

# **The Republic of Letters**

Working class writing  
and local publishing

NEW CITY COMMUNITY PRESS  
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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# NEW CITY COMMUNITY PRESS

Our mission is to provide opportunities for local communities to represent themselves by telling their stories in their own words. We document stories of local communities because we believe their voices matter in addressing issues of national and global significance. We value these stories as a way for communities to reflect upon and analyze their own experience through literary and oral performance. We are committed to working with communities, writers, editors and translators to develop strategies that assure these stories will be heard in the larger world.

Executive Director, Steve Parks, Syracuse University

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- *Chinatown Lives: Oral Histories from Philadelphia's Chinatown*
- *Espejos y Ventanas/Mirrors and Windows: Oral Histories from Mexican Farmworkers and Their Families*
- *Free! Great Escapes from Slavery to the Underground Railroad*
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- *No Restraints: An Anthology of Disability Culture in Philadelphia*
- *Open City: A Journal of Community Arts and Culture (Vols. 1 and 2)*
- *Soul Talk: Urban Youth Poetry*
- *The Forgotten Bottom Remembered: Stories from a Philadelphia Neighborhood*



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In the spirit of *The Republic of Letters*, we also need to acknowledge the labor of those who took a rather worn copy of the book, scanned the pages, turned the images into words, which could then be designed, proofed and published. Much has changed in the publishing world since this book first appeared, but the continued commitment to working class writing is embodied in the efforts of Elizabeth Parks, George Rhinehart, Krisi Johnson, and Beth Uzwiak. Beyond individual efforts we also are grateful to institutional partners. Comedia Publishing Group granted us permission to reprint the book. Syracuse University Press supported its production, marketing, and distribution. Finally, Syracuse University's Writing Program continues to be a strong partner in the work of New City Community Press' efforts to support local writing groups and national publication projects – such as this one.

More than any individual or institution, however, we want this book to be seen as the result of worker writers, putting pen to paper at breakfast, on break, or at the end of a shift. Worker writers who gather in pubs, in living rooms, or in solitude to craft a language and style that expresses

the possibility of a culture grounded in egalitarian values and economic justice. It is in support of their continued efforts that we are proud to re-issue *The Republic of Letters*.

—*The 2009 Editorial Team*

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# The Republic of Letters

Working class writing  
and local publishing

**Contributors:** Paddy Maguire, Roger Mills, Dave Morley,  
Rebecca O'Rourke, Sue Shrapnel, Ken  
Worpole and Stephen Yeo

**Edited:** Dave Morley and Ken Worpole



# Starting points

‘Universal empire is the prerogative of the writer... The Republic of Letters is more ancient than monarchy, and of far higher character in the world than the vassal court of Britain.’

—*Tom Paine*

‘I hated school. Everything was so orderly, correct and restricting. Self-expression seemed to be alien to the whole grey, antiquated building. The male teachers were nothing like my father and the female ones nothing like my mother, or any other relatives, come to that. My lot sounded, and even looked friendlier than these beings. They looked as though they had just been taken out of a showcase. Their tone and accent had an aloofness about it that made it impossible to strike up any sort of relationship whatsoever. We were as remote as shit from sugar.’

—*Ron Barnes, ‘Coronation Cups and Jam Jars’*

‘There is a further claim that can be made for the restoration of the aching of correct English. Attention to the rules of grammar, or care in the choice of words encourages punctiliousness in other matters. That is not just an intellectual conceit. The overthrow of grammar coincided with the acceptance of the equivalent of “creative writing” in social behaviour. As nice points of grammar were mockingly dismissed as pedantic and irrelevant, so was punctiliousness in such matters as honesty, responsibility, property, gratitude, apology and so on.’

—*John Rae, Headmaster of Westminster School in ‘The Observer’ 7.2.82*

## *Happy Years*

In 1946 I married Harry.  
 Maria our daughter.  
 Gerrard our son.  
 Happy years.  
 Five years ago I had a stroke.  
 Five months in hospital.  
 Paralysed down one side  
 Walking is difficult.  
 Talking is difficult.  
 Tip of my tongue.  
 But the right words won't come out.  
 In time it'll come.

—Eileen Williamson, *'Tip of My Tongue'*

‘Whether that is literature, or whether that is not literature, I will not presume to say, but that it explains much and tells much, that is certain.’

—Virginia Woolf, introduction to *'Life as we have known it'*

‘There is no doubt in the minds of the Committee that on a community level the work is of sound value and ... a new reading public is responding to this situation. Nevertheless... no recommendation for grant-aid from the Literature budget can be forthcoming. The members were of one voice in judging the examples of literature submitted; they considered the whole corpus of little, if any, solid literary merit...’

—Charles Osborne, *Literary Director, Arts Council of Great Britain*

‘Literature is a place for generosity and affection and hunger for equals -not a prize fight ring. We are increased, confirmed in our medium, roused to do our best, by every good writer, every fine achievement. Would we want one good writer or fine book less? The sense of writers being pitted against each other is bred primarily by the workings of the commercial market place, and by critics lauding one writer at the expense of another while ignoring the existence of nearly all.’

—Tillie Olsen, *'Silences'* p. 174

‘It is important that we do all we can to increase audiences for today’s writers, not that we increase the number of writers. There are already too many writers chasing too few readers. Although the real writer will always emerge without coaxing, it is not so easy to encourage new readers into existence.’

—Charles Osborne, *Literary Director, Arts Council*

### *No Dawn in Poplar*

When the sun comes up in the morning  
rising slowly  
the sun comes up  
it’s the sun coming up.

There’s no dawn in Poplar.

—Richard Brown, *Tower Hamlets*

### *Hung Up*

I’ve got a theory  
That the K.G.B.  
are monitoring our phonecalls  
(very secretly)  
if not,  
Last time around,  
What was it  
Made you sound,  
So foreign to me?

—‘Voices’

‘The Encyclopedia of Article Ideas gives you over ten thousand saleable ideas - which you yourself can actually shape into marketable ideas.’

—*Advertisement*

‘Which reminds me that the strong minded, practical girl is definitely out of place in these novels, since the creation of terror in the mind of

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the heroine is a vital element... Having given the requirements for a successful Gothic novel, let us consider the taboos, which are as follows:

1. Any considerable departure from the plot formula.
2. A setting which is entirely matter-of-fact and lacking any air of mystery or danger.
3. A 'Women's Lib' type of heroine.
4. A heroine whose character has undergone neither change nor development by the end of the story.
5. A sad ending.
6. Too-rapid pace, and a completely rational explanation for everything that has happened.
7. Sexual contacts or risque situations.'

—An article on writing Gothic novels in, *'The Writer' magazine*

'STORYBUILDER: A brilliant new approach to the step-by-step creation of the modern short story to meet today's editorial needs. Everything you ever wanted to know, from the moment you sit down at your typewriter till you post off your completed story to an editor, told in simple, clear language with no vague generalisations. Choosing your theme. The unique Plot Chart offers you a personal choice from thousands of basic frameworks. Creation - the essential mental process. The secret of the opening paragraph. How to write crisp, natural dialogue...'

—Advertisement

'I was speaking to one of our local pensioners one day, at the beginning of making this book. I happened to bump into her, and I said, "Oh, I can't stay because I'm late. I'm writing a book." And she says to me, "I would like to do that," she said, "but I don't know how to go about it."'

—Joyce Crump, *'The Ups and Downs of Being Born'*

'Adults who are learning to read often say that the easiest pieces to learn to read are the ones which sound most like the way people speak. This helps break down the barrier of print. The language is part



of the story. It is often an oral language alive and central to the atmosphere and feeling.'

—*Gatehouse leaflet*

'Wednesdays was our day for poetry lesson, and naturally we had to recite what we had learned and the teacher always picked a kid who stammered to recite first: he'd say things like, "Speak up boy, don't mumble, put some life into it, you're not saying 'have a cup of tea'." By the time he'd finished, the kid stammered worse than ever. Then there was Friday afternoons. Before he came it used to be classed as leisure time. We were allowed to bring along our own books and comics to read, but Dean put the kibosh on that. He opened a school library and made us choose our books from it and when we finished a book we had to write an essay on it. I don't think he was trying to interest us in literature; he was probably being his normal sweet self. I remember Billy Jarmyn suffered a lot. He'd picked a dull book by Sir Walter Scott and having a bad memory, when he'd finished his book he'd forgot what he had read and was forced to start again -he was landed with Sir Walter Scott for a whole term! I doubt if he took much interest in books after that.'

—*Jim Wolveridge, 'Ain't It Grand'*

'To some people a Union poetry debate may not seem much, yet since last November we have had more readers' letters, more contributions from other unions, than ever before...'

—*Editorial in Transportation and General Worker's Union monthly journal, The Record*

'As we arrange courses and study-circles for the working class in Sweden, we find that books written by "ordinary people" (a reference to Centerprise books bought in large quantities) are a lot more interesting than the usual stuff we can get through "educational experts" of various kinds...books about vicars spending their afternoons drinking tea in lovely thatched cottages and that sort of thing...

—*From a letter from the Swedish Workers Educational Association to the Gatehouse project*

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Eleven times I tried to write  
another poem for the People's Road  
Five hours within myself  
trains were moving  
signals changed  
night gathered immense wagons  
in a string of stars  
sun shuffled  
shunting dawns  
& I could not write

I had forgotten myself  
in the studied books  
lost my own experience  
in the history of others  
become the old events  
& I could not write

There's learning for you  
The road itself had taught  
to live is to be  
perception first, then memory

I remember these lives within  
from a sense of being  
one with the road  
which book is peopled  
as this twelfth success  
with what I saw when the eyes were mine

—Joe Smythe, *Commonword*, Manchester

‘But perhaps the real achievement of (this movement) lies in the fact that, over and above making a reality of working class culture, it redefines the “political” in terms of the struggle of individuals to recapture the right to articulate their own situation...’

—Mike Poole, *‘Time Out’*

# Introduction

*The Republic of Letters* examines how in recent years working class people, particularly women and black people, have begun to develop new forms of writing, new modes of local, collective publishing, and alternative distribution networks - the elements of a movement which aims to 'disestablish' literature, making writing a popular form of expression for all people rather than the preserve of a metropolitan or privileged elite.

Many of the people involved in these initiatives - in adult education and literacy classes, in community publishing projects, in writers' groups and local history workshops - came together in 1976 to form the Federation of Worker Writers & Community Publishers. Poetry, stories, autobiographies are all now being produced outside the established field of 'Literature' and the market economies of commercial publishing.

The book looks critically at the policies of the Labour and trade union movements towards the Arts, particularly writing and publishing, and at the dismissive response which the Arts Council has made to this lively and growing phenomenon.

*The Republic of Letters* examines the problems as well as the very real successes of the recent movement, and discusses possible lines of development for the future. We hope it will be helpful to those people already active in the writing and community publishing movement, particularly those in groups who are members of the Federation of Worker Writers & Community Publishers, but also to those active outside this federation.

This book addresses a number of questions concerning all writers and readers - questions of literature and literacy - and in particular questions about the way these matters are dealt with in schools and other educational institutions. The book speaks also to trade unionists and socialists who believe that the broad labour movement cannot restrict its vision to economic equality alone, but who believe that all forms of cultural production are equally the right of working people. It is a book of analysis but also we hope of genuine encouragement.

# Early days and community politics

In 1976 representatives of eight groups engaged in the publishing of local histories, poetry and autobiographies met for a weekend of discussion at the Centerprise bookshop and cultural centre in London. It was here that the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers was born.

The title is wordy and loose yet its terms are important. A Federation rather than other forms of organization, to keep the autonomy of the member groups. Worker writers, to register the fact that the working class, the majority of the population, are still, in Tillie Olsen's words, 'marginal to the culture'. Community Publishers, because almost all of the member groups have a local base and local boundaries, and the intention to continue together in their future work.

This book is about the work and development of these groups and their Federation, about the work of allied groupings who are not members, and about the issues in politics and culture raised by these practices, the sometimes unresolved problems of this work. It is written by people active in this movement, aware that we have not been able to refer everything back to our various, argumentative, active, vital and changing groups, or even fully to each other. It's one road through a complicated patch of ground.

The oldest of the groups meeting in February 1976 went back only five years but, as projects sprang up in different towns and cities, they had begun to visit each other, correspond and exchange ideas and experience. A later section will examine the forerunners and origins of this activity, but we need to say here why it was that parallel developments of this kind had come about in different places within a few years of each other.

During the 1960s political and social activity turned away from the electoral, national and bureaucratic towards the local, campaigning, direct action, sectional and self-organised. Groups of working class people, finding that no formal structure dealt adequately with needs and issues as they felt them, began to represent themselves. They took direct action in the form of rent-strikes, the playgroup and nursery movement, squatting, housing and tenants' co-ops, free schools, the creation of local and accessible print and resources centres. And, growing out of face-to-face politics but rapidly transcending the local, there grew black politics and the women's liberation movement.

The fact that these various, deeply resistant and creative movements were perjoratively categorised 'community politics', and exploited by local and national politicians and their policies, points to one of the problems of basing activity in the 'local'. Locality is not a power base; it may not even define common interests. It can be an assertive badge of class; but it can be a divisive screen to separate people from wider allegiances and produce a false togetherness. We may only begin to articulate the values of a neighbourhood as it, and they, are dismantled. But, at its best, the local in politics stands for testing policies and actions by their impact on people's day-to-day life and development - as with the group in Liverpool who, when commissioned to contribute to a Lord Mayor's Enquiry into Crime and Vandalism in the Inner City, produced a paper called 'We Live Here'.

## Local communications

Local battles need local communications. The booklet, *Here is the Other News*<sup>1</sup>, in this series, is an excellent account of the development of alternative and community presses. People seized hold of the idea that the new off-set lithography was a form of printing that was more amenable to local control and local participation. Photographic plate-making meant that typing, drawings and half-tone photographs could be reproduced directly. This made design and layout a possibility for anybody. Gradually the use of this accessible form of printing moved from the campaigning and critical - the broadsheet, the leaflet, the strike bulletin, the exposing community paper - to reproduction of writing in forms which we are

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1 *The Republic of Letters* was originally a series of Comedia books about alternative cultures (Editors' Note, 2009).

used to calling literature. (This is not an apology; we will argue later that such writings are not third-class literature but a challenge to the category of Literature). And, from the start, this did not mean a diversion from campaigning writing to something tame and bland. Literature threatens and disturbs too. *Stepney Words* was published in 1971, a collection of poems by school children. Their critical view of their world in print led to the suspension from his post at the school of its editor, Chris Searle, and a demonstration by the young contributors and their parents for his reinstatement.

### Why publishing?

In the same month, just two miles up the road, the Centerprise bookshop and cultural centre was opened, one of the first of the alternative and community bookshops which came to be of great value to the local publishing movement. They are sales points, sometimes mail order distributors, places where people bring writing to be looked at, sometimes publishers or supporters of publishing. They are physical bases for this movement of self-development and self-organisation. (See, for example, *Rolling Our Own* in this series, for an account of the relationship between Grass Roots Bookshop in Manchester, and the project on Law and Sexuality.)

Centerprise began publishing with the writing of young people - their educational and cultural needs - in mind. (We will have more to say later about the place of this work in educational practice). But, in Hackney as everywhere, it became clear that, against the odds, many people were writing who had no educational reasons and little outside encouragement for doing so.

Once it became known that Centerprise published books written by local people, a great deal of material began to come in. In the main it was either small collections of poetry, or autobiographies, often just childhood recollections. The initial criteria for deciding what to publish were simple; Given limited resources and so much material we decided that whatever we published had to be clearly written and understandable to a wide cross-section of people; it must honestly reflect and allow the reader to understand the writers' experiences. We would also look for writing that embodied good description and critical thinking, and we would give priority to local people who had not had any opportunities for further education...

As it turned out, few manuscripts caused severe editorial difficulties. What

was nice was the way in which one piece in print would inspire other people to put pen to paper. We got poems in response to poems we had already published, people confirming or taking issue with historical incidents in published autobiographies. There was an extraordinarily high level of response and feedback to the books.

—*Writing*, p.38

Another common strand of development was the move from local issues into recording local history, either as memoirs by a single person or as an assembly of many. Campaigns over the quality of life in an area found natural allies in the recovery and recording of its past, not out of any simple illusions about the good old days, but because the life of the past represented the investment of human energy that was to be cherished and allowed to address itself to new needs.

This was the origin of QueenSpark Books:

The newspaper (QueenSpark) started in December 1972... It grew from a fierce campaign to stop Brighton Council turning a historic building in a park (The Royal Spa) into a casino, and to get a nursery school, day nursery and park centre instead. As a matter of policy the paper is sold almost entirely door-to-door. A thousand copies of our first QueenSpark Book (Albert Paul's *Poverty, Hardship But Happiness*) also sold in less than a month in this way. The selling system involves area contacts and some 40 individual street sellers. With the paper goes a duplicated slip for letters and comments.

... The development from newspaper to book publishing came by way of a historical feature in the paper called *Sparchives*. This was based on a series of interviews, mostly researched by Molly Morley... The Sparchives feature led Albert Paul to bring his book to *QueenSpark*. He had sat down to write it one evening per week over several months, when his wife had an evening out. A production team was formed, and since then we have tried to have separate teams on each book. More recently we have had book evenings occasionally to read aloud, plan and talk.

—*Writing*, pp.151, 154, 157

There were some immediate forerunners of this way of looking at history -important because they helped people to recognise and shape what was happening. The rare appearance on BBC radio of work like Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker's 'Radio Ballads' in the 50s and early 60s (*Ballad of John Axon*, *Singing the Fishing*, *The Big Hewer*, etc) had got many people excited about using tape to record the wealth of history, reflection, story, jokes and myth that lives in people's talk. The Ruskin College History Workshops, which originated amongst tutors and students in the mid-sixties, created the basis for a new kind of popular history. They

encouraged original research by the worker-students themselves, about the places they came from, the lives and occupations of their families, histories of their trade or union, and so opened up the consideration of people's lived historical experience as a counter to the narrowness of textbook history. The phrase that most neatly describes this approach, 'Dig where you stand', comes though, not from Ruskin, but from the title of Sven Lindquist's Swedish handbook on researching your workplace.

The cassette tape-recorder was a technical development which lent itself to these uses as readily as litho printing to shared control of print. Oral and written history go together to make many of the Federation books. This is what Greg Wilkinson wrote about the Partington Lifetimes series:

We began meeting and recording early in 1974. To begin with it was mostly just one person or a couple, with me as a pretty traditional interviewer. We started like this because the authors were not sure how many people they could talk to. I'd get some written notes from them before we met, and base my questioning on those. Simple questions mainly, like 'How did that happen?' 'What then?' 'How did you feel about it?' and 'Why?' These sessions were taped and transcribed, and two copies of the transcripts given to the speakers - one for themselves, one for anybody else in the group that they wanted to show. It was soon clear that everyone was willing for everyone to see their transcripts, so we took to duplicating them and distributing them around. As people got less shy and more involved, we moved into larger groups. Other people began asking the questions, freeing me to be more myself. One person began writing rather than talking - she said she couldn't get a word in with her husband around. And most people wrote some part, which could then be picked up in live discussion. We found that reading aloud brought a much more active response than leaving people to read the duplicated versions to themselves.

—*Writing*, pp.114-115.

## New ways to write

This description leads to one further basic characteristic of the Federation's member groups: the workshop group. Spending a substantial part of its time in face-to-face meetings is the usual way they work either at history or at writing. This doesn't necessarily mean writing during group meetings (though it's not unknown). It does mean a commitment to using the group as the first readership or audience for work, and as the body that decides about editing, shaping, public reading or publication. One last description of a group that was in the Federation from the beginning:



The Scotland Road Writers' Workshop was born in the autumn of 1973. Its founders included an out-of-work electrician, a dock-gate man, a fireman, an O-level dropout, a militant feminist - all working-class people - and a university lecturer in literature. Since then over fifty people have been part of the workshop at some time or another and attendance at weekly sessions has come to average a creditable thirteen.

The initial aim was simply to try to find some of the imaginative talent we know to exist in Britain's poor and exploited inner city areas. For this reason the founders stressed that the workshop was not concerned with grammar or fine writing but with finding words for working class ideas and experiences and feelings.

That is what the workshop has done. Within the first few months its members produced not only recollections and pieces about conditions in their area but imaginative work - poems, short stories, plays. And these have not been passing flashes. Production has been steady and expanding. Today members of the group are moving towards matching words to music in the attempt to create popular songs with a social content. Another branch of activity has been the use of tape to record accounts of recent working class struggles - rent strikes and tenants' election campaign for instance.

—*Writing*, p. 168.

These were the practices of some of the early groups involved in the Federation. We include here a piece of writing from Centerprise (Vivian Usherwood), from QueenSpark (Molly Morley) and from Scotland Rd (Jimmy McGovern).

### *The sun glitters as you look up*

The sun glitters, is shining bright!  
The sky is blue!  
The clouds are no longer there:  
It glitters as I look up!  
Bright it is, bright as my sister's face:  
The sun looks like a face without a body,  
Just round, with a nose and two eyes.  
If only that beautiful face would come down –  
It will be mine,  
And I shall shine with it.  
As dim as I am now I will be brighter,  
Even brighter than the sun itself.  
So it shall be,  
And I shall be as dim as ever,  
For it shall stay there for many years to come.

—*from Vivian Usherwood: Poems*

*Carlton Hill — when we were young*

An area of dealers and totters: you would see them sorting their rags, and then the mums would come to find clothing and other useful items for a few pennies. There was more profit in this than when it was all weighed up for the trade. Some women would buy flour-bags: these, by cutting head and arm holes, would make children's frocks, or opened up become sheets. People were borrowing from one another - tea, sugar, anything - all the time. Mrs Calder, at the William St. corner shop, used to help people by selling them a farthingworth of tea and ha'porths of sugar and milk. A packet of tea could be for 1d those days. Street doors ever open, a hungry child might wander in and be asked, 'Haven't you had any dinner' and answer, 'No, I ain't 'ad nothin'.' The expected, 'here y'are have some of this', was a moment of joy! As families grew large this often meant moving house. Those of eleven children might also have relatives and grandparents nearby. Children called their neighbours aunts and uncles too. Although a rough area, there was no necessity for locked doors. Thieves lived there but never stole in their own neighbourhood. Had one dared, the wrath of a whole community would have sealed his fate! Friday nights were very tough! A man recalls seeing two women fighting bare down to their waists, and they each had every bit of clothing torn off them! The men just stood around. When one woman had had enough her husband pulled her out of the gutter by her hair! The police would patrol Carlton Hill 'four-handed' (four at a time). There was the night in Carlton Court when about five policemen were actually knocked out by women with fire-tongs and pokers! Their menfolk, whom the police were after, had already got clean away!

—Molly Morley, *Sparchives*

*The day of the rat*

I remember the day we found the rat in Billy Carey's lobby. The rat was grey and wet and it was moving its feet a lot and scratching the floor but it wasn't getting very far. Black stuff was coming out of its nose.

Jimmy Murphy went to grammar school so we sent his house for a ruler to measure the rat. It was six inches long, but its tail measured seven inches, and Jack O'Reilly said that if it had been another five inches, it would have been half a yard long. Five inches didn't seem a lot so we always afterwards described the rat as half a yard long. It wasn't a big lie

and I always counted it on Fridays, at Confession.

None of us would pick up the rat. Gerry Rowan was best at picking up because he could pick up a cockroach. I was second best, because I could pick up wood lice, but a rat was something else. It was a hundred times worse than a centipede (Gerry Rowan said) even more worse than an earwig, which could run up your sleeve and eat your ear drum away. In the end, we got some sticks and poked them at the rat. It's funny, you know. We were in Billy Carey's lobby so he ought to have been in charge. Gerry Rowan said that Billy ought to charge our mates for having a look, but Billy didn't want to. He was scared of the rat and said that if it had been found in somebody else's lobby, he would have enjoyed himself torturing it, but he didn't like the rat in his own lobby. He said that he was going upstairs to tell his old feller.

Billy's old man worked nights in the bakehouse in Rose Lane. Billy's mam used to say that she was proud of her husband working 84 hours a week on nights to keep her and the kids, and my mam used to say that my old man didn't know there were 84 hours in a week! In any case, my mam said, Billy's mam was on the game.

We heard Billy's old man fizzing away upstairs until he could get the words out, and then he gave Billy a belt which we all felt. When his old man came down the stairs, we were scared stiff because he had only a shirt on and he was scratching his balls and we knew that he wasn't expecting anybody to be in the lobby. We all spewed it before he could get the words out and the next time we saw him, he was coming out the house with his clothes on.

We watched him cross over the street and pick up a brick and then he went back to the lobby and hit the rat with the brick, and all the black stuff splashed over his face. Then he put the rat in his pocket and marched off down the street. Billy's mam come out and folded her arms and waited for the neighbours to come out too.

We knew that Billy's old feller was going to see the Snotty Bitch and we had to trot to keep up with him. When we got there, Billy's dad was in the queue. The Snotty Bitch was going on about points again and then she offered this woman a flat in Kirkby and then when the old woman kept on asking for a house, the Snotty Bitch started to tap her pencil and look sideways at her mate, like she always did. Then another woman came up and the Snotty Bitch soon started tapping her pencil again and looking sideways at her mate. We thought we'd have to wait about two hours for

Billy's dad's turn when, all of a sudden, he just marched up to the counter. The Snotty Bitch asked him his present address and Billy's dad tried to get the words out but he couldn't. He was banging his fists against his legs but he still couldn't say anything and all the time, the people behind him in the queue were shouting 'Frigging cheek', and all that kind of thing. The Snotty Bitch started to tap her pencil and look sideways and then Billy's old feller let out a roar and started crying and threw the rat over the rail.

She screamed but at first, she didn't know it was a rat and then when she saw that it was a rat, she just gurgled and fell forward and her face smacked against the rat and she lay there for about five minutes. Then these two geezers came out the office and took her away and they phoned the Police and the Ambulance, and then they took Billy's dad inside and told him to pull himself together because he couldn't stop crying. I am glad Billy wasn't there.

Four days after this happened, Billy's mam got the offer of a new house in Cantril Farm and they took it. We all kept looking in the *Liverpool Echo*, for a report of what had happened but we didn't see anything. My dad, who is very clever and uses a lot of big words, said that the *Echo* wouldn't report it because of the implications. Implications must be very important because all that week, there were lists of the names of the people who had been fined for not having a telly licence, and a big picture of a man who had worked at the same job for fifty years, but there wasn't even a mention of Billy's dad.

—Jimmy McGovern

So you want to be a writer...

We know the talent is there, we know it comes up against (Tillie Olsen's phrase again) 'complex odds' in seeking outlets, so we need to organise in order that these and routes for development exist. Before this, what was there for working-class writers? There was the chance, for a very few, of becoming one of those who are taken up and who make it as novelist, playwright, TV dramatist, very very rarely poet. (We don't think it's appropriate to use the language of cream naturally rising; we know how many obstacles there are to some cream even forming. We know, too, that the market has an appetite for particular kinds of success, but it needs them to be singular. It would be no use to the book trade if every Oxfordshire village produced a Pam Ayres, let alone a crop of

women writing poems which fitted less easily within the frame of light entertainment).

There was the less class-bound but highly competitive field of lyric writing for rock music. There were less ambitious outlets such as the historical anecdote in the local paper. There were short stories which some newspapers and more magazines would take (provided these fulfilled the literary norms in which books and courses offered to train you) though most now will only accept work from literary agents.

There was the £5 (1981 prices) for a published letter to a magazine. There was the deadly expensive and ineffective trap of vanity publishing, in which you pay for a small number of copies of your work to be printed (and often hardly distributed at all). This didn't even get you a readership!

It's reasonable to want people to read what you write; but even if you manage to write it (and it should not be necessary to go on at great length about the material obstacles of time, overcrowding, fatigue, anxiety, other priorities; also the cultural problem of underrating yourself; the lack of acceptability of what you are capable of or want to write; language snobbery, and more serious oppression of your language and thought; disbelief by the gatekeepers of the published culture; the tourist approach to poverty and working class life), what chance is there that you will find anyone to whom you can show your work in the expectation that it will be read, understood, supported, answered, propogated and built into culture, without being in some measure stolen from you and from the world that gave rise to it? That is the challenge. This network of groups is part of a response. They have not been able to meet the equally reasonable hope that work done and published should be paid for. But this has deterred very few people; it seems that the desire for readership comes first.

We remain locally organised and federated because this seems one way of continuing to work together and share and develop skills, rather than to pass work over to others who will edit, illustrate, package and market it in a way that the writer cannot control.

However, this decision alone does not guarantee the growth of organic working-class cultural organisations. Some of the groups in the Federation have grown up in areas where most of the residents share a class background, an occupational tradition and a strongly established, sometimes relatively closed way of life. Yet, even here, the development has rarely been without the participation of someone in an educational or 'community' job, or of politically committed incomers (often no easier to

deal with in cultural politics than in a Labour Party Ward).

Most of the groups are based in socially mixed areas, or reflect the fact that the break-up of the pre-1939 rigidity and hardship is still very real to many people; they have been discouraged from recognising class as a reality in their new conditions of living and working. Even member groups that have started sure of their base and identity have changed.

Further, in looking at class *cultural* oppression, we have had to confront its overlaps and entanglements with the oppression of black people. Despite the hard work and self-criticism of people writing now we have had to face the fact that white working class traditions have contributed to these oppressions. The author of a Federation book, a skilled working class man, may be dismissive of the language used in another piece by a West Indian hairdresser. He may also record the weight of the past on women, as in Terence Monaghan's recollection of Tyneside life:

There's no doubt about it, men in that generation were the kingpin of the house. Other people cleaned their shoes. They had a special seat. Nobody dare sit in their seat. This kind of thing. My wife's father, nobody dared pass him in case their shadow went on his newspaper... They were tyrants really in their own way.

## Making a Federation

The constitution of the FWWCP, worked out shortly after the founding meeting, chose an inclusive, even vague, form of words when it referred to 'writing produced within the working class and socialist movement or in support of... working class activity and self-expression'. But there is disagreement about emphases. One Annual Meeting included a contentious workshop on 'Working class or Socialist?', insisting that we might have to make a choice. And, apart from the fact that feminist groups would not necessarily see the Federation as serving their interests, it isn't always obvious from the other side either that their aims are the same, and issue 25 of *Voices* prints an argument against admission of a feminist group to the Federation. (*Voices* is a quarterly magazine, originally organised from Manchester now acts as an anthology for the whole Federation.)

There has also been discussion, and different decisions made in different groups, about the role of 'middle-class managers' - those of us who have been involved as educators, bookshop or publishing workers,

sometimes servicers of the group's work, paid or unpaid. Like for example, most of those who have met to produce this book.

Some groups hold that these can threaten and inhibit working class writers (by their position, not by behaving badly), or have found it hard to create structures that oblige the 'professionals' to share their skill and confidence so that the group can go on without them.

It should be said also that some of those same 'middle-class managers' have found by working with their local groups an inspiration and incentive to write that they had not experienced before.

The arguments will continue. What is important though, and what represents the opening up of an area formerly closed to working class people is that there are now groups, networks and practices directed to a local history which is also a people's history, and local writing that does not seek to model itself on the prize-winning, official culture. Local groups have existed before - and they have no doubt included working class members. But such groups have never allowed for the possibility that the experience of being exploited could produce a valid and vital view of history. Consequently they have been of no use to the majority of people. Nor have they existed in places where Federation groups now thrive; it was believed that nobody would be interested. The opposite is now proved to be the case. With interest and encouraged together with publication and distribution of their writings, these groups are thriving and growing in number.

### Structure and activities

Since that founding meeting in 1976, more local groups have applied to join the Federation each year; today the number of affiliated groups stands at 24. Between them they have achieved sales of well over a half million copies of their publications. Some have had the support (never more than part-time) of paid workers, who may work for a multi-purpose project like Centerprise, THAP or the Peckham Bookplace, or who may be tutors for the WEA or University Extra-Mural Departments. Many carry on with no paid work put in at all; some are specifically concerned with making a place for the writing of those working class adults who are students of literacy. No two groups are alike, for all have different histories and origins.



Yet at some point each member group has found it necessary to formalise itself in order that it can apply for grants, agree on a corresponding address and, of course, apply to join the Federation. This is a moment that many find difficult because it means a change from an informal association of people who write into a group with a business agenda at each meeting and the requirement, if not to elect officers, at least to apportion the working responsibilities. Often this seems a diversion from the main purpose - to talk about writing and to listen to the latest taped interview - but if the group is to have a relationship with the wider movement then the business has to be done. One of the most complex initiation ceremonies is the opening of a corporate bank account in the name of the group - 'Hereafter with regard to the aforesaid rules and regulations excluding such as may have been deemed inappropriate to such offices and executees as are deemed so within the conditions of paragraph 3, sub section I, *unless* the aforesaid rules and regulations...' It is precisely this kind of language wielded like a heavy baton over popular organisation within our society that we struggle against.

To become members of the Federation, a group contacts the Executive Committee (a body of seven elected members voted to take account of regional representation and a balance of women and men), which then asks the Federation members to visit the applicant and report back. If their report is favourable and accepted by the committee the group can be taken into provisional membership until the next Annual General Meeting, at which its acceptance must be confirmed by all groups present. The idea of scrutinising groups at all has come under attack even though it has rarely led to refusals. One such refusal came about because the application was made by a paid worker rather than by the group members themselves. The main criterion used in deciding whether or not to accept groups into the Federation is whether they are genuinely self-organising and not encouraged into being and still controlled externally within some kind of community development or education programme. Another requirement is that they should have published, or be well on the way to publishing, including duplicated magazines.

### *Festival of people's literature*

Worker Writers gathered this month at Nottingham University for what you might say was a cross between the Oscar awards and a Trade Union conference.



Some 120 people representing 24 local groups attended the fifth annual general meeting and festival of the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers.

The weekend was a mixture of serious business meetings, discussion groups on various aspects of writing and publishing, and a reading of work by the writers themselves.

The Federation is what it says it is, a national organisation for the promotion and encouragement of working-class writing through writers' workshops and local publishing initiatives.

One of the most important functions of its annual get-together is to allow working-class writers from different towns and cities to meet, exchange experiences and listen to each other's work.

That way lies the development of various new forms of writing and new kinds of writing aesthetics.

A number of people brought their families along with them for the weekend. There were probably slightly more women than men.

On the Saturday morning there were three workshops: the first, a discussion of the editorial policy of the Federation's quarterly magazine 'Voices', which was lively and combative.

Agitprop or 'heroic' verse was increasingly felt to be inappropriate to modern political conditions and the 'politics of the personal.'

The second workshop concerned questions of payment for writing, within the Federation and more obviously in connection with the established media.

The third was for those involved in the forthcoming trip by six writers from Federation groups to the USA at the invitation of the American worker-writers' movement.

The AGM was held on Saturday afternoon. Everyone agreed that it had been a very successful year with the movement growing stronger and stronger.

Highly protracted negotiations with the Arts Council literature panel seemed about to produce a modest one-year scheme for a full-time development worker.

Two new member groups were admitted at the AGM: 'Women and Work' from Birmingham and the Northern College Writers' Workshop - Northern College is a full-time college for people involved in the working-class and labour movement.

The Federation continues to live a precarious financial life: the Gulbenkian Foundation, which has funded a worker for two years, has

ended its funding with a supplementary grant which helped toward the cost of the AGM.

An appeal is being circulated to sympathisers for subscriptions to the work of the Federation which can be contacted at 136 Kingsland High St., London, E8.

Late Saturday afternoon workshops dealt with basic book production, relationships between the Federation and other cultural and political organisations and a workshop on women writers in the Federation.

It is Federation policy that women-only workshops and black writers' workshops are automatically eligible for Federation membership as they represent specific sections of the community which have been particularly repressed culturally and linguistically.

The evening reading was a packed and tumultuous affair. Everyone crowded into a large room above the bar and for nearly four hours listened as people from all over the country sang songs, read poems, short plays and stories.

An endless succession of women and men, black people and white, bounced up to the microphone, battled with the feedback and read from the work they had written.

During the reading a collection was taken for the burnt out bookshop in Birmingham and £30 was raised. A party followed the reading.

Sunday morning saw a large bookfair where member groups displayed their publications, talked to each other and sold books.

Member groups between them have now sold well over half a million publications nationally through a form of publishing that involves completely new forms of social relationship between writers, publishing initiatives and readers.

There were also two workshops: one was an account by the Hut Writers, Bristol, of how they run their workshop and the other tackled the complicated and vexed question of 'Working Class Writers/Middle Class Managers?'

Festivals and annual meetings such as these re-affirm our belief that in the past too many voices have been stifled or silenced by the education system and commercial forms of publishing.

We aim to create a living, non-competitive popular history and literature. By the people, for the people.

—FWWCP Press Release, April 1981

The Annual General Meeting is turning into an important occasion - part debate, part festival, part business meeting. Up to 120 people meet together, many with children, for a residential weekend whose high spot is always the Saturday night reading. But as well as this, and a variety of workshops, the meeting elects an Executive Committee and officers, and looks at the Federation finances.

## Finance

Once you have decided to set up a national network, you need money - even if it's only for correspondence and travel. The AGMs cost more than could possibly be provided by most of the participants (weekend residential costs run around £30 a head, in addition to travel). In the past money has also been needed for specific projects: *Writing* the collection of work from all the groups published in 1978; a mounted and laminated Exhibition which has toured widely since 1979; a recent tour in the United States by six writers from different groups (which derived from our international links with people pursuing similar aims and activities). And the Federation soon decided that, if it was to have the capacity to develop its members' work to the fullest possible extent, it needed a paid co-ordinator.

These needs have been met, or not met, in various ways. Many member groups register with the national or local Poetry Secretariat, so can claim subsidy when they give public readings on their own or each other's ground (often the only way of paying for travel). Member groups pay a small subscription for basic organisational costs, and the better-heeled members and friends are encouraged to make out standing orders. The Gulbenkian Foundation gave a grant which paid for a national co-ordinator's pay and costs for two years (1979 and 1980), and for the cost of Executive and other meetings. (Executive Committee meetings are open to all members.) The Arts Council of Great Britain gave a grant to publish *Writing*, then refused for two years to support the continuation of what the Gulbenkian grant had paid for. They have now agreed to pay for a temporary part-time co-ordinator, and to contribute to travel costs. The Gulbenkian Foundation has recently advanced the costs of a Publications List. Like all radical groups seeking funding from charitable trusts and State bodies, we have found the process full of comedy, frustration and enlightenment; its detailed history will be discussed later. We have not

received (or sought directly) substantial backing from the organised labour movement, though they have supported our pressure on the Arts Council.

Meanwhile, since the full-time co-ordinator's post came to an end, more work has fallen on members and the Executive. One most important development has been to publicise and distribute members' books by maintaining two stocks of all publications currently, one in Manchester and one in London - for reference and to supply bookstalls and local buyers.

The issue of distribution, the importance of what method to choose and the impact this has on the feedback, control, pricing and availability of books, will be discussed later.

# Disestablishing literature

Why not, simply, the truth?

By becoming a Federation - by coming into association with each other, sharing and looking at the body of work we have produced between us, making space to reflect on what we do and to bring together our separate reflections we have put ourselves in a position to challenge Literature as it is dominantly defined. It is a two-fold challenge: we claim both that we are already producing literature, that our books are full and excellent examples of it, rather than provisional statements until we learn the refinements of Craft or Art; and we claim also that our practices are on a collision course with Literature.

This chapter will try to back up and explain both these statements. The challenges, at one level, are made whether we articulate them or not: it's the perception of others that to organise in the way we do around literature is threatening or against the nature of the art. But we are also making these challenges consciously as we reflect on how these books are made, on how they and the activities which surround them are limited by what goes on elsewhere in the culture.

This is a long road from where many of us started, which may have more to do with the question Doris Lessing voices through Anna, the central character of *The Golden Notebook* (1962). This is Anna reflecting on her first novel:

... now what interests me is precisely this - why did I not write an account of what had happened, instead of shaping a 'story' which had nothing to do with the material that fuelled it. Of course, the straight, simple, formless account would not have been a 'novel' and would not have got published, but I was genuinely not interested in 'being a writer' or even in making money. I am not now talking of that game writers

play with themselves when writing, the psychological game - that written incident came from that real incident, that character was transposed from that one in life, this relationship was the psychological twin of that. I am simply asking myself: Why a story at all - not that it was a bad story, or untrue, or that it debased anything. Why not, simply, the truth?

What a question to ask! - at a time when we are all caught up in ideas about how different the proceedings are in each separate head, and when we dread the notion of a public 'truth' as totalitarian. And what a question to ask in relation to literature, which since its beginnings has juggled event, experience and artifice.

### Private and public

And yet so many people are drawn to write out of a sense of an unheard truth (our truth, my truth, social and personal), and of the violence done in the gap between our ideas and what goes on in the world. This gap has become a chasm into which the majority of us fall or get pushed, with 'silent', 'apathetic', 'quite happy with the way things are', 'depressed', 'housebound', 'in need of a break', or 'unfortunately I cannot sign my name' wrapped round our necks.

In this situation 'my life' becomes private - of no possible interest to anyone else. Federation groups have found this to be the first obstacle and the first achievement. How can memories written for a grandchild, with all the directness of that most private of forms - the letter - telling *him* all kinds of truths which *he*, with *his* college training and cars, is utterly ignorant of, how can such memories be of interest to anyone else? How *can* they be worth publishing? The books between private private and public often work on this rich border-line. They have the sharpness, the confidence, and the varieties of register which characterise letters, rather than 'writing' which has got itself up, dressed for public display. They came into being without a public in mind, or rather without a public of the kind implied by purchase through the market.

In favourable circumstances, when these things are published, the intensity of response is such that other forms of writing become possible. Not only do rival memories rush in, with one Federation book leading directly to another (in Brighton the sequence is particular clear, with Albert Paul stimulating Daisy Noakes, Daisy stimulating Bert Healey and so on), but also having one book published leads directly into another

by the same author. This isn't automatic; it needs ways of making the response known, of bringing people together, and of making further opportunities to write open and really possible - in other words it needs organisation, and organisation of a kind directed carefully to these ends.

The books are full of direct address: 'let me tell you a story...' and 'as I was saying'. But 'direct' doesn't mean 'naive'. There is no simple relationship between the 'truth' and the telling, and everyone who tries it finds that 'telling' immediately becomes 'making' - becomes art. The books reflect on the making of the tale even as it is being told.

And the tale has often been made in many different ways - the extreme example being the Manchester, seven volume, *Lifetimes* series which contains recorded conversations, direct writing, editorial reflection, and individually-made tapes. This project is full of courageous self-consciousness: painful, quickening, embarrassing in different moments, and much more available for criticism in constructive ways than has yet been taken advantage of.

These books often ignore time, and linear, logical sequence. They weave in and out of moments, family lives, funny stories, connected by their significance for the teller rather than by their succession in a particular 'career', or correct, seamless narrative.

My father is on the broad side and tall side. My father was a hard working man and he had a lot of money. He was not fat or thin... His age was about thirty years when he died, he had a good reputation, he is a married man. When he was in hospital I went to see him every Sunday afternoon. I asked him how he was going on, he told me he was getting a lot better. My father was very kind to me and gave me and my cousins cigarette cards. He likes doing woodwork, my father, for me, and he likes a little game of cards now and then; or a game of darts. He chops wood and saws the planks and he is a handsome man but he is dead. He worked at the rubber works before he died. (9 year old boy)

—*Teacher's comment*: 'Tenses. You keep mixing past and present'

—*Jackson, English Versus Examinations, 1965.*

Indeed, the autobiographical accent in Federation work is specifically not about careers or good works, either in the *Men, Movements and Myself* labour autobiographical genre or in the spiritual, confessional, Puritan one. They move easily between accurate memory, triggered often by a product name (maybe of an old patent medicine) or a badge, a street - and direct speech, but direct speech re-created in a skilful literary way by authors who were not there to hear it. (The best example, and a fine book in *any*

company, is Ron Barnes' *Coronation Cups and Jam Jars*.) They deal with things which are the common subject of talk but not often of writing, such as hospital operations, school violence (by the teachers rather than the taught), humiliations mixed with pride in domestic and factory work, the details of (mostly women's) work towards survival at times (recent times) when survival has been a very creative, cooperative and labour-intensive achievement.

### The functions of writing

The possibility of writing like this, and of letting the writing out, with all the risks that involves, is there because it is a movement back into social life and not out of it. Writing is openly functional. That is to say, the books often tell how writing has enabled the author to associate and communicate a story in alliance with a known group of persons or community, rather than telling how success has enabled further exile in the haven at the top of the house where the lonely writer sits or the haven overseas where the poor-rich writer avoids his tax. *The Ups and Downs of Being Born* by Joyce Crump is only 42 pages long and 75p, so there is no point in proving its quickening pleasures here, beyond a few words at its beginning:

'In this book', the introduction says,

I have tried to tell you about my real life. It's not been easy to tell, because remembering is not easy. There is a lot even now that I've left out. And, like a lot of people, I find writing hard to do on my own. If it hadn't been for the tape recorder, this book would never have been written. I wrote it by talking with Jane, and by making visits with Caroline. Maggie, Jane and Ian typed it all out. Then I worked with my friends at the Union Place Resource Centre to design and print the book.

Life hasn't been easy, and it isn't today. During the winter we were working on the book, both my daughter and my grand-daughter were very ill. We still live under difficult conditions.

The Neighbourhood Council and local activities take up a lot of my time. It means a lot to me, and I want to say thank you to them for helping me to be involved in the community. They've stopped me from becoming a hermit. They've helped me to be in touch with other people.

Much of the writing has been historical, based on memory, experience, and investivation. But this has not meant that the books have lost the qualities of clarity, warmth and accessibility. The word is not 'immediate',



because as we have already said, the awareness and use of the medium is swift to develop and often skilful; but they are readable in a way that the dominant forms of history-writing, including socialist work intending to be popular, rarely are.

In describing and celebrating what we do we have constantly been returning it to its context, considering it in the light of what it has done for others, or for the writers, as part of their lives; we haven't considered texts as things on their own. Does this play into the hands of those who put down the work as therapeutic, 'community writing', if not pre-literate (although sometimes it is that), then certainly pre-literature? We would prefer to stress the positives behind these negatives: better therapeutic than disabling, better community writing than writers in isolation, better the contributions from all than the inaccessible pinnacles of 'talent'. But we would also claim that this body of work, this 'school' of writing, has its own characteristics, excellences and shortcomings, and is beginning to develop its own standards. Among these is the conviction that work which may be, from some people's point of view, not so good as other work, is essential to the growth of the best, and that it should not be removed from view, as Criticism does to work falling outside the great literary tradition. Practically this means a commitment to printing a lot and keeping work in print - which was a policy, for example, of Centerprise in the early days, but is now proving financially impossible. Again we are returned to issues of organisation and support.

We shall have more to say about how the social relations that surround and sustain this work differ from those of the orthodox publishing world, and how much further we now want to go, in the light of what we have learned from the practices which now shape our aspirations. But we should also stand out of the way for a while and let you as readers take a substantial look at the work we are celebrating. These four passages - three extracts from autobiographies, one complete story - all come from the powerful and often traumatic experience of the entry into adult life through 'starting work'.

### *Ron Barnes: 'Licence to live'*

I wanted to be a sign-writer. If I had had the right guidance, I would have wanted to be an artist, but to me sign-writing was an art. I got a reference from school which no employer even looked at and I found it

very difficult to get a job as an apprentice, or even a learner.

‘Well,’ said Mum. ‘You’d better go into the French polishing with Uncle Alf, then.’

My mother had always been a bit of a mystery to me. Here I was, an asthmatic child, being told by my mother to take up French polishing, among the fumes of polish, sawdust, and in very bad working conditions. All I could put this down to was that she didn’t understand what sort of trade she was telling me to go into.

At last I managed to get a job from the labour, as a learner sign-writer in Stamford Hill. I rang the bell and waited. I then heard footsteps running down the stairs as though being chased. When the door came open I was then faced with the enormous body of Mr Davis. I never thought it possible for a man of his build to run downstairs like this.

‘I’m enquiring about the job.’

‘Oh yes, how old are you?’

‘Fourteen, sir.’

‘Don’t call me sir, boy, for gawd’s sake. No sir, er, Mr Davis’ll do.’

‘I have a reference here from my school. They think I would be suited to sign-writing.’

‘Oh, never mind that, can you make tea?’

‘Yes, sir - Mr Davis.’

‘Are you strong?’

‘Oh, yes s...’

‘Do you think you could lift scaffold boards and push a barrow?’

‘Oh yes, I could.’

I was hoping that my tone of voice would make me appear stronger than I looked.

‘All right, kid, start Monday.’

Oh boy.

‘Thank you sir Davis, er Mr Davis, thank you.’

I was full of joy that afternoon. Never again was I to experience the delight and sense of achievement that I got from getting my first job. I had visions of becoming a first class tradesman, with my own little box of paints and first class brushes and a palette. As soon as my parents came home I told them. Their reply was ‘Oh good’. No questions, nothing. My mother wasn’t on to me to start work to get some money from me, but it did hurt me deeply when little interest was shown at what I thought was a wonderful achievement. Maybe they were so depressed with their life

of work and struggle and an unhappy marriage, that they could find no enthusiasm for anything. Or they may have been just plain indifferent. I don't know.

I reported for work on Monday morning at 8am. I made my way down the sloping alleyway, which was about five hundred yards long. I got to the bottom and there was the shed on the left. All around were scaffold boards, ladders and old shop facias. The two big doors to the shed were open. I looked inside to see two men, one about fifty and the other about twenty-five. The older man spotted me.

'Are you the new boy, then?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I'm Alf and him there is Ron. What's yours?'

'Er, my name's Ron as well.'

'Ah, be jassus, we can't have that now, can we? There's enough fucking confusion around here already. We'll call you Ronald. You ever used a brush, have you?' said Alf.

'Well, I have done a lot of drawing and painting and that.'

'Well forget all that, 'cause you won't be doing any drawing here. Do yer know the primary colours?' he asked.

'I do,' I replied.

'Have you ever mixed oil colours?'

'No, sir.'

'Alf, not sir!' he bawled. 'Well first of all you'd better make a cup of tea.'

This Irish foreman, Alf, was short but heavily built, with a mass of thick, curly black hair, a broad face, wide-set clear blue eyes, broad nose and a healthy red face. Although he only stood about five foot four, he was a fit and powerful man.

He showed me how to mix paints, and this was my job for a long time, before ever touching a sign-writing brush. After being there about five months I had still not been given the opportunity to use a writer. I thought, perhaps Alf doesn't think I could do it? At home I did a poster, and was inspired to write, 'God is Love'. It turned out beautiful. I thought that if I showed it to Alf he might have a better opinion of me. I couldn't have been more wrong.

'Oh, gawd, bloody blimey. Oh holy mother of God! What are you trying to do: convert me or something? Oh fucking hell, oh it's fucking good boy, fucking good to be sure!'

About a fortnight after this incident, I had a chance to try my hand on some ladders which had the firm's name on them and had to be gone over to liven them up a bit.

'Now then, Ron. I've got to go on a job, find something for Ronald to do.'

Alf picked up his kit, made his way down the alley and disappeared.

'I know what you can do, Ronald,' said Ron. 'You can paint over the firm's name on them ladders.'

'What me?' I said.

'Yes, But you'll have to keep your eye open for him coming back. At least it's something for you to practise on, and anyway, there's nothing else for you to do.'

I mixed up my paints, got out the ladders, got a box to sit on, and away I went. After a while I could feel I was being watched. I slowly turned round and a few yards behind me was Ron.

'Good kid good. Look, Ronald, take no notice of him.'

'Oh Alf you mean.'

'Who else?' said Ron.

He came nearer so that he was right behind me.

'He's a funny bloke,' he said. 'Mind you he treated me rough when I first started, but what he did to you the other week was diabolical. But never mind kid you keep at it and you'll soon pick it up. It's easy enough writing when you've got the knack, but wait till you have to get up there on those bleeding scaffold boards with a force nine gale blowing up your arse, or when the sun plays on your back till you want to spew your ring up. And the bright colours don't help your eyes much; that's why old Alf's got a squint ain't it? Keep at it son.'

I had been writing for about an hour. Ron had just gone to put an order in for some colours at the office above our shed. Suddenly I felt someone behind me. It can't be Ron, I thought, he's in the office. Oh no, it can't be comrade Alf. I shouldn't have got so carried away with the job in hand. I slowly turned my head. As I did so, Alf's chin was almost resting on my left shoulder.

'Don't they look attractive enough for you' he said. 'And what makes you think your bleeding wobbly hand is going to improve them? What a liberty you've got. Wipe it off, Ron,' he bawled, 'come here!'

I was sweating hot and cold, and I felt I had committed a most terrible crime.

'Don't you dare let him do that fucking lark anymore, I'm telling you.'

In fact next time I've got a job outside you will come with me.'

What was going through his mind I was soon to find out during that same week.

'Righto! Ronald get that barrow!'

To me this barrow was a monster on iron treaded wheels of about three feet diameter.

'Now then get those four boards and four tressels and put them on the cart.'

The boards were about two inches thick, and about eight foot long. The tressels were about ten foot long. Ron could see how exhausted I was after the first three boards and made towards me.

'Leave him!' screamed Alf. 'He wants to be a sign writer so he's got to know how to handle ladders and push a barrow.'

Ron gave Alf a look of hatred, but said nothing, probably because if he did his life would be made a misery as well, or perhaps the sack, the most dreaded weapon of all. I finally lifted the last tressel onto the barrow.

'Now then' shouted Alf, 'put me coat on, that bucket and rags, and me kit. O.K. Ron we will see you tonight. I painted the shop front yesterday and I'm going to finish it today, I've got to write and varnish it. Right now then' he said, 'push like fuck!'

I look up the slope of the alleyway and thought god I'll never make that, the weight on the barrow must have been about seven hundred weight. Alf pushed it like wheeling a baby in a pram. As we got half way up the slope Alf eased off so that I had most of the weight.

'Come on' he shouted, 'don't leave it all to me'.

I couldn't even see over the barrow, if I was going straight or not, I was on the kerb side; the barrow must have moved out to the right when a bus just missed the front of the barrow as it passed. Alf jumped up like he was going into a complicated ballet step.

'Keep the fucking thing straight' he bawled. A woman must have heard this language as she passed, judging by the look of surprise on her face.

We eventually got to the job in Stoke Newington High Street. By this time I was sweating profusely, off came our coats and we began to put up our tressels. Alf got out his brushes and colours, made his way up the step and settled down to write, leaving me at the bottom. I began to cool down and I began to feel cold.

'Alf! I'm breaking me neck' I called.

'Go in the shop, sod you, and ask if you can use theirs'.

I was to make this journey many times in the course of the day.

Whether Alf's guardian angel spoke to him or not I don't know, but he shouted to me to come up to him. I had never been on a scaffold before, it must have been about twenty foot up, not very high, but for a novice it seemed about twice that height. I held on for dear life. As I got to the top of the tressels, and had to swing my leg over and onto the boards.

'Come on' cried Alf, 'don't shit your fucking self, just don't look down'.

I didn't want him to think I was scared so I stood as upright as I could, and made towards him. Then it happened: I had trodden on a part where two boards were over-lapping. I did a sort of tap dance where the performer leans the body forward and kicks back his legs alternately. There was Alf doubled over, holding his stomach, red in the face with glee, the happiest I had ever seen him, he was overcome with joy. His joy was quickly broken when on recovering himself he found his front covered in the red paint which was meant for the job. Where he had been leaning over, the small pots clipped to his pallet had tilted, the paint running down the front of his overalls.

'You clumsy git,' he said, 'go down and get a cloth off the barrow. No, don't bother I'll go'.

After wiping himself down, he then gave me a brush and I was allowed to paint the inside of the letters, while Alf did the more skilled job of doing the outlines of the letters. After letting me do this my spirits began to rise, with visions of myself carrying my little box, with its paint and oils and brushes inside. I began to make my own sign-writing box, in my spare time in the yard, when I didn't have to mix paints or make boards for the shop fronts. But for some unknown reason Alf would harrass me at every occasion and try to dishearten me. At times I would go home through the back streets so as to hide my tears from passers-by. I was so unhappy with this man after me all the time, yet I was afraid to pack up in case I couldn't get another job in the sign-writing trade; heaven knows it was difficult enough getting this job let alone a second choice. I was unable to tell my parents my troubles, as they always seemed to be so distant, why I don't know, but there it was. So, when in bed I would pray. I had always prayed. God? I didn't even feel that I knew him or his son, there was no one else, so I prayed. Well, they told me in school to pray if I wanted something, so that's what I did. I got no answer. Alf kept after me, and I had to pack up, I could stand no more. Mr Davis could do nothing about it.

So much for job number one.

'I don't know why you don't go in for french polishing with your

Uncle Alf,' my mother would say. After being out for about three months, I tried a little sign-writing shop in Stoke Newington Church Street. The owner didn't want to know if I could make tea, in fact he didn't want to know anything, 'Bring your cards on Monday' and that was it.

He was a big man with a big beard and of more gentle breeding than Alf. One mistake lost me this golden opportunity to learn the trade. Jackson had a small board to write in De Beauvoir Road. He gave me a large empty paint can, and a small one full of paint which was to paint the background with before writing. He also gave me some newspaper and said,

'Put the newspaper in the large can and then put the small tin of paint inside the big one.'

Due to my misunderstanding, I thought he wanted the small tin poured on to the newspaper that had been put in the large can, and this is what I did, thinking it was some kind of trade trick that I hadn't seen yet. When I had finished painting the board it looked shocking. Result: the sack.

### *Daisy Noakes: 'The town beehive—a young girl's lot'*

A dormitory maid was wanted at Ovingdean School, so my sister Lily spoke for me.

This was November 1922, and I would be 14 in December, so an appointment was made for the interview.

Yesterday in blouse and gymslip, today unrecognisable in a costume my mother bought from a neighbour.

The coat reached my knees, the shirt my ankles. Around my shoulders a wide fox fur, its ugly head grasping the tail. On my head a large brimmed black hat, fitted with several foldings of newspaper inside to make it fit, and every wisp of hair out of sight.

We had a penny train ride to the Pier terminus, then proceeded to walk to Ovingdean by way of Sea Front, Kemp Town to the back of the East Brighton Golf Course, behind Roedean School, and down to Ovingdean. Although it was November, I was so hot with all the unfamiliar clothes I was wearing.

Mother told me to always add 'Ma'm' to every answer, and stand up when spoken to. By now I was getting a bit nervous, but knew I had to face it. We went round to the back door, as staff were never allowed to use the front door or the front drive.

The butler was called, and said 'I'll see if Madam will see you'. Yes, she would, so we were shown into the large drawing room. I was



bewildered. I did not want to be in all this elaborate surroundings. Madam entered, and asked us to sit. I perched myself on one of the chairs, while Mum was asked if I was honest, hardworking, reliable, an early riser. (I did not know that would be 5.30am). To all this Mum replied that I was.

I was asked to standup, and Madam said 'You will look taller when you have a longer skirt and hair done up in a bun'. She asked me how old I was. I replied '14 next month', so she said my wage would start at my age, £14 a year, with a 2/6d. a month rise at the end of a year, and I could start work as soon as I attained my 14th birthday.

Now began the preparation for my leaving home. I would need servant's uniform and a box to pack it in.

Mum and I went to the market where she bought a light coloured tin trunk. The lid was dented in, and between us we carried it home, taking a handle each. Dad got a plank of wood and a hammer, and banged the lid till the dent came out. Then Mum painted it with stove black paint all over and it stayed out in the yard several days, because of the strong smell the paint contained. When it seemed fit to bring indoors, Mum pasted wallpaper over the inside, and then it looked quite smart.

With materials wanted for my uniform I had to draw all my money from my Penny Bank. I had over £3 which seemed an enormous amount, but it was not enough for what I needed.

Mum made me two blue dresses for morning wear, half-lined, one black dress for afternoon wear, and four large bibbed white aprons. Fancy white aprons were not worn at the school till later. I had two Dorcas type caps for morning wear, frill caps for afternoons were supplied, one pair of ward shoes for mornings, one pair high-lows for afternoons and three pairs of black stockings, and lastly a pair of corsets. Oh, the agony, getting used to them after a liberty bodice, and quite unnecessary as I was so thin. My other underclothes would have to do. No new hat or coat, but I took my Sunday one, (and, as our time off duty was so small, there was no chance of wearing them out). Celluloid collar and cuffs.

My hours were from 5.30am to 10.30pm and no let-up anywhere during that time. How I stayed awake I do not know. My off-duty time was Tuesday 2.30pm to 9.30pm and one afternoon a fortnight for the same hours.

Mum helped me carry my trunk to the tram, and helped put it on the bus to Ovingdean. The bus then only stopped on the Coast Road, and my sister Lily should have been there to meet me.



The conductor helped me off with it and there I waited at the roadside, as one person cannot carry a tin trunk with any dignity. It was not long before Lily came into view and between us we reached the school and what was to be my bedroom, which I was to share with three other maids.

How bare it looked, a rail divided each section but the curtains were all pulled to the centre, four beds with one mattress on each, and a red blanket top cover, four washstands with jug in basin on top, mug and toothbrush dish underneath, and a chamber in each of the cubby holes at the bottom.

My sister was not one of my room-mates and I felt so miserable. At night I was afraid to completely undress. I put my nightie on top of my vest and knickers, and how I was going to use that chamber in the night if I needed it, I did not know.

I was nearest the light switch so it was my privilege to turn it off. I felt my way to my bed, and lay there thinking about running home, but I knew I would only be sent back, so cried at the thought when something went bang under my bed. It was my tin trunk reverting to its original shape, and from that moment my childhood ended, and I realized I had been launched on the world to earn my own living. 1923. I vowed no more tears but a 'stiff upper lip' was needed from now on.

Tomorrow started a new life in new surroundings and I'd prove I was somebody instead of one in a crowd.

### *Ernie Benson: 'To struggle is to live'*

For me the New Year was to be my baptism as a worker. On the eve of my commencing work my father, who by now had 'jacked up' the peddling business and returned to work at the steelworks, said he would wake me before he left for work, which for him commenced at 6.00am. My starting time was 7.00am and finishing time 5.00pm.

And so it was that shortly before leaving he came upstairs, shaking me gently so as not to waken the others and whispering it was time to get up. It was a dark chill morning. Overnight there had been a fairly heavy fall of snow, which muffled the sound of the miners' and mill-workers' clogs. I trod quietly down the stairs and saw that father had lit a fire in the grate which was giving out warmth and light. He indicated the washing sink, saying 'Get thissen weshed fust afore breakfast,' and knowing this would be done, he put on his cap ready to go out, hesitated for a moment, then with a 'Look after thissen while tha's at wuk', he went out closing the door softly behind him. He had cut and wrapped up some sandwiches for

me, there was steaming hot tea in the teapot, so I made my breakfast, but not before there was a slight creaking on the stairs and mother appeared, and started quietly bustling about, for my sister Caroline also had to go to work. It was going to take me a half an hour's walking to get to my place of work for Chas. Benn & Co. Boilermakers.

After my being rejected for a job on the *Yorkshire Evening Post* the juvenile employment office could only offer me work in the mines or engineering. Several of my cousins and a couple of uncles and many of the lads living around us worked down the mines, and having seen those who had been injured and heard various stories, I had decided I would work anywhere rather than underground. Some miners had to take journeys of nearly an hour to get to work by tram and shank's pony.

Thus it was that after I completed my breakfast, mother tied a scarf round my neck, buttoned my overcoat (things I could easily have done myself, but she seemed to want to do them), gave me a little hug and with an anxious 'Look after yourself love', stepped out of the door with me to see me off on my first working day.

I shall always remember that bleak morning, trudging along in the snow, head bent down trying to avert the cold wind and the flurry of snowflakes on my face. There were not many workers going in my direction and those who were seemed too numbed to bid a 'Good morning', with which most workers whether you knew them or not, would greet each other. Part of my journey was alongside the canal, whose black water contrasted sharply with the snow and there was the sight and sound of water lapping against the shadowy coal barges tied to the mooring posts on the canal bank. At last I entered the works, making my way to the timekeeper's office, on the outside walls of which hung the time clock. On the clock box a candle was burning and flickering in the draught from the door whenever it was opened. Apparently the firm had its own generator, but owing to the cold weather there had been some difficulty in starting the gas engine and until it started there could be no lighting.

Having punched my time card, I waited until someone should come along, and was looking round the dimly lit place wondering what I was going to do in it, when a gruff voice behind me said, 'You the new lad?' I nodded in answer to his question and the man said, 'Heng on a minute or two, the gaffer won't be long afore he's 'ere'.

At last the gaffer did appear and it was old Charlie Benn himself. For that day my duties were to be at the beck and call of the men in the works.

The following day was pretty much the same, except that after carrying out most of the orders I was told to go and sweep the floor in the boiler house. One of the men took me there to show me what to do. It was nice and warm there. The boiler was a gas fired one and had a small oval iron cover in the front held in place with an iron bar propped against it because the latch to hold it in place was broken. I was told by the workman not to stand in front of the door because if the bar slipped the door would fall down and possibly shoot out flames. Sweeping up the floor even leisurely didn't take very long and nobody seemed to be worrying what I was doing. I sat on the barrow into which I had emptied the floor sweepings and began to enjoy the warmth of the place compared to the chilly atmosphere of the workshop and handling cold metal. The barrow was placed two or three feet away from the small oval cover. All of a sudden, the iron bar fell down with a clatter, the cover fell down and as it fell a long blue flame, I'll swear it was four feet long, shot out straight for my belly. I fell back into the barrow, then went yelling to tell one of the workmen what had happened. He came back with me, got another iron bar which he used to lift the cover in place, then replaced the bodger bar. Turning to me he grinned and said, 'Did it frighten you sonny!'

Just before 5.00pm the gaffer came to me and said he didn't want me to go to the works the following day, but to go to engineering works, Joshua Buckton & Co., where I would join three of his men who were on a contract for steelwork on an extension to one of workshops there. Buckton's was still as far away to walk, but in the opposite direction.

Next morning I reported there at 7.00am and asked where Charles Benn's men were working. Someone took me along, for it was a huge place and certainly, apart from the steelworks, I had never been in a factory like it, with rows of benches and vices and machinery of various shapes and sizes. My guide led me to where three men were stood around a brazier, saying to them, 'I think this lad 'as to work wi' you', then left me with them.

The oldest man of the three, smoking a pipe and with arms folded, took the pipe out of his mouth and with a stare that had the hint of a smile, said, 'New lad eh – what's your name?' I told him and then one of the younger men looked a bit interested and said 'Tha wouldn't be Ginger Benson's lad would tha?' I nodded at which the man went on. 'Ahr knows 'im - wukked wi' 'im once - if tha tuns aht as gooda wukker as 'irn tha'll do'.

We stood around the brazier for a few minutes, then the old man who

was the leading hand and a Scot, knocked the dottle out of his pipe and said briefly, 'Reckon we ought to start'. 'Jock' and the man who said he knew my dad, were rivetters, the other being the holder-up, the man who held the rivetting 'dolly'. My job was to be rivet lad.

With a 'Come here', Jock took me to where the rivet fire was. It was an iron pan on four steel legs with bellows underneath with a pipe which connected with the pan. The pan itself was filled with coke which had a dull glow in the centre. Jock seized a handle at the side of the pan, moving it rapidly to and fro and the full red glow sprang into life with sparks flying upwards, turning from dull to bright red, then yellowy and then almost white heat. 'Gimme some o' them rivets' he commanded, 'and now watch what I do'. Placing the rivets in the fire he worked the bellows and as the rivets changed colour and just appeared to be at sizzling heat he said 'Now that's how we want 'em - no hotter or they'll burn, - see them little tongs?' he indicated a small pair in a tray at the side of the pan. 'Give 'em to me an I'll show you what to do.' With the tongs he picked out a rivet, then with a 'Coming over Sam', he tossed the rivet to his mate who caught it in a similar pair of tongs before it hit the floor. It was all done neatly and expertly. 'Try it' he said. After several attempts I began to get the knack of it and he nodded approvingly, saying, 'That'll do, let's get started'.

I began to like the job and soon learned to get the rivets to the right heat and toss them a hit more expertly. Those three men worked with a beautiful rhythm. As soon as I tossed a rivet, one would catch it in tongs, the holder-up would slam the dolly on the rivet head, then with hand flashing for only seconds the rivetters hammered the rivets flat. They worked amazingly quick and I had my work cut out to keep up the supply of rivets at the right degree of heat.

It was during a lull in the morning, when I had left some rivets in the firepan ready for a resumption of work, and had been away for a few minutes on an errand for the rivetters, that on my return I found a youth operating the bellows like one possessed. Shouting at him to stop it, I went up to him pointing out that he had burnt the rivets, but he answered quite impolitely and shoved me aside. At that I picked up the tongs and threatened to bash his face in if he didn't stop. He knew I meant it and though he was bigger he slunk away.

A few minutes later I saw a bowler hatted foreman speaking to the rivetters and pointing at me. Jock jerked his head for me to go over, and when I stood in front of them he said, 'Mr So-and-so here says that you

were going to hit his son with a pair of tongs - is that right?' 'Yes' I said, 'and I'll tell you why', which I did and showed him the burnt rivets. Turning to the foreman (who had nothing to do with us) Jock said to him, 'Bugger off and the next time you come to us with a complaint, come with a straight story and you can tell that lad of yours that if I see him messing around here I'll kick him from arseholes to breakfast time'. As the foreman went away the other rivetter said, 'Tha did reight lad, ahr can see tha's a chip off the old block', and he rumbled my hair with his hand.

I worked with them for the rest of the week. When they were working on the overhead girders and doing cold rivetting, I would climb the stanchions with a couple of bags of rivets slung around my neck. Before I did this however, they asked me if heights worried me, but I didn't reckon fifteen or twenty feet was high - not after climbing pylons of thirty feet and more and sitting on the cross members at the top for a 'dare' when I was still at school.

I drew my wages for a fifty hour week on the Saturday morning, receiving my first wage packet of 10/d. On the Monday morning I had to return to our workshop and after the usual morning errands and tea brewing, the gaffer thought up a new job for me picking up rivets lying around the shop floor, sorting them out, then placing them in appropriate boxes. Almost in the centre of the workshop was a big machine, the base of which was below the shop floor. The main drive belt itself was below the floorboards, which could be lifted out and removed in the event of the belt breaking, when it would be much easier to repair. Some rivets had fallen below through gaps in the floorboards, but as the machine was running I left them there. Later on the gaffer came round and it was obvious he had been checking on my work; calling me over to where the big machine was, he lifted up one of the boards and said, I hadn't done my work properly. 'Look at all those rivets', he said. My reply was that the machine was running and I was afraid of the big belt. He said it was nonsense and there was nothing to be afraid of, but seeing that I was afraid he said, 'Pick 'em up when it stops'. Clearly he wasn't pleased with my attitude, so just after lunch he told me he had another job for me in the basement stores. This was a fair-sized place, dark and cold, lit by a single forty or sixty watt bulb.

Under this light, on the floor, stood a big many-spoked pulley about four feet in diameter. This was the job - he wanted me to clean all the rust from the spokes and hub ready for painting. Actually a scaling hammer

was required, but instead he handed me an old 14" half round file, and, after showing how it could be used for chipping and scraping the rust off, left me to it. What a miserable hole it was with that single lamp and no heating and in the first week or so of January.

However, I set to, in an effort to keep warm more than anything else. Pausing after a vigorous effort, I thought I heard a very faint slithering sound and looked rather nervously towards the more shadowy sides of the basement, but couldn't see anything. Several times I thought I heard this almost inaudible noise, then I saw a dark shape gliding across the floor, where the fringe of light from the light bulb merged with the shadows. There was no mistaking, it was a rat and not alone either for in its wake there was another. Now I never liked rats - neither the four-legged or two-legged and I'll confess I was afraid, remembering a story about a man who worked in the Paper Mill, who was trying to kill a rat he had cornered, when it sprang and bit him in the throat, causing an infection from which he later died.

A little before 5.00pm the gaffer came to see how I had progressed and expressed his displeasure at what he considered a small amount, and said I would have to work on it the following day. 'No I won't' I said, 'Yer can stick the job up your arse, I'm not working with rats about.' My outburst astonished him and he said, 'I don't think you'll be much good to me' and feeling saucy I told him I thought his workshop was not going to be much good to me either.

That night I walked home wondering what I was going to tell my parents about chucking up my job. Nevertheless I told them all about it, omitting any mention of the swear word I'd used. Father was a bit amused, asked how much I'd been paid for the weeks work I'd put in, then said I must go back the following day and demand payment for the day I had worked and also to ask for an extra 4/-, being a 1/- a day out-working allowance for the previous week when I worked at Buckton's and to tell the gaffer that he (dad) had told me to ask for it. 'Also' he added, 'if he wants to know who your dad is, say Ginger Benson and if he doesn't give it to you, I'll be walking down to collect it myself.'

Next day I went to the works and old Charlie Benn asked what I was doing there; he started to crib about the 4/- saying I wasn't worth it and who had told me? But when I said Ginger Benson was my father he thrust the money in my hand shouting, 'Get out of the bloody shop' and I was

happy to get it. Father laughed when I told him about it and said, 'He knows what I know about him and he'd been a bit frightened if I'd gone dahn'.

*Janice Day: 'A break with routine'*

It's just a little something to remind you of us all', Hilary placed the package on the post desk.

'Thanks very much, I didn't expect anything'. My embarrassment showed on receiving my first leaving present.

I opened the wrappings which revealed a small carved elephant. 'They never forget', explained Dave, 'We thought it would make a good present. We won't forget you in a hurry'.

I smiled at Dave. He'd been trying to get a date with me since my first day at the bank. Six months and three days later he was no longer hopeful. 'Perhaps', I thought, 'his best friend should tell him'.

Still he had been kind and more than helpful to me in my first job. I'd replaced him as junior, he had now reached the exulted position as junior clerk. He'd explained my duties to me:

8:30 arrive, sign in (the junior's name was always first in the book). Sort out post. Open head office sack. Distribute accordingly. Make coffee as soon as Mr. Williams (Bank manager) arrives. Mr. Williams and Mr. Rice (Sub manager) have cups and saucers, everyone else mugs. After collecting and washing dirty cups report to machine room for sorting of cheques and recording control (debits and credits taken over the counter) punching of statements, transmission of previous day's work to Head Office. After lunch do post until 3.00 then make tea. When washing up finished, return to machine room to finish recording control; then finish post. Take post to post office on way home.

'I'll never cope' I thought that morning, but after a few weeks I had the routine off pat. That was when the trouble started.

My first blunder had been one made by most juniors. Breaking the clip in the head office sack. The sack was a canvas bag, into which internal memos etc were zipped and then the zip sealed with a clip. I managed to break the clip while the zip was still fastened. Dave came to the rescue. His boy scouts penknife, the bit for getting stones out of horses hooves, soon solved the problem.

'There you go' he beamed. 'Now let's get the post out before you do anything else'.



‘Thanks Dave’, my relief was short lived as I gazed at the memos appearing from the sack.

‘But that’s what I sent off last night to head office’.

‘Oh! Jan, you forgot to turn the address label round’, Dave seemed to think it all a great joke, and wasted no time in relating the story to the others.

‘Well’, remarked Bob, assistant machine officer, ‘You’re a fully-fledged junior now; we all did that during our term of office’.

‘Don’t worry’, said Hilary, now a fully-fledged counter clerk, ‘Send the head office sack off this morning, no-one will say anything’.

‘I suppose so’ I sighed. ‘But I must remember to change the address this time.’

I had just lived down this episode when fate struck again. There were no washing facilities on the ground floor of the bank so twice a day I had to carry the dirty cups up a narrow flight of stairs to the ladies. The banking hall was always busy around tea-time, and I collected the dirty cups as discreetly as possible. There was the kind of hush you get in libraries as I carried the tray of crockery up the stairs. I’d reached the last but one stair when my foot slipped and down fell Janice, tea-cups and all. In the echo chamber of the stair well it sounded like the 1812 overture. The sound reached into the manager’s office, and even brought Rosemary and Derek up from the basement, where each afternoon they spent half an hour ‘getting things straight’, I was soon surrounded by anxious faces.

‘You ok.., quick Dave bring a blanket’ Bob, the bank’s first aid certificate holder, took control ‘Now just stay still while I see if anything’s broken’.

‘I’m f.f.f.fine’ I stammered, tears streaming.

‘Janice, what a noise’ Rosemary looked more flustered than me.

‘Keep still everyone. I’ve sounded the alarm!’ Norman the messenger appeared waving his truncheon.

My laughter was forced from me.

‘It’s shock’, stated Bob, ‘She’s having hysterics’.

The customers were leaning over the counter, trying to get a sighting of the bank robbers. Fortunately Mr. Rice managed to forestall the police, so the incident was kept ‘within the family’.

The shock waves from my next escapade reached the whole of the Westminster network. On the last Friday of each month all branches had to punch out a Form 28. This was a summary of the branch’s work



during the previous month. The tape was transmitted to H/O and fed into the computer memory banks to tie in with all the other Form 28s. This particular Friday our branch was short-staffed. Rosemary, who, as Senior Machine Officer, usually processed the form, was absent with her monthly migraine. Bob and Derek seconded to the Chigwell branch. The rest of the staff were dealing with the customers, Which left me in charge of the Form 28. Being well aware of the need for accuracy I took my time preparing the tape. In fact I took so long that there was only just time to transmit it to H/O.

Mr. Rice was really very kind on the Monday morning, all things considered that is. It seemed I had omitted to punch out the X on the form, mainly because I didn't know I had to, thus throwing the monthly figures for Westminster Bank into disorder.

Of course, under normal circumstances this responsible task would never have been given to a junior. Mr. Rice peered over his reading glasses. 'I'm very sorry, it won't happen again'. What more could I say.

'For the time being, any tapes prepared by you, will be checked, until you have become more accustomed to machine work' his voice was suitably stern.

I gave my notice in the following Friday, and now I was in Mr. Rice's office saying my farewells.

'We'll be sorry to see you leave, you certainly livened the branch up', Mr. Rice's relief was evident, 'Don't forget us'.

'I won't Mr. Rice, and thank you', I shook his hand and left banking to enter the world of journalism. My next job was on the local paper, of course I was starting as junior. Making the tea and doing the post, but who knew where that might lead.

## Collision course with literature?

So far we have talked about some of the reasons why people start to write - pressure to communicate, if you like - and we have begun to sketch some of the forms of communication which people may find themselves part of, as this writing is circulated locally and from group to group. But this is already a historical jump; it supposes as the social reception of writing the pull from the outside, something which has only existed recently and which exists imperfectly even now. It leaves out what was there before, to make it worth the labour of creating names and forms

and finding hearers for what would otherwise stay in silence. What was there before was shaped by a particular set of myths about writing and breaking into print.

Writing does have a very particular magic to it. The idea that you can, with very little equipment, set down something which only you have made, and which can give meaning to who you are and what has happened to you; and the idea that this can be reproduced in thousands of copies and come back to you in a form which can help you recognise yourself in a new way, be recognised by others as you wish to be recognised, *and* enable you to live without the normal constraints of waged work, i.e. make *money*... all that is, it must be admitted, a bit magic! With my pen, the fantasy goes, I can at a stroke alter my entire relationship to the culture, and move from the galleys to the bridge of my own ship. And I can do it, seemingly, all by myself, with the aid, at most, of a few kind gentlemen from offices in Bloomsbury with access to the magic market. None of all that nonsense about cleaning other players' boots for five years. Anyone can do it, and, as the advertisements put it, in only ninety days! It's so magic that many of us keep it in reserve in a drawer, a resort so potentially important that it is better never finally to try because it would be so awful to fail.

It would be silly to deny the power of all this - and silly for us, in the Federation, to deny its relation to the realities as well as the myths of the contemporary publishing industry. We have learned from many experiences just how attractive this magic is - to ambitious individuals or, to put it more kindly, to people who want to make a bob or two. Individual groups in the Federation have been put under considerable strain through the individual 'success' of some members outside the Federation, for example on television or in the theatre.

And yet we know, too, that the publishing industry isn't structured around the nurturing of new and unpractised writers, and isn't at bottom interested in our struggles with our forms of truth. The experience of working in community bookshops has given us a clear idea how bookselling is now about the intensive promotion of a few dominant genres (of fiction and non-fiction) which push everything else into the margins. What follows is a sketch rather than a portrait, but we have to leave it to those more intimate with the industry to elaborate it.

## The politics of publishing

Most publishers have now been taken over by major multi-nationals or conglomerates. They are now run like any other capitalist industry, with the finance and marketing departments well to the front of decision-making and editorial departments well in the rear.

The fiction industry seems set to self-destruct... The current crisis is rooted in the deeper problem triggered by the American inspired paperback revolution of the early 1970's. Then a traditionalist industry was transformed by mass marketing. Novels were promoted on TV and radio, writers sent on nationwide tours, and dump bins began to appear in supermarkets and bookshops ... Now the industry is placing increasing reliance on a single novel each year, preferably by one of the brand names: Higgins, Ludlum, Le Carre, Maclean, King, Straub.

—*Time Out*, December 1980.

### *Best-selling books Sunday Times, 20.9.81*

*Figures in brackets give last week's positions. Final figures indicate number of appearances in listings.*

#### *General*

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. (3) <i>Rothman's Football Yearbook 1981-82</i> Jack Rollin (Queen Aline's Press £5.95/7.95) 1 | Boycott (A. Barker £6.95) 3  |
| 2. (1) <i>Invitation To a Royal Wedding</i> Kathryn Spink (CLI £7.95) 5                          | 8. (8) <i>James Herriot's Yorkshire Photos</i> by Derry Brabbs (Michael Joseph £8.50) 92 |
| 3. (4) <i>Me and My Camera</i> Joe Partridge (Ash and Grant £4.95) 1                             | 9. (6) <i>The Royal Wedding</i> Brenda Ralph Lewis (Purnell £2.50) 5                     |
|  | 10. (-) <i>Second Book of Bricks</i> Robert Morley (Weidenfeld £4.95) 0                  |

#### *Fiction*

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 4. (5) <i>Guinness Book of British Hit Singles</i> Tim and Joe Rice, Paul Gambaccini and Mike Read (Guinness £4.99) 7 | 1. (3) <i>Voices in the Garden</i> Dirk Bogarde (Chatto £6.50) 1 |
| 5. (9) <i>Cosmos</i> Carl Sagan (Macdonald £12.50) 16   | 2. (-) <i>River of Death</i> Alister Maclean (Collins £6.95) 0   |
| 6. (7) <i>The Lord God Made Them</i> All James Herriot (Michael Joseph £6.95) 13                                      | 3. (1) <i>Noble House</i> James Clavell (Hodder £8.95) 13        |
| 7. (-) <i>In The Fast Lane</i> Geoffrey   | 4. (-) <i>July's People</i> Nadine Gordimer (Cape £5.95) 0       |
|   | 5. (2) <i>Luciano's Luck</i> Jack Higgins (Collins £6.95) 5      |

*Paperbacks*

1. (-) *Unreliable Memoirs* Clive James (Picador £1.50) 0
2. (2) *Mastering Rubik's Cube* Don Taylor (Penguin 95p) 9
3. (1) *The Prince and Princess of Wales, Wedding Day* (Pitkin £1.95) 3
4. (3) *Not 1982* (Faber £2.99) 5
5. (10) *The Flame Trees of Thika* Elspeth Huxley (Penguin £1.50) 1
6. (6) *The Prince and Princess of*

*Wales* (Jarrold £1.00) 5

7. (-) *The Simple Solution to Rubik's Cube* James J Nourse (Bantam 95p) 6
8. (8) *The Girl in a Swing* Richard Adams (Penguin £1.50) 8
9. (-) *Dr Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party* Graham Greene (Penguin £1.25) 0
10. (5) *Firestarter* Stephen King (Futura £1.95) 1

Agents like Carol Smith are already commissioning fiction literally sending out plots to suitably hungry tyros... Carol Smith is not in the business of promoting writers, or even selling novels, but of setting up deals. She prides herself on disabusing her clients of their literary pretensions and re-directing them towards what will sell.

—'Into the dump bin', *Time Out*, December 1980.

Books are published with a shelf-life like tuna fish or condensed milk of six months, after which they will be pulped. Some will be top of the best-selling list before they are published, like the old Beatles records used to be.

Fewer and fewer first novels are published every year, and those normally in hardback editions of 1-2,000, distributed almost exclusively through libraries. (Federation books usually work on first-print runs of 1-2,000 and don't wait for the author to win the Booker Prize before they re-print.) The number of publishers who publish new poetry is very small, and most collections are by poets who have established a reputation through the important magazines. Group collections of poetry, of the kind Federation groups have favoured, rarely appear. The small presses and little magazines, though sharing with us many arguments about the way subsidy runs on main lines in predictable directions, tend to be coteries rather than open associations, marginal forms rather than oppositional ones. (A sign of what we mean by lack of openness is the frequent absence of even a contact address - on a book of poems.)

There is more to say, some of which will be said later, about the connections between the prestige end of publishing and the literary

establishments of universities and the Arts Council. The point to make here is that these are all forms of organisation of literature, and that they stand in the way of new forms that develop for new needs, and that for all but a few messages, they act as silencers rather than megaphones. We are not complaining simply that they fail to recognise the interest and the potential of working-class social history, local studies, poems and stories. On the contrary, since the market was opened up by the history workshop movement and local publishing initiatives, parallel books have appeared on many lists. OUP has a series of 19th century reminiscences which includes *A London Child in the 1880's*, *Hooligan Nights* and *The Diary of a Victorian Poacher*, and among the more popular imprints, Coronet has *Binder, Twine and Rabbit Stew*, Pan has *Mother Knew Best* and *Reuben's Corner*, and Penguin *The Book of Boswell*. Good books, all of them. Much more valuable than *Confessions of a Travel Courier* or *I was Hitler's Chiropodist*. But even as they move towards contemporary writers in this vein - including, as is already happening, some writers who started in Federation groups - they will not be able to do more than lift out end-products from a process they have had nothing to do with.

### Co-operative forms

It has taken labour and thought to move away from the forms of work of the publishing industry - one of whose characteristics is the division of labour to the point where responsibility for the shaping of the whole work gets removed from the writer, dispersed and lost. In the beginning, except in their local scale of operation, some of the publishing groups in the Federation worked in much the same way as conventional publishers as far as the author could see. A manuscript would be sent or brought in, was mysteriously judged by unknown readers, just as mysteriously designed, typeset, produced and distributed. This was certainly the case with Centerprise, Stepney Books and People's Press of Milton Keynes. But it soon became clear that while you might have a different product, it was hard for the writer (let alone a reader) to be clear in what ways it was different. Writers could be left feeling that though they were not paid, money was being made by someone somewhere.

But as the movement developed we learned how to work *with* writers at every stage of making the book. Either in dialogue or in a wider group

or in team work, interventions were made, passages were re-written, re-taped, bits deleted, additions asked for... then the making of the pages themselves, the choice of type, the placing of the pictures, the search for new pictures beyond the writer's own family album, the lettering at the start of each part or chapter, the design of the cover, the price, what else should be said in the book other than the author's main text (about the group and the Federation by way of introduction, or invitation for further submissions)... all this began to be done collectively. Certainly technologies played a part here - undoubtedly it is easier to do all this when working with offset litho, which makes it easier for everyone concerned to shape the final page exactly as it will be issued.

In this way, the writer and the workers learned more about the making of books and once this is learned it's hard to look at any printed matter as if it had just arrived on the page without a complex labour process. Many groups try to share this knowledge more widely, through workshop sessions or through exhibitions that show the growth of a book through re-drafting on paper, or through the stages of editing and commentary on a transcript of a tape. A look at a typed draft often shows objections or suggestions by the typist another invisible worker made visible; then typesetting, negatives, plates, unbound sheets and the finished product are shown. Teaching the processes towards print has become a feature of much adult literacy work too, to try to break down the distant, authoritative and often threatening nature of the disembodied final tract.

### *Celebrating and sharing writing*

Launching a book made in this way is an important social celebration. Rather than being an exercise in publicity management, a launching is an occasion for bringing all the people who helped create the book together: writers, lay-out people, typists, printers, other writers in the project, friends, families, neighbours and so on. The reading of part of the text is, of course, the highlight. There have been launchings in pubs, community centres, cafes, railway station buffet rooms, trade union buildings, cinemas, where large numbers of people have gathered to listen to an evening of readings of autobiography, poetry, new writings by literacy students read by themselves to large audiences. This kind of display of the self-confidence generated by the new social relationships of writing and reading, are, for the majority of those attending, very

important moments in the dis-establishing of literature and the mystique of publishing. For every reading is always permeated by the assumption that listeners are now potential writers themselves. *Under Oars*, a lighterman's autobiography published by Stepney Books and Centerprise jointly, was launched in a Thames-side pub and attended by dozens of retired and still working lightermen, trade union officials, families and friends, many of whom hadn't seen each other for twenty or thirty years. Parts of the book were read by the author's son to a packed pub listening in complete quiet. *The Island* was launched in a school built on the site of the old Island neighbourhood, with an exhibition of old photographs and amplified tape-recordings. It brought together people, who had been dispersed through re-development from as far away as Kent and Essex, in a re-creation of the neighbourhood which had finally disappeared 15 years earlier. *Every Birth it Comes Different* was launched in the Centerprise coffee bar, packed by Hackney Reading Centre students, their families and friends, and visitors from other centres, and the evening was an extraordinary blend of private and public; women read aloud written accounts of the birth of their children to eighty or more people.

Launching parties are part of selling the books, as are all public readings. It's quite a different thing to buy a book which has just spoken to you in the person of its writer. When the East Bowling History Workshop in Bradford launched its first publication, *Bowling Tidings*, in a local social club, 400 copies from a first print run of 1000 were sold in half an hour. Many groups, particularly writers' workshops, have made it a priority to read in public, at schools, colleges, local festivals, political events and pub evenings, and simply on exchange visits to each other. Apart from the inevitable bookstall and the sales it achieves, this is distribution of literature, and creates a wider audience than book production alone can do. In some groups the balance tilts strongly this way, with reading dominating over publishing; some have developed towards performance of songs, sketches and drama, like the Controlled Attack group which has strong links with writers' groups in Tower Hamlets.

### Questions of reading and distribution

Different work, reflecting popular experience; different writers, whom you may know and can certainly meet; different distribution, through local centres and face-to-face contacts - all these have created new



reading publics. Examples tell the story best. Poetry is supposed to be a minority interest and yet the collection of poems by Vivian Usherwood sold over 10,000 copies, of which it is likely that nearly half were sold from one bookshop, Centreprise in Hackney. They were bought in dozens by friends of his, by relations, by other black teenagers and parents, by school teachers who used them in the classroom and by people who were prepared to try out such an attractive small collection at such a cheap price, the first edition was sold for 5p. It had a printed cover, was duplicated inside, folded and stapled by hand. Today, printed and stapled (or 'finished') commercially, this collection continues to sell at a still low price of 30p.

New readership can become new writers. A young woman, Christine Gillies, read Vivian's poems and decided to bring her own very personal poems to Centreprise for consideration. One of those poems was directly inspired by one of Vivian's and was a kind of reply to it. Half of the first edition of Jack Davitt's collection of poems, *Shipyard Muddling*, was sold in Swan & Hunter's shipyard where he worked on Tyneside. An ex-miner from Crumlington, Northumberland went around the numerous social clubs in his area, asking the club secretaries to announce on the tannoy that he was in the bar with his new book for sale. In five weeks he had sold 600 copies out of a print run of 1,500. Another example - in 1974 a retired carpenter, Albert Paul, took a manuscript of his early autobiography to the Brighton community newspaper, *QueenSpark*. They decided to publish it and the book was typed, designed, pasted up, cut and stapled by local voluntary labour. The pages were printed by a small local press. 2,000 copies were sold within three months, the majority in one small neighbourhood. It was sold door to door mostly, and Mr. Paul himself sold 700 to friends and in cafes and streets.

QueenSpark have set a lot of store by this method of selling as a logical extension of the aim to make all the processes of producing and distributing visible, to challenge the concessions to commercial structure that are involved when selling through bookshops. One important gain is keeping the price low, thereby terminating the need to add the distributor's percentage. It can be done as collectively as any of the earlier processes. It encourages people to see writing and publishing as a neighbourhood activity growing out of, and nourishing, other social actions and contacts. It allows conversations to develop which give the writer feedback from



readers, or may lead to writing being pulled out of a bottom drawer, or photos being offered for a street newspaper, or memories - too short for a book but long enough for an article - being told. It's one highly successful form for some groups of the *work* that must go on to stop the product of all these diverse activities being absorbed as just a commodity for sale on a shelf. Where this cannot be done, other ways have to be found of keeping the space open around the book.

Where groups haven't the social organisation, the close neighbourhood in which to work like this, they have to rely more on shops for distribution and sales, and this takes us into a field of unresolved problems. They are less acute when the shops are the community bookshops, with which local publishing has developed in close association. Indeed it is the experience of working in these shops and selling our books through them that has boosted our confidence enough to say that the crude averages of bestseller lists do not represent any live 'popular taste'. These shops may include many books apart from our own, on topics from pruning roses to natural childbirth or a new children's picture book but the stock certainly includes books which have been made close to the readers' own lives. The problem comes when we (as we surely must) try to sell outside our own neighbourhoods, or insert our books among those in the mass distribution outlets. The main problem is price - the distributor takes roughly 50% of the cover price. In turn the bookshop usually takes 33%. Even when we hold down production costs, these can push the price of a book out of the reach of its local market. One solution has been adopted by Centreprise after years of deliberation: a two tier price system. Centreprise's more recent books have a Hackney price and a higher price for elsewhere. This is only a provisional answer and it may be that distribution is the next aspect the Federation will need to learn to organise and control.

When we say we are on a collision course with literature as it is conceived and established, we don't mean that all our activities are designed to confront, challenge or harass it. We merely suggest that if the kind of literary production we are engaged in were to become the norm - i.e. co-operative, associative, aiming at two-way (many way) communication, cheap, widely available, producing much in order to find out what our 'bests' are - then the conventional norm - competitive, elitist, profit-controlled, labour-dividing, separating producer from consumer - would be impossible (and in the meantime, the prevalence of

the existing norm makes the establishment of ours uphill work in spite of its satisfactions). The techniques of mass community production are particularly painful when we encounter them in the world of cultural production, because it is there that we try to locate our expectations about breaking our silences; about sharing meanings and ideas. For all the work that has been done towards dis-establishing *this* literature, the creation of more reciprocal relations between readers and writers, this is still only a beginning.

# Producing contradictions

Four years ago, Ken Worpole, in an afterward to the FWWCP's anthology *Writing*, put the problem this way:

Let us here honestly admit a problem. On the one hand, shoe-string publishing opens up possibilities for working class creation and communication outside the commercial and state-controlled media. On the other hand, the more important and widespread this alternative publishing becomes, the bigger the economic threat it may seem to pose to people working in the printing trade.

We can best try to take up the problem from this point.

This section was nearly not included. The problems talked about in this book were discussed frequently by the various contributors but this particular chapter, which we had rather grandly entitled 'Contradictions in the Labour Process in Local Publishing' seldom entered our conversation.

It wasn't that people didn't see it as a problem, they certainly did. But it was evidently such a hot potato that no-one wanted to take it up. The difficulty is implicit in our day to day operations, the way in which we actually conduct our work, 'make' our books, relate to other organisations and regulate our internal affairs. It obviously wasn't something we could duck, even had we really wanted to, though when it first came up - at the fag end of another discussion on some much more grandiose problem like 'culture' - our various reactions made it evident that here, at least, we did not think alike.

*Who's digging whose grave?*

None of us would wish to compete with, act against or actively undermine another form of working-class association or expression,

and whatever else they may be trades unions certainly come within that category. Or, at least, we wouldn't want to *say* that that's the game we're in.

It's immensely uncomfortable to think that digging where you stand may amount to digging someone else's grave. So the first thing we want to register here is how close we came to *not* confronting the problems of our own practices. We also feel obliged to record two of the comments made at the meetings when the issue finally did come up.

The first of these was, 'Oh well, really anyone can learn it in twenty-four hours.' The second: 'We're only making work they wouldn't have anyway.'

We want to register these responses because the first demonstrates the power - our *power* - to determine the conditions upon which Labour will be hired is a power they resent most intensely, the second because it's the argument of the industrial revolution. We want to note this because it reflects both our own 'touchiness' about the whole convoluted issue and, perhaps more importantly, because it also reflects a very deep-seated ambivalence, not to say occasional antipathy, towards the trade unions and unease about positive expression of their (limited) power. This ambivalence is not something we will lightly escape from.

Why that should be is, on reflection, fairly obvious. Most of this book is devoted to our external relationships, to the way we relate (or don't relate) to the world outside our groups; this section, amongst other things, is about the way we relate to the world inside these groups. One thing that emerged from our discussions was that we were very sensitive about the manner in which we produced our various goods (i.e. the labour process involved). It was easy enough to agree that capitalism had an inbuilt propensity to divide the labour process (i.e. the making of things be they soap powders or computers) into smaller and smaller sub-units (in earlier days no less than 39 separate operations were involved in the making of a pin). And this process (increasingly dependent on 'impersonal machinery') removes people further and further from any direct relationship with the finished product (they find themselves making car door handles as opposed to cars). It also takes away the 'skill' necessary to make things, and to possess a skill ensures a good bargaining position (hence the working class tradition of learning a trade).

All of this was obvious. But precisely what were the characteristics

of our own labour process? And what were the relationships between our labour process and trades unions? If capitalistic production was always going to be marked by such a division of labour was the same to be true of oppositional production? There were no easy answers.

As capital constantly divided the labour process, labour responded by craft trade unionism and later resistance through demarcation disputes and restrictive practices. Trade unionism itself emerged as a response to this capitalist sub-division of labour, and is largely a form of organised resistance for better conditions and material standards of living, using weapons defined by capitalism. The major weapon in such a conflict is the withdrawal of labour from the process of production; that that is dis-connection, rather than the demand to produce in different ways or to produce different things. Here one could point to the apparent acquiescence of trades unions in the sacking of Mike Cooley, one of the leading figures in the Lucas aerospace alternative production project (which tried to show how the workers there, rather than being made redundant, could be employed producing such eminently useful goods as kidney machines). Despite such recent manifestations of interest in alternative ways of producing things as the Wales Trade Union Congress (TUC) visit to Mondragon in the Basque country (with its complex of interlocking co-operative establishments. the most successful in Europe), alternative ideas are still largely of last resort status. (Though that last resort is becoming increasingly frequent, as with the Transport and General Workers Union's (TGWU) decision to form a shirt-making co-operative from the bankrupt wreckage of a private firm). There is also an entrenched revolutionary Leninist opposition to such alternative ventures as in this SWP article:

We in the Socialist Workers Party have always argued in the past and will continue to argue in the future that all alternatives are diversionary. They are not the answer to the bosses' present vicious attacks on our organisation and our living standards.

—19th September 1981, *article on co-operatives*.

## Workers as employers

Many of our own groups, including the actual Federation, have found themselves at various times in the far from easy position of employers of labour. Being employers (often of people who are

themselves members of/active in the various groups) has involved us in certain processes which can conflict with the interests of those employed. To put it at its simplest, some (though not all) of our interests as groups lie in getting things done as cheaply as possible. Lie there not because we want to make a 'profit' but because, firstly, we don't have enormous capital resources and, secondly, because cheapness means a wider distribution of a greater number of books. Certainly no-one's going to make a fortune working for any of our groups, but when paid labour is employed there is an immediate division between it and unpaid labour. Arguments in favour of the former are obvious. So much work needs to be done, a lot of it in the daytime, organizing, visiting, setting up working groups, that here is an opportunity to create paid employment for one or more persons. But at once tensions develop. Contracts of employment have to be drawn up specifying hours, wages and conditions. But there is often an implicit assumption that what is written down as conditions of employment is a minimum expectation, the reverse of what one would expect in other jobs. Why are people who work in alternative projects expected to work longer and for less money? Largely because their employers are friends and fellow activists who put their commitments into such projects voluntarily.

But it's more than that. It's also because there is a deep distrust within the movement of anything which looks like the professionalisation of politics or cultural development - the creation of 'experts' with a vested interest in running affairs, with a propensity (to put it no stronger) to take decision-making out of the hands of the membership. Another fear is that paid workers will become the 'representatives' of projects or movements, the ones whose views are most often heard because they are most readily available to attend meetings or be interviewed by local radio. This has the effect of disenfranchising the group from coming to collective opinions. These are real fears because it has been the experience of many groups that outside agencies cause full-time workers to see themselves as representatives rather than the employees that they actually are. Radio stations ring up, 'We're doing this programme tomorrow on the breakdown of community life, can you come and give us an angle on this?' Or someone from the Town Hall rings up to say that there's a meeting on Friday to talk about another weekend festival, and can the paid worker come to suggest what role local writing can play in it. The fact is that the cycle of democracy for most self-organised voluntary organisations is

monthly whereas the cycle of capitalist and local government is daily. It is always tomorrow that they need someone to come to a meeting. The more the paid worker responds to such pressure the more disenfranchised and de-activated the voluntary group becomes.

One solution here is obvious - don't employ paid labour. Indeed many of our groups have a strong aversion to taking on full-time workers, and many others seek to limit the time anyone person can be employed. In Manchester Commonword, people are only able to work for pay for three years. The first three paid workers who started Centreprise all agreed beforehand to the term of three years. The Federation itself appoints on a yearly basis, though such appointments can be re-negotiated for another year. But these are solutions which carry their own inbuilt problems. We would not be over-fond of jobs in other spheres with an inbuilt redundancy guillotine. Even without that problem, short term contracts paying people for a forty hour week, but expecting them to put in sixty, cause groups to employ particular kinds of people (the young, the unattached, mobile, those with no great financial or personal commitments). Refusing to engage any kind of paid labour can move groups to have most of their work done by the aged, the unwaged and those in jobs with flexible hours (like night education). Where there are no easy answers, each solution carries with it its own problems as groups experiment with various ideas such as job-sharing, attaching the payment to the work and so on.

## *Technologies and their contradictions*

Nor is this the only problem we face, for it is not just a question of relationships with paid labour inside our groups; it is also a problem of the avoidance of paid labour, or the undercutting of paid labour, outside them. When the community press started in the late 1960's it did so very much on the basis of 'we must control the means of production ourselves'. The new offset litho technology has made it possible for many people to learn basic printing and plate-making on small A4 and A3 machines. Similarly, access to an electric typewriter with a carbon ribbon makes elementary typesetting easy. Also it was very much part of the ideology then that campaigning groups, ethnic groups, tenants' associations and so on should do the whole typing, layout and design and printing process themselves for their leaflets and street newspapers. A number of early community press projects bought machines for which they lacked sufficient work, with the

result that they often went out looking for commercial work and, in the process, sometimes undercut unionised firms and unionised labour.

Nonetheless the problem of the relationship between our groups and union shops is one of considerable importance for a number of reasons. On the one hand, since one of our key aims is to liberate a whole production process (i.e. the making of books) for popular, unconditional access, we are in a sense directly or indirectly impinging upon those who make their living out of just that process. In a certain sense, since we are saying 'anyone can do it' we are taking the 'trades' out of 'trades unionism'. At the same time, part of our ability to operate in the way in which we do depends upon the availability of certain technologies. But technology isn't neutral. Just as we are trying to utilise its potential, so are capitalist firms - witness the way in which some academic publishers are now asking for camera-ready copy (i.e. for the author to do what amounts to the typesetting) as are many newspapers and magazines, particularly for display advertisements. In many ways the scale (as well as the motive) is very different, we aren't employing £50,000 computer based printing systems or £5,000 word processors; to us 'new technology' often means a typewriter and a tape-recorder.

But in some senses the problem is the same: it's about the ability, the right of organised (i.e. unionised) labour to dictate the terms (or bargain about them) upon which changes in production processes are made. That arises with our groups in two ways. Firstly a sensitive moment in production is 'pasting up' (literally doing just that with the bits and pieces that go to make a page). This is labour intensive and is a quite boring job if you have no connection with the text but is a deeply interesting and satisfying one if you have. It is quite likely that most of our groups, whilst increasingly contracting out typesetting and printing to outside firms and presses, will want to keep control of their 'paste up'. In a very obvious sense this avoids the use of paid (unionised or otherwise) labour. Secondly, since very few of the Federation's groups have their own press (possibly only Tower Hamlets Art Project [THAP] and Commonword) a lot of the production process is actually contracted out. Usually, though, it is contracted to community presses, resource centres and other non-commercial (and frequently non-unionised) printers. The reasons for this are various but one obvious one is based on financial considerations. Very few, if any, of the groups can afford to take their books to large commercial printing companies. More than that, many of the non-



commercial presses have taken a keen interest in the books they have printed; they have involved the writers and the compilers in seeing how the books are produced, have made suggestions for improving designs or choosing colour schemes for covers. This contrasts with the attitude of many commercial firms which is one of 'this is toytown stuff... normally we do runs of 50,000, three colours anyway, give it us here and we'll give you a ring when it's ready'.

### *Bridges over troubled waters*

Again there are no easy answers. But one way forward is to seek state-grants either directly or indirectly (though a number of our groups would have strong reservations about the possible dependence and constraints implied by such a situation), in order to enable us to directly pay union rates or indirectly employ unionised labour through the community-based provision of printing and publishing facilities. It may also be that we have to talk to the unions (we are, after all, on the same side) about the proper conditions under which this 'new technology' can be utilised in the area of working class publishing. We may, at some stage, have to think of resurrecting that old Labour movement weapon, the fair wage clause. We may even have to look anew at some of our own practices and ask just why it is that so many small, local organisations have so often, to put it politely, ignored or apparently been indifferent to organised labour. Just why is it that we appear to inhabit such different worlds?

There is, of course, one other area of importance with regard to our relationships with organised labour - the question of payment to writers. For working class publishing is radically different not only in creating new reading publics and new publishing possibilities for people who write, it also actively encourages new writers. It does this on the basis of regarding publishing as the last stage in the process of offering writers a means of sharing their experiences with others. It is not a commercial transaction whereby the publisher buys the manuscript from the writer in the hope of making a profit. No royalties are paid to authors. For writers who try to make a living by writing, and who might well be members of the TUC registered trade union for writers, the Writers' Guild, local publishing could be seen as another form of exploitation by undercutting the market. Local publishing might well give additional credence to the view that

writing isn't really work, that it's just a recreation and people should feel grateful for being published, never mind paid.

Members of the Federation have had a meeting with a representative of the Writers' Guild at the TUC, organised by the TUC Education Office. We put our view on the new role of non-commercial local publishing in creating new writers and reading publics and they saw this new development and understood the reason for non-payment of authors. However, they were concerned that when people published by Federation groups were asked, as they often are, to read a few poems on radio, or make a television appearance, they should insist on payment at proper rates, otherwise this was genuinely undercutting union labour. When people active in the Federation have written for commercial companies we have encouraged them to join the Writers' Guild. Quite a few commercial publishers, particularly those of schoolbooks, have approached local publishing projects to reproduce poems or extracts from autobiographies for use in such things as school text books. A proper rate has always been asked for this right and the money, in most groups, passed directly to the writer as it is quite clear policy amongst Federation groups that, although writers do not get paid, copyright rests with them and so, therefore, do all subsequent reproduction rights.

This is just one small example of how the contradictions which we face might be dealt with - but the overall problem is a large and serious one. People in the Federation have often had a difficult and tenuous relation to mainstream trades unionism. If we really wish to be on the same side it's time we started building bridges. The very success of the movement has meant that we can no longer live on islands of alternative practices: our practice actively affects (and we hope will increasingly affect) people in the trade union movement. We need to recognise the seriousness of the contradictions that do exist and start to develop strategies for dealing with them.

# Writers and communities

*The writers' circle, or try anything once*

A telephone rings.

Mavis: Hello. Bethnal Green Home for the Bewildered.

Shirley: Is that you Mavis?

Mavis: Oh, Shirley? Sorry, I picked that up from the kids and can't stop saying it now.

Shirley: Lucky I'm not in a call box, I'd have lost my money. Anyway, what did you think of last night?

Mavis: I quite enjoyed it Shirl, honestly. I was surprised, I didn't expect to.

Shirley: I told you didn't I? There was no reason to be embarrassed about your stuff. Some of their poems were a lot worse than yours.

Mavis: Did you think so? Oh thanks. I didn't like that long silence after I finished reading though. For a minute I thought I was going to be thrown out.

Shirley: Don't be daft. Who by?

Mavis: Well, I know it's silly of me, but when we first got in there I thought that big bloke next to the door was a bouncer. But of course later on when he read his story, I -

Shirley: Good, wasn't it? All that clever scientific stuff. I wouldn't have thought he had it in him. But then you can't go by appearances, I always say.

Mavis: No, especially when he kept on reading his comic all through your story.

Shirley: He didn't, did he?

Mavis: Oh, everyone else was listening Shirl. They were. Honest.

Shirley: Do you think they liked it?

Mavis: Oh, I'm sure they did.

Shirley: Are you? They looked a bit baffled to me.

Mavis: Well, you write very deep stuff Shirl and –

Shirley: I wish you'd stop calling me 'Shirl'. You know I can't stand it.

Mavis: Sorry. As I was saying – what was I saying? Oh yes. You write such deep stuff, I bet they'd never heard anything like it before.

Shirley: I think I was at least up to the standard of that tall sophisticated looking girl, don't you?

Mavis: The one who wrote that long sad poem about dying for love?

Shirley: OF love, not FOR it. Really Mavis, you never listen properly.

Mavis: W-ell. it was a bit over my head. She's a secretary you know, like you.

Shirley: Oh well. No wonder.

Mavis: No wonder what?

Shirley: Never mind, you wouldn't understand.

Mavis: I understood that other woman's poems, you know? The one all about babies and the family and all that. Nice, wasn't she.

Shirley: Oh yes. Motherly. Reminded me of my own mum actually.

Mavis: Funny you should say that. I was thinking the same thing. My mum keeps on losing her glasses and dropping things just like she did.

Shirley: And the convenor had such a job stopping her once she started, didn't he? I thought ...

Mavis: The who?

Shirley: The one who was running it all. That quiet, studious looking fellow with the glasses.

Mavis: Oh him. Was he running it? I wondered what he kept knocking on the table for.

Shirley: What did you think he was doing - calling up the spirit world?

Mavis: Oh go on, Shirl - sorry Shirley. No one took any notice of him though, did they?

Shirley: No, they could have been better behaved, I must say. You could see he'd had a superior education to the others. Definitely a professional man.

Mavis: Get away. He was a plumber's mate. He told me in the pub afterwards.

- Shirley: You're kidding. Well who was the one in the plumber's overalls then?
- Mavis: Oh, he was a history teacher. They told me that too.
- Shirley: Hm-mm...he did use a lot of basic Anglo-Saxon.
- Mavis: Talking of language, what did you think of that blowsy woman? Talk about a dog's dinner. All that make-up and jewellery! Must have been fifty if she was a day and –
- Shirley: Mutton dressed as lamb all right.
- Mavis: - then she came out with that lovely gentle ghost story and not one four letter word in it.
- Shirley: Mind you, she knocked back an awful lot of vodka afterwards, didn't she?
- Mavis: They all drank like fish though, didn't they?
- Shirley: I know, but I suppose you have to make allowances for creative people.
- Mavis: Yes, I suppose you do...
- Shirley: They didn't have anything else in common with each other at all really.
- Mavis: No, they were all quite different, one way or another.
- Shirley: - except for being Socialists.
- Mavis: I didn't mention you voted for mother Thatcher last time.
- Shirley.
- Shirley: Thanks.
- Mavis: What do you think then? Shall we go again?
- Shirley: We could still try the pottery class.
- Mavis: Sounds a bit messy...
- Shirley: Mm-mm. Of course there's still the Buddhist Meditation thing...
- Mavis: Bit on the quiet side.
- Shirley: Yes, they were sociable, that's true -for such an odd assortment of people.
- Mavis: Odd. That's the word. That's what they had in common. No wonder we felt so much at home. Shir! Shirley, are you still there? Hello ...
- Shirley: Mavis, I don't think I care for that insinuation.
- Mavis: Ooh, I like that word - insinuation. Anyway, do you want to go next time? After all we've tried everything else - well almost and it is free, after all.

Shirley: That's true, evening classes cost the earth. Well all right then, I'll see you.

Mavis: See you then, Shirley.

—*Jean Archer*

Local publishing is not simply a reflection or passive response to work received, but an intervention in people's lives, locally and nationally, which creates new confidence and abilities.

'Strong Words', the Durham and Tyneside group have described their experience in putting together the book *But the World Goes on the Same*. This was a collection of taped and written accounts of old and young people's lives as lived in a group of Durham pit villages which also included poems they had written. Once people got involved in taping and correcting their manuscripts they continued to write in forms quite separate from their original contribution to the book.

It has also been found at Centerprise in London that once people have been encouraged to talk about their lives on tape, and then edit their own transcript, they often carried on writing, having found the process an important way of reflecting and clarifying their experiences. Of the first six writers published by Centerprise, for example Ron Barnes, Vivian Usherwood, Christine Gillies, Dot Starn, Arthur Newton, all carried on writing, not necessarily with a view to publication.

### One of the community arts?

On more than one occasion, and in various places, groups active in the Federation have strongly resisted being defined or slotted into the category of Community Arts. The community arts movement, developed in the 1970's, was made up of, among others, mural painters, video makers and performers who wanted to practise their skills outside the conventional theatre and other such formal areas.

Many community arts projects have done very good work in working class districts, running festivals, initiating murals and so on. It is a professional movement, yet criticism - often from within - of the courses sometimes run on community arts can discourage those without a job-orientated interest. It is this element which makes the movement politically different from the worker-writer movement, committed as it is to the de-professionalisation of cultural production. At worst, some

community arts are unreconstructed entertainment, pure clowning, with very little 'skill-sharing'.

The community arts movement has been financially marginalised by the creation of a Community Arts Panel by the Arts Council. Pressure has been taken off their various specialist panels for funding. Therefore all such projects are urged only to apply to that panel.

Greg Wilkinson's view was that the Arts Council have bought off the potentially oppositional cultural movements of the 1970's by setting up a cultural bargain basement at 105 Piccadilly and titling this the Community Arts Panel. The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers has always in principle insisted that its financial needs should be addressed to the Literature Panel of the Arts Council of Great Britain. Similarly we have resisted all moves to reduce and counter-define the working class writing movement by labelling it 'community writing' as though this were some kind of second order activity compared with 'real' or 'national' writing.

## New pressures

However, because we are writing and publishing within a society which has mystified publishing with assumptions and misunderstandings, there can be real difficulty in getting across to the people the ideals and cultural values which the new publishing groups use as a starting point. Consequently a number of those who have been published in this way have found problems arising from their involvement in writing. It has been the experience of several people on having had a book published that acquaintances assume that this has meant an enormous financial scoop for the writer, rather like a pools win.<sup>1</sup> When told that no payment was involved, another response is to think that the writer was taken for a ride and that someone, somewhere, has pocketed a fair bit of cash. Yet another reaction is that all this activity is not 'real' publishing, which they associate with Habitat office suites, expense account lunches in Soho, television guest appearances and so on.

Even the writer may feel these pressures and begin to think that commercial publishing offers more, although we have to say that this is remarkably rare and that the common experience is a fierce loyalty to the

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<sup>1</sup> Pools are competitions based on predicting soccer score draws, for which some individuals won a considerable pay out (Editors' Note, 2009).

local workshop and publishing project.

We have come to believe within the Federation that it is vital that we should develop alternative values and other contexts by which to celebrate the achievement of writing, in order that new writers may feel that there is proper recognition of all the effort and very hard work required to produce a manuscript.

One or two people initially published by one of the Federation groups have taken subsequent work to commercial publishers. There they have either been treated indifferently, or encouraged to become highly secretive about their writing - even told that it is bad to read work in progress to other people because it spoils the impact of publication - and so have actually been put off writing for its own sake or for the pleasure of others. Writing can become a possessive commodity.

But there are other causes of alienation too. When Ron Barnes published his second book, the highly regarded *Coronation Cups and Jam Jars* one relative wrote to the local newspaper, *Hackney Gazette*, disowning the book and regretting that Ron Barnes had felt compelled to describe the very poor conditions in which his family had once lived. Ron Barnes, in his afterword to the book, describes meeting with people scornful of his autobiographical writings... 'Who more or less suggested that I was not the only one to experience distress in childhood, so why was it necessary to write that I did?' Their view was that it was only the 'special' people of the world who had license to recount their unique experiences in life.

### The plain clothes writer

The writer who is honest to their experience treads a very sensitive path between truthfulness and what others feel to be a betrayal. Friends and relatives can regard writers as potential informers. Some people feel pressured to use a pseudonym when writing about such contentious issues as abortion or male chauvinist pub-culture in particular districts where such matters are thought best left undiscussed.

Roger Mills, who is active in the Federation, speaks of those who 'have been criticised by families and have met with hostility from relatives who feel exploited and exposed by a writer in their midst, a plain clothes writer at that, not even a copy of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* under his arm as identification.'



Susan Price, a supermarket worker before she began writing children's books, discusses this at length in an interview in the *Children's Book Bulletin*: 'Sometimes when I've gone into the local shops everyone is talking, but as soon as I go in then everything goes quiet. It was the same when I was the writer in residence at a teachers' training college. When I sat down the students, everybody would be talking away, and as soon as I sat down everybody stopped talking. There's nothing special about me at all'

Things rarely reach these extremes, but the ambivalences about writers is still there; or we should say about people who, amongst other things, write.

On the whole those involved in local publishing and writers' workshops prefer to see themselves not as 'writers', but rather as people who sometimes write.

Pressure can also come from closer quarters than neighbours. The most common of these is the pressure on women from husbands to stay at home rather than go out to a writers' workshop - or any other kind of independent activity where different values operate from those at home. It does also occasionally work the other way round. Men are sometimes thought odd to be wasting their time on such an eccentric activity as writing. Some people keep secret their involvement in writing, telling nobody until this is revealed by publication.

Involvement in a group means much more than just going somewhere where you can discuss writing or work on a local history project. Other issues raise themselves. Why some people find anti-Irish jokes objectionable, why there should be equal representations of women as well as men in an anthology of working experiences, how the work of typing and making the coffees is to be shared out without assuming which sex is to do it, what should be done about publishing a story which contains a very convincingly drawn and sympathetic National Front member, even though the intention of the story is ultimately anti-racist. All these questions involve thinking through new ideas. Roger Mills again: 'People I know have been politicised through involvement in writers' groups. The evil of such things as racism and sexism have become clear to them in a way that all the isolated readings of *Socialist Worker* or *Spare Rib*, or other such publications given out like so much religious reading matter, could never have done'.

But the slow change in values, questioning of old assumptions and the growth of new friendships involves a distancing from the previous pattern of relationships. It would be wrong to suggest that the situation is critical, but for some people there have been real difficulties. These have been expressed by one writer in a very powerful poem:

*And So a Different Mind*

And so a different mind,  
Nothing sudden or spectacular,  
But smoothly it moves  
Like a tide.  
And leaving with each sweep upon the beach  
Pebbles. Clear. Smooth. Precious.  
No longer out of reach.

A betterment, yet in a way a hindrance.  
But for everything in life, one has to pay.

Being one with those  
Who wore those shabby clothes  
And broken shoes.  
But a different mind  
Drives out the old,  
Replaced by different views.

A greedy mind always wanting more,  
And that alone will shut the door.  
Yet I see a shaft of light.  
And I hope.

Changing tone, changing speech,  
To accommodate each you meet.  
The price you pay each day.

And one is lost  
In this urban mixture of different minds,  
Free minds, yet inclined to isolate.  
You try to choose from different views

And different personalities.  
 Friends act like enemies,  
 And enemies, friends.  
 The price you pay each day,  
 To dare to think another way.

—Ron Barnes

Pressures arise from becoming known as a working-class writer, both locally and nationally. Because of the still relative rarity of this phenomenon, the individuals who have become very active in this movement are often pressured into becoming 'representative' figures and taken up by the media. A book gets well reviewed in the local newspapers, this is picked up by local radio or even regional television. The working-class writer is portrayed almost as a freak. Once his or her name is known he/she becomes convenient. The person to interview or 'use' in any programme. They've got their working class writer, the one whose name and phone number they can remember, so that one gets over-exposed and exploited.

It was the experience of one writer, however, that having been invited to appear on local radio to talk about his writing he was turned away at the door and told to go round to the back entrance. He realised that the cause of this reaction was his working clothes which he was still wearing after a day's work on a nearby site.

### Are writers special people?

Since writing has always been associated with a rare and deep intellectuality, people who have written very well about a range of subjects are assumed to be therefore knowledgeable about everything else, as well as being endlessly entertaining and witty at parties and in all ways singular and eccentric. This is due to the mass media's belief in the transferability of talent amongst 'well known' people. When someone becomes a famous actor or footballer their fame alone somehow renders their views in all fields equally significant. Not only is David Essex a popular singer, but he is invited onto chat shows and asked questions about South Africa and unemployment, as if his views had been given authority and weight by the mere fact that he is famous.

Again, from the Susan Price interview in the *Children's Book Bulletin*:

Q: Has it created any problems for you being known locally as a writer?

A: Yes, because people tend to think of writers as something which ordinary people can't be. They're supposed to be awe-inspiring but I know that I'm not awe-inspiring and I know I'm not particularly clever. It is all right with people you know, but when you meet people who have been told you are a writer they expect something very special. It's embarrassing because they expect you to be proof of a scintillating talent and you can't provide it because it's not there. It's a myth. A friend of mine always thought that writers lived in great big white houses on the tops of hills, with all the walls painted white, and they lay on a large white couch drinking vodka and occasionally went over to a white typewriter and typed a few words...

This attitude towards writers is not helped by the way in which the media present stories about working class writers. For example, Joe Smythe, a Manchester railway guard and member of the Commonword Writers' Workshop, was given a three-month Sabbatical by the NUR to produce a collection of poems *The People's Road*, in an excellent initiative by a trade union. It was published to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway. When *The Guardian* ran a feature on its front page, mentioning this unusual venture, it did so under the headline of '*I wandered lonely as a guard*'. New writers are never judged or presented in their own right, but solely in terms of an established and different tradition. 'Is this Grimethorpe's answer to Shakespeare?' is the kind of local reporting which effectively trivialises very real and different cultural breakthroughs.

All these factors partly explain why many working class writers, song writers, comedians and playwrights have sought a platform for their ideas through the world of commercial entertainment rather than by means of 'Art and Letters'. People in working class areas are not entirely unused or surprised to hear of somebody in the locality entering showbiz, or finding out that some known writer came from round the corner. The fact that the writers no longer lived or even concerned themselves in their former working class environment might not shock them either, because like the showbiz star they've 'made it'. However, the practice of working class writers meeting together to become active in local affairs, writing poetry and prose that relate to current events, is still a novelty. The media turns ability and a yearning for expression into a show, a thing to be snatched from its birthplace and sold as genius, divorced from the environment that created it.

# Finding a voice— the struggle for self-representation

Interesting, but...

Selling our books, talking about them, arguing their merits, we often come across the response (particularly from those with strong ‘political’ predilections) that they’re ‘quite nice really’, ‘enjoyable reading’ and so on - but ultimately ‘irrelevant’. ‘Irrelevant’ that is to ‘real’ political involvement (whatever that may be). If not ‘coffee-table’ stuff, the best it seems they can aspire to is tea and biscuits and old fogies wallowing in the ‘good old days’. Harmless enough, by and large, but hardly of any great import. One of the main arguments running through this book is with this casual dismissal of ordinary working-people’s writings as being of any relevance to the struggle for social change.

Just why that response should be so frequent and why we regard it as such a problem, particularly when made by those on the left, needs spelling out. One reason should be quite clear from the brief summary of the origins and development of the Federation, because that response of ‘irrelevant’ is the most colossal put-down imaginable of so-called ordinary people. It’s surely a major problem for left political activists if their programmes and policies exclude working people’s situations, needs and satisfactions as defined by themselves. Dismissal of this work by the Guardians of Culture is less surprising but still needs exposing, because it’s a way of saying that everybody has a particular position in society and, by and large, should stick to it. Put crudely, if their writings are irrelevant, their expressions of themselves and their experiences of no interest, then so too are the writers. But of course in other respects *they* are of enormous

interest, but of interest within certain closely defined social areas. They are of interest as producers (of material goods, of services, of taxes, etc.) or as consumers (of products, of politics, of TV programmes, etc.) - but not if they step outside these roles.

### The fishermen who found no fish

Writing (i.e. communicating, making concrete certain social relationships, saying things publicly) is something beyond their means, best left to those well equipped to deal with such sensitive and sophisticated matters. As an ex-Chairman of the Arts Council put it, they:

... did decide to investigate the possibility that there might be reservoirs of talent which were being neglected because we did not know about them.

—*The Guardian*, 28.12.81

But largely, it seemed, such reservoirs did not exist.

Which brings us to the third major reason for challenging that charge of 'irrelevance'. Just who constituted 'they' who decided to investigate the 'possibility' of 'reservoirs of talent'? It's doubtful whether anyone reading this book would know (unless of course, they happen to be attached to that particular institution) who made up that team of intrepid investigators going out into darkest Leeds or Manchester in search of undiscovered 'talent', or upon what criteria they searched for it. This is not the place for an assault upon the particular prejudices and predilections of the Arts Council, but it is the place for raising the central question of *representation*. How is it that certain people (in this case the Arts Council) have the right and power (as well as the purse strings) to decide what is and what is not 'good' writing, how are the criteria for such assessments established and by whom?

Put it another way, when was the last time you voted for a representative on the Arts Council (a body it might be said with £86 million at its disposal in the current year), or on any similar body? And why not? Because 'it's not important' and, anyway, they say, ordinary people wouldn't have the interest or the expertise to be involved in such esoteric pastimes, they're much better left to things they understand like beer, baccy and bingo.

## The politics of representation

So what we're on about here is representation: who represents who, and in whose interests? One need go no further than the present state of national politics to see just how crucial this question of representation is. At the moment it's difficult to escape from questions about the nature and purpose of political representation in the battles between and within the major parties, about how people should be selected and to whom (and how) they should be responsible once selected for a particular office. And this is no esoteric question, because it's all about who has the power (in any particular sphere) to decide what happens and under what constraints they can use that power. Nor is it just a question of 'politics', it's about things like schools and parks and office blocks and businesses. It's about the continuous conflicts in all areas of life between those who claim to have power and authority and those who are on the receiving end.

We'd argue that much of the impetus within the Federation comes from a very deep-seated feeling amongst ordinary working people of powerlessness. Of not being represented, of not being properly represented, of being mis-represented.

On TV, for example, 'ordinary people' appear as studio audiences, as the objects of games-shows, as the ingredients of sit-coms, as the subjects of documentaries or even (occasionally) as the distant heroes of long dead histories. Not that TV, or any other major medium, ignores people; far from it - people, in this context, means pound notes. No, people aren't ignored, but they are represented in certain ways, under certain constraints.

Part of the justification is that it's only the 'experts', the controllers of TV stations or mass circulation newspapers, who really know firstly how to produce these items (like TV programmes or newspaper articles or novels or whatever), and secondly understand just what items ought to be produced. *They* know best and it's obvious that *they* know best, otherwise *they* wouldn't be in that position in the first place.

The TV Companies have in recent years made gestures in the direction of other, less exclusive, methods of production with programmes like 'Open Door' (though these are immediately labelled as 'minority' and therefore, again, 'irrelevant'). The great mass of people in this kind of set-up are simply there to be an audience. That, of course, imposes certain constraints upon the producers; they do, after all, need that audience to justify their productions in the first place. Nonetheless the whole system of producing (and distributing) cultural products is built upon the few producing for the many.

## Self-representation

Against that, often in conscious opposition to it, the Federation and its affiliates are engaged in attempting to create a more open and democratic method of producing culture (in this case books). Just as there are autocratic and democratic ways of conducting politics or businesses or trade unions, so too are there democratic and autocratic ways of producing, making and distributing literature. What is important to us here is allowing people to represent themselves, of devising ways by which people, ordinary people, can organise and represent themselves. That is why we cannot divorce our methods of production (writing, discussing, criticising, editing, pasting-up and in every other way putting books together) from the 'finished products'.

Questions of representation and power do not only come up in relation to class, but also in relation to gender. In recent years women in many countries have begun to challenge the media's sexual stereotyping of them as pretty but dumb, incompetent everywhere but in the kitchen, the sexually deferential inferiors of men - stereotypes which contribute to their subordination.

But rather than simply respond with complaints of unfair treatment, the women's liberation movement, in its own films, books, music, and own magazines and journal, has presented positive accounts of women's own experiences. A similar struggle has happened amongst black people, particularly those living in ex-colonial settings, to resist and displace the crude imperialist ideologies of black ignorance and natural inferiority. These are not just abstract struggles or paper battles but massive social movements, attempts to construct different ways of relating to each other.

## Haven't we been this way before?

Those with power have always tried to restrict access to, and control over, the means of communication. From the days when preachers were licensed by those in authority, from the days of the English Civil War when popular pamphleteers proved a threat to authorities of various political hues, the question of who should control, and under what terms, the dominant means of communication, has been of major interest to all Governments and to all ruling classes. But such concerns have also been those of the subordinate classes as well. It is no accident that the first radical working-class organisation in industrial Britain was the London



*Corresponding* Society, with a very definite emphasis on that second term. Nor was it an accident when Government, in its efforts to crush such radical challenges, literally outlawed *corresponding*. Nor was it an accident, either, that many battles of the early nineteenth-century English working class movement were over the right to a free and unlicensed press.

Those past conflicts, like the present ones, were not just about communications in isolation. They were about the way in which particular societies should be organised, and about how social organisations should be depicted, and about who should decide what was right and what was wrong within those particular social organisations.

To put it another way, the struggle for freedom of speech has been inseparable from political and cultural struggle, and deliberate misrepresentation has always been used to discredit radical movements. The early radicals, the Co-operators, the first trades unionists, the unemployed workers, were vilified in the press and in subsidised leafletting campaigns, as 'scum', 'the mob', and by other epithets, just as modern trades unionists were vilified in the media recently in the so-called 'winter of discontent'. Something called 'politics' cannot be divorced from something called 'communications' or the 'media'. Nor can it be divorced from something called 'culture'.

The struggles about representation, about resisting dominant views of working class life and the life of the nation, about demanding access to the means of spreading other and oppositional views, are always involved with political struggles, and this is where we place the movement of working class writing now developing. The particular character that this work takes is not direct opposition, not necessarily confronting in argument, but beginning to supplement or replace the dominant culture - creating, making space for, developing ways of distributing, the self-expression of working class people themselves, so that the dominant views will not have a free field. This emphasis too has a history which it is useful to be aware of.

This struggle over who should control, who should determine the nature of writing and publishing, has been going on for far longer than any of us have been around. It may be just that the recent movement of working-class writing and publishing has been more intense than its predecessors, but it also represents the re-emergence of a popular cultural and political tradition stretching back over at least the last two hundred

years. Subordinate classes have rarely failed to make and organise their own culture, their own cultural organisations in (partial, at least) opposition to those of the dominant classes.

### Earlier movements

The 18th century saw the publication of many small collections of verse by working people, often agricultural labourers, whose writing not simply portrayed a rural idyll but also a frequent sense of injustice at the conditions under which working people lived. In 1831 Southey published *An Essay on Uneducated Poets* which looked back at some of the self-taught poets of an earlier era: Ann Yearsley, milkmaid; John Taylor, Thames Waterman; James Woodhouse and John Bennet, shoemakers; Stephen Duck, farm labourer, and others.

Stephen Duck's case is described in Raymond Williams' recent *The Country and the City* as a very early example of the self-taught poet being taken up and patronised by people in the so-called higher classes and in the process having his early radical edge smoothed out. For the early Duck poems were full of the conditions of the labourers and their families in this rural landscape:

Let those who feast at Ease on dainty Fare  
Pity the Reapers, who their Feasts prepare:  
For Toils scarce ever ceasing press us now;  
Rest never does, but on the Sabbath, show;  
And barely that our Masters will allow.  
Think what a painful Life we daily lead;  
Each morning early rise, go late to Bed;  
Nor, when asleep, are we secure from pain;  
We then perform our Labours o'er again:

Some years after being given an annual stipend of £30 through the offices of Queen Caroline (there was no Arts Council then) the tone and angle of perception had changed:

Of blissful Groves I sing, and flow'ry Plains:  
Ye Sylvan Nymphs, assist my rural strains.

The nineteenth century witnessed a resurgence of independent literary culture (as well as whole new departures in working class cultural

organisation) often closely associated with conflicts over political and trades union representation. Whilst such a tradition was continuous, as well as innovative, it had clear 'high spots', again frequently corresponding to political/social crises. Chartism, the mass working-class movement of the 1830's and 1840's, with its demands for full political representation and a People's Parliament, was not only accompanied by distinct cultural activities but also (perhaps more importantly) did not make, and refused to make, distinctions between the 'political' and the 'cultural'.

A distinct Chartist social world was constructed, based on a positive rejection of the existing social forms and institutions: radical bookshops, coffee shops, a vigorous press (which easily outsold the 'establishment' press) and reading rooms which often promoted public readings of news, of poetry, of serialised novels. It was not unusual for small groups to buy Chartist publications between them and to read these aloud together. There were writers' groups like the Poet's Corner in Manchester which boasted seventeen members when it published an anthology of its work in 1842. Indeed, a number of the best-known Chartists like Thomas Cooper and Ernest Jones were keen poets, and it is both significant and ironic that the only collection of Chartists' poetry ever published was published not in this country but in the Soviet Union.

In a similar vein there were a number of Chartist novels, often serialised in the thriving newspapers and journals of the movement. The Chartists believed that working-class people should produce their own literature, since established writers were incapable of creating a literature that gave full cognisance to the complex reality of everyday working-class life and politics.

The defeat of Chartism in the late 1840's brought with it a period of apparent 'calm', but the revival of the independent working-class movement in the 1870's also produced a new literature and a new audience for literature. The early working-men's clubs which proliferated in the last three decades of the nineteenth century were part and parcel of a widespread revolt against middle class supervision and tutelage in political parties, trades unions, factories as well as clubs. These clubs often included in their programmes readings of Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley as well as the poetry of the elder Chartists and of club members themselves.

The independent working-class movement of the 1870's to the First World War, like its predecessors, was not only highly self-educated

politically (creating such educational organisations as the Central Labour College and the Plebs League) but maintained a high degree of interest in science, philosophy and literature. It also found itself in increasing competition with and opposition to the infant mass entertainment industry and state education. The decline, or rather the transmutation, of working-men's clubs into branches of the entertainment industry (under the impact of centralised booking agencies and the developing 'star' system), clearly demonstrated the difficulties, if not the impossibility, of maintaining a totally independent existence.

### More recent times

The 1930's was a significant era for working-class writing though this took a different form from that of earlier periods. At the same time the tradition of working-class education survived and in some cases even thrived, despite efforts to undermine it (for example by the 'tutelage' of the WEA),

The worker-writer movement of the 'thirties was a diffuse cultural and political association which included the documentary film movement, the Workers' Film Movement, the Workers' Theatre, the various Labour Party sponsored sports organisations, workers' painting groups such as the Ashington miners, documentary writing projects such as those initiated by Mass Observation, Unity Theatre and literary initiatives such as *Left Review* and *New Writing*. Culture was clearly as much a battlefield as ever - the positive alarm with which showings of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* were viewed in some quarters could be seen as ludicrous were it not for the fact that present film societies owe the restrictions under which they operate to just such alarm at uncontrolled access to 'political' material - hence the peculiarly British policy of pricing them out of the market through high membership fees.

In the 1930's the characteristic publishing process was very much controlled by sympathetic middle-class intellectuals like John Lehmann and George Orwell, who encouraged working-class people, particularly men, to write down their experiences, either in direct autobiography or fictionalised form. The system was one of patronage, well intentioned but liable to founder in the case of personal animosity between patron and writer.

Work of great significance was also published in this period by members of the Women's Co-operative Guild. *Maternity* in 1915 and *Life as We Have Known It* were both encouraged into print by Virginia Woolf.

Many of the best-known working-class autobiographies and novels of the 'thirties, such as B.L. Coombes' *These Poor Hands*, Willy Goldman's *East End My Cradle*, the early writings of Jack Common and George Garrett, are dedicated to Lehmann or some other patron. The magazines of that period, *New Writing* and *Left Review*, encouraged working-class writing but from a centralised and commissioning point of view. The Communist Party played no small part in encouraging the publication of working-class autobiographies like Phil Piratin's *Our Flag Stays Red* and Lewis Jones' *Cwmardy* and *We Live*, though the emphasis lay very heavily on novels and autobiographies, with very little attention to poetry, perhaps only Idris Davies, an ex-South Wales miner, being the exception.

Nor was it only a question of publishing. One of the major organisational breakthroughs was the massively successful Left Book Club, with its extraordinary output of books on international domestic questions, and network of discussion groups and popular lectures. At the time this was seen as a major threat, not just by the right (with its Right Book Club) but also by the Labour Party, which went so far as to proscribe membership of the Club. Ernest Bevin, for one, felt its real purpose was 'to undermine and destroy the Trade Unions and the Labour Party as an effective force'.

## 1945 and after

This profuse and varied cultural growth was interrupted (to put it mildly) by the advent of the Second World War. Even so, within service life, adult education classes, discussion groups and so on, kept alive many of the pre-war issues.

It's also worth mentioning that cultural deprivation - in the sense of the wide spread of low standards of literacy and general education - was the shock revelation of mass conscription and mass 'screening' in the Second World War, just as malnutrition and physical deprivation had been in the First.

The Army Bureau of Current Affairs was often criticised from the right for its activities in facilitating topical discussions. Indeed to many on the

right it seemed as if that massive Labour landslide in 1945 owed a lot to such 'cultural' and 'educational' activities. As the right-wing cultural magazine *New English Review* saw it in 1946:

This new post-war Parliament can fairly claim to be representative. It is the legitimate fruit of much earnest endeavour. Classes, discussion groups, summer schools... book clubs and bureau of current affairs, have brought it into being. A vast wash of words, both written and spoken, has prepared the way for its coming, and now it has come. Leftism has arrived and is installed in Westminster.

Clearly other forces had played a part in this development but nevertheless this serves as eloquent testimony to a decade of cultural activity and organisation.

It also heralded a cultural counter-attack. It was not the war which brought to a halt the working-class movement of the 'thirties but, ironically, the new Labour Government.

There had been signs before the war that large sections of the Labour Party's leadership were at best indifferent, and at worst hostile, to the self-education traditions which had characterised the early working-class movement and to more recent forms of cultural politics. When the Labour Party came to power in 1945, committed to a programme of economic and social reconstruction, it quickly became evident that cultural reconstruction was not part of that agenda. Clear, too, that that process of reconstruction was going to be organised from above. Raymond Williams in *Politics and Letters* remembered this moment very clearly:

I thought that the Labour Government had a choice: either for reconstruction of the cultural field in capitalist terms, or for funding institutions of popular education and popular culture that could have withstood the political campaigns in the bourgeois press that were already gathering momentum. In fact there was a rapid option for conventional capitalist priorities. The refusal to finance the documentary film movement was an example. I still believe that the failure to fund the working-class movement culturally when the channels of popular education and popular culture were there in the forties became a key factor in the very quick disintegration of Labour's position in the future.

Just as important was the deliberate cultural counter-offensive, often tied in with the politics of the emerging Cold War. As the Cold War took hold, many of those who had been most deeply involved before found themselves ostracised as Communists or 'fellow travellers'. Thus in 1948

a three-day conference on the state of contemporary Theatre, chaired by J.B. Priestly, addressed by Stafford Cripps (Chancellor of the Exchequer), was boycotted by the entire West End theatrical establishment on the grounds that the organising secretary, Ted (now Lord) Willis, was a Communist.

### That small world's ending

Throughout the fifties, when real gains in comfort and pay disguised the lack of change in power relations between classes, the slogan was that class culture was dying a natural death: 'We're all middle class now'. Class culture seemed to be succumbing to commercially organised mass culture. Intellectuals who had come from working class homes worked at recording the culture of the communities of their childhoods in works like Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, Willmott and Young's *Family and Kinship in East London*, and Jackson's *Working Class Community*; but the pressure seemed to be to record them before they disappeared. This notion has fed into the dismissal of reminiscences and local histories as un-political. If these cultures don't exist, if they no longer have any power to rally and unite people and to form the springboard for action, then indeed there is a political problem of a kind not dealt with by the continuity of the left's sources, programmes and rhetoric.

That is a problem too big for us to tackle within this book: all we can do is point to the fact that if spaces are made to listen to people - not the conditional space of the interview but spaces in which they can develop what they want to say - then what is to be heard is not a set of illusions about living in a classless society. The changes are real and large and they are reflected in the writing. Mary Casey's poem, 'The Class Game', is written about a world in which it is possible to pretend or to be confused about class positions, but it is still strong and challenging.

### *The Class Game*

How can you tell what class I'm from?  
 I can talk posh like some,  
 With an 'olly in me mouth,  
 Down me nose, wear an 'at not a scarf,  
 With me second hand clothes.

So why do you always wince when you hear  
 Me say "Tara to me Ma" instead of "Bye Mummy dear"?  
 How can you tell what class I'm from?  
 'Cos we live in a corpy, not like some,  
 In a pretty little semi, out Wirral way,  
 And commute into Liverpool by train each day.  
 Or did I drop my unemployment card,  
 Sitting on your patio (we have a yard)?  
 How can you tell what class I'm from?  
 Have I a label on me head, and another on me bum?  
 Or is it because my hands are stained with toil,  
 Instead of soft lily-white with perfume and oil?  
 Don't I crook me little finger when I drink me tea,  
 Say toilet instead of bog when I want a pee?  
 Why do you care what class I'm from?  
 Does it stick in your gullet, like a sour plum?  
 Well mate! A cleaner is me mother,  
 A docker is me brother,  
 Bread pudding is wet nelly,  
 And me stomach is me belly,  
 And I'm proud of the class that I come from.

—*Mary Casey*

Nor are the celebrations, in prose and verse, of 'that small world's ending' passive or uncritical. There are aspects of the old world, and of its working-class cultures, which everyone is glad to see the end of; and also there is a criticism of the lives that have replaced them in the re-creations of the human support (and comedy) that the 'small world' made possible. To write is to record and assert the humanity of those who write - as is the case with any social action: to build, to entertain, to play, to organise. It should be clear that the continuation of this among the other cultural traditions is of the first importance in this decade when 'the end of ideology' itself looks like a brief illusion, the power struggle within society hardens again, and the humanity of the powerless is again discounted.



*Small world*

Outside the fair at Ardwick Green  
hot potatoes from the hot-potato man  
stay like a taste for the old exotic,  
The hot-potato man, the organ grinder,  
the knockerupper thieving dreams,  
the donkeystone with dollyblue man,  
the foggy tram conductor's cough,  
the policeman with his street wide feet,  
the local burglar with apprentice,  
the man who fought Len Johnstone  
the length of Brunswick Street,  
Preaching Billy Arbuthroyd in flight  
from nightwork husbands,  
the born lights of singing pubs  
that small world's ending.

—Joe Smythe

# Writing, culture and class

## Socialist or working class?

Our description and analysis of current working class writing has, so far, emphasized organisation. We have seen how the movement organises itself internally and how it is connected, on a much wider scale, to issues of self-representation within working class experience. We will later examine the way in which this challenges certain pre-conceptions about literature and also some of the principles on which cultural policies are founded and executed. In doing so we will be dealing with the large and unwieldy areas of *culture, literature, class, language and education*. It is important and necessary to do this and, as long as we avoid wilful obscurity, to do so with the help of abstract thinking. The energy which working class writing currently exemplifies and generates probably exists collectively more than individually, and its importance is certainly collective rather than individual. At the same time, however, there is a fundamental importance carried by individual acts of writing. This dialectic between the individual as writer and as workshop member, and between individual workshops in themselves and as the basis of an expanding national movement, lies behind many of the debates which continue to influence the direction of growth of the movement. Issues that have been particularly engaging recently include such arguments as whether the movement is 'socialist or working class' and questions about whether the concerns of women and feminists, in relation to writing, cut across or remain within traditional class boundaries - a debate which has recently been sharply argued in the Federation's own journal *Voices*. These questions bear on the act of writing - what subjects are written

about and in what ways - and whether these are, can be or ought to be, distinctively working class. At the point where these concerns encounter the Establishment, either educational or cultural, issues of language and forms of writing invariably appear.

But, to begin from the beginning, we need to look first at the predominant themes and forms of the writing with which we are concerned.

### What are we writing about?

Gerry Gregory, an English teacher who has written about Federation publications and their use in schools, has produced a breakdown of the common themes occurring in workers' writing and community publishing from the late 1960's onwards. He makes the important observation that '... the range of themes is as wide as in any comparable body of work ... all the big, perennial themes that all speakers and writers at times try to confront (childhood, becoming adult, marriage, war and peace, death etc.) are represented.

One important thing shown by Gerry Gregory's analysis is the continuity with what others regard as 'real' writing. Federation writing is importantly and dramatically *different*, but that difference is *within* the broad limits of cultural experience, not outside of it. Any element of discontinuity with traditional cultural expectations comes into play because themes are represented by and for a working class viewpoint, and predominantly those of the inner-city. Thus themes become distinctive or common to forms of remembered or contemporary working class experience.

Such themes usually begin with a strong memory of childhood and street culture, street games, going to the markets, stealing from the markets, home life - especially marriage relationships and physical conditions. Home life experiences naturally remain in people's memories in very deep ways, more so if there was a pattern of heavy drinking by the father - often a response to living and working conditions; domestic violence does loom large in many autobiographies as does devotion to self-sacrificing mothers.

School experience is often remembered as authoritative, dull and even brutish, yet often with the memory of the one outstanding teacher who took an interest. Sometimes such a teacher was a socialist, a pacifist,

or in some other way at right angles to their own class background and professional status. Many remember starting work in very harsh conditions, being treated miserably, sometimes learning a trade, often moving from job to job in the hope of finding what they really wanted to do. Women recall going into 'service,' not daring to wear a wedding ring if they had an office job. More recent experiences include redundancy, automation, losing the right to exercise your skills, being made to produce had work at the insistence of the employer.

Against these harsher memories are others of a happier nature - of mutual help within the factory and within the street, playing tricks, having a laugh, making something out of nothing, materially and emotionally, patching and mending, scrimping and saving, not giving in, not going under, keeping a tidy house, making sure everybody in the house contributed to the domestic chores and economy. There was backyard cultivation and husbandry, allotments, having to eat your favourite pet rabbit for Sunday dinner (or retiring to the bedroom in tears), or going hungry to the point of malnutrition on wartime rations.

And then there were memories of relationships with the authorities; mostly conflict, going up to the Assistance Board, or the Guardians, having to hold onto your tongue as the Receiving Officer told you to sell your one cheap clock before any financial assistance could be forthcoming, being told by the Unemployment Board (often made up of local employers) that one hadn't really looked for work, giving a 'piece of one's mind' back at contemptuous head teachers, patronising welfare visitors, social security snoopers, being batoned by the police on unemployment demonstrations and abused as 'parish-fed bastards'. For some there were court appearances, approved schools or Borstals, Dr Barnardo's and other children's institutions.

Obviously the last war affected many people profoundly - as evacuees, as parents, as members of the forces, as the ones who dug out the bodies after the air-raids. '... Everything went up; no houses, no man, no mother and no boy. We picked up three dustbins full of pieces out of the rubble. The only way to identify where they were was the dampening dust and clouds of flies ... war is bestial and no solution to the world's problems. War is failure, the culminating failure of failure'. (Stanley Rothwell's *Lambeth At War*. Nostalgia? Political naivety? Local?) Many people had to think about what was happening to them as a result of the war and, consequently, there were many 'awakenings', a growing realisation of, and

involvement in, political and trade union struggles. In more recent years housing struggles and rent strikes have been particularly important reasons for solidarity and political awareness. The rise of the modern women's liberation movement has given many older women who have fought the system even more confidence to confront sexism with more emotional and moral support. Much new writing is coming from black people whose lives have been radically changed by living in a very different, and often hostile society. Women's writing, together with black people's writing, is one of the strongest areas within the Federation's recent growth. People are also very keen to write or talk about new interests or commitments; to painting, to writing itself, to a newly discovered interest in history, to new relationships and friendships, particularly between the generations. Indeed one of the strongest features of all Federation activities is the enormous age range of people involved, at local and national level.

These then are the predominant themes and concerns of the work we are writing about. But we need also to consider the question of the forms through which these are expressed. In the process of language becoming literature, form, as an organiser of content, becomes a critical issue.

If we look at a simple miscellany of writing, some examples of which follow, we will realise that we are talking about a great variety of forms which express a real diversity of experience.

## *Storytelling*

At night time, about say eight o'clock in the night  
everybody close in. Especially if you live in the country.  
If you are in the country, the country part is always  
dark.

So, by eight o'clock everybody is in. So you and your  
family sit down and sometimes your mother sit down  
and she start to tell you lots of stories.

So we always say, "Mummy, stop! Don't say it yet,  
until we go and get ready." We go out side and we wash  
our feet and face and hands and come in and sit down.

We take up everything that we're supposed to take in,  
so that we don't have to go back there while she's telling  
us the story. Because we always afraid, you know.

Deadly scared of some of them scary stories.

—M.C., from 'Milk River'

*A Way Out*

It was late at night  
when I realised

I should have left a note for the milkman  
for two loaves for the children's dinners  
the next day at school.

The trouble was

I could not spell loaves,  
and as my husband was asleep

I had to write the note on my own.

After four attempts  
it went as follows.

"Milkman. Can you leave me a cut loaf. Thank you.

P.S. Make that two."

—*Write First Time*

*English literature - GCE*

Two dozen pupils

Dissect the set texts

Relentless hands

Ripping apart the delicate flowers

Petal by petal

To learn

How to understand beauty

—*Savitri Hensman, from 'Hackney Writers' Workshop'*

*The prisoner's tale*

By the end of that week he was snarling and splitting bullets. When he got home after that last shift, his wife wasn't home. He wasn't unduly worried, perhaps she was shopping or visiting relatives. It was Saturday so he backed a few horses and went for a drink. He went to the prison officers social club as the nasty screws can only drink with their own kind for fear of reprisals from ex-cons. He arrived home four that afternoon, the worse for drink. In fact, stoned out of his crust. His wife wasn't there. He was more than a little annoyed. He stormed through the house shouting her name and banging doors. It still didn't dawn on him that she was gone. He fell into sodden sleep. He awoke at four that morning cold and aching

in every joint, he realised then that she had gone. He checked all the wardrobes and confirmed his fears. He went to bed with a troubled mind. Sunday morning he felt terrible, nothing had changed but he didn't dwell on for too long, he was back on the day shift. All the way to work he was blind to all but his problem, never once in his reverie did he consider that he might be wrong.

On the top landing of the jail there is a gothic arch which is vaguely reminiscent of a cathedral. Oblong stood there steely eyed looking nothing like a Bishop. You can bet your life that a man like that, wearing steel toe cap boots in the mood he was in would have to kick something, and Joey's cell was on that landing. He was the catalyst without ever knowing why. Joey was really pissed off. His woman had sent him a 'Dear John' she had said she could wait no longer, and was going to London to live with somebody else. A man who had told her he could be a loving father to Joe's son. Joe was sick with rage. He paced his cell in silence breathing heavily through flared nostrils, his mind afire with violence and hatred.

Tea-time the bell's danger echoed through the lofty prison wing, woke the sleepers and grated on raw stripped nerve ends.

Joe didn't want any food, he didn't have the stomach for it, McKenna, his cell mate was worried. He didn't know what was wrong with Joe, but as a veteran convict he could easily guess. He left Joe in the cell and went for his food. All the time he stood in the food queue he was thinking about Joey's reaction to the letter he received, how he'd paced up and down constantly, and he'd heard the occasional sob catch in his throat. McKenna knew it to be an explosive situation and, handy though he was in a fight, he was really scared of Joe. He recognised the berserker's rage in Joe's demeanour. A thing seldom seen but never forgotten. He knew he'd have to talk it over with Joe before things got out of hand. He also knew he'd have to take care because Joe might take exception to meddling of any description, and may even take McKenna's head off. He found himself at his cell surging with adrenalin supercharged with fear.

The food was the same slop they had eaten the previous Sunday and had been every preceding Sunday by thousands of men for the past ninety years with barely any variation at all, but McKenna didn't complain, he ate it all without tasting any, all the while he ate he watched Joe, who was sat on his bunk with his head in his hands, out of the corner of his eye. His 'meal' finished, he rolled a cigarette and held his tin out to Joe, who didn't notice until he tapped it lightly on the iron bed head. He took it without a

word and rolled up mechanically whilst looking straight ahead.

McKenna spoke, 'D'ya wanna talk about it Joe?'

Joe looked up startled, as if he'd thought himself alone. 'Talk about what?' McKenna was wired through with agitation;

'Whatever it is that's bugging ya.' Joe turned to face the wall again.

There was a sigh of apathy in his voice, 'No, I don't wanna talk about it.'

'Well I just thought maybe I could help you.'

Joe turned to look at him, and there was a definite breaking point in his voice. 'Unless ya got the key to that fuckin' gate out there you can't help me.' McKenna just nodded, he knew he could take it no further, so he lay on his bed and read his book.

Exactly one hour after tea, Oblong began unlocking for slop out. He had a go at just about everybody he could, with the exception of Billy Markham (who was known as the animal, and wouldn't think twice about throwing a screw off the top landing) and then he came to Joe's cell.

'Slop out, leave your tea trays by the door.'

Joe didn't hear him, he was still on his back with his face in his hands.

'Hey! Black Beauty! slop out.' There was a savage stinging taunt in his voice which went completely unnoticed by Joe. Seeing his words had no effect he raised his voice, 'Shape yourself you stupid black bastard!' Joe couldn't fail to hear that. He looked up at Oblong as though he'd noticed something nasty stuck to his shoe, but said nothing, picked up his pot and took it to the ablutions. On his return he was surprised to find Oblong still there.

'Where's your tea-tray, Sambo? You haven't ate it have you?' There was a savage tone to his voice. McKenna knew it was going to go off, when you've seen it as often as he you learned to read all the signs. The air was heavy with static charged tension. Joe squared up to Oblong, he'd had enough.

'I didn't get no tea. It's fuckin' shit anyway.'

'What did you say, nigger?'

'I said it's fuckin' shit anyway, white trash!'

Oblong went quite hysterical shouting, 'What did you call me?' and tried to push Joe into his cell, he'd have stood more chance than a brick wall. Then Joe hit him. His fist didn't move more than six inches, Oblong went sprawling against the hand-rail and nearly over it. He rushed Joe then flailing like a windmill. Joe give him a couple of buffeting blows that started blood flowing and constellations behind his eyes. He knew he



had no chance at hand to hand. Backing away he drew his truncheon, an eighteen inch penis of black ebony. The first blow glanced off Joe's skull and smashed his right ear. Joe was still standing. More in fear than hatred, Oblong dealt repeated blows to Joe's head until Joe went down, his head was red ruin. He was free from all his troubles then. Oblong stood there, gasping like a steam engine. The other screws came running up then, and knelt down checking Joey's pulse etc.

Oblong was hysterical. 'Look what the bastard did to me!' His voice was a high pitched whine. 'Just look what he did.' He was pointing to one of several bruises, and the blood on his shirt front. McKenna looked at him with a mixture of pity and contempt. He walked one step to the table and picked up the crumpled letter. But he'd seen it all before. He shook his head sadly. Yes, he'd seen it so many times that it ceased to make sense. Poor Joey.

He was still alive, just a little scrambled upstairs, forgot his name sometimes, things like that, but he'd be released eventually to play a useful part in society. Oblong was suspended on full pay for three months until the board, formed by prison commissioners to investigate those who administer to the prison, concluded that 'the officer used justifiable means to subdue a violent prisoner.'

—Sammy Tierney, *Commonword*

### *Definitions of a cell*

a small room, as in a prison  
or monastery; a small cavity;  
the simplest unit in the structure  
of living matter; a division  
of a voltaic or galvanic battery;  
a small room, as in a prison,  
where the simplest units in the  
structures of a Mr. J. Kelly and  
a Mr. L. Towers were murdered.

—Nick Ripley, *Commonword*

*A kind of socialism*

The men didn't give their wives all their wages either. They used to have what they called 'keepy back', money which they used to hide from their wives. Men used to get up to some amazing tricks to hide the money. Men coming home from the pit would have to bath, take their clothes off and keep half a gold sovereign in their hand. They'd wash themselves with their hand in a fist. They'd hide them in their carbide lamps, all sorts of things. There'd be hell to pay when woman found out in these villages, you weren't a man if you didn't have some 'keepy back'.

—George Alsop in *'Changing Times'*

*No escape, 1979*

1920's Media: These burns and woods and we, like solid rocks  
 can easily withstand the thunderclap,  
 can easily survive the frantic shocks  
 of transient mobs. That life-giving sap  
 ancient vintage dies then thrives again,  
 and again fed by faith in kings.  
 As sure as warmth and sunshine follow rain  
 the people of this land accept these things.  
 Yet, mercy is the hallmark of such strength  
 those who erred will not feel vengeance done;  
 that we shall never go to such a length  
 is certain as our empire greets the sun.

Memory: But it was never like that...  
 I am on a train heading south and watch  
 the telephone wires race towards the ground  
 to be swept up by the oncoming poles always  
 oncoming  
 In the other track is trough of water, mile on mile  
 Uncle Will explains in a broad Bedlington Brogue  
 the engine lets its gob down, scoops up water,  
 inhaling food.  
 Men carry distemper to London, 200 miles.  
 We were to be the Kenties now,  
 the erring, nudged off the doorstep  
 by the benevolence of northern owners.

Echo:           The benevolence of northern owners  
                  is in a blacklist, which you may think grows  
                  inside a man's head like some parasite.  
                  Or, do you think it's something deep and stagnant  
                  like a dull pool that only comes to life  
                  when poked or stirred? It's nothing of the like  
                  that can be labelled rancour or revenge.  
                  Tis something sharp and clinical cool,  
                  incisive, decisive, always ready:  
                  a simple list of names for reference  
                  with which the keen eyed gaffer prosecutes,  
                  robbing a man of heritage and roots.

Memory:       At Victoria in the rain my father laughed:  
                  This is the railway of the Sunny South Sam!

—Dennis Lawther in *'But The World Goes On The Same: Changing Times In  
Durham Pit Villages'*

## *Under Oars*

Here is an account of one night's work with a drunken man. I was sent to the Victoria dock to be second hand on a barge laden with seventy tons of wheat to French's Mill at Bow Bridge. This meant going up the River Lea, or as it is termed, Bow Creek, which is tidal, the entrance being just above Victoria Dock....

We are nearing Westminster Bridge and both of us are aft keeping her straight, as the tendency is for the craft to come broadside to a wind. There is good way on her so pointing her to the centre of number four arch we take the middle. Attention of the lad was called to the cruel looking buttress here, edges like knives, shapes similar to a ship's ram; the lower the tide the more pronounced ram for awkward or unlucky people. A bundle of straw is hanging suspended in the centre of this arch. I explain this is a signal that repairs are being done at this spot to the bridge. When under the arch I gaze up into the staging; there is a painter pausing in his work looking down at our barge shooting through. Cupping both hands I yell so that the echoes ring (most bridges will produce an echo): 'What stinks worse than a painter?' A reply was expected, but not the reply, 'A dirty little barge boy!' He won. Here was I, in charge, with a new

apprentice, patent to all observers, being actually considered by another workman a dirty little boy. I suffered from an inferiority complex for the next five minutes.

To regain my spirits I demonstrated to the lad how an oar should be handled. He is shown how to carry this from end to end of the craft, blade in water, speedily and safely, and how to throw it 'for'ard' for steering. It is essential for this to be smartly and correctly accomplished. An oar can easily take charges of its owner, especially when the craft has a good headway going through the water, such as when entering slack water from the tideway, similar in fact to a novice in a row boat 'catching a crab'. The 'feel' of how to handle an oar, in this case 28 feet long, comes by practice. A real smart operation is to shift the oar from the rowing tack of crutch to the opposite side in one movement around the bow. This is done by walking smartly 'forward' with the oar, blade tilted, causing the blade to be parallel with the handle, then placing the point of balance on the bitt head or fore post, weighing down on the handle, and with a semi-circular movement - hands, arms and feet working in unison - the oar is flung say from port side to starboard. This may appear a lot of words, but I can assure anyone who may be interested in river work that these essentials formed an important item of 'under oar' work.

—Harry Harris, from 'Under Oars'

### *In a hard winter*

*'A low level of heating allowance should be incorporated in the basic scale rates, and heavy heating costs should be met by the SBC only in "extreme rare cases", - From Social Assistance: a review of the supplementary benefit scheme in Great Britain (Department of Health and Social Security)*

It costs money to be old  
 Lucky he who has trousers without holes  
 Lucky he who goes to bed  
 Having fed

Soon, oh soon  
 They'll have measured our life,  
 Crumbled in a crematorium's iron spoon  
 But before this consummation  
 Sons and daughters of this wealthy nation

Have to measure their untreasured life in hypotherms  
Of no-gas, no-paraffin, nor anything that burns -  
    It costs money to be old  
    It costs money not to die of cold

Shall I dare, oh, shall I dare  
Walking down the 13 storey stair  
Shall I undertake a visit  
Where the lady says: 'What is it?  
'I am busy. You are late.  
'Did you think that North Sea Oil  
'Is for burning in your grate? -  
'or for drink?'

—'Lady, I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed  
'Without drink or any vices  
'Without cakes or buns or ices  
'I am bleeding morning, afternoon and night,  
'From a deep financial crisis'  
—'Really?' flicking through the file with  
    outstretched finger  
Making sure I don't malingering  
(Don't malingering being old)

And here comes the ready, formulated phrase:  
—'Sorry, you will have to wait  
'Anyway, it isn't up to me  
'Why not go and have a cup of tea?' –

I am Lazarus, frozen to be dead  
Stretched across the heatless floor...  
Sorry, mate, I couldn't make the door  
    —*Lotte Moos, from 'Time to Be Bold'*

*Harrassment*

One evening me a com from wok,  
 And a run fe ketch de bus,  
 Two police start fe run me dung,  
 Just fe show how me no have no luck,  
 Oem ketch me and start to mek a fus,  
 Say a long time dem a watch how me,  
 A heng, heng round de shop

Me say me? What? heng round shop?  
 From morning me da a wok,  
 Me only jus stop,  
 An if onoo tink a lie ma a tell,  
 Go an go ask de manager

Oem insisted I was a potential tief,  
 And teck me to de station,  
 Anyway dem sen and call me relations,  
 Wen dem com it was a big relief,  
 Fe se sam one me own color,  
 At least who woulda talk and laugh wid me

An me still lock up in a jail,  
 So till me people dem insist dat  
 Dem go a me wok to get som proof,  
 The police man dem nearly hit the roof,  
 Because dem feel dem was so sure,  
 That it is me dem did have dem eyes on,  
 Boy, I don't know what's rong,  
 With this babylon man,

Dern can't tell one black man from de other one  
 Anyway, when we reach me wok place,  
 Straight away de manager recognise me face,  
 And we go check me card fe se me dis clock out

So me gather strength and say to de coppers,  
 Leggo me onoo don't know wey onoo on about,

You want fe se dem face sa dem a apologise,  
But when me look pon how  
Me nearly face disgrace,  
It mek me want fe kus and fight,  
But wey de need, in a babylon sight,  
If you right you rong,  
And when you rong you double rong

So me a beg onoo teck heed,  
Always have a good aleby,  
Because even though you innocent,  
Someone always a try,  
Fe mek you bid freedom goodbye

—Fred Williams, *'Moving Up'*

### *Knowhow & wisdom*

There is 'knowhow' and there is wisdom,  
these are worlds apart,  
For 'knowhow' lives within the head  
and wisdom in the heart.  
If the trees of science  
are not tended with great care,  
the bitter fruit of intolerance  
will bloom profusely there.  
Planners with great 'knowhow',  
will bulldoze the friendly street  
replacing them with warrens  
Tall towers of concrete.  
Splitting friendly neighbours  
into isolated cells.  
Then bring in the psychiatrists  
to hush the lonely yells.  
They will gird the country lanes  
into an asphalt yoke  
isolating the country  
from the country folk.  
They will mix their noxious lotions  
to further their own ends

polluting all about us  
 with their baneful blends.  
 They have tamed the mighty atom  
 and caged it just in case  
 they need its grim precision  
 to wipe out the human race.  
 The arrogance of 'knowhow'  
 can crush the human heart  
 When knowhow rules compassion  
 wisdom will depart.  
 And the humble individual  
 will fall along the way  
 Mid data and computers  
 If knowhow rules the day.

—*Mary Casey*

## The forms of writing

As varied as the themes themselves are the forms through which writers realise and work on those themes. It is true, of course, that certain forms predominate are even, as in the case of autobiography, taken to be characteristic. Autobiography, particularly as a form of history writing, has generated a certain amount of controversy. Before we look in detail at those issues let us consider the occurrence of other forms within the writing.

### *Why no novels?*

One of the most striking differences today between contemporary worker writers and those of earlier periods is the absence of novels. Arguably there has only been one contemporary novel produced from within the FWWCP, *The Gates*, a fictional account by two East London teenagers of their experiences in a succession of truancy schemes and maladjustment schools, which was published by Centerprise in 1974. This is in marked contrast to the 1930's when the novel was by far the most important means of representing working class life and experience. That era produced such important books as Greenwood's *Love on the Dole*, Walter Brierley's *Means Test Man*, John Somerfield's *Mayday*, Lewis Jones' *Cwmardy* and *We Live* and James Barks' *Major Operation*.



Perhaps this is because people no longer feel so obliged by family and neighbourhood pressures to fictionalise their own experience and are now much happier to relate them directly as autobiography. Clearly many of the earlier novels were based on real experiences, lightly fictionalised, to distance the writer from the events and traumas of the characters and their times.

Most of the 1930's novels were dedicated to a patron, usually a left wing intellectual. One such was John Lehmann, who bore the responsibility of publishing and who, occasionally, encouraged or financially supported the writing. As this system of patronage has now disappeared the difficulties of sustaining creative, imaginative work over the time needed to write a novel militates against them ever getting written. Certain established, successful writers will claim that those who desire to write *will* write and any excuse is merely an excuse for the inability to write. It is hard to believe that these people have ever experienced directly the countless pressures and demands which hamper thought, let alone writing, that are the everyday circumstances of most of the people connected to Federation groups. Tillie Olsen, the American writer, is eloquent upon this subject:

How much it takes to become a writer. Bent (far more common than we assume), circumstances, time, development of craft - but beyond that: How much conviction as to the importance of what one has to say, one's right to say it. And the will, the measureless store of belief in oneself to be able to come to, cleave to, find the form for one's own life comprehensions. Difficult for any male not born into a class that breeds such confidence. Almost impossible for a girl, a woman.

—*Silences* p.256

We have to recognise the sheer difficulty of sustaining a long fiction in brief snatches of writing time. Material conditions profoundly affect the forms which people choose to express their experiences. However, considerations of such mundane matters as money, space and time rarely appear in literary theory.

This is the reason why so many people write poetry within the Federation - despite poetry being regarded as one of the most mystified erudite forms of writing within our culture. The great thing about the poem is that it can be short, can be sometimes actually written, revised and finished within the odd quarter of an hour between washing up the Sunday dishes and starting to get tea, or in a spare half hour when the other people

in the house are watching television or out at the cinema. The kitchen seems to be the favourite place for writing to many people, both women and men.

### *Shush - Mum's Writing*

Sit down be quiet read a book  
Don't you dare to speak or look  
Shush Mum's writing

She's left the dishes in the sink  
All she does is sit and think  
Shush Mum's writing

Nothing for dinner nowt for tea  
And all she ever says to me is  
Shush Mum's writing

But what's all this Mum's wrote a book  
Why not buy one have a look  
No need to shush now we can shout  
And tell all our friends about  
MUM'S WRITING

—Pat Dallimore

The short story or 'slice of life' is also a very popular form amongst writers in Federation groups, although it has been a very unpopular form commercially for years. Clearly people are attracted to it because it allows them to get something down in a limited period of time whereas such restrictions would make the writing of a novel an impossible prospect.

Roger Mills wrote *A Comprehensive Education* in a notebook on the tube train journey to and from work; others we know have written poems sitting at the back of Ward Labour Party meetings, during procedural discussions, or whilst waiting at the doctor's and so on.

Against all odds, writing *does* happen. In what form does this process of making sense take shape? The first and usual way is often via other forms, not necessarily suited to the experiences which are being represented. Understandably, many writers begin with conventional forms,

those which are seen to be literary, what writing should be like. The little tale with a twist in the final sentence is a form which was massively sustained by the *Evening Standard* Short Story competition. It has always been thought that poetry must rhyme, even at the cost of a truth or an appropriateness. Often poetry is regarded as a device to write about nature, even in places where 'nature' is a rare sight indeed. Romance, expressed as love and emotion by women or action and adventures by men, is frequently adapted to this form. But not all influences from the mainstream or from school are necessarily detrimental. Indeed, the most alive and responsive writing is that which incorporates but transforms elements from literary and/or popular writing. Any attempt to establish rigid, essential forms for working class writing would be doomed to failure.

### *Poetry in the street*

The changes in the mainstream literary world during the 1950's and 60's opened up the possibilities in poetry and are probably largely responsible for the ease in which it is now written. Many people have also been encouraged into writing poetry because of its growing popularity in the culture of rock music - with many groups now paying much more attention to the coherence and originality of the lyrics - even to the extent where many record album covers now print the lyrics as pieces of poetry in their own right. Poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson and John Cooper-Clarke have attracted an enormous following amongst young people through their association with reggae and punk music. The contribution of these factors has produced a situation whereby writing poetry is no longer such an esoteric activity. It is one of the most available forms and this is reflected in working class writing, where the lyric poem and the combative ballad are well represented. Such democratisation of the form co-exists with the idea that poetry is the most privileged, the most literary of all writing activities. This same sense of poetry as an elite activity is reinforced at the most symbolic moment of its democratisation: the annual Arts Council sponsored National Poetry Competition. Unlike the very prestigious book awards - the Whitbread, Pulitzer, Booker prizes - in which publishers and/or literary intellectuals submit and then vote on already published work, anyone can enter the National Poetry Competition, provided their poem is within the required length and is accompanied by the fee of, usually, £10. There is normally a phenomenal entry and, just

before the prize is awarded to an already established, published poet, one of the judges is almost bound to comment in tones of outrage that 'anyone thinks they can write a poem'.

Writing is about the adaptation of old forms to create new forms to serve new purposes within representation. One of the most successful ways in which this has is in the move away from poetry as something which is read, privately and silently, to poetry as performance shading into cabaret and drama. It is difficult to write about that process except to say that it happens and that the power and the excitement is as much in the audience as in the performance. Poetry readings, as we've seen earlier, are a very important part of the new social relations being forged around writing. The effect of this on the forms of writing is, simply, that they are often written to be spoken as well as, or instead of, to be read to oneself. This has effects on the rhythms of the writing, particularly as it is often a rhythm of speech with dialect inflections. The staging of a poetry reading or of a performance often leads groups to isolate out and concentrate on the dramatic. In some areas, Liverpool for example, there is a real commitment to the production of plays. In Liverpool this has been helped by the playwriting course run by the University Extension in which potential playwrights work with established authors in the context of real plays, real stages and real performances. Elsewhere, London and Manchester particularly, the growth of new cabaret, where songs, satire, sketches and stand up comic routines have been revived, has provided a new outlet and a new challenge to some working class writers.

### *The autobiographical tradition*

The use of the autobiographical mode has recently generated strenuous debate. Much of the power of the autobiography, as a literary form which is linked to traditions of political resistance, comes from its contrast to the conventions of standard biography. In the hands of working class writers this power comes from its distance from the usual subjects of autobiography. Biographies are usually written about the rich and powerful, they register the worth of an individual's life as well as conferring a sense of importance. The usual authors of autobiographies, often ghost written, are politicians, film and media stars - as in biography, people who are prominent in public life. But the autobiographical form also has a history which links it to working class experience and to political struggle.

Since the 17th century, some non-conformist traditions have encouraged the personal testimony as a prelude to the act of conversion. Individuals were encouraged to describe their past lives at length, their errors and trials, to confess to their previous histories before starting their second life as one of the saved. The tradition also has more directly political antecedents. In many state trials in the 19th century, the usual defence of working class political activists standing trial for illegal or insurrectionary politics was a statement of the harshness and misery of the life that had brought them inescapably to political action. These can be studied in Patricia Hollis's book *Class and Class Conflict in 19th Century England* from which Pilling's defence, for example, is taken:

Gentlemen, I am somewhere about 43 years of age. I was asked last night if I were not 60. But if I had as good usage as others, instead of looking like a man of 60, I should look something like a man of 35... (here follow pages of personal testimony concerning the growth of political awareness)... And now, gentlemen of the jury, you have the case before you; the masters conspired to kill me, and I combined to keep myself alive.

This kind of connection between the political and the deeply personal can also be seen in contemporary autobiography. Sabir Sandali's deeply moving autobiography, *Small Accidents*, written whilst still at school, about his experience as a young Asian in Uganda before his family fled to England, ends with his own reflection on the moment of writing his account.

It's eight o'clock on a typical November evening. I can hear the cars swishing away along the wet roads. It's exactly twenty-one months since my father died. Nothing seems to be happening. My brothers and sisters are downstairs, glued to the television, and here I am, sitting at a table, thinking and scribbling down memories, wondering whether I'll ever be able to remember my past, when I was a young kid of nine, being entered into public school for the first time - the days when I didn't have much to worry about. I remember playing marbles in the sand behind our house. I'm crowded by my friends, excited because I've won.

I remember the epic journey to my secondary school. Be it cold, windy, rainy or sunny, I get my bike ready to start, to once again ride wildly through the fog patch - and then I remember the black, tortured man, hands cut off, the smell of kerosene polluting the fresh morning atmosphere...

Here, as in much Federation writing, the purpose of such writing is a making sense: not a making beautiful or making entertainment but a

making of sense for the self and for others. Some autobiographical writing has had very direct results:

Last week I was sent a copy of the Leeds bulletin 'TUCRIC' (Trades Union & Community Resource Information Centre) which contained a review of my book, a review which gave me great pleasure because the reviewer, evidently a factory worker, said he had started reading it when feeling very depressed, because at the time the workers in his factory were faced with a situation affecting their wages and conditions which he thought they couldn't win. After reading the book he was so stimulated that he was able to think out a new strategy which brought victory for himself and fellow workers. It had made every minute that I had spent writing the book worthwhile, even if it was only for that one instance.

—Ernie Benson, author of *To is Struggle is to Live*, in a letter to another writer

Some people have written their autobiographies quite independently of any local publishing initiative, often not with a view to publication but simply to get down on paper a record of what their lives had been like. Ron Barnes' first book, *A Licence to Live*, was written to be passed on to his daughter. Ernie Benson wrote *To Struggle is to Live* after a number of people had asked him 'Why don't you put it in writing?', after hearing his various anecdotes. Federation groups continue to receive unsolicited autobiographies from people throughout the country who have come across their names and who seek an opinion on the suitability of publication for their work. Unfortunately, not all of these requests can be followed up because the writer lives beyond the publishing constituency of the group. Other people have been prompted to write because of some personal crisis or change of circumstances often linked to love, death or illness. Martha Lang wrote *An Austrian Cockney* during the time she had left over while looking after her invalid husband. Leslie Wilson's *Dobroyed* was written in diaries during a stay at an approved school and then re-worked afterwards into its final form.

And then many others have been encouraged to write about their lives by the local publishing initiative themselves. In most cases this has been as a result of a person's reminiscences being taped and then transcribed. This is then made the basis for subsequent revision, addition, joint or collective editorial working, so that the end product is not simply a transcript but a piece of writing that has developed out of the spoken word. The directness of speech often gives particular strength and accessibility to these books.

Many of the books published by Federation groups were produced in this way, often by literacy students in co-operation with teachers and

other students. So, personal experience, the autobiographical, dominates local publishing activity. Its expression, though, is not just through direct autobiography but also poems and short stories.

The most usual way in which people represent their experience is currently through 'realism', though with recent moves towards playwriting mixed media productions (e.g. music words) this may well be changing. 'Realism' is a loaded term, carrying with it a number of pejorative connotations. For many 'realism' means something unattractive because it is equated with 'kitchen sink drama', with 'downers', bleak pessimism and squalor.

But people who have expressed reservations about 'books which just tell you how bad everything used to be and still is' are often surprised to find that realism can also be about inspiring feats of personal heroism in the face of dreadful handicaps. That it gives an account of much selflessness amongst many people in life, that it is often covering periods of great reflective happiness and is an appreciation the minutiae everyday experience. And when they are read, as they have been in their hundreds of thousands, many people are highly appreciative of the fact that for once common experience is given the dignity and significance which it deserves. Through such books many people are able to find large parts of themselves because they shared the same or a similar environment or experiences.

The detailed autobiography can also function as a 'general autobiography' - one that reflects, details, analyses and critically validates much of what has been lived in common with others.

There has been criticism recently of such local autobiographies by socialists who feel that individual accounts of personal experiences are so subjective and localised that they may in fact militate against a collective, socialist project by confirming the individualism of social experience so central to capitalist and puritan ideology.

The clearest example of this approach is perhaps that adopted by Chris Miller in his review of *QueenSpark* in the *Head and Hand* review of books:

They do not attempt to produce a socialist understanding of their history, and are much more likely to talk about 'working people' rather than 'working class'...one doesn't 'make history' through the writing of autobiographies... consequently they are unable to confront what are basically reactionary ideas. They are silent when a writer's understanding is simply a reflection of bourgeois thinking, and fall into the trap that because it's from the working class then it must be good.



Where such criticism fails for us is in the assumption that everybody knows exactly what socialism is, knows that they want it and knows how to get it. Working people do not cease to be the bundle of contradictory, often bourgeois ideas and feelings, when you start calling them a class and not a people. Of course it is easier to publish only the autobiographies of militant shop stewards to propagate the myth that this represents the truly authentic working class experience. But then that leaves the majority of working people behind with nothing of any value to contribute to the making of socialism, wherever she may take us.

To raise these issues of writing, culture and politics is, evidently, to open a Pandora's box of problems. But it seems unavoidable that we should open that box - having done so we then need to take a look inside.

### The cultural minefield

Every discussion culture that took place among the group involved in this book led us into a minefield. When it came to 'middle-class culture', 'working-class culture', then to the 'State', 'hegemony', 'dominant and subordinate', then on to bar billiards, the relationship between our bank managers and the bourgeois literary tradition...well, the mines began to go off.

But we could not get away from it. Early in our collective work we each went away and wrote a separate paper on what we understood by 'working class culture'. These we found individually helpful and they were also necessary in order to try to clear our heads. But while these papers were useful to us and helped to clarify certain points they still did not feed directly into the text of the book. When it came to the final draft, the person who offered the penultimate text on 'Working Class Culture - What does it mean?' got more flack from the rest of us than any of the other writers who wrote sections for this book. We found it extraordinarily difficult to agree on a consecutive flow of argument: difficult, too, to disagree constructively on the text offered in a way that would fundamentally improve it. Yet we were a group with deep basic agreements, with a lot of shared cultural and political practice.

We were convinced, however, that the problems which 'culture/working-class culture' etc, pointed to were not trivial. We felt that the academic language in which these issues have generally been debated might baffle and annoy many of the people whose work this book is about.



But we also felt that the issues, in themselves, were important enough for us to have to try to clarify them. They are issues which have a real bearing on how we communicate with each other.

We came to the conclusion that we couldn't even in the most general sense, get it right. This was not due to any lack of time, or goodwill. It was the very importance of the topic, the words and phrases themselves as labels for central areas of class conflict, that caused us to go round and round the subject. It would have been easy to be 'objectively correct', to have held all our terms constant, things equal, fact apart from value. We could perhaps have our definitions 'right', but only at the cost of getting everything else wrong. It is all too easy to end up as world champion of a game which only you and your six best friends can play. To be abstract in this area seemed to do violence to what many of us thought of as complex realities. In the end, we did not want to run away with a smoothing iron and flatten our arguments.

Instead we present them as assertions and questions, finished and unfinished propositions.

- Working class and popular culture is not necessarily anti-capitalist. There'll be no prize for mole catchers waiting for the class to surface one day unsullied by capitalism. Such expectations are as unrealistic as the view that produces a nostalgic and pure picture of the working class, a dominated but heroically untainted force. FWWCP books and groups are not really into that kind of super-heroics. Indeed we have produced a lot of material, much to the irritation of some socialists, which makes a nonsense of it.
- Established cultural institutions are not simply one-way conveyor belts for ruling class ideology: nor are working class people and communities blank slates upon which those cultural institutions can, at will, write. Cultural relations are matters of negotiation, contest, struggle. The frontiers shift, bits are bought, incorporated and changed by both sides in the struggle.
- What is special about cultural struggle is that it is never safe from a ruling class point of view. Communication is never 100% safe even when the communicators have very advanced technologies, know exactly what they wish to communicate *and* have a tradition-less, supine audience upon which to play. Hands up those who are signed-up members of the 'masses'! While rulers can successfully, to an extent, use cultural weapons as instruments of domination, to that same extent

they must engage themselves with *some* of the real needs, desires and capacities of the oppressed in such a way as to make it possible to swing the sword back the other way.

- There is some space to work in culturally towards better relations of production and a different society from the one we have now. And rather *now* than ‘after the revolution’. But that space cannot be occupied without interference from outside. It cannot be used effectively for the project of cultural liberation without using many of the forms, technologies, ideas and, yes, even the ‘values’ used outside. To allow the ‘middle-class’ to enclose and exclusively possess values which they profess to adhere to like democracy, art, culture...to let them call such things ‘middle-class’ and then to allow *ourselves* to give these things up by calling them ‘bourgeois democracy’ etc, is to give far too much away and thus to continue to remain ineffectively isolated.

It ain't what you do,  
it's the way that you do it...

Of course, there are differences and bitter conflicts in the cultural field, apart from those over wages or party labels, between working people and the bourgeoisie. But workers have always adapted, and used for their own purposes, literary and other forms designed by others for other purposes. This is a strength, not a weakness. ‘Consumers’ also use and enjoy products in many ways quite foreign to their makers and promoters. There are some areas (meanings and signs are among them) which can never be closed and which historically oppressed people have been amazingly inventive in keeping open.

Much of what we regard in retrospect as working class culture was based on the adaptation of existing bourgeois forms. This is certainly true in the literary field where Chartist writers adopted the novel for their own purposes - a classic literary form - as well as using elaborate verse forms which they had come to know through their reading of established poets like Shelley, Milton and Byron. The many ‘Handel’ societies which flourished in working class communities in the late 19th century, committed to an annual production of ‘The Messiah’, represented an absorption by many working class people of something from the bourgeois

cultural tradition which they particularly wanted. The many choirs and bands associated with specific pits or industrial workplaces should not be defined culturally by the music they played -which was often classical, court and palace in origin - but by the way it was performed within a completely different set of social relationships, which gave the music a quite different social meaning from that intended by its composers.

When we look to the power of the State and its Health Service, Arts Councils etc, we can see them as contested public areas, sites of struggle through which we can push for reforms, defences and partial victories. Of course, the dice are loaded in this game. It will be the dominant groups who will determine the form in which the demands -for trade union rights, for education or health care are to be met. Yes, you can have trade unions, an education system, a health service but these must take certain regulated forms. The power to define and control the form in which these demands are to be met is central - but that does not mean that the contradictions then disappear or that the systems of control work smoothly and without opposition.

### The culture industry: tensions and contradictions

We may find life contradictory, but so do capitalists. They compete with each other, and are not a single united force. Spaces for struggle and subversion do exist. Here we need to be aware of the contradiction between the interests of the individual capitalist to make the maximum profit for himself by producing any commodity, no matter how subversive, for which there is effective demand, and the interests of the capitalist class as a whole to secure the social foundations of capitalism against subversion. Hence the need for state intervention, monopolies commissions, obscenity laws and so on, as part of the attempt to 'police' these contradictions.

Many people on the left talk about 'the media' and the entertainment industry, as if they were highly effective machines driven by their Capitalist Drivers simply to inject 'bourgeois ideology' (or some such Bad Thing) directly into the heads of their (presumably passive and gullible) audience. But people do not read novels or go to movies in order to consume bourgeois ideology. These commodities are consumed because

the individuals concerned think that they will derive pleasure, in some form, from their consumption. Now, it may be that they will be exposed to ideology in the process of getting that pleasure - but who's to say that an audience necessarily takes a programme or a film the way it was intended? What the different people who make up the audience for the TV news get out of it on any given night is likely to be quite different from what the journalists and newscasters thought they were putting into it. Consumers of all kinds of cultural commodities frequently find uses for those commodities which are quite different from those which their makers intended. Those who took the white man's Bible to Africa to civilise the natives could never have foreseen the ways in which black people have taken those biblical stories of oppression and exile and transformed their meaning - so that 'Babylon' now refers to the homelands of those who exported the Bible.

In world of commercial culture profits may get made. But a lot of other cultural processes (not all of them necessarily in with interests of the profiteers) may go on at the same time. This is to say the relation of commercial culture to working class culture is a contradictory and unstable thing, a process of consumption, but also of subversion and transformation - not a process in which a 'dominant ideology' is simply imposed, from the outside, on the working class.

Relations of commercial exploitation also involve, simultaneously the begging, borrowing and modification of different modes of cultural expression. Sometimes this takes the form of hacking out spaces in which to within dominant institutions, sometimes building alternatives, sometimes taking the micky out of prescribed forms. There's a whole tradition of socialist songs based on the of parodying the dominant forms so that they are, as it were, made to speak of their own contradictions - most well known perhaps is Hill's rewrite of a Salvation Army song to produce 'You'll get Pie in The Sky When You Die'. More materially, the 'work to rule' is the most obvious example of the way in which an oppressive system can be made to run in reverse, or to grind to a halt.

### *Working class cultures*

Any notion of working class culture as a thing apart, in its own space, needing to be defended and kept pure from the encroachments of the media is misleading. It just doesn't seem to be useful to think of different cultures (commercial culture, working class culture) as if they occupied

distinct and different social spaces. Cultures have to be seen as embedded in contradictory ways in the same spaces or institutions. This also means that, rather than thinking of some simple opposition - a unified Them versus a unified Us, it may be more useful to think in plurals. We need to think of working class culture not as some unified and monolithic thing, but of the many different varieties and forms of working class culture - the cultures of femininity and masculinity, of work, of youth, of the street, of locality, in short of the many different subcultures that exist within the class.

By posing the question in terms of something called middle class culture, as opposed to something called working class culture, we may be off on the wrong foot, by assuming that a class to be worthy of must possess a unified homogeneous culture all of its own. But once we accept that the historical and contemporary experience of groups within the working class has been immensely varied, we should not be surprised that the cultural forms of expression of those experiences are varied too. There is no one unified working class culture, but rather a plurality of forms as different as those of bowls, reggae and dressmaking.

Similarly, we would like to resist the familiar but simplistic equations that common sense makes between economic categories and cultural traditions. People often speak of middle class culture as if to suggest that bank managers and civil servants, for example, are the natural inheritors of all that is best in the European artistic traditions - as if these people spent their evenings discussing impressionist painting while listening to Chopin.

We cannot assume the existence of some common working class experience and culture - a person is never simply a member of the working class, but always also a member of a particular gender, a particular race, living in a particular locality, etc. These other factors have to be seen as producing important differences in the experience of people who may all be working class in the economic sense, but whose varied experiences are expressed in a range of different cultural forms.

It has to be admitted that working class culture has often been defined in terms of male activity, with the interests of women being of secondary importance. Much contemporary writing by working class people, particularly women, centres on recalling and describing such inequalities and looks forward to ways of breaking down the rigid sex-roles which have been inherited from past social relationships. It also has to be acknowledged that British working class traditions were formed

in the midst of one of the most powerful imperialist empires historically known, and even today colonialist and racist sentiments are still widely expressed amongst working class people as much as in other sectors of the society (see Jeremy Seabrook's book '*What Went Wrong?*', Gollancz, 1978 for more on this).

It is also true that generational conflicts within working class communities are often as powerful as class conflicts. A number of young working class writers have expressed the feeling that their strongest sense of alienation was first felt as an alienation from what they perceived as adult society in general, and this provided them with the anger which they transformed into various kinds of written and spoken expression. In many cases involvement in writers' workshops and local history projects has brought the different generations much closer together in the process of sharing experiences. But, at times, local history projects which have attempted to portray whole communities - *Changing Times* in a Durham pit village, *The Island* in an East London neighbourhood - have disclosed a rupture in the continuity of working class life between the generations. Huw Beynon, in a review of the Centerprise publications referring specifically to the debate about generational differences sparked off by the publication of *Strong Words*, has this to say:

A dialogue started, and at one point a young lad said, 'We can see from the way you older ones talk about your lives that you had something to be proud of. But what have us younger ones got to be proud of? We've got nothing like that'.

In *Working Lives*, Ken Jacobs, a Hackney postman, put it another way:

You hear a lot of stories about the old post office... but you take that with a pinch of salt... The kinds of jobs have altered but so have the way in which they related to other aspects of life.

### *Localities and communities*

It's often assumed that the essence of working class culture is to be found in a set of concerns with locality and with forms of solidarity built up around the labour and trade union movements. The problem is these cultural forms grew up in particular historical circumstances. As these circumstances change, the same cultural forms and institutions take on new and different meanings. Firstly, in the context of post war patterns of migration and settlement, the notion of working class culture being based

on the defence of a particular cultural identity in a given locality can easily slip over into reactionary forms of parochialism and racism. We have to recognise, for instance, that a traditional site of working class solidarity and good humour, such as the Saturday afternoon football crowd, can and in some cases has become a site for the development of the narrowest forms of intolerant racism and machismo.

The organisational forms of the labour and trade union movements grew up around the institution of labour in the factory. But, as economic circumstances change, in the inner cities, factories are being closed down and production is reorganised on outwork principles. In these circumstances, the organisational forms of solidarity and resistance have to change as well. It will not do to elevate one particular historical form of working class culture and organisation to a point where it is seen as the fixed standard, the essence of what working class culture has to be.

One important question for us is that of when, and in what circumstances, do working class people consciously try to 'make culture'? What for, in what forms, and why is writing currently among them? If we approach the question of working class culture this way, then one of the things that becomes immediately apparent is that its particular groups, affected by determinants beyond those simply of class, who are most evident among those consciously 'making culture' in the form of writing. Here we mean, for example, people for whom the momentum their material lives has been severely dislocated - by structural economic changes (Scotland Road and Liverpool 8; Strong Words in the North East); old people in traditional industrial communities threatened by change (East Bowling in Bradford; the People's Autobiography Group in Hackney); migrants who have to redefine themselves in a new life (the Gatehouse project in Manchester; Black Ink in Brixton); women trying to redefine themselves through new forms of consciousness (the Women and Words group in Birmingham: the group from Knowle West estate in Bristol who produced *Shush Mum's Writing*); people uprooted within the country (the Partington Lifetimes project); young people facing possibly permanent unemployment (Fred's People: Our Streets Our Lives from Newcastle). From the variety of circumstances in which these different groups are operating it follows that the cultural forms through which they express their experiences are very different and these forms cannot be understood simply in relation to class structures - they have to be understood in their relations to patriarchy, imperialism and racism.



*Language and culture: bricks and mortar*

So far we've talked about culture - but the principal mode through which culture is expressed is that of language. If we live in the house of culture, then it's built with the bricks and mortar of language. Similarly, we cannot talk about literature without talking about literacy - indeed the separation of these two terms is a very recent historical phenomenon, even if it is a separation we tend to take for granted. To remake these connections is one way to begin to be able to speak about the ways in which literature, (built as it is out of language used in certain particular styles and manners) has been 'elevated' to a position where it is often difficult for working class people to break into the circuit of its meanings.

Language has been for many centuries one of the main forms in which class and cultural differences have been expressed. But these differences inevitably express power relations as well. Language can't be seen merely as a neutral instrument which we all use for the purpose of communication - language is intimately bound up with social power and prestige. So deep are the prejudices about certain kinds of speech in our society that language, and especially speech, is always a contentious issue and at times an explosive one. Certainly it is an area that is carefully 'policed' in the key institutions of cultural transmission - until recently the BBC had someone with the Orwellian title of 'Director of the Spoken Word'.

Indeed, these issues are by no means dead and buried. As recently as March 1981 the BBC prepared a 'guide' for announcers and presenters on their radio networks 'The Spoken Word: A Guide to Preferred Usage', written for them by the chief editor of the Oxford English Dictionaries. The Guide was designed to direct BBC personnel towards 'the best...of educated English, in its standard form'. Indeed, the point is clear:

The form of speech recommended is that of a person brought up in one of the Home Counties, educated at one of the established southern universities, for example, Oxford or Cambridge...

*The proper way to talk*

Speech is intimately connected with locality and class; dialect comes through locality, speech style is inherited through the family and within the neighbourhood peer group, and therefore through class. Speech locates us within the social structure of British society more immediately than any



other kind of personal and social characteristic which we may possess. Powerful evaluative processes are continually at work elevating some registers of speech and subordinating others.

As Raymond Williams has pointed out (in his essay on speech in *The Long Revolution*): 'We can trace the minor relics of class prejudice in the lasting equation of moral qualities with class names - base, villain, boor and churl for the poor; kind, free, gentle, noble for the rich'. These connotations have lasted for 600 years. During that time, a particular definition of 'Standard English' has been developed - a particular definition of the Correct Form of the language, which offers itself, commonsensically, as natural, timeless and inevitable. Now, of course, this Standard can be adapted to meet changing times and circumstances - new words are admitted to the Oxford dictionaries, and the media, in their contemporary 'populist' phrase, are less insistent on a Home Counties Standard English form of speaking than they used to be. However, these are marginal adjustments to a system which is premised on the massive metropolitan dominance of that form of the language that happened to grow up in that part of the country where the court and the early universities happened to be established. This then is a crucial dimension of oppression, through which the Correct Form of the language, directly tied in to the structures of economic and political power in the society, becomes an oppressive standard against which all other regional forms and dialects are judged incorrect or inferior - or, at best, are tolerated as 'quaint'.

This is where language is connected to power relations - in terms of the social processes through which one way of speaking comes to be defined as correct and others as incorrect, and in terms of the social processes through which speakers of non-standard forms of the language are encouraged to internalise a sense of their inferiority.

However, just as there are a number of dimensions of oppression, there are a number of forms of resistance, none of them immediately reducible to the outlines of the class system alone. We live in a society in which different groups (and the same people at different times) are subordinate by virtue of their class, race, gender, age or geographical position. Patriarchy, imperialism and racism come to bear on language as they do on culture - indeed they are embedded in the basic structures of our language. Dale Spender amongst others has argued (in her book *Man Made Language* Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) that many aspects of the

language we speak, right down to the equation of ‘people’ with men in the use of the pronoun ‘he’ when gender is unspecified, are structured along the lines of gender, and that this gives rise to a whole set of particular difficulties for women speaking and writing.

Our language is also structured by a set of racist concepts and categories, right the way down from the equations between black and evil, and between white and purity which stand at the centre of the culture. This is linked to the way in which the destruction of forms of Black English (e.g. the standard double negative in W. Indian English being outlawed as ‘wrong’) is more violent and more systematic than the similar destruction of forms of non-standard English among the white working class. This is so to such an extent that these standards are often internalised by the members of the oppressed groups (so that they come to regard themselves as in some way linguistically inferior). Then again, some black activists argue that it is important for black people to be able to speak the standard forms of the language if they are not to be consigned to the ghetto of educational failure by virtue of their ‘failure’ to master the correct standard.

More sharply, Franz Fanon argues that the first impulse of the black man is ‘to say no to all those who attempt to build a definition of him’. Jean Genet, in his introduction to George Jackson’s *Prison Letters*, takes the point further. He suggests that black writers, striving to express themselves in ‘the language of the master’ caught in a double blind. As Genet puts it ‘It is perhaps a new source of anguish for the black to realise that if he writes a masterpiece it is in his enemy’s language, it is his enemy’s treasury which is enriched by the additional jewel he has carved’ - his only option then is to ‘accept this language, but to corrupt it so skillfully that the white men are caught in his trap.’

Since compulsory education began in Britain in the 1870’s the majority of school children have been criticised for the language that they have been brought up to use at home, and offered an alternative to admire and emulate based on the ‘Received Standard’ - nowadays expressed in the speech of the BBC news-reader.

This perspective has dominated the teaching of English in schools for some fifty years - at least since the publication of the Newbolt Report in 1921. The strength of the condemnation of working class speech inherent in this perspective deserves to be seen at some length.

Speech training must be undertaken from the outset... Teachers of infants sometimes complain that when the children come to school they can scarcely speak at all. They should regard this rather as an advantage... It is emphatically the business of the elementary school to teach all its pupils who either speak a definite dialect or whose speech is disfigured by vulgarisms, to speak standard English, and to speak it clearly... The great difficulty of teachers in elementary schools in many districts is that they have to fight against the powerful influence of evil habits of speech contracted in home and street. The teacher's struggle is thus not with ignorance but with a perverted power...

—*Extract from the 'Newbolt Report on English Teaching'.*

The report dates from 50 years ago, as we've said but, unfortunately, this is a perspective on language which still holds in many schools.

### *Internalising inferiority*

So intensively has this idea of linguistic inferiority been promoted that even today, some millions of people continue to feel embarrassed about their own style of speech when put in contexts outside the familiar world of work and neighbourhood.

One of the main areas of difficulty we meet in Britain is the very complex area of pressure, restraint, anxiety around the different modes of speech which are class linked and which - where there's a whole set of cross pressures between class and region...

...I was asked, it must be now 20 years ago, by a group of active trade unionists to run a class for them on public speaking -elocution- it would have been. And er precisely because these were men er with natural accustomed to taking a social lead, they were actually most of them very fluent men, very intelligent men, but in this very particular complex of British culture with those cross pressures, they had certain worries which you couldn't argue them out of theoretically. You know - er - about what are called mistakes in grammar, about pronunciation as it's said.

—*Raymond Williams in discussion at a CNAA conference, on Communication Studies, 28.11.73.*

Speakers of regional or class dialects are still laughed at, ridiculed or mimicked for their speech, or alternatively have to adopt a hybrid and stilted 'proper' voice when being interviewed on the radio or television, because of the deep snobbery within the mass media with regard to anything other than 'Standard English'. Yet, despite centuries of ridicule and ostracism, it is significant how deeply class and regional accents resist incorporation and are handed on:

TO GET TO THE TOP,

TALK PROPER by *Bryan Silcock*

A person with a 'Standard English' accent is rated as more intelligent than one with a regional accent by sixth-form children and they respond more to him, according to Dr Howard Giles of University College...

Carol Browne is a teacher herself now, but when she arrived from St Kitts her first teachers mistook her dialect hang-ups for stupidity.

—*Observer Magazine*, 16 December 1973.

### *The same words but different meanings...*

When a particular group of people say 'house', 'home', 'dinner', 'tea' or 'supper' the general term contains a specific sense: Homes/ houses of a particular kind, dinners, teas, suppers at certain times of day and with expected sorts of food and drink. These general terms, in other words, involve specific expectations. To put it another way, the general terms derive their meanings from the social contexts in which they are used; this is how people of the same group understand one another and why outsiders often find it difficult. Standard (or 'official') English language and thought does not stand in an abstract relation to these particular contexts though it is claimed that the standard language represents some 'general' interest. In fact the standard language represents a group for whom just such small words like 'house' or 'tea' do have a quite specific content - located in the social backgrounds of a particular section of the society.

Within a working class group (although there will be differences across the counties of the United Kingdom here) we understand what it means to be invited to tea in someone's home. We also would know to expect something different if invited to take tea in, say, the Queen's home or at 10 Downing Street. There is also, quite literally, a world of difference between 'come round for supper' and 'come round for some dinner'. But these simple terms like 'home' and 'tea' also have different meanings *within* the group. Between genders, for example, and between age groups, 'having dinner' means different kinds of task, work, responsibility and commitment/worry.

Now when different groups use what seem the same terms they think and mean differently with them. They also, of course, use different terms - what we have been taught to think of as dialect words or phrases. The complex that we refer to as culture is quite literally all those different systems of thought and expression, intention and understanding. Popular

television serials and series recognise this and know they have to 'get it right' for their working class audiences - they still, of course, very often get it wrong. Popular personalities (like Radio 1 DJs) and politicians also trade on this use of working class terms and figures of speech, but they too get it wrong - like Harold Wilson's statement about people putting their bills under (instead of behind) the clock or ornaments on the mantelpiece, or Tony Blackburn<sup>1</sup> speaking about men going to work with their sandwiches wrapped in newspaper.

These different systems of understanding the world are not abstract; they are as real and material as the differences they represent. The so-called proper speech of the BBC and the proper writing of school textbooks, official forms, scientific explanations and, above all, the Law, all these operate to make us feel stupid, outside what is acceptable, old-fashioned and not quite all there. In this way they continue what most of us felt and cried over at school 'the hard red cross of intelligence' one poet called it, and the instruction to 'do it again, properly'.

'Getting on' at school and society involves paying a very high price, the suppressing of what we feel to be parts of our identity, in favour of writing and speaking and thinking in ways that we may feel are uncomfortable and strange. Thomas Carlyle explained this by a useful analogy, he spoke about language as being like clothing. We often feel the language we have to use does not quite 'fit the facts', does not enable us to feel properly or fully, hems us in, seems to pinch or sag here and there, restricts our movement and so on. The most dramatic example of this is being in a courtroom as a witness or, alas, in the dock! We feel out of place, foolish, not in control. But this is really only the extreme example of how all forms of organised communication minimises what is distinctive about different groups in favour of some general bland language that expresses only the expectations and needs of the middle classes. Again gender experiences cut across all of this, as do age, ethnic, regional and national differences.

So, to sum up, this distinction between a way of life, thought and language that 'fits' and the many that do not, penetrates our innermost sense of ourselves and makes it difficult to express what we feel and experience. Given, as we have discussed already, the domination in our society of the means of expression and communication by particular

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1        Tony Blackburn is a radio DJ. At the time of publication, he had a popular programme on BBC Radio 1 (Editors' Note, 2009).

groups, it is little wonder that most people live in semi-silence until, as Thomas Carlyle also said, their actions speak out loud, in a language most strange. Although there have always been rich and poor (so we are told on good authority), and men have always been the masters of their own houses, these forms of domination like the conquest of one nation by another differ under capitalism from earlier times. We think one particular feature of this difference is the domination of the means of expression, including the attempt to deny different groups their own voice and ways of thought. That is why initiatives by ordinary women and men through organisations like the Federation are actually far more important than even their very significant sales and organisational consequences.

### Repairing the damage

As far as all this contributes to what writers and groups in working class neighbourhoods do, it gives them a double task: to repair damage, and to develop a self-assertive fight back. Many people are convinced that the language they use just won't do for purposes of thought and creation, or indeed for anything on paper. For some this amounts to an inhibition from writing so great that it can only be got over by tape and transcript, or by having their words taken down for them by a listener who believes in their validity. For others, what they are led to produce is the kind of stilted language that comes from dressing up your meaning in a form that you may not practise enough for it to come easily, or that you may not have the confidence to criticise or vary. Federation books aren't free of this kind of stiffness. But freeing writers from these anxieties is an aim both of the direct encounters in groups, and of the growing body of published work.

Where the writers do think and create in the common tongues, worth looking at some instances where the work's statement includes statement about language, either made in so many words or by the writer's working choices. There is dialect writing as such; few people now exploit it across a wide range of tones and subjects, but there is Fred Reed's *Cumen and Gannin*, in which he has chosen to use spelling imitative of the spoken sounds of Northumbrian dialect over a range of satirical, lyric and contemplative verse.

## Seedin

Whaat ends wi' borth and whaat begins wi' endin?  
 Dust t' dust or life t' life ascendin?  
 Wheor mild coos meditate betwixt theor feedin  
 A women wi' a scythe lops thistles seedin.  
 She's not alen. A bairn is in hor womb  
 That tiv hor lusty sweepins will succomb.

There are many more people who less self-consciously maintain the rhythms and turns of thought and expression of a region, most easily identifiable through local uses and slangs but going beyond that. This is all London:

Now why he always worked at night was that it was easier to rook a half-drunk toff at night coming out of the night clubs, than what it was to rook somebody in the daytime, that just wanted a station job done.

—Lil Smith, *'The Good Old Bad Old Days'*, *Centerprise*.

—just as this is all Yorkshire:

My memories of Bowling Tide are mostly of hard work with as much fun pushed in as possible. I worked in Harold Mills' cobblers' hut just on one side of the Tide Field and we were always overfaced with work during Bowling Tide week. With it being holiday week, we'd plenty of working boots to mend and when the Tidefolk came they fetched all theirs as well. They used to save them while they came to Bowling.

—*'Bowling Tidings'*, *East Bowling History Workshop*.

Writers also reflect on local usages, as Jim Wolveridge does in *Ain't it Grand?* and *The Muvver Tongue*, or as an incidental but essential part of explaining a condition of life, like Terence Monaghan in *Hello, are you working?*

You grew up with this complex. You were afraid of things. You were nulled. It means that you were afraid. There's more to it than just being afraid. You were humbled, cowed. There's a tremendous lot of descriptions you can apply to the word 'nulled'. You were nulled because of circumstances. Because of life.

Some writers make the judgement - important in the light of discussions of the range and kind of thought and generalisation that particular forms of language can carry - that standard English is



appropriate for narrative, and the local lingo for dialogue. A.S. Jasper wrote *A Hoxton Childhood* this way, about his childhood before the first world war; and a recent and interesting example is Errol O'Connor's *Jamaica Child* - interesting because part of what it is about is the existence of a culture of riddles, old stories and traditions, and the mixture of warmth and scepticism with which it is received:

I asked Papa why the sun shone in the daytime and the moon at night. He explained it to me, but I never did understand what he was talking about. After some time explaining, somehow he saw the dumb look on my face. So he explained it another way, the way I liked best.

Millions an' millions of 'ears ago, when only de moon an' de sun was about, Papa began, de sun an' de moon use to shine in de daytime togeda, because dey was good, good fren' den. Time go by an' de moon became grumbly an' neva satisfied... anyway, de sun try an' try fe pleas de greedy moon, but de moon still neva satisfi. So one deay de sun start fe quarril wid de moon. Soon dey was fighting...

These writers may be partly concerned to demonstrate that they can use standard language with skill. Toby, the tramp in Bristol Broadside's' book, goes further; he has learned to reproduce the use of high-falutin language to bamboozle and assert power, usually in situations when he is fighting up from under:

The Social Security once suggested to me that I go to Winterbourne Rehabilitation Centre. I said, Gentlemen, I have neither the desire nor inclination to form an alliance with such an establishment, with its misfits who have taken a retrograde step into the morass of moral degradation. It would be tantamount to a social indiscretion. A statement like that would leave them somewhat impervious.

The last instance that should be mentioned is Leslie Wilson's *Dobroyed*, a book whose struggle with English spelling was thought by readers and editors to have produced new connections and combinations of ideas. It represented the writer's perceptions too closely to be re-arranged into the standard forms so was published as it was written. This is a sample:

In the afternoon, I took a strong deslike when sitting in a depressive mood. I watched the time linger on heure after heure until I new I was on my last momment and began a comfersation with mother, and the feelling of a strong urge to stay dident help. I new my strong brake of effort had to be made as my time had allready passt the leaving heure, then holiding my smaller brother I kissed him breafly, then put him



dawn leaving him with just one or two pats on his head. After wishing mother good-by I was soon enough through the door and can say almost on the verge of krying as closing the front door.

This is not a complete catalogue of the relationships between standard and non-standard language that the Federation books demonstrate. Yet it should be enough to make it clear that the writer's relationship with a language which she or he can make free with in more than one form is part of what writing is for, because the exploration of language is partly an exploration of class (or gender or race) position.

This section should also indicate that these books, written as they are by people whose use of English was formed in different places and at different times over 70 or more years, are full of evidence for the debate about language, thought and expression, which we will go on to discuss.

### *Patterns of language: patterns of thought*

There is an intimate connection between the thoughts we think and the words we use. There is also disagreement about what the connection is. Is all thought 'internalised speech', or is it possible to think thoughts without language for them? If not, is language always words? Answers on one side of a postcard only. In any case, it is clear that the range of languages and the range of ideas and beliefs in a particular culture at a particular time, are very closely connected, and that they both differ from those of other cultures and times. Rather than attempting to compare one language with another, we could look at changes in our own, for example, at the developing meanings of words like 'society' and 'moderate'.

The question that arises directly out of this is, are there differences between the range of ideas and beliefs open to people whose thinking has formed in the mould of the different dialects of a language? In other words, if we can say that language use in English relates to class - and we have decided that in spite of the tendency all round to piracy, overlap and perhaps standardization, we may say this - can we also say that the thoughts we can think relate to class? And if so, would this be a statement about the restriction of some thought-and-language forms, or just a statement about different kinds of specialisation?

*Educating the educators?*

On the basis of this general argument about the close connection between forms of language and forms of thought, it has been argued in recent years (most notably in the massively influential work of the educational sociologist, Basil Bernstein) that the familiarity and closeness of working class communities produces an intimate way of speaking which is quite appropriate and suitable for these contexts, but which is inappropriate and unsuitable for the learning process in school. This argument has then been advanced as one of the main reasons why working class children fail to do well in school because they are alienated by the formality and abstraction of the language used there. The next step along this argument has been to suggest that there is some kind of structural impasse between the everyday language of working class speech and the rational, intellectual, impersonal languages of scientific, administrative and abstract thought.

Now there is plenty of evidence to support the notion that there is a discontinuity between working class language(s) and the various scientific and theoretical discourses used in the education system. The problem is to explain how that discontinuity comes about. Is it the result of the inherent limitations of working class people, as some right wing educationalists would argue? Or is it the result of the 'cultural deprivation' which working class children are said to suffer in their pre-school years - before they get the benefits of middle class culture and socialisation in school? Or is this discontinuity (the inability of working class children to enter into the formal discourses of the school successfully) simply another word for the prejudices of middle class teachers and administrators - so that children who don't talk like them are seen as linguistically inferior, and children from different backgrounds to their own are seen as 'culturally deprived'?

The discontinuity between working class language(s) and the various scientific and theoretical discourses which are needed to further our understanding of the world we live in may be most directly explained as a result of the ways in which the educational system itself is, and remains, closed to most working class people. If the children are to be designated 'failures' because they can't connect with the language of the school, then the schools ought also to be designated 'failures' if they can't connect with the forms of thought, language and culture which the children bring with them when they arrive school. But just a question what happens in school:

I talk as a manual labourer who, at the age of 30, decided that he could benefit more from a university education than employed for life in mass production. I was too tired at the day's end for anything else and I couldn't see the work I was doing leading me anywhere. Many men are similarly placed.

I applied for a place of my choice with 2 good levels (Grade A and C)...

Everything in the interview seems rigged to undermine the person's confidence. Unless he makes the 'right' impression, that's it. For one particular course I was interviewed by two gentlemen of the Arts faculty...

The tone of the questioning was gossipy and often callous: How come I had so many children? 3 by the age of 30. What age did I start? etc. I was asked about my father's occupation. He is dead but they were interested in what he did. Then the leading interviewer asked me about my last years at school and my early years at work. Leaving no stone unturned he stopped often, queried what I was saying or what I'd written on the form... Then I was asked about 'stamina' in writing essays. Would I be able to keep abreast of the other students? He didn't seem sure. I told him with my experience that would be easy...

They both went outside the room, to discuss something together. When they returned one had to leave and shook my hand, smiling. The other told me, 'I'll have to say No'. Why? My use of English on the form of application and my faulty grammar, when I spoke as well.

— *Extracts from an article on 'Higher Education and the Working Class' by J.A. Jardine in 'W.E.A. News' February 1982.*

### *Teachers, leaders and theories*

Many of these arguments about the inadequacy of everyday speech in coping with abstract thought and theory have not only been advanced educationalists as explanations of why working class children fail in school, but also by intellectual Marxists as explanations of the increasing distrust which many working people have come to feel about abstractions such as 'Socialism' or 'Marxism'. It may be that one part of an explanation of how this distrust has come about might relate to the reluctance of the Labour party, throughout its history, to take any real interest in encouraging political debate and education within the party itself. Evidently, the emphasis on 'cultural politics' in the last few years - out of which this book arises - has been a result of attempts to revive these areas debate.

But the remaking of a popular socialist culture will not simply happen as a result of people sitting in universities and left publishing houses or socialist conferences producing elegant theories of how and why Capitalism is a Bad Thing. It can't be a question of waiting for the working class (those other people, over there, somewhere) to come and

buy the latest Socialist Book and to be converted, with all the religious overtones of that metaphor. Rather, it has to be a question of producing new forms of political practice in daily life which connect with the felt concerns of the majority of people in all areas of life, not just around questions of wages and votes. It's a question of developing new forms of social relationships around the issues that people care deeply about - and of developing a common socialist language out of those day to day practices and relationships. It's no good having brand new Socialist Solutions dreamed up by the vanguard intellectuals to solve everybody else's problems. The very notion of there being one separate category of Thinkers or Theorists (what does that make everybody else!) is part of the problem, and no part of the solution.

Many of the debates that have gone on over the last few years about language and cultural politics have been conducted in an academic context, and in a dense jargon unfamiliar to many people. This in itself may be a good reason for being suspicious of all this 'theory' and for calling for a return of ordinary language and plain speaking. But this might not be much of an answer. For one thing, we can't simply ditch the theory and go back to some unpolluted 'ordinary language' or 'common sense' - at least, not without ending up back inside the terms of the dominant ideologies, and frameworks of thought we want to oppose. Common sense ('A woman's place is in the home') and ordinary language ('queers, wogs, extremists') are heavily colonised by the dominant culture. We certainly need to disentangle 'theory' from its usual equation with a particular and superior category of theorists, teachers and leaders - a category from which most people are, by definition, excluded. But that simply makes theory (or understanding the principles which govern the problem you're facing, whether that's how to build a wall or a sentence) everybody's business, not something we can do without. Just as there is, in our view, no such thing as 'unskilled' labour - for all human labour involves the brain alongside the hand - there can be no knowledge which does not involve some kind of theory, and no political practice which is not based on some theory about, for instance, how power operates. Correspondingly anybody engaged in 'cultural politics' is necessarily working with some set of theories or ideas, implicit or explicit, about how culture operates.

The debate about class and language generated by Bernstein's work is not of merely academic consequence, but directly affects educational policy and day to day teaching in schools. The work of writers such as

William Labov and Harold Rosen has been of great value in revealing the depth of social prejudices about the 'proper' way to talk and write, and in revealing the power relations behind the notion that only some groups in the society have what can be called 'culture' (Go to the back of the class all you lot without culture.) Their work is important as part of the struggle to demolish the practices through which everybody other than the speakers of the accepted white middle class forms of language are oppressed and 'failed' in the educational system.

As that critical work has developed, many of Bernstein's theories about the inadequacy of working class language have crumbled in the face of evidence of the strength and subtlety of working class black languages. A major part of that struggle has been to give speakers of non-standard dialects and languages the support needed if they are not to be made to feel inadequate by the way in which the education system presently defines and processes them as unintelligent, educationally sub-normal, and so on. But we can't be content simply to celebrate the strength and vitality of these ways of speaking. There are problems with the language that any and all of us habitually use, problems which go back to the ways in which our language structures and limits our ways of thinking - sometimes in very negative ways, ways which we often remain unconscious of. The problem here is deep rooted because our ways of thought and speech are habitualised and 'naturalised' as common sense, obvious, beyond question. It's exactly because of this that we need to question our taken-for-granted modes of language - hence the importance of organising debates and developing new practices around the basic issues of language and writing.

It is certainly true that there is much in our existing language which is severely limiting and distorting to the struggle for a different society. We saw earlier in the Raymond Williams quote how class relationships of 600 years ago are still reflected in the value-laden words in use today.

The feminist movement, by the way it struggled with and against sexism in our language, has played a leading role in bringing to attention the deep prejudices and divisive values widespread in everyday language. Women who are 'birds' or 'tarts' are held in as little esteem by the user of such language as the Irishman who is 'Paddy' or 'Mick', the West Indian who is 'Sambo', the Chinese who is a 'Chinky' or the Asian who is a 'Paki'. Language, as a means of definition is also a means of control. Women who refuse to be called 'birds' or 'tarts' or any one of the numerous, belittling offensive patriarchy names has for them are also

refusing the expectations limitations implied by them. The ‘little woman’ is standing on her own two, strong feet.

Part of struggle for different forms of social, economic cultural relationships involves a linguistic struggle which will *prefigure* the new relationships we seek. And that is why such questions as the words we use when talking to each other and about each other have figured so prominently in the experiences of the individual Federation groups and in the conduct of national Federation business.

One lesson to be drawn from all this is that anyone particular form of ‘English’ will always be partial - however much it may be standardised and institutionalised as the correct form of the language. The argument that certain types of ‘non-standard’ language are not suitable for use in ‘literature’ can then be examined in a new light. Language is the very material of literature. If we transpose the arguments about the devaluing of working class experience, and of the forms of language through which that experience is articulated, in the education system, we should perhaps not be surprised if the literary establishment similarly devalues the representation of those experiences by working class people in their own language and for their own purposes. One way to pursue this argument is to quote from a very academic, but nonetheless useful, formulation of the point:

A ruling class will always try to ensure that everybody says and knows what, in practice, the majority do not and cannot experience, But that dominated class -and this is the dimension that is overlooked – will experience what it appears cannot be said (at least in public discourse). This makes that experience private, but also immoral, infidel and heathen.

—*From an article by Phil Corrigan and Derek Sayer.*

More simply we can say that the questions of who is to speak, who is to be listened to, and what kinds of voices, and ways of writing are to be valued are always questions of political power as much as they are questions about communication, or education, or literature.

# Literary institutions and education

Literature has a privileged status among the arts in Britain: it is something we are known to be good at, we have it so to speak in the bank. English Literature (which artfully subsumes Irish, Welsh and Scottish literature) has been held to embody the best of the humanist traditions that keep the barbarians from the gate. Many of the other arts defer to it by adapting its great works into the other forms: opera, orchestral music, dance, films and television. Yet it is an ancient cry of the artist how obtuse, how satisfied merely to preserve, how unwilling to support new creation, its guardians can be. The banker approach to culture doesn't encourage the granting of overdrafts to today's untried writers.

## *Training the consumers*

This is a struggle that goes on within university literature departments as well outside; there is a constant resistance to the inclusion of modern works to study, and even when this battle is won, it doesn't necessarily help us or other writers, in that university English is a training in reading, not writing, literature. Even socialist and marxist theories of literature formed in the university mould and are predominantly theories of criticism, of texts mainly from the past. This is not to be read as a rejection of the work of dead writers. There is no point in writing off Shakespeare, Blake, Jane Austen or Virginia Woolfe as useless because they come from aristocratic or bourgeois traditions. Writers use whoever they can use in their work, and some writers' struggles and victories are recognisable across centuries of cultural change. But a concentration on literature as tradition, as a mode of cultural consumption, is damaging because it rarely



PLATE I

[illegible]

I slept in the dark from every dismal threat  
 In the silent night  
 O'er my head and floor  
 And I felt delight  
 In the morning I went  
 By every in motion  
 To seek for new joy  
 But found the shadow of grief  
 But I met with scorn  
 So Woodchuck  
 But more the shadow of grief  
 But I met with scorn  
 So Woodchuck  
 But more the shadow of grief  
 But I met with scorn  
 So Woodchuck

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 100. *Calliandra*

Why darkness? ...  
In all they ...  
That were ...  
It is ...

[illegible]

The present history was a the 20th year of the  
A.D. 1800 and the 18th year of the 18th century.

When the voice of chiding is heard on the pane  
And thy presence is in the dale  
Thy <sup>dear</sup> youth see him in my view  
I thy presence there give up for a while  
Then come home my children, he is in your room  
And the doors of earth are  
Thou spring & your day are wasted on play  
And your winter & night in sleep

Not the joys of money matter  
 Than the joys of night  
 And an the young joy of youth  
 Advanced of the light  
 verse

Let age & sickness, silent, ebb  
The usurper on the aged  
But those who burn with vigorous youth  
Pluck patriots before the bill.

1. What is the name of the person who is the author of the book?  
 2. What is the title of the book?  
 3. What is the subject of the book?  
 4. What is the main idea of the book?  
 5. What is the author's purpose in writing the book?  
 6. What is the author's point of view?  
 7. What is the author's tone?  
 8. What is the author's style?  
 9. What is the author's audience?  
 10. What is the author's message?

2. I want to know what you think  
of me. I am very  
in what way have he  
what he has done since the war

3. The first question is a last act  
can't touch the memory. My heart  
that's why they don't open their hearts  
that dead heart is not alive now.

~~from the former at 1000 ft. alt.~~

[illegible]



# Crossing The Waste Land.

no. 24.

Crossing the waste land behind the damp  
streets, ~~of the waste land~~, *October*  
Crossing the waste land in the ~~evening~~  
evening,

I thought of T. S. Eliot, and then of  
Ianto Bach Rees who had never heard of  
T. S. Eliot,

And I saw the dead thistles ~~head~~ *low* to the  
broken tins,

And a jaded pony against the fence *crooked fence*

Of the bleak allotment. And I heard

*A dozen* thirteen deacons grumbling behind the *dirty*  
~~dirty~~

And the night came down like a ragged *flannel*  
shawl

Slowly, slovenly, over the *empty* streets,

And stale ideas lay scattered about the world  
like

Dead horses in a time of famine,

Dead bodies for *smart ambitious local*  
~~delicate~~ boys to gaze on

Before they blossomed out as

Saviours of disillusioned men; *and then*

~~Then~~ The thunder came, and the rains,

*0* ~~the~~ the rains came and great was the *downpour*  
~~the valleys~~, *on the chapels and the collieries*

And bitter the weeping in the ruins *by the river*  
*and the cabbages*

Bitter the laughter in the gloom *of forsaken Goshen,*

And then there was silence, *silence.*

And the elegant contrasts among the  
to the tired business crowd in the Plaza Hotel. *Italian*



Ayeemvi some big silly  
 if come + go, with hill  
 Can you eat it? can you drink it?  
 Can you take it for a walk? to  
 Can you hunt it or can you talk to a snake  
 For an Irish - just don't joke?  
 what  
 about

A poem is sometimes silly  
 It grows like a tree, wily, wily.  
 With its roots stuck in mud  
 And some branches ~~lift~~ <sup>hang</sup> up.  
 Sprouting what? A turtle dove?  
 Ah, more likely just a duck.  
 Quack! A poem is sometimes silly  
 It nears ~~flies~~ <sup>flies</sup> a bird's bill &

A poem is sometimes silly  
~~If you can~~<sup>It's</sup> ~~be like a poem~~ ↗  
 (Two sides and a gap in between)  
 To you dip it, must <sup>be</sup> foot needle  
 tell you clo is make it ~~perfect~~, he  
~~Make it bumpy, make itilly, make it~~  
 Can you cooleddle, can you tease it,  
~~Can you pull~~<sup>but</sup> ~~pull too hard~~  
 Next, ke whole ~~the fatso part~~  
 And you say I am a sucker

A poem is ~~smelly~~ oily  
And ~~it~~ ~~lose~~ ~~heart~~

against whom, Kaupit was <sup>exactly</sup> hundred feet,  
there was

[illegible]

A poem is something silly  
like a poem, two sides to a coin  
to go deep, it must be needle  
All you do is make it frilly  
Can you wobble, can you <sup>up and</sup> trans it  
H, ya pull but pull too hard  
Next to whole thing starts to punkal, ~~over~~  
and it falls apart  
and ya say I am a sucker  
And lox heart - u - u ( - u )

[illegible]

focuses on the question of the *production* of contemporary literature - how the literature of today is getting produced is going to get produced, by whom, in what conditions with what support.

*'The Man of Letters'*

It's hard to say that there is a prevailing theory of how literature is produced: rather there are bits of theories, or rather assumptions, that between them obscure the real processes of enabling and disabling. There is a bit about individual genius of the romantic kind, which corresponds roughly to the educational proposition that exceptional talent will always find a way through, and that there is enough support available for the few whom it matters - to support. (After all, the material resources needed for writing aren't great just a ball point pen and the backs of some old leaflets.) There is the Man of Letters approach (they usually are men), which combines cultured family, early immersion in literature, probably sedentary job, and suitably learned and cultivated companions - an approach which justifies the real existence of networks based on shared life-styles and the ancient universities. There is the mystification of the writer's work - the tray at the door, the wife fending off phone calls, the morning's work discarded except for the one excellent paragraph - but who rates it excellent? How did the writer get there from his or her first rejection slip? Where has the teaching and learning gone on? The models we have for that are solitary study, the relationship with publisher or editor, or the relationship with a chosen mentor among other writers (the Ezra Pound/T S Eliot connection). What we notably don't hear about is learning from, or with, readers. All the myths, including the hard-nosed modern ones about the commissioning of the best-seller, turn us away from the possibility of teaching or learning to write better.

*The skill which cannot be taught?*

In this, literature is unique in this country. Those interested in music at schools, playing, composing, making and mixing, can at least compete for the opportunity to go to a full-time college of music. People who have a particular interest in painting, sculpture or other visual arts, can also compete to go to a full-time art college. The same is true of dance, theatre, film-making, television production and so on. The exception is writing. It still seems to be believed that you can either do it or you can't: very little stands between the critical heights of university English, which

often convince young writers that the sights are set so high that it's no use trying, and the newspaper ad's 'Make this the year you learn to write'. Among the few exceptional institutions committed to the teachability of writing, or at least to the possibility of a writer's sharing some skills, are the Arvon Foundation and schemes like Writers in Schools. The teaching of creative writing is more widely practised in the USA, often to the scorn of British academia; but it would not be hard to argue that this is a contribution to American literature's being more energetic, less elitist, more open to ethnic and minority experience.

And yet literature is organised, there are establishments with the power to damn or to silence or to exclude, without the power to create. This is the old and still justified complaint of other groups as well as worker writers. If we sound stung by the judgements of 'no literary merit', we recognise that we have this in common with many others, just as we recognise that we shouldn't expect to share standards with the literary establishment. The pretence that 'literature will out' whatever the circumstances, acts as a cover for a situation where the 'literary tradition' is in fact readily available only to a few: cultural capital, as well as economic, still moves in restricted circles. It should be easier to confront this from the basis of a view of literature, like other arts, as a mode of cultural production involving formal techniques, learnable processes and styles, and so on. This should make it clearer that we learn different things, recognise different excellence, according to how our learning is shaped and to what ends.

Our project must be aimed, then, both at developing new and more liberating forms of language and culture, and at the development of new and more democratic social relations in which 'literature' is to be produced and consumed. The workshop is a teaching and learning group, evolving with some difficulty to start with, because there are few models for it to build on: what are the ways of helping when you feel a piece of writing could be improved? We should say something here about the teaching of English in schools, as most people have experienced it, and about the relationships that writers and publishing groups have to mainstream education.



## Writing in the margins?

We have said earlier that many of the groups have started as adult classes, or otherwise worked in some relation to educational practices or institutions. Characteristically it has been in marginal sectors of education - in remedial classes, supplementary black schools, WEA<sup>1</sup> classes, adult literacy centres, prison education, pensioners' clubs - that writing and people's history have developed. As oppositional activities we could not perhaps expect them to take most hold in the parts of the education system that have most to do with certificating and validating the recognised body of educational and cultural achievements. But the fact that these developments have captured any space at all reflects turbulences within mainstream educational practice and thought. In particular, there were important changes in the teaching of English in schools from the 1960s on. The kinds of writing encouraged in schools widened beyond the socially obsolete form of the essay, on such titles as *A day in the life of an umbrella* or *Bells* or *Those were the days*. This is too wide a development to be adequately covered, but influential figures included David Holbrook with *English for the Rejected* and Ted Hughes who has been a consistent advocate and encourager of children's poetry. It became easier to argue that children had creative power and important matter to write about before they were filled with vocabulary lists and approved sentiments and literary models by the school - that their own lives and experience and sensibilities could shape valuable writing. The other important strand was the debate about the educational significance of issues of language and class, about which we have already written.

### *They write you off*

But it takes a long time to change what is done in schools, and not everybody wants to. These approaches to English teaching came up against two main opponents: those who held that a literature based on students' language and experience was only all right for those who couldn't aspire to *real* standards, as represented by classic literature; and those who held that the appropriate English was that which fitted people for the (mainly obedient and responsive) reading and writing jobs that ordinary life demands, and that self-expression was a luxury and a diversion. Sometimes it was only with the wholly rejected that other relationships and ways of working could be developed. Vivian

1         WEA stands for Workers' Educational Association, an adult education organisation in the UK (Editors' Note, 2009).

Usherwood, the young black writer whose wonderful poems were first published by Centerprise in 1972, was a 'remedial' pupil - a demeaning status which, ironically, gave him the time and space to think things out for himself and start writing. His poems have sold over 10,000 copies, many to other young people in Hackney; this makes him one of the best-selling poets of the 1970's, not that you would know it if you read the cultural and literary press. It is sad to mention that Vivian died in a house fire during Christmas 1980.

Billy House and Leslie Mildiner, the joint authors of *The Gates*, found some freedom and encouragement to write and act in the maladjusted school they ended up in after years of truancy. Many young black writers have been encouraged to write in settings outside school or through counter-educational initiatives, such as the Talking Blues group which met at Centerprise, or through the workshops run by the Black Ink project in South London. For young black people there is a particular problem about the language they think and write in. Young black writers like Paul George and Bev Shaw, published by Commonplace Workshop of Ealing, are working through some conscious decisions about using West Indian dialects, standard English, or Black British formations which have grown out of the specific experience of second-generation Black residents. These choices, if they represent independence, can't even with the greatest goodwill be wholly incorporated into the school curriculum. But if the struggle in schools has advanced on any of these issues, it is partly because alternative publishing has produced a body of work to widen the range of models and to keep the debate visible.

### *Our own institutions*

Most older people trying to write now haven't had the benefit of new approaches to English in schools. For them to find an educational setting useful at all, it is often necessary to dismantle the boundaries that seal off education from other parts of life and social action. The Centerprise project in London, for example, was set up in 1971 as an independent initiative which hoped to prove that 'the arts, youth and community work, social work and education itself, are not separate entities invariably requiring separate institutions. They are related and inter-dependent'. Much of Centerprise's early publishing work was done in conjunction with Hackney Workers' Educational Association. Much of the material for, and the editorial work on, its books was provided by a local history

class, *A People's Autobiography of Hackney*, and by a writers' workshop, set up after the Federation started, as a piece of direct learning from the Scotland Road and Basement Writers groups. That WEA branch itself was revived after years of non-functioning, as a way of organising a more active and political adult education programme than the highly traditional and non-controversial classes put on year after year by the Adult Education Institute in that area. In using the WEA, people have been responding to, and putting new life into, its traditions of self-organisation, local democracy, and student control of the planning of courses. There have been battles to be won here, for example about the relative merits of academic qualifications, and of local knowledge and informally acquired skill, for the tutor of a class.

The Scotland Road Writers' Workshop came out of a pioneering approach to working class adult education by the Institute of Extension Studies of Liverpool University. The University offered the resources to a group of local people who chose a programme of courses and classes. It is worth mentioning the importance of the decision to appoint to the University's project team someone with the skills to work on writing, as a direct preference to the more predictable radical choice of someone with experience in planning or urban policy. (For further details of the Liverpool experience see the essays by David Evans & M. Yarnit in *Adult Education for a Change*, Hutchinson 1980).

Out of the same set of initiatives has come a 'Second Chance' course that has referred itself deliberately and thoroughly to the situation of working class people, particularly women, as potential students. A local history workshop and a writers' workshop are key parts of this, vital in making it a co-operative rather than a 'taught' course. Several of the Bristol publications, such as *Up Knowle West* and *Bristol as We Remember It*, and also the writers' workshop which produced *Shush, Mum's Writing*, came out of WEA classes. In Southwark, Rochdale, Peckham, Tottenham, Hackney and more recently in Edinburgh, the WEA has played an important role in making education once again a mutual and self-organised project.

## The uses of literacy

One of the fields of work where most has to be done to dismantle the old view of learning that many students bring to their new start, is in

adult literacy. Here, outstandingly, we are working with a group of people who have built into their understanding of themselves the conviction that they are failures in this activity whose importance isn't in their hands to decide, and who often think they must be punished for failure by a repetition of the rigours and humiliations of their last attempt to learn. It's harder for them to base their study on ideas about sharing in learning, or on a perspective that sees not individual failure but a written culture so hostile that they have been inhibited from freely learning its mechanical skills, though when they do start unpicking their experience of education it produces some compelling writing.

### *Way of learning*

I love to meet entrenched people, mostly friends and family, people like myself. The kind who say, 'Don't spare the rod and spoil the child'. And all that shit. Rules are there to be broken, and break them we did and often. School was a prison, breaking out time at 3.45. That's when we could start to live.

The easy way to beat the system is to cheat by shadow learning: listening, and letting it go over your head. I was good at that. Like sitting at the back of the class, looking out of the window, counting cars, eyeing up girls, having a smoke, or a laugh and a joke. If you were different and didn't understand you were a fool. But you only asked once. You never made that same mistake twice, by becoming the laughing stock of the class. If you asked a question you might make waves and cause people to learn something.

Teachers were there to control the class, holding you at bay until the next lesson. So I made sure I stuck it out, till going home time. With entrenched people, you never prove them wrong. It is easier to let them live in their little world. It's not right, but it's easier. And I know I took the easy way out.

—Paul Anthony, from *'Listening Ears'*, Cambridge House/ Blackfriars.

Turning people's speech into reading matter and showing that spoken language can exist as written language represented a crucial advance in method which led us toward publication of student's work.

These developments took place partly because adult literacy is marginal, under-funded and sketchily organised, so that even at the height of the 'literacy campaign' no major resources were put into the creation of



learning materials. It was assumed that the educational publishing market would provide, as it so often is assumed, but it didn't. There was a dead weight of material devised for secondary remedial work, which was soon discarded by most people as transparently irrelevant; but whether we were working from the limited notion of relevance, or from the broader idea that value lies in the greatest possible participation in the creation of the learning material with which you work, the only thing was for students and tutors to do it themselves. It became clear that this was a radical alternative to concepts of functional literacy that not only limited the uses of literacy to those that met bureaucratic requirements, but continued to rule invalid and inadequate the language in which working-class people express, organise and present their lives and understanding.

This way of working had also been encouraged by reports of the work of Paulo Freire in literacy programmes in Brazil. He described not literacy classes but 'culture circles', with the emphasis on mutual education; he saw the professionals' job as being to learn, and then work with, the words that referred to the significant (economically and culturally vital) aspects of people's experience. Through this, both parties to the dialogue learn how people analyse and interpret the world they live in and talk about - in fact, the job for the educator was to show people that they do analyse and interpret the world, and that this is part of their potential power over it.

### *Producing your own materials*

Adult literacy was the first sector of education where the bulk of teaching materials and reading books were autonomously developed by the teachers and students themselves, and distributed nationally through informal and alternative systems. Much of the linking work was done by the group who produced *Write First Time*, a magazine of writing by literacy students, and also a founder member of the Federation. Commercial publishers investigated whether there was a market here for them, but very little was produced - possibly because the scale of the operation was not large enough for their costing systems, and also because they were not close enough to rapidly evolving needs and practices.

But distribution remains a problem for a self-help movement, and here commercial publishers would appear to have a clear advantage. An attempt was made to marry the two systems in a partnership between a national publisher and a literacy centre in Brighton, to produce eight books by Brighton students. Detailed accounts of gains and losses would

be hard to draw up, but the gains were expected to include payment for the writers, high quality photographic work, professional illustrations and the assurance of wide sales. However, this has not been the case. Sales are dependent on a marketing department, and while reasonable, have not exceeded those of the best self-help groups. Much of the photographic work was done by a Brighton photographer as was the overall design and layout. Illustrations were twice rejected by two of the editors, who in the end commissioned their own - and one was local. One of the most interesting lessons learned by the group was how limited the photographic and artistic resources of a major publishing house are. Several of the problems were only resolved because of the close personal involvement of the commercial editor who was in sympathy with the ideas behind the group's insistence on controlling the way the text was presented. Nevertheless one is dealing with a corporation, not an individual, and one sympathetic editor cannot manage the whole operation. The worst mistakes were outside his control.

In the final analysis, eight interesting and attractive student written books were made available to other literacy students. It is difficult to assess whether a small under-funded, overworked literacy scheme like the Friends' Centre would have had the time or energy to do all this without the external stimulus. Little money has been made but neither did those involved have the enormous task of seeking finance. Perhaps the most ironic result was that where there were no production difficulties, writers and editors felt far removed and somewhat alienated from the process. The greater the problems, the more the work was referred back to writer and editor, and though the technical production of these sections was perhaps less perfect, the satisfaction of those involved was far greater.

This particular publishing house did at one time consider issuing further student material, but the sympathetic editor has moved on and it now seems unlikely that more such books will be produced by commercial publishers: one series, it seems, has proved to be all that the market will bear.

However, for those involved at all points in the process, with books merely an episode in a chain of communications, learning and development, there's a different and much less easily satisfied appetite for a great variety of work in a variety of forms. What to the commercial market was the one break-through from below, has been re-absorbed into the thickening foliage that has grown up around it.

It has been essential, for literacy groups as for other groups in the Federation, to learn how to do as much as possible of this work together. Cultural forms and actions till now unaccessible and unrecognised (a meeting to work from talking to writing separately or together; reading over and changing the transcript of a tape; selecting your own and other people's writing for publication; public reading of unpublished or published work) are now among the choices adult students can make.

Our relations to educational establishments and practices mirror our relations to the culture as a whole. We work in margins where we are relatively free from control, but where we often remain insignificant and find it hard to make inroads on the most widely recognised practices. We catch at survivals from the past and re-animate them, borrow from them and pursue the logic of our own developments, hoping out of this to shape something that can assert itself as not of the margin but of the majority, and that can emerge as a substantial culture in its own right.

In the end this brings us, inevitably, to questions of who is to *define* what is 'culture', what is 'good literature' and so on - in short to the questions of the cultural arbiters of our time. In our case the main protagonist in this debate has been the Arts Council of Great Britain.

# The guardians of culture

From the beginning, local publishing projects found a genuine interest in their activities from Regional Arts Associations. The Greater London Arts Association was an early financial supporter of the Centerprise publishing project and has remained so; they have also given active support to the later projects around THAP and Peckham Bookplace. Elsewhere in the country this pattern has been repeated; Southern Arts with QueenSpark, NW Arts with Commonword and Voices, South West Arts with Bristol BroadSides and soon.

## The power to define

At the national level, however, things look very different. The relationship between the Arts Council and the FWWCP is fraught and antagonistic. The battle for recognition and support from this state body has frequently been discussed at Federation meetings. This section explains why that dispute is so crucial.

The struggle over funding and recognition from the Arts Council matters primarily because the development, co-ordination and consolidation of this new movement depends on there being a secure financial basis. The sums of money involved in terms of necessary financial support are relatively small and the question is a valid one of why energy has not been directed towards generating self-sufficiency within the movement, or funding been sought from other sources (effectively the Labour Movement, whose interests surely coincide with those of the Federation itself). If we recognise that the struggle with the Arts Council was never simply about cash we are some way towards an explanation.

The Federation, as an organisation and through the writings of its member groups, proposes a re-definition of literature and a challenge to the organisation of literary culture.

For that challenge to be effective it is not enough for groups and individuals to work solely in their localities with small groups of people. This would eventually leave the Federation as an alternative rather than an opposition to the established forms of organisation of Literature.

The Federation had not set out to 'win' writers or readers from high culture, but neither was it winning them for it. It was not about creating the conditions for the one, real writer to emerge and then recommending him or her for individual grant aid. And it was not about fostering the illusion of participatory community arts which, at its worst, composes the bargain basement of the national culture, ephemeral, gaudy and imitative.

The need to be oppositional rather than alternative is part of a much wider political debate which we can only refer to here, but culture plays an important role in maintaining divisive social relations in existence, for the benefit of the ruling class. 'Culture' as defined by its guardians - the spuriously homogeneous national culture - belongs to that minority. The working class is either ignored or misrepresented in that culture. The world it speaks to is not theirs, and access to that culture of the ruling class is available only to the privileged.

If we look at the organisation of the national literary culture, seeing it not as an abstract idea but as a system of power, ownership, control and profit, we realise the degree to which it is sustained by the labour of the working classes. Literature is made from the taxes of working people, distributed as grant aid to writers, just as surely as it is made through their labour in distribution, print processes, publishing and the manufacture of literature's raw materials, paper, pens and ink.

The form in which a national culture develops is neither arbitrary nor natural. Although a state policy for the arts doesn't mean total control over the production of art, it does decide and affirm priorities which, linked to financial support, tend to determine the form in which a particular art will develop and survive. The state policies for the arts also define what is, and is not, within their brief and whether what is matches their criteria.

It is as much the power of definition as the power to allocate financial resources on the basis of those definitions that the Federation contests with the Arts Council.

## The Arts Council and the FWWCP

There was early support from the ACGB for one particular form of Federation activity: a grant for £2,000 in 1978 towards the publication of the first national anthology of writing from member groups, *Writing*. It was assumed that this was to be the first stage in what was expected to be a developing relationship as the Federation grew bigger and required more administrative support. For the Literature Panel it was clearly intended to be the first and last. By the time the first major funding application was made to the Panel the Federation was a national movement, albeit at an embryonic stage. In 1978, when the application *to contribute* to the funding of a full-time co-ordinator and certain administrative costs was made, there were around 15 groups scattered across the country, some of whom had been active for a considerable period of time.

Both the Gulbenkian Trust and the Arts Council were approached at the same time with an outline of a three year scheme to employ a full-time national co-ordinator, together with administrative and travelling costs, and a smaller amount to pay for members to travel to national meetings. The amount in question was quite modest, about £7,500 per annum for three years. Talks were held at which representatives from Gulbenkian, the Literature Director of the ACGB<sup>1</sup> and members of the Federation were present. Gulbenkian were very keen as they saw the growth of the local publishing movement as a part of the new community initiatives they were keen to support. The Literature Director of the Arts Council was markedly less enthusiastic. Right from the beginning it was obvious that the Arts Council, through their officers, regarded the local publishing and writers' workshop movement as a phenomenon quite unconnected with 'literature' and probably something to do with all that community politics stuff, a lot of ghastrly frothing about on council estates which are certainly not the kind of places to go looking for *literature*.

*'Not good writing... '*

They suggested a meeting, held in March 1979, which was, we were told, almost without precedent. Applicants rarely meet the panel. It was a very hostile occasion indeed. We didn't even realise at the time that it wasn't the Literature Panel we were meeting but the Finance Committee

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<sup>1</sup> ACGB stands for Arts Council of Great Britain, a government body concerned with public funding for the arts. There are now separate Arts Councils for each country in the UK (Editors' Note, 2009).

of the Panel. Amongst the comments made were that such local publications were 'interesting, possibly, from a sociological view', but unfortunately, however interesting these little books might be they were 'not good writing'; that the Federation's emphasis on the working class experience was 'racialist' (sic), and that such quaint little local projects might be deformed and spoilt by national co-ordination. This was followed up with a letter declining to assist the Federation:

There is no doubt in the minds of the Committee that on a community level the work is of sound value and... a new reading public is responding to this situation. Nevertheless... no recommendation for grant-aid from the Literature budget can be forthcoming. The members were in one voice in judging the examples of literature submitted: they considered the whole corpus of little. if any. solid literary merit. and. therefore - sympathetic as they are to the community value of the Federation - cannot feel justified in recommending grant-aid from the Literature allocation of funds. Two members of the Committee also felt strongly that there was little point in organising the groups of the Federation on a national basis: they felt the whole strength of the work lay in its stimulation of local activities and interests, and in binding the people of a certain locality together by virtue of those common interests... After long discussion it was agreed that the only action which might bear fruit is once again to direct your application to the Community Arts Committee of the Council...

Fighting talk indeed. Their decision not to fund the Federation is clarified by Jim McGuigan, a sociologist who was present at the time in the course of researching the Literature Panel's system of grant-aid to writers. His report, when published, had all detailed references to the Federation and its application meticulously deleted. This is what he written about the meeting described above:

After the Federation representatives had left the meeting a lengthy discussion took place between the committee members. Apart from the chairman, the committee was opposed to assisting the Federation. Melvyn Bragg said he was not impressed by the writing but thought the Federation was doing a good job by encouraging working class people to read literature. He offered a compromise solution: an initial grant of £6,000 and after a year appraisal of the continuing work of the Federation before giving more assistance. This was rejected by the rest of the Finance Committee... Charles Osborne explained the views of the Literature Finance Committee to me:

'The kind of writing which they were encouraging into publication didn't really for the most part justify itself on literary grounds... One could see it was useful from a therapeutic point of view, perhaps, and maybe in general social terms, community terms, for people whose writing talents might be quite modest to encourage them to write if it was of use to them, and sometimes a lot of the things were interesting to

people in the immediate vicinity... There wasn't, we thought, a great deal, or indeed very much at all they were producing which was at all sort of justifiable in terms of literary merit which wouldn't get published in the more normal kind of way because it was worth publishing. But we could see there was perhaps a case to be out for them as performing a useful sort of social function. we thought if they were going to get any Arts Council money at all they would be more likely to get it from our Community Arts sort of people.'

The Gulbenkian Foundation, who had been particularly keen to enter into joint funding with the Arts Council, generously went ahead with the first year of the three year funding programme. A full-time worker was appointed. At the same time another letter was written to the Arts Council asking them to consider taking over the second year's funding. This led to an interesting correspondence in which we learnt a great deal about the assumptions concerning literature, culture and politics held by the guardians and paymasters of British cultural development.

### *The glittering prizes*

The next occasion on which it was possible to raise these issues in public came in March 1980 when the Literature Panel called a public forum to discuss the work of the Panel. It was an invitation-only occasion (even their definition of 'public forum' is askew) and the Federation put a lot of hard work into securing three tickets. Though all questions had to be submitted in writing in advance it should have been a lively and controversial occasion. It was neither. The only thing that sparkled was the ornate chandelier suspended in the middle of the plush conference room.

The evening got off to an unpromising start with the embarrassing realisation that hardly any of the members of the Panel itself had managed to turn up to take part in this rare occasion at which their policies could be questioned and discussed. This confirmed the all-pervasive influence of the full-time Literature Director who replied in person to every question. The fact that Literature only gets 1.2% of the Arts Council budget, a percentage which continues to get smaller each year, was unconvincingly explained away as being due to there being no massive loss-making organisations in Literature, unlike Covent Garden for the Music Panel or the National Theatre for Drama. They refused our request to be considered their big loss-making organisation as they had no other. But the Director then went on to rub salt in the wounds of the assembled public by saying



that the Panel *could* get more money, but the fact was that there weren't enough applications of sufficient literary merit to warrant making available extra funds.

The work of the local publishing movement was dismissed gently with the comment that interesting though this writing by taxi-drivers and coloured school-children was, it had failed to convince the Literature Panel members of its eligibility for a grant.

They then went on to announce more major prizes, three new prizes of £7,500 for poetry, fiction, and criticism, with three judges to be paid £2,000 each for assessing the literary merit amongst the entries. Not one women's voice was heard that evening; there was no mention of the major significance of contemporary feminist writing, or of the African, Caribbean and young black British contribution to the energy of post-war literature published in Britain.

As people were leaving, the Federation members were approached by one of the two Literature Panel members who did show up who said how interested he was to learn of the activities of the Federation. He also claimed that he had never seen or even heard of our application. Which confirmed our belief that substantial screening processes are employed before lay members of the Panel actually get a chance to have their say.

Greg Wilkinson of the Commonword Workshop, who attended the meeting, wrote afterwards to Sir Roy Shaw, Secretary General, re-stating the Federation's case:

In answer to your own remarks, the point is not that an occasional taxi-driver or black schoolboy should have a piece picked for the prize-giving, nor that our movement – comprising hundreds of working men and women who write – is mainly concerned with merit awards... What matters is that a lot of writers who have not been educated or mesmerized into a certain literary convention – but whose experience, feeling and imagination is all the more notable for that – must now make do without the support that your Literature budget, and our tax money, could well provide.

How long can we divorce 'literary merit' from the life and people that literature should represent and transform? Can we accept that the great majority of working men and women should rely on those who love and leave them to write on their behalf, while what they write themselves is disregarded? Can we accept that there is just one Literature and set standards for all, and that these should be fixed by a little minority, who, in refining their writing skills to the standards of a relatively leisured class, remove themselves from the life and language of the majority?

We want the chance to develop our own standards, standards possible and intelligible to people who work long, un-intellectual, ill-paid hours; to people whose intelligence cannot be simply highjacked from the circumstances – the scope and the

limitations – they share with the most of the un-Literary public. These circumstances may not favour the codes and constructs of conventional Literature, but they may evoke new forms more fitted to a content that Literature largely ignores (or older forms) that the Literature of the day has overlaid: where would even classical music be today if jazz had not emerged, or sculpture without the ‘primitive’ works ‘discovered’ by people like Epstein: and do we have to go as far as Africa or the Deep South to recognise the limitations of our little, local, and classstandards? Have the greater part of our own people got nothing to offer to a Greater Literature?

As for the Worker Writers’ movement, this is not some therapeutic sideline to be nodded off to Community Arts (and we find it hard to accept the whole notion of a two-tier system, implicit in Community Arts; a sort of jumble sale or bargain basement, where prices and distinctions are slashed, where everything is possible and all mixed up as long as it’s cheap).

### *Amateurs and professionals: gentlemen and players*

The comparison between literature and music is interesting, because music is the other cultural form in which many of the same crass divisions and distinctions as are made about literature are also been used. For, whilst Opera and Symphony Orchestras are given some £13 million a year, the money available for jazz, experimental rock and folk music is negligible. In fact folk music is said by some members of the Music Panel not to count in its terms of reference. The English Folksong and Dance Society is actually funded by the Sports Council! A large part of the case against folk music is that it is largely the province of ‘amateurs’, an argument that has also been used for not funding the Federation, another cultural province of ‘amateurs’. Whilst supporting the rights of professional cultural workers to good living standards and proper working conditions, we do feel that this should not be seen as therefore permanently maintaining the distinction between ‘amateurs’ and ‘professionals’ as in all other areas of our lives. The ‘amateurs’ argument was the one used, interestingly, in reply to the TUC letter supporting the Federation’s case for funds; the ACGB clearly thought that was a good hand to play when dealing with the trade union movement.

### *The wisdom of the impeccable heavenly democrat*

A woman active in the ‘Women and Words’ workshop in Birmingham wrote to the Literature Director criticising the decision not to fund the Federation and questioning the right of the committee to decide on what had ‘insufficient literary merit’ without explaining what their criteria were. The reply illuminated even further the Arts Council’s thinking about writers and reading publics:

It may seem unfair to you that some people are more talented than others, and indeed it is unfair; however, it remains a fact that talent in the arts has not been handed out equally by some impeccable heavenly democrat. You are right to think that the Arts Council views itself as a patron of the arts. This is, indeed, our function. It is important that we do all we can to increase audiences for today's writers, *not that we increase the number of writers*. There are already too many writers chasing too few readers. Although the real writer will always emerge without coaxing, it is not so easy to encourage new readers into existence! (Our italics)

The Arts Council justified its refusal of grant-aid primarily on the basis that the work produced by the member groups was insufficient literary merit'. Were it not for the power which this undefined and undefinable term exerts it would be a laughable response to the varied writings of the worker writer movement and the detailed, well argued case for funding put forward and matched by an impressive array of support from inside and outside the FWWCP.

The charge of 'insufficient literary merit' is clearly the safest and most effective objection to the work of the FWWCP. On the question of funding the FWWCP, the Arts Council is contradictory. The discrepancy between Regional Arts Associations (who have contributed to virtually every member group within the Federation) and the national policy can only partly be explained by the conflicts between regional and national organisation. The nub of the contradiction is that it was an Arts Council grant that enabled *Writing*, the first national anthology of the movement *as a movement*, to be published.

What this contradiction points to is that the charge of 'insufficient literary merit' is far from being the whole story. The Arts Council refuses to discuss what it means by literary merit, nor will they disclose how standards are agreed and their judgements arrived at.

Jim McGuigan is again illuminating on this:

Although criteria of evaluation were not made explicit in the finance committee, members seemed to understand what each other meant when terms like 'merit', 'quality' and 'serious' were used. The concept of 'serious writing' is crucial to the decision making.

Melvyn Bragg, in discussion with Jim McGuigan, had this to say:

I think serious writing is represented by those people who think that they represent it at the time... the Arts Council Literature Panel is full of people who could be said to either be writing or representing serious literature in various ways.

Asked if he considered 'literary merit' to be a definable concept he replied:

I don't think so. I mean you could theorise about it. I'm not inclined to.

The discussion and debate on questions of literary merit, values, standards and quality which took place within the Federation and its member groups as a result of this judgement were, on the whole, a valuable contribution to its work. Attempts to debate the matter with the Arts Council were fruitless from our point of view but perhaps for them it was a successful ploy. People were kept occupied with a question conveniently irrelevant to the real issue. By running the hare of literary merit they made it impossible to turn discussion (where it took place at all) onto the dangerous area of the power of institutions and the control. production and uses of literature.

There are two basic explanations for why the Arts Council will support what it takes to be a one-off collection of *writing* but refuse support to an institutional base for the development of that writing. One lies in the stated policy towards support for literature set out in their charter and subsequent policy documents. The second concerns the composition and mode of operation of the Arts Council itself and the determining effect this has on the interpretation and subsequent implementation of those policies. We will consider each in turn.

### *An empty golden treasury*

Literature claims just over 1% of the total Arts Council budget. Between 1946, when the Arts Council received its Royal Charter, and 1966, when 'A Policy for the Arts' was adopted, there was no formal commitment to literature. This is a testimony not to literature's marginality but to its ability to manage itself. The centrality of 'English' to the school curriculum, the existence of a free public library system and the commercial viability and expansion of publishing rendered state support for literature (as opposed to the minority art of poetry) unnecessary.

When a Literature Panel and a financial budget was established, its role was primarily conceived in terms of grant-aid to individual writers. Despite very cogent arguments to the contrary, aid to already established writers as individuals continues to be the keystone of state policy towards literature.

Some of the most powerful and consistent criticisms of the Arts Council policy towards literature at the time of its formulation were to be found in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement*. The main concern was that in 'its concern with the blooms' at the expense of the 'roots and branches' the Arts Council was neglecting 'the actual basis of our literature' and contributing nothing to its growth and development.

The Arts Council's answer to these criticisms followed what seems to be its standard response to criticism: it ranged from silence to evasion of the issues involved. Despite this, the Literature Panel's involvement in areas other than direct grant-aid to individual writers has increased over the years. There is, however, a clear residual commitment to the individual writer and to the known, rather than emergent, writer at that. When confronted with a movement within literature, even to some extent against literature, Charles Osborne, then Director of the Literature Panel, can only respond in individual terms; a concern with 'the writer' rather than with writing.

### *The writer or the writing?*

The Federation's case has never rested on individuals - as readers or as writers. Its concern has been to develop an institutional form which can accommodate the actual and potential attitudes and relations to writing held by the working class of this country. Furthermore, even as the policy for state support begins to shift from the individual writer to the apparatus of literary culture, it retains an exclusive focus on the literary magazines, small presses, and forms of publishing subsidy which characterise the predominance of the metropolitan white middle classes within the national literary culture.

The change in emphasis in the Arts Council's activities, particularly innovations such as Writers' Tours, Creative Writing Fellowships and Writers in Schools, indicates a shift away from the view of the writer as an isolated individual who writes, to that of the writer as a person who must generate - or have generated for him/her an audience for their work. The emphasis moves from the primary production of literature to the education of the consumer:

We need to do something about the arts, because they are undersubsidised, underpatronised, undervalued and, if I may coin a word, underdistributed.

—ACGB Bulletin March 1980 - Roy Shaw.

The professional, privileged status of the writer is maintained. It is not the *activity of writing* that generates interest in literature, but *the writer*. Ted Hughes, Douglas Dunn and Susan Hill are felt to do the job of encouraging school children's interest in writing far better than an average English teacher, and this reinforces the distinction between writers and people who write which appeared to be breaking down with the adoption of progressive English teaching. The principle informing the Federation's approach to reading and writing, that you are both a producer and a consumer of writing, and that your skills in relation to each are mutually benefitting and intermeshed, is inevitably incomprehensible within this scheme. The producers, who are of necessity few, remain distinct from the consumers, of whom there are never enough.

*There are already too many writers...*

What ensures that the Federation cannot benefit from this policy change is the implicit assumption about who can benefit from this strategy towards the 'consumer'. It is young people, primarily young middle class people within the education system, and mainly in further and higher education who are to benefit; The Federation is composed largely of adults, many of whom received the minimum of formal education. Although at particular points it stands in a close relation to 'education' - through literacy work, through the WEA, through 2nd Chance Adult Education - its aims are not primarily educational. It is not compensatory, it does not seek to impose standard English and conventional literary values, it does not seek to improve people's 'English'. Thus, in relation to the Arts Council, the Federation lacks a primary commitment to educational work, and the people with whom it has (or is likely to have) contact are considered to lack potential for literary excellence as producers or literary competence as readers. Putting money into the Federation would be, in the Arts Council's terms, an investment without return.

It is for this reason that the achievement of generating involvement with reading and writing represented by the sales, publications and readings record of the Federation's member groups can be overlooked in the concern to generate new audiences.

It is important that we do all we can to increase audiences for today's writers, not that we increase the number of writers. There are already too many writers chasing too few readers. Although the real writer will always emerge without coaxing, it is not so easy to encourage new readers into existence.

It would appear that it is not simply readers that are required but a certain kind of reader to complement - indeed to read - the 'real' writers.

We can see how the actual policy guidelines within which the Literature Panel operates are framed in such a way as to marginalise the intentions, work and achievements of the Federation. This marginality is compounded when we consider the composition of the Arts Council Literature Panel and its procedures. This has been discussed by Raymond Williams in an article *The Arts Council* which he wrote after serving as a panel member.

*A little bit of democracy is a good thing*

Raymond Williams's main argument IS that the Arts Council *appears* to be:

An intermediate body, responsibly and accountably disposing of public money and including in itself people with direct current knowledge of the arts and their administration.

In reality, however, the social processes through which it works produce only marginal independence; its budgets and its appointments are the work of government ministers, its decision-taking consensual and co-optive (viz the sacking of Richard Hoggart).

The procedures of the council flow from fundamental assumptions . . . embodied in its mode of appointment and constitution. What begins, from a department of state, as a process of selective and administered consensus, cannot become . . . an open and democratic public body.

Decisions are effectively taken by full-time officers of the Arts Council, not its 'representative' lay members.

They sit...around the council table with lay members. In practice I would say policies are determined by these officers and the panel chairman, in consultation where necessary with the council chairman and the council's senior officers. The... lay council, and even more the lay panels, come through as interested occasional parties, though the consensual mood encourages them to see themselves, and...to be generally seen, as a fully responsible public body.

This lack of democracy and public accountability means that dissent and debate - of whatever kind - are 'managed' rather than harnessed to progress.



The Literature Panel doubtless considers itself to be a rock of stable quality and excellence within the choppy waters of cultural change. Others take a more cynical view of their policies in practice:

A striking feature of the system of Grants to Writers is the interchangeability of roles: grant recipient/sponsor/panel member . . . During their period of service, Panel members are not eligible for assistance. However, grant recipients are not excluded from subsequently becoming Panel members, nor are former Panel members ineligible for grants. Since 1966 sixteen individuals have received grants either before or after serving on the panel. Perhaps this is not surprising. However, it does provide further evidence of the regularised interconnections between grant giver and receiver.

—*Writers and the Arts Council* - Jim McGuigan

Members of the Federation felt particularly slighted on learning that the details of their submission were unknown to many members of the Literature Panel. It would seem, though, that this ignorance of the cases under their consideration is quite usual, particularly when we take into account the advisory nature of the Panel. The real decisions are taken by a Finance Committee.

This account so far seems very depressing. In fact, the Federation won a partial victory over the Arts Council in getting money to fund part-time 'Literature Development Officer'. In addition, the recognition and support from the Gulbenkian Foundation, the contact with the TUC Education Advisory Committee, the favourable coverage by Press and television, and the actual growth of the movement itself all testify to some degree of changing awareness. Although the Federation does have curiosity value for some sections of the media, it became clear through the struggle with the Arts Council that the solid case made by the Federation was recognised and supported by a wide range of institutions and individuals, not of whom are necessarily committed to its aims or the politics it tends to represent. The Arts Council began to look increasingly foolish, and the occasion of the change of chairmanship of the Literature Panel, from Melvyn Bragg to Marganita Laski, provided an opportunity for them to back track as well as to save face.

### *Institutions of labour*

Naturally the Federation will continue to seek financial support from the Literature Panel of the Arts Council, not through any wish to



obtain approval or legitimation from the state, but simply because we feel that, since money has been paid by working people out of their taxes, we have a right to have some of it back for the work we are involved in. Yet we also wish to secure for the Federation and the activities of its members groups, serious financial support from the trade union movement. We do feel that the kind of history-making, autobiography writing and poetry and short story writing practised in Federation groups comes from a background which is also the home of past and present trades unionism. The range of themes explored in people's writings described earlier relates very closely to the constituency and interests of working people. Already some trade unions have shown an interest in this field. The TGWU monthly paper, *The Record*, has devoted its central pages for some years to poetry and short stories written by its members. NUPE<sup>2</sup> districts have on occasion run poetry competitions, the entries to which the Federation magazine, *Voices*, has recently published as a selection. The NUR<sup>3</sup> set what could be a very important precedent, by giving Joe Smythe paid leave to write his poetry collection *The People's Road*. We hope this increasing interest will quite soon lead to firmer links between the trade unions and the Federation.

Another indication of this interest came from the TUC Working Party Report on *The Arts* which acknowledged the new role played by many local publishing groups in working people's lives:

The establishment, in certain areas, of local publishing houses... is very much welcomed by the working party. Local authorities could do a great deal to stimulate writing in their various localities, by encouraging community publications. They should also be conscious that very little creative writing by working class authors has in the past survived and when diaries, reminiscences and essays giving a view of the world as working people see it are discovered, historians value them highly.

These days, of course, it no longer has to be just historians who might gain access to such documents and writings. We have the material means of production for making these available to a wide audience as and when they are written.

We strongly hope then that the TUC Advisory Committee on the Arts, Entertainment and Sports, which was set up as a result of the 1976 Report, will address itself to the arguments in this book and urge both the TUC

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2 National Union of Public Employees (Editors' Note, 2009).

3 National Union of Railwaymen (Editors' Note, 2009).

itself and individual trade unions to support the creative capacities of their members by financially supporting the Federation, member groups and individual writers, in order that the writing and publishing movement can expand even further and create a genuine history and literature of working people in Britain.

We also strongly urge the Labour Party to make the encouragement and financial support of the writers' movement a priority in its policy-making statements and discussions on local government policies for the arts. Its own policy document *The Arts and the People* which came out in 1977, a year after the TUC document, is weak in its awareness of the powerful movement represented by the Federation and is also simply wrong on some of the facts. In the section on bookshops it attributes the development of the community bookshop movement to the Arts Council, when in fact the opposite process was the case. Generous the Arts Council has certainly been to several such bookshops in recent years (bookshops initiated locally and often sustained in their first years by one or two paid workers and hundreds of hours of voluntary help), but it has yet to issue a public policy statement on financial support for bookshops.

### State support, yes, but not municipal literature

We contest both the language and the definitions of the Labour Party document in its characterisation of 'literature as a community art form' and its differentiation between 'amateur' writing and that of professionals, not just as a difference of payment and non-payment but in the status of the writing itself.

The Labour Party is clearly right in its concern for the proper financial remuneration of commercially published writers and its support for the policies of the Writers' Guild, but surely (together with the trade unions) it should examine ways in which working people could obtain paid leave and grants to write. Their suggestion of 'Direct state intervention in the shape of a state publishing house, with regional branches ...' ignores the reality of the situation. Over the past ten years many such regional and local publishing initiatives have been set up and run successfully on a self-organised and co-operative basis. Now, while there may be a place for a non-commercial national publishing house, we feel that local and regional needs can be catered for by initiatives such as already exist within the

Federation - with additional funds being, of course, greatly welcomed.

The arguments here run in parallel with those raised in recent years about the labour movement's best response to unfavourable coverage in the mass media. One line of argument suggests that the problems can be best dealt with by the launching of a new Labour sponsored national daily paper which would provide sympathetic coverage. But against this it can be said that there are already, in different parts of the country, a number of 'alternative' and socialist local papers, and that the best strategy is to support and develop these local initiatives while respecting their autonomy.

A state publishing house, like a sponsored Labour daily or a subsidised national printing resource, might very quickly ossify into a bureaucracy functioning to reproduce a state 'programme' of preconceived 'solutions' and ideas. The first necessity is to support and develop the local projects that already exist, where new voices are telling their own stories, articulating their own demands and desires. It is the development of this process, through which new voices are beginning to be heard, which is the priority. We cannot prejudge what the voices will say, nor expect them to conform to some pre-defined 'correct' perspective, nor can we yet know what might be accepted as solutions to problems only now becoming recognised and defined. But, as the writing, poetry and autobiography develops, what is clear is the vitality and urgency of this movement still in movement as these words are set in print.

# Writer's workshops/ community publishers: List of member groups

The descriptions of the activities of the various groups listed below were compiled on the basis of replies to a list of questions about their work which we sent out to all the groups we knew of. Where no reply was received at the time of going to press we have simply given a brief outline of the groups concerns, or in some cases, simply a contact address.<sup>1</sup>

## **FEDERATION OF WORKER WRITERS AND COMMUNITY PUBLISHERS, 6 Twiss St, Liverpool 8.**

This is the address to contact for more information about the FWWCP and its activities -please enclose a stamped, addressed envelope with all enquiries.

The Federation's first anthology of writing by member groups, *Writing*, is still available for £1.75 (including postage) from FWWCP c/o 76 Carysfort Rd, London, N16.

## **BASEMENT WRITERS, Old Town Hall, Cable St. E1**

A writer's workshop which meets on a weekly basis.

## **BRISTOL BROADSIDES, 110 Cheltenham Rd, Bristol BS65RW 0272-40491**

Bristol BroadSides is a co-operative publishing group which was set up in 1977. We have about 20 members, age range between twenties and sixties and a more or less equal number of women and men. We

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<sup>1</sup> The contact and group information listed here is from the original 1982 publication, and has not been updated to reflect changes (Editors' note, 2009).

have produced eleven publications including *Bristol as We Remember It*, *Shush Mum's Writing*, *Toby*, and *Tears and Joy*. Many of our books have come either from writers' workshops or history groups -which we run in conjunction with the WEA. At present (Jan 82) we have three writers' workshops running in Bristol.

We are given a grant by South West Arts to pay the salary of a full time worker. The production costs and overheads are financed out of sales; with the help of grants from such organisations as Bristol City Council and the Mental Health Foundation - who helped fund *Tears and Joy*.

**CENTERPRISE PUBLISHING PROJECT**, 136 Kingsland High St,  
London E8 01-254-9632

Publishing from Centerprise bookshop/Community centre, in conjunction with Hackney People's Autobiography and Writers' Workshop groups (see below). The project has published over 40 titles since 1973, including poetry, prose and pictures, local history, autobiography and fiction. Write for current list.

**COMMONPLACE WORKSHOP**, 28 Dorset Rd, Ealing, London W5

The workshop has existed since 1975 and has 6 publications to date, the last of which was published in Sept. 1981. Several different writers' groups have met during this time. The current group is all women and meets fortnightly. We are about 10 in number, and range in age from late 20's to 76. The workshop started with the publication of an anthology of poetry written by four young women living in Southall. Later on the first writers' group began to meet. We receive no financial support and fundraise locally by putting on plays, shows, poetry readings, etc.

**COMMONWORD WRITERS' WORKSHOP**, 61 Bloom St,  
Manchester M1 3LY 061-236-2773

Commonword began after an oral history project in the overspill town of Partington. It was decided to start a group not just for autobiography, but for a wide range of working class writers. This began meeting in the centre of Manchester in 1977. After initial funding from Job Creation, we were given grants from the council and the local arts association to employ workers, develop writers' workshops and put out publications.

The group draws in people from all around Manchester, with representatives of all ages and backgrounds. From the start, however,

there've been very few women members. This has been put down to various factors, including the fact that men in groups act very differently to women, and that women felt unable to read out work that was often very personal. At the end of 1979, an all women's group, *Home Truths*, was set up in Stretford Library, to be followed, in 1981, by another women's group (this time a daytime one) in Longsight Neighbourhood Centre. (*Mum's the Word!*) Another group was started in 1981 for children in Stretford, *The Write Crowd*, and we are also involved with Rochdale Writers' Group.

Over the years, we've become more and more ambitious with our publications, and we have our own press. An anthology in 1977, *Coming Up*, was followed by our quarterly magazine, *Write On*. Other publications include poetry by four early Commonword poets (*Commonverse*), and poetry by Joe Smythe and Joan Batchelor (*Come and Get Me, On the Wild Side*). Our most widely read book is probably *Clout!*, in which battered women talk about their lives. *Dobroyed* is an autobiographical novel, written in its own spelling and virtually its own language, about a young boy's life in approved school, and *Home Truths* is an anthology of women's writing. Our most recent publications are *Nothing Bad Said*, the first short story collection to be published by a worker writer group; and *In All Innocence* poems by Stan Preston.

All these groups meet weekly or fortnightly. Most of them began with two or three members, but we now include dozens of writers under the Commonword banner.

**EAST BOWLING HISTORY WORKSHOP**, 75 Brompton Rd, Bradford  
BD4 7JE

**GATEHOUSE PROJECT**, St. Luke's, Sawley Rd. Miles Platting,  
Manchester 10 061-205-9522

The Gatehouse Project has been in existence since November 1977 and is based in north Manchester. The Project's writing and publishing work are all with adults whose initial involvement has come through adult literacy classes. In the last four years it has published 11 books, all of them written or taped by people learning to read and write.

Three writing workshops are meeting regularly at present. These are 'Tip Of My Tongue', a women's writing group meeting weekly at our premises in Miles Platting and with an average attendance of 5-7, a Hulme

writers' workshop which also meets weekly and involves approximately 14 on a TSO Preparatory Course, and an editorial/writing group in south Manchester which meets fortnightly. All these groups are working on collections of writing, soon to be published.

We also run short-term writing workshops of three sessions. We have so far worked with sixty groups, each workshop culminating in the production of a magazine by the group. The three sessions - writing, editing/illustrating and layout - cover the various stages involved in the writing and publishing of ideas, our aim being to de-mystify the process by which words get into print. We hope that having been through the process with us, groups will feel able to go on and produce their own reading material.

The Project is funded by the Inner City Programme and has three workers. Books are fund-raised for individually.

**HACKNEY WRITERS' WORKSHOP**, *c/o Centerprise, 136 Kingsland High Street, London £8*

The workshop was started in 1976 as a WEA class based at Centerprise. Over the last five years some 30 people have been involved in the workshop, and meetings have usually averaged an attendance of 8-10. We have produced three anthologies of work which we collected, discussed, edited and designed and pasted-up ourselves, as a group.

Members have been involved in giving readings in pubs, adult education classes, literacy conferences, in associations with local political and cultural campaigns, and have also given a reading in a prison. The age range has run from 16 to 76, with an equal number of women and of men.

**LIVERPOOL 8 WRITERS' WORKSHOP**, *6 Twiss St, Liverpool 8*

The group, which was formed in 1975 is mixed as between black and white, old and young, and is 2/3 male, 1/3 female. The work produced is mainly about where we are at politically, socially and economically. An occasional love poem or short story (of pure imagination) arises, and is of course welcome. There is a hard core of about 15 members who turn up every week. We have produced two magazines and are getting started on a third. Our interest in performing our work live to any audience that will listen has always been keenly felt. Some say we will perform at the drop of a hat. We have very close links with all the other Liverpool groups.

We have no source of finance, except when we have occasionally

applied to any Trust with a few pounds to spare, and only then when we have needed to produce a magazine. In fact we, like the rest of Liverpool 8, live very much hand to mouth -but we survive: though in the past we have had small amounts of money from Merseyside Community Relations, Partnership and the Liverpool Adult Education Consortium.

**LONDON VOICES POETRY/PROSE WORKSHOP**, 70 Holden Rd, Woodside Park, London N12 7DY

The group originally formed in 1974 in order to help promote the *Voices* magazine which is published in Manchester, and transformed itself into a writers' workshop in 1979. The group comprises 8-12 people, equal as between men and women, people of all ages, and meets monthly. Publications include *There's None Ever Feared* 1978; bi-monthly broadsheets, and an anthology is in preparation. People come to the workshop from all over London. The group is self-financing, although they do now have sponsorship from the Co-op. Members have given poetry readings for CND, cultural festivals, etc.

**NETHERLEY & DISTRICT WRITERS' WORKSHOP**, 38 Glebe Hey, Netherley, Liverpool 27

The group was established in 1978 with 3 women and one child. The child wrote the first poem for our book. We produced this within a few months as the workshop seemed to become instantly popular. People who didn't want to write contributed by having meetings in their homes, or helping design the cover, etc. The workshop now meets weekly, with an average attendance of 6 people. The age range is from 10 to approx. 55, with an equal number of men and women, though in the past it was nearly all women. We are all local people, and have published 3 books, and are in the process of publishing a fourth. We financed our first book by a few members missing a week's rent. The proceeds have paid for the following publications. That is all the finance we have.

We are all people who either live in Netherley or have friends here. We are interested in the writings of working class people and the history of the working class -which we know is not a purely individual characteristic. But we do feel that we are one of the few groups who have started themselves and not been started by a tutor or middle class writer, and who get no financial assistance from anyone. We like that as we can please ourselves what we write and we don't have to answer to anyone.



**OLD SWAN WRITERS' WORKSHOP, 30 Fieldway, Liverpool 15**

The workshop was established in 1979 in Old Swan Technical College as part of the Adult and Community Education programme. The group has a paid tutor/co-ordinator, but we hope eventually to sever our links with the college and meet elsewhere. We meet on each Wednesday evening during term time, and fortnightly in members' houses, during the summer. The average attendance is about 10 people, although members often bring guests with them. There seem to be equal numbers of men and women attending, with an age-range between 17 and 83; young children occasionally bring their work to us too.

To date we have published 3 anthologies of work: *Ring of Words; Swan Song* (1) and *Swan Song* (2). At present we are working on a fourth, more satirical booklet, provisionally titled *Spit It Out*. The first three books were duplicated on college equipment, but our fourth will be printed on an offset-litho machine, belonging to the workshop, and bought with a grant from Merseyside Arts Association.

We are still establishing contacts with the local community mostly through giving readings, word-of-mouth and by printing leaflets for local groups on our printing press. Collectively we represent a wide range of interests: drama, CND, feminism, 'Free Radio', and local history, to name but a few.

**PECKHAM PUBLISHING PROJECT, The Bookplace, 13 Peckham High St. London SE15 01-701-1757**

The Peckham Publishing Project started in 1977. It aims to produce books by and for people in Southwark as an integral part of work at The Bookplace, Peckham's community bookshop. It is run by the Publishing Group and a full-time Bookplace worker. The group has regular monthly meetings to make decisions. Work sessions on individual books are organised as necessary. The members are local people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and occupations and there are close ties with the Peckham Writers. Peckham People's History and The Bookplace Education Project. To March '82, twelve books have been published, with particular emphasis on writing by women, school students, black people and old people. The project is non-profit-making and aims to be financially self-sufficient. Books are priced as cheaply as possible to cover printing costs and overheads. Writers receive no royalties and retain copyright of their work. Financial support comes from the Greater London Arts

Association and other organisations like Southwark Libraries, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the John Collett Trust, which help with grants or interest-free loans for specific publications. Publishing policy is actively anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-fascist and open to all local people on this basis.

**PECKHAM WRITERS**, *The Bookplace, 13 Peckham High St, London SE15 01-701-1757*

The Peckham Writers began as a group in 1978. They meet every Tuesday evening from 7.30-9.30. Around ten people usually come, women and men, representing a cross-section of multi-cultural Southwark. They are mostly in their twenties or early thirties, though there is a strong policy of keeping the group open to all. They have published three anthologies of members' work, including *Person to Person* in 1982. There are also periodical newsletters. The Writers have good relations with the Peckham Publishing Project, sharing material, publishing skills and decision-making. The Writers have a small publishing grant from the Publishing Project for their own publications. Recently they have begun to go into schools to read poems and stories, as well as appearing at local and FWWCP events.

**PEOPLE'S PUBLICATIONS**, *34 Fenham Rd, Newcastle on Tyne NE4 5PB 09632 761351*

**QUEENSPARK BOOKS**, *13 West Drive, Brighton, Sussex 0273 682855*

A community newspaper group that moved - via local history features - into books.

**SCOTLAND ROAD WRITERS' WORKSHOP**, *113 Byrom Street, Liverpool 3*

A working class Liverpool group at the Vauxhall Community Centre. The first known writers' workshop the 70's revival, this was formed in 1972.

**SE1 PEOPLE'S HISTORY GROUP**, *10 Brief St, London SE 5 9RD 01-274-4617*

SE1 People's History Group was formed in January 1979; in the April it became a WEA class. It meets regularly and has an average attendance

of about ten with an age range spanning thirty to eighty comprising slightly more women than men.

Besides meeting as a class the convenor is paid for a couple of hours outreach work every week by North Lambeth and North Southwark Community Education Project. This Project has also help fund the Group's three publications to date.

**STEPNEY BOOKS**, *19 Tomlins Grove, London 3E 01-790-6420*

A community publishing group.

**TOLLCROSS WRITERS' WORKSHOP**, *Riddle's Court, 322 Lawnmarket, Edinburgh EH1 2PG 031-226-3456*

The group was formed in May 1980 with the involvement of WEA Industrial Brunch Tutor Organiser, and meets fortnightly. Its membership is 25 in total, and attendance at meetings averages 18 people or so, ranging in age from 15 to 68; 2/3 of the group are male. Publications include *Clockwork* – stories by workshop members, of which the 750 print run has sold out – forthcoming publications *Clockwork 2* and *With Foot in Mouth* by Jacqueline Robertson. Members of the group are drawn from the Tollcross locality, but also from other housing schemes and inner city areas throughout Edinburgh. The group does local public readings in the area and elsewhere. Until recently the workshop no external financial support, but now they have a co-ordinaror who is paid by Lothian Region Community Education Department.

The workshop's concerns are principally with content rather than style, with a strong emphasis on mutual support in writing about difficult personal experiences. Half the members are unemployed and there is an overlap with a WEA Unemployed Worker's Course.

**TOTTENHAM WRITERS' WORKSHOP**, *Drayton Community Centre, Gladesmore Rd, London N15*

The workshop began as a Workers' Educational Association class in Autumn 1979, meeting weekly. It now meets fortnightly, with an average attendance of 6-10, people of widely assorted ages, mostly women. It has published two anthologies, largely self-financed, but with some help for the second one from the Local Arts Council. It meets in a Community Centre and has given public performances there and (more usually) in pubs – sometimes in conjunction with other writers' workshops.

**TOWER HAMLETS WORKER WRITERS' GROUP, 178***Whitechapel Rd, London E1 01-247-0216*

The group formed in late 1978. It meets fortnightly, usually attracting between 8-12 people to the meetings. For a long time the group was mainly male, but is now about equal as between men and women. Age ranges from late teens to middle age. All the members live in Tower Hamlets. Two publications so far: *No Dawn in Poplar* and *Poetry and Prose Calendar 1982*. Both are published by the Tower Hamlets Arts Project (THAP), which also provides funds for the group. The group has read its work at pubs and festivals, and also at TEEF (the yearly The East End Festival) at the Half Moon Theatre.

**VOICES, 61 Bloom Street, Manchester M1 3LY 061-236-2773**

*Voices* contains short stories, poems, autobiography, cartoons, linocuts, photographs, as well as the latest news on working class literatures.

*Voices* started in 1971 as a group of Manchester trade unionists with an interest in literature. The Federation of Worker Writers was formed in 1976 by groups involved in community publishing. In 1980 *Voices* became the Federation's official magazine.

*Voices* is the only regular national publication of working-class writing.

*Voices* sees itself as continuing in the tradition of *The Ragged Trousered Philantropist*, but also reflecting the very different world of today, in which writing by women and black writers has a special place.

*Voices* is also of interest to librarians and teachers of English, Literacy, and General Studies, who may wish to introduce learning materials more closely related to the backgrounds of their students.

*Voices* welcomes subscriptions and mail orders from individuals and libraries.

*Voices* also welcomes standing orders from trade union district and regional committees, Co-op member relations committees and other such organizations.

*Voices* is sold in most alternative and socialist bookshops. Where there is no section for people's history and culture, we sometimes get shelved under poetry. 2.50 for four issues. 75p for single copies including back numbers.

**WOMEN AND WORDS, 137 Newton Rd. Sparkhill, Birmingham 021-733-6063**

Women and Words was started in the belief that many women write – poems, stories, diaries, fragments about our lives – but that this writing is often kept secret and look on with embarrassment by the women who do it. From its beginnings as a WEA class in February 1980 it has developed into a contact point for about forty women writers, of all ages and with various occupations. We meet on Tuesdays, the original group in the evening and a new group in the daytime with a crèche: at a typical meeting there will be about ten women, but the number varies between five and fifteen. We have published an anthology, *Don't Come Looking Here*, and a second is due out in Spring 1982. Both have been made possible by loans from the WEA, but after more than a year during which that body paid tutor fees it has now had to withdraw this support and our funding is now limited to the payment of administrative expenses, partly by the WEA and partly by a local adult education project. We have given several public readings, in pubs, at women's and other festivals, on women's studies courses, and, most enjoyably, with other women's writing groups, particularly Home Truths in Manchester.

**WORD AND ACTION PUBLICATIONS, 23 Beaucroft Lane, Colehill, Wimbourne, Dorset 0202-883197**

Word and Action (Dorset) Ltd was started in 1972 in Dorset as a community theatre and publications cooperative.

We grew out of the nationwide movement in Community Arts which challenged the outdated belief that culture is the property of a highly educated minority, to be found only in the theatres, art centres and museums of our larger cities; or between the glossy covers of an expensively promoted book.

As a result our publications are concerned with developing the particular artistic character of our region.

Word and Action's approach to writing is one of acceptance rather than criticism. We do not aim to provide expert advice for aspiring professional writers, but to encourage ordinary people to write as freely and honestly as possible.

Word and Action (Dorset) Ltd. is a non-profit distributing cooperative subsidised by the Arts Council of Great Britain.

We have published a series of books of local poetry, and are now working on local history and autobiography.

**WRITE FIRST TIME**, *Westbourne Road Centre, Westbourne Rd, Bedford MK40 1JD 0234-64454*

A quarterly newspaper/magazine bringing together writing and recordings by adult 'literacy students' across the country.

### Further Reading

For a full listing of the work available from the various member groups of the FWWCP see the Federation's Publications List 1981/2 – available (price 50p inc. postage) from the FWWCP c/o 10 Brief St, London SE5.

We offer here a short list of other relevant publications.

*Writing*, published by FWWCP, 1978.

*The Politics of Literacy*, (ed) Martin Hoyles. Writers and Readers Publishing Co-op.

*Silences* by Tillie Olsen. Virago.

*Man Made Language* by Dale Spender. RKP.

*Education & the Labour Movement* by Brian Simons. Lawrence & Wishart.

*The Long Revolution* and *The Country & the City* by Raymond Williams. Penguin.

*People's History & Socialist Theory* (ed) Raphael Samuels. RKP.

*In and against the State* London/Edinburgh Weekend Return Group. Pluto.

*The Making of the English Working Class* by E.P. Thompson. Penguin.

*The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist* by Robert Tressell. Panther.

Note: The history of working class writers and readers, from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is still largely unexplored. That work which has been done is often only published in learned journals, or is published only in America, or is out of print. We thought it best only to list books which are actually in print and available fairly easily from bookshops and libraries. No general or comprehensive study of this area has been published since R.D. Altick's *The English Common Reader* (1957), and that excellent book has itself been out of print for years. There is still a long silence to be broken in this particular field of history and literary studies.

# Afterword

The initiative for this book came from the Minority Press Group (now Comedia). It is part of a series dealing with various aspects of cultural production in contemporary British society: newspapers, magazines, community papers, the women's press, radio, television, as well as other of popular communication. Since it has been feature of the books produced within the FWWCP to explain concisely how they came to be by whom and in what ways, we feel that this book should be no exception.

In the autumn of Dave Morley of the MPG approached Ken Worpole, who was treasurer of the FWWCP and one of its founding members, suggesting that the MPG would like to commission and help facilitate the production of such a book. Some twenty people active within the Federation, or who had been involved in some kind of related work, were invited to a meeting to discuss the writing of such a book. The first meeting was held at the Centerprise bookshop and community centre in London on 13th December and such was the enthusiasm for the project that work began immediately, list topics to be covered was drawn up and various people volunteered to produce first drafts of sections on these topics. The meetings were tape-recorded and Dave Morley, on behalf of the MPG, transcribed the tapes to produce minutes of the meetings and acted secretary and convenor for the group.

In the following months different sections of the book were drafted by Stephen Yeo and Maguire (QueenSpark. Brighton); Roger Mills (THAP Community Bookshop. E. London); Rebecca O'Rourke ("Women and Words", Birmingham); Sue Shrapnel (Centerprise and *Write First Time*, E. London). Gerry Gregory, who was unable to attend any of the meetings. sent in a list of themes which he had drawn up based on his extensive reading of Federation books. Philip Corrigan (Institute of Education) also attended meetings and commented on the draft manuscripts. Barbara

Shane, Chairperson of the FWWCP, Mike Kearney, the ex-full-time co-ordinator of the FWWCP and Ken Worpole, the FWWCP, attended the meetings fed in their own involvement in the Federation.

In November of 1980 Ken Worpole produced a first draft the whole book from the various partial drafts. This was sufficiently monolithic to set people to work again to revise all sections so that they should reflect the actual difficulties and problems all of the issues raised. This was done in a six week period over Christmas of 1981. A two day meeting in early January 1982 involved the reading aloud most the new drafts, agreeing amendments and finally leaving the tidying up to the two co-ordinating editors: Dave and Ken Worpole. It was a very time-consuming process, occasionally hot-tempered, but finally brought together with genuine solidarity. It is not a seamless text but then it couldn't be, since it reflects the individual styles and 'truths' number of individual activists, who, whilst certainly in broad political agreement, are bound to reflect differences of detail. (After all, socialism is as much about differences as it is about sameness of things). Neither is it the definitive understanding of the subject some of us dreamed it might. But it is, we hope, a fairly thoughtful understanding movement *in movement* and we hope of use to who read it.

In mid-February 1982 it was handed over to an outside subeditor to tidy up incongruities of style, repetitions and unintended obscurities. From that point on MPG handled the type-setting, printing and publishing and distribution processes. The two people who took responsibility for editing the book were paid for the labour. Everyone else involved in the project worked voluntarily, receiving only travel expenses. The readers, we hope, will now make their contribution. We would welcome feedback from readers - suggestions and criticisms. That way everyone moves on one further... for arguments about culture class and political commitment are not just about where we come from, but very much where we are going to.



# COMEDIA PUBLISHING GROUP

Poland St, London W1

Cornedia Publishing produces books on all aspects of the media including: the press publishing; TV, radio film; and the impact of new communications technology. The Cornedia publishing series is based on contemporary research of relevance to media and communications studies courses, though it is also aimed at general readers, activists and specialists in the field. The series is exceptional because it spans the media from the mainstream and commercial to the oppositional, radical and ephemeral.

## *New titles*

### **No.9. Nukespeak -The media and the bomb**

Edited by Crispen Aubrey

Nukespeak is the official language of nuclear war, presented to us by the military and political propagandists. Nukespeak looks at how and why media coverage of the nuclear issue varies, at examples of censorship, at how the jargon obscures the truth, at how journalists approach the subject and what practical steps are open to disarmament groups to press their case. A useful and controversial intervention in the current debate about whether Britain should give up its bomb.

*Paperback £2.50, Hardback £7.50*

### **No.8. NOT the BBC/IBA-The case for community radio**

by Simon Partridge

The rise of the community politics and media movements has rekindled interest in a new form of local radio. The book describes the existing BBC and IBA structures and makes the case for a much more local democratic and accountable system, where there is far more scope for audience involvement. It describes how the idea came about and examples of how it can work both at home and abroad. Part 2 is a comprehensive guide of how to put the idea into practice.

*Paperback £1.95 Hardback £5.00*

### **No.2. WHERE IS THE OTHER NEWS - The news trade and the radical press**

by Dave Berry, Liz Cooper, Charles Landry

*Paperback £1.75 Hardback £4.50*

### **No. 1. HERE IS THE OTHER NEWS - Challenges to the local commercial press**

by Crispin Aubrey, Charles Landry, Dave Morley

*Paperback £1.75 Hardback £3.50*



# **Afterthoughts:**

The past, present, and future of  
worker writers and community  
publishers



# Historical currents

by Nick Pollard

When *The Republic of Letters* was published in 1982 the home computer or word processor was an expensive accessory beyond the reach of most worker writers. Most of them relied on the pen and the typewriter. Print technologies have become far more accessible and require less labour than the offset litho and messy duplicators used in community presses. Yet the practices of community based writing workshops remain little changed, and core of this text remains relevant to the experience and practice of facilitating people in recording, writing and publishing their own experiences.

## Rolling back the frontiers

None the less, the community publishing and worker writing movement represented by the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP) has seen significant changes. In 1982, when *The Republic of Letters* was first published, the FWWCP was about to lose its Arts Council funding. Many of the groups which made up the FWWCP had developed from oral history projects, Workers Educational Association classes or forms of adult education. The political climate, only two years into a 17 year Conservative party administration, was of regular industrial conflict with many groups of workers embattled in what was to be a systematic and sustained campaign to 'roll back the frontiers of socialism.' And yet, it was to be later under the arts policy of this Conservative administration that the FWWCP was able to regain its funding and use its grass roots strength to build a movement that, while still marginal and small, gained an international membership.

The FWWCP was, of course, a political organisation. It sought to

represent marginalised cultures, specifically the culture of the working classes, but the ideological battles of the 1980s extended that definition until members began to debate whether ‘worker’ itself was an elitist definition since it excluded those without jobs. By the beginning of the miners’ strike in 1984, there were around 3 million unemployed people in the UK, many of whom had been out of work for years.

The numerous left wing parties in the UK had never had much influence on the FWWCP – the majority of the members with party affiliations were members of the Labour or Communist parties – but none of the parties viewed the kind of cultural struggle the FWWCP might represent as significant. Partly this was due to the major conflicts still being played out – the struggle against public services cuts, against privatisation, and of course the miners’ strike itself. These concerned whole sections of the workforce and, in the case of steelworkers and miners, entire communities. It wasn’t that the FWWCP was irrelevant to this, if anything the miners’ strike stimulated large numbers of people to begin writing, forming workshops and making community publications. Some FWWCP member groups were engaged in this activity, but much of it took place as part of the struggle.

The defeat of the miners was catastrophic to working class morale in many areas of the country, and the long lasting effects of the struggle and the economic deprivation that followed it blighted whole communities for generations. With each of the major industrial and public service sectors cowed and reduced, the Labour party realised that it would be unable to regain power unless it adopted some of the reforms of the Thatcher administration. Popular appeal depended on it disposing of some of the more left wing elements in its membership. During the early 1980s the Labour party began to purge itself of the various entryist groups, the most well known of which was the Militant tendency, which it felt compromised its ability to espouse a middle territory nearer that occupied by the Conservatives. By the end of the decade and the beginning of the 1990’s the battle was for the power over the political centre rather than a conflict between the poles represented by Thatcher and the ‘Old Labour’ of Foot and Benn.

People were searching for and discovering new directions. If working class morale was damaged by the miners’ strike and the battles which had led to it (with every other large union sector), women emerged from the struggle with increased confidence. Many working class women had

demonstrated their capacity for political and community organisation during the strike, including community publications and even songs. Working class women were also emerging as the new breadwinners as the economy drifted from an industrial to a service base. In the FWWCP women began more than ever before to articulate a range of feminist perspectives which challenged the male dominance of 'workerism'. The FWWCP found itself discussing whether women's writing groups could be admitted to the movement, when they excluded men.

Around the same time the FWWCP was also trying to accommodate an emerging black consciousness. While many FWWCP groups had black members, now more groups were developing a separatist stance. A good number decided to go their own way to generate their own cultural perspective. There were long and quite robust arguments, which continued right up to the last festival of writing in 2006. In the 1980's these were painful. The language we used and the jokes we told each other were often replete with racism and sexism. Sometimes people were unaware of the origins of the terms they used and reacted to middle class and educated people who appeared to own the correct language telling the working classes how to express themselves. FWWCP executive members wrote self criticisms examining their own racism. Attempts to address the needs of black writers were rejected by some as tokenism.

Dealing with these issues is a continuous struggle. The FWWCP ran a series of workshops at its AGM weekends and other regional events that enabled people to find out about, discuss these issues and perhaps become more critically reflective. If people made a strong case about excluded minorities during the AGM they might well find themselves asked to join the executive committee to represent views that had not been recognised before. On the other hand, some white writers responded to the exciting new possibilities in language revealed through black writing by trying their own hands at patois forms and rap. As Tom Woodin (2005) describes, the frictions rubbed off, often people discovered a respect for each other. We stayed at each others' homes, critiqued each others' work, and through the intense medium of writing and performance shared experiences and emotions. The FWWCP was a place where curiosities were nurtured and fed, and understandings developed. These have never been perfect, nor did they always happen without tears, but members of the Fed carried on trying to work with each other. It is remarkable that the FWWCP survived all this, that it continued to maintain and enjoy a diverse profile.

The diversity issue was not only a matter of gender, race or identity politics set against a context of redefined political agendas. Until the late 1980s nearly all the FWWCP groups were from England. There had been links with some groups overseas, including a visit to the US. The FWWCP model was the basis for people like Cliff White to develop community publishing activities in Australia, but these links rarely proved sustainable. Even within the UK there were logistical difficulties. In 1984 a writers group from Scotland found that its members would not be able to participate in executive meetings because the unfunded FWWCP didn't have the financial resources to pay for their rail tickets. The spread of groups around England was uneven, with concentrations in London and Merseyside, but few in the Midlands and almost none in South West or East Anglia. An association between writers groups in Liverpool and Northside Writers in Cork grew into a closer relationship. The Irish group was enabled to join the Fed when its determination to do so encouraged constitutional changes to allow their membership, and for a few years many Fed members exchanged visits with their Irish counterparts.

### *Funding, workers and commitment*

Under the chair of Al Thomson negotiations with the Arts Council were successfully reopened to obtain funding first of all for a part time worker and eventually for an administrator, Tim Diggles, to work 4 days a week from 1991. The establishment of the worker posts meant that the FWWCP was able to operate an office and establish a more permanent presence. Prior to this the organisation survived through much of the 1980s on donations and some money from a television programme about worker writing. This had been broadcast on Channel 4 in the first week of this new commercial station's operation, featuring performances by FWWCP members such as Gladys McGee, Alan Gilbey and Roger Mills. Funding remained precarious, but the lean years had encouraged a strong commitment from the membership to keeping the organisation going.

From the beginning of the movement, the annual general meeting had been built into an event with readings and a programme of workshops, all of which were voluntarily given by the people attending. The weekends were organised at universities, which offered relatively low cost accommodation. They were located around the centre of the UK to spread the burden of travel costs as much as possible. Many groups were able to



obtain funding from regional arts associations in order to attend, but the events were set up to keep the costs as low to enable as many people to attend as possible. As costs got higher, the average age of the membership got higher, and the nature of writing groups and the perception of need for a 'worker writing' organisation changed, the numbers attending slowly dropped. There were over a hundred people attending an AGM in the early 1980s, but by the 1990s and into the next decade a figure of 70 was more usual. Occasionally certain locations encouraged more people to attend for a day in addition to those who were staying. When it emerged that calling the event an 'AGM' prevented people from getting funding to go, it was redesignated as a Festival of Writing, of which the AGM was a part. As a 'festival' the event could be identified with educational learning objectives and as a venue for cultural dissemination, purposes for which funding could be obtained.

The paid worker took on many of the tasks previously distributed around the executive members, in particular applying for funding and developing projects to meet funding needs and the organisation of the AGM, but eventually also the process of visiting groups who had applied to join. The executive found that it needed to meet less frequently and did so in response to the proportion of the organisation's running costs that were taken up in travel. The Voices magazine which had become the voice of the FWWCP folded in the mid 1980s and a newsletter was set up to replace it. This became Fed News and eventually was relaunched as Federation in 1992. Initially Federation tried to avoid publishing poems and stories, but to concentrate on reviewing publications and articles about community publishing. A separate Broadsheet was developed as the vehicle for members' creative work, but often the two were printed and circulated together to save costs.

The FWWCP had published its first anthology *Writing*, in 1978. During the early 1980s it was felt that the organisation should publish a further anthology showcasing the writing from around the expanding number of groups. Two regional trade union anthologies, *Different Drums*, published in the North West of the UK, featured a number of FWWCP writers, but funding for a national anthology was difficult to find. *Once I was a Washing Machine* appeared in 1989, published eventually by the FWWCP itself, and largely distributed through its membership. A further anthology, *Gizza Poem*, documented the winners of a poetry competition, while an anthology of women's writing appeared shortly after. In 1995 the

FWWCP and the Co-operative Movement produced another anthology around the theme of 'co-operation' called *Writing for a change*. Sarah Richardson edited *Writing on the Line: Working Class Women Writers in the 20th Century*, published by Working Press, a FWWCP member group, which remains an important source book.

Having a permanent worker made other developments possible. Contacts were made with TEC/CRIAC, a regional cultural body in Northern France, following the publication of translated FWWCP materials in a radical book on writing and publishing. This led to a series of meetings through the 1990s with community publishing organisations in Europe which discussed comparative practices. For several years Bernard Lecointe from the Lille print workshop CREAFI, which worked with mental health service users and recent migrants from North African countries, attended FWWCP festivals to demonstrate the use of lead type composition in promoting literacy. These were popular workshops, attended to capacity. The FWWCP sent members to conferences and arts programmes in France and Germany, often attending several meetings in a day, talking directly to workers in lunch time seminars, works librarians, and taking part in mediatheque 'animations'.

The organisation built up a presence which was also recognised in the USA and Canada. In 1997 the FWWCP's *Feds under the Beds* tours visited the George Meany Center in Washington, took part in trade union events in Canada and worked with school and university students, to establish links which have survived the change in organisation.

These visits were often something of a collision of cultures. While the FWWCP saw itself as a very grass roots based organisation, which celebrated its diversity, many of the organisations we encountered came from a very different tradition of cultural action, based in top down development of projects 'for the people'. Often these were around specific topics determined by the organisation. Working with the people in a way that was wholly collaborative, or the idea that people might simply develop their own writing and publishing projects was often seen as unusual. Unlike our hosts we did not work through universities or the cultural wings of trade unions. Despite the foreign community arts and academic interest the FWWCP did not become the focus for study in the UK, except where people who had been involved in it moved into the university sector. Perhaps this was fortunate, allowing the organisation to continue going its own way.

Although these meetings were important, and were seen as meeting some of our funders' expectations in developing an international profile, sometimes even as representatives of British culture through the British council, many of the people we met were cultural workers, rather than other worker writers. Occasionally we encountered people who wanted to write about their experiences but did not have the vehicle of a writers' workshop to enable them to do this, while a group of railway workers told us that they did not have the time to write about their lives - instead they were paying for an academic to do this for them.

Several European groups began to seek affiliation with the FWWCP, and new forms of membership were devised to facilitate this. Given the cost of travel it was unlikely that groups could regularly send their members to the AGM or Festival of Writing, so 'associate membership' and 'reciprocal membership' allowed the FWWCP to exchange publications and so remain in a network. Occasionally people from groups such as Editions Sansonnet or Werkreis would come to the UK and meet some of the executive and groups to discuss different strategies for developing community publishing.

## Changes

Changes in arts council funding saw a move increasingly away from the regional arts boards to a more centralised budget. This did not happen immediately, but gradually. The response the FWWCP had had from the regional arts boards had varied, some boards were enthusiastic about the kind of activities in which the members engaged and found different ways to support it, but others were indifferent to its value. Consequently some groups found it more difficult than others to participate in events because as most of the people involved were on low incomes, subsidies were an important factor in accessibility. Similarly, as the FWWCP tried to develop a foothold in regions where there were no members the co-operation given varied considerably. However, having a secure income enabled the FWWCP to plan activities over a longer term basis. The executive, elected at the AGM in April during the Festival, would meet four times a year, usually over a weekend. Although this seemed to enable a good amount of work to be done, this was a change to a more leisurely approach than the more frequent pattern of meetings the executive had had in earlier years. Perhaps one detrimental consequence of

this was that the executive became less in touch with a wider membership, but another result was that more and more work became the responsibility of the administrator. Some groups began to question what they got from their FWWCP membership besides the Festival of Writing.

There had been more, during the early 1980s. *Voices* magazine which had started in the 1970s, printed on oddments of paper in a print shop - sometimes different sizes being bound into the same issue - became the Federation's magazine soon after the FWWCP had formed. It published writers' work four times a year, and groups were expected to sell copies. This ceased to happen when it became difficult to organise the sales and return of monies to maintain the magazine. The FWWCP developed a travelling bookstall to enable it to have a presence at arts events such as book festivals. Each member group was supposed to send 5 copies of each of its publications to be sold through the stall, but this ceased to be practical. Some groups were producing four or five books a year, and the cost of contributions to the stall quickly mounted.

Groups were able to obtain funding from regional arts councils to organise a series of regional events combining workshops facilitated by FWWCP presenters with other sessions featuring prominent local writers. Through the mid 1980s the FWWCP met at venues around the country, with groups travelling from all over to attend. These were supplemented by further events organised between workshops, when minibuses of writers would go and perform at each others events. Executive meetings were hosted by local groups and often included an opportunity to stay over and perhaps attending a reading in a pub with local writers.

However, the social climate changed. It became more difficult to access minibuses cheaply, fewer pubs and other social venues had affordable rooms for hire. People were less happy about having a houseful of guests sleeping on their floors. Many places do not have a range of affordable accommodation. The executive found it convenient to meet at Burslem in Staffordshire, where the office was eventually based, as this reduced some of the venue expenses, but it meant that the organisation got around its members less. Under these circumstances it was difficult for people to observe meetings as they had done earlier.

The FWWCP continued to run training events around the marketing of books and publishing skills, including familiarising people with the developing technology of desk top publishing. It also developed a series of writing projects using regionally based writers to work with groups

over a number of weeks to enhance their writing skills. While the writing projects were to encourage group members to showcase their work at the Festival of Writing, and so encourage more people to become active in the FWWCP, they were also aimed at boosting group membership.

The Arts Council for England set up the Raymond Williams Community Publishing Prize in 1989, and by the 1990s not only were many FWWCP groups entering their publications, but the panel often included a representative from the FWWCP. However, many of the organisations which won the prize were better funded than most FWWCP groups. The FWWCP argued that community publishing was more than high production values, but was also about the process of collaboration. A cheaply produced broadsheet, illustrated and printed by group members might be a closer representation of community expression than an expensively printed and glossy book with a commissioned editor which many people from the community would be unable to afford. There are many arguments for this kind of book, but fewer and fewer FWWCP member groups found themselves able to produce it or market it - they did not have access to the funds and funding strategies or to the distribution network. The FWWCP had hoped to take over the administration of the Raymond Williams Prize where it could address some of these issues, but went into liquidation before being able to do so.

During the late 1980s there had been several regional networks of writers workshops within the FWWCP. The London Fed and Merseyside Association of Writers Workshops (MAWW) involved several groups from across a region. Others, such as Bristol Broadsides and Commonword, often had a base from which numerous groups were organised. Sometimes these networks were supported by Literature Development Workers based in the public library services. MAWW was particularly strong, with nearly 30 groups, not all of whom were FWWCP members. With their local base it was thought that they might be stronger than the national network and have more to offer members. However, most of the regional groups were affected by combination of internal disputes, changes in adult education or funding, and the capacity for literature development workers to undertake tasks that had previously been organised voluntarily. While people are often motivated to write about their lives and to share and to listen to worker writer narratives, often such vernacular movements are vulnerable to fashions in policy that determine how funding is allocated, generate new keywords and catch phrases that have to be inserted into aims and

outcomes, requiring the specialist interpretation of professional cultural workers. In the process the worker writers and community publishers are left to represent themselves, remain out of step with the forms and the processes, but continue to find new forms and new ways to distribute their stories.

# A question of class, a question of place

by Ken Worpole

Matters of class are always matters of time and place, and many of us have continued trying – since the first publication of *The Republic of Letters* - to understand how once seemingly solid social relationships and political belief systems appear to have unravelled in what is now usually described as a post-industrial, post-colonial, global society. In order to change the world it was always assumed one needed a solid place on which to stand – and class was once that foundational category of history and experience which powered an alternative way of seeing and being in the world. Today there are only shifting sands.

Time and again we are told class is no longer a defining mode of experience, let alone an agency of political change, though it still hovers in the background of continuing debates about poverty, powerlessness and loss of political attachment. New Labour's disdain for social history, or even mildest acknowledgement of the many achievements of British working class history and politics, is as shocking as it is sadly unsurprising.

Yet time and again class raises its head anew explicitly, and it is usually around issues of place, identity and memory. When Glasgow was declared European City of Culture in 1990, a group of trades unionists, writers and artists calling themselves 'Workers City' issued a ferocious attack on those definitions of culture which excluded a full recognition of Glasgow's troubled and highly radicalised working class life and history. The same happened again when Liverpool was declared European City of Culture for 2008: poets, playwrights, artists, novelists and local political activists insisted that the rich culture of Liverpool's maritime

and industrial history should be fully reflected in the celebrations, which might otherwise have been about pop music, imported art exhibitions, architectural heritage and shopping. Class is as embedded in the streets, stones and memories of Britain's villages and cities as it is in the history books.

In a similar manner, a bitter controversy over the post-war cultural history of London's East End – often regarded as one of the capital's most distinctive working class districts - was stirred by the publication of a provocative sociological study, *The New East End*, emanating from academics working at The Young Foundation (formerly the Institute for Community Studies) in 2006. In brief, the authors claim that misguided planning policies and housing allocations, de-industrialisation and the loss of jobs, together with more bureaucratised welfare systems, actively undermined the strong sense of class identity of the long-standing residents of East London, whose memories were shaped around the great post-war political promise of a better world to come. Historians such as Andrew Saint have argued that policies of housing dispersal were deliberately used in Britain throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to undermine a perceived threat from class militancy and political aspiration.

Not surprisingly, resentments against the failure to deliver the promised utopia have subsequently been directed at immigrants and middle-class incomers, seen as taking advantage of the social instability and ever-changing economic dynamics of inner-city urban life to gain a foothold on the ladder of social mobility. What is left is folklore – the last redoubt of working class identity in many but not all British cities, taking symbolic shape in the streetscapes and landscapes of remembered places and attachments. Thus to talk about working class culture today is too frequently to describe a trip down memory lane. Tom Woodin's account of the 'sense of ending and loss' which pervaded much working class autobiographical writing published in the 1970s, was subsequently captured and denatured in the genre of commercially exploited 'misery lit', making it now almost forbidden territory to explore.

From early on class was interwoven with place, with localism, with street life and even with landscape. Clerkenwell's printers and instrument-makers lived in a world as different as it is possible to be from that of Welsh miners, Tyneside ship-builders, or Lancashire's cotton workers. Even as late as the 1950s, London's dockers and lightermen inhabited rituals and customs, quite unlike those of Cornwall's tin-miners, Bolton's



mill girls, Irish construction workers or London's East End Jewish cabinet-makers and tailors. Yet the institutions and moral economies they each and separately created locally, and the principles upon which these were based, led to national and international movements. The British working class became one of the most dynamic social forces of the industrial world, admired and emulated across the globe, pioneering the creation of trade unions, the international Co-operative movement along with a politics based on traditions of self-education, mutual aid and internationalism. It also produced a literature and historical narrative of its own making and meaning.

That history has now been relegated to the margins of cultural memory. Today the institutions of the wider labour movement, and the values which created and sustained, them have been declared redundant - outmoded forms of mutual aid in a world of economic models based solely on private actors and their interests (even as, paradoxically, politicians scramble round in the bargain basement of 'communitarian' theory for ways of evoking and recreating desperately needed new forms of social responsibility and moral solidarity). So while class still exerts a powerful influence on many people's attitudes, aspirations and career choices, its relationship to radical politics and affiliations of place is now attenuated.

Yet questions of place and identity are again foremost amongst the political and cultural issues now in play. The 1997 Labour Government began the long process of devolution of power to the nations of the Union, with Scottish and Welsh parliaments and assemblies created, leaving an unresolved problem as to the residual identity of England itself. Both the Scottish and Welsh literatures of place now seem stronger and more continuous than the English tradition of writing about place and cultural identity - particularly where matters of class are concerned. At the heart of the English dilemma is what is increasingly perceived as the writing out of history of the English working class, a class on which New Labour has turned its back, if it has not rejected it completely.

In the wider literary world, the concern with what is often regarded as place-based writing, whether fictional, historical or topographical, is usually grouped under the term 'regionalism', and remains a minor area of literary interest or concern. Regionalism often functions as a way of avoiding the difficult issue of writing about class and, more recently, ethnicity and race. In the early days of New Labour, regionalism was seen as a substitute nexus of class and identity, though that came to nothing.

Urban and regional economies remain largely branch economies in global politics, though this may not be able to continue for much longer. Many of the organising principles of a new economics which is environmentally friendly and sustainable in the long term are based on re-creating and consolidating local relationships of production and consumption.

I am sure that Stephen's (Stephen Yeo) claim that writing is becoming more important to 'the economic' is prescient and true. I think there are significant regional economies still to be created in the whole process of democratising communications (including 'fair trade' publishing!). While many of the early Federation groups made a direct claim on locality – most of the groups took their names from their place of origin (Bristol Broad-sides, East Bowling History Workshop, Hackney Writers' Workshop, Scotland Road Writers' Workshop, and so on) – they gave particular weight to face to face meetings and forms of mutual aid in the production and dissemination of work. This is a far cry from the organisational and cultural practices of the mainstream literary world which has always been tied in to 'centre and periphery' mentalities and relations.

Similarly I agree with Roger (Roger Mills) that the content of education once again has to be wrested from those who police the national curriculum in schools, and the target-driven managerialism in further and higher education, to re-connect it with life and human possibility. Thus there is a politics of the relationships and practices involved in speaking and writing - in their production, criticism, support and dissemination – as well as in what is ultimately distributed in print, in recording, or on the internet.

All these trends, movements, disruptions and recursions, nevertheless still support many of the original understandings in *The Republic of Letters*. There is something quite different and politically invaluable in a movement – still active after three decades - which proclaims that the production of writing and the economies of communications represented in community publishing are a form of local dialogue and educational endeavour, and that these face to face relationships can forge friendships and the development of shared values which globalised cultural production structurally denies.

If the above paragraphs appear to over-intellectualise the matter, then I am more than happy to conclude with the words of D.H. Lawrence (who knew a thing or two about the relationship between words and lived experience): 'Look! We have come through!'

# We don't need no...

by Roger Mills

Right from the start, it was part of my hope for the community publishing movement that the short stories, poems, adult literacy work, histories and autobiographies that it produced would enter the education mainstream. A dream of thousands and thousands of young people up and down the country learning about their own communities through the voices of their forefathers and contemporary neighbours. Issues around school and education, after all, were prominent themes in much of the writing. But it doesn't seem to have worked out that way, stuck as we are with a national curriculum that would appear to disregard local experience in all its diversity.

My own book *A Comprehensive Education*, published in 1979, was one of a trilogy of novel-length Centerprise publications of autobiographies dealing with the school system. The other two volumes being *The Gates* by Leslie Mildiner and Bill House and *Jackie's Story*, the author of which remains anonymous to this day.

The inspiration for writing my own story came about through a chance visit to Centerprise, based in Dalston, London. The project's building comprised office space, meeting rooms and, alongside the coffee bar on the ground floor, a bookshop. Amongst the eclectic mix of commercial bestsellers and left wing tracts on the shelves, I found books that they had produced themselves. They included a collection of poetry by a young black schoolboy and the autobiography of a middle-aged local taxi driver. Neither the type of people I had thought of as writers.

As a consequence of this revelation I joined a writers' workshop which there regularly. My fragments of writing, with the encouragement of other group members, began to morph into autobiographical stories which in turn became the basis of the book. I wrote 'A Comprehensive Education' partly as an exercise in understanding the experience I had recently come

out of, partly as a sort of alternative ‘school report’. But one written by a pupil. Was I ‘getting back’ at the teachers and the system? Maybe, although my experience was little different a thousand others. I’m still proud of the book I wrote although I can now see its faults and omissions. A major point that I didn’t get across, for instance was that, despite it all, I always considered the staff to be a largely dedicated bunch.

But I wasn’t the first Centerprise ‘school’ author. They had already created a sensation in publishing ‘The Gates’. Praised by educationalist Leila Berg and poet Adrian Mitchell, Les and Bill’s book was different from my own in that it hardly features any traditional classroom anecdotes at all. This was on account of them never having spent longer than five minutes in any of the schools they were sent to. Both were chronic truants (or ‘school refusers’ or even ‘school phobic’ as the young authors labelled themselves). Their experiences in various adjuncts of the education system were totally different from my own. And because of its unique nature ‘The Gates’ attracted much media attention. Newspaper articles and television appearances by the writers swiftly followed.

The third book, published after mine, was ‘Jackie’s Story’. It arrived anonymously at Centerprise, spread over two handwritten exercise books. With it, a touching note: ‘I’m sending you this manuscript in the hope that you will find it good / interesting enough to publish. Most of the story is true though some parts I added or missed out. I’ve changed some of the names and left out my family’s and my own so that if you publish it no one will know it is them. If you don’t want to publish the story I don’t want it back so feel free to throw it away. I’m sorry that it is untyped and apologise for any mistakes.’

Jackie’s experience is also of Secondary Modern truancy, the hit and miss involvement of the various welfare agencies and the effects on her and her family. The introduction by the Centerprise editors is the first time that the three books are linked as a trilogy, albeit an organic and unplanned one. The editors voice their hopes that all three books ‘will encourage debate amongst educationalists, teachers, welfare workers and parents. It is also hoped that it will be used in schools.’ They go on to state that in general this had not been the case and that: ‘this is despite the positive reactions that we very often get from teachers we meet and their concern about the lack of interesting material available which pupils can identify with.’

My own recollections are slightly more positive. After the publication of 'A Comprehensive Education', I received regular invitations to visit school classrooms and teachers conferences in Hackney and elsewhere. And yes, the students I spoke to could definitely identify with the experiences I had set down. The book was also bought in bulk by some schools, although it must be stated that it was usually on the initiative of more independently-minded teachers and heads of department. Community Publishing by its very nature meant that print runs were limited and by the principle that, in order to attract a working class readership, prices were kept down. Many projects were largely dependent on subsidy. And with the passing of benefactors such as the GLC in London and a shift in funding priorities generally the output of publishers shrank or disappeared completely. With them went a source of regular, locally produced material which schools could call on.

The material, often challenging and sometimes controversial, was written and produced by people very similar to its readership. Such a claim can't be made of the world of commercial publishing, leaving a huge hole in the range of material on offer to both student and teacher. The following, from the introduction from 'The Gates', published in 1974, is still relevant today: 'The public bodies who are supposed to encourage the growth of 'culture' have so far remained deaf to the many voices which arise out of the less glamorous parts of our cities and towns. They cannot any longer choose to ignore the growing demand for a more equitable distribution of financial resources that are being made available for 'the arts'.

# Still ‘No Literary Merit’

(and why that should matter to  
Ivory Tower Academics)

by Steve Parks

*“no solid literary merit”*

*The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978*

When the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP) approached the British Arts Council in 1978 for organizational funding, the FWWCP leadership represented the organizing edge of a movement that had seen a national working-class network of writers emerge, a network dedicated to recording and valuing working class experience. As a result, the FWWCP member groups had also seen their local publications sell more than established poets, represent a broader range of communities than most established writers, and occur within a growing national literary movement. A request for funding, then, seemed natural. Acting as “cultural guardians,” however, the Arts Council declined to approve their application. Indeed, the Council argued that there was no need for more writers; instead, there was a need for more readers. And, they argued, even if the FWWCP might be producing more readers, the worker writing itself had no “solid” literary merit. In short, FWWCP members might be better off reading something else. *The Republic of Letters*, a manifesto on the importance of this re-emergent working class writing movement, represented one response to this moment.

With the value of hindsight, I want to argue that *The Republic of Letters* (ROL) should become a primary text for university, college, and public/private school teachers committed to representing diverse literacy and cultural backgrounds in their classrooms. Indeed, we want to argue that The ROL a unique model through which to fulfil many of the

progressive aims of new literacy reform movements which are broadly organized under titles such as “community literacy,” “service-learning,” “new literacy studies,” and “scholarship-in-action.” To understand the importance of the *Republic*, however, I first need to explore the English Studies’ role as “cultural guardians.”

English Studies, on both sides of the Atlantic, has always inhabited an oddly hybrid position of progressive-conservatism. “English Studies,” that is, is progressive to the extent it has historically argued for the value of “vernacular” English against the dominance of Latin/Greek texts as the only sites of cultural value. Yet, the field is also conservative in the sense that to justify “English” language texts, concepts such as the “canon” or “great authors” have been deployed to separate everyday language writings from those produced by authors with the “gift.” On one level, I would argue, too many English professors have adopted an attitude not too different from the British Arts Council – what is needed are not more writers, but more readers of literary texts. And who better, it might be asked, to guide these readers to the correct sensibility than English professors?

Of course, this history is probably too simple. And certainly the past thirty years since the publication of the ROL, the Literature classroom undergone a transformation in the types of writing students typically encounter in their classrooms. Yes, Shakespeare, Milton, Hemingway, and Twain are still there. They are now joined, however, by the voices of Achebe, Morrison, and Kingston, and Anzaldua, among others. Unlike the British Arts Council in 1978, that is, English Studies now recognizes a larger set of voices as possessing the values that draws them into our classroom and makes them required reading for our students. (Indeed as the British Arts Council was transformed into the more regionally-based Arts Council of England, even the FWWCP began to receive steady funding for the work supporting the development of writers.)

I want to argue, however, that expanding the published voices in our classrooms, however, does not expand the actual representation of those diverse communities in our classrooms. Nor does it alter how students approach writing. Particularly in the United States, increased representation of non-traditional voices has run parallel to many working class students across heritages to losing their seat in college and university classrooms. Increased tuition, decreased federal/state support, and stagnant family wages, have resulted in individuals from the very communities an



Achebe or Morrison represent no longer being in the classroom. That is, it is not clear how such curricular inclusion has significantly changed the actual political relationship of a university to its local or national partners. Increased representation in the classroom via assigned texts has not necessarily resulted in increased resource sharing with these populations at the local level. Here representation is an alibi for a more systemic exclusion of community-based voices.

In fact, it might be argued (to stick with working-class authors) that the academy has used a simplistic version of Marx's theory of value to guide its curriculum reform efforts. The shorthand version of Marx's theory of value would go as follows: individual workers, dispossessed of the means of production, are forced to sell the only value they possess, their "use-value" as laborers. For this labor, the capitalist provides them with enough wages to sustain their daily existence; this is the labor's exchange value. According to Marx, the capitalist trick is to force the worker to labor beyond the point of his mere reproduction – i.e. the worker provides more "use-value" than he receives in "exchange-value." Marx concludes that the worker fails to see this exploitation because of the "fetishism" of commodities – i.e. the worker believes it is the inherent quality of an object, and not his labor, which creates value (Marx, 125-244).

In terms of canon formation, Marx's view that capitalism has produced a culture which masks/hides worker reality (and its exploitation) has been translated into an argument that the canon has worked to exclude the full range of writing being produced within a culture as well as the economic and historical context from which that writing arose. The canon has fetishized certain texts and claimed them as "art" by removing them from the context of their production. In the process, under the guise of objectivity, the canon has become a vehicle for representing the desires of the bourgeoisie/middle-class. In response, Marxist literary critics have argued formally marginalized writing, such as working class literature, should be placed within the canon. Indeed, marginalized writing is often held to possess the liberatory or progressive values that critics claim the canon has traditionally denied. This version of canon reform has lead to a situation where English Studies is asked to choose between two opposing sets of texts (canonical and non-canonical), each seen as possessing a set of essentialized moral values to which it should or should not be associated (For an extended argument on this point, see Guillory.) This decision, of course, can take place without any consultation



or involvement of the local instantiations of the communities now “represented” in the curriculum. It can also take place even when none of the individuals who are members of that community are in our classrooms.

In this way “exchange” value is an inadequate tool for true curriculum reform. Instead, some Marxist scholars have already argued for a shift to use-value. Gayatri Spivak makes this argument in “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value.” As she points out, “use-value” is both inside and outside the network of exchange (162); that is, it can be defined both as a marker of labor-power as well as possessing the material properties of an object. For this reason, use-value can speak both to labor-relations from which the object emerges as well as the cultural/aesthetic value of that object. Spivak’s focus on use-value, then, demands that an instructor not mask larger narratives of economic exploitation when deciding to use non-standard texts. If one were teaching, *The Republic of Letters*, for instance, the teacher would have to consistently highlight how it was an not only to challenge dominant understandings of class politics (and the pedagogy in which such politics are often taught) but also an attempt to alter exploitative publishing practices. Here a constant vigilance is required.

Constant vigilance as a classroom practice, however, is an incomplete answer. While it enunciates the responsibilities of the professoriate, it does not enunciate the rights of the community. So while a focus on use-value works to introduce the ways in which an object is “used” into our classroom, we also need to pay equal attention to how our work might also intersect and interrupt those networks of exchange from which that use-value emerges. For being aware of how text is used (and framed) within a class does not change the actual working relationship or practices of the institution to the communities being studied. Nor does it model to the student how such academic study can be connected to the actual work of building egalitarian university/community partnerships. A focus on use-value challenges us to work on both classroom and community partnership levels simultaneously.

For this reason, we need to imagine how a focus on “use-value” might actually interrupt our current practices with community and neighborhood organizations. At this point, it is helpful to consider how political philosopher G.A. Cohen reframes use-value. Whereas Spivak ultimately accepts Marx’s conception of “surplus labor” as a conceptual tool to explain exploitation, Cohen argues that we can shift our attention away from the laborer that creates value to the product that has value.

For Cohen, Marx was wrong both in believing that “labor power” was transferred to the produced object and in believing such a viewpoint was necessary to talk about exploitation (Cohen, 207-238). Instead, Cohen argues exploitation occurs through how the “value of a product is appropriated” – to what uses and ends it is put. It is irrelevant whether the worker has embedded her labor power in an object; the point is she helped to create the object and should have a role in how the product is used.

Cohen’s argument highlights the ways in which concepts of private property limit the right of the worker to determine how the product she created will be used, either as an individual or as a collective. Under Cohen’s scheme, it is private property which allows the capitalist instead of the worker to control the uses to which a product’s value is put. For that reason, economic exploitation cannot be solved by shortening the working day (limiting extraction of surplus value), it must be addressed by creating a system in which workers gain control over how an object is used: “[T]he crucial question for exploitation concerns the justice of the distribution of the means of production.”(234)

Earlier I argued that non-traditional texts were being introduced into classrooms to make the canon more “representative.” Within the limited scope of English Studies, Cohen’s argument demonstrates the inadequacy of such a move. For the inclusion of marginal voices within traditional networks of production – curricula, required courses, textbooks, and publishers – simply repeats the current networks of sponsorship and power. (Certainly, this is one of the lessons of the current curriculum reform, communities are “represented,” but have no right to form their “representation.”) What is needed is a new model of aesthetic and cultural production that not only provides alternative cultural products for use inside and outside our classrooms, but alternative forms of production for our students and community partners.

And it is here that the *Republic* – and the history it represents – becomes a vital set of arguments for the future of literature/literacy classrooms, particularly those that imagine themselves as “community-based.” For what the *Republic* offers is a sense of writing, of literacy, which emerges from the labor of the writers themselves within a production system where the “worker” never loses ownership of their product. The opening moments of the book track how many of the FWWCP writing groups emerged out of an immediate local need to respond to attacks on important working-class institutions or occupations

– demonstrating how the community came together to record its own history. As the writing emerged, public readings and local small newsletters emerged to provide a new local public space in which these voices, could be heard and represented. As the movement grew, so did the range and type of publications. Even at the moment of publication, however, author/community ownership dominated the process. As represented in the *Republic*:

It has taken great labour and thought to move away from the forms of work of the publishing industry – one of whose characteristics is the division of labour to the point where the responsibility for shaping of the whole work gets removed from the writer, dispersed and lost. In the beginning, except in their local scale of operation, some of the publishing groups in the Federation worked in the same way as conventional publishers as far as the author could see. A manuscript would be sent or brought in, was mysteriously judged by unknown readers, just as mysteriously designed, typeset, produced, and distributed... But it soon became clear that while you might have a different product, it was hard for the writer (let alone a reader) to be clear in what ways it was different. Writers could be left feeling that they were not paid, money was being made by someone somewhere.

But as the movement developed, we learned how to work with writers at every stage of the book. Either in dialogue or in a wider group or in team work, interventions were made, passages were re-written, re-taped, bits deleted, additions asked for... then the making of the pages themselves, the choice of type, the placing of pictures, the search for new pictures beyond the writer's own family album, the lettering at the start of each part of the chapter, the design of the cover, the price, what else should be said in the book, other than the authors' main text... all this began to be done collectively...

Teaching the processes toward print has become a feature of much adult literacy work too, to try to break down the distant, authoritative and often threatening nature of the disembodied text.

—*Original Edition-40*

Once the author/community controlled books were published, the work was sold (often by the author) in locations and venues which insured the text would circulate within its intended audience. Rather than simply substituting one text for another (an established author for a local author) in bookstores, these worker writers were indirectly invoking Cohen's sense of use-value – claiming that their labor gave them the right to control how their work was used.

I have come to believe that educational institutions should also invoke Cohen's sense of value, embodied in the work of FWWCP members, and make part of their work as “socializing” the means of cultural and

aesthetic production. Or as Guillory argues in *Cultural Capital*, aesthetic and cultural production must be reintroduced as a right of every citizen and become an aspect of everyday ordinary life: The point is not to make judgment disappear but to reform the conditions of its practice. If there is no way out of the game of culture, then, even when cultural capital is the only kind of capital, there may be another kind of game, with less dire consequences for the losers, an aesthetic game. Socializing the means of production and consumption would be the condition of an aestheticism unbound, not its overcoming. But of course, this is only a thought experiment” (340). Guillory’s “aestheticism unbound” is an argument for the right of communities to create their own aesthetic self-definitions; it is an instantiation of Cohen’s view that exploitation can only be overcome by expanding access to the means of production.

English Studies should imagine itself as a field engaged in fostering new local public writing spaces. The field should partner with community writing groups, providing necessary (but not controlling) resources to these groups to insure they are able to publish their work. Then, understanding their right to control their product, English Studies should work with these groups to create a curriculum which educates students not only in the diversity and values which emerges out of local traditions of writing, but also the “use-value” nature of writing itself – that it involves the production and circulation of texts. In the process, English Studies should demonstrate to its students how concepts of in/out, canonical/non-canonical, moral/immoral are the result of negotiated literacy acts and practices. Ultimately, English studies could push against a literal view of language, where language is a reflection of a community’s reality, to a metaphoric view of language, where different language communities bring themselves together for greater explanatory power – replacing the literal text with a catachretical text. I would even go so far as to argue that for students undertaking such collaborative work as part of their general education, it would demonstrate the true “use-value” of the writing process.

And to return to the connection of English Studies, value, and community-publishing, I want to repeat my above argument the history of English Studies (a rubric containing both literary and composition studies) has been the slow inclusion of vernacular or marginalized voices- the limited definition of value. It now rests in a space, however, from which it can take on a strategic role in alliance with marginalized populations to not only produce community-based publications, but to insure that

the emerging commitment to publishing the words and voices of our local communities are brought into our classrooms in an ethically and politically honorable fashion. In doing so, English Studies will not only further articulate its own traditions, but develop a framework which will enrich the work of students, community members, and faculty. For this reason, English Studies should attempt to inhabit the traditions represented within *The Republic of Letters* and become part of the effort to socialize the means of literary/literacy production through becoming active in the community publishing networks within their local communities or establishing their own small/low-level community publishing efforts.<sup>1</sup>

And for this work to occur within the spirit of the *Republic of Letters*, it is vital to understand the history of the FWWCP.

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1 Portions of this essay were previously published as TEXTS OF OUR INSTITUTIONAL LIVES; an extended version of this argument can be found in Parks' "Strategic Speculations on the Question of Value: The Role of Community Publishing in English Studies" College English (May 2009).

# Working-class women writers—

In and out of the Fed

by Sarah Richardson

The idea for a book initially came from a conversation I had at the 1993 FWWCP Festival of Writing with Stefan Szczulkun of Working Press. He said that Working Press had published no books about working-class women writers and were anxious to do so.

He asked whether I would be interested in doing some research on the subject. At the time, although interested, I didn't feel up to the task as I don't have an academic background. I started in a modest way to trawl through my own collection of books. I then photocopied this list of twenty or so names and sent it to friends, colleagues, Fed. members and other interested bodies such as the Women's History Network, independent bookshops, Marx Memorial Library, Trades Unions, the Labour Party and many others.

## Debate

This list provoked a lot of debate, some strong reactions and discussion of terminology. I had used class background as my starting point, and included women from many different cultures. There were famous women writers listed such as Alice Walker and Maya Angelou as well as writers from the Federation and Yorkshire Art Circus. All the women wrote primarily in the twentieth century. At the same time I used the Fawcett Library and the Feminist Library in London to find reference works and secondary sources to check factual details such as births and deaths. I also went to the local library and used their CD ROM to scan the disc of "British Books in Print" and find publications details.

In summer 1994, whilst I was still researching, I attended a conference organised by Working Press called “Class, Culture and Identity”. The conference was part funded by the Federation. It was there that I met Merylyn Cherry, Sammy Palfrey and Gail Chester. Sammy and Gail were both members of the Fed. Mel had just had a pamphlet published by Working Press focusing on working-class women writers. Sammy had written a dissertation on women’s writing during the Miners’ strike and Gail was leading a workshop at the conference on the problems of being published as working-class women writers. Stefan decided that these four separate pieces could come together in a very interesting book and we began to work together to make this happen.

## Working Together

We had several all day meetings to discuss format, design, layout, illustration and marketing. We decided on “Writing on the Line” as a title for the book. We composed Advance Information sheets to send to interested parties and bookshops. I rang round several printers that different community groups recommended, getting quotes. We decided on Spiderweb in Finsbury Park, because Eastside Bookshop had used them before and they had a lot of experience with book publishing. A lot of the smaller printers do not, and so their bindings can be of poorer quality and liable to fall apart after a short time.

At the same time, I was learning how to use a desk top publishing package on the computer for the first time so that we could keep costs down by doing the typesetting and layout ourselves. We chose the fonts, where to italicise, where to type in bold. Gilda O’Neill, another author on the list who I met at the Women Writers Network (London), agreed to do the introduction. My brother, Matthew Richardson, who is an illustrator, designed the cover, with symbols from a working woman’s life.

Finally the whole book was ready to be proof read by Sammy. Once this was completed it was off to the printers with discs, the hard copy, the originals for the art work and instructions to the printer. The first run of covers came out in very dull tones and had to be done again. Deadlines had to be negotiated and renegotiated.



## Launch

Meantime we were organising the launch at Eastside Books. Denise Jones and Roger Mills sent invitations to a huge list and sorted out the guests. With a week to go, I went to pick up 200 of the print run of 1,000 from Spiderweb. It was a very exciting but also intimidating moment. Opening a fresh box of books, smelling them, seeing it in print after two years of work was brilliant. But how would we sell that great mound of books and at least break even?

The launch night, in late November 1996, was great. A mixture of Working Press associates, Eastside Writers and friends, and two or three car loads of women who had driven up from Greenham Common Peace Camp, Yellowgate. In all around 70 people, came to Eastside to celebrate the launch of this, and another Working Press book, “Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp: A History of Non- Violent Resistance 1984- 1995” by Beth Junor. Denise Jones and Roger Mills were on hand to help run the event. I talked about “Writing on the Line” and how Mel, Sammy, Gail and myself had been involved in the project. Liz Thompson (of Eastside Writers) did a hilarious poetry reading in her own inimitable style. Then Beth Junor, author of “Greenham Common”, described how delighted she was to find a publisher for a previously untold story. Other women from the camp read moving, and at time harrowing, accounts of life there.

## Reviews

We sold 32 copies of “Writing on the Line” that night, which was a great start. Eastside Books kept some in their window. We all began selling to family and friends. Those who didn’t buy got a copy for a Christmas present anyway! We also blitzed national and local press, TV and radio. To some we sent review copies, others a copy of the cover and a Press Release, based around Pat Barker who is listed in the book, and who had just won the Booker Prize for “The Ghost Road.” This mailing was followed up with phone calls. We were reviewed by (among others) Rebecca O’Rourke in “Federation”; “Everywoman;” “New Woman” and “The Pink Paper”. In January 1997, I was interviewed on Viva Radio, a women’s radio station covering the whole of London. The reviews, particularly in “Federation” sparked continuing debate on the definition of class and whether class had different meanings globally. It also



encouraged people to make suggestions for other women writers they would like to see in a re- print.

## Hard Work

To get “Writing on the Line” into print was much harder work than I ever imagined. Researching and writing it was hard enough and a goal in itself. Working as a collective where each gave ideas and helped the others built our confidence and was empowering. I would definitely recommend this method of working.

## Women Writers in the Federation

It’s very difficult to choose women as examples from the book to somehow represent at least some of what the Federation is about. Many women writers in the Fed. were never published. Some were performance poets. Others were not fortunate enough to attend groups where funding was available for publications. There was a boom in community publishing in the 1970s and 80s when grants from the GLC and some Labour councils were forthcoming. Changing priorities and rising printing costs and overheads have meant a decline in these ventures. There has been a sharp rise in publishing work on the internet and on the Fed’s own web- site which has attempted to address some of these limitations. Other authors have managed to self fund limited print runs or photocopied work.

Looking back again through “Writing on the Line” ten years on, I am struck again by the achievements of the women there and how the list was just the beginning of a debate. The four authors with links to the Federation I have chosen to focus on are Gladys Mc Gee, Sue Torr, Joyce Storey and Pauline Shore. A short poem by Gladys introduces this section.

Please read my poetry  
Don’t let me write in vain  
It is only in the last few years  
I found I had a brain.

*Gladys McGee*

Gladys was born in Wapping, East London in 1917. At the outbreak of World War 2 she joined the ATS with her sister, hoping to be posted abroad. As her daughter Kim told me “she never got further than Reigate.” During the war she had her first daughter, Christine, with a Canadian airman. She moved back in with her mother to help with the baby. Gladys worked in a biscuit factory and also at the Goldstein Baths in Petticoat Lane. She met her second husband and had another daughter, Kim, in the 1950s. She wrote early in the mornings after her husband, a stoker, left for work. Her daughter Christine became a successful actor, appearing, among many other things, in the 1970 film “If.” It was her daughter Kim who introduced her mother to Basement Writers, Cable Street. Kim was a student at Sir John Cass school at the time of the school strike in 1971. She was invited to join the group by sacked teacher, Chris Searle. Too shy to go alone, the fifteen year old Kim took along Gladys who felt immediately at home. Gladys and her friend Sally Flood brought a new dimension to this young group. Gladys, in particular, enjoyed sparring with them. It was Alan Gilbey, a fellow Basement Writer and former John Cass student, who first dubbed her “The Bard of Stepney”. She cut a striking figure at live performances in a gold lame trouser suit, as, adjusting her spectacles, she would throw her arms up and yell out her poetry. Her work was a mixture- angry diatribes against injustice in society; quiet, introspective pieces about regret and loss as well as comic work. Gladys’s poems were published in two anthologies. The first “Shoutin’ and Bawlin” in 1982 and “Old age ain’t no place for sissies” in 1986. Both were published by THAP (Tower Hamlets Arts Project). Basement Writers and THAP were active member groups within the FWWCP. THAP later became Eastside Books.

Gladys performed all over the country at different writers’ groups and was prominent at FWWCP conferences. She was also the subject of a Thames Television documentary “The Bard of Stepney” in 1984. Although dogged with ill health later in life, she continued to write and perform until her death in 1999. She left an unfinished autobiography.

*Sue Torr*

Sue was born in the fifties into a working- class family of eight children. Her dyslexia was not picked up as a child and she struggled with

literacy until well into her thirties. She kept her illiteracy a secret, even from her own husband and describes in “Secrets” (2006) how her wedding day was ruined for her because she could not spell her middle name on the marriage certificate. “I used to write disgustingly scruffy so that people couldn’t understand.” (Torr). At 38 she was working as a lunch- time supervisor in her son’s school. A child asked her to read a story and Sue finally told this child that she couldn’t. Later, she also confided in an Adult Literacy tutor who was working at the school. The tutor worked with Sue and gave her a Gatehouse (FWWCP) book to read- “Never in a loving way” (1977) by Josie Byrnes. Sue was thrilled to read her first book. Later, the tutor asked her to write down how it felt not to be able to read and write. After more work at the Mount Wise Writers’ Group, this writing was taken up by the Theatre Royal, Plymouth as a play “Shout it Out.” It was first broadcast on Radio Devon in 1993. It won a Sony Radio Award for outstanding achievement in 1994. Sue was nominated as Devon Woman of the West Country in 1994. From 1999- 2003 “Shout It Out” was jointly funded by the SRB, BSA and Plymouth College of Further Education. It toured schools, colleges, prisons and community centres, telling Sue’s story and inviting audience members to break their own silence on literacy needs.

In 2007 Gatehouse Books published “Secrets” a further autobiographical book and DVD by Sue. As for other authors published by Gatehouse, it was great that Sue had first been taught to read by using a Gatehouse book and had now written one herself. Tony Blair wrote of this book “Sue Torr’s remarkable story will inspire thousands of adults and young people to find the confidence to improve their reading and writing.”

### *Louise Shore*

Louise was born in Ewerton, Jamaica in the 1930s. Her father died when she was seven years old and her mother was left to bring up their sixteen children alone. Louise did well at school and enjoyed it until a period of illness set her back and she did not return to full time education. She began work as an assistant in a doctor’s surgery in a different neighbourhood called Linstead. As a teenager she found this work quite distressing and instead became a live- in nanny. Whilst in this job she became pregnant herself, but after the baby was born her boyfriend took the baby to America and Louise lost touch with her child. She had a time

back at home but did not want to return to school or attend church. Instead she sought employment as a general help near Kingston. This woman and her subsequent employer helped Louise to save enough money to pay for her passage to Britain and also encouraged her to attend night school to continue her education. Louise hoped that when she was in Britain she would be able to send for her son.

Louise came to Britain in 1960. "My ambition was to write a book" (Pure Running 1982). She began working for Lyons in Hammersmith but had problems finding a room as a black woman. She found temporary lodgings in Battersea and then Wandsworth. She then shared a house with a man in Wembley. Through this, she lost her savings, her job and had a breakdown. Eventually she got a GLC flat in Hackney and a new job, first at Selfridges and then British Airways. Louise felt encouraged to begin writing when she read other people's life stories, who had also endured hardship. She read these, and received support from, the Hackney Reading Centre based at Centerprise. Centerprise was another Fed. group which published many local peoples' life stories. Louise's book "Pure Running" was published in 1982 with help from Rebecca O'Rourke and Maggie Hewitt as well as some funding from City Limits magazine. The first two chapters that deal with Louise's early life in Jamaica are in the short lines of text favoured by Gatehouse for Adult Learners. Later chapters are in longer prose as Louise explores the hardships of her new life in the UK, hardships understood by many. "Sometimes I stand waiting for the bus and I think over these things and I full of grievement." (1982).

### *Joyce Storey*

Joyce was born in Kingswood, near Bristol, in 1917. She left school at 14 to go into service. At the age of 15 she started work at a corset factory where she worked until her marriage in 1939, on the eve of the Second World War. Her husband was in the Air Sea Rescue Service and was posted to Grimsby. Joyce followed, never having been away from Bristol before. She described the difficulties of her early married life in her second volume of autobiography "Joyce's War. (1990)" "I had made a wrong move and a bad impression. Confused emotions covered me." Joyce soon had a young family of four children. Joyce moved back to Bristol towards the end of the war and lived there for the rest of her life. Joyce's life was filled for much of the time with her role as a stay at home mother. At the

age of fifty she became a manager of a charity which she loved. As her daughter Pat Thorne relayed in “The House in South Road,” “she just knew there was something beyond them (the family)- a magic landscape where everything was possible for her, where the liberty and creativity she craved were only limited by her own imagination.” And “”she often said that she and Daddy should never have married, and perhaps this was true.” (2004).

Joyce’s husband John or “Bertie” died in 1979. Four years later, aged 66 Joyce joined “Bristol Broadsides” an FWWCP group. She also attended other writers’ and women’s groups at this time. Joyce was also encouraged by her daughter Pat to keep going with her writing when she became partially sighted through a stroke and slipped into depression. In 1987, Bristol Broadsides published her first volume of autobiography “Our Joyce”. “Joyce’s War” followed in 1990. She was awarded the Raymond Williams’ Community Publishing Prize for “Our Joyce” and “Joyce’s War”. This introduced Joyce’s story to wider audience and both books were taken up by Virago, the women’s press who re- published them both. They also published “Joyce’s Dreams” the final part of the trilogy in 1995. Virago compared her work in importance to Kathleen Dayus, Helen Forrester and Laurie Lee. Joyce died in 2001. Posthumously, her daughter Pat edited her three volumes of autobiography into one book “The House in South Road” in 2004.

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*Special thanks to Kim McGee for valuable information about her mother*

# London voices

A poetry group in slow motion!

by Gillian Oxford

London Voices was formed in 1975 to promote Voices, a National Magazine for Working-class Writing, which was published quarterly by Ben Ainley in Manchester. Ben had started a writing group in a working men's institute in Manchester, but suddenly found that ordinary working people were filling a national creative space, and poetry and writing by a huge number of people, who'd never had a voice before, exploded overnight in groups which blossomed all over Britain.

We got to know Ben by letter, and I went to see him in his bungalow on the outskirts of Manchester. I was impressed with his energy and understanding. Voices was inherited by Rick Gwilt in Moss Side, and Bill Eburn and myself were on the editorial board. Bill had graciously suggested I should run our group, which is a why a woman runs London Voices! We went up to Manchester two or three times a year, and helped select what was published, from the huge amount of writing submitted.

Our group soon discovered that each and every one of us was writing, and the logical step was to become a "workshop" open to the public, where our work could be aired to a responsive audience. We met once a month, and produced a quarterly Broadsheet, and were once labeled, "A poetry group in slow motion", by Phil Boyd. Phil was in a Manchester group which met once a week! I think he left after about two years. The various writing groups seemed to depend on a particular person, for example Sally Flood, who ran Basement Writers for years. We joined the FWWCP (Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers) in 1978, but never applied for funding. We had production help from the Coop for about ten years, enabling us to photocopy, rather than cyclostyle our Broadsheet, which we used to do in a friend's house. I always

collected our members work with a view to publication. Writing and publishing *do* go hand in hand.

In 1985 the GLC (Greater London Council) had the foresight and wisdom to award several groups £1000, and performance space at the Royal Festival Hall, in the Purcell room. We had to do our own advertising, using their facilities. We had a wonderful reading with Peggy Seeger, the folk singer, as guest of honour. All the readers used a mike to read aloud to the audience, and received a posy of flowers. My garden was particularly productive that year, and my kids made up 20 bunches, which were presented in a plethora of excitement and colour at the end.

The £1000 was used to fund our first paperback, *Rising Tide* and the money the book earned, was enough to invest in the next book. We called these anthologies, Broadsheets, because initially they were like the penny broadsheets of poems produced years ago and sold in the street. Last year we produced number 44. Apart from this the group has always been unfunded, undemocratic and non-exclusive. However an unofficial committee share the load, and we continue to thrive. The only publishing rule is that any writing should be tried out in the workshop, first.

Many people have had their work published apart from this, and London Voices itself has published several anthologies by individuals, such as Jim Ward's (*Trains of Thought*), Kay Ekevall's (*Kindling memories for the Future*), Bill Eburn's (*Be my Guest*, about being in a Japanese wartime camp) Lawrie Moore's (*Guided Missiles, poems of social anger, love and hope*), Gertrude Elias's (*the Suspect Generation, my life and times*), Bob Dixon's (*The Wrong*), and Dave Marshall's (*The Tilting Planet*), to name a few.

We are immensely proud of our annual Broadsheet anthologies, each containing 30 to 40 stories and poems specifically illustrated by our artists in the group. We have often had rave reviews by Nick Pollard and others in various Fed Publications.

Nearly complete collections of the 44 Broadsheets can be found in the Poetry Library at South Bank in the Royal Festival Hall, and in the Library of Working class Writing in Manchester.

Many's the time a newcomer to London Voices workshop has said, "I've got a cupboard full of stuff,"- unaired treasures, which they've eventually been confident enough to read regularly, and have published.

Sometimes there's much sucking on pen ends, by someone like Pat O'Gorman who used to write on the tube, or at the actual meeting in the



pub. And how many pubs have we met in, some no longer there: The Metripoll, the Crown, The Betsy, London Spa, the Sekford Arms, -always in the Clerkenwell area of London, where we began. At the moment we meet in the Lamb, Lamb's Conduit Street near Holborn, once a month, as I said! So come along!

I found a sample of Pat's and Bill's very short poems. Bill specialized in short poems. He found he was often published!

*It's peaceful here*

It's peaceful here though crowded  
But it's not far to the trouble  
Here it's throwing horseshoes  
There it's petrol bombs and batten rounds  
Among the rubble.

—Pat O'Gorman

*Change of countenance*

"You can read me like a book," she said  
but there was that in her visage  
which caused him after one look  
hastily to turn the page!

—Bill Eburn

# The Republic of Letters, 1982-2008: A note

by Stephen Yeo

In *Living Thinkwork: Where do Labour Processes Come From?*, published two years before *The Republic of Letters*, Mike Hales defined class as ‘the grouping and re-grouping of practices in the course of people’s struggles to direct their own futures’. In spite of every official rumour to the contrary, class in that future-oriented sense is as powerful and necessary as ever, but more global in its actual and necessary reach than we took it to be in 1982.

*Writing* is even more important to class practice and formation than we took it to be in the early 1980s. Information and communications have moved even nearer to the centre of the ‘economic’ than they used to be. And with them, changes in the technologies of communication for which the word revolutionary is not enough. These changes were visible in 1982 but not as all-informing as now. We dreamed of a proto - wikipedia but enclosed by ‘the Left’, in a laundrette in Montreal Rd Brighton in 1976...

The opportunities for and meaning of ‘publication’, in and against its dominant modes and ideologies, have changed out of all recognition. This is not to say that it is any easier to use them to direct our futures. But it is, I guess, technically more possible. I still find Raymond Williams’s 1978 lecture on ‘Means of Communication as Means of Production’ (in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, 1980) inspiring, with its ‘perspective that we can reasonably and practically achieve Marx’s sense of communism as “the production of the very form of communication”’,

in which, with the ending of the division of labour within the mode of production of communication itself, individuals would speak “as individuals”, as integral human beings’. At that date Williams was excited by mobile radio transmitters. I remember *QueenSpark*’s excitement at webb-offset litho, and then at our first golf ball typewriter. Things have moved a bit ... in the interests, it could be, of Fair Trade in knowledge and creativity.

Seven years after the first edition of *The Republic...*, I moved from being an historian and *QueenSpark* person in Brighton to being head of Ruskin College in Oxford where I stayed until 1997. Since then I have worked with the Co-operative College in Manchester where Tom Woodin of the FWWCP also worked. Happily unattached now, as a writer mostly on co-operative and mutual enterprises, I work in many other settings academic and otherwise. I am trying to teach myself to write poetry with the active help of the Poetry School. The poetry world seems exceptionally eclectic and active in Britain at the moment, with worker writer and community voices often present and sometimes explicitly so. Reading and writing groups flourish. Full mutuality in the exchange of poems, tracking, ‘accept changes’ ‘reject changes’, save version 26, is now so much more widely, though of course not universally, available. How ‘private’ and whose is the end product?

*QueenSpark* lives on, and on line. At least four generations of activists have carried it on after the initiators left. At Ruskin, *History Workshop* became less and less explicit about its working-classness through the 1980s and 90s and then less overt also about its socialism, while maintaining strong commitment to womens’ history. The College on the other hand tried to host the FWWCP on a couple of occasions but we were too slow about disabled access to develop the link as strongly as was wanted. But *Ruskin Writing* had a strong, internal College life; ‘creative writing’ grew as a College activity and then as a formal course of study; and the *Write First Time* archive found a good home in Ruskin’s library. The National Co-operative Archive at the Co-operative College in Manchester working closely with the People’s History Museum in the same city, is now being funded by the National Lottery Heritage Archive Fund to get itself together, overflowing as it is with working class writing and community publishing. It extends into the present every day. Also in the North West, Professor Timothy Ashplant of Liverpool John Moores

University is leading a gargantuan initiative to put *all* working-class writing during the last three hundred years on line...

Is all this collecting part of 'Heritage'? Is all this discontinuity in the means of production and in the meanings of literacy, yet another episode in technological romanticism? Or part of the end of the beginning which *The Republic* set out so helpfully? What are we now trying to federate?

# Class identity and the republics of letters

David Morley and Ken Worpole interviewed by Nick Pollard  
London, June 10<sup>th</sup> 2009

## Writing, class and history

Nick: What made you decide to produce this book?

Ken: Individual groups and individual personalities in the Federation from the early days were closely associated to the History Workshop movement, the working class and oral history project which emerged from Ruskin College in the late 1960s. But I think by the end of the 70's there began to be disagreements, political disagreements. The Republic of Letters was thought to be a good way of clarifying our wider feelings about class and identity and radical politics. In the writers' workshop movement we were more focused and better organised locally. The History Workshop movement was more academically oriented. I think this was a way of clarifying what it was we stood for and how we positioned ourselves in and against the History Workshop movement, which we saw as becoming more academic.

David: It was also very overdetermined. We were all moving in and out of different projects simultaneously.

It did seem to be a moment at which we could – to say that we were going to 'theorise' what was being done is to give it too big a term – try and think it through a bit explicitly. There was also a longer history for Ken and I of being involved with things to do with education, language and Harold Rosen and the Language and Class groups, and these had a bearing on what we wanted to bring to it.

It was deeply contentious right from the very beginning, for instance I was being paid through the Gulbenkian project for the work I was doing on this; no-one else was getting paid. There was quite a debate within the group about whether things were being improperly professionalised, at the point at which Ken and I took the responsibility to co-ordinate this group and take it forward.

Ken: I think that's raised a very interesting point. There were enormous sensitivities at that time over individual names being attached to projects, particularly writing projects, with political pressures to work only through anonymous forms of editorial collectivising. That was very strong at Centerprise –the politics of the day was that decisions were made collectively and individuals should not be seen to be promoting their own identity.

David: Certainly at the Cultural Studies Centre in Birmingham some people were very critical of what the Federation and what the People's Autobiography had been doing. Although it used the term 'People's Autobiography' it published things which were individual stories. Hard liners would argue that the autobiography was an ideological form because it inscribed individuality, it avoided the existence of class structures and so to do anything in that field was held to be a deeply problematic enterprise. These were the contradictions we were trying to find our way through.

Ken: There was this tremendous sensitivity about editorial processes and editing. For example, what right had people, firstly to interview others and then to change or 'clean up' what they had said. Some argued that you had to include everybody's ums and ahs and repetitions and coughs to be authentic, and any attempt to clean up or to make someone's story slightly more reader-friendly was an imposition. We might laugh now, but these editorial matters were very much of the time. And that went back to Charles Parker's earlier Radio Ballads, wonderful work done on the radio based on tape recordings with fishermen, miners and so on. It was a very brittle time actually, but in good ways, very interesting.

*Community and mainstream presses and process*

Nick: At that time we were talking about perhaps half a million community publications having come out by the time this book

was published –how do you see the influence of the Republic of Letters on the mainstream, with that kind of volume of publications, small as they were?

Ken: There was long-standing and dissident tradition of small literary presses, certainly in the field of poetry. The worker-writer movement was trying to find some ground between that and the world of documentary history, and some new ways of making history through using tape recorders. Again, with people like the oral historian Tony Parker who made some wonderful books based on tape recordings there was a great fluid space, which was a rejection of conformist publishing work where, for example, there's an advance paid to an individual named author to do something.

We initially said that we wouldn't pay any writers. And this early on caused problems. It was raised in The Republic of Letters because we unexpectedly found ourselves with commercial successes on our hands. With writers at Centerprise like Ron Barnes and Roger Mills –we sold several thousand copies of these books – and in Vivian Usherwood's case we'd sold something like 10,000 copies of a single book of poems, mostly to schools. The money was going into the publishing project but we then had to think again. This was work, people had to be paid for their labour.

David: Another important thread is the process of publishing and writing. That was part of what we were about and linked back to the educational project of broadening the base of people who'd had the experience of writing and being involved in publishing something. The world of IBM golfball typewriters and letraset and glue and paste is a very straightforward production process, it's relatively easy to induct someone into it.

But there was a problem because at that time the unions were resisting offset-litho printing. We had the production technology which would enable people to take a part in doing this, and that has had an enormous influence in broadening the base of cultural production, and in the demystification of the concept of authorship and creativity. That was certainly part of the ambition we were all working with.

As we're looking back on all this, let me offer an analogy here, about how we should judge success and failure. When Spare Rib

closed down, somebody put a question to one of the collective, saying ‘wasn’t it awful that Spare Rib had foundered?’ She said ‘Why is it awful? We’ve done our job. All the things that we started agitating for as being kind of extraordinary to talk about in public, to do with sexual life, domestic abuse, eating disorders, they’re the common parlance now of women’s magazines’.

To put it grandly, Gramsci, when talking about hegemonic struggles, argues that ‘the most important struggle of all is for the transformation of common sense, for the transformation of that which can be taken for granted, that which goes without saying’ (1971). The Republic of Letters was part of a project which has actually transformed common sense about the representation of people’s lives and, in particular, working class lives. If you look now at the media and the types of representation of working class life on television, whether you take an author previously associated with the Federation like Jimmy McGovern, who’s got prime time dramas on big channels, or whether you take any series of other examples, e.g. Paul Abbott and *Shameless*, there is now a vitality of representation of these lives which simply wasn’t there in the public sphere before. There’s all kinds of problems with the way it’s being represented now in reality television but that stuff just wasn’t in the central places of the culture before. I would say that The Republic of Letters played a small part in the large movement that transformed the representation of working class life in the public sphere of the media. That is the central achievement, not just of this book, but of all the strands of this debate which have gone on over thirty or forty years.

Ken: I also think these kinds of publications have transformed the way history is now written. It’s interesting that the very good, recent book by David Kynaston, *The Age of Austerity* is so heavily reliant on the Mass Observation Archives, which were collections of diaries and notebooks kept by ‘ordinary’ people in the 1930’s as part of a political/anthropological movement. Coming back to The Republic of Letters and this particular strand of documentary writing, it did seem a much more volatile and experimental period, and there was so much more going on. Firstly there was the notion of extending authorship, beyond the professional sphere. Secondly



there was the notion that history could be written in a different way, from 'below'. Thirdly there was a self-critical discussion of the relationship between someone who was going around with a tape recorder and the person who was being tape recorded - and who would have the final editorial say. Fourthly was the question of whether there were any financial relationships in these new forms of production, and fifthly, as Dave has mentioned, there were the problems that the democratisation of forms of production were causing with trade unions. I can give a good example of this. At Centerprise we wanted to do an oral history of Hackney Trades Council - local involvement in the General Strike, Spain and so on, to be printed on one of the community presses, but Hackney Trades Council wanted it to be published by a trade union printing firm. There was no way we could afford it! So you could either have the book - but this required breaking with certain traditional understandings of craft unionism, or you couldn't publish. Added to this many of the small community presses had a love and a flair for this sort of radical history.

There were two forms of printing going on, one was 'capitalist, but trade union organised' - firms which had no interest in the material, the other were the small printing groups who were coming up who were passionate about all kinds of poetry and feminist texts and so on. The problem in this period was that there were so many political battles one had to fight simultaneously. Eventually everybody accepted offset litho. Today we've all got computers and everybody is a typesetter and a printer now. It seemed at the time that the ideological problems associated with every step of the writing, editorial, printing and publishing process were phenomenal.

David: It's crucial that we don't focus too much on *The Republic of Letters* as a particular project but as simply one moment in a history that goes back through *Mass Observation*, the *Language and Class* debate, Charles Parker and the 1950's: certainly when colleagues now in the media field want to talk about reality television, they only want to talk about the present. They don't know anything of that longer history in print, film, television or radio.

Nick: And the other key thing is the history of the relationships between the processes isn't it?

David: In recent years in terms of production one of the things that I think is very interesting, was how important the internet has been in providing the Federation with a way to survive. You've got this enormously powerful instrument with which you can easily exchange texts, maintain and sustain links with people over a variety of distances, where geography doesn't matter very much. Everything is replete with this ideology of how the net is going to democratise everything, but Enzensberger told us that the video camera was going to bring down capitalism in 1972; then it was the offset litho, then it was the golfball typewriter, now it's the net. These are all relevant in terms of the radicalisation of the instruments of production and the cheapening of the mode of production which makes it possible to publish, but the thing we never cracked was distribution. It was the demise of the alternative bookshop network that killed off The Republic of Letters publisher Comedia because it depended on funding from local authorities and central government which was cut by Mrs Thatcher. The same problem applies now in the world of the internet. Whether you are interested in working class writing, Bulgarian nationalism, or spiders on Mars, you can be in touch with other people very cheaply, very easy. But what the internet doesn't do is solve the communication problem. It locks people into these separate sphericules of like-minded chitter-chatter. The instruments of production, the technology, have been democratised, but the problem of distribution seems to me to be the one we still haven't cracked.

Nick: That links to trying to deal with diversity – we were appreciating the burgeoning diversity that was in the Fed – with people falling in and falling out of the Fed, and the separatist arguments that people needed to set up their own groups to find out who they really were. That relates in a way to the parallel set of universes that we're talking about now, because that compartmentalisation is going on in every facet of life; on the high street as much as on the internet. I interviewed a lot of people in the Fed about what its value was for them, and many said that it was meeting people that they would not have ordinarily met. In later years we emphasised

that experience of diversity because of the social inclusion agenda but it was a genuine thing. Where else does that happen?

David: Very few places. It's a wonderfully valuable experience when people have it but a very hard one to construct, because that is genuinely a learning experience for everybody involved: listening to a story told by someone whose assumptions are completely different from yours, who's coped with a situation quite differently or even perceived it so completely differently from how you've perceived it. If you can create spaces in which people can exchange those experiences in a productive manner then it's truly fabulous, and that seems to be one of the best things that these groups have done. They've been one of the best places to my knowledge in which it has happened.

### *Just doing it*

Nick: The work that I'm doing is partly about making the connection between this stuff and occupational therapy approaches, applying it not in a clinical sense but saying let's forget the therapy bit, let's look beyond the hospital gates, how do you translate this into coming into an active citizenship where despite any disabilities you're recognised. Although the roots of OT in the beginning of the last century are in social projects like Hull House it has not produced that kind of diversity because the profession is very narrowly defined – it's traditionally been a female profession and there are difficulties about that but it deals in a narrative about what people do. The Fed was much more about performance and representing yourself. This kind of experience and particularly connecting with the survivor's poetry movement in the 1990's amongst other people who were coming into the Fed then I think changed both the Fed's and my own direction about where that sort of politics of representation and the process of representation was going.

David: What you're talking about is a much more fluid story, where the project starts off with certain values and practices and then it meets other situations where in curious and hybrid ways these ideas, strategies and practices developed in a different context

have another value. The capacity for these practices and ideas to produce benefits in unforeseen contexts that none of us thought about in the first instance, are very important and we should recognise and value them.

Nick: I think one of the things was that you could kind of do stuff. In a way, in 1976 it was a bit like punk in that all you needed to do was go into Woolworths and get a couple of Kay guitars and you'd got a band, and with the access to the technology, golf ball typewriters and so on print was just as accessible. It's not coincidental that at the same time at the small presses and community papers like Hackney Free Press and Sheffield Free Press were flourishing – there was a whole growth of fanzines and people producing a punk literature and cutting stuff up and sticking it down and making it into magazines.

### *Representations and definitions*

Ken: It's worth asking why the Federation didn't implode very early on because all these things about alternative movements carry with them lots of definitional problems. The Federation started by being very much about the working class - really the white working class experience - in a small number of inner city areas: Liverpool, London, Sheffield, Newcastle, Tower Hamlets. Within only a matter of years there was a black group which wanted to join, women's groups that wanted to join, a literacy group, and so on. I think it is of great credit to the Federation that it always allowed and didn't try to suppress debate about these issues. It could easily have split had it not been for the annual festivals where despite all these ideological differences, the sheer personalities of the people involved - when they all had to read and reveal themselves as individuals as well as being political actors - enabled the Federation to carry on. Its long standing is really quite remarkable. These things are changing all the time, and notions of the purity of identity - that only a certain thing can be classified as working class - really had to be questioned very early on and very quickly.

David: It doesn't go away though. We were talking earlier about contemporary debates in media studies about the representation

of the working class. A number of people in those debates assume a privileged position by virtue of having or claiming working class origin. This, in a rather Lukacsian classical Marxist mode, is proposed as their qualification to speak about the experience of the working class, because they were born in it. Conversely, just to go back to *Shameless*, it could be argued that Paul Abbott's got no right to be producing that material because although he might have been born in those circumstances he's a rich man now. It's a sort of curious essentialism, I don't think it will ever go away but it's terribly important, as Ken says, that this bugbear should be debated and held off in its more pernicious effects.

Nick: The new Fed has dropped the 'working class' bit. It was always a problem, for example in the '80s we had discussions about how 'worker writing' represented all the people on benefits. It still carried as a lot of the population of the Fed have become older and people are on their pensions. But there was a small minority, perhaps only represented by me, who felt that it was a mistake to drop the 'working class' because even though it wasn't very good as a definition it's still making a stance, in a way. Is there an approximate working class value that you can place on this kind of publishing or was it always muddy?

David: There is a strong academic theorisation that things have changed radically in recent years. A German sociologist, Ulrich Beck says that we all live in a 'risk society' where things aren't plannable and you don't know what will happen tomorrow, you haven't got a career and you're living on bits and pieces. Actually what he's talking about is that risks that used to be experienced by working class people are now experienced by middle class people as well. In the present crisis they're making a terrible fuss about it. I was interested in that you were saying that there were debates in the Federation about whether people on benefits could be called working class, because now we're going back to a very classical Marxist definition of the lumpen proletariat, the reserve army of labour. In Marx's time, when there was still heavy industry, someone who was a member of the lumpen proletariat who was unemployed at a certain time could be assumed to still be able to move back into employment at a later stage. We're now in

the situation post the industrial collapse of Mrs Thatcher, where people who are in that situation are now condemned to that for eternity and their children will be in it too. That's what Shameless is about, three generations of unemployment. That definition, 'working class', has to be changed, it can't have the same simple value that it had in the era of trade unionised working class in the manufacturing industries. The miner's strike was the end of that story. 'Working class' as a clear and coherent value was always debatable but I think it is much more problematic now.

Ken: It's not so much the decline of manufacturing but there are obviously place attachments that relate to class. Liverpool docks provide a very different kind of place and working class culture to that of Glasgow clothing manufacturing or to fishing in Cornwall, or the furniture trade in East London. A lot of the oral history picked up this relationship between geography and class, because the original reason that the ship building industry happened there and the fishing industry or agriculture happened here was for purely topographical reasons. That has also changed now. You can have a call centre in Liverpool just as well as you can have a call centre in Cornwall or the Isle of Scilly if you want, so contemporary jobs have no place-identity or specificity about them. That's another problem that we're still trying to deal with because it's easy to wrap class around place and together they form an even stronger bond. We're now dealing with the floating nature of employment as well as the floating nature or the transitional nature of so much place. In Hackney 60-70% people are not born in the Borough, and it's an area of very high transition.

David: You do have to think about differences. What Ken says is entirely true – but 50% of people in Britain still live within 5 miles of where they were born. Most grandparents claim to see their grandchildren at least once every two weeks, which argues for a low level of intergenerational mobility. There is still place attachment. If you're running a project where you want to bring people together and write and talk about their experiences, the common experience of place (or the differential experience of the same place) still seems to me to be a very valuable base on which to do it. There is a kind of romanticisation of diaspora and

migration in which we're all seen as 'migrants', but we're not all migrants in the same way. Those are differences that seem to be very well worth exploring and encouraging. People need to articulate how they deal with those difficulties, whether it's the difficulties of coming to a new place and learning to deal with it, or the difficulties of feeling stuck in a place that you'd like to get out of but you can't find a way.

Nick: If you look back at the publications that were produced over a thirty year period that was very much a feature of the initial ones –

Ken: East Bowling History Workshop –

Nick: Bristol BroadSides' Bristol Lives (1987, 1988) and Centerprise's Working Lives (1977, 1979) were particularly good applications of that. It might have been a change in the way that these organisations were organised, but local identity seemed to fall away. Were you aware of those sort of changes taking place in the pattern of writing over time?

Ken: Yes I can see in retrospect. The decline of local history groups as part of the Federation membership became more obvious as more and more writers groups were being organised around creative writing and performance. Obviously it's easier to organise around a live event like the annual get together of the Federation. It's easier to bring poems than to read extracts from a book about the weaving trade or something like that. Dave's point is very true that all the work in the Federation about democratising the process of writing and performing and performing with others and group improvisation is now very much part of the mainstream. If anybody said 'we've got some lovely poems by children here' I don't think anyone would blink an eyelid. Fifty years ago poems written by children would not have been anywhere on the school curriculum, - the BBC or anywhere, or poems written by a miner or in the case of Joe Smythe, a railway guard. Now a lot of these poems are in mainstream anthologies.

## Geographies and histories

What is still difficult is developing a new way of doing history around place. The old thing was that you tape recorded people about their memories of a traditional industrial process or way of



life. It was fascinating because that may have been the dominant mode of work in that area. Today there are tremendous new opportunities for doing place-based and oral – maybe we shouldn't call it 'history' but perhaps 'experience' – as a way of bringing people together again and using the tape recorder or the camera to represent the lives and experiences and aspirations of very mixed groups of people in diverse areas. There's been less formal inventiveness in integrating spoken voices either on the radio or in literature. I can't think of any great books of oral history in contemporary times. One exception to this is the fine poem about the River Dart by Alice Oswald (2009), which is based on tape recordings of people who fish on the Dart, gamekeepers and so on.

Nick: We were talking earlier about the miners' strike – it's been 25 years since then and there's been a series of tv documentaries revisiting it. I was surprised that there didn't seem to be very much more published about it because at the time – I wish I'd collected more of these myself – there was a massive explosion of writing by groups that were just formed for the strike. There were hundreds of women's publications and oral history groups writing about the process and history as they were living in it and very consciously doing that. But there hasn't been any retrospect stuff from groups like this. Maybe it's because that kind of identity, with the mining industry, the railways or steel isn't really there anymore.

David: There isn't that easy basis any more. One of the valuable things that people still involved with the Federation might want to think about is not whether or not new stuff is produced but what's happened to the stuff that was produced. The Federation might develop a more coherent strategy about where it would like its archives to be and making available what has already been produced which sits in too many people's basements or attics. We've tended, all of us, to think 'well, I haven't thrown it away, I've kept it safe'. But as long as it's safe it's dead. It's better that one takes a little bit of a risk to keep it less 'safe', if it means that it's more accessible to other people who might make value from it and learn things from it and use it. I think the work of reconceptualising an archive, not just storing for posterity, but making accessible and telling people about the stuff that is there is a terribly important resource.



- Nick: My collection is one of the largest ones still around, and there's the Fed's archives at Pecket Learning Community. These things are extremely fragile, you know if you're doing research they're so ephemeral...
- Ken: I gave my collection to the Mass Observation archive at Sussex University, a couple of hundred pamphlets and books produced by various groups around the country.
- David: Of the contemporary ones that I know of, there is one that Paul Long has developed at Birmingham which is specifically around Charles Parker. One at the University of East London which Mika Nava is co-ordinating which is designed to be much more inclusive, to do cultural history, class, politics and so on.
- Nick: If you were going to pick out a book from this movement, what should people really read or listen to?
- Ken: There's a collection by Jack Davitt (Ripyard Cuddling)(1993), a guy who worked in the Newcastle shipyards. He basically sold his poems to the workforce, in a very old tradition of the ballad – like sea shanties and so on. He was a balladeer and his audience were his mates. Joe Smythe is another (1979, 1986) a railway guard and active in the union and so on. His seriously good poems are very much around the railways and some are quite technical, but he was writing for his fellow railway workers. That's one thing that the Fed was able to widen the distribution of and to show that this tradition carried on.
- David: My question would be contemporaneously, how about some poetry from people who work in call centres. Ken was using the example of the transformation of industry and how call centres could be anywhere. There seems to be an enormous potential for developing work which is based on the new commonalities of employment. It's generating new drama on the television – the writers of *Goodness Gracious Me* now have a new programme which is based in a call centre in India. The premise that these places themselves have cultures about which people can write seems to me perfectly valid. The fact that they're not the same as the experience of an engine driver or a coal miner doesn't seem like a problem to me – sometimes the movement has perhaps romanticised the manufacturing basis of employment, or perhaps I've just seen it that way.

Ken: The classic soap operas that people watch now feel completely historical. Coronation Street and East Enders where the focus is the street now seems to us almost as anachronistic as the factory gate being the centre of working class life. A lot of media are struggling to find the place or the site where these voices come together, because they clearly do, in the supermarket or the street market, but the fact is the street and the factory are in the past. It may be the call centre, it could be the university – by the time that 50% of the population go to university.

Nick: The Uni could be an everyday story of working class life!

David: Manifestly there has been a lot of change to do with the internet and the way that transport and communication has ‘reduced’ distances. One of the things that we almost get fooled by is an idea that there used to be geography but now anything is anywhere. It’s just not true. If I phone up the call centre and ask about the next train to Manchester I won’t be speaking to anyone in Britain. But they’re not just going to be anywhere else in the world, chances are they’re going to be in India specifically because the British empire bequeathed to India the combination of a low wage economy and English taught in schools, for the same reason that a high percentage of French and Spanish call centres are in Northern Africa. It’s not that there’s no geography, it’s that people are still in places but now there’s this virtual dimension of their lives laid on top of it. We have to understand how the virtual and actual dimensions of their lives are inscribed together. To take one example, anthropologists have looked at how in Trinidadian society many people work abroad. In every family one of their members at any one time is somewhere else, working to send back money through the wire. So their notion of family involves the fact that there is always one person who can’t be there. The interesting thing here is the specific way that the internet and these new communications technologies affect the sense of place in Trinidad. I think one of the important things to figure out is how we live in places and ‘non-places’ at the same time. It’s not that the internet wipes out place. I think we have to help people articulate those two dimensions of their lives. And what’s interesting is that a lot of the most profitable internet sites. Facebook, UpMyStreet and so on, are actually to do with intensifying communication between people

who are already in communication, they're not necessarily that far away from each other. It's a thing that we're all now dealing with in our lives, and enabling people to articulate that experience is a very important project.

Nick: There's maybe a sense of carrying 'a place' with you that may not be where you are now but where you've come from. All those Alan Sheldon books which are quite successful, of 'Memories of whatever town you happen to be in', collections of old postcards were very like those backyard and backstreet Brighton books that QueenSpark (n.d.) produced, or the Shop book Griffiths n.d.), collections of old photographs. I guess people are buying them through Amazon to show their kids 'this is where I grew up'.

Ken: More copies of the Hackney Gazette are sold in Essex than in Hackney. The attachment to the local newspaper is stronger outside the locality than it is inside.

### Freezing cultures

David: It goes back to a long historical discussion about the way that cultures get frozen in the diaspora. When people go looking for the most authentic version of the Childe ballads from Scotland they find them in the Appalachians; to find the most authentic Irish music, go to Chicago, don't go to Dublin. It's understandable to want to show your children where you came from, and nostalgia is not necessarily a dirty or an intrinsically problematic word, but the problem is that cultures get frozen as they go into migration and become a matter only of memory.

Nick: In David Vincent's (1981) book on 19<sup>th</sup> century working class writing he says one motivation of people for writing their autobiographies was that they'd witnessed so much change that they felt that their kids wouldn't believe their story. Setting it down on paper was a way of authenticating it. We're talking about the same kind of thing now.

Ken: There were discussions or arguments in the Federation when several reminiscence groups tried to join. These were therapy groups of the elderly, some of whom had dementia, though it was the professionals who were in control of the process and therefore

there was a question about were they eligible to join a Federation that was very much about self-empowerment. Even if the material coming through the reminiscence group was intrinsically very interesting but it wasn't within the agency of the people speaking, someone else was acting as the entrepreneur for that material. There was always the question of the role of the intermediary in that form of production.

Nick: It's quite widely used as a practice now in working with the elderly and in working with people in learning difficulties and it should be more widely spread in care homes and so on, but there are several approaches to that which didn't always translate to the membership. Gatehouse did a book which sold through a rehab catalogue Later on the issue of agency wasn't so vexed. By the 1990's we'd dropped a lot of those ideological arguments.

Several other such projects sent their books for review by the Federation's magazine but were never members. It was not possible because of the membership requirement to attend the AGM, and people couldn't travel or the facilitation of their travel by care staff was too expensive and demanding. Generally such groups were formed for a brief publication project by an arts worker so were not really developed to be sustainable. They wouldn't have lasted long enough to consider or gain advantage from membership, but there was an Age Concern group from the North East who briefly joined. We met some of these groups through a series of regional events, where we tried to take the Fed out to the regions, because it was centred on only a few centres of population. For people in Cornwall coming to the AGM could be quite a daunting experience because there were two days of travel tacked on to either end of it. But the regional events brought in quite a mix of people from different groups running workshops – we tried to run about 4 a year during the late 80's and early 90's until the funding ran out, and there were those sorts of connections then. But by the time the old Federation folded up it was nearly all writing groups.

Ken: And interestingly some of the success stories like Jimmy McGovern from Scotland Road Writers' Workshop, Tony Marchant from Basement Writers, these are regarded as great TV writers, and are in fact regarded as some of the three or four great television

dramatists of the generation. Dramatic speech did seem to be one of the strongest areas of working class writing.

Nick: There's Henry Normal, the comedy writer, who was from Commonword in Manchester and Nottingham Writers

Ken: - and John Cooper Clarke who started out with the Federation. And it's this connection with the voice that we haven't really talked about. Hanif Kureshi wrote in the introduction to one of his books which was about hearing John Lennon's voice for the first time. He said when that voice arrived on the BBC, when the Beatles started, this voice had so much pain and anger. It was unbelievable. I think there is something about the human voice, it can be enormously disruptive and challenging. Under the BBC of Reith the voice was policed rigorously, onerously. Only a very narrow range of voices were then being broadcast to the nation.

David: Especially in the key moments, the interstitial spots, the headline spots which had to be spoken in the white public school manner or you weren't allowed on air. Again that has rather fundamentally changed, and I think the politics of community publishing has played a part in bringing that about.

I also think that when we're looking back at the history, we shouldn't just be concerned with establishing what has been a continuity or what has been a 'success' in its initial terms, because the periods are so different. It's not like because something is good now, it will always be good. Something else may be needed. What was good in '84 will be much less useful now, because you've got to speak to a new set of problems, a new set of experiences. The fact that the emphases of the primary forms of expression might have changed over the period isn't necessarily problematic but is precisely to do with the need to adapt to different times.

### *Writers, performers and readers*

Nick: We've talked a lot about history, but one of the things that to me was very important was the workshop process, the discussion of writing, the recommendations of other things that people should look at, that we should read all kinds of stuff. It was one of the things that I found particularly valuable from the experience, personally. There was loads of stuff that I wouldn't have otherwise

come across, heard about or read. It was about the marriage of a creative process to a self taught process because you were taking apart other people's writing and asking 'can I do that?', experimenting with techniques and styles

David: People had to develop a way of doing that which wasn't to put someone down, to be able to say 'well actually I don't think that bit works as well as the first bit'. Without putting people on the defensive. That seems one of the tremendously productive aspects of the workshop process when it works well, of people being able to develop the skill to articulate difference without it being a form of negativity.

Ken: But also because we did performances and public readings you then were able to say to someone, 'look you've got six poems but actually two really work very well, and if we're going to do a reading we think you should do those two.' There was a kind of 'rehearsing' so the relationship between the writing, discussing and then the performing for everybody involved a degree of self-criticism and understanding. That was much more collective than the traditional literature class where there was a teacher who said 'C plus for that'. And performance has been central to the whole Federation ethos, hasn't it?

Nick: Yes, you could see somebody read something out and be struck by the power of the reading of it which might not be evident on the page, and then go off and buy it – you could see the person and read the book or read the book and see the person, just that whole ability to approach people and talk about their writing and say 'I liked that' or 'that triggered off something for me'. Having that continual workshop process going on beyond the actual workshop itself. I think why the Fed – and the New Fed - has continued was because of the strength of that kind of relationship. You can go into a group of people that you haven't seen for years and years and you're there straight away.

Ken: Another part of the of the Federation thing was to create new readers. It was astonishing that a shoemaker's autobiography in Hackney could sell 2,000 copies in Hackney. So what in today's jargon is called 'market penetration' was phenomenal. A collection of stories by school children could sell 1500 copies just within one borough. There was a process not simply of encouraging people to

write but creating a real interest. And there was a dual cover price – there was a Hackney price and an outside cover price to cope for the whole problem of distribution and dissemination ..

In the early days of the Federation there was also a lot of interest and excitement about community radio as another medium for disseminating local writing but it didn't really develop.

Nick: There was also the programme that was broadcast in the first week of Channel 4, among the people in it were Alan Gilbey and Roger Mills. Gladys McGee (then in her 70's) was on the back of a donkey performing poems about being the Virgin Mary and also Britannia on Empire Day, both roles she had been denied at school!

Ken: That was when Channel 4 had the remit to produce regional films Channel 4 was required to programme so many hours a week of regional production. And there were some quite good links in the North East, for example, between Strong Words, which is just about still going, and people who ran the Side Gallery and Amber Films.

There were echoes of that in the admiration that people felt for the Federal Writers Project in America, New Deal stuff that was very regionally based. Dozens of wonderful histories were produced by poets, writers and photographers. I think for a while there had been some hopes of something similar of regional forms of dissemination and production beginning to happen. And I think it's interesting what has happened to regionalism within the British psyche now as a space for identity - it's probably weakening now that the powers of the county councils have been largely abolished.

Nick: There's a very definite Yorkshire or Sheffield identity and not only that but down to individual parts of Yorkshire. If you're from Barnsley that's a whole different universe from Rotherham. I don't know if that's a ubiquitous thing.

David: I think what's interesting is the places in which it does survive and the places in which it is forgotten. I don't think it is a one way story because you do get the re-invention of it. In the present credit crunch situation of people not taking foreign holidays the British tourism industry is busy re-inventing regional identities apace as part of our national jigsaw. There are places, South Yorkshire is probably one, where people have a strong sense of their regional identity, I think East Anglia is another. But it can't be assumed to

exist as it did in a period where everybody had a regional identity, where now only some places do.

Nick: But I think they are also emerging aren't they. I think you could see in some of the books that came out – like *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers* (Adams 1987) which was about the Asian community from the 1930's or some of the things about the Jewish East End which were about a period from the 1930s onwards – that were focussing on a 'within living memory' or within living generations' memory. I went to visit Stevenage Survivors the other week – a New Town, 60 years old, but clearly people were talking in terms of a common experience because that's what they'd grown up with, there was a sense of a shared space.

Ken: Another thing that was happening at the same time of the publication of *The Republic of Letters*, was the appropriation of traditional genres like the crime thriller by feminists and gay and lesbian and also local identities. Rebecca O' Rourke wrote *Jumping the Cracks*, a crime thriller set in Hackney, which was as much about the nature of the streets and people as it was about a particular murder. Crime is very locally specific, and is often used to understand a particular town or city, which is why it is a very good vehicle for social comment or analysis.



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# Rethinking society and culture

Changes in the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers since 1982

by Tom Woodin

When the *Republic of Letters* appeared in 1982 the Fed had been in formal existence for six years although many of the member groups had been established in the early 1970s and the roots of the movement stretched back even further. The book grew organically from the activism, sociability and expanding collective identity that characterised the Fed in its early years. Groups aimed not just to make culture accessible to working class people but also germinated and propagated it from within working class communities. There was a widespread feeling that cultural and educational institutions had excluded the majority from learning and culture. Working class people had been silenced for too long and denied the right of cultural expression; encouraging them to write became a crusade nurtured through writing and publishing workshops based on participation, activism and friendship.

The early Fed groups positioned themselves both in opposition to and as alternative to mainstream cultural and educational forms, as a democratic challenge to elitist, competitive and profit-based conceptions of “Literature” and “History”. They worried about the “professionalisation of cultural production”. Indicative of this wariness, the FWWCP Executive Committee minutes reported in 1980 that a “Macmillan rep is prowling around groups,” an idea that many people today would find hard to understand in their eagerness to be published. Nor was the opportunity for television coverage always welcomed with fears being raised that

it would compromise the message and misrepresent the writer. Similar concerns were expressed about academics and the press preying on writing groups to enhance their own career development.

In this potentially explosive yet creative context, writing a book about the Fed would face many challenges. At least seven people directly contributed to the *Republic of Letters*, each involved in different ways and keen to represent their various perspectives. In places the narration in the book breaks down in recognition that no common ground could be found, for instance, on the meaning and practices of culture. Despite the sensitivity shown to Fed writers, some remained sceptical of the whole project – writing about it carried intrinsic dangers of representation and diverted attention away from actual working class people writing. There was also a gut feeling, almost superstitious, that writing about the Fed in some way foreshadowed its demise.

However, these political and emotional reservations were tempered by the urge to project the Fed in wider social and cultural circles which had often met this burgeoning movement with a cold silence. The authors were eager to respond to explicit and implicit criticisms of the Fed that were becoming apparent, even among ostensibly sympathetic radical and socialist constituencies: lack of writing skills, lack of literary appreciation, lack of socialist consciousness and lack of a critical historical awareness were just some of the supposed shortcomings raised by such critics. Moreover, writing a book from within the movement seemed a far superior option to allowing outsiders to do it.

The *Republic* crystallised the preoccupations of the Fed in its early activist phase and represented a particular historical moment that was changing rapidly. In delineating this history since 1982, a number of broad periods of change are discernible. The years following the publication of the book would be characterised by intense discussions on the nature of the movement in which the politics of identity became increasingly pervasive. In addition, debates with the Arts Council of Great Britain over whether the Fed should receive public funding and the nature of “quality” in literature subsided a little and, at one point in the early 80s, the Fed received support for part-time temporary staff. However, this was a limited success and the movement would largely depend upon the active participation of writers to sustain itself, especially after 1985 when Arts Council funding for literature as a whole was drastically reduced. But from

1992 regular funding from the Council marked the onset of a period of stability during which the Fed would be characterised by an increasingly eclectic and looser network of groups; many international links were also forged. These years also saw the significant decline of oral history and autobiography which became increasingly difficult to finance and sustain. Tragically, in 2007 the FWWCP suffered financial collapse and the paid worker was dismissed – a not uncommon historical experience among radical initiatives. Yet the Fed has not gone away. More than three years on, activists have continued to hold meetings, email groups, and writing events; a new membership structure based on individuals and groups along with a new name, The Fed—a Network of Writing and Community Publishers—have been agreed. This is helping to keep alive the potential to re-build a powerful cultural formation.

A number of themes have overlapped with these broad phases since 1982. In fact, many features of the early Fed were to endure and persist in such a way that the Federation of “Worker Writers” would often seem to be out of place in the proceeding years. Even though the campaigning and openly political aspects of many of the founder groups became less pronounced over time, the commitment to re-making the cultural sphere remained an implicit and widely held assumption. The writing of working class people who had not necessarily “made it” was seen to carry enormous potential not only for individual writers but also for the more ambitious and nebulous promise of an expanding cultural democracy.

Such a vision had been central to the early Fed—connecting the local and specific to broader aspirations for social, cultural, and political change. In the coming years this impulse for liberation would continually be constrained by wider social forces as well as a number of contradictions inherent in the lives of working class writers themselves. Thus, personal and political issues were to be continually re-cast through the rapid changes taking place in the wider society. In particular, the nature of working class writing and personal experience; publishing and communicating with audiences; the politics of identity; and problems of organisation have been persistent and thorny issues. The way in which these issues were interconnected with social and political changes also lent them a general significance. In some cases, the Fed provided a very visible forum where such developments became distilled and strengthened in their power and concentration; certainly the openness and democratic nature

of the movement facilitated the free discussion and expression of wider tensions and dilemmas. In this sense, the Fed's history has operated as a microcosm of broader social changes.

Most obviously the Fed has been embroiled in the on-going transformation of social class both in its objective and subjective dimensions. The period since the early 1970s has witnessed the dramatic decline of class as a way of living and speaking and as a means of understanding society. Traditions of working class institutions and practices have also dissipated. The gradual eclipse of social class from public life can be seen as part of a conscious strategy across the political mainstream. Most notably, during the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government set out to undermine the practices and ideas of working class solidarity as epitomised by its combative assault on the miners during the 1984/5 strike. In addition, the intensification of "globalisation" and the attendant population movements have made issues surrounding "diversity" ever more pertinent which also impacted upon class configurations. Of course such developments were already well underway long before the 1970s and the Fed itself was a response to some of these changes. Indeed, from the inception of the Fed it attempted to grapple with the ways in which class was changing; its continued existence testifies to the complex ways in which class has continued to play an important role, albeit in more shadowy and less tangible forms.

## Writing

The first Fed anthology, *Writing* argued that good working class writing "must contain in its tissues and exude from its pores" working class experience. Understanding the history of the working class through exploring personal memory had been a paramount motivation for many groups, particularly for community publishers which focused upon oral history and autobiography. Individual experience provided a poignant lens to view the seemingly monumental changes in working class culture that had taken place within living memory. A sense of ending and loss infused much of this writing, a reflection in part of the break up of "traditional" forms of working class ways of life.

Many autobiographies written in the 1970s and 80s mined the sense of community that was forged in the period before the Second World

War in local and specific ways and in spite of widespread poverty. For others, the focus on material hardship as well as activism in the labour movement could serve as an alternative organising theme to that of community. However, from the mid-1980s this genre began to decline as publishers gradually sought out different experiences to represent, such as Maurice Beckman's enormously successful *The 43 Group*, published by Centerprise, about the activities of a Jewish anti-fascist group in the East End of London after World War Two. This and other books were indicative of a move away from searching out "common" and representative experiences in favour of unique stories with a general interest.

Community publishers also engaged with the experiences of minority ethnic groups. During the 1980s activists would become aware that some oral histories and autobiographies portrayed a history of the "white working class," just at a time when Britain was becoming increasingly diverse. This was often more apparent in the historical work rather than the broad range of writing that was taking place across all the workshops. A number of groups developed publishing initiatives in this area and impressive work was carried out by the Ethnic Community Oral History Project in west London which emerged in the later 1980s and continued successfully for much of the 1990s. It helped to chart the lives of black and minority ethnic groups, even during the pre-war period, by turning resources over to specific groups who were supported to make their own books based on memory, interviews and writing. These included publications produced by Greek, African Caribbean, Irish, Iranian, and Polish networks among others.

Similar concerns affected QueenSpark Books in Brighton which had successfully developed autobiographical and oral history work. In the early 1990s it expanded its repertoire by publishing *Daring Hearts*, a gay and lesbian history. By the early 2000s the group's well-established focus would shift to online and multi-media work. The success of QueenSpark had helped to spur on the work of Brighton Museum in developing on-line community publishing. In fact, across the country, many local government services added community publishing to their range of activities, initially through partnerships but, in some cases, at the expense of Fed and other voluntary groups. By the turn of the Millennium there were hardly any community publishers left within the Fed. Much of the publishing had to be done by individuals themselves or was carried out by larger groups able

to raise funding such as Age Exchange in south east London, a theatre and reminiscence group which had been a member of the Fed for a number of years. This reflected a difficulty in financing this now established form of activity as well as the greater availability of on-line resources and discussion groups.

Educational changes since the early 1970s also affected Fed writers. As the *Republic of Letters* testified, writing by school children had been tremendously important in getting the Fed off the ground and stimulating writing and publishing groups nationally. Young people would continue to be involved in the Fed for many years but, over time, they would of course grow older; the “young people” originally in the Fed are now middle aged. In the 1970s, these young writers had emerged from a particular educational context in which a network of radical London teachers were attempting to make progressive educational traditions relevant to the experience of the urban working class child. These activities would be gradually eclipsed from mainstream educational practices that would become dominated by standards, testing and, eventually, a national curriculum. As a result, the numbers of young people coming into the Fed from such formal educational sources would dry up, which in turn impacted on the age profile of the movement as a whole. Having said this, Fed activists would continue to support young writers by bringing their own children to events and by publishing anthologies of young writers’ work. Discrete workshops in schools continued to take place although these tended to be additional to mainstream provision and increasingly became the remit of more professionalised writers and writing organisations.

Similarly, even in the less regulated world of adult literacy, a core curriculum introduced in the 1990s would make it much more difficult to pursue open-ended writing and publishing with students. These practices had already been constrained during the 1980s as adult literacy provision was regularly restructured and forms of testing and certification were introduced. Groups like Write First Time that pioneered student publishing in adult literacy in the 1970s suffered direct cuts in funding resulting in part from political interests – a not uncommon experience. Despite these constraints, groups such as Gatehouse, a Manchester based publisher of student writing, successfully weathered these storms and expanded from the mid-1990s by working with family literacy groups, Asian women and



prisoners among others. Its demise in the mid 2000s was largely due to internal factors rather than an inability for this work to thrive in a difficult environment. Furthermore, the inauspicious context did not prevent ex-members of staff from continuing the work and New Leaf publishing has emerged from the ashes, already with many titles to its name.

The other main avenue for working class expression, at the very heart of the Fed, has been the writing workshops. As more basic and fluid forms, workshops have been sheltered from some of the institutional, financial and structural pressures that affected community publishers and adult literacy groups. Some voluntary-run workshops such as Basement Writers were first established in early 1970s and did not feel that different to newer additions such as Grimsby Writers and others that came into the Fed during the 1990s and 2000s. Of course being dependent on voluntary participation has made workshops vulnerable to sudden changes of membership or a temporary lack of interest. In some cases particular workshops ran their course and members split off to form new ones or searched out different and more challenging places to write – this has been a natural process of growth since the early 1970s.

By joining workshops and groups, Fed writers were embarking on a voyage of personal and social exploration into unknown waters. Learning how to express oneself through writing was not always easy. The ideas and experiences of writers were often rich and there was a strong impulse to communicate them, but translating stories into writing could meet with technical difficulties and personal obstacles. Indeed, the writing initially produced in workshops acted as a model for others to imitate, adapt and translate and, in this way, the Fed fostered cultural growth. In time these models might be perceived as well-worn and even stultifying, thus potentially paving the way for new bouts of creativity and inventiveness.

That the forms and content of worker writing would be expanded was an almost inevitable process nurtured by the early ideas and context of the Fed. For example, the widespread generalised use of “writing” rather than particular genres or forms was emphasised, and this reflected the need to allow new writers to experiment and grow in their work. Larger groups like Centerprise were able to openly question the division between forms of writing and brought together literacy, community publishing and writing workshops under one roof. As a result, writers could move across these divisions which were seen as excluding working class people. The Fed itself also operated as a conduit for those who moved from literacy



groups to writing groups or between writing workshop and community publishing.

Over time the specific focus of the Fed would also be debated and questioned from within workshops. For instance, writers had always been wary of representations of working class life that were devoid of humour and focused exclusively upon the damage of living in poverty. Reviewers in the Fed magazine, *Voices*, felt this applied to novels such as Pat Barker's *Union Street* which might be contrasted to a book like Basement writer Liz Thompson's *Just a Cotchell*, in some ways mirroring the former but in others more effective in its infusion of humour and voice. Similarly, many adult literacy students and tutors would welcome a shift from exploring poverty and oppression to the witty anecdote, as reflected in books like Chris Curley's *The Cardigan*. These creative movements reflected a wider tension around the multi-faceted nature of class. Some came to argue that an exclusive focus upon a class identity could result in a "burden of representation" that inhibited personal expression; writing for a known and local audience could also lead to self-censorship rather than openness. For instance, exploring sex and sexuality was a taboo subject in certain workshops. A tension grew in some writers between connecting personal experience to social class on the one hand, and developing more idiosyncratic and personalised expression on the other. Many of these tensions are apparent in *Once I Was a Washing Machine*, a significant collection of Fed writing from the 1980s.

While experimentation across forms persisted in workshops, for those who continued with their writing, expressing themselves in publicly recognised forms was essential. Taking writing a stage further led writers to specialise in poetry or fiction or autobiography. For instance, Jimmy McGovern and Tony Marchant, both of whom had been involved in Fed writing groups, developed dramatic forms and went on to achieve considerable success as playwrights. Drama enabled them to connect to much wider audiences through television than would have been the case with novels or poetry, a reflection of the way in which culture was viewed in terms of communication with working class people. It also projected a traditional strength of Fed writing – the use of spoken language and local accents and meanings.

Poetry and prose has also often been written for the spoken word and many Fed writers were active in nurturing performance poetry that has expanded exponentially in popularity since the 1970s. Activists would

initiate and develop performance venues and help to establish groups such as Apples and Snakes, now itself a national organisation promoting and supporting performance poetry.

### *Audiences and publishing*

The widening forms of writing fostered within the Fed were matched by the diverse ways in which publishing came to be understood and practiced – again, as a form of direct communication with readers. Thus leaflets, performances, posters and cheaply produced booklets took their place alongside the quality books that were published. Throughout the Fed's history there has been a desire to publish both quality and accessible products although, at times, there has been a tension between producing the more expensive books and the informal and cheaper forms of publication. Most groups that could afford the former have also tended to develop pamphlets and other means of publishing new and experimental writing. More recently the internet has created the basis for partnerships and interaction across geographical regions and countries and among writers who find it difficult to access the same physical spaces. For instance, this has enabled Fed writers to exchange their work with students in the USA.

As a result of the popularity of Fed books, new reading publics were established and this was especially true in areas such as Brighton, Hackney and Newcastle where strong local identities helped to ensure a demand for community publications over many years. In appealing to working class people the Fed brought into being groups of readers who may not have visited traditional bookshops and other established book-selling outlets. This demand was forged partly by selling books directly to “customers” who were also encouraged to become involved in workshops. Market stalls; door-to-door selling; utilising local shops, events, and public displays, as well as the bookshops set up by Fed groups themselves all helped to build a community of readers to support the production of these books. In addition, wider radical networks provided a further national market for these publications through a web of fairs, festivals, and workshops.

However, these audiences would begin to fragment during the 1980s. Activists moved out of alternative and oppositional networks to defend local services and attack Thatcherism from within the Labour Party.

Working class urban areas were experiencing gentrification and this contributed to the gradual break up of so-called “traditional communities” where many Fed books were sold. As groups searched out new publishing opportunities they aimed to extend beyond particular audiences. New writers and experiences were continually sought to help connect with wider groupings.

For example, in an area like Manchester, Commonword found that general working class writing sold less well than niche publications labelled as women’s writing or gay and lesbian writing. Commonword was based in the city centre and had never been closely connected to particular communities – its remit had been broader. The resulting development connected to an urge to professionalise the production of books in order to achieve wider sales across the whole North West of England and beyond. Fed groups had always been sympathetic to the argument that quality publications helped to value the writing but one tendency in this approach was to foster a reliance on mainstream audiences serviced by full-time paid employees. Centerprise would also be influenced by this approach and, as a result, ceased publishing and focused instead upon writing development and supporting writing workshops across North London. Increasingly these developments led to calls for greater “quality” in writing in order to appeal to audiences on the same basis as any other literary product. Such groups would later come under the shadow of the 2008 *McMaster Review* which called for a return to “excellence” and “judgement” in arts funding and thereby fired a warning shot across the bows of arts groups that serviced such intermediate and emergent artistic constituencies.

## Identity

Quality in writing was a key on-going discussion within Fed workshops. It meshed with another: the shifting identity of writers and their workshops. During the 1980s and 90s writing workshops were dramatically affected by the wider battles being fought over the politics of identity. Initially these revolved around class. While many workshops had been initiated by middle class facilitators, as working class writers gradually became more confident they asserted their independence and autonomy. Fears came to be expressed about “middle class managers” and the professionalization of writing activities as outlined in the *Republic*

of *Letters*. In addition, an influx of new member groups gave rise to concerns that the movement might be weakened and diluted. As part of this awakening, the class credentials of groups that wanted to join the Fed were scrutinised closely and, in the 1980s, some would be turned away as being too professional and middle-class. By contrast, in the late 1970s, this had been less likely to occur when a range of different groups were accepted for membership.

These issues were to be re-worked in relation to “new” identity groupings that were proliferating and expanding, particularly those based on women’s, black, disabled, and gay and lesbian constituencies. Writers from these groups had always been part of the Fed, but, for many of them, identities sharpened in the 1980s. Some black and women’s workshops emerged directly from within the shell of existing Federation groups; for instance, Liverpool 8 Writers Group or a similar Commonword workshop in Manchester’s Moss Side simply became more self-consciously “black writing groups”. The professionalising impulse in Commonword would interconnect with this development by establishing Cultureword which embraced minority ethnic writers, some of whom were wary of being cocooned as “community writers;” instead they yearned for more mainstream success. Again this could have class implications by dismantling bridges to the first time writer.

The majority in the Fed embraced these developments, attempting to hold together a range of contradictory viewpoints and identities, and eventually an equal opportunities policy was agreed in 1992. However, this was a difficult transition involving many acrimonious and traumatic moments. In 1982 the *Republic of Letters* printed a Fed press release which stated that black and women’s groups were automatically eligible join the Fed because they represented “repressed sections of the community”—in fact this was a bitterly contested point and was to become more so throughout the 1980s when intense and prolonged debates about the position of such “exclusive” groups would take place. As the language of class was being eclipsed in the wider society, one group of writers held ever more tightly to a class identity. Whereas “new” groups could identify some positive trends in society with the growth of similar groups elsewhere, this was not the case with specifically working class groups. The result was a conflict over resources and the increasing isolation and silence of sections of the white working class. Some

retained the idea of producing a distinctive literature based on a “unified experience” of class—in the process class could be transformed into a narrow identity, mirroring the emergence of the “new” groups.

The Fed is illuminating here because it was an example where such debates were given free reign. Even though identities hardened for a time, many people learnt a considerable amount from one another—learning that took place over many years. By coming together in this way, commitments became less clear than they had previously, and unlikely alliances and friendships were built up between people who were ostensibly on other sides of the fences that were being constructed elsewhere. In fact, participation in writing and publishing served a broad range of purposes for individual writers who crossed many barriers. The Fed operated not only as a source of identity but also of community, friendship, culture and beauty as well as a springboard for public achievements in writing and education. With growing confidence many writers returned to adult education classes and some became tutors themselves while others would go on to participate in a wide range of initiatives and organisations. Thus issues of identity were bound into the complex individual and collective journeys that writers took through the Fed.

Moreover, as a result of these debates, the door was opened to a widening array of member groups. A notable addition in the mid-1990s was the then burgeoning Survivors’ Poetry Network which facilitated poetry among those with experience of mental distress who had survived the mental health system. The advent of Survivors Poetry stimulated and contributed to discussions on mental health and disability in relation to writing, and it also helped to shine a spotlight upon a number of Fed practices. The network contained middle class members with experience of mental distress, many of whom were able to bring skills and resources to bear in supporting the network to grow. It also traversed another distinction within the Fed by including well-known writers in their anthologies, thus re-branding William Blake, TS Eliot and others as “survivors.” Furthermore, Survivors’ Poetry re-illuminated debates about “writing as therapy” that was being pursued by other emerging writing and literature organisations. This had always been an important aspect of most Federation groups but it had not been out in the open given the earlier disparagement from the Arts Council on just these grounds. Thus with the growth of the worker writers’ Federation and the entry of new groups,

collective learning and adjustment took place. This was also facilitated by growing international links, particularly with the USA, France, Germany, and Canada, which led to exchanges of experience and new partnerships.

## Organisation

In part these developments were facilitated and enabled by the openness of the movement and the dynamic relationships within it. The conviction that those at the bottom of society should be encouraged to speak and write directly informed the way in which groups were consciously constructed to foster just this sense of participation. Challenging the power of the tutor and teacher in educational contexts often spilled over into the promotion of informal workshop structures and connected to theories of “pre-figurative forms” that influenced some groups, i.e. that a future state of society might be lived and outlined in existing organisational structures and arrangements.

These experimental and loose groupings were complemented by more formal structures that the Fed inherited from its labour movement heritage—for instance, elected committees, chaired meetings, agendas and minutes, standing orders and so on. In some cases informal practices were criticised for failing to equalise power differences within groups. These could not easily be undermined and tutors, teachers and articulate middle class activists would continue to play significant roles in most groups. In these situations, structures could be introduced to reserve space and time for less confident people. Forms of leadership were interrogated, challenged and moulded so that power might be devolved to working class members who carried out the full range of group activities, from chairing and convening workshops to writing press releases and publishing books.

The Fed illustrates how both informal and formal structures could be used to construct more equal relationships. The Federation was constituted by autonomous groups but held together by a tight centre; this fact helps to explain the longevity of the movement—giving groups and individuals freedom to explore yet ensuring organisational continuity. For many years groups were very successful in balancing these different approaches.

However, it was a fact that increasing numbers of paid staff played significant roles in the Fed, especially during the 1990s when it was estimated that the Fed and its groups were populated by approximately

150 paid staff. One argument was that surviving in hostile and competitive environments required increasing levels of formalisation and control by paid staff in order to handle external funders and public bodies. It also reflected the success of such groups in arguing their case for funding. In the long run, paid staff could come to dominate and squeeze out volunteers and activists although the process was never that simple and, in many cases, they ensured the continuance of a group, expanded its work and even played subordinate roles to volunteers. Initially, workshops employed their own working class activists and members consciously argued for this. However, in time it could also lead to difficulties as paid workers faced unrealistic expectations and questioned whether they should become paid activists – some simply wanted a job. In other cases a mismatch of expectations arose in adapting to new work roles when activism became a salaried opportunity. For instance, in the success and popularity of the Scotland Road Writing Group in Liverpool helped it to claim funding for staff. But there were divergent views over what paid workers should be doing which led to a split and the establishment of Scottie Road '83, a workshop which continued within the Fed. More positively, these divisions also represented an expansion of the overall number of writing and publishing groups available to local writers.

Where there was a rapid turnover of staff, relations between the Fed and its member groups could become increasingly tenuous. This contributed to a trend for the Fed to become a more diverse agglomeration of groups. At the same time funders tended to view the Fed in terms of the benefits it provided for members rather than as a campaigning group. The Fed has had to grapple with this subtle but significant move between social movement and service provider by adopting multiple identities according to the occasion. In addition, despite the fact that the strong ownership of the Fed among its member groups gradually waned, particular activists and writers would continue to hold the Fed together and provide a sense of collective identity.

Many groups also consciously contained these divergent tendencies toward professionalization and participation. For instance, in the mid 1980s a tutor and a committed group of students established Pecket Well College, a residential college for adult literacy students, that championed participatory approaches in which students themselves controlled the organisation, ran workshops and classes, and employed staff. This often



involved very long meetings and a deep fear of staff “taking over” that could result in their exclusion from meetings, weakened communication and difficult working relations. Gaining funding from mainstream providers forced complex compromises between funders’ demands for classes with clear outputs and detailed information on students on the one hand, and the desire to run democratic and open workshops in which students contributed to teaching on the other. However, those involved have gained tremendously in skills and confidence and remain fiercely loyal to the college. Groups such as Pecket Well were for a time fêted by people in mainstream educational institutions that wanted to learn more about this unique approach and apply lessons to their own work. Such groups have managed to impact upon the mainstream in unexpected ways while maintaining a radical vision. Core funding remained elusive for such an experimental group and the College has suffered setbacks in the last few years. However, a re-constituted “Pecket,” having weathered many difficulties, is currently working confidently to re-establish itself.

...

The activities, assumptions and discussions that took place within the Fed have transmogrified from being quirky, revolutionary and out of place to being mainstream, normal and everyday. It is possible to identify debates, practices and issues, initially generated from within the Fed, that are now widely diffused. More broadly it has contributed to movements that have resulted in a wide range of educational and cultural changes such as creative writing classes, community publishing, community involvement in education, and family literacy and learning. The very existence of the Fed and the arguments that it has consistently made also contributed to wider institutional change. The softening approach to issues of access and diversity in the Arts Council during the 1990s was also matched by the emergence of urban cultural festivals in cities such as Sheffield and Manchester. In the early 1990s the Fed itself had reconfigured its AGM and workshops into a “festival of writing.” Some Fed groups moved comfortably into the spaces created by such changes, for example, connecting with the growth of semi-commercial presses. This did not mean that they simply became “incorporated” into the mainstream. Rather, these moves represented attempts to change institutions which had offered a limited acceptance within a given hierarchy. These may



yet transpire to be temporary gains in the light of recent injunctions to exclusively fund “excellence” which may result in the closing down of such opportunities. Such progress can never be considered permanent and embedding it has been an on-going process.

The Fed has also impacted directly on the literary scene. Well-known writers have emerged from the Fed, even though this was never the core purpose of workshops – participation and access have been the key concerns. It is interesting to note that many successful writers emerged from the earlier periods of the Fed—when it adopted its most oppositional stances and was shunned by mainstream institutions. This was especially apparent as writers gained in maturity and experience through the 1980s. During this time writers in the Fed met informally and supported one another in their career progression such as Rebecca O’Rourke, Anne Cassidy and Roger Mills who all read each other’s work that would be published by commercial presses. The list would also include both Jimmy McGovern and Tony Marchant; Alan Gilbey, who writes scripts for TV animation; writer and poet Henry Normal; writers, storytellers and poets Sandra Agard, Patience Agbabi, Lemn Sissay, Levi Tafari, and Bridget O’Connor; as well as the original punk poet John Cooper Clarke who was published in *Voices*. More recent writers to achieve success include Commonword’s Pete Kalu and Qaisra Shahraz. The achievements of such writers were generally applauded by workshops and their success was seen to reflect well on the movement as a whole.

Since 1982 the success of the Fed in surviving such inhospitable times should not be underestimated. Given the internal difficulties of financing and sustaining radical organisations, and in comparison with the short life of similar initiatives, the Fed has shown tenacity and perseverance. Generations of people have managed to take hold of workshops and turn them to a useful purpose and this seems likely to continue. Even when the end appears to have finally come, activists and enthusiasts have, against all odds, simply jumped out of the coffin and kept going, rejuvenating themselves and their collective forms in the process. As a result we should not underestimate the considerable levels of continuity in the history of the Fed.

Of course this is not a moment for complacency. As the *Republic of Letters* warned in 1982, there is a great danger in remaining too marginal and small scale. Since that time there has been a widespread loss of

political agency and vision during a time of growing inequality. This paradoxical situation should make us reflect upon the still urgent need to nurture new voices and listen more closely to subordinate groups. As such the history of the Fed remains a source for re-thinking society and culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In part this draws on some already published articles:

- (2009) "Working class writing, alternative publishing and audience participation" *Media, Culture and Society*, vol 31, no 1, 79-96.
- (2008) "A beginner reader is not a beginner thinker': student publishing since the 1970s" *Pedagogica Historica*, 44, 1/2, 219-232.
- (2007) "'Chuck out the teacher?' The pedagogies of community publishing" *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 26, 1, 89-104.
- (2005) "Building culture from the bottom-up: the educational origins of the FWWCP" *History of Education*, 39, 4, 345-63.
- (2005) "'More writing than welding': learning in worker writer groups" *History of Education*, 39, 5, 551-67.
- (2005) "Muddying the waters: class and identity in a working class cultural organisation" *Sociology*, 39, 5, 1001-1018.





# Appendix



# TheFED and member addresses

## TheFED

TheFED is an umbrella organisation for individuals and community writing and publishing groups. We promote skill-sharing and encourage our members to support and help each other.

TheFED used to be called 'The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers' or 'The FWWCP'

TheFED aims to encourage and promote writing done by ordinary, working class people and people who may struggle to get their ideas down on paper.

TheFED values difference and welcomes people who lack confidence in themselves and their writing ability.

TheFED is run entirely voluntarily, by the members and for the members. We have no funding, no office and no paid workers.

TheFED welcomes people of all backgrounds and abilities. Our MiniFests are accessible and friendly. We try to cater for people's special needs as far as we possibly can. For example:

We offer 'writing hands' to help those who find it difficult to write down what they want to say.

- We try to provide a variety of foods that are suitable for people with food allergies or who have special diets for health or religious reasons.
- We make sure that the venues we use have good disabled access.

*Contact:* TheFED, 156 Gonville Crescent, Stevenage, SG2 9LY

Phone: 01438 225377

Mobile: 07954 141127

Email: [luciabirch53@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:luciabirch53@yahoo.co.uk)

[www.fed.btik.com/p\\_About\\_Us.ikml](http://www.fed.btik.com/p_About_Us.ikml)

## Members

### **The Bread is Rising Poetry Collective**

Since 1994, The Bread is Rising Poetry Collective has worked to spread consciousness through the arts. We are also committed to celebrating and commemorating conscious artists from around the world. Based in New York City, the Collective has performed across the United States and in Canada and England. In New York, we host the monthly series The Julia De Burgos-James Baldwin-Rev. Pedro Pietri-Lorraine Hansberry People's Cafe. Through The Bread is Rising Press, we publish books by our members and *The Voices of The Bread is Rising*, a journal of poetry, art and commentary. We also produce *We the People Speak*, a weekly show on the Manhattan Neighborhood Network. We also collaborate regularly with our sister organisations - also in the Fed network - Precious Promise Arts Circle and Writers Block Poetry Collective.

For Information on The Bread is Rising Poetry Collective, the DeBurgos-Woodbey-Pietri People's Cafe & We The People Speak.

Contact: Phone: 347.534.5715

E-mail: [thebreadisrising@excite.com](mailto:thebreadisrising@excite.com)

### **Grass Roots Open Writers (GROW)**

Grass Roots Open Writers (GROW) is a community writing and publishing group, that particularly welcomes people who need to develop confidence in expressing themselves.

GRASS-ROOTS - Working towards a foundation of literacy, communication and social skills. The organisation is run by the members themselves.

OPEN - Our meetings and events are accessible and friendly. We try to always be aware of our members' support needs and cater for them, as far as possible.

WRITERS - People who write for pleasure, healing, personal growth, insight, perspective or to inform. Our members have produced a broad range of writing which includes both formal and informal styles

Writing Workshop, Hastings Children's Library, every Tuesday, 10.00 - 12.00

Skill-Sharing Workshop, Roosevelt Court Lounge, every Wednesday, 10.00 - 12.00



Writing Workshop, Roosevelt Court Lounge, every Friday, 14.00 - 15.00, (except school holidays)

*Contact:* Ashley Jordan (Secretary), 25 Cumberland Road, Sidley, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex, TN39 5BU

Phone: 01424 730647

Mobile: 07932 231491

E-mail: [grass.roots.open.writers@gmail.com](mailto:grass.roots.open.writers@gmail.com)

[www.grass-roots-open-writers.btik.com](http://www.grass-roots-open-writers.btik.com)

### **Newham Writers Workshop**

Newham Writers Workshop began in 1986 as Forest Gate Writers Workshop, an adult education class, at Forest Gate School. We moved out of Forest Gate as a result of the adult education cuts of the late 80's and changed our name to Newham Writers Workshop. We have since become an independent group, running ourselves as a co-operative. After several moves around the borough we settled in 2003 at our current venue, St John's Church, Stratford Broadway E15, where we meet from 7.00 to 9.00 pm on Thursdays during term time. We kept (roughly) to school terms, our legacy from Forest Gate. We are a sociable, multi-ethnic group, our membership ranging from beginners to published writers. Come along and visit, find out if our workshop can work for you.

*Contact:* E-mail: [nwwstjohns@googlemail.com](mailto:nwwstjohns@googlemail.com)

<http://www.newhamwriters.org.uk/> or

### **New City Community Press**

Our mission is to provide opportunities for local communities to represent themselves by telling their stories in their own words. We document stories of local communities because we believe their voices matter in addressing issues of national and global significance. We value these stories as a way for communities to reflect upon and analyze their own experience through literacy and oral performance. We are committed to working with communities, writers, editors and translators to develop strategies that assure these stories will be heard in the larger world.

*Contact:* Steve Parks, New City Community Press, 7715 Crittenden St. #222, Philadelphia, PA 19118, USA

[www.newcitypress.org](http://www.newcitypress.org)

### **New Leaf Books**

*Contact:* Anne Chester, New Leaf Books, 5 Wardley Road, Walton,  
Warrington, Cheshire WA4 6JA  
E-mail: [amchester@btinternet.com](mailto:amchester@btinternet.com)  
[www.newleafbooks.org.uk](http://www.newleafbooks.org.uk)

### **Pecket Learning Community**

Pecket Learning Community: your say, your way, your chance to learn (formerly Pecket Well College), a West Yorkshire based charity, was set up and is run by people tackling difficulties with the written word. We bring people together to share a day, a weekend or a week, to learn from and support each other, to build on strengths and to work on difficulties. Creativity has been at the heart of our activities. We listen and encourage people to find their voice and use ‘writing hands’, where needed, to enable people to get their words on paper, whether it is their life story, poetry, articles for a magazine, a letter, funding applications, or for their studies. We work always on the principle that ‘a beginner reader is not a beginner thinker’ (Opening Time writing resource pack. Published by Gatehouse Books).

*Contact:* Registered Office, Pecket Learning Community, Co-op  
Buildings, Keighley Road, Pecket Well, Hebden Bridge, HX7 8QP  
Phone: 0113 815 0551  
E-mail: [office@pecket.org](mailto:office@pecket.org)  
[www.pecket.org.uk](http://www.pecket.org.uk)

### **Stevenage Survivors**

Meeting Place ... 21 Cuttys Lane, Stevenage, Herts, SG1 1UP.  
We meet every two weeks on Friday evenings 7.30 - 9.45 pm  
We hold a poetry/creative writing workshop  
Admission and refreshments free.

*Contact:* Roy and Lucia Birch, 156 Gonville Crescent, Stevenage, Herts, SG2 9LY  
Phone: 01438 225377  
Mobile: Lucia Birch, 07954 141127  
E-mail: [royb@survivorspoetry.org.uk](mailto:royb@survivorspoetry.org.uk)  
[luciabirch53@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:luciabirch53@yahoo.co.uk)

## **SOUNDWORK**

SOUNDWORK is a community arts project which runs a range of writing projects with people of all ages and abilities, and has set up the Coleford Festival of Words, to provide a platform for an annual celebration of words and a platform for local writing and publishing.

SOUNDWORK builds on the body of work achieved by Forest Artworks! in this fairly isolated rural area over the last 20 years and has always been a keen and active member of the FWWCP and more recently The Fed.

*Contact:* SOUNDWORK, Roger Drury, Woodend, Parkend Walk,  
Coalway, Coleford, Forest of Dean GL16 7JS

# Additional reading

*This is not a complete list. We have tried to represent material that offers some discussion rather than passing reference to the Federation, but it is quite possible that more exists particularly amongst the material produced by individual groups or in 'grey literature.'* Further resources are available through the website of The Fed: <http://www.fed.btik.com/home.ikml>

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