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‘The Gates’: writing within the community

Most people ignore most poetry
Because
Most poetry ignores most people

It was with the above epigram that Adrian Mitchell prefaced his most recent collection of poems, and one could quite easily substitute ‘books’ for ‘poetry’ and the slightly altered epigram would worry us even more. For there is a truth in the proposition which, for most of the time, we repress, quickly moving on to secondary questions of fantasy versus realism, cash flow in the publishing trade, the ‘adolescent novel’, and so on. The important debate, surely, concerns the relationship between people and books, with the emphasis here on children as a section of these people. Even the order in which we put the two nouns, people and books, represents a set of priorities, for there are many people in the world of children’s books who somehow find that, perhaps only inadvertently, they are always talking about the relationship between books and people, or ‘getting more people interested in books’ when they should be getting more books interested in people.

I remember at the 1973 Exeter conference feeling very uneasy as time and time again participants would place all the emphasis on the books and dismiss as irrelevant any concern for the people who actually might be — or might not be — interested in reading them. In support of this quite blatant commodity — fetishism — we had the following three remarks given to us in the opening session: ‘In the end what is in libraries is more important than in people’s minds’; ‘The children are irrelevant in reviewing children’s books’; ‘The children are not the future, the living truth is the future’, this last being a quotation from D H Lawrence, a dangerous authority to quote really, as he also said that the working class should never have been taught to read. Apart from the philosophical illogicality that an artifact can have more value than the originating mind, we must reassert that people — including children — are
more important than libraries, that their needs and aspirations are relevant to the way in which we receive specific books, and that children most certainly do represent many aspects of the future.

Getting back to the relationship between people and books, it is as well to remember that mass publishing and mass literacy aren’t very long established traditions, and it is probably worth having a look at the quite significant ways in which both have developed, and are developing still. Yes, it is important to realize that we haven’t quite reached the end of history yet; there still could be quite different possibilities and options for the future.

The idea of the social consequences of mass literacy only first became a political issue in Great Britain in the first decades of the 19th century, even though previous to that, at the time of the English Revolution, the level of literacy was high and subsequently declined until the 19th century revival. There were strong interests represented against the spread of literacy, as can be seen in the following speech from a House of Commons debate in 1807:

However specious in theory the project might be of giving education to the labouring classes of the poor, it would, in effect, be found to be prejudicial to their morals and happiness; it would teach them to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants in agriculture, and other laborious employments to which their rank in society had destined them; instead of teaching them subordination, it would render them factious and refractory, as was evident in the manufacturing counties; it would enable them to read seditious pamphlets, vicious books, and publications against Christianity; it would render them insolent to their superiors; and, in a few years, the result would be that the legislature would find it necessary to direct the strong arm of power towards them.

Already this attitude was out of date, as the great Wesleyan revival just prior to these debates had already taught many thousands to read, and other religious organizations were carrying on the work. What is interesting is that even once reading had become acceptable, for the poor, the idea of teaching them to write was frowned on even by many of the reading teachers: ‘They learn, on weekdays, such coarse works as may fit them for servants, I allow of no writing for the poor’ (Hannah More). ‘It is not proposed that the children of the poor be educated in an expensive manner, or even taught to write and to cypher. . . .’ It may suffice to teach the generality, on an economical plan, to read their bible and understand the doctrines of our holy religion (Alexander Lancaster).

Eventually writing was allowed, although it is important to remember that mass literacy was achieved without a statutory education system and by the efforts of the working class itself through its own religious and political organizations, often in spite of highly repressive measures against reading and writing at various times.