

CHRISTOPHER HILLIARD. *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain*. Harvard Historical Studies, 150. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. Pp. 390. \$29.95 (cloth).

In his discussion of intellectuals in the so-called *Prison Notebooks*, composed in the 1930s, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci insisted that “all men [and women] are intellectuals,” though he added that “not all men [and women] have in society the function of intellectuals.” His slogan, if a sentence necessarily designed to elude the prison censors can be categorized as a slogan, was “*homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*” (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks* [London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971], 9). The rigid opposition that some self-consciously modernistic intellectuals instituted between themselves and the masses at this time is collapsed completely.

Gramsci argued that even the most mechanical physical labor involved creative intellectual activity, and that there is in consequence no such thing as purely physical labor. Furthermore, he emphasized, each man pursues intellectual activities outside his professional duties: “he is a ‘philosopher,’ an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought” (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 9). Men and women are intellectuals, according to Gramsci, in the quite ordinary pursuits that they take up in order consciously or unconsciously to compensate for their alienated function in the capitalist mode of production.

Gramsci’s efforts to democratize prevailing conceptions of philosophical thinking coincides almost exactly with the “democratization of writing” that Christopher Hilliard identifies in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. In Hilliard’s fascinating social-historical account of the decades conventionally associated with the advent of modernism, all men and women are effectively creative writers, either potentially or in actuality. The argument in the *Prison Notebooks* is of course the product of a specific intellectual formation (one shaped by Benedetto Croce as much as Lenin) and of a particular political situation (the attempt to build the Italian Communist Party in the emergent epoch of fascism). But it nonetheless signals, albeit telegraphically, the fact that, during these decades, the process of democratization unfolded in a slightly broader context, both historical and geographical, than Hilliard’s tightly focused book about the production and consumption of demotic literature in Britain can offer. The most salient aspects of this process, though there is no space to discuss them in detail, are no doubt the rise of mass media like the cinema and radio and the mobilization of the labor movement.

*To Exercise Our Talents* is, however, a scrupulous and convincing attempt to excavate the traces of a sometimes spectacular and sometimes subterranean explosion of popular creative writing particularly during the interwar period. It is interested in the literature produced by both the “unprinted proletariat” (as one contemporary editor put it), and those sections of the lower-middle and middle classes that had not benefited from a higher education (130). It accesses these lost and forgotten testaments to the unpretentious intellectual aspirations of plebeian authors through an impressive archival investigation of a vast number of periodicals, writing clubs, and publishing companies. Hilliard’s book is evocative and at times even moving in its historical reconstruction of the social dynamics that operated for example in the amateur writers’ circles, which created what he calls “a ‘depoliticized’ but implicitly conservative kind of middle-class sociability, and one in which both men and women could congregate” (7).

*Seven*, a “Magazine of Popular Writing” that, according to Hilliard, “had a better claim to the designation ‘people’s writing’ than any other periodical or organization of its time” (163), can for the purposes of this review stand as representative of the almost invisible

mass movement identified in this book, and not least because it stood at the intersection of those traditions of popular writing in which Hilliard is most interested, “the tradition of working-class writing and the aspirant writers’ movement represented by writers’ circles” (164). At the height of its success this magazine, which featured fiction, nonfiction, and photographs by what it called “non-professional writers and artists,” sold 100,000 copies an issue (168).

Philip O’Connor, who became the coeditor of *Seven* from 1940, though he had previously contributed poems to it, seems to have embodied the democratic aspirations of “people’s writing” with particular ambition and élan. He deliberately cocked a snook at the literary establishment, insisting that ordinary people were capable of spontaneously producing extraordinary literature, in contrast to the high priests and priestesses of the deadly modernist cult. “We think that children and people not used to writing make a livelier job of it than the professionals,” O’Connor asserted in antitechnocratic tones analogous to those of Gramsci; “they use the first words they think of, which are the best, arrange them in a way as exciting as the subject, skilfully evocative, because people are natural artists” (172).

Hilliard’s chapter on *Seven*, which is all the more compelling because it reproduces some of the material published in the periodical, precisely underlines one of his book’s central theses, that amateur literature, paradoxically, was the almost apolitical expression of ordinary people whose lives were inescapably shaped by the politics of the period. “The fact that even a ‘social-literary movement’ of people to whom politics really mattered did not consistently produce very politicized writing,” Hilliard argues, “suggests strongly that the default popular attitude was to regard writing and politics as separate domains” (194). Instead, plebeian creative writing provided a means both of developing alternative models of sociability to those available in everyday contexts like the home and the workplace and of fulfilling popular romantic aspirations to articulate ordinary personal experiences as meaningful and authentic.

In pursuing a “literary history from below,” as Hilliard calls it, *To Exercise Our Talents* quietly redefines the cultural landscape of the first half of the previous century in relation to this “complex of popular romanticism,” and in so doing rescues innumerable writers from the enormous condescension of posterity. This is an intensely humanistic piece of scholarship in which *homo faber* becomes inseparable from *homo scriptor*.

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GRAHAM WALKER. *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party: Protest, Pragmatism and Pessimism*. Manchester Studies in Modern History. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004. Pp. 308. \$120.00 (cloth).

Graham Wheeler has written an ambitious history of the leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party, from its origins as an anti-Home Rule movement, to the Stormont parliament’s party of government, to the leading voice of unionism in Northern Ireland under direct rule. He stresses consistent issues throughout the party’s history, such as its inability to move beyond its original program of opposition to Irish unity and its futile quest for a permanent settlement of Northern Ireland’s status. He also evaluates the importance of the set-aside of seats on the Council for the Orange Order as a key to the perpetuation of ethnic politics in Northern Ireland: “By placing [the Orange Order] so prominently within the engine room of Unionism . . . they were signalling their willingness formally to embrace religious sectarianism and the militant ethnic politics which accompanied it” (23).

The Unionist Party faced the standard nationalist movement’s problem of portraying a unified public image while handling numerous internal factions. Given the nature of Home