

Introduction

During the 1970s, working-class writers entered the cultural landscape in ever greater numbers. 'Ordinary' people formed writing and publishing workshops in which they explored ideas, histories and feelings. A great variety of people started writing, including school children, housewives, black and minority groups, unemployed people, retired workers as well as those still in work. Writers of all ages were examining personal experience with fresh eyes and renegotiating their place in the world. Over the coming decades, thousands of publications would be produced, with an estimated readership in the millions. Autobiography, poetry, short stories and drama were consumed avidly by those within the writer's immediate vicinity as well as by more general readerships. In 1976, the working-class writing and publishing groups, which were proliferating across the country, established a national network, the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP or 'the Fed'), that would later add the strapline 'to make writing and publishing accessible to all'.¹ The movement that coalesced around the basic democratic idea that everyone could be a producer of culture released a pulse of energy that still reverberates today.

This cultural ferment was taking place amid growing social and economic instability. Long-held assumptions about social class were being disrupted by seismic political and economic shifts. The post-war consensus cracked in the 1970s, creating a space that came to be filled by the New Right, and which would in turn expedite neoliberal reforms. The historical outcomes of these processes were not a foregone conclusion. The working class came under the microscope as people sought to understand their lives in the past, present and future. Economic and political dimensions of class were being permeated by personal reflections and cultural meanings.² The desire to write about material and moral landscapes was palpable. To some extent, they faced the end of the 'traditional working class', and many texts were a means of coming to terms with the demise of a way of life. While the working class had always been diverse and subject to unremitting change,³ in the 1970s there was a belief that a quiet revolution was eclipsing an old world. This book charts one aspect of these

changes. It is not a straightforward organisational history but one that surveys a social formation that coalesced around the need for working-class expression.

In the early twenty-first century, a text about the recent history of working-class writers and writing is not a unique, quirky idea but one relevant to rethinking globalisation, digital technology and the complex cultural interactions that have become commonplace. The relations between these forces have a history. Community publishing itself utilised new technologies and responded to changing urban populations. Gaining a voice and expressing it in writing represented another way of thinking about the world. Writers searched for the means to understand and express the difficulties and contradictions of daily life. They wrote from within a distinct context and also pointed beyond it to more expansive desires.⁴ Indeed, the idea of working-class writing is an ambiguous one that cannot easily be slotted into a specific category. It provides an essential window onto the perennial subject of how we live, the so-called human condition; it raises ethical dilemmas and philosophical questions in helping us to comprehend where we have come from and how we might map potential futures.

Working-class subjectivity?

Stories matter. The interpretation and representation of social change is of fundamental importance to the production and reproduction of social structures. Class is not only a material demarcation of life opportunities but is inscribed in, and contested through, symbolic meanings and values that have very real consequences.⁵ Studies of working-class literature and writing have illustrated the capacity for narratives to help mould and activate individual and collective identities.⁶ Commentators have also worked to explain the apparent inconsistency that, as economic inequality has deepened since the late twentieth century, the ways in which class has been talked about in the public realm have been correspondingly curtailed, not least in literature.⁷ Understanding projects that supported the development of working-class voices is therefore particularly pertinent at this current historical juncture, when the tendency towards self-reflexiveness is growing.⁸ The expansion of subjectivity has taken many forms. Anthony Giddens has argued that modernity was aligned with a 'reflexive project of the self' by which individuals sustained coherent yet continuously revised biographical narratives. Class, gender and race were seen as partly about access to these potentially empowering narratives.⁹ In this context, harnessing and distributing workers' experience was invested with a radical potential. Writing from experience meant that everyone could participate, a fundamentally democratic position.¹⁰ Groups created opportunities for writers and readers who were to become active participants in this expanding cultural democracy.

However, it was evident that these forms of expression had to be built up gradually. Making literature and literacy more widely available, while necessary, was also problematic. A growing sense of individuality among working-class

people could be undercut by material shortages. In addition, as Raymond Williams would argue, writing and reading, unlike other forms of communication and art such as painting and sculpture, were technical skills that needed to be learnt through an apprenticeship before taking advantage of them, a fact that helped to explain part of the reasoning behind the Fed.¹¹ Brian Street provided a different emphasis in stating that writing was not purely a neutral and 'autonomous' technology but was inherently 'ideological' and dependent upon the setting within which it was located. Proponents of 'new literacy studies' would further dissect the situated nature of literacy practices.¹²

In the Fed, technology and context were interconnected. Writing and publishing workshops contained different social possibilities and nurtured self-belief and collective empowerment. Barriers were psychological as well as technical, and the assumption that only certain people could legitimately be writers was not easily expunged. Indeed, sustained organisation proved to be an important basis for writing to flourish, as the contemplative atmosphere of the workshop provided a forum for the development of working-class subjectivity. Technical limitations on written expression were minimised by scribing for others, the use of voice in performance as well as publication via offset litho printing. In turn, the strength and importance of writing helped to galvanise a sense of community and to encourage new writers.

Enriching working-class subjectivity would overlap with the emergence of new constituencies. The dominant position of class within workshops, as in society at large, would be challenged from a number of different directions. At one level, class had always been articulated through a diverse range of experiences. These differences became more pronounced as groups came to assert identities based upon race, gender, sexuality and disability and argued for autonomous spaces in which to write – and, at times, the relevance of class was rejected. The ensuing conflicts led some working-class writers to lose faith in the Fed. Yet class was not abandoned as a personal identity nor as a source of agency, and this was reflected in the writing. Class was also retained as a way of denoting difference and respecting 'other' constituencies.

The supportive structures built around marginalised writers and their communities extended to the reception of written work. A concern of 'community publishing' was that writing should be returned to its originating constituency.¹³ A study that removed the 'product' from the 'sources', so that people were unable to see themselves or felt misrepresented, was considered to be an act of violence.¹⁴ This pattern was also seen in the mass media, where stories about working-class people had been manipulated by the popular press, TV talk shows and reality TV in ways that discouraged serious reflection. In recent decades, a penchant for marginalising and laughing at working-class characters has turned into a full-scale frontal attack, based upon demonisation and ridicule.¹⁵

A comparable process can take place in the more polished arena of university-based research, which rarely gets fed back to the people who are the

subjects of study. From the origins of social science, the representation of subordinate groups has been a bitterly contested terrain, often involving more than an element of cultural imperialism in which those being studied have little agency of their own.¹⁶ Rather, people are transformed into 'data' to inform research that may circulate in lecture halls and academic journals, and occasionally influence policy, but not be returned to those 'sources'. This has been closely allied to conceptions of knowledge. Daniel Bertaux described 'symbolic exploitation' which devalues the everyday: 'commonsense knowledge, carrying a cognitive value, is being taken from laymen and converted into social-scientific discourse which can eventually face them as an alien force, exposing them to all kinds of sinister exploitation'.¹⁷ The work of the Fed focused on just this area of 'accumulated experience and reflective communication'. Forms of knowledge were being scrutinised in both intellectual and organisational terms.¹⁸

Criticisms

The Fed was stepping into a fast-moving stream of contemporary debates on culture, literature, literacy, history and education that stretched back to earlier times. Intellectual arguments were rooted within institutional forms where power, hierarchy and status helped to define cultural practices and disciplinary boundaries. The arrival of these workshops was met with both disbelief and instinctive resistance as certain critics took exception to its work. Indeed, the perspectives that underpinned the FWWCP were to come under substantial critique in the very period in which these groups were forming. Opposition and marginalisation from a cultural elite did not come as a surprise, but other detractors closer to home would soon emerge. There has been very little critical evaluation of the Fed, and the continuous silence itself constituted a form of dismissal. For instance, it has not been uncommon to find sparse mention of worker writers and community publishing in relevant academic works on history and heritage.¹⁹

In place of the restricted idea of culture as a finished product, 'the canon of English literature',²⁰ the Fed represented itself as the spearhead of a democratising impulse that might extend and transform culture.²¹ The subtleties and nuances of the Fed's cultural practice were at times lost in divisions that came to be called the 'culture wars'. Working-class, feminist and post-colonial positions on culture were being pitted against 'Literature' as exclusive and exclusionary, seen as Eurocentric, middle class and masculine.²² Others questioned whether literature should be conceived as a body of work at all and, instead, accentuated the practices of reading, writing and communication. From this standpoint, established literary products were being substituted for creative processes and English literature disestablished in favour of a diversity of 'writing'. The proliferation of creative writing MAs testified to this change. Yet commentators in the Fed lamented that such courses tended to attract the already well educated and

were isolated from the study of literature, so that the production and consumption of writing were kept on separate tracks with different destinations.²³

These disputes threw up interesting paradoxes. The Fed was to be called to account by some of those who had pioneered studies of working-class culture, such as Richard Hoggart and Dennis Marsden. Having advanced through grammar schools and universities, they occupied positions in cultural and educational institutions and were inclined to see their own lives as living proof that working-class people should and could progress through education. However, they were upset by the idea that others, without adequate training, were suddenly going to become 'writers'. In particular, Ron Barnes's *Coronation Cups and Jam Jars* caused concern, compounded by the fact that he had received an Arts Council grant. Hoggart referred to it as 'banal; awful rhetoric. He needed to be introduced to the discipline of the craft.'²⁴ Marsden was also upset by the book:

In his introduction he [Barnes] says, 'It doesn't take some special gift of genius to write an autobiography, a story or a poem. And of that I am living proof. Writing is not too difficult'. Much as I wanted to agree with him, I'm afraid writing comes harder than this.²⁵

While we can agree that writing is difficult, Marsden was reticent to explore the value of the text. Hoggart and Marsden, who both produced groundbreaking studies of working-class life, nonetheless defended standards against a rising tide of relativism and consumerism that, in their view, had undermined traditional working-class culture, a trend that would peak with post-modernism.²⁶ To some extent, their arguments chimed with the right-wing critics of progressive education in schools, typified in the *Black Papers*, edited by C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, which called for a return to 'traditional' educational standards and discipline.²⁷ This line of thinking also underpinned the Arts Council's allegation that the Fed's work was 'of no literary merit' and only of 'therapeutic' or 'sociological' use.²⁸ In the 1990s, both Cox and Hoggart would collaborate on a book about literacy and literature.²⁹

These criticisms simplified complex social changes. Writing workshops confronted traditions in literature that could alienate working-class people. But this issue was debated vigorously. Writers would come to read 'classic' texts as their own writing improved. Moreover, the question of standards was discussed and groups would develop their own ideas on the criteria for 'good' writing, which could not be set down in advance; they had to emerge over time once the process of fostering, publishing and distributing a large quantity of writing had taken place, 'producing much in order to find out what our "bests" are'.³⁰ In a letter to the Arts Council, the Fed also quoted Williams, who made the case that the profusion of such initiatives, in the Fed and elsewhere, was a necessary precursor to innovation in literature.³¹ Thus, despite the simplifications, many finely graded and subtle arguments over culture took place within the Fed.

Another strand of criticism targeted at the Fed was related to a broader attack on the value of experience. Within workshops, the catholic embrace of different forms of knowledge was matched by interdisciplinarity in the academic world, especially in the humanities, social sciences and cultural studies. Gradual changes of outlook among the socialist and feminist historians' network known as History Workshop, as well as the group surrounding Stuart Hall at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural and Community Studies (CCCS), would influence the debate.³² They argued for a more theoretically informed approach and became increasingly sceptical about 'bottom-up' history and the possibility of retrieving authentic working-class culture.³³ Indeed, theory was coming to play a much more significant role in intellectual and academic life in a way that would isolate worker writers as less relevant.³⁴ It was a small step to view Fed work as tainted by an overly nostalgic and simplistic account of the past. 'Therapy' and 'nostalgia' were frequently applied in a derogatory manner to Fed writing, and the mere mention of these words operated as an immediate disqualification from a sympathetic reading. There was a danger that the 'unvarnished autobiographical mode', which was trapped in localised settings, was not capable of identifying real social relationships and wider contexts.³⁵

From the 1980s, socialist and feminist historians dissected the idea of working-class experience and thought about the way that discourses could block and constrain the expression of marginalised people.³⁶ Freeing personal meanings from the institutional frameworks in which they were collected became very tricky. For example, in the past, working-class people have had to give an account of their lives in order to receive welfare and charitable benefits. This form of surveillance has cast a shadow over working-class writing – exposure involves risk.³⁷ In the cognate area of subaltern studies, Gayatri Spivak asked, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Her answer was negative as she doubted the capacity of the marginalised to have a real voice.³⁸ The critique also drew upon a generation of Marxist thinkers who questioned the notion of class struggle and the progressive nature of the labour movement.³⁹ Gradually there would be an intellectual shift to focus upon the reproduction of capitalism and its social relations. Education, culture and society became sites for confirming inequalities – a trend that foreclosed active conceptions of class. Writers and autodidacts would be hemmed in by multiple inequalities, a lack of cultural capital and powerful institutional assumptions.⁴⁰ This occluded the ability to see working-class writers as significant or as capable of providing a different conception of life.

The Popular Memory Group, in an important analysis of memory and history, applied some of these general arguments to community publishing. They contended that allowing such autobiographies to 'speak for themselves' meant they would be integrated into conservative ideology. Rather, these accounts were to be treated as 'raw material' from which to develop a socialist consciousness through a dialogue with theory and an acknowledgement that contemporary concerns filtered into memory and consciousness.⁴¹ To some extent this

was a sophisticated version of the argument that capitalist values and practices were thoroughly embedded in society. For instance, Chris Miller argued that working-class writing workshops were peddling ‘reactionary ideas ... They are silent when a writer’s understanding is simply a reflection of bourgeois thinking, and fall into the trap that because it’s from the working class then it must be good.’⁴²

There were a number of problems with these critical stances that treated Fed publications as merely raw material for theory or as soaked in capitalist values. The dismissal downplayed the possibility that working-class writers already held opinions based on protracted experience and critical reflection. Fed groups were very sensitive about the time-consuming editorial meetings, drafts and redrafts that went into the production of texts. Writers became vulnerable in exposing themselves and could not easily be made to adjust their interpretations or widen their analysis. Yet many of these writings were to expand the areas of life that could be written about and made public. Therapy and nostalgia could not be ignored. Therapy encompassed many aspects of life, from resurgence through to pacification, and could exist side by side with other impulses and motivations.⁴³ Similarly, critique, empathy and the sensitive re-creation of a past were implicated in nostalgia. Celebrated commercial texts often revealed therapeutic and nostalgic strands, so there was a feeling that this was a false distinction used to discredit Fed writing and prevent the active participation of older people in comprehending and framing the past rather than expecting them to accept passively the interpretations of others.⁴⁴

The rebukes also underplayed the validity of distributing texts to a readership who might be able to receive the writing in a critical manner. Given that one book tended to encourage another, it was possible that more thoughtful accounts would accumulate. The Fed was helping to create a movement within which contradictions could be expressed rather than developing a ‘correct’ theory.⁴⁵ In addition, *The Republic of Letters*, an account of the Fed written by activists, maintained that the actual practices and products of the FWWCP – ‘co-operative, associative, aiming at two-way (many way) communication, cheap, widely available’ – were a democratic challenge to the elitist and competitive notion of Literature.⁴⁶

Critics tended to assume that writers would need to undergo some form of personal transformation before the real meaning of their lives could be comprehended – an analysis that those interrogating this writing did not always apply to themselves. Moreover, complex autobiographical works on class were appearing at this time and were often presented as a norm against which to judge other autobiographies.⁴⁷ Such an argument implicitly excluded the majority of people, as academic training would be necessary to write such an account of one’s life. At its most extreme, the critique of the Fed implied the need for a kind of ‘savage social therapy’ that very few people would ever willingly choose to go through.⁴⁸

Histories

These debates were not entirely new and the working-class writer was not an unfamiliar figure in the 1970s. Working-class success stories in literature, drama, TV and cinema had been a feature of the post-war years.⁴⁹ The emergence of the Fed helped to cast light upon the past, learning from previous traditions of writing and cultural activity from below. Researchers were identifying marginal voices within the history of reading and writing and the so-called self-educated working class, over prolonged periods of cultural and social change.⁵⁰ One of the attractions of radical movements has been the opportunity for self-expression, indicated by the large quantity of poetry found in labour movement journals. Obituary columns bring to light trade unionists and co-operators who immersed themselves in education and literature.⁵¹ Adult education tutors had been exposed to a great amount of working-class writing.⁵² The idea of a working-class cultural organisation was not new either and had featured in dreams of a better world. For instance, in the 1970s, the novelist Glyn Hughes interviewed Billy Holt, a councillor, writer and artist who, in the 1930s Communist Party, had been 'more interested in the aesthetic side of life', the 'inner mystery of it all', and had wanted to found 'a league for the liberation of proletarian art, writing and painting and poetry expressed through personal vision, which they were not able to do under the capitalist system of the day'. But the Party would not publish his ideas and informed him that 'You can't revolutionise proletarian art until you've had the revolution. You've to wait for that.'⁵³ Holt's thwarted vision of a league for proletarian culture was to be partially realised in the creation of the Fed in 1976.

However, historians have attempted to quarantine an earlier tradition of working-class writing which serves to isolate it from more recent cases of worker writing in the Fed. J. F. C. Harrison argued that a British autodidact tradition ended with the First World War whereas Jonathan Rose dates the death at the Second World War, despite continuities in experiences.⁵⁴ Those who have regarded the Fed as distinct from older traditions have positioned it as part of a surging relativist tide over the previous four decades,⁵⁵ or as focused upon alternative forms of publication, in contrast to the 1930s when mainstream outlets were utilised.⁵⁶ The content of autobiographical works and their motivating themes are also seen to be at odds with those of the nineteenth century.⁵⁷ Workers' education and culture is portrayed as petering out in the twentieth century in a world that offered opportunities and escape routes for those whose attachments to working-class institutions and communities would be greatly weakened.⁵⁸ The Fed was partly a historical reaction to these changes by those 'left behind' in the wake of publicised cases of upward mobility during the 1960s.

While these claims are not without foundation, there remain significant links between the Fed and more distant historical practices, apparent in the

very fact of working-class people relating to culture in a serious way as well as fashioning their own. In the 1970s, the lives of some writers did stretch back to this earlier set of influences. The initiators of the Fed were imbued with a consciousness of previous attempts to build radical education and culture. An historical awareness would also help to justify publishing books: working-class writers were to stake their place in history so that, in the future, it would not be all 'kings and queens'.⁵⁹ The importance of writing has not always been recognised by historians. For example, Rose's fascinating account of working-class reading, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, concentrated more upon what can be learnt from autobiography as a window into the cultural consumption of classic texts rather than viewing working-class writing as a creative act in itself.⁶⁰ The singular 'life' of Rose's title and his interest in the 'best' culture downplayed the range of cultural production by working people.

The organisation of writing and publishing among marginalised groups was a feature of the Fed that related to the past. There is always a danger that the term 'autodidact' directs our attention to the oddball individual at the expense of the social circumstances and educational process out of which they emerged. It has been recognised that the nineteenth-century autodidact tradition was based on a network of domestic and associational forms, rather than disparate lone individuals.⁶¹ Furthermore, if we accept that tradition may be an amalgamation of discontinuous moments that require continual remoulding rather than an unchanging practice that is passed on directly through the generations, such experiences can be seen to overlap in important ways.⁶² All traditions are to an extent invented and are necessarily selective.⁶³ Studies of alternative and radical media testify to the enduring significance of these forms.⁶⁴ Brecht's poem 'New Ages' struck a chord with many in the Fed who were thinking creatively about the past and the future. His warning that old ways could easily be reproduced and that history was not necessarily a progressive force – 'From the new transmitters came the old stupidities' – helped activists to utilise technology and interpret the past.⁶⁵

Changes

The history of the Fed traverses four broad chronological phases. From the early 1970s, there was a concern to develop writing and personal expression in working-class communities. As writers came together in a turbulent atmosphere, they challenged cultural assumptions and institutions. Their work received affirmation from a number of quarters, and this initial dynamism lasted into the mid-1980s. The later 1980s and early 1990s was a time of growth and debate about the meaning of the movement within the inhospitable climate of Thatcherism, which weeded out alternatives and refashioned British society along more authoritarian and commercial lines. Class movements and alternative ideas came under strain at the same time as new identity groups emerged based

upon gender, race, disability and sexuality. However, by the early 1990s, mainstream attitudes mellowed as the Fed became a funded client of the Arts Council and many of its ideas became more acceptable. This period was marked by the development of a looser and more inclusive network of groups. Finally, with the loss of funding in 2007, caused by financial irregularities, the movement returned to a more informal network of writers and workshops, communicating through occasional meetings and online.

The Republic of Letters remains an essential statement, from an early phase of the movement, that presents an oppositional stance to cultural and educational institutions.⁶⁶ Subsequent studies were to focus more narrowly on the educational benefits of the Fed, literacy and occupational therapy, or write about specific examples. Although a new edition of *The Republic of Letters* was published in 2009, and while there has been some ongoing interest in the Fed, no broad accounts of the movement have been published.⁶⁷ Analyses of radical education and popular history offer occasional glimpses of topics that are of relevance to the Fed but are generally silent on working-class writing and community publishing.⁶⁸

This book has gestated over many years. My involvement with the network of writing and publishing workshops spanned the period from 1990 to around 2005 and provided insights into the feelings and emotions, cultures and dynamics of workshops. Personal experience provided access to invaluable archival material and contacts, much of which was collected in the early 2000s.⁶⁹ Material has also been gleaned from listening to people – in meetings, workshops and more informally.⁷⁰ It became necessary to step out of the internal debates and place them within a historical context,⁷¹ a process that was helped by writing a number of articles which have here been edited into a new shape.⁷² Producing an ‘academic’ study of the Fed has presented a number of conflicts, many of which have a long history. There is always a danger of ‘spurious identification’ with a community.⁷³ Yet all communities are divided and change over time so that, with the passage of years, there are multiple audiences for a text such as this.

I concentrate upon the early phase of the movement to capture the motivations, meanings and complex forces that were in play and how these changed over time. The main story is taken through to the mid-2000s. Chapter 1 analyses the origins of the movement, bringing together the educational and social influences that contributed to the emergence of the Fed. The following four chapters are preoccupied with writing. This is not a random choice. Writing was the core purpose of the Fed and it is worthy of critical evaluation. Professionals commenting favourably on the workshops have frequently maintained that process and organisation have been of more value than the content of the writing. This bears a resemblance to Williams’ claim that working-class culture comprised collective organisational structures rather than the creative, expressive and individualist novel.⁷⁴ While much Fed writing was experimental, at times ephemeral, it would be an error to assume that it cannot stand on its own. We need to learn how to write about this kind of work and assess it in a way that connects to

intellectual currents. Accordingly, Chapter 2 deals with the writing of young people; Chapter 3 discusses the trend of autobiographical writing by older people in the 1970s and 1980s; and Chapter 4 considers the work done in adult literacy groups. Chapter 5 reviews the work of writing workshops and reflects upon Fed writing as a whole. I outline its key characteristics within historical and literary perspectives.

The second half of the book addresses the development of the Fed as a social movement in five thematic chapters. Chapter 6 focuses upon the journeys that writers took and assesses their learning as well as the cultural significance of these personal changes. Chapter 7 looks into the role of readers and distribution in the attempt to democratise culture. Chapter 8 discusses the politics of organisation and its relevance to the theory of critical pedagogy. Chapter 9 addresses class, the element that bonded the movement together – although, as this fractured, intense clashes over identity occurred. Chapter 10 investigates the battles for cultural recognition with the Arts Council and other institutions, and demonstrates that the distinctive identity of the movement gradually waned as ideas that the Fed pioneered gained a foothold across society. Finally, the conclusion draws out the overall significance of these ideas and practices. As a whole, the movement represents an important yet under-recognised cultural force whose impact has been felt for nearly fifty years. In a world of increasingly stark inequalities in which the majority of people feel they have little voice in society, the history of working-class writing and publishing retains great significance.