The Literary Invasion of the Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiography

A response to the claim that “Nobody wages war with Dostoevsky or Dickens”

Claire Lynch
Two Cultures?

“Their mode of experiencing, feeling, interpreting and writing sets no standards, provides no models, makes no sense to a discipline that has always aspired to science”

(Plummer 1983, 6)
The Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiography

Over 230 autobiographies of subjects who lived in England, Scotland or Wales between 1790 and 1945.

“the significance of the inner lives of ordinary men and women, and about the necessity of understanding human identity in the dimension of time”

(Burnett, Vincent and Mayall 1984, xiii)
The Original Manuscripts

Original Project

"asserting the right of the labouring poor to make their own history"

(Burnett, Vincent and Mayall 1984, xvii)
Shared ground?

“Writer and reader, storyteller and historian, are bound together by a common fascination with the detail of an unfolding life”

(Burnett, Vincent and Mayall 1984, xvii).
“selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve and that just ended up there”

(Steedman 2001, 68).
"Duplicate" Documents

I've been thinking, to get an idea of the orphanage and people's attitude towards orphans in the earlier Victorian periods you could do worse by not acquainting your good self with the life of George Muller, and the institution of the orphanage was a compassionate attitude towards the boards of homeless children he was around him. There was much opposition to the kids, and the good people of the time objected to noise and games of children at play, and it gave children at play, and it annoyed them. One condition of admission was that the orphan was born in wedlock, and certificates had to be furnished in proof.

Mullers was divided into 5 "houses" and cared for 2,000 + children. 6 and 1 boys left at 14 years of age. Boys were kept rigorously apart. Houses No. 1 and 4 were used for boys and No. 1 and 4 were used for boys and 3 for girls. Even brothers and sisters never came into contact at all. Children never came into contact at any two sisters (when I did not know, I never even come until I came back).

I think it necessary that, with the Dickensian view people have, a true Dickensian view people have, a true picture is made. For instance, young Oliver would not have taken him. Oliver would not have taken him, and asked for more. To use a slang word of my times, he wouldn't have asked for, he wouldn't have had the mallow, (meaning, he wouldn't have had the pluck plus occasion). Our meals were already laid out before we marched into the dining rooms, and we marched into the dining rooms, and we took our "established" place at table. And all meals were taken at table. And all meals were taken at table. And all meals were taken at table. And all meals were taken at table.

I don't know what shoes, or boots, as no one wore shoes in those days. I don't know what shoes, or boots, as no one wore shoes in those days. I don't know what shoes, or boots, as no one wore shoes in those days. I don't know what shoes, or boots, as no one wore shoes in those days. I don't know what shoes, or boots, as no one wore shoes in those days. I don't know what shoes, or boots, as no one wore shoes in those days. I don't know what shoes, or boots, as no one wore shoes in those days.

Birmingham; Worcester. Orphanage life 1906-1917, life as tramp, experiences in lunatic asylums in 1930s.
Abstract

I. Bibliographical Information
II. Family Life
III. Occupations
IV. Activities
V. Comments
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I. Bibliographical Information

II. Family Life

III. Occupations Sequence of occupations over lifetime, with dates where given

IV. Activities Interests and activities outside work. Pastimes; beliefs; religious practice; tenure of unpaid office in organisations (salaried positions entered in paragraph iii); literary activity

V. Comments Summary of character of autobiography. Brief indication of the principal areas of interest and the quality of the writing
III. Occupations

Imprisoned for theft; committed to mental hospital on several occasions; joined the Territorial Army in 1938.
V. Comments

A remarkable story of orphanage life [...] recalling the lack of variety and the imposition of daily routines and chores, forms of punishment [...] his unpreparedness for the outside world, interpreting language literally and so causing many misunderstandings and some to doubt his sanity. Some mention is also made of his life as a tramp and comparisons between the orphanage and his experiences in lunatic asylums in the 1930s.
"young Oliver taken his basin and asked for more. To use my times, he
the mallom."

I think it necessary, you see, to use slang words of my times. We "fed up." We were "fed up" as we took anyone who happened to walk by. And so, we had no games. Indeed, we had no games, so we played on the grass and in the gardens. We had no toys, so we made our own.
"Young Twist was an orphan, like me, wasn’t he? It made me laugh when Dickens wrote that Oliver took his bowl and asked for more. He wouldn’t have had the mallom to do that. At mealtimes we ate in silence. No-one ever asked for more.”
Dr Claire Lynch
Brunel University
claire.lynch@brunel.ac.uk