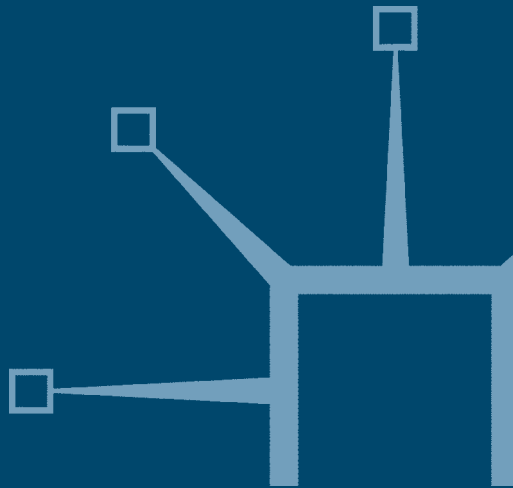


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The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880–1939

Jonathan Wild



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Jonathan Wild
The University of Edinburgh

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For my Mother, Dorothea Wild

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1

Introduction: Leonard Bast's Revenge

The anonymous reader of the manuscript of this book describes the office clerk as 'a haunting and heretofore ghostly figure in fiction'. My own research into this topic began from a similar perception of the spectral nature of this figure. Why, I wondered, had such a representative member of the urban scene apparently left behind so few traces in British literature between Charles Dickens and the inter-war period? In other literatures of this era – American, Continental European, Russian – clerical workers were recognised as key components of developing cityscapes. By contrast, during the same period, British literature managed to produce only a comical Mr Pooter and a pathetic Leonard Bast to stand for their emerging class. While nobody would suggest that the literature of a nation should slavishly mirror its entire working population, the swelling army of late Victorian and early twentieth-century clerical workers would seem to plead a special case for representation. As a group that epitomised the *petit bourgeois* of the era, their interest for readers and writers (including those of the clerk class themselves) is self-evident. The starting point for my investigation therefore, and the question around which this book is constructed, concerns the reasons for an apparent fault line in literature in Britain. What was it about this culture that inhibited the development of a body of work capable of responding to the growth of a distinctive and effectively new class?

While specific literary historical questions remain foregrounded in this book, I am mindful of Robert Darnton's warning that book historians often 'lose sight of the larger dimensions of the enterprise' because they 'stray into esoteric byways and unconnected specializations'.¹ The 'larger dimensions' of my topic are, I hope, always kept in view. More than simply the history of representations of the office clerk, my study seeks to offer a valuable contribution to the history of social class in

Britain. In making this somewhat ambitious claim, I do not wish to suggest that this book offers a naïve reconstruction of social history via largely fictional literary sources. It is, instead an attempt to understand a dynamic relationship between texts, readers and society. To date, scholars of literature and history have consistently overlooked the petit bourgeois in discussions of class in Britain. When seminal studies of this class were published in the 1970s by Arno J. Mayer and Geoffrey Crossick, their research looked forward to a growth of scholarly interest in this area.² This optimism, however, failed to produce the body of research on the lower middle class that might have been anticipated. Both Mayer and Crossick predicted the reasons why the studies of this class would remain few in number, and their arguments are worth revisiting here. Mayer suggested on the one hand that the 'polymorphous and tangled' nature of the group made it too intricate to satisfactorily analyse, and on the other hand that scholars were content to avoid dealing with a class for which they had 'approvingly prophesied ... extinction'.³ Mayer further inquired 'could it be that social scientists are hesitant to expose the aspirations, life-style, and world view of the social class in which so many of them originate and from which they seek to escape?'³ Crossick, focusing specifically upon the British lower middle class, pointed towards the group's inactivity on 'the historical stage', and additionally its failure to achieve a 'sense of corporate identity' or 'organisation'. This lack of dynamism, according to Crossick, ensured that future historians would experience a 'difficulty [in] penetrating lower middle class ideas and beliefs'.⁴ Whichever of these arguments is correct (and I have much sympathy with Mayer's theories on scholarly embarrassment), the neglect of this section of society remains unquestionable.

The effect of this lacuna in scholarship is clear in relation to my own field of specialisation. Apart from a chapter in John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (2001), and several extended references in Arlene Young's *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel* (1999), representations of the petit bourgeois clerk in British literary history have been almost entirely overlooked.⁵ Nor has much work appeared which attempts to trace the office worker as reader and writer of literature. Only in Jonathan Rose's recent *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001) has this area received any serious investigation.⁶ Rose's book has at least managed to focus fresh critical interest on this overlooked field of study. Furthermore, in a chapter entitled 'What was Leonard Bast Really Like?', Rose sets off a number of hares that my own investigation looks to pursue: 'was Leonard Bast so culturally

impoverished?'; 'was the character Forster created an authentic representation of that vast and growing army of Edwardian clerks?'.⁷ While I tend to agree with Rose's general conclusions that 'those of us who only know Leonard Bast from *Howards End* would scarcely recognise the man in his self-portrait', my own approach to this point takes a somewhat different route.⁸ The focus of this study is much more about the causes of the disparity between fact and fiction. Although Rose admirably draws upon memoirs of the period to reveal a generation of culture-hungry clerks, he sheds little light on reasons for the evident gap between these real clerks and Leonard Bast. My own study therefore attempts to work backwards from Rose's often autobiographical sources by asking why the clerks he identifies were so anxious to establish their cultural credentials in print. Why was there such an evident need for them to take their revenge on the literary establishment that had classified them, along with Bast, as simply a 'tailcoat and a couple of ideas'.⁹

Any attempt to trace a single theme through a large stretch of print cultural history necessitates an important series of choices regarding selection and limitation of material. In my own case, the decision to focus this study upon British male clerks from 1880 to 1939 implies a number of exclusions on grounds of geography, gender and chronology. At this stage it is worth outlining the reasons behind the choices upon which this book is constructed. To take the question of dates first, it might be asked why the offices and clerks of Dickens, Lamb, Thackeray and Trollope are placed outside the boundaries of my investigation. Although these earlier nineteenth century depictions of office life are indeed of great interest, the extraordinary changes evident in both the history of work and literature after 1880 suggest the value of a later starting date. These changes, as they affected the working population, primarily involved a rapid increase in numbers of clerks; census figures reveal the total number of white-collar employees in Britain rising from 262,084 in 1871, to 534,622 in 1891, and further swelling to 918,186 in 1911.¹⁰ But more than just a growing workforce, the era witnessed the supplanting of the Dickensian counting house by the modern business office. As David Lockwood argued in his landmark study *The Blackcoated Worker*, the arrival of clerical modernity was marked by several factors: the increase in average size of offices; the emergence of scientific management and office mechanisation; and an increase in industrial concentration and amalgamation which in turn led to the 'concentration and rationalization of office work and staffs'.¹¹ Lockwood further notes in relation to the increased opportunities for white-collar work that during this period 'every literate person became a potential clerk'.¹² Even if

one remains sceptical about the scale of the effect of the Education Act of 1870 and successive legislation, it is still possible to see the late Victorian clerk as an individual distinctly different from his earlier counterpart.

The field of British print culture was undergoing a similar period of transition after 1880. Once again, the scale of change is revealed in rapidly increasing numbers, in this case reflecting the volume of books and magazines issued: the total number of new adult novels appearing in 1874 was 516, rising to 762 in 1887, and further increasing to 1315 in 1894; similarly, the number of weekly and quarterly magazines issued rose from 643 in 1875, up to 1298 in 1885, and later reaching 2081 in 1895.¹³ Behind these figures were several key factors and events in publishing history that stimulated greater production. The massive jump in new novels, for example, was influenced by the demise of the three-decker in 1894 and the subsequent emergence of the single volume novel as the standard format for new works of fiction. An increase in opportunity for new writers was also promised at this time by the popularity of the weekly paper *Tit-Bits* and its successors. With an average weekly circulation of half a million copies during the thirty years following its launch in 1881, *Tit-Bits* heralded a new epoch for the popular press.¹⁴ All of these changes were facilitated by a number of technological developments in publishing.¹⁵ As Richard Altick notes, these improvements included more economical production of paper through 'the development of chemical and mechanical methods of preparing wood pulp'; the introduction of the high speed Hoe press 'to turn out enormous quantities of paper-bound books'; and the slightly later emergence of the Monotype composing machine. Taken together, these technological innovations ensured more efficient and cheaper production of printed material.

Whereas the opportunity to examine the parallel expansions in work and publishing history offers compelling reasons for beginning this study in the 1880s, other choices of focus for this book are less clear cut. The decision, for example, to deal primarily with the masculine dimensions of clerical work suggests that my investigation into office and cultural life is only a partial one. Women had a demonstrably growing presence in offices from the 1880s (by 1921 they represented 46 per cent of Britain's total number of clerks)¹⁶ and the traces that these developments have left upon literary culture are clearly of considerable scholarly interest. This interest has indeed begun to be acknowledged in recent works that discuss the relationship between new business technology and female workers in the *fin de siècle* office.¹⁷ But although

male and female clerical workers were both classified as 'clerks', their experience of clerical employment was entirely different in terms of roles performed, expectations of advancement, and pay scales. To a considerable extent, women and men existed in separate occupational spheres of the business world. Gregory Anderson confirms the scale of the gendered division of roles, noting the extent to which female clerks were associated with shorthand and typewriting: women typists in England and Wales in 1931 numbered 212,296, compared with only 5155 men in equivalent roles.¹⁸ My intention therefore in focusing upon male clerks in this book is not to impose a false gender border upon a topic that clearly embraces both men and women. It is rather to recognise the differing experiences of the sexes that might easily become masked behind the single elastic term 'clerk', and in doing so to acknowledge the need for separate studies of cultural representations of these groups.

Reservations about offering a masculine gender focus for this book are further eased when one notes that British literature before 1914 seldom depicts men and women together in mixed sex offices. Although both male and female office workers are evident in a variety of print cultural sources, these appearances tend to serve different literary ends. Female clerks in literature, almost invariably machine workers of some description, typically inspire debates about genteel employment for 'surplus' middle-class women. By way of contrast, the archetypal male clerk is generally a member of the lower middle classes, whose literary role reflects contemporary debates about masculinity and urban life. While this crude division is challenged by several notable exceptions in the following pages, the rough outline provides a fair indication of the clerk's place in literary culture. Taking this dichotomy into account, it is perhaps easier to understand why British literature did not produce a female Pooter or Bast. In a similar way, we can recognise why few male counterparts of the resourceful and physically attractive female typists are found in contemporary novels and short stories. Rather than attempting to bridge these evidently disparate literary and (occupational) points of focus, this study instead seeks to concentrate upon issues relating to men and masculinity. While not intending to position this book alongside those recent works which offer a specialised study of masculinity and literature, my study does intersect with and complement these other works.¹⁹

The final major decision regarding focus of research for this book relates to the geographical boundaries of my investigation. If Great Britain was not alone in experiencing vast changes in cultural and

business life at the end of the nineteenth century, why restrict the study's scope to a single area? Although lack of space available in a single volume provides an economic and practical answer to this question, other considerations offer more pertinent reasons for making this choice. These are perhaps best outlined by sketching the gulf that exists between British and, say, American literature with reference to my topic. While North America and Britain both experienced a similar shift towards modernity in business and publishing industries from the 1880s, the social framework of those countries was and remains quite dissimilar. It is reductive to introduce here simple clichés opposing American democracy to British feudality, but American history from Civil War to New Deal undoubtedly created substantially different conditions for the cultivation of business and culture. The evidence to sustain this grand claim is discovered in the readiness with which, for example, the urban businessman found a prominent place in American literature. From the earliest period of business expansion Walt Whitman anticipated the openness of American writers to new city dwellers and workers. Whitman sums up this attitude in *Song of Myself*:

The little plentiful manikins skipping around in collars and tail'd coats,
 I am aware who they are, (they are positively not worms or fleas,)
 I acknowledge the duplicates of myself, the weakest and shallowest is deathless with me,
 What I do and say the same waits for them,
 Every thought that flounders in me the same flounders in them.²⁰

This avowedly democratic vision embracing cultural life and business life is widely evident in subsequent American literature in the work of such writers as Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, Edna Ferber, F. Scott Fitzgerald, O. Henry, William Dean Howells, Henry James and Sinclair Lewis. For many of these writers, the office clerk became an American Everyman, epitomising the country's economic shift towards commercial and financial capitalism; Christopher P. Wilson goes as far as to describe the American white-collar worker after 1880 as representing the 'arithmetical mean of culture, a norm embedded'.²¹ In British literature, I will argue, the male office clerk was also seen as a symbolic representation of social change, but his symbolic attributes lack the positive quality so evident in Whitman's verse. Few British writers

were prepared to recognise clerks as duplicates of themselves. While American literature is therefore outside the focus of this book, it does retain an implicit marginal presence.

* * *

Having decided on the scope of this study in terms of period, gender and geographical location, the subsequent decision to present this material in a diachronic framework was a relatively straightforward one. The strength of this option became clear when I realised the extent to which the clerk's portrayal in print culture was sensitive to specific historical events and trends. We can trace this relationship between history and cultural form in the way that, for example, the First World War and Great Depression apparently softened the literary profile of the office worker. This reorientation balanced those pre-1914 attitudes which had associated male clerks with perceived limitations in late Victorian education reforms. For writers such as George Gissing, these reforms, beginning with the 1870 Education Act, had created a blighted generation whose misguided schooling had left them unsuited for both office life and cultural life. The image of the 'quarter-educated' Board school clerk feebly sipping culture while shackled to an office desk typifies the prevailing literary attitude in this era. By using a diachronic framework, therefore, historical events can be placed alongside print cultural evidence to trace otherwise obscured relationships.

The print cultural evidence that I present here consists primarily of novels and short stories, the majority of which have been overlooked since their publication. These neglected texts were identified through research on weekly book reviews in a variety of newspapers, magazines and journals. Without the adoption of this admittedly painstaking approach it is unlikely that valuable works such as the anonymous *The Story of a London Clerk*, Rudolf Dircks 'The Two Clerks', or Herbert Tremain's *The Feet of the Young Men* would have emerged from undeserved obscurity. Although traditional 'literary' sources provide the core of my research texts, I have also traced much other relevant cultural material. This material, including memoirs, essays, letters, contemporary sociological texts and newspaper correspondence, provides a broad socio-cultural context in which to locate the clerk. While any attempts to recreate 'lost' historical epochs are destined to fail, it is at least possible to reposition cultural material in its temporal frame. In adopting this method of literary interpretation, I concur with Pierre Bourdieu's

argument that:

Ignorance of everything which goes to make up the 'mood of the age' produces a derealization of works: stripped of everything which attached them to the most concrete debates of their time ... they are impoverished and transformed in the direction of intellectualism or an empty humanism.²²

While I make no attempt here to follow Bourdieu's example in fully reconstructing historical fields of cultural production, my own approach is sympathetic to and informed by this holistic theoretical model.

Finally, by way of introduction to this book, I need to qualify the use of the word 'rise' in my title. While I do offer a sense of positive progression from the 'hopeless clerk' of the 1890s (Chapters 2, 3 and 4), through the tensions of the Edwardian era (Chapters 5 and 6), to the often self-assured and forthright clerks of the First World War and inter-war period, (Chapters 7 and 8), this is no simple narrative of Whig history. While the clerks (and the lower middle class in general) do find a cultural voice during the twentieth century, the negative connotations associated with the word 'clerk' effectively work to eradicate this term. If equivalents of the term 'clerks' discussed in the following chapters exist today they are likely to be 'managers', consultants' or 'executives'. The *rise* of the clerk must therefore be recognised only alongside his subsequent death.

2

'Getting On'?: The Clerk's Emergence in Literature 1880–1900

When writing his autobiography in the 1930s, H.G. Wells looked back with satisfaction upon the early years of his literary career:

The last decade of the nineteenth century was an extraordinarily favourable time for new writers and my individual good luck was set in the luck of a whole generation of aspirants. Quite a lot of us from nowhere were 'getting on'.¹

This chance to 'get on' provided not only financial rewards for Wells and his fellow literary aspirants but also the opportunity to transform existing print culture. The scope for transformation of British literature at this time is hinted at in Wells's self-conscious description of his own class background as 'nowhere'. For Wells and others of his generation this was the 'nowhere' of the suburban lower middle classes, a social landscape until then lacking definition in literary material. The opening up of this cultural field allowed these new writers the chance to refigure for their readers an existing Victorian literature that, as Wells remarked, 'no longer fitted into their everyday experiences'.²

Arnold Bennett's first novel *A Man from the North* (1898) includes a moment which, on several different levels, shows Wells's reflections in action. In this scene Richard Larch, a solicitor's clerk and the northern man of the title, is depicted sitting in a London public library reading a half crown review and speculating about embarking on a career as a writer. These meditations are inspired by an article in the review, written by 'a writer of considerable repute', entitled 'To Literary Aspirants':

After an unqualified statement that any man ... might with determined application learn to write finely, the essayist concluded by