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INTRODUCTION: THE COMMON WRITER

TITLES that remain in print long after the deaths of their authors are at the top of the hierarchy of books. Not only do they influence our thought, they continue to earn money for publishers, academics and film producers. It is these extant books that we are accustomed to think of as literature. But at the time of the first edition, no one knows for sure which books will survive, and few care.

There is an illusion that these literary survivors have been carefully screened; first by the original reviewers and readers, and then by successive generations of readers and critics. This is to ignore the pressures of publishing economics and the often random business of literary criticism. Of course the best work of Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, Tennyson, Browning and Hardy has passed the litmus test of public and academic approval. But their worst work remains in print, while the best work of their forgotten contemporaries was pulped for waste paper long ago. One or two obscure reputations flicker in reprint series, but too often reprints are subject to the same pressures that excluded such writers from the received version of English literature in the first place. Trollope's many out-of-print novels have recently been reissued but not his friend Robert Bell's powerful *Ladder of Gold*. Libraries will buy Trollope because they have heard of him, Bell is unknown. G.H. Lewes's tedious and pretentious novel *Ranthorpe* has been reprinted, presumably because Lewes was the partner of George Eliot. Robert Brough's enjoyable and informative *Marston Lynch* is forgotten.

Literary studies, which exert a decisive influence on the re-publication of dead authors, have stuck to the comforting idea of a great tradition, a world of literary giants that somehow stands apart from the mass of ordinary writers. A glance at the annual list of literary thesis titles confirms that there is scant interest in more than a handful of nineteenth-century writers. Such a narrow focus betrays a fairly thorough ignorance of the social and economic conditions of authorship and publishing. As Robert Darnton has observed, 'despite the proliferation of biographies of great writers, the basic conditions of authorship remain obscure for most periods of history'.[1]

In *The Unknown Mayhew*, E.P. Thompson complains about the lack of

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information about the writer and journalist Henry Mayhew – 'there is something like a conspiracy of silence about him in some of the reminiscences and biographies of his contemporaries'. Thompson detects a 'delicate evasion' which he attributes to embarrassment at Mayhew's imprisonment for debt and financial incompetence.[2] It is more likely that Mayhew suffered the fate of all minor writers who did not write autobiographies; he was not a big enough name, even in his own time, to rate an index entry.

Publishers aim to sell books, and books teeming with accounts of unknown or forgotten writers are unlikely to be profitable. The chances of a minor writer being able to place a volume of memoirs depends almost entirely on the inclusion of a substantial number of new anecdotes about more famous writers. The insignificant George Hodder, for example, was able to publish his memoirs because of his connection with Douglas Jerrold (who was just big enough), Dickens and Thackeray. The public and the publisher wanted intimate glimpses of great writers not an account of George Hodder's friendships with Mayhew's unknown brother Gus or someone called Robert Baxter Postans. This emphasis on a few famous writers consolidates their fame and reduces the rest of the literary corps to the ranks of the unknown. It leads to a simplistic view of literary culture, for without the common writer there would be no literature at all.

Writers are people mentally and physically engaged in writing for publication. They expect to be paid for their literary labour in cash or honour – preferably both. There are, of course, many part-time writers, and many writers who only write one book. On the other hand, outside the ranks of journalists, there are only a few people who can claim to be full-time writers. Most have to work in non-literary jobs where the business of earning a living can squeeze out authorship altogether.

This study focuses on those nineteenth-century book writers who attempted to sustain their literary activity over a number of years. Though many were part-time writers – doubling as clergymen, politicians, ladies-in-waiting – they would not have regarded themselves as amateurs. They can best be described as persistent writers. This emphasis on book writers excludes most writers of street literature – broadsheets and chapbooks – but includes writers of book-issued fiction, however dreadful. In practice, the writing, production and reading of books was a middle-class monopoly.

Assuming that the number of writers increases roughly in proportion to the number of titles, then book production figures suggest that the

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population of writers rose fifteenfold during the nineteenth century. Presumably this increase applies equally to persistent writers and to the authors of only one book. Persistent writers were more likely than others to identify themselves as 'authors' to the census takers. There were three decades from the 1860s when the census consistently listed authors, editors and journalists under the same heading: 2,443 in 1871, 3,434 in 1881 and 5,771 in 1891. This is about as accurate a set of figures as we can hope for; by 1871 there would have been far less reluctance to admit to authorship than earlier in the century.

By comparing the census figures with the number of new book titles we find that in any one year self-confessed writers outnumber new titles by about three to two.[3] So there might have been some 550 persistent writers in 1800 when there were some 370 new titles, and 9,000 writers by 1900, when there were over 6,000 new titles. Allowing for five generations of writers – most writers who completed census forms were aged between twenty-five and forty-five – it seems that there were about 20,000 persistent nineteenth-century writers. Such a figure is imaginative rather than literal, but it marks a useful reference point for placing individual writing careers in perspective.

Much of the evidence presented in this book is drawn from the archive of the Royal Literary Fund. Some 3,000 people applied to the Fund between 1790 and 1918, of whom 2,500 were awarded one or more grants. This is a much larger sample, providing much more biographical detail, than has previously been studied. Raymond Williams, when examining the social background of authors in *The Long Revolution*, discussed 163 writers from 1780 to 1930. R.D. Altick in his 'Sociology of Authorship' investigates the backgrounds of 737 nineteenth-century authors.[4] Both Williams and Altick confine their studies to élite authors listed in the Oxford and Cambridge reference books, using the *Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*) as their main biographical source. Altick acknowledges that 'when the audience for the printed word has a broader base, as it has had in the past century and a half, the study of the people who produced its reading matter must be similarly broadened'. His survey aims to include 'all but the very lowest stratum of hacks', but as he relied on the *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* (*CBEL*) which listed only 849 writers from a potential constituency of at least 20,000, he has overstated the case. There are, for example, over 400 applicants to the Royal Literary Fund with entries in the *DNB* who are not listed in the *CBEL*, and they are clearly not the 'lowest stratum of hacks'.

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Though the Royal Literary Fund sample is large, it might be considered unrepresentative; focusing on failed writers in contrast to the *CBEL*'s claim to list all writers of relative success. Of the applicants to the Fund 194 are listed among the 1,200 or so writers in the new edition of the *CBEL*. In terms of the total number of applicants to the Fund this represents a more or less average proportion of élite writers. Behind the figures are the names. Peacock, Coleridge and George MacDonald, for instance, applied to the Fund as young, unestablished writers. W.H.G. Kingston, James Grant and Ouida were all popular novelists who applied towards the end of declining careers. There were few writers without private incomes who did not experience periods of financial hardship; though, as it happens, the Fund also received several applications from the erstwhile rich – Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges and Mary Russell Mitford for example, whose authorship was not responsible for their vanishing fortunes. Finally, the picture of authorship that emerges from the Fund's archive is corroborated by other manuscript sources and contemporary letters, diaries, biographies, memoirs and novels – fiction often gives the more complete and honest account of literary life.

The principal and limited aim of this book is to provide detailed information about representative authorship and the publishing climate. But as John Gross warns, 'any picture of the literary world which concentrated exclusively on minor figures would be as unnatural as one which left the minor figures completely out of account'. Dickens exercised an unrivalled influence on the workings of the Victorian literary world, and he is, if not exactly the hero, a central and crucial figure. Other writers who are given due prominence are Byron, Hunt, Coleridge, Southey, Lytton, Thackeray, Trollope, Gissing and Henry James. This emphasis on the author as novelist is a reflection of the dominance of fiction in nineteenth-century literary production. If the great women novelists receive only a passing mention, it is because, through force of circumstance, they kept aloof from a male-dominated literary society and, with the notable exception of Harriet Martineau, played hardly any part in the politics of authorship.

There is little point in discussing the work of writers solely on the grounds that no one else has done so. I have, however, thought it useful to examine the careers of unfamiliar writers in some detail, in order to extend the study of authorship beyond the famous and sometimes misleading examples. For the most part I have selected writers who were relatively well known at the time and whose work is above the run

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of the mill. This means, of course, that they are not quite common writers, in the sense of absolutely average, but they are common enough by the standards of orthodox literary history. Their careers demonstrate, as the careers of the exceptional Dickens and Eliot cannot, that the prerequisites for literary success are education, social status, and monied leisure.

The chapters which follow are arranged by theme and in a rough chronological order. It is possible to identify three overlapping periods which map out the changing economic conditions of authorship. The period up to 1840 was a time of rapid advances in technology, commercial confusion, and literary insecurity. The years 1840 to 1880 saw the book and newspaper trade settling down into general profitability, except for some bumpy patches in the transitional 1840s. The majority of writers were able to make ends meet as they and their middle-class publishers produced just about the right quantity of reading matter to satisfy the middle-class reader. After 1880 publishers began to look beyond the middle classes towards a mass audience, leaving their middle-class writers to sink or swim.

I have not thought it necessary to rehearse the history of literary legislation – the various copyright acts and international treaties – because they made very little difference to the lives of ordinary writers. The extension of the copyright period under the Acts of 1814 and 1842 for example, had no effect on the majority of writers because they rarely owned the copyright of their books. Publishers, however, did benefit; they were given more time in which to exhaust the copyrights they had bought from their authors. James Grant sold the copyrights of his popular historical novels to Routledge for between £100 and £250 a time. Between 1856 and 1882 Routledge sold 100,000 copies of Grant's *Romance of War*: no wonder Grant described authorship as 'a hopeless treadmill'.

Chapter 1 describes the place of the Royal Literary Fund in the literary history and literary politics of the period. Founded in 1790, the Fund was the most successful and resilient nineteenth-century authors' organisation. But its reluctance to provide leadership, and to represent authors as a professional body, led to a succession of attempts to establish a writers' union. The Fund stuck to the easier business of charity – cure rather than prevention – and evolved into an impregnable Victorian institution quite capable of withstanding a barrage of criticism from Dickens.

The records of the Fund make it clear that the calamities of authors

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are the natural consequence of writing for a living. Few activities other than gambling are so risky. Throughout the century, as the book trade set its sights on the mass market, more and more writers were called into existence. But as literature does not pay, a web of institutions was needed to support literary activity (Chapter 2). Without this informal welfare state for writers, the whole business of literature would have collapsed. As major writers are one in a thousand, 999 people had to find ways and means of surviving as writers to enable a Dickens or a George Eliot to emerge from their ranks.

To combat this lemming-like literary progress, writers adopted a Bohemian character which matched failure with insouciance. However, failure became less inevitable with the commercial growth of Fleet Street in mid-century (Chapter 3). Journalism provided writers with a literary income even when they were not writing books. By the 1850s there was a paying trade of letters. It was however very much the territory of the lower middle class. To succeed at writing the kind of books that would be discussed and reviewed, a university education and a private income were indispensable. For this reason working-class writers who aimed to supply middle-class culture failed miserably (Chapter 4). Few working-class writers had the time or the knowledge to write convincing middle-class novels. Most turned to poetry in a vain attempt to compete with their aristocratic idols: Byron, Shelley, Tennyson. They remained the one group of writers to attract old-fashioned patronage; but this was because they were curiosities – models of self-help – it was not a tribute to their literary merit. Those that dosed their poetry with politics or their blood with alcohol quickly lost their patrons.

Less than one in thirty writers published by the middle-class publishing firms could claim working-class credentials. Women, too, were a literary minority (Chapter 5). About one in five nineteenth-century writers were women. And as working-class writers found the economics of authorship turned them into versifiers, so women discovered that their informal educations and limited employment opportunities channelled them into writing fiction. Over 80 per cent of women writers wrote fiction for adults or children. Yet, despite male fears (and sneers), male novelists outnumbered women novelists by three to one. There is no evidence that women were paid less for their novels than men. There were, however, so few openings in journalism for women writers, or in any half-way respectable employment other than teaching, that many were dependent on pot-boiling for a living.

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My final chapter examines the literary world as described by George Gissing in *New Grub Street*. By the mid-1880s the Victorian literary giants were dead or dying, and there was – among fastidious readers – a feeling of pessimism and a fear of democracy. The rolling forward of the mass market under the guidance of men like George Newnes, W.F. Tillotson and W.T. Stead, gave most writers far more commercial opportunities. But, according to Gissing and Henry James, it also led to a lamentable decline in literary standards. And although the facile writer, who could tailor copy to suit all markets, was richer than ever before, those writers who could not command a large readership were poorer than at any time since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The age of New Grub Street culminates in the applications of Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Edward Thomas and D.H. Lawrence to the Royal Literary Fund.

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LITERATURE AND CHARITY: THE ROYAL LITERARY FUND FROM DAVID WILLIAMS TO CHARLES DICKENS

In 1773 Benjamin Franklin, in England as the agent of the American colonies, asked to meet the author of a heterodox pamphlet which he particularly admired. The pamphlet, *Essays on Public Worship, Patriotism and Projects of Reformation*, had been published anonymously, but Colonel Dawson, the Lieutenant Governor of the Isle of Man, was able to introduce Franklin to its author – David Williams, a Dissenting minister of radical views. Franklin and Williams were so impressed with each other's abilities that they decided to form a debating club which would meet convivially 'over a neck of veal and potatoes at the Old Slaughter Coffee House'.[1] As well as Franklin, Williams and Dawson, the club included Josiah Wedgwood and his éminence grise Thomas Bentley; the painter and architect James Stuart; the philosopher–clockmaker John Whitehurst; Daniel Solander, Keeper of the Natural History Department at the British Museum; Thomas Morris, a song-writing army captain; and Thomas Day, the eccentric educationalist and writer of children's books.

The Club of Thirteen, so called because of the limit on its membership, may have been less famous than the Literary Club of Reynolds, Johnson, Burke and Goldsmith, but as an example of the abundant intellectual activity of the period, it was no less impressive. Several of its members, Whitehurst, Wedgwood, Bentley and Day, were also members of the Lunar Society – Erasmus Darwin's name for the group of progressive scientists and writers who met once a month at each other's Midlands homes to discuss pottery, steam or literature. Williams's club lasted little more than a year, breaking up when Franklin fled England to escape arrest in 1774. But at least two topics discussed at its monthly meetings led on to greater things: one was a proposal to revolutionise the church service and the other was a proposal by Williams for the founding of a literary fund.

Williams did not believe in leaving authors 'to the discretion and

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patronage of the government, nobility, and opulent gentry'.[2] His own experience had taught him something of the pitfalls of authorship: 'in the annual estimate of the fruits of my labour, I generally thought myself fortunate if I received half the sums due to me by verbal agreements – of promises of patronage I never took any notice'.[3] He called for the protection of literary property and the establishment of a fund to assist authors in distress, arguing that of all members of society, authors, through the influence of their writings, were among the most productive. Although the idea of a literary fund was favourably received by the club, it was decided that a new church liturgy was a more pressing necessity, and Williams, as a professional theologian, was commissioned to write it. After the decision to proceed with the liturgy, Williams had a private conversation with Franklin which made him more determined than ever to establish a fund for authors: 'as I quitted the room, he pronounced these words which have a thousand times, rung in my ears: "I see you will not give up a noble idea. I do not say you will not succeed but it must be by much anxiety and trouble, and I hope the anvil will not wear out the hammer"'.[4] It was to take Williams another sixteen years to forge his noble idea into an actual literary fund.

DAVID WILLIAMS was born at Waenwaelod, Caerphilly in 1738. His father, an eager Calvinist, ran a small mining provision store which earned just enough to send Williams to the local grammar school and then on to the Dissenting Academy at Carmarthen. Once ordained Williams went successively to Frome, Exeter and Highgate as a Dissenting minister. It appears from his autobiography that he was anything but a dedicated churchman – 'I spent nineteen parts in twenty of my time among women'.[5] He was also an ardent playgoer and it was the theatrical world that inspired one of his first literary works – an open letter to Garrick, published in 1772. An actor in Garrick's company, Henry Mossop, had been imprisoned for a small debt, and Williams blamed Garrick. He wrote accusing Garrick of avarice and vanity, comparing his talents unfavourably with Mrs Cibber, for whom he had a passionate admiration. He was also extremely critical of Garrick's controlling interest in the London press. The letter is most interesting in that it is Williams's first public statement about the arts and the plight of unfortunate artists.

In 1772 he married and established a small school at Lawrence Street, Chelsea to which he admitted boarders at the high annual fee of £100. He combined the relaxed educational philosophies of Jan Amos

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Comenius and Rousseau with his own; his progressive ideas meeting with 'far less obstruction from the indocility on the part of children, than from the obstinacy and prejudice of their parents'.[6] On the death of his wife in 1774 he was obliged to give up the school, but as a result of the experiment he published *A Treatise on Education* (1774) and *Lectures on Education* (1789).

Meanwhile he had published his *Essays on Public Worship* in 1773 which earned him the sobriquet 'the Priest of Nature'. In 1776 there appeared the club's commissioned *Liturgy on the Universal Principles of Religion and Morality*. More than any of his other works, this seems to have established his reputation as an original and influential thinker as well as an infidel – a deist rather than a Christian. Thomas Bentley took a copy to Rousseau in Paris who said 'Tell Williams it is a consolation to my heart that he has realised one of my highest wishes, and that I am one of his most devoted disciples.'[7] And Voltaire wrote acknowledging a copy: 'It is a great comfort to me, at the age of eighty two years, to see toleration openly taught and asserted in your own country, and the God of all mankind no longer pent up in a narrow tract of land. That noble truth was worthy of your pen and your tongue. I am, with all my heart, one of your followers, and of your admirers.'[8] Others who thought highly of *Liturgy* included Rudolph 'Munchausen' Raspe and Frederick the Great, and it appears to have had some influence on the French Revolution for 'it inspired, at least in part, the worship of Reason and of the Supreme Being in 1793 and 1794, and was adopted almost in its entirety by the theophilanthropists under the Directory'.[9]

After the death of his wife and a brief spell of preaching in the Margaret Street Chapel, Westminster, where his attempts to practise his own liturgy proved unpopular, Williams seems to have made his living by coaching private pupils and by authorship. He did not confine himself to religious and educational subjects; he translated Voltaire, wrote political philosophy and historical works, and was commissioned by Robert Bowyer to complete Hume's *History of England* to rival Smollett's version. This last contract was broken by Bowyer as a result of Williams's political activities: 'he had been branded . . . a Democrat; and he was informed that his engagement respecting the History of England could not be carried into effect, in consequence . . . of an intimation having been given that the privilege of dedication to the Crown would be withdrawn if he continued the work'.[10]

His major political work, *Letters on Political Liberty* (1782), influenced several British radicals, among them Thomas Holcroft, and led to the

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