



Popular forms and practices of reading and writing in the Victorian and Edwardian periods

International conference organized by the SFEVE (Société Française d'Études Victoriennes et Édouardiennes), with the support of IMAGER (Institut des Mondes Anglophone, Germanique et Romans, EA 3958) and Université Paris-Est-Créteil (UPEC)

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Keynote speakers

Kirstie Blair (University of Strathclyde, Scotland)

Fabrice Bensimon (Université Paris Sorbonne)

The adjective “popular” pertains to three main fields: the social and sociological one (related to the working class and the “people”, in accordance with its etymology), the literary and generic one (popular art and culture), and, broadly, that of reception, when “popular” means well liked, or in vogue and fashionable. It is a wide-ranging, multi-layered, ambivalent, and ideologically connoted notion.

It is used to designate literary and cultural productions that sharply distinguish themselves from more “canonical”, classical, scholarly and highbrow ones. Popular works and texts are “intended for or suited to the understanding or taste of ordinary people”, “as opposed to specialists in a field” (OED entry 4.a), and they encompass “forms of art, music, or culture with general appeal; intended primarily to entertain, please, or amuse” (OED, entry 7b). Popular art, whether or not produced by “the people”, is meant for “the people”, hence the crucial role of “popular” (low-priced) editions and of periodicals as the vehicles of these popular forms of writing in the Victorian period.

The notion constantly hovers in the collective imaginary between the positive (when it is seen as a common, vigorous, level-headed heritage shared by the people), and the negative, as cheap, lowbrow, unrefined, or even vulgar and “plebeian”. Popular culture has, however, amply been rehabilitated by Cultural Studies from the 1960s onwards. Therefore, the aim of this conference is **not** to contest traditional critical distinctions between “high” and “low”, or to study the forms and modalities of popular literatures and cultures against the aesthetic, intellectual and social norm of the “high”. Our aim, rather, will be to focus on these popular forms of culture for their own sakes.

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the dramatic increase in literacy rates, the wider and cheaper circulation of books and newspapers, and the growing interest for reading this fostered, created a high demand for popular works across the social spectrum. This was a particularly favourable context for the emergence and development of popular forms, formats and practices of reading and writing, and the aim of this conference will be to explore the conditions for this emergence and development in the Victorian and Edwardian periods from complementary perspectives.

We wish to address the various *modalities* of these writing and reading practices, together with their *roles*, social significance, and the diverse and sometimes heterogeneous *motivations* accounting for their emergence and development. These popular forms and practices of reading and writing could have an improving mission; besides, they were frequently vehicles for sociability and integration, strengthening the family and communal fabric and a sense of belonging. Or, alternatively, they could also respond to more individual needs and be escapist pastimes and forms of entertainment, or in the case of marginal/ized subjects such as prison or asylum inmates, have curative, liberating and integrating roles.

We welcome proposals from all disciplines (language and literature, cultural studies, history, sociology, visual studies...) which address the modalities and roles of, and the motivations accounting for, these popular forms and practices of reading and writing and we encourage a variety of critical approaches that will highlight the polysemy of the term “popular”.

The following aspects, themes and fields, not merely in isolation but also in their interdependence and various interactions, could be dealt with (but the list is by no means restrictive):

- * The various media and channels for the reading, reception and diffusion of popular culture (thanks to the rising literacy rate): the popular press (local newspapers, family or women’s magazines; magazines of domestic economy; periodicals, low-cost publications, W.T. Stead’s Penny Poets, Penny popular novels, Penny weeklies, Penny dreadfuls...), lending libraries...

- * The various (non-literary) environments, places, and circles in which these popular forms of writing were produced (and read): coffee houses and factories, Mechanics’ institutes, popular clubs. Analyses focusing on the production and consumption of written works in institutions such as prisons, workhouses, hospitals, or asylums, would be particularly

welcome as these places are not traditionally seen as environments conducive to a culture of reading and writing.

* The brevity of the forms adopted because of the publishing media and the conditions of production (material and financial reasons such as time, lighting, cost and availability of paper, ink, or pens, etc.): the short story (ghost or detective stories, for instance), poems, letters, usually short autobiographical texts, and more infrequently, diaries; political pamphlets; “educational” booklets on miscellaneous subjects such as hygiene, gardening, spiritualism, rational recreation, etc.

* The question of minor literary forms and voices within gender, genre, social or political perspectives: underrepresented, undervalued, marginal/ized people (women, the working class, prison or asylum inmates) getting a “voice” through authorship and the practice of writing.

Please send a 300-500-word abstract (for a 25-minute presentation) with a short bibliography to Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay and Fabienne Moine: dupeyron@u-pec.fr, fabienne.moine@u-pec.fr

Deadline for submissions: 10 July 2020

Notification of acceptance: 20 July 2020

Publication: A selection of peer-reviewed articles will be published in *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens (CVE)*

Languages of the Conference: English and French

Scientific committee

Fabrice Bensimon (Sorbonne Université)

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Neil Davie (Université Lyon 2)

Laurence Dubois (Université Paris Nanterre)

Cassandra Falke (UiT, The Arctic University of Norway)

Kate Flint (University of Southern California (USC), Dornsife College)

Georges Letissier (Université de Nantes)

Kevin Morrison (University of Connecticut / Henan University, Chine)

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Laurence Roussillon-Constanty (Université de Pau Pays de l'Adour)

Jean-Yves Tizot (Université Grenoble 3)

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