STUDIA HISTORICA GEDANENSIA

TOM X (2019)

Iwona Sakowicz-Tebinka
(Wydział Historyczny, Uniwersytet Gdański)

The role of historical education in "The Penny Magazine" 1832–1845

At the beginning of the 19th century Great Britain was experiencing profound social changes. Industrialisation affected not only the economy but the social fabric of the whole country. The growth of the working class, conscious of its existence and position, marked the transition from a pre-modern to a modern society[1].

The working classes were often called, until the reform of 1832, the "lower ranks" reflecting an economical and political position also affecting education[2]. Deplorable housing conditions, frequent phases of unemployment, and epidemics all tended to be a permanent element in the life of "labouring poor" making it drab and unbearable. Education which could be a way towards betterment was not widely available to members of working class.

Probably about one third of children were able to attend some form of educational institution when Queen Victoria assumed the throne in 1837. There were factory schools, Sunday schools run by different religious denominations, and private day schools. They did not teach anything beyond "elements of English language"[3].

It was not uncommon in Victorian Britain to find opinions about the superfluity of teaching them anything more. On the pages of "The Educational Times", a letter appeared in 1854, expressing the opinion that "education which is manifestly unsuited to the wants and requirements of the working classes must unfit them for duties to which, as members of society they are all more of less liable", denying in fact the purpose of teaching anything beyond basic rudiments of the three Rs[4].

---

[1] Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 11.

[2] Aruna Krishmamurthy, "Introduction" in *The Working-Class Intellectual in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Aruna Krishmamurthy (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 3.

[3] John Fletcher Clews Harrison *Learning and Living 1790–1960: A Study in the History of the English Adult Education Movement* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1961), 19.

[4] *Educational Times* (October 1854): 302. Richard Aldrich, *School and Society in Victorian Britain: Joseph Payne and the New World of Education* (New York–London: Garland Pub, 1995),101.

The working class was not perceived by the middle class as a respectable group. Their members were thought to be lazy, immoral drunkards posing a threat to the established social order of the state. Education, for many middle-class reformers, was a form of cultivation that would lead the working men out of their moral misery. It was not the only reason why there was a variety of philantropic organisations providing education for the lower classes. The idea of upholding the social order through education was important. Working class children would learn about their place in the society thus stabilising the order. Religious education was also treated as an element that could calm an eventual revolutionary movement. Henry Brougham, a reforming British politician (Whig) and well known education pioneer claimed in the House of Commons "that the education of the poor was […] the best security for the morals, the subordination, and the peace of countries"[5]. The already mentioned author of the letter to "The Educational Times" wanted the schools to be a place where "practical principles for the guidance and control of the lower order" were being implemented[6].

Despite difficulties there was a slow rise in the number of working class children in schools during the first part of the 19th century. Out of over 2 million working class children in 1831 about 900 thousand attended some form of school. In 1851 these figures were doubled[7].

Improvements came with the 1870 Education Act, which acknowledged a Crown responsibility for elementary schools, but real progress was made with the establishment of the National Board of Education in 1899 and free primary education available to all[8].

The education available to working class people was associated with their economic position. Henry Mayhew in his well known series of articles for "The Morning Chronicle" in the 1840s published later in book form as "London Labour and London Poor" often referred to the lack of reading ability among the poorest workers in London[9].

Literacy rates were measured not in a very precise way- the ability to sign the marriage register meant that the person was literate. The rates increased during the 19th century – due to expanding popular education. There was also another factor: emerging adult education and the growing availability of inexpensive reading matters. There was a large variety of adult educational institutions from mechanics'

---

[5] 2 Parl. Deb. H.C. (2nd. ser.) (1820) 49–91.

[6] *Educational Times*, 302.

[7] Robert Kiefer Webb, *The British Working Class Reader, 1790–1848. Literacy and Social Tension* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1955), 18.

[8] Florence S. Boos, "The Education Act of 1870: Before and After". BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History, accessed August 20, 2018, http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=florence-s-boos-the-education-act-of-1870-before-and-after.

[9] Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and London Poor* (London: Griffin, Bohn and Company, 1861), 2: 123, 264, 364.

institutes organized by industrialists to mutual improvement societies managed by working class men for themselves[10].

In Victorian Britain this was a favourable time for self-help organisations. These ideas were best expressed by Samuel Smiles in his famous and popular book "Self Help" published in 1859. He was encouraging all classes of society to learn, believing that "education was the best investment of time and labour"[11]. "Diligence, perseverance, industry" were his watchwords, expressing not only his, but broad Victorian convictions that every person would first take care of through hard work[12].

Children leaving school were losing their ability to read and write if reading habits were not sustained. There was the "phenomenal expansion" of the newspapers and cheap book editions yet most of them beyond reach of the working class[13]. Taxes imposed on the newspapers, their advertising content and the paper itself, already in the 18th century and increased at the beginning of the 19th c kept prices of newspapers high[14]. In 1836 Stamp Duty on newspapers, and other taxes affecting print were reduced, yet the prices were still too high for working class. For working class men there were other options available like hiring the newspaper from its seller for one hour, reading it in an alehouse or coffeehouse. The newspapers in public houses were quite often read aloud for the benefit of those who did not have the ability[15].

The illegal way to fight with "taxes on knowledge" as they were known was to publish without the stamp. Unstamped press was cheaper and had a very high circulation. It usually represented radical (Parliament reform orientated) opinion.

The high prices of newspapers were also against the interest of the stamped press owners. New technological developments increased the capacity for the supply of print, new communication channels through telegraph and distribution through railways were fully harnessed in the second part of the 19th c[16].

---

[10] Thomas Kelly "The Origin of Mechanics' Institutes", *British Journal of Educational Studies* 1(1) (XI 1952): 17–27; Christopher Radcliffe, "Mutual improvement societies and the forging of working-class political consciousness in nineteenth-century England", *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 16(2) (1997): 141–155.

[11] Samuel Smiles, *Self-help; with Illustrations of Character, Conduct, and Perseverance* (London: John Murray, 1897), 342.

[12] Michael D. Stephens, Gordon Wynne Roderick, eds., *Samuel Smiles and Nineteenth Century Self-Help in Education* (Nottingham: Department of Adult Education, University of Nottingham, 1983), 5. Yet in 1840s Smiles believed in necessity of government aid for the education of children. James Stanfield, "Samuel Smiles on Education", *Economic affairs* 24(4) (2004): 63.

[13] Thomas Kelly, *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1962), 158.

[14] Closer about the campaign for the repeal of the taxes on knowledge: Martin Hewitt, *The Dawn of the Cheap Press in Victorian Britain: the End of the 'Taxes on Knowledge', 1849–1869* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014). All the taxes were eventually abolished. Paper duty was repealed in 1861.

[15] Mayhew, *London Labour and London Poor*, 2: 123.

[16] Jeremy Black, *The English Press 1621–1861* (Stroud: Sutton, 2001), 181.

Apart from the newspapers there was also a market for cheap books aimed at the working class reader, so called *chap books*. Small and affordable books were popular from the 17th to the 19th century. They covered different subjects from ghost stories to crime and generally did not represent high quality literature. There were books for children and adults[17]. Despite low prices they were too expensive for many of the working class readers. Circulating libraries, which lent books for an annual subscription fee, were an option, together with libraries of different societies, penny reading rooms which could supply readers with printed matters[18].

Middle class reformers often complained about the quality of popular books read by the working class. Henry Mayhew believed that unsuitable literature might lead to moral degradation: "bad books, which act like the bad companions in depraving the taste, and teaching the youth to consider that approvable which to all rightly constituted minds is morally loathsome"[19]. Apart from books without moral perception there were other dangers in reading that would lead the working man astray.

The unstamped radical press was perceived as a threat to the social stability of the state. "Cheap publications almost exclusively directed to the united object of inspiring hatred to the Government and contempt of the Religious Institutions of the country" wrote Victorian reformer and publisher Robert Knight in 1819 regarding these kinds of publications[20] .

A middle class solution for the absence of serious reading matter for the working class was to supply them with good but affordable literature. In the 1820s and 1830s there were some publishing enterprises printing non-fiction books for a popular audience such as "Constable's Miscellany" in 1826, "Murray's Family Library" in 1829. Also the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, founded in 1698, started to print inexpensive Christian literature.

Among these different initiatives a very active organisation the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK) was founded in 1826. It was organised by a small group of people believing in value of self-education. The aim of the organisation was to diffuse ideas about Western science and civilisation. Among its founding fathers was Henry Brougham, a British politician and lawyer[21]. But the real enthusiastic force behind the movement was Charles Knight who joined the Society in 1827. He was a son of a bookseller and printer. Working as an apprentice to his father he gained the necessary knowledge and

---

17 Victor E. Neuburg, *The Penny Histories: a study of Chapbooks for young readers over two centuries* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968).

18 Louis James, *Fiction for the working man 1830–50* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 5–9.

19 Mayhew, *London Labour and London Poor*, 3: 370.

20 Kelly, *A History of Adult Education*, 165.

21 Chester William New, *The Life of Henry Brougham: To 1830* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 347–358.

himself became a publisher in London. His belief in the value of popular education matched his energy as a business man despite the eventual failure of the SDUK publications[22].

The society for the next 20 years had been providing a reading public with inexpensive books . The choice of publications was based on a utilitarian concept of knowledge which had to be useful and then interesting. The publications avoided politics and religion – controversial subjects – so they would appeal to wide public. The first series published by the Society called *The Library of Useful Knowledge* was a failure. The books, all of them popular science, did not sell good enough to bring a profit. *The Library of Entertaining Knowledge* was another venture of the SDUK – it was aimed at a wider readership. The books were also non-fiction type but there was more attention to literature and history.

The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was a very enthusiastic project, unique in its far-reaching aims. Through cheap books and periodicals the society hoped to diffuse knowledge about the modern world. Yet the success of some of its publications was only temporary[23].

"The Penny Magazine" was one of the most successful ventures of the Society. The magazine covering a variety of subjects was not a first of its type. "Chambers's Edinburgh Journal" started by William Chambers in February 1832 was a relatively cheap periodical with articles covering subjects from history and religion to science. "The Penny Magazine" was launched 6 weeks later. Both weeklies had similar aims of providing working class with beneficial literature. Both were initially popular with the reading public – "Chambers's Edinburgh Journal" was selling 50 thousand copies and "Penny Magazine" doubling or even quadrupling this figure[24].

"The Penny Magazine" outclassed Chamber's magazine by introducing woodcut illustrations. The pictures were not just simply decorations of the texts. They were "well composed" and occupied a "key position" in the texts[25]. There were prominent artists working for the magazine – followers of Thomas Bewick school[26]. The Victorian age was a time of fast developing visual culture – the engravings printed on the pages of books and magazines were rare at the beginning of the 19th c but

[22] For more on of Knight see Valerie Gray, *Charles Knight. Educator, Publisher, Writer*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.

[23] Webb described SDUK as "noisy and inefficient". Webb, *The British Working Class Reader*, 66.

[24] It probably sold between 100 to 200 hundred copies. Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader. A Social History of the Mass Reading Public. 1800–1900* (Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 393.

[25] Scott Bennet, "The Editorial Character and Readership of 'The Penny Magazine': An Analysis", *Victorian Periodicals Review* 17(4) (Winter 1984): 130.

[26] Thomas Bewick (1753–1828) a famous English engraver and author. Jennifer Uglow, *Nature's Engraver: A Life of Thomas Bewick* (London: Faber, 2006).

by the end of the century they were the standard[27]. "The Penny Magazine" was setting an example soon followed by other publications[28].

Despite connections with Whigs, through the SDUK, "The Penny Magazine" did not present a particular ideological line. Yet it is visible from the content of the articles that the magazine appealed to a reader "determined to not to change the world but to understand it"[29]. The editor did not want to cover any controversial subjects thus politics and religion were permanently excluded. James Bronterre O'Brien editor of the radical, unstamped "The Poor Man's Guardian", complained that the knowledge offered by "The Penny Magazine" was "trash"[30]. This harsh criticism stemmed from the conviction that periodicals for the working class should educate them about their rights and make them more informed about their grievances.

As a periodical with an educational predilection "The Penny Magazine" refrained from printing fiction. It was eventually one of the reasons for its closure in 1845 as all competitors did not have such objections. The "Non-controversial" and "miscellanous" character of the magazine was another cause of its ultimate failure[31].

Is always difficult, studying Victorian periodicals, to assess audience[32]. "The Penny Magazine" aimed to reach the working class but in reality this was not fulfilled. The initial high circulation could be attributed to a wide audience including working class[33]. During the first year the readership went down to 40 thousand copies and evidently apart from skilled artisans and the labour aristocracy the working man generally did not buy it. It was mostly members of the lower middle class who were the ardent readers of "The Penny Magazine".

One of the serious subjects covered by the magazine was history. It was a topic of paramount importance for the Victorians. Society in Britain was going through very rapid and unprecedented technological and social changes. History was a remedy for a fast changing situation where many felt unsecure[34]. The past was a reference for the present, seemingly unstable, times. In Victorian times history become available and meaningful to a "mass reading public"[35].

---

[27] Patricia Anderson, "Ilustration" in *Victorian Periodicals ad Victorian Society*, eds. Jerry Don Vann and Rosemary T. VanArsdel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 125.

[28] Anderson, "Ilustration" , 139.

[29] Bennett, "The Editorial Character", 138.

[30] Patricia Hollis, *The pauper press: a study in working-class radicalism of the 1830s.* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 21.

[31] Scott Bennett, "Revolutions in thought: serial publication and the mass market for reading" in *Victorian Periodical Press: Samplings and Soundings*, eds. Joanne Shattock and Michael Wolff (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982), 5.

[32] Joel H. Wiener, "Sources for the Study of the Newspapers" in *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, eds. Laurel Brake, Aled Jones and Lionel Madden (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 155–165.

[33] James, *Fiction*, 18.

[34] Peter Bowler, *The Invention and Progress. The Victorians and the Past* (Basil Blackwell, 1989).

[35] Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (New York: Twayne; Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada; New York; Oxford: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1995), 5.

History was perceived as a very important subject for the person who wanted to understand the world. As rev. Thomas Cooper, Unitarian minister, said history was a subject "necessary for a man who is to live in the world"[36].

On the pages of "The Penny Magazine" history was a permanent feature. Historical knowledge was to be found not only in strictly historical articles but also in the ones covering architecture, art, travel, statistics or biography. It was quite often connected with local history although usually well placed within the context of general history. This kind of article often included an assessment of the civilisational level of Britain. The dynamic between civilisation and barbarism formed an important part of Victorian discourse.

In the first issue from 31st of March 1832 there were a number of such articles with illustrations. A history of a former Charing Cross village, a colony of Van Diemen's Land, and beer mixed history with geography, botany and economics. Even these kinds of articles allowed writers to introduce instruction about the past and to make judgements about Britain and the world in the past and present. In the article "The Antiquity of Beer" information about the amount of beer drunk in the country was cited as an indication of "national wealth, satisfactory by comparison with the general poverty of less advanced periods of civilisation in our country and with that of less industrious nations in our day"[37].

Apart from long articles there were also short items like the column called "The Week" which presented historical facts which happened this particular week in the past. In the first issue there was a note about the birth of a famous philosopher Rene de Cartes, and also of dr. William Harvey who in 1620 was the first scientist to describe the circulation of blood[38]. During the first year the title of the column disappeared but the idea was still there. There were other short miscellaneous texts often also conveying some historical knowledge.

Within 13 years of its existence articles from "The Penny Magazine" covered all the important buildings in the British Isles, both secular and ecclesiastical. Edifices ranged from great cathedrals to small churches – from St.Paul's Cathedral in London, to Stone Church in the small village near Dartford[39]. The list of secular buildings covered by the magazine also varied from well known like the Tower of London or Somerset House to less familiar like Charlton House in Kent[40]. The choice of illustrations confirms the predilection of the editor for British architecture

[36] Valerie E. Chancellor, *History for their masters: opinion in the English history textbook: 1800–1914* (Bath: Adams & Dart, 1970), 27.

[37] *Penny Magazine*, 31 III 1832, 3.

[38] *Penny Magazine*, 31 III 1832.

[39] *Penny Magazine*, 12 V 1832; 3 V 1845.

[40] *Monthly Supplement to the Penny Magazine*, 31 V–30 VI, 1836, 249–256; *Penny Magazine*, 14 IV 1832; 5 VII 1845.

and landscape – 57% of the illustrations from "The Penny Magazine" were located on the Isles[41].

The descriptions of the palaces and castles were the basis for the assessment of historical periods. History of Somerset House in London from April 1832 was a classic example of numerous articles of this kind of article, where the building was placed within the context of the British past. Somerset House evoked the 16th century as the age of "arbitrary […] lawless power" contrasting with a later age of freedom, freedom that brought to Britain development and wealth "produced by unfettered industry". It is interesting that the article is dedicated to the 16th century building applauds science, free trade and industry for bringing "comforts and enjoyments"[42].

"Magna Charta" was the title of the article published in 1833 and was devoted to the famous document form the 13th century. The full story of the "foundations of the free constitution" event were described with details – denoting Saxon population and Norman "tyrannical" rule[43].

"The British Valhalla" was a series of articles printed in the Supplement to "The Penny Magazine" in 1845. It was a basic course of English history through the lives of its kings and queens. Its aim was to present "great events of our national history as are most proper for the hands of the painter or the sculptor". The series started with legendary past – the author of the article did not want to leave it out as it was "picturesque" and "captivating". The legends were forming "national character" thus were an important part of its heritage[44].

"The Penny Magazine" was closed the same year thus ending "The British Valhalla". The last part covered the conquest of France by Henry V. There were hardly any dates in the articles of the series but plenty of imagined dialogue instead.

England received the most coverage when it comes to history art or architecture. Scotland was next with Wales and Ireland being not popular topics of articles. There was no marked difference between England and Britain – the terms British and English were used synonymously[45]. British heroes hailed on the pages of the magazine were building the greatness of England. A short note describing the life of Cromwellian admiral Robert Black was such an example[46].

The articles devoted to the history of Scotland were usually focused on the Middle Ages, typically ending with James V. The Scottish past was incorporated into a common British heritage. Even the battles lost by the English were deemed

41 Bennet, "The Editorial Character", 140.

42 *Penny Magazine*,14 IV 1832, 17.

43 *Penny Magazine*, 15 VI 1833, 228–231.

44 *The Supplement to "The Penny Magazine"*, I 1845, 33,34.

45 It is true for all Victorian era. Eric Evans, "Englishness and Britishness. National identities, c. 1790–c. 1870", in *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History*, ed. Alexander Grant and Keith Stringer (London: Routledge, 1995), 232.

46 *Penny Magazine*, 11 VIII 1832, 191–192.

heroic- thus the field of Bannockburn was called "glorious" and the battle "Marathon of Scotland"[47].

Surprisingly the British empire and its history did not form a substantial part of the articles from "The Penny Magazine". The subject was rarely raised and did not feature in the woodcut pictures either. The marginal place of the empire was in harmony with the way it was covered in Victorian textbooks and popular culture[48].

Historical articles appearing on the pages of "The Penny Magazine" were focused on Britain. There were a good number of items covering different aspects of continental art, architecture and history but Britain dominated as a subject. The superiority of Italian culture was not questioned but in every other aspect it was Britain above all other states. Its people were praised as industrious, patriotic and not fanatical. The "plain, sober, hard-working English labourer" was lauded as a paragon of virtues[49].

The biographies of famous people were usually devoted to characters who were diligent and hard-working and as such achieved success in the world. Interestingly enough it was quite often lesser known figures who were described. Important was the lesson from their lives – hard work is the way to improve one's life.

There was a continuity in British history presented on the pages of "The Penny Magazine" . The process of constant yet gradual improvement was a characteristic trait of development of the British past. The political system in Britain was evolving from brutal and uncontrollable power of the crown to a government conscious of the rights of the subjects. Progress of freedom was presented as slow but its roots were deep in pre-Norman traditions. "True Anglo-Saxon spirit" was amalgamated with the passion for liberty[50]. Freedom of trade, constitutional progress and betterment of the living conditions of the poor were presented as a typical for Britain.

"The Penny Magazine" was presenting a typical Victorian era vision of history. The British historian Herbert Butterfield called it the "Whig interpretation of history"[51]. In his classic but still popular book he criticised the vision of the past written from the Protestant, progressive, 19th century viewpoint. As he claimed it was history of the past written "with reference to the present"[52].

Rosemary Mitchell analysing the Victorian illustrations on the pages of the fiction and the historiography coined the term "picturesque history"[53]. This could also

---

47 *Penny Magazine*, 15 XII 1832, 364–365.

48 Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists. Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

49 *Penny Magazin*e, 22 V 1841, 200.

50 "*Monthly Supplement to the Penny Magazine*", I 1845, 34.

51 Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). First edition was published in 1931.

52 Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation*, 17.

53 Rosemary Mitchell, *Picturing the Past: English History in Text and Image 1830–1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

be applied to "The Penny Magazine". "Picturesque history" relied on pictures – the strong visual element was as important as the text itself. It was not only presenting the past in visual form through illustrations of ruins and other artefacts but also emphasised specific historical periods. For exponents of "picturesque history" the Middle Ages and the early modern epoch were the favourite subjects of narration. It was also a "highly localised" history deeply immersed in the landscape of the British Isles[54].

The educational value of "The Penny Magazine" was limited. To read and understand the articles certain historical knowledge was already necessary. Yet there was another dimension of education that the editor of "The Penny Magazine" seemed to aspire to – the shaping of collective identities. History played an important role as a factor in nation building. "The Penny Magazine" was constantly presenting ideas of freedom as a bond unifying members of the nation united around shared, common values.

Iwona Sakowicz-Tebinka

The role of historical education in "The Penny Magazine" 1832–1845

Summary

"The Penny Magazine" was created as a cheap periodical fulfilling both the entertaining and educational role. Financed by the "Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge", magazine aimed at working class. Its purpose was to supply uneducated readers with information on non-controversial topics. The whole enterprise lasted from 1832 to 1845.

Despite the ambitious goal the educational value of "The Penny Magazine" was limited. Some knowledge of history was already necessary for understanding the articles. Yet there was another dimension of education that the editor of "The Penny Magazine" seemed to aspire to – the shaping of collective identities. Historical education played an important role as a factor in nation building. "The Penny Magazine" was constantly presenting ideas of freedom as a bond unifying members of the nation around shared, common values transgressing the social class distinction.

[54] Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 15.