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Breaking the “Class” Ceiling: The Challenges and Opportunities of Creating a Digital Archive of Edwardian Working-Class Book Inscriptions

Abstract

Book inscriptions are an important example of “ordinary writing” that have the potential to reshape current understandings of working-class life in Edwardian Britain (1901–1914). Nonetheless, due to historical bias in collection policies and the perceived value of working-class writing, books containing these marks tend to survive largely outside of official institutions of power. Furthermore, when examples exist in libraries and archives, they tend to be scant and undocumented and, thus, are difficult to find. Without some form of intervention, these inscriptions face endangerment and entire narratives of working-class culture and history risk being eradicated. Digital preservation offers an important way to safeguard these inscriptions and make them available on a large scale. However, there are a number of challenges that prevent or hinder the possibility. This paper explores some of these difficulties and suggests ways in which they can be overcome in order to give a permanent voice to the voiceless and break the “class” ceiling.

Keywords

book inscriptions; class barriers; Edwardian; digital archive; working-class; historical bias

1. Introduction_____

The Edwardian era (1901–1914) marked an important period in the history of the British working classes. More than twenty years of free and compulsory education had resulted in a highly literate population, while rapid changes in book production methods meant that book prices had decreased dramatically. As a result, book ownership became democratized and increasingly possible for both male and female members of the working classes (McKitterick 2009, 73–74). Access to literature sparked an awareness of the inequalities in British society, leading many working-class individuals to question the deeply-rooted division between “those who served” and “those who were served” (Todd 2014, 28). These individuals became active participants in the labor movement, joining trade unions, signing up to the newly established Labour Party and enrolling their children in Socialist Sunday Schools. They formed mutual improvement societies, accessed Mechanics’ Institutes and Miners’ Libraries and attended Workers’ Educational Association classes to exchange ideas and share experiences. This wave of self-education, community spirit, industrial militancy and political mobilization meant that the working classes were no longer helpless bystanders with no say in the decisions made by Westminster; they were now a collective force with their own identity, goals, ambitions and strategies (O’Hagan 2020b, 202).

One surprising way in which many of these working-class changes are captured is in the Edwardian book inscription. Inscriptions dominated books in this period, from simple hand-written declarations of possession and gift marks to prize stickers and bookplates. These

traces of ownership provide unprecedented knowledge of working-class life and culture in early twentieth-century Britain, standing as important first-hand evidence of people's identities, social circles, jobs, hobbies, beliefs, hopes and fears. While some provide the formative voices of future Labour MPs or trade union leaders, most capture the voices of men and women who passed their lives under the radar but made important contributions to Edwardian society in their own ways, whether through serving, mining, sewing, building, teaching or soldiering. Thus, book inscriptions enable new understandings of everyday life in Edwardian Britain for men, but perhaps more significantly for women, who are too often relegated to the sidelines in working-class history (cf. Dunk 2003; Loveday 2014).

Many of these book inscriptions are rare, only exist in a single instance and are not protected in official archives or libraries. Without some form of intervention, they face endangerment and entire narratives of working-class culture and history risk being eradicated. A digital archive of Edwardian working-class book inscriptions offers a permanent way to safeguard these material artifacts and give their creators "pictorial enfranchisement" (Phillips 2004, 4), thus ensuring their survival for future generations. The archive would be of considerable use for academics (particularly in the fields of book history, social history, literacy studies, sociology and sociolinguistics), as well as librarians and archivists. It also has high pedagogical value for teachers and would be an important resource for members of the general public with an interest in family history and local history. For several years, I have been trying to lay the groundwork for its creation, but I have faced numerous challenges along the way. In this chapter, I reflect on some of those challenges and how they might be overcome in order to give a permanent voice to the voiceless and break the "class" ceiling.

2. The Case for a Digital Archive of Edwardian Working-Class Book Inscriptions

Although the idea of giving a voice to the working classes may seem perfectly reasonable, it is, in fact, a historically radical view. This position had to be forged over time against the assumption that only the histories of high-status individuals merited academic study (O'Hagan 2020, 14). The foundations for this change in mentality were largely laid in the 1960s by the work of E.P. Thompson and his pioneering "History from Below", which emphasized historical events from the perspective of common people rather than leaders. Through its focus on class relationships, political movements and organized labor, History from Below fostered a new way of looking at the working classes that helped restore a sense of power and agency to them (Thompson 1966, 279–80). However, in the 1980s, there was a shift back to focusing on the lived experiences of the middle and upper classes, which led to working-class history becoming "an increasingly disregarded fragment of historical studies" (Hitchcock 2004, 295). In 2004, Tim Hitchcock advocated for a "New" History from Below that based historical research on sources *from* ordinary people and not merely *about* them. Hitchcock received support from Martyn Lyons who argued that a "New" History from Below must recognize the autonomy of working-class writers and refuse to regard them as "passive receptacles for information and ideologies produced by someone else" (2010, 59.4). By bringing individual experiences to the forefront, the "New" History from Below aimed to foster a re-evaluation of how ordinary people navigate the emerging institutions of the

modern state and how their behavior shapes such institutions. In short, it would make the working classes active agents in shaping their own lives and culture (O'Hagan 2020a, 16).

The "New" History from Below fits well with the new agendas of archives and libraries to provide a more diverse representation of society in their collections. Institutions began to recognize that they wielded great power in the shaping of public memory and, therefore, they had to act socially responsible and use this power in safe and inclusive ways (Seale 2013; Caswell 2017). Equality and diversity are now high on the collection policies of all institutions. The National Archives, for example, promotes an annual Diversity Week, where "hidden" histories from their records are shared with the general public. They have also produced specific research guides to help users find records relating to Black history, LGBTQ+ history and women's history. However, most institutions continue to pay little attention to the working classes, often viewing this group as falling into the remit of community and specialist archives that are typically driven by social or political movements [e.g. Working Class Movement Library in Manchester; South Wales Miners' Library in Swansea] (Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd 2009). This disregard leaves a burgeoning gap in the history of members of the working classes who were not politically mobilized (particularly women), a gap that book inscriptions can fill.

Equally, despite its claim to be built on openness and a sense of community, the field of digital humanities has also been criticized for failing to give sufficient voice to historically marginalized groups. Ezell (2010, 107) claims that a bias against manuscript evidence means that certain texts remain prioritized over others and push the work of minor and anonymous authors to the side. This view is supported by Risam (2015) who argues that a heavy focus on digitizing copyright-free material has privileged canonical texts and writers, who are predominantly white, middle-class men. Furthermore, research by Bordalejo (2018) on diversity in digital humanities has found that most digital humanists are binary, white, affluent and anglophone, which has led to an overwhelming bias in the types of texts that are digitized and studied. In light of these criticisms, Earhart (2012) recognizes the need to "examine the canon that we, as digital humanists, are constructing" to ensure that the working classes, women, people of color and LGBTQ+ communities are all represented. By not giving these minorities a digital presence, the field risks replicating historical practices that favor the dominant culture and relegate difference to its margins (Risam 2015). Higgin (2010) goes further, arguing that digital humanities as a whole downplays issues of cultural politics because of "a disposition that the battles of race, gender, class and ecology have already been won, their lessons have been learned and by espousing a rhetoric of equity, everything will fall into place". Potter (2013, 358) supports this notion, asserting that, although new digital technologies have their own history, they resonate with historical questions of race, class, gender, nationalism and sexuality, and, consequently, must not be separated from them.

In the past five years, increasing attention has been paid to the need to diversify digital humanities and make it a more inclusive field of study. Gallon (2016) has pushed for a "technology of recovery" to fill the aperture between Black Studies and digital humanities and "help unmask the racialized systems of power at work" (43) in how we understand the field

and use its associated techniques. Similarly, Ruberg, Boyd and Howe (2018) have emphasized the importance of a “queer digital humanities” to make visible histories of queer representation and issues affecting queer communities and, in doing so, to foreground social justice and value social criticism and people as much as computation and data. Important work has also been carried out by Risam (2018) to decolonize digital humanities and Losh and Wernimont (2018) to introduce a feminist perspective to the field. Mahony (2018) and Liu (2020) have focused instead on linguistic and cultural diversity, arguing that the digitization of non-English texts must be prioritized in order to strengthen and diversify our understanding of how we view and understand the world around us. However, despite these important breakthroughs in the field of digital humanities, inclusive representation and diversity in terms of social class remain largely ignored.

Although there is still much to be done, there are several pioneering digital humanities projects taking place in the United Kingdom that aim to give a platform to these historically “silent” groups. The Stray Voices project (SOAS University of London), for example, draws attention to the stories and images of homeless men and women in order to understand the social, administrative and cultural history of vagrancy, while Writing Lives (a collaboration between Brunel, Liverpool John Moore, Open University and Sheffield Hallam) is an initiative to digitize “out-of-print, inaccessible, unexcavated and critically neglected” working-class autobiographies. The Edwardian Postcard Project (Lancaster University) is another important resource of 5,000 postcards that can be used to explore the writing practices, travel patterns and social networks of (largely) working-class and lower-middle-class Edwardians. However, there is currently no existing digital archive of working-class book inscriptions.

On the whole, inscriptions held in formal institutions have either been disregarded as “mundane” and not deemed necessary of photographing or, when they have been photographed by researchers, this has been carried out solely for the purposes of fieldwork and the images have not been publicly shared. The creation of a digital archive of working-class book inscriptions would, thus, offer an innovative, interdisciplinary resource that “constitutes a rich chronicle of ordinary experience” (Edwards 2004, 29). This is because collected inscriptions would not just be safeguarded and made accessible to users, but would also be tagged with detailed metadata on the local context of the book, the inscription, the awarding institution (when relevant), the inscriber’s personal life and the broader context of Edwardian society. As the rate of literacy in Edwardian Britain was almost 100%, book inscriptions offer the unique opportunity to learn just as much about female experiences as male. In doing so, the archive would act as a critical and analytical space that challenges users to rethink their current understanding of working-class life and culture in early twentieth-century Britain.

A sample inscription can be seen in Figure 1, with the type of information that would be tagged and made searchable for users in the accompanying Table 1. It comes from my own dataset of 4,000 book inscriptions, collected as part of my doctoral and postdoctoral research (see [Opportunity One](#) section for further details). The first field indicates a basic transcription of the text provided in the inscription; the second field outlines the category and sub-

categories of inscription, the writing implement used, the printing technique used, the surface material used, the date of inscription and its position in the book; the third field details the title of the book, its author, publisher, place of publication and date of publication; the fourth field specifies the various institutions or people involved in the awarding of the book (when relevant); the fifth field documents the name of the recipient/inscriber and their gender, age, location and occupation; the sixth field enables biographical notes on the recipient/inscriber to be recorded; and the seventh field allows open text on any other pertinent information. The biographical information is obtained from census records and other official documents available on www.ancestry.com, while details on social institutions of the Edwardian period come from www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. Together, these fields provide comprehensive information about the social life of the book inscription that emphasizes its function as a social object that is laden with culturally-specific meanings and is part of the reproduction and performance of social values.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 AND TABLE 1]

Overall, a digital archive of Edwardian working-class book inscriptions would be of considerable importance from both a conservation and research perspective. First, it would provide, for the first time, a permanent and freely accessible place to store examples of inscriptions that have been historically suppressed, ignored or undervalued. This, in turn, would also offer a platform through which the stories of forgotten, “everyday” Edwardians can be shared with the general public. The archive would also facilitate a dialogue with national institutions of power regarding how to preserve and protect endangered memories and increase the presence of underrepresented people in archival and library collections. From a research perspective, the archive would enable the study of variation in working-class book ownership and inscriptive practices according to gender, age, occupation and geographical location. It would also open up new ways of exploring and thinking about people’s relationships with their books and broader social institutions, networks, values and traditions, as well as foster a new recognition of the multiple social, communicative and performative functions of the book inscription for working-class Edwardians. These insights have the potential to diversify current understandings of social class by questioning the transmission of culture as a unidirectional process from dominant to less dominant groups, as well as reshape existing knowledge on working-class life in Edwardian Britain and challenge historical perceptions of the working classes as “passive” and “mindless”.

3. Diversifying the Digital Archive: Challenges and Opportunities

Although a digital archive of Edwardian working-class book inscriptions would provide an important and long-overdue resource for documenting the book ownership and readership practices of a historically marginalized group, there are three main challenges that hinder its development: the survival of working-class inscriptions in official institutions, the accessibility of working-class inscriptions in official institutions and traditional attitudes to “ordinary writing”, which make it challenging to obtain funding for establishing and sustaining such an archive on a permanent basis. Nonetheless, these challenges can be overcome by sourcing material from outside official institutions, collaborating with official institutions as an entry

point to digital archiving and arranging events to change perceptions of working-class literacy practices.

3.1 Challenge 1: The Survival of Working-Class Inscriptions in Official Institutions

Special collections and archives are generally considered to be impartial institutions “mandated to create, maintain, use and provide records of a shared national history” (Sutherland 2017, 10). It is, therefore, ironic that historical bias in their collection policies has tended to obscure the history of “ordinary people” (Zinn 1977, 21). Sinor (2002, 185) notes that working-class voices in such institutions largely “linger as shadows” in documents by higher authorities. These indirect sources often frame the working classes as helpless victims, whether as names in workhouse registries or Poor Law records, or “writing upwards” in letters to employers or politicians.

The statistics are even more concerning when dealing with books rather than documents. Interviews with archivists and librarians at the 36 institutions that are members of Research Libraries UK revealed that, historically, acquisitions have been weighted in favor of upper-class, wealthy, male individuals (O’Hagan 2020c). Not only did these individuals tend to be more educated, and therefore more literate, but they also had the necessary disposable income to afford books in the hand-press period. Although book ownership had been democratized by the Edwardian era, for much of the twentieth century, institutions continued to prioritize the books of “prestigious” people and did not deem working-class books worthy of collection. Today, acquisition decisions are no longer influenced by an owner’s social status. Nonetheless, this historical prejudice means that most books in institutional collections had socially elite or wealthy male owners.

For these reasons, Lyons (2013, 5) claims that most “ordinary writing” resides outside of traditional institutions and its survival often depends on the good conservation practices of personal collectors. This is supported by Caswell, Harter and Jules (2017) who state that the most valuable collections documenting the lives of marginalized people are within community or specialist archives. As Hall and Gillen (2010, 170) note, ordinary writing represents an “elusive quarry” of information on working-class literacy and provides a rare opportunity to hear working-class voices directly.

3.2 Opportunity 1: Sourcing Material from Outside Official Institutions

As noted by Caswell, Harter and Jules (2017), community and specialist archives present an excellent opportunity to access records from diverse communities that challenge mainstream representations of history. However, when dealing with working-class history, they have a tendency to reflect a certain type of working-class individual: a militant and politically active male campaigner who struggled against traditional authority and hierarchies of power (Flinn 2007, 29). While this was true for a certain stratum of working-class Edwardians, it was not the norm. Book inscriptions routinely reveal how male and female working-class individuals realized the potential of the spaces provided on endpapers to record things that mattered to them, such as births, deaths, marriages, new jobs, retirement and illness (“my baby boy was born today 28th May at 6:15pm”; “Alice Urie went to Canada June 8th 1911”; “In memory of

dear brother David who died Feb 25th 1904”). Furthermore, they turned to their books to record world events, such as war or a change in government (“Today England declared war against Germany, August 4th 1914”; “May 31st 1902, Peace proclaimed in South Africa today”), challenging the myth that many members of the working classes were uneducated or ignorant about current affairs.

Interviews with the 36 members of Research Libraries UK confirmed that bookshops currently present the best opportunity to access working-class book inscriptions (O’Hagan 2020c). Unlike libraries and archives, bookshops are non-discriminate in the types of books that they sell (providing that they are in good condition) and, hence, non-discriminate in the social backgrounds or genders of their owners. In addition, as middle- and upper-class inscriptions have been typically filtered out into institutional collections, bookshops are statistically more likely to contain a higher number of working-class inscriptions. This is particularly the case for the Edwardian period because more than twenty years of free, compulsory education, coupled with the introduction of newspaper print methods to book production, had resulted in a highly literate working class with the financial means to purchase their own books. Choosing bookshops as a data-collection source, thus, directly challenges the failure of mainstream repositories to collect a more diverse representation of society. It also confronts digital humanities with a new way to avoid unintentionally propagating historical bias by looking outside of national institutions for data and resources.

In order to trial this initiative, I contacted two of the leaders in the secondhand book trade in Britain: Oxfam and Bookbarn International. Oxfam was the first charity shop to sell books secondhand and, since 2011, has successfully sold books online via its own website (www.oxfam.org.uk/shop). It is now the largest online retailer of second-hand books in Europe, selling roughly 12 million per year and making around £9.6 million annually from book sales (Oxfam 2020). Bookbarn International, on the other hand, is located in Hallatrow, Somerset and is the largest “bricks and mortar” bookshop in the UK. It stocks over two million antiquarian books and generates sales of roughly £2 million annually (Cotton 2019). Both shops responded positively to my research and agreed to let me use their stock to collect inscriptions over a period of nine months.

As Oxfam and Bookbarn International only record information on bookplates or inscriptions by famous figures in their online database, I decided to collect the inscriptions through a simple random sampling method, which involved manually searching the shelves of the shops and identifying an Edwardian book inscription from its date or appearance, as well as the book’s date of publication. This method also ensured that I did not collect a biased sample of inscriptions or that my sample was distorted by any preconceived ideas on the types of books or authors that were popular in Edwardian Britain. All signs of ownership were photographed (e.g. hand-written or printed ownership marks, booksellers’ stamps, library stickers, university paste-ins) and basic information on the book, inscription and owner were recorded. Then, I researched the inscriber using official records hosted on www.ancestry.com, including census returns, military registers, probate documents and birth, marriage and death certificates. I used five main criteria to determine whether an inscriber was working class or

not: occupation, father's occupation, size of family, number of infant mortalities in family and address.

In total, I collected 4,000 Edwardian book inscriptions, 2,500 of which belonged to working-class Edwardians – a considerable amount that would provide a solid foundation for a digital archive. Of these 2,500 inscriptions, there was almost an even 50:50 male/female split, ensuring that voices from a diverse range of Edwardians were captured.

3.3 Challenge 2: The Accessibility of Working-Class Inscriptions in Official Institutions

Although it is rare to find examples of books belonging to the working classes in official institutions, in some cases, copies may be present, but staff are unaware of their existence. This is because, until recently, copy-specific cataloguing was rarely attended to beyond easily identifiable provenances, such as armorial bookplates of institutionally-significant or historically-significant individuals. This means that if any examples of working-class book ownership exist, they are unlikely to have been recorded and, thus, are exceedingly difficult to find. This issue remains a challenge today because the DCRM(B) cataloguing guidelines that most libraries follow state that provenance should only be recorded “if considered important” and only for “individuals of interest”. The librarians and archivists that I interviewed expressed concern that this practice risked “a skewed vision of book ownership” that turned cataloguing into a highly subjective procedure that is dependent on an individual's own discretion (O'Hagan 2020c).

Most librarians and archivists agreed that it would be very useful to highlight examples of working-class book ownership in their collections, but believed that they lacked the staff capacity to carry out, what they considered to be, such a time-consuming process. Some also emphasized the tensions between the expectations of librarians and researchers: “We are there to make the basic information available. It is up to the researcher to use that information in whichever way they see fit” (O'Hagan 2020c, 5). In other words, the librarian should record basic provenance information, but it is the role of the researcher to investigate the social history of the inscription. Another issue identified is the sheer quantity of books produced in the Edwardian era, which made it “near impossible”, as one librarian claimed, to record provenance data for any books from the period, let alone working-class books (ibid.). Furthermore, there is much debate over whether an Edwardian book should be classed as “rare” or “modern”, which has an impact on whether provenance is recorded.

Overall, while there is not necessarily an intentional class-based approach to cataloguing today, perpetuating traditional practices can lead to unintentional bias and unrepresentative collections that distort the history of book readership and ownership in Edwardian Britain. This lack of accessibility was the main reason why I used bookshops as an original way to collect working-class book inscriptions. However, when it came to applying for funding, I encountered problems because most investors were disinterested in data from non-institutional collections. Five of my applications were unsuccessful, with feedback describing my data-collection sources as “eccentric” and “unconventional”. My arguments surrounding the importance of book inscriptions as evidence of working-class literacy and political

mobilisation were also disregarded as “improbable” and “inconsequential”. This type of “intellectual snobbery” continues to put marginalized writing at a disadvantage and propagates a one-sided account of history told by the most privileged.

3.4 Opportunity 2: Collaboration with Official Institutions as an Entry Point to Digital Archiving

While the above issue is frustrating and discredits the rich data that can be found in bookshops, there are creative ways to lay the groundwork towards a digital archive of Edwardian working-class book inscriptions. As discovered from my interviews with libraries and archives, many institutions contain books that require retrospective cataloguing. These books may feature previously undocumented inscriptions that provide new evidence on working-class literacy. Collaborating with institutions when creating a digital archive offers a mutually beneficial way to pool together resources and obtain greater access to funding bids. As a researcher, I can improve the cataloguing of books by contributing knowledge beyond what is expected of a rare books librarian, while also adding new inscriptions to my own dataset that I can use in a future digital archive.

To this end, I decided to change tack and apply for funding to explore working-class literacy through the Edwardian book inscription rather than to develop a digital archive. In 2019, I successfully obtained a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council for a one-year project entitled “Reading, Writing and... Rebellion: Understanding Literacies and Class Conflict Through the Edwardian Book Inscription”. As part of this project, I was able to allocate one day a week to work in a special collection to help increase representation of Edwardian working-class book inscriptions.

I decided to approach Cardiff University’s Special Collections and Archives (SCOLAR) because in 2014, they received a donation of 800 Victorian and Edwardian working-class children’s books, now known as the Janet Powney Collection, that have remained uncatalogued ever since. The Janet Powney Collection is unique because all the books were awarded as prizes by schools, Sunday schools or clubs to working-class children. Therefore, they provide a rare insight into working-class literacy, schooling, religion, social life and culture in late nineteenth/early twentieth-century Britain for both boys and girls.

Over a period of one year, I catalogued all 800 books in the Collection, with a specific emphasis on detailed information that I could reuse in a future digital archive. I organized all details according to the fields identified in Table 1. A sample record with full provenance details can be seen below:

In the Summer Holidays by Jennett Humphreys, Blackie & Son, London, 1892.

50p in pencil and prize sticker printed in offset chromolithography with decorative art nouveau border on front endpaper stating “High Town Primitive Methodist Sunday School Presented to Ellen Foxen for good conduct and early attendance during the year 1890 J. Harding, Mnister, J. Giltrow, Supt”.

Ellen Foxen (1880-1959) was born and died in Luton, Bedfordshire. Her father was a straw hat blocker and her mother was a straw hat sewer. She had three

siblings. In 1900, she married Harry Wilding Bates, a railway van man. They had three sons together. During this time, Ellen worked as a straw hat finisher. Ellen was widowed in 1910. She remarried in 1912 to Ernest William Lundy, a straw hat stiffener. She was widowed yet again in June 1915 when Ernest commit suicide after throwing himself into a lake. According to local newspaper reports, the couple had been arguing and Ernest had been suffering from temporary insanity. Ellen remarried again in October 1915, this time to William F. Collins. After William passed away in 1935, Ellen remained a widow for the rest of her life.

High Town Primitive Methodist Church was established in Luton in 1852. By 1897, the congregation had expanded so rapidly that a new chapel was built and the old church was adjoined and became the Sunday school. The chapel cost £2,566 to build and accommodated 900 people. The High Town Methodist Church is still an active place of worship today.

As part of the project, I also created regular blog posts for SCOLAR that highlighted particular working-class inscriptions or individuals in the Collection (scolarcardiff.wordpress.com).

The collaboration has been very successful for both parties: SCOLAR has benefitted from making their Collection discoverable to users, while I have added 800 new inscriptions to my own dataset (418 male; 382 female). We are now discussing the possibility of specific volunteer and intern schemes aimed at this type of research to help increase the presence of other working-class inscriptions in collections. Using a collection from a well-established institution offers a more appealing and sustainable way to start a digital archive for funding bodies, yet gives me the possibility to add my own bookshop dataset to the archive gradually. Dorothy Entwistle, an academic who collected 1,200 working-class inscriptions in the 1990s as part of her PhD research, has already contacted me expressing interest in incorporating her own data into my digital archive. This would mean a total of 3,700 working-class inscriptions could be brought to light for the first time.

3.5 Challenge 3: Traditional Attitudes to “Ordinary Writing”

Strongly linked to the historical collection policies of official institutions is the greater value that has typically been placed on the writing of the elite when constructing official narratives of history (Lillis 2013, 5). “Ordinary” writing often does not conform to literary standards or expectations (Hall and Gillen 2010, 188): it is not normally produced with the reception of others in mind, nor is it aesthetically crafted. Consequently, it often lacks an obvious context or the embellishments that might be found in literary texts (O’Hagan 2020a, 7). Banal, mundane, discardable, unremarkable, invisible, irrelevant, boring, commonplace and valueless are just some of the many words that have been used to describe ordinary writing (Sinor 2002, 5; Barton and Papen 2010, 10; Hall and Gillen 2010, 188). These unfair classifications have devalued its importance as one of the few opportunities to access the first-hand views of working-class people, which, in turn, has devalued the writers themselves.

Lyons (2013, 2) outlines two other mistaken assumptions that have hindered the study of ordinary writing: that the working classes left few written traces and that their life is too difficult to understand. Although it is true that, prior to the late nineteenth century, a strong percentage of working-class people were illiterate or semi-illiterate, they were still able to make their voices heard through scribes, images or functionally literate texts (Richards 2019). Moreover, by the Edwardian era, almost 100% of Edwardians were literate and used writing in their daily lives, whether to write letters and postcards, diary entries, shopping lists, receipts or memoirs. Book inscriptions are an important example of this literacy for men and women. To overlook these written traces and their writers is to miss valuable evidence of self-representation and identity construction that empowers the working classes, gives them agency and recasts larger cultural narratives.

Estill (2019) notes that digital humanities continues to offer a skewed perspective on literacy because of its persisting preference for literature over ordinary writing. She cites the fact that certain authors such as Shakespeare are heavily overrepresented in this field to the detriment of ordinary writers. She warns that “biased sources can only lead to biased scholarship”, which is a danger, particularly for students who may not be well-versed in identifying this prejudice. Bourg (2018, 460) claims that digital humanists must be prepared to “engage in conscious acts of resistance” by ensuring that digital tools do not reflect and perpetuate inequalities and that the limited binary that divides writing into high and low forms is removed. Doing so will enable a better understanding of what writers can do and how readers can respond, thus countering the negative and persisting stereotypes on ordinary writing.

3.6 Opportunity 3: Arranging Events to Challenge Perceptions on the Value of “Ordinary Writing”

A 2019 report from Research Libraries UK recognised the increasing importance of impact and engagement activities to provide local communities with opportunities to learn, explore and interact, to raise the profile of institutions and collections, and to encourage openness in scholarship and culture. Another important aspect of impact and engagement is to challenge perceptions and encourage people to think in a new way. In order to stimulate interest and foster support for a digital archive of Edwardian working-class book inscriptions, I decided to share some of the collected examples through three key outreach events: workshops, a family history show and a digital exhibition.

Jones (2018, 89) notes that book inscriptions have high pedagogical value and can be used to develop curricula and introduce students to new learning resources. With this in mind, in November 2019, I organized a pilot specialist workshop with students and staff in the School of English, Communication and Philosophy at Cardiff University to showcase the value of working with working-class book inscriptions. I provided each participant with an image of a book inscription and asked them to think about what it might reveal about the owner’s social status (e.g. choice of words, spelling mistakes or grammatical errors, handwriting, writing implement, content). Then, I demonstrated how www.ancestry.com can be used to ground these suppositions in primary evidence from official records. The students enjoyed the opportunity to engage with an unfamiliar text in an innovative way and were particularly

excited about the potential of book inscriptions to reveal new information about working-class life, particularly for women who are often overlooked or underrepresented in research on the topic. They also generally agreed that a digital archive would provide an excellent pedagogical tool to interact with these inscriptions more personally and explore one specific feature that may be of interest (e.g. gift inscriptions from mothers to sons; books inscribed by miners; inscriptions written with indelible pencil). To commemorate International Women's Day 2020, I also delivered a presentation, drawing attention to female inscriptions and the stories behind them, which formed part of Cardiff University's Migration, Ethnicity, Race and Diversity Research Conference. Given the positive feedback, these workshops have since been rolled out with history and sociology students (tailored to their specific interests).¹ I also plan to conduct similar sessions with students in creative writing, book history and literature.²

The Family History Show is an annual event that brings together historians, genealogical organisations and amateur genealogists to provide expert advice on family history research. I organized a stall at the February 2020 event that showed members of the public how to use inscriptions as an entry point into researching their family tree. I brought along physical examples of Edwardian books containing book inscriptions and demonstrated how the details (e.g. owner's name, date of birth, location) could be inserted into www.ancestry.com to find biographical information on the inscriber. The stall proved popular with visitors and the general feedback obtained was that it had made them "reconsider the value of book inscriptions". One respondent particularly acknowledged their worth at shedding light on events that may not be recorded in surviving official documents or provide new perspectives on national history (e.g. showcased examples included endpapers used to write first-hand accounts of Queen Victoria's funeral procession and King Edward VII's coronation and express support for female suffrage, the Labour Party and Darwinism, to name but a few). These types of shows could offer an innovative way for academics and other professionals to engage with the public and assess general interest in their research.

On 5th March 2020, I launched a digital exhibition on Instagram entitled "Prize Books and Politics: Rethinking Working-Class Life in Edwardian Britain". Over a period of 6 weeks, I posted one inscription per day that encapsulated the life of the working classes in Edwardian Britain (ensuring a 50:50 gender balance). Each image was accompanied by a short written reflection exploring its main message, which aimed to encourage readers to rethink current perceptions of the working classes. A sample post can be seen in Figure 2.

¹ History and sociology students used newspaper archives to conduct an investigation of one of the awarding institutions and build up a general picture of their history and how they were involved in the prize book movement.

² Creative writing students could be shown a range of inscriptions and encouraged to think about how they can develop a story, poem or play using the ownership mark as a starting point; literature students could explore how content analysis and corpus tools can be used to explore gender stereotypes in prize books and track historical bias; and book history students could be introduced to www.ancestry.com and given a specific book owner to track down using the records.

[INSERT FIGURE 2]

Thomas (2017, 22) warns against using social media to host digital exhibitions because it gives historical images the same value and identity as other images, which risks downplaying their importance. Nonetheless, Instagram offered an important way to experiment with a “transient” digital archive, in addition to attracting interest and obtaining feedback from a completely different audience to that of the Family History Show. Instagram also enabled me to engage directly with users through tagging and comments. Tagging served as an important means of democratizing inscriptions by using the “everyday words of the crowd” (ibid 2017, 74) and emphasising social language over descriptive language.

Feedback from the digital exhibition was overwhelmingly positive. Visitors from across Europe, America and Australia all stated that it had changed their perception of the working classes and transformed the way they think about how working-class people are represented in the media today. While some visitors felt that the exhibition highlighted the injustices concerning the historical representation of working classes, others believed that it served to celebrate the working classes and their culture. Many also stated that the exhibition showcased how book inscriptions can be a powerful medium for expression and communication, even at a time when the working classes were oppressed or had a limited voice. They were also pleased that the exhibition moved arguments beyond simplistic categorisations of respectable/roughs, drinkers/thinkers etc., and encouraged visitors to think about the working classes in new ways, with a particular emphasis on voices not often heard, such as women and children. When asked about future plans to create a digital archive of Edwardian working-class book inscriptions, most users expressed enthusiasm and agreed that it would be a beneficial resource to open up new platforms for debate and challenge others to reflect on a topic that they may not have considered in this way before.

Although these events are relatively small-scale, they have succeeded in their aim of challenging users to rethink their attitudes towards ordinary writing and recognize its worth as a resource for exploring working-class life in Edwardian Britain. They provide some indication of the power of impact and engagement and demonstrate that there is general support for a digital archive of Edwardian working-class book inscriptions. The supportive evidence provided by participant feedback may help build a convincing case for potential funders to subsidize the project.

4. Conclusion

For too long, the book inscription has been disregarded as a simple declaration of ownership. This has obscured the multifaceted functions that it performs and the broader cultural experiences and sociohistorical context that it encompasses. Book inscriptions are shaped by personal needs, traditions and knowledge, yet each belongs to wider-scale historical narratives. These pieces of material culture “operate at a junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal unconsciousness” (Spence 1991, 13) and define who we are within broader social networks and our place in society.

Edwardian working-class book inscriptions, in particular, offer an important yet previously overlooked resource for exploring, rethinking and reshaping our understanding of working-class life in early twentieth-century Britain. By bringing personal experiences to the forefront, these inscriptions can help us re-evaluate how working-class Edwardians organized their lives and made sense of their experiences, and how culture and knowledge is produced, reproduced and performed. They can also open up perspectives on working-class life beyond the male-centred context of the labor movement and shed light on the everyday experiences of women who played an equally important role in “keeping the country going”, albeit largely behind the scenes. In doing so, inscriptions can help foster fresh understandings of working-class life and culture that showcase how both men and women were able to use literacy to take control of their own lives.

A digital archive of Edwardian working-class book inscriptions would provide a permanent place to protect these “vulnerable” artifacts and construct a self-generated history of voices that are scarcely heard in official histories yet are intertwined with the events that made up the period. Furthermore, its digital search functions have the potential to drive new research into gender-, age- and occupation-based patterns in working-class book ownership and inscriptive practices, as well as how semiotic and material choices were used by working-class individuals to assert identity, personal beliefs and belonging. The archive, thus, provides an unprecedented opportunity to tap into working-class lives in ways that have not been done before and reveal a wealth of information on the multiple realities from which people constructed their self, their social circle and the Edwardian era as a whole and how class was felt, read, passed on and communicated

Despite the growing recognition for open-mindedness in digital humanities research, there is still some reluctance to fund a project of this type. Although I received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the general public and fellow academics, feedback from funders considered a digital archive of Edwardian working-class book inscriptions to be “overly ambitious” and did not feel that there was much need for such a resource. A digital archive of this sort is not possible without important changes regarding the value of ordinary writing, as well as the survival and accessibility of working-class inscriptions in official institutions. In this chapter, I have suggested several ways to counter these challenges through bookshops as alternative data collection resources, collaborations with official institutions and impact and engagement events. McGann (2005, 72) claims that, in the coming decades, “the entirety of our cultural inheritance will be transformed and reedited in digital forms”. If this is the case, we must ensure that working-class people are at the forefront of this representation of culture. To lose their voices is to lose an important part of our cultural heritage.

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