William Hutton is a fascinating example of an eighteenth-century working man – lacking a formal education, but confident, industrious and enterprising. When he settled in Birmingham in 1750, most inhabitants were unable to read words on a sheet of paper. Yet the town needed people with writing and reading skills to participate in its emerging ‘industrial enlightenment’. Self-taught individuals like Hutton played key roles in Birmingham’s development.

Self-Education

When William Hutton (1723-1815) settled in Birmingham in 1750, most inhabitants were unable to read words on a sheet of paper. Yet the town needed people with writing and reading skills to participate in its emerging ‘industrial enlightenment’. Commerce, politics, and social life required informed citizens. But how were words on paper to be understood by an untrained populace?

Self-education, outside of formal institutions with help from personal networks, helped generate literacy in trading towns. Historians usually place the rise of self-education in the mid-nineteenth century, after Samuel Smiles popularised the concept in his book called Self Help. Yet Birmingham had been producing autodidacts, along with gilt buttons, for over a century. These self-educated individuals used their mastery of words to improve themselves and their towns.

A search of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography reveals scores of self-taught people, whose careers were centred on a new-found love of books - school teachers, itinerant lecturers, booksellers, printers, journalists, reviewers, and first-time authors. Their use of words, or literacy, to get on in life was particularly evident in manufacturing hubs, where book reading, selling, and lending had become systematised by 1750.

Self-Improvement

William Hutton is a prime example of someone whose involvement with words improved his standard of living. Hutton started life in abject poverty as a child labourer in a Derby silk mill. Though he lacked formal education, by the 1740s, with the help of siblings and local mentors, he was reading low-priced literature from market bookstalls. After a second apprenticeship in knitting stockings in Nottingham, he imitated a local bookseller and learned to bind cheap volumes.

In 1749, he borrowed money from his sister and walked to and from London to buy bookbinding tools. When his former master, a dissenting minister, retired, he gave Hutton his old books for a nominal note of £1.7s. Summoning up courage, in 1750, Hutton rented half a shop in Bull Street, Birmingham ‘to begin the world’ as a bookseller. After some success, he moved to the centre of High Street – one of the best sites in town. He was determined to use his books as a pathway out of poverty.

Birmingham was a booming commercial centre with about 24,000 inhabitants. Words were being hawked everywhere, from taverns and newspapers to debating clubs and libraries. The British Book Trade Index from 1720-60 shows 22 Birmingham booksellers – 12 during Hutton’s first decade – clustered together in the town centre. Twelve taverns interspersed amongst them created a seamless web of conversation, sociability, and drink.

By 1752, Hutton was binding, selling, and lending books from his circulating library. In 1756, Ani’s Birmingham Gazette noted:

Just Published and given gratis a CATALOGUE of Entertaining Books, to be Lett out to Read at Two pence per Week each Volume by Mr Hutton, bookseller in High-street. At the above Place is kept a Paper Warehouse, where may be had…any Sort of…Paper. Taking advantage of cheap locally-made paper and an expanding provincial press, Hutton tailored his stock to meet Birmingham’s needs. A cashbook in the Birmingham Central Library records sales of 2,581 items for Hutton’s first years in trade. 670 books with legible prices were heavily discounted for only 1-6d. There were also 712 charges for ‘reading’ – likely fees for borrowing books or reading items inside Hutton’s shop.

Newly-literate readers could select Hutton’s best-sellers: Almanacks, Magazines, Prayer Books, Bibles, Plays, Easy Readers, Battledores, Testaments, Prayers, Chappbooks, and Reviews. School books, grammars, dictionaries and self-improvement guides let people master words and educate themselves with a minimum of external teaching. Paper was Hutton’s most profitable product. Indeed, 65% of his sales were for paper, stationery, and binding. After greedily trying to make paper himself in an unsuccessful mill in Handsworth, Hutton changed his focus from selling books to inexpensive grades of paper. This shift brought him ‘an ample fortune’. Hutton’s paper and notebooks, waiting to be filled with words, were symbols of the man and his town. They recorded Birmingham’s busy life and were vehicles of self-expression for future writers like Hutton.
started life in abject poverty as a child labourer in a Derby silk mill. Though he lacked formal education, by the 1740s, with the help of siblings and local mentors, he was reading low-priced literature from market bookstalls. After a second apprenticeship in knitting stockings in Nottingham, he imitated a local bookseller and learned to bind cheap volumes. By 1752, Hutton was binding, selling, and lending books from his circulating library. In 1756, An[1] publishing house in Birmingham noted: Just Published and given gratis A CATALOGUE of Entertaining Books, to be Lett out to Read at Two pence per Week each Volume by Mr Hutton, bookseller in New Street…At the above Place is kept a Paper Warehouse, where may be had…any Sort of…Paper.
William Hutton, F.A.S.S., was a member of polite society. He could now sign himself: W. Hutton, Author and Historian.

A Self-taught Voice

Why did Hutton and other autodidacts long to become published authors? Part of it was the sheer joy of self-expression that only the self-taught could feel: ‘I never wrote for profit’, claimed Hutton, ‘only for the pleasure of writing is inconceivable.’ He imagined how his History would sound to others: ‘Pleased as a food parent, I...had the whole by heart...Frequently...in the night I have repeated it in silence for two or three hours...’ Once published, his History brought status, even authority, to a man who had never before mastered the word. What is more, he wrote it in his own self-taught voice.

Hutton’s style was to mix caudion, humour, and bluntness with opiniated digressions on topics he enjoyed. This breach of norms marked him as a literary autodidact, a writer independent of conventional historical norms.

A Culture of Reading and Writing

Writings flourished in eighteenth-century Birmingham and were crucial to the success of self-educated men like Hutton. They help us to understand why a culture of reading and writing was prized by aspiring citizens in developing towns. This culture was sustained not just by scholars and antiquarians, but by an expanding flow of people, some self-taught, who strove to gain useful knowledge. Their accomplishments arose from an openness to learn from experience, from masters and traditional authorities. Hutton, like John Locke, thought the mind was like the blank paper he sold, to be filled by the use of his own senses and observations. This idea had much in common with the empiricism, experiences and notions of the august Royal Society in London. Nullius in verba (Take nobody’s word for it - a rough translation that championed the use of facts and resistance to authority). Self-taught individuals like Hutton have been neglected by historians. They should be acknowledged as a key element of Birmingham’s provincial enlightenment.

Further Reading

Audrey Duggan, A Lady of Letters: Catherine Hutton (Brewin Books, 2000).
William Hutton, An History of Birmingham (Pearson and Robinson, 1781) or later editions.
The book was a tribute to his adopted through brash, witty, plainspoken language. He could now sign himself: History Antiquaries on the reputation of his made a fellow of the Scottish Society of William Withering, a member of the Lunar topography', wrote the envious antiquary 'obliged…to lay down the battledore, seen Oxford', he admitted, and was preface revealed a writer who publicly education, was a daring attempt.' Yet the the original work. 'To venture into the was confirmed by the many editions, (dated 1781). Its popularity was influenced as a key element of Birmingham's provincial enlightenment. • Dr Susan Whymann, an historian of eighteenth-century England, is the author of The Pen and the People. English Letter Writers, 1660–1850 published by Oxford University Press. She is working on a biography of William Hutton. www.susanwhymann.com 1938. Further Reading Audrey Duppigny, A Lady of Letters: Catherine Hutton.[Brown Books, 2000] William Hutton, The Life of William Hutton, with introduction by Carl Chinn.[Brown Books, 1998] William Hutton, An History of Birmingham.[Pearson and Rollinson 1781] or later editions. Underwritten words flourished in eighteenth-century Birmingham and were crucial to the success of self-educated men like Hutton. They help us to understand why a culture of reading and writing was prized by aspiring citizens in developing towns. This culture was sustained not just by scholars and antiquarians, but by an expanding flow of people, some self-taught, who strove to gain useful knowledge. Their accomplishments arose from an openness to learn from experience, instead of from masters and traditional authorities. Hutton, like John Locke, thought the mind was like the blank paper he sold, to be filled by the use of his own senses and observations. This idea had much in common with the empiricism, experiments and notions of the august Royal Society in London: Nulla in etsu (Take nobody’s word for it – a rough translation that championed the use of facts and resistance to authority). Self-taught individuals like Hutton have been neglected by historians. They should be acknowledged as a key element of Birmingham’s provincial enlightenment. A Self-taught Voice Why did Hutton and other autodidacts long to become published authors? Part of it was the sheer joy of self-expression that the self-taught could feel: ‘I never wrote for profit’, claimed Hutton, ‘only for the pleasure of writing is inconceivable’. He imagined how his History would sound to others: ‘Plaised as a food parent, I... had the whole by heart... Frequently... in the night I have repeated it in silence for two or three hours... without... missing a word.’ Once published, his History brought status, even authority, to a man who had neither before he mastered the word. What is more, he wrote it in his own self-taught voice.

Hutton’s style was to mix candour, humour, and blunt asides with opinionated digressions on topics he enjoyed. This breach of norms marked him as a literary authority, to a man who had neither before he mastered the word. What is more, he wrote it in his own self-taught voice.

Hutton proudly chose the words that best described his town: ‘grand, populous, extensive, active and humane’. Among the History’s subscribers were 12 nobility, 38 esquires, 11 clergymen, 4 book societies, the Overseers of the Poor, Joseph Priestley and Matthew Boulton.

A Profusion of Words Once the floodgates to authorship were opened, words flowed profusely from Hutton’s pen. All of his writings were based on personal experience. They suited the nation’s thrust for useful knowledge and entertaining new formats like biography, memoirs, travels and novels. His published works can be divided into poetic, life-writing histories of institutions he knew well, histories of places where he lived, and accounts of travels that he took – some antiquarian in nature, others devoted to social and cultural customs.

In the decade following his History, he wrote six books: A Journey from Birmingham to London (1785); Count of Regencies (1787), The Battle of Bosworth Field (1789), A Description of Blackpool (1789); A Dissertation on Janes (1789); and The History of Derby (1791). He little suspected that his country house, shop, and writings, would be destroyed in the Birmingham riots of 1791. Devastated at his loss, Hutton wrote no more, except for two attempts at poetry. But after his wife’s death in 1796, cognizant of the fragility of life and records, he turned to writing about the subject he knew best - himself.

In eight months he composed a remarkable manuscript, Memorandum from Memory’. He ruled a notebook into 365 rows, and entered a memory for each day drawn from earlier years. His creative powers refreshed and with new purpose, by 1798 he completed the history of his family (burned during the riots) and his autobiography, with annual updates thereafter. His daughter published it posthumously in 1816 as The Life of William Hutton, F.A.S.S. with an account of the riots and a history of the Hutton family. In 1798, he started an alphabetical commonplace Book and recorded references to his reading and deaths of celebrities and friends. It also contained poems lost during the riots, which he published as Poems, Chiefly Tales (1804). Hutton imitated the traditions of earlier learned scholars, who used calendars and commonplace books to record their reading, writing, and poetry. They helped him develop the art of rhetoric and persuasion.

His last works reveal a considerable author. The History of the Roman Wall (1802); Reminiscences upon North-Hides (1803); The Scarborough Tour (1804); and A Trip to Cutham (1810).

A Self-taught Voice Why did Hutton and other autodidacts long to become published authors? Part of it was the sheer joy of self-expression that the self-taught could feel: ‘I never wrote for profit’, claimed Hutton, ‘only for the pleasure of writing is inconceivable’. He imagined how his History would sound to others: ‘Plaised as a food parent, I... had the whole by heart... Frequently... in the night I have repeated it in silence for two or three hours... without... missing a word.’ Once published, his History brought status, even authority, to a man who had neither before he mastered the word. What is more, he wrote it in his own self-taught voice.

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Hutton was a prolific writer. He wrote six books: A Journey from Birmingham to London (1785); Count of Regencies (1787), The Battle of Bosworth Field (1789), A Description of Blackpool (1789); A Dissertation on Janes (1789); and The History of Derby (1791). His works record the story of a nation and its people in various stages of development. For Hutton, authorship was an opportunity to proclaim the accomplishments of himself, his family, and his beloved town. That writing came late in life to an autodidact, made its rewards even sweeter. A Culture of Reading and Writing The written words flourished in eighteenth-century Birmingham and were crucial to the success of self-educated men like Hutton. They help us to understand why a culture of reading and writing was prized by aspiring citizens in developing towns. This culture was sustained not just by scholars and antiquarians, but by an expanding flow of people, some self-taught, who strove to gain useful knowledge. Their accomplishments arose from an openness to learn from experience, instead of from masters and traditional authorities. Hutton, like John Locke, thought the mind was like the blank paper he sold, to be filled by the use of his own senses and observations. This idea had much in common with the empiricism, experiments and notions of the august Royal Society in London: Nulla in etsu (Take nobody’s word for it – a rough translation that championed the use of facts and resistance to authority). Self-taught individuals like Hutton have been neglected by historians. They should be acknowledged as a key element of Birmingham’s provincial enlightenment. • Dr Susan Whymann, an historian of eighteenth-century England, is the author of The Pen and the People. English Letter Writers, 1660–1850 published by Oxford University Press. She is working on a biography of William Hutton. www.susanwhymann.com


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