

Reviews

- 1
2
3
4
5
6 **Tom Woodin, *Working-Class Writing and Publishing in the Late Twentieth***
7 ***Century: Literature, Culture, and Community***. Manchester: Manchester
8 University Press, 2018. ix + 270 pp. £80.00 hb. ISBN 978-0-7190-9111-7.
9
- 10 The subtitle to this timely and important new account of postwar British
11 writing, 'Literature, Culture, and Community', gives something of an idea
12 of the scale and ambition of this work, as well as of its ultimately positive
13 assessment of its subject, the Federation of Worker Writers and Community
14 Publishers (FWWCP), affectionately dubbed 'the Fed'. Woodin's account is
15 organised into three loose sections. The first chapter describes the origins
16 of the diverse and dispersed groups that would come together in 1976 to
17 form the Fed, including community organising groups such as Centerprise
18 in London and QueenSpark in Brighton, adult education programmes such
19 as the Scotland Road Writers' Workshop in Liverpool, literacy campaigners
20 such as the Write First Time group, and schoolteachers such as Chris Searle,
21 who was sacked for publishing his students' poetry as *Stepney Words* in 1971.
22 Chapters Two to Five provide a broad survey of the writing itself: firstly that
23 of young people, then older people, then adult literacy groups, then writing
24 workshops. The third section, comprising Chapters Six to Ten, examines the
25 Fed as an actual movement within society, looking more closely at individual
26 writers' personal journeys, the Fed's readership, the *realpolitik* of community
27 organisation, the complicated and often turbulent relationship between class
28 and other aspects of identity, and finally the Fed as an institution working with
29 and against Britain's cultural mainstream.
- 30 This is clearly a lot of ground to cover, and for the most part Woodin does it
31 well. The book is impeccably researched, with a bibliography of over 150 pieces
32 of Fed writing and a further 'select' bibliography of over 400 items. 'Personal
33 experience', Woodin writes, 'provided access to invaluable archival material
34 and contacts' (10), and also included forty-two first-hand interviews with key
35 figures such as Searle, literacy campaigner Sue Gardener, QueenSpark's Ken
36 Worpole, and screenwriter Jimmy McGovern. The Fed writing itself is quoted
37 at length throughout the book – in a manner reminiscent of the long blocks
38 of direct quotation in Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) – allowing
39 us to see for ourselves the poetry and prose with which few will have been
40 previously familiar. Alongside these, Woodin offers sympathetic close readings
41 of this previously-dismissed writing; this is particularly useful in the chapter on

1 young writing, where shorter poems that seem naïve and straightforward, such 1
 2 as Colin Graves's 'Soldier' from *Stepney Words* (1971) and Paul George's 'Once 2
 3 Upon a Time' from his collection *Memories* (1975), are shown to be interrogative 3
 4 and ambiguous, with various unresolved tensions that the young writers handle 4
 5 with sophistication. Graves's 'Soldier', for example, is 'historically inaccurate' 5
 6 but 'nevertheless pinpoints sharp class differences exposed by the war' (39). 6
 7 Woodin's critical generosity is a real strength. 7

8 The book is a real contribution to the study of working-class writing in 8
 9 that it addresses a definite gap in academic scholarship and the academy's 9
 10 understanding of postwar British literary culture. Woodin concludes rather 10
 11 coyly that the Fed's writing and workshops 'are an underexplored phenomenon 11
 12 that has featured very little in contemporary debates on culture' (193); this is, 12
 13 to be sure, the first major book-length study of the Fed's work. Although by 13
 14 now the Fed has all but fizzled out, our lack of knowledge of their work seems 14
 15 on the one hand bizarre, especially given the immense popularity of certain 15
 16 ventures like Centerprise's Hackney bookshop, established in 1971: 'the first 16
 17 year's turnover was £30,000, which represented sales of 75,000 books' (25). 17
 18 On the other hand, it can be explained as an unintentional by-product of the 18
 19 active decision made by these groups not only to promote writing by and about 19
 20 but also for the working class. As Woodin puts it, '[a] concern of "community 20
 21 publishing" was that writing should be returned to its originating constituency' 21
 22 (3). This is compared to 'the mass media, where stories about working-class 22
 23 people had been manipulated by the popular press, TV talk shows and reality 23
 24 TV in ways that discouraged serious reflection' (3). Curiously, Woodin does not 24
 25 here mention Williams, who had made a similar distinction in the conclusion to 25
 26 *Culture and Society*: 'we cannot fairly or usefully describe [the] material produced 26
 27 by the new means of communication as "working-class culture". For neither 27
 28 is it by any means produced exclusively for this class, nor, in any important 28
 29 degree, is it produced by them' (419). 29

30 *Culture and Society* is one of the ten works by Williams cited in the select 30
 31 bibliography; however, Woodin only ever mentions Williams in passing. 31
 32 Other thinkers, such as Antonio Gramsci, enjoy similar passing nods, but 32
 33 there is a sense in reading the book that Woodin's account would have been 33
 34 strengthened by a more sustained interaction with their ideas. The chapters 34
 35 comprising the second section, in particular, are mainly expository and each 35
 36 moves very quickly from one historical event, piece of writing, or section to 36
 37 the next with little analysis. Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) for 37
 38 example, is also mentioned in the select bibliography, but Woodin's use of the 38
 39 word is rather one-dimensional: the third chapter's survey of older people's 39
 40 autobiographical writing, titled 'The Good Old Days?', would have benefited 40
 41 41

1 greatly from a more nuanced critical interrogation of nostalgia, namely the 1
2 differences between reflective and restorative nostalgia described by Boym. 2

3 This tendency towards exposition and description rather than a more 3
4 extended analysis is the book's major shortcoming, but it is perhaps 4
5 understandable given the ambitious scope of Woodin's project. The broader lack 5
6 of scholarship about both the Fed and working-class writing and publishing in 6
7 postwar Britain more generally makes Woodin's broad historical survey valuable 7
8 indeed. A more fashionable book marketed at a wider, more general readership 8
9 would have perhaps focused on a handful of key individuals, including perhaps 9
10 Searle, Gardener, or Worpole, and telling the history of the Fed from and 10
11 through their perspectives. Such an approach would be appropriate for a social 11
12 movement like the Fed; as Woodin himself writes, '[t]he personal and political 12
13 were intermixed. Writing, publishing, and organising were part of the personal 13
14 relationships upon which, in reality, the networks were built' (34). But there 14
15 is something to be said for breaking the scholarly ground with a wider, more 15
16 general history of the movement, allowing for the possibility of more specific 16
17 considerations of individuals figures or publications to follow. 17

18 *Working-Class Writing and Publishing in the Late Twentieth Century* will 18
19 nonetheless be a huge boon for the study of postwar British culture. Both for 19
20 its well-organised historical account and its extensive bibliographies, it is an 20
21 invaluable academic resource that will make an important addition to university 21
22 libraries. A greater awareness of post-war worker writers and community 22
23 publishers will be especially vital in 2020, not only to redress a significant gap 23
24 in our academic understanding of the period, but also to inspire contemporary 24
25 community action that again encourages extramural and extra-parliamentary 25
26 alternatives which are both locally relevant and nationally coordinated. Such 26
27 community action will prove vital for the left over the next four years, and the 27
28 historical account that this book offers is a valuable first step towards that end. 28

29 *Joe Williams* 29
30 *Freelance journalist* 30
31 31
32 32
33 33
34 34
35 35
36 36
37 37
38 38
39 39
40 40
41 41