

## Was literacy, or its absence, the main cultural difference in 17th century England?

Through the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sped along by the new technological advances in printing and paper production, literate institutions became more and more prominent in public life. Documentary evidences became increasingly necessary for transactions in court, while the expanding bureaucracy of government control produced more and more official papers. Yet it has been suggested that the percentage of the population who could actually read was extremely low. Bishop Stephen Gardiner, speaking in the mid sixteenth century, felt confident in saying that reading was 'such as few can skill of, and not the hundreth part of the realm.' For those who therefore were able to take advantage of their literacy, the number of applications for this skill gave them a distinct advantage over their illiterate colleagues. Written contracts for business ventures reduced the likelihood of fraud and deception, while accounting procedures made for better management of funds. More importantly, with the development of correspondence and reading for pleasure, it soon became apparent that there was a broader range of pastimes available to literate people over their illiterate brothers. Even for those outside the metropolitan elites of London, reading became more and more a pleasure. An example must come from the numbers of printed ballads specially designed for the popular market. John Rhodes published *The Countrie Man's Comfort* in 1598, which said 'If therefore it happens to light into hands that are wise and learned, know that doe not count it so fit a book for thee as for the Scholler of pettie Schooles, the poor Countrieman and his familie... sometimes saying what shall we doe in the long winter nights: how shall we passe away the time on Sundayes, what wold you have us doe in the Christmas Holydayes: for such I have made this book, for that they are naturally given to sing, if happily I may winne them to sing good things and forsake evill.'<sup>1</sup>

The question of who exactly could read is a difficult one, since there are many possible measures of literacy. Certainly the rapid expansion of the book trade meant that the numbers of new titles grew rapidly: by the 1660s, over 400,000 almanacs were published annually, in addition to the Bibles which were consistently the best selling publication. Unfortunately, measuring the numbers of Bibles and other books in circulation does not necessarily imply that the possessors of them could read them. An example of where this assumption could confuse the historian is in cases such as that of Richard Baxter, who flooded the town of Kidderminster with 800 free books: as he said 'Every family that was poor, and had not a Bible, I gave a Bible to.'<sup>2</sup> The indiscriminate nature of such donations makes no judgement as to how frequently these volumes were referred to. Indeed the myriad purposes which Bibles were lent to prove that they were often not just a book but also a talisman. Bibles often in post-Reformation England took on the superstitious functions previously applied to rosaries e.g. warding off of evil spirits, use for divining thieves etc. On the other hand, we do know that 'divers poor men of the town of Chelmsford' could read the English Bible in Henry VIII's time, while the prohibition in the 1543 Act for the Advancement of True Religion stated that 'No women or artificers, prentices, journeymen, serving-men of the degree of yeoman and under; husbandmen nor labourers' were allowed to read the English Bible - clearly therefore there was a significant number who were able to do this. In order to arrive at sensible figures, therefore, we should look to other sources for the numbers of literate people. Cressy suggests the figure of those able to write their own name on official documents, as opposed to those reduced to using marks of some description. Projecting back figures, he arrives at a conclusion that 90% of men and 99% of women were illiterate in the age of Henry VII, while over 70% of men and 90% of women were unable to

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<sup>1</sup> Spufford: *Small books and pleasant histories* p.10

<sup>2</sup> Cressy: *Literacy and the social order* p.51

spell their name on the Protestation Act of 1642. Depositions from the Northern Circuit Assizes confirm this gradual improvement in illiteracy rates from 65% for men in the 1640s to only 30% in the 1740s.<sup>3</sup> There are significant difficulties in extrapolating too from this source - not least the fact that it allows only a narrow definition of what constituted literacy. Assumptions that good readers could sign their names can easily make us under-estimate the numbers of literate people. As an example of the hidden levels of reading in the same period, the Swedish Lutheran Church launched a reading test, which produced a 90% pass rate by 1740 without a significant increase in formal schooling.<sup>4</sup> There remained also a not inconsiderable difference between being able to read print (either 'black letter' or roman) and handwriting. As an example, when the Elizabethan non-conformist John Penry wrote to his wife from prison, he assumed that the letter would be read out to her, while nevertheless expecting her to read the Bible and teach their daughter to do so.<sup>5</sup> Since writing was taught after reading, and required a higher level of formal schooling to achieve even signature quality than was available to most people, it seems likely that there were many more people who could read print than could sign their own names. Yet this figure remains the only significant one for quantitative analysis - and it also reveals considerable social and regional differences in the literacy of the population. In looking at figures for those signing the Protestation Act, the Vow and Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant, the illiteracy figure for rural England was 70% yet for London this was only 22%.<sup>6</sup> At a lesser level this trend for greater literacy in towns is confirmed by the depositions at assizes in the North, where 53% of villagers between 1640-1740 were unable to sign their names, while half this number at 24% of town-dwellers were illiterate. However, looking closer in, we soon see that the division between town and country is much more a reflection of the relative prosperity of the towns - and was related directly to the need for an educated merchant-class in carrying out commerce. Noticeably, the developing industrial towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire especially in the eighteenth century continued to have a higher illiteracy level. In a survey of the diocese of Norwich from 1580-1700 it appears as if the rate of illiteracy is inversely proportional to the wealth of the social grouping - thus only 2% of gentry needed marks instead of signatures, while 35% of yeomen marked, 44% of tradesmen, 79% of husbandmen, 82% of servants and 85% of labourers.<sup>7</sup> If literacy is taken to mark a cultural difference in the country, therefore it seems to act as another factor differentiating the richer sections of the population from their social inferiors, rather than being an organic development.

Nevertheless one of the attractions of reading ability to the intellectuals and divines of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was as a religious aid, so much so that it is easy to witness the changing emphasis through this period from regarding reading as being a help to religious understanding to being almost essential as a means to salvation. Thomas More 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'. 'Many shall with God's grace, though they have never read word of scripture, come as well to heaven.'<sup>8</sup> After his death, the early Puritan Nicholas Bownde said in 1590: '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.'<sup>9</sup> John Ball likewise commented in 1633 that 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.'<sup>10</sup> Finally, Richard Baxter declared in 1673: 'By all means

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<sup>3</sup> Houston: *The development of literacy: northern England 1640-1740*

<sup>4</sup> Thomas: *The meaning of literacy in early modern England*

<sup>5</sup> Thomas: *The meaning of literacy in early modern England*

<sup>6</sup> Cressy: *Literacy and the social order* p.73

<sup>7</sup> Cressy: *Literacy and the social order* p.119

<sup>8</sup> Cressy: *Literacy and the social order* p.2

<sup>9</sup> Cressy: *Literacy and the social order* p.2

<sup>10</sup> Cressy: *Literacy and the social order* p.2

let children be taught to read...or else you deprive them of a singular help to their instruction and salvation.<sup>11</sup> Noticeably the proponents of this reading of the Bible among other sacred texts were invariably evangelical Protestants - suggesting that literacy could again form a cultural difference between those embracing different religious traditions - Catholic sympathisers and recusants did not lay anything like as much stress on reading. At a more basic level, the literate campaigns of Protestant reformers formed a cultural difference with the ordinary people when it came to tampering with the traditional forms of civic life such as carnivals, parades and folk-plays. The use made by educated readers of literacy also clashed with more popular forms literary output, such as the printed ballads, described by Stubbes as 'toys, fantasies and babberies' from the popular press, which 'corrupt men's minds, pervert good wits, allure to bawdry, induce to whoredom, suppress virtue and erect vice.'<sup>12</sup> Even John Bunyan claimed he was led astray by cheap literature 'that teaches curious arts, that tells of old fables.'<sup>13</sup>

However, there were also extremely good reasons unconnected with religious activity which encouraged the development of literacy. As described by Nicholas Breton in 1618, the point of attending schools was: 'to read common prayers at church and set down common prices at markets, write a letter and make a bond, set down the day of our births, our marriage day, and make our wills. These are the chief matters that we meddle with.'<sup>14</sup> In an increasingly literate world, the absence of literacy tended to make life much harder for those entrusted with responsibility, such as government servants. An example of difficulties illiterate agents might face comes from a constable in Wiltshire who asked to be relieved in 1616 'forasmuch as I am unlearned, and by reason thereof I am constrained to go two miles from my house to have the help of a scrivener to read such warrants as are sent to me.'<sup>15</sup> In another such case, churchwardens in Buttsbury, Essex were accused of allowing William Pinder to preach without a licence, yet replied that 'they saw a thing in writing with a red seal on it, which Pinder did tell them was a licence.'<sup>16</sup> Later on, the diarist John Evelyn confirmed the growing official preference for the written - and therefore more immutable - word, especially in legal situations. 'Verbal reports,' he said, 'we experimentally find so inconstant and apt to err...nay why (if this be otherwise) do men take such wondrous care about their deeds and legal evidences...if writing be not more certain and less apt to err than words?'<sup>17</sup>

However, for those neither in towns nor engaged in regular official business, the necessity to be literate was much lessened. As Nicholas Breton put it: 'we can learn to plough and harrow; sow and reap; plant and prune...and all without book.'<sup>18</sup> A hundred years later, Crabbe still felt able to write: 'Behold these marks uncouth! How strange that men / Who guide the plough, should fail to guide the pen./ For half a mile, the furrows even lie / For half an inch the letters stand awry.'<sup>19</sup> Yet the very lack of a necessary written aspect to much of agricultural life helped maintain this ambivalence to the written word. Although the almanacs which swelled in circulation did from time to time contain agricultural information, only a fraction of social knowledge passed on through the printed word. New farming techniques for instance continued to be transmitted by word of mouth, while gossip tended to spread news faster than any printed editions. On a more scholarly level, of 6,000 books in the Bodleian library by 1600, only 36 were

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<sup>11</sup> Cressy: *Literacy and the social order* p.2

<sup>12</sup> Cressy: *Literacy and the social order* p.8

<sup>13</sup> Cressy: *Literacy and the social order* p.8

<sup>14</sup> Cressy: *Literacy and the social order* p.10

<sup>15</sup> Thomas: *The meaning of literacy in early modern England*

<sup>16</sup> Thomas: *The meaning of literacy in early modern England*

<sup>17</sup> Thomas: *The meaning of literacy in early modern England*

<sup>18</sup> Cressy: *Literacy and the social order* p.12

<sup>19</sup> Thomas: *The meaning of literacy in early modern England*

in English<sup>20</sup> - hardly an indication of a massively expanded reading population. This is not to say that newspapers did not exist - they did albeit briefly in the 1640s and 1650s - but merely that they did not become the primary means of getting information, and thus literacy remained often a luxury. Even if by some chance there was a need to read papers it was reasonably simple to find a scrivener or some other person who could read to interpret whatever writings had arrived. Chap-books were estimated to have a reading audience of six times as many as editions were sold, since all such materials were read aloud. Richard Baxter's complaint that poor tenant farmers 'cannot spare their children from work while they learn to read...so that poverty causeth a generation of barbarians in a Christian, happy land'<sup>21</sup> - is overly dramatic, since it was perfectly possible to survive without being personally literate. As confirmation, there were several notable illiterate success-stories. Shakespeare's father and daughter both illiterate, as were religious leaders such as the Baptist Andrew Debnam in 1640s, 'a cooper by trade, a sorry fellow that can neither read nor write' yet was 'a great preacher among the sectaries'. Literacy also not incompatible with political action: 142 anti-enclosure rioters in Northamptonshire in 1607 all used marks; likewise in the Civil War armies 'few were able to read and fewer to write their names.' Alternatives to literacy could also be found, mainly based on use of learning by rote or other memory techniques: for example John Bruen had a servant who could not read or write, but who had memorised scripture and quote the relevant chapter number. Shepherds & innkeepers often used tallies and notches as a form of numeracy without literacy.

However, printed matter did penetrate into all parts of the country whether wished for or not. Fixing onto existing cultural institutions it often destroyed local oral cultures. As an example, 80% of the folksongs collected in the early twentieth century were found to have derived from printed broadside ballads of the seventeenth century - even though only a minority could have read them directly. The brash opening speech of St George in Richard Johnson's *Seven Champions of Christendom* of 1596 found its way into around a thousand local folk-plays. One of the other effects of this widespread distribution of printed material was to unify the country around the capital and the English language around the dialect spoken in and around London - the location of the printing presses. Yet by standardising the language, and forcing at least partial acceptance of metropolitan values, much of the existing local cultures were lost, such as initially the carnivals and later popular chiarivari.

In conclusion, the spread of literacy did not in itself create any defining cultural changes, since as a skill it may well have already been quite widespread if unused across the country except for religious purposes. The Protestant Reformation, with its constant stress on the benefits of learning to read, may well have had a big impact on literacy levels, but on the other hand it might well be that the existing high levels of literacy helped the spread of the Reformation, especially bearing in mind the popularity of Henry VIII's introduction of the English Bible. In cultural terms, and bearing in mind the difficulty in deciding how to measure literacy, it would appear as if its absence was rarely a disaster since there were always literate men available in the villages able to help with correspondence and contracts etc. However in purely demographic terms, it seems fairly clear that literacy provided yet another criteria separating the richer and poorer elements of society. Schooling - crucial for writing - was expensive and writing itself was unnecessary even according to religious authorities. There existed several other more obvious cultural differences such as religious observance and occupation - differences which literacy highlighted, but did not create.

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<sup>20</sup> Houston: *Literacy in early-modern Europe*

<sup>21</sup> Cressy: *Literacy and the social order* p.43