LITERATE OR SEMI-LITERATE?

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The difficulty of distinguishing between semi-literate and literate is well known even in the modern world. It is even more difficult for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, since we have only signatures in parish registers and on wills, depositions and such like documents to teach us something about literacy. In the most recent publication dealing with the problem the author, quite rightly, opens the book with a chapter entitled: L’analphétisme: une notion à éclaircir (illiteracy, a concept to be clarified).

Any document, therefore, which could help to give a fresh insight into the problem should be welcomed. Recently I came across such a document.

In 1778 three men living in the neighbourhood of Bruges were interrogated by the magistrates of the town about an accusation of forgery and the falsifying of deeds. There was no problem about the real author of the forgeries who admitted his crime even without being tortured and he was promptly condemned to be strangled. The two accomplices were questioned to discover whether they had signed the deeds or had simply made a cross. The first accomplice, Joannes de Kroock, called variously Krook, de Crock, de Croock or de Kroock, by the magistrates was asked if he was able to read, write and sign his name. He answered that he was able to read a prayer book, but was not able to read (hand)writing and that he could only sign his name. His signature, ‘Jooannes de Kroock’ at the end of the procès-verbal is so elegant that one would assume that the culprit was deliberately understating his case.

The second accomplice, Jacobus de Poyer (de Poover or de Pover) was asked more specifically whether he was able to write and sign his name. Jacobus’ answer was more devious. He pretended to be able to read ‘the Book’ and also hand-writing ‘a little’; to be able to sign his name and even to write a little. But his signature, ‘Jacobus de Pover’ is inferior in quality to that of de Kroock and the letters of his first and surname were not joined but written separately.

What can we conclude from both these interrogations? Firstly, that in the eighteenth century the magistrates did not attach any importance to the correct spelling of names. Secondly, that they seemed to accept as natural a disparity between reading, writing and the signing of names. As regards the culprits, one should bear in mind that they would use every trick to prove their innocence. One would assume that de Krook was more literate than de Pover. And that must have been the opinion of the magistrates for de Kroock was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment and de Pover to ten years.

We may come to the conclusion that children were taught to read the printed word, but not hand-writing in Sunday school. The assertion that they were able to read the ‘book’ (i.e. the Bible) and a prayer book shows that at that time only religious education was of importance.
Should we therefore consider 'semi-literate' those people who had gone to Sunday school and were able to write in printed letters and 'literate' those who could produce a proper signature?

NOTES

1. R. S. Schofield, 'The measurement of literacy in pre-industrial England.'
