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Embracing the Written Word

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Embracing the Written Word

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Embracing the written word

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From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307 by M. T. Clanchy. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: Edwin Arnold, 1979. 330 pages.

The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City by Harvey J. Graff. New York, London: Academic Press, 1979. 352 pages.

In the West we are at the same time suspicious of the success of literacy and obsessed by the possibility of its decline. During the recent triumph of *Princess Daisy*, a novel of greater commercial appeal than artistic quality, the *New York Times* quoted a publishing industry representative to the effect that so few people read at all these days, any sign of collective reading pleasure ought to be welcomed as an indication that readers will eventually move on to finer things. To say that few people read is to distort the facts in behalf of a powerful ideology which seeks to justify literacy almost exclusively (and not a little paradoxically) as instrumental to high culture.

Not only critics and publishing industry representatives are subject to lapses of this kind. A growing interest in the ways most people actually have made use of literacy skills has in the last decade or so persuaded many historians to discard a Whiggishly idealized model of literate development which Western societies have usually been depicted as asymptotically approximating. A competing Romantic school has always interpreted the development models as a fall from a purer, better culture, but has accepted the Whig narrative of events in order to deplore them. More and more historians now argue that the transformation to literacy never followed the simple progressive model taken for granted by Whigs and Romantics, that oral forms were extraordinarily difficult to dislodge, that we have mistaken our own familiar habits of mind and expectations for a universal account.

Two recent attempts to examine literacy in a more historically faithful way begin at quite different points in Western development. In ***From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307***, M. T. Clanchy has reconstructed the sequence of events by which written records became part of the routine conduct of English government in the late Middle Ages and laid the foundations for state-sponsored mass literacy movements in the nineteenth century. The utility of literacy for urban Canadians at mid-nineteenth century is the subject of ***The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City*** by Harvey Graff.

Since their investigative temperaments are as different as their temporal perspectives, these two studies give us a chance to consider the new historiography of literacy as well. Graff's study is a statistical analysis of literates and non-literates from 1861 census data for three Canadian communities—Hamilton, the largest and most important, London, and Kingston—with occasional glances at 1871 data as well. His work is part of an econometrically oriented tradition, largely revisionist, convinced that the hard data of history are there to set the record straight. Clanchy, on the other hand, works in the tradition of cultural history. He is more interested in the imaginative lives of his subjects than in their political and economic fortunes. He asks how habits of mind changed as a result of literate practices and, conversely, what habits of mind had to change before literacy could take hold. His evidence, which ranges widely from anecdotal tradition to surviving manuscripts, has none of the regularity—or narrowness—of census data. Viewed even with finer and different kinds of instruments, many aspects of the history of literacy remain elusive in both studies. But they effectively challenge the common-sense historical notion of literacy as the simple extension of modern ways of thinking to more and more people. What distinguishes much of the new work on literacy is the recognition that literate habits of mind were gropingly arrived at in a world that had worked quite well without them. Fascinating compromises were made between literate and non-literate practices in the process.

The thesis of ***The Literacy Myth*** is simple. It attacks the rhetoric of nineteenth-century educators (and modern reformers by implication) who preached that literacy would advance the fortunes of all citizens and increase the harmony of community life, especially by diminishing crime. Contradicting the claims of the reformers, Graff argues that literacy skills did not help the poor. According to his figures, ethnicity was a far more important correlate of class and status in a population ninety percent literate by self-report, and crime and literacy were unrelated. Graff believes the possession of literacy only exaggerated the effects of ethnicity. In all three communities, citizens of English Protestant descent were at the top of the social heap and those of Irish Catholic descent at the bottom. English Protestant non-literates were only slightly less economically and socially advantaged than English Protestant literates. Similarly, literate Irish Catholics were

only slightly less disadvantaged than non-literate Irish Catholics. Blacks were an exception to the pattern; their literacy skills had absolutely no influence on their worldly fortunes.

There are several problems with Graff's thesis about the failure of rhetorical promise to match the facts of literacy. Although he gives us chart after chart of statistical comparisons, their very number obscures the unequal significance of the results they offer and the real dearth of information some of them present. Many sample and cell sizes are so small that we must doubt the generalizability of conclusions derived from them. Nor is this unevenness made sufficiently apparent in the supporting text.

More important is that the evidence neither proves nor disproves the larger explanation Graff offers for the failure of rhetoric to match or affect reality as he has measured it. The purpose of promotional rhetoric about literacy, he hypothesizes, was to seduce the work force into accepting the discipline of industrialization. By teaching accommodation to externally imposed routines, literacy helped re-educate workers away from traditional work habits more efficiently and less disruptively than coercion could do. Similar explanations have been offered for the development of other institutions in the industrializing West—among them the factory, the asylum, and the school. In the case of literacy this reasoning may conceal more than it reveals by bringing the inquiry to a premature end.

For what other reasons could rhetoric have failed to match facts? That question cannot be satisfactorily answered without some notion of the nature of self-reported literacy skills in a mid-nineteenth-century urban setting, which Graff is unable to provide. At times he says the evidence is not available; on other occasions he suggests that the literacy skills of Canadian workingmen (women of all classes were poorly educated) were barely functional by modern standards, since literacy was superfluous for coping successfully in emerging industrial society. In every case he treats literacy as a single, uniform phenomenon. Minus evidence about various levels of mid-nineteenth-century urban literacy—whether there were any, and if they differed significantly in their social efficacy—Graff's conclusions about the monolithic impotence of literacy are too positive, and the rhetoric of educational reformers is too easily disparaged for bad motive. If literacy skills differed up and down the social scale with different educational opportunities associated with class, and if self-reports of literacy among English Protestants generally referred to a much different set of habits and practices than self-reports of literacy among Irish Catholics, it is easy to understand why contemporary reformers believed high quality literacy could work a powerful transformation among the poor. It is not clear from Graff's data that literacy skills at one level of the social hierarchy were just the same as literacy skills at another level and therefore that the acquisition of high quality literacy skills could make no difference in the lives of the poor.

A related question is whether Graff has chosen the appropriate interval within which to assess the impact of literacy. He reports, for example, that the children of illiterates had a poorer start in life across classes than the children of literates, though he finds the absolute advantages and disadvantages too small to be significant. It is possible that such differences grew with compound interest from generation to generation, and that the proper interval for such effects is generational rather than cross-sectional at a single point. Elizabeth Eisenstein has recently reminded us that it took printing perhaps a century to make its impact felt, and the frame of reference used by Clanchy in *From Memory to Written Record* to chart the movement of an entire society toward written records is two centuries. To see improvement in the lot of one's children is surely not an insignificant reward. And Graff never considers whether the wider world that literacy made available did not have rewards of its own, even without a direct cash translation. Perhaps patience is a virtue for historians as well as reformers to cultivate.

From Memory to Written Record has two parts—an account of materials and methods by which written records were made and kept, and a discussion from several perspectives of the gradual shift from non-literate to literate social organization. Its most interesting contribution is to our imagination of what literacy meant at a different time under conditions different from our own. In a late medieval society where French, Latin, and English all had currency, special functions attached to each. Latin, the traditional language of formal writing, was not the language of speech; the differences between seeing and hearing assumed in importance a variety and a subtlety which is unfamiliar to us. The growth of literacy was not merely an extension of elite habits; psychological and social bridges had to be built across the divide of speech and script. Ingenious compromises made new written routines assimilable while providing continuing access for non-literates to social activity. The beauty of the calligraphy and visual imagery of illuminated manuscripts, for example, gave them a meaning even for those who could not read, just as the persistent habit of reading aloud kept non-literates informed. The symbolic objects of the oral tradition—cups, knives, rings and swords, fragments which recalled the living memory of some ancient event—were recapitulated in personal seals which had the combined character of the unique personal relic and a replicable standard to serve the needs of documentary validation.

Clanchy traces the process by which writing began to shape English officialdom during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. He assigns the beginning of this transition to pressures exerted on monastic houses to justify their ancient claims and privileges to foreign rulers arriving in the wake of the Norman invasion. Since documents were counterfeited as needed, based often on earlier authentic documents and revered oral traditions, distrust of writing was more than simple suspicion of the unfamiliar. It also was a pragmatic recognition of the real untrustworthiness of many documents. Practical literacy nevertheless posed a different relationship to writing than the monastic culture which had been its guardian for centuries. The shift from unique sacred documents, which were derived from oral pledges transmitted through trusted, known persons and reinforced by memory objects, to administrative documents, which were organized by principles of comparison, reference, and utility for strangers, required new habits of thinking, particularly the invention of suitable storage and retrieval systems and dating procedures. Before documentation was taken for granted, memorable occurrences had been temporally anchored to singular persons or benchmark events. Early documents were therefore either undated or, gradually, associated with recurring religious, personal, or regnal events. One document might even contain several dating systems. Only by degrees did written records shift to a single uniform calendar.

The governors themselves were not always sure what to do with the documents they summoned into existence. Record-making, keeping, and retrieving were separate imaginative and historical achievements. William the Conqueror's famous "Domesday" survey was never administratively consulted until the thirteenth century. Edward I's order to search the royal archives in 1300 for evidence of his claim to Scotland was a royal precedent, but inadequate storage and retrieval procedures rendered the accumulated archive nearly useless for another century.

The sense of an ecosystem of literate and non-literate practice and custom which Clanchy articulates so skillfully and which is the real strength of his work is precisely what is lacking in Graff. To some extent Graff's omission of the social details of the practice and significance of literacy in mid-nineteenth-century urban Canada reflects a modern mythological view that statistics tell the simple truth. At the same time Graff has felt little need to discover a social matrix for his census data because it is already provided by his ideological system. In this case, ideology does not substitute for what should have been a more searching examination of both qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Whatever their differences, Graff and Clanchy share a belief that the extension of literacy must be supported by a strong state or authority of some kind, and that secular literacy has grown historically to serve practical goals more than the ideals of liberal education. Both studies also share an appreciation of the great ambivalence with which societies have embraced the written word, in spite of its utility. The particular theme of skepticism takes its color from its own time. Today, for example, there is the story popularized by the late Christopher Evans about a future civilization that fills all available storage space with data, not only on the earth but throughout the solar system. Eventually, spacecraft must set out to locate new worlds, new sites for data storage. Outbound they meet a ship approaching them in search of the same thing. This story reflects a continuous cultural tradition that begins at least as early as the Domesday survey, an unprecedented written accounting of people and property. So alarmingly thorough was it, in the eyes of the native Anglo-Saxons who were its subjects, that it seemed to them like the Last Judgment described in Revelations, and they named it "Domesdei" or Doomsday.

In their own way, they knew what was coming.