

## Lost and Found: Working Class Writers and Mainstream Publishers in 1930s Britain

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### Abstract

Working-class writers often struggled to find their way to print in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But while common authors and readers have been paid increasing attention, such writers have been less pursued from a publishing perspective. This article engages with the losing and finding of working-class writing in 1930s Britain. Though notice is often given to such stepping-stones to print as patronage and left-wing periodicals, critical recoveries reveal a fashion for mainstream publishers' interventions in this field. This study examines how while this class of literature has often gone missing from publishing history, worker-writers' novels and short-story collections knocked on the door of mainstream literary production. Taking stock of their struggles to get published, it broadly assesses the extent of working-class authors' breakthroughs into the literary culture of the Thirties by covering issues of literary tokenism, paratextual politics and commerce. The article concludes that the venture between working-class authorship and mainstream publishing culture worked counter-productively, in the main, to exclude these minor publications from the literary mainstream.

### Key Words

Working-class Writing; Mainstream Publishing; 1930s Britain; Literary Culture.

“Missing! – a working class novel”, chimed the *Sunday Worker* on 5 June 1927. Yet by the end of 1930s – a decade since bookmarked for its social and political interest – this lost literature had, to all appearances, been found.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have given coverage to how writers of working-class origin wound their way to publication through periodicals, patronage, writing competitions and left-wing publishers. But although many struggled to make any headway at all into print, these absent authors were also reached by another means: mainstream publishing. Between the wars, publishers Jonathan Cape, Chatto & Windus, Methuen and others all issued worker-writers’ literary labours. Demonstrating that they were *not* then, as was troubling Jack Common (1938, viii), entirely “mute as far as print goes”, this gateway to publication nonetheless produced particular clashes between writers’ craft and class. Bringing further pressure to bear on classifications of working-class authorship and mainstream publishing in 1930s Britain, I make the case that this working relationship subjected their literature to all the pitfalls of mainstream literary creation, from paratextual politics, to keeping up with literary fashions. Thus, while London publishers did make efforts to publish this fiction, the machinery of mainstream publishing left it, more often than not, in its own minority class of literary production.

### Facing Realities

I got 3,000 words done, Jack, but it can’t be helped, you know the way we live in this bloody tenement, while I was out the baby got hold of the sheets and messed ‘em up, so you’ll have to count me out (Common 1938, ix).

Having to turn down this singular publishing opportunity, those are the only words of one aspiring author ever to be printed. They appeared in Jack Common’s preface to *Seven Shifts* – a short-story collection that opened windows onto different manual labours. The protagonist of Jack Hilton’s *The Plasterer’s Life*, for instance, finds himself “reaching the age of discretion, the age when a fellow thinks that life should offer more than killing himself at work in order to get a week’s pay” (Hilton 1938, 5). This “pretty improbable congregation to turn up in book-covers” was collected and edited by the railwayman’s son from Newcastle for the benefit of the as-of-yet (in his reckoning at least) “unprinted proletariat” (Common 1938, vii) – and this as late in the decade as 1938. Another hopeful “wrote to me, with savage despair, that if he didn’t get a job, or a promise of acceptance from a publisher in two or three weeks’ time, he knew it would be impossible to go on”, *New Writing’s* editor John Lehmann (1955, 258) recalls. Wolverhampton-born coalminer B.L. Coombes, too, noted “the terrific struggle a man of the working class must put up before he can ‘get through’ as a writer” when “[i]t seems that every door is shut against him”. Simply, “the Leaning Tower writer starts with a tremendous advantage over us because he has been

taught the use of words” (Coombes 1941, 33; 32). The bottom line is that authorship was a privilege out of the reach of would-be writers without the leisure to put pen to paper or bear rejections when battling the realities of their education and living conditions. In the struggles to get published, theirs was a laborious route to print.

“Working-class writing” is a term often used to conflate writers’ class and politics of the Thirties. Following Carole Snee’s (1979, 167) suggestion that “it is a mistake to assume that a working-class writer will reveal automatically a class rather than a sectional consciousness”, I, too, use it “simply to denote works written by a member of the working class about that class” – while avoiding glossing over differences between such writers. The critical literature on working-class writing in the 1930s was bolstered by a run of works that appeared, in the main, between 1980-90, culminating in influential studies by Valentine Cunningham (1988) and Andy Croft (1990). This critical interest, whose engine has since been ticking over, was more recently rekindled by Christopher Hilliard arguing that “established firms as well as left-wing publishers and editors played a significant part in bringing workers’ manuscripts to light” (Hilliard 2006a, 161). While these critics have unearthed a considerable body of evidence on “literary history from below” (Hilliard 2006a, 1), their focus has been trained mainly on the periodicals, patrons and left-wing publishers that encouraged working-class writing.<sup>2</sup> But what they don’t tend to do, with the exception of Hilliard, is qualify verdicts delivered in passing on mainstream publishing. Investigating this avenue of publication will advance their enquiries by addressing just what was at stake when entering mainstream production.

### Entering the Mainstream

Aspiring British authors, from one-time to more prolific novelists, did find their way into print through publishers that have been characterised as “mainstream”. For all this, their encounters have been left to what might be described as a footnote in this chapter of twentieth-century publishing history. Traces are to be found looking through the keyhole of publications, authors’ autobiographies and snippets in publishing histories. The shortage of evidence from a publishing perspective has also contributed to this literature’s leave of absence from literary history. An inventory of writers’ labours reveals, nonetheless, that Routledge & Sons saw fit to publish miner Joe Corrie’s *The Black Earth* (1939), while Faber and Faber sent Welsh miner Jack Jones’s *Rhondda Roundabout* (1934) and *Black Parade* (1935) to press. F.C. Boden’s *Miner* (1932) and *Flo* (1933) were released in turn by J.M. Dent & Sons. Prestigious publishing house Methuen, whose history dates back to 1889, took on Hanley’s *Between the Tides* (1939), as well as Walter Brierley’s *Means-Test Man* (1935) and *Sandwichman* (1937). Admitting himself that an “ex-plasterer turned author did sound a

rather queer specimen”, Birmingham-born worker Leslie Halward was delighted when the firm manoeuvred his *To Tea on Sunday* (1936) into print – and this despite the “very modest terms” he received for its retailing at 3s. 6d. (Halward 1938, 271; 256). Despite this, in Maureen Duffy’s history of Methuen – *A Thousand Capricious Chances* – working-class fiction earns the notice of only one-third of a page.

Heinemann had on its books a clutch of working-class novels, from John Sommerfield’s *They Die Young* (1930) to two books by Welsh grocer’s son Rhys Davies (1937; 1938). Meanwhile, Chatto & Windus issued a run of James Hanley’s works, including *The Furies* and *Stoker Bush* (both 1935) and *The Secret Journey* (1936). Although these fictions appear to have been distributed somewhat thinly across the publishing industry, the spread of distribution is striking. Jonathan Cape proved particularly willing to publish working-class writing. Established in the early 1920s, and becoming “[o]ver the next fifty years [ ... ] the centre of gravity of the city’s literary publishing” (Stevenson 2010, 65), the company put into print two books apiece by Ralph Bates (1936; 1939) and Simon Blumenfeld (1935; 1938). Writing *Champion*, plasterer Jack Hilton had vowed in 1937 to “go[] all out to break through these next 12 months”. Despite him “know[ing] that it will be against its chance with publishers and the public”, the book was bought – by Cape, and “with an advance of £40”.<sup>3</sup> Walter Greenwood’s *Love on the Dole* (1933) was to be received as “the first novel of its kind by a working-class writer [...] to reach a wide audience and receive critical acclaim” (Snee 1979, 170). Having already faced rejection from other publishers – an event that for working-class writers was by no means uncommon – it was finally trialled by Cape. Three more of his books followed suit that decade. Yet as Janet Batsleer attests, the fact remains that, simply, “most publishers had a *token* working-class writer on their lists” (Batsleer 1985, 45, emphasis mine). This verdict deserves further consideration in order to grasp the prevailing literary politics behind mainstream publishers’ designs for working-class novels.

### 1930s Print Culture

For Leslie Halward, finding favour with Methuen was the pinnacle of all his toils towards publication. This meant “be[ing] read by all the important people in the literary world. The book would be reviewed in the newspapers, I should be talked about. [...] This book would give me a reputation” (Halward 1938, 256). John Fordham (1997, 122) makes clear that for James Hanley, “real acceptance as an author was [...] to have his name on the spine of a novel from a major publishing firm preferably Chatto & Windus, as he wrote to that company’s Henry Raymond”. Hilliard (2006a, 150) has reached the conclusion that in the Thirties, “the publishing history of working-class writing was thus part of the history of mainstream British publishing”. “Mainstream”, then, is a label often applied to established

publishing outfits of a commercial character. These firms' political and literary sympathies adjusted to commercial and cultural pressures to achieve the broadest profitable circulation. In an increasingly metropolitan marketplace, these pressures would work against working-class writing. From miner Harold Heslop's papers, Croft has retrieved a rejection sent by Jonathan Cape in 1935. It reads, "[although] the book is written with great sincerity and honesty [...] we cannot foresee a sale large enough to justify our publishing it".<sup>4</sup> Likewise in 1938, Allen and Unwin echoed that while "you have produced a remarkably readable story [...] it is difficult for us to envisage a sale for a book of this kind anywhere near enough sufficient to cover the expense".<sup>5</sup> Cape's "concern with books", Howard (1971, 11) imparts, "was primarily commercial; his appreciation of the trend of public taste, and consequently sales potential, greater than his intellectual sympathy with authors."

While books by working-class writers were imprinted with the signs of mainstream publishing, they also wore their class on their sleeves. It is revealing here to consider how a book's paratextuality showcases the designs of its publisher. This term was coined by Gérard Genette to communicate how paratextual thresholds "ensure the text's presence in the world" (Genette 1997, 1). Mainstream publishers branded and classified their publications through advertisements and prefaces. Carrying this beyond Genette's boundaries that "something is not a paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it" (9), this includes the critical reviews that constituted a work's unauthorised public epitext. By being published as working-class novels, these were received and reviewed as such. According to Batsleer (1985, 45), "[b]y the mid-thirties, publishers were actually advertising for working-class authors, and their books were marketed both as 'human interest' stories and as shocking revelations of the conditions of working-class life". In carving out its literary identity for, more often than not, a middle-class audience, these paratextual politics drove a wedge between this and other classes of writing. In appealing to its novelty, this literary typecasting did give working-class writing visibility. Broadly speaking, however, it was never really able to shake off its origins. Mainstream firms scouted for new writing talents whose class credentials could become another profitable paratext to be manipulated to the publishers' credit.

Chatto & Windus marketed J.C. Grant's *The Back-to-Backs* (1930) as a "brutal and ruthlessly honest account of the struggle against poverty, dirt and disease" (quoted in Croft 1990, 75). "It is the duty of every intelligent British man and woman to read this book about their own countrymen, and to face up to the facts in it" (quoted in Duffy 1979, 107), announced the advertisements on the jackets of Methuen titles published the same year as Derbyshire miner Walter Brierley's *Means-Test Man*. Capitalising on this, Methuen avers that the book, a "faithful picture" (107) of the author's experience, needs, urgently, to be consumed. In

fact, following rejections from the Hogarth Press and Hutchinson, Brierley's MS had only wound up at Methuen thanks to its being passed to the sister-in-law of the firm's managing director (Croft 1990a, 179). Decades later, Croft received a letter from employee Peter Wait concerning its publication history. He recalled, "we were doing so badly at the time that we would have been prepared to make money out of books of almost any political colour".<sup>6</sup> Here, the levers of mainstream publishing had for once worked in working-class fiction's favour. Ruled by economic necessity, Methuen had decided to give precedence to its commodity value regardless of other conflicts of interests. After the turn of that decade, however, the fact remains that Brierley never had another book published.

For all their, in Coombes' words, "g[etting] through", there are a spate of instances of publishers losing interest in working-class writers once they had done just that. They did not, in the main, sustain long working relationships with any one author. Often their support did not outlast a few years, never mind the decade. Croft has studied the correspondence that survives between Jack Hilton and *Seven Shifts'* editor Jack Common. The book's preface promises a further volume of women's writing. The two were also at work on essays of working-class criticism. But publishing newcomer Secker & Warburg – and a left-wing publisher at that – "lost interest" without explanation (Croft 1990a, 254). That these projects had fallen through, combined with a broader drawing to a close of some other writers' careers with mainstream publishers, supports the notion that this literature had a shortened lifespan. As late as 1941, B.L. Coombes (1941, 32) acknowledged that working-class writing "for the most part is still like an alarmed infant, whimpering at finding itself in strange company and fearing that it may be cuffed before being sent back to its home". The final proof of the precariousness of mainstream publishing materialised the next decade when working-class writing would, once again, go missing. The final word rests with the author of *Red Letter Days*:

They took the novel to places where it had never been before—down a pit, on a dole queue, in a working-class kitchen. Which is why writers like Jack Hilton were dropped so suddenly by London publishers after the war. The market for books like his had simply disappeared. He seemed too full of old grievances, too provincial, too old-fashioned (Croft 1990b, 17).

## Conclusion

Mainstream publishers worked a shift in issuing workers' publications in this, arguably *the* decade, for working-class literature – and just three years after the *Sunday Worker* made its appeal. Theirs was a novel publishing enterprise. Opening up new channels into print culture, publishers gave these literary labours the mobility to knock on the door of

mainstream literary production. Some firms, it appears, were trying to reach within their quotas a middle-ground between mainstream conservatism and taking chances. Countless aspiring writers may have fallen through the cracks without a trace. Striving to enter what Common (1938, vii) called “the writing classes”, others, however, did find opportunity in the Thirties. Halward, who wrote “about my own people, the working-class”, found himself to be “a real author as I used to dream I should be” (Halward 1938, 164; 287). On another’s tombstone, and “according to his own wishes”, appeared the inscription “Bert Lewis Coombes (Author)” (Jones 2002, xxii). But the way to publication was thorny and unpredictable. The very fact that working-class fiction was put into print by metropolitan publishers called into play all the forces of mainstream cultural production to press upon it, while its paratextual classification kept this literature in a class of its own. The vicissitudes of commercial publishing meant that worker-writers found themselves, in broad terms at least, excluded still from mainstream currents of literary production.

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<sup>1</sup> Valentine Cunningham (1988, 13) takes exception to distortedly labelling this as a discrete decade of activity. Nevertheless, establishing these parameters encourages closer study of this particular period of visibility for working-class writers.

<sup>2</sup> The two most common examples of periodicals are *Left Review* (1934-38) and *New Writing* (1936-40). For literary patronage, see Andy Croft’s comprehensive list (Croft 1990, 179). Left-wing publishers Lawrence & Wishart and Victor Gollancz have also attracted the most attention.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Jack Hilton to Jack Common (quoted in Croft 1990b, 16).

<sup>4</sup> Letter in the Heslop papers from Jonathan Cape, 9 January 1935 (quoted in Croft 1990b, 75).

<sup>5</sup> Letter in the Heslop papers from George Allen and Unwin, 17 July 1938 (quoted in Croft 1990b, 74).

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Peter Wait to Andy Croft, 20 January 1981 (quoted in Croft 1990, 94).

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