

Report on the annual SFEVE conference on “Popular forms and practices of reading and writing in the Victorian and Edwardian eras”, January 29th, 2021. [online]

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The SFEVE annual conference organized by Pr. Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay and Pr. Fabienne Moine (Université Paris Est Créteil) was held online, January 29, 2021. The objective of this year’s venue was to recognize the significance of popular forms of reading and writing in our understanding of Victorian popular culture.

The president of the society, Laurence Roussillon (Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour), opened the conference by presenting this year’s special online migration and the chosen theme of the event. Although an unforeseen circumstance, she felt it was quite fitting, in various respects, to the day’s discussions. As a matter of fact, limited opportunities to travel and meet in the flesh have us rethink our appreciation of the past and consider contemporary challenges to uphold new ways to socialize. Half-way between a seminar and a discussion forum, the meeting strived to contribute to the broader dialogue within the humanities between literature and social sciences.

Laurence Roussillon, then, welcomed and thanked the two keynote speakers, Pr. Kirstie Blair (Chair in English Studies at Strathclyde University) and Pr. Fabrice Bensimon (Sorbonne Université). She also thanked the speakers who agreed to contribute to the SFEVE volume that would come out of this event and who were also attending this seminar. Namely Alan Mcnee (University of London), Alice Bonzom (University of Lyon 2), Michael Sanders (University of Manchester), Françoise Baillet (University of Caen Normandie), Madeleine Pham-Tham (University of Lyon 2), Rebecca Nevset (University of Wisconsin), Alexandra Sippel (University of Toulouse Jean Jaurès), Myriam Ardoin (Independent researcher, Lyon).

It was then Fabienne Moine’s turn to speak as Vice-President of the SFEVE and co-organiser of the seminar. She pointed out the incentive and inspiring dimension of the day’s venture. Focusing on popular forms of writings “for their own sakes, not in a high versus low approach” was long overdue, for questions of “the popular” and popular culture had only been examined by the SFEVE in connection with elite culture. The discourse of those marginalized or simply belittled by their ordinary life must be reassessed, as well as the social and cultural conditions that empowered and supported such artistic aspirations. This endeavour, 30 years of age, gave rise to the reassessment of popular autobiographies and now prompts that of poetry in the periodical press. It is an issue of featuring the created shared values and community links, threatened by the coming of mass culture as described by Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy*. On one hand, these popular creations were certainly instrumental in the alienation of the popular classes by providing “the opium of the people”. Indeed, reading and writing offered the possibility of escaping from the shackles of an unpleasant, bitter, or empty life. On the other hand, literary and cultural sharing shaped lives as well as minds and reinforced sociabilities. She concluded that this field deserves now more academic consideration. It is time to make the voice of those who have been made silent heard, to “capture the ordinary” and to make up for the shortfalls of history.

The afternoon was structured in three parts: the first consisted of Kirstie Blair’s speech entitled “Prating of the pit: reading and writing in the northern mining district” followed by remarks by her two respondents Jean-Yves Tizot (Université de Grenoble Alpes) and Françoise Baillet; the second was dedicated to Fabrice Bensimon’s presentation entitled “L’histoire ouvrière au prisme des autobiographies en Grande-Bretagne au XIX^e siècle” and to the responses by Sabine Reungoat (Université de Paris Est Créteil) and Alexandra Sippel;

the last part of the event was meant as an opportunity to share ideas, and have an open discussion on the more general theme of the seminar.

The first speaker, Kirstie Blair, presented the literary culture of Victorian colliery miners in the north of England and Scotland. She started by introducing her project about the collective dimension of the popular literary movements within the mining communities and about the opportunities of sociability for the workers. Her objective was to explore the link between professional identity, literary engagement, and geographical proximity. As a preliminary approach, she mapped the literary life of colliery miners by covering a 10km-square area between Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Blyth in the Northumberland coalfields.

She explained the social frame in which mining literacy evolved, including the different types of literary culture, influential characters, dissemination formats and promoting institutions such as reading rooms. The commitment of popular poets seems primarily to have emerged from a spirit of mutual intellectual advancement. However, as Kirstie Blair indicated, the support of the worthies and the middle class was essential to the endeavour. The literary materials and the means which were made available to them were varied but limited, not only in respect of the types of institutions that received them, but also in conformity with approved cultural norms.

She continued with the case of four pitmen poets in order to highlight the importance of the sense of community and closeness which led them on the same literary path. Although their personal interests may have been diverse, the link between literature and political engagement is perceived as indissociable. The use of colliery poetry for political purposes is crucial but it is often confronted with the desire of the worthies and colliery masters to pacify their workers or with the denunciatory consequences that may have ensued. This poetical opportunity seemed to provide considerably more than just self or mutual improvement, as the qualities of the poets, orators and debaters that these literary gatherings nurtured were central to understanding the success of such gatherings, as both artistic and political forums. Kirstie Blair underlined the parallel between literary engagement, sociability, and political initiatives. The investment in literacy had heightened intellectual qualities while serving as a device for respectability and recognition both in their artistic and political life.

Kirstie Blair concluded her presentation by assessing the remarkable “work-life balance” maintained by the colliery poets, as they remained faithful to their original social and work circles even when acquiring a significant literary reputation. It stressed in a way the complexities between social emancipation and social legacies.

The first respondent, Jean-Yves Tizot, took an interest in the methodology of such a vast undertaking. The specificity of Kirstie Blair’s work is an exemplary one, he said. By focusing on a specific group of workers within a small area, her research highlights the rich potential of such a subject, especially with the modern tools developed in the digital humanities, and sets the pace for many more needed investigations. Jean-Yves Tizot then inquired about the idea of common decency of the ordinary people that usually appeared in working-class literacy. For Kirstie Blair, there is a twofold norm between what was destined for publication and what was made for individual use. She reminded us how the decency idea was above all a constructed one, a “strategic political rationale” used at will by the workers to voice their sensible humanity. The poets presented a voluntary adaptation to certain standards which were no doubt betrayed in personal writings.

On that note, the second respondent, Françoise Baillet, outlined the ways in which “artistic creativity was harvested to address political and social issues” which raised questions on the relation between colliery poetry and canonical one. Kirstie Blair stressed how inspiring canonical poets, Robert Burns the first of them, could be for them and how modelling their

poems on canonical norms would bring notability and facilitate the path to paid periodical publications. The reception of the poems, as Françoise Baillet suggested, must have been encouraged through alternative means, such as public performances. A point which again emphasized the idea of distinction, especially in workplaces where, for - Kirstie Blair, original compositions were highly valued and much appreciated. Unfortunately, oral forms of literacy, albeit extremely common in those days, are now lost in history.

Jean-Yves Tizot concluded this first Q&A session by asking for the “possibility of a continuity of resonance” between Victorian colliery literacy and miners’ strikes if we look at what happened in the twentieth century. Kirstie Blair agreed and added that there is a definite miners’ poetical tradition of protest. However, the political and denunciatory zeal of the miner poets may have also often been eclipsed by their thirst for recognition from their “betters” and for fear of repercussions. Unrecorded songs shared between members of the community are also evidence of this continuity.

The second paper by Pr. Fabrice Bensimon dealt with 19th century working-class autobiographies as a means to follow the history of their authors through their personal narratives. Fabrice Bensimon started by highlighting the complexity of understanding early Victorian workers’ daily lives and thoughts, for they were both familiar and foreign to our own. The objective of his talk was to reflect on the value of working-class autobiography, its emergence as a distinct literary genre, the issues incited by such particularities and the uses it now provides to researchers in nineteenth-century history.

Born with the industrial revolution, popular autobiography marks the arrival of the working-class into a literary world long dominated by the literate and the socially privileged. With the necessities of urban life, the literacy rate rose among the working-class and with it, the aspiration to tell one’s life. First rising as spiritual and moralist discourses, popular autobiographies before long proved their utility in more progressive and political initiatives. Yet, as Fabrice Bensimon pointed out, the elites instrumentalized such narratives in an attempt to silence radicalism and to further orderly and patriotic or loyalist sentiments. To understand these forms of antagonism, popular autobiographies, published or anonymous, are now a central part in the exploration of British social history. And although historiography has too often overlooked them, it is undeniable that their considerable number and their different forms offer substantial grounds for study.

However, the heterogeneous nature of popular autobiographies raises issues. How to consider posthumous publication? How to surely assess authorship? How to identify the target audience? How to guarantee authenticity and truth? Even though autobiographies are foremost subjective accounts, they are time-sensitive. The recollection of events may be blurred or altered by life journeys and appearance concerns, thus raising temporality and finality issues, especially when separating autobiographies from other forms of self-writing. Added to this is the matter of representativity, notably the scarcity of narratives by women, and the removal of the expressions of emotions, sidelined by the autobiographers but increasingly relevant to modern studies.

Nonetheless, popular autobiography, as Fabrice Bensimon emphasized, sheds light on old questions and brings an additional layer to previous conceptions. Indeed, recent studies proved fruitful in understanding the literary culture of the working-class. But more broadly, they reveal intimate aspects of daily life, attitudes toward norms, and political and economic realities. Still, Fabrice Bensimon stressed the controversies among scholars following those discoveries, pertaining to the nature of popular autobiography.

Fabrice Bensimon ended his presentation by underlining the relevance of testimonies drawn from autobiographies. If they are to be questioned, popular autobiographies are necessary

sources – albeit not sufficient ones – to renew our understanding of and appeal to our conception of working-class history, if not history in its entirety. After all, the working-class was equally part of it!

The first respondent, Sabine Reungoat, acknowledged the literary wealth that stems from working-class autobiography and pointed out the possibility of influential material echoing the authenticity of working-class writings. The non-representativity of the working class as a whole, she added, alludes to the ambivalent status of these authors, swaying between affirming a deep-rooted social class and yet identifying with the so-called elitist, “qualified” workers. A statement which raised the paradox of social distinction, which Fabrice Bensimon addressed by recalling the omnipresent quest for respectability. She also referred to the history of emotions and noted that newspapers and correspondence seem more suited to provide accurate insight; a point highlighting the necessity but insufficiency of autobiographical analysis.

Alexandra Sippel, the last respondent, recalled the hateful image labelled on the working-class which undoubtedly fed the popular demand for individualisation and humanisation. She also wondered about “conscious re-writings” within popular autobiographies, thus building on Sabine Reungoat’s remarks. As indicated by Fabrice Bensimon, that aspect of autobiographies is particularly challenging, although the influence is mainly that of canonical authors.

The final part on the agenda consisted in questions and discussions relating to the general theme of the seminar. The attention turned to the norms in force in colliery mining reading rooms. According to Kirstie Blair, some liberties were countered by the social and political views of these intuitions. At which point these reading rooms disappeared in favour of libraries, which then offered free service. Other aspects in relation to colliery literacy were argued, such as the links between versification and songs or the revival of local dialect. The focus was also set on reading practices, mainly in the case of workers' autobiographies. Fabrice Bensimon mentioned collective reading practices as inspiration for writers and, as Kirstie Blair added, the importance of acknowledging some canonical authors. Images, on the other hand, held a small place in autobiographies or in literary materials at the time, notably due to the recent advent of the printing press. The dialogue landed on female writing, still too rarely accessible, but which would open valuable dimensions to the day’s topic.

By way of conclusion, Fabienne Moine outlined the historical and literary approaches brought about by the day’s discussion. She emphasized how both presentations and the ensuing debate demonstrated the vital association of practices and forms to our understanding of popular literary productions. Productions, she added, that are certainly bound on a collective level since it is through community that they have grown and spread.

Fabienne Moine then brought the day to an end by thanking the attendance.

The venture of the day comes as an illustration of the new possibilities popular historical and literary sources holds. It demonstrated novel ways to read these sources while appreciating them at fair value. Workers’ literacy proved an indispensable basis to understand the average people’s daily lives, as no history is complete without bearing the marks of all those who made it. Confronting *a priori* traditionalist perspectives, widening determined narratives and calling for new dimensions allows people’s history to be explored in all its plurality and offers the possibility to grasp the essence of former times. As Fabrice Bensimon mentioned, history tells the tales of the past which are meaningful in the present time. Hence, allowing Victorian workers to be heard and to speak for themselves while cross-referencing forms of knowledge are now part of a large and collective initiative of Victorianists and other humanities scholars. Furthermore, as justly advertised, Victorian writers and their collective willingness to share their thoughts and reinforce social bonds by any means made available no doubt mirror our

own contemporary objectives, particularly during the uncertain times and the imposed isolation we are going through. What was originally the on-site annual conference of the SFEVE and ended as an online seminar nonetheless retained all its spirit of collaboration and sharing.