I

Reading, writing and the margins of literacy

The value of literacy was widely proclaimed by religious and secular authors in early modern England. From the reformation to the industrial revolution there was a constant clamour among men of God and men of letters to the effect that reading and writing brought enormous benefits to whoever possessed those skills. Spiritual benefits and worldly advantages would reward those people who learned to read and write and who made proper use of their literacy. Horrors and difficulties were forecast for the unfortunates who failed to embrace literacy, and pity was extended to the illiterates who were unable to remedy their condition. Literacy was highly desirable, at least in the minds of those who already had it.

The case for literacy was persuasive. A person who could read was better equipped to prepare for salvation than his illiterate fellow Christians and was more likely, in the view of protestant divines, to lead a life of duty and godliness. Without the equipment of literacy he could not fully meet the obligations or reap the rewards of the protestant Christian experience. Practical and intellectual advantages were also at stake. One who could read was more likely to be at ease in a world which was increasingly dominated by written instruments and instructions, documented decisions, correspondence, record-keeping and the printed book. Reading gave one access to information and ideas, diversion and stimulation, controversy and entertainment, which lay beyond the immediate reach of the totally illiterate. A person who could write possessed even more advantages. He could set down his ideas, his accounts, his reports or his instructions and communicate them over distance and time. In matters of business and pleasure alike a person who was fully literate could engage in a broader range of affairs and cope better with the complexities of the world than his contemporaries who were unable to read or write.

Yet it is possible that the writers who proclaimed the advantages of literacy overestimated its value to ordinary men and women. People who were not unduly troubled about salvation, who were content within their horizons of knowledge and experience, and

whose daily or seasonal routine required no mastery of print or script, had no pressing need of literacy and could hardly be persuaded to seek it. Those who campaigned for literacy were often faced with an uphill struggle, especially when faced by a population for whom the skills were superfluous. Evidence from the seventeenth century, which will be examined in detail in later chapters, shows that England was massively illiterate despite an epoch of educational expansion and a barrage of sermons. More than two-thirds of the men and nine-tenths of the women were so illiterate at the time of the civil war that they could not even write their own names. This fact of illiteracy underlies all the rhetoric and commentary which will be discussed in this chapter.

Religious conservatives of the mid-Tudor period saw little reason for people to trouble themselves with literacy, and viewed with disdain the early protestant effort to spread the vernacular Bible. Thomas More, for example, denied that 'the having of the scripture in English be a thing so requisite of precise necessity that the people's souls should needs perish but if they have it translated into their own tongue', since the illiterate multitude would not be able to benefit from it. In any case, religious literacy was beside the point. 'Many . . . shall with God's grace, though they never read word of scripture, come as well to heaven.'[1] Most people could not read, but the sacraments secured their salvation and images and emblems reminded them of their faith. Popular illiteracy caused little harm.

Stephen Gardiner would have agreed with More. In a letter of 1547, provoked by some excessive protestant iconoclasm at Portsmouth, Gardiner argued that images, both secular and religious, adequately supplied the place of writing.

> For the destruction of images containeth an enterprise to subvert religion and the state of the world with it . . . The pursuivant carrieth not on his breast the king's names written in such letters as few can spell, but such as all can read be they never so rude, being great known letters in images of three lions and three fleurs de lis, and other beasts holding those arms. And he that cannot read the scripture written about the king's great seal, either because he cannot read at all or because the wax doth not express it, yet he can read Saint George on horseback on the one side and the king sitting in his majesty on the other side . . . And if the cross be a truth, and if it be true that Christ suffered, why may we not have a writing thereof such as all can read, that is to say an image?[2]

Images suffered badly with the reformation, being rooted out in church after church down to the very 'stones, foundations, or other places, frames or tabernacles, devised' to display them.[3] The conservative position was being eclipsed in the mid sixteenth

century and a new tradition emerged which placed heavy emphasis on holy texts and which held literacy dear. Visual information continued to be important, as it still is today, but few would justify it as an alternative to reading and writing. In a church purged of images the eye would be caught by newly painted and enscribed tables of the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, words which were worth a thousand pictures.[4] Whether the congregation could actually read them is another matter.

Writers of protestant devotional and inspirational works in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries commonly urged literacy on their countrymen as a means to advance religion. Literacy was singled out as a tool for godliness, a weapon against anti-Christ, an essential component in leading a proper Christian life. Bibles, prayer books, psalters, homilies and other religious books were available in churches with the intention that parishioners should read them. Clergy were instructed to

> comfort, exhort, and admonish every man to read the Bible in Latin or English, as the very word of God and the spiritual food of man's soul, whereby they may the better know their duties to God, to their sovereign lord the king, and their neighbour.[5]

By the end of the sixteenth century there was increasing encouragement to read the Bible at home as well. Church attendance was to be supplemented by private study of the scriptures, since Christian devotions were incomplete without regular reading in the Bible. Nicholas Bownde, a Puritan writing in the 1590s, recommended, 'so many as can read, let them do it upon the Lord's day, and they that cannot, let them see the want of it to be so great in themselves that they bring up their children unto it'. Englishmen, like their protestant co-religionists throughout northern Europe, were expected to 'learn to read and see with their own eyes what God bids and commands in his holy word'.[6]

The idea that literacy formed a crucial part of a Christian's armour echoes in sermons and tracts throughout the seventeenth century. For Puritans in England as in New England, 'literacy was a universal prerequisite to spiritual preparedness, the central duty of the covenant'.[7] Preachers and teachers pressured and cajoled, and warned of the consequences of failure to learn.

Illiteracy created problems for this world and the next. As George Swinnock lamented in 1663,

> some for want of reading their neck-verse have lost their lives, but ah, how many for want of reading have lost their precious souls . . . alas, the people perish for want of knowledge. And how can they know God's will that cannot read it?

Piety and devotion alone were not enough. Even faith was insufficient without literacy to guide it. Swinnock advised parents,

> I tell thee, didst thou but know of what concernment reading is to the soul of thy child, thou wouldst rather beg of every person in thy parish and the next too, rather than let them go without it.[8]

The point was made again by Richard Baxter, who summarized the evangelical tradition in his massive *Christian directory* of 1673. 'By all means let children be taught to read, if you are never so poor and whatever shift you make, or else you deprive them of a singular help to their instruction and salvation.'[9] Yet salvation was not the only issue, since that was in the hands of God rather than man. Civility and Christian neighbourly behaviour also suffered, or so the preachers believed, when people lacked training in literacy. The author of *The office of Christian parents* (1616) argued that without literacy to guide them in godliness children would become 'idle . . . vile and abject persons, liars, thieves, evil beasts, slow bellies and good for nothing'. William Gouge in 1622 warned that 'rudeness, licentiousness, profaneness, superstition, and any wickedness' would follow from the inability to write and read. Reading and writing he referred to as 'the groundwork of all callings', and added that 'many that have not been taught them at first would give much for them afterwards'. Baxter feared that without literacy there would be barbarity, 'a generation of barbarians in a Christian happy land'.[10]

If the fruits of illiteracy brought misery, its banishment promised happiness and delight. 'Civil and moral comeliness in behaviour', as well as 'the knowledge of Christ', was associated with learning to read and write. 'The surest guides to duty and happiness' were available to the literate through 'study of the sacred scriptures'. Sermonists spoke repeatedly of the 'mercy' and 'profit' involved in being able to read.[11]

Since literacy was so vital the Christian had a duty to help those around him learn to read God's word. Parents should teach children, masters should teach servants, those who could read and write were to assist their associates who could not, while philanthropists and governors should cooperate in the provision of public education. With his characteristic blend of good sense and high ideals, Richard Baxter advised that

> if you have servants that cannot read let them learn yet (at spare hours) if they be of any capacity and willingness. For it is a very great mercy to be able to read the holy scriptures for themselves, and a very great misery to know nothing but what they hear from others.[12]

The benefits of literacy were compelling. Being able to read led

one directly to the word of God, and it freed one from dependence on the availability and reading ability of others. John Ball argued in his much reprinted *Short treatise* that 'private reading maketh the public ministry more profitable'. The ability to read 'enableth us better to judge of the doctrines taught . . . thereby we are better fitted for the combat . . . and many evils are prevented'.[13] Baxter was equally convinced that only through literacy, and a discriminating religious literacy at that, could a Christian sufficiently arm himself for this world and the next. Baxter's own religious awakening, like that of his father before him, was attributed to the private reading of books, and books could bring about a similar transformation in others. His eloquent commentary on the importance of books in a Christian's continuing education was not just because he wrote so many himself.[14]

> The writings of divines are nothing else but a preaching the gospel to the eye as the voice preacheth it to the ear. Vocal preaching hath the pre-eminence in moving the affections, and being diversified according to the state of the congregations which attend it. This way the milk cometh warmest from the breast. But books have the advantage in many other respects. You may be able to read an able preacher when you have but a mean one to hear. Every congregation cannot hear the most judicious or powerful preachers, but every single person may read the books of the most powerful and judicious. Preachers may be silenced or banished, when books may be at hand. Books may be kept at a smaller charge than preachers. We may choose books which treat of that very subject which we desire to hear of, but we cannot choose what subject the preacher shall treat of. Books we may have at hand every day and hour, when we can have sermons but seldom and at set times. If sermons be forgotten they are gone, but a book we may read over and over till we remember it, and if we forget it may again peruse it at our pleasure or at our leisure. So that good books are a very great mercy to the world . . . Books are, if well chosen, domestic, present, constant, judicious, pertinent, yea and powerful sermons, and always of very great use to your salvation.[15]

It was one thing to listen and be inspired, but an altogether more satisfactory activity to read and review, to go back over difficult passages, compare texts and glosses, and find one's own way about the scriptures. Without literacy this dimension of the Christian experience was closed. Nor should the Christian fear that private reading would lead to error. To forbear reading for fear of erring makes sense, according to Baxter, 'no more than that men must forbear eating for fear of poison, or that subjects must be kept ignorant of the laws of the king for fear of misunderstanding or abusing them'. Only 'papists' took such an attitude to literacy.[16]

The Christian could also benefit through being able to write. Sermons made good listening in church but they could be savoured afresh from notes made during the service. Writing permitted one

the extra pleasure of committing remarks from the pulpit to paper and sending the substance of a sermon to somebody else. Oliver Heywood, for example, accompanied his mother to hear dozens of preachers and served as her amanuensis by recording their main points for the aid of her memory. When he went up to Cambridge in 1647 his father instructed him to 'take short notes of every sermon and write some fair over for your loving mother'. Grammar-school boys were often required to take notes on the sermons they attended, although this may have been to enforce their attention and practise their handwriting, as much as to stimulate their piety. Among religious enthusiasts a longhand summary of a sermon or debate could serve much the same function as Baxter's books after the speaker had departed.[17]

Writing allowed one to interact with the holy word, not merely to absorb it. One who possessed that skill could make marginal remarks on his Bible or any other work in print, and could collect together choice verses or comments in a commonplace book. William Cecil advised his son to procure expositions of the New and Old Testament 'to be bound in parchment and to note the same books with your pen'. Oliver Heywood was advised by his father to 'labour to get every day some sanctified thoughts. . . and write them in a book'.[18] Exhortations to pious writing were by no means unusual. The most accomplished literate Christian might maintain a spiritual diary or list of objectives, write letters of comfort to his brethren, and even compose devout writings of his own. Such high attainments were not the normal requirements of a godly life, but if God had given you the ability to write then it should be used, like all other talents, to his glory and in his service. Writing was never so important as reading, but the ability to set down words on paper could refine and enhance the active Christian experience.

Literacy was said to benefit civil society as well as the kingdom of God. Educational writers from Roger Ascham in the sixteenth century to Christopher Wase in the seventeenth argued that 'misorders' and 'disobedience' would diminish if young people were properly educated and learned, through literacy, their duties to man as well as to God. The entire commonwealth could profit since literacy was associated with such desirable features as 'policy and civility' and 'justice and discipline'. Literacy was good for you, good for your soul, and good for everyone else.[19]

A world of information and entertainment was opened for people who could read. Literacy was the gateway to grammar and all humane learning as well as an avenue to godliness. Most pedagogues saw elementary reading and writing as but stepping stones to classical literature and it was taken for granted that anyone

wishing to be familiar with the finest thoughts of antiquity, or who merely wished to mix well with the educated clergy and gentry, would quickly master basic literacy and pass on to higher things.

Tudor and Stuart humanists had little to say about simple literacy but the ability to read and write English could have immediate and useful applications for people who never aspired to grammar. Works of practical wisdom and volumes of literary diversion poured off the printing presses along with Bibles and other religious texts. Not everyone stayed focused on sin and salvation. Almanacs and prognostications, jest books and chap books, travellers' tales and histories, and advice for farming or housekeeping, were all available from London booksellers and their provincial agents. Works on husbandry which reported successes in soil improvement, lawbooks for the layman with abridgements of the statutes and model instruments for legal actions, tables of tides and calendrical, medical and meteorological advice of the sort found in almanacs, all put valuable information into the hands of people who could profit from it.[20]

Although we cannot yet trace their circulation or pinpoint their market it is thought that such materials had a popular appeal at least comparable to that of the Bible, especially after the expansion of printing in the later seventeenth century. Thomas Tryon in the mid seventeenth century recognized that 'the vast usefulness of reading' extended beyond its spiritual benefits and could help one comprehend the world. His own literacy took him to commercial success as well as religious awakening.[21] Literacy offered the curious reader a feast of discoveries and adventures, histories both natural and political, and delights like *A strange and wonderful relation of the burying alive of Joan Bridges* (1646), none of which was directly accessible to the illiterate.

Literacy could keep you politically alert, telling of recent and current events and advising on future developments. If you could read you were more likely to know what was going on, although traditional oral communication was also effective in spreading information. A literate villager and his illiterate neighbour might both set their names to petitions or declarations in the civil war period, by signature or mark, but the one who could read might better appreciate the significance of the action. Through literacy you might get your information earlier and you might also get it right. Checking a text or reading a broadsheet for oneself was more reliable than tracing a rumour or trusting in village demagogy. Information may or may not be power but at least it gives you some contact with the doings and wishes of the powerful.

Popular political literacy was not necessarily in the best interests

of the ruling elite, but it was an increasing force to be reckoned with throughout the seventeenth century. Political activists and political commentators took to print to justify their actions and vilify their opponents. Handbills, advertisements, proclamations and packets of news made the ability to read such things politically significant, and spread political information away from the centres of political action. The role of popular literacy in the political crises of the period, and the degree to which ordinary people participated in them, is a subject deserving of much greater study. Literacy was not essential to political consciousness but it surely enhanced political sophistication. Richard Overton, the leveller, regarded reading and writing as part of the suppressed birthright of Englishmen, and in this he was not alone.[22]

If reading could bring enrichment and advantage it could also imperil the soul, damage the mind and subvert the moral bases of society. Printing was powerful, like gunpowder, in the acerbic view of the royalist James Howell.[23] Concerned preachers repeatedly warned their congregations against the dangers of 'wicked books' and 'the loose and immoral writings which swarm in the present day'. Horror stories and ballads, 'playbooks and romances and idle tales' kept printers in business and preachers close to apoplexy. Many of those who could read were drawn to material which was unabashedly escapist fun, and in this respect the early modern period was, perhaps, little different from the present. Phillip Stubbes argued that 'books and pamphlets of scurrility and bawdry are better esteemed and more vendible than the sagest books that be', and he lamented the resulting infection and corruption.[24]

Literacy was evidently a double-edged tool, which could lead to depravity as well as to godliness, to dissipation as well as to practical improvement. Elizabethan and later puritans railed against these seductive timewasters. Stubbes believed that 'toys, fantasies and bableries' from the popular press went so far as to 'corrupt men's minds, pervert good wits, allure to bawdry, induce to whoredom, suppress virtue and erect vice'. Nicholas Bownde protested that the circulation of printed ballads threatened to 'drive away the singing of psalms'. Richard Baxter was outraged by the 'tempting books' that were 'the very poison of youth'.[25]

The attack from the pulpit was testimony to the attractiveness of popular printed entertainment. Some of the critics had themselves succumbed in early days to the temptations of literary poison and this, perhaps, added to the urgency and passion of their condemnation. John Bunyan had been led astray in his youth by cheap peddled literature 'that teaches curious arts, that tells

of old fables', and Richard Baxter also confessed to an early bewitchment and corruption by popular romances and fables.[26] The advocates of educational expansion were in a difficult bind. On the one hand, they wanted everyone to learn to read in order to know their religious duty; on the other, they knew that reading, if not rigidly controlled, might do more damage than good. It would be ironic if the activists who pressed so hard for protestant education held back from a wholehearted literacy campaign for fear that popular literacy would be profane. The only comfort – dubious comfort – was that most people in pre-industrial England still lacked the ability to read these materials, and were kept from sin by their ignorance.

Writing was important to the promoters of literacy for its practical secular utility as well as for its contribution to the maintenance of civilization. 'The art of writing', wrote Martin Billingsley, 'is so excellent and of such necessary use, that none ought to be without knowledge therein'. Through writing, according to David Brown,

> all high matters of whatsoever nature or importance are both intended and prosecuted, secret matters are secretly kept, friends that be a thousand miles distant are conferred with and (after a sort) visited; the excellent works of godly men, the grave sentences of wise men, and the profitable arts of learned men, who died a thousand years ago, are yet extant for our daily use and imitation; all the estates, kingdoms, cities and countries of the world are governed, laws and printing maintained, justice and discipline administered, youth bred in piety, virtue, manners and learning at schools and universities, and that which is most and best, all the churches of God from the beginning established and always unto this day edified.

Writing served as a cultural cement, a social lubricant, 'the key', in Billingsley's words, 'to the descrying and finding out of innumerable treasures'.[27] Billingsley and Brown, of course, were professional writing men who taught calligraphy and orthography in Stuart London and who had a commercial interest in promoting literacy, but it is hard to disagree with their encomium.

The extent to which literacy was valued as a career asset is difficult to discern. Conventional opinion in Tudor and Stuart England generally frowned on personal advantage and private advancement since these qualities were thought to challenge the much stronger ideal of order and balance in the commonwealth. Arguments in favour of literacy tended to stress its general usefulness to the community, for the service of God and the betterment of society, rather than its utility for individual ambition. But occasionally a voice was heard which subordinated traditional considerations. David Brown frankly explained how the ability to write could

bring social and business advantages to his pupils and clients.

> Not to write at all is both shame and scathe. Shame for two causes: first, because whosoever seeth that thou canst not write knoweth thee to be ignorant of all kinds of learning; and why? because writing is the key or beginning of all learning . . . And secondly, it is shame both to employ a notar to subscribe for thee in any security, and to want that good token of education which perhaps thine inferior hath, for wheresoever any man of honest rank resorteth who cannot write, chiefly where he is not known, he is incontinent esteemed either to be base born or to have been basely brought up in a base or moorland desert, that is, far from any city where there be schools of learning, discipline, policy and civility.

The scathe or injury lay in having to rely on a scrivener or notary who might take advantage of your illiteracy and betray you. Through illiteracy you might 'lose some good design', which the simple ability to write might otherwise obtain for you.[28]

The implication was clear. Anyone who wished to make headway in the world should learn to read and write, and the professional penman was only too willing to teach them. 'If thou be such a one, whether the negligence hath been in thy parents, friends or in they self . . . whether thou canst read or not', David Brown was ready to take on customers.[29]

We must be careful not to read a universal attitude to literacy in the salesmanship of the writing masters. There may have been, as Billingsley claimed, 'a multitude of inconveniences'[30] attendant on not being able to write, but the value of full literacy was tempered by its context and use. The sophisticated market economy of Stuart London may have created a unique environment where anxieties about writing would thrive and where literacy was sought as an aid to ambition, but a much more relaxed attitude to literacy was likely in other parts of England. It is difficult to discover anyone who actually felt shamed by his inability to write or who feared damage to his reputation or frustration of his designs. For the ordinary Englishman writing indeed facilitated a great range of activities, but it was not absolutely essential for any of them.

The skill of writing made possible a more complex set of interactions with one's neighbours, loved ones, enemies and associates. A man who could write might make a more useful community servant, as churchwarden, constable or overseer, although literacy was never a prerequisite of these duties. Hundreds of parochial officials were unable to sign their names but the tasks of record-keeping and rendering of accounts must have been easier for the others who were literate. Literate and illiterate alike appeared before the manor courts as tenants, before the church and secular