

The Republic of Letters: Working Class Writing and Local Publishing edited by Dave Worley and Ken Worpole

(London, Comedia Publishing Group, 1982)

From time to time literature must be revitalized by new materials and new techniques. As Synge, who wanted to give utterance to the peasantry of Western Ireland, said to Yeats, style is born out of the shock of new material. We have the English novel in part because of the English Dissenters and their preoccupations - money and the growth of the soul. Recently we have seen the impact of various submerged groups on Canadian and American literature: Blacks, women, gay men and lesbians, all with compelling stories to tell. New writing by newly vocal communities may become fashionable for a while, but the only enduring ways to keep the work available are the alternative networks of presses, bookstores, and magazines, enterprises which are often as co-ops.

In **The Republic of Letters** Dave Worley and Ken Worpole have assembled a history and analysis of an alternative writing network in the United Kingdom, The Federation of Work Writers and Community Publishers, an organization that embraces twenty-seven local writers' groups with a variety of interests. These groups are a movement: "which aims to 'disestablish' literature, making a popular form of expression for all people rather than a preserve of a metropolitan or privileged elite." It is a book that Canadians and Americans can learn from, although there are some important differences in the British situation. The obvious one is class. Britain has classes that are more clearly demarcated (especially in language) than we can find in North America, and the classes are more aware of their identities. The working class is more likely to see itself as such. It has a long and honourable history of self education and its own institutions, including a political party to feel betrayed by. From the text of **The Republic of Letters** it is clear that the alternative writing network is basically working class. There are Black groups and women's groups, but their members are working class. In North America the members of the working class are likely to define themselves by the middle class: they believe they are in it, or will be, or have failed to be. I can't think of any North American equivalent to Richard Hoggart's study of working class culture, **The Uses of Literacy**, a book written not by a sociologist but by a scholar who has a firm sense of his working class origins.

In Canada and the United States alternative writing does not have a clear working class orientation. While there is a successful waterfront workers' writing group in San Francisco, the emerging minority voices are usually not consciously class oriented. There is, of course, a growing body of writing about work, but that subject cuts across class lines, and the work writer is most likely to be a member of the middle class who doing something unusual for a while: fishing, laying pipe, waiting on tables. There is much to be

Dockers & Detectives by Ken Worpole

(London, Verso, 1983)

learned from this book in spite of the different class situation. Major questions are raised: does the alternative publisher have the right to deprive union employees of wages in order to cut costs; what is the role of the hired administrator, who may not be a member of the constituency but comes to be seen as its spokesman; what happens when the experience of the minority group clashes with ideology. The last question is poignant. Alternative writing in Britain comes from a class that often indulges in prejudice against Blacks and women. This problem is confronted honestly in the book. Another ideological problem arises when the content of the work fails to meet some critic's notion of "correct" socialist doctrine. The Federation is clearly socialist in spirit, but its members don't always find that their work grows on the trellis of theory.

The most interesting insights come, I believe, with the discussions of the mystique of the writer and the mystique of publication. As long as the writer is seen as a Romantic figure whose work is a mystery, writing is not likely to flourish as an activity open to anyone with talent. As for publishing, it is too widely assumed that publishers are primarily interested in selling good books rather than in making money. Now that conglomerates own so many publishing houses, there is hardly any room for established writers of merit, let alone new ones with an unfamiliar point of view. The publishing system now commissions best sellers (cookbooks, novels based on television or intended for television). But it is widely believed that talent will always emerge and find a standard publisher. The Arts Council of Great Britain has denied funds to Federation activities on the basis of that belief. Working class writers are assumed to be untalented amateurs.

The book, then, concerns itself largely with the economic basis of literature. The authors of this joint effort want to make more writing available from groups who have had little chance to be heard, groups that haven't thought of themselves as having a voice. The quality of the writing is not the main concern, and some of the literary judgements show a minimum of discretion. The book has many samples of writing from the working class. They are uneven but many are quite good, especially the autobiographical narratives. A common tendency in writing from emergent groups: there is a desire to tell what has not been told before, to offer testimony. The style of these reflections carries more of the shock of new material than of the poems. At one point we are told that the good thing about a poem is that it is short and can be written in brief intervals: "The great thing about a poem is that it can be short, can be sometimes actually written, revised and finished within the odd quarter of an hour between washing up the Sunday dishes and starting to get tea, or in a spare half hour when the other people in the house are watching television or out at the cinema." A poem can be started in an odd quarter of an hour, but not revised and finished too. But I

assume that the gifted will find their way to a strong commitment. The Federation works against the mystification of poetry in particular, the notions that the poet is a being detached from life and that all poetry is difficult to understand. The Federation's member groups have found that poetry actually sells when it speaks to people's lives.

The authors show an interest in creative writing courses, and here they might have something to learn from North America. Creative Writing is not a standard subject in the U.K., and they assume its prevalence in the United States is: "a contribution to American literature's being more energetic, less elitist, more open to ethnic and minority experience." However, for all their value, creative writing courses are being questioned these days because they encourage an exclusively technical approach to writing, detached from social and philosophical concerns. For the writers' groups in Britain, a workshop is a free meeting of people with a common experience who want to learn how to write about it.

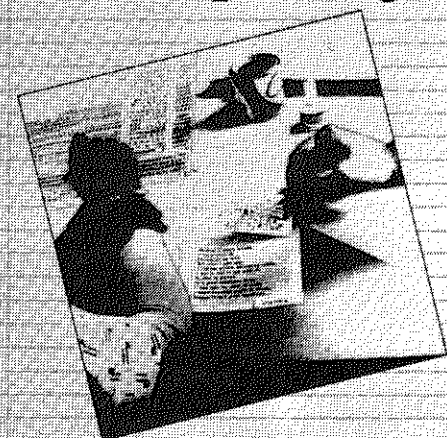
The closest Canadian equivalent to the Federation is probably the provincial writers' guild. These groups are open in membership and encourage all sorts of writers. The Writers' Union of Canada is a different kind of body, one limited to professionals. The small presses have organized to distribute their members' publications. But so far there is no national network like the Federation.

Literary history is usually a safe and dull enterprise. In **Dockers and Detectives** Ken Worpole, one of the editors of **The Republic of Letters**, performs a salvage operation, which is more daring than reciting facts. Worpole wants to retrieve some valuable books that haven't made it into the canon. And he wants to clarify the nature of popular writing.

He clarifies the British working class enthusiasm for American tough fiction in a very informative essay. Many British readers (and writers) were impressed with the naturalist assumptions and vernacular style of writers like Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ernest Hemingway and Theodore Dreiser. This list of authors shows that Worpole doesn't trust the usual distinction between popular and elite literature. The simplification of syntax and vocabulary, the realistic descriptions of common life, the cynical attitude toward society, all can be found in the popular writers as well as in the Nobel Prize winner. Worpole suggests that the American vernacular style democratized literature at a time when writers in England were preoccupied with provincial manners and a refined, elusive syntax. "Democratized" is a loaded word for discussing style, of course. I find Worpole's theoretical framework - bits of Gramsci, Walter Benjamin and Russian formalism - a little shaky for some of his assumptions and arguments throughout the book. It is clearly a collection of studies rather than a full treatment of popular reading and writing.

The Republic of Letters

Working class writing and local publishing



Writing/Culture
Publishing/Politics

Recently we have seen the impact of various submerged groups on Canadian and American literature: Blacks, women, gay men and lesbians, all with compelling stories to tell

Other chapters deal with popular fiction of World War II in some of its left-leaning, pacifist tendencies and with expressionist novels by three Liverpool seamen who wrote in the 1930's. The books by the seamen show alternatives to Socialist realism and the documentary novel in dealing with working class life, but unfortunately they are out of print. The final chapter considers a number of forgotten Jewish writers of London's East End, whose work is also unavailable. They write out of the same setting as Arnold Wesker, but they have been forgotten. Worpole's intention is admirable, to show us literature that we didn't know existed, and to find it in places that most people don't look in. The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers makes it less likely that valuable writers will fail to publish or fail to be noticed in the future.

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