

## The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes

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**Author:** Jonathan Rose

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**Reviewer:** Donald MacRaild

The enormously energetic working-class reading cultures occupying the core of Jonathan Rose's magnificent study grew up from rather unpromising roots. For long periods, reading, like publishing, could be a dangerous business. In the sixteenth century, Thomas Cranmer had 'proposed to confiscate heretical texts and prosecute bible readers'; and, as Rose informs us, 'at least twenty people were burned for discussing heresy between 1539 to 1546'. We can see where Cranmer was coming from: just like Carlo Ginzburg's Menocchio the Miller, in *The Cheese and the Worms* (Routledge & Kegan Paul; London, 1980), those who could read might develop critical, political views or levelling tendencies. Robert Darnton's *Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (W.W. Norton; New York and London, 1995) shows that the authorities, fully in awe of the power of the word, worked themselves into frenzies about books, burning dummy tomes and imprisoning booksellers. In these early times, publishing and reading might have carried a health warning.

Nevertheless, if a vigorous reading culture could be developed and maintained in earlier times, against such zealous policing, then we might expect that those who had the tools to do so would read as much of anything as they could. Indeed, one of the themes of Rose's massive, evocative book is the indiscipline with which the discipline of reading was developed. Learning to read required staying power. Finding time to read inevitably meant rubbing against that great monolith, work; but even so, the reading culture of the working classes, from the eighteenth century onwards, was widespread, sometimes indiscriminate, and occasionally lacking in an internal logic – except to say that reading, any sort of reading, was somehow good for mind and soul. Thus, in the 1930s, Welsh miners read *Das Kapital*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Tarzan of the Apes*.

Rose owes an enormous debt of gratitude to John Burnett, David Mayall and David Vincent (which he fully acknowledges), for it was their exhaustive compilation of working-class autobiographies [*The Autobiography of the Working Class. An Annotated Critical Bibliography* (3 vols; Harvester; Brighton, 1984-89)] that provided the springboard for the *Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. Rose also follows in the tradition of Vincent's important books, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom* (Europa; London, 1981) and *Literacy and Popular Culture. England 1750-1914* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1989). Rose's study also might be seen as a development from John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses. Pride and Prejudice amongst the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (Faber and Faber; London, 1992). Although Rose's and Carey's are different types of studies, they share at least one common theme: the impact of a working-

class desire to consume a culture normally associated with those who were traditionally highly educated. Carey's and Rose's modernist writers—notably, Shaw and Lawrence – were fearful of the impact of a wider reading culture; they were also perhaps surprised at the success of those who produced *popular* fiction for the masses. Perhaps the elites had seen the way things really were. After all, if a Welsh miner would read Marx and the Brontës but not Woolf and O'Neill, it might be that the latter authors, not the readers, had got it wrong. Or perhaps the miners of Wales were snobs, preferring *real* classics of literature to (what were then, among the middle classes, at any rate) modish books?

Whereas Carey focuses on elite grumblings about the baseness of working-class reading habits and their potentially challenging effects, Rose aims to elevate the working class from the position of unthinking consumers of 'low' culture. Rose also seeks to show that not everything the ordinary man or woman read was trashy and inferior. Working-class people may not have read books with an academic vision, but they still sought classics and highbrow works. Moreover, those who thirsted for reading material were not only men. There was surprise and even alarm that women accounted for eight and 13 per cent respectively of subscribers to Alexander Pope's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. This situation was not considered agreeable by the men of the early eighteenth century. Rose reminds us of the comment of Thomas Burnet and George Duckett: because of Pope, 'every Country Milkmaid may understand the *Illiad* as well as you or I'. Not milkmaids, perhaps; but women, nevertheless. Similar fears were expressed with respect of how reading might affect men well above the social rank of the common farm servant. Francis Place, the noted nineteenth-century political activist and tailor, had orders cancelled by middle-class clients who could not stomach the idea of a needle-smith like him possessing more than 1000 books. And the pressure to conform to a particular (much narrower) reading culture than the likes of Place could countenance, also caused problems in the twentieth century. Not unlike a sketch from Monty Python, some families were worried when their kin 'came out' as thinkers, writers and aesthetes. An Irish labourer in Scotland, who tried to write (rather than simply read) literature was horribly scorned by his brother: 'If you'd just been a poof the priest could have talked to you or one of us could have battered it out of you. But what the hell can anyone do about a writer?'

While Rose's book springs from a important tradition of working-class history, this does not mean that the *Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* does not stand on its own – it does, most assuredly so. It is, in fact, a brilliantly illuminating analysis of the impulses that shaped working-class reading culture, from sheer autodidacticism, early education reform, revolutions in printing, working men's clubs, the settlement movement, theatre and music hall, the Workers' Educational Association, the Open University, and much else besides. This is a book about what people read before radio and television took over their lives (though it is also about what sort of radio they liked to listen to – and it was not all low-brow stuff). Nor was what they read merely restricted to popular fiction; at the same time as workers eschewed the modernists they were also reading H. L. Gates' revelatory account of the Armenian massacres of 1915 [*Ravished Armenia; or, "The Auction of Souls"* (1919)]. Predictably, at around the same time, Robert Tressell's *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (first published 1914) was well-thumbed by members of the same class as the heroes of the book: you did not have to be a future MP to exclaim at the tuberculosis of Owen or wince at the grisly self-slaughter of 'Nimrod'.

Rose's task of recording, reporting and explaining is made more difficult by his subjects' refusal to be bound by simple or uniform ideals. A singular theory thus escapes us. We might have expected to be able to chart working-class reading culture according to a simple model or two: but this cannot happen. Individual choices as well as common moods and shared fashions rest at the heart of Rose's book – as a result, his thesis is complicated and multi-layered. Autodidactic culture did not simply die out with the education reforms of the mid-nineteenth century: neither Forster nor Mundella fundamentally changed the way many people thought about the world of their reading. Increasing literacy levels simply opened up new possibilities. Far from producing a dull, conformist intellectual gruel, schooling provided ordinary men and women with further filters to apply to their vision of the world; and the skills in reading which might otherwise have been more difficult to achieve, were instead instilled by the state. Interestingly, then, few of the autobiographers and diarists used by Rose express loathing of school; most, in fact, seem to have been content there. This might simply be because school appeared easy next to work – I remember this as a

genuinely and wistfully expressed view among my own father's peers as they trudged off to work in the local shipyard. Schooldays were indeed the happiest days when much of the rest of adult life would be spent sweating inside torpedo tubes and the like with red-hot and dangerous welding all around. Such approval for school undoubtedly also developed among those who wrote of their lives because, without the core elements of education, no such task could have been undertaken. Whatever the cause of this obsession with the written word, visitors to Britain from overseas continued to be amazed about how much the working classes read. Elsewhere, according to Carl Moritz (1782), reading was restricted to the higher order; in Britain, it was pervasive and crossed the lines of class.

Equally, the independence of thought and action which is implied in the miraculous tales of weavers or miners skimming the pages during (or between) bouts of work does not lead to the emergence of a simple, teleological relationship between literacy and politics. True, weavers could be (and were) radical; true, they also had prodigiously high literacy levels (as noted in the west Lowlands of Scotland). This was because a book could be propped up on the weaving frame and read as the shuttle flew. We know of the weavers' literacy rates because of the levels at which they subscribed to magazines and periodicals. And it is also true that they were early to organise in protection of their craft (though technological change meant they had to). But reading did not lead straight into Chartism or the Labour Party. It could also lead towards a conservative disposition on the part of some; it also created that curious breed the working-class Tory, all imperial loyalty and Primrose League. What reading mainly did, which cut across political affiliations, was to create a questioning mind. As well as that, it also caused the welling up of a generalised appreciation of the brilliance of the book and a worship of culture as a thing to consume.

Less surprising than the complicated class position of reading, however, is the fact that women were less well represented than men, as poets, writers or indeed as known consumers of texts. This remained the case until probably the later nineteenth century. In even more general terms, Rose subscribes to the view that the dictum 'knowledge is power' really meant something to the pre-twentieth-century worker. We might also add that the power ran in numerous different ways. There can be no doubt that reading bonded people into social groups; and when it did this, it also held out the chance of creating political linkages. Thus, Rose rightly highlights the miners' institutes of South Wales as 'one of the greatest networks of cultural institutions created by working people anywhere in the world.' By the Second World War, for instance, the Tredegar Workmen's Institute had a library that circulated 100,000 volumes per year, a cinema that could seat 800, celebrity concerts, a film society and other events to demonstrate the cultural homogeneity of that community.

The list of what these people read is bewildering. The working man and woman were always more likely to consume yellow press and penny dreadful productions than were the middle classes; but they, too, knew and loved their classics. Few of them went on to become great scholars of the texts they admired; but few were without a critical sense of where their appreciation of Shakespeare or Milton sat in relation to that of others. Among readers, the lunchtime break from work or an evening at the CIU club with ale in hand, could become a competitive journey around critical views as to the meaning of this or that text. Working-class people also appear (at least from my reading of Rose's book) to have been adept at implying social relevance and political metaphor in the works they read. Perhaps everyone reads literature with the present in mind. If so, it is no surprise that the horny-handed fustian-jacketed reader saw worlds of unequal privilege upended (or else endorsed) in works of literature.

Perhaps the most controversial of Rose's chapters is the one in which he lays down further reasons why Britain developed no mass Marxist tradition. Some of his arguments are convincing; others less so. Of the latter, it is controversial to claim, as well as difficult to prove, that a mass engagement with Marxist politics was in some way stymied by alienation from individual British Marxists. (Support for Labour was never permanently compromised by the lack of appeal or over-bearing zealotry of many of Britain's socialists.) Where Rose is on firmer ground is in explaining how Marxists – foolishly, we might argue – strove to undermine many of the writers upon whom Britain's prodigiously broad-based autodidactic and/or working-class educational culture had been based. Declaring the classics of English literature to be bourgeois was

bound to remove a broad swathe of opinion from the Marxist cause, just as the limited availability in English of writings by European Marxists must have created something of a vacuum. Rose points to the difficulty of Marxist writings to explain the low rates of take-up. He is also right to imply that the goings-on in Stalin's Soviet Union were known to ordinary men and women and must have put them off. The war may have led to a temporary cessation of dislike for Stalinism, but it could not last.

Rose is to be applauded for writing such a book as this. Its dramatic effect is greatly enhanced by a superb use of quotations from autobiographies, memoirs, letters, etc. What emerges from these pages is a breathtakingly wide-ranging interpretative account of what working-class people read and what they thought of literature. *How* some of them found time to read is probably beyond most modern readers; *why* they did so is now much clearer. For this, and for much else, Rose deserves praise and a wide readership.

The author thanks Dr MacRaild for the warmth and generosity of his review

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