Research paper

Introducing new sources of evidence into the history of reading

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Contextualisation

This research paper argues that an examination of the development of reading skills in early modern England has to include the socio-historical context in which learning to read took place. This context, it is asserted, had at least as much impact on the diffusion of reading skills as formal school and teacher-based learning. Consequently, this study draws upon a wide variety of research methodologies, including content analysis of archival documents, an analysis of the circulation of these documents and a review of secondary literature. As it takes the historical context into account, this study is located at the intersection of history of education, history, political sciences and sociology.

Abstract*: This paper describes how a brief example of an apparently 'non-educational' document, from the year 1792, can be used as part of a discussion about reading practices during that period. One of the threads informing my argument is the idea that if we break away from school and teacher-based sources for our histories of education and learning, we might discover things we were not previously aware of. The view is informed by a perspective that brings to the fore the material contexts in which reading and associated skills such as listening and remembering took place. My historical focus is the period of the early industrial revolution in England when 'literacy' rates had started to increase to such an extent that the use of the term 'mass' literacy becomes both possible and appropriate.*

Forces for change

When researching amongst the papers of the Treasury Solicitor's Department for the 1790s in the National Archives in Kew I came across a pristine copy of a Royal Proclamation issued in May 1792 that was lying with papers for a Sedition Trial against supporters of the Corresponding Societies. These societies were, in the main, lower middle class associations dedicated to the core ideas of the recent revolution in France. They saw themselves in particular, as advocates of the writings of Thomas Paine and they sought to challenge the Government's attempts to circumscribe their right to read, purchase and sell books, write letters, establish lectures, demonstrate in public and a host of other basic democratic demands. These societies had democratic aims and they all sought to extend their reach beyond their own class and into the wider population. It was this later aim of widening literacy in order to spread democratic ideas, rather than what they actually wrote, published or proclaimed, that brought them into collision with the authorities.

These Corresponding Societies are interesting for an historian of literacy, because many tens of thousands of people learned to read after becoming involved in the radical ferments of those times. I am interested in how reading practices changed during the early industrial period and when we look at the 1780s and 90s we witness transformations in the way that reading and writing happened. The conjunction between three things: (1) changing political circumstances; (2) emerging social formations around new methods of manufacture; and (3) developments in the means of communication; set the scene for a massive rise in both the propensity for people to learn to read as well as develop the ability to do so.

A single document analysed: Synchronic reception

In May 1792 the Prime Minister, William Pitt and his Home Secretary, Henry Dundas secured the consent of King George III to issue a Proclamation. This was a real, physical document rather than the electronically transmitted messages from Government that we are accustomed to today. It measured 14 X 20 inches (I am using the historically appropriate measuring system of the time). This Bill was to be pasted or nailed up in as many public places as possible in every parish of Britain. Magistrates were enjoined to ensure that this task was undertaken and to report back to Dundas upon the extent of coverage they had achieved. Many of these responses from the local gentry can be seen in the Home Secretary's boxes for that year in the National Archives.

If the document is seen today it would more than likely be as part of a heritage type display in a public exhibition space and it is likely that the exhibition would have a wider commemorative context such as celebrating Pitt or re-examining the reign of George III. More than likely though is that the document and what it represents is purposely glossed over as it exemplifies strident anti-democratic sentiments that embarrass even the political heirs of Pitt and Dundas. An example of this is the recent short biography of William Pitt by the ex leader of the British Conservative Party, William Hague, in which he gives only fleeting mention of the repressive campaigns and actions of the government in 1792 (Hague 2004). The fate of most documents of this type is for them to lie un-noticed in archives and therefore for them not be used as part of attempts at presenting aspects of this historical period.

A modern viewer of the Proclamation would initially be struck by its imposing size, by the antiquated type-faces and the kerning of the letter s, the use of ligatures, and the dated and redundant typographical arrangements. Viewers would be struck by the 6 by 2inch sized, lion and unicorn engraved royal crest at the head of the page and the elaborately decorated initial 'W' which appears in style much older than the date of the document itself.

Many viewers (readers) would bring to their reception of such a document a cluster of accumulated and remembered associations about the period from which it came. Many of these would be vague and imprecise but would nevertheless provide some framework within which the reading of the document could take place. These associations act as a sort of filter through which certain features within the document would be recognised and responded to and it is likely that the original intention behind producing it will not be the dominant impulse within the reception.

For example, the royal crest and initial 'W' would attract attention because of their visual prominence and positioning at the top and top left of the document. Readers or viewers (because the form might initially at least be more active within the nexus of reception than the formal printed content) would more than likely be keyed in to specific features within the object by a printed information card or numbered point in a catalogue or tour guide. It may be that this 'keying' into an object is achieved through recorded oral pointers delivered via earphones. These mediating devices are provided partly because the document on its own would be difficult for someone to 'read' through in the normal usage of the term. Instead we are provided with a 'reading'.

A reader/viewer would need to overcome the typographical differences and the unevenness of the presswork which creates variations in the appearance of letters. They would then encounter seemingly interminable circumlocutions, with sub-clauses piled upon each other, in a way that would not be encountered in a modern document from any British government

source. The repetitions, and archly formalistic manner of address combined with a now redundant style, would distance it from any would-be reader of today.

Few, if any, would actually arrive at the key point of the Proclamation contained as far into the text as line 23, which enjoins readers to inform local authorities about any radical printers, authors and publishers. Nevertheless the experience of 'reading' such an historic document would be fascinating and the least one might take away from the experience is an enhanced interest and awareness of the style of the period. Style has become commodified by the heritage industry and is one of the things that 'readings' or appreciations are intended to identify. A person is then offered the post card, poster or brochure.

Literary/textual analyses

There is another approach to such a document; the examination of the text as text (broadly speaking a form of literary criticism). This approach eliminates the physical form and properties of the document and transcribes and transforms the text in order to examine meanings. This might enable us, for example, to use the Proclamation as part of a discussion about formal State/legal forms of English. We might also make reference to the political circumstances that brought about its publication and distribution in the Spring of 1792. Once we adopt such an approach the document becomes a secondary source, a mere by-product of a prior political decision and its meaning becomes dependent upon how one initially describes the political circumstances. It would have become a secondary, illustrative document. This is an approach that one finds in a vast array of excellent historical writing but I will argue that as an approach it forecloses access to other important significances of the documentary sources. The simple fact is that the words within the document under discussion here do not tell us much about the issues behind its release. For that to be done we would need to place the Proclamation alongside other contemporaneous documentation whose texts are richer as sources of descriptive and confirmatory information.

Diachronic analysis

If, on the other hand, we attempt to replace the Proclamation of May 1792 into its local and physical setting, it can assume altogether different meanings to those I have briefly sketched above. At the time the magistracy was generally reflective of the political values and interests of the gentry and from within this social group there emerged a national organisation of supporters of traditional privileges, supporters of Crown and Church. These supporters became the instruments for placing these expensively produced Bills inside and outside churches, vestry halls, Inns, shop windows and other prominent landmarks. The idea was that the Proclamation was to be known everywhere and to everyone in the Kingdom. Supporters of the newly formed 'Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property Against Republicanism and Levellers' declaimed the Proclamation whenever and audience could be found (Claeys, 1989). This royalist and anti-democratic association, which was established to counter the Corresponding Societies, spawned 1,500 local branches which had spread throughout Britain by as early as November of 1792. Indeed what we can see in this Association is the origin of what became the modern political party.

The Proclamation ordered that everyone should report, to their local magistrates or to the government, anyone found to be printing or selling seditious books, and, although Tom Paine's 'Rights of Man' is not mentioned by name, it was obvious by that time what the main target was. The aim therefore of the Proclamation was to proscribe the activities of democrats and radicals through fear and repression, organised informally and semi-legally, using voluntary local associations. The Proclamation provided a legal basis within every local community, for action to be taken against supporters of the French Revolution, and

supporters of the ideas of Paine. It was a key instrument in a Government attempt to unleash a reign of terror against the local leaders of a popular radical movement. For over two decades this Proclamation marked the start of a bleak period of repression for dissenters[1], trade unionists[2], and republicans. For others it was the start of a long-overdue fight-back by the forces of tradition and order against potential traitors who would jeopardise the growing prosperity and opportunity afforded under the Crown. Behind all of this activity lay the presence of hundreds of thousands of autodidacts (or 'autodictats') who achieved degrees of competence in skills we now cluster around the term 'Literacy' and who, having acquired those skills, sought an outlet for them.

The declamatory style of the Proclamation was integral to the purpose for which it was intended. The reader of the text was speaking (giving voice to) the words of the King so the prolixity would have seemed appropriate and in many ears, effective. It was an essential feature of the style of this document that it was seen as being special and separate from and above ordinary speech or commonly heard declarations such as judgment by judges after trials. Anything less would have disappointed expectations. For others, especially radicals, this was an example of the way that language was used by authority to mask the real purpose behind the meaning of the words. It is worth reproducing a short excerpt:

> And Whereas We have also Reason to believe that Correspondences have been entered into with sundry persons in Foreign Parts, with a view to forward the criminal and wicked Purposes above-mentioned: And Whereas the Wealth, Happiness, and prosperity of this Kingdom do, under divine Providence, chiefly depend upon due submission to the Laws, a Just Confidence in the integrity and wisdom of Parliament….

The writing suggests a rounded oracular delivery akin to the way that set speeches of royal figures were performed by leading actors of the time. The bills would have remained posted for some time so that individuals could peruse them or small groups could assemble informally to consider what was being ordered. Their visibility would have been heightened by the fact that the street scene was not one where posters, hoardings, signs and such like were common, so it would have stood out. Many would have been defaced and stolen and many, although agreeing with the government view, would have been disturbed by the implication that well-known individuals within their communities were being targeted[3]. The intimidating actions of drunken and illiterate mobs, hired by the local clergy and gentry to cower serious-minded and literate artisans and labourers, did more to highlight the essential contradictions lying at the heart of the Government campaign than any amount of counter propaganda could achieve. On the one hand the government was worried about the potential disturbances that might arise from the effect that radical writing might have upon literate

[1] The Methodist New Connection was formed in 1797 and led by Alexander Kilham who was expelled from the Wesleyan society. Upon Wesley's death Kilham demanded that the Societies' constitution be democratised to permit lay members of local congregations to play an active part in the conduct of worship and in the choice of ministers. Dissenting Christians who opposed Paine's essentially deist and republican views, nevertheless had imbibed ideas about self rule and democratic accountability.

[2] In 1786 journeymen bookbinders in London went on strike to reduce their working day by an hour from 14 to 13. Five leaders were arrested and tried for conspiracy and given two years imprisonment. One died after a year whilst in gaol. A combination of sedition and conspiracy charges were routinely used throughout the late 18th century to repress workers organisations, yet despite the severest penalties, organisation grew. The illegality served to strengthen ties of loyalty and identification between workers who generally also became highly literate autodidacts. For a reference see Bundock (1959).

[3] Materials relating to these actions can be found in H.O. 102 in the National Archives. They are the boxes of papers for William Pitts Home Secretary, Henry Dundas. Dundas never intervenes to stop violence when directed towards radicals.

readers from the lower social classes. On the other hand, Government supporters recruited retainers to burn, attack and loot people who in other respects were models of personal respectability. The torching by a clergy-led mob of Joseph Priestley's house in Birmingham with the loss of all of his manuscripts and papers is just the most remembered of these petty and localised outrages.

Nothing managed to promote the importance of Tom Paine's book more than this Proclamation, so when we assess its historical importance we must take into account how it was used and received over a period of time and not narrow our focus and analysis upon the authors and their intended purpose. What began as an instrument of repression, became in time its very opposite, an instigator of counter-reactions, encouraging people to read radical literature, despite the potential sanctions that could fall upon a person.

People would stand in the open in a public space with others and listen to the Proclamation being read aloud. Some of these deliveries would have been counter-intentional and designed to ridicule and defy. Others would be passionate advocacies of the viewpoint expressed within the Proclamation. The readings would have provoked discussions, key words would be spoken by people from all classes during work, in the home in other social spaces such as an Inn or place of worship. Some would have found themselves dragged into the net of suspicion by association – Quakers, Unitarians, dissenters, and democrats. Possession of the much feared printed words of Paine became an imperative for virtually every radicalised person and one can imagine the furtive pleasure of actually handling and owning a signature (part of a bound and published book) from one of Paine's works.

Reading, publishing, possessing and distributing certain books, all became political and controversial, and a generalised climate was created where not to be able to read excluded someone from a growing community of correspondents. This created a social pressure to learn to read or at last to acquire parallel skills of remembering and listening and signing in order to be able to be counted amongst those who wanted to play a part in bringing about the New Jerusalem.

Provenance studies

One of the most intriguing things to emerge from the rarely used archives of this period of the Home Secretary and Treasury Solicitor was the presence of dozens of examples of cheap printed editions of Paine's Rights of Man accompanied by heavily inked newspapers advertising further new editions and carrying reports of yet more meetings in every region of Britain where the work would be read, discussed and **shared**. There are also the indictments against the printers and publishers that make reference to the numbers of copies that were impounded and confiscated. So numerous were the multiple cheap editions (and they were coming in from printers in Holland because British print capacity could not meet demand) that it suggests that somewhere within the population was a much wider pool of people who could read, or who could participate in a social activity where reading a text was the central focus, than has hitherto been considered possible when using sources such as handwritten signatures of spouses on parish marriage registers (Schofield 1998; Stephens 1998). Recent studies of the history of literacy have demonstrated wider possibilities with respect to the numbers of people who engaged with aspects of an increasingly literate culture. Rose (2001) for example shows how skilled technicians, who would never, at work, have to deal with clerical, administrative functions, nevertheless read Bunyan or Ruskin or the Bible. Vincent (1993) demonstrates how an organisational change such as the introduction of the Penny Post, transformed the means through which literacy practices could expand in contrast to previous systems that had been in place. My research work focuses on exploring, through documents and artefacts drawn from the time of the early industrial revolution, the extent to

which people from all classes were able to participate in the emerging literate culture that was destined to displace the traditional, oral, parochial culture.

My contention is that by integrating a wider than usual range of contemporary documents and artefacts into an account of literacy during this period, that we will discover some new insights about reading and learning practices. My study aims to move away from a focus upon children, schools and teachers and instead to examine wider social and cultural settings where reading and writing might have taken place, possibly in different forms to those we have become accustomed to. One fact educators working in the first decade of the twenty-first century might like to dwell upon is the way that, in England during the last decades of the eighteenth century, mostly without schools, and, absolutely, without colleges and universities, literacy rates rose consistently to a point where it is appropriate and possible to use the term 'mass' to describe the social phenomenon that took place.

In this brief review of just a single document I have tried to show how it is possible to glean insights into the history of 'literacy practices' especially as they relate to deeply entrenched, traditional 'oracy' (Ong, 1982), practices, by opening a door to the use of primary sources that hitherto have not featured within accounts of the literacy within this period. I believe that studies of this type eventually have as much to say about the times in which they were written as they do about the times in the past that they originally set out to bring back to life.

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