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Chapter 7

Learning to Read Trash: Late-Victorian Schools and the Penny Dreadful

Anna Vaninskaya

The pernicious effects of reading penny dreadfuls had always been a favourite topic of Victorian cultural commentators, and by the last few decades of the century – although the genre itself was being rapidly transformed by developments in cheap publishing – it grew to be a constant and familiar refrain. In the quarterlies and reviews penny dreadfuls were condemned (and occasionally defended), blamed for every occurrence of juvenile crime, and subjected to disapproving sociological and literary analyses. The emphasis by the 1880s had, along with the publishers' target market, shifted squarely to lower-class boys: the act of reading penny literature was equated with unwholesome eating habits, with the consumption of 'poison' – as damaging to the mental constitution as a poor diet was to the physical.¹ And the epidemic was one of national proportions.

But whence came this huge audience of millions? The answer, so late in the century, was likely to be: from the Board schools. Elementary education was still at the experimental stage, observers complained, 'and one of the first lessons from the experiment is that when we have taught small boys and girls to read, their natural inclination will often be to read what is not good for them'.² Any discussion of reading brought in its wake the issue of popular schooling: articles with titles like 'Elementary Education and the Decay of Literature' began to pepper the pages of the reviews.³ The errand-boy had learned to read in the classroom, but its barren literary fare had left his appetite for fiction unsatisfied, and his imagination was starved by the fact-cramming exigencies of the three Rs system. The link between juvenile reading practices and the shortfalls of compulsory primary education was

rediscovered again and again. Campaigners for elementary curriculum reform were quick to seize upon the connection: the memorisation-based system, they argued, may have extended literacy, but it prevented the formation of good reading habits. Board school graduates, if they read at all, inevitably turned to penny fiction. They had access to free libraries, but they preferred ‘garbage’ to ‘wholesome or delicate food’, and this ‘addiction to low and vitiating forms of reading’ was fed by a rising supply.⁴ More than one author remarked that a generation before penny dreadfuls had been neither as numerous nor as directly targeted at boys.

To what extent this picture was a cultural construct – as opposed to an accurate reflection of the reality of the lower-class reading experience – is difficult to determine. Some of the observations have in fact been confirmed by modern scholarship – both on the changing economics of popular publishing and on the nature of Victorian state education. But it is equally easy to disprove other assumptions by pointing to autodidacts’ accounts of finding inspiration in the Board school reading books, or of using penny dreadfuls as a ladder to higher forms of literature. As even conservative commentators admitted, ‘If to acquire a taste for reading is a good thing by itself, it may be accounted something even that [children] should read “penny dreadfuls.” The large number of readers of sensational fiction who do not become criminals may yet rise on stepping-stones of their dead selves to Stevenson or Thackeray.’⁵ The autodidacts, if the selections in Jonathan Rose’s *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* are anything to go by, heartily agreed.⁶ Penny dreadfuls, wrote London hat-maker Frederick Willis, ‘encouraged and developed a love of reading that led [a boy] onwards and upwards on the fascinating path of literature. It was the beloved “bloods” that first stimulated my love of reading, and from them I set out on the road to Shaw and Wells, Thackeray and Dickens, Fielding, Shakespeare and Chaucer.’ ‘Miners’ MP Robert Smillie surreptitiously gorged on *Dick Turpin* and *Three-Fingered Jack* as a boy, they too

“led to better things”: by fourteen he had seen *Richard III*, read some of the Sonnets, discovered Burns, Scott and Dickens.’ The ironworker’s son Alfred Cox ‘attributed his “budding love of literature ... to an enthusiastic reading of Penny Dreadfuls”’; George Acorn, an East Londoner, read ‘all sorts and conditions of books, from “Penny Bloods” to George Eliot’; and Howard Spring, a gardener’s son, traced a direct line from the *Magnet* to Scott and Dumas.⁷ For one miner autodidact ‘adventure stories ... led to more substantial material including, Dickens, Scott, Eliot, and the Brontës’, while the future poet W. H. Davies, growing up in Newport in 1885, ‘began with the common penny novel of the worst type, but acquired a taste for better work in a shorter time than boys usually do’.⁸

The commentators also did not take into account the possibility that some working-class children may have entered school already knowing how to read, having devoured **classical** literature at home with their parents or siblings: sometimes in tandem with the less elevated fare of the streets, sometimes exclusively. The shortcomings of the elementary school curriculum had little to do with their reading development, and such students were usually capable of finding literary inspiration even in the poor teaching materials condemned by middle-class observers. *Their* imaginations were certainly not starved by the system: the selection in Nelson’s *Royal Readers*, as Flora Thompson famously recalled, ‘was an education in itself for those who took to it kindly’.⁹ Thompson was able to extract enough Scott, Byron, and Tennyson to keep her happy from the same reading book that her classmates found tedious and dry. She was not unusual. As Davies’ biographer describes, although ‘his first attraction was to the penny-dreadfuls of his day, which he read in secret’,

The school-books he read [also] contained poems that stirred him deeply. One of the school texts he used contained long passages from *The Lady of the Lake*, with a prose commentary attached. And there was a favourite schoolboy poem starting with the resounding line: ‘A Soldier of the Legion lay dying in

Algiers’, with a refrain that the boys loved to chant at play. There were extracts from Shakespeare, the usual lyrics, and a few heavily didactic poems intended to inculcate morality in the boyish heart.¹⁰

Jonathan Rose provides many more examples of working-class child readers who not only indulged equally and simultaneously in both the ‘classics’ and the ‘trash’, but also drew from their Board or church society school curriculum a deep appreciation of literature for its own sake. ‘Jones ... attended a Board school, where he found “salvation” in an old cupboard of books presented by the local MP. They were mainly volumes of voyages and natural history, “which took a Rhymney boy away into the realms of wonder”’; ‘H.M. Tomlinson, a successful author and dockworker’s son, credited his East End Board school with encouraging free expression in composition classes and giving him a solid literary footing in the Bible, Shakespeare, and Scott.’ One headmaster ‘read aloud from *Macbeth*, *The Pickwick Papers*, and *The Water Babies*’, and another acquainted his students with ‘*Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, and *Tales From Shakespeare*’. “Thinking back, I am amazed at the amount of English literature we absorbed in those four years,” recalled Ethel Clark’.¹¹ Many of these children were born shortly after the end of the Victorian period, but Rose adduces as much evidence from those who went to school before 1900: Edgar Wallace, the future best-selling writer, enjoyed most of all precisely that routine memorisation and recitation of poetry and scenes from Shakespeare’s plays that critics of the system condemned as mindless and incapable of imparting any proper understanding of literature. Testimonies like his were not exceptional. ‘Mark Grossek (b. 1888), son of a Jewish immigrant tailor, concluded that his Board school in dismal Southwark was in many respects superior to the genteel grammar schools he later attended on scholarship’, for instead of Latin grammar ‘he was treated to Byron [and] Shakespeare’.¹² It was probably only a minority of students who believed that Board schools successfully ‘introduced the best in English literature, then set their pupils free

at adolescence to read on their own', but it was a minority the contemporary critics resolutely ignored.¹³

These children may have been precocious (their subsequent careers are certainly far from representative), but their reading experiences often betrayed remarkable similarities despite widely differing circumstances. Flora Thompson's case, for instance, may be compared with that of another well-known autobiographer, Robert Roberts.¹⁴ On the surface they had little in common: Thompson attended a small rural Oxfordshire school in the 1880s, Roberts a large urban one in the Salford industrial slum of the 1910s. Thompson's peers left by the age of eleven or twelve at the very latest to take up agricultural labour (she and a friend were the only pupils to reach Standard V), and no special subjects like history or geography were on offer. By Roberts' time, some students stayed on until thirteen or fourteen (up to Standard VII – the highest available), and benefited from history lessons, art, and music. Though they were not put in for examinations by the headmaster, there was nothing to prevent them from trying for technical or commercial colleges instead of going straight to work. Yet both schools were poor National (Church of England) primaries, staffed for the most part by unqualified teachers, and offering, according to the HMI Inspectors who visited them, an execrable education concentrating mainly on the three Rs and Scripture. Both made it their chief business to inculcate patriotism and class subordination, and both produced semi-literate readers of illustrated comic papers as well as future writers who amused themselves in their spare time outside school by reading or writing poetry. Unlike Thompson, Roberts also enjoyed boys' penny papers and adult penny periodicals churned out by the presses of Harmsworth and Pearson, but this did not prevent him from patronising the public library. Of course, for every child like Thompson or Roberts, there were several others who gained even less from their training in the three Rs than the most pessimistic school inspector feared. Memoirs, as well as more systematic recent research, confirm that a by no means

negligible number of pupils remained illiterate upon leaving school, or lost their reading and writing skills through lack of use. The percentage of those who even reached the higher standards where genuine ability to read was tested was tiny: in 1882, ‘a mere 1.9 percent proved their capacity to “read a passage from one of Shakespeare’s historical plays, or from some other standard author, or from a history of England” as demanded by Standard VI’.¹⁵ If the more gifted children had little to fear from penny dreadfuls because they were already educated enough to appreciate ‘healthy literature’, those who were let down by the system were even less likely to be tempted by something they barely had the skills to consume.

But whatever the actual reader experience may have been, the cultural construct it gave rise to deserves to be considered on its own terms. The observations that follow are based on a close reading of over fifteen articles spanning the period from 1870 – the year of Forster’s landmark Education Act – to 1901 – the end of the Victorian era and the year before the passage of the equally monumental 1902 Act, which abolished the Board schools, established the Local Education Authorities and put the provision of secondary education for the working classes on the national agenda. There were, of course, more than fifteen articles, but the extent of repetition over the thirty year span, both with regard to complaints and to proposed remedies, and the fact that some articles published decades apart actually came from the same pen (Francis Hitchman, Thomas Wright), make even a random selection at least partially representative.¹⁶ The publication venues ranged from *Macmillan’s to the Quarterly and the Fortnightly*, although the biggest proportion of such articles was to be found in the *Nineteenth Century* and the *Contemporary Review*. The spread of authors was even more impressive: from Helen Bosanquet, leader of the Charity Organisation Society and author of the Poor Law Majority Report (1909), to popular middle-brow novelists like H. Rider Haggard and James Payn; from Thomas Wright, a working-class School Board visitor and social commentator, to Hugh Chisholm, Conservative editor of the famous eleventh

edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and Alexander Strahan, Liberal publisher of the *Contemporary Review*.¹⁷ James Greenwood, brother of the editor of the *Cornhill* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and one of the first of the late-Victorian social explorers, who dressed as a tramp and slept in workhouses in order to gather material for his journalism thirty-five years before Jack London and sixty-five years before Orwell, also pitched into the debate about the ‘Penny Awfuls’. What all these people had in common was a concern with the link between lower-class schooling and reading experience, and the belief, as one article in the *Nineteenth Century* phrased it, that ‘the instruction imparted through the Board school has not superinduced any large amount of reading, except in a shape contemptible and worthless’.¹⁸ It was not sufficient to teach children *how* to read, Greenwood wrote: the newly set-up London School Board should also have been empowered ‘to root up and for ever banish from the paths of its pupils those dangerous weeds of literature that crop up in such rank luxuriance on every side to tempt them’.¹⁹ Teaching reading was not difficult, guiding pupils away from the tempting and dazzling dreadfuls that beset them on every side to more ‘wholesome and profitable’ matter was the more necessary task.

Despite the diversity of their backgrounds, most of these critics were in some way involved with popular education, popular literature, or the cultural life of the working and lower-middle classes. Chisholm described the purpose of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as ‘democratising the means of self-education’²⁰; Haggard wanted to know where the audiences for his romances came from – romances which were routinely accused of plumbing the depths of penny-dreadful awfulness, and which sold in the millions when reprinted in one-penny formats. One of the answers he proposed was the new Board schools that ‘pour[ed] out their thousands every year’.²¹ Thomas Wright, one of the most perceptive commentators on the issue of penny reading, was the most suited by his background to the task. He was a member of the self-educated, local Mechanics’ Institute-attending respectable working class,

a prolific observer of its ways of life, as well as of the culture of the poorer casual labourers his school visiting brought him into contact with. Helen Bosanquet, through her work for the COS, also had a direct acquaintance with the penny dreadful-consuming public, though her paternalistic perspective had none of the participant-observer authenticity of Wright's. Strahan, the publisher, was known for his zeal in providing 'good but inexpensive literature "for the people"', which might go some way towards explaining the recurrence of enlightened publishing self-interest as a proposed panacea for the horrors of cheap print.²² In 1870, in his own *Contemporary Review*, Strahan asked whether it was 'worthwhile to agitate for compulsory education, if, when people have learnt to read, they will content themselves with such poor innutritious stuff?'²³ The solution lay firmly in the hands of private enterprise, and Strahan took comfort in the fact that tastes would improve if a better kind of cheap literature were made available by businessmen like himself.

The belief that publishers rather than educational institutions held the key gave comfort to many other commentators over the next thirty years. Although remedies like the provision of good literature in the classroom received the obligatory nod, this school of thinking pinned its hopes primarily on the market. In 1880 Francis Hitchman, having given an extensive survey of penny journals, boys' story papers and penny dreadfuls, acknowledged that matters might mend with the further diffusion of education. But since such education routinely excluded 'culture', it was better to rely on enterprising publishers to supply good literature, and to expunge the 'tract element' associated with poorly selling philanthropic attempts to wean the working class off their poisonous addiction. Businessmen knew best.²⁴ After ruling out censorship as a solution, and admitting that the introduction of religious teaching in the Board schools to fill up the moral void was politically out of the question, Hitchman turned to the 'healthy and natural light' of capitalist enterprise: 'Publishers are beginning to awaken to the fact that the spread of education and the increased

facilities of communication have created a vast new public to which it is worth while to appeal.’ ‘The extent of the sale of the trash ... proves the existence of a public ... from whom a large profit may be drawn.’ If books, illustrations and systems of distribution were selected judiciously, and good literature published in ‘penny number form’, return on speculation would be at least as good as that ‘yielded by the shabby, vulgar, and vicious prints’ of Drury Lane.²⁵

The device of starting reviews of penny fiction with perorations on the state of elementary education and ending with appeals to progressively minded publishers to step into the breach was a favoured one. G. B. Johns, in an *Edinburgh Review* article of 1887, began with a description of the vast audience of shop-girls, errand-boys, and street arabs: the millions of Board school pupils and graduates whose demand for fiction and excitement was met with an overabundant supply of penny dreadfuls. The solution was to ‘Flood the market with good, wholesome literature, instead of the poisonous stuff to which the hapless purchasers are now condemned’, to make it ‘as easy and profitable’ to potential publishers to supply the pure as it was to supply the tainted. Although the reprint series could already boast horrible abridgements of Dickens and Thackeray, Johns proposed an entirely new penny library of healthy fiction. ‘Romances’ and ‘Lives’, ‘tales of history, love-making, adventure, crime, and fairyland’, wonder and mystery, could be written not by the anonymous purveyors of trash, but by writers such as Wilkie Collins, Elizabeth Braddon, Mrs. Oliphant, G. A. Henty, and Walter Besant. Even the old Gothic romances of Walpole and Radcliffe could be resuscitated and repackaged for a modern readership. Though to reach their target working-class audience these authors would have to dispense with preaching and simply amuse, Johns saw no reason why they could not sell as well as the rubbish currently dominating the market.²⁶

A few years later, Hugh Chisholm echoed Johns in calling upon publishers to make good fiction available as cheaply as the bad. Like Hitchman, he realised that it was unworkable to censor the dreadfuls by state legislation: they did not fall under the acts dealing with blasphemous, obscene, or seditious literature, and suppression did not in any case deal with the root of the problem. But if ‘the schoolboy [could] get the *Prisoner of Zenda* for a penny he [would] not be obliged to buy the only thing which that modest sum will now procure in the market, some choice morsel like *Sweeney Todd*’. The reduced prices could be made up for in greater circulation, and as copyrights ran out, good readable fiction from the previous fifty years would fill the shelves:

With Penny Populars like Dickens, Thackeray, Scott, the two Kingsleys, Marryat, Whyte, Melville, Lytton, G. P. R. James, Wilkie Collins, Grant ... and all the rest of them, including Stevenson, Rider Haggard, and Sir Walter Besant himself, the well-directed young glutton for fiction in the next century will have the very best chance of neglecting the rubbish-heap of badly-written and clumsy sensationalism to which the protection of better literature by the Copyright Act has resulted in confining the larger number of the poor in our own day.²⁷

‘Cheap wholesome literature for the poor’ had in fact been suggested as an alternative to the penny dreadful since at least the 1860s, and both religious societies like the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and mass-market publishers like Harmsworth, with his halfpenny juvenile periodicals intended to ‘counteract the pernicious influences of the Penny Dreadfuls’, attempted to provide it. The new publishing tycoons, however, were significantly more successful than the Religious Tract Society and its ilk in achieving ‘domination of popular publishing in Britain’, and by the turn of the twentieth century the market was monopolized ‘by a handful of large firms’.²⁸ The Amalgamated Press is the most famous, but

the anti-Dreadful counter-attack was many-pronged: W. B. Horner & Son, for example, specialised in proper and wholesome ‘Penny Stories for the People’, with hundreds of thousands of copies of hundreds of titles printed.²⁹ Chisholm had of course been disingenuous in making his argument: as David Vincent points out, ‘This reduction of “choice” to a stark contrast between the elevating and the corrupting was both misleading and perceptive’.³⁰ For a penny one could already get a reprinted classic or an improving monthly as readily as a dreadful – and the children knew it. Joseph Stamper, an iron-moulder-novelist, had to **“ponder whether to buy Thomas à Kempis or *Deadwood Dick*”**,³¹ and in his autobiography he gave an overview of the wholesome literature on offer to the youthful working-class consumer:

Maybe to neutralise the Penny Dreadful, Cassells brought out the Penny Classics. These had a bluish-green cover and were world famous novels in abridged form, but sixty or seventy pages. And W. T. Stead brought out the Penny Poets. The covers of these were pimplly surface-paper, a bright orange colour, and they contained selections from Longfellow, Tennyson, Keats, and many others. I first read *Hiawatha* and *Evangeline* in the Penny Poets and thought them marvellous; so marvellous that I began to write ‘poetry’ myself. Stead also brought out another penny book; this had a pink cover and contained selections from the ancient classics: stories from Homer, the writings of Pliny the younger, Aesop’s *Fables*.³²

In the very year that Chisholm penned his plea, 1895, W. T. Stead started his famous *Library of Penny Poets, Novels, and Prose Classics*, and he was by no means the first in the field.

But if publishers were the answer, the schools were the problem. In an 1890 review of penny fiction, ranging from old favourites like *Spring-Heeled Jack*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Turnpike Dick*, to papers like the *London Journal*, the *Family Herald*, and the *Boys of*

London and New York, Francis Hitchman took up the subject again. The opening of his article made the roots of the evil absolutely clear: ““We must educate our masters”, said Lord Sherbrooke (then Mr. Lowe), in the course of the debates on the Reform Bill of 1867. The remark fell upon fertile soil, and Mr. Forster’s Education Bill of 1870 sprang directly out of it.’ Hitchman continued with a highly partisan account of the Victorian debates over state education, coming at last to the main question:

We have been ‘educating our masters’ in the three Rs for nearly twenty years, and some of us are beginning to ask, to what use they have put that painful training in the rudiments which has cost the country so much solid money. The natural inquiry is, what do they read? Not indeed that they read much. The modern system of education, with the pressure of impending examinations for ever weighing upon teachers and children, is admirably adapted to prevent the youth of the period from troubling itself greatly about literature in any form.

But after he has left school at thirteen, ‘the working lad finds that the enterprising publishers of Shoe Lane and the purlieus thereof have provided him with a certain store of amusement.... the lads employed in City offices and warehouses, who in many cases have a great deal of leisure’, are occupied in reading, but reading ‘which is not precisely of the kind for which Cobbett and Franklin hoarded their pence. No small proportion of it comes under the category of “Penny Dreadfuls”’.

This foul and filthy trash circulates by thousands and tens of thousands week by week amongst lads who are at the most impressionable period of their lives, and whom the modern system of purely secular education has left without ballast or **guidance, it is** not surprising that the authorities have to lament the prevalence of juvenile crime, and that the Lord Mayor and

Alderman should constantly have to adjudicate in cases for which these books are directly responsible.³³

Even commentators like Thomas Wright, who did not endorse the view that penny reading led to juvenile crime, agreed that ‘the cram system, at its present high-pressure pitch’, contributed to a hatred for real books and increased susceptibility to the widely advertised penny dreadful or serial. Compared with the age before the Education Acts, the number of subjects had increased, the workload was heavy enough to ‘bewilder’ the brain, and schoolboys no longer had the time or the stamina to pursue outside reading.³⁴ As a school visitor, Wright may have been echoing contemporary concerns about ‘overpressure’: a scare of the mid 1880s which attributed child death and insanity to overwork in the Board schools. But the cramming system was being condemned from all sides: the conservative Chisholm expressed the prevailing view when he claimed that its only purpose was to ‘gain prestige for the school (and the headmaster) at the examinations’.³⁵

Most observers by the end of the century agreed that the extension of popular education did not in itself equal the extension of culture, and that without reinforcement it would produce people capable only of reading newspaper police reports. But for education professionals like Wright, schools were not just part of the problem, they could also be part of the solution. He welcomed the fact that authors like Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton, Gaskell, Reade, Trollope, Ainsworth, and Braddon had already written for the twopenny or onepenny public, but this was not enough.³⁶ What was needed was collaboration between publishers and schools. ‘Popular education and cheap literature are tunnelling ignorance from either end’:

Happily inspired publishers have issued in **school book-form** ‘Robinson Crusoe’, Southey’s ‘Life of Nelson’, and one or two other works of a like interesting character. The leading school-boards have been wise enough to

place these volumes on their Requisition Lists ... as they are found by experience to give schoolchildren a much greater interest in their work than the older forms of 'reading book'.³⁷

These older general readers – the only kind of textbook millions of children had access to for most of the Victorian period³⁸ – were 'patchwork' concoctions, not 'incentives to higher forms of reading [but] the task-work reading of the school'.³⁹ So if on the streets tales of crime and violence were to be challenged by easily accessible high quality romances from big-name novelists, in the schoolroom scrappy reading books had to be replaced by whole literature classics. Wright was predicting a trend: towards the end of the century educational publishers did begin to issue abridged or edited texts of nineteenth-century novels for school use. They were not often read continuously or for their own sake: 'The interest of the narrative', Wright pointed out, was 'necessarily ... impaired by being read not only in piecemeal, but, so to speak, in sandwich fashion – between, say, slices of grammar and arithmetic'. But even when employed for boring dictation lessons, the impression they made, Wright claimed, was great enough to 'create a taste for reading', and to inspire some students to pursue it outside the classroom. Such books could also be used to make other subjects, like geography or history, more interesting: 'a cut-and-dried geographical lesson-book' was less effective, Wright argued, than an 'illustration of the voyages of Robinson Crusoe'.⁴⁰ The argument eventually bore fruit: Rose refers to one early twentieth-century teacher 'who disregarded the timetable that prescribed one hour each for history, geography, and English. Long before the word "interdisciplinarity" had been invented, he taught them all together as one subject'.⁴¹ There were probably many others like him.

School libraries of the kind established by the London School Board were another way forward. According to Wright, 'they constitute[d] a recognition of the importance of general reading as an instrument of an improved elementary education'. They had to contain

books of interest to students, not ‘goody’ morality tales which would fail to attract the readers of penny dreadfuls as surely as the unsuccessful journals of pure literature. But ‘if a well-selected library formed part of the apparatus of every public elementary school, we might confidently expect to see the reign of the penny dreadfuls come to a speedy close’.⁴² Progress on the school library front was certainly being made: in 1880 twelve percent of ‘inspected schools in England and Wales had their own libraries’, and the figure rose to forty percent by 1900, though there is no evidence to suggest that their existence had any effect on combating the popularity of penny reading.⁴³ Hugh Chisholm also supported the move to start Board school libraries: ‘The best way to counteract the penny dreadful is to provide an equally attractive substitute, and the teachers might do a great deal by seeing that the young folk should have access to a good supply of healthy fiction’. ‘If the Education Department would get Parliament to make a grant for extending these “juvenile” libraries, it would be money well spent.’

But Chisholm also went further, proposing a solution that the working-class Wright would never have contemplated. Unlike upper-class boys who were educated either at Public boarding Schools or at home, Chisholm pointed out, Board school pupils were raised in an environment without discipline. Teachers had no authority outside school and were afraid to enforce discipline within it, parents had no time or desire to control their children at home. Something had to be done

to equalize the chances of the neglected Board school children with their more fortunate brothers at the Public schools.... the State must recognize that its responsibilities are not finished when it compels children to come and be taught. If we only teach them how to read stuff which poisons their minds we are doing them a wrong, and it is our duty to prevent that to the best of our power.

The answer was to make Board schools into imitation Public Schools, with houses, team games, ‘a regular system of moral and religious training’, and the rest of the paraphernalia, including the ‘intervention of Dr. Stick, of whose valuable ministrations our modern sentimentalists fight so uncommonly shy’. Greater involvement by the teachers in the moulding of the ‘new generation of the lower class’ **on the lines of Public School masters** was a prerequisite. ‘When one thinks of what the teachers might make of the Board schools, it is not difficult to imagine a healthier state of things among the children, which would of itself go far to counteract the morbid influences of sensational fiction’.⁴⁴

In other words, if you wanted lower-class boys to stop reading penny dreadfuls you had to transplant them to an upper-class environment. This kind of solution could never be tested in practice, but it would, ironically enough, be tested many times in the imagination of the lower-class boys in question, and teachers would have nothing to do with it. For if a Public School ethos did eventually permeate the boys’ lives, it was through the school stories found in the Amalgamated Press penny and halfpenny papers, in particular Frank Richards’ stories in the *Gem* and the *Magnet*. These taught Frederick Willis ‘to be “very loyal” to the headmaster and teachers at his old Board school: “We were great readers of school stories, from which we learnt that boys of the higher class boarding schools were courageous, honourable, and chivalrous, and steeped in the traditions of the school and loyalty to the country. We tried to mould our lives according to this formula ... the constant effort did us a lot of good.”’⁴⁵ Robert Roberts shared the experience: ‘Through the Old School we learned to admire guts, integrity, tradition’. So did numerous other boys whose testimonies Rose adduces,⁴⁶ and whose involvement stretched beyond imitation of the characters’ lingo and body language to the absorption of a ‘moral code’: ‘Over the years these simple tales conditioned the thought of a whole generation of boys. The public school ethos, distorted into myth and sold among us weekly in penny numbers, for good or ill, set ideals and standards.’⁴⁷

The worlds of the Board school and the Public School were light years apart, but unfamiliar realities could still be emulated if they were presented in the familiar format of the boys' paper. This type of identification may not have resulted in a 'common schoolboy culture that ... transcended class', as Rose opines, but it certainly proved that the reading habits condemned by critics could produce the most unexpected results.⁴⁸ Working-class pupils were not cured of their addiction to penny fiction by the salutary influence of a Public School environment: on the contrary, it was only through penny fiction that they gained access to it.

Notes

¹ For a general examination of the vocabulary of poisonous consumption, see Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). For penny dreadfuls see John Springhall, "'Pernicious Reading'? 'The Penny Dreadful' as Scapegoat for Late-Victorian Juvenile Crime", *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 27 (1994), 326–49 and idem, "'Disseminating Impure Literature": The "Penny Dreadful" Publishing Business since 1860', *Economic History Review*, 47 (1994), 567–84; Patrick Dunae, 'Penny Dreadfuls: Late Nineteenth-Century Boys' Literature and Crime', *Victorian Studies*, 22 (1979), 133–50; Elizabeth James and Helen R. Smith, *Penny Dreadfuls and Boys' Adventures: The Barry Ono Collection of Victorian Popular Literature in the British Library* (London: The British Library, 1998); and Judith Rowbotham and Kim Stevenson, *Behaving Badly: Social Panic and Moral Outrage – Victorian and Modern Parallels* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 163–8.

² Hugh Chisholm, 'How to Counteract the "Penny Dreadful"', *Fortnightly Review*, 58 (Nov. 1895), 765–75 (p. 771).

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- ³ Joseph Ackland, 'Elementary Education and the Decay of Literature', *Nineteenth Century*, 35 (Mar. 1894), 412–23.
- ⁴ Thomas Wright, 'On a Possible Popular Culture', *Contemporary Review*, 40 (Jul./Dec. 1881), 25–44 (p. 27).
- ⁵ Chisholm, p. 771.
- ⁶ Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 368–70.
- ⁸ David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 223; W. H. Davies, *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1908), p. 10.
- ⁹ Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 181.
- ¹⁰ Richard James Stonesifer, *W. H. Davies: A Critical Biography* (London: Cape, 1963), p. 21.
- ¹¹ Rose, pp. 33, 157–58.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 159.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 162. For just one example of the type of literature such working-class intellectuals went on to read see Rose, pp. 191–2.
- ¹⁴ Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (1971; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), and *idem*, *A Ragged Schooling: Growing Up in the Classic Slum* (1976; London: Fontana, 1978).
- ¹⁵ Vincent, p. 90.
- ¹⁶ For many more examples see *Popular Print Media, 1820–1900*, ed. by Andrew King and John Plunkett, 3 vols (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).
- ¹⁷ Helen Bosanquet, 'Cheap Literature', *Contemporary Review*, 79 (Jan./June 1901), 671–81;

James Payn, 'Penny Fiction', *Nineteenth Century*, 9 (Jan. 1881), 145–54.

¹⁸ Edward Salmon, 'What the Working Classes Read', *Nineteenth Century*, 20 (Jul. 1886), 108–17 (p. 117).

¹⁹ James Greenwood, 'Penny Awfuls', *St. Paul's Magazine*, 12 (Feb. 1873), 161–68 (p. 161).

²⁰ Nigel Hamilton, 'Chisholm, Hugh (1866–1924)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32404>> [accessed 10 Jan. 2010] (para. 3 of 9).

²¹ H. Rider Haggard, 'About Fiction', *Contemporary Review*, 51 (Jan./June 1887), 172–80 (p. 174).

²² Patricia Srebnik, 'Strahan, Alexander Stuart (1833–1918)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/40987>> [accessed 10 Jan. 2010] (para. 3 of 5).

²³ Alexander Strahan, 'Our Very Cheap Literature', *Contemporary Review*, 14 (Apr./Jul. 1870), 439–60 (pp. 458–59).

²⁴ Francis Hitchman, 'The Penny Press', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 43 (Nov. 1880/Apr. 1881), 385–98 (pp. 385–89).

²⁵ Francis Hitchman, 'Penny Fiction', *Quarterly Review*, 171 (Jul. 1890), 150–71 (pp. 170–71).

²⁶ G. B. Johns, 'The Literature of the Streets', *Edinburgh Review*, 165 (Jan. 1887), 40–65 (pp. 62–63).

²⁷ Chisholm, p. 774.

²⁸ Joseph McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain, 1914–1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 23.

²⁹ Victor Neuburg, *Popular Literature: A History and Guide* (London: The Woburn Press, 1977), p. 228.

³⁰ Vincent, pp. 222–23.

³¹ Rose, p. 371.

³² Joseph Stamper, *So Long Ago* (London: Hutchinson, 1960), p. 162

<<http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/recorddetails2.php?id=11365>> [accessed: 10 Jan. 2010].

³³ Hitchman, ‘Penny Fiction’, pp. 150–51, 154.

³⁴ Wright, ‘On a Possible Popular Culture’, pp. 32, 34.

³⁵ Chisholm, p. 772.

³⁶ Thomas Wright, ‘Concerning the Unknown Public’, *Nineteenth Century*, 13 (Feb. 1883), 279–96 (p. 296).

³⁷ Wright, ‘On a Possible Popular Culture’, p. 40.

³⁸ See Christopher Stray and Gillian Sutherland, ‘Mass Markets: Education’, in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, ed. by David McKitterick, 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), VI: *1830–1914*, pp. 359–81.

³⁹ Wright, ‘On a Possible Popular Culture’, p. 41.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 41.

⁴¹ Rose, p. 159.

⁴² Wright, ‘On a Possible Popular Culture’, pp. 41–42.

⁴³ Rose, p. 149.

⁴⁴ Chisholm, pp. 771–73.

⁴⁵ Rose, p. 323. School Boards were abolished by the 1902 Education Act, so the *Gem* and *Magnet*’s Edwardian readers could not have attended ‘Board schools’, but in practice the elementary educational establishments in question would have been the same.

⁴⁶ See Rose, pp. 322–31.

⁴⁷ Roberts, *Classic Slum*, pp. 160–1.

⁴⁸ Rose, pp. 328–29.