LITERATURE BELONGS TO EVERYONE

A report on widening access to literature

By VIOLET M. HUGHES

Commissioned by the Literature Panel of the Arts Council

PRESS RELEASE

ARTS COUNCIL

15 July 1991

LITERATURE BELONGS TO EVERYONE

A report on widening access to literature, LITERATURE BELONGS TO EVERYONE commissioned by the Literature Panel of the Arts Council and written by Violet M Hughes, is published today (Monday). Violet Hughes, a former member of the Arts Council's Literature Advisory Panel, is Research Associate at Ruskin College, Oxford.

In preparing her report Violet Hughes interviewed eminent writers and trade unionists, representatives of libraries and bookshops, arts agencies and the educational establishments.

The writers who contributed to the report are: Janet Beaton (romantic novelist); Penelope Lively (novelist and writer of children's literature), Piers Paul Read (Novelist), Willy Russell (dramatist and composer), Norman MacCaig (poet), Jackie Kay (poet and playwright) and Seamus Heaney (poet). Trade union leaders who have expressed their views include Norman Willis, Gavin Laird, John Edmonds and Ron Todd.

In her introduction Ms. Hughes writes: "Literature is the greatest art this country has produced. It is universal - that is, it belongs to everybody. Yet in practice it does not seem to; it seems to belong mainly to the educated middle-classes. If a mass of people are in practice shut out from the effective sharing of our literary heritage, past and present, we have a serious flaw in our society and the nature of its democracy."

"Despite often splendid work of individuals and organisations, what emerges most significantly is a lack of coherence intackling the needs and opportunities for wider access. The enterprising libraries do not work much, if at all, with trade unions, nor do the trade unions engage with bookshops and university extra-mural departments. What above all is needed is the sense of connection, of inter-relatedness. The Arts Council and especially the Regional Arts Boards have the potential to create this, both in the relam of thinking and of action.

Ms. Hughes concludes that however willing, and with however much government support, the Arts Council could not do all that needs to be done along. "But it should and could give the lead, co-ordinate the alliances and liaisons necessary, and inspsire and ovesee the arrival at long last of the Common Reader.

Copies of LITERATURE BELONGS TO EVERYONE are available free of charge from the Literature Department, The Arts Council.

Violet Hughes

Acknowledgements

My grateful thanks are due to Tony Harrison and Penguin Books for allowing me to repro duce in full his poem, Book Ends I, and to Willy Russell for his generous permission to quote freely from an unpublished, autobiographical manuscript. I am greatly indebted to the Literature Panel of the Arts Council of Great Britain for their confidence and support in commissioning me to carry out this project. This association with the Arts Council helped open doors everywhere, indicating the huge goodwill that exists towards that body. The views expressed here are, of course, my own. To all those interviewed I owe great gratitude, not only for the time they spared from, as one trade union leader put it, 'Fighting bush fires and dealing with bread and butter issues', but also for the frankness and often depth of their responses. That they all treated the question at issue with such serious attention was itself inestimable encouragement.

Particular gratitude is owed to Dr Alastair Niven, Literature Director of the Arts Council, for the unfailingly helpful advice and constructive criticism given over the last two years, and to my husband for sustained interest and always stimulating, uncompromising comment. The 'voices' heard later extend beyond those of the named interviewees. I am indebted to scores of former Ruskin students, not only as friends who taught me so much, but as colleagues arguing and responding to earlier surveys on the issues explored here. Lastly, I must record the warmest appreciation and gratitude to Diana Crayk, without whose endless patience and expertise my much corrected handwritten version of the report would never have been translated into print.

Violet M. Hughes
(Oxford, March 1991)

Preface

This report was commissioned by the Arts Council's Literature Advisory Panel, of which Violet Hughes is a former member. It is a responsibility of the Arts Council, stated in the Royal Charter, to widen access to and understanding of the arts. Literature, an art in which Britain has excelled, can potentially reach into every home in the land, yet it fails to do so. Are many people frightened of it and, if so, why? Violet Hughes, through her unique interviews and commentaries, throws new light on the inhibitions which restrict access to this supreme expression of the creative imagination.

The Arts Council will see that many of the recommendations in these pages are implemented, either directly under its own auspices or by influencing others. I warmly recommend Miss Hughes's report for its freshness, commitment and practicality, and would like to record the Arts Council's thanks to her and to the many people who have contributed to her report.

Alastair Niven
Director of Literature
Arts Council of Great Britain

Book Ends I

Baked the day she suddenly dropped dead
we chew it slowly that last apple pie.

Shocked into sleeplessness you're scared of bed.
We never could talk much, and now don't try.

You're like book ends, the pair of you, she'd say,
Hog that grate, say nothing, sit, sleep, stare....

The 'scholar' me, you, worn out on poor pay,
only our silence made us seem a pair.

Not as good for staring in, blue gas,
too regular each bud, each yellow spike.

A night you need my company to pass
and she not here to tell us we're alike!

Your life's all shattered into smithereens.

Back in our silences and sullen looks,
for all the Scotch we drink, what's still between 's
not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books.

Tony Harrison

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

"Fearless access is the thing to try to get".

Mary Enright (Librarian, The Poetry Library, The South Bank Centre)

The Arts Council and Access to Literature

Literature is the greatest art this country has produced. It is universal - that is, it belongs to everybody. Yet in practice it does not seem to: it seems to belong mainly to the educated middle-classes. Why do we not face this major and compelling issue? Access is not a question of the marginal accretion of numbers. If a mass of people are in practice shut out from effective sharing of our literary heritage, past and present, we have a serious flaw in our society and the nature of its democracy.

The Arts Council under the principles of its Charter has an obligation to widen accessibility to all the arts. And yet, as recently as 1984, the official policy stance of the Council itself was to marginalise the rôle the Arts Council should seek to play vis-à-vis literature on the grounds that the needs for access were met straightforwardly by a range of agencies.

> *"English literature...is sustained by a large and profitable commercial publishing industry. It is a basic ingredient in the school curriculum. It is available to the public through the Public Library system. In these circumstances, the impact of the Arts Council's subsidy for literature other than poetry is highly marginal".*
>
> Glory of the Garden, 1984

Fortunately, that policy was challenged both from within the Arts Council by the Literature Panel and its officers, and by those in the regions. Subsequently, the Council's subsidy for literature, though still far too small, was increased. Many people, however, still assume that schools, libraries and bookshops are the main purveyors and guardians of literary culture, that because the doors are open, anyone and everyone will feel free to walk in. Such people effectively deny that there is a problem of access, implying that there may be rather a self-inflicted refusal of opportunity.

That, to say the least, is a naïve view that ignores the effects of the economic, educational and social divisions in our class-ridden society. For the arts generally, the significance of social class is great. When we seek to measure this phenomenon, we have to move from general phrases such as 'working-class people' to the classifications of the statistician, namely social classes C_2, D and E referring respectively to skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers and their families.

This project centres on such people. They are the people who have wages rather than salaries, the least formal education, the most boring or least satisfying jobs (or none) and the least attractive housing.

Surveys[1] of participation in the arts show consistently much higher rates of participation by the non-manual groups A, B and C, than by the manual groups C_2, D and E. There is a woeful lack of figures relating specifically to literature but the figures for library use, the reading of different kinds of newspapers and watching TV display significant differences by social class.

Education - for all?

The cultural effects of such class divisions are nowhere more clearly seen than in education. We are being constantly told we are at present in an 'education crisis'. If, however, an educated democracy means that all its members must have the opportunity to develop their innate intelligence and talents to the full, we have been in an 'education crisis' for over 100 years. From the end of the 19th century Lord Acton's voice still sounds relevant: "No government has ever been able to afford to educate the working-class", while today, at the end of the 20th century, Sir Claus Moser points out that only 20 per cent of the total population receives an adequate education. That considered judgement comes nearly 20 years after the ending of the selective system by which 75 per cent of children, mostly from a working-class background, 'failed' and went on to secondary modern schools (or in Scotland, junior secondaries), while the remaining 25 per cent (the majority from middle-class homes) 'passed' and went on to grammar schools. The great majority of working-class children still receive little or no sustained education after the age of 16, the age at which entry into the mature world of ideas and learning is appropriate, but reserved for the few.

The cultural barriers and human pain that this huge educational failure creates are vividly described by writers[2] and poets of different generations. Richard Hoggart in *Uses of Literacy* describes how the 'bright' scholarship boy from a working-class background becomes both alienated from his roots and simultaneously unable to relate fully to the different culture of the middle-class he uncomfortably joins.

The poet Tony Harrison, grateful to Hoggart for helping him understand his very similar experiences a generation or so later, in his fine poem *Bookends* (see Introduction) demonstrates the human consequences of cultural divisiveness. In writing about the death of his mother he is also mourning with some bitterness another bereavement, the loss through education of communication with his father, and a break with his roots.

This sense of alienation is expressed also by the young black poet Jackie Kay, reflecting on her experience at university. 'Working-class students have a strange experience there, because you feel it doesn't really belong to you. You wonder when you'll be found out! If who you are isn't actually reflected in your environment, you will feel your confidence is undermined'.

Must we remain with this tension, unresolved, that is - either the high culture or its rejection in favour of human solidarity? Is there a solution to this apparent impasse?

Access and Women

The struggle for access to the arts and to literature is not a new issue. Virginia Woolf forcefully argued the case for the liberation of the literary creativity of women in her polemical writings, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, in aesthetic, political and social terms (occasionally,

as in *Three Guineas*, in almost incoherent rage at the injustices and inequalities for women, particularly in education). Her importance for the feminist movement is great and the phrase, 'a room of one's own' has passed into the language. The achievements since then of the feminist movement in the encouragement of women writers and readers, in publishing and in the rediscovery of work, lost or neglected by women writers of the past are remarkable. Virginia Woolf put her finger on the one thing necessary to the people who were shut out from full participation in literary culture, as important as the need for space, income and time, namely confidence, belief in their own capacity against the appallingly inhibiting force of that inner voice, product of generations of received opinion: 'Women can't write, can't paint.....'.

Almost everything she wrote on this topic is equally applicable to working-class people. It still seems incomprehensible that this upper-class woman of genius could and did restrict, in these two books, her concern to 'the daughters of educated men' and quite explicitly exclude 'the working-classes' (her term). Yet that astigmatism makes her doubly relevant here, underlining as it does the sheer difficulty of the economically secure in understanding the obstacles to those who not only have no rooms of their own, or leisure, or much money, but little or no contact at all with books and literature, whose parents were similarly placed, and whose children may, many of them today, be so circumstanced.

A contemporary Scottish writer, more than half a century after Virginia Woolf, voices the problems of understanding for those with no felt experience of working-class life, who still may think such problems belong to the past:

> *"They don't understand what it is to be on the broo (dole - social security) for instance; they don't understand these things except as temporary phenomena - they don't realise that it can be a permanent situation from which there is no get out. You know your prospects won't improve next year, you can't borrow money on the strength of it because it's the strength of nothing....."*.
>
> James Kelman (quoted in *Edinburgh Review* No.71)

Kelman of course is talking about men and women - people.

The Culture and Democracy Debate

Probing questions on this issue have occupied thinkers and teachers for the last 100 years. Matthew Arnold, often criticised for his certainty about what actually is 'the best that is known and thought in the world', is increasingly relevant, both for the value he placed on culture in a world 'drugged with business' and in love with technology[3], and for his thinking on culture, democracy and equality:

> *"To live in a society of equals tends in general to make a man's spirits expand, and his faculties work easily and actively...to live in a society of superiors...in general tends to tame the spirits...to be heavily overshadowed, to be profoundly insignificant, has, on the whole, a depressing and benumbing effect on the character"*.

- a comment not remote from Woolf's thinking on women and one that evokes the question, raised by some trade union voices that follow: Must there first be then a political struggle for a more equal society, leaving the arts aside till that is achieved?

Raymond Williams in his essay 'Culture is Ordinary', rejecting any notion of the 'cultural missionary' bearing culture to the deprived, saw as necessary the abolition of boundaries between high and popular culture, as well as those between art and politics:

> *"Culture is ordinary. An interest in learning and the arts is simple, pleasant and natural".*

Are the two issues inseparable - the taking possession of the literary heritage by those hitherto denied it being an essential aspect of the gaining of equality?

And if this is a desirable aim, how it might be achieved? Paulo Freire, the great Brazilian philosopher and literacy teacher, jailed for his literary campaigns, sees as fundamental the recognition by the 'teacher' that the adult student (whether literate, semi-literate or totally illiterate) has culture, responses to people and experiences, so that the educational experience is one in which both give, both receive and the method by which this is achieved is that of dialogue - a word that also crops up frequently in the interviews that follow. He dismisses the whole concept of 'leaders', cultural, educational or political:

> *"They don't trust the people because they think the people lack the ability to think, to want to know".*

What relevance might this approach have to the breaking down of barriers in this very different society? On the other hand, might the democratic, or 'dialogical' teacher, run the risks of bad faith, of pretending, or even claiming, that there is no great body of high culture, while being the sole speaker in the dialogue to have some real acquaintance with that? And yet again, if such great faith in people's innate capacities and their own culture is justified, should there not be a total absence of cultural intervention in their lives?

The 'What is Literature?' Debate

At the present time debates about the nature and meaning of literature are more often characterised by scepticism than certainty. One symptom of this is the anguish over the very word 'literature' that was expressed in some way in practically every interview undertaken for this report, conveying anything from a structuralist or post-structuralist amazement that anyone could use the term and assume an agreed common meaning for it, to a socialist or Marxist-type fear that the use of it might denote a total lack of awareness of class influences on cultural expression.

These debates are handled at a level of abstraction substantially removed from the actual activities, concerns and needs of people. The approach adopted in this report does not have to rest on any one agreed theory or definition of literature. The issues posed by the question of access to working people would still remain, however 'literature' might be defined.

Just as the feminists have helped rediscover and even re-assess women's writing of the past, in addition to encouraging a much wider spectrum of women writers today, so too others are uncovering lost or neglected work by labouring men and women and simultaneously, as in the efforts of the Federation of Worker Writers and other groups, stimulating new creative writing from thousands of ordinary people. Who knows how all this will alter our perspective on the literary landscape?

Aims and Methods

In a sense this report is rooted in 25 years of teaching literature at Ruskin College. This college, like the seven other full-time residential adult colleges in Britain, reverses the educational procedures of most other institutions of higher education in admitting as students those without any educational qualifications and with little, or no, previous experience of study. These are largely working-class people. To have worked with such adults, mostly rejected by the formal education system as not worthy of the opportunity of higher education, and become aware of enormous latent human potential that finds realisation in such a college, makes it impossible ever to accept that a society can be called healthy or civilised that allows that potential to go to waste. It is only comparatively recently that Ruskin, small, enclosed, successful, began to try to be a 'college without walls' realising that its purpose should be not just to serve a small group of those rescued from our hopelessly inadequate educational system, but should be creating a totally open enlarging process that involved the capacity of most.

The aim of this report is to draw attention to this issue of access to literature and to highlight some of its complex aspects - physical, psychological, educational and economic - in order to discover ways of increasing that access. The method used was the interview[4], to investigate the attitudes of key people working in institutions that could or ought to be active in this opening up but who as yet might either not be aware, or only marginally aware, of the class aspect of approaches to literature. The two main areas for this exploration were the south east, (Oxford and London), and Scotland.

Effort has been made consistently to catch the voices, to be true to what people have actually said. Names and jobs have been quoted to create a more vivid impression of the kinds of individuals in whose hands lie the possibilities of advance.

Headings have been used to bring out the nature of the choices and decisions that have to be made. At the end of each chapter is a list of proposals for action that emerged as a result of the preceding discussion.

In the 'Writers' chapter, it seemed appropriate to let the makers of literature speak and the reader listen and interpret for him/herself.

The need to create the conditions for the arrive of the true Common Reader is urgent for many reasons. To look only at two for the moment: first, there is the use of English as the main international language, with the consequent creation of a growing and important literature in English from many countries. Access to this must matter in the context of such concepts as the 'common European home' and our human identity as 'inhabitants of one planet'.

Secondly, we must try to grasp the complex and dynamic issues involved in the increasingly multi-cultural nature of society here in Britain. How difficult that is can be seen in our problems in grasping and assimilating all that is involved in the Rushdie affair.

What are the barriers between people and literature and how may they be removed? That is the main question that is explored in the following pages.

APPENDIX

THE RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL CLASS

Available statistics indicate the importance of socio-economic class in determining who reads books or participates in the arts, from the extensive researches of Peter Mann, who concluded that those who read as part of their leisure 'are over-represented among those who received an education past the statutory leaving age' and those belonging to the higher socio-economic groups, to the latest editions of *Social Trends* and the *General Household Survey*. A range of survey data - though inadequate for our purposes so far as literature itself is concerned - makes clear both the significance of class (in the statistical sense of socio-economic categories) and the likely importance of lack of educational qualifications.

The *General Household Survey* in 1986 (still being quoted in *Social Trends* 1990) showed under half of the manual categories 'reading books' in the four weeks before the survey, compared with over two-thirds of the non-manual (professional, managerial, clerical etc.). But the high response rate was partly the result of 'prompting' by the surveyors. Perhaps more telling are the surveys of national newspaper readings. Not surprisingly the peak proportion of adults reading tabloids are found among adults from semi-skilled manual households (social class D); class E (unskilled) actually shows lower levels of such readerships - suggesting a literacy barrier. Only one per cent of adults from class D are recorded as reading particular 'quality' newspapers, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, *The Times*, the *Independent*. This compares markedly with (respectively) the 28 per cent, nine per cent, 16 per cent and five per cent of adults from social class A (professional etc.) reading these newspapers.

TABLE: READING OF NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS: BY SEX AND SOCIAL CLASS[1] 1987

Great Britain

	Percentage of adults reading each paper in 1987		Percentage of adults in each social class reading each paper in 1987						Readership[2] (millions)		Readers per copy (millions)
	Males	Females	A	B	C1	C2	D	E	1971	1987	1987
Daily newspapers											
The Sun	28	23	5	10	20	32	37	27	8.5	11.3	2.8
Daily Mirror	23	18	4	8	16	27	29	19	13.8	9.1	2.9
Daily Mail	11	10	14	14	14	9	6	5	4.8	4.5	2.5
Daily Express	10	9	9	12	13	10	6	6	9.7	4.3	2.5
The Star	11	7	2	2	6	12	15	9	-	3.9	3.2
The Daily Telegraph	7	5	28	16	8	3	1	2	3.6	2.8	2.4
The Guardian	4	3	9	10	4	1	1	1	1.1	1.5	3.1
The Times	4	2	16	8	3	1	1	1	1.1	1.2	2.7
Today	3	2	1	2	3	3	3	1	-	1.1	3.3
The Independent	3	1	6	6	3	1	1	-	-	0.9	2.8
Financial Times	3	1	8	5	2	1	-	-	0.7	0.8	3.5
Any daily newspaper[3]	73	63	74	67	67	70	72	59		68.0	
Sunday newspapers											
News of the World	30	27	9	12	23	36	40	30	15.8	12.8	2.6
Sunday Mirror	22	19	5	10	17	27	27	18	13.5	9.1	3.1
The People	20	17	3	8	16	23	25	17	14.4	8.1	2.8
Sunday Express	14	13	24	22	18	12	8	7	10.4	6.1	2.7
The Mail on Sunday	12	11	16	16	16	11	7	4	-	5.1	2.9
The Sunday Times	9	7	35	22	10	3	3	2	3.7	3.6	2.9
The Observer	6	5	14	14	7	3	2	2	2.4	2.3	3.0
Sunday Telegraph	5	4	19	11	7	3	2	1	2.1	2.2	3.0
Any Sunday newspaper[4]	76	71	78	75	74	76	76	64		74.0	

1. See Appendix Part 10 Social Class
2. Defined as the average issue readership and represents the number of people who claim to have read or looked at one or more copies of a given publication during a period equal to the interval at which the publication appears.
3. Includes the above newspapers plus the *Daily Record*
4. Includes the above newspapers plus the *Sunday Post* and *Sunday Mail*

Source: National Readership Surveys, 1971 and 1987. Joint Industry Committee for National Readership Surveys, Circulation Review, Audit Bureau of Circulation.

SOURCE: From Social Trends 1989

The library use survey conducted in 1987 (as part of the *General Household Survey*) found a clear differentiation in use by social class and in relation to educational qualification. Thirty-two per cent of those surveyed who came from 'non-manual' households had visited a public library in the previous four weeks compared with 18 per cent of the 'manual' categories. As to education, 25 per cent of those surveyed had A level or above and these accounted for 36 per cent of library visits; 41 per cent had no educational qualifications and accounted for only 29 per cent of library visits. If the differentiation is apparent it is also true that the widespread use of libraries by those from manual households and by educationally unqualified adults make them particularly significant in our search for wider access to literature.

Similarly, surveys of participation in the arts by the post-16 age groups show consistently much higher rates of participation by the non-manual socio-economic groups (classes A, B, and C_1) than by the manual groups (C_2, D, and E). In particular, for a number of different kinds of 'arts' the professional and managerial groups (A and B) have participation rates several times higher than the manual socio-economic groups. The differences are not merely an income effect.

TABLE: PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE SEEING ARTS PERFORMANCES, VISITING ART GALLERIES, MUSEUMS AND HISTORIC BUILDINGS IN THE FOUR WEEKS BEFORE INTERVIEW BY SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP

Persons aged 16 or over — Great Britain 1987

	Socio-economic group*						
	Professional	Employers and managers	Intermediate and junior non-manual	Skilled manual and own account	Semi-skilled manual and personal service	Unskilled	Total+ manual
	Percentage participating in the four weeks before interview						
Arts and entertainments							
Films	15	11	12	8	8	5	11
Plays, pantomimes	13	10	10	4	4	3	7
Ballet or modern dance	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
Operas or operattas	2	2	1	0	0	0	1
Classical music	6	3	3	1	1	1	2
Jazz, blues, soul, reggae concerts or performances	2	2	2	1	1	0	2
Other music shows, concerts or performances	9	7	8	7	6	5	7
Gallleries and historic buildings							
Arts galleries or museums	15	11	11	6	5	4	8
Stately homes, castles, cathedrals or other historic buildings	14	11	10	6	5	4	8
Basee = 100%	705	2465	6012	4051	3830	1265	19529

SOURCE: General Household Survey.

Such data on library use, on readership, and on 'arts' participation are useful indications of the significance of broad socio-economic class in the concern we have with barriers in access to literature. One edition of *Social Trends* also records - helpfully - that the Arts Council in the late 1980s was only devoting one per cent of its budget to literature (compared with a princely two per cent in the 1970s). Perhaps the starvation of resources in this area has something to do with the dearth of survey material relating properly to adults and literature itself.

BOOKS AND THEIR READERS - LIBRARIES AND BOOKSHOPS

Those neo-classical buildings made you feel you were going to meet God.

Dr. Jo Hendry

When people ask what you do and you say you're a librarian, there's a silence. Now if I was to say 'I'm an accountant...'.

Young Oxfordshire Librarian

The Republic of Letters is more ancient than monarchy.

Tom Paine

PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

Public Libraries

Dr. Jo Hendry, Chief Librarian, Renfrewshire District Council

Pat Coleman, Chief Librarian, Birmingham

Margaret Sharpe, Assistant Director of Recreation (Libraries), Edinburgh District Council

L. White, Chief Librarian (Retired), Oxfordshire County Council Employees

Tom Forrest, Assistant Director of Leisure and Arts (Libraries), Oxfordshire County Council

Sally Fritwell, Children's Librarian, Oxfordshire County Council

Specialist Libraries

Mary Enright, Librarian, The Poetry Library, The South Bank

Tessa Ransford, Director, The Scottish Poetry Library, Edinburgh

W.H. Clennell, The Assistant Secretary, The Bodleian Library, Oxford

Bookshops

Hugh Andrew, Book Consultant (formerly, Manager, Thin's, Edinburgh), SeoL, Edinburgh

Willie Anderson, Assistant Managing Director, John Smith's, Glasgow

Alison Blair-Underwood, Senior Manager, Heffer's Cambridge

Sally Herman, General Manager (formerly Dillon's, Oxford), Dillon's, Gower Street, London

BOOKS AND THEIR READERS - LIBRARIES AND BOOK-SHOPS

What's the Problem?

Libraries, particularly the public libraries, are quite often seen as the conclusive evidence that there is no 'access to books' problem. They are open to practically everybody, still providing the free-lending of books; surely here if anywhere there are no barriers, so what's the problem?

The public library system has been, and still is, an indispensable life-line for the imaginative and intellectual development of working-class people, as many distinguished people from working-class backgrounds have testified. Even so, many working-class people do not use the library at all, some only occasionally and often with unease. There is a problem of barriers to access to libraries, and to bookshops, which educated people can find difficult to understand.

> *"I never really used the library till I was in my forties. Then a friend offered to show me how you choose a book. I started with the S's and borrowed a Steinbeck novel. Then I tried the D's and read* **Robinson Crusoe**. *That was wonderful. It made me realise that everybody feels alone. And that started me off understanding about community".*
>
> A mature student, former factory worker

Adult colleges find they have to arrange brief and absolutely essential introductory courses on using small libraries for new students. Once confidence and familiarity are acquired, barriers fall.

Bookshops pose similar problems. We can't assume that working-class people buy books or that their parents did[5]. Even today, when many working people have more disposable income than their parents did, the fundamental problem is a cultural one. Working-class culture is oral, not a book culture.

As Willy Russell puts it, explaining his 'failure' at school:

> *"Schools assume and reflect a middle-class culture with literacy at its heart whilst kids from working-class families are part of a culture that has not literacy, but oracy at its heart".*

Answers from ordinary people questioned at Community Centres, literacy groups, adult classes and colleges: 'Do you go into bookshops (other than Smith's or Menzies) often?' were most frequently - either 'No, never' or 'Hardly ever' or 'No - well just W.H. Smith's because, you know, that's like an ordinary shop' or 'I went into Blackwell's once to buy a present but I didn't feel comfortable. I didn't know where to look and I didn't like to ask'.

Mature students, after two years' full-time residential study on a Literature diploma course, frequently answered the question always put at the end of the two years: 'What things have you got out of the course that you're pleased about?' by including this comment (amongst others): 'I can now go into a bookshop and not feel embarrassed'.

Such a remark as that, coming from adults frequently going straight into the second year of an Honours degree course, indicates something of the force of the intangible barriers, harder even than the physical ones for the working-class individual to overcome. The difficulties for ordinary people can be multi-layered. What needs to be done to resolve these?

Public libraries and Literature

The two issues of access to literature and access to libraries are inseparable. Public libraries are, of course, not just about literature. But the persistent underfunding of literature and its underemphasis in the public library sector become even more disturbing in view of the rapid growth and investment in Information Services and Technology (some librarians are now called Information Scientists). Even the recent development of public library involvement in the arts 'doesn't do a great deal for literature'[6].

Impressive advances in widening access to libraries have been made in some parts of the country and it is unfortunate that the Heeks report does not focus on these successful attempts to demolish barriers holding back large numbers of the least privileged members of our society. There is little or no sense of the consumer's voice in its pages. Despite its useful reference to work in Renfrewshire and other places, and to 'public' library concern from the mid-1970s onwards for readers at a disadvantage in using the library service, it effectively ignores the fact that that 'concern' virtually emerged as a revolution in library thinking and practice.

Major Changes in Major Libraries

The head librarians interviewed here include Dr Jo Hendry, the man 'whose vision changed library thinking not just in Scotland but in many other places' and Pat Coleman, chief librarian in Birmingham, the biggest public library in the UK with 850 staff and all the challenges, not just of the metropolis, but of the inner city. These two people shared a deep conviction that libraries are about people, not just about books. Their pioneering 'community libraries' work clearly influences the other two chief librarians of Edinburgh and Oxford respectively. A change of vital importance, socially and, one would hope, intellectually, is under way. These are the people who, with others, are making it happen.

Jo Hendry's whole work and aim is to make ordinary people feel welcome in the library, that it belongs to them.

His changes, 'commonplace enough now, though it seemed Bolshevik then', were intended to abolish psychological barriers:

> *"The physical aspects of the buildings, grand, wide steps - well some of these posh new classical buildings make you feel you're going to meet God! Fifteen years ago, I arranged simple application forms (no electricity bills - they used to have to produce something like that to show they were respectable), no limit on the number of tickets, abolished fines and reservation charges. And, above all, trained the staff in making people feel welcome - that's the most important thing of all".*

Jo Hendry's vision of the indivisibility of the social and cultural functions of the library was born from bitterness at the spectacle of mass unemployment in his area, of thousands of people thrown on the scrap-heap, and a conviction that a civilised society, proud of its accumulated knowledge and culture, ought to and could share all that through its libraries to reduce, or even transform, the futility and misery of the lives of thousands of its members.

He has an innate understanding of how working-class people feel and sees their difficulties as vivid and real:

> *"We had a woman, Margaret Canning, from Ferguslie Park (an estate notorious for vandalism and desolation) on her own, with eight children. She won a prize for a letter to the BBC telling what the library had meant to her, that it had changed her whole life. We've had a lot of people say they feel like that. There's something stirring - music, writing - a feeling that Glasgow's a special place, no' a dump! Something to do with community, a sense of identity, shared values - a desert wi' windaes!".*

Access - Social Work?

Some librarians have felt the need to protest that they are not social workers. Even the authors of the Scottish Readership report feel anxious enough to dispel any notion that their desire to increase the young readership for literature might suggest ambitions to 'do goodery', or 'bring art to the people'[7]. But the vision of these pioneering librarians transcends any trivialisation of their work as 'social engineering' or 'cultural missionarydom'.

> *"The local library is the ordinary person's access to world culture. Libraries aren't a frill - they're essential, for everybody".*
>
> Pat Coleman

To change libraries in the most run-down areas of large cities, to try to put into practice the belief that the library belongs to all, needs more than vision, it requires courage and persistence. Working in such places is very far from the old idea of librarianship as a sheltered occupation.

> *"You have to make people feel they'll be welcomed, that it's something for them. It's more difficult for some than for others to feel that, for example, black people, under-educated people, 'failures'. To make access equal you have to take positive action in favour of disadvantaged groups.*
>
> *It can be tough, being a librarian today, especially in the inner city. Difficulties with teenagers - what can you do if there's a threatening mob outside the door? We must help staff. So we started employing specialist staff (sort of security really) and ran courses on interpersonal skills for staff. It's a similar problem with mentally handicapped borrowers. Staff, like most of us, have fear but it's important that they learn how to handle such people so we have courses that give them skill and therefore confidence. It's necessary because the library has a lot to offer handicapped people".*
>
> Pat Coleman

For those who believe that the library service in a democracy should be promoted as a key, not a fringe, service, access to all, whatever the difficulties, must be achieved. In Edinburgh a priorities plan was drawn up by the Council with reference to areas of multiple deprivation and ethnic minorities including Indians, Palestinians, Chinese and others and, as Margaret Sharpe (formerly head librarian, now Assistant Director of Recreation (Libraries)) describes, the libraries were considered as important as hospitals and housing.

> *"The libraries were as deeply involved in this as housing and health. The District drew up the Leisure Plan, 1984-1990. We're now into the second one. The libraries are a priority next year. We shall have 65 additional staff in two years: the book fund increase is £125,000. Everything in my work is to do with access to books and information for people but with a clear proviso - we must identify particular communities neglected previously - like Muirhouse (a desolate estate with problems of drugs and violence)".*

As in Birmingham, the challenges were considerable but here too there was no question of failing to face these. After a total revamp of the tatty old library (redecoration, new lighting and carpets) at first borrowing went up by 120 per cent! Then it tailed off. The staff were having a tough time with rough and sometimes threatening behaviour from local people - mostly teenagers.

> *"We had to close in the evenings in the winter. We tried to set up a committee with a nucleus of people in the community. You can't be separated from real life, you have to be community librarians".*

And whatever the problems that might arise, the librarian, calling in whenever necessary the help of other services, will work to make the library in the most difficult areas open and welcoming to all who live there.

Libraries and Educational Neglect

All this brave and necessary effort is a challenge to the traditional view of libraries and in some ways is paralleled by recent developments in adult education, ideas and practice that challenge the formal education system. Access to education is, in some pilot schemes, being widened not primarily to aid the bright scholarship boy of Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* but the very people from whom he became alienated in important ways by his grammar school education.

This concern with those people most neglected educationally (and in other ways) surfaced in the discussion with Tom Forrest, the head librarian (now like Margaret Sharpe, significantly entitled Assistant Director of Leisure and Arts) of Oxfordshire, a very different area from the inner city of Birmingham or the ghetto-like estates of Edinburgh. Libraries here have always been well used. The recently retired Chief Librarian had been happy with the high level of borrowing:

> *"How many people can you expect to read? Sixty-five per cent do. Why worry about the thirty-five?'".*

Nevertheless, describing the library system of Oxfordshire in which he had trained as a 'safe, reactive service', Tom Forrest too subscribed to the views of Jo Hendry and Pat Coleman that

the main concern should be with the sectors of the community who would never come to the library at all:

> *"They don't come because we don't seem relevant to their needs. Libraries are predominantly white and middle-class. Libraries are in a competitive environment for people's leisure time. Other things appear more exciting - pubs, discos, TV. We need to be more enterprising. The County is very good in keeping up the book supply. We should use more imagination in the way we present the books in order to renew the life of the book".*

He is currently preparing plans to put before the appropriate committee to try to reach those people, linking up with specialists in other departments.

Leisure and Recreation (Libraries)

The recent tendency to incorporate many libraries within 'Departments of Recreation and Leisure' (instead of subsuming them under Education) is of more than organisational and financial significance.

Margaret Sharpe recently moved from the library to her new office in the City's Department of Recreation which houses its six separate departments of Arts and Entertainments - namely - Books, Libraries, Museums and Galleries, Parks and Open Spaces, and Sports.

She had no doubts about the advantages of this change:

> *"Being in this huge department gives me a broader role. For example, I chair the Equal Opportunities Committee. We link a lot with the Arts Outreach Section (this has five staff). We put on displays in connection with other activities, for example sport. We produce booklists on this, encourage more women to participate in sport; we work with the Women's Unit - we drew up a booklist on the menopause and on keeping fit after 40. The very fact that we're all in one department makes ideas and initiatives burgeon. We'd like to create a sports library at Meadowbank for example".*

It is good that libraries should no longer be isolated in having to fight their corner for funding and for attention. At the same time, libraries, though they do and should offer recreation, have always stood for more than that. The Edinburgh District Council's Leisure Plan (its second - 1990-1994), in very many ways a magnificent achievement, ought to be challenged in its assertion:

> *"No leisure activity is intrinsically superior to any other".*

Re-organisation - does it widen access to literature?

While the impulse behind this re-organisation of libraries and the different view of the library's functions are democratic ones, there is a risk involved of a simple utilitarianism obscuring other values.

There are some dangers, departmentally, institutionally and culturally, in consciously

separating the libraries off from the Education department, that should be avoided. It would be a retrograde step if a new class division arose between the 'recreational escapist readers' and the heirs of the library as the 'poor man's university' tradition, between those who might seek only the shelves loaded with Mills and Boon and the readers of more imaginative fiction.

> *"What is access really? It is access to the depth of the content. We become obsessed with the operational problems, but these are means, not ends. The core value is about enrichment, self-fulfilment. Access to the written culture is the same as access to the environment".*
>
> Tom Forrest

Dr. Jo Hendry's convictions are unequivocal. His own deep love of literature does not lead him to a simple hope that brightly-lit, carpeted, well-decorated libraries with the right staff attitudes would automatically lead people to literature:

> *"We must give people the opportunity to read - anything. It sounds trite: but it's true. Are we running institutions to keep working-class people in awe, or are we trying to provide facts, knowledge, ideas that people want and need?".*

This radical thinking (that led, for example, to the creation of the award-winning teenage library JILL[8]) has to be understood in its context of the last 30 years of library history, when most libraries have largely been used by, and catered for, middle-class people.

> *"I've been in libraries since 1964; we were in the Education department then. Thirty per cent of the stock was recreational, 70 per cent educational/cultural. All libraries mirrored each other. We as staff selected stock for six libraries at a time! We ended up with a type of stock appealing to the middle-class educated person, not to working-class people. If working-class people used the service, they didn't make requests or complaints. The middle-class did".*

As a result of such experience, Margaret Sharpe sees her aim as getting people into the printed word. She wouldn't like to condemn Mills and Boon - that would be patronising:

> *"I'd like to broaden choice - whatever people choose is what we'd like to provide. We want to open their eyes to what's available so that they'll realise there's a lot more enjoyment in deeper reading".*

This cannot just happen: the question is - how to widen choice? Tom Forrest who buys quantities of Mills and Boon disagrees with the argument that these will lead people on to expand their choices..."I think they stick to that category of reading".

Reflecting on recent history and current practice, Pat Coleman comments:

> *"Literature? The librarian's job is to promote the best and we don't do that. We used to promote only the best. We used to go to great lengths to try to make people read non-fiction! We arranged the shelves, fiction and non-fiction mixed up! A very élitist view; it's now changed - maybe there's been an over-reaction. It's gone to great lengths now, Mills and Boon - anything available. But I do think we should show, and encourage people to want the better You try with festivals, readings, good displays.*
>
> *People want help in structure. We've moved further and further from that - no help. All*

these books - no-one tells you how to choose. We need some sort of programme people can link into".

Everyone is agreed on the necessity of stimulating the broadening of people's reading. The key question, of course, is how to get people to appreciate it's all theirs, *Anna Karenina* and the paperback romance, if that is what is wanted. The libraries can't do that on their own. Co-operation with other agencies is essential, as well as new initiatives in library training. Without such action the cultural divisions will persist and even increase.

Specialist libraries - the Poetry Library (South Bank), the Scottish Poetry Library, (Edinburgh), the Bodleian Library (Oxford)

How, if at all, does the widening of access to literature by working-class people apply to these special libraries?

The Poetry Library (South Bank)

Membership of this library, which houses the Arts Council's unique collection of 20th century poetry in English, is free and open to all who wish to join. Such is our lack of any really common (or universal) culture, many people will not even know of its existence.

Mary Enright, its librarian, though believing that poetry may be a minority interest, thinks that the minority could be greatly increased once people - of all classes - realised what was on offer. As yet the library is used mostly by those already familiar with the poetry world, the readings, magazines, writing groups, while working-class contact with the Poetry Library is mainly by letter.

"People write in looking for the poetry of their youth. They remember bits from their childhood, from their 'learning off by heart'. I suppose poetry isn't taught like that any more. Fearless access is the thing to try to get".

Her work is based on '..going out to them and inviting them to come in to us'. She aims to visit the many writing and appreciation of poetry groups in London at least once and hosts individuals and groups such as adult education groups in the beautifully appointed library from which the Federation of Worker Writers recently launched their new anthology. Conscious of the existence of cultural fear, she aims to demystify poetry for ordinary people by reaching out through popular papers such as *Car Mechanic, Sailing* and even comics.

"We want the Poetry Library used".

The Scottish Poetry Library (Edinburgh)

This little library, situated in a quiet corner close off the old High Street in Edinburgh, is a startling tribute to the power of the individual and to voluntary workers when fired by love of the art. It was started by its present director Tessa Ransford because:

'...there was nowhere for poetry. Nobody knew about the Poetry Library in London. Poetry was so invisible and unmentionable. There was a complete lack of an environment for poetry in Scotland except the pub. When I saw there was no place I decided human beings unlike the animals can alter their environment so I started this in 1984".

Her account of its birth and growing up shows what is possible:

"We've now got five branches in Scotland, all run by volunteers. They have duplicates from us. They include someone in an arts centre in Dundee, an hotel in Ullapool, a few shelves someone has in the Extra-Mural Department in Glasgow, and a chap in Inverness. The volunteers make their own rules for borrowers. We make it free, friendly and normal to borrow a book of poetry.

There are three staff, me as Director, one librarian and one assistant, all part-time. Everybody else is a volunteer. We've made the first Poetry Catalogue in Britain and the computer is manned by volunteers, supervised by the assistant. We hired a mobile library at first and went as far as Shetland. It was necessary to have advance publicity and a member would leaflet every house in the village we planned to go to.

We have our own van now. People are terrified at a van with poetry!

During the Festival we have spontaneous poetry readings here in the courtyard. People read their own or other people's poetry. We don't make it a money-raising event which means we avoid all the work and bureaucracy - hiring halls, fees for poets, publicity and so on. All you want is to hear the poetry. No worry about sponsorship. There are so many people you never hear of who never get a chance to read their stuff. We do this at Spring Fling (an annual festival of literature run by the Edinburgh District Recreation Department at one of the huge estates) and other galas.

I don't want this place to become a rigid institution. We're here to respond.

People come in with a need, people like social workers or nurses. Other people wander in off the street (that's the advantage of being in the High Street), dustmen, policemen - they just wander in and I give them a welcome and say 'You'll find something you'll like'".

Like Mary Enright, Tessa Ransford doesn't believe everyone can be brought to like poetry.

"Everybody has a bit of creativity but not necessarily for poetry. Self-expression can be therapy but poetry isn't self-expression. Women especially are prone to use it for self-expression - they'd be better marrying a hill farmer! Yes, there is a Scottish dimension - a tradition of poetry reading and, of course, the Burns readings and Bible readings. There's a democracy of the intellect here!".

We have no proof that poetry will always be a minority interest, especially in view of the developing work of librarians like these. We cannot know until more efforts are made to understand its absence from most people's lives and to put them in touch with it.

The Bodleian Library, Oxford

The relevance of the main question to one of the world's most magnificent university libraries

lies in the necessity, as with the two Poetry Libraries, to demonstrate that it is for all those who have a serious interest that can be advanced by the use of such a library, thus demystifying what might sometimes seem a heritage only for an élite.

Mr. Will Clennell, the Assistant Secretary, acknowledged the importance of the access question:

> *"Well, yes, we do have to think about access, who and what we're for. When Sir Thomas Bodley set the library up in 1602 he called it a public library. 'For you the University of Oxford and for you the Republic of the Learned'. He had conditions: you had to be a reputable scholar but he was not thinking of excluding classes of people.*
>
> *It is still for 'reputable scholars' and this is a term that crosses over class barriers. The 'independent scholar', that is, the person coming to us not through the institution (of the University) but as an individual has only to show 'demonstrable need' backed up by a letter of reference. No degrees or qualifications are required".*

The real point of bringing such a library into this discussion is to emphasise the continuing ideal of the common 'republic of letters', membership of which is open to all. Nearly 200 years on from Sir Thomas Bodley, Tom Paine and William Wordsworth, in similar words, link to the ideal of equality that membership of such a:

> *Republic, where all stood thus far*
> *Upon equal ground, that they were brothers all*
> *.....as in one community*
>
> (The Prelude. IX.190-3)

Another 200 years on, that republic of letters remains still more dream than reality. Why?

Bookshops and Access

Civic and national libraries clearly have a duty to members of the public but why should bookshops care about widening access so long as they sell more and more books? Heffer's Senior Manager in Cambridge, Alison Blair-Underwood, knows well the importance of profits to the survival of bookshops, but rejects any notion of books as commodities like any others. She believes bookshops have an obligation to assist the widening of access, especially for those who seldom or never enter bookshops. Why?

> *"Because books belong to us all. They are what we hold in common".*

This becomes an increasingly important question in view of the growth of conglomerates such as Pentos and Pearson. It is now openly recognised that Britain is under-book-shopped. This unfortunately does not mean that there will be an increase in the number of small community bookshops, often so much more than just a shop, the life-blood even of a small community. Their existence is in fact increasingly threatened by the spreading of the big chains and the possible abolition of the Net Book Agreement.

Dillon's answer to the question above is clear:

> *"Access means getting more people to enter the shop. But we're not interested in access by a particular sector. Dillon's aim is to expand the market for books, to get more people to buy more books. Any kind of books, any kind of customers.*
>
> *We promote books and hope the people will be attracted to come in and buy the book. You hardly ever see an Asian face here in the Oxford shop but when we got Imran Khan (Captain of the Pakistan team) to sign copies of his book, we had a queue right along Cornmarket, lots of Asians. We didn't set out to attract Asians, just to target the market. I don't think we've seen many Asian faces since, though. Like the Christmas market - we got people who'd never been in the shop before".*
>
> Dillon's Manager, Oxford

American-style book selling is becoming common. A Pentos-sponsored nationwide promotion for Mother's Day by Dillon's was '..a tremendous success. We sold a wide range of books - everything from Do It Yourself to Love Poetry'.

> *"To us books are part of the leisure industry. We're competing for that money, the £1 that might otherwise be spent in the pub or whatever".*
>
> Sally Hermann

A young manager, full of ideas about how to persuade people unfamiliar to bookshops, acknowledges that at present:

> *"...almost nothing bears on access in my work. Look at the so-called 'Christmas books', so primitive, so haphazard. The book trade are not trying to expand the market but always and only the motive is to increase profit. You're trying to market your best-seller more successfully than your opposition".*
>
> Hugh Andrew

A Glasgow shop, however, has a policy that manages to combine commercial aims with real concern for the customer.

> *"My aim in buying books for the shop is to satisfy the converted bookreader and to tempt the less interested. I don't mind what people read - Mills and Boon, Catherine Cookson. I think there are intellectual barriers, a fear of not understanding. The way to overcome all that is to make them welcome in the shop. Welcome. No patronising, no snobbery. Make them feel like guests".*
>
> Willie Anderson

Willie Anderson genuinely shares the 'going out to welcome in' philosophy of Jo Hendry with whom he frequently collaborates in library/bookshop initiatives. 'A good library means a good bookshop and vice versa'. His shop has a computer for customers to operate themselves (he compares it to Renfrewshire's teenage library JILL - 'it lets people feel they're in control'), runs mini-concerts where people bring sandwiches and sit on the floor, readings

and even chess competitions. Most important of all, he retains the habit begun when an assistant, of keeping a small desk in the main shop so that he can welcome and talk to customers.

Heffer's in Cambridge, inevitably perhaps, enjoys a largely middle-class and academic clientèle ('Our only concession to working-class people is a small shop in Grafton shopping centre' says a senior manager) but it has an impressive record of 'outreach' work.

> *"I do think bookshops are, or should be, instrumental in the whole education process. Commercial enterprises can and do care about enlarging the reading public".*
>
> Alison Blair-Underwood

Acknowledging that 'our main shop is a bit formidable', Alison Blair-Underwood tries to 'demystify' reading by organising popular events in the smaller outside shops. A lot of work goes on with libraries and schools, shop staff talking to PTAs and teachers and multi-cultural centres. Close links have been forged with the Open University and with Cambridge University Extra-Mural Department, even to the extent that Heffers sponsors an extra-mural student on an annual basis.

Conclusions

The achievements of those who created the library revolution could be as important a breakthrough in flinging open doors to the culture of books as the Ford/Union education scheme, EDAP (see Trade Unions and Access, p.32).

Can we assume that these remarkable transformation of libraries in many areas will happen everywhere? And, secondly, will they be used as a base for the development of people in the community, and within that, not least, the extension of their enjoyment of and appetite for literature?

Librarians and booksellers have both admitted they are in a 'competitive environment for people's leisure time', vying with the attractions of the pub, TV and the disco. One danger for the libraries might lie in a too simple 'give people what they want', stocking up on the basis of shelves full of formula novels. How do people know what to want unless they are aware of choices? To judge success simply on rate of borrowings is perilously close to that kind of commercial bookshop thinking that rates success purely in terms of profit.

Fortunately, both libraries and bookshops have the resource of the people who work in them. Despite the disturbingly low level of importance given to literature[9], all the head librarians interviewed shared a passion for literature (e.g. 'I couldn't manage life without it', Jo Hendry: 'It enriches your life, transports you in a unique way', Tom Forrest: 'It enables one to enter other worlds', Pat Coleman). People who work in bookshops generally like literature (e.g. 'It's central to my life', Hugh Andrew). This is true also of market-orientated Dillon's. The books themselves exert a power. Dillon's manager described her young assistant floor managers (all non-graduates) who become so interested in books in their charge - poetry, literary criticisms, essays and so on - that they read them in all their spare moments and during tea-breaks and lunch:

> "*No, they're not doing it for career reasons. It's sheer interest. They get it from talking to the customers who're into that kind of reading*".

- a piquant reversal of the librarian or bookseller sharing enthusiasm with the customer.

Given energy and ideas and communication by those who are committed to it, these and other relevant agencies through collaboration are capable of achieving a true widening of access to literature. Conversations with local councillors as with booksellers and librarians reveal more than sympathy with this aim. One councillor wrote, after being interviewed:

> *"Imaginative writing can play a very important part in everyone's life, practically, intellectually and emotionally.*
>
> *I have been thinking how little I have done for libraries in the County which is disgraceful considering their importance in my life and their importance for increasing people's control over their own lives rather more speedily than the lumbering education system".*
>
> Tom Richardson, Leader, Labour Group,
> Oxon. County Council

With such a rich variety of response, and attitudes, together with the kind of work ranging from the re-organisation of a whole city's library system or the spare-time unpaid librarianship of a poetry lover with a couple of shelves of duplicate copies to lend, how can the total widening of access to literature not succeed?

Proposals

Absolutely essential:

a) a variety of alliances and co-operative effort (involving libraries, bookshops, education departments, art organisations) focused on specific experiments and activities.

b) throughout and after such efforts the emphasis should be on the dissemination of all that has been learned from such experiences (successful or unsuccessful) through the network of agencies involved.

Some examples of existing practice that could be learned from:

i. JILL (the Johnstone Information and Leisure Library) in Renfrewshire, awarded the Robinson Medal for Library Innovation. A teenage library - used mostly by 16-19 year olds (there is 80 per cent registered youth unemployment in this area) the library houses comics, magazines, paperbacks and a large, borrowable record collection: games, computers and a hi-fi system are also part of what is on offer, as is a hot drinks machine. The library is extremely popular.

ii. The Edinburgh Library Information Service for Ethnic Minorities
Its purposes:

   a) to provide literature in six different languages;
   b) to provide information for all departments
   c) to provide a translation and interpreting service, and
   d) to organise a Mushaida - that is a gathering for the community in which about 20 poets speak as the spirit moves them, the audience commenting likewise.

This last, considered as the most important of all these services by the Chief Librarian, was arrnaged in close consultation with people in the community (who insisted it take place in a local hall, not in the library). About 250 people came, and its success ensured that it will happen regularly.

iii. The 'Creative Reading' schemes in Sheffield and Birmingham: the proposal of a Sports Library at Meadowbank, Edinburgh.

Community Bookshops and Local Authorities:

Local authorities should consider sourcing a substantial part of their orders for new books in the shops in their community, bearing in mind the contribution such shops make to their communities.

Library Training Colleges:

The importance of literature, including contemporary writing, should be part of all courses, as should also the dissemination of ideas and practice related to the widening of access.

Books in Factories[10] Hospitals, Offices (or anywhere where ordinary people work):

Libraries and bookshops, together with help from education or recreation departments, should evolve some pilot schemes in workplaces for borrowing, buying and just reading. This should be a genuine service, with help and guidance for the working people when needed.

The Arts Council and Regional Arts Associations:

Where not already happening, they should be involved, structurally, at the planning stage of the local authority Leisure Plans where these (increasingly) exist.

The Edinburgh Leisure Plan, for example, for all its excellent qualities is a strangely 'value-free' or 'valueless' document. This matters very much to those interested in literature. The building-in of the Arts Council organisations to the planning mechanism would be an achievement of considerable importance, especially to the potential needs in literature as well as the expressed demands of ordinary people.

The Arts Council should set up a working party on access with interested booksellers and librarians to pool knowledge of existing good practice, share ideas for new initiatives and monitor these when put into operation.

THE TRADE UNIONS AND LITERATURE

There are no masses - only ways of seeing people as masses.

Raymond Williams

We had hardly any books in our house. We hadn't the money to buy them. So now I buy lots of books. They're so special - I still wash my hands before I take a book down from the shelf.

A secretary at the headquarters of the Transport and General Workers' Union

PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

Bill Brett, General Secretary, Institute of Professionals Managers and Specialists

David Buckle, District Secretary (Rtd) (Oxon.), Transport and General Workers' Union

Peter Carter, National Education Officer, General, Municipal and Boilermakers' Union

Margaret Dunn, National Officer, National Union of Public Employees

John Edmonds, General Secretary, General, Municipal and Boilermakers' Union

Neville Harris, District Secretary (Oxon.),Transport and General Workers' Union

Gavin Laird, General Secretary, Amalgamated Engineering Union

Peter Potts, General Secretary, General Federation of Trade Unions

Margaret Prosser, National Women's Officer, Transport and General Workers' Union

Ron Todd, General Secretary, Transport and General Workers' Union

Norman Willis, General Secretary, Trade Union Congress

THE TRADE UNIONS AND LITERATURE

Why The Unions Matter

Constraints (of time and resources) have meant that only one of this country's democratic voluntary movements could be considered here. The choice of the Trade Unions is in no way intended to minimise the relevance to the overall theme of such pioneering organisations as the WEA (Workers' Educational Association), the WI (Women's Institutes), and the WRI (Women's Rural Institutes). These have, over many years, enabled thousands of men and women to discuss and develop their intellectual and aesthetic potential. But the sheer scale of the Trade Union movement makes it central to this report.

If the widening of access to literature by working-class people is important, it must involve the largest organised movement of working people in the country, the ten million members of the Trade Union movement. The potential in it for increasing access is great. Hundreds of thousands of these ordinary people are constantly developing their imaginations, reasoning and language skills in the effort to improve the quality as well as the conditions of their own and their fellow-workers' lives. The network of communication is wide, ranging from small groups in workplaces to national and international conferences.

Yet the individual unions contain many thousands, indeed millions, of men and women for whom barriers to the arts are a reality.

Union Attitudes To The Arts

The TUC has had for a long time an Arts Advisory Committee, though its last Working Party Report on the Arts was published in 1976.

> *"I believe that over the years when we've talked in trade union branches about access to the arts and literature, it's almost been a lip-service sort of attitude. A bit like rabbits in a lettuce field, nibbling here, nibbling there, but no general concentration".*
>
> Ron Todd

The lowly place on union agendas of the arts is understandable in view of the major concerns that daily confront them, what one of their leaders referred to as '...fighting bush fires and dealing with the bread and butter issues of ordinary people'.

Yet no official approached refused an interview, despite such issues as, in John Edmonds' case, the ambulance dispute, or the constant interruptions of Norman Willis's discussion by broadcasters and other journalists demanding instant statements on urgent issues of the day. Despite differences about 'priorities', there is amongst those leaders interviewed, a general consensus that the arts are important, precious even, and a fear that they are under threat.

> *"I think trade unions have to be in on the arts - I mean - if someone doesn't keep the damn things alive, they'll go".*
>
> Bill Brett

"One of the problems about this present Government is that if we don't watch out we're going to end up as one of the most uncultured nations going".

Margaret Prosser

Nevertheless, this general approval does not necessarily imply particular actions or initiatives.

"People need to be encouraged. The trade unions should do something about this - it's a weak point of our movement. The unions shouldn't be happy that most people read rubbish. We care about the quality of life. But it shouldn't just be inside the unions. It's about the whole environment we live in. It's an international matter. It's different in Europe".

David Buckle

"We've never asked people - how do you perceive the arts? What do you think we should be doing? High art shouldn't be beyond the pale. And we shouldn't say from some inverted snobbery 'We've got our own working-class culture. We don't need that'. Because 'that' belongs to us. I mean, people in the Black Country - we ought to say, 'Look! Shakespeare came from your area - he's one of yours'".

Ron Todd

'Should the trade unions care? ' was the main question put to the General Secretaries and others interviewed.

Why These Leaders?

Those interviewed are key people in mass, craft and professional unions. The most important here are those whose memberships largely comprise semi-skilled manual workers, namely, members of the Transport and General Workers' Union and of the General, Municipal and Boilermakers' Union, with one and a quarter million and nearly one million members respectively, and lastly, the National Union of Public Employees with its particularly high proportion of women workers, many of whom are in lowly graded manual jobs.

The General Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, a union of skilled craftsmen, and semi-skilled men and women, with a long tradition of self-education and book-culture, and the General Secretary of a professional union, many of whose members work in libraries, museums and galleries, lend other perspectives.

Because of their power to influence their huge organisations, these leaders' views are of crucial importance. The vividness and sometimes passion with which they express their views will astonish only those who accept the media stereotype of trade union leaders as tough negotiators whose concern stops at the business of pay. The range of response was wide, from that of Peter Potts for whom the agenda was too full of urgent items for this issue of access to literature to be a relevant one at this time, to Ron Todd's robust unequivocal belief that of course '...all that - literature, opera, music - should be available to everybody and it matters'. Somewhere around the middle, Gavin Laird challenged the need for the question to be put at all on the grounds that his members had no problems with barriers other than the

existence of too few resources. (General Secretary of a mass union, with a strong craft tradition, he was perhaps over-reliant on a long tradition of self-education by the skilled working-man). Norman Willis on the other hand recognised that there was a problem.

> *"I accept invitations whenever I can manage it to read my poetry in public. Last year I read at the Hay-on-Wye Literature Festival. Partly I do it to show that a committed trade unionist is no less committed because he reads and writes poetry. A lot of trade unionists think it isn't macho to do that sort of thing. You've got to show you know it can be an important part of being human".*

The frequent use of the word 'arts' in preference to 'literature' itself indicates a barrier. Margaret Dunn explains why:

> *"Working-class people feel shut out. They've no familiarity with literature or art or anything like that. They see well-to-do, well-educated people enjoying things like opera and theatre that aren't part of their lives. They feel the social injustice of it, so they want to rectify that injustice. It's much easier to talk in general terms of 'the arts' when you're not familiar with any of them in a particular way. In fact, it's the only way when you don't feel you have any knowledge of say literature or classical music".*

Some Barriers

Manual and semi-skilled work

Those who do society's most boring or dirty or physically hard jobs are also usually those who suffer most from the inadequacies of our educational system. The sheer monotony, noise, filth and often danger of such work are not conducive to an interest in the arts and literature. A welder explains how he even becomes unused to words:

> *"I have to wear ear muffs to deaden the awful noise and an eyeshield. No chance of talking. If I want to talk, I have to take them off. Then the foreman sees me and tells me to get back to work".*

Harsh working conditions inspire two seemingly opposed views of the union's potential involvement in access to books, from two District Secretaries of the Transport and General Workers' Union:

> *"No, I don't see what the problem is. I don't know what you mean by access. Yes, I'm a reader. But it's up to people themselves. They need to have the motivation. It does matter if people don't read. People wouldn't be so content if they read more. We try to encourage education. We wish questions like yours could be among our top priorities, but it can't be when you put it besides things like Health and Safety. Do you know, in two years, £90 million were paid out in compensation?".*
>
> Neville Harris

David Buckle, Mr. Harris's immediate predecessor, believes the trade unions are letting their members down by neglecting the problem of their total quality of life outside, as well as inside the factory. His conviction comes from personal experience, when as a young man with a

family the problem was survival:

> *"I had no interest in serious books. I lived in a small house with very few consumer durables. I was working in the factory at Pressed Steel - it was very dirty - we called it the Black Hole of Calcutta - doing very boring work. My quality of life was absolutely dreadful. I simply had to do something about it. I took off in two directions - politics and the arts. What difference have books made to my life? Well, of course it improved - but not as much as I'd wished. You need education to deepen your understanding of literature and art".*

He argues that it's the duty of the individual union to assist its members to think and to develop their imaginations, and also to enrich their lives, the quality of which is so diminished by the dullness of their jobs, by helping them enjoy the arts.

The opinions of these two officials, apparently totally opposed, are in important ways actually complementary. No one would deny the absolute priority of Health and Safety for workers. The other view says only that too narrow a view of what a member needs to know and be can actually diminish his effectiveness as a trade unionist. It is a criticism of compartmentalised thinking.

In addition to the effects of monotonous work on the spirit and the dangers to health and safety, Margaret Dunn would add the lack of self-confidence many women in particular feel who do menial jobs.

> *"Some of my members have such low self-esteem because they think they're 'only working part-time' or 'only cleaning'. Yet they're often doing two or three jobs, looking after their own and possibly a daughter's family, all the housework, cooking, fetching children".*

She believes encouraging them to read is an important way to boost morale and always hands out lists of novels in her trade union education classes, particularly recommending 'anything by Virago - they'll find a lot there to give them confidence in themselves as women'. Another national women's officer, Margaret Prosser, would add to that the intellectual confidence that reading the classics and contemporary novels can give to trade unionists, insights into people and relationships that provide something economics and industrial relations by themselves cannot do and an imaginative nourishment as well.

> *"Reading sort of balances out people's lives. Trade unions are dealing with harsh realities and miseries. You need something broader and to give you a context for what you're trying to do in your trade union work".*

The Question Of Priorities

Many trade unionists, like Neville Harris above, think that too many urgent issues need attention for literature and other arts to receive emphasis at this time.

Peter Potts, General Secretary of the General Federation of Trade Unions, himself with a wide range of cultural interests takes that view, while Bill Brett, proud of his union's publication *Heritage*, reveals ambivalence if not contradiction in stating that '...the arts and literature have to be very low down on the list of priorities', yet adds:

"Yes, I think the question matters. Look at opera - enormous subsidy for the few. The middle-class can afford access: it keeps all the arts as a special privilege. Why does it matter? People should have a chance to enjoy all the arts.

If there's one thing worse than not having something, it's having something but not having access to it. Look at the new gallery in Liverpool, not opened. The library in Beckenham is closed three days a week. Terrible!".

What is it that prevents such leaders, themselves highly 'cultured', from assisting their members to take possession of that heritage too?

Gavin Laird's response to the question was not so much against treating literature as worthy of a place on the agenda, as indignant at the implication (as he saw it) that trade unionists aren't cultured.

"It's arrogant to ask that question. I don't see a need to educate our members to recognise a cultural dimension. Our members are cultured. It's a natural tendency of unions to care about opera, literature, folk music. I mean.....if you go around the country as I do and talk about a recently published book, I expect to get a response. Most of our members read books. It's part and parcel of being a trade union person. Look at our magazine: there's always a book review".

His deeply felt pride in his craft union's achievements must not be allowed to obscure the needs of its very many semi- and un-skilled members. He grants as much:

"Mind you, it may well be that our culture to a very large extent has been developed by craftsmen and craftswomen so I can't speak for every trade union or trade unionist. But I don't think we're that peculiar. We've never compartmentalised the arts, music, theatre. It's part of our ethos. If you want one of the best examples, it was the Upper Clyde sit-in. We had concert after concert. It was our members entertaining not just our own members but a whole broad spectrum of people".

His belief in the 'natural tendency of unions to care' and in the arts as part of the ethos of a trade union points a way forward, as does his deep conviction that 'the arts should be a very natural function'. So they should. Why are they often not so?

Cultural Fear

This suggestive phrase of John Edmonds pinpointed a kind of fear that prevents people exploring the arts, and which conversely can make so-called 'cultured' people fear the expression of their own arts interests as socially divisive.

"It's about spiritual development, individual and human happiness. Everyone should have the chance to try all the experiences that human beings find enriching. And, people don't usually reject. It's fear that stops them.

Cultural fear - this needs exploring. Why do some Labour politicians talk down to people? Is it that cultured people aren't socialists? Or are the highly educated socialists themselves full of 'cultural fear' as a kind of élitism or arrogance?

> *Why can't we convey the joy of literature? If I quoted someone in a speech, if it was clever or amusing, I'd get away with it, if I didn't quote the source. If I mentioned the writer, it would alienate, be divisive".*

He attributes this to the inadequacies of our education system.

> *"In many working-class organisations, to have a knowledge of literature actually acts as a barrier rather than anything else".*

There is plenty of evidence to confirm the truth of that. Even Ron Todd, passionately advocating the grasping by working-class people of 'all that - Shakespeare and so on', in recounting how Mortimer Wheeler on the 'telly' started him off on a life-long interest in archaeology, added:

> *"Thirty years ago - I mean me then? - A Ford's shop steward, studying archaeology!".*

Cultural fear takes many forms and does not afflict only working-class people. But it is understandable that the aspect of it which is linked to gross educational and social inequalities should so deeply affect those who suffer most from these. To many in trade unions, a serious concern with the arts might seem to go against the collective principle, almost to betray the ideal of solidarity. The reading of 'quality' newspapers, if not concealed from fellow-workers, can provoke accusations of 'working-class snob'. A Labour Councillor, asking his fellows why they were reluctant to serve on the Council's Arts Committee, received the reply:

> *"People would say, 'What's the matter with him?'. We'd be looked down on as middle-class".*

John Edmonds, well aware of his Oxford education as a privilege open to few, is acutely sensitive to the deprivations, cultural as well as economic and social, of so many of his members. Pondering whether '...it might be possible to introduce literature into union education classes?' he added: 'On the other hand, it might just be yet another barrier'.

This complex of feelings, anxieties, prejudices that make up 'cultural fear' did not seem to be a phenomenon in the accounts to be read of 19th century trade unionists who quoted, often freely, from literature (most often the Bible) without any apparent fear of cultural divisiveness.

The danger - 'shut it out. It's middle-class. It's not for us' - is that it is a false and self-damaging reaction to a society divided by amongst other things educational and cultural privilege. It may alienate those who feel it from the very heritage they argue, justly, should belong to all and turn them against taking the steps necessary to enjoy it. It can lock people into that very deficiency they rightly resent.

There is also, again, a risk of compartmentalised thinking, if not of double standards, if the leaders of a movement based on ideas of equality and the 'common cause' themselves have access to cultural resources while many of their members do not. Such a risk vanishes once all the leaders, as some already do, show that arts access is an important issue for all.

How To Overcome The Barriers

One way is to emphasise proper pride in the trade unions' own culture. But why stop there? As Ron Todd says:

> *"We're good at trade union memorabilia. What happened in the old days, Ben Tillett and all that. It's important for us because we came from that. But why shouldn't Dr. Johnson's books be equally important for us?".*

Conviction - that is the one thing necessary. It could belong to all. This same leader explains his love of Robert Burns - by sheer chance, during a visit to China with time to spare and nothing to read, he was lent a copy of the poems:

> *"And now for nearly 3,0 years I've had a personal love of Robert Burns. I couldn't understand a word at first. I think I can now claim to have read every word that Burns wrote - I love Burns. We shouldn't be restricted you know - '..only eat in this field'. A farm labourer would love to sit and soak in Puccini. It's not meant for people in top hats and silk coats. It's important. We ought to broaden out!".*

How to convince everyone of this is the challenge. Bringing home the realisation that the poetry is to do with you is essential. Margaret Dunn, a miner's daughter turned adult student, remembers:

> *"It was an important moment for me in a class reading Wilfred Owen. We read that poem* **Miners** *where he compares the lads in the trenches to coalminers. I come from a mining background and here was someone considered a great poet using his art to write about people like me".*

Apart from the immediate business of pay, trade unions all the time are working to try to gain greater access for working people to wider influence on and participation in industry, politics and other areas of society that shape people's lives.

This is seen as the essential way of working towards a genuine equality and democracy. There seems, however, to be a separation between all that (i.e. industrial, political and social participation) and the arts. So the question arises - how may literature - as the art most relevant here - be brought closer into the union vision?

Literature And Trade Union Education

That question was put to Peter Carter, National Education Officer of the GMBU, with one of the biggest education jobs in the trade union movement. He works in the union's magnificent National College where hundreds of union members study on short courses every year. The walls were hung with children's paintings (they'd had a competition for members' families), students (i.e. factory and local authority workers) were sitting in the comfortable carpeted bar, chatting during their brief coffee break.

His task is to give skills and confidence to people who, perhaps for the first time in their lives, are being involved daily with others, faced with new subject matter, handling papers, acquiring new vocabulary, speaking for others, all the time developing themselves.

Some may need help[11] with literacy skills. It is not hard to see why there is, in Peter Carter's words '...a shift from education to training'. At the same time, his ambivalence surfaces:

> *"I'm actually conscious that the broad field for reading gets less and less of a look-in. We do sell books. A lot of our people never go into bookshops".*

His ambivalence changed into embarrassment in describing the visit of a member of the Australian TUC whose brief was to find out what ideas and practice the TUC here could offer that might help develop the arts for trade union members in Australia:

> *"What could I tell her? Well - the 'Mother of Trade Unions' and all that rubbish! We don't do anything!*
>
> *You see, part of the function of the trade union is to deal with bread and butter issues, but increasingly the trade unions have got to offer a broader range if opportunities for members to develop. We're beginning to ask about 'quality of life' - what does it mean? The Scottish TUC has set a cracking example!".*

The Scottish Trade Union Congress has a full-time Arts Officer and its policy states that all curricula for trade union schools should include arts subjects - a significant breakdown of the division between education and training in trade union thinking.

Education and training - a false dichotomy?

This split between education and training in trade union theory and practice reflects the vocational/academic kind of streaming in state education favoured by some educationalists, regardless of the fact that nothing contributes more strongly to a culturally divided society, or acts more effectively as a brake on the advance to an educated democracy.

Education that includes training creates more confidence than training that excludes education. The experience of teaching 'communications' in trade union classes at Ruskin College on both short- and full-time courses convincingly demonstrates the dangers of limiting language skills to 'What is useful in the job of being a good shop steward'. Bringing in examples of the full range of the languages of negotiation, speech-making, media, poetry and prose, acts not only as a stimulus to awareness and greater articulacy, but begins to 'demystify' prose and poetry. The development of students' sensitivity to language, encouraging creative reading and writing even in trade union classes, releases energy and confidence that can only improve their performance in whatever job they are doing.

More, to limit for example language skills to '..what they will find useful' is not only losing an opportunity for people as people and as readers, but it is, however, well-meant in itself, an unconscious kind of patronising, 'We know more than this but it's not relevant for you', that consolidates the very cultural fear that one of the earlier voices described eloquently. And if a text is needed as a touchstone of authority on this, George Orwell's as yet unsurpassed essay *Politics and the English Language* will do very well.

We don't know how far people may develop and in what unforeseen directions, once the confidence-building, stimulating process of such education is begun. That should be the central aim of any education course. Acknowledging and building on the capacity, often

latent but always there, right from childhood, of people to become excited about language is a means that must not be ignored. It is possibly the single most important means of building the individual's sense of self.

> *"I didn't really get into writing poetry till I was in my forties. Landscape moved me - I wrote a poem about the Settle railway. I got very interested in words. Trying to find the right words for my poem, to be true, has made me a braver person as a trade unionist".*
>
> Norman Willis

Conclusions

The widening of vision in trade union leaders and members shows itself in a growing pre-occupation with 'the quality of life' of their members, as one of the conditions of working people that the movement is dedicated to improve. Access to the arts should not be left until after the improvement of social and economic conditions, but go along with and even be part of that effort.

> *"Yes, it matters now. It's wrong to say that when we win through to a better, fairer society, we'll be able to enjoy literature and music. It should start happening now. It'll never be a perfect world...".*
>
> John Edmonds

> *"No, I don't believe access to literature should be low on the list of trade union priorities. You know - the attitude - 'When we've won the revolution sisters, then we'll have time to live'".*
>
> Margaret Prosser

The energetic arts involvement of the Scottish and the Australian TUCs, together with increased contact with European colleagues, heightens this awareness of fresh possibilities. A second, more pragmatic factor is that the modern trade union, in its constant efforts to maintain a high level of membership, must have more to offer new members, recognising new needs in the '90s.

Linked with that is the recent dramatic breakthrough (in terms of the opening up of liberal, cultural opportunities to the trade unionist) of the Employee Development and Assistance Programme (EDAP)[12] worked out jointly and agreed by unions concerned and Ford UK. Under this scheme, every Ford employee is entitled to a grant of up to £200 per year to follow an educational course of his or her choice, which must (a) not be purely recreational and (b) not be job-related. The take-up by Ford workers had been high (in one factory of mainly women workers it was 80 per cent). Other major firms are already considering similar schemes. These developments, like the 'Access' courses now opening up local adult education to all-comers, herald a shift of the greatest significance in the possibilities of releasing the cultural and educational potential of working people. The trade unions should seize the moment to play their part in this, educationally speaking, revolutionary situation.

The unions themselves should take over, for their members, as policy and in practice, the

widening of access to language and literature. Thousands of individuals in the movement read seriously, wish to explore further but feel isolated. If the unions could only discover and build on the attempts such people make, the whole atmosphere could change.

> *"Libraries, bookstalls, aren't enough. Without signposts, guidance and encouragement, such things are useless. You need a guide to hold you by the hand, take you through, making suggestions 'Have a look at this'".*
>
> John Edmonds

The unions should not leave this to other agencies as that will not dispel 'cultural fear'. Members belong to their union, it has their trust, it is where everyone is equal. When the union, amongst all else that it offers, holds out this opportunity, undoubtedly it will be taken up, not least by newcomers who bring an alert interest and curiosity about what is available to them. It will seem, as it ought, to be part of their rights.

Of course, the other agencies, the Book Trusts, Regional Arts Associations, the Arts Council should be used. But not in terms just of liaison. The trade union movement should approach these bodies and demand what they need for this project as a matter of rights, based on the needs of its members.

> *"It's making a path for the people to see art is part of their culture as well - it doesn't just belong to a certain group, you know".*
>
> Ron Todd

Proposals

The TUC:

- should conduct and publish a survey of the specific initiatives in widening access to the arts and literature and language that individual unions are planning or already carrying out;

- should invite such pioneering librarians as Dr. Jo Hendry or Pat Coleman to advise on ways in which members could gain much more from public libraries (e.g. producing a guide 'How to Use Your Library'; organising for groups of trade unionists to visit libraries (a) to learn how to make the most effective use of them and (b) how to improve their own local libraries);

- should, with the help of such a joint TUC/Librarians Advisory Body, aim to establish library/bookshops in factories, office blocks, hospitals etc. (see Library Section p.22).

The Arts Council and the Regional Arts Association should:

- insist that all their education courses should include a wider version of 'communications', i.e. development of language skills and awareness with reference to every kind of language use, from that of the media to poetry and prose;

- consider appointing a writer-in-residence to their National College (if they have one) or in large firms or factories;

- offer bursaries (cf. NALGO) to those wishing to follow reading or writing courses;

- sell books - of all kinds - at all possible union outlets;

- give platforms at galas, conferences etc, for writers to give readings for members' enjoyment;

- publish regular book articles and reviews in their journals (cf. the literary page of the TGWU (Transport and General Workers' Union) journal.

Individual unions:

Clearly the Arts Council and Regional Arts Associations would be more than happy to be involved (and perhaps are already so in some instances) in some of these proposals.

It is vital, however, to the success of any attempt to widen access via the trade unions, that the trade unions themselves should take the initiative and approach the Arts Council and the Regional Arts Associations with demands for help, information and resources.

ACCESS TO LITERATURE AND EDUCATION

Encountering literature shouldn't just be left to what I call the 'happy accident' - when you bump into someone who says, 'Look, you must read this book'.

Norman Willis

I am fighting for my life. It is that important.

Willy Russell
(pleading unsuccessfully for an education grant)

PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

Dr Graham Allen, Deputy Warden and English Tutor, Coleg Harlech, Wales

Dr Joan Bellamy, Dean of Arts Faculty, The Open University

Dr Christopher Butler, Official Student (i.e. Fellow), Christ Church, Oxford

Dr Kate Flint, Fellow and Tutor in English, Mansfield College, Oxford

Dr David Grylls, Tutor in English, Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies, Oxford University

Mary Hedderwick, Senior Community Education Worker, Oxford

Dr Graham Jones, Principal, Denman College, Oxon (the Women's Institute College)

Professor Graham Martin, Professor of English Literature, The Open University

Dr Heather O'Donoghue, Fellow and Tutor in English Language and Medieval Literature Somerville College, Oxford

Dr J.B. O'Donoghue, Lecturer in English, Magdalen College, Oxford

Mari Pritchard, Community and Adult Education Officer, Oxford

Dr Mary Ross, Tutor in English, Newbattle College, Edinburgh

Tom Schuller, Director, Centre for Continuing Education, University of Edinburgh

Alison Soskice, Community Education Development Worker, Oxford

Brian Spittles, Tutor in English, Ruskin College, Oxford

EDUCATION

Why it Matters

"Literature did change my life and extraordinarily for the better. I remember the first book I ever read right through. I was about 22 or 23, full of frustration, having spent all my life since school in one unskilled manual job after another.

I remember quite well working in a stock room and another worker talking about **The Grapes of Wrath.**

He lent me his copy and I read it, purely as an escape from this drudgery, but luckily not into a fantasy world - into a greater reality.

That led me to other works, then to the Workers' Educational Association. I owe everything to them. It was a - forgive the cliché - an amazing enrichment, a development of something in me. And, if you can remove the cliché, it meant something very deep.

It literally changed the way I perceived life, and it changed the way I lived".

Brian Spittles

Many people come through to literature without the aid of education. People with little education who have made their own way, however, often express a deep sense of loss at what they feel they have missed out on.

The account above of the transforming power of literature and education on one man is also an indictment of the education system which had failed him, along with 75 per cent of children at that time in the 11-plus examination. Now, with two degrees behind him, Brian Spittles is a lecturer in a residential college. What further educational opportunities will the rest of that 75 per cent have received?

Education is the most powerful instrument we have for the development of people's potential. A huge network exists, from literacy centres to universities and polytechnics, for the education of adults from 18 onwards. Yet, despite the current emphasis on the concept of 'life-long education' and therefore on 'access' courses, the realisation of the vision of the educated democracy still eludes us. If education - in all its variety of adult forms - could get it right, what a contribution to that process it could make. Three questions are suggested in an effort to explore the present practice of these manifold organisations in relation to access to literature.

First, what values underpin their work? Secondly, what are the relevant processes by which they try to achieve their aims? And lastly, what are the constraints they work under that affect that main question?

Values

'Education' is not just to do with systems of learning. Who is it for? Why does it matter? Do the people working in basic literacy - for illiteracy must be considered the first barrier to access - have values similar to or quite different from the specialists in higher education? Are the specialists concerned with teaching others, a minority, their specialisms, or do they see what they are doing as sufficiently important for it to be desirable that everyone should share it? Do they believe that without such a condition, the quality of our civilisation is impaired?

Literacy

The figure for illiterates or semi-literates in Britain is around six to ten million. In any discussion of literacy, the issue of values is inseparable from process or method.

> *"Six million illiterates can't read. If you're talking about literature, it's they who need help most. Yes of course they need information and skill but most important of all, they need to be exposed to imaginative writing so that they can express their imagination and feelings - absolutely vital. They need Arts Council support most of all".*
>
> Dr G. Jones (formerly Director of Adult Education, Bucks.)
> Principal, Denman College, Oxon

Not everyone who works in community education and basic literacy work agrees with that view. Sometimes the awareness of such teachers of the seriousness of the illiterate person's problems (and the people who lack literacy lack many other things) leads them to an exclusive stress on skills teaching.

One volunteer, helping wind up the International Literacy Year work of UNESCO,[13] questioned the value of time spent on investigating barriers to literature when such a large proportion of the world's population can't even read.

Mari Pritchard, formerly in charge of Oxfordshire's literacy work, explained that people come to literacy classes for fundamental skills. The most important barriers include in particular the lack of vocabulary and that of the skill of reading. She didn't consider the relationship of literature to literacy of importance till a later stage i.e. when people became fluent readers - 'one hopes they'll go to the library then' - but she thought their writing and making of little books very important: 'Because it makes books part of their culture, not your culture'.

A different view was expressed by Wendy Hill, a voluntary literacy teacher for the last 15 years, and herself a former adult student).

> *"I see the powerlessness and lack of confidence of people who lack reading and writing skills as the heart of the problem. So sometimes I bring bits of Shakespeare to read with them. Of course it's too difficult to do much with but it breaks down the barriers between 'us' and 'them'. We have a good laugh. But it's important".*

Literacy is not a subject for over-simplification. It must be about culture and the whole

person. The writings of Paulo Freire have to be understood in a context of the Third World but have much to say to us, in spite of - or maybe because of - our superior material standards. He argues that every human being, no matter how submerged, is capable of looking critically at his world, given the proper tools. Believing that, the teacher working with illiterate adults assumes intelligence, experience, imagination, and bases the skills learning on those qualities. Freire found that peasants learning to read discovered their own autonomy, demonstrating 'the humanising power of thought' to negate accepted limits and open the way to a new future. The value of literature in such a learning process seems obvious, appealing as it does to the imagination, feelings and power of thought that are common to all human beings.

Values And The Adult Educator

It must be more than accident that the great tradition of adult education in this country, owing so much to the vision and work of R.H. Tawney, has thrown up some of the most remarkable literature teachers and thinkers of the last 40 years. Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson (as distinguished in literature as in history) have each written books of such striking originality that no contemporary thinking on the relation of culture to society can safely ignore them. The effects of this tradition on community and adult education include the emphasis on what the student brings to the process from his/her life experience, the emergence of unconventional and even new methods of teaching and learning, and a shake-up of conventional meanings of education.

Literature is proving itself as an indispensable part of much innovative practice. Alison Soskice, an outreach worker for may years, dismisses the view that people with little or no education need only 'basic teaching' that will enable them to fill in forms, to claim benefits or understand the housing points system. With attractive boldness she insists that the understanding of a poem actually has a positive effect on someone's ability to fill in a form. She does not mean that in the utilitarian sense of improving writing skills (though, who knows, such a proposition might well be worthy of some research). She does seriously think of it as creating in the readers (or listener) a kind of confidence that can flow from the perception and reception of the power of art.

> *"At first, people are afraid of poetry, think it's too clever for them, nothing to do with them. You can show them it's to do with human responses and that each of them has those.*
>
> *You have to provide a very trusting setting so that people can say what they feel. Imaginative writing puts you in touch with something in yourself - something you maybe didn't know you had. When people try to express that - their feelings and thoughts - it helps them become articulate and so, confident.*
>
> *That's when you feel able to fill in your forms!".*

Outreach work like that is absolutely necessary to correct some of the unfortunate results of the traditional extra-mural literature class that notoriously (though not always) attracts the educated middle-class student, frightening off those with little or no background.

The originality of the long term residential adult college[14] lies in its offering the adult (usually working-class) with no formal qualifications at all a rigorous advanced course of study that compares favourably with university standards. While this makes the vital point that almost

any adult, offered the opportunity and with motivation, can achieve as good, if not better, work than conventional undergraduates, the very terms used here indicate the problem. Such colleges - like Harlech and Ruskin - can admit only a pitifully small number of students and leave untouched the great majority outside.

Two aspects of Brian Spittles' work illustrate this vividly. When not helping mature adults to reach their full intellectual potential at Ruskin College, he works in the local youth theatre, producing plays with youngsters '...from the deprived side of Oxford, not from the posh schools or North Oxford'. The choice of plays ranges from Sophocles to Arthur Miller. 'Their parents and friends come, mostly from the council estates. You hope some of them might pick up an interest'.

The split nature of his work illustrates the problem - the 'privileged' few (those snatched from the vast number the state system fails) enjoying two years' full-time study, and the audience, shut out from the opportunity of higher education, perhaps gaining from a two hours' play a glimpse of the possibilities of enrichment. Is this the best we can do?

Academic Values - Promise Or Threat?

Tom Schuller, Director of the Edinburgh University Continuing Education Department, significant new name of the old Extra-Mural Department, believes the answer to that division between those with advanced education and those without can be healed by the achievement of '...total access to the university, degrees for all', yet worries that something of value might even get lost if that is ever achieved. He discusses:

> *"....the pity of it - all that experience of adults locked in there, waiting to be released. And the sensitising power of poetry.....I admit I get a bit depressed when I compare the commitment people make to meaning when compared with the exam-orientated 'pull apart this text' type of approach.*
>
> *Response to a literary text is so much richer in mature people because they draw on experience. It would be harder for a mature person not to respond totally to a text".*

His comment on the limitations of his own privileged education (Winchester and Oxford) lends force.

> *"Access has to be widened at all levels, starting with literacy. But even I, with my expensive education, need access for example to poetry.*
>
> *OK - I have the technical equipment to analyse. But in terms of personal response, we were taught not to allow that.*
>
> *I remember, after 'doing' Sophocles, we were reading Euripides in Greek. We had five minutes to spare at the end of the session so we were asked if we'd enjoyed it. We actually talked about liking Euripides for five minutes. It was very unusual to be allowed to discuss your personal responses".*

His conclusion is arresting.

> *"We have to ask - what is Higher Education? That's the question now".*

Values - the universities and polytechnics

The university teachers value literature for more than its standing as an academic discipline. As Christopher Butler, eminent critical theorist of Christ Church, Oxford, says:

> *"Of course you grow when you read literature. It'll do it inside you - it can transform you inside. That's what a great poem or novel is, something that can do that".*

Such satisfactions need to be linked to education (perhaps loosely defined here as critical dialogue between teachers and student).

> *"Anyone can enjoy Beethoven - it's all so very big and exciting and anybody above a certain level of education can enjoy Dickens. But it's ridiculous to say reading Dickens is as easy as say Mazo de la Roche. It helps access by, paradoxically, making it clear that there is something better.*
>
> *Since people treat their access to culture as a kind of achievement, then one should let it remain to be seen as a kind of achievement".*
>
> Christopher Butler

Dr Heather O'Donoghue does not make a distinction between 'reading for work and reading for pleasure'.

> *"If I read P.D. James tonight, it's impossible to say it's got nothing to do with my work. And then, literature has a big knock-on effect on my reading of newspapers and watching TV.*
>
> *Really, for me, literature is a very time-consuming job, plus a hobby, and is vital in its effect on the way I look at the world. That's how much, how large a part, it plays in my life".*

Far from seeing her specialist interests in Icelandic and medieval literature as esoteric, she feels:

> *"...a fundamental link between me teaching Icelandic literature and people reading anywhere. There's a necessity of an imaginative life for people. I'm sure also reading fictional literature sharpens your understanding of all kinds of discourse.*
>
> *Just today, in discussing* **Troilus and Criseyde** *with a student, I found we were agreeing that Chaucer's perception and judgement of a dubious narrator was exactly what you'd think today about certain kinds of newspaper writing or media techniques.*
>
> *The way people behave in the Icelandic sagas and Chaucer or Henryson indicate that there is no mystique - that this literature, close to raw, human experience in so many ways is, or should be for anyone, everyone".*

The literature faculties of the universities provide research and enquiry that nourish literature as a main artery in the body of knowledge and through systematic teaching ensure that the literature of the past as well as the present is made to come alive for each generation of students, a necessary condition for continual cultural renaissance. Literature also, studied in its historical and sound context, is one of the mainstream subjects which give the student the ability to understand and to cope with living in a very complex society.

Without such knowledge people are at a disadvantage in today's world. Christopher Butler's words recall those of trade union leader Margaret Prosser:

> *"If you give people access to cultural knowledge the more they're going to be able to cope. And the more of the cultural map you give them the more they're going to be able to cope. They're going to have a wider range of imaginative possibilities to match against what they see. It can produce happiness and discontent. 'Why is the world not so good as it is in literature?' Nothing wrong with that Utopianism. And one needs the painful side of that as well as the pleasurable side".*

A democratic view common to these teachers says that everybody, as in politics, should be brought into the debate about culture and full participation in that depends, to a point, on shared knowledge. Graham Martin of the Open University concurs:

> *"The value of literature, more particularly, is to do with democracy. It helps us to understand how language controls us. Poetry best helps us get a grip on the slipperiness of language. And literature leads people to have more self-confidence, not rashness, more understanding of moral and other experience".*

Critical theory, as such, played little part in these discussions though there was general agreement that the debates about the 'canon' (i.e. can you now say there is a 'great tradition' or is it meaningful to refer to 'great books' at all?) had significantly helped access to literature by blurring the boundaries between different kinds of writing, between 'classics' and 'popular' literature, even between literature and television. '*Bread* is literature', said one teacher, referring to Carla Lane's Liverpool comedy that attracted millions of viewers. If literature courses are including the stuff of what the 'Common Viewer' enjoys, might this be an indication that the arrival of the 'Common Reader' or 'Common Student' might not be quite so far off?

Processes

Processes, involving teaching methods and syllabuses, are another aspect of value. Is teaching literature about the pursuit of qualifications or about the inner development of the individual? Should teaching be needs-based or course-based?

Students at universities and polytechnics are mostly very young adults, full of life and energy, with a fair amount of skills and expertise from the Sixth Form that has prepared them for what the university has to offer. By contrast, adult education organisations, with completely open access, requiring no qualifications, have to attract or persuade people to come in, many of whom may have been alienated by, or even feel failures because of, their school experiences. The conventionally A level educated young apply (even compete) for what the university, with a long tradition of teaching and scholarship, has to give.

The adult educators, on the other hand, have a duty to discover the needs of the mature student and the best ways of serving these.

Despite these contrasts, these two kinds of educators share certain aims. Both are concerned to develop the abilities of the individual, and universities are more and more interested in increasing their percentage of mature students. Many experiments, from altering entrance qualifications to changing the nature of an examination, indicate an open-mindedness and flexibility that can only assist the mature student. Conversely, adult education is increasingly preoccupied with standards and qualifications. The higher and adult education sectors make up one vast single scene in which one part influences another and tensions about aims, methods, syllabus and so on can cut right across it at times.

How and what to teach?

The Open University can be seen in one way as trying to fuse the best elements of university and of adult/community education. Anyone may apply to enter it, without qualifications and work for a degree[15]. The problem is how, without loss, to reconcile the adult's sheer interest in literature with the pressures of formal examined courses.

Professor Graham Martin of the Open University, reflecting on Tawney and the old, unexamined, three-year tutorial class where 'people went for the pure love of it', expresses the problem:

> *"If you're trying to move people from a hedonistic concept of reading - literature of escape - to a more complex kind, then you need courses. The problem of our culture is that our institutions are so close to the academic and pedagogic with their stress on qualifications".*

One way to build the adult student's confidence, he feels, is to demystify literature:

> *"I'd like to find a way of defining literature loosely without a capital 'L' - a way of programming it educationally speaking so that it's not wrapped up as a thing that teachers know and that students have to be told - I think that's absolutely wrong".*

At the same time, Graham Martin's experience taught him that mature people who have struggled to find their way into higher education, far from wishing to be given soft options, appreciate intellectual challenges. He instanced his own introduction of:

> *"...a course in 20th century poetry against a lot of disapproval on the grounds that it was too difficult.*
>
> *It became a highly regarded course with a high annual course population".*

Every good teacher must both interest and excite on the one hand and on the other offer intellectual challenge. The adult educator has to find ways into study that will build on the experience of his student and create confidence. Graham Allen of Coleg Harlech offers an anti-Arnoldian view:

> *"We have to get away from the old Coleridgean or Arnoldian view - you know - the old 'right words in the right order' to be given to the great unwashed!".*

He argues against 'levels' and for the basing of teaching on the language adults themselves use.

> *"It makes literature more accessible if you think meaning and language are the basis of it - I mean if you probe the way in which words and meaning trace back to the direct uses of language in the workplace, the hearth and the home.*
>
> **Hamlet** *and* **Lear** *- it makes them less inaccessible if you do it that way. Bring it down - a linguistic question".*

Graham Allen acknowledges a debt to Wittgenstein in his own thinking, but he is no remote philosopher:

> *"I do a lot of 'Poets and Pints' in pubs. A lot of people think it's demeaning. I don't, because you see the lines being blurred between certain types of literature.*
>
> *The use of language in jokes - that's literature. It's partly meaning, partly practice - and this sort of thing is against institutionalism which is a great barrier - élitist!".*

For those with no educational qualifications, to consider applying to the Open University or a college such as Coleg Harlech, great courage and motivation are required. Millions more in the community do not even begin to believe that such opportunities are for them. The community education worker has therefore to create a different starting point:

> *"Most people haven't a clue where to start. Most people don't think classes are for them. So you have to go out to where they are - mother and toddler groups, works' canteens, shops. I often organise things on the spot that seem to be what people want.*
>
> *I use reading and writing to get their personal response. If you don't encourage them to express that, I don't know where you do start. (Otherwise you just take ideas from books - other people's ideas. That's really bad!). After that, they're ready to go on".*
>
> Outreach worker

Outreach education work of that sort is fundamental to the widening of access and at the present time is the most important of all adult education initiatives, both in its aims and its often daring and original methods of work.

Christopher Butler, approving strongly of outreach work, takes what he called an Arnoldian/ Reithian line about the teaching process:

> *"Of course access in your sense has essentially to be part of the educational process, that is, I don't think it's possible 'naturally' to pick up how to understand or enjoy literature, any more than it's possible 'naturally' to play, say, football. Everything is learned, and literature in particular when divorced from some sort of educational process is lost and goes dead because you don't know what to do next".*

He agrees that this 'Arnoldian line' has dangers of paternalism and authoritarianism but insists that it must be made tactfully clear that there are levels, while also making it 'abundantly clear' that the right approach to literature makes the really important bits accessible.

He does not see this as an élitist view. Only harm is done to the ideal of equality if 'false equality' is paraded. Belief in democracy requires that knowledge is truly shared.

> *"You can't have a dialogue with somebody if you're not equating the background information that you've got.*
>
> *The teacher has to have some rough idea of where is this leading other people. They have to be very truthful but it's a terrible pretence to believe we're all equal. The teacher has to have the map. You can't walk across open country without somebody who knows what you're doing in that kind of weather. Teachers have to accept the burden of being more literate. It's absurd to say they have to talk down. It's not about 'up' and 'down'".*

Despite differences in method and theoretical stance and very different constituencies of students, all those interviewed agreed it was important 'to start from where the student is'. To try to improve access, the extended notion of culture is needed. Teachers need to have a broad cultural view, know about TV and other medias though surely the teacher was right who said:

> *"I do think there are some very severe dangers in divorcing media studies from the higher culture. Then you are being conned really".*

Teaching only 'relevant literature' may be self-defeating. The constant presence of such old-fashioned '60s choices as *Kes* and *Catcher in the Rye* in the school syllabus, of *The Ragged Trouser'd Philanthropist* to the exclusion of a wide range of books on trade union and similar bookstalls, may well deny people the stimulus to development. Adult students, partly because they're not school-based, are more original and experimental than those coming via O and A levels. They are quick to see that people can only be extended imaginatively and educationally when they pick up the differences from, as well as the similarities to, their own experience.

It would be unwise to draw too distinct a line between the teaching processes of adult and university teachers. There are many experimental and innovative initiatives by the latter while some of the former stick to the old traditional academic methods. The area that is already growing but which must be hugely expanded is that of community and access education. Much of what has been said above could nourish and aid that process. Nevertheless, higher education is also attended by features that act as constraints on such a development.

Constraints and Conclusions

The Universities

The universities dominate the educational scene, no doubt rightly so. We need them for their intellectual eminence, their insistence on excellence and on pushing back the limits of human knowledge.

But the question of excellence begs the question - What is a truly civilised, i.e. excellent society? What might the universities do to help bring that into being?

The traditional university, with all its resources, caters mainly for a very narrow age group, roughly those from 18 years to 22. Secondly, this is a very small part indeed of the total population of that age group. Thirdly, the university is orientated towards specialisms. Its staff are career-orientated in their special areas. No doubt this is because it is the demand made of them[16].

For Christopher Butler, despite his expressed deep social concern, access for working-class young adults as far as it affects his job arises as an issue only when he is conducting the highly competitive interviews for admission to his college (only eight or nine places to read English are awarded each year). He explained his difficulty:

> *"How can you judge the potential of a young student from a non-bookish home who has been 'turned on' to literature by O and A levels with one from a very cultured background who has been surrounded by books and ideas practically since birth?".*

In his own specialism, which happens to be in theory, he points to the total irrelevance of that to the access question:

> *"Academic work is so specialised - it's for other experts. The pathos of this is that politically well-meaning work is often only accessible to other élitist kind of theorists and actually doesn't do what it is pretending to do.*
>
> *The trouble is, the academic profession is extremely competitive and marginalised. It is too rarely to do with communicating well. The rewards are very high, so the specialist uses specialist language. If the same people were asked to make a TV programme they'd have to use a different language. If literature is important, you should be able to explain what's important in it to virtually anybody.*
>
> *My profession needs a bit of a shake-up in terms of realising its democratising duties".*

Extra-mural departments

The extra-mural departments of universities were set up in aid of that idea of the university 'realising its democratic duties', going literally 'outside the walls'. Some, such as those of Edinburgh and Leeds, show great enterprise in doing this. Others, like the Oxford department, seem tied by a strong umbilical cord to the university. Its recent success in being accepted into Congregation (the governing body of the university) might mean stronger efforts to influence the university to concern itself with opening up its resources to the ordinary people who actually live and work in Oxford. Mary Hedderwick, Senior Community Education worker who works in Cowley, is sceptical:

> *"The university seems meaningless to ordinary people. It offers them jobs as cleaners...".*

The danger for an extra-mural department attached to so prestigious a university as Oxford lies in the temptation to prove itself 'as good as the university', for its staff to emulate its academic standards both in their own specialisms and career ambitions as well as in their classes, in short - to turn inwards instead of outwards.

Its recently appointed English tutor, David Grylls, cautious about the 'now cant term - access - almost mystical - an umbrella term for opening up all forms of education bringing people who wouldn't normally be brought in', was very positive about the need to do that. Since

'normally' Oxford extra-mural classes have more adults aged over 75 than they have under 30 years of age, it clearly is time to try for 'abnormal' recruiting. Current initiatives include co-operation with the Workers' Educational Association in setting up a two-year Humanities Foundation Course for 20 adults. He would like to see part-time degrees offered by the university but thinks it is not yet ready for that. His ambition, while aiming to reach more and younger people, is 'to put on the kind of course the university would be proud of'.

That might be acceptable as a standard if the university's vision of higher education included both an understanding of the educational needs of unqualified adults in the community and an obligation to open its own doors much more widely to them.

Degrees, Qualifications - Stimulus or Trap?

The kind of thinking that most hampers the imaginative efforts to widen access is that about grades - full-time degrees and the university as 'higher', part-time degrees and open adult education as 'lower'. This may trap educationalists in old-style ideas of education. They become pulled back by the closed thinking and the closed structure of 'the system' instead of venturing out. This is not to deny that the issue of 'accreditation', whether degrees or certificates, is important and it would be wrong to take an absolutist stand on this. Graham Martin, of the Open University, says that:

> *"What people want is validation - a record to say you've done the work. One can't be pure-minded about this question. Perhaps once everyone has 'bits of paper' (i.e. degrees or diplomas) they would lose their exclusive value. Maybe the true aristocrats then will be those who read for the love of wisdom, truth and beauty".*

Tom Schuller of the Edinburgh University Continuing Education Department - while acknowledging '...there is a dilemma - it's important to give people something tangible. Against that, it slices subjects up, compartmentalises...' - nevertheless is:

> *"...100 per cent committed to widening access for working-class people, giving adults tools. The strand that interests me is changing the structure of university provision, to get degrees open to everyone".*

To him this means going outside. He spoke with admiration of Lothian Council's numeracy initiative, 'the Number Shop. It's next door to the fishmonger's', and wondered about the possibilities for Literacy, and even Literature, Shops.

The outreach worker, sensitive to the needs of the most educationally disadvantaged, sees the problem as one of threshold:

> *"How do you shift people, once you've got them reading and writing, to that next level - being able to think in different kinds of frameworks, stop being personal? A lot of people find that very hard. But you have to bridge the gap between personal and objective.*
>
> *You need a critical assessment when you're ready for it - at some stage. An exam. is more objective than your tutor. Somehow it's a kind of evaluation of you by society - it does matter to people for good reasons".*

The adult colleges too, though turning the conventional system upside-down in many important ways ('If you have A levels, don't apply to us. Go elsewhere'), get drawn into the

conventional system with a very high proportion of their adult students going on to degree study. This can, of course, be very helpful to the individuals themselves, but leaves unresolved the problem of stimulating and bringing in the great majority. It may even exacerbate the problem:

> *"We challenge our students, even beyond the formal teaching, deliberately choosing the toughest kinds of writing - like* **Krapp's Last Tape** *which we did on the Fringe.*
>
> *We may be pulling them into an academic mystique instead of enriching their ordinary lives. You sometimes get students saying they can't talk to their families or former friends anymore when they go back home. We must resist this by being ordinary, using ordinary language".*
>
> Mary Ross (tutor at Newbattle College)

(Ironically, this college, the only one of its kind in Scotland, is threatened with closure by the withdrawal of government funding at the time of writing.)

Higher education - what does it mean?

A new vision of what education means and how it ought to happen is the only and the essential way to resolve the needs of a partially educated society. Learning should happen wherever people are, in the workplace, the old people's home, the maternity hospital - every kind of experiment is needed in the aim of opening up, to the whole range of adults, informal access. This calls for a multitude of alliances between the great number of groups and organisations concerned, for colleges without walls[17], rather than for the 'hiving off of the problem' into the existing educational institutions. There is a crying need for an imaginative leap that will take seriously the challenge to create the educated democracy.

Role of the Arts Council

The Arts Council is the national body that should give voice and shape to the vision of a truly cultured society. Could it not, reflecting on the second principle of its Charter, produce a policy and design that would harness the imagination and energies of our complex educational agencies towards that end? The Arts Council has a vision of the arts, and in particular, for our present purposes, of literature, that is different from, and wider than, the educationalist's one. There is a role that the Arts Council could fill in some creative resolution of the tension between, on the one hand, the old Tawneyesque liberal tradition of adult education, that is, learning for its own sake, and on the other, the emphasis in the system on accreditation and degrees - 'bits of paper' perhaps, but to the underqualified adult, tangible recognition of his/her achievements.

Some Prospects and Proposals

In this spirit, connecting arts and educational organisations through the common thread of widening access, it is worth pulling together the elements that are required to make this a developing social reality.

From the standpoint of education:

1. The flow of mature students admitted to all institutions of higher education should become a river, and none of these institutions should be free from criticism if (as with the University of Oxford) the numbers remain a mere trickle. Fortunately, demography is helping to change the emphasis towards the attraction of mature students as the numbers in the normal entry age fall in the population at large. Capturing more of the evident potential among mature adults is now part of the self-interest of higher education (as an alternative to stagnation or decline).

2. Those mature students, in the arts subjects, need and deserve new syllabuses, fresh teaching (and learning) methods, more choices, challenges and initiatives, more encouragement to respond to the experience of literature etc. It is not a simple matter of 'adding on' mature students to existing practice, but of transforming and liberalising the cumulative experience that passes as higher education.

3. This is not solely - perhaps not even mainly, so far as literature is concerned - a matter of what happens within the universities etc., or of what happens to full-time students. The universities and polytechnics need to become involved in many more and new ways with the communities they are situated in. This has to mean not merely becoming involved with the already educated, but with the processes of access that enable many of those who had earlier been effectively shut out of life-long education to come in. Consequently, higher education needs to strengthen and expand its adult education departments, and re-direct their activities, so that wider work with community and education, with people in their workplaces and work-based organisations, with continuing and evolving collaboration with arts organisations, becomes normal practice that can overcome the existing barriers to access.

From the standpoint of the Arts Council and its linked organisations:

1. The access-orientated work of the Arts Council should be firmly interlinked with the innovative access programmes of adult education developing throughout the country. The Arts Council needs to learn itself from the 'best practice' that has developed, but it also has much to contribute (intellectually, imaginatively and through opening up connections to the contemporary arts and creative writing that might otherwise be ignored). It should, not least locally and regionally, be within the arts-linked access programmes and their design and co-ordination, their experimentation and monitoring.

2. Arts organisations should bring their influences to bear on the nature and content, the delivery and flexibility, of both formal academic syllabuses and in wider adult education programmes. In doing so they would find themselves working with the grain of mature students' needs and the best evolving educational practice. Not least the Arts Council should be seeking to demonstrate the value and practicability of studying contemporary literature alongside the 'heritage' of bringing the educational process closer to creative writing and creative re-interpretation (cf. dramatic production) of our literature.

3. All this would point to the need to bring together academics, media people and writers, to discuss choices and priorities, to co-operate in new initiatives.

4. If access matters to the Arts Council then it cannot limit its involvement in education to the 'higher' aspects of the great web of development. It would seem right to become involved at the beginning, at the crucial threshold of literacy work. 'Liaison' here would be too weak a word for what is required; forming alliances might be a better way to put it. For a narrowly utilitarian approach to literacy teaching may be better avoided if the arts organisations are demonstrating in practice the great stimulus and contribution that literature itself, properly used, could make to literacy teaching.

THE ARTS AGENCIES

Poetry, literature, all the arts should be like water, available to everybody!

Jo Shapcott
Poet and Arts Officer

Florence in the 14th century should be our aim. That is, everyone should be able to read the poets and enjoy them!

Adult student (former British Rail Guard)

PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

Rachel Adam, Rachel van Riel, Organisers, Yorkshire Arts Circus

Piers Benn, Co-ordinator, Southern Artlink

Ron Butlin, Poet and Novelist, Teacher of Creative Writing, Edinburgh (sponsored by SAC)

Walter Cairns , Director of Literature, Scottish Arts Council

Maura Dooley, Literature Officer, The South Bank

Lynne Ivison, Secretary, Literature Department, The Arts Council

Shonagh Irvine, Literature Officer, Scottish Arts Council

Roger Jones, Assistant Director, Arts and Entertainment, Edinburgh District Council

Keith McWilliams, Chief Executive, Book Trust

Dr Alastair Niven, Director of Literature , the Arts Council

Kerry Rankine, former Literature Touring Officer, the Arts Council

Sue Robertson, Director of Education, the South Bank Centre, London

Jo Shapcott, Poet and Education Officer, the South Bank Centre, London

Dr Anne Smith, former Chief Executive, Book Trust Scotland

Jane Spiers, Literature Officer, Southern Arts Association

Alan Spence, Writer in Residence, University of Edinburgh

THE ARTS AGENCIES

The Arts Council and Literature

The Arts Council itself, the 12 Regional Arts Associations, the Book Trusts and the large number of arts bodies throughout the country are by definition agents for enabling wider access to the arts. Their very existence testifies to the necessity of that process. It has already been argued that other institutions such as educational organisations, libraries, bookshops and trade unions and Women's Institutes are, or could be, at least in part, seen as performing that function too.

The Arts Council, Literature and Access

The good news for literature is that the Arts Council has not only completely reversed the policy laid down in *The Glory of the Garden* which claimed that literature needed little Arts Council support since libraries, bookshops, publishing and the education system provided access to literature very satisfactorily; it has even extended the second principle of its Charter, the widening of access to the enjoyment of the arts, as Dr Alastair Niven, Director of Literature, points out:

> *"The Arts Council has evolved in its thinking to making access a key issue, linked to education and even to what some would call social action or social therapy. I don't see anything wrong in this so long as the literature (or the music, or painting) is worthwhile".*

Since the Arts Council has, nevertheless, a responsibility to all people in all social classes, did Alastair Niven think concentration on 'working-class people' too narrow?

> *"I feel utterly sympathetic to your project. However, it's very difficult to talk without seeming to be patronising. Lots of working-class people never had the chance to be introduced to literature.*
>
> *Patronage has encouraged the arts towards the middle-classes and away from ordinary people, who nevertheless went on creating ballads and stories. But in the last 100 years or so, literature has been between book covers and only accessible to those who can read, while industrialisation had already obscured the natural oral tradition".*

Access to him is not just about people with little education getting access to the books but is to do with persuading everybody of 'the centrality of literature in this country. It is the art form in which Britain has excelled'. Contemporary public attitudes to poets and novelists sometimes reveal 'almost a contempt as if they're not a central part of society' - a result of the undervaluing of our literary inheritance.

> *"Access has got to be about the past, not losing the past. Ninety-seven per cent of our work in the Literature Department is to do with new work. I think the emphasis is almost too much on that. We do very little about the heritage.*

It's such a sad loss, an historical loss if people have no sense of the literature of the past. My father's generation could quote yards and yards of poetry learned as children. Even people who didn't make literature their special interest knew their Shakespeare and their Wordsworth. Some teachers don't think it's relevant to teach Shakespeare!".

Alastair Niven, himself an expert on the literature written in English of other countries, sees the encouragement of a multi-cultural and international approach to literature as another vitally important side of access. The oral traditions, their origins lost in the depths of mythology and legend, are coming back here in performance poetry - especially black poetry and West Indian rapping and in African fables and Latin American story-telling. He was disappointed when last year a Cambridge college turned down the black poet Benjamin Zephaniah's application for a fellowship.

"They said his work wasn't good but he can pack a hall with 2000 people so it must have some quality. Of course you could go on about the figures indicating the popularity say of Coronation Street. But I'd argue that Zephaniah's ability to sustain and continue an oral tradition of communication validates his work as literature".

The breadth of its Literature Director's concerns indicates the scope of the Arts Council's tasks - impossible to fulfil on its own. However, the Council's Literature Department and the Regional Literature Officers ('officers' - there's a word I dislike with its overtones of militarism and authoritarianism!' said one of them) regard as central to their work the enabling and working with other bodies, acting as a catalyst as well as initiating and carrying through whole projects. Here some particular attitudes, initiatives and questions at national and regional level are looked at in relation to the main issue.

Working-class people and literature

Recent developments at Book Trust and at Book Trust Scotland emphasise the Arts Council's broader ideas of access. The Director of Book Trust, its former title the National Book League, sees its new name as indicative of the search for a much wider clientèle for its work.

"It used to be more like a club for the well-read. I hope we'll break down its former middle-class limitations and reach out particularly to those people who find libraries and bookshops confusing. We work with Regional Arts Associations and other organisations We're not big enough to go it alone. We believe we have a national role, to bring people together and co-ordinate, act as a catalyst.

The Trust aims at publicising the image of the book in very available way - TV, radio, the press, even the programme for the Cup Final".

Keith Williams's understanding of ordinary people's difficulties stems from his own background.

"I came from a very ordinary home. My father was a bus driver. We had a few books in a glass case. I discovered books for myself. They opened doors for me and I want everyone to have the opportunity. I hope they discover good stuff. The pleasure in reading is growth in reading but you've got to start with anything that will appeal".

The key question of course is how to stimulate that 'growth'. Anne Smith, former Chief Executive of Book Trust Scotland, is concerned about the thousands of working-class people who do break through to literature on their own but are isolated.

> *"You have to talk to individuals. Glasgow's full of people who're self-educated, who read but have no-one to talk to about the book, so that's what you have to keep in mind all the time. Access means availability of books in the right context. And the right context is someone interested enough in you to ask what you're interested in".*

Amongst the 'right contexts' she would like to see provided are groups in housing estates, led by such writers as James Kelman and Alasdair Gray, themselves from working-class backgrounds.

The significance of social class in the readership of literature is vital to any discussion of ethnic minorities. An Arts Council member of staff points out that:

> *"...the talk always seems to be about colour and race, physical and other disabilities. Class gets missed out all the time.*
>
> *If you're a black upper-class woman, you suffer certain things but not in the same ways, or to the same degree, as a black working-class woman who endures the multiple handicap thing. People don't talk about 'working-class'".*

Feroza Khair, a Muslim teacher who made her way overcoming many difficulties first to Ruskin College then to Lucy Cavendish College in Cambridge (which exists to give 'higher education to women'), confirms the truth of that from personal experience:

> *"We had a lot of financial difficulties but my parents had both been to university in India. I suppose we were fairly middle- or upper-class and had some know-how.*
>
> *The women I teach are really working-class. They have lived in Oxford for ten or twenty years and were not aware of the existence of Broad Street (where Blackwell's and other bookshops are)! Yes, they know Cornmarket and Queen Street for shopping but I had to take them to Broad Street! They've never visited an Oxford college".*

She points out that there are no bookshops in Cowley where most of these women live. 'Good literature would be a wonderful way for them to get into life outside'.

> *"They go out so little. The TV is on all day or rather videos are. Awful rubbish in Hindi so they're not even picking up English from going out and about".*

Oxford she thinks is very behind in many ways unlike London, 'perhaps because we're not an inner city'. She would love to have a books grant from the county to buy 'literature - good books (graded of course). Yes, English literature - there's something universal about good writing'.

She acknowledges that '...in many ways I'm more of a social worker than a teacher. Often you're their only contact because they're very cut-off, shy, even suspicious'.

How can she not be in these circumstances? Words like therapy, social action, education and imaginative enjoyment are all relevant to the work she does.

Arts workers, both national and regional, have to go out in order to invite people in: other arts bodies of radical kind believe firmly that working-class people themselves should be creating their own culture, while there is, across the board, a belief in the value of creative writing by people themselves that invites questions of considerable importance.

Going out to them: Coming in to us

Scotland is regarded as a nation rather than a region by most of its inhabitants. This view, together with the comparative smallness of the country, creates an impression of community and shared cultural identity, despite the bleak divisions and differences that exist here, as elsewhere. This sense of some sort of shared community make possible all kinds of alliances and links to be forged between different, smaller organisations. The Scottish TUC has an Arts Officer and many connections with the Scottish Arts Council. The Edinburgh District Council likewise shares certain initiatives with the Scottish Arts Council. Walter Cairns, its Director of Literature, conveys something of the freedom and informality of relationships:

> *"People just wander in and have a chat. It might be a writer, or an ordinary person coming off the street with a query or a request. We have a little booklet with the names and address of every writer and poet in Scotland who's willing to give readings or talks and anyone can ring them up or write to them".*

Shonagh Irvine, Literature Officer, confirms this sense of continuing, warm communication with the general public:

> *"We see ourselves as originating and supporting initiatives that help the access-educational process. We want to help writers and readers. We have a dozen Writers' Fellowships. We help communities with readings and Scottish writers by subsidising publishers".*

The social context in England is more complex and so therefore is the task of the Arts Council's Literature Department in England ('and not least', says Alastair Niven, 'when you compare our share - about half a per cent of the Arts Council budget - with the 4.7 per cent that the Scots get from theirs'). The largeness of the population makes the idea of community, as opposed to the more abstract one of nationhood, to say the least, daunting. In this perhaps lies the special importance of the ethnic minority cultural groups, the Federation of Worker Writers and other such associations in nourishing the sense of identity and community.

The brief of the literature officers at the South Bank Centre is national and international as well as local. The key word they use in describing their efforts to bring in ordinary people is, like Jo Hendry and his fellow librarians, 'Welcome'.

> *"The Festival Hall foyer is so welcoming - all sorts of people come in. They may drift up to the Poetry Library. The foyer is nothing to do with 'art'. People go to meet friends - an ordinary place. Thanks to the GLC people feel it's theirs - that's the key".*

Jo Shapcott, South Bank Centre Education Officer, went on to talk about access and the problems connected with that:

> *"Access is dear to my heart. It's what it's all about - making it possible for people disinherited from art - giving them the critical tools - to reject or evaluate.*

The attitude problem - 'This is not for me' - is so deeply engraved in our class and culture (other countries aren't like that). One of the worst aspects of our society is, it encourages middle-class as well as 'ordinary' people to jeer at art".

As well as enticing people in with all kinds of projects, including workshops and performance art, which cross boundaries by using dance, music and poetry, they also go out. As Sue Robertson, Director of Education Programmes at the South Bank Centre, says:

"By its very nature our work is collaborative and we do a lot of exploration of the relationships between the arts. Workshops and active participation are the way people learn to make judgements about the work of others. We create projects in our neighbouring boroughs, developing relationships with teachers and local authorities for longer-term projects".

Maura Dooley, Literature Officer at the South Bank Centre, was enthusiastic about the 'crossing of boundaries' and linking 'for example, black dance and music and black poetry' so that people might come in with one interest and find themselves stirred by another.

Paradoxically, a problem arising from the very richness of the South Bank's resources, is:

"...when you offer something good, the middle-classes grab it!".

Jo Shapcott

Cultural fear emerges. When very many well-educated, clued-up people throng to hear, say, a famous poet, it is not exactly easy for the uninitiated to feel confident about joining in. The sheer importance, now and in the future, of the South Bank Centre does not obviate, but in fact underlines, the necessity of directing huge energies to the effort to redress the balance for those 'disinherited from art' so that such public cultural wealth may be shared by all the public.

The sense of a warm, culturally-sharing community that emerges in talk in many areas of Scottish life does not 'naturally' penetrate the bleak, barracks-like estates like Easterhouse in Glasgow or Muirhouse on the outskirts of Edinburgh. There is no middle-way choice for the arts worker - either the thousands forced to live in such heartless areas must be ignored, or the arts workers must, like the librarians described earlier, go out to them.

The initiative of doing something for the cruelly depressing housing estate of Muirhouse (with all the most serious of today's social problems) came from the District Council's Department of Leisure and Recreation. Like many other beautiful cities (Oxford for example) Edinburgh has two identities, the exquisite centre, comprising the mediæval Old Town and the elegant, 18th century New Town, and the monstrous, soul-less estates that the tourist seldom, if ever, sees, situated as they are a long way off from the centre. Two cultures made visible.

Roger Jones, Deputy Director of Leisure, sees his job as entirely about access for ordinary people.

"I believe absolutely in the power of the arts in depressed communities. The problems for people living in a place like Muirhouse are two: first of all, physical - there are no bookshops in Muirhouse, and secondly, attitudinal.

People have a fear of threshold. You have somehow to create the environment in which people learn to want to overcome the fear".

This fear was overcome to the extent that Muirhouse now has its own annual festival, Spring Fling. Roger Jones attributes this achievement to the initiatives taken by the people involved in running the creative writing groups. The key to success was the consultation from the start with the community leaders, ethnic groups and the small creative groups. The result has been an outpouring of different kinds of writing, literary competitions, small-scale publications, story-telling (with over two thousand entries for the poetry competition last year).

'It may be social work but it's not art'. This comment by a highly-placed administrator in the west of Scotland not only reveals the rigidity of outlook that inhibits any pondering what possibilities might be released by such grass-roots work, but also ignores the whole question of 'threshold'. If 'art' matters, then finding ways of helping people cross that threshold must matter too. The question 'Creative Writing or Reading and Response - where should the emphasis lie?' is one that concerns every arts worker in the field of literature.

Creative Writing and Reading?

This question refers to an area where the formal and informal education and arts organisations touch one another and even overlap, where there exist great opportunities for the cross-fertilisation of ideas and policies.

Alastair Niven, impressed with '...the sheer amount of creative writing going on up and down the country, much more than people recognise', is keen to stress that reading is at least as important as writing:

"...of course you can nurture talent but I personally would place the emphasis on reading - get people excited about a book, get them to express a reaction. A lot of people read books but only for relaxation. We should also read to extend our awareness and enlarge our sensitivity.

Creative writing is very important but people will do it if they want to. And if they don't read they'll probably end up as very poor writers. There's no substitute for reading rather a lot".

He would nevertheless like to have some sort of Arts Council scheme that would recognise the unpublished writer and offer mediation between writer and publisher.

Southern Arts Literature Officer, Jane Spiers, would not like to see reading literature, and writing creatively, as alternatives:

"I think they are inter-dependent really. I do think that if we want to have a truly representative literary heritage, it is essential to press home the point that working-class experience is as valid and worthy a base for creative writing as any other. I don't just mean more working-class autobiography of the **Upstairs, Downstairs/What did you do in the War, Mum?** *or* **Ragged Trouser'd Philanthropist** *variety. Let's nurture a generation of new writers with new and different experiences to equal the stature of the Drabble/Monica Dickens/Lively middle-class England or the Lodge/Lurie world of the academic set".*

There are wide differences in views on where the stress should fall, reading or writing, according both to the context within which initiatives are taken and to the educational level of the participant.

Educationalist Attitudes to Creative Writing

a) The University Teacher

Higher education institutions have been slow in allowing 'creative writing' into the syllabus, though now several invite it on a voluntary basis.

A fairly common academic view is Christopher Butler's:

> *"There's a Rousseau-like impulse and crusading belief that everybody has something creative inside them, a creative imagination that they could express. So writing - or even talking about your dreams - is a way of getting access to something valuable in themselves*
>
> *Then there's the therapeutic justification of any form of creativity like using paint, or plasticine, or words. And, in those contexts, I think you should use words just as loosely, sloppily and so on as paint. You shouldn't make them feel that what they're doing needs them to obey certain kinds of conventions. You shouldn't be put off at the beginning.*
>
> *Then you have to consider literature in the more honorific sense. You try to write very well and then discover you have very little real talent. You realise that Dickens, for example, has done it all so much better that eventually you decide, if you haven't got it yourself, the effort does give you a real respect for the creative imagination.*
>
> *I don't see either approach can do any harm".*

b) The Adult Teacher

The adult education teachers look differently at the educational value of such writing, seeing it as an important aid to the reading of literature.

> *"A good way to get people to understand novels is to get them to write them. I'd like to get going a university course in the kinds of writing our society demands. Getting students to write in all sorts of ways puts them in a more participative relationship with what they're studying".*
>
> Graham Martin

Pointing out that while a college of music always has teachers who are also executants, he regrets that a university department of English '...only teaches students to write essays'. Extra-mural teacher David Grylls also sees an overlap between reading and writing courses, believing that often the motive behind the wish to study literature is the desire to write. He approves the mature student who wrote his 'essay' on *Hamlet* by re-writing it as a modern play. 'This helps you move in many directions'.

Creative Writing in the Community

The more we move into the community, away from the institutions, the more importance is given to creative writing and its ability to give people a sense of their own identity, confidence in their capacity to become articulate and to achieve something of their own.

Ron Butlin, poet and novelist, also teaches creative writing to adults and pupils in state and public schools and points out that it is not only people in deprived areas who need to be stimulated to be creative:

> *"The public school boys are under such academic and career pressures - 'success' is the aim (after all, their parents are paying fees of around £7000 per annum) so that the feeling and imaginative self is hardly allowed to emerge. The community school pupils have more energy and liveliness.*
>
> *When I ask Fettes' schoolboys - 'What do you most need when you're going to try to write a story?' - they say things like - 'You need a plan, a structure...' and so on, while children at the local school immediately say - 'Imagination'".*

He thinks, paradoxically, that these apparently 'over-privileged' boys need the imaginative stimulus, the services of people like himself, as much as working-class children.

Norman MacCaig, who also teaches creative writing at what he refers to as '...every kind of school, from the poor to the posh' thinks differently:

> *"It's obvious that young people who've been surrounded by books and talk about books and the arts from an early age have a tremendous advantage over the kids from poor homes with hardly any books and maybe no talk at all about subjects like that".*

Both these poet teachers are right. Pupils under continuous academic pressure to 'succeed' undoubtedly must need opportunities to develop affectively while those with less favourable educational environments need the most elementary help. Alan Spence, another Edinburgh writer, illustrates from his teaching experience something of the dilemmas created by a society still so unequal in its educational provisions:

> *"Sometimes you have to divide the groups and teach absolute basics, like how to write a sentence. On the other hand, you get teachers coming, feeling their own creativity was frustrated by the academic strait-jacket. Sometimes you get quality work and other times the writing is simply therapy".*

Fundamentally he believes that creative writing is an educational activity and he uses freely poems, stories, extracts from novels and plays in the process. 'It all comes back to craft'. The production of his own play *Changed Days* illustrates the way in which adhering to standards of excellence can go along with the involvement of the people on whose oral reminiscences of life in the old slums the play is based - '...a welter of material, some wonderful stories in it and genuinely beautiful words'. The director insisted on a professional writer but brought 'the old wifies' into the rehearsals and discussions. Most had never entered a theatre before and were thrilled with the play they had helped to create. This admirable procedure thus obviated all patronage, opening doors for people and simultaneously respecting their innate capacity to criticise and acknowledge standards.

Alan Spence believes that creative writing can complement the reading of literature. Talking about his father, a sail-maker, '...very well-read - all Dickens, some Donne', he felt there was a kind of sadness, of unfulfilment at the end of his life.

> *"He was writing poems, rather crude dum-ti-dum stuff. He died in '79, just before the writers' workshops got going. They would have been great for him".*

Creating your own Heritage

Some enterprising movements such as History Workshop, Yorkshire Arts Circus and the Federation of Worker Writers were born in a vigorous and healthy reaction to a culturally divided society with the aim of helping ordinary people reclaim and even create their own cultural heritage, giving them the chance for the first time to find a voice and to express their sense of self, of where they live, of their own communities. Publications such as Yorkshire's community book *A Hundred People's Voices* and the Federation's *Once I was a Washing-Machine* demonstrate the energy and talent waiting to be released. Alastair Niven saw the latter...

> *"...as a seminal book yet like other FWW publications it was barely reviewed in the literary pages of the 'quality' papers and reviews. It's very difficult for any small press writer or black writer to get noticed".*

Such neglect, or lack of interest or even awareness on the part of the literary and quality papers, reinforces the false image of the exclusiveness of literary culture that such movements challenge. The Federation's regular day-schools offer sessions on everything from critical discussions of writing to 'Making your own books, literally'. Yorkshire Arts Circus[18] run on a shoestring, sells books back to the community through such places as pubs and newsagents. Both are increasing the number of readers, first of their own movement's publications but it is to be hoped not only of those. The one risk such admirable movements might run is of becoming, to a certain degree, enclosed within their own ethos if they do not have links with the world outside. It would be ironic if such radical ventures in the very business of attacking barriers were to be in any way, perpetuating the divisions between 'élite' or 'highbrow' culture and the 'popular', between 'creating your own heritage' and possessing the huge heritage that should be commonly owned.

Creative Reading

To emphasise the inclusion of reading in the flourishing creative writing scene in no way diminishes the tremendous importance of the flood of creative writing from an estate like Muirhouse. It is probably true that community arts have to do primarily with living and the quality of life, but they can be a starting point of the greatest significance for the people involved. They have been seen as indicators of the possibilities of developments. The occasional jibes of 'social work not art' can safely be ignored if the literature field worker has the clear aim of sharing all literature with those disinherited from it. Many people, when pushed, lean towards the view that any reading is better than no reading at all. Not all, however. Kerry Rankine, former Arts Council Literature Touring Officer, is opposed to the view that:

"...anything people read is literature. I'm not a great exponent of that view. I think it's arrogant to say Mills and Book is OK. It isn't literature. It's not good enough for people.

Language to me is very important. A lot of Mills and Boon language is clichéd, redundant. It doesn't allow people to have thoughts other than they have already, it doesn't allow readers to have any new experiences.

And literature is so important. The main thing literature can do is not just give other people ideas - the device of fiction allows you to imagine yourself into other ways of life".

The real value of a book for the reader (leaving aside the debate - '...is the escapist novel just restful or is it corrupting?') lies in its power to stimulate and nourish the imagination. Alan Spence's words on why he is 'dead against' writing for the market apply equally well to the reading of such formula fiction:

"It is anti-educational anti-creative and therefore anti- the development of people. It is not concerned with genuine feelings and truth to experience, to the truth of imaginative experience".

There is too another kind of falling-short if those who care about sharing the literary heritage take no initiatives involving the classics. As Anne Smith says:

"We create confusion, a feeling of double standards which gets passed on subliminally to others if we only offer contemporary writing. There's about three thousand works of fiction published each year. It destroys a sense of history, of continuity if you only read contemporary stuff. You know -

Don't read **Anna Karenina** *- it was published more than a year ago!*

So what's the permanent value of books?

These views do not imply a no-compromise, Leavisite, literary Puritanism. Anne Smith, very much believing in the open door, welcome policy at Book Trust Scotland, admits:

"I'm happy to discuss the **Beano** *if that's what somebody likes. I still like the Beano anyway. I can take it from the* **Beano** *to Evelyn Waugh - that's not such a great quantum leap either!".*

Amongst her contributions to Glasgow's Mayfest, she organised a session at which Molly Weir and Cliff Handley, authors of sentimental autobiographies, talked about their books: *'The Way We were Then'.*

"Their books matter. They know they haven't written literature. And it'll please an awful lot of ordinary folk".

Surrounding people with choice, offering talk - advice, guidance, discussion, argument - trusting in people's innate good sense and powers of discrimination are all essential elements in this work.

Conclusions

Are we in a 'reading crisis'? The answer to that question of Pat Coleman, head of Britain's largest public library, is:

> *"Yes - there is a reading crisis and now if ever is the time for action to resolve it favourably. Reading is regarded in the community as of low status, unlike creative writing which enjoys a fairly high status.*
>
> *We need a national campaign, national initiatives".*

The Scottish Arts Council shares that sense of urgency. Disturbed by the findings of its own Readership report on the ever-diminishing amount of time given by young people to reading, it has requested all its writers who conduct creative writing classes to include in all sessions the reading, discussion and recommendation of books - a step which, if followed across the whole country, by all the agencies organising such writing groups, could lead to a significant rise in readership numbers and quality of reading too.

The sense of urgency that sees a country-wide strategy as necessary is in no way denying the importance of community; indeed its success depends on communities.

The Arts Council Literature Department and the Regional Arts Associations, working as they do in partnership, provide the model for national initiatives interacting with communities. The task of that department is, in the Director's words, huge:

> *"Last year we took a conscious policy decision to swing away from being reactive to being initiatory".*

The proportion of the Arts Council's total grant for the Literature Department needs to be greatly increased in view of the supreme importance of that job, which in essence is no less than the sharing of the literary inheritance, past and present, with those who, because of social, educational and economic circumstances, have as yet no feeling it is theirs. If the Council itself were to confront the 'reading crisis' as one of its major concerns, might it consider a three to five year strategy to vis-à-vis access in the sense argued here? If that suggestion is premature or too formal, then the following proposals might be considered.

Proposals

The Arts Council and the Regional Arts Association should:

- strongly support the trend to appoint more literature field officers, 'literature animateurs', who should be asked to focus on access to literature by those hitherto deprived;

- or - in each region - a particular persons (or persons) be asked to concentrate on access i.e. to see that it is treated as a central or continuing element of the job description;

- monitor, evaluate and exchange properly analysed experiences, experiments; initiate dialogue about best practices, active alliances with community and educational organisations and throw open such dialogues so that the widest possible network of people and organisations involved can know what is being attempted, why it is being done and how it operates, so that they can offer their own challenge.

More Specific Suggestions

(of course some of these and others not mentioned, must already be taking place):

Links with educational bodies to break down barriers e.g. link a council estate reading or writing group with a university literature class to argue about a particular book, writer, poet or etc.:

- similarly - link a basic literacy class with a community literature reading/writing group;

- a university media studies class might join with say a Liverpool literacy group to discuss eg. *Bread*

- a university class with a trade union to argue about *Hard Times, The Ragged Trouser'd Philanthropist*;

- bring together the academic and media people to talk, argue, co-operate in new initiatives;

- form an alliance with literacy bodies to demonstrate the great contribution literature can make to their work.

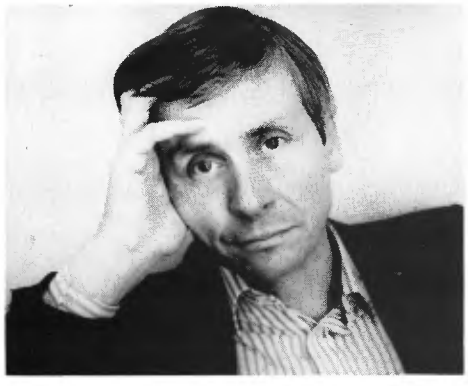
It distresses me that ordinary people don't demand more. Why don't the agencies concerned show them what is possible?''.

(adult student)

THE WRITERS OF LITERATURE

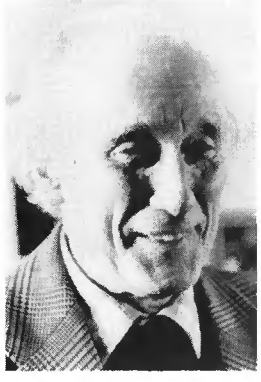
Janet Beaton, Romantic Novelist

Penelope Lively, Novelist and Writer of Children's Literature



Piers Paul Read, Novelist

Willy Russell, Dramatist and Composer



Norman MacCaig, Poet

Jackie Kay, Poet and Playwright

Seamus Heaney, Poet

THE WRITERS OF LITERATURE

The writer is different from the other people interviewed in this report. The others are not necessarily typical teachers, librarians, trade unionists and so on, but in their professional or working capacity, they are bound to embody certain aspects of the institution to which they belong, even or especially in their reactions to it, approving or critical.

The makers of literature are not in any normal sense of the word accountable to an employer or committee or community, although they may, as some here do, feel a deep sense of responsibility *towards* the community. He or she may, like two of those whose views follow on from here, feel accountable to some mysterious power that operates deep within, or even beyond, the limits of self. We value the writer for the individuality, even the uniqueness, of his vision. He/she is one of the most, important defences we have against the prescriptiveness of committees and other modes of bureaucratic officialdom.

The aim of including writers in this endeavour was simply to ask what importance, if any, they as *writers* would attach to the main question. It therefore seemed appropriate in this chapter to allow the individual voice to speak as directly as possible to the reader.

One advantage of hearing the writer's voice lies in its reminder that 'literature and education', 'literature and arts agencies', 'literature and libraries', for all their importance, are less than literature and that access, first and last, is to the words themselves.

Janet Beaton - Romantic Novelist

NOTE: Janet Beaton has written 16 novels, published by Robert Hale, in addition to serials for such magazines as *Woman's Weekly, Woman's Realm, Woman and Home.* She is a member of the Romantic Novelists' Association.

Romantic Fiction and Access to Literature

In a way the romantic novelist is the writer most conscious of access. Is the work as accessible as it can be to the anticipated readership? If not, why not? How may it be altered to improve its accessibility? This novelist writes for the market, and the finely honed rules for the writing of such novels are regularly tested by market research.

Access takes on a different shade of meaning here. It doesn't involve demolishing barriers. It sets up its own as is shown by the Mills and Boon tape: "'And then he kissed her' - Advice for Aspiring Writers". While strenuously denying any formula, the voice lays down three essentials: 1) the heroine must be young and pretty; 2) the hero must be tall, handsome and powerful; and 3) there's got to be conflict which must be resolved in a happy ending.

As Janet Beaton points out, this kind of fiction commands a varied, as well as huge (largely female), readership:

> *"It's surprising how it's read for recreation by people who should know better, by well-*

educated people! Our writers' association meets monthly in London and we're a remarkably mixed clientèle. It includes people with degrees, early leavers, old wifies!".

She sees herself as 'very different from the serious writer such as Penelope Lively who allows people to share her vision'.

"Romantic fiction is essentially different in that it is written to a formula, primarily for entertainment. Every publishing house, every magazine, has its guidelines. It's genre writing, superficial, not profound or percipient. 'Serious' literature may be entertainment but not necessarily. It is much more. Crime novels, as in the hands of P.D. James and Ruth Rendell, can transcend the limitations of the genre and become literature".

For her, the line between formula fiction and literature is defined by the way in which the writer of the latter faces up to the dark side of life and sees aspects of it in depth, whereas the romantic novel *must* end happily.

"A death is OK but it must be essentially reassuring, boosting, the sort of thing people want to read in hospital or at the end of a long day with the kids".

She didn't see this as 'therapy', as that implied didacticism, but as something cheering and entertaining. Literature, contrastingly,

"...can make you feel that life is terrible, very very difficult but magnificent".

Did she see this kind of writing as aiding or hindering access to what she herself regarded as literature proper?

"I am one of those who think that any reading is better than no reading. Yes I do think this sort of fiction could - no - does help people to progress, extend their reading to women's magazines for example, and some of them publish very good writers. If people get a taste for the word, then they might get hooked. I'm sure it happens that way".

She concurred too in Dr Kate Flint's finding in her researches into women's reading that women acquired all sorts of 'bits of knowledge' from such writing, 'from tips about behaviour to learning something about other countries'.

Creative Writing for the Market

Obviously classes and courses in writing for this genre differ in many ways from the more open, unrestricted kind. I asked Janet Beaton why she, clearly so well-read and sensitive to what she herself referred to as 'real' literature, chose to write this kind of book and encouraged others to do so.

"I wanted to write. Then I discovered I didn't have the necessary kind of talent. So I felt my way into what I thought I could do.

No, I don't think the formula threatens my integrity. The Mills and Boon one would certainly do that. It's so unrealistic. They have very definite ideas about their heroes of which I don't approve. It must answer to some sort of fantasy need.

Even if you're writing for a mass public, you can put quite a bit of yourself into it you know, be true to your own experience of life and have a respect for the language. It mustn't become cheap or slovenly. It can be a worth-while craft, with its own standards. I admit I'm keener on the language side of it than some. Most practitioners do it because they think they can't do serious fiction well and of course they write for money - like Dr Johnson did!".

The writing workshops that she and many romantic novelists take part in as teachers are linked always to what will succeed in the market; but she, unlike Alan Spence[19], felt they helped people improve their language skills.

"I do regular workshops for the Scottish Association of Writers' Circles. Magazine fiction is the most popular. The best market for short stories is women's magazines - they take very good things you know.

If someone tries to write, there's some feeling for words. We shouldn't criticise if they don't read. You must be clear-sighted enough to know your own limitations. One mustn't be too harsh because we're not to know if the self-expressive writings of some young ingenue aren't going to become literature one day! It must work, though, as good craft".

The largest sales of novels are to libraries.

This is not an area that should be cordoned off, as it were. To quote Anne Smith, former Chief Executive of Book Trade Scotland:

"Who are 'we' talking about 'them' - those who read Mills and Boon and that sort of stuff, as if 'they' were a different species.....?".

Penelope Lively - Novelist and Writer of Children's Literature

Penelope Lively admits to a passionate concern for the opening up of literature to everyone, especially children. She herself felt she owed such education as she had up to the age of 12 or 13 to reading, or being read to, as she then lived in Egypt, with no formal schooling. She was under the care of 'not a governess but a nice woman', who was supposed to be administering a kind of 'Do It Yourself parents' kit, but really 'did whatever came into her head' and that meant, above all, stories - the Bible, Greek and Roman mythology, Norse tales, legends. In many ways she thought she could not have had a richer foundation.

Access to Literature

Books in the home and reading being seen as a natural and essential part of living are crucial to access.

> *"It's not so much education as the reading experience itself. Nobody can make value judgements about kinds of books until they've read more than one kind of book."*

While acknowledging social class as having some relevance, and that 'probably more readers come from the middle-classes', that would be a 'statistical matter'. She sees no reason why readers should come from the more privileged areas of society.

> *"You write what you're going to write and you don't think of who it's for. I would hope it would be open to anyone who hadn't shared those experiences. That's what we ask for from fiction, whether it's great fiction or just humdrum fiction. You're asking to be taken out of your own head or your own experience.*
>
> *The prime disabling factor in society is the fact that some have grown up with books in the home and some haven't".*

Her perception of the access issue involved the use, or avoidance of the use, of the word 'literature' itself.

> *"I'm saddened by the rejection of what seems to be considered an élitist word. We had a discussion at the Arts Council recently about whether to use the word in describing a summer school - it was seen as off-putting, exclusive. What is going wrong when the term 'literature' causes people distress?"*

Her definition of literature as poetry, fiction, prose that has stood the test of time places the classics at the centre and she regrets what seems to her 'the soft option', whether in schools or adult education, of going for contemporary works to the exclusion of the classics. 'Maybe it's a legacy of the way we teach literature in schools'. To her, the libraries are the most potentially important agent in the encouragement of wider readership:

> *"I'd like to know about what the libraries do to encourage people under 30, experiments with opening hours and things like that".*

The way to increase the enjoyment of literature is not by packing the shelves with Mills and Boon, as if literature were a commodity.

> *"People can afford to buy these anyway; the libraries should use their resources to provide the worthwhile, usually more expensive, and sometimes more difficult books that people can't afford".*

She finds cause for optimism in the way in which many teachers in this 'Golden Age of Children's Literature' use books as a means of persuading children to see reading as a life-long experience of value. 'Readers are formed young'.

Creative Writing or Reading and Response?

Her feelings about the value of creative writing courses are 'mixed'. Like Norman MacCaig, she thinks there is 'far too much emphasis on publishing'.

> *"Even at the Arvon Foundation, there's a mixture of aims and motives. Some people are there for the wrong reasons - to meet other people, have an interesting time, thinking it is the route to publication. There is a huge misconception about writing as a profession. Even familiar names earn less than a primary school teacher.*
>
> *If people go as a sort of exercise, to limber up their use of the language, that's fine. But it's disastrous if they think it's a skill like mechanics.*
>
> *Read first. The determined writer will write anyway. Don't think I'm against writing".*

Access and Her Own Work

To the question - for whom do you write? - Penelope Lively gave the answer of most writers:

> *"In a sense you write for yourself. You are the first critic to have to satisfy, so you exercise your own personal jurisdiction. But I'd have hoped anybody would find my novels accessible. I'd be disconcerted if I only appealed to my own age group and so on. I hate being called a woman writer".*

Barriers are not so much cultural or social as mental, although she felt our media, particularly TV, fell way behind the French in cultural discussion which they took for granted as part of normal daily living.

> *"People are missing a whole dimension of life if they don't discover books. It's as if they were forced to go without a sense. It's as if you were only allowed to see the world in black and white, never in colour. Literature enables you to see the world as someone else sees it - it's a glimpse of a richer vision".*

Piers Paul Read - Novelist

Piers Paul Read has published several novels and a true story *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors*, which achieved immense sales across the world. He was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1989.

Piers Paul Read is eloquent on the duty of the writer. His views on this determine both what he writes about and the techniques of his novel-writing.

"As a Catholic, I would say I have a duty to God to communicate with other people. I certainly don't think my writing is simply to express myself for my own well-being or fulfilment.

I do have a great belief in the importance of the word. Again you might say that comes from my religious belief, you know - 'In the beginning was the Word' - the fact that God communicates to man through literature.

I see the writer as in some way a minor prophet - or a major prophet if he's a major writer - as in the Old Testament, as a historian, a moralist, an observer and if necessary a chastiser of his generation".

Barriers to Access

i) **Television**

He deplores the contemporary decline in the reading habit, attributing it largely to the bad effects of television watching.

> *"TV has a terrible effect. Kids expect almost instant gratification without making any effort - it's deadening to the imagination. Books give you something TV can't - they stimulate the imagination more. A response has to come out of you.*
>
> *You create for example the heroines - their enchantment comes out of your own ideals. I'm sure my concept of Natasha is different from Tolstoy's, and different from yours. The film stymies that. Radio is different - it too calls on the power of the imagination".*

Another great fault of the media he defines as its anodyne content '...because of its capitalist structure if you like'.

> *"They're so frightened of putting anything across that might upset people. They'll put across volumes of social injustice, homelessness and so on. But when it comes to the cherished sins of the community, you won't find much criticism of those.*
>
> *Maybe you'll think this is just because I'm a Catholic but I think divorce is a terrible thing - the damage to the children. You don't see much of that on TV.*
>
> *What's so scandalous on TV nowadays is chastity".*

ii) **Literature**

The modern novel itself may be to blame for putting people off reading, perhaps writers such as Joyce and to some extent Proust.

> *"The novel has given up its role as entertainment and taken on the role of somewhat self-indulgent and introspective expression of the writer's own preoccupations.*
>
> *What I regret is the kind of modern assumption (it's stronger on the continent than it is here) that literature as 'art' must somehow be difficult, and plotless, and have moved on from narrative form.*
>
> *I don't think there's any reason why great art should abandon narrative form. I think in the same way music has abandoned melody and in the same way has lost all its audience".*

His desire to reach as many readers as possible motivates him to try to bridge 'the chasm between serious writing and escapist fiction - between say Salman Rushdie and Jeffrey Archer'. To do that you must tell a good story and tell it well. 'I very much feel the writer's obligation to carry his readers on. I don't think you should bore your readers'.

The novels he admires are the great 19th century French and Russian novels which 'to some extent' inspired him.

The importance of the novel today is great, because we live in an age of specialisation.

> *"I don't think we can all become Renaissance men again but the writer can be a very important tier-up of loose ends of may different disciplines. And I think people can only understand themselves and the society in which they live through literature.*
>
> *For example, economics is very important, so is psychology, sex, love.....but they tend to be compartmentalised.*
>
> *Now to me, a good novel would show the different balance of those forces in people's lives - Cleopatra's nose, the relationship of falling in love to voting for Hitler.....And that's what I've tried to show in my historical novels".*

He loathes escapist fiction; what differentiates fiction that is literature and fiction that is not literature is whether the author is telling the truth.

> *"The sort of novel I don't regard as literature is the sort that indulges in lies about life. Breaking up love, for example, is a very serious thing, makes for great unhappiness. Bringing up children is a very boring tedious business but is very important - and these huge fantasy novels encourage people to think there's some escape from all that. Some do it deliberately for money".*

Access and Social Class

While totally serious about the importance of access, he thought the 'working-class' part of the question 'rather old-fashioned'. (Challenged on this later, he conceded that maybe his

living where he did, and in the south, and enjoying a rather privileged education, influenced him in his denial of the relevance of 'working-class' as a term.)

> *"When I was younger, I was rather socialistic and left-wing and very much thought I wrote for 'the people'. I never dedicated any of my books to anybody because I regarded that as a very individualistic thing to do. One of the things that estranged me was that I came to think that this categorisation of people as 'working-class' or 'not working-class' was false really.*
>
> *Maybe the distinction now is between people who read hardbacks and people who read paperbacks, or people who use libraries and people who don't".*

That there was a serious problem about access he had no doubt, but felt it had little or nothing to do with class. Referring to James Hogg (the Ettrick shepherd), he pointed out that Hogg would probably have read only two books, one of which was the Bible, and that anyone brought up in even a very poor home on the Bible...

> *"....in a sense had an enormous literary and historical education which a great many of the new middle-classes don't have. It's extraordinary the number of people now with university degrees who have no such knowledge".*

Access and his own writing

On an Arts Council tour in Lincolnshire he thought that the people who came to the readings tended to be those who read books anyway.

> *"The danger is that reading is going to become a minority interest, like photography or model-building".*

Unlike Seamus Heaney, who separates 'the command to write' from 'the citizen's duty' to do something about access, he sees these two as one: his writing is his access work. There are problems for him in this:

> *"You have to take a decision about the kind of knowledge you can presume your reader has and inevitably and unconsciously, I think one who writes for one's friends, one's peers if you like.*
>
> *I think my books do assume a level of knowledge, of culture, history and so on which do assume a certain level of education. It's a pity in a way because I'd like my books to be accessible to a great number".*

The implication here that there does exist a large number of people 'below a certain level of education' is one that concerns him. Commenting on his real life story, *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors*, he said:

> *"I didn't write down. I'd never write down. The millions who read it, read if for the wrong reasons. But it was a serious book, not a trashy book. It was the only one of my books where the story itself provided access.*
>
> *The fault may be with the writers - we aren't writing the kind of book that grips the imagination. It's obviously possible to get people to read".*

Uncompromising in his standards, he is nevertheless unlike some of his friends who:

> *"...become disdainful when it comes to the editing of their work. You know - 'I'm not allowing my art to be tampered with!'.*
>
> *But I'm very interested if an editor says 'This isn't very intelligible. It might work better a different way'. I'm always willing to listen and I often take advice.*
>
> *I want to try to be understood".*

Despite his scepticism about the term 'working-class' his final comment reveals awareness, like his earlier comment on education, of important divisions in society.

> *"My publishers were discussing whether the paperback editions of my works were to have the Picador - that's the upmarket imprint - or the Pan (mass-market) imprint. The decision was for Pan. You let them, because of this desire to reach as many people as possible.*
>
> *The publishers said 'This way we think we can get people to read your books who won't think of them as literature'.*
>
> *In a way, that's rather insulting because one wants people to think of one's books as literature. But in a way, it's a sign of my success because it means people will read them for the story alone, or the entertainment value.*
>
> *It's very interesting that all these companies have two imprints. That distinction runs through publishing and by their own admission access is limited by the upmarket imprint, by the fact that it is the upmarket imprint!"*

Willy Russell - Dramatist and Composer

Willy Russell's plays all deal in some way with the theme of the individual's struggle for fulfilment. *Educating Rita* is the classic comic statement of the very theme of this project.

Willy Russell shares the view of Piers Paul Read that the 'highbrow' associations of 'literature' are responsible for putting off huge numbers of people, though differing strongly in what he sees as the reasons for élitism. But like Read, his imaginative works too are his access work.

Did he feel things had improved since the days of *Rita*?

> *"Not very much - there's a great divide between the literature industry and many many people. I still think* **Educating Rita** *spells out - in a completely accessible way - some of the huge problems involved in access to literature".*

He referred me to an account[20] of his own struggle to get an education once he left school, which had done little for him.

> *"I didn't know it them, I didn't know it for years and years but my experience at school was doomed from day one. It was a largely futile experience because two cultures were in constant conflict. Of course, this was very explicit and it was only when I became a teacher myself that I realised that schools assume and reflect middle-class culture with literacy at its heart, whilst kids from working-class families are part of a culture which has not literacy but oracy at its heart. The languages are different, and yet still, today, schools try to teach working-class kids without addressing the fact that the school speaks with one tongue and the kid speaks another. And implicit in this process is the message that the language of the school is the valid language whilst the language, the working class idiom, of the kid is valueless, is base.*
>
> *Like thousands of others who left school bemused, confused and apparently apathetic, I sensed that inside I was capable. I sensed that I was valuable. But I couldn't prove it".*

Willy Russell's post-school experiences were the source of his inspired comedy. Like Rita he was a hairdresser - smitten with a burning desire to learn and be a teacher:

> *"And then I'd be overwhelmed by doubt and insecurity. Me? A teacher? The mere thought was ludicrous. And so, the next morning I'd be back at the perm trolley or the shampoo basin, depressed, frustrated....".*

However, he managed eventually to join an evening class to study for an O level, clutching *Animal Farm, Henry V* and Browning's poetry...

> *"...riddled with fear and uncertainty, the smells common to all educational buildings - making me feel sick with memories of school.....There was a break for tea and coffee down the corridor. I was so terrified, felt so conspicuous and exposed, I just sat at the desk, clutching it, pretending I wasn't thirsty.....It was all a mistake.....It was too late for me and I'd better start accepting the fact. And anyway, I hated Shakespeare - that's why I'd never read it. And that book about pigs, I mean pigs. Who the hell would write a book about pigs? I'd packed it in after the first three pages. And then he was saying, this teacher - it isn't about pigs at all. Well, it is on the surface. But below it's about the Russian revolution. Oh, so the*

pigs are like, like symbols of people in the revolution? Yes. The book is what's known as an allegory.

I wrote down the word - allegory. And then my understanding of its definition - a story that looks as though it's about one thing but is also about another. On the bus, going home, reading, making perfect sense now out of something which I'd dismissed because I'd been afraid. Going home and straight to bed to read right through this great book".

Willy Russell's enormous success as a writer has in no way diminished his sense of frustration at the difficulties - almost insurmountable for many - facing adults wishing to break through.

"It's a huge question. I think that to do justice to your theme, I would have to take the rest of my lifetime and many many books. The question of literature is so inextricably bound up with the questions of class, power, and economics.....Literature may apparently be available on a wide scale. But to make literature truly accessible on a broad popular front, we must first acknowledge that the word itself - literature - is an extremely loaded one, which can smack of privilege, élitism, rarification, cultural ghettoism, etc..".

He sees the problem as at least in part one of communication, though behind that there is the more complex one of cultural and educational privilege.

"It's partly the way the media deals with the word 'literature' you know. The message that gets across is that this stuff is only for a certain type of person who has been educated in a certain type of way.

Ironically writers, or at any rate the best of them, don't write literature. Writers write their work, tell their stories, communicate their ideas in some sort of narrative structure. The writer sets out to directly address his reader. But between the writer and his reader are pundits, commentators, critics, academics and media professionals, a great motley crew which combines to form something called the literature industry. This group talks incessantly to itself and so doing gradually settles upon what shall and what shall not be termed literature. It is this group, then, and not the writers who make 'literature'.

Should we avoid using the word literature?

"The more I think about it the more I think the word literature is a terrible curse of a word in our society. A fine word in its own right of course but now saddled with so much baggage that we can hardly see the word for what it is. I mean for example, if I shouted over to my neighbour who's sitting across from me, 'Hey Jac, I've got a great book for you to read', she would immediately be receptive. If, on the other hand, I was to shout across to Jacqueline, 'Hey Jac, I've got a great piece of literature for you to read', she would smile politely and I would see an element of fear in her eyes".

This notion of 'fear' of literature emerges once again in these interviews. Willy Russell is unusual in being able both to remember vividly his own terror as an uninitiated reader and to recognise that fear in others when he meets them as teacher and as writer. At the same time, having come through as an adult student, he is conscious of what literature can and should mean.

"Some of us, of course, are not remotely afraid of the word and take it to denote a whole wealth of insight and enjoyment. We are not intimidated by the literature industry and unintimidated, make up our own minds as to what is and what is not valuable in a literary sense.

Having been, as it were, in both camps, I would say that it is not a question of whether you have access to such material, but whether you feel secure, confident, and qualified enough to exercise your right to that access. Try telling a man who's never been able to swim that there's plenty of water around and all he has to do is jump in. Before he goes anywhere near that water, a massive element of fear will have to be dealt with. So it is with literature to many people. I see lots of them who would love to swim, but if they are going to do so they have to be led and guided by someone whom they trust".

Willy Russell has spent, and still spends, a good deal of his time teaching creative writing in order to try to reach 'all the Ritas out there'.

Jackie Kay - Poet and Playwright

Jackie Kay has already gained a considerable reputation as a young poet and playwright of remarkable talent. She is also well-known for her poetry readings. Her first volume of poems will be published by Bloodaxe later this year. She has just completed two years as Writer in Residence at Shepherd's Bush Library and has taken up the post of Literature Touring Co-ordinator at the Arts Council.

Access and obstacles

Jackie Kay's ideas about access to literature, the barriers to that, and how to overcome these, are put into practice in her public life. She is critical of too generalised a use of the term 'working-class', pointing out the significant differences between, say, black working-class people and white, English and Scots. At the same time, she dislikes labels:

> *"I define myself as black and Scottish. The danger is when they pigeon-hole you. You know - '...you're black, so you only care about black issues'.*
>
> *I resent the idea I have to be one thing or another. At a recent event on Celtic and Caribbean literature the organiser asked me to make sure I'd make '...a strong Celtic input'. He didn't see me as being Celtic* and *Caribbean".*

She is well aware of the difficulties of access for black and working-class people, seeing them as the same for black and white, though intensified and multiplied for 'ethnic minorities' (a label she dislikes).

> *"Black and working-class people at the moment have access to literature only in a stereotyped and unimaginative way. Few of them have the confidence to browse in bookshops of quality, pick out a book and buy it - or even have the money to do that.*
>
> *How many libraries stock books by working-class and black people in the way they stock books by John le Carré or Danielle Steel ? People like them are the most read. They're cheaper to buy than what people think of as 'specialised' books".*

The significance of social class emerges in so many areas connected with literature, creating a sense of élitism that keeps ordinary people out.

> *"It's the same people who go into the bookshops, and the cinemas, the same educated middle-class people. It's the same at The Poetry Society - the same poets who read, the same people who attend. ICA (the Institute for the Contemporary Arts) is the same. Ordinary people feel it's not for them".*

She herself felt something of that kind of anxiety, yet another aspect of cultural fear, at university as a girl from a working-class background. "Working-class students have a strange experience there as the first members of their families to partake of such education:

> *...because you feel it doesn't really belong to you. You feel, 'when will I be found out?'.*
>
> *If who you are isn't actually reflected in your environment, you will feel your confidence*

undermined. There are so few blacks, so few working-class people in universities. Who are the teachers? Who chooses the books you are to read?

It's the same with books and TV. If you're in a minority, that's a barrier. Look at the arts programmes, the same kind of people on both sides of the screen!".

How to remove the barriers

a) Hospitality

Jackie Kay's views on how to widen access comprise both practical action and the choice of literature offered to people. With more than an echo of the radical librarian-reformers, the many events she has organised at Shepherd's Bush have been distinguished by the atmosphere of welcome. Publicity goes to all kinds of groups. Believing that ordinary people's fear of literature comes at least in part from fear of school ('We won't understand; too difficult; all these classical allusions'), she treats them as guests, offers food and (a little) wine, has flowers on the table, thus creating a relaxed atmosphere, so that the poetry can be enjoyed as a 'natural' pleasure, not seen as a 'difficult' activity.

b) Oral literature

She believes oral literature is the main key to access, because people can instantly respond to its music. The spoken word, accessible to everybody, needs to be valued as much as the written word. Oral literature is also the way for the multi-cultural approach to succeed, by the embracing of all the different oral traditions, for example the linking of Scottish and African culture.

"If I was trying to put together an oral tour or event, I'd want to be culturally diverse - distinct and similar literatures. You could have Guyana and Fife, Cardiff and Nigeria".

She attributes the more 'natural' feelings of ordinary Scottish people to the folk traditions, and particularly to the Burns tradition, describing her own enjoyment, from childhood on, of the reciting, dancing, eating and drinking of the Burns Suppers.

"Look at the buzzing literary activity in Scotland now - all those working-class writers, celebrating our cultural heritage. It's ours!"

Multi-culturalism

This breadth of vision incorporates as strong a dislike of compartmentalising as it does a strong love of internationalism.

"We need to stop people thinking of black women writers as 'specialised'. That's the whole problem - working-class writers, anything that's not a big popular romance is treated as specialist.

We need to think of that kind of writing (i.e. by black women or working-class people) as reflecting the experience of a huge number, even the majority, of people's experience and stop seeing it as a voice from the margin".

Not enough effort, she feels, is made in this direction by people in schools and in arts agencies. The double problem for black people, of racism and the way black people are presented in literature (cf. *Little Black Sambo*) shows the need of black writers for all children, black and white.

> *"This country is so introverted and ignorant of Third World writers. Children need to be taught a world viewpoint".*

Her aim for her own poetry?

> *"I want to write for everybody".*

Norman MacCaig - Poet

A new edition of Norman MacCaig's collected poems has recently been published this year in honour of his 80th birthday. He was for 34 years a primary school teacher and later he spent 80 years on the staff of Stirling University. He gives many readings of his poetry all over Scotland.

Access to literature

He is both sceptical and generous in talking about people and their possibilities.

> *"I think literature consists of the kind of books that the majority of people don't read. The majority who do read books read rubbish".*

He is stern about the need for development of the critical intelligence and looks to the school teacher to see to this as well as to stimulate the enjoyment of poetry. But for him the supreme initiative for breaking through the barrier for people who never read literature is the poetry reading. 'People come who never bought a book.' He expresses great admiration for the Scottish Arts Council who organise such events up and down the country for adults and for schools:

> *"...from the poor to the posh. The school gets a poet for nothing! And that's the most important thing in Scotland for the spreading of an interest in poetry. Because it influences the teachers too - that's very important.*
>
> *They also improve the range, especially of poetry, in the bookshops, because when more and more people go to readings, they pester the shops to get the books they want. The poetry readings cause this, far more than reviews or anything like that".*

Creative Writing

Norman MacCaig initially thought that creative writing could not be taught, but later changed his mind. He called his method 'talking sympathetically and critically', always asking, 'What does that line mean? Why that image?' and found that his aspiring student writers steadily improved, some of them later publishing books of their poems.

> *"I was writer in residence at Edinburgh University for two years. When I accepted the job I thought, you cannot teach people to write poetry. If it's in them they will, and if it's not, they can't. I used to think to myself.....I'll tell you a beautiful couplet.....*
>
> *The feathered tribes on pinions skim the air.*
> *Not so the mackerel, still less the bear.*
>
> *I was the first writer in residence in Scotland and they didn't know what to do with me. They gave me a wee room and asked if my wife would like to join the Ladies Tea Club. Well, the number of students who came to me got more and more, and I found I was wrong. You can't teach people to write poetry but if they've got a grain of poetry in them, and most people have, you can help them develop!"*

He makes a firm distinction between this kind of approach and the random, 'self-expression' kind of writing that he feels leads nowhere. Possibly his classics background as well as his Scots education contribution to his emphasis on discipline and seriousness.

The following remarks of his on would-be 'poets' are not cynical. They are rather a severe criticism of our educational system and its failure to develop that 'grain of poetry' he believes most people have.

> *"I get huge amounts of poems sent to me by total strangers. It's a burden to me because most of them just haven't a clue. An extraordinary number of people try to write poetry. But they're far more interested in getting published than in writing poetry. The poems people send me are mostly bad.*
>
> *One of the reasons I'm sure was that they were badly taught at school. The answer is good teachers. I can always tell when I go to a school and start talking to the children, I can always tell if there's a good teacher who's enthusiastic about poetry. Good teaching is absolutely fundamental".*

Reading and Response

A combination of reading, arguing and writing is the best way to develop people's enjoyment of literature. Norman MacCaig put this into practice during his time as a lecturer in English studies at the University of Stirling. He insisted on teaching only contemporary poetry and, shocked by the almost exclusive concentration on English literature ('They didn't do very much Scottish and their knowledge of foreign poetry and novels was non-existent'), he introduced his students to all sorts of European poetry which they loved.

His convictions about the importance of education and the central role of the good teacher are very Scottish:

> *"Maybe less now, but for centuries Scots have had a huge admiration for education. If there's five or six kids in the family they'll starve to let the 'bright' one go on to university".*

At the same time he believes:

> *"...there's a rudimentary artist in everyone. I've seen such wonderful drawings and paintings in infant and primary schools. Then it fades; self-consciousness takes over - then puberty".*

This dual belief in the importance of the formal processes of education and in the mysterious inborn creativity in the human being finds expression in the achievement of MacCaig's own life, as poet and as teacher.

Access and his own work

> *"I never think of my readers when I write. At the poetry readings I read the poems that I take to be available to the ear. I never include information that any literate person wouldn't understand. Of course one hopes to be accessible to anyone, everyone, and to that extent only I consider my readers".*

Barriers to access he suggests are two: lack of familiarity with books and poetry ('How can you be interested if there are few or no books in the house you grow up in, and no talk of art or literature?'), and secondly, lack of education. So the task is to create interest and take if from there.

For him, there are no difficulties in communicating with people. He feels a common bond with them:

> *"Almost everything I write comes out of my own experience. But then I'm a very ordinary man, so my experiences are shared by most people. I'm not an experimental writer - all I can do is maybe clarify experiences at the best or remind them of experiences.....I hate writing about myself and I never write about the process".*

His poem, *An Ordinary Day*, seems particularly apt in this context:

> and my mind observed me,
> or I to it, how ordinary
> extraordinary things are or
>
> how extraordinary ordinary
> things are, like the nature of the mind
> and the process of observing.

Seamus Heaney - Poet

Seamus Heaney, currently Professor of Poetry in Oxford, is himself a very important object of access. Six hundred and more people throng to his lectures each term. There has been nothing like it since Chomsky's lectures in the '60s. He also sets aside regular times for discussions with individual students. The question of access is one familiar to him through personal experience and much thought.

Access - and Barriers

> *"There's arts and there's access. Some are more conscious of the first and some of the second.*
>
> *I had originally a shyness, an anxiety, in the face of these things - you're a country boy with the wrong accent, and you see, without any access, you're without anywhere to start from, you have to create first base".*

The word 'class' was not mentioned. Cultural divisiveness he thought, appeared in the different ways of speech. The power of accent, especially the old BBC-type 'Received Pronunciation' voice, to distance those without such orthodox, establishment-reflecting speech was very great, and his own experience of this dominated his approach to people when he stood up to speak or read in halls and schools and colleges.

> *"For years I was conscious not of the initiated among the audience but of the uninitiated - and perhaps unfairly at the expense of the initiated specialist. I tried to speak so that the uninitiated would not feel fear".*

His intention was to dispel that fear (the same 'cultural fear' that John Edmonds talks about in relation to trade union members) by demythologising the art itself and the artist. It is essentially a matter of personality, of the way people conduct themselves.

> *"Some people are irretrievably hopeless at communicating anything. If I were an arts organisation, I would lock them up (laughter). If the function of an arts institution is to give access to the arts, you want the best people to create that access".*

His desire to help abolish the barriers to access is accompanied by an anxiety that

> *"...commendable as it is from a social and educational point of view, you may still be selling something else short. So I think you should testify to the difficulty of it, you know, and the slight 'otherness' of it as well - it's possible to do that without distancing people".*

Art and Access - a Separation

Art and access are quite separate entities. He drew an uncompromising distinction between the artist and the citizen. While he hoped the artist would contain within himself the desire of the 'decent citizen' to help his fellows feel freer or more able to approach the arts, he saw any such work as visiting educational institutions or arts centres as being

> *"...no part whatsoever of any obligation to society on the poets' part as makers of works. It's*

an extra duty in their life, but it's a separate duty, a separate command from the command to make or do".

Education: Creative Writing

While in many ways approving of such well-intentioned activities as the encouraging of 'creative writing' and poetry competitions for the young, he warned of the

"...necessary but perilous confusion between educational function and artistic achievement. It's very difficult to confer a competition prize without giving the child the impression - and the assembled society the impression - that this is for a work of art. A child will usually not be able to know the difference between what's poetically good or bad, even if he or she has produced it".

He grants the importance of every child writing a poem, and points out that, from the viewpoint of education, the fact that the poem might be worthless aesthetically didn't matter at all. That the child went through some experience that issued in a poem, and has a memory of having written a poem, is good for the general health of the arts in society.

"The actual business has been incurred, however minimally, as part of the subjective experience of the citizen, so that the word 'poetry' is not something that is 'beyond'. It has happened on the inside. It's been demystified".

The educational experience is 'utterly valuable' as long as in the end it does not demean the expectations from poetry itself.

There is absolutely no reason, he believes, why any writer should be in schools at all - except for educational purposes.

"The number of people who understand the inner demands of art is very small - in fact most of the connoisseurs don't know a thing about it.

Most writers are afraid because they know they know nothing - and yet they are very close to knowing all that needs to be known about 'the thing'. The line between that perilous and slightly panicky state and the certitude of clued-in connoisseurship is narrow but crucial".

Was he suggesting that too crude efforts at widening access might confuse or mislead people about what poetry is?

"Yes...some part of me is depressed more by the sight of an active arts centre...".

Question: 'Worthiness?'

"Yes, that's right. It's the absence of scepticism and humour - but there have to be arts centres and you can't run an organisation on scepticism and humour (laughing). Maybe in Scotland and Ireland, it'd be induced anyway. No, that's not fair to the southern folk".

The Situation Now

"My feeling is - I'm now 50 - it's better than it was. I just think of the young person, particularly in Northern Ireland in the Sixth Form: the acoustic has changed for them. They hear their own accent talking about these matters. It's not the R.P. voice. The writers who come into the schools are Northern Ireland writers. On the whole, they've mostly gone through the same system as the kids on the benches.

There's some help in the fact that the practitioners of the art who come to talk are out of your own ethos, as it were.

Other things help - more local publishing, for example. But there's a great divide between what's going on in art and what's going on in school. This is probably unfair, but the staffroom is not the place to pick up what's going on in the arts world.

I don't want to stand up in front of that enormous school assembly again. I am nowadays very conscious of the gap between the grey-haired man and the restless gazers. My trust in what can be done is perhaps broken a little, you know, the huge epiphany (laughing) of showing him (the poet) to the people - it's a ritual. Maybe it's better in small groups".

Did he find readings for people tiring and repetitious? He explained how he prepared beforehand, choosing which poems to read.

"You end up doing almost the same things, but the pause and preparation of a list of poems remind you that each time is a moment of possibility, a possible growth ring in the memory of some listener".

Citizen Obligation - Artist Privilege

"This is entirely personal and speculative, but I think it's the fact that I'm the eldest of eight and I have a brother who works on a building site and who now can't work any more because of a bad back from pushing barrows; another brother who's a barman, another one who's a farmer...a deep part of my unspoken being lives in the pre-literary world still.

So the sense of obligation and privilege is still there. I'm in this world and they're in that world. I see myself sitting in rooms like this...it's two worlds, this world, Oxford, Harvard and all that, and their world. I've written about it, the line between life and art, elsewhere, in a completely different set of discourses (as we now say)".

He referred to his essay *The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker*[21], where he takes issue with the common interpretation of Nero fiddling while Rome burns as an image of indifference.

"I see it as an image of passion, of devotion to a higher form.

Chekhov was really wonderful in that regard. He commits six weeks of his life as a successful writer to going, without a grant, to the island of Sakhalin (then a kind of Devil's Island) to interview the prisoners and to write about their conditions. And of course his friends were puzzled. He just goes out of some sort of solidarity. When he gets there after a hard journey

of six weeks, he drinks this bottle of cognac that his friends had given him. I always take this moment as emblematic of the privilege of the artist and of the fact that this privilege can be somehow earned.

The question is whether it has to be earned or not. But that's a difficult one. I mean, demonstrably, it doesn't need to be earned, for some people have it without earning it. I think it's an accident of temperament. Wilfred Owen versus W.B. Yeats.

The gist of what I feel is that there is citizen obligation which is involved in education and derives from the Beatitudes and the commandment to love your neighbour, and then there's the completely self-absorbed freedom and the making.

How the relationship works out between that freedom and the rest depends on the temperament and disposition of the maker.

I'm very lucky - I have a very large audience. But in order to retain my innocence, I have to pretend that I don't know what'll happen there. You have to be both vigilant and sceptical of the fact that you're in collusion with commercialism, image-making, canon-making and all that...".

Comment

We value writers for their individuality, even uniqueness. The foregoing discussions present a spectrum of insights and attitudes which throw light from different angles on the topic. The one view held in common was the sheer importance of widening access.

The creative writers give us the most important access of all, free entrance to their own creative vision. One striking difference that emerges in this discussion is that between the poets and prose writers. Norman MacCaig puts it succinctly when he says 'I never talk about the process'. Seamus Heaney at greater length draws a clear distinction between the aesthetic and the social roles of the poet, believing that the artist has no obligation other than 'the command to write', though such a privilege can be earned by his activities as a 'decent citizen' helping to break down barriers between people and art. The writers of novels and the plays on the other hand appear more conscious of their readers as they write. Ron Butlin, interviewed earlier as a teacher, is both poet and novelist and put it this way:

> *"I write poetry - regardless. But in my prose writing, I am more conscious of the readership".*

Piers Paul Read and Willy Russell, quite different in their attitudes to social class and privilege, resemble one another in their fusing of the concepts of access and their creative work. These are to them one activity, although the former sees it as a command from God while the other is impelled by the sheer force of social injustice experienced in his own life. Jackie Kay sees the encouragement of the oral tradition as central to widening access, perhaps particularly for Afro-Asian people who endure additional problems such as racism both inside literature itself as well as in the world outside.

There are no convenient parallels that allow us to group responses. The threads that appear to connect two writers in one way are caught into another pattern by their differences.

Seamus Heaney and Willy Russell for example both felt that in this discussion, they had to refer in some detail to their own backgrounds which made it impossible for them to forget the people in a 'pre-literary' way of life. Yet his work is seen by the poet in an almost Platonic light, quite separate from the social question, while the dramatist offers his plays as his most accessible diagnosis of just that.

Piers Paul Read and Penelope Lively were both united in their eloquent expression of the deprivation, spiritual and imaginative, suffered by those excluded from entrance to the worlds of imaginative writing, however differently they saw the underlying causes of that exclusion.

Fear, that same 'cultural fear' that John Edmonds put his finger on in the Trade Union chapter, was emphasised as a barrier, particularly by the writers whose own roots were amongst those most susceptible to that fear, Willy Russell with his account of his own felt experience similar in some ways to that of Jackie Kay, and Seamus Heaney in his sensitivity during his poetry readings 'to the uninitiated so that they would not feel fear'.

No one suggested that there was any one single solution to the problem of access. Seamus Heaney even warns that we might be selling something else short if too much emphasis is placed on making people feel at ease with art - maybe we have to keep always in mind the difficulties involved. Poetry, he reminds us, 'is more a threshold than a path'.

The word threshold offers a more positive image than barrier does and more hopefully suggests the nature of the challenges that have to be faced.

CONCLUSION

"The arguments for the arts are universal or they are untrue".

William Rees Mogg

"Literature is a verb, not a noun".

John Hatcher

The aim of this project has been to find an answer to the question: where is the Common Reader? A one person attempt to explore this problem within parts of contemporary Britain cannot be anything but limited and inadequate. Adults only have been discussed. Some topics of importance to the main question have been only briefly touched on, the media for example, television in particular. and the whole question of the 'Information Revolution' which in less than ten years' time will offer an (apparent) wealth of consumer choices such as we cannot yet image. The issues involved in the development of our multi-cultural society (imperfectly captured by the us-and-them phrase, 'ethnic minorities') demand a study of their own.

Again, in the concentration on working-class access to literature, little attention has been paid to the problem of the indifference, or even hostility, to the arts and literature in particular, of people in other social classes who have received what is reckoned to be a 'good' education. Arnold's 'Philistinism'[22] is a harsh and maybe unhelpful term to describe an attitude that is probably far from simple, deriving perhaps from a variety of causes such as social uncertainties, a too narrowly technical or some other kind of one-dimensional education, or 'cultural fear'. This too would be a worthwhile topic for study, one which might throw more light on the main question.

What has emerged in specific terms as a result of seventy or so interviews are the 30 or 40 proposals at the end of each of the first four chapters. In some instances, these recommendations are extensions of existing practice in such areas as adventurous libraries or (Scottish) trade unions. Other proposals are a result of reflection on more general points whose emergence from the individual discussions lend an extra dimension or perspective to the whole business of access. It is the significance of some of these issues that must finally and briefly claim attention here.

'Only Connect'

In terms of understanding and response, all those interviewed (and no one asked to give an interview refused) agreed on the validity and contemporary relevance of the main question. They recognised a series of problems, and offered insights and often suggestions for action, ranging from ways of ending the marginalising of the issue in their own work to bold plans for the transformation of whole ways of working.

Yet, despite the often splendid work of individuals and organisations, what emerges most significantly is a lack of coherence in tackling the needs and opportunities for wider access.

The enterprising libraries do not work much, if at all, with trade unions, nor do the trade unions engage with bookshops and university extra-mural departments. The magnificent work of the two Poetry Libraries, battling away against difficult odds, yet goes along with the feeling that poetry is bound to stay a 'minority interest'. What above all is needed is the sense of connection, of inter-relatedness. The Arts Council and especially the Regional Arts Boards and Associations have the potential to create this, both in the realm of thinking and of action. The words we use and our understanding of them are central to the success of this.

Literature - for Pleasure?

Heavy - perhaps too heavy - emphasis has been placed earlier on education, a word that often suggests a process opposed to enjoyment, pleasure or leisure (leading to strange conjunctions like 'education for leisure' or 'reading for pleasure' - as opposed to pain?). Literature of course offers relaxation, simple enjoyment and escape as well as the expanding of the mind and the imagination. But the pleasure principle is not in itself enough if we are talking about access. Simple hedonism is self-defeating, or, at any rate, not concerned with movement or development. Widening access, however, implies movement towards something and must be about the different kinds of pleasure involved in reading more challenging books. John Stuart Mill, exposing once and for all the fallacy of simple utilitarian philosophy, put it rather histrionically with his:

> *"Better Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied".*

But the implications of that demand attention. They have something to do with meaning, that it is better to strive for something that meets our effort at understanding, even if it is to show how little we succeed (e.g. *Waiting for Godot*). It is better to ditch something in the end that accepts an inadequate grasp of, or deliberately ignores, the meaning of the experience it purports to express. A car worker turned adult student got near the mark:

> *"You can't imagine the sheer pleasure of stretching your mind after 20 years on the conveyor belt".*

The Need for Dialogue

Thousands of working-class people are serious readers but, as the former Chief Executive of Book Trust Scotland and others have observed, they are often isolated and have no one to talk to. A former adult student, John Hatcher, now a university teacher, gives his view:

> *"People who come to Ruskin are bursting with the books they have read but have had no one to talk to. It's absolutely necessary to give and receive talk.*
>
> *Literature is a verb, not a noun. It only exists in communication.*
>
> *It has to be incarnated, say a poem, first between writer and reader, then with someone - a friend? Or a teacher? You can create it between you. It's tremendously exciting; something that seemed dead on the page comes alive.*
>
> *Someone said to me before I managed to get to college: 'All that stuff you read and talk about -*

you want to get that out of your system. Go to the university, then get yourself a good job!'. He meant: 'And then stop thinking!'. That's what he really meant!''.

Perhaps the essence of the meaning of education is caught here, something not necessarily to do with institutions but that involves the active participation of the whole person, intellect and feeling and imagination. In that sense, literature itself can claim to be our greatest educator.

Other former adult students have expressed the enormous relief, as well as release, in at last being with people like themselves in an environment conducive to talking about shared interests. Even if only a modest[23] proportion of working-class adults can be offered a place in a residential college, that prospect of total access to books, dialogue and discussion could be translated into reality, depending on certain developments.

One of these would occur if the higher education institutions not only opened their doors much more widely to mature, working-class people but also abandoned the older educational tradition of didactic one-way teaching, the lecture as the norm, set syllabuses with narrow choices, received wisdom delivered with no chance for argument or challenge. When this happens (and to be fair it is already happening in some places), then adult students can bring all their valuable experience, insights and creativity to the reading of literature. Such a development, in its turn, would alter our conception of 'education' and make it easier to see how organisations, from bookshops to pubs, community centres to Women's Institutes[24] or trade unions are, or could be, agents in this process. The brilliant simplicity of the Poems on the Underground initiative shows how even the London Underground can be involved.

But such a development could and should happen in reverse. If the libraries, bookshops, trade unions and similar bodies were to translate everywhere into practice their potential for creating the environment where 'ordinary' people are welcomed as readers and talkers about books, as a 'natural' function of the organisation's activities, again the whole meaning and even the shape of the systems of education would be affected.

A Danger of Using Literature? Excellence and Élitism

The quest for increased access to literature for working-class people all the time raises the issue of equality and most of the proposals suggested would, if carried through, serve those twin ends. Might this in some way, though, subordinate literature to something else? In the earlier discussion of the use of literature or 'creative writing' as instruments of social action or of therapy, a consensus was reached on the use of these as starting points for the appreciation of literature. There must of course be development from these: access must include movement and growth.

Fear of betraying standards of 'excellence' or of distorting the true nature of literature, however that is defined, lies behind the anxieties about 'using' it. 'Excellence' is a term that needs to be distinguished from 'élitism'. The latter is a social term, meaning in practice the exclusion of a majority of people from a minority group. 'Excellence' is quite different, referring to the best standards in human achievements, whether of the intellect and art, craft, physical and other skills. Excellence will look after itself once élitism disappears. Everybody has the capacity for discerning excellence, whether in football or poetry. The small number of working-class people doing this in poetry, it has been said over and over by different people in this document, is because of 'cultural fear' or unfamiliarity.

Cultural Fear Again

The power of this barrier is so strong that every kind of imaginative way of demolishing it is needed. A miner's daughter described earlier the importance of reading Wilfred Owen's *Miners* - '...someone considered a great poet writing about people like me', a moment similar to Jackie Kay's discovery of Soyinka's poem *Telephone Conversations*, 'I felt here's somebody who has written about me'.

Seamus Heaney describes the excitement[25] at finding in the poem, *Spraying the Potatoes*, by Patrick Kavanagh, '...details of a life I knew intimately - but which I had always considered to be below or beyond books - being presented in a book'. He points out that such a 'revelation at first naturally inclines the individual to overvalue the subject matter of the poetry at the expense of its salutary creative spirit'. Then he goes on to express the confidence-giving value of the experience of recognising his own world in a poem, 'world become word', which left him feeling '...less alone and marginal as a product of that world'. Such experiences as these describe definitively the barrier that cannot be overlooked and that must be removed.

Literature - the Need for Common Ownership

People not yet aware of the fact have to be convinced that the literature of the past and the present, of their own and other countries, belongs to them. To believe in the universality of literature and not be disturbed by the un-universality of its contemporary readership is a contradiction. It is a matter, to borrow a phrase of Neal Ascherson's, to do with grief that so many working people never have the opportunity to enjoy their rightful literary inheritance. To achieve a universal 'ownership' of literature might even lead to a flourishing of imaginative and intellectual life that in the past has been seen only in sections of particular societies.

The Arts Council's Literature Director, Alastair Niven, describes the widening of access to literature as '...a gigantic task'. However willing, and with however much government support, the Arts Council could not do all that needs to be done alone. But it should and could give the lead, co-ordinate the alliances and liaisons necessary, and, given the cumulative effect that would ensue were the proposals put forward here translated into action, inspire and oversee the arrival at long last of the Common Reader.

Footnotes

Introduction

[1]For detailed figures, see Appendix to this chapter, p.6.
[2]For Willy Russell's account of his anger and near despair, see p.78.
[3]cf. Matthew Arnold's comment in one of his school reports when he was an HMI on a student's paraphrase of Macbeth's 'Cans't thou not minister to a mind diseased?' as 'Can you not wait upon the lunatic?': 'What a curious state of affairs if every pupil of our national schools knew - let us say - that the moon is 2160 miles in diameter and thought at the same time that the above was a good paraphrase'.
[4]This was semi-structured with some key questions. See Appendix A.

Chapter 1 - Books and their Readers - Libraries and Bookshops

[5]"The book market in Glasgow is not huge. Basically it is the home-owner consumer who buys books and when the mortgage goes up there is that much less left for books". Willie Anderson, Glasgow bookseller (reported in the Glasgow Herald 6.11.90).
[6]*The Heeks Report: Public Libraries and the Arts* (1989). Only 19 per cent of librarians agreed that the main arts responsibility of the libraries lies in literature and only 38 per cent of libraries have a policy on selection of works of literary merit (see also p.24 of the Report and footnote).
[7]*Scottish Readership Report* (1989), p.3.
[8]JILL see p.23.
[9]Only recently a librarian in my own local library described to me the low esteem in which fiction was held (and 'fiction' includes here every kind of novel from Jeffrey Archer and Jane Austen to Wilbur Smith and Zola). 'If anyone wants a book from any of the other sections, history, sociology, art or whatever, we'll go to enormous lengths to get hold of it for the reader. If it's fiction that's wanted, we just wouldn't bother'.
[10]See *Trade Unions and Literature*, p.25.

Chapter 2 - The Trade Unions and Literature

[11]The union persuaded several London boroughs to release employees in working time to attend literacy classes in the place of work and the scheme has been so successful, it is now extending to areas outside London - one instance of the way in which union education seeks to remedy the deficiencies of our state education system. This particular scheme was the result of the initiative of the National Union of Public Employees.
[12]See Appendix D. Note also that the Open College of the Arts reckons almost 20 per cent of its students comes from NALGO (National and Local Government Officers' Association) who give bursaries to its members.

Chapter 3 - Access to Literature and Education

[13]'The achievement of literacy...calls for comprehension, action in the social, economic and cultural sphere as well as in the field of education' and '...an effort should be made to alert public opinion - to the association between illiteracy - and social and cultural exclusion' UNESCO International Literacy Year, Information Document, ED/ILY/88.10.
[14]There are only seven full-time adult residential colleges in Britain.
[15]Currently it defines only 28 per cent of its students as 'working-class'.

[16]The Association of University Teachers is currently seeking for a better balance - in terms of status and reward - between specialism and generalisation, between research administration and teaching. Good teaching, it is argued, is often grossly undervalued.
[17]'Colleges without walls' is a phrase coined by the William Temple Foundation in Manchester which pioneered the practical application of this vision, offering resources - ideas and intellect even more than material help - to people in their own often neglected estates.

Chapter 4 - The Arts Agencies

[18]'The first Arts Council Raymond Williams Memorial Award was given - appropriately by Normal Willis - for *Barbed Lines* - poetry and prose by the Bengali Women's Support Group, published by Yorkshire Arts Circus, Sept. 1990.

Chapter 5 - The Writers of Literature

[19]See Arts Agencies, p.54
[20]This is from an unpublished speech he made when opening a college library.
[21]From *The Government of the Tongue*, Faber & Faber, 1988.

Conclusion

[22]Last year, the newly appointed Controller of Radio 2 explained that her channel was 'for the middle people, middle-aged, middle-brow, with middle of the road views' - a self-fulfilling prophecy, if ever there was one.
[23]A young adult student (a former coal-miner) on a panel interviewing people for scarce places at Ruskin College, appalled at having to agree to reject a keen applicant as there were no places left, burst out: 'There ought to be a Ruskin College on every street corner!'.
[24]Anne Ballard, General Secretary of the W.I. the largest organisation of women in the country, points out that education is a main aim in its constitution. Yet over 90 per cent of its courses at Denman College are for crafts.

> *"We have to fill beds to survive economically. Literature courses play a very small part".*

Another effect, surely, of the barriers between 'popular' and 'high' culture? and of cultural fear?
[25]From the essay 'The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh' (in *The Government of the Tongue*, Faber & Faber 1988).

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1 What do you understand by "literature"?

2 What do you understand by "access"?

3 What are the most important aspects of access?

4 What, if anything, in your work bears on this question of access?

5 Is reading and response or creative writign more important as a starting point?

6 a) What initiatives have in your view worked successfully?
b) What initiatives might work?

7 What initiatives have failed?

8 Do you know anyone (that is, a working class person) who has "come through" as a result of reading?

9 Media: do they help or hinder this business of access?

10 Is there a Scottish (or Trade Union, etc.) dimension to this question?

11 Any question you think I should have asked but didn't?

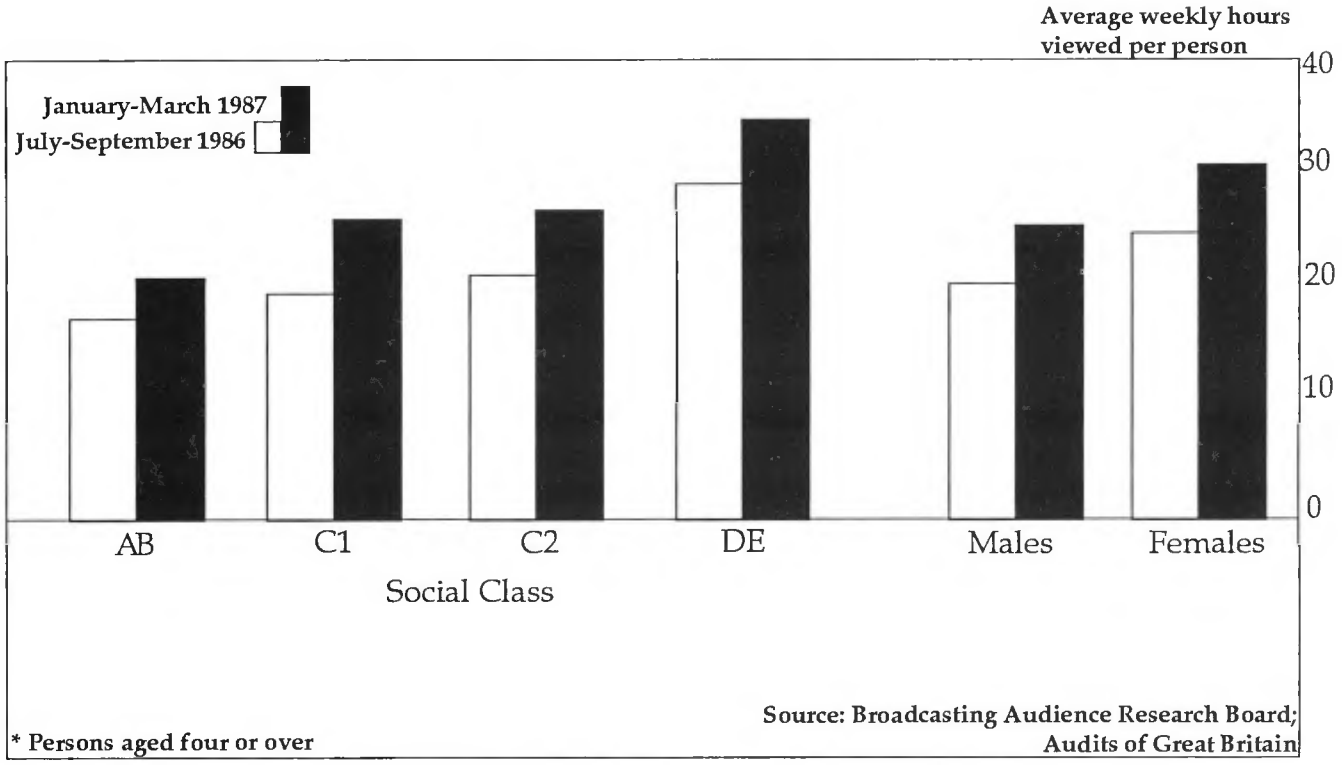
Additional queries as a result of no.11

1 Why do you **care** (Dr Jo Hendry)

2 Isn't there also a middle-class problem? (Dr A Niven)

Appendix B

Television viewing*: by social class and by sex



Appendix C

Lack of educational qualifications

These are especially apparent for women and in the older age groups.

Example (1987 data)

Only five per cent of women aged 40-49 had degree level qualifications;

only three per cent of women aged 50-59 had degree level qualifications.

52 per cent of women aged 40-49 had no qualifications;

65 per cent of women aged 50-59 had no qualifications.

35 per cent of men aged 40-49 had no qualifications;

44 per cent aged 50-59 had no qualifications.

These figures understate the lack of qualifications since they exclude those who "did not know" or "preferred not to state" their qualifications.

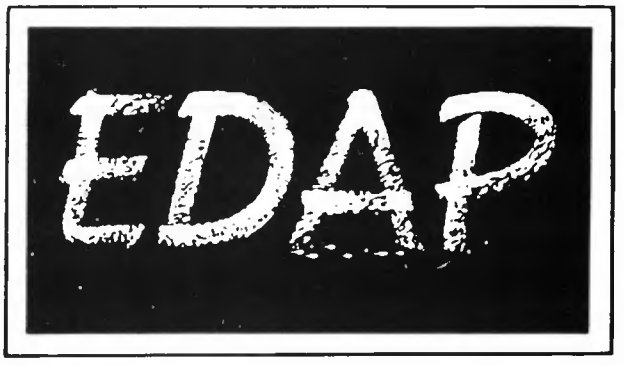
3.22 Qualifications[1] of the population aged between 25 and 59: by sex 1987

Great Britain — Percentages and thousands

	Males aged					Females aged				
	25 -29	30 -39	40 -49	50 -59	All ages	25 -29	30 -39	40 -49	50 -59	All ages
Percentage of the population with a qualification										
At degree level or equivalent	13	15	12	10	13	9	8	5	3	6
At least higher education below degree level	18	20	17	14	17	17	17	14	10	14
At least GCE A level or equivalent or apprenticeship	55	56	50	42	51	32	29	22	17	25
At least GCE O level or equivalent	69	66	58	48	60	61	50	38	25	42
At least CSE grades 2-5	77	68	58	48	62	72	54	38	26	46
Any qualification[2]	80	74	65	56	68	75	61	48	35	54
Total (= 100%) (thousands)	2113	3769	3395	2886	12,163	2087	3759	3381	2959	12,186

1. Percentages are based on data excluding those who did not know or preferred not to state their qualifications: however, the total includes such persons.
2. Includes foreign qualifications and other qualifications which are not listed in the table.
Source: Labour Force Survey, 1987. Department of Employment.

Appendix D
Outline of EDAP (Employee Development & Assistance Programme)



For coding purposes only

27410

1-5

013

6-8

Employee Development & Assistance Programme

A joint initiative by Ford & the Trade Unions

- Did school fail you?
- Like to have another go at qualifications?
- Want to learn new skills?
- Could you be living more healthily?
- Like to be getting more out of life?

If your answer to any of these questions is yes, then Ford's Employee Development and Assistance Programme, 'EDAP', will certainly have something to offer you.

EDAP is a jointly run programme between the unions and Ford. It offers access to all kinds of courses and health assistance programmes with grants of up to £200 per employee per year.
Under EDAP you can pursue educational qualifications, learn new skills, develop your interests, and/or get assistance in improving your health and lifestyle.
EDAP can cover the fees for you to take an existing course on offer from a local college or elsewhere. EDAP can also set up special courses, to meet your particular interests and needs, which can be held at times and places to suit you.

So, if there is something which you would like to know more about, such as:

- a TV programme which got you thinking about how the world works?
- a news item you found interesting but didn't completely understand?
- not feeling left behind by your children and what they know about computers?
- something you gave up at school that you'd like to study again?
- an interest of yours?

Or is there something else?

14 Great Peter Street, London SW1P 3NQ

June 1991

0-7287-0620-2