

## LITERACY IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND: A CAVEAT

Victor E. Neuburg

Mr. Neuburg has been engaged for many years in research in the History of Education. He is the general Editor of the Woburn Press series of reprints 'The Social History of Education and the author of 'Popular Education in Eighteenth Century England'. He is at present a lecturer in the School of Librarianship of the North-Western Polytechnic, London.

The problem of the extent of literacy amongst the eighteenth century poor is both important and complex; I suspect, moreover, that undue reliance upon parish registers may lead us seriously astray in our assessment of it unless certain factors are borne in mind.

The first of these concerns the term 'literacy' itself, and here I would like to stress the fact that contemporary writers drew a clear distinction between the two arts of reading and writing. The Rev. James Talbott, whose manual The Christian School-Master was popular throughout the century, held that writing should be taught only when children could read 'competently well': and Isaac Watts - no enemy to the spread of elementary instruction amongst the poor - felt that children in rural districts should learn to read, but could have no need to be able to write. Indeed, an examination of the writings of those who contributed to the theory of eighteenth century popular education leaves one in no doubt at all that the teaching of reading was regarded as very much more important than that of writing, and that some skill in the former was very much more widely mastered.

Secondly, once elementary teaching in reading had been given, encouragement to remain proficient in this skill existed in several forms, while for the poorer classes opportunities to make use of any ability to write could have been few. The principle objective of those who advocated popular education had been to spread the ability to read the Scriptures; but in fact a widely diffused cheap popular literature, of both a secular and a religious nature, became increasingly available throughout the century. There was, moreover, in eighteenth century England a steadily developing background of the printed word in everyday life, taking the form of flysheets and tradesmen's announcements, verse epitaphs carved upon tombstones.

posy rings, sundial mottoes, and the increasing use of wrapping papers by shop-keepers and merchants, which often incorporated a name, address, trade mark, and occasionally something more in words. Each of these, in its different way, brought ordinary men and women into contact with print, and an inability to cope with it could set a person very much at an economic or social disadvantage.

If, then, we are to rely in even the most superficial manner upon signatures and marks in marriage registers from 1754, we shall gain only a fragmentary answer to the question: How widespread was the ability to read amongst the eighteenth century poor? Clearly we are presented here with an opportunity to accept what Peter Laslett has rightly called "a challenge to the historical and literary imagination". The process of counting signatures and marks will yield a statistical answer; and if we look in some detail at the secular and religious popular literature of the eighteenth century, and the rapid development of this popular literature during that period, which argues, I believe, for an increase in the size of the reading public, we shall arrive, not of course at a further statistical answer, but at the conclusion with some certainty that there were more readers than writers.

There is another point: What precisely do we mean, within an historical context, by the ability to read or to write? So far as reading is concerned, I would suggest that what is meant is simply the ability to cope in a reasonably satisfactory manner with a simple passage in the Scriptures, a catechism, one of the cheap evangelical works such as Osterwald's History of the Abridgement of the Bible, or a chapbook. Examples of such publications would have been readily available - they were in fact designed primarily to be read by the poor; while a further and very worthwhile means of establishing some yardstick in this connection is a consideration of the way in which reading was taught, and the textbooks used.

The meaning which we attach to proficiency in writing is very much more intractable, and certainly there are limitations inherent in the process of counting signatures and marks in marriage registers. What are we to deduce from the ability to sign one's name? As Roger Schofield has said, "It is not even clear whether the ability to write the few letters of one's name is invariably accompanied by the ability to read, and still less by the ability to write anything else.

If, therefore, we are to gauge the extent of literacy amongst the

eighteenth century poor, the present statistical approach appears to promise the uncovering of one facet only of the problem. Upon these results, and side by side with them, we can build much wider evidence - although the facts available to us do not readily lend themselves to the statistical approach. There is, however, one source - hitherto overlooked, so far as I am aware - which can offer a slender thread of statistical evidence regarding the extent of the reading public. The chance discovery in Islington, London, of three MS volumes of a return called Annual Register of the Parish Poor Children Until they are Apprenticed Out, covering the period between 1767 and 1810, showed that one column was provided for indication as to whether the child was a reader or not. If such a record were kept elsewhere and has survived (although a random search has so far drawn a blank), then we have a valuable piece of evidence. A survey of this particular parish shows that approximately 75% of the boys and girls under its care during the period mentioned were listed as "readers". Two questions arise: What was the criterion of readership? How typical was this parish? I have already indicated what the answer may have been to the former; but to the latter query no answer is possible unless careful comparisons are made - and even then chance survival in one area and not in another may produce a distorted picture. In any case, for the years before 1767 the qualities of insight and imagination will, if used with knowledge, play a complementary part, and I believe a more effective part, in a reconstruction of eighteenth century literacy than the counting of signatures.