistakes in arithmetic: “All my life I have been unable to tolerate injustice, perhaps because the seed was sown then (p171).

Militant socialist Rowland Kenney claimed that unfair corporal punishment transformed him into a political rebel and destroyed the prestige of adults in his eyes: “Previously I had believed in grown-ups. I had accepted as fact their assumption that they knew. Whereas now I knew they did not know (p171). “This teacher did not know; these lessons of hers were mostly mere chatter. She was a poor, ignorant creature pretending to be all-wise, and she was afraid of something - of our questions perhaps - and she hid her fear under a mask of sternness and acts of cruelty (p171).

“She was merely a fool. I began to feel sorry for her. I had seen through her and beyond her and I knew so much more about her now than she knew about herself” (p171).

After he lost faith in his teacher and adults in general, God was the next domino to fall: “Now, in this big all-seeing, all-knowing, all-denouncing, all-threatening bully there was no substance at all. And with this realization was linked up the idea of a general falsity, in which all grown-ups -p arents, teachers and elders - were included” (p171).

Luton welder Aubrey Darby loathed his school for its corporal punishment and its “sparse and insipid” curriculum, but his bitterness did not make him a radical. On the contrary, toward the end f his life he railed againsts an intelligentsia “obsessed with a need for stimulation, takeing in its stride drugs, sexual abnormality and neurotic criminal tendencies. Could it be that our environment of ignorance made for a more stable and contented society” (p172).

A good quarter or 30 percent of working class children left school to harbour resentment against their teachers for the rest of their lives. Nevertheless, the resentful were outnumbered by those who reported that corporal punishment was invariably fair, or infrequent or simply not done (p172).

The statistics suggest that several other assumptions concerning working-class schooling should be modified or discarded entirely. Neither parents nor children were much interested in further education: “Family and friends expected them to work as soon as the law allowed and they themselves looked forward eagerly to doing so” (p172).

But 36.6 percent of working class people recalled that they were unhappy to leave school. Parental involvement strongly influences a child’s attitude toward school. Half of all children who received no parental support or encouragement nevertheless enjoyed school (p173).

That discrepancy could reflect the fact that the schools were doing too good a job, educating young people far beyond their parents’ understanding. For scholarship girl Elizabeth Flint, school was a place where “we were allowed to think for ourselves and to discuss things. great long discussions about practically every topic under the sun. Each day the world opened out a little more, and again a little more” (p173).

But her east end family saw no value in books, would not set aside study space at the kitchen table, and could not understand the school play she performed in. her mother promised to see her perform on speech day but then lost heart at the door (p174)

“I didn’t go in, Liz. I meant to, honest I did. I meant to go in alright, I did, but it was too grand for me. It was them mothers, liz, that’s what. Why some of them came in cabs they did, right up to the door. I couldn’t go in with them, I couldn’t (p174).

Even if they wanted scholastic success for their children, working people of that generation sometimes felt constrained to express any encouragement. The post-victorian generation would be more interested in and more outspoken on the quality of schooling, at least through to the second world war (p175).

Social commentators who lamented the decline of the old working-class respect for education were not entirely the victims of false nostalgia (p176).

Girls were more likely than boys to find school a positive experience - perhaps because they were considerably less likely to suffer corporal punishment. 80.4 percent of women interviewed felt their parents had taken an interest in their education, compared with 68.4 percent for men (p177). There was little feeling among the majority of women interviewed that they or their mothers had been particularly exploited by men: they were much more likely to feel exploited by their employers. Nearly all of the women interviewed disliked domestic science classes in school, but not because they rejected traditional domestic roles: they simply preferred to learn housewifely skills from their mothers (p178). Joana Bourke reminds us that married working-class women in the early twentieth century valued domesticity and the opportunity to stay at home. Even a working-class feminist like Elizabeth Andrews affirmed that, while all professions should be open to both sexes, “nevertheless to the majority of women, homemaking will still remain their chief and noblest contribution in life, for home is not only a place to eat and sleep, it is the abiding place of the family where the character of our future citizens is made or marred” (p178).

Slum girls were frequently ordered to get their noses out of books and attend to their chores (p178). Adeline Hodges, a Durham stonemason’s daughter loved *The Last of the Mohicans* and her Sunday school prizes, “but Mother wasn’t keen on reading trash. All books were trash. She thought one’s time was better spent on mending, darning, knitting etc” (p179).

Robert Roberts noted, the lower working classes discouraged reading among children of both sexes: “Put that book down”, a mother would command her child, even in his free time “and do something useful”. If reading distracted girls from housework, in boys it was regarded as effeminate: “Among ignorant men any interest in music, books or the arts in general, learning or even courtesy and intelligence could make one suspect” (p179).

Roberts identified D.H. Lawrence as a victim of “this linking of homosexuality with culture”. “Everybody is educated, and what is education but unmanliness”. “Pitch them overboard, teach them the three Rs, and then proceed with a certain amount of technical instruction in preparation for the coming job” (p179).

Vernon Scannell and his brother had to endure the same kind of sneers: “Head stuck in a book, just like a girl. No wonder you’ve got spots”, from their father in the 1930s. As a construction worker, Rowland Kenney feared that his love of poetry might mark him as “effeminate”, until he heard his foreman reciting Tennyson’s “The Lotus Eaters” “in a powerful voice with a Lancashire accent” (p179). “I hugged myself with delight, if a fighting, drinking, you to to hell man like hmi could openly mouth poetry then so could I”. Thenceforth the two of them recited Omar Khayyam to each other on the job. “I never thought in terms of becoming a professional writer. In the first place it was somehow effeminate, that’s why it had to be a secret occupation with me”, said Sid Chaplin, a colliery blacksmith (p180). One might think there was no need for Chaplin to be anxious about his masculinity but “That was the feeling you got in a Durham mining village, a man found his place through his muscular strength and ability or agility. Writing was considered feminine so I said nothing about it (p180).

For the same reason, merchant seaman Lennox Kerr ditched overboard his early experiments in authorship: "If my shipmates had found them and read how I described them as having bodies like Greek gods they would have laughed me off the ship. Because writing isn't for a working man" (p180).

"It sets him apart. Makes him lonely among his own people. It is an extravagance a working man cannot afford. He isn't such a good toiler if he knows too much or does things like writing. Even reading Shakespear and the Bible put me under suspicion. I had to take up every challenge as soon as it showed: had to swipe a chap's face when I did not want to, or boast about my splicing - just to prove that reading books was not making me any less a good sailor" (p180).

But underneath the philistinism, Kerr perceived a suppressed literary impulse among his shipmates. In groups they would conform to a rough anti-intellectualism, yet when they were alone on lookout the subconscious would start talking out loud (p180):

"The secret desires in men come out as they feel themselves alone and free from the screen of cynicism men don in public. That deep, creative wish to be more than merely an obedient worker appears, and men are romantic, noble, courageous, poetic in the secrecy of darkness" (p180).

By the early twentieth century it was not unusual to find working class families where women were better read than men. The son of a barely literate collier worker recalled that his mother's reading "would astonish the modern candidate for honours in English at any university. "Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgeniev, Dumas, hugo, Thackary, Meredith, Scott, Dickens, all the classics poetry etc. All these gave her immense joy" (p181).

In contrast to workingmen of an earlier generation, Labour MP John T. Macpherson was not ashamed to acknowledge that his mother-in-law had helped him make up for his lack of schooling: "Well educated herself, she was never too weary or tired to help me, and she opened up many avenues along which I trod, and continue to tread today (p181).

For all these reasons, it was hardly surprising that girls were often more reluctant than boys to leave the warm world of the classroom for a lifetime of manual labour, "I cried my eyes up at the idea of having to leave school", recalled a houseservant who had to begin work after only four years of schooling. "They were the happiest days I ever had, that was the freest time I have ever had in my life" (p181).

Having failed the entrance exam to secondary school, Gardner's daughter, Anita Hughes had to become a cotton mill worker at 5 pennies a week: "I could never forget my last day at school - I was heartbroken and just sobbed (p181).

But for others, the first day of work was a rite of passage into manhood, a graduation into the ranks of wage earners, a liberation from schoolroom disciplines (p181).

Said Wil Edwards "I cannot help recalling the sense of excitement and adventure I felt when, at age twelve, I was able to abandon school to work in the pit in the friendly, helpful, comradely environment of underground life" (p182).

There he discovered the intense intellectual debates so common in the mineshafts of South Wales: "it was only when I began to work in the darkness of the pit that the true light of learning shone". As another collier boy put it "What on earth did I want with any more schooling? Couldn't I read any other boy off his feet and gabble the newspaper over to my short-sighted elders. Couldn't I, didn't I read

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everything that came within reach? And what more could any boy be supposed to do? Hadn't I heard time and again that reading and experience were the great turnpike road to knowledge?" (p182).

They may have changed their minds about school after a few years of work: "I was full of enthusiasm at the thought of going into the mill, and earning money", recalled Thomas Thompspon, who disliked his Lancashire school. But "the very first week and I knew I had ben led into a trap - I loathed it, and the recollection of my mother and sister having to work in that noisy, steaming, smelly weaving shed when they were hardly fit to stand has shorn me of any enthusiasm for the success of f actory life" (p182).

He made a desperate escape b y taking Co-operative society classes, reading through the Sunday school library, joining a workingmen's naturalist society, and even studying French Impressionism with an art teacher (p182).

Most children of this generation enjoyed their schooling as far as it went. "I feel that I was wasted from a social point of view in that I had the capacities that were not used, because the opportunities to develop them were not there", complained the son of a Lancashire packer (p184).

"But I don't feel sore about it or anything like that. I don't feel any aggrieved. It's just because the way society was. There'a a lot of others the same as myself". He tried to catch up by studying the WEA and the Marxist National Council of Labour colleges (p184).

The daughter of a Durham joiner could feel no bitterness about her limited schooling because "nobody seemed to go in for education in those days". Some compensated by educating themselves: "I managed without it", said a Lancashire ironfitter's son who hated his Catholic school, "I've been a great reader" (p184).

Far from growing nostalgic with age, the interviewees seem to have become more aware and critical of their disadvantages. A slum child in 1910 would probably accept the existing social order since he knew nothing else, but by the end of his life, having witnessed the creation of the welfare state and the scholarship ladder, he was more likely to see the inadequacies of his own education (p186).

Many interviewees who were happy to leave school at thirteen or fourteen later came to regret it. "I would now like to have been a bit better educated", said a London servant woman "but as it was in those days one had to take it as it came. One was satisfied" (p186).

## Cultural Literacy in the Classic Slum

Carl Mortiz wrote: “I have spoken with more of the common people, all of whom know their English authors and have read some of their works. This improves the lower classes and brings them nearer and higher, so that there are few subjects of general conversation among the working class on which the workers are not able to form an opinion (p187).

From the beginnings of industrialization, the British working class enjoyed a reputation for self-education. That demand made for the success of Chambers’s Edinburgh journal, a compendium of “useful knowledge”: what we now call “cultural literacy” (p187).

It offered some remarkably sophisticated literary discussions, turning to Homer, Herodotus, Livy, Tacitus, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ariosto, Tasso, Chaucer, and Defoe. While it is difficult to generate a socioeconomic profile of the readers of Chambers’s Journal, scattered evidence suggest that they were largely working class (p188).

Well into the twentieth century, radicals and self-improvers testified to the value of the journal and other Chambers publications. Early Labour politicians and countless workmen used to teach themselves mathematics, science, English literature, modern languages, Greek and Latin (p189).

Fertilized by such publications, autodidact culture flourished in the years leading up to the first world war. There was little thought, by most of these readers, that knowledge acquired would qualify them to get a better job, more money, or higher social status (p189).

Frank Goss remembered “My father read everything he could lay his hands on: history, geography, science, economics, poetry, fiction, drama, and enjoyed his hobby purely from the mental excitement he gathered with the assimilation of knowledge.” (p189).

We can say very little about working-class cultural literacy until 1918 when a remarkable survey was carried out in Sheffield. The survey interviewed and assessed 816 adult manual workers. They were asked to identify local government officials landmarks in English history, such as the Battle of Hastings and the Industrial revolution, and a long list of important artists, writers, and scientists from the past and present (p190).

This survey gives a sense of what working people read and equally importantly, what they knew. Based on the answers they received, the investigators sorted their subjects into three categories: 20 to 26 percent were judged intellectually “well-equipped”, 67 to 73 percent were judged “inadequately equipped”, and 5 to 8 percent were judged “mal-equipped” (p190).

The survey attempted to separate out the working-class intelligentsia, the more-or-less respectable but unphilosophical masses, and what would today be called the “underclass” (p190).

Investigators were instructed that “A worker in the intellectually well-equipped class would read good literature, have an active and well-informed interest in politics, be keen on Trade Union, Co-operative Society, Church or socialist club, live in a really pleasant home, understand the value of education, show signs of aesthetic sense, have elevated ‘root desires’ make a good Tutorial Class Student or WEA worker” (p191).

More than 25 percent of workingmen read books and newspapers, almost half only the papers, a quarter nothing at all. Women tended to read less than men. Nearly all women of the working classes have a feeling that it is wrong to sit down with a book (p193).

The survey revealed a striking ignorance of working class history. The name of Darwin was widely recognized, even by two of seven men in the Underclass. How well his work was understood is another matter. For one collier among the Respectables, he was vaguely associated with “the missing link” (p193).

Wilfred Wellock claimed that many of his fellow Lancashire millworkers could discuss *The Origin of Species*. Whether they had actually read it is unclear. “Terrific arguments used to spring up among working people at the mention of Darwin’s name. Nobody had read any of his books, nobody knew anything about *Origin of Species*. But that was all the better. If you only have a small amount of exact knowledge, and you are a truthful sort of person, your knowledge limits your arguments. But when you know nothing at all you can argue north, south, east and west, just as your fancy takes you” (p195).

The labour movement had done much to popularize poetry. In the early days of the Socialist movement it was common practice for speakers to recite poetry. “I remember a number of popular speakers whose orations consisted entirely of poetic excerpts which their audiences loved” (p195).

The relatively high recognition of Beethoven is hardly surprising. Sheffield steelworkers participated widely in choirs and orchestras, many of them supported by their company directors. A working-class culture of classical music had long flourished in the same regions and trades where the autodidact tradition was strong, notably among Welsh miners and Lancashire weavers (p196).

For most working people, only the Sunday schools offered opportunities for serious musical education, performance and composition, via hymns and oratorios. Poverty virtually barred John Shinn from formal schooling but his father, a London cabinetmaker somehow acquired a violin and was given an old piano to store (p196).

John bought cheap instruction manuals and taught himself to play both. Starting at age ten he had to work with his father six days a week from 7am to 8pm yet he found time to practice in the workshop after hours by candlelight (p196).

He received his first formal musical education in a singing class at Sunday school, where he was allowed to practice once a week on a small organ. He eventually was invited to play at evening services. At twenty-six he was appointed church organist at St Jude’s Whitechapel at £25 a year, and began considering abandoning the cabinet trade (p196).

He supplemented his income by taking on pupils, opening a small and eventually profitable music shop on Holloway road, and composing music for Sunday schools, which sold quite well. At fifty-two he passed the examinations for a Mus. Bac. from Cambridge university (p196).

In his eighties he began writing a Lent Cantata, until failing eyesight forced him to give it up. Light classical music was widely broadcast by string and brass bands. One of the most vital expressions of working-class culture was the brass band movement (p197).

Originating in the early nineteenth century, it was organized mainly by workingmen, though many bands were sponsored by employers. In 1913 there were 2,600 bands throughout Britain - one band for every 15,500 people (p197).

Concentrated in the smaller industrial towns and coalmining regions, they performed in parks, at seaside resorts, and at massively attended competitions. At first the repertoire drew heavily on Italian opera, giving way to more classical and romantic symphony pieces in the twentieth century (p197).

Around the turn of the century, there was some kind of family musical activity in 86 percent of all working-class homes: Sunday singalongs, playing a violin or accordion, banging away at a piano or harmonium, playing gramophones, singing in a choir, or attending the opera or a band concert (p197). “We larked about and sang in the kitchen because we had no other way in which to express ourselves, and we seemed always to quarrel unless we sang”, recalled boilermaker’s daughter Marjory Todd. She never attended a concert until she went to London and heard Moiseiwitch perform sonatas by Beethoven: “I felt as though I had been drugged. I walked all the way back to the East End, and I am only surprised that I was not run over” (p197).

Just possibly, singing in the kitchen prepared her for that experience. From the later nineteenth century, philanthropic efforts would bring music to the masses. Even in small villages the performance would attract fifty to one hundred and fifty concertgoers, mostly working people, more from the artisan classes than tenant farmers or poor labourers (p198).

Down in the pits, a collier-cellist explained that “It makes it possible for one to express finer feeling and I think that the cello is a beautiful instrument for one to display these inner, intimate feelings. When you are doubled up here for seven hours a day with nothing but darkness and nasty smells, you can go home, get out your instrument, close your eyes and enter another world with music” (p199).

For miners, wrote Harold Brown, music “is their only means of balance. Without some means of expression, they would go mad working as they do under such pressure and under such horrible conditions”. And perhaps they found a political message in classical music as well (p199).

Great music as much as great literature, could stir up unrest among the working classes, even when it conveyed no overt political message. Says millworker, James Whittaker “After most recitals I came away with my head in a whirl, and my emotions and feelings in a state of tumultuous rebellion. The music used to get hold of me and carry me away into a realm which defies description: it was a realm of pure feeling, not of sights and sounds” (p199).

He thrilled to Bach and Beethoven but Grieg especially spoke to him: “for under all his music, I constantly felt a weird note running that struck an answering chord in the lostness and desolation within myself. Going home from these recitals, I used to shiver and be miserable. The beauty of the hours I had just spent only accentuated the dirt, misery, poverty and cruelty about me” (p199).

While many autodidacts looked to Everyman’s Library to emancipate themselves, for others music was the high road to a better world. For a Nottingham hosiery worker the people’s music proved that “The working class did have the capacity to be creative. They had the ability to enjoy some of the good things in life; I don’t mean having culture rammed down their throats, but we loved nothing so much when I was a kid as going to my auntie’s and listening to her records” (p200).

Rose, Jonathan (2001) *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. Yale Nota Bene.

Manchester was a city where Neville Cardus could become music critic for the Guardian. He could lecture on the songs of Hugo Wolf in a small depressed factory town to a roomful of millworkers: "I have never since spoken to an audience so quick of apprehension, and so absorbed and moved at times" (p201). In the worst streets of Sunderland, tough kids heard and appreciated classical records played by the local pawnbroker (p201). There was nothing extraordinary in a gasworker hearing Takles of Hoffmann sung in a proletarian pub on a Saturday night. True, not everyone in working class communities owned a gramophone, but classical music was literally in the air (p202).

"I learned to whistle classics" at the cinema was a common refrain in plebian memoirs. When the wireless arrived in working-class homes between the wars, it built on an existing familiarity with popular classics. Percy Edwards, a Suffolk plough maker who later became a broadcaster himself, described its impact: "The day after the BBC broadcast "The Magic Flute" from Covent Garden in 1923 you'd have thought the Martians had landed there was such excitement" (p204).

Though some criticized BBC classical programming as elitist, it was lavishly praised in the memoirs of all sorts and conditions of working people. "When I heard the works of Beethoven, Mozart and Tchaikovsky for the first time, I was transported to a realm I had never entered before", recalled a Kimbolton tailor "and I regretted the weasted years without the inarticulate unfathomable speech of music" (p204). Music hall star Georgie Wood, though barely educated, was a dedicated fan of Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, and Schubert; and he hailed the BBC for bringing "first-class music, played by great orchestras" to the masses (p204).

"They have been given a taste for good music, and have learnt that music which is good is not of necessity music which is 'highbrow' and beyond the comprehension of any but those minds which have been musically educated" (p204).

By the outbreak of the second world war, radio reached 79.1 percent of all homes. Given that working people outnumbered the middle classes among listeners by two to one, the respective audiences for grand opera and recitals were roughly equal in absolute numbers (p204).

Remarkably, half of all working class listeners tuned into orchestral music. While there was a substantial working class audience for Beethoven, British autodidact culture was more literary than musical. That was partly a matter of availability: secondhand bookstalls could be found in the smallest and remotest communities, unlike symphony orchestras (p206).

Working class cultural conservatism also manifested itself in total resistance to modern music, which never enjoyed a place in the brass band repertory (p206). It may be simplistic to write off the Victorian period as one of sexual repression, but the circulation of sexual information in print was certainly constricted (p207).

The erotic information available in the Bible and other sources was fragmentary and often inaccurate. Working-class children growing up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suffered from notoriously low levels of sexual literacy, a fact confirmed both by oral history and by autobiographies (p209).

For the daughter of a London composer, "Sex was a well-kept secret. Any visitor or neighbour who got anywhere near the subject in conversation was silenced by sign language by my mother. We didn't discuss

things with our parents. We were told what to do, or not to do, and were not allowed to answer back” (p209).

In Jim Bullock’s mining village in Yorkshire, “one thing the children talked about a great deal was sex, and what they did not know, they imagined”. They endlessly and ignorantly debated how babies were made, and engaged in some childish sex play but the subject was never discussed at home (p210).

At that level of ignorance, it could be difficult to decipher sexually suggestive literature. Allen Clarke, the son of a Bolton textile worker, found physiology books in the public library incomprehensible.

Margaret Wharton’s parents were highly literate, and with that encouragement, she entered a teaching training college in 1936, but they taught her nothing about sex: (p210)

“Though we read books like *The Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Hatter’s Castle*, both dealing with the deterioration of innocence and an ultimate baby, we drew no parallels and made no application to ourselves. At the age of nineteen in the college, in common with my contemporaries, we anxiously awaited a much touted lecture by the college doctor on the facts of life (p210).

“While she gave a graphic description of the birth process, she made no mention of the part the father played in how the baby got there and I remember the disappointment in which most of us seemed to share” (p210).

The ignorance could produce fear, loathing, and trauma. Edith Evans, a seaman’s daughter was “terrified of the opposite sex. I had no desire for a boy friend, in fact I was sure I was never alone with one. I was a very romantic minded girl and enjoyed reading love stories, and hoped to marry one day and have children. I loved babies, but the thought of how one was conceived made me decide to remain childless” (p212).

Britain was a mainly urban society, however, and soon an expanding range of sexual literature became available in the cities. Mark Grosse, the son of a Jewish immigrant tailor in Southwark, acquired his knowledge from graffiti and scandalous stories in the local press (p213).

The beginning of the twentieth century is generally treated as an era of erotic liberation, driven by the socialist and feminist movements. Some emancipated working class women were caught up in these movements. Yet these currents of sexual liberation reached only a tiny fraction of the proletariat (p213).

Even the most intellectually active working women confronted mountains of sexual ignorance and anxiety. Margaret Bondfield, a shop assistant who became Britain’s first female cabinet minister, was raised by a radical mother and father who had taken evening courses in science and classical literature. nevertheless, she was terrified by the onset of menstruation: (p213).

“All I knew of sex was the shaming gossip of schoolgirls. I felt hot all over if I saw a pregnant woman, because one was not supposed to know anything about a baby until or unless it appeared - and as a result of marriage (p213).

Ethel Mannin was an exceptionally liberated letter-sorter’s daughter, an early reader of Freud who made something of a career championing sexual freedom in the popular press. But when she approached the subject as a girl, she was more fearful than informed: (p214)

“At the board-school all the girls were morbidly interested in parturition, menstruation, and procreation. The older girls talked about little else. We raked the bible for information, and those of us who came

from homes in which there were books made endless research, looking up in encyclopaedias and some medical works, such words as “confinement”, “miscarriage”, “after-birth”, “puberty” and “menses”. We were both fascinated and horrified” (p214).

“Not until I was fifteen did I know what parturition meant, and horror was heaped on horror’s head. For a long time I refused to believe that the father had anything to do with the creation of a baby”. Even those who read widely about sex often learned very little (p215).

These women had achieved, not sexual freedom, but some freedom to talk about sex, with a mixture of fervor and confusion, audacity and fear, sophistication and bluffing. Ruth Slate and Eva Slawson both recognized in Charlotte Bronte their own ambivalence between two rival passions: marriage and motherhood versus intellectual freedom that had long been the lodestar of male autodidacts (p216).

They felt trapped between the social conservatism of their own class and the arrogance of middle-class feminists. Ruth explained “how from my earliest years I have longed to study and learn, how it has been my fairy dream often. I want to read and study, and yet at the same time to be helpful at home, and spare mother all the work I possibly can. And between the two feelings I am often sorely vexed” (p216). On the other hand she felt intimidated by educated women who flaunted their college connections by calling one person a “fool”, and speaking cynically of mankind as a whole. She quarrelled with her boyfriend over women’s suffrage: “I told him that I could not go on as I have been doing, for I felt the best in me was being starved” (p216).

With an evangelical zeal freed from the moorings of dogma, Ruth plunged into the post-Victorian “sex question”. She heard lectures on eugenics and women’s diseases and read Auguste Forel’s *Sexual Ethics*, though she could scarcely bear to glance through the *Great Scourge*, where Christabel Pankhurst insisted that the vast majority of men were infected with venereal disease (p216).

She was intrigued when a woman argued in the avant-garde *New Age* that the temple of prostitutes in the East were a much better arrangement than the “unsanitary” way of ordering these things in the West. All this made Eva think furiously about free love, wavering between acceptance and apprehension (p216).

Carpenter’s manifestos for homosexuality plunged the two women into an earnestly muddled discussion: “We wondered whether the great teachers Christ and Buddha were homosexual, having in themselves the experiences and nature of either sex” (p217).

A few working women were swept up in the post-Victorian cultural revolution, with all its fervent and unfocused notions about sexuality, and this rush of new ideas was bound up with the kind of passionate individualism that had always driven male autodidacts (p217).

Ruth felt that intellectual freedom was more important to the working classes than welfare legislation: “The aim of progress is to make self-realization possible to all. The fundamental thing I believe to be knowledge and education, and until these are open in equal measure to all, as part of humanity’s natural heritage, I believe social legislation to be prejudicial to the individual” (p217).

Ruth and Eva could enjoy that kind of emancipation because their educational opportunities, though still limited, were distinctly better than those available to their parents’ generation. They both took evening classes and later attended the Woodbrooke Settlement, a Quaker adult education center near

Birmingham. There Ruth studied social philosophy, economics, industrial legislation, comparative religion, education and anthropology with a feminist spin (p217).

Ruth and Eva were exceptional but after the First World War their would be a wider working-class audience for sexual science. Gladys Teal's parents never discussed sex but when Gladys took a job at a draper's shop around 1930, a female assistant gave her a Marie Stopes book on birth control, which she gratefully read (p218).

Houseservant Margaret Powell was unusually daring: she left Marie Stopes on the bedside table for her husband. Eventually, she was forced to conclude that the book went unread, or at least unheeded. Dr. Stopes clearly had a large working-class following. Literally thousands of readers wrote to her asking her advice on birth control (p218).

The book readers were far more likely to use birth control methods that required some education in contraception, such as caps, and pessaries, sheaths, and douches. When doctors warned working-class women that their pregnancy could be dangerous, they usually declined to explain how it could be prevented (p218).

With middle-class patients they were far more forthcoming. The working-classes not only knew less about contraception; they were more reluctant to ask, and far less likely to receive a straight answer. It was this inequality of information that Stope's correspondents resented, even more than economic poverty (p218).

One man who could not afford books on contraception wrote, "I don't begrudge wealth but I do its value of knowledge". A compositor's wife lamented "The rich seem to think a working wo man has no right to know anything, at least that has been my own experience" (p218).

At the same time, there was much hostility to contraception within the working classes. It was one thing to read Dr. stopes surreptitiously, but it took some courage to walk into the free clinic she opened in Holloway in 1921 (p219).

The décor was warm and unintimidating, the staff entirely female: nevertheless, an average of only three women a day used it during its first year of operation. When the Malthusian League set up its own clinic later that year near the Elephant and Castle, local people pelted the building with stones and eggs, smashed windows, and deface the walls with obscene graffiti.

"At that time birth control was not a subject of discussion, the women would pass this shop almost with their head lowered in case anyone would think they were interested", recalled one Camberwell resident. "Husbands on learning of their wives visiting Dr. Stopes would in may cases punish their wife with blows, how dare she show him up with his pals, they would taunt him about his virility" (p219).

In a 1943-46 study of 100 working-class wives, mostly from Londong, reported having organsms always or frequently, thirty-six infrequently, five never, and ten supplied no information. But the investigators conceded, many of these women may not have understood the question (p219).

Some real progress toward mass sexual literacy had been accomplished by the end of the Second World War. Contraception had become almost universal among younger working-class couples in London. Yet the investigators felt justified in sounding a note of triumph: (p219)

“Enlightenment has filtered down to the masses, through the pioneer work of Marie Stopes, through improved education and public discussion of population problems. In 1949 only 17 percent of the working class now completely disapproved of sex education (p219).

The less educated were also somewhat more opposed to divorce, while the middle classes and the highly educated were less likely to think that moral standards were declining. Girls were more likely than boys to be told the “facts of life”, perhaps because they had to be warned about menstruation and pregnancy, and it was assumed that boys would ‘pick it up’ (p220).

In fact, “picking it up” was still the main source of sexual knowledge for one out of four respondents. Thirteen percent were taught by other children, 11 percent by their mothers, 6 percent by their fathers and workmates. Only 8 percent learned primarily from reading, including the bible, while for another 12 percent it just “came naturally” (p220).

One should not forget that working people always relied far more on friends, parents and the street for answers to their questions. The low level of working class sexual literacy is hardly surprising. What may be more remarkable is their lack of knowledge of current affairs, even in a century when the daily newspaper habit became universal (p220).

According to a bus conductor’s son, “most parents could not read, and the general news meant nothing to those who had nothing”. Even in 1900, the Suffolk village of Langham only received one newspaper per week: the owner would read it on a street corner to his neighbours before Sunday dinner, and that one copy would supply conversation for the rest of the week (p221).

As late as 1937, Roger Dattler, ex-collier and WEA tutor in South Wales reported that “It is possible to converse with alarming numbers of working people without ever hearing the slightest mention of Hitler, Mussolini or Stalin. It confirmed the feeling that the “masses” simply did not care” (p222).

BBC newscasts made political discourse intelligible to the undereducated, something that “quality” newspapers, weekly reviews, and most statesmen had failed to do. Even Herbert Morrison, the populist Labour politician and former shop-assistant, was liable to talk over the heads of his listeners without realizing it (p223).

One local Labour Party activist was babbled by the words “conceive”, “demeaning”, “emancipation”, “issues”, “lineal”, “deflected”, “evolutin”, “inegral”, “pliant”, “suppliant”, and “fundamental”. Had these words been spoken by a Conservative, they would have aroused much more resentment (p223). Vocabulary was a class barrier, and this particular form of cultural illiteracy effectively cut off the less educated from the political arena. For as long as writing has existed, the literate classes have attempted to preserve a closed shop through exclusionary languages (p223).

Latin tags, professional vocabularies, and postmodernist jargon have all been used in turn as forms of encryption, permitting communication among elites while shutting out everyone else. Since the Lollards, the working classes have seen through this game (p223).

The value of a commodity can be inflated by creating an artificial scarcity and jargon could enhance the prestige of literature by rendering it less accessible to a mass audience. By the twentieth century, university-trained professionals had taken over the business of science (p225).

in their laboratories and their private scientific language there was no place for either genteel or proletarian amateurs. Unfamiliar with the conventions of modern drama, country people responded well to amateur productions of medieval miracle plays, Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher (p223)

“but to attempt Sheridan or Shaw or Conrad would be disastrous from the outset because these write in an idiom which is entirely foreign to their mode of thinking. Verbal wit, abstract ideas, symbolize an idiom of thought that expresses itself in an entirely different key from their own” (p223).

Blatchford's accessibility made him, of all the socialist propagandists, the most successful in reaching a mass working-class audience. Blatchford was no orator, wrote Labour MP Manny Shinwell “but his language was simple, clear-cut, easily understood and for a person like myself, with limited education, more likely to be of value in forming ideas than the writings and speeches of some of the Labour politicians of the period” (p226).

Farm boy, Richard Hillyar was a rare example of a classical autodidact, who acquired some Latin from old textbooks found in a junkshop. It helped that the previous owner had scribbled translations between the lines, and an abridged Roman history text provided enough context to make the pursuit interesting (p226).

But the real motive was a desire to break the code, to gain access to privileged information: “There was the satisfaction of solving a puzzle as meaning began to emerge from the chaos of unknown words. But there was more than that. Latin gave me my self-respect (p227).

“Plodding my way through this noble old language, feeling that I was breaking into a secret which brought distinction to those who possessed it; and that I was doing this without the help or even knowledge of others, kindled a pride that was very good for me just then” (p227).

“Where it would lead to, or if it would lead anywhere I could not tell. What earthly use Latin would be to a farm labourer was impossible to see” (p227).

Many Jewish immigrants were socialist or anarchist intellectuals, eager to wean Jewish workers away from their rabbis and educate them into a common secular culture shared by the international proletariat (p227).

By the 1920s, the Jewish East end was an intellectual hotbed. While immigrants attended the raucous and sentimental Yiddish theater, their children, who had been exposed to the great English dramatists in school ventured out to the West end to see Shakespeare, Shaw, O'Neill and O'Casey (p228).

Playwright Arnold Wesker admitted he was “a very bad student”, but his parents provided an environment of “constant ideological discussion at home, argument and disputation all the time. All this affected my parent's attitude to study. It wasn't ever a question of, “Now you must study” and “Education is a good thing because it is necessary to be a lawyer and get on”, but it was the common currency of day-to-day living that ideas were discussed around the table, and it was taken for granted that there were books in the house and that we would read” (p228).

The books mostly had a leftward political slant - Tolstoy, Gorky, Jack London and Sinclair Lewis - but Wesker soon reached out to Balzac, Maupassant, and a broader range of literature. That second generation assimilated with breathtaking speed and thoroughness Harold Laski, Selig Brodetsky, and Jacob Epstein (p228).

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Ralph Finn scrambled up the scholarship ladder to Oxford University. He credited his success largely to his English master at the Daveant foundation school: “When I was an East End boy searching for beauty, hardly knowing what I was searching for, he more than anyone taught me to love our tremendous heritage of English language and literature” (p228).

And Finn never doubted that it was his heritage: “My friends and companions, Tennyson, Browning, Keats, Shakespeare, Francis Thompson, Donne, Housman. All as alive to me as though they had been members of my family”. Bill Naughton grew up in Lancashire among Irish colliers, whose attitude toward education was very different from East End Jews (p228):

Ambition of any kind was suspect amongs my boyhood street-corner pals: the thing was, you knew what you were, and you left it at that, so that folk knew where they were with you”, he remembered. “You didn’t welcome anybody who began chopping and changing, or who wanted to improve himself; others were made to feel even worse by such capers (p229).”

When he repeatedly scored at the top of his class in examinations, his mother uneasily suggested that he allow someone else to take first place next time. There was “almost an inborn impression of belonging to the ignorant, the poor, and the uneducated - the ones who had nothing to give to the world but the labour of their two hands. And the best thing to do was not to expose yourself to ridicule by writing” (p229).

Naughton concealed his literary work as best he could. He went to bed immediately after coming home from work and got up at 11:30pm to begin writing. Without a room of one’s own, “it wasn’t easy”, he recalled. “There is almost no privacy in working-class life, and any change in routine arouses suspicion” (p229).

Under these pressures he found writing far more stressful than manual labour. “I often thank God that none of my workmates could see me”. If they did acquire the necessary language, the educated classes were likely to be unappreciative (p229).

When Naughton applied for conscientious objector status during the Second World War, the tribunal chairman found him suspiciously literate: “Where did you pick up that word - ‘background’”, he asked him. That word is not one a lorry driver would use” (p230).

“I couldn’t help feeling hurt”, Naughton recalled, “that they should deny one the right to use the English language”. That hit both ethnic and class nerves: he had been born in County Mayo, of peasant stock. At any rate, he was using the language to read Locke, Nietzsche, Thoreau, Schopenhauer, Marx, and The Farie Queene (p230).

They were not easy to decipher at first, but he pieced together an understanding of what he was reading and became more critical and less deferential, more inclined to see individuals when others saw only “the masses” (p230):

“After reading some few hundred pages of anthropology, and being supposed to have some comprehensive picture of a strange tribe among whom the author had lived for a couple of years, I would think “Curious he seems to know everything about these people, but if I write about these people I have always lived among I find they are almost everyone different (p230).

“And even as a whole I don’t know very much about them. Each single home I visit is unlike the rest. I’m afraid it took some time to realize the writers and philosophers were ordinary people” (p230).

Once he had grasped that, however, he could see that the literary anthropologists who went snooping around his own community were equally fallible. “Almost every portrayal of working-class life and people that I read was a travesty. No wonder the different classes had such absurd notions of how one another lived” (p230).

Once public libraries and cheap classics were widely available, motivated working people were able to narrow the cultural gap separating them from the educated classes, at least in the realm of literature. By the late 1930s and 1940s, a large personal library was no longer a rarity in the slums (p230).

Rose Gamble, the daughter of a cleaning woman and an irregularly employed seaman, remembered that her sister acquired and read secondhand penny volumes of Conrad, Wodehouse, Erick Linklater, Jeffery Farnol, Edgar Wallace, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Mark Twain, Arnold Bennett, R.L Stevenson, and John Buchan (p230).

The family of one soho dustman had, by 1930, accumulated 750 volumes, largely from a second-hand stall beneath their window. Around this time boys read about six books per month and girls just over seven (p232).

In 1940 light fiction was still the staple at the public library in working class Fulham, but the men were also borrowing Huxley’s *Antic Hay*, Zola’s *The Downfall*, Kipling’s *Limits and Renewals*, and *Les Miserables*; the women, *Sense and Sensibility* and *The Story of an African Farm* (p232).

By 1944 Dickens, Hardy, and Jane Austen were the second, third, and fourth most popular novelists at the Bristol Public Libraries. In February 1940, a Gallup Poll found that 62 percent of adults were currently reading a book (p232).

A wartime surge in working-class demand was reported to Mass Observation by London librarians and booksellers in 1943-44: “There are a great many more of the younger working-class people to be seen now taking an interest in books. I notice them everywhere I go. But a lot of them want the classics, and nearly everything is out of print. I think there never was a time when there was so much obvious hunger for books, and so few books to satisfy it” (p233).

“there’s quite a new interest in books on the part of the less educated section of the community - factory hands and so on. I suppose it must be the blackout that has made them take to reading” (Victoria bookshop) (p233).

When Mass Observation asked why they read, practically the same proportion in all classes - 38 percent - said “knowledge”, though among the working classes it was still usually young men who gave this answer, not often women (p234).

Big employers like the International Chemical Company responded to the wartime culture boom by offering its workers lecture series on company time. Coping with severe labor shortages, the corporation felt that these perks helped to recruit and retain good employees (p234).

After the war many companies sponsored cultural programs designed to make their employees “rounded citizens who were interested in other subjects than sex, strong drink, cowboys and football”. Even if it did not displace calendar girls, the “art for the People” movement clearly sprang from the grass roots,

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Vigor asserted. "Ordinary folk wanted it". In his postwar sociological surveys, Ferdyand Zweig estimated that 20 to 25 percent of working men could be considered self-educated (p235).

When Zweig asked his subjects "What in your view is the greatest factor in workers' progress and betterment?", the answer invariably was "Education", though different respondents variously emphasized vocational, liberal, political or moral education (p235).

Thanks largely to the postwar expansion of secondary and higher education, cultural literacy continued to improve. Surely the BBC deserves some credit for the fact t hat practically all the men recognized Mozart and Chopin (p236).

The question that still confronts us is whether this vast cultural wealth is fairly shared among all, in inner city schools as well as those that serve the affluent. In that sense, E.D. Hirsch is entirely right to criticize the maldistribution of knowledge in contemporary America (p236).

When he argues that democracy and equality are impossible without mass cultural literacy, he is only saying what generations of British working people knew in their bones (p236).

## The Welsh Miners' Libraries

The miners' institutes of South Wales were one of the greatest networks of cultural institutions created by working people anywhere in the world. Many of the Welsh miners' libraries began in the nineteenth century as mechanics' institutes, temperance halls, or literary societies, under middle class patronage (p237).

Victorian colliers commonly authorized deductions from their wages to pay for their children's education, but when school fees were abolished in 1891, this flow of money - usually one or two pence in the pound - was redirected toward the miners' institutes (p237).

They also received contributions from coal companies and other benefactors, but as the miners themselves usually covered the ongoing expenses, they controlled acquisitions. By 1934 there were more than a hundred miners' libraries in the Welsh coalfields, with an average stock of about three thousand volumes (p237).

The larger institutes were well-equipped cultural centers offering evening classes, lecture series, gymnasia, wireless rooms and photography labs for amateurs, and theaters as well as libraries. They hosted concerts, amateur drama, travelling theatrical troupes, opera, dances, trade union and political meetings, choirs, debating societies, and about thirty of the Welsh workmen's halls were equipped with cinemas (p237).

The pride of the movement was the Tredegar Workmen's Institute: by the Second World War its library was circulating 100,000 volumes a year. It boasted an 800 seat cinema, a film society, and a popular series of celebrity concerts, where the highest priced tickets went for 3 shillings (p237).

There were similar institutions in all the coal regions, many of them established by mine owners with the frank intention of making their workers sober, pious, and productive. Wales had a tradition of weaver-poets, artisan balladeers, and autodidact shepherds going back to the seventeenth century (p238).

Though affluent intellectuals denigrated the "Little Bethels" of the mining regions, collier-intellectuals recognized that they provided an enormous stimulus for debate and literary analysis. The parents of D.R. Davies had no formal education and could not read English until fairly late in life, but his father, a collier, composed Welsh poetry and hymns, as well as a cantata performed by the chapel choir (p239).

Their home was often filled with neighbours discussing religion: "Conversation was invariably about things that mattered, and ideas were the staple of intercourse. Without knowing it, I breathed a strong, stimulating intellectual atmosphere" (p239).

All the children had music lessons and were singers, one with the Moody Manners Opera Company. "I was constantly listening to Bach, Handel, Mozart, Mendelssohn and Schubert - oratorios, cantatas and masses", Davies recalled (p239).

"Along beside the narrow dogma went a broad culture. Can anything promote a wider interest than history? And history led to politics, which, in turn opened the door on many intellectual horizons. And music. It fed the spirit as an instrument of perception, as an organ of knowledge (p240).

“We had few of the graces and polish of manners characteristic of an affluent society, but music gave us something better. It created in us a fastidiousness of moral as well as literary taste”. Even the perpetual Bible reading, in English and Welsh, stimulated an appetite for secular literature (p240).

If it still seems amazing that such a vital cultural life could flourish in the coalfields, one miner offered a fairly mundane explanation. “Every miner has a hobby. The miner works in a dark, strange world. he comes up into the light. It is a new world. It is stimulating. He wants to do something (p240).

“It may be pigeon racing, fretwork, whippet racing, carpentry, music, choral singing or reading. Think what reading means to an active mind that is locked away in the dark for hours every day!” (p240).

Stephen Walsh, the Lancashire Collier and Labour MP offered another explanation: “There is no place like a mine for promoting discussion. There is something in the never-absent danger, in being shut away underground, that draws men to each other, that makes them anxious to break the darkness and sense of loneliness by talk on subjects many and various” (p241).

Welsh miners did not have to consult Matthew Arnold to recognize the liberating power of culture. They experienced it first-hand and saw it in their workmates. In the village of Penrhiwceiber the intellectual lights were Ted, a collier who read thirty books a year, and Jeff, an engine driver who played “The Rustle of Spring” on the piano and invited his friends over to enjoy his impressive library of classical recordings (p242).

“At such times we did not feel we were colliers doing menial and dangerous jobs in the bowels of the earth, but privileged human beings exposed to something extraordinary. Most of us were badly or barely educated, but such young men as Ted and Jeff, who educated themselves, and having drunk the wine of knowledge they seemed to glow with pride” (p242).

“They were never crude, never resorted to bouts of bad language and temper, or said mean things about others, although they took a lot of “stick” from many pit workers for being different (p242).

Nottinghamshire collier G.A. W. Tomlinson volunteered for repair shifts on weekends, when he could earn time-and-a-half and read on the job (p242):

“On Sundays I sat there on my tool-box, half a mile from the surface, one mile from the nearest church and seemingly hundreds of miles from God, reading the Canterbury Tales, Lamb’s essays, Darwin’s Origin of Species, Wilde’s Ballad of Reading Gaol, or anything I could manage to get my hands on” (p242).

“Apart from religion”, recalled a Durham Colliery blacksmith “perhaps the most important influence at work in the village was the colliery institute. It provided some sort of alternative to the chapels, and churches, in that there was a library” (p243).

The village cobblers shops were often cells of flourishing cultural activity, the boot repairers themselves often being thoughtful and wellread men who played active parts in the cultural, social and religious life of the village (p244).

Except for the occasional schoolteacher, shopkeeper, or clergyman, the miner’s libraries served a working-class clientele; and miners determined acquisitions. The borrowing records of these libraries - unlike those of the public libraries - can therefore offer a profile of working-class reading preferences uncontaminated by middle-class cultural hegemony (p244).

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South Wales was a hotbed of labour militancy where, according to historians of the left, many workers were well versed in the Marxist classics. In the Victorian period, however, the reading public began to divide between high and low literature, and after the First World War the two audiences were irreconcilably divorced (p245).

The masses now consumed rubbishy crime fiction and romances, while the great modernists - Lawrence, Joyce, Woolf, Eliot - were read only by small educated coteries. There is a bias involved in any short-term study of library records. It can exaggerate the impact of a best-seller, which may enjoy a brief supernova of popularity and then, a year or two later, be forgotten (p245).

If a classic is borrowed at a slow but steady pace over the decades, it may eventually surpass the readership of the most popular light fiction. There was not a trace of interest in modernist fiction at the Aynon and Duffryn Library. For these readers, the art of the novel culminated with Bennett, Galsworthy, and Wells. As for books on politics and social issues, only five can be located in the collection (p245).

Any historian of working-class culture in early twentieth-century Britain must deal with this inescapable fact: the readers of Marx and Lenin were infinitesimal compared with the fans of Mrs. Henry Wood (p248). Where then, were the Marxist miners of South Wales? The most plausible answer is that the literary and political interests of Welsh working people could vary enormously from town to town (p249). Steeped in the Welsh tradition of theological debate, miners plunged quite readily into adult education classes in philosophy and history, though instructors often found them wedded to a simplistic economic determinism (p249).

“Any superstructure of church or state, institutions or art, was disregarded as being irrelevant”. The intellectual climate could vary from mineshaft to mineshaft: as one collier explained “The conveyor face down the Number 2 Pit was a university where Darwin, Marx, Paine and modern theology were debated, while the surface of Number 1 Pit a den of grossness” (p250).

These extreme cultural variations can also be attributed partly to the fact that literary activities in a given community usually depended on the initiative of a few energetic individuals. Readers relied heavily on the advice of librarians in choosing books (p250).

A miner with a passion for the English classics was a likely candidate for institute librarian: in that capacity he could acquire the books he wanted to read himself and recommend them to his neighbours. If Marxists were in charge of acquisitions, as they often were, they could do the same for leftist literature. And if no one in town provided intellectual guidance, there was always “Tarzan of the Apes” (p250).

The miners' institutes had been funded by deductions from miners' wages, the Miners' Welfare Fund, and by local governments. Between 1920 and 1928 all these sources dried up. The probable cause was the prolonged and deep depression that crippled the coal industry from the early 1920s (p251).

If their libraries did not close down completely, librarians' wages were slashed, central heating was done without, and acquisitions of new books came to a dead stop. By 1937, many libraries had bought no new books in the past decade (p251).

A few miners of this era remembered reading every book in their library. One library in Ynyshir was patronized by 300 out-of-work miners who borrowed a total of 500 books a week, an average of eighty-six books a year per miner (p251).

Enduring prolonged structural unemployment, any one of them could have exhausted a collection of several hundred volumes. Out-of-work men commonly and quite plausibly claimed to read three or four books a week (p251).

“It brought a bubbling sense of freedom at first”, wrote dole-queue veteran Walter Greenwood, “a secret elation in being at liberty to indulge in a feast of uninterrupted reading”. Thousands used the library for the first time, recalled itinerant laborer John Brown, who read Shaw, Marx, Engels, and classic literature until he exhausted his South Shields library (p251).

If the library had stocked Jane Austen, she would have been read, simply because she was on the shelves. “I just went through the catalogue,” recalled Jack Lawson, and without any more guidance than that he was introduced to Dickens, Scott, Charles Read, George Eliot, the Brontes, Hardy, Hugo, Dumas, Shakespeare, and Milton” (p251).

The lack of new books only encouraged literary conservatism among the miners, who continued to read Victorian best sellers into the 1930s. In the twentieth century, capitalism produced an ever-increasing flood of trash novels - and by virtue of their sheer volume, these diverted readers from the great books (p252).

From April 1937 to March 1940, the escapist fiction that was so popular a few years before had given way to the literature of political commitment. The same readers still found Marx hard to tackle but many of them borrowed Engels's *The Origin of the Family* (p252).

The war had created new jobs by 1940 but not necessarily in the mines: many former colliers now made long and tiring commutes to munitions factories. That might explain why people now sought relief in easy reading (p253).

There were intellectuals and Marxists among the Welsh colliers, but they were in minorities concentrated in certain places at certain times. As the prime movers behind the miners' libraries, they represented the last efflorescence of the Victorian ethos of mutual improvement (p253).

When they died or moved away there were no successors to carry on the institutes. By 1934, the signs of decline were obvious. Books could still be borrowed from the Blaina Institute library for 1 penny each, and nearly 400 individuals did so, but of those only thirty went in for any kind of serious or leftist literature: the rest only read escapist fiction (p253).

Lectures at the Blaina Institute still had a following, but adult education was much less popular and far less available than it had been before the war. Walter Haydn Davies, a colliery worker turned adult education teacher recalled that most members of his miners' institute debating society aimed to acquire the intellectual skills for upward mobility (p254).

In 1939 an investigator reported a general awareness among miners that the decline of coal was irreversible. Of fifty collier's sons in an elementary school, he found only six who wanted to go into the mines, of whom four aspired to be foremen. All the students at a Junior Technical School were aiming at other lines of work, usually clerical, teaching, or skilled mechanical (p254).

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Only the least ambitious remained in the pits, and their reading tastes ran to romances and crime stories. In 1909, light literature accounted for 1,818 loans in the Central Workers' Library in Gotha, more than two thirds of the total (p255).

There was limited demand for classics (150 loans), science (162), history (239), and social science (66), and scarcely any interest in party literature (13), or trade unionism (6). There is evidence that increasing availability of light reading crowded out serious books (p255).

They found Marx difficult to digest. Friedrich Stampfer borrowed Karl Kautsky's popularization of Das Kapital and found only the first twenty pages heavily thumbed: the rest was "virgin purity". Though Welsh miners certainly had an enormous appetite for thrillers, Westerns, and tepid sex, they did not entirely ignore Charlotte Bronte (p255).

They did ignore the moderns, but in the late 1930s more than a few of them wanted to know about Germany, Spain, the Soviet Union, and even Iceland (p255).

## The Whole Contention Concerning the Workers' Educational Association

The history of education, like literary history, has been written mainly from the perspective of the suppliers rather than the consumers. We have seen that a dramatically different history of primary education emerges when we shift our attention to the students (p256).

The Workers' Educational Association and Ruskin College were the most influential continuing education movements in twentieth-century Britain. Who were the students? Why did they enroll? What were their intellectual goals? What went on inside classrooms (p256)?

According to Marxist critics, these institutions played an important role in steering the British working class away from Marxism. As Roger Fieldhouse argued "The adult education movement was welcomed by the establishment as a bulwark against revolutionism, a moderating influence in the form of social control (p256).

According to Stuart Macintyre: "The mission of the WEA was to break down the isolation of working-class students and integrate them in a national culture; in political terms the proletarian intellectual was encouraged to widen his narrow class horizons for a broader progressive polity; in cultural terms the old, dogmatic, autodidact knowledge was discredited in the light of university studies (p257).

The weakness of this argument is a weakness common in theories of social control: it focuses on the controllers rather than the people who are supposed to be controlled. Ruskin Hall affiliated with the WEA, and both dedicated themselves to offering a nonideological liberal education to working class students in cooperation with the universities (p258).

By 1907, after it had been rechristened Ruskin College, political fissures began to appear. The student body was becoming increasingly Marxist. H. B. Lee Smith, lecturer in economics proposed to put some backbone into Ruskin's unstructured curriculum, introducing examinations, assigning more essays, and discontinuing the Marxist sociology lectures. Nearly unanimous student protests preserved the sociology lectures, and most of the students refused to take the first exams (p258).

Meanwhile, an Oxford-WEA joint committee was exploring proposals to allow Ruskin students to take Oxford diplomas. The militant students, however, were suspicious: they perceived a plot by a bourgeois university to absorb a potentially troublesome working-class college and indoctrinate its students with capitalist ideology (p258).

A struggle for control of the college ended with the Marxist lecturers' retirement, whereupon the majority of students voted to boycott classes: they demanded his reinstatement and the dismissal of two anti-Marxist lecturers (p258).

The governors responded by shutting down Ruskin for two weeks, then readmitting only those students who signed a pledge to obey college regulations (p258).

The Central Labour College (CLC) in Oxford proclaimed what distinguished it from Ruskin College and the WEA was 'Independence in Working-class Education' - it would have no truck with universities that served the capitalists (p259).

The same workingmen who, in 1920, regarded universities as ruling-class institutions, were often astonished by the hard leftism of the Oxbridge graduates they met in adult classes in 1946. Now it was Rose, Jonathan (2001) *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. Yale Nota Bene.

the student's turn to complain of Marxist indoctrination. It was a neat reversal of the 1908 crisis, as well as a measure of changing intellectual trends (p259).

One might see here enacted on a miniature stage the political struggles that would rock universities throughout the Western world sixty years later. One Ruskin graduate complained that nothing was more gruelling than "attempting to wade through a chapter of Marx (p260).

For some students the ordeal would be too much and copies of Marx would be thrown across bedrooms. Ruskin students were grown men and trade union activists, who would not tolerate the disciplinary rules applied to adolescent undergraduates. Women were not admitted until 1919 (p260).

The college could offer a sophisticated political education for Marxists like barber John Paton. "I was acquiring knowledge now under discipline, and finding, while doing it, that the masses of undigested, unselected facts, with which my tentative memory teemed, were falling into form and place and becoming altogether formidable weapons in my armoury" (p260).

"The fear so often expressed that the teaching of Ruskin college destroyed a revolutionary and created instead a spineless politician, was obviously groundless in my case. I ended more revolutionary than I began" (p260).

For engineer George Hodgkinson, a lecture on Dante "was a philosophical breeding ground in which grew up a spirit of revolt against capitalist competitive society which pitted man against man and put him at no higher level than the beasts in the field" (p260).

Many Ruskin students, like Miner Jack Lawson, jumped at the chance to attend Oxford lectures. Lawson's academic background, which consisted of reading his way through a miners' library, was sufficient to make him feel at home at Oxford (p261).

Jack Ashley found that liberal studies at Ruskin College were directly relevant to his work as a trade unionist: "Although I was impatient to study current controversies, rather than the ancient ones of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates, I appreciated that these gave philosophical depth and understanding to fundamental political problems of all times" (p261).

Ashley was less prepared for Ruskin than most of the students, having read only two books since leaving school. But principal Lionel Elvin "appreciated the profound difficulties facing working-class students:" (p261)

"He was an excellent teacher, genuinely interested in discussing ideas and persuading students to express their own" (p262).

For some working people "Oxford imparted what would today be called a 'superiority complex' that simply made them unmitigated snobs, with a strong dislike for the work to which they had to go back to when they left the university" (p262).

The only generalization one can make about the Ruskin graduates is that they were not politically emasculated. At Oxford, Frank Hodges noted well the hostility of undergraduates towards Ruskin men, but he enjoyed the university, "which for the rest of my life I shall remember with generous affection" (p262).

It was in the pits - the centre of culture amongst miners - that Wil John Edwards was introduced to Karl Marx. None of the miners could really understand him or satisfactorily explain the labour theory of value, but that did not limit their enthusiasm (p263):

“Marx was a prophet of the revolution; what he said went and it could hardly matter where”. Following closely on the heels of the 1904 Welsh evangelical revival, Edwards’s Marxism became “a crusade demanding all the devotion of a religion. It was less a political philosophy than a spiritual cult. I was looking for a precisely drawn creed, perhaps for a gospel, something I could grip mentally (p263). At first, a liberal education appeared to be an essential part of the revolutionary struggle. Their grievance of autodidacts against capitalism was that it condemned miners to intellectual as well as economic poverty, a life “without culture and without beauty” (p263).

Ruskin students had made a solemn promise that their education “was never meant to be a relish or even a privilege; it was part of a grim plan whose object was the uplift of the workers of the country”. “I think we all secretly found Oxford a dream which had come true, even if we might talk contemptuously of Oxford as a nursery of privilege (p264).

In retrospect, Edwards conceded that Ruskin students “very naturally had been so concerned with the class struggle that it had become part of us and a big enough part to crowd out any suspicion that any of our opponents might have a point of view” (p264)

“And how could we, with our background in those days, possibly see any other point of view than our own, that we as a class were being exploited, kept deep in the earth as the foundation of privilege” (p264).

Consequently, when Oxford officials made a sincere overture to Ruskin College - offering financial aid and opportunities to matriculate at the university proper - the students rejected it as a sell-out (p264).

Edwards was convinced “that there are factors in Marxism that can produce more suffering to innocent human beings than has ever been inflicted by the most savage dictators”. WEA classes were designed to open up communications across class lines, to allay working-class distrust of universities, to educate the “educated classes” in the realities of proletarian life, and to train workers to exercise power in a democracy (p266).

That policy drew fire from the far left who argued that this ideal of objective scholarship was designed to distract the workers from class warfare. In essays “expression becomes more chastened, judgements become more moderate, a sense of the complexity of the facts shows itself (p266).

“It is almost universally true that the effect upon students who remain in the classes is to make them reconsider their original crude generalizations, to make them aware of the complexity of the social and economic system in which they live, to make them more sceptical of ready-made nostrums, to introduce an element of cautiousness into their statesmanship” (p266).

That was precisely what militant socialists dreaded. Ethel Carnie, the proletarian novelist, warned that the WEA would “chloroform” the working man. WEA students found these assaults enormously condescending. Lavena Saltonstall, a garment worker, shot back “I say that if Miss Carnie, and those from who she has imbibed her views concerning the WEA, insist that a working man or woman is liable

to be side-tracked or made neutral or impartial because they look at all sides of a question in order to understand it fully, then they are libelling the intelligence of the working classes (p267).

“I am sufficiently class-conscious not to stoop to flatter my own class”, sniffed Miss Carnie. But letter writers to the Daily Herald found something profoundly insulting in the assumption that workers wanted nothing but propaganda: “the socialist movement suffers from the extremists who recognize no teaching as being education which is not designed especially to confirm their views”, one letter writer noted (p268).

“The assumption of the socialists is that the working man cannot think for himself, but will drink in , as truth , all that is told to him.” said another. The WEA succeeded famously in overcoming working-class distrust of the ancient universities (p268).

“The idea, so common, that Oxford is out to “noble” the workers, and to side-track their demands, is soon dispelled. Oxford, as I saw it, is honestly seeking to learn of the workers, and to guide any misdirected zeal of theirs along lines that will not lessen the zeal, but will make it effective, because of the knowledge gained” (p269).

Even if summer school students fervently embraced the university, they did not change their minds about capitalism. “I feel more keenly than ever the lack of opportunities of the workers for real education, and wonder how different the position of our class might have been had it been otherwise.”, concluded one student (p269).

The atmosphere of those early summer schools appears to have been a mixture of confrontation and good humor, sharp dissent and mutual respect. Tutorial classes at the WEA spent three years inculcating detachment and objectivity as academic virtues: did that, in the long run, pull students away from the militant left (p271).

A 1936 survey found a few students who argued “In discussions, the tutors never had any definite point of view, and seemed to restrain those who wanted to go to the left or the right. The student rapidly gained the idea that no problem was capable of solution, that there was so much to be said on all sides of a problem that one should take no action at all. It was only fools who gave adherence to a party, or had plans of action for changing the status quo” (p271).

Fieldhouse interviewed seventy-one persons who took WEA courses before 1951 and he found that if the WEA had any influence at all, it encouraged political activity and drew some students further to the left. The tutor only reinforced existing political convictions or spurred the student to greater activism (p271).

“The average worker-student does not care twopence about the WEA and socialist squabble”, observed one autodidact. But in a literature class, one of the students exploded: “I am a wage-slave, and I am out for the class war. That’s every thing to me - the class war! Anthony and Cleopatra? What do I want with Anthony and Cleopatra? What does it mean to me? Nothing!” (p273).

Overall though, such clashes seem to have been a minor and occasional nuisance for the WEA. Bessie Braddock credited the WEA with teaching her “the political and economic history I had been denied at elementary school. I began to find out how society evolved, and how trade unions grew up. How the capitalists controlled money, business and the land; and how they hung on to them” (p273).

There were some on the left who argued that the WEA diluted working-class radicalism by diverting students away from economics to literature and the arts. It is true that the proportion of WEA classes studying economics and economic history declined steadily, from 52 percent in 1913 to 32 percent a decade later. Between 1913 and 1933 literature rose from 11.7 percent to 21.4 percent, and the arts from zero percent to 7.9 percent (p274)

In part, this represented a simple broadening of interests on the part of the students. They would commonly begin by organizing a course on economics, and then at the end of three years, the class might stay together and tackle another subject (p274).

It is ironic that students of the 1930s considered economics a left-wing subject and English literature conservative, when today the two disciplines have reversed positions. But even back then, the study of literature could have revolutionary consequences (p274).

Nancy Dobrin, whose father was an unemployed shipyard worker said of the WEA: “Before the first session had finished I was hooked. This was interesting. From then on I was reading and learning. I read with new eyes. It was fascinating. Everyone in the class seemed to be so well informed, to my astonishment I knew nothing. There was no stopping me, I was empty and needed filling. I slowly realized what an ignoramus I had been and bigoted into the bargain” (p275).

The WEA helped George Gregory work out his own criticism of capitalism. “Words fail to explain what that meant to me, and how I was assisted intellectually on the threshold of adult life”. No diplomas or certificates were granted at the WEA. The idea was to eliminate competition and vocationalism from the classroom, as well as to ensure that the tutor could not intimidate the students (p276).

At the grass-roots level, the WEA created an articulate and obstreperous working-class intelligentsia. Many students felt that the most valuable lesson they had learned in the WEA was to “see it whole”. That ideal addressed one of the most basic intellectual hungers of the working-class student: the need to understand how his individual life fitted into the larger society (p277).

“Instead of seeing my job in isolation as an individual postal worker, and from that angle only, it began to take shape as a planned industry with a complex structure; one of many in the social structure of the country I live in”, explained George W. Norris (p277).

“I could now spread my wings and begin to think intelligently about wage claims, hours of work, and conditions in the industry, and to compare my industry with other industries. I discovered that my thinking was mostly propaganda and not thinking at all” (p277).

It was easy work making propaganda speeches and giving stock answers to stock questions, but I soon found myself stumped for replies when questioned by trained thinkers”. He could scarcely express himself on paper or in debate until he learned that “to acquire knowledge in the university tradition meant a knowledge of how to use books as tools” (p277).

After twenty-two years of WEA courses at a total cost of £10, George Norris testified that “I can now hold my own with the finest products of Eton, Harrow, Oxford and Cambridge whether it be in understanding problems of trade and commerce or in the realms of literature, art and music... Training in the art of thinking has equipped me to see through the shams and humbug that lurk behind the sensational headlines of the modern newspapers” (p277).

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The WEA offered Lavena Saltonstall a welcome escape from a suffocating hegemonic working-class culture: “I am supposed to make myself generally useless by ignoring things that matter like literature, music, art, history, economics, the lives of the people around me and the evils of my day. The world is suffering today because men and women merge their individuality into one orthodox mass” (p278). “Should any girl show a tendency to politics, or to ideas of her own, she is looked upon by the majority of women as a person who neglects doorsteps and homematters. If girls develop any craving for a different life and wider ideas, their mothers fear that they are going to become socialists or suffragettes” (p278).

“If their daughters show any signs of craving for higher things than cleaning brass fenders or bath taps, they put a stop to what they call “high notions””. One can always argue that the WEA should have devoted more attention to Marx (p278).

Most tutors seem to have been critical of Marxism, though the Marxist point of view was often discussed in class. Like all questions of canonization, this one is endlessly debatable. How much Marx is enough? Why should there have been more Marxism on the curriculum (p278).

After the implosion of world Communism and the 1997 “New Labour” landslide, the WEA emphasis on non-Marxian socialism seems admirably far-sighted. The WEA could hardly have steered many workers away from Marxism, if only because so few of its recruits were Marxists (p279).

Before the second world war, dissenting religion was still a more potent opponent of liberal education, and tutors had to take care to avoid theological subjects. In 1916 when a WEA organizer requested classroom space from the Clay Cross Education Committee, one member, a preacher, objected that “surely coal miners had no reason to study Economics, Philosophy, or European history”, or indeed anything other than “how to dig more coal, and get ready for the next world” (p280).

Construction worker Stan Dickens, who described his parents as “bigoted nonconformists” took WEA courses to get beyond the dogmas of the Plymouth Brethren, which he found “increasingly irksome and unsatisfying. I had tasted the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and for good or ill wanted to eat more of it” (p280).

Harold Entwistle explained why a traditional liberal education can nurture radical thought more effectively than any program of indoctrination. Without a knowledge of the past, students had no standard for judging the present. Without a fund of basic information, they could not intelligently form their own opinions or criticize what they were taught (p281).

To say that classical education represents an imposition of middle-class culture on the masses overlooks an insistent working-class demand for that kind of culture. A colliery blacksmith said that “I think the point about public school and university education is that at their best they teach you to think” (p281). Marxism failed to find a large working-class following in Britain for many reasons but the WEA was not one of them. The goal if the WEA was “to enable one to appreciate and cultivate a desire for the best in art, music, literature etc. to more readily understand the significance of science, and generally to raise the level of intelligence in order that the student may enjoy a fuller and more harmonious existence, freer from the trammels of prejudice, superstition and dogmatism” (p282).

Few believed that adult education should aim exclusively at building socialism. Even some of the most militant Marxists argued that only a broad liberal education could prepare the workers for political struggle: “When education is purposely made available to fit the student, say for the class war, the result is mostly undigested dogma, consequently the class war suffers” (p282).

Except for the occasional partisan of class warfare, students generally appreciated the impartiality of their teachers. Intellectual independence was frequently cited as a prime educational goal among students. Alongside self-realization, the social motive was also a compelling reason for joining WEA classes (p283).

Education should be pursued with no thought of competitiveness or economic gain, that knowledge must be acquired for its own sake in an environment where students helped each other. Many joined the WEA in search of an escape from the industrial machine (p284).

Those with more interesting jobs - clerks, carpenters, metalworkers - often suggested that the WEA might relax its ban on vocational training: but there was a “chorus of ‘Noes’ from the machine-workers, the coal miners and from the hammer-and-file brigade of the engineering industry” (p285).

“The actual working life of most manual workers is in the main semi-slavery, with the fear ever before them that even that will be taken away. My opinion is that adult education should be as far removed from the actual working life as possible. To simply use up all one’s time and thoughts for the purpose of obtaining the necessities of life is a very low standard of life for a human being” (p285).

“When I had learned a little I wanted to know how profits were made, and why workers did not have a more reasonable share of them”. The family that took classes together might grow closer. Sometimes a man would bring his wife into the WEA and make her, as one put it, “an intellectual pal”. But women rarely persuaded their husbands to join: (p286)

“My wife says I’m all blasted Economics and British working class. I have refused offers of better-paid jobs which would have made WEA work impossible. My wife does not think it is a good paying proposition and would prefer the flesh-pots to a place in heaven” (p286).

Having attended Ruskin College, a newsagent found himself drifting apart from his wife: he became a philosophic materialist while she took up spiritualism (p286). Adult students were often viewed as people who were getting above themselves, presuming to “improve” their kinfolk, disturbing the equilibrium of family life and the class hierarchy (p288).

A typist complained that her insistence on gaining further education “led to many phrases of bitterness. I was accused of ‘getting too big for my shoes’, learning to look down on my own family, and filling my head with dangerous ideas, and certainly with ideas about things which were of no concern to me and ought to be left to my ‘betters’.” (p288).

She was picking up notions about politics and religion quite unlike anything her parents taught her. These new attitudes in turn “brought about desires for changes in my way of life, and most of these were resisted and resented”. In a large family with children at several different educational levels, the tensions were compounded with everyone accusing the one adult student of “showing off” and being too “bookish” (p288).

These frictions could be reduced by making adult education a family project. For growing numbers of women, the WEA provided the social and intellectual outlet that the mutual improvement society had provided for workingmen (p289).

Female students had often been reluctant to speak up in early Tutorial Classes, especially where they were greatly outnumbered. A woman might find it difficult to disagree openly with a male student who was a neighbour (p289).

Unlike men, most women were not used to voicing their opinions on the shop floor, in offices, at trade union and labour party meetings. The WEA addressed this issue by setting up a Women's Advisory Committee in 1909, dedicating a full-time organizer to women in 1910, and sponsoring some all-female classes (p289).

Those policies, combined with liberal trends in society at large, brought more women into the WEA. By 1922 educational inspectors noted "that the extension of the franchise is producing a profound change in the attitude of women towards education and towards each other" (p289).

The proportion of women in WEA classes rose from 13.6 percent in 1912 to 44.2 percent in 1938. This was partly the result of offering more courses in literature, always a favorite subject among women, but the percentage of female students was increasing in every discipline (p289).

It has been argued that the constant interruption of housework left women less able to pursue serious study than men, who could at least count on large blocks of free time outside work hours. It was men rather than women, whose leisure activities tended to become narrower and more domestic with age. Overall, women were more likely than men to attend theater, lectures other than WEA, art galleries, concerts, and museums (p290).

While fewer women than men devoted time to politics and trade union business, women were more likely to indulge in singing, photography, and amateur theatricals. They were far more likely to play a musical instrument, just as likely to dabble in painting, and not much less fond of debating (p291).

"My husband and brothers obviously notice that I am much more ready to join in conversations on world outlook - economic problems and even political ones, which previously I dismissed as "mens subjects", but the WEA has taught me otherwise" (p291).

"particularly with my husband, I fill a much more important place in the home and in his mind. he asks my opinion and likes to discuss vital things with me, which was entirely absent before I took WEA classes" (p291).

"It has not only given me more confidence in myself, but I am myself - I have an individuality of my own. It has made me understand my husband better: there is more comradeship in our lives, more give and take, more freedom for both of us" (p291).

Far from doping the workers by imposing middle-class cultural hegemony, Ruskin College and the WEA did precisely the opposite: they made their students happier but less content. "When I look back I realize that, without my acquired knowledge, my life would have been blind, unconscious and animal-like" (p291).

“I did not know the joy of living until I was enabled to understand the problems of life. It has extended my range of thought and feeling. As I grow older, and as I learn, I become more tolerant. This is happiness” (p291).

“When important things were reported in the newspaper, one could have a shot at explaining them, and in doing so felt much happier than in merely resignedly saying “Such things are for other folk”. I am not necessarily happier but my life is fuller” (p292).

“I have found that education tends to make one more sensitive and to feel things more keenly.”

“I have lost many illusions but I do not regret them, for education has taught me it is better to see things as they are.”

“Adult education is its own reward -and its own revenge” (p292).

The working class had become educated. They could read the financial news in the newspaper, if they wanted to, and understand it. They wouldn't be able to get involved in it, but they could see which way the wind is blowing” (p293).

“They should know whether their being done or not. The working class are more aware of the craftiness of things today than they were before. They could pull the wool over their eyes before, but they couldn't now” (p293).

Building on a long autodidact tradition, the WEA had produced an army of postwar Labour politicians passionately committed to education, and thus contributed an all-party consensus for government aid to the arts (p293).

Though WEA tutorial classes accomplished much good work, the goal of educating students up to university honors standard was, as even sympathizers conceded, “a polite fiction”. Astronomy, physics and chemistry were rarely offered by the WEA because they required expensive equipment and sophisticated mathematical skills (p294).

Biology, botany, zoology and geology were more feasible, since classes could resort to museums, zoos, botanical gardens, and country rambles (p294).

“For some students, adult education produced more stress than gratification. When postal worker Paddy Molloy took his first class “An entire new field of learning was opened up for me although I must confess that I understood very little of what was being taught” (p294).

But when he returned to his post office and trade union work “Many of my colleagues did not know quite what to make of me. The WEA and Ruskin experience, had, to put the matter bluntly, lifted me out of the relatively uneducated working class rut. I felt compelled to argue against their unsubstantiated prejudices” (p294).

By the end of the war Molloy was disillusioned with the WEA. He saw it becoming more and more a middle-class organization, steeped in “the high flown jargon of the University lecture”. The proportion of worker students had fallen from nearly half in 1938 to just under a third in 1950 (p296).

Autodidacts, the traditional constituency of the WEA, were becoming an endangered species, thanks to the opening up of secondary and higher education. By 1952 children at the same IQ level, regardless of their class background, had an equal chance of entering grammar school, though of course children from affluent families were likely to score higher on intelligence tests (p296).

Rose, Jonathan (2001) *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. Yale Nota Bene.

Adult Education: Why the Apathy? was the telling title of a 1953 report by WEA official Ernest Green. By then it was clear that the wartime enthusiasm for culture had worn off. One encouraging sign was the fact that educational broadcasts on radio and television regularly reached 24 percent of skilled workers, 30 percent of the semi-skilled, and 18 percent of the unskilled (p297).

That pointed the way toward the open university, launched in 1969, and reaching more than 200,000 students by the 1990s. Even in the Thatcher decade, adult students were still seeking the best that is known and thought in the world (p297).

## Alienation from Marxism

“Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?”. Historian Ross McKibbin has posed the question, and he suggests a number of inhibiting influences: smaller factories where owners knew their employees, layer upon layer of caste and craft subdivisions within the working class, a persistent attachment to church and chapel, loyalty to depoliticized monarchy, the legitimacy of Parliament as a reformed Institution based on a broad suffrage, opportunities for social mobility up to the House of Lords, education in democratic procedure via model parliaments and trade unions, faith in the rule of law, and a government that had withdrawn from industrial relations to permit unfettered collective bargaining (p298).

McKibbin particularly focuses on another necessary “condition for the emergence of a Marxist Party - an active ‘socialist’ leadership whose own values and ways of life are largely outside and hostile to the ruling values of civil society” (p298).

“The sort of men who were so prominent in European socialist parties - marginal bourgeois, journalists, ‘theoreticians’, professional orators - were comparatively rare in Britain. The British working class had forged its own organizations and its own leaders, who did not care to accept middle-class patronage, even under the name of socialism (p298).

Everything McKibbin says is true, but he and other historians have missed other factors which may be at least as important, and which only become visible when working people themselves explain why they were not Marxists (p298).

British working people judged Marxism by the Marxists they knew, and concluded, with good reason, that such people were not going to make a better world (p299). The Labour Party rather than the Communist Party would attract mass support, for reasons that can be traced back to their religious and literary roots (p299).

In the first half of the twentieth century “Practical Christianity” - a vague but sincere belief in charity, equality, and doing good - was the consensus theology of British working people, whether or not they attended church (p299).

It was a doctrine entirely at home in the Labour Party, but difficult to reconcile with orthodox Marxism. Where labour socialism was ethical, idealist and undogmatic, early British Marxims embraced a more “scientific”, materialist, and rigid world view (p299).

Early British Marxists dismissed as “bourgeois” the same canon of English classics that inspired generations of autodidacts, thus alienating the very proletarian intellectuals who might have been the driving force behind a more creative Marxism (p299).

Labour socialists proclaimed that knowledge (rather than ownership of the means of production) is power. There was something inherent in the Communist Party that put scoundrals in control, and most of the idealists either left in disgust or were pushed out (p299).

The dogmatic tendencies of working-class Marxism were reinforced by two authors they often studied side by side with Marx - Adam Smith and Charles Darwin. They both suggested that the existing social order was not divinely ordained, but had progressed according to certain scientific laws (p300).

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The difficulty was that the combination of theological absolutism and scientific certainty could produce a pharisaical type of Marxist who alienated his potential followers. Walter Citrine, who passed through a phase of Marxism noted that a workmate on his Liverpool construction site was “cordially hated by most of the other workmen because of his sarcastic manner, and perhaps because he always defeated them in argument” (p301).

Not many working people were prepared to take dictates from such men. The communist Party closely policed the daily lives of its members dictating their dress and even instructing them to pay their bills: “We did not want our members to appear queer, in the original sense of the term, in the eyes of the working class” (p301).

“All one’s thoughts were concentrated on the party and its work, its associations, its people, its doctrine, to the exclusion of the larger world around us. The more I have thought about the way in which we lived the less surprised I am that communism made so little headway” (p302).

The primary motive of autodidacts had always been intellectual freedom. Few of them would sacrifice it to a Marxism that submerged individuals in the massing of masses and the clashing of classes. Taxi driver Herbert Hodge was at first impressed with the intellectuals he met in the Soho branch of the Communist Party, but soon realized that they treated workers as unthinking objects (p302).

Hodge knew that years on the dole only produced apathy, and that out-of-work men wanted practical help in dealing with their problems far more than ideology. “Human masses, social systems and economic forces... We’ve been so used to thinking in these terms that we’ve forgotten the root of them all is the human individual” (p302).

Economic deprivation made intellectual liberty all the more valuable to the poor. Any political system that denied working people “beauty, colour, and adventure from life” was treating them like machines. Marxism was thus treated as “a compendium of answers to set questions, without enough emphasis being placed upon its ability to identify new questions and problems” (p303).

Marxists insisted that there was no viable reasoning on economics before Marx, and none whatever since. “All we were instructed to do in Marxian classes was to locate non-marxian philosophers and reject them on the grounds that they were not relevant to the working class” (p304).

Working people and autodidacts could be profoundly affected by Marx’s outrage, his pity, the “crashing force in the simplest observations”. But that side of Marx was lost in Marxian lectures. For all their talk of “international solidarity... whenever one or two Marxians meet for common action, they nearly always snarl and chew one another up” (p304).

Socialism is not simply the outcome of inexorable historical development but “the creative act of the working class to solve the economic crisis of capitalism”. Because it is creative, it isn’t inevitable; the capitalist system can end in fascism, as in the thirties in Germany, rather than socialism (p304).

And because socialism is creative, “it isn’t about state planning...; it is about the working class owning the means of production and planning their lives for themselves”. The key to building socialism, then, was creating an intellectually sophisticated working class, though that seemed a remote prospect by the 1970s (p305).

“The intellectuals are writing for one another instead of for working class people”, Harry McShane complained, “they seem to think that workers can’t read!” (p305).

Workers had great difficulty reading Marx and Marxists. The Marxists generally and glaringly failed to produce literature accessible to the working classes. Marxism was inherently a movement of the educated classes rather than the labouring classes (p305).

The working classes were deliberately excluded by the difficulty of Marxist language. Any number of autodidacts registered that complaint. How can human beings be emancipated by a doctrine they cannot understand and have no role in creating (p305)?

Of the Labour MPs surveyed by Review of Reviews in 1906, only two mentioned Marx as a formative author. It is difficult to locate anyone who even claimed to have read all three volumes of *Das Kapital*. T.A. Jackson doubted that fifty people in all of Britain had persevered to the end (p305).

The Marxists answered every criticism with the same conversation stopper: “Have you read Marx?”. A.E. Coppard finally learned how to trump that card: “Have you?”. Then inevitably came the lame admission: “Some of it, that’s really necessary, the first five chapters of *Das Kapital*, they contain the essence, all you want” (p306).

Yet to them the Revolution was a truly mystic ideal, as vague as heaven. The jargon cut of Marxists from the class they were supposed to be mobilizing. Margaret McCarthy was at first dazzled by young communists who reeled off words like “dialectical”, “empiric”, “formalistic”, and “materialist conception” (p306).

Only later did it become apparent that the phraseology was an encryption device to exclude newcomers, like herself from Party discussions. “I have since realized that most human institutions, and particularly political bodies, do tend to freeze out the new recruit, despite the professed desire to attract the masses” (p307).

The fact that working-class readers did respond to Marx’s rare concessions to wit suggests a missed opportunity. It took Ifan Edwards about four hundred pages of close print to come to the crux of his argument in the classic illustration of the labourer looking for a job in a factory, and as he said “expecting nothing but a hiding” (p307).

Edwards said “this little aside appealed to me very much, as I had one or two hidings myself”. If an ideology offers a rationalization for a type of unacceptable behavior, it will often attract followers with that kind of moral weakness (p307).

Such formulas as “Self-interest is the greatest virtue” or “Your anger is not a personal failing, but a healthy response to social injustice” or “All human relations are power relations” will exert a gravitational pull on selfish, hostile, or dictatorial personalities (p307).

Early British working-class Marxism was all too often a vulgar Marxism that glibly dismissed morality in capitalist society as bourgeois morality, or resorted to the easy excuse “capitalism has made us what we are”. In contrast the Labour Party preached that socialism would be brought about by an ethical revolution based on broadly Christian principles, just as nineteenth-century evangelicalism had transformed a brawling, hard-drinking proletariat into respectable church-going Victorians (p307).

Working people rooted in this tradition were repeatedly appalled by the behavior of individual communists, most of whom seemed to lack the moral commitment that had built the Methodist Church, the trade union movement, and the Labour Party (p307).

Most communist party meetings fell victim to internal bickering and a general unwillingness to volunteer for organizational work: "Why don't you do something yourself?", "I'm not at all". Such complaints are registered fairly consistently in workers' memoirs (p308).

A.T. Collinson, a founding member of the Communist party in Middlesex, left it partly because too many had joined up "to gain personal advantage, and when successful in this respect they fade out". Lather-turner Les Moss admitted he spent a lot of company time discussing Marxism and he left the Party in 1947 because, he felt, it was run by intellectuals who kept power in their own hands but would not back workers in their confrontations with bosses" (p308).

Though John Brown was a student of Marx, he saw "that the type of man who was joining the communists was very obviously not the self-sacrificing martyr type so largely responsible for the creation of the Labour Party (p308).

"They spoke continually of 'mass action' by the workers. What form of 'mass action' was to take was never clearly defined, and I noticed that when it came to doing any propaganda or canvassing work for the local movements, those who had been doing the shouting the hardest were not to be found" (p308).

"This room full of filth and ignorance was the cell of the party, it was the party in essence. The Party was just this; multiplied a thousand fold, a millionfold. And it was because the party had become like this that it had withered, the workers wanting none of us..." (p310).

The chapels had always reinforced the doctrine of Christian benevolence and individual responsibility. But these values were now increasingly confined to the older generation. "They have transferred self-condemnation to the convenient condemnation of "the capitalist system which makes us as we are". For those who are versed in the verbiage of socialist and communist doctrines, there is a surprisingly clear recognition that a gap exists between their principles and their ability to live them" (p313).

Cut adrift, the unemployed increasingly resorted to "systems" for winning football pools, millenarian Christianity, millenarian Communism, and among women especially - astrology. All these panaceas offered short-cuts to salvation involving no real individual effort (p313).

"I knew two leaders of the party, each of who was discontent with work in the mines and found in communism a justification for their attitude and often callous indifference for the safety and welfare of their duties in the colliery" (p314).

New members were likely to find that local chapters were run by incompetent hacks, or dominated by cliques that froze them out. The Labour party had similar problems but it nevertheless succeeded in building a movement with a mass working-class base, in large part because of their moral appeal. Lacking that attraction, the communists were never more than a marginal political force (p315).

The Communist Party emphasized doctrine and slogans rather than practical assistance in dealing with the problems of poverty. It is an extraordinary thing "to see an out of work man arguing his head off about the fate of Trotsky, in the midst of sheer misery and poverty (p315).

“the ordinary voice has given way to the loud Quack, the most skull-splitting theories upon Politics, Art, Literature and Painting and the rest are trumpeted into the ear, all things ordained with the assurance of Caesar” (p315).

“Many of these people hold that all literature that has ever been written is valueless”. Given that most autodidacts were devoted to the literary canon, nothing could have done more to drive them away from Marxism (p315).

Doctrinaire British Marxists of the 1920s and 1930s generally refused to see any value in art apart from propaganda. “Books were a refuge from the horrors of life around us. Unemployment in the 1930s was unbelievable, you really felt you’d never escape. So books for me were a kind of fantasy life”, said Ewan MacColl (p316).

“I’ve noticed frequently among middle-class communist party people that I’ve worked with, over the years, that there’s an idea that workers will accept anything, providing the message is ok. The quality doesn’t matter, the form doesn’t matter. All that matters is that we agree on the correct slogans” (p317).

“Saying things like “the workers”, but we were the workers. Christ! We couldn’t have been more the workers”. Was an education in the classics really a vaccination against Marxism? As a published proletarian author, William Holt did not appreciate party hacks telling him that “There can be no proletarian art until after the revolution” (p318).

Conversation among Communists was “dreary - obsessed as we were by politics - humourless and barren. The tension of party life was unnatural, and a growing suspicion began to haunt me that Bolshevism was a horrible disease” (p318).

Disdaining “books of the month” and “best-sellers”, Jack Jones was anxious to distill “the quintessence of the great minds of all time, the imperishable intellectual substance of the ages”. Marx admired Tom Jones and Robert Burns; Engels had learned much about English social conditions from Carlyle’s essays, Disraeli’s novels, and the poetry of Elizabeth Browning; Stalin, in his youth, read Shakespeare, Vanity Fair, and Origin of Species (p318).

## The World Unvisited

What we now call “cultural studies” can be traced back to George Orwell’s classic essay “Boy’s Weeklies” in 1939. Orwell was one of the first intellectuals to subject popular culture to serious critical analysis, focusing on their political implications (p321).

Since then, historians and literary scholars have become increasingly obsessed with the ideologies of race, class, empire, and gender embedded in all kinds of texts, canonical literature and popular magazines (p321).

We often get out of our reading what we put into it. Well before the Teddy Boys, school stories created a youth culture powerful enough to challenge parental authority. These stories, which strike us today as laughably wholesome, may have threatened working-class parents “because all the girls in them went away to boarding schools and were out of their mothers’ clutches (p330).

The fact that many parents banned such stories only enhanced their appeal for children. Though school stories appeared to be blatantly conservative, they were not always an effective vaccination against leftist politics (p331).

Walter Citrine won, as a Sunday School prize, a volume of school stories from the Captain. “The lady who gave this prize awakened in me a thirst for good literature”, eventually leading to the works of Karl Marx and his followers (p331).

George Scott left school and the boys’ weeklies behind at fifteen: in barely a year he had absorbed enough Shaw, Wells, Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and Marx to lecture his parents on the evils of capitalism and to flirt with the Communist Party (p332).

There was never any suggestion that the upper class boys in the School Stories were ever going to be anything or do anything. “They were fifteen but the thought of a career or profession just didn’t occur. They were true parasites - non workers” (p332).

Whether a text is “conservative” or “subversive” depends on the context in which it is read and the larger literary diet of the reader. The same reader can enjoy Karl Marx bringing a different frame to it. It is equally possible for the same reader to adopt different frames for the same story, relishing it on one level while seeing through the claptrap on another (p332).

In his public speeches Winston Churchill seemed incapable of switching off his boys’ paper frame: “It is his refusal to grow up which is part of the Prime Minister’s attraction for the general public”. As human beings are flooded with far more empirical data than they can possibly process, they must invent strategies for preprocessing, admitting some kinds of information while screening out others (p333).

This is one of the functions of the frame: like an intelligence analyst, it must first sift “signals” from a much larger body of irrelevant “noise” before it can interpret these signals. Marx encountered that filtering mechanism at work in Greek dramas. They condoned slavery, and in that sense were political; yet modern audiences could still be riveted by these plays, without in any way diminishing the horror of slavery as an institution (p333).

All audiences at all times employ frames that focus selectively on some types of data while de-emphasizing or disregarding others. It hardly matters that school stories were broadcasting reactionary propaganda because the audience has tuned out that message (p333).

“School stories fulfilled every schoolboy’s fantasy of finding himself among wealthy people in a noble setting”. Few of the working class were imperialists. Many of them would have been hard put to name a couple of British colonies. The Public school stories, which were so successful in converting slum children to Rubgeian values, dramatically failed to make them love the Empire, even when reinforced by relentless imperialist evangelizing in the schools (p335).

Grass-roots working-class activists in the Liberal, Labour and Communist Parties were almost uniformly anti-imperialist, while those who were less interested in politics generally brought a healthy apathy to imperial issues (p335).

Most plebian memoirs do not mention the empire, and those that do usually view it through a skeptical frame. After the military victories of mid-1900, working-class jingoism and army enlistments quickly faded away (p337).

When Welsh miner Jack Jones enlisted for the Boer War, his father was disgusted: “Boy you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Only them that runs from the police and them that are too lazy to work, does to the army (p337).

Shortly after arriving in South Africa, he deserted (p337). Coronations were celebrated as national, not imperial, holidays. “One felt the coming together of the whole country for a day of contentment and freedom” (p338).

Some children came away with more subversive thought, like the laborer’s daughter who had to recite a poem about the great merchant ships bringing England her bread and butter. “and somehow or other it stirred a bit of rebellion in me, I thought where’s my bread, and where’s my butter? And I think it sowed the first seeds of socialism in me, it really did” (p339).

When the standard imperialist history was taught “It was all dates and battles”, recalled engineer’s son Jim Flowers “the Spanish Armada, Nelson, Marlborough and all that. It didn’ tmake much of an impression on me thogh. It went into my brain and I stored the facts because you had to, but patriotism never struck me as being very clever” (p339).

“The Mayor always seemed to tell us how fortunate we were to be born British, or words to that effect. It must have taken a bit of doing on his part c onsidering how many of us nippers had fathers who were unemployed” (p339).

One seaman’s daughter went home for her half-holiday “with no understanding of anything we had done, but aware that we were exceptional because we were English”. What those schools failed to create was any real feeling of imperial comradeship toward Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, and South Africans (p341).

“Teachers might rave and yammer of “brothers” from beyond the seas standing shoulder to shoulder with the brothers from the Homeland. We knew such was not the case. Instead of shoulder to shoulder, it was hand to throat and feet to belly, and kick him when he’s down” (p341).

Why then, did working class children care so much for public school stories and so little for the empire? The drawings of working-class children of the world had the center ground “dominated by the streets in which they grew up, drawn to enormous scale and etched in fine detail. Nearby towns hovered vaguely in the distance. Foreign countries, if they existed at all, were all smudges on the horizon” (p342).

British working-class memoirs are predominantly works of local history. Any excursion beyond these boundaries could be bewildering. Guy Aldred, a clerkenwell office boy, never fully appreciated that some human beings were not Londoners (p343).

“The world to me was London, and, as I realized to my surprise, not all London. The dominions of the British empire meant nothing to me. History, geography, everything beyond the immediate locality of my experience was undefineable alienism (p343).

“My mind refused to form any impression of a true wide-view of the past, just as it declined to form any impression of the distant in point of space. I understood that there was a world that was not christian but in order to enter into relations with it it seemed to me that I would have to possess Aladdin’s lamp” (p343).

Through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, little news from the outside world penetrated working class communities. Millions of men and women died in their towns and villages without ever having travelled five miles from the spot where they were born (p344).

To them the rest of the world was a shadowy place merging into the boundaries of unreality. “Rumours might reach us of a war with the Zulus or the tragedy of General Gordon, but it was all too distant to disturb our sleep or excite our fear (p344).

The isolation could produce enormous contrasts in culture between neighbouring working-class communities. Geography was always a conspicuously weak subject in English popular schooling. Even as the government began to invest more in education, the quality of instruction in geography did not improve dramatically (p347).

They might sing patriotic songs on Empire day but it did them no harm because it never went very far - no one knew where the empire was (p348). A 1946 survey of Tottenham residents, 95 percent of them working-class, found that their favorite category of nonfiction reading was travel and adventure (p349). “Maybe that’s because I’ve never been outside England but I would like to go to some of them countries you read about”, explained one manual worker with an elementary education (p349).

Sunday schools and church-related day schools, while they neglected modern geography, meticulously taught the landscape of the holy land. The fact that Scripture provided the foundation of English literature and the modern English language perpetually reinforced the idea that Palestine was the promised land for the English people (p351).

“The landscape of the bible was far more familiar to us than the geography of England” (p351). British working people were equally enthralled by the geography, literature and culture of another promised land - America (p353).

America always fascinated the proletariat as much as it has repelled the European educated classes, because it promised a measure of freedom and affluence that the Holy Land did not grant. Those who remained behind could immerse them selves in American literature (p354).

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Thanks to availability, the literary conservatism so common among the working classes was reversed in the case of American authors, who were enjoyed by common readers long before they acquired acceptability in literary circles (p354).

All varieties of British radicals - abolitionists, humanitarians, temperance reformers, peace agitators, feminists, champions of the public and adult education, drew inspiration and support from their American counterparts (p354).

As the tramp-poet W.H. Davies wrote, America was a wonderful territory for beggars (p355). In a country where few were educated intensively, the American alternative of broadly educating the many appealed to autodidacts (p355).

According to a London tobacco worker's son, "Those were the days when people within our social class were looking to the new world of the American continent for relief from their existing poverty. A new world of prosperity and promise to which many emigrated" (p357).

Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* and George Orwell in *Coming Up for Air* typified the horror felt by middle-class intellectuals when they confronted the prospect of flashy, chrome-plated, materialistic "Americanization" (p358).

American films had captured 85 to 90 percent of the British market after the war, much to the distress of elitist critics. "Of course it was escapist fantasy: but when your parents and teachers indoctrinated you in a class fatalism, squelching any hope that you might have some direction over your own life, Hollywood conveyed an intoxicating sense of possibility" (p359).

"The world was ruled by a mysterious THEY whose sole purpose was to prevent ignorant people like US from making any headway in life. From boyhood onwards, any original endeavour that I might tentatively consider would be met with: "THEY won't like it" or "THEY won't take no notice of you" (p359).

The movies brought home an entirely different message. Hollywood was mass-producing "the opium of the people", an endless output of "fantasy and unreality. In days when many lived almost on the breadline, we saw people living in the most opulent affluence" (p359).

The movies portrayed a society where class barriers existed but could be hurdled by anyone with determination. In British films, if the working class were shown at all, they were depicted as dimwitted clowns who spoke with a phoney accent that was even worse than the real thing (p360).

One could swallow Hollywood films and myths whole without blunting one's political radicalism, perhaps because both were based on similar kinds of adolescent idealism. Mass Observation found that 64 percent of working class people had a positive opinion of American films compared with only 20 percent negative (p360).

Though most filmgoers realized that Hollywood presented an unrealistic portrait of America, they also broadly believed the United States was more democratic than Britain. What the working classes found alluring in these movies was a society where, it seemed, everyone could be bourgeois, where middle-class affluence and values were apparently the norm (p361).

Respondents of both sexes confirmed that Hollywood glamor left them dissatisfied and somewhat envious of the American way of life, even if they realized that the tinsel was fake. "Films are like a drug - the

more one has the more one wants, and yet, after seeing a film there is no satisfaction. Everything seems flat and dull when the last scene flickers out, and knowing that - I still go” (p361).

“You will find earnest ex-public school boy members of even the communist party writing little tracts for each other on how to get on with the ‘workers’ - as if the ‘workers’ were a different biological species. In the states there is no such caste division” (p361).

The American boy grows up in a community dedicated to the proposition that all men are born free and equal. In cold fact they may be no more free and equal in the U.S. than they are in Britain. But because they are all of them dedicated to the proposition they do tend to behave in their social intercourse as if it were so (p362).

“And that is at least the beginning of a true democracy. We’ll never get as near as that to democracy in Britain until we’ve abolished our caste system of education. Perhaps the most damning conclusion one can reach about British imperial propaganda is that it utterly failed to alert the working classes to the greatest threat the empire would ever face - Nazi Germany (p362).

“Instead of teaching us about how one-fifth of the world was red and British, we should have been taught something about Hitler, Mussolini and their kind”, complained the daughter of a Southampton longshoreman (p363).

Hitler and Europe and Chamberlain and the whole threat of war seemed another world away. “We were all terribly ignorant of the storm that was building up across the horizon”. For seventeen year old Margaret Perry, a Nottingham store clerk, the declaration of war meant little (p363):

“I didn’t read newspapers in those days, had no idea what had been happening across the channel during the last six years. Germany was far, far away and Poland even further. Where was Poland anyway? I know Austria was next to Germany and Czechoslovakia around there somewhere but our lessons in Geography at school never included a map” (p363).

“The British Empire, yes, I remember that. Tea came from India and Africa was full of little black pygmies, but Europe, that was full of foreigners who couldn’t speak English. Another world of which I was completely ignorant” (p363).

Two polls conducted in 1948 provide hard statistical evidence of that ignorance. A government survey found that only 33 percent of those earning £4 a week or less could correctly name a single colony. After forty years of Empire Day propaganda, 63 percent of all respondents could not think of a single raw material imported from the colonies (p363).

Among unskilled workers, 59 percent had little or no interest in colonial matters. When Mass Observation asked 2,078 people which countries belonged to the Empire, 17 percent could not name any. Fully 65 percent could not name any recent event in any part of the Empire (p364).

That is not to say that Empire Day was completely a failure of propaganda. It undoubtedly found a reception among middle-class schoolboys, who could realistically look forward to a career commanding Africans or Indians. But it simply did not have the same relevance for working-class children, who rarely ventured from home. After all, how much of the Empire did they own (p364)?

## A Mongrel Library

Autodidacts certainly worshipped the classics, but they could also be charitable toward the lesser ranks of literature. While they tended to have a conservative sense of literary hierarchies, they tended to grade books on a sliding scale rather than pass-fail (p366).

Once the old Evangelical hostility to secular literature had been overcome, even serious autodidacts could treat fairly rubbishy books with remarkable tolerance, and they were not distressed by the jumbling together of high and low culture (p366).

These readers tended to approach any literary work on its own terms and take from it whatever they found valuable. After all, as one workhouse veteran noted, there was more mental stimulus in a boys' weekly than in the typical Victorian schoolbook (p366).

From the nineteenth century up to today, popular culture has been blamed for promoting a variety of social evils: juvenile crime, racism, violence, male supremacy, consumer capitalism, not to mention bad taste. None of these accusations is completely groundless, but the actual uses of literacy may be much more complicated and ambiguous than most students of cultural studies imagine (p367).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the penny dreadful (cheap crime and horror literature for boys) created something approaching panic among middle-class observers, who were certain that it encouraged juvenile delinquency (p367).

Working-class critics, however, were inclined to be much more easygoing. Much of the clamor over penny-dreadfuls grew out of a longstanding prejudice against teaching the poor to read. "True, our heroes were outlaws. But what boy is not a bandit, a rebel, a pirate at heart!" (p368).

As London hatmaker, Frederick Willis explained "No boy would be any the worse for reading penny dreadfuls and in many cases they encouraged and developed a love of reading that led them onwards and upwards on the fascinating path of literature" (p368).

Though most readers consume a certain amount of junk, it does them no harm because they recognise that it is junk. In the 1940s Mass Observation surveys confirmed that fans of cheap thrillers commonly acknowledged that they were facile and not to be compared with classics (p370).

We must break the habit of treating high culture and popular culture as two distinct categories with mutually exclusive audiences. A promiscuous mix of high and low was a common pattern among working class readers of all regions, generations, and economic strata (p371).

Their approach to literature was a random walk. Autodidact culture is commonly ridiculed for its unsystematic organization and acquisition. They read "almost anything that was put into their hands". If that seems a middle-class condescension, it was consistently confirmed by working-class readers (p371). Most working people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even some in the twentieth, faced an absolute poverty of reading matter. That is, the literature available to them could not fill up their leisure time, even if they read it all (p372).

There was no room for selectivity. A Cornish carpenter, George Smith had little access to libraries. He read "every sort of book that came in my way" - novels, history, biblical criticism. He particularly liked mathematics because it was slow reading (p372).

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Readers who read whatever came to hand would unavoidably stumble across a certain percentage of classics amidst the rubbish. Under those conditions, one inevitably read much that was not age-appropriate, far above or below one's comprehension level (p373).

Younger plebian readers often tackled difficult books, even if they read them through an unsophisticated frame. "We younger ones often dipped into books far beyond our understanding. It did us no harm, I believe, for we skipped a lot and took what we could from the rest" (p374).

Some uneducated readers had an uncanny knack for recognizing greatness in literature. Thus it was possible for a naïve reader, flying blind, to home in on the classics. By following intertextual links, autodidacts could reconstruct the literary canon on their own (p375).

The most heroic chapter of this history recounts the struggle of ordinary readers, in the face of tremendous obstacles, with no meaningful help or preparation, to discover literary greatness on their own. "We must make our own soundings and chartings in the arts, so that we may all one day climb to our own peak" (p376).

"Reading for me then was haphazard, unguided, practically uncritical", recalled a boilermaker's daughter Marjory Todd. "Whether I knew it or not, my curiosity was being sharpened, knowledge absorbed, mental frontiers pushed back" (p377).

Derek Davies could not recall that his mother ever read a book. His father, a die-caster in an automobile factory, read only local and sports papers and two novels a week: "By the age of eleven or twelve I must have read a couple of hundred of these novels. In one unplanned leap I plunged myself into reading and found myself simultaneously reading voraciously on several widely differing levels" (p377).

"Gradually, as I found out how to use the School Library and Public Library, some degree of selection took place, but as nobody at school before sixth form advised me what to read the selection remained distinctly erratic" (p378).

Even his father's rubbishy novels "provided me with a reading fluency and a vocabulary which gave me a flying start in the Grammar School". Charlie Chaplin was a classic autodidact, always struggling to make up for a dismally inadequate education. He groped haphazardly for what he called "intellectual manna" (p378).

Female reading was no less mongrelized. Alongside the School Stories, girls had their own parallel universe of school stories. Some of them passionately identified with the young gentlemen in the School Stories for boys, even to the point of mimicking their manners and catchphrases (p379).

Just as their foremothers had been inspired by Pope, Carlyle, and Lord Chesterfield, these girls suffered no psychological damage when they assumed a male perspective. At a time when literature offered few truly emancipated heroines, girls could leap out of constricting female roles by identifying with adventurous male characters (p380).

A 1940 survey of working class girls aged thirteen and fourteen found that about a quarter of the adolescent magazines they read were, in fact, written for boys. As one woman remarked (p380): "a great many girls never read so-called "girls" books at all; they prefer those presumably written for boys... we girls who are much quicker and more imaginative, are often supposed to read milk-and-watery sorts of stories that we could generally write better ourselves" (p381).

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“far from indoctrinating them with a male ideology, boys books reinforced their independence”. Popular literature and movies have also been indicted for communicating racist attitudes to their audiences. Boy’s papers in particular stand condemned for routinely depicting the Chinese as villainous and blacks as comical or vicious (p381).

“Nigger” minstrel shows were enormously popular in the Victorian period, but how were they read by working-class spectators? Chartist agitators and trade unionists frequently compared the condition of free English workers with that of American slaves (p382).

Though the labour press supported the Confederacy in the American Civil War, their readers tended to side with the North. One ex-weaver from Stockport said “I detested slavery of every kind whether among the white factory operatives at home or among the negroes of America. I always went with the dog that was down” (p383).

As late as 1940, Uncle Tom’s Cabin was one of the most widely read books among working-class schoolgirls. When they recalled the dark ages of child labour, working men often framed their protests in those terms: they had been treated as brutally as Uncle Tom (p383).

“Reality” may not be the word that Uncle Tom’s Cabin brings to mind today, yet audiences before the First world War found in it a heart-stopping realism. “Uncle Tom’s Cabin played absolute hell with our emotions. We felt every stroke of the lash of the whip. It cut us to the quick, heart and soul” (p383).

The complicated reality is that prejudice against and identification with nonwhite people could coexist in working-class culture, often in the same individuals. The conventional working-class idea of Africa at the time was equally cartoonish: a remote place “where the people were black and lived in the jungle. It was very hot there, and these people, who were called niggers, didn’t wear clothes” (p385)

“Some of them were savage and carried spears, and some would even eat you if they caught you”. Yet however demeaning these attitudes were, they were not imperialistic: no one who thought Africa was like that would want to spend his life policing the continent (p385).

Before the First World War, the working classes in Britain were considerably less racist than the governing classes. They rarely engaged in racial violence, and they had not absorbed the scientific racism fashionable among the university-educated (p385).

After 1918, as racism became less acceptable among educated people, it became more common among British workers, as they increasingly competed with immigrants for jobs (p386).

Throughout most of the twentieth century, leftist intellectuals regarded “mass culture” with suspicion. They warned that music halls, the cinema, professional sports, and the popular press were narcotizing the proletariat (p386).

But entertainment that seems empty to academics may be stimulating, socializing, and educational for a less sophisticated audience. If you ask viewers what they gain from soap operas, they will naturally emphasize the positive: they are not likely to mention, or even be aware of, subtle forms of indoctrination (p386).

In any case, the realm of “mass culture” is so vast and various that even an army of sociologists could not reliably generalize about its political effects. It is reasonably safe to say that certain kinds of popular literature communicated profoundly conservative values to working-class readers (p386).

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Marxists and near-Marxists of the 1930s characterized Hollywood movies as capitalist dope, and surveys around 1945 suggest that audiences may in fact have absorbed attitudes congenial to the conservative party (p389).

Of all popular media, advertising acquired the most poisonous reputation among the British intelligentsia. The tailor-poet Jacob Holkinson, with only three weeks of formal schooling, taught himself to read by studying signboards, handbills, and booksellers' windows (p391).

Advertisers sometimes resorted to "cabalistic phrases" and misleading language, but the ordinary reader could learn to decode these and, in so doing, develop his defenses against all kinds of propaganda.

Historians should study audience response directly before they leap to conclusions about the "ideological work" of advertising or any other medium (p392).

One thing is clear: British common readers were remarkably adept at appropriating enlightenment and mostly harmless entertainment from popular culture (p392).

## What Was Leonard Bast Really Like?

The fundamental motive behind the modernist movement was a corrosive hostility toward the common reader. Nietzsche, George Gissing, H.G. Wells, Bernard Shaw, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Sigmund Freud, Aldous Huxley, D.H. Lawrence, and Graham Greene all strove to preserve a sense of class superiority by reviling the mean suburban man (p393).

They convinced themselves that the typical clerk was subhuman, machinelike, dead inside, a consumer of rubbishy newspapers and canned food. The intellectuals had to create this caricature to maintain social distinctions in an increasingly democratic and educated society (p393).

By the early twentieth century, the Board schools had introduced great literature to the masses, who were buying the shilling classics of Everyman's Library by the million. Workers and clerks had by no means caught up with the educated classes, but they were coming uncomfortably close (p393).

Many intellectuals felt threatened by the prospect of a more equal distribution of culture. In a society where every man supplies his own philosophy, the philosopher becomes redundant. The fear was that the 1870 Education Act would succeed in creating an enlightened proletariat (p393).

A practical means of restoring their elite status was the creation of modernism - a body of literature and art deliberately made too difficult for a general audience. The old autodidacts had built on a foundation of English classics partly because they were so accessible (p394).

That kind of self-education was possible in the nineteenth century but in the twentieth, autodidacts discovered that the cultural goalposts had been moved, and that a new canon of deliberately difficult literature had been called into existence (p394).

The inaccessibility of modernism in effect rendered the common reader illiterate once again, and preserved a body of culture as the exclusive property of a coterie (p394).

If knowledge is power, then power, wealth, and prestige depend on preserving inequalities of knowledge. Consumers will tend to create exclusive inner circles controlling access to certain kinds of information. Like all other goods, the market value of knowledge increases with scarcity (p394).

This is not to say that universally distributed knowledge is necessarily valueless. It has use value to us as individuals but not exchange value among others. Exchange value of information can be created by creating artificial scarcities e.g. monopolies (p394).

The rational economic strategy of the information class is to "erect barriers against entry, to consolidate control of opportunities, and to use techniques of exclusion". Each member of that class must strive to control the discourse whether it concerns biblical interpretation or women's fashion or literary theory (p394).

"Restricted literacy" was used to corner the information market in pre-print societies. Consumers prefer to maximize choice and availability, and they will regard claims to special knowledge as an unfair monopolistic practice (p395).

It is precisely because education is so powerful a force in preserving existing social distinctions, that change is always a highly explosive political issue, and is always bitterly resisted and resented. As Francis Place had learned; it is not prudent for a working man to know more than his employer (p397).

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Until the early nineteenth century, literacy alone had been enough to confer some intellectual distinction. The subsequent expansion of literacy was regarded with apprehension by the educated classes, because it diminished their caste status (p397).

Another response to the growing number of autodidact workers was to ignore their existence. No such characters appear in any English novel before 1880. Clearly, the educated classes reckoned, the autodidacts should give up their quest for special information and be content with ordinary knowledge (p399).

While the pursuit of literature was emancipating for autodidacts, they did occasionally notice that they were ignored or reviled by some of their favourite authors. "Eliot showed people as ugly, stupid, shabby, vulgarian, squalid, and somehow indecent. But people such as those in *The Waste Land*, I had been looking at all my life. The 'broken fingernails of dirty hands' was meant to repel, to startle readers into seeing working people as rats - slimy, mean, ugly. Weren't those the hands of my father and mother?" (p400).

From then on, she channelled her scholarly energies toward the poetry of John Clare whose work affirmed the literacy of working people. The condescension was not always immediately obvious to autodidacts. They considered themselves respectable and intelligent, so when they came across allusions to the uneducated masses, they might assume that the author had others in mind (p400).

"I came across phrases that puzzled me such as "shiftless rabble", "dregs of humanity" and "ignorant masses". I wondered where all these worthless people lived. I could only think it must be in London or some such place outside my ken. Then one day it dawned on me, these scornful and superior writers were writing about me, and the people who lived on our street. It knocked me sideways for a little time (p400).

"Nothing angers me more than to hear some critics dismiss millions of people as the great unthinking "mass", or refer to them with contemptuous arrogance as they they had no more sense or sensitivity than a school of mackerel" (p401).

"Behind the condescension is the presumption that the critic's own tastes, standards, and way of life are so much more rewarding, so much more elevated and worthwhile, than those of the man in the street. I must confess that I have not always found this to be so" (p401).

E. M. Forster could only deal with the working classes on a feudal basis - as peasants to be patronized. "Imaginative passion, love, doesn't exist in the lower classes", he said. Forster could not believe that a clerk might be genuinely thrilled by literature. And that prejudice is not dead among academics, even today (p404).

For the leisured classes, a gradually expanding intellect is certainly a preferable approach to learning, but the self-educated have only limited time to make up enormous gaps. They must move quickly, they have hungrier minds, and they will passionately embrace any book that opens up a new intellectual landscape (p404).

For autodidacts, almost any one of the English classics could produce a kind of epiphany - but not usually anything modernist (p404). In 1906 the first Labour MPs cited Ruskin, more often than anyone else, as the author who had moulded their minds (p405).

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The intellectual awakening of one Beeston engineer took place when his father-in-law, a trade unionist, presented him with *Unto This Last* and *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Up until this moment his reading had been limited to penny dreadfuls, his father's newspaper, and a Sunday school prize biography of Abraham Lincoln, but now: (p406)

"Ruskin began to implant in my mind a positive philosophy, the virtue of work, the need for a new standard of values, that man is a creative being. I became an honest seeker of truth rather than a rebel with a chip on his shoulder, and one with a growing appetite for reading and for study opportunities (p406).

One silk millworker quoted Ruskin's preface to *The Story of Ida* to legitimize the whole project of working-class autobiography: "The lives we need to have written for us are of the people whom the world has not thought of, far less heard of, who are yet doing most of its work, and of whom we can best learn how it can best be done" (p406).

W.J. Brown worked as a boy clerk in the Post Office Savings Bank at West Kensington for something under 15 shillings a week. Modernist texts, from *Howard's End* to Bernard Shaw's *Misalliance*, have consistently depicted the clerk as a prisoner, trapped in a suffocating office and a mind-killing job (p406).

The clerks themselves, however, offer a radically different portrayal of Edwardian office life. A surprising number of them found their careers intellectually stimulating. No doubt there were thousands of clerks whose brains were numbed by years of deskwork, and therefore lacked the energy for memoir writing or any other creative activity (p406).

Those clerks who did leave behind literary works probably also had the drive and the imagination to rise above the kind of office routine that would have anaesthetized others. We can conclude that many Edwardian clerks were intellectuals: their memoirs are simply too numerous and too enthusiastic to dismiss entirely (p407).

The authors were not isolated or alienated: they depict themselves as part of a large and lively community of philosopher-accountants. Along with schoolteaching and journalism, clerical work attracted the brightest Board school graduates, if only because no better careers were yet open to them (p407).

Already, the best minds were skimmed off the working classes and concentrated in offices, where they often achieved a critical intellectual mass. After work, W.J. Brown, for example, would enjoy "five glorious hours of freedom" reading Huxley, Darwin, and Tennyson's *In Memoriam* at the Battersea Public Library (p407).

"I had then, I think, the happiest days of my life", Brown remarked. "I had the elementary schoolboy's love of crowds, the slum kid's love of the prolific life of the mass. There was no rule against talking, and after a while, the work itself could be done mechanically, without engaging more than a fraction of one's conscious mind, conversation went on all day long" (p407).

"We discussed, argued, and disputed interminably; approving, questioning and debating every proposition under the sun, and in the process adding enormously to our stock of ideas and knowledge" (p407).

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The West Kensington Post Office Savings Bank was Brown's university. He organized 3,000 of his workmates into a union, and persuaded a Royal Commission to redress some of their grievances, and went on to become an important trade unionist and Labour MP (p407).

Another boy clerk at the Post Office Savings Bank confirmed that it was not difficult to "do more than an hour's work in an hour, and then surreptitiously read a study book or a novel. Kindly bosses generally winked at this proceeding (p408).

In a few years he had worked through all of Carlyle and advanced to the Second Division of the Civil Service. "No one who has not lived the life of a young man in a big office can realize how intensely the life can be led" (p408).

"True, there are hours of dull work, though even that can be mitigated by devising rapid methods of doing it. But there is the association of a number of young and eager minds, all reaching out in different directions, a number of characters in the shaping, all experimenting" (p408).

A coworker was familiar with the art galleries of Europe, as well as French and Italian literature: "It was a pleasure to listen to his talk and I am sure I sucked in more knowledge than any professor at a university could have imparted. No doubt it was less perfectly digested, but it was his, acquired by himself and poured out like a fresh and untroubled spring" (p408).

"There were many readers amongst us. We philosophised, we talked history and politics and literature and were altogether gloriously uplifted" (p408).

"I myself could cast up long columns of figures with perfect accuracy, and talk incessantly with my neighbour about Oliver Cromwell or Mahomet. Most of us had this capacity in greater or lesser degree, and the quicker workers often lent a hand to the slower. It was a good life" (p408).

V.S. Pritchett found the same adventure of the mind as an office boy for a leather factory. He relished the disinterested intellectual pleasure of learning the business. And far from stifling his dreams of becoming a writer, his work brought him into contact with customers and workers who had serious literary interests (p408).

One of the most successful of the intellectual clerks was Joseph Toole, the son of a Salford tramworker, who became a Labour MP and Lord Mayor of Manchester. After a miserable Catholic school education, periodic unemployment allowed him to study in the Manchester Reference Library (p409).

There he discovered Adam Smith, Ricardo, Herbert Spencer, Huxley, Mill, Emerson, Dickens, Morris, Blatchford, Shaw, Wells, and John Ruskin. "Study always left me with a deep feeling that there was so much amiss with the world. It seemed that it had been started at the wrong end, and that it was everybody's business to put the matter right" (p409).

His mates, who saw no value in the great books, accepted the status quo "as God-given and never to be altered. Fatalism run riot". Toole found liberation in the insurance business which offered an unequalled education in economics and sociology (p409).

Though doing well in the insurance business, he was not uncritical of capitalism: for a time he read Marx and joined the Social Democratic Federation (p409). Eager for self-education, working class autodidacts embraced the brilliance of metropolitan life (p410).

Where a middle-class intellectual might feel engulfed and oppressed by the urban masses, the same crowds could be endlessly stimulating to proletarian writers, many of who were refugees from the provinces (p410).

“Wonderful London! What a school for learning. What a field for training! What a sphere for service!”, sang printer William Lax, brought up in a small Lancashire mining village (p410). V. W. Garratt, who migrated to London from Birmingham after the First World War, immersed himself in the “brotherhood of books” at the British Museum (p410).

Far from T.S. Elliot’s city of faceless masses, London offered ordinary people unequalled scope for identity and liberty (p411). Frederick Rogers said “London and its opportunities were educating me as universities do other men” (p412).

“The navy can feast his eyes on the world’s masterpieces at the National Gallery, Hampton Court, Tate Gallery, and Dulwich. He can obtain Shakespeare, Dante, Shelly, Milton, Dickens and Scott for a few shillings or read them for free at the public library (p412).

Opportunities for young women only really opened up during the manpower shortages of the First World War. “I’m so fed up with reading about the doleful thirties”, Elizabeth Ring protested in 1975. “I am reaffirmed in my belief that every poor person should live in London. We had the culture of the world at our doorstep” (p413).

“It is in the city tha tman became human. In the crowded, stinking little streets. No noble conception, no great idea, was conceived outside a city”. - Eric Hoffer (p413). Modernists were not always insensitive to the wonders of mass urban life b ut they rarely had anything positive to say about the suburbs (p413).

While millions, in Britain and the United States, voted with their mortgages for suburban villas, the university-educated intelligentsia looked on in horror (p413). In what was supposed to be a cultural wasteland, there were many literary societies, attended by clerks, shop assistants and workers (p414).

A postman’s son, Richard Church rememberd his inner-suburban world as warm and secure, “a pocket of civilisation utterly quiet and self-sufficient”. He once entertained adolescent dreams of becoming a “mephistophelean” artist, “ready to claim a larger authority over my fellow-creatures, over circumstances kind or averse, over the very laws of right and wrong”, but that was not to be (p414).

Though he won a scholarship to Camberwell Art School, his father pressured him to give it up and sit for the Civil Service exam. Church dreaded the day he had to report for work at the Land Registry. He was gratefully surprised to discover that the living death of clerkdom was more a literary cliché than a reality (p415).

“The multitudes of cultured men whom I met in the Civil Service, friends, advisers, monitors, served me in those first years in lieu of a university, helping me to educate myself, to enlarge my range of mind and experience” (p415).

Church rose every morning at 5 am., read until 7am, clocked in at the office from 9am to 4pm, did a bit more reading on his majesty’s time, was home again by 5pm, and continued reading until midnight. He attended lunch-hour organ recitals at St. Clement Dane’s on the Strand. He could stand and read in bookshops as long as he occasionally bought a shilling classic (p415).

Far from being a wasteland, the Civil Service provided Church with the raw material for his first novel, *The Porch*, which won the Femina Vie Heureuse Prize. He had no reason to envy Oxbridge because the Civil Service offered a livelier literary milieu (p415).

Church found that compiling bureaucratic reports “was good technical training for a young writer. It taught me verbal concision and precision, a fundamental virtue in a poet” (p415). Church was a populist who aimed to broadcast literature as widely as possible. He hailed the radio for whetting the public appetite for museums, books, and classical records (p416).

Belletrist Augustine Birrell taught him that a truly literate person must have a library of at least 2,000 volumes and “that a part of literary education was to sit surrounded by one’s books, absorbing them through one’s skin, as sun-starved aspirants to health absorb ultra-violet rays from a lamp” (p417).

Church was taken aback when someone asked him if he read contemporary authors. His was an Everyman’s Library definition of literature. Shop boys who worked for newsagents or lending libraries enjoyed tremendous opportunities for self-education (p417).

As a 10 shilling a week office boy in a Clydeside shipyard, John Macadam felt “vastly overpaid” and profoundly bored, but on errands he could escape to the public library to read travels and biographies. Later, as an apprentice plater, he would sometimes “slip into a quiet corner of a hold somewhere and scribble away in grubby little notebooks” (p417).

From there Macadam was propelled into a thrilling journalistic career: reviewing Anna Pavlova, writing up Jacob Epstein, discussing pugilism with Bernard Shaw (p417).

Forster, in *Howard’s End*, depicts Leonard Bast as a man hopelessly trapped in his cubicle capable of doing only one specialized kind of insurance work. When he loses that job, he inevitably and helplessly plummets into destitution (p417).

Most popular periodicals had low literary standards, but that allowed anyone with a limited education to take up journalism. One example was Patrick MacGill, son of an illiterate Donegal peasant. After leaving school at age ten, he picked potatoes and worked as a navy. He read virtually nothing until he happened to pick up some poetry written on a page from an exercise book. Somehow it spoke to him, and he began to read “ravenously” (p418).

He brought Sartor Resartus, *Sesame and Lilies*, and Montaigne’s essays to work. *Les Miserables* reduced him to tears, though he found *Das Kapital* less affecting. Each payday he set aside a few shillings to buy secondhand books. His reading inspired him to write poetry solely for the enjoyment of his workmates (p419).

When a fellow navy was killed in a work accident, MacGill scribbled an account on a bit of tea-paper, with no thought of publishing it. He sent it to the *Dawn*, which offered two guineas for his next article. His workmates were astonished, impressed, and amused to learn that one could earn so much simply by writing (p419).

MacGill soon had a regular job with the *Dawn* at 2 pounds a week, and went on to become a popular novelist. Thomas Thompson managed to write his way out of the mills of Lancashire, starting with gossip paragraphs for local newspapers at a half-crown apiece (p419).

He discovered “easy money” when the Cotton Factory Times paid him 7 shillings and six-pence for a column. It is tremendously significant that so many late Victorian popular papers sponsored essay contests (p419).

For slum children with some writing talent, these offered the essential first rung up the ladder of literary success. Lancashire journalist Allen Clarke, the son of a Bolton textile worker, avidly read his father’s paperback editions of Shakespeare and ploughed through the literature section of the public library (p419).

In 1881 he bought the first issue of Tit Bits, where he began publishing verses and humorous sketches, and then went on to found and edit several Lancashire journals. The first literary prizes won by Neil Bell, a Southwold boatbuilder’s son, included a fountain pen, a bronze medallion, a multibladed knife, and a parrot (p420).

When Yes and No offered a prize for a true travel story, he fabricated and partly plagiarized something about an escapade in southern Italy and won half a guinea. By 1955 he had published about eighty books, mostly novels and children’s stories, and was earning nearly 2000 pounds a year from writing alone (p420).

The growth of popular journalism, public libraries, and Board schools in the late nineteenth century all conspired to create an office-boy intelligentsia paralleling the modernist intelligentsia. A.E. Coppard, in the pursuit of culture and understanding of literature “I continued to follow my instinct. There were no night schools or evening classes for my purpose, I had to find my own way and my instinct seldom mislead me” (p420).

“Certainly I was never bored, I have never in my life experienced that so common malaise. Nobody could order me to study some book because it was renowned or esteemed. I felt no want of assistance or instruction from anybody and always wanted to be alone in this.” (p420).

His instinct directed him to the standard poets, but not modern verse. His artistic taste stopped at the borders of Bloomsbury (p420).

The elite classes maintained their prestige through the conspicuous display of intellectual wealth as well as material goods (p423). The fear of “middlebrow” culture has been endemic in the modern intellectual left, which has generally despised the cultural classlessness of the United States (p424).

It was not unusual to meet a collier very fierce for learning, but whose study has been gravely warped by lack of direction (p424). WEA students thought that if a poet took little trouble to make himself understood, he must not complain of comparative neglect. They felt there was an obligation on the artist as well as in the reader (p425).

Supported by this earthly confidence, students disregarded jargon that would either exclude them from the discussion or force them to engage the issue only on the instructor’s terms. In their essays they aimed at the elimination as far as possible of aesthetic terms, or definitions which in the opinion of the essayist tend to obscure the issue upon which he or she is writing (p426).

They blamed the clique and coterie for boosting the “sterile obscurantism” of James Joyce. They were ready to argue that Charles Dickens, though out of fashion among modernist critics, in fact passed the only true test of literary greatness - borrowings from the Public Library (p426).

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In his later career, Joyce wrote increasingly obscure books for private publishers and a coterie readership. Had he heeded the advice of his editors and submitted to the disciplines of the literary marketplace, he might have produced more structured and accessible work - another "Portrait of the Artist" instead of "Finnegan's Wake" (p426).

Authors paid for modernism by giving up the wide audience their ambition desired and their talent deserved (p426). The plebian intellectual was likely to remain a populist as long as he or she belonged to a circle of other plebian intellectuals (p427).

The mutual improvement societies, the WEA, or even a gang of like-minded clerks could offer such a congenial cultural home. Those who failed to find such a home - or who chose to avoid it - were liable to gravitate toward the more exclusive orbit of modernism (p427).

Edwin Muir, a Glasgow Clerk "began to like ordinary vulgar people, because in my eyes they were no longer ordinary and vulgar, since I saw them shoots of the glory they would possess when all men and women were free and equal (p427).

"Reading Nietzsche gave me a feeling of superiority which was certainly not good for me. But it stimulated my mind and sharpened my contempt for sentimentality. My socialism and Nietzscheanism were quite incompatible, but I refused to recognize it" (p428).

"I did not reflect that if Christianity was a "slave morality" I was one of the slaves who benefited by it, and that I could make no pretension to belong to the "master class" (p428).

"Although I did not know it, my Nietzscheanism was what psychologists call a "compensation". I could not face my life as it was, and so I took refuge in the fantasy of the Superman" (p429).

Inspired by New Age Nietzscheanism Hugh MacDiarmid, became a self-described "intellectual snob of the worst description". He applauded the 1911 anti-Jewish riots in South Wales, denounced Robert Burns for preaching democracy and brotherhood, called for a "Scottish Fascism" and complimented the Soviet secret police (p430).

The Scotland he grew up in still had a strong autodidact tradition, which MacDiarmid preferred to ignore. He professed to enjoy the company of "quite illiterate people" as well as the creators of "difficult high-brow literature" but never half-educated mediocrities" (p430).

It was in fact a kind of shabby intellectual gentility, desperately striving to distinguish itself from the masses. His memoirs were mostly given over to name-dropping, quoting favorable reviews, and explaining his own failures a refusal to join the herd (p431).

When the masses occasionally came into his line of vision, he either extolled them in the abstract or vilified them in reality. In the first half of the twentieth century two rival intelligentsias squared off against each other, competing for audiences and prestige (p431).

One was middle class university-educated and modernist, the other was based in the working classes and clerical class - more classical in their tastes, but fearlessly engaged in popular journalism and the literary marketplace (p431).

The labels that were forced upon them were "highbrow" and "middlebrow". Until about 1950 the highbrows could reasonably claim to be beleaguered and misunderstood in a culture dominated by

middlebrows. The BBC, and the expansion of higher education gradually created a mass audience for Forster, Eliot, Woolf, Pound, Joyce, and the entire Bloomsbury group (p431).

If they treat middlebrow culture at all, they usually dismiss it as superficial and middle class, and to a considerable extent it was. But it was also the direct descendant of Victorian self-improvement, produced for and by thinking people with working-class roots (p431).

By the end of the twentieth century, with the decay of the autodidact tradition, the decline of the industrial working class, and the opposition of an increasingly popular and modernist culture, middlebrow culture would lose its audience and disappear (p431).

According to Virginia Woolf, “highbrow” - members of the thinking classes “is the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea”.

Conversely, the “lowbrow... is of course a man or woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of living at a gallop across life” (p432).

In other words, the lowbrow belongs to the non-thinking classes. Lowbrow is now usually called “popular culture” or “folk culture”. Far from disparaging it, intellectuals have usually admired popular culture as earthy, authentic, indigenous, unselfconscious, vital, traditional, natural, free of the taint of commercialism, a source of inspiration for high art (p432).

Highbrows need lowbrows and lowbrows need highbrows. They cannot exist apart when one is the complement and the other side of the other. Lowbrows provide the two essentials every highbrow needs: subject matter and an audience (p432).

As long as these two castes remain in their proper stations, where one produces culture while the other consumes it, there is a happy equilibrium. T.S. Eliot had no objection to proletarian culture within a strict social hierarchy: he was genuinely fond of the lowbrow antics of Groucho Marx and music hall star Marie Lloyd (p432).

Trouble arises only with the intrusion of a third cultural stratum, which has been called “bourgeois”, “petit bourgeois”, “mass culture”, “midcult”, “suburban”, “middle class” and “middlebrow”. Modernist intellectuals shared an obsessive loathing of middlebrows (p432).

Virginia Woolf defines “middlebrows” as “lowbrows” who invade the territory of highbrows, practising authorship without a licence. Middlebrows occupy a dubious place in the class system, “betwixt and between” confusing neat intellectual hierarchies (p432).

They are promiscuously democratic, associating on equal terms with both lowbrows and highbrows. Where highbrows embrace the avant-garde, middlebrows prefer “bound volumes of the classics behind plate glass” - a clear dig at the self-educating working classes (p433).

But middlebrows are a menace because they poach on the reading audiences that highbrows once considered their own. Virginia Woolf worried that prosperous middlebrows might move into Bloomsbury, drive up the rents, and force her out - an anxiety that afflicts every artist living in the bohemian quarter (p433).

Journalists who wrote lowbrow literature were less of a problem for highbrows, since they offered no direct competition for readers. But middlebrow authorship had an appalling habit of writing clear across the intellectual spectrum (p433).

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The unpleasant reality was that clerks belonged to a rising and increasingly articulate class. Everyman's Library was promising those clerks a complete literary education for 50 pounds. Economically as well as culturally, the clerks were breathing down the necks of the highbrows (p434).

The highbrows could preserve their cultural prestige only by creating a new literature inaccessible to Board School graduates (p434). The modernists used difficulty to fence off and protect literary property. If the point of modernist poetry was to overawe the masses, what was to prevent them from learning the trick of it and producing on their own (p435)?

The irony is that this hostility to the masses was a response to an increasingly sophisticated audience. The reading public on both sides of the Atlantic was becoming more affluent and more educated. Mass education, even mass higher education, never produces a "common culture", however noble that dream may be (p436).

Whenever the masses are educated up to a given level of culture, elite audiences and intellectuals will have already pressed on to the next and more challenging level. The BBC offered the general public classical music and quality newscasts, along with lighter programming, but Virginia Woolf disdained this mix as the quintessence of middlebrow (p436).

The BBC, she snorted, really stood for "the betwixt and between company". The BBC's Third Programme was created as a closed shop for intellectuals, which would deliberately exclude the self-educated. The company's director general defined the audience as "already aware of artistic experience and will include persons of taste, intelligence, and education (p436).

But during the first week of the Third Programme, 19 percent of working-class listeners found the Third Programme "very attractive", compared with 55 percent of the lower-middle class and 70 percent of the Upper-middle class (p437).

Always working against the "Balkanization" of the arts are the popularizers, the cultural "middlemen" who explain the professions to the general public. Because they cut through jargon, popularizers tend to deglamorize intellectual "vanguards" and effectively steal their intellectual property (p438).

Why should a mass audience struggle with highbrow culture when middlebrow commentaries are more readable? When modernism became mass culture, the avant-garde had to move on to something even more modern - postmodernism (p438).

## Down and Out in Bloomsbury

“It takes so much money to be bohemian these days”, sighed Maurice Barres in 1888. Not everyone has the capital to set up shop in bohemia. One has to invest heavily in education, social connections and, above all, location (p439).

Bohemians are recruited from the Bourgeoisie, patronized by the bourgeoisie, and finally absorbed back into the bourgeoisie. Bohemia has always served the Bourgeoisie as a laboratory for cultural research and development, experimenting with new sensibilities in literature, art, music, couture, cuisine, design, erotics and narcotics (p439).

Bohemians are as essential to a dynamic capitalist economy as research scientists. Because Bohemia produces new culture rather than new technologies, it must be adversarial: if bohemian aesthetics and moralities were not transgressive, they would be part of the larger culture, and we do not pay inventors to invent what we already have (p439).

Therefore the Bohemian must exploit the liberal freedoms of bourgeois society somewhat farther than the respectable bourgeois is prepared to go -at first. But the ultimate goal of the Bohemian is to get past that initial shock, to change bourgeois tastes and thus create a larger market for his avant-garde art (p439).

To the bohemian, the working classes offer an earthier sensibility, a more honest morality, a fascinating potential for revolution. But what do the workers have to say about the bohemians? Though admission to the avant-garde usually required an elite education and some family money, a few proletarians managed to find a precarious foothold in London’s Bohemia (p440).

Says poet Clare Cameron: “Life could be so easy like that [bohemia], so flowerlike and fragrant; so light and laughing and care-free; a song, a dance, a caper, instead of the dull jog-trot we were used to. People lived like that in Chelsea; that was life, not the grey and prosy existence we knew” (p440).

At her first Bohemian party she was dazzled and intimidated by the easy conversation, the poise, the confidence, the wit. And she was not aware that it might all be a matter of class. How did one attain to that long-desired level? Must one be born with it or forever go unsupported (p440)?

It was painful to compare her own dimly “respectable” East End home with it. Nothing was so pathetically bourgeois as working-class domesticity. Yet she could not feel at ease in Bohemia either. Clothes were an obvious problem: something shabbily “picturesque” would have passed for artistic, but hers were shabbily proletariat (p441).

“We could not belong”, Clare recognized, “but we could go to the studios if we were invited, and live on the fringe”. That marginal position allowed her to study Bohemia from an ideal vantage point. The proletarian writer in Bohemia was at once an insider who knew the culture and an outsider who could criticize it (p441).

Once dazzled by artistic types, Clare eventually saw they were “conventional rebels, poseurs, hangers-on, freaks, slavish followers of fashion wherever fashion led”. This pattern would repeat itself again and again. From their precarious economic perch, working-class writers were able to produce a remarkable perspective - and disillusioning sociology of Bohemia (p441).

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Cultural conservatism was an insuperable barrier separating the working classes from the professional avant-garde. Working people could not afford permissiveness; for Bohemians it was and is a professional necessity. "The artist must experience everything" because he can put that experience into his art and sell it (p443).

A visit to a Bohemian cottage came as a nasty shock to Angela Rodaway. "It looked like the archives section of a government department through which a tornado had passed". One must remember that generations of British working-class women had waged a relentless class struggle against dirt (p443). A coal-fired economy produced a perpetual drizzle of soot, which would overwhelm any home without constant scrubbing and cleaning. Angela commented: "I saw a rejection of at least half of all had hoped to aspire to" (p443).

Bohemians are professional dissenters defining themselves in opposition to the bourgeoisie, or at least their own cartoon of the bourgeoisie. Consequently, they often back themselves into an alternative conformity, becoming slaves to counterfashions. Everyone in her crowd, Angela noted, somehow had the idea that it was bourgeois to smoke but not to drink, so they drank but did not smoke (p443).

Though they put on airs of poverty, many of them had considerable financial reserves. "Whatever one did, Freud would excuse, and Bloomsbury would approve" - except yesterday's fashions (p444). Joyce, Eliot, Rilke, Mann, Picasso, Gaudier, Wyndham Lewis, Jung, Stravinsky and Schonberg. These were the lords of the new culture; these had outshone the older artists, writers, thinkers, musicians till their work was reduced to the status of a clumsy child's ineptitude (p444).

Ethel Mannin broke into Bohemia only after serving an apprenticeship with the archenemy - the advertising industry. She ground out romantic novels at a guinea per thousand words, and picked up another 20 pounds a month writing for the women's pages of London and provincial newspapers (p445). Her formula was to write frankly for readers who were "philistines and proud of it". She was stubbornly committed to "recognizing neither class nor intellectual distinctions", which she regarded as two related and equally arrogant forms of elitism (p445).

If all good workmanship is art, and if creative people are everywhere, we must inevitably confront a disorientating question: "Where is Bohemia?". Bohemia is always in a great metropolitan center. A suburban bohemia seems a contradiction in terms, even an obscenity. Bohemia defines itself as anti-suburbia (p445).

As other plebian writers testified, there was plenty of culture in suburbia. The difficulty was that it was a classic Everyman's Library culture, which has no economic value for professionals in the business of producing new culture (p448).

They cannot do their job unless they have news about galleries, artists, theatrical directors, designers, undiscovered authors - and they must have it sooner than anyone else. There are four industries that must cluster in metropolitan centers fairly close to each other: the arts, finance, the national media, and the garment trade (p448).

Entrepreneurs in all these businesses therefore must have absolutely up-to-the-minute information, which can only be picked up "on the street". If they remain in the suburbs and wait until the press reports on a new artistic movement, that news will be stale and worthless (p448).

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The cultural contradictions of Bohemia were most penetratingly analyzed by East End novelist Thomas Burke, a former hotel boot-cleaner. He discovered that the “high rent” Bohemia of Chelsea was all “painfully manufactured” (p 449).

Bohemia, he concluded, could not deliver the creative freedom it promised because it was essentially a business, a factory for manufacturing aesthetics. “In all my experience”, Burke wrote “I have met few real poets, artists, or musicians who are bohemians” (p449).

“I have usually found them to be as precise and formal as lawyers are supposed to be”. That is why those who escape to bohemia in search of self-realization are usually disappointed. Bohemia organizes nonconformity, standardizes eccentricity, plans spontaneity, lays down rules for creativity, industrializes innovation of art, and markets a repudiation of capitalism (p449).

A true Bohemian, as Burke argued, would be “simply the habit of being oneself at all times and occasions. But in the professional Bohemia, individuality has little play. At Art balls and revels everybody is alike, all must conform to the prevailing mood and taste” (p449).

Only the homosexuals saved it from hopeless dullness, and even they were no longer fulfilling their quota of outrageousness. The irony was that all that Bohemia promised - freedom, creativity, novelty, diversity, colour, could be found in every part of the metropolis outside the artistic quarter (p449).

For Burke, the only true Bohemians were the workers, because they pursue art and literature without concern for sales or image. “It proves”, Burke proclaimed, that one can lead a Bohemian life, if one wishes to, in strict decency, and that muddle and drunkenness are no necessary part of it” (p450).

All the same, the working-class Bohemian might feel as alien in his own community as in Bloomsbury. The East End did occasionally give rise to unmistakably bohemian eccentrics, but their neighbours tended to label them as “queer” (p450).

People with warped lives will forgive you anything but being different from themselves. They will deny it as long as they can: label you “no-good”, “snob”, “stuck-up”, and all the rest of it - until you prove your difference (p451).

Then they will hate you with a mean, murderous hate. That is the greatest honour they can do you. It is the reward of the artist who rises from adversity. Working-class aspirants to Bohemia faced a great barrier: without leisure time, a university education, or social contacts among the avant-garde, it was almost impossible to master the modernist canon (p452).

It is one thing to be socially mobile, but it is another thing to catch up culturally. That takes longer. Whenever an idea has been finally and thoroughly discredited, then the moment has come for its revival (p455).

The modernist mood of disillusionment, disaffection, dissent, and dissonance would gradually permeate popular culture and eventually trickle down the social scale. Originating in Bohemia, it would be picked up by academics and highbrow periodicals, and then later, after a decent interval, relayed to the masses by middlebrow journalists, screenwriters, and novelists (p456).

When that sensibility reached the secondary modern schools, it would inspire what we now call “youth culture”. The Victorian earnestness, which sustained the WEA and autodidact culture as a whole,

survived largely intact up until 1945. Only the next generation, too young to remember the idealistic thirties, would catch up with modernist pessimism (p456).

The age of Warhol was deeply disillusioning for traditional autodidacts. There are many humanitarians who beat their wives or socialists who are fascists to their children. "It's so easy to hid behind a banner. Maybe they love the masses because they can't love people" (p459).

A circle of working-class poets would carry the tradition of working-class domesticity forward into the 1960s, celebrating the respectability of "Penny Lane", while uneasy amidst the brittle promiscuity of Swinging London (p459).

For the old-timers of Soho, things got desperate. Some tried to fit into the new coffee-bar society, became characters, dispensing old anti-social tales to the newly lost. They held court, were lionized but remained pathetic. Most of them died alone somewhere, at night in a lousy room, and they were forgotten within days (p460).

The green light had been given not only to washing machines, automobiles, and television sets, but also to fashion designers, interior decorators, artists, boutiques, rock entrepreneurs, experimental playwrights, and trendy restuarants (p460).

What had changed was the fact of more disposable income, which called into existence the Bohemian shopping malls one now fi nds in London's Camden Town or New York's Soho. The pursuit to purchase the trappings of Bohemia has become an increasingly expensive competition for status involving rapid obsolescence, as cultural styles supersed one another with dizzying speed (p461).

In this dynamic economy the autodidact is left hopelessly behind, like a traditional craftsman made redundant by new technology. How can he possibly catch up when even well-educated cultural professionals are hard pressed to keep pace with the constant accelerating fashion (p461).

In these circumstances the problem of controlling or disseminating information is made more difficult by continual change in the stock of information itself. In an environment in which inventiveness is being encouraged and paid for, there is a great sense of shortage of time (p462).

Arts trends have as brief a shelf life as stock exchange trends, and they depreciate rapidly if one fails to catch the latest wave in architecture or literary theory. The names htat Bohemia adopt for itself - avant garde, advanced, progressive, new wave, cutting edge, modernist, postmodernist - all reflect the Anxiety of Cool, the relentless stuggle to get out in front and control the production of new cultural information (p462).

Bohemia is "subversive" only in that it seeks to wean consumers away from older cultural products in order to sell them new ones. In that sense it exemplifies "creative destruction", the rapid innovation and obsolesence that Joseph Schumpeter identified as the essence of mature capitalism (p462).

Far from undermining capitalism, Bohemians are selling ever newer and more expensive cultural products as status markers, thus extending the distance between the poor and the rich. They are shortening everybody's time perspective for the sake of their own competitive anxiety, generating waste while at the same time deploring it (p462).

By the 1960s, this process produced middle-class youths who so thoroughly embraced Bohemian values that they grew frankly contemptuous of a culturally conservative working-class. Though they styled

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themselves members of the radical left, they could be outrageously arrogant toward the people who had to clean up after them (p462).

The “creative industries” generate more than one million jobs, £50 billion in goods and services, and a vigorous export sector, eclipsing the declining heavy industries. In Cool Britannia, it made good political sense for the Labour Party to find a new base here (p463).

The old classic orientated autodidacts have disappeared with the factories that employed them. A 1981 report found that 63 percent of Arts Council grants for writers went to applicants who had attended Oxford or Cambridge (p464).

However often today’s literary scholars repeat the mantra of race, class and gender, they clearly have a problem with class. The MLA directory of periodicals lists no academic or critical journals anywhere in the world devoted to proletarian literature, and the subject is very rarely taught in universities (p464). The accoutrements of the avant-garde are used to distance and distinguish cultural workers from more traditional manual workers. For both of these classes, the withering away of the autodidact tradition has been a great loss (p464).

We forfeited some important knowledge about ourselves when we shut out or forgot the working-class observers of Bohemia. Even if they never caught up, they saw, more clearly than any of us, where our culture was moving (p464).



