1

INTRODUCTION

Joseph Mayett was born in 1783, one of ten children of a farm labourer in the vale of Aylesbury. The poverty of his family caused him to spend his childhood making lace rather than attending school:

> however notwithstanding this my mother being able to read and write a little though in some instance hardly legible yet she taught me to read at a very early age I cannot Remember learning the Alphabate but when I was four years of age or there about my Godmother presented me with a new book it was the reading made easy it had many pictures in it which I Remember I was much delighted with this takeing my attention there was nothing suited so well as my book and by this means I was sone able to read it without spelling . . .[1]

He received further assistance from his grandmother, and from a Sunday school, where he made progress in 'Learning hard names'; and in his early twenties, whilst serving in the Royal Bucks. Militia against Napoleon, he persuaded a fellow soldier to teach him to write, so that he could correspond with his parents. Over the century and a half covered by this study, Mayett's laborious acquisition of the skills of literacy became an increasingly common experience in English popular culture. In the middle of the eighteenth century, three hundred years after the invention of printing, half the English population could not write.[2] By 1914, over 99 per cent of brides and grooms had gained sufficient command over the technology of communication at least to sign the marriage register.[3] England, together with a handful of advanced Western countries, had for the first time in history achieved a literate society. This book seeks to understand how and why literacy spread into every interstice of English society, and what impact it had on the lives and minds of the common people.

Literacy in history presents a more than usually difficult problem of perspective. At one level the nineteenth-century drive to mass literacy could amount to little more than groups of ill-clothed, ill-disciplined children gabbling through incomprehensible paragraphs in the Bible or

sterile vocabularies in primers before the demands of their family economies thrust them into a labour market largely indifferent to their barely grasped skills. At the same time we are dealing with a practice which, at least since the twin events of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, has been seen as ever more central to the salvation or advancement of man and society. As Furet and Ozouf discovered when they traced the spread of reading and writing in France, it is virtually impossible for even the most dispassionate account to avoid the language of growth and success.[4] Literacy became a consequence, a cause, a guarantor, and eventually the very epitome of progress.

Today the transition from orality to literacy is attracting increasing attention from scholars in a wide range of disciplines. The most recent survey of the literature claims that 'More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness.'[5] It is argued that in the ancient world, the dichotomy between 'primitive' and 'advanced' countries can best be explained in terms of the discovery of writing.[6] The invention of printing in the fifteenth century has been identified with the emergence of the spirit of innovation and individualism in Western Europe.[7] The more recent arrival of the electronic media has served only to intensify the concern with the relationship over time between the technology and content of communication.[8] In more practical terms, around a hundred countries have launched mass literacy campaigns which have reduced the world illiteracy level from 44 per cent to 29 per cent in three decades.[9] 'The right of all to education' is now considered 'an integral part of human rights as a whole'.[10] In decolonisation struggles, literacy and liberation have gone hand in hand, if only because, as Guinea-Bissau reported to Unesco, 'proficiency in reading arithmetic was seen during the war of liberation as a condition for using some of the more sophisticated weapons'.[11] Amongst those countries thought to have conquered reading and writing generations ago, successive economic crises have forced attention on the attainments of the workforce, and led to the discovery of 'functional illiteracy' and to demands for reform and extension of the system of elementary and adult education.[12]

The distance between ambition and performance was never greater than in the industrialising countries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Any historian of literacy is faced with a yawning gap between the hopes of the educators and the experience of the educated. A number of recent studies, in particular Harvey Graff's work on North America,[13] have successfully demolished many of the claims made on behalf of reading and writing by those bent on civilising the labouring poor. Yet the subject cannot be confined to the category of myths or false ideologies. The way in which individuals communicate with each other, the means by which they acquire and transmit bodies of knowledge, skill, imagination and belief, lie

at the heart of their culture. The spread of literacy raised a series of major questions about how the common people thought about their world, and how they performed in it. If the transformation of their mental outlook was less immediate and dramatic than the reformers had hoped, there were in the end few areas of popular culture left untouched by the shift from restricted to full literacy which had taken place by 1914.

The scope of this study is defined in the first instance by the availability of the principal source of statistical evidence, the marriage registers of the Church of England. Prior to the middle of the eighteenth century, there exists no single long-term set of data for any country except Sweden,[14] and levels of literacy can only be established by means of educated guesses based on an assortment of wills, depositions and other documents. However, in an effort to correct abuses which had crept into the system, Hardwick's Marriage Act of 1754 established that no wedding would be valid unless it was entered in the parish register and signed with a signature or a mark by the bride and groom and two witnesses. Henceforth there was created an orderly body of evidence on the distribution of basic literacy skills in every parish in the country. Until the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages Act of 1836 the data were collected locally, but thereafter the system became the responsibility of the Registrar General, who published aggregate literacy tables in his annual reports. The period up to 1839 has been the subject of a major research project by Roger Schofield, who has established the general movement of literacy levels, and the more important social and economic factors which lay behind them.[15] Little systematic analysis of the registers for the remainder of the century has yet been made,[16] and for this study the evidence of the Registrar General's reports has been supplemented by a sample of 10,000 marriages taken from ten registration districts in different parts of the country between 1839 and 1914.[17] This has made possible a closer examination of the forces which wiped out illiteracy levels of 33 per cent for grooms and 49 per cent for brides in no more than three generations.

All the analysis of the marriage registers suggests that the single most important correlation was between literacy and occupation. More than any other factor, how the child's father earned a living determined its chances of learning to read and write. In broader terms, the achievement of full literacy has been a characteristic goal of every society undergoing an industrial revolution, and recently much attention has been focused on what is claimed to be the key role played by literacy in the loosely defined process of 'modernisation' in the developing countries. The connection between literacy and work will be the subject of a separate chapter, but the broader question of the relationship between the technology of communication and the economic and social upheavals of the Industrial Revolution

will inform the entire study, and for this reason the middle of the eighteenth century, which saw the first signs of the transformation in modes of production, is an appropriate point of departure.

The outbreak of the First World War is an obvious destination. England managed to ensure that all its young men could read and write just in time to send them to their deaths in the trenches. The official illiteracy level first dropped below 1 per cent in the last full year of peace,[18] although, as we shall see, there remained a gap between the attainments of the marriage cohort and those of the population as a whole. And whilst the uses of reading and writing have continued to multiply throughout the twentieth century, it was in the first two decades, at the very moment of its triumph, that literacy began to be challenged by radically new forms of mass communication. Whilst almost all the competition to the printed word still came from traditional oral sources of knowledge and imagination, by 1914 the important innovations in cinema and radio had already been made. Today the average English child spends twenty-five hours a week watching television, exactly the same length of time that it attends lessons at school.[19]

The concern here is with England and not with the remainder of the United Kingdom.[20] The evolving relationship between the cultural traditions of the nations of the Union still awaits a proper examination, but in this context the fact that England alone possessed only one language is sufficient to confine us to its borders. Elsewhere in Great Britain and Ireland, as in much of Europe and North America, the spread of literacy was intimately connected to the struggle for supremacy of competing tongues, which in turn raised major questions of national identity.[21] England itself, however, was as much divided as united by its common language, and later chapters will examine the part played by reading and writing, especially as taught by schools, in the conflict between regional and class-based codes of communication.

Elsewhere, the limits of this book are less easy to establish. Culture is here taken to refer to what Clifford Geertz has described as 'the informal logic of actual life',[22] the patterns of meaning which make sense of experience, and the artefacts and practices in which they are embodied. Literacy plays a dual role in the evolution of culture. As a mechanical skill it is a means by which thought is generated, stored and transmitted, and at the same time it is a crucial element in the system of values by which social groups define themselves or are subject to definition by those in power over them.[23] Thus the growing abandonment of 'popular' by 'polite' culture throughout early modern Europe, which has been charted by Peter Burke,[24] was founded on the assumption that the common people could make little or no use of the printed word. Their subordination was both caused and measured by their relation to reading and writing. In turn the

arrival of mass literacy, which is the concern of this study, embodied a two-fold challenge to the identity of popular culture. The increasingly widespread employment of the new modes of communication threatened the structures of authority which kept the cultures apart, whilst the meanings attached to literacy itself, and to associated concepts such as learning, rationality, science and literature, were at the heart of the debate about the boundaries between the cultures.

The task of assessing the impact of literacy on popular culture over time appears at first sight to possess one major advantage. In contrast to the notion of culture, literacy would seem to be an uncontentious term. Indeed it may be argued that one reason why its promotion became the object of so much public investment and private demand during the Industrial Revolution was precisely that it was so easy to recognise and measure. Year after year the Registrar General's reports seemed to provide an exact statement of the success of the schools, and, by extension, of social progress in general; and parents could see in their children's increasing ability to read and write a direct return for expenditure on education or the reduction in family income.

However, as soon as we move from possession to use, difficulties arise. The problem of perspective which lies at the heart of the topic stems from the absence of any accepted criteria for measuring the power of literacy. The strength of the steam engine, with which this technology of communication was so often compared, could be objectively calibrated. But the horsepower of the schoolmaster, the consequences of his labour for the community which supported him, was and has remained a matter of intense debate.

The accumulation of research in recent years has done little to resolve the confusion. Too often literacy has been the battlefield rather than the meeting place between the wide range of disciplines which now have an interest in the subject. Psychologists and sociologists, historians and economists have introduced a variety of methods and concepts which those who argued over the issue in past centuries could never have anticipated. The language of 'psychic gaps' and 'mass modernity', 'human capital' and 'generalised cognitive transformations' belongs very much to the twentieth century. It is, however, possible to detect a certain pattern in the competing claims of modern scholars which bears a more than passing resemblance to the range of hopes and expectations of those who first attempted to democratise the capacity to read and write.

Throughout the period of this study, the vocabulary of aspiration was derived directly or indirectly from the Church. The earliest theories of the uses of literacy were formulated in response to the danger of heresy or disbelief. We owe the term 'oral tradition', the notion that the character of

a whole structure of thought could be determined by the role of the written word, to the seventeenth-century puritan Bishop Joseph Hall. He argued that the strength of 'Romish Traditions' which still flourished outside educated society was derived from their means of transmission. Where Anglicanism was taught and defended by the Bible, Catholicism relied upon the spoken word: 'As for orall Traditions, what certaintie can there be in them? What foundation of truth can be layed upon the breath of man? How doe they multiply in their passage, and either grow, or dye upon the breath of man?'[25] At the centre of the discovery of popular culture a century later lay the same axis between religion and literacy. John Brand's edition of Bourne's *Antiquitates Vulgares*, which was the foundation text of the folklore movement in England, began with the assumption that 'Few, who are desirous of investigating the popular Notions and vulgar Ceremonies in our Nation, can fail of deducing in them in their first Direction from the Times when Popery was our established Religion.'[26] The ability of Catholicism to survive the Reformation was explained by the immunity of the culture of the 'Common People' to the transforming power of print; superstitious beliefs and practices, 'consecrated to the Fancies of Men, by a Usage from Time immemorial, though erazed by public Authority from the *written Word*, were committed as a venerable Deposit to the keeping of *oral Tradition*'.[27] Form and content could not be divorced. The two cultures owed their separate identities to their respective modes of communication.

By the end of the eighteenth century, revolution was replacing Rome as the chief enemy of the established order. Whereas the charity school system had been founded to reinforce the authority of the Church of England, Sarah Trimmer could now claim that in the face of the threat of France, 'no less than the safety of the nation probably depends upon the education of those children who are now growing up to maturity'.[28] Increasingly the weapons of the Enlightenment were employed to counteract its influence. As in the United States, Evangelical Protestantism and new theories of social development combined to create a powerful ideology of literacy.[29] Within the primers and teaching manuals there was a gradual shift to more secular forms of knowledge and morality, and at least some of the newly equipped readers used their skills to emancipate their minds from the claims of both religion and the capitalist order. Yet embedded in the ideology was the constant assumption that literacy would have a profound impact on the mental and moral character of the individual and by extension of his society. Thus, for instance, Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, the leading educational administrator of the middle third of the nineteenth century, conceived the purpose of the Government's reforms as the provision of an education 'calculated to develope the entire moral and intellectual capacity of the whole nation'.[30] For their

part, those who employed their education to set down an account of their lives write of their first encounter with 'book knowledge' in terms which amount to a secularised conversion experience. 'It was in every sense a new light to me', recalled the weaver Ben Brierley; for the shepherd Robert Story, 'the effect on my mind was magical'; and when the cabinet maker Henry Price discovered the world of literature, 'my eyes were opend it seemd for the first time in my life'.[31]

In the face of such expectations, it was a brave man who questioned the claims which were made on behalf of literacy and the institutions which promoted it. As early as the 1720s we find Bernard Mandeville complaining of the new Charity Schools that 'The generality are so bewitched with the Usefulness and Excellencey of them, that whoever dares openly oppose them is in danger of being Stoned by the Rabble.'[32] Yet he had a case to make. It was not only that, as so many teachers were later to discover, 'such as are so Ungovernable, that neither Words nor Blows can work upon them, no Charity School will mend'.[33] Nor was his critique confined to his well-known fears about the implications of education for the provision of a deferential labour force. His fundamental argument was that far too much was coming to be expected of the acquisition of literacy. It was not schooling, but the 'Precept and the Example of Parents, and those they Eat Drink and Converse with, that have an influence upon the Minds of Children',[34] and as for the central relationship between literacy and the Church, 'those who complain ... that they cannot imbue their Parishioners with sufficient Knowledge of what they stand in need of as Christians, without the assistance of Reading and Writing, are either very lazy or very Ignorant and Undeserving themselves'.[35]

The fears and hopes generated by the French and Industrial Revolutions eventually overwhelmed such doubts, but as the elementary education system began to consume an ever larger proportion of the State's resources, new dissenting voices began to be heard. The catalyst of the debate was the Revised Code of 1862, which in its crude attempt to ensure that the Government received value for money stimulated a wide-ranging debate about the relationship between the basic skills of literacy and the wider structures of knowledge and morality within the working-class community. Although they reached some of Mandeville's conclusions, the more thoughtful critics were now looking forward to the development of modern child psychology. In a paper delivered to the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science in 1867, the educationalist W. B. Hodgson launched a sweeping attack on the orthodox view of the learning process:

> The radical fallacy is in supposing that no knowledge or improvement is obtainable except from books, and the result is a

> confounding of means with ends. A child is a living, restless, never ceasing interrogator, 'perpetually wanting to know, you know', perpetually asking, What? and how? and when? and where? and above all (as I have observed with some surprise) why? perpetually putting all around it 'to the question'.[36]

In this activity literacy played only a limited role. Reading and writing, he argued, 'are no more knowledge or education . . . than a knife, fork and plate constitute a dinner'.[37] Such skills were at best 'mechanical means', 'tools for gaining knowledge; they are not crop, but plough and harrow'.[38]

Set in its historical context, the scope of the debate among contemporary observers becomes more comprehensible. It is easier to associate literacy with progress than progress with the study of literacy. As one recent survey concluded, 'Despite a vast amount of study since the end of the nineteenth century, reading and literacy are still very confused research areas.'[39] The claims made on behalf of these skills continue to range between the extremes of ambition and caution.

The tendency to attribute transformative powers to literacy has been most notable in studies of developing nations, where mass education programmes have been taking place. In the first of these, completed by Stalin as part of collectivisation, A. R. Luria found that 'only a year or two of schooling' produced a fundamental reorganisation of cognitive activity amongst hitherto illiterate peasants.[40] More recently, reading and writing have been placed at the centre of the creation of 'modern man', whose attitudes, values and behaviour have been counterposed to the passive, isolated, fearful, inward-looking 'traditional man', whose horizons are confined by his continuing dependence on oral means of acquiring and transmitting information.[41] The technology of communication becomes not just a characteristic but the very engine of change. As Daniel Lerner put it in his influential study, 'Literacy is the basic personal skill that underlies the whole modernising sequence.'[42] Most recently, Emmanuel Todd has concluded that 'Literacy – associated with a rise in age at marriage – may be considered the central element in any region's or any nation's attainment of modernity.'[43] Those particularly concerned with industrialisation have sought to establish a literacy threshold, below which economic take-off cannot take place.[44] The disciplines of anthropology and psychology have come together to put forward a series of generalisations about the way in which the acquisition and employment of these skills promote new ways of classifying, reasoning and remembering, transforming the thought processes of the individual, and by extension, of his culture. Whether they attempt to explain the present or the past, these theories rest on a basic dichotomy between 'oral' and 'written' cultures, which can be located in every society in which the victory of print is

incomplete. The encounter with books produced a fundamental change in the mind of the reader, who undertakes a one-way journey to a rational, purposive, participatory way of life. From being God's chosen instrument, literacy comes close to replacing the role of religion altogether. We are presented with a new form of spiritual conversion, as profound and irreversible as any described by those who found salvation through reading the Bible.

Reaction to this approach embraces both the conceptual framework and the methodology of the study of the connections between literacy and culture. In the midst of increasing doubts about the substance of notions of social progress inherited from Victorian liberals and Marxists, it is tempting to dismiss out of hand the claims made for literacy within both bodies of thought. If individuals and cultures display no general pattern of advancement, whether unilinear or dialectical, the function of reading and writing may be both slight and inconsistent. Studies of the subject have been attacked for their failure to establish a convincing measure for the changes which are said to take place. In practice it has proved extremely difficult to set up a satisfactory relationship between theory and evidence in this field. As Scribner and Cole discovered, 'It is striking that the scholars who offer these claims for specific changes in psychological processes present no direct evidence that individuals in literate societies do, in fact, process information about the world differently from those in societies without literacy. They simply make assumptions about changed modes of thinking in the individual as the mediating mechanism for the linguistic and cultural changes which are the object of their inquiry.'[45] The challenge is to find a means of interrogating these assumptions without losing sight of the scale and complexity of the processes which they seek to explain. On the one hand there is a proper mistrust of what one hostile critic has termed 'the wide-sweeping pseudo-sociological generalisations of the mass-culture theorists'.[46] On the other there is, at the very least, the testimony of those who have directly experienced the spread of literacy, either in the previous century or in our own times. There is a substance about their accounts of the impact of reading and writing which cannot be discounted by attributing false consciousness to them, or inadequate scholarship to outside observers. What is required is a way of understanding the power of literacy in its specific historical context which will permit a cautious appraisal of the body of claims and counter-claims which now surround the issue.

The way forward is to go back to the critique which began to be mounted in the heyday of Victorian confidence about the consequences of mass education. As he sought to restore a sense of proportion to the subject, W. B. Hodgson turned to agriculture rather than industry for a metaphor.

Reading and writing were not the 'crop' but the 'plough and harrow'. His insistence that literacy should be regarded essentially as a simple tool anticipated much of the more successful recent research. It is an approach which throws into sharp relief the characteristics of the skills with which this study is concerned.

In the first instance, as Hodgson himself recognised, literacy is a double- rather than a single-edged tool. The relationship between reading and writing is far from constant either over time or between cultures. Differing levels of possession and application are determined by a number of factors, including methods of education, availability of raw materials, and the perceived value of each skill. Reading has traditionally taken precedence over writing partly because it is technically easier to learn, and certainly easier to teach in a situation where time and resources are at a minimum. A labourer's home was much more likely to possess reading matter, even if it was no more than an old handbill or a fragment of newspaper, than writing materials, although the determined child or autodidact could always improvise, with chalk replacing pen and ink, and the wall of a barn a sheet of paper. The early schools taught reading first, and it has been calculated that in the seventeenth century, a child of average ability would have mastered that skill by the age of seven and would only learn to write if it stayed at school for a further year.[47] In the charity schools writing took a back seat, and it was not until the arrival of the monitorial system of Bell and Lancaster in the early decades of the nineteenth century that teaching manuals began to recommend that the two skills be taught simultaneously.[48] The evidence presented to the Newcastle Commission would suggest that the Church schools were slow to respond to this initiative, and the private day and Sunday schools slower still. However, the gap was closing. Webb has calculated that during the first half of the century, the ratio between those who could read and those who could also write ranged from three to two to two to one,[49] but the records of the examinations conducted under the Revised Code from 1862 indicate that almost all children who gained some proficiency in reading could also attain what were considered to be comparable standards in writing.[50]

The changing emphasis owed much, as we shall see in chapter 3, to an altered conception of the functions of each skill, with writing in particular undergoing a major revaluation. As the two processes were brought together and linked with the third 'R', arithmetic, there was a danger of losing sight of the very different roles reading and writing play in the development and exercise of the individual's capacity to acquire and generate knowledge. Yet the slow convergence should also warn us against accepting the absolute dichotomy between the impact of the skills that Furet and Ozouf insist upon in the context of