

Chapter 1

Sources of radicalism

In the 1970s, working class writing flared up in the collective imagination. Local areas became sources of creativity that connected to a much wider movement. The local was conceived both as a geographical and political space that was ripe with democratic potential. Writing and publishing workshops were part of a more general set of social movements, intellectual trends and traditions. They had roots in debates on education, culture, class and the media that stretched back to the late 1950s and 1960s. Writers such as Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams opened up the study of 'culture' as lived experience while E.P. Thompson's seminal *The Making of the English Working Class* 'rescued' a rich working-class culture in the early nineteenth century.⁷⁷ The idea of the Cultural Revolution, or even a Long Revolution, appealed to those who felt that society needed to be reborn through the creativity of the working class, a term which, even then, meant many different things to different people, encompassing the 'traditional' industrial working class as well as a more diffuse group of people. The growing realisation that culture was material, in the words of Williams, would help to unlock working class writing as a source for social change.⁷⁸

From the late 1960s a younger generation of radicals who were mainly but not exclusively middle class allied themselves with what they perceived as a simmering working-class discontent, specifically with writers who were keen to express their experience and frustrations. Creating the means for direct and unmediated communication between working-class people was seen as one vital foundation upon which an alternative to capitalist forms might be built. This interest in the

means of communication echoed the radical culture that turned away from formal electoral politics and rejected existing mainstream institutions as outdated and elitist. Instead they asserted the need for democracy, autonomy and self-help.⁷⁹ As with other such initiatives, the Fed was set up to meet new needs that could not be accommodated within the mainstream; it was to be an independent space for working-class people to write, publish and meet together.

The Fed's creation in 1976 is of consequence. The moment of formation was to ensure its distinctive stamp. There was an escalating resistance in everyday life as people broke out of the subordinate positions to which they had been assigned. New forms of resistance did not fit into traditional socialist understandings of struggle.⁸⁰ One of these was the Fed. As the post-war consensus came under increasing pressure, a feeling of decline and failure was in the air despite relative prosperity in comparison with the past.⁸¹ Whilst the welfare and corporatist state had brought benefits, working class people were still excluded. Those who had witnessed improved living standards were moving out of the 'inner city', a newly imported term from the USA. Geographically and culturally they were becoming remote from the old, the unemployed, the unskilled and immigrants who were left behind.⁸² Moreover, the rhetoric of the Labour Party that presided over many of these changes was losing traction with the realities of working class existence.⁸³ A pessimism about the future was shared by a broad alliance of well-educated professionals as well as trade unionists and many poor people.⁸⁴ Some of them also had time on their hands and were keen to contribute to community projects.

The coming together of the Fed was preceded by intense local activity stimulated by radical community politics. It grew out of several areas: schools, adult education and adult literacy, the labour movement as well as newer forms of

community campaigning, oral history and the popularity of 'history from below'. Each of them had an educative effect on the others, an outward rippling from many different sources that eventually coalesced into a movement.⁸⁵ Although the Fed was in some respects unique, it grew out of a broad social and cultural context.

Young people

The single most significant event in the emergence of the Fed was a school strike by children at Sir John Cass School in East London, which followed the sacking of Chris Searle for publishing *Stepney Words*, a collection of children's poetry.⁸⁶ Searle was to act as a catalyst of educational rebellion even though he would be reinstated two years later by the then secretary of state for education and science, Margaret Thatcher. As with other young radicals in the 1970s, Searle was convinced of the need for both personal and social liberation. Words could be weapons in a struggle by conveying a message and poetry could serve a basic aesthetic need in people to create beautiful things.⁸⁷ He wanted to teach in East London partly because of a strong feeling of empathy towards Isaac Rosenberg, the East End Jewish poet who died during the First World War. Searle explained in an interview that, as a young student, he was:

growing up in the mind of Rosenberg ... you almost relive their life, you have a tremendous spirit of empathy ... I wanted to teach in the same place where he had developed his poetic vision.⁸⁸

The reality he was to find contrasted with his vision: his pupils' imaginative creativity had never been given opportunity for respectful expression. In producing *Stepney Words*, along with photographer Ron McCormick, he breached educational

expectations. McCormick's photographs helped to bring the writing alive to children and parents, injecting both vibrancy and excitement into everyday life and enhancing the impact of *Stepney Words*.⁸⁹ Searle, imbued with a concern that educationists should engage with communities, also gained support for the project by contacting parents to present copies and establish a sympathetic context for the reception of the book.⁹⁰ The poems published in *Stepney Words* were about life as seen by the pupils - much of it was unhappy stuff that ran contrary to the 'chirpy cockney' stereotypes favoured by the school authorities, some of whom, decades later, continued to question whether the children had actually written the poetry themselves.⁹¹ The children wrote honest, fresh and vivid poems that disturbed those in power. It included critical and despondent pieces like Susan Johnson's:

The world is dim and dull

My classroom is dim and dull

My teacher sits there thinking

She's so dim and dull

That she just sits there thinking

The world is dim and dull

My life is not worth living.

Susan Johnson⁹²

The spirit of the strike spread to many quarters with well-known figures such as the Bishop of Stepney, Trevor Huddleston, and the communist dockers' leader, Jack Dash, lending their support. The mainstream press took up the story as a picaresque tale devoid of political implications featuring front-page headlines such as

‘The Astonishing World of These East End Kids’ and ‘Please Don’t Sack Sir’.⁹³

Searle, in contrast, insisted that the children were emulating their parents’ trade unionism and other schools even came out in sympathy with the strike. School strikes momentarily became a part of the educational landscape. The Schools Action Union set up in 1969 was partly responding to the 1968 Lycee Movement in France. From 1969-72 a number of school student organisations formed, such as the Manchester Union of Secondary School Students, and there were strikes by pupils in Manchester and London.⁹⁴ This directed attention to a rich history of labour movements and struggles of working people. The great grandson of the trade unionist Ben Tillet was in one of Searle’s classes yet this history of ‘courage, ingenuity and creative skill’ hardly featured in history lessons.⁹⁵ Later, as the press came to learn of Searle encouraging children to empathise with the poor and exploited around the world, in books such as *Classrooms of Resistance* and *The People Go Marching On*, the headlines would rapidly change to the horrified, ‘How “the Class Struggle” is Taught in the Classroom’⁹⁶ and ‘Teaching Revolution in the Classroom’.⁹⁷ This about turn resulted from a clash of assumptions which had not initially been detected by the press.

The episode created enthusiasm for writing and inspired many groups that would establish the Fed. For instance, Searle himself set up Basement Writers in 1972 with some of the pupils he had taught who met in a basement on Cable Street which carried a symbolic meaning as the scene of the battle with the fascists in the 1930s. Searle was not working in isolation. Ken Worpole and a photographer at Centerprise produced a book for use by school children, a *Hackney Half-term Adventure*, which proved popular with teachers and pupils who ‘were only too delighted to find page after page of photographs of what they recognised only too

well'.⁹⁸ Worpole came to realise that it might have been even stronger had it been written by children themselves, an insight further stimulated by the weaknesses of commercially produced materials that were:

'directly relevant to the modern urban working class child,' with breathless titles like, I characterise, 'The Jesmond Alley Crew Go Mugging' ... the contents of such readers are very crude and false projections of working class life written without empathy or imagination.⁹⁹

As an English teacher at Hackney Downs School, Worpole had been deeply moved and excited by the poems of Vivian Usherwood, a 12 year old 'remedial' African-Caribbean student, and was keen that they be exposed to an audience. His poems, published by Centerprise, mined ambiguous feelings and desires which were both perceptive and emotive. One of the most popular was

The Sun Glitters As You Look Up

The sun glitters, is shining bright!

The sky is blue!

The clouds are no longer there:

It glitters as I look up!

Bright, it is bright as my sister's face:

The sun looks like a face without a body,

Just round, with a nose and two eyes.

If only that beautiful face would come down –

It will be mine,

And I shall shine with it.

As dim as I am now I will be brighter,

Even brighter than the sun itself.

So it shall be,

And I shall be as dim as ever,

For it shall stay there for many years to come.

Vivian Usherwood¹⁰⁰

[figure 1, Vivian Usherwood]

The humanity of these poems struck a chord and their electrifying effect in Hackney and beyond was reflected in sales figures which would approach 18,000 copies.¹⁰¹ Centerprise itself also re-printed Stepney Words and went on to publish a series of publications written by young people. Other teachers were given confidence to develop children's writing and they carved out space within the curriculum. Blair Peach, who was killed in the Southall Riots of 1979, was one of these teachers and an anthology of his pupils' writing would be produced in his memory.¹⁰² From 1976, The English Centre, part of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), also published a series of books written by children, many of them immigrants. In 1966, John La Rose had established New Beacon Books which would exert a considerable influence on radical politics in the era and bring together established and new black

writers. Many teachers, such as Anne Johnson who helped establish the Commonplace Workshop, were closely involved.¹⁰³ Children's writing became a normal part of life within overlapping networks which disavowed upward social mobility and provided a culture of solidarity.¹⁰⁴

This innovative work with school children built on prominent post-war progressive educational practices.¹⁰⁵ Marjorie Hourd, who had taught Chris Searle at Exeter University, wrote a key text, *The Education of the Poetic Spirit* in which she maintained that children's writing should be judged not according to notions of grammatical correctness but by its intensity of expression and imaginative engagement. Later the leading journal, *The Use of English*, and David Holbrook's *English for the Rejected*, based on his work in a Cambridgeshire village, were pivotal in fostering self-expression in English teaching. One commentator called the 1960's the 'decade of pupils' anthologies' during which a steady stream of children's writing was published, not least by such figures as Alec Clegg, chief education officer for the West Riding of Yorkshire.¹⁰⁶ There were also moves to make English more 'relevant' and theme based, for instance through the popular text-book *Reflections*, published in 1963, which sold over 200,000 copies.¹⁰⁷ Implicitly the state encouraged these practices. The Plowden Report, *Children and Their Primary Schools*, had given an 'unqualified welcome' to the expansion of 'creative writing' and the 'flowering of children's writing', alleging that, 'the best writing of young children springs from the most deeply felt experience'. It stated clearly that 'active and imaginative experience and use of the language should precede attempts to analyse grammatically'.¹⁰⁸ During the 1960s, progressive teachers 'were operating under an invisible license to experiment and explore' and child centred learning was related to a flexible job

market.¹⁰⁹ Moreover this was becoming the accepted approach in progressive courses at many teacher training colleges.

Radical teachers rejected deficit models of 'cultural deprivation' and the ideas of Basil Bernstein at the Institute of Education that were seen as ascribing a deficient or 'restricted' language to working class children.¹¹⁰ In contrast, educationists like Harold Rosen, author of the pamphlet *Language and Class*, contended that working class language and speech should be seen as relevant in its own right. For example, Valerie Avery had written *London Morning* as one of his fifth form students. Rosen, who gained a persuasive voice on the left, reasoned that English teachers

must engage with working class life and learn to apply our educated ears to its voice, with the same respect, awareness of nuances and human warmth we have applied so readily elsewhere.¹¹¹

He lamented that progressive and socialist opinion had often only seen ugliness in working class life, complaining that 'more is known by scholars about late West Saxon than about cockney of the Seventies'.¹¹² In a similar vein, as a trainee teacher in Brighton, Worpole had listened to Leila Berg speak about her books for children which embraced working class life, for example in her Nippers Series. Both Berg and Rosen had argued within the Communist Party for the cultural recognition of working class life and Rosen himself had resigned in 1957 over the Party's condescension towards working class culture.¹¹³ Attempting to improve the cultural level of the working class without first examining its configurations and strengths, was an anathema to Rosen. Indeed, Party members had long been perplexed by the conundrum that the working class had not all been immersed in cultural activity yet

this was the force that was meant to deliver emancipation.¹¹⁴ However, in its early years, the Fed would be promoted by the Party as part of a new outlook based upon an assertion of working class culture. Specifically, the *Morning Star* was the only national newspaper to take the writing and publishing groups seriously, giving generous space for debate and reviews.¹¹⁵

Voice of the people

Young people's writing was not sealed off from older people who also became involved in Basement Writers and other workshops. Although 1960s radical culture tended to be iconoclastic, stressing an absolute break with the past, it conversely generated an interest in radical traditions. The early years of the Fed was to coincide with an attempt to democratise the practice of history through autobiography, oral history and people's history. More diffusely the radical culture of the 1960s and early 1970s included a desire to relate to working class memory. There was an implicit sense of the need to catch something which was vanishing. The specific, everyday lives and thoughts of ordinary people took on great importance. This impulse was shared by many older people themselves. For instance, this poem was found by a nurse at the bedside of an elderly patient:

Kate's Poem

What do you see nurses

what do you see?

Are you thinking

when you're looking at me

A crabbit old woman

not very wise,

Uncertain of habit

with far-away eyes

Who dribbles her food

and makes no reply

...

I'm a small child of ten

with a father and mother,

Brothers and sisters

who love one another,

A young girl at sixteen

with wings on her feet,

Dreaming that soon now

a lover she'll meet.

A bride soon at twenty,

my heart gives a leap

Remembering the vows

that I promise to keep.

At twenty five now

I have young of my own

Who need me to build

a secure, happy home.

A young woman of thirty

...

But inside this old carcass

a young girl still dwells,

And now and again

my battered heart swells.

I remember the joys,

I remember the pain,

And I'm loving and living

life over again.

I think of the years

all too few – gone too fast,

And accept the stark fact

that nothing can last.

So open your eyes nurses,

open and see,

Not a crabbit old woman,

look closer – see ME!¹¹⁶

Older people chose to express their lives and feelings through poetry and prose, not just autobiography. Experimentation across history, fiction, documentary and poetry was to be a particular feature of the Fed. The willingness to listen attentively and to express this in writing transgressed academic and cultural boundaries.

A conscious working class perspective informed new initiatives. Greg Wilkinson, an original member of Commonword in Manchester, produced the *Lifetimes* series of books with a group on the Partington overspill estate which included a mix of interviews and writing. A contributor to *Lifetimes*, 'Sarse', presented an historical viewpoint at a time of momentous social change, 'we'll never come back to the position we are leaving. We are coming to the end of an era'.¹¹⁷ He had honed a keen sense of history:

When I was working on building sites I found a number of old pipes and other things. And I would often think 'what were the men thinking who smoked these clay-pipes?' ...

And you can get a middle class person, or somebody from university, who can come along and write about what they assume were the attitudes of working people. But I felt this was an opportunity to record what it was actually like to live, not from an intellectual point of view but from a working class point of view.¹¹⁸

An impulse behind *Lifetimes* was the use of personal experience to challenge professional authority. As a middle class 'welfare' worker living in Partington, Wilkinson was also sceptical about 'all the surveys, programmes, explanations and theories' which emanated from experts, professionals and even socialists. He called for 'a move to enable working people to define their own experience ... their own words. Not simply to provide raw material for others to refine, evidence for others to interpret, but to find their own forms'.¹¹⁹ A reviewer in the *Oral History Journal* was to note that *Lifetimes* did not fit easily into existing models. They were neither simply source material for academic research nor actual histories but rather an attempt to build a sense of community in the present.¹²⁰

The project of recording can thus be seen in relation to concepts of counter-cultural practice in radical circles in the 1960s and 70s which was to bring new elements into academic subjects. The Fed was closely aligned with a growing interest in oral history that was stimulated by an uneasy feeling that the past was rapidly seeping out of public consciousness. Jeremy Seabrook described this process in *What Went Wrong?*, a book which fascinated members of QueenSpark in Brighton who carried out a 'collective review' with the author.¹²¹

Non-academic work, particularly in radio and theatre, had preceded the 1970s activity in oral history. Examples include Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield* and George Ewart Evans' oral history of East Anglian farm workers which had originated in his radio programmes.¹²² Tony Parker's interviews with marginalised people offered further possibilities. Charles Parker's *Radio Ballads*, from 1958-64, were innovative in their use of direct working class speech and song, by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, to evoke aspects of working class life, for instance in *The Ballad of John Axon* and *The Big Hewer*.¹²³ In the 1970s, however, community publishing groups

were to take this approach into new forms of booklets with photographs. Again these would draw on existing models. John Berger and Jean Mohr's *A Fortunate Man*, for example, had used text and photographs to analyse the life of a middle class doctor and his relationship with patients in a rural working class area, the Forest of Dean.¹²⁴ Fed books such as *Working Lives Two* (Centerprise) or QueenSpark's *Brighton Beyond the Rocks*, which opens with a quote from *A Fortunate Man*, modified this format and the latter was reviewed sympathetically by Berger. Greg Wilkinson also corresponded with Berger when producing *Lifetimes*. In addition, the North East group Strong Words worked with photographers Richard Grassick and Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen as well as 'Amber', a film and photography group representing working class communities.¹²⁵

[figure 2 here, QueenSpark publicity]

A more general radical impetus within labour history contributed to the Fed. During the 1970s, the History Workshop movement published research by worker students from Ruskin College and ran yearly conferences that welcomed enthusiasts and academics. The Fed set itself up on parallel tracks to this workshop movement that had aimed to draw together a number of history groups.¹²⁶ A conference on childhood in the early 1970s directly led to the formation of a group in Hackney:

The scales fell away from our eyes; we were converted. We came back to Hackney and decided to start a WEA class on local history that we would call 'A People's Autobiography of Hackney'.¹²⁷

Diverse radical clusters comprised History Workshop, some of them with direct links to the emerging writing and publishing groups, such as the East Bowling History

Workshop. Many of the academics in QueenSpark books were centrally involved and organised conferences in Brighton. Subsequently, these close relations were to dwindle as the History Workshop became increasingly critical of experiential writing and a schism was to occur in the way radical culture was conceived by the two groupings.¹²⁸

Labour movement and beyond

A number of Federation autobiographies were written by rank-and-file workers in the labour movement. People in the Fed learned about cultural traditions through involvement with the Labour and Communist Party.¹²⁹ Strong Words was a more politically motivated group that aimed to be openly socialist. In the 1970s, the idea that another depression was looming led activists to interview older people who ruminated on their memories of the 1930s, published in *Hello, Are You Working?* and *But the World Goes on the Same*.¹³⁰ So whilst the Fed can be traced to the more recent counter-cultural left, it also came out of the 'traditional' labour movement. Yet, it was to express a dissidence in relation to the limitations and narrowness of left culture. The frustrations of many socialists found an outlet in cultural and expressive spheres of life.

This was displayed in the *Voices* magazine which Ben Ainley developed from classes on Literature and Marxism he taught under the auspices of the Communist Party in Manchester in 1971-2. Ainley believed in the power of literature and the need to give workers the opportunity to immerse themselves in the very best literature. The aim of the class was 'to discuss literature on the basis of a Marxist analysis, and to encourage free and original expression by the class members'.¹³¹

This was to be the basis too for the magazine, the first one appearing in 1972. However, *Voices* soon widened its remit and encouraged people nationally to send in contributions. The emphasis was very much on experimentation, although Ainley envisaged a literature with a political purpose emerging:

our writing was not yet a manifesto, or a call to action, but a series of individual utterances. Later perhaps a more unified and challenging character may emerge in future collections.¹³²

Voices magazine was sponsored by a long list of trade-unionists, academics and politicians including playwright Arnold Wesker, trade-unionist Jack Jones, (T&GWU), folk-singer Ewan MacColl, poet Adrian Mitchell, sociologist Peter Worsley and educationist Brian Simon. Ainley was part of the Unity of Arts network that set itself up as a response to TUC Resolution 42. This had called for a recognition of 'the importance of the arts in the life of the community and looked for greater participation by the trade union movement in all cultural activities', a resolution which Arnold Wesker had originally convinced the television and technicians union, the ACTT, to sponsor in 1960. Ainley's extraordinary campaigning capacity was one reason for the success of *Voices*. Rick Gwilt, who was to become editor in 1977, recalled Ainley's pragmatism:

Ben used to go to labour movement organisations like trade union branches, shop steward committees, co-op member relations committees, maybe even Labour Party branches ... and used to say, 'Resolution 42 calls on the movement, blah blah blah, what we are doing about it is ... what we want you to do is to agree to take twenty copies of *Voices*, whatever, ten copies of

Voices, five copies'. That's what he did. He was brilliant at it. I think one of the strengths of the Communist Party was that it knew that if you are going to do anything, you probably had to start in quite a small way ... find little chinks of light, little bits of achievement to build on. So Ben and people like him were good at creating big snowballs out of little stones. That's what they did turning Resolution 42 into Unity of Arts into *Voices*.¹³³

Gwilt himself was keen to publish material in *Voices* that experimented with personal experience and he was struck by the work of Scotland Road, which he saw as an authentic working class group whose writing contrasted with the more convoluted examples being submitted to *Voices*.

From 1980 to 1984, when it was discontinued, *Voices* acted as the national voice for the Fed. It also stimulated London *Voices*, initially set up as a reading group for the magazine but gradually developed into a writing group. However, *Voices* lost its links with the labour movement partly by becoming so closely associated with the Fed and also because, despite informal support from individuals, such as Norman Willis, general secretary of the TUC from 1984-1993, the trade unions never formally developed cultural work.¹³⁴ The lack of union response was to be a continuing source of frustration to those in the Fed who wanted closer connections with organised labour.

The trajectory that *Voices* travelled took it some distance from Wesker's original vision. Wesker himself had been angered by the snobbery of theatre audiences; his response to Resolution 42 was to set up Centre Fortytwo which aimed to develop working class audiences for the arts through festivals, and later at

the Round House in Camden. Rejecting both the concept of a self-contained 'working class culture' and the view that the arts were class based, Wesker's festivals included artists like W.H. Auden, Benjamin Britten and Joan Littlewood.¹³⁵ Alan Sinfield observed that Centre Fortytwo shared the ambiguous relation of the New Left subculture in the 1950s and 1960s to the working class. Wesker's project consisted of 'relatively political and hopefully accessible instances of high culture' cobbled together with 'bits of current student sub-culture' but only 'uncertain gestures towards the creativity of working people'.¹³⁶ This final point was to be taken up by the Fed.

Community organising

For many of the activists in Brighton, left political ideas were blended with a range of immediate community issues. They were interested in organising people in a locality rather than a workplace. QueenSpark emerged out of a community-based campaign which successfully prevented the Royal Spa being turned into a casino and luxury hotel; the group put pressure on the council to establish a nursery school instead. In the process, they started a community newspaper to raise issues of concern. The name 'QueenSpark' was a play on Queenspark, the local park and neighbourhood but surreptitiously borrowed from Lenin's paper *Iskra* (The Spark).¹³⁷ Several members had been involved in a May Day Manifesto group, which underscored left disillusionment with the Labour government, and wanted to federate across socialist groupings. Mothers with young children were particularly active participants who helped to sustain the movement and the educational focus was in line with their concerns.¹³⁸

The invocation of 'community' which manifested itself in Brighton was also part of a more general preoccupation with 'a yearning for social wholeness, a mutuality and interrelatedness', an ambiguous idea which inevitably took on a retrospective dimension.¹³⁹ QueenSpark and other groups consciously occupied this territory. Books developed out of Molly Morley's compilations of residents' memories in the newspaper, known as 'Sparchives'. After the first autobiography sold over 1,000 copies in a few months, publishing developed a momentum of its own. This body of writing would authenticate and promote a neglected version of the past through the prism of autobiography and oral history.

Centerprise was one of the pioneering groups that engaged in community organisation. It was set up in the wake of the failure of the Hoxton Café Project in the 1950s which, contrary to intentions, had isolated young people from their community and even encouraged 'delinquency'. A group of people from this project and the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) Area Youth Offices worked out a new vision in 1969. A black draft-dodger from the US, Glenn Thompson, was to be a key originator of Centerprise who imported ideas from US black and community politics.¹⁴⁰ A quasi-trading context with a bookshop and café in which young and older people would intermix was envisioned. The name Centerprise itself originated from the idea of fusing community activity and commercial enterprise.¹⁴¹ Very much in the style of the 1960s, they questioned the boundaries between supposedly discrete activities:

the arts, youth and community work, social work and education itself, are not separate entities invariably requiring different institutions. They are related and interdependent.¹⁴²

In order to break down barriers between different activities, Centerprise would set up not only welfare advice services but also publishing via the People's Autobiography of Hackney from 1972, adult literacy in the Hackney Reading Centre from 1975 and the Hackney Writers Workshop that would continue to meet until the early 1990s. Together they formed a mutually supportive cluster.

The bookshop was the only one in the borough, an illustration of the way that culture was geographically demarcated. In 1971, an article in the Bookseller doomed the shop to inevitable failure. Yet the first year's turnover was £30,000, which represented sales of 75,000 books,¹⁴³ and it thrived well into the 21st century. Unlike some other community initiatives, Centerprise catered to a wide range of interests, stocking not just political books. The 1975 Annual Report included its contribution to the Redcliffe-Maud Enquiry on Arts Patronage and foreshadowed its vision of a bookshop

as a venture needing assistance so we can get away from the WH Smith model, in which books are simply commodities which are self-explanatory, towards a newer idea of a bookshop as an active outgoing service to the community, as well as a place where people can come along, browse, talk, ask advice and feel at home.¹⁴⁴

The bookshop was to provide a context in which publishing would flourish. Whilst Centerprise might sell 30 copies of a best-seller, it would shift 1,500 copies of a local autobiography. This created new readers and helped to break down the exclusive image attached to books and bookshops.¹⁴⁵ Peckham Bookplace would follow suit by basing its work partly around bookshops. Fed groups also benefited from the

mushrooming community and alternative bookshops that were eager to sell their publications.

In developing this work Fed groups were drawing on an expansive range of radical movements. Ideas of non-violent direct action in India and the USA combined with community organising. For example, Saul Alinsky had outlined models and methods for community organisers in the USA.¹⁴⁶ The emerging black consciousness movements with their assertion of cultural dignity also led to an emphasis on the radical potential of cultural activity. The links between personal and political liberation were being actively explored. The American Civil Rights movement raised the idea of the 'oppressed' asserting a subjectivity and self-consciously using 'I'. This interconnection was also part of the American New Left heritage and was to be taken up by the emerging women's liberation movement. Many of the young radicals involved in the Fed were convinced of the need for both social and individual liberation. Comparable political attitudes cropped up in the left organisation Big Flame in 1969 where several members of future Fed groups cultivated their ideas.

Another inspiration was Danilo Dolci who had organised poor communities in Sicily to challenge the government and mafia through various peaceful means. Dolci's *Outlaws at Partinico* in 1955 had caused a stir with its use of statistics on poverty and ill-health alongside the transcribed voices of the people themselves, written in Sicilian dialect. The 'strike in reverse' (sciopero in rovescio) drew on popular traditions and organised hundreds of people to mend the roads and carry out other improvements; it inhabited a similar universe to a QueenSpark 'plant-in' at the Royal Spa, years later.¹⁴⁷ Both Dolci and Alinsky were in the tradition of radical catholic social action. The worker priest movement, in addition to liberation theology, unlike the Marxist left, placed a strong emphasis on community as a source of

personal survival. These views were pervasive across worker writer groups which looked beyond the state and the market to the community as a source of cultural authority.

Adult education

New forms of struggle, many of which were closely tied into adult education, provided a further fount of ideas for the Fed. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Liverpool where a rent strike erupted in opposition to the 1972 Fair Rent Act. This campaign galvanised residents into seeing themselves as the initiators of change, writing leaflets in the first instance. Some people were already writing and decided they wanted support with setting up a writing group. David Evans, at Liverpool University's Department of Extension Studies, had been running free classes on literature when residents came to him and said

'Look, we enjoyed looking at literature and so on, but some of us are writers, and we know you are a bit of a writer, a failed writer like ourselves', I think that was the term, 'We can't read our stuff out in pubs and so on, it doesn't go down well there, and it's not the atmosphere. Could you convene a group in which people brought in their writing, and discuss it?' And that's how the Scotland Road Writers Workshop started.¹⁴⁸

Evans was on his own for a time, feeling and felt his way in the dark and learning as he went. The group remained politically active, often abandoning the writing group to attend tenants' meetings which also served as a recruiting ground for new writers. A pamphlet, *Voices of Scotland Road* enticed in new members and caught the

attention of other groups around the country, notably Centerprise, with whom they forged an informal alliance. Scotland Road proudly promoted itself as the first working class writing group and encouraged many others through visits, advice and support. When a group of working class women in Liverpool heard about the example of Scotland Road they set up their own workshop. Individual writers from Scotland Road formed workshops in around the city, emulating the success of their parent group such as Keith Birch who set up Childwall Writers. By the mid 1980's, there were many writing groups in the region, enough in fact to form the Merseyside Federation of Worker Writers (MAWW).

In the 1970s, Scotland Road Writers' Group was integrally linked to the work of radical educationalists such as Bob Ashcroft and Keith Jackson in the Department of Extension Studies at Liverpool University. Their courses targeted working class adults and engaged in social struggles. They operated in the shadow of Paolo Freire whose educational programmes, based on the lives of peasants in South America, were outlined in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Cultural Action for Freedom*.¹⁴⁹ The adult educationist was to take sides with working class people in an act of solidarity,

The difference between 'them' and 'us' is not broken down by 'learning to speak the language of the natives' but by becoming one of 'us', not in romantic terms, but on issues that really matter'.¹⁵⁰

A sensitivity to cultural expression led to the long-term development of writing groups that had previously fallen outside an educational remit. The adult educationist Tom Lovett, noted the importance of oral traditions and anecdotes in Liverpool which meant that educators made use of 'this descriptive, imaginative, person-oriented

characteristic' in order to 'explore ideas, concepts and principles without destroying such qualities'.¹⁵¹

Second Chance to Learn, an early form of access course, established by Big Flame member Martin Yarnit, was to interact closely with the Scotland Road group and organisers were determined to avoid the trajectory of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) classes which, they believed, had been rapidly taken over by the middle classes.¹⁵² In 1980 Yarnit commented that in Liverpool, 'a generation of militants ... for whom education is a priority' had emerged from 'a decade of committed adult education'.¹⁵³ Scotland Road and other groups had nurtured 'organic intellectuals' in the Gramscian sense, a concept that was to gain some purchase in the Fed.

With a long history of black immigration, Liverpool possessed more than one strand of radical class consciousness, not least in terms of race issues. For instance, Evans facilitated the Liverpool 8 Writing Group which described itself as 'mainly but not exclusively Black, working class and adult'. In 1976 Dorothy Kuya, a worker for the Community Relations Council, had identified the need for a group to encourage people to write 'stories, verse, recollections, plays and polemics'. The Liverpool 8 Writers group was then seeded at a residential weekend in March 1976 with the support of the Scotland Road group.¹⁵⁴ Diverse 'Black' writers including Franz Fanon, Walter Rodney, George Lamming, Sam Selvon and Amilcar Cabral were read.¹⁵⁵ David Evans himself had spent five years in a South African jail for his anti-apartheid stance.

The association between radical forms of adult education and the Fed also existed elsewhere. Bristol BroadSides partly developed out of WEA classes on the

labour movement and other groups that recorded people's memories in the Barton Hill area which led to publishing *Bristol As We Remember It*, selling 3,000 copies.¹⁵⁶ This work was stimulated by a boat trip down the canal as a prompt to tape record memories from those who had known its past life in servicing iron and cotton industries.¹⁵⁷

Literacy

During the 1970s, adult literacy was widening the scope of adult education. The idea of student publishing, that literacy students could write for themselves and other students, was a new form that flowered in the 1970s. The UK was the first industrialised country to recognise the existence of a 'literacy problem' among a broad section of the population despite the fact that compulsory schooling had been in place for almost a century. A number of individuals and organisations came together around the Right To Read Campaign co-ordinated by the National Committee for Adult Literacy, including the Russell Committee, local authorities and British Association of Settlements, and was given enormous publicity by the BBC, indicative of the growing power of television. In 1974, the Adult Literacy Resource Agency was set up with a £1 million grant.¹⁵⁸ Although adult literacy was marginal, it was symbolic of larger issues. The 'discovery' of this 'problem' was not just technical but challenged the idea of an 'advanced' society and the revelation that adults struggled with literacy was a moment of lost innocence.¹⁵⁹

Literacy students and their mainly young female tutors were faced with an acute shortage of appropriate reading materials. Many immediately rejected children's books as patronising, like the Janet and John series that were associated

with failure at school. A few had used Centerprise books and other community publications.¹⁶⁰ The only other model was the *Liverpool News* which utilised issues from the mainstream press in a format palatable to literacy students.¹⁶¹ In 1974, in order to stimulate a discussion about new directions, Sue Gardener called for a 'teaching newsletter for literacy work' where she envisaged explanations of legislation and welfare services, topical and political information relevant to working class people and student writing based on 'local speech' that would encourage other students and also serve as a means of tutors keeping in contact with each other. Crucially, the paper was to be committed to 'a working class perspective ... worth acting on experimentally'.¹⁶² A number of tutors, dedicated to the idea, self-funded the first issue of *Write First Time*, a broadsheet sized newspaper. After numerous fundraising attempts, the Adult Literacy Unit agreed to provide some limited funds for printing and secretarial support – all other work had to be done voluntarily. Alongside the mechanical skills of reading students needed accessible and relevant

material which will talk about their own experience, and help them to formulate their own view of it as distinct from the concepts they inherit from the world's view of them. Only then will we be teaching literacy instead of remedying illiteracy.¹⁶³

Literacy was viewed as a process without end. The urgency and usefulness of the writing, in comparison to the more staid attempts by tutors eager to provide graded reading materials, was rapidly confirmed. The process of writing, often mediated by scribes or tape recorders, was invested with a huge potential; it 'transforms you into an active user of literacy and not just a passive receiver'.¹⁶⁴ It was a relatively small step to give students control over the process of publishing as

part of the educational process. Tutors and students had to learn these skills together and the process helped to peel away the 'mystique and authority' from printed texts.¹⁶⁵

A number of Fed groups would develop this work including the Hackney Reading Centre, the Peckam Publishing Project and Gatehouse Books. Other literacy groups also started publishing student writing such as Cambridge House, Blackfriars and CAVE. It is noteworthy that literacy work, specifically Write First Time, started in the mid-1970s and was one of the founder members of the Fed. This created a precedent for other literacy groups to enter later on. A clearly educational and tutor-led national project may have aroused too many suspicions had it attempted to join in the early 1980s.

These tutors had created a unique literacy practice having started from a practical issue about the availability of reading materials. Many adopted the language experience approach¹⁶⁶ and read Freire. Adult literacy tutors challenged deficit models of education that informed the literacy campaign, such as the well-intentioned ideas of Peter Clyne who spoke of the 'adult illiterate' as 'backward' in his evidence for the Russell Committee. Medical metaphors, in which the 'illiterate adult' was afflicted by a kind of illness, were rejected.¹⁶⁷

In addition, they questioned UNESCO definitions of 'functional literacy' that tended to separate out literacy as a technical skill that needed to be mastered if adults were to function in society by reading notices, directions and instructions. By contrast, 'emancipatory' learning was to take account of the fact that students had a range of skills and life experiences and were able to reflect on political, social and philosophical issues. Gardener distinguished what she called the 'social work

approach' from her favoured 'political approach' which saw the student as 'wronged and deprived' and the teacher's job as 'the disturbance and creation of consciousness' to demand 'national recognition of the problem'. She wanted to embrace the non-professional teachers as part of a working class campaign: 'It needs to find a way of creating among students solidarity, mutual help, and the shedding of self-reproach and shame by recognition of a common problem and the growth of indignation'.¹⁶⁸

Growing up, Gardener was socialised into the idea of working class culture, in particular the capacity of spoken language to convey a depth of feeling and meaning. Her parents ran WEA classes and Labour Party meetings in their front room and she later drifted naturally to WEA work in Nottingham and Liverpool where one of her classes made a radio programme using local people's voices. She had listened to the Radio Ballads and supported Keith Jackson's view that culture should be a central facet of working class adult education. From 1975, Gardener would move to Centerprise's Hackney Reading Centre.

Many of the tutors involved in this work were also attracted by feminism with its focus on talking about personal experience and learning to listen to the subtleties of what people were saying. The idea of organising autonomously in democratically run collective groups became routine in the Fed. Reading people like Sheila Rowbotham helped Jane Mace to talk more openly about personal relations, 'validating what you might think of as unimportant or unworthy'.¹⁶⁹

Technology, culture and tradition

In part these networks had been made possible by the availability of cheap and accessible technology, especially off-set litho printers, photocopiers and tape recorders that would enable 'a completely new kind of history'.¹⁷⁰ Alternative and small scale publishing expanded in the 1960s and new technologies allowed the past to be re-evaluated.¹⁷¹ Groups such as QueenSpark and Bristol Broadsides developed partly out of community newspapers, which were published with off-set litho technology.

The application of new forms of technology was not simply ad hoc. A premise in radical thought was that the media and culture were not neutral in their operation. Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message* had had a widespread impact in the 1960s and a similar attentiveness informed Raymond Williams' *The Long Revolution*. Worpole was swayed by the translation of Walter Benjamin's essays, 'The work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction' and 'The author as producer'.¹⁷² Overall, the interaction of ideas and technologies fed into the notion that it would be possible to publish 'ordinary' people and initial experiments were to be successful.

Technological change was attached to a vigorous debate on culture. Mainstream culture was often associated with the middle class, an idea expressed in such books as Nell Keddie's *Tinker, Tailor... the Myth of Cultural Deprivation* and later Sue Braden's *Artists and People* which were discussed in the Fed. Moreover a sociological literature, such as Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden's *Education and the Working Class*, was documenting how educated working class people entered a cultural limbo because mainstream culture was alien to their working class background.¹⁷³ Writing and publishing workshops assumed that publications would demonstrate a working class culture that could strip away the distortions of the tabloid press and elitist arts establishment. For instance, there was outrage when the

Greater London Arts Association decided to hold an 'arts festival' by covering Tower Hamlets in posters featuring the work of artists, all of whom were outsiders. They managed to divert the funding to neighbourhood initiatives that included the opening of a bookshop by Tower Hamlets Arts Project (THAP), which would become another Fed member.¹⁷⁴

Others were not willing to concede that mainstream culture was necessarily middle class. Worpole refused to simply dismiss 'bourgeois culture' and argued that classic authors like Blake, Dickens, Woolf and Auden 'belong to us as much as the contemporary bourgeoisie'.¹⁷⁵ The early years of the Fed thus revealed uncanny echoes of the 1930s when writers debated whether working class and bourgeois culture were distinct or related practices.¹⁷⁶ These disputes were not to find a resolution and the group which produced the *Republic of Letters* was unable to agree a single position on culture.¹⁷⁷

Rather than concerning themselves with theoretically coherent statements, in practice groups aimed to widen working-class readership and encourage new writers.¹⁷⁸ Implicitly this notion was informed by the perspective that the working class was the force that would change society and, as such, it was their creativity that should be developed. This implied the acceptance of a variety of overlapping motivations. Tony Harcup, a member of Basement Writers who went on to edit *Leeds Other Paper*, became inspired by the idea of producing culture, a fluid energy that could have been channelled in a number of directions: 'Had it been three years later we'd probably have started a DIY punk band instead!'¹⁷⁹ Other writers, such as Alan Gilbey and Tony Marchant would also become absorbed in a DIY punk ethic.

In addition, discussions of class and culture were not restricted to small groups of committed socialists. Television was the key medium in reaching general audiences and new kinds of working class voices were to be heard throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Keith Birch, a writer from Scottie Road, elicited the meaning of the Wednesday Play for him and his workmates as

the really good piece of TV that we had, that the working class were involved in ... Everyone used to talk about the *Wednesday Play* ... they felt comfortable talking about it, what they got out of it, and it might be wildly sort of different than anyone else ... it didn't matter. The debate was on. People were being drawn to drama, and its power and everything that it can do.¹⁸⁰

The use of documentary styles in TV drama by writers such as Jim Allen who worked with Ken Loach and Tony Garnett influenced a new generation of young working class writers. Jimmy McGovern who emerged as a playwright from the Scotland Road group, was particularly taken with the plays of Jim Allen, such as *Spongers*, screened in 1978, which challenged the stereotyping of people on benefits.¹⁸¹

Though the founders of the Fed situated themselves as part of an on-going tradition it was to be evident that the idea of a continuous working class culture was over simple. Subordinate cultural forms have not had a coherent expression; they have been recovered momentarily, surfacing in diverse streams, frequently to vanish again.¹⁸² Roger Mills was a young writer involved with both Centerprise and Basement writers who avowed that a break in tradition had occurred:

I think at one time there was the thought that ... that we were carrying on the working-class tradition of writing, going back to Alexander Baron and Bernard

Kops and all that. But to be honest, I think the line had been broken, really. I think the people I knew in the Basement weren't really writing as a part of a sense of tradition, they were writing influenced by much newer things, like pop music, pop lyrics, and the Mersey poets, the Liverpool poets, Roger McGough ... And in a response to challenging the things they'd seen on the telly or the films ... I think people create their own art out of lots of different influences from all around them, whether it's from high art, low art or on the buses. Anything.¹⁸³

In reality, teachers were often happy working with popular culture and they emphasised the pupil's urban environment whereas an earlier generation, including Hoggart and Holbrook, had been critical of it.¹⁸⁴ By positing the idea of a break in tradition Mills testifies to the fact that experience was not simply transmitted from one generation to the next, rather it was being re-interpreted in new conditions and then related back to previous forms.¹⁸⁵ He offered a fundamentally different approach towards the relationship to a mass popular culture which was to find expression in intellectual investigations of football and music. Mills also pointed to a faith in the ability of people to break out of the constraints of commercial forms, an assumption widely shared in the Fed.

Building a movement

If *Stepney Words* and the strike provided the spark for the Fed, Centerprise did the most to spread the fire. Chris Searle had set up Basement Writers and established initial contact with the Scotland Road Writing Group after visiting the Scotland Road Free School. Subsequently he went to Mozambique and was not to be much

involved in the worker writers' movement thereafter. However, Centerprise had secured funding and created a tangible organisation. It supported people who set up other groups such as Ian Bild (Bristol Broadsides) and Richard Gray (Peckham Publishing Project).¹⁸⁶ Lydia Meryll (East Bowling History Workshop) attended meetings there as a student, and Roger Kitchen (People's Press) saw possibilities in Milton Keynes after visiting and being impressed by Arthur Newton's *Years of Change*.¹⁸⁷ Brighton's QueenSpark Books adapted Centerprise's work with young people to work with older people.¹⁸⁸ In the North, Scotland Road and Liverpool 8 had also contributed to a vibrant culture of writing on Merseyside.

From the early 1970's writing and publishing groups in Liverpool, Hackney and elsewhere were liaising closely with each other. Meetings and readings were complemented by football matches and social activities. After a more informal gathering at Hulme Library in Manchester, the inaugural meeting of the Fed took place at Centerprise in 1976. Each small and seemingly prosaic step in assembling the movement was judged to be tremendously significant to the participants and this helped to release further dynamism. For instance, organising travel so that writers could meet and share their writing was a crucial first step in learning about one another and finding familiarity in other lives:

very few people actually ever get the chance to travel or to see how people live in other cities or that their experiences are very much in common and so this was terrific ... and it was all done on a shoestring.¹⁸⁹

The need to express was matched by an interest in listening and supportive audiences proliferated, such as at the E1 Festivals in East London.¹⁹⁰ The launch of

Writing in 1979, the first anthology published by the Federation, featuring contributions from different groups, entranced those who attended. As different writers from around the country read out their work in a range of forms, styles and accents people gained a cumulative sense of the work being produced. The reading seemingly enabled one to grasp the whole of a movement in its purpose, energy and diversity. The fact that people were reading aloud meant that a real 'voice' infused the writing. The Fed's 1979 Annual Report enthused on this growing collective impulse:

readings brought silence. As group after group stood up to introduce its work, the gathering of over a hundred people became electric ... Everyone who stood up to read their own writing was part of a group, and every group was part of a national network. The corporate feeling was unmistakable. Some of the readings were funny; some angry; all, moving. None of the readers were 'professional' writers gaining an income and personal fame from their work. All were gaining strength and illumination from writing. It was an historic literary event.¹⁹¹

Infected with this excitement Worpole sent a postcard to comrades in Brighton that 'the whiff of an epistemological break was in the air'.¹⁹²

The business AGM was incorporated into a weekend of workshops, readings and socialising. The social element was one of the principal factors in sustaining the movement:

I found it really exciting ... it was the beginning of that culture of sheer enjoyment of weekends away and late nights reading and drinking ... they

turned into great festivals, I mean they were great events you looked forward to them all year, it was like a carnival.¹⁹³

Informality became a source of creativity. The workshops were based on what people were doing in their own groups and stimulated dialogue and debate while offering practical guidance. All of these were put on by writers for no payment which engendered reciprocal learning and an intense interest in the writing:

people would sit there until two in the morning whilst everyone read, and there was a real thing of, 'I am not going to leave, because you have listened to me, and I will listen to you' ... the early Fed was terribly interested in what everybody else was doing.¹⁹⁴

Rotating meetings and events around the country helped cement the movement together. Members stayed on each other's floors and developed a more meaningful national picture of the writing being produced. Unlike many other literature organisations, the Fed contained groups throughout many English cities.¹⁹⁵ Individuals like Worpole became so motivated and committed that they took on a personal responsibility to foster a greater sense of movement, chivvying people to share their work with each other nationally as part of a federated movement.¹⁹⁶

Personal and political work were intermixed. Writing, publishing and organising regularly were part of personal relationships upon which, in reality, the networks were built. Strong bonds of loyalty and mutual understanding created an environment in which all sorts of relationships blossomed:

we felt quite welded together by it and you know you could fall in love with each other ... when there is a movement people do find each other's ideas very attractive and do find each other interesting as people ... and so we felt a bit more like a movement.¹⁹⁷

These energies would sustain a commitment to writing and publication for a number of decades. Writing was always at the centre of the movement, the force and passion which drove people on. Critically assessing the content and value of the work produced by young people, older people, literacy students and the array of writers in various workshops, provides new perspectives on the mental world of working class people during the 1970s and 1980s.