

The Cultural Front

The Literature of Labour: Two Hundred Years of Working Class Writing

H Gustav Klaus *Harvester Press* £18.95

Reading by Numbers: Contemporary Publishing and Popular Fiction

Ken Worpole *Comedia* £3.95



Why are the following critics in such a bad temper?

'They had better furnish the man with good implements for his trade than raise subscriptions for his poems. He may make an excellent shoe-maker, but can never make a good poet.'

'It is important that we do all we can to increase the audience for today's writers, not that we increase the number of writers. There are already too many writers chasing too few readers.'

The first is Dr Johnson, denying that an 18th century Birmingham cobbler like James Woodehouse could write anything that deserved to be published, never mind read. The second is Charles Osborne, Literary Director of the Arts Council, in much the same terms, denying grant aid to a more recent generation of working class writers. Though there are 200 years between these two statements, there is little to choose between them in terms of critical impatience and cultural prejudice.

Gustav Klaus in his collection of essays on British working class and socialist literature over the past 200 years, repeatedly and emphatically dumps the notion that there is something incompatible between working and writing. This is particularly true of his discussion of the work of Woodehouse and his contemporary 'plebian' poets. These essays go a long way towards a rediscovery of some sort of

unselfconscious tradition of political reading and writing by working men and women. And it is refreshing reading for anyone concerned at the state of 'English letters' at the moment.

Ken Worpole feels that there is reason enough to worry about a literary culture that can pay Harold Robbins £40 per word but which cannot find any room on the bookshelves for the ordinary writings of ordinary people. On the one hand there is the world of the literary establishment promoting the continuation of an ever-narrowing literary tradition. On the other hand commercial publishing is increasingly interested only in the formulaic international best-seller. This gulf is between what people are told they ought to read and what they actually do read; into this gulf falls most working class and socialist literature. This is exacerbated by the gruff elitism of the Arts Council which refuses to give financial support to *any* literature, since it is 'sustained by a large and profitable commercial publishing industry.' Is there any room then for working class or socialist writing?

Both Klaus and Worpole are aware that our literary tradition is not one of unbroken exclusiveness that can be written off as irredeemably bourgeois and bad. There have been moments when the literary establishment has recognised the power of popular writing, the originality of popular reading tastes, the importance of working class and socialist literature. In particular working men and women were able in the second half of the 1930s to find their way into print on a scale seen neither before nor since.

Harold Heslop, a Durham miner and a socialist, is a good example of this phenomenon. Heslop is central to Klaus' book, and enjoys a chapter all on his own; and he precisely illustrates Worpole's argument about the radical and renewing possibilities of popular writing. For not only did he try and popularise political arguments about trade union leadership, the mechanisation of the coal industry, the social consequences of pit closures, he did so in popular literary forms - detective fiction, a historical novel and a science fiction novel. This was partly because he sought to reach people who otherwise would not read 'political' novels, and partly because of the radical potential of these forms - the analytical properties of detective stories, the materialist elements of historical novels, the Utopian possibilities of science fiction.

According to Worpole such popular forms of writing have proved not only the most innovatory, subversive and flexible genres of the last century, but also the most influential. We cannot understand Brecht without reading Kipling; or Barry Hines without understanding his debt to children's writing; or much of feminist fiction without understanding its relation to romantic fiction. And these forms never go completely stale - hence Worpole's enthusiasm for the recent series of political thrillers published by Pluto. If the Left is *only* interested in triumphalist tales of industrial militancy, we will never create anything more than a literary ghetto.

On the other hand, as Klaus argues, we cannot understand the novels of Dickens, Disraeli or Mrs Gaskell if we ignore the novels of Chartism; we cannot understand the writings of the 'pink intellectuals' in the 30s unless we acknowledge the contributions of explicitly socialist writers; the force and influence of the documentary movement in the 30s and 40s make little sense if we forget the radical aesthetics on which it was originally based.

Both these books are excellent introductions to the sociology of literary production, detailing the material problems and the literary consequences of different kinds of productive relations - patronage, subscriptions, commissioning, editing, subsidy, the market - and the effects of distribution and price. (How many working class writers can afford *The Literature of Labour*?) Above all they are very clear on both the dangers and the necessity of literary patronage. Klaus writes perceptively about the *patronising* and damaging ways in which working class writers have been briefly and superficially 'taken up' by the literary establishment.

But he recognises too that working class or even socialist literature cannot be an 'autonomous entity', and that without patronage few people can ever make it into print. The communist novelists that he discusses - John Sommerfield, James Barke, Ralph Bates and Mulk Raj Anand - all owed their publication, success and their impact to the cultural politics of the Popular Front. 'It is important to realise,' he asserts, 'that the cultural significance of the 1930s lies not only in the fact that representatives from the underprivileged sections of British society were drawn into the artistic ambit, but also in the political awakening of an overprivileged group and their consequent literary intervention.'

The success of the remarkably produc-

tive political and cultural alliance in the Popular Front years is worth remembering today. The number of writers who have publicly associated themselves with the NUM in recent months is an exciting development. But it has been almost entirely a one-way process. Working class and socialist poets, novelists, playwrights, memoirists need to be able to break into print on a much wider and popular scale. Lawrence and Wishart's series of reprints from the 30s and the Hogarth Press's projected 'Socialist Classics' are important commercial innovations. But the process has to go beyond merely reprinting the literary past.

Feminist writers and publishers have been very successful in breaking new ground in the last few years. Similarly there have been breakthroughs in gay publishing and in black and third world books. Feminist, gay and black politics have a strong cultural component, and this has led to a context and a natural audience for their writers. We need a similar context for socialist and working class politics.

Andy Croft