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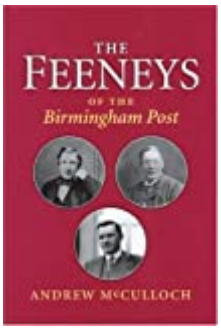
Christopher Hilliard. *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006. 390 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02177-8.



Andrew McCulloch. *The Feeneys of the Birmingham Post.* Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 2004. xii + 180 pp. $37.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-902459-48-6.

Reviewed by Mark Hampton (Lingnan University, Hong Kong)

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New Readers, New Authors

Between the late nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century, British publishing, reading, and writing underwent a dramatic transformation in which audiences expanded rapidly and new publics emerged, developments that entrepreneurs turned into enormous profits. While many cultural guardians feared that the new audiences represented a crisis of political or cultural authority, others regarded the expansion of audiences and the creation of more accessible newspapers and periodicals as important agencies of democratization. An increasing number of scholars have studied this transformation from such perspectives as institutional studies of periodical and book publishing, biographies of key figures, content analysis of the publications, examinations of elite response, and surveys of popular readership. Yet in the context of growing audiences, publishing houses, and profits, new opportunities arose not merely for readers and entrepreneurs, but for non-elite writers as well. Christopher Hilliard tells their story in his excellent new book, *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain.*

Hilliard's focus is on the milieu of "aspiring writers," primarily of the working and lower-middle classes, a world into which he gains access via three movements. First, in the late nineteenth century, a largely middle-class, amateur writers movement emerged to offer guidance, through literary agents, writers' magazines, correspondence courses, advisory bureaus, and manuscript criticism, to the bewildering new field of opportunity for common writers. With the right techniques, it was claimed, virtually anyone could become a writer, and some magazines went so far as to provide formulaic plots for aspirants who paid the fee. For many agents, though, manuscript criticism remained the centerpiece, ensuring payment for the agents' service. In addition to such agents, the amateur movement found expression in writers' circles and clubs in which textual criticism often featured prominently. Hilliard points out that, unlike modernist *literati*, such writers generally embraced American popular culture and unashamedly wrote escapist fare for the market. Unsurprisingly, they were not sympathetic to the elite idea that their attempts to sell their writings to popular magazines represented the feminization of culture. Moving beyond the working-class autodidacts eloquently described by Jonathan Rose, Hilliard finds, among these writers, a common culture including manual and non-manual workers, and men and women.[1]

Second, Hilliard describes interwar working-class literary activity, particularly as it was encouraged by publishers and left-wing intellectuals; here he focuses on writers of working-class origin, as well as those who remained within the working classes. Unlike the mixed company of the writing circles, most working-class writers were men. Hilliard portrays the difficult conditions under which working-class writing took place, most notably a lack of a quiet space in which to work, and shows that, while middle-class writers often saw themselves as entertainers and practitioners of a craft, working-class writers more commonly saw themselves as romantic artists. Moreover, an important working-class motivation was the opportunity to correct misperceptions about working-class life. Hilliard links working-class writing and its encouragement to romantic ideas of authenticity and to "writing what you know," and the emphasis given in the New Journalism to the commonplace. More than any other literary tradition, the British short story influenced working-class writers of the 1930s, not least because full-time work made it difficult to sustain longer projects such as novels. In addition, for working-class as well as middle-class writers, the proliferation of new periodicals beginning in the late nineteenth century significantly expanded the opportunities for publishing short fiction.

Finally, Hilliard examines the popular literary output during World War II, particularly in the literary magazine *Seven: A Magazine of People's Writing* (1941-47), which he sees as an intersection of working-class writing and the aspirant movement of the writers' circles. Merging left-wing celebration and documentation of working-class people with "a valorization of the ordinary that often had a conservative (and Conservative) character in 1930s Britain," its "representation of ordinary lives owed as much to the popular press as it did to left-wing documentary" tradition most notably associated with Mass-Observation (p. 164). According to Hilliard, *Seven* lived up to the claim of its subtitle by publishing nonprofessional writers of different social classes, and encouraging them to write about their daily lives. Thus blurring the distinction between readers and writers, it demonstrated a clear debt to the New Journalism, while its content reflected the non-political emphasis of the New Journalism as well as middle-class norms of sociability. While the journal muted overt politics, however, such favorable British national characteristics such as humor, as well as a linking of war service to sacrificial renunciation of pleasure, were frequent themes. In keeping with its working-class romantic influences, poetry was a recurring wartime genre (though less famously and extensively than in the Great War).

Hilliard argues that the field of popular writing, as he describes it, retreated soon after World War II. Various middlebrow institutions were undermined: the writers' circles tended to become more highbrow, as radio, television, and other art forms competed with magazines. Publishers such as Penguin mass-produced both "high" and "low" forms, leaving the middlebrow relatively less represented, while well-compensated freelance opportunities faded considerably (even the relatively generous BBC did not make up the gap). Though older theories of embourgeoisement do not withstand scrutiny, Hilliard notes that in the era of affluence there was less patronage of distinctly working-class writers.

Drawing on numerous previously unexamined local archives (among many other sources), Hilliard evocatively captures a popular enthusiasm for writing that will be of great interest to historians of leisure, consumerism, literature, and journalism, as well as class relations and popular culture more generally. I find little to criticize in this eloquent and authoritative book, but I will venture a disagreement. While there can be no doubt that Hilliard

has demonstrated that an active popular culture of writing held its own against a passive mass/consumer culture, I am not convinced that this adds up to "the democratization of writing." For one thing, it is not clear from Hilliard's account just how widespread aspirant writers were. Nor, given his repeated insistence that fiction and journalism remained linked until the 1950s, is it quite fair that the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), founded in 1907, does not come into the story. One measure of "democratization," to be sure, is mass participation in writing; others, however, included ownership of the publishing houses and control over editorial decision-making, measures by which early-twentieth-century writing appears considerably less democratic. If the expansion of large-circulation and niche periodicals published by giant publishing chains opened up numerous opportunities for freelance writing, to many NUJ members such casual laborers were blacklegs whose willingness to do piecework undermined attempts to constitute journalism as a secure occupation controlled by "working journalists."[2] Among other motivations, early-twentieth-century publishing chains welcomed freelance contributions from "ordinary people" for reasons similar to those underlying today's participatory media genres, ranging from *vox populi* interviews, polls, and solicitations of anecdotes, to reality television and tabloid talk shows: even if a celebrity host is employed, all of this content is considerably cheaper and more flexible for the media companies than content produced by full-time writers, actors, or journalists. Yet whatever one's view of the relationships between markets and democratization, Hilliard has written an important and gripping book that substantially revises our understanding of popular intellectual life in twentieth-century Britain.

Even in an era of mass readership, and notwithstanding the blurring of lines between readers and writers described by Hilliard, the study of the elite publishers, journalists, and newspaper proprietors who made the editorial decisions remains indispensable. *The Feeneys of the Birmingham Post* examines an important family in Victorian and early-twentieth-century local journalism. Despite its publication by a university press, however, this book is not a scholarly account of ways in which its title characters illuminate the wider world of British journalism. Rather, it is a more narrowly genealogical account by a descendant of John Frederick Feeney, founder of the *Birmingham Daily Post.* I do not mean it as a put-down to say that this book is obviously not aimed at either professional historians or a general readership, but family and friends, and that it will hold very little interest for most people reading this review. However, specialist scholars of either Birmingham or journalism history may well find it worth reading simply for its description of unpublished and privately held material that is currently not available to scholars.

Notes

[1]. Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

[2]. On these themes, see my articles, "Journalists and the 'Professional Ideal' in Britain: The Institute of Journalists, 1884-1907," *Historical Research* 72 (June 1999): 183-201; and "Defining Journalists in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22 (June 2005): 138-155.

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