

2018

'The Road to Learning': Re-evaluating the Mechanics' Institute Movement

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/11817>

<http://dx.doi.org/10.24382/863>

University of Plymouth

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‘The Road to Learning’:
Re-evaluating the Mechanics’
Institute Movement

by

Douglas Robert Watson

A thesis submitted to University of Plymouth in partial fulfilment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Humanities and Performing Arts Doctoral Training Centre

7 April 2018

Acknowledgements

“‘The Road to Learning’: Re-evaluating the Mechanics’ Institutes Movement’ followed on from my MRes thesis ‘The Battle of Plymouth Hoe’ (2012) and grew out of a chance encounter with a Mechanics’ Institute, which arose from that project; reading about its members and their sense of public-spirited engagement with science and progress left its mark on me and I wanted to find out more about these Institutions. I would like to thank those mechanics from long ago first and foremost.

This research project was made possible by the University of Plymouth, and I would like to thank the University Doctoral Training Centre in the Humanities for the award of a scholarship, 2012 – 2015. I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr James Gregory, Dr Daniel Grey and Professor James Daybell. Their support through what has been an at times difficult process has gone beyond what could have reasonably been expected of them as individuals and as a team. Thank you. I would also like to thank Dr Lee Miller, Professor Liz Tingle, Professor Roberta Mock, Professor Kevin Jefferys and Karen Sedgman for their support, insight, and encouragement. I would like to thank the students I had the pleasure of teaching at Plymouth between 2012 – 2013.

I would like to thank the Members of Plymouth University Nineteenth Century Society (PUNCS), for allowing me to present at their inaugural conference in March 2015. I would also like to thank the Society for the History of Education for allowing me to present a paper to their Postgraduate Panel at the annual History of Education Society Conference in Exeter in 22–23 November 2013.

I would especially like to thank my examiners, Dr Helen Rogers and Dr Claire Fitzpatrick, for their valuable insights and recommendations.

For their help, insight and encouragement, I would like to thank Dr Jana Sims, Dr Helen Flexner, and Lucy Huggins. I would also like to thank Taryn Edwards at the San Francisco Mechanics Institute.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family for putting up with me all this time.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award.

Work submitted for this research degree at the Plymouth University has not formed part of any other degree either at Plymouth University or at another establishment.

This study was financed with the aid of a three-year studentship from the School of Humanities and Performing Arts, 2012 – 2015.

A programme of advanced study was undertaken, which included taught modules and attendance at training and study workshops. These were as follows:

Research Skills in the Arts and Humanities (Plymouth University module code MARE 525);

Plymouth University Graduate Teaching Associate training programme;

Faculty Doctoral Training session in workshops in Endnote;

Presenting to Conferences;

Sessions on Writing Spaces; Referencing; Discursive Strategies and Framings;

Overcoming Panic and Anxiety; Stop Procrastinating; Research Owning and Using;

Critical and Strategic Reading

Word count of main body of thesis: 79, 079

Signed:

Date: 7 April 2018

‘The Road to Learning’. Re-evaluating the Mechanics’ Institute Movement

Abstract

Douglas Robert Watson

This thesis is a re-evaluation of a movement founded to provide what Samuel Smiles called “the road to learning” for workers in the nineteenth century. Mechanics’ institutes emerged during the 1820s to both criticism and acclaim, becoming part of the physical and intellectual fabric of the age and inspiring a nationwide building programme funded entirely by public subscription. Beginning with a handful of examples in major British cities, they eventually spread across the Anglophone world. They were at the forefront of public engagement with arts, science and technology.

This thesis is a history of the mechanics’ institute movement in the British Isles from the 1820s through to the late 1860s, when State involvement in areas previously dominated by private enterprises such as mechanics’ institutes, for example library provision and elementary schooling, became more pronounced.

The existing historiography on mechanics’ institutes is primarily regional in scope and this thesis breaks new ground by synthesising a national perspective on their wider social, political and cultural histories. It contributes to these broader themes, as well as areas as diverse as educational history, the history of public exhibition and public spaces, visual culture, print culture, popular literacy and literature (including literature generated by the Institutes themselves, such as poetry and prose composed by members), financial services, education in cultural and aesthetic judgement, Institutes as sources of protest by means of Parliamentary petitions, economic history, and the nature, theory and practice of the popular dissemination of ideas. These advances free the thesis from ongoing debate

around the success or failure of mechanics' institutes, allowing the emphasis to be on the experiential history of the "living" Institute.

The diverse source base for the thesis includes art, sculpture, poetry and memoir alongside such things as economic data, library loan statistics, membership numbers and profit / loss accounts from institute reports. The methodology therefore incorporates qualitative (for example, tracing the evolution of attitudes towards Institutes in contemporary culture by analysing the language used to describe them over time) and quantitative (for example, exploring Institutes as providers of financial services to working people) techniques. For the first time, mechanics' institutes are studied in relation to political corruption, debates concerning the morality of literature and literacy during the nineteenth century, and the legislative processes of the period.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction: A Meeting of Worlds

On 17 June 1848, over 500 members of the New Swindon Mechanics' Institute – dressed in their best attire and accompanied by their wives and children – arrived at the railway station in Oxford.

The time was just after 8.30am and the train carrying them was met by a delegation of University dons. The event was the result of collaboration between the owners of the Swindon Institute – the Great Western Railway – and the Oxford branch of the British Association, founded in 1831. It took the form of an open-air picnic and a tour of both the City of Oxford and its famous University, with some of the leading lights of the latter as guides. The visit was a resounding success, the departing workers were applauded by a crowd of citizens from all classes as they boarded the train back to Wiltshire and their “respectable” and “orderly” conduct was praised in glowing terms.¹

The journey to that encounter, and that it took place at all, reveals much about the functions of social, political and cultural interactions between individuals and people from different backgrounds. At play were a complex web of social expectations, behavioural norms, cultural contexts and individual and collective codes of conduct governing every aspect of the encounter and the respective worlds beyond it.

The fact that ordinary working people were there at all was down to the influence of the mechanics' institute, and such organisations were, by then well-established all over the country and had been influencing the attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and expectations of (and about) those workers for a number of years. This influence made itself felt in the social, cultural or political aspects of life, and not just within the walls of the Institutes themselves – they had an influence which went beyond them.

¹ *Oxford Journal*, 17 June 1848, p.3

It was the mechanics' institutes which had made this meeting of worlds – of mechanic and professor – possible. This thesis is the story of how that meeting, and others like it, came to pass.

The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis takes a threefold structure of *political*, *cultural* and *social* themes as its overarching framework. These three thematic approaches are the foundations upon which the last century of historiography has been built. There is crossover. In order to fully explore some aspects of Institute influence or some events surrounding them, it is necessary to examine them through each of the three lenses. No single piece of research has looked at the history of the mechanics' institutes from all three viewpoints. The thesis therefore addresses this, speaking to the social, cultural and political historian, the art historian and literary critic, the economic historian and student of Parliamentary democracy alike, of a time when the idea of a “road to learning” (I take the phrase from Samuel Smiles, lecturer at mechanics institutes and the author of the archetypal text on self-help, published in 1859) of piecemeal education for the working classes was being challenged.² By engaging with the material in these ways, the thesis charts the scale, impact and outcome of that challenge, and explores the formation of an alternative road – signposted with different types of learning and bound for a different destination.

² S. Smiles, *Self-Help; with illustrations of character and conduct* (London: John Murray, 1859), p. 286. This has one instance in the mass of anecdotes, on an individual with a mechanics institute experience: the blacksmith and self-taught artist James Sharples (1825-1893), p.132. For scholarship on Smiles, see A. Tyrell, “Class Consciousness in Early Victorian Britain: Samuel Smiles, Leeds Politics, and the Self- Help Creed”, *Journal of British Studies*, Vol.9, No.2 (May 1970), pp.102-125; R.J. Morris, “Samuel Smiles and the Genesis of Self-Help; The Retreat to a Petit Bourgeois Utopia”, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1981) pp. 89-109; A. Briggs, ‘Samuel Smiles: The Gospel of Self Help’, in G. Marsden, ed., *Victorian Values: Personalities and Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century Society* (London: Longman, 1990), pp.85-96; for a recent examination of the female reading of this text see B. Leckie, “Reader-Help: How to Read Samuel Smiles’s Self-Help”, ch.2 in P.R. Rooney and A. Gasperini (eds.), *Media and Print Culture Consumption in Nineteenth-Century Britain : The Victorian Reading Experience* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp.15-30.

In terms of time this thesis takes as its starting point the establishment of the first recognised mechanics' institute in London at the end of 1823 and concludes in 1869, with the imminent arrival of Forster's 1870 Education Act amid a widespread and growing popular clamour for mass elementary instruction. This time window has been determined by theme as much as brevity. It allows a detailed and full consideration of the Mechanics' Institutes from their inception, through their evolution, to their heyday and beyond into the beginning of their eventual decline.

The first chapter deals with the political aspects, impact and influence of the mechanics' institutes. It explores the nature of political involvement in them and the attitudes to such involvement. Taking the founding of the London Mechanics' Institute (in 1823) as an example, it places this important organisation in the context of a radical political tradition in the city. Recent scholarship on the London Mechanics' Institute is examined and critiqued. The involvement of elected politicians as founders is examined, before the chapter moves on to consider the wider, non-radical, nature of mechanics' institutes on the political landscape. Institute involvement with Parliamentary process is examined, and the use of institutes and their members as a symbol in debates for the inherent potential of the working classes is given especial consideration. Institutes as active participants in the Parliamentary process by means of petitions is examined for the first time and in doing so reveals aspects of long-term party political strategy in the United Kingdom.

Developing the theme of Parliamentary involvement still further, the gradual acceptance of mechanics' institutes as political spaces in the popular imagination will also be considered, including the first examination of institutes in the context of bribery, electoral fraud and the place of institutes in the popular political sphere. The institutes in the context of political controversies and agitations will also be examined, with the complexity of the relationship, in the 1840s, between institutes and local and national

Chartist groups and figures, being considered for the first time. The chapter also presents four case studies of institutes taken from England, Wales and Scotland in the 1830s-1860s (Devonport, Pontypool, Gateshead and a cluster of institutes in Nithsdale and Annandale). These samples are used to examine committee, membership and patronage makeup.

The second chapter deals with social and economic aspects. It first considers social aspects, impacts and influence, and the core practicalities of the movement as originally intended – of instruction and education. The context of such activity is examined in relation to gender and gendered spaces. Institutes are considered as both followers of socially accepted gender norms, as well as subverters of them. The female presence in institutes will be discussed, with the spectrum of women's experiences of them – as onlooker, as learner, as educator and as social participant – being explored. Generational differences are described, with the generally implicit and often explicit “pitching” of Mechanics’ Institutes to the young providing the context of the discussion. Other social aspects, such as the provision of institutes as recreational spaces, as well as the large-scale social relationships between institutes and other organisations such as Lyceums, fraternal groups, educational establishments such as Sunday schools, are examined as well.

As part of those discussions, a demonstration of the utility of institute committee reports as a tool for gauging the relative “health” of communities in the face of broader socioeconomic trends is undertaken, with a selection of cases discussed. The chapter concludes with an examination of institutes as providers of banking services to the working classes. The scale of community banking networks operated by institutes individually and in unison is explored and compared with other provision. As part of this, discussion of Institute mortgage lending to working people outlines the scale and potential motivation of what was the first affordable home ownership scheme in British history.

The third chapter deals with cultural aspects, impact and influence. The chapter includes a discussion of autobiographical culture among institute members, as well as material composed by institute members for wider dissemination. The chapter then progresses to a broader treatment of cultures of language and literacy against the background of the mechanics' institutes, including a discussion of institutes in a broader literary context; as a plot device in novels, as well as the cultural commentary and critique of the times. The relationship between institutes and the press is dealt with, including how institutes were viewed in satirical periodicals and newspapers. Examples of cultural engagement, expression and provision are discussed, in the context of wider influence as well as the impact on the scale of the movement itself.

The overarching structure of this thesis, as noted previously, follows a tripartite structure, suggested by the main historiographical themes and trends which have influenced subsequent scholarship of the past as a whole, as well as mechanics' institutes in particular.

The Historiography of the Mechanics' Institute Movement

According to an essayist in the *Westminster Review* in 1844, a mechanics' institute was:

a voluntary association of a portion of the humbler classes of a town or locality, assisted by a few of the leading and wealthy inhabitants, to raise, by means of small periodical contributions, a fund to be expended in the instruction of the members in science, literature and the arts, to the exclusion of controversial divinity, party politics and subjects of local dispute, by means of a library of circulation, lectures, evening or day classes, and a reading room.³

This definition – a “curious mixture of description and prescription” in the words of Edward Royle – frames the historiographical debate about the character and impact of

³ ‘Mechanics Institutions’, *Westminster Review*, XLI, 2, (1844), pp.416-445 (pp. 417-418).

mechanics' institutes.⁴ It refers to their voluntary nature and of their original establishment as vehicles of learning for ordinary working folk. It notes the patronage Institutes enjoyed members of social elites. It refers to the remit, nature and limits of the learning imparted in and by Institutes, and of the activities they played host to. The description is one of class and class tensions, of politics, of culture, of social hierarchies. As a distillation of what mechanics' institutes were meant to be, what they were understood to have been intended to do by their contemporaries, and the standards they were judged against – both by those contemporaries and by the commentators which followed them – it is effective and efficient. *The Westminster Review*, a highly influential organ of the intellectual middle-class was merely adding to the mass of commentary diagnosing the state of the mechanics' institutes as a movement in terms of their success and failure.⁵

The key questions driving the debates on the history of mechanics institutes dealt, and still deal, with matters of clientele, patronage, control and success. Political historians have concerned themselves with such things as the identities and party affiliations of institute backers and sponsors, or have reflected on the prohibition of certain subjects which many institutes apparently imposed. Social historians have wondered whether Institutes succeeded in attracting the working-class audience they were intended for, and whether they were controlled environments with a control agenda. Historians of all persuasions have reflected on whether mechanics' institutes were a success or a failure,

⁴ E. Royle, "Mechanics' Institutes and the Working Classes, 1840-1860", *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (June 1971), p. 308.

⁵ Databases such as the ProQuest Database of British Periodicals, as will be discussed below, in relation to primary source methodology, are crucial to identifying essays concerning the fortunes of the mechanics' institutes. In the 1820s, these include essays such as: 'A Word to the Members of the Mechanics' Institutes', *The Literary Chronicle* 386 (7 October 1826), pp.631-633; in the 1840s, these include 'A Word on Mechanics' Institutions Generally', *Chambers's Edinburgh journal* 12.573 (21 January 1843), pp.5-6. 'Mechanics' Institutes', *Hunt's London Journal*, 1.23 (7 December 1844), pp.296-297; in the 1850s, these include 'Mechanics' Institutes: What they are, and how they may be made, Educationally and Politically, more useful', *The Athenaeum* 1359 (12 November 1853), pp.1348-1349; 'Present and Future of Mechanics' Institutes', *Chambers's journal of popular literature, science and arts*, 205 (5 December 1857), pp. 364-366.

and how the degree of their outcome is to be measured defined. These questions have been central to the study of the institutes since contemporaries of the movement began to study it in depth.

This Figure has been removed due to copyright restrictions

Figure 1. Title page of J.W. Hudson's *History of Adult Education* (1851). Google books.

Contemporary Commentaries

The oldest literature in the historiography,⁶ such as the work of James Hudson (1851) and James Hole (1853), is contemporary history of the institutes, composed by people who

⁶ There were other treatments of institutes which predate Hudson and Hole, however these were not dedicated self-contained histories, but rather overviews of varying levels of surface detail only; articles, inclusions in larger works, and other material which was included incidentally. For a sample of such works, please see: J. Dircks, *Popular Education A series of Papers On The Nature Objects and Advantages of Mechanics Institutions* By Henry Dircks A Honorary Secretary of The Liverpool Literary and Scientific Institution Etc And Member Of Various Mechanics Institutions, (Manchester: Heywood & Co, 1841), pp. 3-4; M. Bowley, *Universal history on scriptural principles. Chiefly Designed for the Young*, Vol.8, (London: Samuel Bagster, 1842), pp. 411-412; D. Liddell, *Suggestions relative to the best means for diffusing useful knowledge among the working classes: addressed to the president, vice-president and committee of the Mechanics' Institution, Newcastle*, (Newcastle: W. E. & H. Mitchell, 1836), pp. 4-5.

used them and, in Hole's case, helped organise and run local examples of individual institutes and collectives of them.⁷ James Hole (1820-1895) was, in the eyes of such contemporaries as George Jacob Holyoake, "a man of remarkable ability".⁸ He was "an advocate of most movements of his day which sought progress by reason".⁹ Arguably more radical than his contemporary Hudson, Hole was himself a product of the institute system, rising through its ranks to become the President of the Yorkshire Union,¹⁰ the largest such co-operative network of institutes.¹¹ His philosophy included a belief in the amorality of property ownership and the incompatibility of capitalism with basic human nature and personal happiness.¹² By the 1860s, however, this attitude was nuanced by an increasing appreciation for the possibilities offered by philanthropic landlords in providing better living conditions for working-class families, and by the time of his death he actually owned several buildings himself scattered around London.¹³ Hole's shifting ideas about this issue (while maintaining his radical edge) are best summed up in his 1866 book *The Homes of the Working Classes, with Suggestions for their Improvement*.¹⁴ He continued to advocate for a wide range of social, cultural and political reforms throughout his life.¹⁵

⁷ J. Hole, *An Essay on the History and Management of Literary, Scientific and Mechanics' Institutions* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman, 1853); J.W. Hudson, *The History of Adult Education* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman, 1851).

⁸ G.J. Holyoake, *The Jubilee History of the Leeds Co-operative Society Limited From 1847 to 1897, traced year by year* (Manchester: Co-operative Printing Society Limited, 1897) p.253. Obituaries include Leeds Mercury, 19 February 1895, p.5.

⁹ Holyoake, *The Jubilee History*, p.253.

¹⁰ M. Hewitt, *Hole, James, (1819/20-1895)*, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/94048> [Accessed 29 December 2013]

¹¹ Hudson, *History of Adult Education*, pp. 222-234; M.A. Walker, "Solid and Practical Education Within Reach of the Humblest Means: The Growth and Development of the Yorkshire Union of Mechanics' Institutes, 1838-1891" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Huddersfield, 2010), p. 13; J.F.C. Harrison, *Learning and Living, 1790-1960: A Study in the History of the English Adult Education Movement*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 77.

¹² M. Tylecote, "The Manchester Mechanics' Institution, 1824-50", in D.S.L. Cardwell (ed.), *Artisan to Graduate: Essays to Commemorate the Foundation in 1824 of the Manchester Mechanics' Institution, Now in 1974 the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology*, (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1974), pp. 69-70.

¹³ Hewitt, *Hole, James, (1819/20-1895)*,

¹⁴ J. Hole, *The Homes of the Working Classes, with Suggestions for their Improvement* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1866).

¹⁵ J. F. C. Harrison, *Social reform in Victorian Leeds: the work of James Hole, 1820-1895* (Leeds: Thoresby Society, 1954)

Hole's overriding attitude towards institutes was one of regret and of missed opportunity. A sense of his frustration at what he perceived as their failure to attract their original target clientele shines through consistently in his writings.¹⁶ Hole was a subscriber to the ideal of institutes as places for radical ideas and radical imagination.¹⁷ His vision of institutes was a venue for the intellectual transformation of members, a place where "every man should be a politician" in his mind and where members would go forth to enact change through "works and reasons" rather than "shouts and brawls."¹⁸ He believed that this intellectual transformation should be shared by members of either gender on equal terms.¹⁹

Dr James William Hudson dedicated his history to Edward Baines, at that point editor of the *Leeds Mercury*, and founder of the Yorkshire Union of Mechanics' institutions in 1842.²⁰ Hudson had been a bookseller before turning to adult education in 1843, and had positions in Greenwich, Leeds and Glasgow. He was a founder of the Scottish and Northern Unions of Literary and Mechanics Institutions. He became the first secretary of the Yorkshire Union – Hole succeeding him in that role in 1847.²¹ Hudson would give evidence to the Select Committee on Parliamentary Papers in 1853.²² He had been secretary of the Manchester Athenaeum (founded in 1836) from 1849, was a member of the Free Library Committee in Manchester, and chairman of the Institutional Association of Lancashire and Cheshire.²³ Marx and Engels briefly corresponded about

¹⁶ Hole, *Essay*, passim.

¹⁷ Hole, *Essay*, p. 13, pp.65-66.

¹⁸ Hole, *Essay*, p. 73.

¹⁹ Hole, *Essay*, p. 39.

²⁰ Hudson lectured on the 'Domestic Life in Northern Germany', for the Glasgow Athenaeum, see *Practical Mechanic's Journal*, Vol.1 (April 1848 – March 1849), p.87.

²¹ M.P., Tylecote, *The Mechanics' Institutes of Lancashire and Yorkshire Before 1851* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957), p.64.

²² "Select Committee on Free Distribution of Parliamentary Papers, Report, Proceedings, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix", *Parliamentary Papers* [henceforth PP, 1852-53, Vol. XXXIV, No.720, pp. 331-602.

²³ *Manchester Courier*, 17 September 1859, p.9.

sending material to Hudson in October 1852.²⁴ In 1862 he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquarians of London, and later elected a member of the Chemical Society: he was principal of Trafford College in South Manchester.²⁵

The empirical basis for much of what followed in the historiography was laid down in James Hole's surveys. A key aspect of what Hudson sought to do in his analyses of them was demonstrate their historical development. This was sufficiently comprehensive for twenty-first century scholars such as Martyn Walker and Helen Flexner to utilise his figures as the foundations for their respective research. Thomas Kelly's statistics in the 1950s were practically a distillation and repackaging of Hudson's. This is testament to the strength of Hudson's research; beginning in 1850 and concluding the following year he sent questionnaires to every institute in the British Isles and compiled the resulting returns into data tables. His work was – and remains – the most comprehensive sampling of institutes from across the scope of the entire movement in Britain. He also documented the histories of every institute which provided returns, including historical data they had submitted from their records in the process. He supplemented his publishing of the survey returns and associated analyses by writing the first concise historical narrative of the movement as a whole. Hudson's work (apparently his only book) was a methodical, rigorous, empirical sampling which moved beyond a snapshot and became a quantitative catalogue of the individual institutes and the collectivisation they had started to undergo. Hudson's work remains the standard

²⁴ *Marx and Engels Collected Works. Letters 1852 – 1855* vol.39, transl. P. Ross and B. Ross (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983) Engels to Marx, 31 October 1852, p.233. The context is possibly the contact with Germans in Manchester including the theologian Dr Gottfried Kinkel, see 'Soiree of the Athenaeum Verein', *Manchester Times*, 24 November 1852, p.6.

²⁵ *Ashton Weekly Reporter*, 22 February 1862, p.3; *Journal of the Chemical Society* 20, p.597 (17 January 1867). See also R. Bud and G.K. Roberts, *Science Versus Practice: Chemistry in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) p.102. For a biography of Hudson see B.R. Villy, *Manchester Review* Vol.9 (Manchester Libraries Committee, 1962), pp.352-361. For his views on athenaeums for the middle class, contrasted with mechanics institutes, see *Manchester Courier*, 1 February 1851, p.10. Charges against him for inefficiency in his role as secretary of the Athenaeum, which he resigned in 1858, were raised in public in 1858, see *Manchester Courier*, 12 June 1858, p.5.

reference text of the movement's history to 1851. It allowed the early history of the institutes network and its constituent parts to be charted, defined and measured with precision.

Hudson's work is significant in another way – his open declaration that Institutes had already essentially failed in their core objectives by the middle of the century. This failure, according to Hudson, could be attributed to a broader failure to attract a working-class clientele. This was, in turn, caused by discontent with middle-class backers on the part of the workers, together with the levying of subscription fees which were often levied on inflexible terms, and an awareness that mechanics' institutes were controlled environments, with the levers of control being actively kept out of the reach of the audience of workers.²⁶

James Hole, writing in 1853, likewise proclaimed the failure of mechanics' institutes in their core mission, and, like Hudson, he blamed the presence and influence of the middle-classes for the lack of interest shown by ordinary working people.²⁷ He declared that not only were Institutes a failure at local level, but their Unions were failures too, only on a much grander scale.²⁸ He noted lack of financial resources as a key reason for the latter problem, while otherwise acknowledging the fact that the collective model was a sound one.²⁹ Like Hudson, only on less wide and broad a scale, his findings were based on empirically surveying his subjects.³⁰ The contradiction – that a supposedly flawed enterprise at local level could potentially be a collective success – was never addressed, although perhaps, given Hole's position at the time as honorary secretary of the Yorkshire Union of Mechanics' Institutes, it can be explained. Inability to attract the "juvenile" worker in his "apathy" was another cause of failure cited by Hole.³¹

²⁶ Hudson, *History*, p. viii-xiv.

²⁷ Hole, *Essay*, p. 72.

²⁸ Hole, *Essay*, p. 142.

²⁹ Hole, *Essay*, p. 127.

³⁰ Hole, *Essay*, pp. 16-17.

³¹ Hole, *Essay*, pp. 21-22.

Like Hudson, Hole has been an influence on every subsequent history of the movement, whether those later works have been on a regional or broader level. Subsequent works have either agreed with Hole's assertions or have sought to refute them by challenging his definition of failure. Neither Hudson nor Hole however, or by extension their ideas, have been placed under any form of in-depth scrutiny or revisionist approach. Inconsistencies and contradictions – such as Hole's reflections on individual abject failure transforming into potential success through no other means but coalescence – have never been effectively challenged. Hudson and Hole framed their studies against absolute measures of success or failure, taking account of change over time only when it represented signs of either. Their influence on later historiography, in this respect, has been considerable and enduring; every subsequent work in the field has either agreed with them in spirit if not degree, or else has sought to refute them by redefining failure.

Later Diversification

Post 1850s, the literature can be divided into several distinct thematic phases. Each highlights the influence of wider currents in general historiography. The studies by historians of education such as Thomas Kelly and Mabel Tylecote from the late 1950s onwards took place against a backdrop of significant social change. The work of sociologists and social historians – with their narratives of social control and class antagonism – such as Steven Shapin, Barry Barnes, Ian Inkster, and John Laurent from the 1970s into the 1980s followed on in this tradition. This was followed by political historians from the 1960s to the 1980s such as Colin Turner and Trygve Tholfsen. Finally, there was the work of educational and interdisciplinary historians including Clinton Stockdale, Jana Sims and Martyn Walker from the 1990s up to the present, where the debates are informed by advances in methodology brought by the cultural turn, spatial

turn, post-structuralism and interdisciplinarity.³² The membership number statistics in Hudson's data are now permitted to exist as individuals in time, inhabiting space and not necessarily conforming to classifications and parameters.

The Historians of Education

The most productive phase in terms of secondary literature on mechanics' institutes began in the late 1950s, with the publication of works by Thomas Kelly³³ and Mabel Tylecote.³⁴ These have come to be accepted as standard reference texts in the field. Indeed, the second part of Kelly's 1957 biography of George Birkbeck (1776-1841) "the founder of Institutes in theory and one of the early leading lights in practice" comprises a one volume treatment of the broader movement, while Tylecote's book on the Institutes of the Industrial North has provided the template for all subsequent in-depth regional studies.

Both Kelly and Tylecote were writing from a background of educational history, at the end of a decade where a broad consensus of the utility of education, not just for its own sake, but as a driver of economic growth had become the zeitgeist – a better educated worker was a more productive worker in the decades following the second world war.³⁵ This had parallels with the period of the mechanics' institutes' ascendancy. As standard texts, both have aged relatively well, and engage with the key debates in different ways. Kelly was the first to re-examine the Hudson and Hole narrative of institutes as failures. He did so by breaking down the contribution of institutes towards communal and national life into constituent elements – technical school, day-school, library system and social

³² F. Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 62-65 (spatial turn), pp. 21-33 (postmodern / post-structural turn), pp. 136-190 (cultural turn); A.F. Repko, *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory* (Second Edition) (London: Sage, 2012), pp. xv-xxvi.

³³ T. Kelly, *George Birkbeck: Pioneer of Adult Education* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1957).

³⁴ Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*.

³⁵ C. Chitty, *Education Policy in Britain*, 3rd. edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 199.

space.³⁶ By looking at the parts rather than the sum of them, and by doing so in isolation to better track their evolution, Kelly was able to trace the assimilation of some of these elements and their values into the broader fabric of communal, social, civic and cultural life. His engagement with the debate about class tension and social control followed a similar formula, taking the view that besides the self-serving institute benefactors there were some who took part through genuine philanthropy.³⁷

Tylecote used the exploration of that philanthropic impulse as a starting point for her engagement with the key debates about institutes. Through meticulously gathered and analysed data, ranging from subscription lists and membership books to accounts and library borrowings, Tylecote demonstrated that in the North of England at least, it was not the workers deserting the institutes which led to their downfall. She showed that membership numbers were broadly consistent from the outset across Lancashire and Yorkshire to 1851 and beyond. The institutes there were instead hindered by lack of support from industry, normally a prominent source of backing elsewhere, and from successive central governments – who saw the value of what the Institutes delivered but balked at the idea of helping to fund them.³⁸ Tylecote argued that it was not controlling interest from above which damaged the institutes in the North, it was the lack of such interest. Tylecote also contributed to the debate around institutes as failures, by arguing that rather than failing and disappearing they instead contributed to the development of modern public services such as galleries, libraries and museums.³⁹

³⁶ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 271-277.

³⁷ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 212-215.

³⁸ Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, pp. 283-289.

³⁹ Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, p.289.

Socialists and Sociologists

The work of Kelly and Tylecote was on the fringes of historical enquiry, confined to the history of education. Historians such as E.P. Thompson⁴⁰ and Trygve Tholfsen⁴¹ instead took their cue from recycled judgments going back to Friedrich Engels.⁴² Thompson condemned the London Mechanics' Institute as a puppet of the "great and wealthy" in his epochal *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) on the strength of one quote from a single edition of a radical newspaper, while at the same time contradicting himself by admitting the potential complexity his dismissiveness glossed over.⁴³ He interpreted Francis Place's involvement with mechanics' institutes as proof of his assertion that Place was a "captive" of the middle-classes⁴⁴ – the implication is that Thompson viewed the institutes as tools of the metropolitan bourgeoisie.

The emphasis on class in Thompson's work was of course, central, and his engagement with the key debates about institutes reflected this. He was essentially correct, in that "class" permeated every aspect of life and society in the nineteenth century, and that included mechanics' institute life – and also that the middle-classes were more likely to control the doings of institutes than to leave their operation to the working

⁴⁰ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991).

⁴¹ T. Tholfsen, *Working-Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

⁴² F. Engels, *The Condition of the English Working-Class in 1844* (Marxist.org ebook edition Edition) downloaded 15 June 2015 source:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/condition-working-class-england.pdf>

⁴³ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 818-819.

⁴⁴ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 846.

classes. The literature on class and culture in nineteenth-century Britain is immense.⁴⁵ It should be recognised in relation to mechanics institute discourse that “class” and class identity are not simple. Yet they played a role in generating “class” discourse. Voluntary associations such as the mechanics’ institutes and other mutual improvement bodies were important in shaping class identities, whether for improving artisans, or for members of the middle classes. As Gurney notes of the middle class, they were in “a continual process of decomposition and recomposition”, in the period to mid-century, and “it required a great deal of associational and ideological effort to create unity out of difference.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See for example T.G. Ashplant, “London Workingmen’s clubs, 1875-1914”, in S. Yeo and E. Yeo (eds.) *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590-1914: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981), pp. 241-270; E. Yeo, “Culture and constraint in working-class movements, 1830-1855”, in S. Yeo and E. Yeo (eds.) *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590-1914: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981), pp. 155-186; D. Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Autobiography* (London: Europa Publications, 1981); G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of class: Studies in English working class history 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); S. Alexander, “Women, Class and Sexual Differences in the 1830s and 1840s: Some Reflections on the Writing of a Feminist History”, *History Workshop Journal*, No. 17 (March 1984) pp.125-149; R. McKibbin, “Why Was There No Marxism in Great Britain?”, *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 99, No. 391 (April 1984), pp. 297-333; J. Purvis, *Hard Lessons : The Lives and Education of Working-class Women in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class. Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class 1848-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); S.O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1992); J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English political culture c.1815-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); P. Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); A. Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); E. Hopkins, *Working-Class Self-Help in Nineteenth-Century England: Responses to Industrialization* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995); P. Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); D. Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998); C. Hall, K. McLelland and J. Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); H. Rogers, *Women and the People: Authority, Authorship and the Radical Tradition in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); P. Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the City in Britain* (London: Verso, 2003); B. Beaven, *Leisure, citizenship and working-class men in Britain, 1850-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010); P. Johnson, “In Pursuit of Prudence: Speculation, Risk and Class in Victorian Britain” in C.V.J. Griffiths, J. J. Nott, and W. Whyte (eds.) *Classes, Cultures, and Politics: Essays on British History for Ross McKibbin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) pp.59-69; P. Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁴⁶ Gurney, *Co-operative Culture*, p.145.

Tholfsen's work was in a similar vein to Thompson and emerged from a similar place embedded within the Marxist intellectual tradition. He described the middle class backers of institutes as exhibiting "condescending self-assurance"⁴⁷ while their writings expressed the "ideological inclinations of the middle classes ... almost to the point of parody."⁴⁸ Tholfsen viewed institutes as places where working people were indoctrinated with middle class values⁴⁹ although he accepted the possibility of a genuinely philanthropic impulse and rationale at work amongst the control. His work was also notable as the first in-depth examination of the role of Christian Utilitarianism and the self-help movement in institutes, even if he explored the nature of it only to condemn it.⁵⁰

During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, social scientists became involved in the study of mechanics' institutes and related debates, motivated by interest in the question of 'social control', a concept with its origins in the work of E.A. Ross in 1901. Shapin and Barnes for instance, rather than debating the moral complexities of perceived rights and wrongs of social control through education, instead built a convincing model for how this control agenda was formulated and delivered.⁵¹ The resulting model was a one of institutes as a large-scale experiment in transformative social and cultural anthropology. Richard Johnson examined the social control uses of education in a *Past and Present* essay in 1970, and also argued for a Gramscian hegemonic motive behind the work of educational "experts" such as Henry Brougham, a key figure in the mechanics' institute history, in the 1830s in an essay in the seminal collection on social control edited by Donajgrodzki. It is important to note that Donajgrodzki cautioned against seeing social control necessarily as conscious, and cynically applied by reformers, whether in

⁴⁷ Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, p. 43.

⁴⁸ Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, p. 44.

⁴⁹ Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, p. 42.

⁵⁰ Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, pp. 44-45.

⁵¹ Shapin and Barnes, "Science, Nature and Control", p. 32.

education, or religion.⁵² R.J. Morris offers the useful phrase of “cultural bargaining between classes,” instead of control and hegemony.⁵³ F.M.L. Thompson observed that social control was an amorphous and poorly delineated model for scholars, while simultaneously acknowledging the material presence of such control in nineteenth-century life.⁵⁴

Since then, it could be argued that prominent additions to the historiography have added detail and sharper definition to what Thompson perceived as imprecision and “an alluring but poorly-defined concept”.⁵⁵ These additions, when considered *together*, rather than as discrete contributions to scholarship on themes such as work, individual experience, language, class, gender, and space, allow a more meaningful interrogation of social control as a central “concept for understanding the nineteenth century”.⁵⁶ Changes to working environments and practices during this period are fundamental to debates over social control, class dynamics, and everyday experience.

It remains essential to look carefully at the complicated relationship between those who attempted to “improve” others through institutions such as the mechanics’ institutes, and how the intended targets of these interventions understood and responded to this sort of philanthropy. For example, David Vincent has sought to tease out the working-class meanings of phrases such as “useful knowledge” in self-improvement in relation to its usage by the middle-class agency of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, closely involved with the mechanics institute movement in the 1830s, to assess the extent

⁵² R. Johnson, “Educational policy and social control in early Victorian England”, *Past & Present*, No. 49 (1970) pp. 96-119; “Educating the Educators: ‘Experts’ and the State 1833-9”, ch.3 in A.P. Donajrodzki, ed., *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1977). Johnson points to the failure of a ‘populist’ strategy by Brougham in the 1820s, between middle-class progressive educationalists and working-class radicals (p.97). For Donajrodzki’s reminder to appreciate the unconscious element, p.15.

⁵³ R.J. Morris, “Clubs, societies and associations”, p.416. in F.M. L. Thompson, (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750 – 1950*, 3 vols. (1990; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), vol.3, p.416

⁵⁴ Thompson, “Social Control”.

⁵⁵ Thompson, “Social Control”, p.208.

⁵⁶ Thompson, “Social Control”, p.190.

to which “the working class conception of the uses of literacy was vulnerable to the aggrandizement of the middle class educators”.⁵⁷

One pressing question for historians and social scientists writing since the pioneering work of the 1970s has been the extent to which these sorts of apparently benevolent activities (not to mention more obvious examples of state regulation such as policing) should be viewed as measures that were primarily or exclusively about those in positions of authority asserting social control over potentially disruptive groups.⁵⁸ However, as Helen Rogers has observed, it is problematic to assume that Victorian responses of kindness or gratitude expressed by working-class people to their middle-

⁵⁷ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p.134. Johnson’s essay, “‘Really useful knowledge’: Radical Education and Working-class Culture, 1790-1848”, in J. Clarke, C. Critcher and R. Johnson (ed.), *Working class culture: studies in history and theory* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), pp. 75-112, led to debate with E.P. Thompson in *History Workshop Journal* on the concept: R. Johnson, “Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History”, *History Workshop Journal* No.6 (1978), pp.79-100; K. McClelland, “Towards a Socialist History: Some comments on Richard Johnson, ‘Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History’”, *History Workshop Journal*, No.7 (1979), pp.101-115; G.McLennan, “Towards a Socialist History: Richard Johnson and His Critics: Towards a Constructive Debate”, *History Workshop Journal*, No.8 (1979), pp.157-166.

⁵⁸ See P. McCann, “Popular education, socialization and social control: Spitalfields, 1812-24” in P. McCann (ed.) *Popular education and socialization in the 19th century* (London: Methuen, 1977) pp. 1-40; J. Brown, “Social control and the modernisation of social policy 1890-1929”, in P. Thane (ed.), *The origins of British social policy* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), pp. 126-146; F.M.L. Thompson, “Social Control in Victorian Britain”, *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (May 1981), pp. 189-208; G. S. Jones, *Languages of class*, pp.76-89; S. Cohen, *Visions of Social Control: Crime, Punishment and Classification* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985); T. Dickson and T. Clarke, “Social concern and social control in nineteenth century Scotland: Paisley 1841-1843”, *Scottish Historical Review*, No. 65 (1986) pp. 48-60; D.G. Enoch, “Schools and inspection as a mode of social control in south-east Wales, 1839-1907”, *Journal of Educational Administration & History*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1990) pp. 9-17; N. Till, “‘First-Class Evening Entertainments’: Spectacle and Social Control in a Mid-Victorian Music Hall”, *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2004) pp. 3-18; C.J. Griffin, “Social Conflict and Control in Hanoverian and Victorian England”, *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2005) pp. 168-176; T. Weller and D. Bawden, “The social and technological origins of the information society: An analysis of the crisis of control in England, 1830-1900”, *Journal of Documentation*, Vol. 61, No. 6 (2005) pp.777-802; M. Moore, “Social Control or Protection of the Child? The Debates on the Industrial Schools Acts, 1857-1894”, *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2008) pp. 359-387; H. Sperber, “Philanthropy and social control in the Anglo-Jewish community during the mid-nineteenth century (1850–1880)”, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2012), pp. 85-101; M. Pluskota, *Prostitution and Social Control in Eighteenth-Century Ports* (London: Routledge, 2015); and the collected essays in Donajgrodzki (ed.) *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain*; J.P. Gibbs (ed.), *Social Control: Views from the Social Sciences* (London: Sage Publications, 1982) and S. Cohen and A. Scull, (eds.) *Social Control and the State: Historical and Comparative Essays* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1983).

class “benefactors” were invariably either cynical or under duress.⁵⁹ Rogers argues for a more nuanced understanding of working-class men and women demonstrating their own agency and their sense of moral and civic values that were often shared across gender and class lines in the nineteenth century.⁶⁰ And the inspirational possibilities of mechanics institutes – the “tremendous pride and independence” that some could stimulate – should be recognised.⁶¹

Following on from this question of “social control” is the issue of “self improvement” and how to relate self-help to improvement in *association*, i.e., mutual improvement. The mechanics movement must be recognised as one of various efforts at association also understood in “self-help” terms including temperance, Sunday Schools and the cooperative movement (the latter, also experienced, in the phrase of Peter Gurney, the “middle-class embrace”).⁶² Mutuality and co-operation clearly are represented by the institutes: and the voluntary impulse continued well into the late-nineteenth century as Stephen Yeo demonstrated.⁶³ Alexander Scott, in a lecture on self-education to the Salford Mechanics’ institution in 1854, pointed out the communal nature of “self-education” in the sense that “we ... came under the influence of other minds, conveyed in books, in institutions, in conversation, and in the direct voluntary help which individuals afford our efforts in self-education”.⁶⁴

The “failure” narrative which began in earnest with the work of Hudson and Hole came under renewed scrutiny, with evidence drawn from members’ registers over time suggesting that, in some places, there was a statistically significant degree of social

⁵⁹ H. Rogers, “Kindness and Reciprocity: Liberated Prisoners and Christian Charity in Early Nineteenth-Century England”, *Journal of Social History*, Vol.47, No. 3 (March 2014), pp. 721–745.

⁶⁰ Rogers, “Kindness and Reciprocity”.

⁶¹ See Rose, *Intellectual Life*, p.67.

⁶² Gurney, *Co-operative culture*, ch.6, ‘The middle-class embrace’, which examines co-operative movement in the second half of the century.

⁶³ S. Yeo, *Religion and Voluntary Organisations in Crisis* (London: Croom Helm, 1976).

⁶⁴ A.J. Scott, ‘Self-Education’, *Manchester Examiner and Times*, 18 January 1854, reprinted as *Self-education: an opening lecture delivered to the members of the Salford Mechanics’ Institution, on Wednesday Evening, Jan. 11th, 1854* (Manchester: Ireland, 1854), p.1.

mobility on the part of institute members. This in turn distorted the statistics and hid the fact that Institutes were more of a success than had generally been believed.⁶⁵ Shapin's and Barnes' engagement with the debates around class and control led to a new awareness of the practical realities in most mechanics' institutes – that they were consistently controlled by the middle-classes, not merely in the role of investors who had contributed financially, but as agents of control on its own merits. Ian Inkster and John Laurent made the same kind of arguments – with Inkster broadening the focus on control to show how well-run mechanics' institutes could be vehicles for “hostile takeovers” of other community enterprises of similar purpose and intended audience.⁶⁶ Laurent, meanwhile, explored the post-Hudson period and examined the connections between institutes, underground socialism and the promulgation of sophisticated knowledge – taking Darwinism as his example and its underground growth amid intellectual radical working people in Yorkshire. Laurent posited that these secret radical political affiliations were connected to the spread of controversial ideas generally, and taken together were an unintended by-product of social control in institutes.⁶⁷ The contribution from the social sciences to the mechanics' institute debates, therefore, was not whether social control was actively attempted, but rather what form it took and to what effect.

Regional Studies

The contribution of doctoral scholarship to the historiography has been significant. It has generally taken the form of extended regional case studies, typically with a clearly defined scope of a few decades, along the lines of Tylecote's study. Most of them, such as L.V. Gaulter (who covered some of the same geographical area as Tylecote only in much

⁶⁵ Shapin and Barnes, “Science, Nature and Control”, pp. 31-74.

⁶⁶ I. Inkster, “Cultural Enterprise: Science, Steam Intellect and Social Class in Rochdale, c. 1833-1900”, *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (May 1988), pp. 299, 308.

⁶⁷ J. Laurent, “Science, Society and Politics in Late Nineteenth-Century England: A Further Look at Mechanics' Institutes”, *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (November 1984), pp. 585-619.

greater detail) adopted a “microhistory” model by concentrating on a small sample before using that narrow lens as a tool for seeing aspects of the wider setting in a new light.⁶⁸ Gaulter’s work in particular saw a number of firsts, including the first detailed exploration of Lyceums and their connection to institutes⁶⁹. It was also significant as the first detailed examination of institutes created by employers on company property.⁷⁰ Like Tylecote, he noted potential reasons for lower than expected working-class membership numbers in some institutes, and the failures of others – specifically blaming long-working days, low pay, poorly qualified lecturers and the fact that company institutes were seen as an extension of both the workplace and the employer.⁷¹ Gaulter identified unrealistic expectations on the part of institute founders and backers as a potential factor in the supposed failure of institutes generally, and made the argument that falling student numbers were part and parcel of any educational enterprise and as such were to be expected.⁷²

In a similar vein, Thomas Evans focussed on the institutes of the Welsh Valleys⁷³, noting the institutes there were storehouses of revolutionary ideas inspired by French and American events. This veneration of republican revolutionaries is something which was seen elsewhere and is discussed in this thesis. Evans also analysed oral culture, in particular noting the informal translations into Welsh of the works of Thomas Paine and their resulting dissemination at meetings and recitals in the institutes of South Wales.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ L. V. Gaulter, “Rise of the Mechanics’ Institutes in South East Lancashire and North East Cheshire (Oldham Lyceum, Stalybridge Mechanics Institute, Stockport Mechanics Institute) in Relation to the Social and Economic Background of the Area” (Unpublished MA thesis, Manchester University, 1970).

⁶⁹ Gaulter, “Rise of the Mechanics’ Institutes”, pp. 40-47.

⁷⁰ Gaulter, “Rise of the Mechanics’ Institutes”, pp. 125-126.

⁷¹ Gaulter, “Rise of the Mechanics’ Institutes”, pp. 127-129. For social control applied to the workplace, see H. Shpayer-Makov, “Control at the Workplace: Paternalism Reinvented in Victorian Britain”, ch.2 in H. Roodenburg and P. Spierenburg, (eds,) *Social Control in Europe* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2004) pp.70-92.

⁷² Gaulter, “Rise of the Mechanics’ Institutes”, pp. 127-129.

⁷³ T. Evans, “The Mechanics’ Institutes of South Wales” (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1965).

⁷⁴ Evans, “Institutes of South Wales”, pp. 179-183.

He revealed a previously unknown appetite in the Valleys for radical (and at that time seditious) literature, enjoyed by the reading groups which coalesced around Mechanics' Institutes.⁷⁵ Evans also looked at Welsh working-class revolutionary poetry, and in doing so evidenced the utility of the cultural turn and the opening up of new types of evidence to the historian – Evans' work was the first literary criticism of poetry in Wales during the period. He demonstrated links between institutes and radical Chartism⁷⁶ and presented remote rural networks of institutes which functioned as centres for the exchange of radical ideas unfettered by middle-class control. Evans depicted the mechanic himself as “a constituent part” of the “living world” around him, with a “desire for knowing what is passing” in it.⁷⁷ Evans' contribution to wider debates was marked, as he explored the consequences in Institutes of lack of control from above, and how that could manifest itself in times of political unrest.

Regional histories describing mechanics' institutes as involved in organised political unrest are contrasted in the literature with work like Lilian Machin's study of the Potteries institutes in Staffordshire.⁷⁸ Machin revealed the institutes of that area to be centres of orthodoxy, with any radical tendencies suppressed and the institutes themselves adhering strictly to their articles of association. Most institutes in the Potteries were either heavily supported by local industrialists, or else owned by them outright.⁷⁹ Machin's research examined the dynamic of the relationship between employer and employee in the context of company-owned and managed institutes. Like Tholfsen, she discussed the religious aspect by examining the supporting role of the Anglican Church in the patronage of institutes in the Staffordshire Potteries.⁸⁰ The role of established Church clergy in

⁷⁵ Evans, “Institutes of South Wales”, pp. 181-184.

⁷⁶ Evans, “Institutes of South Wales”, p. 190-205.

⁷⁷ Evans, “Institutes of South Wales”, p. 224-228.

⁷⁸ L. Machin, “A Critical Survey of the Mechanics' Institutes of the Staffordshire Potteries” (Unpublished M. Ed thesis, University of Liverpool, 1970).

⁷⁹ Machin, “Critical Survey”, p. 120.

⁸⁰ Machin, “Critical Survey”, pp. 120-125.

supporting the vested interests of local industrialists in this way had not been considered previously. The contrast between the radical institutes of Evans' rural Wales and the orthodoxy of Machin's Staffordshire demonstrates the localised and regional dynamic of the Institutes and the localised and regional aspect to the questions generated by the key debates.

Regional case studies have become the norm in the study of mechanics' institutes – and demonstrate that even at that level it is possible to encounter examples to support all sides of debates. Regions which were a patchwork of radicalism and orthodoxy have been studied by Clifton Stockdale⁸¹ and also by Jana Sims.⁸² Complexity, and borrowings from other disciplines, has become the new consensus. Stockdale's first chapter, for instance, framed his examination of the mechanics' institutes against the wider socio-economic history of the North East of England and drew on in-depth analysis of economic statistics.⁸³ His work was the first to bring the combination of socio-economic, demographic and natural resource usage histories into the study of mechanics' institutes, and considered the growth and development of employer-sponsored institutes in the light of mineral resource deposit and exploitation in the region.⁸⁴ With Stockdale the cultural turn was fully in evidence – his chapter on the leisure aspect of mechanics' institutes being particularly progressive.⁸⁵ He argued convincingly for the importance of what he called a "leisure revolution" which came to prominence during the later years of the nineteenth century,⁸⁶ while elsewhere noting the diversity of lifestyle services on offer to institute members across the industrialised North East of England, which included allotments for growing vegetables for the table.⁸⁷ Despite being a regional study,

⁸¹ C. Stockdale, "Mechanics' Institutes in Northumberland and Durham, 1824-1902" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Durham, 1993)

⁸² Sims, "Mechanics Institutes in Sussex and Hampshire, 1825-1875" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2010).

⁸³ Stockdale, "Northumberland and Durham", pp. 1-40.

⁸⁴ Stockdale, "Northumberland and Durham", pp. 1-20.

⁸⁵ Stockdale, "Northumberland and Durham", pp. 327-346.

⁸⁶ Stockdale, "Northumberland and Durham", p. 98.

⁸⁷ Stockdale, "Northumberland and Durham", p. 130.

Stockdale's work had many of the characteristics of a more general examination of the institutes movement, due to its quality of examining a regional aspect or issue and then expanding it to discuss it in a national context.

Jana Sims' recent work on the mechanics' institutes of Sussex and Hampshire likewise feels like a similarly finely focussed examination of a wealth of detail which is contextualised as part of a national picture, adding considerably to understanding of both spheres in the process. Her study also examined gender as a formative element of mechanics' institute "spaces" although June Purvis had also looked at the struggle for admission to the institutes, and then women's access to news and reading rooms in *Hard Lessons* (1989) in her two chapters on women's relationship with the mechanics' institutes.⁸⁸ Sims' discussion of the importance of music in the social and educational doings of institutes was the first of its kind.⁸⁹ Her work also developed Tholfsen's themes of interaction between institutes and non-conformist Christianity.⁹⁰ She engaged with the censorship and control debates, such as in her treatment of institute management committees.⁹¹ Sims demonstrated that these committees were just as likely to break their own rules on conduct and content as they were to enforce them. Censorship in Sussex and Hampshire was present in theory but largely absent in practice.

A recent addition to the debates is Helen Flexner's recent study of the London Mechanics' Institute.⁹² Flexner's research brought much new material to light, doing so in a thematic frame of reference drawn from the social history tradition of the 1960s and 1970s. Her work has returned the question of class to the debate, and has placed renewed historiographical emphasis on a social control agenda. By focussing exclusively on

⁸⁸ Sims, "Sussex and Hampshire", pp. 227-257; for access to these rooms, see J. Purvis, *Hard Lessons*, pp.115-120.

⁸⁹ Sims, "Sussex and Hampshire", pp. 263-292.

⁹⁰ Sims, "Sussex and Hampshire", pp. 190-219.

⁹¹ Sims, "Sussex and Hampshire", pp. 89-110.

⁹² H.H. Flexner, "The London Mechanics' Institution: Social and Cultural Foundations, 1823-1830" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University College London, 2014)

London Mechanics' Institute over a short span of time, Flexner has been able to capture the intensity of the socio-economic dynamics and class tensions of the times with crystal clarity. On several occasions she contextualises her case study against the history of the wider movement and on each of these she returns the language and idea of class and class hierarchy to the forefront.⁹³ Despite the historiographical progresses made by the cultural turn and other methodologies, it is still the case that institutes were class riven and class driven. Furthermore, Flexner has amassed a significant body of primary source material which has been brought into the public domain for the first time. A substantial cache of institute minute books and members registers have been transcribed. This data allows the class dynamics of the London Institute to be charted to an impressive level, while at the same time presenting a valuable corpus of source material by including the results of her labours in the appendices.⁹⁴

The latest addition to the historiography is Martyn Walker's *The Development of the Mechanics' Institute Movement in Britain and Beyond: Supporting further education for the adult working classes* (2017). Concerning itself primarily with the latter decades of the nineteenth-century, Walker's book is a strong, well-researched and informative contribution to the field, and makes the case well for expanding the focus of interest in Institutes. Walker seeks to shift the emphasis beyond the limitations of educational history, into the areas of the social and cultural histories of both education and educators. His particular strength is in his use of the Yorkshire Union of Mechanics' Institutes, which he utilises almost like an expanded micro-historical case study in order to illustrate the finer nuances of his arguments. He also provides a brief, yet informative and well-researched, overview of the spread of the mechanics' institutes overseas.⁹⁵

⁹³ Flexner, "London Mechanics' Institution", p. 12.

⁹⁴ Flexner, "London Mechanics' Institution", pp. 93-133.

⁹⁵ M. Walker, *The Development of the Mechanics' Institute Movement in Britain and Beyond: Supporting further education for the adult working classes* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

Thematic Studies

Regional studies make up the majority of the literature, however there are some which deal with themes. Turner, for example, focussed on the political history of the institutes.⁹⁶ His main contribution to the debates was his categorisation of institutes according to how they were funded and operated. This was based on assessment of an Institute's founding principles and is reminiscent of the six points of E.J. Hobsbawm's "Labour Aristocracy" model.⁹⁷ Turner's work also looked at a case study – the manufactured Mechanics' Institute of New Swindon⁹⁸ – where he demonstrated that even in such artificial environments, control was not in fact total. The annual *soirée* at the New Swindon Institute, for instance, was often the scene of disruptive behaviour on the part of employees; an interesting development in an entirely employer-planned, built and owned community where the mechanics' institute was the only local leisure resource.⁹⁹ Turner's work engaged with the control question by demonstrating how a mechanics' institute was selected, constructed and employed as the leisure and recreation centre of a planned and controlled community.

The mechanics' institutes were not just educational sites for education's sake. Although much of the historiography comes from the pens of historians of education, the story of the institutes goes beyond the classroom, the textbook and the functional machine model – they were sites of learning but also sites of socialising, cultural exchange, political expression; they were places and spaces where life was lived, not just where its lessons were learned.

⁹⁶ C. Turner, "Politics in Mechanics' Institutes, 1820-1850: A Study in Conflict" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 1980)

⁹⁷ Turner, "Politics in Mechanics' Institutes", pp. 65-66.

⁹⁸ Turner, "Politics in Mechanics' Institutes", pp. 82-89.

⁹⁹ Turner, "Politics in Mechanics' Institutes", pp. 88-89.

Those lives were structured along gendered and generational lines, as well as socioeconomic ones. All were reflected in how institutes were founded and operated, and in how they and their member interacted with each other and with the communities they were part of. Examination of institutes' library usage, for instance, reveals not just the raw borrowings of book holdings; it reveals a systematic approach to literacy and learning in terms of how those holdings were structured. The system used was generally one of books being "arranged both alphabetically and scientifically"¹⁰⁰ which was a framework which prefigured the Dewey classification, remarkable given that the institute model was in operation at least a quarter of a century before Dewey.

The books being borrowed were of interest for reasons beyond innovative classification methods of library stocks. This thesis reveals aspects of attitudes towards the exercise of popular literacy, for instance, specifically the reading of fiction, which led to controversy, hostility and claims of immorality being cast in the direction of mechanics' institutes. A maelstrom of moral panics seemed to converge in the reading rooms of institutes, where otherwise sober commentators added their usually secular voices to the chorus of disapproval emanating from religious conservatives – the resulting consensus being a fervent and vocal belief that the devil had as much use for active imaginations as he did for idle hands, particularly if those hands and minds belonged to the working classes.

Questions to Examine

This thesis engages with these debates and addresses the questions raised by them, as well as the questions related to the thematic structure the research has adopted.

¹⁰⁰ B.F. Duppa, *A Manual for Mechanics' Institutions* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman, 1839), pp. 163-164.

The most enduring questions about mechanics' institutes are those around whether they were a success or failure, and whether the belief that they were an agent of deliberate 'social control' was and is justified. Related to these points are questions about whether the mechanics' institutes constituted a movement at all, and if so, what was the nature of its eventual goal.

There are also broader points which will also be addressed: how typical mechanics' institutes were as cultural, political and social entities will be explored, as well as the activities of these entities in these three areas and how institutes related to other organisations within them. In the *political sphere*, questions concerning the nature of institute adherence to admonitions concerning involvement in radical activity will be explored – the reasoning behind those admonitions will be discussed, as well as the level of any adherence and whether there was any change in that level over time or whether that admonition remained in place. Questions about political engagement and influence will be contextualised against confessional differences, regional differences, differences across time and those arising from changes to the national political landscape.

The discussion of *social aspects* will examine points about social roles, functions and expectations within institutes and on the part of institutes themselves. Questions concerning differences in the male and the female experience of membership and attendance will be addressed. Points about the form, degree and success (or otherwise) of social events and facilities provided by institutes will be explored alongside questions concerning the perceived status of institutes and their users in the social imagination. Where these elements are present in the evidence, questions will be asked of their typicality and whether there was any discernible change in that state of affairs over time.

Questions relating to the *cultural presence* of mechanics' institutes will be explored in relation to points regarding the nature of an "indigenous" mechanics' institute culture, and what form that culture may have taken. Points of conflict, contrast and

commonality between institutes and other organisations of similar intent hoping to attract the same clientele will be addressed. The responses to questions about the degree, breadth and depth of engagement with culture within institutes, will in turn frame further questions about differences in cultural experience in terms of geography, gender and generation.

It is crucial for any study of the mechanics' institutes following the new political history of Patrick Joyce, James Vernon and others, in the wake of Gareth Stedman Jones's seminal work on the "language of class" in the age of Chartism, to recognise that twentieth-century Marxist-inspired ideas of "class" are anachronistic when applied to nineteenth-century cultural identities. Languages of "the people," and in politics, "populism" should also be considered.¹⁰¹ This thesis demonstrates that mechanics' institutes in their written pronouncements certainly ascribed to ideals which could be identified as populist, in practice (in their organisation and activities), however, the reality was rather different. More directly related to the debate around social control is Joyce's assertion that control is ultimately consensual.¹⁰² Mechanics' institutes were controlled environments where the individual decision to subject oneself to regulation was generally a free one. But there were clear differences between institutions in the scale and scope of control, ranging from the social pressures of a small informal reading group to the more pervasive influences of an employer-owned mechanics' institute at the heart of a manufactured town (such as New Swindon). But we can agree with Joyce that "culture" should be at the beginning of our thinking, not at the end'. The speeches and writings of mechanics' institute supporters should be seen as contributing to what Joyce has called the "social imaginary," and "demotic imaginary".¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Joyce, *Visions of the People*.

¹⁰² Joyce, *The State of Freedom*, p.7, p.122.

¹⁰³ Joyce, *Democratic Subjects*, pp.1-7.

Methodology and Sources

This thesis uses a variety of methodologies. The chapters use a diverse range of sources which are dealt with using methodologies suggested by the theme within which the evidence is being presented. Some material is analysed by a series of methodologies across chapters. Some events have been analysed in each chapter using different methodologies each time and have yielded up these different interpretations or sets of data.

The typical study of mechanics' institutes tends to be one with a local emphasis or, at widest in scope, a regional study. Although such an approach has much to commend it, this study uses instead a wider, more holistic focus. The reasons for this are thematic. Regional studies of institutes reveal much by analysing a few examples with a common geography, and an implied (if not explicit) case is made for why they are different from everywhere else. A holistic view, meanwhile, considers other factors beyond the local in order to establish commonality and shared experience. Furthermore, the localisation of research into mechanics' institutes has obscured the reality of Institutes as a movement, with the role of regional networks and local organisations as individual and collective participants within that movement likewise becoming obscured. This study seeks to reinforce the validity of the wider movement model within the scholarship on institutes.

In the sphere of political aspects and influence, the sources have been interpreted and analysed in the context of political history. Parliamentary debates, for example, have been analysed as qualitative evidence – by being examined as texts – and as quantitative evidence – compiled and logged in order to generate statistics which are in turn used to plot changes in attitudes and priorities over time. Relevant secondary material informing the interpretation of legislation, for example, as it is proposed, debated, passed and implemented has been used to frame discussions on the phenomenon of mechanics' institutes at once petitioning for laws to be changed while they themselves have been held

up as examples and justification for why other laws (such as franchise reform) should be introduced. Social and cultural material has been gathered and interpreted in the same way.

Visual material such as art has been placed in its context, with the emphasis on attempting to discover any and all relevant interpretations, to generate multiple layers of meaning which then add depth and breadth to the discussion and, it is hoped, bear a close similarity to how a typical contemporary audience or observer would have interpreted the piece. Using this method, the innocuous bust of Benjamin Franklin in the foyer of the Liverpool Mechanics' Institute during the annual exhibition there, for example, while always retaining its inherent presence as a piece of minor statuary, is at the same time symbol for republican and revolutionary sympathies on the part of the patrons, sponsors and management committee.

The mechanics' institutes movement produced its own journals from 1823 onwards, published in London, Glasgow and elsewhere in Britain.¹⁰⁴ These included from 1823-1872, *The Mechanics' Magazine* which retailed at 3d. This publication was edited by Joseph Clinton Robertson, who later edited the *Trades Magazine*.¹⁰⁵ Other, more ephemeral journals such as circulating manuscript magazines existed.¹⁰⁶ The collection, analysis and interpretation of newspapers and periodicals has been conducted primarily digitally. Ease of access and range of holdings in the growing number of available

¹⁰⁴ *Mechanics Magazine, Museum, Register, Journal And Gazette* (1823- 25 Sept 1824); *Mechanics Magazine, Museum, Register, Journal and Gazette* (2 October 1824-1857); *Mechanics Magazine* (1858) (price 3d, 1823-72); *Trades Newspaper and Mechanics Weekly Journal* (1825-1827); *Glasgow Mechanics' Magazine: And Annals of Philosophy* (1832); *The Scots mechanics' magazine, and journal of arts, sciences and literature*; *London Mechanics Register* (1825); *The monthly news of the Leeds Mechanics' Institution and Literary Society*. Several other provincial mechanics' magazines are mentioned below in Chapter 3.

¹⁰⁵ See I. Prothero, on *Trades Newspaper*, which related to MIs, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1979); D. Magee and B. Maidment, 'Mechanics' Magazine (1823-1873)', in Brake and Demoor, eds., *Dictionary of Nineteenth-century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland*, pp. 405-6. For insight into the background of the magazine see preface, *Mechanics' Magazine*, Vol 5, p. iv.

¹⁰⁶ See for example mention of the Banbury Mechanics' Institute manuscript magazine in *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*, 7 April 1838, p.4

research databases which hold such material has proved invaluable to the research which underpins this thesis. Key databases of material have included the *ProQuest* Database of Nineteenth-Century Periodicals; the British Newspaper Archive, the British Library Nineteenth Century Newspapers Collection; pamphlets via Jstor's collections (such as the Cowen Tracts); material digitised through the Hathi Trust; the digitised corpus of parliamentary debates (available through hansard.millbanksystems.com) as well as the Parliamentary Papers archive. Access to other primary material – such as books, pamphlets and Institute reports – has been through archive.org and Google books. The mass of pamphlets emanating from mechanics institutes activities or concerning them, include such titles as Dr Charles Favell's *The value and importance of Mechanics' Institutions* (1836), Reverend William Cookseley, *The Labouring Classes. Communism, Socialism, Lodging Houses* (1851) and Reverend Frederick Robertson of Brighton's *Two lectures on the influence of poetry on the working classes* (1852).¹⁰⁷ The surviving ephemera from nineteenth-century British mechanics' institutes includes such items as admission tickets, programme sheets, elaborate typographic advertisements, portraits of donors, sponsors and patrons, and prize medals.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ C.F. Favell, *The value and importance of Mechanics' Institutions: an address, delivered on Monday evening, the 29th of May, 1836, before the managers, teachers, members, and friends of the Sheffield Mechanics' Institution* (Sheffield: Leader, 1836) ; R.W. G. Cookesley, *The Labouring Classes. Communism, Socialism, Lodging Houses. A Lecture Read before the Windsor and Eton Mechanics' Institute* (Windsor, 1851); F.W. Robertson, *Two lectures on the influence of poetry on the working classes, delivered before the members of the Mechanics' Institution, February, 1852* (Brighton: King, 1852).

¹⁰⁸ See the Admission ticket for the Mechanics Institution, Greenock for the closing night of elocution lessons on 9 April 1868, McLean Museum and Art Gallery, 1978.56, Greenock. <https://www.inverclyde.gov.uk/community-life-and-leisure/museum/museum-collections/social-history/personal-and-family-life>. For lecture programmes see the lecture sheet (and other material) from Bradford Mechanics' Institute, in Brigham Young Library, Provo, Utah, United States: <https://archive.org/details/programmeoflectu512brad>. For elaborate typographic ephemera see material associated with Derby Mechanics' Institute objects associated with Derby MI, via: <https://enlightenmentderbyshire.wordpress.com/tag/prints/>. For portraits of the patrons, sponsors and donors of Mechanics' Institutes George Courtauld, Donor of Braintree Literary and Mechanics Institution (1802–1861) and H. T. Moore, Esq., President of the Mechanics' Institution (1837) see the Art UK database.

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Figure 2. Prize Medal of the Birmingham Mechanics Institute, 1826, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, 1885N1526.165:
<http://www.bmagic.org.uk/objects/1885N1526.165>

We are able to reconstruct the physical appearance of the mechanics' institutes inside and out from a variety of sources from architectural blueprints and designs, to paintings of the realised structures and records of their social lives through engravings in the illustrated newspaper press and, later in the Victorian era, photographs.¹⁰⁹

It is, above all, newspapers which are central to this study. Interpretation of the newspaper evidence has largely focused on the collation and qualitative analysis of institute business, specifically reports of annual general meeting sessions, when the Committees delivered their reports in public. The news coverage of these reports have been mined for data, which has been checked against a sample of published versions of the same reports (where possible) to check accuracy, which was confirmed in all cases.

Newspapers have also been used to generate statistics on institute banking activity although this has been secondary to the use of annual reports sourced in their entirety. As

¹⁰⁹ For paintings of Mechanics' Institutes, see the watercolour of Burnley Mechanics' Institute, published at microsite <http://burnleymechanics.co.uk/home/history-burnley-mechanics/>. Images from the illustrated press include, for example, the representations of the Mechanics' Institute in Nottingham in 1844, and Charles Dickens at the soirée at Liverpool Mechanics' Institution also in that year.

in the case of annual general meeting report data, accuracy was checked against a sample and the news reporting found to be of verbatim accuracy when relaying figures.

Newspapers have yielded more than the reporting of facts and figures related to the business dealings of institutes and the details of meetings. As part of the discourse of daily life, with divisions and subcultures of reporting and consumption which spread across lines of geography, education and socioeconomic status, newspapers provide valuable insight into things more ephemeral and yet more omnipresent because of that. If the accounts of the doings and transactions of the mechanics' institutes in the press of their time shows the body of the institute movement at work, then the to-ing and fro-ing of letters in correspondence columns, the advertisements of coming attractions, the paens of praise from supporters and the harsh words of critics allow a glimpse into the soul of the movement as it interacted with the world around it – becoming at local, regional and national level what Benedict Anderson termed an “imagined community.”¹¹⁰ Newspapers also provide all sorts of evidence about the role that mechanics' institutes played in the lives, marriage and deaths of their members. Obituaries, notices of unions and death in newspapers, refer to mechanics' institutes membership.¹¹¹ Some of the examples of mechanics' institutes members and patrons which I have included in this thesis are derived from newspaper obituaries, with a few lines printed for more “ordinary” members and more substantial biographical notices for more famous members such as Sir Henry Parkes, whose death at Sydney was reported in May 1896 in the international press and included reference to his youthful membership of the Birmingham Mechanics' Institute.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹¹¹ For obituaries of wives of MI members, see *Derby Mercury* 4 June 1845; *Hull Packet*, 28 June 1867, p.8; *Glasgow Herald*, 13 August 1869, p.5; for marriages to MI members see *Leeds Mercury*, 16 March 1844, p.8; and for the surprising inclusion of a birth that occurred in a Mechanics' Institute, see *Newcastle Courant*, 13 January 1854, p.8.

¹¹² *Lloyds' Weekly Newspaper*, 3 May 1896, p.4. For examples of rank and file mechanics' institutes members who had short obituary notices published see *Hull Packet*, 26 October 1849, p.5.

In this, mechanics' institutes were not alone and not unique. On the contrary, the acceptance of the institute movement into this 'imagined community' of news commentary and consumption places them in their proper context *as* a movement. Whereas previous studies of institutes have generally regarded their reading rooms and libraries as sites for the *consumption* of news, little attention has been paid to the institutes as vehicles for the *generation* of news. This study seeks to address that shortfall and in doing so, allows the institutes to take their place alongside the Owenites, the temperance movement, the freethought movement, and others as active and eminently newsworthy participants, spectators and commentators in the collective intellectual life of the nineteenth-century world, and just as worthy of study by historians in this regard.¹¹³

Among the important material published by the movement are printed book catalogues, which are the focus of study in Chapter 3.¹¹⁴

Physical archives from across the United Kingdom have also yielded source material, in particular the British Library in London, the Derbyshire Records Office in Matlock, the Devon Records Office in Exeter and the Plymouth and West Devon Records

¹¹³ For key secondary treatments of press, periodical and newspaper cultural history during the period addressed by this study, see L. Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); L. Brake, *Print in Transition, 1850-1910: Studies in Media and Book History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); M. Conboy, *Journalism: A Critical History* (London: Sage, 2004); and A. Jones, *Powers of the Press: Newspapers, Power and the Public in Nineteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2004).

¹¹⁴ *Catalogue of books in the Liverpool Mechanics' and Apprentices' Library* (1829); *A catalogue of the library of the Hexham Mechanics' & Scientific Institution, etc.* (1831); *A Catalogue of the Library of the Louth Branch Mechanics' Institution, with a sketch of the objects and advantages of the Institution* (J. and J. Jackson, 1837); *A Catalogue of Books in the Library of the London Mechanics' Institution, etc* (1837); *A Catalogue of the Library of the Bradford Mechanics' Institute ... with rules of the Institute* (1836); *The fourteenth annual report of the committee of the Bradford Mechanics' Institute, or, Society for the Acquisition of Useful Knowledge, presented January 30, 1846*; *Catalogue of the Glasgow Mechanics' Institution Library: with the Constitution and Rules* (1848); *Supplement to the Catalogue of the Manchester mechanics' institution, containing the additions made to the library from Aug., 1849, to Nov., 1850*, vol. 1; *A Catalogue of the Books of the Sheffield Mechanics' and Apprentices' Library* (1849); *Catalogue of Books in the Library of the Settle Mechanics' Institute* (Settle: John Wildman, 1853). These are available as digitised editions via Google Books and via Archive.org. See also: <http://www.senatehouselibrary.ac.uk/blog/radical-voices-mechanics-institution-libraries> regarding texts from various Mechanics' Institutes now in London Senate House, e.g., the book catalogue of the Hackney Mechanics Institution.

Office.¹¹⁵ Scotland, one of the birthplaces of the mechanics' institute movement, also has archival holdings.¹¹⁶ This has been, where necessary, transcribed before being analysed and interpreted. Where statistics for national socioeconomic trends have been required, the information has been obtained from Budget speeches, State papers, Bank of England historic data and supplementary statistics derived from newspapers and other contemporary sources.

A key aspect of the methodology underpinning this thesis is the concept and nature of *space* as a characteristic of all of the aspects of the mechanics' institutes under consideration. As the "spatial turn" has made itself evident in the wider debates within history as a discipline and has become manifest in the historiography at large, so it becomes an essential theoretical framework for the analysis and interpretation of the mechanics' institute movement. As both *physical* spaces erected as edifices in stone and as *intellectual* spaces which were at once within and also of the nineteenth-century "imagined community", the form, nature, expression and contemporary understanding of space allows for deeper insights into the history of the mechanics' institute movement. The work of such historians of space and place as Jon Stobart, Andrew Hann, Victoria

¹¹⁵ For other archival holdings related to Mechanics' Institutes in England, not studied for this thesis, see, for example: Oxfordshire Record Office for Banbury Mechanics' Institute; Northumberland Archives for Blyth Mechanics' Institute; Lancashire Record Office for Clitheroe Mechanics' Institute; Cheshire Archives in Local Studies for Crewe Mechanics' Institute; Tyne and Wear Archives for Gateshead Mechanics' Institute; North East Lincolnshire Archives for Grimsby Mechanics' Institute; Lancashire Record Office for Haslingden Mechanics' Institute; for Huddersfield Mechanics' Institution, see Heritage Quay-University of Huddersfield Archive; West Yorkshire Archive Service for Dogleigh Lane Mechanics' Institute, Kirkburton; Leeds City Archives for the records of the Leeds Mechanics' Institute; for the Leicester Mechanics' Institution; London University: University College London Special Collections, within the Brougham Papers, for the London Mechanics' Institute; Manchester University John Rylands Library for Manchester Mechanics' Institute; Berkshire Record Office for Reading Mechanics' Institute; North Yorkshire County Record Office for Skipton Mechanics' Institute; for Swindon Mechanics' Institute, see Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre; Wigan Archive Service for Wigan Mechanics' Institute; Hampshire Archives and Local Studies (Winchester) for Winchester Mechanics' Institute.

¹¹⁶ For other archival holdings related to Mechanics' Institutes in Scotland, not studied for this thesis, see, for example: University of Strathclyde Archives and Special Collections for Glasgow Mechanics' Institution (the archive also holds records relating to John Anderson's Institution; Glasgow City Archives for Greenock Mechanics' Institution; Perth and Kinross Council Archive for Perth and Kinross Mechanics' Library; Dumfries and Galloway Archives for Dumfries and Maxwelltown Mechanics' Institute, and also for Annan Mechanics' Institute.

Morgan, and Katrina Navickas, themselves drawing on earlier methodological advances by thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja, have established and proven the importance of focussing on the physical environment as well as the people within it.¹¹⁷

However, whereas Navickas in her generally excellent *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789-1848* (2015), uses the framework of the spatial turn to argue in favour of mechanics' institutes being dry, dull and drab machinations of the middle-class in comparison to other spaces, places and movements of the period. This study will use the tools afforded by the framework of the spatial history to demonstrate the opposite; that the mechanics' institutes were places of "conviviality and mutuality" just like working men's halls, that they provided an "alternative to the drudgery of factory work" just like trade unions did, and they concerned themselves with providing a range of facilities and services, just like the organised Chartists.¹¹⁸

The Scope of the Thesis

The scope of this thesis reaches beyond institutes and into the world in which they existed. Previous studies have concentrated on the education which was delivered in them and how it was imparted and used. This thesis deals with education as a theme secondary to the stories of the people who used the institutes, the uses which institutes were put to, attitudes towards them and a consideration of how institutes became important spaces and facilities in their communities. The geographical scope of this thesis has been, for reasons of brevity and practicalities of time, confined to the British Isles.

Whether used as a library, reading room or school; whether enjoyed as a leisure space, meeting place, lecture hall, museum or art gallery; whether utilised as polling

¹¹⁷ J. Stobart, A. Hann and V. Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption: Leisure and Shopping in the English Town, c. 1680-1830* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (London: Wiley, 1992); E. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); K. Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789-1848* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

¹¹⁸ Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space*, p. 190.

station, vocational college, bank or building society; whether perceived as a bastion of conformity or headquarters of radical agitation, this thesis will explore mechanics' institutes in all of these aspects and more. By portraying them in political, social and cultural terms, this thesis poses both old and new questions about impact and influence which are addressed using a mixture of methodologies to evaluate a broad range of sources. By speaking to the social, cultural and political historian, to the art historian and to the literary critic, to the economic historian and to the student of Parliamentary and municipal politics – this thesis seeks to bring to life a time when the idea of a “road to learning”, consisting of piecemeal education for the lower classes was being challenged.¹¹⁹ By engaging with the material in these ways, the thesis charts the scale, impact and outcome of that challenge.

¹¹⁹ Smiles, *Self-Help*.

Chapter 1.

THE POLITICS OF THE MECHANICS' INSTITUTES, 1823-1860

Introduction: Down Among the “Liberty Boys”

The first mechanics' institutes were denounced by a hostile periodical press as places where “liberty boys” and “revolutionaries”¹ were openly plotting to overthrow the existing order in their local “uncongenial hole”.² The “rule” of barring political discussion in institutes, while being widely acknowledged, convinced nobody.³ Yet references to the revolutions of the previous century were deliberate and serious. Political meetings in institutes took place regularly, and displayed an ability to plan and assemble on the part of members which made some elements of the periodical press uneasy.⁴ This was, contrary to what Navickas claims, not merely ‘making do’ by using a convenient site for political reasons unbeknownst to those responsible for administering it.⁵ Supporters among the political elite knew well enough how the authorities might interpret such activities and took steps to warn institutes and members that such conduct could be misconstrued as sedition.⁶ Considering the widespread and popular engagement with radical ideas in the early decades of the nineteenth century, this was understandable.⁷ To establish any kind of mass movement involving large numbers of working people during this period would have been interpreted as a political act and this is what happened with

¹ *John Bull*, 18 July 1825, p. 229. For a response to this coverage, see for instance ‘The John Bull’s Burlesque of Mechanics’ Institutes’, *The Kaleidoscope: or, Literary and scientific mirror* 6.276 (11 October 1825), pp.113-114.

² *The Age*, 15 January 1826, p. 284.

³ *John Bull*, 10 March 1826, p. 93.

⁴ *John Bull*, 11 June 1827, p. 182.

⁵ Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space*, p. 206.

⁶ *Caledonian Mercury*, 8 December 1825, p. 2.

⁷ C. Parolin, *Radical Spaces: Venues of Popular Politics in London, 1790-c. 1845* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010), pp. 33-39.

mechanics' institutes. The institutes, their "sites and usages were an expression of independence."⁸ It is in this context that the political impact and influence of the Institutes must be examined so that the contemporary history of the movement, and its later evolution, can be properly understood.

This chapter addresses questions of political expression, identity, control and change during the heyday of the mechanics' institutes movement between 1820 and 1869. Study of institutes provides a tool for deeper analysis of the political world including national and local political structures. Institutes will be examined as sources and drivers of political change, as well as expressions of and reactions to political culture. Case studies of four mechanics institutes from England, Wales, and Scotland are also examined in greater detail to look at committee members, and where possible, comments on rank and file.

Teaching in institutes was infused with the spirit of radical political change, even where politics was not supposed to be discussed openly, far less taught. Secret radical political affiliations were associated with the dissemination of ideas in places where the more direct exposure to political ideas was frowned upon.⁹ This covert politicisation of education in many institutes, and the fear and anxiety it generated in opponents will be a key theme of this chapter. This was an era in which such politicisation and resistance to authority "formed part of the wider context of the struggles of everyday life".¹⁰ The discussion of the political aspects of the mechanics' institutes in this chapter will be framed against the political forces and realities of the age. As places for radical unrest, both imaginary and real, they were locations where working people engaged with those forces and realities. The adoption of institutes as a motif by the utilitarian movement is here explored as a political act in itself, one with long term consequences.

⁸ Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space*, p. 219.

⁹ J. Laurent, "Science, Society and Politics in Late Nineteenth-Century England: A Further Look at Mechanics' Institutes", *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (November 1984), pp. 585-619.

¹⁰ Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space*, p. 13.

Mechanics' Institutes in a Political Context I: "The Uncongenial Hole" as Political Space

The political world into which the first mechanics' institutes emerged was a paranoid one. The language used to describe the early mechanics' institutes was the language of criticism of overt political radicalism. In order to properly discuss and understand this criticism, it must be placed in its wider context.

Traditional ideas of individual freedoms and independence of action often stood uneasily alongside notions of individual accountability, civic responsibility and moral expectations.¹¹ The recent past of the mechanics' institute world was one of unrest, plots, abortive uprisings against the government, riots and the steady dissemination of revolutionary ideas across the networks which permeated the radical underground of London and other cities.¹² The Peterloo Massacre in August 1819 came at the culmination of a period in which a generalised movement for reform had become radicalised in the face of implacable institutional opposition to such ideas.¹³

An important aspect of the London radical political scene in the years prior to the first Mechanics' Institutes was the London Corresponding Society.¹⁴ That organisation was frequented and supported by radicals, and with the open exchange of revolutionary ideas came the attention of the authorities. Members ran the risk of being jailed for the involvement in political agitation, and eventually arrest and incarceration became the

¹¹ M. Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England, 1832-1914* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), pp. 11-14.

¹² I. MacCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 7-26.

¹³ Parolin, *Radical Spaces*, pp. 1-6.

¹⁴ Parolin, *Radical Spaces*, pp. 3-6.

norm of membership in the late eighteenth century.¹⁵ Among its members was Francis Place (1771-1854), whom Christina Parolin calls “a ubiquitous figure in the machinery of radical London.”¹⁶ He composed its rules, articles of association and constitution.¹⁷ Other committee members included radicals such as Henry Hetherington (1792-1849), a bookseller and publisher.¹⁸ The radical activist father and son Thomas Evans senior and Thomas Evans junior – adherents of the radical Thomas Spence (1750-1814),¹⁹ and acquaintances of Francis Place²⁰ – were members from the early days. Another early member, John Gale Jones (1769-1838),²¹ was a veteran radical agitator who had been imprisoned for his activities with the Society.²²

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Figure 3. Detail of wood engraving from Title Page of London Mechanics’ Register (1825), depicting in the oval Apollo showing the London Mechanics’ Institution to a group of workmen and children.

Individuals with known radical leanings were therefore clearly in evidence in the early mechanics’ institute movement in London, and demonstrate a reason why

¹⁵ M.T. Davis, ‘The Mob Club? The London Corresponding Society and the politics of civility in the 1790s’, in Michael T. Davis and Paul A. Pickering (eds), *Unrespectable Radicals? Popular Politics in the Age of Reform* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 21–40.

¹⁶ Parolin, *Radical Spaces*, p. 131.

¹⁷ T. Kelly, *George Birkbeck: Pioneer of Adult Education* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1957), p. 61.

¹⁸ G.J. Holyoake, *The Life and Character of Henry Hetherington* (London: Watson, 1849), p. 6.

¹⁹ Parolin, *Radical Spaces*, p. 158.

²⁰ McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 183.

²¹ Hudson, *History of Adult Education*, p. 49.

²² McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 114.

contemporary chroniclers chose to criticise the movement for being radical in character and intent. The spaces used by the fledgling organisation supported this view. The first public meeting on the establishment of a mechanics' institute in London, for instance, was held at the Crown and Anchor Pub on the Strand.²³ This was a nationally acknowledged meeting place for political agitators, radicals and revolutionaries at the time.²⁴ The choice of the Crown and Anchor for the inaugural meeting of the London Mechanics' Institute in November 1823 therefore potentially displays radical political credentials for the enterprise as much as the identities of some of those involved. Any organisation, like the London Mechanics' Institute, which chose to hold its meetings there became associated with this kind of radical activity.

In this light, the attitude of contemporary chroniclers towards the early mechanics' institutes, especially in London, is understandable. When the periodical press accused them of playing host to "liberty boys" and "revolutionaries"²⁵ they were in essence stating a fact. The "uncongenial hole" where such people gathered was well-known in the city at large.²⁶ The scepticism with which claims of rejection of political matters in institutes was greeted takes on a deeper dimension given the context.²⁷ Observations that institutes were for an "enlightened" audience²⁸ which had started to learn French²⁹ also

²³ *Mechanics' Magazine, Museum, Register and Gazette*, vol. I (London: Knight and Lacey, 1823), pp. 178-179. For other coverage of the London Mechanics' Institute see 'The Mechanics' Institute', *The Literary chronicle* 46.235 (15 November 1823), pp.731-731.

²⁴ Parolin, *Radical Spaces*, pp. 151-155.

²⁵ *John Bull*, 18 July 1825, p. 229.

²⁶ *The Age*, 15 January 1826, p. 284.

²⁷ *John Bull*, 10 March 1826, p. 93.

²⁸ *John Bull*, 22 August 1825, p. 269.

²⁹ *John Bull*, 3 December 1827, p. 381.

have deeper connotations than might first be apparent, especially when read alongside reports of increased levels of political discussion and general political activity on the premises.³⁰ Despite any protestations to the contrary, institutes attracted accusations of radical activity because they had radicals as members and inhabited radical spaces. Those spaces had become distinctive in the popular imagination, associated with radical activity, and within a short time had taken on their own established practices of custom. They appealed to the revolutionary tradition in their use of language and the inhabitation of memory and the “shared representations of the past in the landscape”³¹ of the spaces they inhabited.

Mechanics’ Institutes in a Political Context II: From Radical Space to Party Political Shorthand

The criticism levelled towards mechanics’ institutes in the popular periodical press evolved over time. It changed tone, becoming less of critique of radical tendencies. Instead, it became more of a critique of politicians.

The radical political activity in the early mechanics’ institutes was mostly a phenomenon of the larger urban centres and as time passed and the movement spread this became less the state of affairs. Non-radical political expression and involvement was the norm. The physical, organisational and practical structures of these Institutes was laden with political meaning and expression however that politics was of the most non-radical – even conservative – kind. Mechanics’ institutes may have banned the inclusion and discussion of radical politics, but the more traditional political norms and truths were welcome, celebrated and reinforced. Traditional political norms of patriarchy and patronage were more likely to be the status quo in a given mechanics’ institute than radical

³⁰ *John Bull*, 10 March 1826, p. 93.

³¹ Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space*, p. 17.

agitation was, and constituted just as valid and real a form of political atmosphere and expression as the hubbub of any radical gathering. The volume of meetings, lectures and other events on institute premises where political activism did *not* take place far outweighs the opposite.

That the majority of institutes were bastions of traditional values and non-radical politics and were more likely to be found fighting to defend the existing order than for change is demonstrated by their adoption as a favourite cause of social elites. An early example would be the Earl of Shrewsbury's role in founding the Alton Mechanics' Institute in Staffordshire in 1831 and supplying it with numerous publications issued by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge alongside "many other works of general utility". The SDUK (founded in November 1826) shared with the mechanics' institute movement the key figure of Henry Brougham, and middle-class radicals of the 1820s-30s, and as Vincent has said, the organisation 'saw itself as the handmaiden of the movement and of all associated bodies involved in the field of adult education'.³² The SDUK material supplied to Alton would no doubt have been at a discount from the Society.

The role of existing elites in supporting and patronising institutes was well noted and came under fire from satirists of the day.³³ Figures of national political repute took to touring the lecture theatres of mechanics' institutes during parliamentary recesses to give public talks on the merits of the status quo.³⁴ Once the fear of mechanics' institutes as foci for agitation and sedition had retreated,³⁵ they became an accepted part of the political landscape.³⁶ The institute patronised by the local political elite became part of the popular

³² *Derby Mercury*, 27 April 1831 p.3. See also Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p.136. On the broader context of the SDUK and its work, see R.B. Kinraid, "The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge and the democratization of learning in early nineteenth-century Britain" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006).

³³ *Punch*, 3 June 1848, p. 236.

³⁴ *Punch*, 7 December 1853, p. 233.

³⁵ *The Age*, 11 December 1831, p. 398; *Figaro in London*, 7 January 1832, p. 19.

³⁶ *John Bull*, 9 April 1837, p. 76; *The Penny Satirist*, 22 April 1837, p. 1.

imagination, first appearing in fiction with Benjamin Disraeli having a mechanics' institute be sponsored by the Marquis of Hampshire in his novel *Tancred* (1847), for example.³⁷ The landed elite who spied on the doings at their local institute in Frank Edward Smedley's *Lewis Arundel* (1848) in case there was any sedition or agitation were, by the time the novel was penned in the 1850s, an anachronism.³⁸ Mechanics' institutes had already entered the political mainstream.

Elites were just as likely to patronise or frequent mechanics' institutes in order to control their own destinies as to influence the destinies of those who used them. Contemporary periodicals and satires lampooned the involvement of political elites in and with institutes.³⁹ According to the satirists, the institutes were not mere vessels for working people with ideas above their station, they served a purpose for their sponsors and patrons. This was mocked by the press, with the interest in institutes shown by politicians used as an angle of attack against them. One especially vivid example, part of a range of commentaries across the mid-nineteenth century by the satirical periodical *Punch* that targeted mechanics' institutes, was published in June 1848. In this article, when the Member of Parliament for the fictional town of Great Muddlewick, President of his local mechanics' institute, engaged in lecturing the public on political economy, he lamented the increase in sanitation standards. These had lowered the levels of child mortality and this, in turn, had lowered wages all round due to the glut of workers looking for employment.⁴⁰ The parallels here with the political economy taught in institutes, especially with regard to the link between employment levels and wage levels, are clear.⁴¹ The hypocrisy of the MP who would cling to his principles and see children die of poverty

³⁷ B. Disraeli, *Tancred* (London: Henry Colbourn, 1847), p. 62.

³⁸ F. E. Smedley, *Lewis Arundel* (London: Virtue, Hall and Virtue, 1848), p. 33.

³⁹ S. Sen, 'Radical Satire and Respectability: Comic Imagination in Hone, Jerrold and Dickens' in *The Working-Class Intellectual in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by A. Krishnamurthy (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 149-150.

⁴⁰ *Punch*, 3 June 1848, p. 236.

⁴¹ See T. Hodgskin, *Popular Political Economy* (London: Tait, 1827), p. 126.

and disease was the target, not the institute, although the institute was associated politically with the MP. Similarly, when George Howard the seventh Earl of Carlisle's 1853 lecture tour of mechanics' institutes was used as a starting point for a satire of other worthies touring the country pontificating on progressively ridiculous topics,⁴² the target was the speaker and not the venue or audience. There was a suggestion that, as so many politicians seemed to be working as lecturers in institutes, perhaps institute lecturers should therefore take up the seats in the Lords.⁴³

Mechanics' Institutes in Public Political Life I: Robert Peel, the Tamworth Reading Room and "The Best Manure of the Mind"

The Tory-Anglican conservative establishment took issue with the education on offer in Institutes, which catered for the intellect – they argued – but not morality. However, the idea of better educating working people, provided that the moral guidance concern was addressed, had its admirers among traditionalists. Even critics who committed their views to print, such as the Reverend Edward Grinfield of Bath, did not damn the idea of working class education *per se*, but rather the act of providing such education for the mind while neglecting the soul. Only by providing a balanced body of knowledge, and furthermore one with a moral axis, he argued, could such enterprises provide "the best manure of the mind."⁴⁴

The answer to Grinfield's call for a mechanics' institute which would be compatible with conservative values was not immediately forthcoming. The Tory attitude to Institutes was one of "dwindling distrust" throughout the 1830s however the horror of a state education system remained and the close association of institutes with Whigs such as Brougham made sure that the dwindling was slow. A more progressive Toryism was

⁴² *Punch*, 7 December 1853, p. 233.

⁴³ *Punch*, 18 December 1852, p. 264.

⁴⁴ Rev. E.W. Grinfield, *A Reply to Mr Brougham's 'Practical Observations upon the Education of the People'* (London: C. and J. Rivington, 1825), p. iv.

emerging which identified morally balanced education as desirable for practical social and economic reasons.⁴⁵

Sir Robert Peel's activities in this regard are of interest. In 1841 he established the Tamworth Reading Room, a mechanics' institute in all but name, in Tamworth in Staffordshire. He was local MP and served as the main financial backer and inaugural president.⁴⁶ The institution he founded was designed to cater for moral needs as much as educational requirements and technical necessity.⁴⁷ It was a mechanics' institute infused with Anglican values. The debt his enterprise owed to Institutes was clear yet he chose not to credit them explicitly in his published inaugural address.

Criticism of Peel's enterprise was just as vocal as that directed at mechanics' institutes, and came from similar sources, indicating that press affiliation did not necessarily hold fast to party loyalties. As had become the case in newspaper and periodical criticisms of Institutes from the early 1830s onwards, where personal attacks on founders and backers replaced criticism of the enterprise itself, so with the Tamworth Reading Room. Satirical periodicals tarred the Room with the brush of debauchery for allowing "virtuous women" to be members, and noted such women would not remain virtuous for long in the moral vacuum of popular education.⁴⁸ Newspaper coverage stretched beyond the local and regional, typically defended critics of the venture and accused Peel of catering to his own ego rather than any underlying educational need among the workers of Tamworth.⁴⁹ Only in centres of radical activity such as Manchester

⁴⁵ D. P. Delio, "John Henry Newman's Areopagus: The Tamworth Reading Room as an Apology for the Christian Difference" (Unpublished PhD thesis, Catholic University of America, 2013), pp. 61-63.

⁴⁶ Delio, "The Tamworth Reading Room", pp. 61-62.

⁴⁷ R. Peel, *An inaugural address, delivered by the Right Hon. Sir Robert Peel, Bart. M.P., president of the Tamworth Library and reading room, on Tuesday, 19th January, 1841* (London: J. Bain, 1841), pp. 11, 25-29.

⁴⁸ *The Satirist*, 28 February 1841, p. 70.

⁴⁹ *Hull Packet*, 26 February 1841, p. 3; *Morning Post*, 6 November 1841, p. 5.

did the press side with Peel, championing his creation and defending him from the “insufferable insolence of the established hierarchy.”⁵⁰

Criticism came from other quarters. There was a stream of correspondence in the popular press from a commentator who used the pen name “Catholicus”, as well as coverage of that correspondence. This criticism came from Anglican quarters and appeared first in the Anglican periodical press. Sir Robert Peel’s enterprise at Tamworth was attacked for not being close enough in tone to a mechanics’ institute, despite having similar aims and facilities. The accusation that Peel’s ego was a greater concern than philanthropy was levelled from the pages of the general press as well.⁵¹ The earlier established church attitudes to institutes, which were either generally indifferent or overtly hostile, had shifted to acceptance.⁵² Within a decade, that acceptance had been extended to the Tamworth Reading Room, or at least to the enterprise if not the originator. Press coverage from the end of the decade and the beginning of the next noted the Room’s “descent” into “respectable monotony” and held it up as a cautionary tale for the “infinitesimal smallness” of Peel’s “petty local vanity”.⁵³ The only thing objectionable about the Reading Room by the end of its first decade in existence was the “monstrous” ego of its founder.⁵⁴ Again, the comparison between Peel at Tamworth and Henry Brougham’s involvement with mechanics’ institutes is clear. The hostility towards both can be better understood by contextualising it in the evolving popular attitude towards the political realities of public life which marked the early-mid nineteenth century.

Mechanics’ Institutes in Public Political Life II: The Evolution of the “Public Conversation”

⁵⁰ *Manchester Times and Gazette*, 8 October 1842, n.p.

⁵¹ *British Critic and Quarterly Theological Review*, Volume XXX (1841), pp. 46-100.

⁵² Delio, “The Tamworth Reading Room”, pp. 61-62.

⁵³ *John Bull*, 2 February 1850, p. 73.

⁵⁴ *The Standard*, 27 January 1849, unpaginated.

The Tamworth Reading Room debate of 1841 demonstrates a shift in attitudes that is similar to the shift in attitudes towards mechanics' institutes and, indeed, the idea of popular education itself. These attitudes were an expression of wider political concerns. Newspapers and periodicals - the "weekly and daily companions" of civilisation⁵⁵ – provide a window into the "collective memory" of this past.⁵⁶ They both reflected and informed the attitudes of the day and through that discourse with the world upon which they at once reported and were read by, became the "principal medium of public conversation".⁵⁷

That "public conversation" was developing a more critical expression and a more sardonic, satirical voice by the beginning of the nineteenth century. The tone had moved towards a more politically conscious and critical one in comparison to the sexually suggestive innuendos of earlier periods.⁵⁸ Allegory took the place of insult.⁵⁹ The ideal in a given set of circumstances was depicted indirectly by the satirical portrait of the polar opposite, which invited criticism by virtue of its deviation from the ideal.⁶⁰ The public critical discourse touched government and elites which had previously been effectively beyond open criticism.⁶¹

In this context, critical pieces such as spoof cabinet meeting minutes, where an uncouth Brougham was rebuked for his conduct and reminded that he was "not in the mechanics' institute now"⁶² were as much a public political critique of politics and

⁵⁵ J. Raymond, 'Introduction: Newspapers, Forgeries and Histories', in *News, Newspapers and Societies in Early Modern Britain*, ed. by J. Raymond (Cambridge: Frank Cass, 1999), pp. 1-11.

⁵⁶ D. A. Berkowitz, *Cultural Meanings of News* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), pp. 301-366.

⁵⁷ E. M. Palmegiano, *Perceptions of the Press in Nineteenth Century Periodicals: A Bibliography* (London: Anthem Press, 2012), p. 1.

⁵⁸ F. Palmieri, 'Cruikshank, Thackeray and the Victorian Eclipse of Satire', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 44, No. 4, (Autumn 2004), pp. 753-777.

⁵⁹ E. D. Leyburn, 'Notes on Satire and Allegory', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 6, No. 4, (June, 1948), pp. 323-331.

⁶⁰ D. Kunzle, 'The First Ally Sloper: The Earliest Popular Cartoon Character as a Satire on the Victorian Work Ethic', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1985), pp. 40-48.

⁶¹ J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991), p. 66.

⁶² *The Age*, 9 January 1831, p. 13.

politicians as they were an attack on institutes and their members. The institute served as a vehicle to lampoon Henry Brougham, the real target, who had become the bad-mannered mouthpiece of an undesirable kind of popular politics. Similarly, the depiction of Brougham in the role of Mr Punch at the foundation stone laying ceremony for the new Liverpool Mechanics' Institute building in 1835 was a critique of the public politician, braying loudly before "the great unwashed"⁶³ in a display which the critical perspective equated with lowbrow street theatre.

Involvement with mechanics' institutes served as a vehicle for public criticism of political figures long after press criticism of institutes and their members had ceased. In 1837 the Bishop of Chichester's involvement with his local institute, which he had "condescended" to join, had apparently liberated him from his previous "spiritual fancies".⁶⁴ Lord Panmure's donation to the Aberdeen Institute in 1838 was allegedly so out of keeping with his characteristic frugality that it must have, according to the press, taken place without his knowledge.⁶⁵ The institutes' capacity as a setting within which social elites could be lampooned even extended to Anglican bishops at opposite ends of the country indulging in public name-calling; the Bishop of Llandaff took exception to the patronage of an institute by his colleague in Durham, to the amusement of the periodical press.⁶⁶ The mechanics' institute had become a canvas for political figures to make fools of themselves and for their views, attitudes and character to be exposed to public critique as a result. This came to transcend party differences, so that politicians of both persuasions were fair game, with their status as public figures being the motivation for the critique.

Mechanics' Institutes and the Mechanics of Democracy I: Parliamentary Debates

⁶³ *John Bull*, 27 July 1835, p. 240.

⁶⁴ *The Satirist*, 4 June 1837, p. 597; *The Penny Satirist*, 10 June 1837, p. 4.

⁶⁵ *The Satirist*, 11 February 1838, p. 43.

⁶⁶ *The Satirist*, 17 June 1848, p. 235.

Mechanics' institutes were employed as a metaphor in Parliamentary debates by politicians for the inherent intelligence of the improving and improved working-classes. Although there were MPs of a radical bent who supported the mechanics' institute movement in spirit and in kind,⁶⁷ most Parliamentary involvement with institutes was of a distinctly non-radical variety. Much debating on the topic of franchise reform, including discussions where institutes were used as proof of working class moral worth and intellectual ability, took place in the chambers of both Houses in the years leading up to the Reform Act of 1867. However, these dealings were conducted as formally as any other dealings in the House, the champions of institutes using the machinery of both Parliament and Government to initiate slow ordered change rather than sudden radical shift.

Nearly every Parliamentary debate on franchise expansion between 1823 and 1869 referred to the members of mechanics' institutes and noted the clear intelligence which they showed. This was used to justify calls for working people to be given the vote. Starting in 1831, with an abortive attempt to steer such a Bill through the Lords based partly on this argument,⁶⁸ there was a tendency for reformers to use mechanics' institutes in this way. A similar measure at the end of the decade, to expand the franchise citing institutes as an example of why working people were intelligent enough to comprehend the enormity of the task before them, failed.⁶⁹ There were similar drives a decade later, again citing the members of institutes as proof that working people understood the franchise, and again these failed.⁷⁰ Despite the association of the Whigs with the cause of

⁶⁷ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 93.

⁶⁸ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 8, House of Lords, 7 October 1831, cols 188-334.

⁶⁹ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 46, House of Commons, 21 March 1839, cols 1048-101.

⁷⁰ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 99, House of Commons, 20 June 1848, cols 876-966;
Parliamentary Debates, Third Series, Vol 100, House of Commons, 6 July 1848, cols 156-226;
Parliamentary Debates, Third Series, Vol 109, House of Commons, 28 February 1850, cols 137-218.

parliamentary reform⁷¹, and despite the association of mechanics' institutes with Whigs⁷² these reform efforts failed under Whig administrations, although there was a Reform Act passed in 1832.⁷³ Further debates on the cusp of the late 1850s and early 1860s likewise used institutes as examples in the same manner and likewise came to nothing, again under a Whig government. However there were references to expansion of the franchise to working people being dependent on continued engagement with mechanics' institutes⁷⁴ as well as to the institutes being a cause of the wider popular clamour for reform owing to their status as places of political instruction.⁷⁵

With the debates surrounding the passing of the Reform Act of 1867, the institutes were used as supporting evidence for a campaign of franchise expansion which was ultimately successful against a background of popular unrest and activism.⁷⁶ James Clay (MP for Kingston upon Hull) referred indirectly to Institutes as proof of the worthiness of working men to be given the vote when he sought leave to introduce a Bill to that effect in 1866.⁷⁷ Although that Bill did not specifically mention mechanics' institutes, it placed emphasis on the educational status of the proposed new holders of the franchise – proven by a certificate of examination declaring the holder possessed the basic elements of literacy and numeracy.⁷⁸ In the event, the Bill failed, withdrawn in the face of strong opposition.⁷⁹ Another Bill introduced the following year, referred to in the Commons as the means to enfranchise the “elite” working class which frequented mechanics'

⁷¹ T. A. Jenkins, *Parliament, Party and Politics in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 89-110.

⁷² M. Walker, ““Solid and Practical Education”, p. 16; C. Turner, “Politics in Mechanics' Institutes, 1820-1850: A Study in Conflict” (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 1980), p. 79.

⁷³ C. Hall, “The rule of difference: gender class and empire in the making of the 1832 Reform Act” in K. Hagemann, C. Hall, I. Blom (eds.), *Gendered nations: nationalisms and gender order in the nineteenth century* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), pp. 107-136.

⁷⁴ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 153, House of Commons, 24 March 1859, cols 692-792.

⁷⁵ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 153, House of Commons, 28 March 1859, cols 915-1004.

⁷⁶ R. Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848-1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 225-264.

⁷⁷ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 181, House of Commons, 20 February 1866, cols 825-47.

⁷⁸ *Bill to Extend Elective Franchise for Cities and Boroughs in England and Wales* (1866), p. 1.

⁷⁹ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 184, House of Commons, 18 July 1866, cols 1003-110.

institutes,⁸⁰ passed into law. The long association of the institutes with the cause of electoral reform over successive Parliaments therefore eventually came to be associated with success – the potential for improvement which they engendered had been recognised in law and practice as well as in debate and theory.

Moves to legislate on working practices also used the institutes as examples. Unlike reform of the franchise however, reform of labour relations met with more success and did so more quickly. The key years in which Institutes were invoked as reasons for a shorter working day – in 1844,⁸¹ in 1846–47⁸² and 1850⁸³ – correspond with the passage of legislation which was intended to bring about just such an end.⁸⁴ Whereas Parliamentary reform met with stiff opposition outside and within the House, reform of working conditions (and also using mechanics' institutes as an example of why such reform was desirable) found favour with employers and employees.⁸⁵ The establishment of mechanics' institutes on company property was reported to Parliamentary Commissioners as proof of compliance with relevant laws and as evidence of concern for employee welfare.⁸⁶ The relaxation of working hours in any case seems to have had the desired effect of encouraging workers to better themselves – more institutes were founded in the period 1841–1851 than at any other point in the movement's entire history.⁸⁷ The institute established at Haworth in Yorkshire doubled its membership in the year ending 1848 and associated this with the effects of the 1847 Act.⁸⁸ Workers gave evidence to

⁸⁰ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 187, House of Commons, 20 May 1867, cols 779-852

⁸¹ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 73, House of Commons, 18 March 1844, cols 1177-267.

⁸² *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 86, House of Commons, 13 May 1846, col 466-536;

Parliamentary Debates, Vol 90, House of Commons, 3 March 1847, cols 745-819.

⁸³ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 109, House of Commons, 14 March 1850, cols 883-933;

Parliamentary Debates, Third Series, Vol 111, House of Commons, 6 June 1850, cols 823-56.

⁸⁴ R. Gray, *The Factory Question and Industrial England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 188,190,197.

⁸⁵ *Second Report on Children's Employment*, p. 190.

⁸⁶ *Commissioners of Enquiry into Operation of Mines Act, and State of Population of Mining Districts Report* (1846), passim.

⁸⁷ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 329.

⁸⁸ *Reports of Inspectors of Factories to the Secretary of State for Home Department, May-October 1849* (1850), p. 44.

Government Inspectors of their desire both for a shorter working day and to use the additional free time for study at mechanics' institutes.⁸⁹ The lessening of working hours corresponds with the general decline of radical activity⁹⁰ in a way that suggests the day-to-day priority of having more time to oneself or to spend in their "happy home" with their "smiling, intelligent and happy families"⁹¹ was more important to the average worker than either the franchise or any other political change. Part of that day-to-day life, as seen from the committee evidence, was enjoyment of Mechanics' Institute facilities.

Mechanics' Institutes and the Mechanics of Democracy II: Parliamentary Petitions

Mechanics' institutes were not just examples to be cited in the political discourse of the times. They actively engaged in this discourse through the act of petitioning. These petitions made no calls for radical change. Instead, they were pragmatic. Analysis of contemporary parliamentary debates returns a figure for all petitions submitted by mechanics' institutes between 1823 and 1869. There were 65 such petitions in all. By far the largest proportion, 42 (nearly two thirds of the total) were to do with the taxation policies of successive Governments. All of these petitions were presented between 1831 and 1848, a period which coincides with a drive across successive Parliamentary sessions to maximise Government tax revenues.⁹² Of the remainder, only one – the petition by Uxbridge Mechanics' Institute in 1838 – called for an expansion of the franchise.⁹³ Although one autobiographer later lambasted that particular Institute at that time as "a violent revolutionary club",⁹⁴ it was also praised by the local press for its measured tone

⁸⁹ *Reports of Inspectors of Factories to the Secretary of State for Home Department, May-October 1848* (1849), pp. 52,59.

⁹⁰ M. Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 271-340.

⁹¹ A. Clark, "The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity: Gender, Language and Class in the 1830s and 1840s", *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (January 1992), p. 62.

⁹² M. J. Daunton, *State and Market in Victorian Britain: War, Welfare and Capitalism* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), pp. 4-6.

⁹³ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 40, House of Commons, 16 February 1838, col 1228.

⁹⁴ J. Buckley, *A Village Politician: The Life-Story of John Buckley* (London: T. Fisher and Unwin, 1897), pp. 96-97.

and the non-radical approach of its members.⁹⁵ Formal petitioning of Parliament was a traditional rather than radical form of political expression. The Chartist National Petitions were a radical tactic by comparison.⁹⁶

The remainder of mechanics' institute Parliamentary petitions were also unremarkable and unsurprising. Such examples as Glasgow's humble request that the House give encouragement to the mechanics' institute educational model in 1834,⁹⁷ and of the London Institute asking for access to all art galleries in the city to be granted to the general public free of charge a few years later⁹⁸ were not radical requests. Where mechanics' institutes engaged with the political process, they did so primarily out of financial self-interest or for reasons in keeping with their *raison d'être*. Despite the drive for repeal of the Corn Laws marking much of the period of the institutes' history, for instance,⁹⁹ there was not a single petition raised by an institute calling for their repeal. Institutes were more likely to call for free public access to art¹⁰⁰ than for a relaxation of trade policies which critics claimed exposed the working classes to "great suffering and privation".¹⁰¹ Indeed, the general involvement of the Corn Law Repeal movement with mechanics' Institutes seems to extend solely to the occasional public meeting on institute premises, generally taking place in the North of England and invariably ending in an acrimonious gate-crashing by local Chartists.¹⁰²

The campaigns of mechanics' institutes were expressions of self-interest and sought primarily to influence taxation policy which in turn impacted the movement's fortunes. These drives to influence tax policy took two main forms. The first was aimed

⁹⁵ *Berkshire Chronicle*, 13 March 1830, p. 3.

⁹⁶ Chase, *Chartism*, pp. 205-206.

⁹⁷ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 24, House of Commons, 9 July 1834, col 1336.

⁹⁸ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 39, House of Commons, 15 December 1837, col 1116.

⁹⁹ A. Briggs, *The Age of Improvement, 1783-1867* (Second Edition) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 269-279.

¹⁰⁰ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 39, House of Commons, 15 December 1837, col 1116.

¹⁰¹ *Repeal of the Corn Laws: Address of the Metropolitan Anti-Corn Law Association* (1840), p. 6.

¹⁰² *Northern Star*, 18 January 1840, p. 5; *Northern Star*, 11 September 1841, p. 5.

directly at taxation itself, seeking exemptions from taxes such as “taxes on knowledge” and other levies. The second sought to influence the content and implementation of specific Bills and Acts of Parliament which granted such exemptions. The policies of Governments towards these respective types of action reveal much about attitudes not only towards mechanics’ institutes in particular, but also the question of tax exemption generally.

Mechanics’ institutes were not the most vociferous opponents of the “taxes on knowledge”, lodging a total of only 5 petitions before Parliament on the matter during the period between 1831 and 1835.¹⁰³ Given the struggle between radicals and the Government for control of the unstamped press during the same time frame, the Institutes were fighting a losing battle from the start. Whig Government policy was to impose greater taxation on knowledge in the form of higher and more widespread levies on newspapers, in order to censor the radical press and stifle sedition in print while at the same time continuing to benefit financially from expressions of these impulses in print.¹⁰⁴ For most of the period of petitioning on the “taxes on knowledge”, Henry Brougham served as Lord Chancellor, only leaving that office in late 1834.¹⁰⁵ One of the guiding personalities of the entire mechanics’ institutes movement, therefore, was in a ministerial position in a Government which was not only refusing to repeal the “taxes on knowledge” but was aiming to increase them in scope. An Act of 1836 which imposed tax uniformity across all newspapers, whether previously stamped or unstamped,¹⁰⁶ left the class of cheap reading matter affordable to working people “virtually destroyed”¹⁰⁷ and, given

¹⁰³ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Volume 5, House of Commons, 12 August 1831, cols 1256-7; *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Volume 13, House of Commons, 2 July 1832, col 1238; *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Volume 17, House of Commons, 10 May 1833, col 1074; *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Volume 25, House of Commons, 23 July 1834, col 367; *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Volume 27, House of Lords, 3 April 1835, cols 779-80.

¹⁰⁴ M. Hewitt, *The Dawn of the Cheap Press in Victorian Britain: The End of the “Taxes on Knowledge”* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 4-5.

¹⁰⁵ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 176-177.

¹⁰⁶ Hewitt, *Dawn of the Cheap Press*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁷ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 173.

that the Act had been passed for as much to do with State security reasons as revenue ones, left the mechanics' institutes with nothing to petition about in this context. The kind of Whig Parliamentary majority which was only too pleased to declare Institutes a success story to be encouraged had no qualms about imposing limits on what could be read in them or about roundly ignoring their petitions and appeals.

When the question of exemption from taxes other than those on knowledge is considered, the picture is again one which lacks success. Between 1840¹⁰⁸ and 1843,¹⁰⁹ no fewer than 22 petitions were laid before Parliament seeking exemption for mechanics' institutes from all tax liabilities. Although a Bill was introduced exempting institutes, together with other similar organisations, from all local taxation,¹¹⁰ an amendment was applied at the Committee stage¹¹¹ before it became law.¹¹² The amendment had the effect of forcing all Institutes which applied for the exemption to have their exemption application investigated and endorsed by a notary with the costs falling on the institute concerned. It was a loophole which left the vast majority of institutes with remaining financial liability. The Government had found a way to (on the face of things) grant the requests for change while at the same time ensuring that most Institutes remained liable for local tax levies. Mechanics' institutes subsequently lodged 15 petitions with Parliament between 1843¹¹³ and 1848¹¹⁴ to have the law amended and the loophole removed. They were all unsuccessful. The institutes did not get their exemption and the loophole remained as did the tax liability. Mechanics' institutes, while hailed as a worthy success by successive Governments, were merely another source of revenue to

¹⁰⁸ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Volume 55, House of Commons, 22 July 1840, col 869.

¹⁰⁹ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Volume 69, House of Commons, 15 June 1843, col 1566-7.

¹¹⁰ *Bill to Exempt from Local Rates, Lands and Buildings Occupied by Scientific and Literary Societies* (1843).

¹¹¹ *Bill to Exempt from Local Rates, Lands and Buildings Occupied by Scientific and Literary Societies: as Amended by Committee, on Re-Commitment and on Report* (1843).

¹¹² *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Volume 71, House of Commons, 21 August 1843, col 953-60.

¹¹³ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Volume 69, House of Commons, 29 June 1843, col 1566-7.

¹¹⁴ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Volume 100, House of Commons, 3 August 1848, col 1113.

administrations which were becoming more ruthless in assessing and collecting that revenue as time went on, regardless of the laudability of the source's aims.

Mechanics' Institutes and the Politics of the Tory-Anglican Establishment

Tory political and moral identification with the religious teachings and social objectives of the Anglican Church was an accepted fact of life during the nineteenth century. The support was mutual.¹¹⁵ As guardians of political and religious orthodoxy respectively, they were opposed to any change which impacted that orthodoxy. Mechanics' institutes, with their secular programme of broadening access to education among the working classes, were potential agents of such change. Whig support for institutes, as highlighted elsewhere in this chapter, was obvious from the earliest days of the movement's history, however party political animosity only partly explains the criticism levelled at the Institutes and their backers from conservative quarters. Educating the workers was championed as a political end in itself by those who supported it and was attacked as a political act by those opposed to it.

Mechanics' institute historiography describes a systematic opposition to mechanics' institutes on the part of the Tory-Anglican axis which was perhaps distorted by the metropolitan lens.¹¹⁶ Mabel Tylecote noted the enmity of Tory politicians generally and made passing reference to the regional differences in tone, with local grandees in the North more likely to take a moderate view than in the capital.¹¹⁷ This differentiation has continued to be explored in the context of the new political history, with recent scholarship noting the support for mechanics' institutes among elements of the Tory local press in Sussex and Hampshire, for instance.¹¹⁸ Local interpersonal networks took

¹¹⁵ J. Black, *The Tory World: Deep History and the Tory Theme in British Foreign Policy, 1679-2014* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 93-94.

¹¹⁶ H. Silver, *English Education and the Radicals: 1780-1850* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 40-41.

¹¹⁷ M. Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, pp. 63-64.

¹¹⁸ Sims, "Sussex and Hampshire", pp. 76-77.

precedence over establishment distaste in Bristol as well, with Anglican clergy present on the Institute (established in 1825) committee in the city.¹¹⁹ The fear of working class education, bound up with the fear of revolution which in turn motivated legislation against seditious assembly, was driven by metropolitan concerns.¹²⁰ Where there was hostility directed at Institutes outside the capital it was because they often attracted support from nonconformist clergy who were already in competition with established interests locally. This was more of a deterrent than party political generalisations tended to be.¹²¹ Critics of the Church establishment such as the temperance campaigner and publisher Joseph Livesey (1794-1884) discussed the challenges presented by mechanics' institutes:

MECHANIC INSTITUTES v. CHURCH ESTABLISHMENTS. – It has often been asserted that the tendency of mechanic institutes is to upset the established church, and as often asserted by their advocates that they have *no such* tendency. This denial I consider a very disingenuous attempt to meet a difficulty. The charge is *well founded*, and accords with this obvious truth, that whatever institution diffuses correct views and rational information is opposing the church, and sapping its foundation. But though the diffusion of knowledge is silently working the extinction of every superstitious and oppressive system, it will always be found a friendly auxiliary of biblical religion and rational piety.¹²²

There were regional differences as well. In the Staffordshire Potteries the Institutes were typically owned and operated by employers.¹²³ They were centres of orthodoxy, with strict adherence to their articles of association.¹²⁴ Anglican patronage of Institutes in the Staffordshire Potteries was substantial.¹²⁵ Moral concerns were at the heart of Tory and Anglican practical politics, and the perceived lack of moral direction

¹¹⁹ I. Inkster, *Metropolis and Province: Science in British Culture, 1780 – 1850* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 191.

¹²⁰ Flexner, "The London Mechanics' Institution", pp. 28-29.

¹²¹ Sims, "Sussex and Hampshire", p. 60.

¹²² 'Mechanic Institutes v. Church Establishments', *The Moral reformer, and protestor against the vices, abuses, and corruptions of the age* 2.1 (January 1832), p.21.

¹²³ Machin, "Critical Survey", p. 120.

¹²⁴ Machin, "Critical Survey", p. 120.

¹²⁵ Machin, "Critical Survey", pp. 120-125.

which pervaded Institute teachings was common grounds for criticism. Providing unfettered access to learning and books was a political act in itself and to do so outside the confines of the moral framework supplied by the Church of England was potentially disastrous. One critical Anglican clergyman thought that people would be led astray from righteousness and left “uneasy, unhappy and dissatisfied” by the “absurd and foolish project” which institutes represented.¹²⁶ The “seditious societies”¹²⁷ which were flourishing all over the country and leading their members into “deplorable evils”¹²⁸ were described in near-apocalyptic terms not merely through their status as meeting places for “radical ragamuffins”¹²⁹ but because any activity contrary to the accepted norm was perceived as being political in tone regardless of its actual motivation.

Not every spiritual commentary on mechanics’ institutes was a criticism. Religious faith and political ideology could combine to provide a new moral dimension to what Institutes might one day achieve. Anglicans often voiced calls for such a dimension. Specifically, there were repeated observations on the power of the political education made available to members of mechanics’ institutes; power which would allow them to transcend party politics. The Reverend John Davies of Gateshead (an evangelical whose children included the suffragist Emily Davies), for example, delivered a lecture on the religious power of mechanics’ institute political teachings in 1848.¹³⁰ George Waddington, the Dean of Durham had delivered a lecture at the same institute which taught a similar message.¹³¹ This kind of transcendental politico-religious doctrine seemed fairly common in the North of England, with lectures such as one at Blyth (1847)

¹²⁶ Grinfield, *Reply*, p. 14.

¹²⁷ *The Age*, 11 December 1831, p. 398.

¹²⁸ *Figaro in London*, 7 January 1832, p. 19.

¹²⁹ *The Age*, 21 March 1830, p. 90.

¹³⁰ Rev. J. Davies, *Mechanics’ institutions, as affecting the character of the people and the welfare of society: an introductory lecture, delivered before the Gateshead Mechanics’ Institute* (London: J.W. Parker, 1848), pp. 1-15.

¹³¹ The Reverend G. Waddington, *An Inaugural Address delivered at the opening of the Mechanics’ Institute, Gateshead* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman, 1848), pp. 17-19.

on the ability of working class mind and consciousness to put aside party concerns¹³² and at Hull (1856) on the rights and responsibilities of labour¹³³ taking a transcendent approach to the issue of politics and political teaching in Institutes.

This kind of religious attitude to political thought in Institutes had parallels over the border. Lectures were given on subjects such as faith and reason at institutes in the Southern Uplands of Scotland. Such events emphasised political and religious sensitivities which transcended boundaries of party persuasion and sectarian differences. The speaker was often a secular figure, with blessings given by Ministers, not just from the Kirk but Dissenters as well.¹³⁴

Mechanics' Institutes and the Politicisation of Education I: Political Economy

An industrialising economy called for an understanding of that economy on the part of the workers driving it.¹³⁵ Instruction in such matters would, in the words of the Reverend Thomas Chalmers, “prove not a stimulant, but a sedative to all sorts of turbulence and disorder.”¹³⁶ From the early years of the mechanics' institute movement, there was an obvious awareness of the potential for criticism of educating working men in such matters, and a resulting care taken to starve such criticism of fuel. In 1825, a lesson plan of a dozen lectures on the subject of political economy (to be taught in London and disseminated to other Institutes nationwide) was vetoed by Francis Place as too radical and too controversial in tone.¹³⁷ The author, Thomas Hodgskin (1787-1869), was

¹³² J. Willis, *The capabilities and cultivation of the human mind: being the substance of a lecture delivered to the members of the Mechanics' Institute, Blyth* (Blyth: J. Robinson, 1847), pp. 5-25.

¹³³ S. Warren, *Labour: its rights, difficulties and consolations: a lecture read before the Hull Mechanics' Institute* (London: Longman, 1856), pp. 4-32.

¹³⁴ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 30 March 1853, p. 3.

¹³⁵ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 214.

¹³⁶ T. Chalmers, “On Mechanic Schools and on Political Economy as a Branch of Popular Education”, reprinted in *The Glasgow Mechanics' Magazine and Annals of Philosophy*, Vol. 5. (Glasgow: McPhun, 1832), pp.215-219 (p. 219).

¹³⁷ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 98-99.

permitted to lecture on the subject the following year once the material had been divested of controversy. These lectures served as the basis of his 1827 book on the subject.¹³⁸ The preface to that book explicitly stated that any and all controversial passages about political reform had been added since the mechanics' institute lectures and had never been taught there publicly.¹³⁹

Lecture series on political economy were typically delivered in London, published and circulated to institutes throughout the country.¹⁴⁰ Guidelines on how to structure such lecture series made up a significant element of published advice emanating from the metropolis.¹⁴¹ Discussion of the political status quo in such material was critical in tone. Examples of how the existing model worked were employed to criticise it, with context drawn from such intellectual reformers as John Locke (1632-1704).¹⁴² The ideal of politics and political structures was to serve and protect “the general benefit of the community” and the pursuit of such an ideal necessitated the rejection of inherited power and of patriarchal models of society and governance.¹⁴³ The party political system was criticised as “promoting misgovernment and excluding the people from all influence” and could justifiably be resisted if “evils actually suffered” outweighed the risks of waging civil war against arbitrary exclusionary government.¹⁴⁴ Through education, the aim was for workers to demonstrate that “people are fit for self-government” – with “a republican government” being “the best” option as monarchy would always “degenerate into despotism”.¹⁴⁵ As has already been discussed, public affirmations of republican sentiment

¹³⁸ Hodgskin, *Popular Political Economy*, p. xvii.

¹³⁹ Hodgskin, *Popular Political Economy*, p. xviii.

¹⁴⁰ E.K. Blyth, *Life of William Ellis (Second Edition)* (London: Keegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1889), pp. 52-54. See also H. Brougham, *Letters and Speeches on Various Subjects*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1840), p. 157.

¹⁴¹ B.F. Duppa, *A Manual for Mechanics' Institutions* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman, 1839), passim. See also Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 249 and B.F. Duppa, *The Causes of The Present Condition of the Labouring Classes in the South of England* (London: Saunders and Benning, 1831), passim.

¹⁴² Duppa, *Manual*, p. 197.

¹⁴³ Duppa, *Manual*, p. 143.

¹⁴⁴ Duppa, *Manual*, p. 197.

¹⁴⁵ Duppa, *Manual*, p. 206.

in print were potentially dangerous, and brought unwanted attention to mechanics' institutes that were already viewed with suspicion. This explains why the session on the history of the French Revolution, always a popular subject, confined itself, at least in print, to a discussion of the monarchy.¹⁴⁶ The lesson plan for this was only a sentence long, and concerned itself specifically with “the rise and gradual formation” of that system and “detailed examination of its constitution”.¹⁴⁷

Education, especially adult education geared towards economic goals – such as the original impulse behind the formation of the institutes – was a political act in that it sought to “close the... gap between classes”¹⁴⁸ and effect a change in how working people saw the world and their place within it.¹⁴⁹ The political economy on offer had an emphasis which was as much political as it was economic. William Lovett (1800-1877) made the explicit link between educating working people and the political changes which were fully intended to follow as a natural result.¹⁵⁰ Thomas Cooper (1805-1892) made the same connection, and associated a growth in political awareness with education and, especially, literacy and reading.¹⁵¹ Such a link was present wherever working people came together to learn together.¹⁵² Education was at once a barrier and an essential criterion for entry into, and involvement in, the evolving public sphere.¹⁵³ Literature produced by institutes for Institutes spoke of the “new and nobler” faculties and understanding “awakened in the minds of many” as the result of their exposure to Institute ideas.¹⁵⁴ Henry Brougham associated reason born of effective and balanced political education with national

¹⁴⁶ Duppa, *Manual*, pp. 205-206.

¹⁴⁷ Duppa, *Manual*, p. 206.

¹⁴⁸ J. Mokyr, “The Intellectual Origins of Modern Economic Growth”, *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (June 2005), pp. 311-312.

¹⁴⁹ Mokyr, “Intellectual Origins”, pp. 285-351.

¹⁵⁰ Lovett, *Life and Struggles*, p. iii.

¹⁵¹ T. Cooper, *The Life of Thomas Cooper, written by Himself* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876), passim esp. pp. 35-42.

¹⁵² P. Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation* (Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing, 1985), pp. 7-20, 43-66, 99-110.

¹⁵³ J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 84-85.

¹⁵⁴ Duppa, *Manual*, p. 76.

success¹⁵⁵ and in turn stated this kind of rational political education was desirable for working people. Within a few years of the genesis of the institutes, Brougham was calling for the easing of restrictions on political ideas within them, a policy of limitation which he himself had helped formulate and implement. In order to improve them, he argued, working people needed to have unfettered access to all political ideas and philosophies. Any restrictions on that access imposed in institutes (which he himself had first suggested) were claimed as a tactic to silence critics, to deflect accusations of sedition and to deflect criticism from institutes generally.¹⁵⁶

Institutes were involved in the transmission of controversial political literature just often enough for their critics to be justified in their suspicions. For instance, institute members in the Welsh Valleys routinely translated the works of Thomas Paine into their native language and disseminated them orally.¹⁵⁷ In addition, radical reading groups coalesced around Welsh mechanics' institutes¹⁵⁸ where manual workers composed poetry based on the revolutionary ideas they were exposed to.¹⁵⁹

Mechanics' Institutes and the Politicisation of Education II: History and the Celebration of Political Personality

History had a particular resonance in the political discourse during the heyday of the mechanics' institutes. Political debate during the nineteenth century was infused with historical references.¹⁶⁰ The invocation of the past and the celebration of personalities from it by means of history lessons, lectures on history and related subjects, and printed literature available in the libraries and reading rooms of the mechanics' institutes was

¹⁵⁵ H. Brougham, *Political Philosophy (Part II)* (London: C. Knight, 1846), p. 334.

¹⁵⁶ H. Brougham, *Practical Observations Upon the Education of the People: Addressed to the Working Classes and Their Employers* (London: Longman, 1825), pp. 8-9.

¹⁵⁷ Evans, "Institutes of South Wales", pp. 179-183.

¹⁵⁸ Evans, "Institutes of South Wales", pp. 181-184.

¹⁵⁹ Evans, "Institutes of South Wales", pp. 190-205.

¹⁶⁰ O. Anderson, "The Political Uses of History in Mid Nineteenth-Century England", *Past and Present*, No. 36 (April 1967), pp. 87-105.

potentially as political an act as waving a Chartist flag or chanting a radical slogan.¹⁶¹ Despite the prohibition on controversial party politics, history proved a consistent and effective means of circumventing such censorship attempts.

The early mechanics' institutes had been of interest to radical republicans such as Richard Carlile (1790-1843).¹⁶² Revolutionaries, rebels and radicals from ages past underwent something of a rehabilitation as the nineteenth century dawned, at least in terms of public debate and discussion. Oliver Cromwell came to represent honesty and integrity as much as rebellion and regicide.¹⁶³ Admiration for Cromwell was a hallmark of Whig historiography.¹⁶⁴ Although his celebration in a lecture at the Mechanics' Institute in Louth, Lincolnshire was enough to trigger some controversy,¹⁶⁵ the lecture took place in an institute particularly proud of its high proportion of library books on history.¹⁶⁶ Most of those books were sympathetic histories of recent revolutions or of ancient republican societies.¹⁶⁷ Histories by Enlightenment historians such as Ferguson¹⁶⁸ outnumbered more traditionalist, conservative, works.

In any event, the lecture on Cromwell at Louth drew criticism as the speaker had allowed a "rigid party feeling" to pervade "his discourse" on Cromwell – dubbed "a violator of the laws of his country, a destructionist, a murderer and a fanatic" by the editorial. The newspaper made much of the lecturer's status as a nonconformist

¹⁶¹ For examples of lectures on history and related subjects, see 'The Connexion of Poetry with History: a Lecture, delivered before the Members of the Plymouth Mechanics' Institute', *The Athenaeum* 1302 (9 October 1852), p.1093.

¹⁶² 'Philosophical Institutions For The Improvement Of Mechanics', *The Republican* 8.25 (26 December 1823), pp.[767]-768; 'Mechanics' Institution at Deptford', *The Republican*, 12.23 (9 December 1825), pp.728-731.

¹⁶³ E.F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 42-43.

¹⁶⁴ P.B.M. Blaas, *Continuity and Anachronism: Parliamentary and Constitutional Development in Whig Historiography and in the anti-Whig Reaction Between 1890-1930* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978), pp. 105-107.

¹⁶⁵ *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 8 March 1839, p. 3.

¹⁶⁶ *A Catalogue of the Library of the Louth Branch Mechanics' Institution* (Louth: J. and J. Jackson, 1837), p. viii.

¹⁶⁷ *Catalogue of the Louth Branch*, pp. 26-28.

¹⁶⁸ *Catalogue of the Louth Branch*, p. 26.

churchman. This history lecture was an intentional exercise in delivering a political message to its audience.

Similarly, when the Battle of Bannockburn was lectured upon, it was in the context of championing freedom in the face of tyranny.¹⁶⁹ The Battle of Bannockburn especially was undergoing a resurgence of interest amid an emerging growth market in historical literature both at home and abroad.¹⁷⁰ Historical literature as a means for introducing political material was a significant factor in many institute libraries. The handbook for institutes drawn up by Baldwin Duppa (1801-1840) in 1839, for instance, includes a manifest of recommended history books for the ideal institute library.¹⁷¹ Institute libraries will be more closely examined in a later chapter however in a political context, as the central feature of most mechanics' institutes, they had a major role in their political life and landscape. The political nature of the histories contained in one library's shelves shall therefore be considered in order to understand the potential for impact upon the imagination of book borrowers and how the content of that library reflected the broader attitude of the institute which housed it.

Liverpool Mechanics' Institute library catalogue for 1829, when examined alongside what is known of that institute's evolution and conduct, reveals much about the prevailing attitudes towards history and the politics it served as a context and metaphor for. Locke's treatises on government sat alongside reprinted accounts of prisoners of the state who were awaiting transportation.¹⁷² A copy of a Select Committee report on policing in London was available for members to borrow,¹⁷³ which was critical of a force

¹⁶⁹ *Leicester Chronicle*, 18 June 1836, p. 4.

¹⁷⁰ B. Hamnett, *The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Representations of Reality in History and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 73, 77.

¹⁷¹ Duppa, *Manual*, pp. 171-176.

¹⁷² *Catalogue of books in the Liverpool Mechanics' and Apprentices' Library* (Liverpool: Mechanics and Apprentices Library, 1829), passim.

¹⁷³ *Liverpool Catalogue*, p. 20.

which was proving corrupt, ineffective or both.¹⁷⁴ For every biography of King George III there were two of Oliver Cromwell.¹⁷⁵

Liverpool Mechanics' Institute in time became identified with teaching and lecturing which was political in tone, with topical and historical lessons delivered by individuals who were themselves reasons to see the programme of lectures. It was a place where history which once had been "monopolised by monks" was now being taught to manual workers.¹⁷⁶ A course on the contemporary history of British India was taught by George Thompson (1804-1878), the anti-slavery campaigner. His vocal opposition to the mistreatment of native peoples across the British Empire including British India, together with his open criticism of state policy across its dominions, made him a provocative choice to teach history in any institute.¹⁷⁷ The reform campaigner and author Samuel Smiles, involved in lecturing on explicitly political topics in Yorkshire a few years earlier, was also taken on as a lecturer, delivering classes at Liverpool on History, specifically on the British Civil War period.¹⁷⁸ Meanwhile, when an average of 2000 people visited the Liverpool Mechanics' Institute Exhibition in the summer of 1842,¹⁷⁹ they were welcomed by prominent busts of men of as Benjamin Franklin and John Locke.¹⁸⁰ In a nearby room hung portraits of local figures of note such as the anti-slavery campaigner and non-conformist evangelical preacher Thomas Raffles (1788-1863), Unitarian minister and local politician William Shepherd (1768-1847), and the radical reformer and anti-slavery campaigner Reverend John Yates (1789-1871).¹⁸¹ Liverpool Mechanics' Institute aligned and identified itself with the long running radical tendency in the city.

¹⁷⁴ J. M. Beattie, *The First English Detectives: The Bow Street Runners and the Policing of London, 1750-1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 73.

¹⁷⁵ *Liverpool Catalogue*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁷⁶ *Supplement to the Liverpool Mercury*, 14 November 1845, p. 1.

¹⁷⁷ G. Thompson, *Lectures on British India* (Pawtucket, Rhode Island: W. and R. Adams, 1840), *passim*.

¹⁷⁸ *Supplement to the Liverpool Mercury*, 14 November 1845, p. 1. For his later recollections, see S. Smiles, 'A Work That prospered', *Good Words* 18 (December 1877), pp.386-392.

¹⁷⁹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 5 August 1842, p. 6.

¹⁸⁰ *Liverpool Mercury*, 24 June 1842, p. 7.

¹⁸¹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 24 June 1842, p. 7.

Mechanics' Institutes in Civic Society: Power, Politics and Patronage

The very nature of an institute – structured, timetabled, committee run and governed by a set of rules and orders – lent itself to the exercise of disciplinary, institutional, power.¹⁸²

The presence in the community of physical structures along the lines of the major mechanics' institutes was itself an exercise in political power and posturing, an enduring political statement in stone. As many of these buildings shared a common architectural style – the Greco-roman – the same statement was being conveyed and, in conjunction with the tuition going on within, the message went beyond aesthetic. Greek culture was being invoked along with the design.¹⁸³ Such symbols and visual cues were as much political as they were cultural and artistic. As Navickas notes, there was a deliberate attempt to convey a specific aesthetic here – with structures rendered in a neo-Classical style such as mechanics institutes, as well as the Owenite Halls of her example, “demonstrating... permanence and trustworthiness”.¹⁸⁴

Set recommended essay questions in Institutes such as “Does the End ever justify the Means?”, “Is early marriage desirable or injurious?” and “Does morality increase with civilisation?”, published by the Yorkshire Union of Institutes in 1865 and adopted widely,¹⁸⁵ were Socratic in tone, method and structure. Greek deities, especially Apollo, were adopted almost as motifs by the institutes. In the context of political thought Apollo represented the stabilising and civilising influence of wisdom and knowledge closely associated with art and the visible, tangible exercise of this learning in the exercising of

¹⁸² M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1977), pp. 149-155, 170-176.

¹⁸³ F.M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 36-38.

¹⁸⁴ Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space*, p. 202.

¹⁸⁵ *The Report of the Yorkshire Union of Mechanics' Institutes, Read at the Twenty-Fifth Annual Meeting* (Leeds: E. Baines and Sons, 1865), pp. 22-25.

political power.¹⁸⁶ By seeking to expand the franchise and thus open up the political process to the working masses made worthy by education, the mechanics' institutes as a movement framed itself against the past in order to recreate it along lines that were democratic – and very current and topical.¹⁸⁷

The art of mechanics' institute exhibitions was laden with political meaning and symbolism. The busts from antiquity, suits of armour, portraits of local and national figures – the phenomena of the institute exhibition was one in which everyone was invited and everyone was a participant. The gender politics and triumph of reason over violence inherent in Rubens,¹⁸⁸ for instance, were on display in the form of originals donated by benefactors or copies made by members. Art served as an exhortation to behave in a civilised way and to reject the impulse to overtly and violently radicalise.¹⁸⁹ Artists such as Francis Wheatley adorned the walls, and such artists employed motifs of responsible masculinity and political moderation.¹⁹⁰ Edwin Landseer was on display also, and his adoption as a motif by the mechanics' institutes was pointed – in life, Landseer had fallen foul of the Royal Institution for claiming that some artisans – such as engravers like himself – were fine artists rather than mere manual workers.¹⁹¹ His political act was transformed into a potent visual political symbol. The proud display of works by such artists as Titian, meanwhile, speaks of allegory,¹⁹² of inviting the viewer to stop, to ponder the meaning, to reflect and to educate oneself. The fruits of such labours were, like art

¹⁸⁶ J.C. Fumo, *The Legacy of Apollo: Antiquity, Authority and Chaucerian Poetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), passim, especially p. 21.

¹⁸⁷ Turner, *Greek Heritage*, p. 7.

¹⁸⁸ L. Rosenthal, *Gender, Politics and Allegory in the Art of Rubens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 167-197.

¹⁸⁹ Rosenthal, *Gender, Politics and Allegory*, pp. 63-112.

¹⁹⁰ P. Higgins, *A Nation of Politicians: Gender, Patriotism and Political Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press: 2010), pp. 178.

¹⁹¹ J. Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences: Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 75-76.

¹⁹² J.L. O'Rourke, *Keats' Odes and Contemporary Criticism* (Miami: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 88.

itself, unpredictable and uncontrolled. Encouraging such labour was in itself a political act, taking place in a highly visual and intellectually political space.

The use of mechanics' institutes as spaces where education, demonstration, and the dissemination of ideas took place was part of their core remit. Lectures, recitals, soirées, performances, public demonstrations were occasions where the card-carrying members and general public were audiences to what, on the one hand, can be read as a multitude of vehicles to promote values of political economy and self-improvement.

Consideration of mechanics' institutes as performance spaces helps illustrate this. Through the lens of political performance, the annual soirée in which most institutes indulged becomes less a celebration and more an affirmation of the political nature of the Institute space and the community. With collective eating, drinking, speeches and song, it had much in common with religious ritual events and, especially, radical rallies¹⁹³ - only with a more socially acceptable veneer. That proceedings were tightly controlled by committee and rules of the institute, as well as by accepted etiquette, only lent a more obvious political restraint to such events. They were as much about control as celebration; as Navickas eloquently puts it, "whoever ... controlled sites of meeting had the upper hand" in the decision about what took place, when it took place and who exactly was allowed to be involved.¹⁹⁴

Mechanics' institutes were sites and spaces of local politics, expressions of regional priorities and reflections of local political practicalities. They served as polling stations and campaign bases in several locations across successive elections. In 1857, for instance, both the Mechanics' Institutes at Bradford in Yorkshire (established 1825) and North Moor in Lancashire (established 1836) hosted polling stations.¹⁹⁵ The 1865 election

¹⁹³ E. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 65.

¹⁹⁴ Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space*, p. 15.

¹⁹⁵ *Abstract Returns from Sheriffs and Returning Officers for Counties and Parliamentary Boroughs in Great Britain and Ireland* (1857), pp. 61, 114.

showed that such usage was not confined to the North, with Devonport and Plymouth Institutes (both established in 1825) serving in the same capacity. Candidates were billed for accidental damage to the committee rooms of the former building which occurred on the day of the poll.¹⁹⁶

With acceptance as part of the bricks and mortar fabric of political life, came involvement with the less honest aspects of political culture. Bribery and corruption were an accepted political fact of early-to-mid nineteenth century civic life and the view of “the giving and accepting of bribes as agreeable and customary accompaniments to the electoral process” was widespread, especially outside of the major population centres and in the provinces.¹⁹⁷ The MP who served as patron of an institute may well have won his seat by unsavoury means. By the 1850s, these activities were starting to be taken seriously by Parliament and petitions against the conduct of candidates (as well as that of those elections as a whole) were investigated more thoroughly than before. Between 1853 and 1869, mechanics’ institutes were implicated – either as locations where corruption took place or as a means to influence constituencies in themselves – 10 times in total, across five elections.

Plymouth Mechanics’ Institute was the rented campaign headquarters of the successful candidate in the Parliamentary election of 1852. Following the lodging of the petition of protest, the case was examined by a Select Committee. Among the witnesses interviewed was Josiah Avent, a former shipwright turned would-be publican in the city, who freely admitted to offering his vote among all of the candidates in return for a license to run a public house in Devonport Dockyard. Avent promised his backing to all of the candidates at differing times and then broke his word, also pushing for jobs for family

¹⁹⁶ *Returns from Sheriffs and Returning Officers of Abstract of Expenses of Candidates at General Election for each County, City and Borough in United Kingdom* (1866), pp. 181, 281.

¹⁹⁷ J.R. Moore and J. Smith, *Corruption in Urban Politics and Society, Britain 1780-1950* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 37-38.

members and friends. He stated that he went to and from the Mechanics' Institute with assurance and counter-assurance, trying to obtain more favours in return for his vote.¹⁹⁸

Mechanics' institutes served as places where those who sought election and those who had the influence to support a campaign could meet and do business in what were obviously considered appropriate surroundings. When the presidents of the Pontefract (established 1832) and the Knottingley (established 1850) Institutes sought mutual support in their respective municipal election campaigns, for instance, they retired to the former to discuss matters (such as which votes were assured and which needed some financial inducement) over champagne.¹⁹⁹ Elected senior office holders at mechanics' institutes often held or had held elected political office as well, be it municipal or Parliamentary. Institutes were therefore run by men with political experience and, with their large membership numbers and position as community spaces, served as yet another vehicle for career politicians of all party persuasions.

Not all political machinations involving mechanics' institutes were so civilised. The Yorkshire town of Beverley saw its political culture and activities attract the attention of the authorities on many occasions throughout the first half of the century. In 1857, the mechanics' institute (established 1832) served as the centre of a controversy when a public meeting of local electors, called by one of the candidates, was hijacked by another would-be candidate who, accompanied by a retinue of thugs, sought to force his way onto the ballot by means of intimidation. It led to a "great disturbance" in the town and 30 special constables were deputed as an emergency measure to try and contain the problem. Rival candidates and their supporters were physically attacked.²⁰⁰ Beverley Mechanics' Institute sat at the heart of the protests. When the borough went to the polls, it was the mechanics' institute which served as the gathering place and was stormed by

¹⁹⁸ *Select Committee on Plymouth Election Petition* (1853), pp. 127-130.

¹⁹⁹ *Select Committee on Pontefract Borough Election Petition* (1852), pp. 137-139.

²⁰⁰ *Select Committee on Beverley Borough Election Petition* (1857), pp. 16-17.

rival agitators. At the next election, the same institute again became the centrepiece of a public display and progress in honour of a newly chosen Liberal candidate.²⁰¹ At the 1868 election, allegations of bribery surrounded the Conservative candidate and his meetings were held in the local Assembly Rooms rather than the mechanics' institute.²⁰² Given the Whig support for institutes generally, this choice was possibly a reflection of ideology shaping the selection of campaign headquarters. In any event, the picture from Beverley in successive contested elections is that the mechanics' institute had become part of the local political establishment in a traditional, non-radical way. Popular politics within them were not always “a one-sided case of ‘us and them’”.²⁰³

Bribery was common enough an issue which caused concern and attracted official scrutiny, regardless of the political persuasion of the perpetrators. In Weymouth during the 1859 election campaign, meetings at the mechanics' institute, founded in 1835, involved the local Liberal party offering cash bribes and the promise of trips to Paris to secure the votes of individual electors as well as the services of local fixers to act as middlemen. These fixers were a guarantee that the candidate was distanced from the corruption.²⁰⁴ The mechanics institute was where payments were handed out. Written pledges were collected and witnessed by a local lawyer who was an avowed Liberal. The fixers avoided using “Tories” as notaries for this purpose as “that would not have done”. All pledging and witnessing of pledges took place at the mechanics' institute, which the Liberals had been careful to avoid renting out as their election campaign headquarters.²⁰⁵

In Totnes, the mechanics' institute (established 1842) was not scene of bribery but rather the bribe itself. Lord Seymour, the Liberal member until the constituency was disenfranchised in 1868, was investigated for corruption after a petition of dispute was

²⁰¹ *Select Committee on Beverley Borough Election Petition* (1859), p. 6.

²⁰² *Select Committee on Beverley Borough Election Petition* (1869), p. 23.

²⁰³ Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space*, p. 13.

²⁰⁴ *Select Committee on Weymouth and Melcombe Regis Election Petition* (1860), passim.

²⁰⁵ *Select Committee on Weymouth and Melcombe Regis Election Petition* (1860), p. 46.

lodged. Seymour had been pouring money into the constituency for several years before his election in 1863, and had bankrolled the provision of a mechanics' institute and associated saving and lending bank. As the major local landowner, he induced enfranchised tenants to vote for him. Those who voted against him were served with eviction notices immediately after the election. In all 95 individual electors were bribed by 54 agents working for him, and Seymour was returned with a majority of 8 votes. Voter registration fraud was widespread in the district, with phantom tenants on Seymour's land gaining the franchise. His financial support for local building societies and home ownership schemes for working people, meanwhile, allowed for an expanded and sympathetic electorate. However, according to multiple witnesses and the report of the Royal Commission set up to investigate the affair, the largest single act of bribery in Totnes was Seymour's gift of a mechanics' institute to the town.²⁰⁶ Seymour effectively bought the Totnes seat with for the price of a mechanics' institute. Local newspapers were enthusiastic about his selection as Liberal candidate in January of 1863 and praised his public works and philanthropy as that of an ideal Parliamentary representative.²⁰⁷ When the affair was formally investigated, those newspapers denounced the "system" of corruption which had become the "rule" in Totnes. The bribing of mechanics to gain votes and buy the seat was granted a horrified mention in newspapers in places as far away as Lancashire.²⁰⁸

The association of mechanics' institutes with dubious electoral procedures permeated the popular imagination. Radical poets talked in disgust of hustings debates taking place in them.²⁰⁹ Playwrights associated holding the chairmanship of institutes

²⁰⁶ *Royal Commission to inquire into Existence of Corrupt Practices at last Election for Borough of Totnes* (1869), passim.

²⁰⁷ *Western Times*, 16 January 1863, p. 5.

²⁰⁸ *Burnley Gazette*, 8 September 1866, p. 3.

²⁰⁹ Anon., *Rhymed Reason by a Radical: The Politics of the People, Part I* (London: Thomas Murby, 1865), p. 17.

with the quest for office in the political sphere.²¹⁰ The curmudgeonly father in Charlotte Yonge's *Abbeychurch* (1848) revised his negative opinion of the local Institute his daughter frequented, from hotbed of socialist agitation to rather bland enterprise by the end of the novel.²¹¹ The institutes became part of national political infrastructure, not through radical agitation but through usefulness, familiarity and patronage by peers²¹², the Clergy,²¹³ MPs and other local worthies (as seen in London and Totnes, for example), and even royalty.²¹⁴ Such rich, influential and powerful people as these built and maintained those institutes, so that the facilities and physical presence came to be associated with them. Their real secular power and authority was inscribed on the walls of the Mechanics' institutes.

Mechanics' Institutes and Radical Politics: Chartism and "Wholesome Agitation"

The history of both the London Mechanics' Institute and of Chartism in the city shared many of the same leading characters, and there is a clear sympathetic relationship between the goals and aspirations of the institute and elements of Chartism. Francis Place and William Lovett, Henry Hetherington and William Cobbett and others – all played roles in the evolution of the Chartist movement.²¹⁵ The relationship was generally along intellectual and theoretical lines rather than shared direct activism.

The London Mechanics' Institute was involved in radical activity which fed into the early growth and spread of Chartism. The Institute allowed its premises to be used for the purposes of a public meeting supporting striking cotton spinners in Glasgow in 1838.

²¹⁰ C.F. Gore, *Quid Pro Quo: or The Day of the Dupes, the Prize Comedy* (London: National Acting Drama Office, 1844), p. 25.

²¹¹ C. Yonge, *Abbeychurch: or, Self Control and Self Conceit* (London: Mozley, 1848), passim.

²¹² *Hertford Mercury and Reformer*, 31 March 1835, p. 2.

²¹³ *Wiltshire Independent*, 18 May 1837, p. 3.

²¹⁴ *John Bull*, 27 December 1851, p. 832.

²¹⁵ Chase, *Chartism*, passim; for coverage of Mechanics' Institutes in Cobbett's journalism, see for example "Mechanics' Institutes. The Editor of The Advertiser", *Cobbett's weekly register*, 76.1 (7 April 1832), pp. 19-29.

The meeting resolved to petition the new Queen directly, appealing for mercy on behalf of the convicted spinners.²¹⁶ This meeting has great significance in the study of political aspects of the institute for three key reasons. Firstly, Brougham's approval for the meeting and thus his sympathy for the cause is explicitly stated, when he is "thanked for his exertions" on behalf of the spinners. This was the first overt political gesture by the Institute and Brougham was quick to support it. Secondly, no other gathering on Institute premises had issued such a petition for mercy directly to the Crown. Finally, although sitting elected MPs had been members of the Institute in the past, and had donated material help in the form of funds as well as incidental help in the form of time and energy, there was in this instance a clear involvement in the debate by established politicians – John Arthur Roebuck (1802-1879), the career radical; Thomas Wakley (1795-1862), founder of *The Lancet*, radical MP for Finsbury, campaigner for an extended franchise, vocal supporter of the cause of the Tolpuddle Martyrs and chair of the meeting;²¹⁷ John Fielden (1784-1849), the industrialist, advocate of a minimum wage for factory operatives, devotee of the works of both Thomas Paine and William Cobbett, and radical MP for Oldham. These men were not mere observers, they were engaging fully with the debate and the process, involving themselves in the meeting alongside ordinary everyday members and users of the Institute.²¹⁸ Also in attendance were two prominent radicals who would become leading Chartists – the orator Henry Vincent (1813-1878) and the reformist Anglican clergyman Arthur Wade (1787-1845).

The theoretical affinity of institutes and knowledge Chartism characterised most of the interaction of the two movements. However there were instances where this was not the case, and where particular institutes had a penchant for activism than was otherwise the norm. The Marylebone Mechanics' Institute (established 1832) in London,

²¹⁶ *The Examiner*, 25 February 1838, p. 11.

²¹⁷ *The Examiner*, 25 February 1838, p. 11.

²¹⁸ *The Examiner*, 25 February 1838, p. 11; *Brighton Patriot and South of England Free Press*, 27 February 1838, p. 1.

for instance, had hosted a lecture in support of the Glasgow spinners before the London Institute itself. That lecture been addressed by the radical, and subsequent *de facto* leader of the Chartist cause, Feargus O'Connor in a "wholesome agitation".²¹⁹ Marylebone as a district had a tradition of radical activism which was already well established by the late 1830s,²²⁰ and existed in a state of near perpetual unrest due to unpopular local and national government policy.²²¹ Radical communities bred Institutes which were more radical in tone than the norm.

Birmingham was one such radical community. The institute there, established in 1825, was independent of middle-class support and patronage.²²² Within two years of its inception it was politically active, petitioning Parliament for changes in the laws of taxation.²²³ The workers organised the petition themselves and had started their own political discussion group on the premises.²²⁴ The local radical Thomas Attwood (1783-1856) was involved in an organisational capacity from the early days of the Birmingham Institute.²²⁵ By 1832 he was MP for Birmingham and was an early adherent of Chartism. In early 1830, he used the annual general meeting of the mechanics' institute in Birmingham to force a debate on political reform used it as a platform to begin the process of forming a Political Union in the city.²²⁶ Attwood addressed rallies the length and breadth of Britain as MP and as head of "the most pivotal parliamentary pressure group of the early nineteenth century."²²⁷ Birmingham Mechanics' Institute by 1841 was

²¹⁹ *The Northern Star* (Leeds), 27 January 1838, p. 5.

²²⁰ D. Goodway, *London Chartism, 1838-1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 21-24, 27.

²²¹ I. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London: John Gast and His Times* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 272-274.

²²² T. Kelly, *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, (Second Edition) (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1970), p. 123.

²²³ *The Morning Post*, 12 April 1827, p. 3.

²²⁴ *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 29 December 1831, p. 2.

²²⁵ D. Moss, *Thomas Attwood, The Biography of a Radical* (Ontario & Kingston: MQUP, 1990), pp. 116, 129.

²²⁶ Moss, *Attwood*, pp. 158-161.

²²⁷ Chase, *Chartism*, p. 2.

hosting fundraising meetings for striking stone masons.²²⁸ By early 1842, it was effectively the headquarters of the Chartist agitation in the midlands.²²⁹ By the end of that year it hosted a “Great Suffrage Conference” with delegates arriving from all over the country.²³⁰ They numbered over 300.²³¹

Radicals elsewhere also used their local mechanics’ institute as a headquarters. George Binns and James Williams, booksellers and newsagents on Wearside²³² were known as “the Castor and Pollux of Chartism in the North East” and dominated radical politics in Sunderland from around 1837 until 1842.²³³ They had been involved with the Sunderland Mechanics’ Institute (established 1825) as office bearers since 1831 while still in their teens; they freely mingled with the Institute’s middle-class backers alongside other radical members and office bearers while at the same time distributing reformist and radical material through their bookshop.²³⁴ By the end of 1837 the Sunderland Mechanics’ Institute had proposed and voted on motions to commit itself to agitate for secret ballots and universal suffrage²³⁵ and had begun to be described as “ultra-Radical”.²³⁶ During the early phase of Chartism in the North East, government raids targeted Chartists²³⁷ including both Binns and Williams. The news of their apprehension was met with open protest in the North-East,²³⁸ and within days a fund for their defence had collected nearly £50 from the people of Sunderland.²³⁹ That September, the

²²⁸ *The Northern Star*, 27 November 1841, p. 3.

²²⁹ *The Northern Star*, 12 February 1842, p. 3.

²³⁰ *The Northern Star*, 19 November 1842, p. 6.

²³¹ *The Northern Star*, 31 December 1842, p. 1.

²³² Chase, *Chartism*, p. 31.

²³³ K. Wilson, “Political Radicalism in the North East of England 1830-1860: Issues in Historical Sociology” (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Durham, 1987), p. 104.

²³⁴ Wilson, “Political Radicalism”, pp. 100-102.

²³⁵ Wilson, “Political Radicalism”, p. 102.

²³⁶ Wilson, “Political Radicalism”, p. 102.

²³⁷ Binns and Williams were, by this time, organising and speaking at open air meetings on Sunderland Town Moor, agitating for the adoption of the Charter. Chase, *Chartism*, p. 78 lists Sunderland as hosting among the largest meetings. See *The Northern Liberator* (Newcastle), 2 June 1838, p. 2 for one example of the role of Binns and Williams as organisers of open air gatherings and see *The Northern Liberator*, 27 Jul 1839, p. 5 for an example of them in their role as participants in these mass rallies.

²³⁸ *Newcastle Courant*, 26 July 1839, p. 4; *Northern Liberator*, 27 July 1839, p. 8.

²³⁹ *Northern Liberator*, 27 July 1839, p. 1.

Sunderland Mechanics' Institute itself was playing host to fundraising events for the accused pair,²⁴⁰ while at the same time continuing its own political activities; it had recently been the venue for the creation of a working co-operative Joint Stock Company²⁴¹ and hosted weekly public lectures on radical politics.²⁴² Post-conviction, Williams arranged to have a letter smuggled out of prison, exhorting the working folk of Sunderland Mechanics' Institute to reject any and all interference from their social superiors, and called the members of the institute to action in the cause of radicalism. Members of the institute were, to Williams, at once both "Socialists" and "Chartists."²⁴³ Volunteers from the Institute helped organise and run fundraising events.²⁴⁴

Mechanics' Institutes in Scotland were as politically active as their counterparts elsewhere. Before the establishment of the London Institute, George Birkbeck had taught a series of lectures on practical mechanics and other sciences in Glasgow at the Anderson Institute, for the benefit of the mechanics and factory operatives of the city. These lectures commenced in 1800 and lasted four years.²⁴⁵ Birkbeck was held in great esteem in the city afterwards, and when the manual workers there heard he had helped set up the London Institute in 1823, they set up their own mechanics' institute in November of that year.²⁴⁶ At first, it maintained a policy of strict independence from the upper classes but this resolve gave way, in time, to practicalities, with concessions to the sensibilities of the middle classes being the price paid for their financial and moral support²⁴⁷

²⁴⁰ *Northern Star*, 21 Sep 1839, p. 5. This article names the venue as "The Assembly Rooms" however subsequent reports explicitly identify this venue as the "Sunderland Mechanics' Institute" in a context which suggests they are one in the same, for example *The Northern Star*, 17 April 1841, p. 5. As Kelly admits (Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 207), nomenclature can be a problem when dealing with accounts of Mechanics' Institutes. This is probably the reason for Stockdale's assertion (Stockdale, "Northumberland and Durham", p. 71.) that the Sunderland Institute drops out of the historical record for over a decade – it simply becomes known by another name locally; in any event, Binns and Williams continue to refer to it as the Mechanics' Institute.

²⁴¹ *The Charter*, (London), 29 September 1839, p. 12.

²⁴² *The Northern Liberator*, 14 March 1840, p. 1.

²⁴³ *The Northern Star*, 21 November 1840, p. 7.

²⁴⁴ *The Northern Star*, 13 February 1841, p. 1; *The Northern Star*, 24 July 1841, p. 2.

²⁴⁵ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 27-35.

²⁴⁶ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 72-75.

²⁴⁷ Hudson, *History of Adult Education*, p. 43.

Clydeside had witnessed a radical activity in the years immediately preceding the establishment of the mechanics' institute there.²⁴⁸ Political activism was in evidence in Glasgow Mechanics' Institute from an early date, with meetings and fundraisers in support of trade unionists locally and elsewhere.²⁴⁹ In October 1840, at Greenock on the Clyde, a Chartist gathering took place at the mechanics' institute (established 1823). On one of the windows of the hall, facing the street, was an image of Feargus O'Connor, the Chartist leader, described as "beautiful and transparent."²⁵⁰ Subsequent reports attested to the strength of the Chartist cause in Greenock and especially its mechanics' institute.²⁵¹

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Figure 4. Design by George Banks for entrance card for Devonport and Stonehouse Mechanics' institute, from R. Burnet, *A word to the members of the mechanics' institutes* (Devonport: Jones, 1826; unpaginated, after p.147)

²⁴⁸ G. Pentland, *The Spirit of the Union: Popular Politics in Scotland, 1815-1820* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011), pp. 53-108, 129-135.

²⁴⁹ *The Champion and Weekly Herald* (London), 14 April 1839, p. 4.

²⁵⁰ *The Northern Star*, 31 October 1840, p. 2.

²⁵¹ *The Northern Star*, 30 October 1841, p. 5.

In front a shield bearing ermine, on a cross gules, five bezantes, being the arms of Sir John St Aubyn, bart. Patron, and the Lord of the Manor. On a chief argent, the frame of a ship ppr. illustrative of our grand naval arsenal *Motto.* - Forward *Supporter* The Devonport Column; thus shewing the power of mechanics in the erection of a monument to perpetuate the condescension of his Majesty; who lately conferred the name of Devonport on our town. A portion of the Hamoaze is exhibited. on which is reposing a ship ready for sea. and the steam packet entering the port. *Distance* the seat of the Earl Mount Edgcumbe, Patron, and Lord of Stonehouse.

Mechanics Institutes: Cases Studies of Leaders and Members

In this section the committee and membership make-up of a sample of four mechanics institutes, beginning in England (Devonport in the South West and Gateshead in the North East), in south east Wales (the mechanics institute in Pontypool, in Monmouthshire) and Scotland (several mechanics institutes in Nithsdale and Annandale in Ayrshire and Dumfriesshire) are examined from the formative period to c.1860s. It must be said at the outset that it is difficult to reach the working-class members from the public records of the local newspapers including the annual reports given there. Appeals were frequently made to working men to join institutes' committees: Walker cites the example of Hartlepool and Stockton in the early 1860s.²⁵²

Devonport and Stonehouse Mechanics Institute, formed in 1825, one of three institutes established in the adjacent maritime towns of Devonport (in Duke Street) and Plymouth (in Princess Square) and nearby Torpoint, was typical of many institutes in its middle-class backing, and local aristocratic patronage, in tandem with a local working-class impulse for self-improvement.

Plymouth Dock had been renamed Devonport in 1824 by royal decree (as noted in the design of the mechanic's institute's entrance card design reproduced above, with the Devonport column). Parliamentary representation followed in the early 1830s. Devonport was in prosperity in the 1820s and 1830s, and the institute was one of many projects in

²⁵² Walker, *The Development of the Mechanics' Institute Movement*, p.78.

civic improvement alongside buildings like the guildhall and the town hall. A Plymouthian would boast in 1843 that in contrast with Exeter, there was a ‘continuous line of three miles [which] here embraces no less a number than five literary and scientific institutions’ in Devonport and Plymouth.²⁵³ The institute joined a wave of cultural development for the town, alongside a theatre, musical performances by the local Harmonic Society. The institute would itself host musical events.²⁵⁴

Much insight about the leadership and members of committees of the institutes of Devonport and Plymouth can be derived from a study of their libraries by Lattimore.²⁵⁵ Among the early members in Devonport was Richard Burnet, a draper and cloth merchant, who published, *A Word to the Members of the Mechanics’ Institutes* in 1826.²⁵⁶ The foreword to the pamphlet presented self-help as a cure for all the workingman’s problems, whilst asserting it was the duty of all to give workers the means to support themselves through their own labours rather than charity. The dockyard mechanic George Harvey, a man with mathematical and scientific talents, was instrumental in establishing the institute.²⁵⁷ He would become an F.R.S. of London and Edinburgh, and in 1834 (the year he died) was appointed Professor of Mathematics at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich (as a working man his election to membership of the Plymouth Institution had failed in an earlier decade).²⁵⁸ Lectures provided by the institute covered topics of local importance: such as nautical astronomy and navigation. The institute possessed many scientific objects and mechanical models, and reports detail an extensive library in the

²⁵³ *Western Times*, 24 June 1843, p.2.

²⁵⁴ *Western Times*, 24 June 1843, p.2.

²⁵⁵ M. I. Lattimore, ‘The History of Libraries in Plymouth to 1914: A Study of the Library Developments in the Three Towns of Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse which Amalgamated into Plymouth in 1914’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of London, 1982).

²⁵⁶ See Burnet, *A Word to the Members of the Mechanics’ Institutes* (Devonport: Johns, 1826).

²⁵⁷ *North Devon Journal* (Friday 27 May 1825), p.4.

²⁵⁸ Lattimore, ‘The History of Libraries in Plymouth to 1914’, p. 196.

1830s including Lardner's *Cabinet Papers on Naval Architecture*.²⁵⁹ One local aristocratic patron gave the institute a 'waxen anatomical figure'.²⁶⁰

In 1827 a 'Mr Rodd' was unanimously elected president: presumably Richard Rodd, a solicitor, in Rodd and Bone, who was clerk to the Board of Commissioners in Devonport²⁶¹, with other prominent local figures such as Cornelius Tripe (a surgeon, and mayor of Devonport, 1838-9).²⁶² The early secretary was George Banks, also a botanist, who provided the engravings for Burnet's *A Word to the Members* in 1826. Burnet described him as a 'man of rare merit, not only as an engraver, ... but as man of more real scientific information than is to be found generally in a day's march'.²⁶³ Other figures included a surgeon, J. Hancock, while naval figures associated included Captain Denman RN. In 1836, the librarian, sub-secretary, and housekeeper was Francis Drew, who was also a French teacher and mineralogist, Bartlett who was elected in his place after his death, was also a French teacher.²⁶⁴

In this period the Devonport institute hosted various other organisations including the Devon and Cornwall Natural History Society with an introductory address of the society delivered to the institute on 3 May 1838.²⁶⁵ By the 1840s, leading figures helping to re-animate the institute after it had stagnated, included Thomas Woollcombe (1800 – 1876) solicitor, and Devonport's first town clerk as president with the solicitor William

²⁵⁹ *Western Times*, 28 June 1828, p.4; *Royal Devonport Telegraph*, 7 April 1832, p.3. For its scientific collections at the time of a polytechnic exhibition in 1844, see *Western Courier*, 4 September 1844.

²⁶⁰ *Western Courier*, 11 March 1830, p.3.

²⁶¹ *Western Times*, 7 September 1839, p.2.

²⁶² *Western Times*, 18 October 1828, p.1. On Tripe, see the biography of his son, the photographer Linnaeus Tripe (1822-1902), <http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/l/linnaeus-tripe/>

²⁶³ Banks was also author of *An Introduction to the Study of English Botany* (first edition 1823).

²⁶⁴ *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 4 June 1836, p.3; Lattimore, 'The History of Libraries in Plymouth to 1914', p.249.

²⁶⁵ *Western Times* 19 May 1838, p.3; *Western Times*, 24 June 1843, p.2.

J. Little and John Norman as vice-presidents.²⁶⁶ The local landowners were the St Aubyn family, and James St Aubyn was patron of the mechanics institute in Devonport.²⁶⁷

From its original site in Ker Street a new Italianate building including reading room, newsroom, museum, and library and lecture hall was erected in Duke Street in 1843-1849.²⁶⁸ Of the rank and file members, by 1849 tradesmen, rather than mechanics, comprised most of the institute's members, although there was a significant core of working-class subscribers. In 1846 the total membership was reportedly 563.²⁶⁹ By 1850, membership had risen to 825, including about 120 women and around 200 working men. When a new lecture hall intended to seat 300, and designed by Alfred Norman of Devonport, was opened in 1850, it was noted that the membership had been stationary 'as to numbers – stationary as to funds' until 1840.²⁷⁰

In the North East of England in Gateshead (which will also be considered later in the context of library catalogues and lending practices), a mechanics institute flourished in the 1830s to 1860s: there was a membership of up to 300 *c.* November 1848: in 1863 the membership roll was 258.²⁷¹ Within a year of it opening, the Gateshead institute had "acquired a library of nearly 1,000 volumes" that their members could use.²⁷² As with Devonport, the role of local worthies is clear from the local press. Aldermen, the mayor, local aristocrats like the earl of Durham, the duke of Northumberland, Marquess of Londonderry, and the Liberal MP for Gateshead from 1841, William Hutt (1801-1882); the manufacturer Sir William Armstrong, all gave their support, financial and material in

²⁶⁶ *Western Times*, 16 July 1842, p.3; *Western Courier*, 5 April 1843, p.2. For Little's occupation see *Plymouth and Devonport Advertiser*, 21 February 1850, p.1. For Woollcombe's later civic career, see J.R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.158, for his activity in relation to enactment of the Contagious Diseases Act.

²⁶⁷ See for example, advertisement, *Western Courier*, 20 March 1844, p.2.

²⁶⁸ *Western Courier*, 20 March 1844, p.2; and *Western Times*, 24 August, p.3.

²⁶⁹ *Western Courier*, 1 April 1846, p.3.

²⁷⁰ *Western Courier*, 17 January 1850, p.3.

²⁷¹ *Newcastle Chronicle*, 21 November 1863, p.2.

²⁷² W. Fordyce, *The History & Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham*, Vol. 2 (London: A Fullarton & Co., 1857), p. 771.

terms of book donations.²⁷³ Hutt was president of the institute from the 1840s through to the 1860s.

Important committee figures as reported in the local press included the Anglican clergyman the Reverend John Davies (1795-1861), the industrialist and local politician George Crawshay (three times mayor of the town), William Henry Brockett (1804-1867, newspaper proprietor, liberal politician as alderman and mayor, in the 1840s, who donated funds for the building of the institute); the newspaper editor James Clephan, and the chemist Cornelius Garbutt (treasurer).²⁷⁴

George Crawshay (1821-1896), a Cambridge-educated member of the Crawshay industrial dynasty from Wales (that included the “Iron King”, Richard Crawshay) became principal partner in the large Gateshead Iron Works (Hawks, Crawshay and Sons) in 1842 and led the firm until 1889. He would be mayor 1856, 1859 and 1863. Crawshay was a radical in politics and dissenter in religion: he supported causes such as the Anti-Corn Law League, and Chartism, Turkish reformers and Polish, Hungarian and Danish nationalists.²⁷⁵

James Clephan native of Sunderland, was the son of a Scottish-born baker (1805-1888) and grammar-school educated. He was associated with early printing of Scott’s Waverley novels in Edinburgh, then sub-edited a paper in Leicester, before becoming editor and proprietor of the *Gateshead Observer*, founded by Brockett.²⁷⁶ He was Unitarian. Joseph Clephan was also involved in the institute, and the *Observer* paper as

²⁷³ *Newcastle Journal*, 25 November 1837, p.3 (earl of Durham, donating £5); *Newcastle Guardian*, 29 May 1847, p.5 (Duke of Northumberland, donating £10 for library books); *Newcastle Journal*, 10 July 1847, p.3 (Marquess of Londonderry, and other leading figures giving support for fundraising bazaar); *Newcastle Journal*, 8 October 1842, p.2, Hutt donating parliamentary reports, debates and papers.

²⁷⁴ On Crawshay, see *Newcastle Guardian*, 25 December 1847, p.5 for the eleventh annual meeting, which he chaired.

²⁷⁵ See entry in J.A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses; a biographical list of all known students, graduates and holders of office at the University of Cambridge, from the earliest times to 1900*, Part II, vol.2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944). His papers are archived in the National Library of Wales, Crawshay MSS (not consulted in this study).

²⁷⁶ W. Whellan, *History, Topography, and Directory of Northumberland* (London: Whittaker, 1855); obituary of James Clephan in *Newcastle Courant*, 2 March 1888, p.4.

manager, and supported such educational enterprises as the British Schools (which were also supported by Hutt).²⁷⁷

The secretary was William Kell (died 1862), town clerk following the municipal reform act, from the 1830s to 1854, who we find associated with fellow Mechanics Institute figures such as the Reverend Davies, and J.W. Swinburne in other philanthropic activities like the Newcastle infirmary, Gateshead dispensary and cholera relief fund in 1853.²⁷⁸ A friend of Robert Stephenson the engineer, he became a member of the Literary and Philosophical Society, Newcastle Antiquaries and a Fellow of the London Society of Antiquaries. According to his obituary, he "devoted himself with much success to the prosecution of general literature and science."²⁷⁹

Cornelius Garbutt (c.1806 - 1865) was a chemist at Bridge Street, Gateshead, who was elected a member of Newcastle and Gateshead Sanitary Association (1848).²⁸⁰ In the mid-1850s he became proprietor of the Dunston Lunatic Asylum. Garbutt was an Anglican, churchwarden of St. Mary's Church, Gateshead. He was later a town councillor, chairman of the Board of Guardians; a vice-president of the Gateshead Dispensary In the institute his roles included being a vice-presidents and at one point treasurer²⁸¹. An associate of Garbutt in the Gateshead Poor Law Union, J.W. Swinburne, was also active in the institute. Other committee members included the physicians Dr Charlton and Dr Jollie. William Jollie who died in 1868, was another figure 'much esteemed in the borough in consequence of his kindness and urbanity to the poor'.²⁸²

²⁷⁷ *Newcastle Courant*, 9 February 1844, p.1.

²⁷⁸ *Newcastle Journal*, 24 February 1855, p.2.

²⁷⁹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, August 1832, p.230.

²⁸⁰ *Newcastle Courant*, 24 March 1848, p.4.

²⁸¹ *Newcastle Courant*, 1 December 1865, p.8.

²⁸² For Swinburne, see *History, Topography, and Directory of Northumberland*, p.787. For Jollie, see *Newcastle Chronicle*, 25 April 1868, p.8.

It is harder from the local newspaper accounts to get a glimpse of any labourers or mechanics as members in Gateshead. In 1855 there was the following comment, from Henry Liddell, MP for Northumberland:

He saw before him most brilliant assembly, but he thought the institution scarcely answered to its name of mechanics' institute. Was it not rather an institute of tradesmen and clerks than of real artizans and workmen He had said on former occasion that this and similar institutions were conducive to the education of the people, but he could not help fearing that these institutions having fallen into other hands partly tended to deter the working-men from availing themselves of their advantages.²⁸³

In 1860 at one of the annual meetings, it was pointed out that institutes provided the “well-informed foremen that out manufacturers’ ranks were ever being recruited from,” and these came from the mechanics’ institutes.²⁸⁴ At the time of the twenty-seventh annual report (1863), the committee complained that considering, “the extensive factories and other establishments in the borough, in which many artizans and others are engaged ... the institute does not meet with that measure of support it so well deserves.”²⁸⁵

In Pontypool in the parish of Trevethin in Monmouthshire, the leadership of the mechanics institute was also made up of local dignitaries and churchmen. During the period covered by this thesis, Pontypool was a thriving market-town in Monmouthshire. A new church had been built around 1840, and the area was home to a number of non-conformist faiths; Baptists, Quakers and Calvinists.²⁸⁶ A newspaper correspondent to *Monmouthshire Merlin* (June 1836) considered its establishment “for the laudable purpose of theoretically instructing the operative mechanic, in the different departments of science, exemplifying their application to the arts, and not wholly

²⁸³ *Newcastle Guardian*, 24 November 1855, p.6.

²⁸⁴ *Newcastle Guardian*, 1 December 1860, p.3.

²⁸⁵ *Newcastle Chronicle*, 21 November 1863, p.2.

²⁸⁶ *The Parliamentary Gazetteer of England and Wales: Adapted to the Most Recent Statistical Arrangements, and Lines of Railroad and Canal Communication, with a Complete County-atlas of England ... Maps of Wales, and an Appendix, Containing the Results, in Detail of the Census of 1841* (Edinburgh: Fullarton, 1851). See Vol. 3, p.641

excluding ethical philosophy.”²⁸⁷ The institute was founded in 1839, following a meeting attended by members of the local elite, including James Morrison, and William Matthews, Charles Conway, W.W. Phillips, Eddowes Bowman, C.J. Hampton, Reverend J. R. Cooper, William Llewellyn, junior, Barnabas Brough, W. Williams Esq, a local surgeon, and David Laurence, another surgeon, and the Reverend Thomas Thomas.

The Welsh-speaking Thomas (1805-1881), was Baptist minister and college principal at a new Baptist College transferred from Abergavenny, who would become president of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1872-3.²⁸⁸ The Lord Lieutenant Capel Hanbury Leigh (1776-1861) of Pontypool Park, local landowner and ironmaker, was patron of the society: in April 1840 he presented to a collection of geological fossils and mineral specimens to the institute.²⁸⁹ Leigh had supported the local infant school. The chair and later President of the Pontypool institute was G.S. Kenrick, who was a Unitarian, a teetotaler and manager of the “Varteg works”, an iron works which also supported a boy’s and girl’s school. Kenrick was ‘a gentleman most highly respected and valued in the neighbourhood’. He delivered a lecture to the institute on 17 March 1840 on “The Population of Pontypool and the Parish of Trevethin: Situated in the So-Called ‘disturbed districts’”, which was published as a pamphlet and reviewed, for

²⁸⁷ “Leocaedius”“, *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 18 June 1836, p. 4. See the following discussion, 16 July 1836, p.4, 30 July 1836, p.3.

²⁸⁸ E.W. Price Evans, “Dr Thomas Thomas of Pontypool”, *The Baptist Quarterly* 130 (July 1926) pp.130-136; T. Morgan, *The life and work of the Rev. Thomas Thomas, D.D. first president of the Baptist College, Pontypool* (Carmarthen: W.M. Evans and Son, 1925); J. Vrynwy Morgan, *Welsh Religious Leaders in the Victorian Era* (London: James Nisbet and Company, 1905), p. 127.

²⁸⁹ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 5 October 1839, p. 2; *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 18 April 1840, p. 3; *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 6 February 1841, p.3. A. A. Locke, *The Hanbury family* (London: A.L. Humphreys, 1916); R.H. Tenison, *The Hanburys of Monmouthshire* (Aberystwyth: Self-published, 1995).

instance in the *Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society* in 1840.²⁹⁰ Another prominent figure was the engineer, William Llewellyn.²⁹¹

The final case study in this chapter is in the Nith valley in south west Scotland. Here local geographical realities and practicalities influenced the administrative operation of institutes in rural and isolated areas, especially at committee level. Differences of opinion in matters of state and religion were put aside in favour of shared local interests. Common cause was expressed in debates and lectures. The networks of institutes in such micro-regions reflected local concerns, character and social topography and formed, like the individual institutes themselves, to meet the needs of the communities.

Loose confederations of shared interests were made desirable by geography, in the vicinity of the River Nith in Ayrshire and Dumfriesshire. This area, then as now, was home to a smattering of communities: Sanquhar, Thornhill, Moffat, Leadhills, Moniaive, Wanlockhead and others, in a rural and semi-rural hinterland either side of the river.

²⁹⁰ G.S. Kenrick, *The Population of Pontypool and the Parish of Trevethin: Situated in the So-called "disturbed Districts;" Its Moral, Social and Intellectual Character. A Lecture Delivered on Tuesday Evening, March 17, 1840, at the Mechanics' Institution, Pontypool* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1840). The lecture was reviewed and summarized in the *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*. See P.O' Leary, *Claiming the Streets: Procession and Urban Culture in South Wales, c.1830-1880* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012); *Appendix to First Report of Commissioners (Mines)*, p.581; "Temperance, Education, and the Sanitary Improvement of the People", *Hereford Journal*, 28 April 1847, p.4; *The Standard*, 24 October 1844, p. 2.

²⁹¹ "W.L." *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 7 September 1839, p. 4.

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Figure 5. Map showing Nithsdale and Annandale, from R. Wilkinson, *The British Isles*, (1812). Source <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk> .
The mechanics institutes in this region were: Dumfries (1825), Annan (1848), Thornhill (c.1851), Sanquhar (c.1853), Wanlockhead, Moffat, Leadhills and Moniaive.

Diversification of institutes from their original urban environment into rural areas was common after the first few decades of the movement's existence.²⁹² As in cities, the impetus came from a desire to make workers more productive through education in 'mechanical' principles, and this held true in remote communities too. Nithsdale and Annandale were remote and needed better transport links to improve their prospects, which occurred at the time that the institutes were in the ascendant.²⁹³ Mechanisation,

²⁹² Harrison, *Learning and Living*, pp. 177-178.

²⁹³ *Carlisle Journal*, 2 February 1839, p. 4.

coming with the construction of the Dumfries to Glasgow railway (1844) which ran through the area, went hand in hand with the development of institutes in the valleys.²⁹⁴ Details of their formation come in the form of reports of lectures, lending library borrowings and membership figures were first talked about in Dumfries (where an institute was formed in 1825).²⁹⁵ This may have had something to do with migrants coming into the area to work on the railway, or in the coal and lead mines.²⁹⁶ In years when the line was being built, the population of one settlement, Sanquhar, grew by 110% of the national average while the typical growth during other periods in this place was 92%.

From Dumfries, within a few years institutes reached Sanquhar, Wanlockhead, Leadhills, Moffat and Thornhill. These communities were wellsprings of popular Presbyterianism and widespread non-conformist sentiment.²⁹⁷ In 1850, there are reports of ad hoc religious gatherings held in railworkers' sheds on the outskirts of Sanquhar, full to capacity and attended by an incredulous correspondent who, despite misgivings, felt warmly welcomed by a throng of the faithful comprising manual workers and their social betters.²⁹⁸ The residents of the region had a long-standing affinity for literacy and self-education. Lowland Scotland had one of the highest levels of recorded adult literacy in

²⁹⁴ *Ayr Advertiser*, 28 March 1844, p. 1.

²⁹⁵ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 11 September 1844, p. 1.

²⁹⁶ *The New Statistical Account of Scotland, by the Ministers of the Respective Parishes, Under the Superintendence of a Committee of the Society for the Benefit of the Sons and Daughters of the Clergy, Vol. IV: Dumfries – Kirkcudbright – Wigtown* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1845), pp. 306-307.

²⁹⁷ R. Simpson, *Traditions of the Covenanters, or Gleanings Among the Mountains* (Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1846), passim; J. Howie, *Lives of the Scottish Covenanters; Being a Brief Historical Account of the Most Eminent Noblemen, Gentlemen, Ministers and Others, Who Testified or Suffered for the Cause of Reformation in Scotland, from the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century to the Year 1688* (Glasgow and London: W.R. McPhun, 1863), passim; C.L. Hamilton, "Scotland, Ireland and the English Civil War", *Albion* Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer, 1975), pp. 120-130; C. Kidd, "Conditional Britons: The Scots Covenanting Tradition and the Eighteenth-Century British State", *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 117, No. 474 (November, 2002), pp. 1147-1176.

²⁹⁸ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 28 August 1850, p. 3.

Europe.²⁹⁹ This extended into rural areas with farmers, tradesmen and weavers enjoying reading on diverse subjects.³⁰⁰

A fusion of industry with spirituality, incorporating a strong affinity for self-improvement, characterised how the institutes of Nithsdale conducted themselves. The region had been informally operating a system akin to the institute model before the term itself existed. Classes sometimes took place in library rooms to cater to the needs of manual workers, such as at Wanlockhead, as institutes were being formed in nearby towns and villages.³⁰¹ Where educational opportunities were far from homes and hamlets, local families pooled resources to hire teachers for their children and themselves.³⁰² In the early 1850s, institutes were set up at Sanquhar, Thornhill, and Moffat, during a general period of expansion in institutes in the provincial and rural areas of Great Britain which coincided with expansion abroad.³⁰³ By 1854, institutes were active in the area, from Sanquhar in the North to Dumfries in the South.

When the Reverend Hope lectured on Revolutionary French history at the Dumfries Mechanics' Institute in December 1850,³⁰⁴ he followed in the footsteps of other lecturers on revolutionary history at other institutes across Britain. Hope was a dissenting minister (Free Church),³⁰⁵ from the small and remote Wamphray parish.³⁰⁶ Essay competitions on topics such as "Evidences of the Christian Religion" were common, first at Dumfries then in institutes in Annan, Thornhill and Sanquhar.³⁰⁷ Religion coloured much of the activity of institutes in the Strathnith area. When the Dumfries Institute raised enough money for custom-built premises in the summer of 1852, the committee decided

²⁹⁹ Rose, *Intellectual Life*, p. 16.

³⁰⁰ Rose, *Intellectual Life*, p. 17.

³⁰¹ *New Statistical Account*, Vol. IV, p. 312.

³⁰² *New Statistical Account*, Vol. IV, p. 312.

³⁰³ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 257-270.

³⁰⁴ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 18 December 1850, p. 1.

³⁰⁵ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 27 October 1852, p. 4.

³⁰⁶ *New Statistical Account*, Vol. IV, pp. 144-146.

³⁰⁷ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 22 October 1851, p. 1.

to have some of the rooms converted to public bath-houses, providing “the means of supplying health to the body, as well as of instruction of the mind.”³⁰⁸

Religious and moral culture was not the exclusive preserve of ministers. Sheriff John Trotter who was also president of the Dumfries Institute travelled to the institute in Thornhill to lecture on “Reason and Faith” in 1853 to rapturous applause (the audience included members of the Sanquhar Institute, and ministers of Kirk and Presbyterian secession who were willing to preside at previous lectures and lead classes on the premises.³⁰⁹ Turning to other leading figures in the institutes of the Nith area, there was James Simpson (chairman of the Annan Mechanics’ Institute formed in 1848)³¹⁰ a teacher also active in temperance as far away as Glasgow.³¹¹ William Cuthbertson, printer, stationer and bookseller donated books to every institute library between Gretna and the upper headwaters of the Afton, ran the Class Committee at the Annan Institute, while his lectures took him to nearly every place his donations graced.³¹² His interest in public affairs included efforts to have the Solway Firth kept in a fit state for the locals who depended on it for an income.³¹³ He was the local agent for passage across the Atlantic for those seeking to emigrate to North America.³¹⁴ When he died in Annan in 1877 he was described as one of the oldest printers in the South of Scotland:

having been forty-five years in business in that burgh. He commenced life in Edinburgh in 1828 reader in Ballantyne's printing office, and in that capacity corrected, along with Mr James Hogg—a nephew of the * Ettrick Shepherd ’—the proof-sheets of several of the Waverley Novels. For twenty-one years he filled the office of assessor for the burgh of Annan, and his life was distinguished by many other labours of public usefulness.

³⁰⁸ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 7 July 1852, p. 4.

³⁰⁹ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 30 March 1853, p. 3.

³¹⁰ *Carlisle Journal*, 26 March 1858, p. 8. For reports of Annan institution, see *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 18 March 1853, reporting fifth annual soiree, p.202. A Mechanics Hall was established.

³¹¹ *John o’ Groats Journal*, 25 July 1851, p. 2.

³¹² *Carlisle Journal*, 27 January 1854, p. 5; *Carlisle Journal*, 21 March 1851, p. 2; *Carlisle Journal*, 29 July 1853, p. 5; *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 18 June 1851, p. 1; *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 9 February 1851, p. 4.

³¹³ *Carlisle Journal*, 13 April 1855, p. 7.

³¹⁴ *Carlisle Journal*, 22 January 1858, p. 2.

In 1857 he founded the *Annan Observer* newspaper, and acted as its editor with much independence of spirit ...³¹⁵

Annan's vice-president was James Little, the local landlord and philanthropist Colonel Dirom of Mount Annan (son of Lieutenant-General Alexander Dirom, 1757-1830) was also involved.

At Dumfries, the institute's fortunes were fitful, 'more than once it almost ceased to exist,' and was 'kept alive by the zealous efforts' of William Mundell, a grocer in the High Street; Thomas Roberts, a carver and gilder, John Bell, an ironmonger; James Charteris, a turner; the architect Alexander Crombie (died 1880) and a brass-founder, William C. Aitken.³¹⁶ The figure below, shows that in advertisement for a series of science lectures in 1844, Mundell and Crombie's occupations were underlined. The obituary in 1866 of Sheriff Andrew Barrie, a president of the institute, covers his activity as churchwarden and in the administration of local justice.³¹⁷ As noted previously, Sheriff Trotter of Dumfries was a patron of the institute: when overseeing law and order in the town, and enforcing legislation limiting fishing rights in the Nith and other local rivers, his judgements earned a distinctly less warm coverage in the local press than did his lectures in institutes.³¹⁸

³¹⁵ *John o' Groats Journal*, 22 March 1877, p.3.

³¹⁶ W. McDowell, *History of the burgh of Dumfries, with notices of Nithsdale, Annandale, and the western border* (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1867), p.769. For Crombie's obituary, see *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 28 February 1880, p.2.

³¹⁷ *Paisley Herald and Renfrewshire Advertiser*, 25 August 1866, p. 4.

³¹⁸ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 3 September 1856, p. 1.

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Figure 6. *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 7 August 1844, p.1.

Mechanics institutes in Nithsdale and Annandale, through the activities of senior committee members who often also took on roles as lecturers, were part of a world which was “a theatre for the manifestation of mind”.³¹⁹ Clergymen who served on committees and conducted lecture tours of the area’s institutes preached their benefits to the wider community in earnest tones, to appreciative audiences who came from all over the district.³²⁰

³¹⁹ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 1 March 1854, p. 4.

³²⁰ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 19 April 1854, p. 4; *New Statistical Account*, Vol. IV, pp. 347-353.

Conclusion

John Glass' address to the Annual Meeting of the Institute at Etherley (established 1840) in 1850 spoke of the political realities of the average worker's interaction with Institutes.³²¹ Improvement was only possible within the existing social order – “it is not to expected that we can all rise to be Kings and Queens, and lords and ladies; society is composed of different ranks” he declared.³²² Political economy should lead to political contentment rather than radicalism.

Peel, in his inaugural address to the Tamworth Reading Room, taught a similar credo, that education and improvement should be geared towards the working man better knowing his place and becoming more appreciative of it. His “increased sagacity” would lead to a consciousness that was thus “subservient to a more exalted faith”.³²³ Political economy fused with moral guidance should lead to acceptance and bring the worker closer to the divine. In the right hands, political instruction could lead to a more productive worker. In the wrong hands, as critics like Grinfield claimed, such instruction could capture the imaginations of the working classes, warping their collective perspective and ultimately lead to catastrophe for all.³²⁴ Such criticisms, as has been shown in this chapter, led to the adoption of a “no political controversy” rule which was in evidence in mechanics' institute rulebooks and articles of association from the very beginning of the movement.

James Hudson's contemporary survey of institutes from 1851 generally only refers to this exclusionary rule in order to show that it was routinely flouted, even in London. When a lecture series by the socialist Robert Owen (1771-1858) in 1830, conducted on Sundays, attracted external criticism of the Institute for its controversial

³²¹ J. Glass, *An Address Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Etherley Mechanics' Institute* (Darlington: Harrison Penney, 1850), pp. 3-4.

³²² Glass, *Address*, p. 7.

³²³ Peel, *Inaugural Address*, p. 28.

³²⁴ Grinfield, *Reply to Brougham*, pp. 5-6.

political themes, the series was terminated and the committee of the London Mechanics' Institute voted to discontinue any and all engagement of speakers or lettings to groups, if those parties were engaged in political activity.³²⁵ This stricture was bent, if not broken, as soon as it was put in place. Owen was soon back, allowed to lecture just as before, and overtly political groups which were already renting the institute for meetings – such as the London Radical Reform Association founded by Cobbett and Hunt,³²⁶ as well as the Owenite British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge³²⁷ – were allowed to continue to do so.³²⁸ This adoption of a stricture against politics which in fact existed in name only was more commonplace than rules which held fast and true.³²⁹

The former historiographical consensus, that mechanics' institutes were politically sterile creations of the middle classes and failed because of it, no longer bears scrutiny in the light of the contribution of the new political history to the debate. When the political impact and influence of the Mechanics' Institutes are read in the context of that contribution, and they are examined as layers in a patchwork quilt of flexible identities rather than as inhabitants of rigid structural models, the evidence begins to paint a more nuanced picture. It reveals a network of institutes linked by common cause where discussion and engagement with political processes and ideas was a living, complex dynamic. That dynamic sits comfortably outside of the narrative of success and failure because the new political history negates any need for it to do otherwise.

The political discussion and engagement did not have to be radical to be real. Indeed, in most places and at most times it was not. Involvement with radical political movements such as Chartism were the exception rather than the rule.³³⁰ Mechanics'

³²⁵ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 123-124.

³²⁶ M. Turner, *British Politics in an Age of Reform* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 170-171.

³²⁷ H. Silver, *The Concept of Popular Education* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 152-153.

³²⁸ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 122-124.

³²⁹ Hudson, *History of Adult Education*, pp. 46, 48, 80, 136, 146.

³³⁰ An example of a Mechanics' Institute supporter involved in Chartism whose obituary appears later in the century is that of former carpet weaver Nicholas Bragg of Darlington, who firmly supported

institute politics was generally of an everyday, self-serving, kind on the occasions where institutes were themselves active. However, the reality of their political impact and influence runs all the deeper and all the more true simply because it was so non-radical and so every day.

‘moral force’ over ‘physical force’ Chartism and was manager of the local Chartist shop-stall. See *Northern Echo*, 21 May 1873, p. 3.

Chapter 2

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF THE MECHANICS' INSTITUTES MOVEMENT (1820–1869)

Introduction

He had seen them manifest the intensest interest at the development of the most abstract principles of natural philosophy. Intelligence sparkled in their countenances while they watched, with a discrimination not to be deceived, the explanations and illustrations of the lecturer. From such a spirit of inquiry he looked for much. But, certainly, if the House dreaded clamour two years hence, the way to avert it was, not to hold out expectations which were inconsistent with policy and duty.¹

When Sir James Mackintosh rose to speak in such terms about the mechanics' institutes, in the House of Lords in August 1824, he did so from personal experience, having attended a lecture in the London Institute, which was by then less than six months old. He had witnessed first-hand a collective interest and engagement with the Institute as a means to advance towards a social end, a communal yet self-directed drive that sought to surmount the barriers imposed by class. His words were echoed by the Duke of Suffolk a few years later, when he also observed first hand that:

I have gone to the mechanics' societies, I have visited their institutions, and seen their libraries. At Nottingham they have a library that would do credit to the house of any nobleman; they have every kind of books, historical and philosophical; in short, they possess an abundance of those works which are calculated to instruct the mind and improve the heart. Now, have not these men as good judgment as your Lordships?—And if they have, have they not a just right to use it? Let me add to this, when we are talking of classes of society, that I have every respect for the nobility of the country. No man can have a greater respect than I have for the claims of rank; but at the same time your Lordships must allow me to say, that education ennobles more than anything else, and when I find the people increasing in knowledge and wealth, I should be glad to know why they ought not, also, to rise in the ranks of society. As they increase in affluence and knowledge, will they not perceive that they have a claim to greater

¹. *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 10, House of Lords, 18 March 1824, col. 1232.

rights, and is it not natural that they should endeavour by every means in their power to attain them? ²

Mechanics' institutes were social sites which served a range of social functions. They were reflections, expressions and manifestations of social priorities and social expectations – physical constructs which embodied principles of social cohesion, reinforced the realities of social identity and yet were also drivers of and vehicles for social change.

In this chapter, the mechanics' institutes movement between 1823 and 1869 will be examined in the context of social change, as an influencer of that change as well as products of it. In order to place this chapter in its proper context, it is necessary to outline one of the most enduring and long-running debates in the historiography of Mechanics' Institutes - the question of social control.

Commentators such as Friedrich Engels in the 1840s³ and later E.P Thompson in the 1960s⁴ accused the founders and benefactors of the Mechanics' Institute movement of manipulating the working men who used their facilities. As Engels argued,

The children receive a purely proletarian education, free from all the influences of the bourgeoisie; and, in the reading-rooms, proletarian journals and books alone, or almost alone, are to be found. These arrangements are very dangerous for the bourgeoisie, which has succeeded in withdrawing several such institutes, 'Mechanics Institutes,' from proletarian influences, and making them organs for the dissemination of the sciences useful to the bourgeoisie.⁵

². *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 8, House of Lords, 7 October 1831, col. 306.

³ F. Engels, *The Condition of the English Working-Class in 1844* (London: Unwin, 1943), p. 239.

⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 818.

⁵ Engels, *The Condition of the English Working-Class*, p.238.

Even champions of the working classes such as Francis Place were dismissed as part of this agenda and tools of the metropolitan bourgeoisie.⁶ Trygve Tholfsen continued in this vein, accusing these middle-class backers of “condescending self-assurance”⁷ and of presiding over organisations which served only to indoctrinate working people with middle-class values.⁸ Although he ascribed such control to a genuinely philanthropic impulse, it remained control in Tholfsen’s analysis.⁹

Between the 1960s and 1980s, social scientists became interested in studying the history of mechanics’ institutes. Indeed, it was the debate around control which led to the initial interest from social science theorists. Steven Shapin and Barry Barnes built a model for how such control was formulated and delivered.¹⁰ They made a convincing case against the argument, first propounded by Hudson and Hole, that working people who at first engaged with Institutes later deserted them. They instead provided evidence drawn from members’ registers over time which suggested there was a statistically significant degree of social mobility on the part of members. This in turn skewed the statistics and hid the fact that Institutes were more of a success than had generally been believed.¹¹

Ian Inkster and John Laurent subsequently made the same kind of arguments – with Inkster broadening the focus on control to show how well-run mechanics’ institutes could be vehicles for “hostile takeovers” of other community enterprises of similar type such as Lyceums.¹² Laurent, meanwhile, explored the period following Hudson (after 1851) and examined the connections between Institutes, underground socialism and the promulgation of sophisticated knowledge – in his example, Darwinism amid intellectual

⁶ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 846.

⁷ T. Tholfsen, *Working-Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 43.

⁸ Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, p. 42.

⁹ Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, pp. 44-45.

¹⁰ S. Shapin and B. Barnes, “Science, Nature and Control: Interpreting Mechanics’ Institutes”, *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (February 1977), pp. 31-74.

¹¹ Shapin and Barnes, “Science, Nature and Control”, pp. 31-74.

¹² I. Inkster, “Cultural Enterprise: Science, Steam Intellect and Social Class in Rochdale, c.1833-1900”, *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (May 1988), pp. 299, 308.

radical working people in Yorkshire. Laurent posited that these secret radical political affiliations were connected to the spread of controversial ideas, and together were an unintended by-product of social control in Institutes.¹³ The contribution from the social sciences to the mechanics' institute debates, therefore, was not whether social control was actively attempted in and by mechanics' institutes, but rather what form it took and to what effect.

Subsequent studies by historians have all addressed the issue of control directly or indirectly, differing only in scale. Gaulter's microhistory surveyed the phenomenon of Institutes founded by employers¹⁴ and posited that, as such institutes were seen as an extension of both the workplace and the employer, they invariably failed.¹⁵ The work of Thomas Evans, which focussed on institutes in Wales, engaged with the control and censorship debates by demonstrating what could happen when both were absent.¹⁶ Lilian Machin described a network of Institutes in the Staffordshire Potteries which were centres of orthodoxy, with any hint of radicalism swiftly stamped out and the individual institutes adhering strictly to their articles of association – most were owned by employers outright.¹⁷ Jana Sims recently used her local study of institutes – specifically their committees – to argue against the presence of a social control impulse.¹⁸ The most recent addition to the debates is Helen Flexner's recent investigation of the London Mechanics'

¹³ J. Laurent, "Science, Society and Politics in Late Nineteenth-Century England: A Further Look at Mechanics' Institutes", *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (November 1984), pp. 585-619.

¹⁴ L. V. Gaulter, "Rise of the Mechanics' Institutes in South East Lancashire and North East Cheshire (Oldham Lyceum, Stalybridge Mechanics Institute, Stockport Mechanics Institute) in Relation to the Social and Economic Background of the Area" (Unpublished MA thesis, Manchester University, 1970), pp. 125-129.

¹⁵ Gaulter, "Rise of the Mechanics' Institutes", pp. 127-129.

¹⁶ T. Evans, "The Mechanics' Institutes of South Wales" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1965), pp. 179-228.

¹⁷ L. Machin, "A Critical Survey of the Mechanics' Institutes of the Staffordshire Potteries" (Unpublished M. Ed thesis, University of Liverpool, 1970), pp. 120-129.

¹⁸ J. Sims, "Mechanics' Institutes in Sussex and Hampshire, 1825-1875" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2010), pp. 89-227.

Institute which has returned the study of the movement in general to an emphasis on class.¹⁹

This chapter shall contribute to the debate concerning social control within mechanics' institutes. It shall do so by demonstrating this agenda to be complex, multi-faceted and long-lasting. At times it was a co-ordinated effort conducted on a national scale, at others it ranged across the institutes as a network and at still it others it had a distinct local focus to fit local priorities. It was at times only an idea transmitted from the intellectual drivers of the movement in London, a suggestion within correspondence from London to the provinces, recommendations and examples rather than hard and fast control, but still real, still a perceptible guiding force. The social world of mechanics' institutes was controlled whether that control was obvious or not. In this, it had much in common with the world outside the Institute walls, with the same structures, layers and rules of control in place without as within.

Control was structured and took existing acknowledged divisions as its guide. Some were obvious divisions, such as gender and social class. Mechanics' institutes recognised the boundaries between these distinct "spheres"²⁰ and played a role in perpetuating and preserving them.

Women as Visitors and Performers

The physical architecture of buildings in the nineteenth century was an expression of gender differences, with masculine sensibilities permeating design and construction.²¹ Within such male defined and dominated spaces, women were guests, and not always

¹⁹ H.H. Flexner, "The London Mechanics' Institution: Social and Cultural Foundations, 1823-1830" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University College London, 2014), pp. 12, 93-133.

²⁰ R.B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society, 1650-1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* (1998; Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1-8; L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

²¹ D. Kuhlmann, *Gender Studies in Architecture: Space, Power and Difference* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 133.

welcome ones. Whether the institute possessed its own purpose-built space or not, was irrelevant – wherever it was, it was a library and lecture hall. As such, it was interpreted at the time as clearly, unambiguously male and under male control.²² Women were allowed in on male terms and for reasons which suited male sensibilities and purposes. Custom, which “defined the rights of working men through the exclusion of women”, or the reinforcement of that inequality,²³ was built into the fabric of the mechanics’ institutes from the beginning as it was throughout wider society. Change was slow.

Female direct engagement with and use of mechanics’ institutes took two main forms.²⁴ The first was the use of the institutes for educational means. However, there were also those women who used institutes for social and cultural purposes. There were clear differences in the experiences of women in both contexts and these differences were dependent on social class, age and status. Kathryn Gleadle has observed that the attitudes of individual Mechanics’ Institutes regarding women “tended to vacillate according to the sociological make-up of their members”.²⁵ For much of the history of the mechanics’ institutes, the voice of female members is conspicuous by its absence. Despite women being considered by many backers and patrons as crucial to the social fabric of the day and in the future, women of the institutes were typically cast as supporting actors at all major events and in all contexts.²⁶ References in contemporary news reports typically took the form of the collective noun “ladies” at events such as annual soirées, in the context of describing attendances.²⁷ The terminology of the references indicates that the ladies concerned were middle-class ones.²⁸ “Ladies” and “Women” were two deliberately

²² Kuhlmann, *Gender Studies*, pp. 140, 188.

²³ Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space*, p. 17.

²⁴ The key work for women and the mechanics’ institutes is Purvis, *Hard Lessons*, which examines their overall and local membership rates, the classes they attended, and the largely domestic skills of the curricula geared towards women, and lecture attendance.

²⁵ K. Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women’s Rights Movement, c.1831-1851* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p.148.

²⁶ For comments on women’s past and future roles in the Mechanics Institute, see *The Examiner*, 16 October 1831, p. 13; *Northampton Mercury*, 20 October 1832, p. 3.

²⁷ *Kendal Mercury*, 10 December 1853, p. 5.

²⁸ D. Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 9.

chosen terms that divided women along class lines. This practice was related to the description of marital status, with the unmarried middle-class ladies being bundled together as “Misses” and only married women referred to as individuals.²⁹ These “Misses” appeared in reports of those activities hosted or created by mechanics institutes that were self-consciously artistic such as musical performances, dramatic readings or poetry recitals, while married women were hardly mentioned in such accounts. In the regular Northampton Mechanics’ Institute Penny Readings programme, for instance, women hardly ever featured except for the occasional foray into poetry recitals, where young unmarried ladies were paired with older married men in lightweight and uncontroversial verse dialogues.³⁰

In dramatic performances, again the norm was for unmarried ladies to play alongside older married males. There was a tradition of male reviewers treating such female performances harshly.³¹ Musical recitals often featured a single unmarried female in an otherwise all-male vocal collective where she was by far the youngest member and never performed alone.³² Women on the stage were viewed as “corrupt, selfish, and vulgar exhibitionists.”³³ The very role and presence of the female performer was associated with a subtext of courtship and reproduction.³⁴ The stage was a dangerous place. When considered through in this context the pairing of older married males with young unmarried females takes on the character of a support role, as a chaperone to protect the virtue and the reputation of the lady. The dangers which awaited such a lady when parted from her chaperone were well known, with theatres being a particular setting

²⁹ *Westmoreland Gazette*, 2 January 1847, p. 3.

³⁰ *Northampton Mercury*, 12 March 1864, p. 5.

³¹ *Holborn Journal*, 18 April 1862, p. 2.

³² *Leicestershire Journal*, 14 January 1837, p. 2.

³³ L. Chattman, “Actresses at Home and on Stage: Spectacular Domesticity and the Victorian Novel”, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* Vol. 28, No. 1 (Autumn 1994), pp. 72-88.

³⁴ T.C. Davis, “The Actress in Victorian Pornography”, *Theatre Journal* Vol. 41, No. 3, (October 1989), pp. 294-315.

for anxieties.³⁵ Those anxieties were a manifestation of class differences – women from working class backgrounds had no such social safety net, nor did they need one.³⁶

Literature provides insight into working-class female experiences in institutes. The character of Margaret in *Mary Barton* (1848) by Elizabeth Gaskell was a young blind woman who, with a locally recognised talent for singing, found herself hired for a short spell of work as a singer in the music class at her local Institute. As an unmarried young woman accompanied on stage by a man – the lecturer – Margaret was depicted as able to enter the sexualised space safely and allowed to perform in a dignified manner.³⁷ Furthermore, her blindness rendered her effectively neutered, as during the nineteenth-century blind women were generally not considered to be marriageable.³⁸ Nevertheless, she made herself “decent”, wearing white wool and a matching shawl,³⁹ evoking images of sanctity, innocence, vulnerability and the sacrificial lamb. By making herself as attractive as possible, yet by emphasising her vulnerability and purity, Gaskell through Margaret showed an awareness of both the nuances and norms of the Institute’s gendered and sexualised space, and also the plain truth of Margaret’s destiny – likely spinsterhood. Even so, when Margaret recounted to Mary Barton the tutorials with the music lecturer, they resemble subtle courtship rituals. He urged her to sing “tenderly, yet joyously”⁴⁰ and the self-penned song he taught her was actually a love song.⁴¹ When he progressed to his next destination on his lecture tour, Margaret accompanied him.⁴²

The experience of working class woman in institutes had the potential to be less socially anxious and therefore subject to a lower degree of overt moral guidance, although

³⁵ J. Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England* (Oxford: Praeger, 2011), p. 113.

³⁶ Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage*, p. 38.

³⁷ E. Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1848), p. 103.

³⁸ M.W. Carpenter, *Health, Medicine and Society in Victorian England* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), p. 145.

³⁹ Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, p. 103.

⁴⁰ Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, p. 106.

⁴¹ Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, p. 107.

⁴² N. Losseff, “The Voice, the Breath and the Soul: Song and Poverty in *Thyrza*, *Mary Barton*, *Alton Locke*, and *A Child of the Jago*”, ed. S. Fuller and N. Losseff, *The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 18.

there were local differences. Unmarried women from such backgrounds could be welcomed with their male companions on an equal footing to married couples if a relationship was publicly acknowledged to exist, at least in some places and settings.⁴³ Social events, with the community itself in attendance, were less of a risk to moral probity than the classroom. In the latter, the unsupervised mingling of young male and female members in some locations, such as in Sheffield, made the Committee there nervous enough to call for something to be done about it.⁴⁴ Social interaction of any kind between the genders had an acknowledged potential for courtship.⁴⁵ Yet, in a world where gossip was rife and reputation was key to individual status,⁴⁶ the institutes provided a “safe” meeting space for the young. Most institutes trusted their attendants to adhere to accepted social behavioural norms without imposing codified bounds. Only the largest institutes were in a position to impose segregated classrooms, and most did not go to the trouble.⁴⁷

Women as Members and Learners

Institutes were at first reluctant to admit women as full members. The London Institute led the way by first admitting female friends and relatives of members to lectures in 1825 and allowing them the use of the library by 1830.⁴⁸ These “ladies”, already literate enough to read books from the library, were admitted under the same terms as apprentices. Their sex was believed to make them immature regardless of their age⁴⁹ and placed them on a par with unskilled boys. Their resulting lower membership fees reflected this. As was often the case, where London led other institutes followed and soon women were taking

⁴³ *Greenock Advertiser*, 6 January 1852, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 April 1853, p. 2.

⁴⁵ G.S. Frost, *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class and Gender in Victorian England* (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 1995), p. 58.

⁴⁶ Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 42, 53; E. Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn: A People's History of the Industrial Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 108.

⁴⁷ Hole, *Essay*, p. 39.

⁴⁸ Flexner, “The London Mechanics’ Institution”, p. 37.

⁴⁹ For the tragic repercussions of such beliefs, see V. Bates, *Sexual Forensics in Victorian and Edwardian England: Age, Crime and Consent in the Courts* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

their place in the lecture halls.⁵⁰ By 1839, one third of lecture audiences at York Mechanics' Institute were female.⁵¹ Huddersfield had its own Female Educational Institute, which operated along the same lines as the local mechanics' institute and enjoyed its full support. This was a more organised female education system than had been the case previously.⁵² Bradford also established a Female Educational Institute, and the local paper reported the self-congratulations of the *male* figures involved in its foundation, in February 1858 ("Of the ladies who have taken a warm interest in the institution since its commencement there were several present"). This included the following revealing comment from the mayor, Henry Brown:

He had been really astonished to find the number of young women who had come forward wishing to become members of this institution. He believed that they had been obliged, in consequence of want of accommodation, to refuse admission to one or two hundred young women who were desirous of participating in the benefit, of the institution. It was a most delightful thing to see these young women coming night after night to receive instruction, to see them so nicely-dressed, so clean and well behaved; and to their teachers this must be a source of high gratification. One could not help being proud of our young women (hear, hear), and he trusted that through their attendance there they would be able to raise themselves to a much higher position in society.⁵³

Keighley had a female wing to its Institute. Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds Institutes had well-attended classes for women members.⁵⁴ High levels of female engagement were seen across the South of England.⁵⁵ Unlike the middle-class women addressed briefly in the initial welcome to ladies in London and at the soirées and recitals, the women engaging with Institutes educationally were working-class women. They learned there,

⁵⁰ T. Kelly, *George Birkbeck, Pioneer of Adult Education* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1957), p. 126.

⁵¹ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 247.

⁵² For a general overview of nineteenth-century girls' education, see J. McDermid, *The Schooling of Girls in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1900* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 3-4.

⁵³ *Bradford Observer*, 4 February 1858, p.5.

⁵⁴ M. Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, pp. 222, 264-266.

⁵⁵ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 264.

and where there were regular classes for women, after a while they were conducted by women who had received education there previously.⁵⁶

The Huddersfield Female Educational Institute is an example of this class divide. Upon becoming members, more than half of the women were functionally illiterate and unable to sign their own names.⁵⁷ This is broadly consistent with the low level of known female signature literacy during the same period.⁵⁸ The committee acknowledged the complexities of teaching young women, noting that the cares and worries of home constantly impacted on their studies. Some had husbands or young families or lived with parents who were unsupportive of academic pursuits. The chances of the women having a continuity of study and the associated success were, as the Secretary noted grimly, “all but hopelessly out of the question.”⁵⁹ The institute’s main aim outside of education was to contribute to society by producing “better daughters, better wives and better mothers.”⁶⁰ The educational emphasis was, to begin with, on reading, writing and needlework, with instruction aided by the teachers ‘giving’ in ‘familiar language.’⁶¹ Women also made up a proportion of the Institute committee⁶² although the Institute remained tightly controlled by the members’ social superiors in nearly every way that mattered.⁶³ The Huddersfield Female Education Institute was not training its members to simply “conform to a Victorian ideal of womanhood.”⁶⁴ Engagement with that training was influenced by age, with younger women using the institute for courses of lessons only while older women were more actively engaged in full-time membership.⁶⁵ The

⁵⁶ Walker, *The Development of the Mechanics’ Institute Movement in Britain and Beyond*, p. 82-85.

⁵⁷ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 23 October 1858, p. 6.

⁵⁸ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 332.

⁵⁹ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 23 October 1858, p. 6.

⁶⁰ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 23 October 1858, p. 6.

⁶¹ Walker, *The Development of the Mechanics’ Institute Movement in Britain and Beyond*, p. 86.

⁶² *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 23 October 1858, p. 6.

⁶³ T. Gerrard and A. Wheedon, “Working Class Women’s Education in Huddersfield: A Case Study of the Female Educational Institute Library, 1856-57”, *Information and Culture*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2014), pp. 234-264.

⁶⁴ J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 2nd ed.) (New York and London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 177.

⁶⁵ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 29 April 1865, p. 8.

difficulties in continuity of study on the part of working women referred to by the committee only eased with time, age and the changes they brought – as the young women moved from being daughters to being wives and mothers with their own households.

Women made up around 10-15 % of members in most places,⁶⁶ while increasing in numerical and comparative terms. This was often in stark contrast to falling membership numbers among men.⁶⁷ Indeed, the growing general female interest in institutes was blamed for a cooling of interest among their working-class male counterparts.⁶⁸ Where there was overall membership growth, the fastest growth in terms of numbers was almost universally among women and girls.⁶⁹ Female attendance at lectures despite such factors as extreme weather was held up as an example in isolated rural locations.⁷⁰ Taking the 10–15 % figure as a guide, and extrapolating it nationwide using Hudson's 1851 figures, the female member base numbered around 12,000–18,000 at its highest point. They borrowed between 20,000 – 30,000 books per year by 1851 and attended 1,800–2,700 evening classes.⁷¹ Where institutes were running into financial trouble in significant numbers, as occurred around 1850, the subjects previously introduced into their classrooms to appeal to women – such as music and languages – remained even when others had been cancelled for lack of interest or to save money.⁷² French language classes, present from early in the history of the institutes,⁷³ proved especially popular with women.⁷⁴

⁶⁶ *Hereford Times*, 12 June 1841, p. 3; *Bradford Observer*, 23 March 1852, p. 5; *Westmorland Gazette*, 30 April 1853, p. 5; *Lancaster Gazette*, 7 November 1857, p. 5; *Brighton Gazette*, 27 April 1858, p. 7. Purvis's research, *Hard Lessons*, shows where there were higher proportions of female membership.

⁶⁷ *York Herald*, 22 October 1853, p. 7.

⁶⁸ *Morning Post*, 10 December 1852, p. 4.

⁶⁹ *Hereford Times*, 12 June 1841, p. 3.

⁷⁰ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 30 March 1853, p. 3.

⁷¹ J.W. Hudson, *The History of Adult Education* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman, 1851), p. vi-vii.

⁷² Hudson, *Adult Education*, p. x.

⁷³ B.F. Duppa, *A Manual for Mechanics' Institutes* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman, 1839), pp. 135, 138.

⁷⁴ *York Herald*, 8 April 1848, p. 7; Hudson, *Adult Education*, pp. 82-84.

Initial reluctance to admit women as members of institutes gave way almost everywhere to first acceptance as visitors, then as members and ultimately as an educational priority in many places. In some locations, things went further, with women stepping onto the lecture stage to impart knowledge in their own right.

Women as Lecturers

Cultural engagement went further than learning languages with female interest in learning seeming particularly keen where the knowledge and ideas were being imparted by other women. Female lecturers were, throughout the nineteenth century, far less common in the United Kingdom than in the United States.⁷⁵ The former had not experienced the same wave of socially transformative inclusivity enjoyed by the latter during the 1820s and 1830s, which opened the doors of public lecture halls and classrooms to female voices.⁷⁶ Like women members generally, the presence of women lecturers was blamed by some for the declining numbers of men using mechanics' institutes.⁷⁷ Despite this, small numbers of women lecturers did brave the criticisms and delivered papers and lesson series to audiences which were often at venue capacity.

Most female lecturers in mechanics' institutes were local women. Although a few institutes, such as Dudley in the West Midlands, hosted regular lectures by women⁷⁸ most were one-off events which might be reported on as novelties up to the late 1860s. Thus, when Georgina Bennett lectured on "British Female Poets" in late 1853 in the Midlands, the local press reported the event with the slightly incredulous tagline "A Lady Lectures!" They noted that she presented her paper well to a large audience which itself was mostly female.⁷⁹ Similarly, when a woman named Lizzie Stuart lectured on Burns at Chichester

⁷⁵ *Coventry Herald*, 23 May 1862, p. 3.

⁷⁶ L.D. Ginzberg, "'Moral Suasion is Moral Balderdash': Women, Politics and Social Activism in the 1850s", *The Journal of American History* Vol. 73, No. 3 (December 1986), pp. 601-622.

⁷⁷ *Morning Post*, 10 December 1852, p. 4.

⁷⁸ *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 19 March 1851, p. 8.

⁷⁹ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 3 December 1853, p. 3.

Institute in 1859, her commentary, poetry recitals and singing attracted a capacity audience which enjoyed the spectacle immensely, including the Mayor of Chichester.⁸⁰

In the context of female public performance, mechanics' institutes were bastions of orthodoxy. Poetry and recitals were common areas of interest for women lecturers. Other works of verse or prose, commonly interspersed with song, were likewise a mainstay of the small-scale local interest lecture delivered by women in institutes. For example, when Katherine Hickson lectured to a capacity audience at Leeds Mechanics' Institute in 1868 on "The Heroines of Shakespeare", she embedded recitals of key scenes from the most well-known plays in her delivery.⁸¹ Given the inclusion of poetry and music classes in Institute classrooms, this is not surprising. Female lecturing was closely tied to the syllabus offered to women in institutes, which consisted of elementary education, domestic practicality and creative arts. Whereas some institutes offered some political fare to some men, a political element to women's instruction was lacking. This contrasted with the experience offered by Chartist halls and the Owenite Halls of Science, where female lectures on controversial subjects were actively encouraged.⁸² Some Owenite Halls were founded by members of mechanics institutes objecting to the treatment of women in them during the late 1820s and early 1830s. The limited range of membership options already noted caused tensions, which led to secessions from the Institutes and appeals to those women to frequent Owenite Halls instead. Owenite education was promoted as free from control and delivered to both sexes on equal terms.⁸³ However by seeking to inform the development of the ideal working-class wife, the men of both

⁸⁰ *Hampshire Telegraph*, 2 April 1859, p. 5.

⁸¹ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 30 January 1868, p. 2.

⁸² B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (1983; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 124-137.

⁸³ Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 233.

Owenite Halls and mechanics' institutes exercised dominance over their female counterparts.⁸⁴ They just did it in different ways.

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Figure 7. Poster Advertising Lecture at Bridgnorth Town Hall, 22 February 1855, by Clara Balfour, Bridgnorth. Printed by C. Edkins, 1855

Female lecturers in mechanics' institutes rarely moved beyond local one-off lectures. The only real exception was Clara Lucas Balfour (1808-1878). For two decades, she conducted annual tours of institutes and lectured on a plethora of subjects (see the poster from a lecture at Bridgnorth in 1855, reproduced in Figure 7, above). Her lectures drew large audiences, especially among other women. Balfour had a national reputation for speaking on women's issues⁸⁵ and was a campaigner for temperance and female

⁸⁴ McDermid, *Schooling of Girls*, p. 4. As Taylor argues in *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p.233, "it is difficult to see how even the staunchest sexual conservative could have objected," to what the Owenite leaders proposed as female instruction.

⁸⁵ J.J. Robinson, *Social Control and the Education of Adults in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Boca Raton: Brown Walker Books, 2013), pp. 223-227.

empowerment⁸⁶ – such empowerment did not amount to radical change with Balfour but was rather an enhancement of the existing female role.⁸⁷ Mechanics’ institutes were never places for the more controversial female lecturers found in Owenite halls, for example. Balfour was as close to the public heresy of the atheist female lecturer as mechanics’ institutes dared to go, and even then her presence was not a uniformly comfortable one.⁸⁸

A predominantly working-class audience female audience packed into Oxford Mechanics’ Institute in 1844 to hear her lecture on the lives of female heads of state.⁸⁹ The rights and responsibilities of working women was also a common motif in her lectures and again, these were always well-attended by other women and typically attracted rapturous applause.⁹⁰ When Balfour ventured into more technical subjects, such as the life and works of the engineer George Stephenson, again the audience was predominantly, numerous and vocally female.⁹¹ The day-to-day user of Stephenson’s advances in steam technology and its industrial applications was just as likely to be female as male after all.⁹² Balfour taught the possibility and desirability of change within the existing order, rather than radical reform. She was welcomed at institutes as a result in a way that a radical socialist feminist like Eliza MacCauley would not have been.⁹³

Contemporary newspaper reports supportive of Balfour’s lectures were also apologetic for them. It was noted that the idea of the Liverpool Mechanics’ Institute engaging a woman to lecture might “by many be considered an improper thing” however the papers went on to rebut this view.⁹⁴ Reports mentioned the growing number of women who had joined and argued it was only natural that they should be afforded the same

⁸⁶ S. Morgan, *A Victorian Woman’s Place: Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 100.

⁸⁷ Morgan, *Victorian Woman’s Place*, p. 56.

⁸⁸ L. Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women’s Emancipation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

⁸⁹ *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*, 30 November 1844, p. 1.

⁹⁰ *Western Times*, 6 April 1850, p. 6; *Leeds Intelligencer*, 2 February 1856, p. 7.

⁹¹ *Western Times*, 15 October 1859, p. 3.

⁹² Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 19.

⁹³ Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 71.

⁹⁴ *Supplement to the Liverpool Mercury*, 14 November 1845, p. 1.

opportunities to speak as males.⁹⁵ The institute in Liverpool was “already identified ... in the closest way with the education of women.”⁹⁶ The press farther afield praised her ability to communicate ideas and made the case for her inclusion on lecture programmes just as at Liverpool.⁹⁷ Even newspapers which had been previously hostile to institutes campaigned for her inclusion and poured scorn on her critics.⁹⁸

Social Attitudes Towards the Female Reader

Some of the hostility towards female lecturers can perhaps be explained by broader attitudes towards female literacy and the perception of moral corruption associated with the reading female, especially the reading of fiction. The functional moral fabric of society was endangered by the female imagination. Mary Barton’s blind friend went to her local mechanics’ institute to sing and not to read.

The literate female in the popular imagination of the nineteenth century was by turns neurotic, suicidal, slovenly and sexually wayward. The teacher who read became neglectful of her charges,⁹⁹ while the wife who read was the wife who cheated.¹⁰⁰ The active exercise of female imagination posed a social threat which manifested itself in financial dishonesty,¹⁰¹ caused an increase in disorder in the home which subsequently spilled over into the courts¹⁰² and was ruinous to the very mental faculties which hosted it as Mary Wollstonecraft had reported in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792).¹⁰³ These beliefs positioned the literate female imagination at odds with

⁹⁵ *Supplement to the Liverpool Mercury*, 14 November 1845, p. 1.

⁹⁶ *Supplement to the Liverpool Mercury*, 14 November 1845, p. 1.

⁹⁷ *Coventry Herald*, 24 January 1845, p. 3; *Liverpool Mercury*, 14 November 1845, p. 1; *Leeds Mercury*, 24 August 1846, p. 8; *Leeds Intelligencer*, 29 August 1846, p. 7.

⁹⁸ *Leeds Intelligencer*, 29 August 1846, p. 7. The *Leeds Intelligencer* had been generally critical of the Mechanics’ Institute movement from the beginning.

⁹⁹ *London Standard*, 6 November 1829, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ *Morning Post*, 30 July 1824.

¹⁰¹ *Jackson’s Oxford Journal*, 16 June 1838.

¹⁰² *Coventry Herald*, 27 August 1847, p. 3.

¹⁰³ M. Wollstonecraft, *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1792), p. 430.

contemporary values of duty, fidelity, probity, domestic order and sobriety and implied that the active female mind was an existential threat to the existing order.

Indulgence of the literate female imagination was considered hazardous, not just to the individual concerned but to the wider community. Women were believed to become neglectful and therefore dangerous when they picked up a book. Unlike the male, who was at times considered merely unmanly on an individual level for his bookishness, the bookish woman was dangerous.¹⁰⁴ It is in this context that interaction between women, books, literature and literacy must be viewed and it is as part of this social landscape of complex attitudes that the hostility towards female lecturers, learners and members of mechanics' institutes is more clearly delineated and explained.

Bookishness and Unmanliness

By the advent of the mechanics' institute movement, Britain was experiencing a population revolution closely linked to the Industrial Revolution – death rates were falling, birth rates were increasing, mean marriage age was decreasing. Although people were living longer, the demographic drift was towards a younger population.¹⁰⁵ This in turn led to a progressively younger workforce, with working-class children entering the labour market at very young ages, especially in industrial areas.¹⁰⁶ Industrialisation provided plenty of opportunities for child labour,¹⁰⁷ and these young male workers were a concern of the mechanics' institutes from the outset in a society where work was given priority among the young and education was secondary where it mattered at all.¹⁰⁸ Mechanics institutes sought to bring about a change in social priorities for economic and

¹⁰⁴ K. Flint, *The woman reader, 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

¹⁰⁵ E.A. Wrigley and R. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1981), pp. 529-535.

¹⁰⁶ Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn*, pp. 57-83.

¹⁰⁷ Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn*, pp. 117-119.

¹⁰⁸ J. Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 329.

industrial reasons. The new industrial workforce for the new industrial age needed to be harnessed to be efficient and productive. They needed to be tamed and controlled.

Youth mattered in mechanics' institutes. Young men in particular were encouraged to attend, engage and succeed above all others. The original remit of the mechanics' institutes was to provide technical education to manual workers, and such workers were predominantly male and young. These workers were aware of the harshness of their lot in life as well as their potential to think, rationalise, learn and self-improve.¹⁰⁹ Such thinking and learning on the part of young working men was not always welcomed in their communities. An all-male informal reading and discussion group in one Scottish village, for instance, was denounced by "honest people" as full of "atheists, poets and play-actors."¹¹⁰ The correlation of godlessness with the performing arts perhaps had more to say about community attitudes towards "proper" male conduct than anything to do with religion.¹¹¹ A former employer's slurs against Francis Place that he was a "bookish man" who had "made acquaintance with other 'bookish men'",¹¹² meanwhile, may have had other, similar, undertones. The terms "bookish" and "unmanly" carried meanings that challenged the masculinity of those to whom such epithets were applied.¹¹³ The accusation was enough to give Place waking nightmares for years afterwards.¹¹⁴ Reading for pleasure was tantamount to effeminacy. Coming together with other males to read and discuss what was read was more suspect still. Mechanics' institutes "thrived where rough

¹⁰⁹ Y.S. Lee, *Masculinity and the English Working Class: Studies in Victorian Autobiography and Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2007), passim.

¹¹⁰ Rose, *Intellectual Life*, pp. 21-22.

¹¹¹ Rose, *Intellectual Life*, pp. 21-22.

¹¹² Rose, *Intellectual Life*, p. 22.

¹¹³ G. Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen* (New York and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 130; D. Cottom, *Ravishing Tradition: Cultural Forces and Literary History* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 21; P. Raby, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 201.

¹¹⁴ Rose, *Intellectual Life*, p. 23.

Homosocial culture did” and the emphasis in some places on communal baths for members and “manly” games would have only fed such suspicions.¹¹⁵

It has already been noted how reading was seen as an unmanly activity and the coming together of men for the purposes of collective reading viewed as morally suspect. The nineteenth century saw a moral panic over male sexuality which, according to the prevailing morality of the times, could become misdirected and lead to sin and depravity. The men who met in public to share imaginations could find themselves accused of sharing intimacy. Claims that nothing more than reading was going on was used to deflect accusations of inappropriate conduct in public between young literate males.¹¹⁶ This sharing of intellectual space and activity by a male collective for “unmanly” purposes explained both the hostility encountered by Francis Place and Place’s panic at that hostility.

Reading alone was considered bad enough for the mind and the moral fibre of the nineteenth century consumer of popular literature.¹¹⁷ Male exercise of the imagination in this way was considered suspect.¹¹⁸ Although attitudes towards fiction in institutes are dealt with more broadly in the chapter on culture, in the context of masculinity these attitudes take on a new layer of meaning – the dread of the moral destruction which reading (and by extension literacy) was believed to bring in its wake took on a veneer of degeneracy which, as the examples previously cited show, acted as a social stigma.

Perhaps the perceived unmanliness of working men who read books was another manifestation of the unease with which such a readership was treated. Employers and establishment figures were generally lukewarm in their support for working-class

¹¹⁵ See A. Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), pp. 85-86.

¹¹⁶ C. Upchurch, *Before Wilde: Sex between Men in Britain’s Age of Reform* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 67.

¹¹⁷ *Manchester Mercury*, 18 January 1825, p. 3.

¹¹⁸ P. Mallett, *The Victorian Novel and Masculinity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 177.

consumption of books which were not specifically vocational in nature.¹¹⁹ Baldwin Duppa, the author of what was effectively a guidebook for mechanics' institutes libraries, rated fiction as the populist fodder of fools and cited such work as the main reason why uncontrolled access to books was a bad thing. Time and again Duppa associated the ill effects of freedom of literary with moral and intellectual degeneracy, and time and again he did so using male pronouns.¹²⁰ The mechanics' institute library space was a male space in Duppa's blueprint, and the male identity was under threat from the free exercise of imagination.

The male experience of literacy and literature, and attitudes towards it, can be glimpsed from autobiographies. The Chartist Thomas Cooper, who composed an eloquent and lucid memoir including time spent as a leading member of the Lincoln Mechanics' Institute in adulthood, reflected at length upon his childhood and young manhood from which he gained a lifelong love of books. It is notable that, by comparison with the people around him as he grew up, Cooper was atypically literate – his parents encouraged his initial love of books and a prolonged period of illness led to him being bedridden for a year with only books for company. He subsequently served as what was effectively a classroom assistant in a local dame school at the age of seven.¹²¹ Of the adults he described, only those who were lame, infirm or elderly were noted as either imaginative or literate or both – injured soldiers, half-blind sailors, dame schoolmistresses, cripples with wooden legs.¹²² Imagination and appreciation for books belonged to the fringes of society in Cooper's world. His love of books made him stand out for the wrong reasons – his mother struggled to apprentice him, her neighbours warned against his being ruined by his imagination and he got into trouble at Church for wanting to read other books

¹¹⁹ Rose, *Intellectual Life*, pp. 21-24.

¹²⁰ Duppa, *Manual*, pp. 49-50, passim.

¹²¹ T. Cooper, *The Life of Thomas Cooper, Written by Himself* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876), pp. 1-22.

¹²² Cooper, *Life*, pp. 1-22.

beside the Bible. By the age of fourteen, tolerance and encouragement of his bookish leanings had turned to tension.¹²³ His intelligence and literacy were marked as signs of a lazy fecklessness which would have been familiar to the detractors of novels encountered in the chapter on culture. Dislike could be open and ferocious.¹²⁴ Cooper's lack of traditional masculinity went beyond the legacy of his childhood illness and his proclivity for books – he openly strolled arm in arm with other young men, talked in his memoirs about a succession of male friends in admiring terms and routinely skipped church to recite romantic poetry with one of them. Their moving on to work and marriage was mentioned in passing, with understated regret.¹²⁵

Cooper was the stereotypical reader and dreamer of the period – his masculinity questioned and questionable because of his interests. That he, and men like him, became central to mechanics' institutes – teaching there and serving on committees¹²⁶ – perhaps added to the unease felt in some quarters about them. When Charlotte Yonge's fictional mechanics' institute in *Abbeychurch* (1848) was labelled as “black”, “bad”, and a home to “follies and mischiefs”, the unmanly behaviour of the men there was the root cause.¹²⁷

Redefining the Bookish and Unmanly Reader

Reading as an unmanly activity was not confined to the consumption of novels and the recitation of poetry. Cooper's critics did not distinguish between genres of reading material in their hostility. Scholarly interest in history, for example, was interpreted through the lens of gender and the masculinity of its pursuers questioned as a result.¹²⁸ As the chapter on culture demonstrates, that kind of reading material was also popular in

¹²³ Cooper, *Life*, pp. 38-39.

¹²⁴ Cooper, *Life*, p. 59.

¹²⁵ Cooper, *Life*, pp. 50-59.

¹²⁶ Cooper, *Life*, pp. 103-108.

¹²⁷ C. Yonge, *Abbeychurch: or, Self Control and Self Conceit* (London: Mozley, 1848), passim.

¹²⁸ M. Goode, “Dryasdust Antiquarianism and Sappy Masculinity: the Waverley Novels and the Gender of History”, *Representations*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (Spring, 2003), pp. 56-82.

mechanics' institute libraries. This contrasted with the vocational, technical and scientific fare on offer, which helped make men better workers. The interpretation of economic productivity through honest work as a desirable and recognisable masculine trait in itself¹²⁹ dovetailed with the industrialisation that mechanics' institutes celebrated.¹³⁰ The phenomenon of men playing games together and bathing together was given masculine legitimacy by being conducted under the auspices of mechanics' institutes, where otherwise it may have aroused scandal.¹³¹ The middle-class patronage of institutes was widespread and took as one of its many forms the donation of books (not helping with the coherence of mechanics' institute library collections, as David Vincent notes), paintings, sculpture and a general impulse towards patronage of the arts.¹³² The introduction of previously feminine interests into a male space to be consumed as an intellectual commodity by a predominantly male audience; as masculinisation of art can be read as part of the agenda of social control in Institutes – the ideal of a more productive worker was only realised if that worker had his manners, attitudes and lifestyle choices “civilised”.¹³³ By introducing what had previously been considered unmanly among the working classes – art, reading, intellect and the pursuit of knowledge – and framing it in a context of collaboration, acceptable homosociality and the wider economic good, the mechanics' Institutes took the effeminacy of the working-class male reader and dreamer and made him more masculine. The teetotal, law-abiding, intelligent man became the new masculine ideal and his opposite – the ignorant, brawling drunk – became the new

¹²⁹ C. Creighton, “The Rise of the Male Breadwinner Family: A Reappraisal,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol. 38 (1996), pp. 310–37.

¹³⁰ J. Tosh, “Masculinities in an Industrialising Society: Britain, 1800-1914”, *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (April, 2005), pp. 330-342.

¹³¹ *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 15 April 1847, p. 3.

¹³² D.S. MacLeod, “Homosociality and Middle-Class Identity in Early Victorian Patronage of the Arts” in A.Kidd and D. Nicholls (eds.), *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism: Middle-Class Identity in Britain, 1800-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 65-80. For Vincent's comment on incoherent collections, citing Duppa's *Manual*, see Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p.119.

¹³³ Shapin and Barnes, “Science, Nature and Control”, pp. 31-74

unmanly man during the nineteenth century.¹³⁴ The mechanics' institutes played an active part in this process.

Youth and Young Manhood

David Vincent has pointed out the crucial stage of youth for autodidacticism through the simple fact of 'relative irresponsibility and slowly increasing earning power': adolescent apprentices could afford to buy books and join mutual improvement societies. As Vincent also notes, their importance for mutual improvement in education reflected their 'greater resistance to personal discomfort... their energy ...innocence and perhaps immaturity of their ambition'.¹³⁵

Young men were an especial priority of the mechanics' institute movement from the start and the word "young" characterised them – it filled rules and orders, articles of association, public pronouncements and annual reports of progress. Where this engagement with and investment in the young was seen to be successful, institutes lavished praise and congratulation upon themselves. Competitions were aimed towards the young enquiring mind. Schemes for formal educational and vocational certification were developed for the young and targeted at them relentlessly. Mechanics' institutes might more properly have called themselves young mechanics' institutes.

When the London Mechanics' Institute was founded in 1823, among the first articles passed at its inaugural meeting was one that made the education of both apprentices and the children of mechanics a priority.¹³⁶ Other institutes followed a similar path, with particular emphasis placed on education of the young for the sake of it. Such education was a means to an end in keeping them out of trouble. Men, according to a contemporary commentator in Kendal, were "prone to evil"¹³⁷ and young men were most

¹³⁴ Tosh, "Masculinities", pp. 330-342.

¹³⁵ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p.128.

¹³⁶ *Morning Chronicle*, 12 November 1823, p. 2.

¹³⁷ *Westmorland Gazette*, 3 April 1824, p. 2.

prone of all. The establishment of a mechanics' institute there was part of a moral crusade against masculine immorality. Founders of institutes declared that young men were the key recipients of the instruction on offer; this imperative often making it into rules and regulations,¹³⁸ as well as guidebooks for the movement in general.¹³⁹ The institute in Tavistock was a rare exception, making no provision for reduced membership fees for younger men.¹⁴⁰ The emphasis on making exceptions for, and special efforts to engage with, young working men was otherwise almost omnipresent.¹⁴¹

The young men in question took this interest to heart. When institutes such as at Leeds struggled initially due to the wider economic conditions during the mid-1820s, it was the younger male members of the institute who kept it in business. Their attendance at classes and borrowings from libraries remained constant despite falling membership in other demographic groups.¹⁴² In Hull, apprentices made up nearly 25% of all members and were the second largest contributors overall to subscriptions.¹⁴³ This was the story across Britain during the first years of the mechanics' institute movement as a whole.¹⁴⁴ 'Apprentices' and 'assistants' amounted to the second largest membership sector nationwide after 'tradesmen' by 1849.¹⁴⁵ In Manchester, the proportion of male youths (10%) on the books was less than the national average but that group engaged more heavily with the resources on offer there.¹⁴⁶ The desire to encourage young men to become – and remain – members even overcame the natural tendency of many Institute

¹³⁸ *Rules and Regulations of the Totnes Mechanics' Institute* (Handwritten, 1844), passim. Devon Records Office Exeter. Catalogue Reference QS/56/26.

¹³⁹ R. Burnet, *A Word to the Members of the Mechanics' Institutes* (Devonport: J. Johns, 1826), p. 122; H. Brougham, *Practical Observations Upon the Education of the People: Addressed to the Working Classes and Their Employers* (London: Longman, 1825), passim, especially p. 23.

¹⁴⁰ *Rules and Regulations of the Tavistock Mechanics' Institute* (Tavistock: Tavistock Mechanics' Institute, 1834), passim. Devon Records Office, Exeter. Catalogue Reference L1258M.

¹⁴¹ Anon, *The Origin of the Mechanics' Institutes* (published post 1850), Derbyshire Records Office, Matlock, D1834/11/4.

¹⁴² *Leeds Intelligencer*, 6 July 1826, p. 3.

¹⁴³ *Hull Packet*, 10 June 1828, p. 2.

¹⁴⁴ *The Examiner*, 6 December 1829, p. 6.

¹⁴⁵ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 331.

¹⁴⁶ Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, pp. 296-297, 300, 303.

Committees to balk at the inclusion of fiction in their libraries.¹⁴⁷ Unwillingness on the part of young men and women to engage with an institute could result in public criticism from the committee. The Secretary of the institute at Annan wondered in 1853 whether young women members were failing to attend regularly because their minds were on “getting married, thinking of getting married, or dreaming about flowers or stars, or some romantic thing.”¹⁴⁸ The same man denounced young men who were likewise lukewarm in their enthusiasm as being “half men” and epitomising “backwardness”.¹⁴⁹ The bookish unmanly young man of past years had given way to the unmanly youth whose lack of masculinity came from not being bookish enough.

The Social Function of Mechanics’ Institutes Soirées

The main administrative event of the year in many mechanics’ institutes was the annual general meeting, when annual reports were read and the doings of the organisation and its committee debated. These events were held by the majority of institutes throughout Britain from around the early 1840s onwards.¹⁵⁰ Food, drink, music and a general atmosphere of enjoyment and celebration were typical at such events. They were a feature of larger institutes as a rule, were frowned upon by some institutes as being too social in their character and were chiefly a feature of the mechanics’ institutes in the North of England rather than further south; although there were some exceptions to this geographical split, such as at Lewes in Sussex.¹⁵¹

The soirée was a newsworthy event in itself, attracting the great and the good of local society as well as the working classes. Patrons and benefactors presided. The Gateshead Mechanics’ Institute gathering in 1856 annual meeting and soirée, for

¹⁴⁷ *Northampton Mercury*, 27 February 1847, p. 3.

¹⁴⁸ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 1 June 1853, p. 4.

¹⁴⁹ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 1 June 1853, p. 4.

¹⁵⁰ Tylecote, *Mechanics’ Institutes*, pp. 77-78, 219-220; Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 275, 271.

¹⁵¹ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 271; Sims, “Mechanics’ Institutes in Sussex and Hampshire”, p. 78.

example, was presided over by the local Member of Parliament and the Mayor of Gateshead. “A very numerous attendance” by a “most respectable company” enjoyed music and songs during the intervals in the proceedings.¹⁵² Thanks were given, not only for the success of the Gateshead institute but also for the health of the movement generally.¹⁵³

Mechanics’ Institutes soirées served multiple functions, with gender aspects having been considered already. However they were also a space for interaction between the classes and served as a means for communicating the successes of an Institute to the broader community for social purposes. Additionally, they served as occasions for reaffirming the ideals and goals of the institute, a platform for addressing criticisms and an opportunity for fundraising. At Cockermouth in 1847, for example, men and women of all classes came together for the local institute soirée on the second anniversary of its foundation. Most of the attendees were women, and the organisation and administration of the event seems largely to have been left to women. Local ladies competed to lend the finest art to the event, to donate the finest flowers¹⁵⁴ and reap the resulting reward in social status.¹⁵⁵ Speech after speech from local establishment figures trumpeted the virtues of educating the working man, while other speeches were given by local employers to affirm the usefulness of such education.¹⁵⁶ The voices of the working men themselves were silent; they were there to listen, not to speak. Although the classes were equal in sharing the space at the soirée itself, the stage served as a platform for preserving the existing class order as well as for delivering information. Exceptions to this, such as John Glass’ address to the annual meeting of the Institute at nearby Etherley a few years

¹⁵² *Newcastle Courant*, 21 November 1856, p. 2.

¹⁵³ *Newcastle Courant*, 21 November 1856, p. 2.

¹⁵⁴ *Report of the Proceedings at the Second Anniversary of the Cockermouth Mechanics’ Institute* (Cockermouth: D. Fidler, 1847), pp. 1-27.

¹⁵⁵ K. Hill, *Culture and Class in English Public Museums, 1850-1914* (London: Ashgate, 2005), p. 72.

¹⁵⁶ *Report of the Proceedings at the Second Anniversary of the Cockermouth Mechanics’ Institute*, pp. 1-25.

later, were the exception rather than the rule.¹⁵⁷ When working men like Glass spoke at such events, it was to place their improvement through education in context by maintaining that improvement was only possible within the existing social order – “it is not to expected that we can all rise to be Kings and Queens, and lords and ladies; society is composed of different ranks” he declared.¹⁵⁸

As well as preaching the virtues of the existing class order at soirées, speakers also sought to emphasise the usefulness of institutes to the communities they served. Committees at the larger institutes in the North of England saw the continued success of their enterprises as crucial to the local economy and essential for social cohesion.¹⁵⁹ Where thousands of people availed themselves of facilities at institutes such as Huddersfield every week,¹⁶⁰ those committees may have had a point.

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Figure 8. The Reading Room of Swindon Mechanics’ Institute, 1900. Image taken from <http://www.swindonviewpoint.com/content/emlyn-square-gwr-mechanics-institute-reading-room-1900>

¹⁵⁷ J. Glass, *An Address Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Etherley Mechanics’ Institute* (Darlington: Harrison Penney, 1850), pp. 3-4.

¹⁵⁸ Glass, *Address*, p. 7.

¹⁵⁹ *Leeds Mercury*, 25 November 1848, p. 8.

¹⁶⁰ *Leeds Mercury*, 2 February 1869, p. 3.

Manufactured Men in Man-Made Places

Whereas soirées preached the virtues of mechanics' institutes to the local community and their contribution to community cohesion, in one case the contribution to community social life went further. The town of New Swindon was a deliberate construct of the Great Western Railway Company.¹⁶¹ It was built from scratch to house its workers. It was an artificial, controlled town where every aspect – the relatively comfortable and advanced construction of the houses, the provision of health care, the leisure facilities, schools, alehouses and even a covered market – was deliberately chosen by the corporation. The goal was to engineer a healthier, happier, more engaged and more productive worker.¹⁶² This attention to detail extended to the Swindon Mechanics' Institute (see Figure 8 above). It was bankrolled, designed, built and operated by the Great Western Railway Company and was created to provide “innocent recreation with solid instruction” for the members. As members of the community of New Swindon they were employees of the company who settled there with their families. Employees of the company even came from elsewhere on the Great Western line to become members and attend events.¹⁶³

The committee was made up of the company's supervisory and managerial staff, with every aspect of institute business geared towards the company agenda. Books were chosen and purchased by the company, classes planned according to the company's policy and economic expediency, lecturers were vetted. The mechanics' institute in the town became the main social centre of the community.¹⁶⁴ Social activities differed from other institutes in scale as well as tone. Members of mechanics' institutes elsewhere went on

¹⁶¹ E. Crittall, “Swindon: Growth of the Town”, in R. W. Dunning, K. H. Rogers, P.A. Spalding, Colin Shrimpton, Janet H Stevenson and Margaret Tomlinson, ed., E. Crittall, *A History of the County of Wiltshire*, Vol. 9 (London: Victoria County History, 1970), pp. 104-119.

¹⁶² Crittall, “Swindon”, pp. 104-119.

¹⁶³ *Reading Mercury*, 1 February 1851, p. 2.

¹⁶⁴ C. Turner, “Politics in Mechanics' Institutes, 1820-1850: A Study in Conflict” (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 1980), pp. 80-84.

day trips where the journey itself was almost as much the end as the means –however the members of the Swindon Institute were taken on an excursion to the city of Oxford and its famous university. They were treated to a guided tour which took in all the major colleges plus a walk around the Bodleian Library. Contemporary reports from the city commended the visitors on their dress and conduct, which were “respectable” and “orderly”.¹⁶⁵ Back in Swindon the lecture would continue with its programme of moral instruction – “work”, its “necessity” and its place as a “duty” to all which was political economy of a sort, with a more evangelical and moralising tone – the lecture was even delivered by a churchman.¹⁶⁶

Theatrical entertainment was on offer at Swindon too, although it was guided by corporate values. Plays with themes such as “honesty” were commonplace, and musical entertainment was often followed by rousing speeches on how fortunate the local mechanics were to be working for such a benevolent and bountiful organisation.¹⁶⁷ Their employer and institute were lauded by one speaker for protecting workers from being “ruined in pocket and character” by indulgence in other pursuits.¹⁶⁸ Lectures included such themes as the value of work and traditional interpretations of worker-employer relations, as well as the veneration of royalty and nobility.¹⁶⁹ There was scope to partake in “manly games” organised by the institute and thereafter indulge in “most salutary” baths “for the preservation of health”.¹⁷⁰ This desire to equate the institute with cleanliness and physical well-being was also found at Dumfries, as demonstrated in the below.¹⁷¹ The institute had its own choral, dance and amateur dramatics classes. Students from these performed to lecture hall audiences throughout the year. All of the classes

¹⁶⁵ *Oxford Journal*, 17 June 1848, p. 3.

¹⁶⁶ *Swindon Advertiser*, 8 February 1864, p. 2.

¹⁶⁷ *Reading Mercury*, 31 October 1857, p. 4.

¹⁶⁸ *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 15 April 1847, p. 3.

¹⁶⁹ *Swindon Advertiser*, 6 February 1865, p. 3.

¹⁷⁰ *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 15 April 1847, p. 3.

¹⁷¹ *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 15 April 1847, p. 3.

were well-attended.¹⁷² Excursions were arranged in summer courtesy of the Great Western Railway Company, with members being given a choice of destination between London or Bristol.¹⁷³ Those who went on them advertised the company by doing so and promoted its image as a benevolent employer. The company viewed the institute as an extension of itself to the point of helping itself to institute funds in order to pay for building works, ignoring the protests of workers.¹⁷⁴ Social activities were conservative, traditional or geared towards encouraging morally responsible behaviour and the social fabric of the institute and by extension the wider community was geared towards preserving social norms.

Social Economy I: Banking and Savings

Education was the primary goal of the mechanics institutes, at least originally. Over time, however, they came to serve a role in wider society as community savings banks. The establishment of such banks for mechanics' Institute members started in Yorkshire and the concept quickly spread across the country. From the outset, the emphasis was on the social and fiscal responsibility such banking could teach members – social control with an economic emphasis. There was also an intention to craft an economic safety net for workers of their own creation.¹⁷⁵ The economic health of institute banks soon came to be featured in annual reports as a matter of routine. The banks themselves were commercial, communal, social enterprises, embedded within mechanics' institutes. They were physically located in their premises and adopted the institute "brand". Thousands of savers, generally from the poorer end of the social spectrum, lodged their deposits there. By 1866, for example, the Penny Bank of Lancaster Mechanics' Institute had been in

¹⁷² *Swindon Advertiser*, 6 February 1865, p. 3.

¹⁷³ *Swindon Advertiser*, 6 February 1865, p. 3.

¹⁷⁴ *Swindon Advertiser*, 6 February 1865, p. 3.

¹⁷⁵ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 9 October 1858, p. 6. For earlier coverage of Penny Banks, see 'Mechanics' Institutes – Penny Banks', *Chambers's Edinburgh journal*, 357 (2 November 1850), pp. 284-285.

operation for six years and had taken in excess of £7,200 in deposits, with almost £650 of that total being saved in the last of those years. Over 200 people deposited cash with the bank on a weekly basis.¹⁷⁶ A decade earlier, Stourbridge Mechanics' Institute Penny Bank took almost £250 in its first year of business. Such was the demand for its services that it had to expand its opening hours to Saturday evenings, to take the long working hours of savers into account.¹⁷⁷ In a single week in 1858, the Penny Bank of the Halifax Mechanics' Institute took nearly £100 in deposits and paid out £23 in withdrawals.¹⁷⁸ Halifax itself was one of the more successful examples, taking £2,500 from over 8500 depositors in the first 18 months of its existence.¹⁷⁹ Newspapers as far away as Devon reported on the Penny Bank model in Lancashire as a great success. The lowest permitted deposit sum was a single penny and the average deposit per week per individual in Lancaster in 1856 was 11d.¹⁸⁰ The Penny Bank of the mechanics' institute in Chesterfield was recognised as a vital community asset on a par with the Institute itself.¹⁸¹ The Penny Bank model spread at least as far north as Annan.¹⁸² Mechanics' institutes therefore provided small-deposit community savings bank facilities to poorly paid workers from Dumfriesshire to the Isle of Wight.¹⁸³ Mechanics' wives would deposit their hard saved coins in mechanics' institutes the length and breadth of Great Britain.¹⁸⁴

Huddersfield Mechanics' Institute Penny Bank took almost £30 in just two days from over 360 depositors in the spring of 1863.¹⁸⁵ Over the same space of time in the autumn of that year, the same organisation took £55 from 412 depositors.¹⁸⁶ This averaged out at 20d per deposit in the spring and 32d per deposit in the autumn. Elsewhere in the

¹⁷⁶ *Lancaster Gazette*, 3 November 1866, p. 8.

¹⁷⁷ *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 12 July 1854, p. 6.

¹⁷⁸ *Leeds Mercury*, 6 March 1858, p. 5.

¹⁷⁹ *Bradford Observer*, 12 November 1857, p. 5.

¹⁸⁰ *North Devon Journal*, 4 December 1856, p. 7.

¹⁸¹ *Derbyshire Times*, 23 October 1858, p. 2.

¹⁸² *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 7 February 1855, p. 4.

¹⁸³ *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 8 May 1853, p. 5.

¹⁸⁴ *Newcastle Journal*, 25 October 1864, p. 2.

¹⁸⁵ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 18 April 1863, p. 5.

¹⁸⁶ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 3 October 1863, p. 8.

same county, there was a drive to amalgamate the most successful Institute Penny Banks with larger banking concerns. The merger of the Halifax Mechanics' Institute Penny Bank with the Yorkshire Bank conglomerate was just one example.¹⁸⁷ Although similar Penny Banks were operated by rival organisations, many of the most successful enterprises were Institute operations, eventually building up significant financial reserves. This success attracted attention from major players in the established banking sector.

The rival Post Office Savings Bank became an established presence from the middle of the decade. Some institutes, such as one example on Tyneside, expressed concern – while also noting in its annual report that the local institute Penny Bank continued to enjoy “a very fair share of business”.¹⁸⁸ The Post Office Savings Banks insisted on a minimum deposit of one shilling. Accounts were capped at £30 worth of deposits per year. An overall limit of £150 in non-interest deposits was imposed on savers. What they lacked in flexibility compared to institutes, they made up for in terms of their backing – which came from the Government. The Post Office scheme was aimed at the ordinary working man from the beginning.¹⁸⁹ The Government, by guaranteeing the scheme, also benefitted materially from having access to the deposits as a source of revenue, whereas the institute Penny Banks either held the funds themselves or lodged it in the established major private banking sector.

Despite the rivalry from the Post Office, many of the institute Penny Banks survived, and annual reports from such locations as Bingley stressed the ongoing success of these enterprises – £375 worth of deposits there in one year. The perceived social and moral benefit of saving and the good habits it engendered in the working population was lauded – well-saved money was wisely spent “leading often to future success in life”. This moral lesson as particularly aimed at “younger portions of our community” as well

¹⁸⁷ *Leeds Mercury*, 5 September 1864, p. 4.

¹⁸⁸ *Shields Daily Gazette*, 3 January 1865, p. 2.

¹⁸⁹ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 14 September 1861, p. 2.

as members.¹⁹⁰ Would-be savers were invited to become clients whether they were members of an Institute or not, thereby extending the potential benefits to the wider community. Banking served a social purpose – it allowed individuals and families to save during times of plenty for material goods, allowed them to prepare for future demands and needs (such as married life) and savings acted as a means of protection against periods of ill economic fortune. Possession of capital was associated with social status in a society where money permeated every aspect of social life and social interaction.¹⁹¹ The institute Penny Banks made control of such capital an affordable and realistic option for thousands of the poorest savers.

Despite the threat from rivals, and a decline in membership across Mechanics' Institutes generally during the later 1860s, the Penny Banks endured. Milnsbridge near Huddersfield was home to a mechanics' institute Penny Bank which took £810 in deposits for the whole of 1865. The combined income of all other institute activities amounted to just over £82 for the same year.¹⁹² Lancaster's Bank generated nearly £600 in deposits while annual income from membership subscriptions to the institute itself barely cleared £100.¹⁹³ At Huddersfield Mechanics' Institute in 1867 a visitor was more likely to be making a deposit in the bank than to be borrowing a book from the library.¹⁹⁴ At Slaithwaite, a visitor to the institute was five times more likely to have an account with the Penny Bank than have an active membership. The Bank had 330 individual account holders,¹⁹⁵ constituting over 10% of the entire population of Slaithwaite.¹⁹⁶ The social significance of the mechanics' institute Penny Bank in this context is thus clear.

¹⁹⁰ *Bradford Observer*, 17 November 1864, p. 6.

¹⁹¹ Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn*, pp. 21-106, 109-133.

¹⁹² *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 17 February 1866, p. 3.

¹⁹³ *Lancaster Gazette*, 2 November 1867, p. 8.

¹⁹⁴ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 2 November 1867, p. 6.

¹⁹⁵ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 29 February 1868, p. 8.

¹⁹⁶ C.A. Coke, *Population Gazetteer of England and Wales and the Islands of the British Isles* (London: Harrison, 1864), p. 195.

Even during the period round 1870, which is associated with the final decline of the mechanics' institutes in Great Britain,¹⁹⁷ Institutes with Penny Banks were thriving and even, as in Northallerton in 1869, moving into new custom built premises.¹⁹⁸ Huddersfield continued to exhibit great success, taking nearly £2000 in deposits from over 14,000 individual depositors in 1868, when the total membership of the institute itself stood at around 1600.¹⁹⁹ As at Slaithwaite, this was around 10% of the local population of the town.²⁰⁰ In comparison, a non-affiliated Penny Bank – for example the one in Gloucester – took around £600 per year in 1869, from just under 500 individual depositors.²⁰¹ This constituted less than 2 % of the population.²⁰² The Bury St. Edmunds Mechanics' Institute and Athenaeum²⁰³ in 1869 had just under 600 account holders who paid in a sum of just under £300 between them in a single year.²⁰⁴ This was 5% of the local population.²⁰⁵ Annual reports of the institute in Bury itself from the same time make it clear that its banking activity had evolved beyond savings – the institute was lending money from the Penny Bank to the local population and was charging interest on repayments.²⁰⁶

Large scale organised networks of institutes, such as those in Yorkshire, saw themselves as networks of banks as much as they saw themselves as library chains, educational collectives and lecturing circuits. As organisations devoted to “peace, love and progress”, they celebrated having twenty Penny Banks in place across the Yorkshire Union by 1869. This network took nearly £22,000 in deposits in a single year from over 50,000 transactions.²⁰⁷ The “progress” therefore appears to have been primarily financial.

¹⁹⁷ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 270-271.

¹⁹⁸ *York Herald*, 7 August 1869, p. 10.

¹⁹⁹ *Leeds Mercury*, 2 February 1869, p. 3.

²⁰⁰ Coke, *Population Gazetteer*, p. 107.

²⁰¹ *Gloucester Journal*, 13 November 1869, p. 8.

²⁰² Coke, *Population Gazetteer*, p. 83.

²⁰³ *Bury and Norwich Post*, 2 February 1853, p. 2.

²⁰⁴ *Bury and Norwich Post*, 23 March 1869, p. 5.

²⁰⁵ Coke, *Population Gazetteer*, p. 36.

²⁰⁶ *Bury and Norwich Post*, 20 April 1869, p. 5.

²⁰⁷ *York Herald*, 22 May 1869, p. 5.

Within a few years, the Union was reporting takings in excess of £30,000 per year,²⁰⁸ rising to over £36,000 per year within a few years more.²⁰⁹

Institute Penny Banks, like institutes themselves, held a special regard for young workers, striving to engender “in them early habits of economy and forethought.”²¹⁰ The Yorkshire Union of Mechanics’ Institutes dubbed this new field of interest “Social Economy”.²¹¹ It was the practical manifestation and implementation of the self-help creed which Institutes had been teaching in classrooms for years. This practical banking was foresighted and became more sophisticated as the period progressed. Depositors could place their money through a hole in the wall if they were unable to make it there in person. Deposits were invested and grown as well as providing working capital for the Institute Bank. That capital was over time increasingly used to provide basic credit facilities to poor working savers.

Mechanics’ institutes banks introduced interest to a demographic unused to the formal exercise of it. Total deposits in an account above a given level, typically in the region of £2 or more, triggered interest payments and acted as an incentive to save.²¹² The 3% interest rate enjoyed by the savers at the Tyne Docks Mechanics’ Institute Bank appears to have been the typical standard. The institutes banked proportions of their own takings with larger organisations to raise interest for themselves and used this to fund the interest they themselves passed on to customers.²¹³ Members of the institutes and users of the Penny Banks were encouraged to spread the word.²¹⁴ Banking was overtaking education as the major thrust of many institutes.²¹⁵

²⁰⁸ *Leeds Mercury*, 23 May 1872, p. 7.

²⁰⁹ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 21 May 1873, p. 3.

²¹⁰ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 5 February 1851, p. 4.

²¹¹ *Yorkshire Post*, 19 May 1869, p. 3.

²¹² *Leeds Mercury*, 23 February 1850, p. 4.

²¹³ *Shields Daily Gazette*, 3 January 1865, p. 2.

²¹⁴ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 13 February 1869, p. 8.

²¹⁵ *Leeds Mercury*, 27 October 1869, p. 3.

As noted previously, institute banks diversified into credit provision.²¹⁶ Credit facilities, more than savings, made banks crucial to the social fabric of their communities.²¹⁷ As the middle of the century came and went, average wages increased, prices fell and working class families were able to save more easily. This was reflected in the steadily increasing revenues and reserves of the institute banks, which constituted the first large-scale social savings bank “brand” in British history and allowed the poorer inhabitants of the social scale access to financial services for the first time.

Social Economy II: Affordable Home Ownership for the Working Classes

“Social Economy” went beyond cash deposits and loans. London Mechanics’ Institute formed a building society in 1851.²¹⁸ Named after George Birkbeck, it shared premises, governance and financial capital with the Institute itself. It became a leading player in the English property market – and in doing so opened up the ideal of home-ownership to working-class families. By the close of the 1850s, the London Mechanics’ Institute had 440 members on its books and was £750 in debt.²¹⁹ The combined financial enterprises of the Birkbeck Building Society, Freehold Land Society and Savings Bank – all owned and administered by the Institute – were more successful. The Building and Land Societies had almost 1500 members, had issued over 3000 shares, had paid out £40,000 to help members buy homes and land, and had taken £85,000 in payments. The Birkbeck Bank meanwhile was able to offer 5% interest on deposits.²²⁰ Homes could be bought for 2 guineas per month, plots of land for 5 shillings per month for either “building or gardening purposes”, and by 1863 the Bank was still offering the same attractive interest rate. It had added current accounts “similar to ordinary” accounts, which included cheque

²¹⁶ *Islington Gazette*, 17 October 1863, p. 2.

²¹⁷ P. Agenot and P.J. Montiel, *Development Macroeconomics*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), passim.

²¹⁸ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 201, 204.

²¹⁹ *London City Press*, 4 September 1858, p. 3.

²²⁰ *West Middlesex Advertiser*, 2 July 1859, p. 1.

books. The cheques themselves were “exempt from Stamp Duty”.²²¹ At a time when the average monthly wage available to urban manual and semi-skilled workers was in the region of 60 – 75 shillings, and the single largest outlay was accommodation costs,²²² the idea of home ownership was being brought into the realms of affordability.

This financial enterprise was generating significant revenues by the mid-1860s. The annual report for 1865 described turnover which “nearly equals that of [the preceding period of years] added together”. Over 1500 people had bought homes through the Birkbeck Building Society, the Bank had over 1200 new depositors and the annual takings of all Banking activities combined was nearly £55,000. Shareholders enjoyed 60% bonuses to their annual dividend.²²³ This performance was exponentially stronger than the beginning of the decade and affairs overall were described as “extensive and flourishing”.²²⁴ By 1866, the takings were nearly £65,000 and the dividend bonus was 66%.²²⁵ By decade’s end, takings were just under £1.5 million and the bank was taking on over 5000 extra mortgage borrowers every year.²²⁶

By comparison, established rival National Provincial had a turnover which was two-thirds that of the Birkbeck. The rival lender cited conditions of wider economic depression as reasons for declining business in their annual reports.²²⁷ No such problem afflicted the Birkbeck. However, smaller provincial banks also experienced declining fortunes and gave similar broad reasons.²²⁸ At a time when banking in general was struggling during a period of economic depression, the London Mechanics’ Institute-based Birkbeck Bank was thriving and enabling working-class home ownership on an

²²¹ *South London Chronicle*, 12 September 1863, p. 1.

²²² A.L. Bowley, *Wages in the United Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900), p. 133.

²²³ *Shoreditch Observer*, 14 July 1866, p. 3.

²²⁴ *East London Observer*, 2 August 1862, p. 2.

²²⁵ *West Sussex Advertiser*, 3 August 1867, p. 3.

²²⁶ *Islington Gazette*, 30 July 1869, p. 3.

²²⁷ *Hampshire Advertiser*, 15 May 1869, p. 8.

²²⁸ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 22 January 1869, p. 4; *Gloucester Journal*, 22 May 1869, p. 8; *Glasgow Herald*, 4 February 1869, p. 6.

ever-increasing scale. The social importance and scale of such an operation is clear and undeniable. Whereas the Chartist Land Plan sought to change society and the law by being overtly political and confrontational the London Mechanics' Institute had more success by acting within the law and established commercial practice.²²⁹

This success can be demonstrated by comparing the Birkbeck Bank to rivals in the capital. Measurement of sums loaned and mortgages illustrates the Birkbeck Bank's role in "one of the most significant social changes" a modern society can undergo – the transition of significant numbers of people from tenant to owner.²³⁰ The London mortgage market has been partially reconstructed using data from three different years (1861, 1865 and 1868) in order to identify and analyse wider trends. Figures have been rounded to the nearest £500 for ease of reporting and comparison. Data has been taken from accounts of annual reports as covered in the media and have been checked where possible against other sources.

In 1861 the Birkbeck Bank reported making advances totalling £23,500 on 836 new mortgages.²³¹ By comparison, the Temperance Movement Building Society in London advanced £44,000 on 627 properties.²³² The Perpetual Investment Land and Building Society lent £4000 on an unknown number of properties during the same year, while the Belgrave Mutual Benefit Building Society lent £2000 against an again unspecified number of mortgages.²³³ The Birkbeck dwarfed two of the sample by ratios ranging from six times the lending of others to in excess of a factor of ten. Compared to the Temperance Movement, the Birkbeck advanced funds on more properties, while the

²²⁹ Chase, *Chartism*, pp. 247-358.

²³⁰ K. McKee, "Promoting Homeownership at the Margins: the Experience of Low-Cost Homeownership Purchasers in Regeneration Areas", *People, Place and Policy Online* (2010), Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 38-49.

²³¹ *East London Observer*, 21 September 1861, p. 3.

²³² *London City Press*, 2 March 1861, p. 10.

²³³ *London City Press*, 6 July 1861, p. 3; *West Middlesex Advertiser*, 9 November 1861, p. 2.

Temperance lent more money. This suggests the Birkbeck catered to a lower end of the social scale or provided mortgages in poorer areas, or both.

By 1865 the Birkbeck Bank advanced £68,000 on 1683 new mortgages.²³⁴ In comparison, the Temperance advanced £179, 000 and the Perpetual Investment advanced £45,000.²³⁵ No figures for actual numbers of loans exist for the latter two banks. The Belgrave had dropped out of the market. As before, the Birkbeck sat between the two remaining comparative businesses, while the Temperance was clearly ahead in terms of sums advanced.

By 1868 the Birkbeck advanced £277, 000 on 6,112 mortgages in twelve months. In comparison, the Temperance lent £203, 000 and the Perpetual Investment lent £62, 000.²³⁶ The London Mechanics' Institute had overtaken the Temperance Movement as a lender across the capital, advancing over 135% of the sums secured by the latter against the property of customers. A *prima facie* educational organisation was thus one of the largest lenders in the whole of London, acting as guarantor for thousands of houses and bankrolling social change and mobility on a large scale. Its business was primarily with ordinary working people.²³⁷ With some justification, the Committee of the Birkbeck Bank were able to boast in 1868 that theirs was “the largest institution of the kind in the Kingdom”²³⁸ and it had become the “Bank of choice for small savers.”²³⁹

²³⁴ *West Middlesex Advertiser*, 7 July 1866, p. 3.

²³⁵ *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 11 March 1866, p. 8; *London City Press*, 7 July 1866, p. 8.

²³⁶ *Islington Gazette*, 2 March 1869, p. 3; *London City Press*, 10 July 1869, p. 2.

²³⁷ H.J.G. Bab, “The Evolution of the English Building Society”, *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 9, No.1. (November 1938), pp. 56-63.

²³⁸ *Islington Gazette*, 30 July 1869, p. 4.

²³⁹ R. Clarke, “Self-Help and the London Mechanics' Institution – Birkbeck after (George) Birkbeck”, in B. Lowden, ed., *Self-Help: Mechanics' Worldwide Conference 2009: Proceedings of the Second Worldwide Conference Convened by the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution at BRLSI, 16-18 Queen Square, Bath, England, 24-29 September, 2009* (Donvale: Lowden Publishing Company: 2011), pp. 52-65.

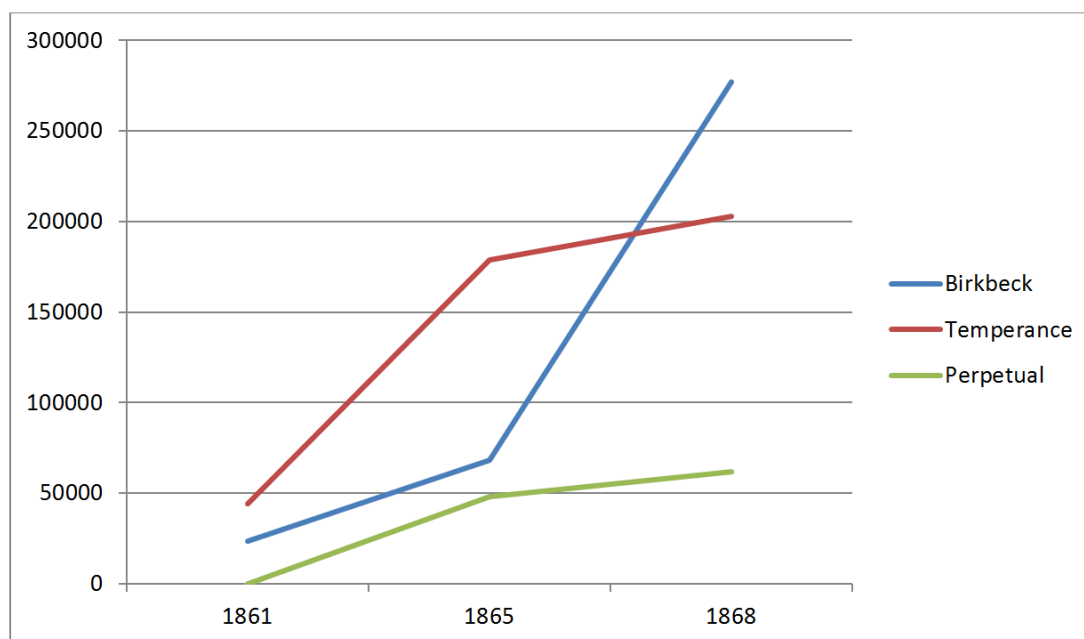


Table 1. Comparison of London Mortgage Lending (Sums Advanced in £)

The Economics of Failure

The vulnerability of mechanics' institutes to broader economic forces and trends has already been noted in an earlier chapter. However this vulnerability to such forces beyond their control dogged mechanics' institutes throughout the time period covered by this thesis. Bank of England historic economic data on recessions reveals trends which, when plotted against the fortunes of the institute movement over time, corresponds almost exactly.

The rises and falls in the fortunes of the mechanics' institutes (as noted first by James Hudson²⁴⁰ in the 1850s and subsequently by Thomas Kelly²⁴¹ in the 1950s) can be categorised as a period of initial expansion to 1825-1826, followed by sharp decline to 1830, then a slow unsteady growth marked by periods of uncertainty with the situation growing more stable through the 1840s up to 1850. It then suffers setbacks in the early and late 1850s before growth is re-established.

²⁴⁰ Hudson, *Education*, passim.

²⁴¹ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, passim.

This pattern is an almost perfect match for the broader economic trends of the time. When such trends are considered in this context, and evaluated in the light of what the Institutes themselves were reporting, the picture which emerges is one which provides persuasive proof of the realities behind the debates concerning failure.

Nominal GDP growth covering the period of this thesis has been derived from Bank of England historic statistics.²⁴²

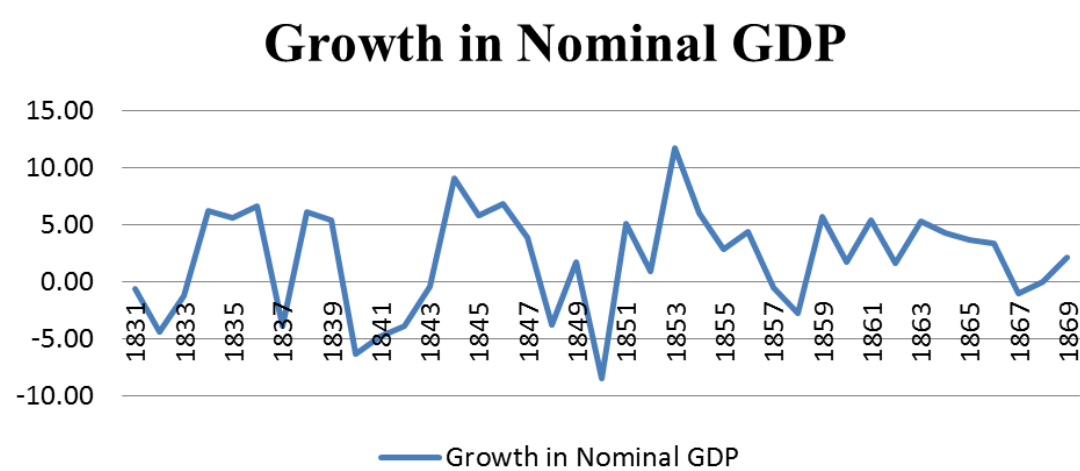


Table 2. Nominal GDP growth, 1831 – 1869

It corresponds with the periods of growth and decline observed by Hudson and Kelly and also trends reported by institutes themselves. When the mechanics’ institutes banking operations are taken into account, they also track closely with the trends – they began to emerge at the beginning of the 1850s and exhibited general upward growth from then on, although there were slowdowns in deposits reported around the downturns at each end of the decade as analysis of a selection of institute annual reports demonstrates.

In Dumfriesshire in Scotland, the Annan Mechanics’ Institute was founded in the late 1840s: its annual general meeting in 1853 heard the committee report that recent annual growth in membership numbers had experienced a slowdown. This was a cause

²⁴² Bank of England Quarterly Bulletin, Q4 2010 (HMSO) and associated data set.

for some concern, as the decline seemed especially severe among the young and among women. A combined total of 21 people from these groups, against an overall total membership of 183, had cancelled their subscriptions. The report thanked the members' "untiring zeal" with acknowledgement that, although institutes elsewhere may be "feeble and decaying", this was not the case in Annan.²⁴³

The economic conditions in 1843, which came at the end of a severe downturn, impacted the Carlisle Mechanics' Institute in the North West of England particularly badly. The annual general meeting that year noted a small turnout with membership in decline due to "the scarcity of work among Mechanics generally" and 40 less people were on the register than the year before. There were references to people leaving the city to look for work, while the members who stayed had let their subscriptions either lapse or had defaulted on the payments in the hope that the institute would not suspend their memberships.²⁴⁴ In order to maximise income, an exhibition – along the lines of those already held elsewhere and explored in the chapter on culture – was mooted and approved.²⁴⁵

The Carlisle institute attempted to cut costs by removing rent as an expense in favour of borrowing funds for a dedicated building. By 1858, membership was still an issue as was poor uptake of tuition. Of the members who remained, only around 65% were "full" members – the remainder being (cheaper) "reading" members.²⁴⁶ The failing Institute had incurred debt of £236 in order to build its own building²⁴⁷ however the broader economic picture, rather than any issues with control and content of lectures, was keeping people away.

²⁴³ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 1 June 1853, p. 4.

²⁴⁴ *Carlisle Journal*, 29 April 1843, p. 3.

²⁴⁵ *Carlisle Journal*, 29 April 1843, p. 3.

²⁴⁶ *Carlisle Journal*, 7 May 1858, p. 6.

²⁴⁷ *Carlisle Journal*, 7 May 1858, p. 6.

Despite being one of the largest and most successful institutes in the country, the Huddersfield institute in Yorkshire was operating at a substantial loss by 1857 for the first time since it had opened.²⁴⁸ In Derby, the committee's report for 1859 noted that classes were being cancelled due to shortage of money and attendees, and membership numbers had dropped over 10% in the preceding twelve months.²⁴⁹ The Birmingham institute suffered a series of crises which mirrored the economic fortunes of the city's working and mercantile classes exactly. It ran out of money to pay lecturers, struggled to pay the rent²⁵⁰ and closed during severe economic conditions around 1840.²⁵¹ Workers suffered such harsh economic conditions they started to organise and conduct open-air rallies.²⁵² Bristol institute's reports were full of grim news for nearly its whole period of operation, and they mirror the broader economic realities exactly. In 1833, it had invested in purpose build premises but was in dire need of "pecuniary assistance"²⁵³ Wider economic conditions were explicitly referenced.²⁵⁴ A decade later, its institute was still running at a loss with the wider economy again being blamed. Debt was soaring, membership was low, classes were cut,²⁵⁵ and the institute was gone by 1845.²⁵⁶

No Mechanics' Institute committee blamed falling member numbers or economic hardship on the members themselves. Every report which references economic trends does so in periods of underlying uncertainty and turmoil and is consistent in its attribution of blame. It was not disapproval or disenchantment which dictated working people's continued interest in Institutes. It was basic economics.

²⁴⁸ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 7 February 1857, p. 8.

²⁴⁹ *Derby Mercury*, 21 December 1859, p. 2.

²⁵⁰ *Birmingham Journal*, 6 July 1833, p. 2.

²⁵¹ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 237.

²⁵² *Morning Chronicle*, 25 September 1832, p. 1; *Birmingham Journal*, 14 May 1842, p. 7; *Manchester Courier*, 28 February 1849, p. 7.

²⁵³ *Bristol Mercury*, 2 March 1833, p. 3.

²⁵⁴ *Bristol Mercury*, 2 March 1833, p. 3.

²⁵⁵ *Bristol Mercury*, 2 March 1844, p. 7.

²⁵⁶ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 316; *Bristol Mercury*, 27 September 1845, p. 6.

Social Engineering and the Campaign to Expand the Parliamentary Franchise

Expansion of home ownership among the working classes would have had the effect of expanding the franchise – home-owners would have become vote-owners. The extension of the vote to the working classes was the long-standing stated aim of a cadre of Whig politicians whose names loom large in the history of the institutes as a movement. Home ownership was one way to secure this aim, with the responsibility it demonstrated being one way to demonstrate the worthiness of the working classes to critics and opponents. However the supporters of such reform mounted a long-running campaign to argue that working people deserved the franchise because they understood it and its implications.

Nearly every debate in the Houses of Parliament on franchise expansion which took place between 1823 and 1869 referred to the members of mechanics' institutes, using the practical demonstration of intellect which their membership showed as justification for arguing that working people be granted the vote. Starting in 1831, with an abortive attempt to steer such a Bill through the Lords based partly on this argument,²⁵⁷ there was a clear tendency for reformers to use mechanics' institutes in this way. These reformers were the same people who patronised and financially supported institutes up and down the country.

A similar measure at the end of the same decade, to expand the franchise – citing Institutes as an example of why working people were intelligent enough to comprehend the enormity of the task before them – also failed.²⁵⁸ There were similar drives a decade later, again citing the members of institutes as living proof that the lower orders understood the franchise, and again these failed.²⁵⁹ Despite the association of the Whigs

²⁵⁷ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol. 8, House of Lords, 7 October 1831, cols 188-334.

²⁵⁸ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol. 46, House of Commons, 21 March 1839, cols 1048-101.

²⁵⁹ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol. 99, House of Commons, 20 June 1848, cols 876-966; Vol. 100, House of Commons, 6 July 1848, Col. 156-226; Vol. 109, House of Commons, 28 February 1850, cols 137-218.

with the cause of Parliamentary reform,²⁶⁰ and despite the association of mechanics' institutes with Whigs²⁶¹ these pushes for reform through the Commons using institutes as justification failed under Whig administrations. Further debates on the cusp of the late 1850s and early 1860s likewise used Institutes as examples in the same manner and likewise came to nothing, again under a Whig government. However there were references to expansion of the franchise to working people being dependent on continued engagement with mechanics' institutes²⁶² as well as to the institutes being a cause of the wider popular clamour for reform owing to their status as places of political instruction.²⁶³ Finally, with the debates surrounding the passing of the Reform Act of 1867, the institutes were used as supporting evidence for a campaign of franchise expansion which was ultimately successful against a background of popular unrest and activism.²⁶⁴

Successive appeals using successive references to institutes integrated them into the political consciousness and made them part of the national political culture, associated with franchise extension for the deservingly self-improved, who would take their rightful place in society as enfranchised, home-owning, responsible men and women. Not everyone, however, agreed with that ideal.

Popular Social Commentary

The satirical magazine *Punch* was aimed at an audience consisting of the educated, affluent middle and upper classes²⁶⁵ and its attitude towards mechanics' institutes – which

²⁶⁰ T. A. Jenkins, *Parliament, Party and Politics in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 89-110.

²⁶¹ Walker, "Solid and Practical Education", p. 16; Turner, "Politics in Mechanics' Institutes", p. 79.

²⁶² *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol. 153, House of Commons, 24 March 1859, cols 692-792.

²⁶³ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol. 153, House of Commons, 28 March 1859, cols 915-1004.

²⁶⁴ R. Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848-1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 225-264; Hall, McLelland and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, p. 153.

²⁶⁵ H. Fraser, S. Green and J. Johnston, *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 57.

from their beginning had carried with them an association with the poor,²⁶⁶ the uneducated²⁶⁷ and the “great unwashed”²⁶⁸ – was a reflection of their respective socio-economic backgrounds and sensibilities. *Punch* played an active social commentary role in its coverage of the institutes, mocking them almost as soon as it went into circulation.

A spoof institute situated in the fictional town of Hookham-cum-Snivey was standard fare for satire during the early years of *Punch* in the 1840s. The name of the town, derived from a contemporary slang term for criminality,²⁶⁹ was itself a social critique of the movement. Hookham Institute was represented as celebrating its annual general meeting with a selection of pointless and impenetrable papers from its members, each seemingly in a contest to be more pretentious than the others.²⁷⁰ The library there was stocked with every kind of rubbish, but excluded books.²⁷¹ Reports of other activities included spoof reports of over-elaborate musicals²⁷² and institutional pseudo-educated pedantry.²⁷³ This form of satire as social critique mocked the Mechanics’ Institutes for having ideas above their station – while Eastern Counties Railways reportedly treated the elites in First Class to luxury, they were providing Institutes for the passengers in the cheaper carriages.²⁷⁴ The image of the working-class members of Institutes and the founders of those Institutes being different classes of passenger on the same journey was a powerful one and spoke as one less obvious interpretation of the ‘social control’ narrative.²⁷⁵

²⁶⁶ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 30, House of Commons, 18 August 1838, cols 649-655.

²⁶⁷ *The Age*, 16 September 1832, p. 302.

²⁶⁸ *The Age*, 24 February 1833, p. 60.

²⁶⁹ *Routledge Dictionary of Historical Slang*, ed. By E. Partridge (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 2577.

²⁷⁰ *Punch*, 12 September 1841, p. 105.

²⁷¹ *Punch*, 18 September 1841, p. 118.

²⁷² *Punch*, 29 April 1843, p. 175.

²⁷³ *Punch*, 3 October 1846, p. 136.

²⁷⁴ *Punch*, 3 October 1846, p. 136.

²⁷⁵ More research is needed on later depictions of Mechanics’ Institutes in popular printed satire, but see ‘The Slocum Podger Mechanics’ Institute’, *Judy: or The London serio-comic journal* 6 (20 April 1870), pp.251-251.

If the satirical press mocked the institutes and those who used them, the periodicals could be more traditionally hostile, especially during the early years. As we have seen above, in the beginning, institutes played host to “liberty boys” and “revolutionaries”²⁷⁶ plotting to overthrow the existing order from the “uncongenial hole” they inhabited.²⁷⁷ Institute business was reported in language infused with political overtones and bitter class references.²⁷⁸ Supporters among the political elite took steps to warn the more vocal Institute audiences of the danger they faced from the state.²⁷⁹

Newspaper and periodical attitudes towards Institutes were different and more varied. Local newspapers reflected local priorities and attitudes. Most reported the meetings, soirées and lectures neutrally.²⁸⁰ Some reports swelled with local pride,²⁸¹ while others seethed with local tensions.²⁸² Generally speaking, however, Institutes became accepted as something that was part and parcel of the contemporary landscape.²⁸³ As noted in an earlier chapter, politics was the main thrust of newspaper reporting on Institutes for most of their early history. Occasionally, and increasingly, they were simply as vehicles for occasional news stories.

Institutes in the early years were just as likely to be lauded as a panacea for social ills in newspapers as they were condemned as hotbeds of sedition in periodicals. Such reports as came from Leamington Spa in the winter of 1838, noted that wherever institutes appeared the local crime rate fell.²⁸⁴ The power of institutes to alleviate crime and poverty had been noted already in the Midlands.²⁸⁵ In the South West of England, the socially

²⁷⁶ *John Bull*, 18 July 1825, p. 229.

²⁷⁷ *The Age*, 15 January 1826, p. 284.

²⁷⁸ *John Bull*, 11 June 1827, p. 182.

²⁷⁹ *Caledonian Mercury*, 8 December 1825, p. 2.

²⁸⁰ *Hull Packet*, 11 November 1842, p. 1; *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 23 October 1858, p. 6; *Bristol Mercury*, 2 March 1833, p. 3; *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 15 December 1850, p. 1.

²⁸¹ *Leicester Chronicle*, 23 July 1825, p. 1; *Carlisle Journal*, 18 May 1866, p. 6.

²⁸² *Leeds Intelligencer*, 18 August 1825, p. 3; *Leeds Intelligencer*, 25 August 1825, p. 3.

²⁸³ *Morning Post*, 9 July 1831, p. 1; *Preston Chronicle*, 20 August 1831, p. 1; *Morning Post*, 23 March 1843, p. 2; *Morning Post*, 14 March 1850, p. 2; *York Herald*, 20 June 1868, p. 8.

²⁸⁴ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 8 December 1838, p. 2.

²⁸⁵ *Coventry Herald*, 18 July 1825, p. 2.

civilising potential of institutes among the Cornish was lauded.²⁸⁶ Institutes were promoted as “a possible panacea to the Irish problem”²⁸⁷ and with that “problem” being associated with lack of social responsibility, moral fibre, inherent criminality and racial inferiority.²⁸⁸ Institutes were referred to as “the nucleus” of “civilisation” in coverage of Parliamentary debates about Irish issues.²⁸⁹ They were very much an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ solution to a perceived ‘Celtic’ problem. The supposed “civilising power of education” lent Institutes some reflected glory in certain quarters of the press. That the softening of such manners had been part of the point all along was never far from commentary about Institutes during the period.

Social Enterprises in Context

Mechanics’ Institutes inhabited a complex web of social and communal spaces and organisations. If we take the Freemasons, for example, we can see the veneration that Freemasons gave to figures important to the mechanics’ institutes movement such as Henry Brougham. The two organisations used each other’s physical spaces. There were other ties than these. As organisations they shared a symbolic link – one, Freemasonry, was a network of organisations where the elites of society (including local society) socialised against a backdrop of shared enlightened ideas. The other, the mechanics’ institutes, was a network of organisations where these ideas were disseminated down the social scale to the intelligent, deserving, though socially inferior, mechanic. Although the consecration of new buildings by Freemasons was by no means remarkable at this time,²⁹⁰ the blessing of the new purpose built premises of the GWR’s Swindon Mechanics’ in

²⁸⁶ *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 16 June 1837, p. 4.

²⁸⁷ E. Leaney, ‘Missionaries of Science: Provincial Lectures in Nineteenth-Century Ireland’, *Irish Historical Studies* 34, No. 135 (May 2005), pp. 266-288.

²⁸⁸ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 16, House of Commons, 4 March 1838, cols 120-94.

²⁸⁹ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 176, House of Commons, 29 June 1864, cols 449-66.

²⁹⁰ J.L. Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire: Freemasons and British Imperialism, 1717-1927* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), passim.

1854 was referred to as “unusual” by contemporary reports. Oddfellows and Foresters were in attendance alongside freemasons, and the dedication ceremony took place after a church sermon delivered by a freemason. The ceremonial unveiling of a new stained glass window in the planned community’s church was the focus of the service. The freemasons themselves were to the event by train, free of charge, in their hundreds. Proceedings were presided over by Lord Methuen, the Provincial Grand Master of Freemasons for Wiltshire²⁹¹ in front of an audience of approximately 20,000.²⁹² One of Methuen’s first acts in his tenure over the Province had been to attend a choral recital at the Swindon Institute.²⁹³ Freemasons, self-help and the Masonic veneration of Brougham came together to have “due effect upon the minds of the employed.”²⁹⁴ Daniel Gooch, the President of the Swindon Mechanics’ Institute,²⁹⁵ was also a prominent Freemason. Improvement of the individual’s economic worth to society while fostering an understanding of that economic worth – the credo of the Institutes – appears to have had common cause with the aims of contemporary Freemasonry.

Engagement with fraternal organisations was a reflection of an increasing normalisation of institutes within society as the years progressed. Mechanics’ institute gatherings and events took place in church halls in communities nationwide – church halls were not merely extensions of sacred spaces, they had served practical roles in the communities they served, including educational ones, for centuries.²⁹⁶ In many communities, especially remote rural and semi-rural locations, they were often the only publicly accessible communal space other than the local inn or tavern. Although this made them the obvious choice to host mechanics’ institutes activities in places where there was

²⁹¹ *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 18 May 1854, p. 3.

²⁹² *Bristol Mercury*, 27 May 1854, p. 2.

²⁹³ *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 8 September 1853, p. 3.

²⁹⁴ *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 25 February 1847, p. 3.

²⁹⁵ *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 25 February 1847, p. 3.

²⁹⁶ J. Lawson and H. Silver, *A Social History of Education in England* (London: Methuen, 1973), pp. 108, 187-188.

neither the means nor the demand to support fully-fledged physical structures, it also painted such activities with a distinct layer of potential social meaning.

By the end of the nineteenth century, eminent churchmen were proclaiming the resurgent social vitality and authority of the Church.²⁹⁷ Mechanics' institutes activities held on consecrated ground spoke with this authority. They were often organised by, addressed by and presided over by ministers or church elders from across denominations. Such activities melded with their surroundings to take on their social function and social function power. Shared premises and shared personnel led to shared meaning. Sessions would begin, presided over by a minister, before the lecture was delivered. Debate would follow and the session would close with thanks and another prayer. On this level, there is little to separate mechanics' institute activities on church premises from church activities such as prayer meetings and scripture study classes.

Mechanics' institutes were one of a number of organisations providing education to the working classes during the period, including Sunday Schools²⁹⁸, night schools,²⁹⁹ and the Institutes filled the gaps in learning left by the absence of a uniform education system. Attitudes towards mechanics' institutes from the rest of this sector took the form of acknowledgement of a shared interest. Where friction existed, it did not last long. This was the case with the Lyceums (founded to cater for those working families who could not afford the fees of their local Institutes) in the Manchester area.³⁰⁰ Lyceums, Athenaeums, Sunday Schools and mechanics' institutes in the vicinity were pooling resources and working towards common goals by the end of the 1830s, following a

²⁹⁷ G. Taylor, "The Social Function of the Church", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Nov. 1899), pp. 305-321.

²⁹⁸ T. W. Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture, 1780-1850* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 86-87; for contemporary discussion, 'The Author of Random Recollections, The Great Metropolis Portraits of Public Characters, &c., 'Sunday Schools and Sunday-School Institutes', *The London Saturday journal* 1.7(13 February 1841), pp.75-77 (the author is the Scottish newspaper editor James Grant (1802-1879)).

²⁹⁹ Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn*, p. 173.

³⁰⁰ *Manchester Times*, 3 November 1838.

summit meeting called by Lyceum committee members from across the district.³⁰¹ The seniority of Institutes in this context was acknowledged by the other organisations. Parliamentary debates recognised both this shared nature³⁰² as well as the primacy of institutes within it.³⁰³ Organisations established for similar purposes – such as Sir Robert Peel’s Tamworth Reading Room³⁰⁴ – were considered in the context of institutes, measured against them and found wanting; Peel’s experiment was criticised in religious quarters for not being close enough in tone to a Mechanics’ Institute, despite having similar aims and facilities.³⁰⁵ This was an evolution from earlier established church attitudes to institutes, which were either generally indifferent or overtly hostile.³⁰⁶ The acceptance of mechanics’ institutes as part of the social and moral landscape of the nation, even as new organisations for working men were established, such as the Working Men’s Club movement, had become fact.³⁰⁷ Whether or not their immediate aim of controlling the evolution of society, by controlling the working man, had succeeded, they had certainly been accepted by society in general.

Conclusion

Mechanics’ institutes were, amongst other things, exercises in social control and as such were social enterprises. Explicitly concerned with education, the institutes’ social functions rapidly expanded to include other roles in new directions. Institutes became more than just libraries, reading rooms and technical school, becoming places where young women could learn to read and write, where young men could go to broaden their

³⁰¹ *Leicester Chronicle*, 26 October 1839.

³⁰² *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 128, House of Commons, 1 July 1853, cols 1091-129.

³⁰³ *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 181, House of Commons, 23 February 1863, cols 980-4.

³⁰⁴ D. P. Delio, “John Henry Newman’s Areopagus: The Tamworth Reading Room as an Apology for the Christian Difference” (Unpublished PhD thesis, Catholic University of America, 2013), pp. 61-62.

³⁰⁵ *British Critic and Quarterly Theological Review*, volume XXX (1841), pp. 46-100.

³⁰⁶ Delio, “The Tamworth Reading Room”, pp. 61-62.

³⁰⁷ ‘Working Men’s Clubs and Institutes’, *Fraser’s magazine for town and country* 71.423 (March 1865), pp.383-395.

horizons, soak up ideas, and become more socially as well as economically productive. They could almost serve as quasi-churches and storehouses of moral guidance, places which were very much of the community they were situated in, whether that community was a town, a city, a port, a county, region, or nation. They were organisations which reflected the needs of the society around them, were bathhouses, music halls, theatres, savings banks and mortgage lenders. A penny which left the pocket of a worker and was handed over to a mechanics' institute could go towards tuition to improve job prospects. Alternatively it could help pay for a day's excursion along a new railway line in a specially commissioned train. It could pay for entry to an evening's musical entertainment or towards saving for a much wanted item or a financial emergency. It could even be part payment towards the price of that worker's own home. The mechanics' institutes were social enterprises, with a social agenda to better society one individual at a time, and in the context of their social activities can be considered the most far-reaching yet underestimated self-help movement in British history.

The mechanics' institutes have been denounced as an attempt by the middle-class to impose a social control agenda on working people in order to soften their manners, make them more productive workers and, by showing them a tightly controlled view of the world, lead them to new acceptance of their place within it. Recent scholarship has sought to distance the Institutes from this narrative. That is unfortunate. Mechanics' institutes were clearly means for social control – the evidence for this is overwhelming and the evidence for the contrary view is not persuasive. All that remains to be debated is the scale and nature of that control; this chapter has demonstrated the scale of that control to be broad and nearly all-encompassing with the nature of it stretching into every aspect of institute business and out into the wider world. The mechanics' institutes were nothing less than an attempt to manufacture men and women for a brave new industrialised world,

who would in time take their place as industrious and enfranchised – but always junior – partners in it.

Chapter 3.

MECHANICS' INSTITUTES AND CULTURE (1820–1869)

Introduction

It's far afore ceawrin' at th' alehouse aw'm sure;
It keeps a young fellow moor *manly* an' pure.
It's far afore ceawrin' awhoam ov a lump,
As ignorant o' th' world as ony owd stump.
It's far afore goin' to the theatre, too,
For aw'm certain we'n theatre-goers enoo.
What we're wantin' at present is *real sterlin' men*,
Wi' a talent for speakin' or usin' a pen,
Wi' courage to do what they know to be reet,
Noan feart o' their actions bein' browt eawt to th' leet;
It's *these* soart o' fellows we wanten to find,
Summat worth coin' *men*—great giants i' mind.
Well, weer are sich chaps to be fun' do yo' think?
Noan at th' "Q," wheer they spend o' they get upo' drink;
Yo'll ha no need o' lookin' at th' corner o' th' street,
But go th' Mechanics some Setterday neet.¹

Samuel Laycock was one of a group of poets operating in the Stalybridge Institute during the later 1850s and early 1860s.² His verse, quoted above, vividly portrays a place for the provision, consumption, dissemination and sharing of culture, and the enthusiasm with which ordinary working people engaged with that environment and the cultural fare on offer. The concerns of Francis Place are echoed here in Laycock's reference to manliness, as noted in an earlier chapter Place had feared accusations of *unmanliness* brought about by his bookishness and love of learning. Samuel Laycock's approach, however, stands in opposition to Place.

Laycock's poetry described the world of the mechanics' institute in every day terms. His Institute was a place for the eloquent, the articulate, the morally upstanding,

¹ S. Laycock, *Th' Mechanics' o' Setterday Neet* (Blackpool: J. Grime, n.d.).

² Laycock, *Collected Writings*, p. xiv.

the *cultured*. Although the institutes were originally intended to serve as sites of technical instruction, with the explicit objective of making a more productive workforce, in many places they diversified into sites of culture. This chapter will examine how and why such a transformation came to pass.

Although the general historiography concerning institutes, together with the narrower histories of individual or regional examples, occasionally refers to the idea of a cultural history of the movement as a whole, such reference has been passing. The historiography of mechanics' institutes has been concerned mainly – in the works of social scientists and various political or social historians – with the movement and its activities. Cultural history lags behind. This chapter addresses that gap in the literature.

Alongside their social and political purposes was an institutional “mission” of cultural dissemination and exchange, utilising a varied range of resources to impart culture and knowledge, and thereby improve the intellectual lives and enhance the vocational efficiency of their members. There were strong links to other movements and broader trends within the cultural landscape. Through close analysis of newspaper reports and newspaper correspondence, autobiography and diaries, as well as the materials left behind by the Institutes themselves, the influence institutes had on the cultural lives and sensibilities of their members and users can itself be analysed and interpreted. The use of lectures as sources of cultural knowledge will be examined. The role of institute libraries, museums and exhibitions will be studied.

Culture is at once (to paraphrase Raymond Williams) the collective ideal, the documentary output and the social life of a society.³ It is an abstraction which attempts to describe an aspect of a civilisation in terms of its collective preconceptions and priorities. It is also a term of reference which attempts to define the seemingly intangible.⁴ Culture

³. R. Williams, “The Analysis of Culture”, in J. Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), pp. 48-56.

⁴. R. Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society – Revised Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 87-93.

is a term to be understood “in the widest sense, [as being] not only ... the production of works of art, but also of political institutions, forms of social life, prohibitions and diverse constraints.”⁵ It can also be understood as a commodity, a form of capital;⁶ and the sum total of the intangible resources at an individual’s disposal. These resources include education, academic qualifications, and the manner in which individuals present themselves to the world - their speech, dress, manners, and appearance. The Dean of Ripon, Henry Erskine, speaking in the late 1850s, stated that “the great object of Mechanics’ Institutions was to promote self-culture”⁷ – to enhance all of these fluid and difficult to quantify elements of culture as personified in the individual and as institutionalised in the environment provided for them.

Cultural concerns and interests have revolutionised the study of the past. The “cultural turn” in historiography has led to the assimilation of an understanding and appreciation of culture within the broader spectrum of historical research,⁸ lending the investigative and interpretative tools of a diverse series of disciplines to the study of the past.⁹ *Culture* has not so much been the word that “broke history in half” but the word which remade history anew.¹⁰

Mechanics’ institutes encouraged cultural engagement and fostered cultural interests in individuals, while expressing institutional cultural priorities and concerns. The Institutes made a contribution to the broader culture consciousness of the world around them.

5. M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France, 1981-1982* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 176.

6. P. Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”, in J. E. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 241-258.

7. *The Institute: A Monthly Literary Journal* (Volume III) (London: Burns and Lambert, 1858), p. 116.

8. P. Jackson, “Pierre Bourdieu, the ‘Cultural Turn’ and the Practice of International History”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 34, Issue 1 (January 2008), pp. 155-181.

9. F. Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), *passim*.

10. K.L. Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating the European Conquest of Native America, 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 148.

Contemporary Manifestations of Self Culture

As the Dean of Ripon observed, the aim of mechanics' institutes was the promotion of "self-culture." Therefore, in order to properly understand institutes in their cultural aspects it is necessary to explore what their members, founders and wider society understood by the term "self-culture", what advantages that quality conveyed on an individual and collective basis, and how effective mechanics' institutes were at imparting it. This question, in essence, sits at the heart of any discussion of mechanics' institutes in a cultural context.

The early nineteenth century marked the emergence of a distinct emphasis on the individual within the wider cultural consciousness. Individual rights, responsibilities and freedoms became more sharply delineated and defined. As the first quarter of the century gave way to the second, a combination of factors arising from moral and social concerns for the welfare of ordinary working people made themselves increasingly evident.

It has been demonstrated in a previous chapter how the self-help mythos of institutes ran through the social fabric of their daily operation. Whether through banking, or the taking of exams, or the learning of new skills – self-help, self-improvement and self-sufficiency were the objectives. However all of those qualities and behaviours are the by-product of increased literacy,¹¹ and mechanics' institutes were above all else sites of *communal* celebration in the self-culture which was brought about through the civilising power of the written word. As is apparent from studies of working-class biography such as David Vincent's, there was an impulse to obtain an education, which was central to the mechanics' institute movement, often there was a "life-long struggle to acquire books".¹²

^{11.} M. Byram, "Language Awareness and (Critical) Cultural Awareness – Relationships, Comparisons and Contrasts", *Language Awareness*, vol. 21, issue 1-2 (February-May 2012), pp. 5-14.

¹² Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p. 113.

Mechanics' Institutes and the Culture of Autobiography

One measure of the cultural impact of the mechanics' institutes is the diaries and autobiographies left behind by their members. These sources are important not just for what these authors say, but how they say it. They are individual accounts of adventures in self-culture and intellectual exploration. Taking the diary of John O'Neill (1830-1875), a weaver who was involved in trade unionism during the early 1860s in Low Moor, Clitheroe, as a starting point, it is possible to demonstrate how the writings of individuals who interacted with Institutes were influenced by them on a cultural level. His diary progresses noticeably in the complexity of its commentary – from small entries on topics of day to day life such as the weather to examination and reflection on the conduct of the American Civil War or the complexities of international affairs – following O'Neill's joining his local mechanics' institute in early December 1861.¹³ Immediately before joining, he noted the lessening of hours in the working day simply as a fact, yet within two months he was able to relate the reduction in hours to the wider complexities of international trade, commenting that prospects at work were impacted by threatened war with America. That threat, in turn, led to uncertainties in the cotton supply and increased job insecurity for weavers such as O'Neill.¹⁴ By 1864 he was an active committee member,¹⁵ discussing American events in even deeper detail as well as committing his wider reflections on international politics to the page: affairs in Denmark, Austria, Prussia and Poland were all recounted and analysed.¹⁶ Even the language had evolved; discussion

^{13.} John Ward (O'Neill) Weaver, cited in J. Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), pp. 80-89.

^{14.} Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p. 81.

^{15.} *The Preston Guardian*, 12 September 1863, p. 7.

^{16.} Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p. 85.

of the slowdown in trade in 1861 – “Bad trade... will be worse than ever, as we will get no cotton from [America]” – became “there is a complete stagnation in trade” by 1864.¹⁷

Other members of mechanics’ institutes elsewhere showed signs of similar change. Alexander Bain (1818-1903) was the son of an impoverished weaver from the North East of Scotland. He later became one of the founders of the modern science of psychology. His autobiography, relates how he first engaged with the scientific material in his local mechanics’ institute at the age of fourteen.¹⁸ He made good use of its library, working through the collected works of Euclid in less than three weeks¹⁹ before progressing to differential calculus and Sir Isaac Newton’s *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*²⁰ as well as astronomy, cosmology, constructive criticism of poetry and practical economics.²¹ He went on to teach at that same institute,²² later reflecting on his own instruction and learning opportunities, stating that it had made “a most important contribution” to his life.²³

Thomas Cooper (1805-1892), the Chartist lecturer, also attended an institute, and made reference to his experiences in his autobiography. He took instruction in vocational subjects,²⁴ as well as drawing, the classics and languages. Like Bain, he progressed to teaching his own classes at the institute and was also instrumental in the launching of a choral musical society.²⁵ Within months this was giving recitals of pieces by composers such as George Frederic Handel.²⁶ Cooper’s autobiography explicitly stated that the

17. Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p. 87.

18. A. Bain, *Autobiography* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1904), p. 16.

19. Bain, *Autobiography*, pp. 16-18.

20. Bain, *Autobiography*, pp. 19-20.

21. Bain, *Autobiography*, pp. 26-28.

22. Bain, *Autobiography*, pp. 44.

23. Bain, *Autobiography*, p. 28.

24. T. Kelly, *George Birkbeck: Pioneer of Adult Education* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1957), p. 56-57; S. Shapin and B. Barnes, “Science, Nature and Control: Interpreting Mechanics’ Institutes”, *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (February 1977), pp. 31-74; J. Laurent, “Science, Society and Politics in Late Nineteenth-Century England: A Further Look at Mechanics’ Institutes”, *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (November 1984), pp. 585-619.

25. T. Cooper, *The Life of Thomas Cooper, Written by Himself* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876), pp. 103-108.

26. *The Sheffield Independent, and Yorkshire and Derbyshire Advertiser*, 27 September 1834, p. 2.

mechanics' institute facilities and opportunities helped further his career²⁷ and allowed him to make "acquaintance with persons of influence to whom I might otherwise have remained unknown."²⁸

Other working-class autobiographies also afford a means to explore the contribution made by institutes to the cultural lives of individuals. This can be done by comparing examples known to be associated with institutes with those who were not. Using Emma Griffin's recent study of working-class autobiography as a starting point, it is possible to gain insight into institute member autobiographies as a proportion of the wider body of surviving working-class autobiographies.

Griffin's sample consists of over 350 autobiographies and constitutes the most comprehensive survey of surviving working-class autobiography.²⁹ Around one in seven of these (47 in total) made reference to an involvement with adult self-education, with the majority of these coming from the second decade of the nineteenth century onwards.³⁰ Twelve of these 47 examples mention involvement with mechanics' institutes.³¹ Around a quarter of surviving working-class autobiographies where the author refers to some kind of adult education, therefore, were associated with mechanics' institutes. The combined institute membership figures for the whole of Great Britain by 1851 was approximately 110,000 people.³² This can be compared to Sunday School adult scholar figures which stood at around 600,000 learners in the same period.³³ Adult elementary school learners, meanwhile, numbered just over 3,000 and night school students numbered around 45,000.³⁴ Institute members made up just under 15% of working adults in the process of

27. Cooper, *Life*, p. 106.

28. Cooper, *Life*, p. 104.

29. E. Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn: A People's History of the Industrial Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 5.

30. Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn*, pp. 176-177.

31. Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn*, pp. 177.

32. Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 264-265.

33. T. Kelly, *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), pp. 148-149.

34. Kelly, *Adult Education*, p. 154.

educating themselves by 1851, therefore, while making up a quarter of the autobiographers.

The autobiography of Emanuel Lovekin, for example, “ungrammatically but vividly conveyed”³⁵ the author’s reflections on his past, while other working people found their writings having to be corrected by an editor before they were seen by the general reading public.³⁶ As Lovekin reflected, “Schooling was not thought very much of among the poorer people and there was but few Schools”. The writing in such autobiographies was, in general, “simple, direct, and unadorned [with a] limited vocabulary”.³⁷ This contrasts with the complex, articulate and sophisticated writing found in the autobiographies of individuals connected with mechanics’ institutes such as those already noted. Others included William Lovett, the Chartist, who in his own memoir described attending a lecture on the physiology of language given by George Birkbeck at the London Mechanics’ Institute. He recalled his having not truly understood the complexities of communication until the session “dissipated the miracle”.³⁸ The language of autobiographies and memoirs produced by mechanics’ institute was of a more sophisticated kind than those memoirs which originated elsewhere.

Members who had been through the Institute system were occasionally called upon to speak at annual general meetings, soirées, prize-givings and other social and cultural events. In this aspect, it had a function as celebration – an affirmation of mechanics’ institute teaching, learning and cultural experience – which went beyond the usual function of a lecturer or speaker as imparter of information and wielder of symbolic

³⁵. J. Humphries, “‘Because They Are Too Menny...’: Children, Mothers and Fertility Decline – The Evidence from Working-Class Autobiographies of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries”, in A. Janssens (ed.), *Gendering the Fertility Decline in the Western World* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 132.

³⁶. W. Tayler, *The Diary of William Tayler, Footman, 1837*, D. Wise (ed.) (London: St. Marylebone Society Publications Group, 1962), passim.

³⁷. Burnett, *Useful Toil*, pp. xiii-ix; p.290 for quotation from Lovekin on schooling.

³⁸. W. Lovett, *Life and Struggles of William Lovett in his Pursuit of Bread, Knowledge and Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920), p. 36.

power over the audience.³⁹ In such instances, the speaker was at one with the audience as one of their own.

In 1849, for example, when John Glass addressed the Etherley Mechanics' Institute in County Durham at the request of the committee there, he was speaking in this capacity, having taken advantage of the facilities at nearby Shildon as there was no Institute in Etherley at the time.⁴⁰ His message, as we have noted above, was one of progressive self-help and the ongoing acquisition of knowledge – “learning has a beginning but it has no end”⁴¹ – combined with a call for acceptance of one's station in life, especially directed at working-people, preaching that “it is not to expected that we can all rise to be Kings and Queens, and lords and ladies; society is composed of different ranks.”⁴²

Culture, Discipline, Control – New Swindon Mechanics' Institute

Affirmation of working-class self-improvement through culture was a key element of mechanics' institutes from the outset. The desire for a workforce skilled in the latest industrial and technological advances and practices was an early driver and remained a motivation throughout the lifetime of the institutes.⁴³ There was also a parallel desire to shape the working classes into law-abiding, teetotal, morally-upstanding and productive members of society.⁴⁴ These impulses were guided by “manifold relations of power” – their promoters saw improvement opportunities provided through carefully selected and limited means and the exercise of authority through the controlled dissemination of knowledge.⁴⁵ The realities and objectives of social control in mechanics' institute meant

^{39.} P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 111.

^{40.} Glass, *Address*, pp. 3-4.

^{41.} Glass, *Address*, p. 4.

^{42.} Glass, *Address*, p. 7.

^{43.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 56.

^{44.} Shapin and Barnes, “Science, Nature and Control”, pp. 31-74.

^{45.} M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), passim, especially p. 77-108.

that cultural offerings were guided towards an ideal just as much as classroom lessons and essay questions.⁴⁶ Everything about institutes was selected, appointed, vetted, approved and monitored by their controllers and backers, a culture of control establishing control through the selection and the dissemination of ‘approved’ culture.⁴⁷

The “steam intellect” which the Institutes fostered was a cultural construct dictated from above.⁴⁸ As noted in an earlier chapter, the Great Western Railway created an institute in the planned town of New Swindon and made it the social hub of the community from the 1840s. The very nature of an institute – structured, timetabled, committee- run and governed by a set of rules and orders – lent itself to the exercise of disciplinary and institutional, power.⁴⁹ That power was exercised in part through the provision of cultural pursuits.

The rationale behind the carefully selected cultural programme of the New Swindon Mechanics’ Institute was to engineer a healthier, happier, more engaged and more productive worker.⁵⁰ “Innocent recreation with solid instruction” was the intention.⁵¹ Senior staff controlled the management of the Institute and ensured the strictly controlled cultural fare met the approval of the owners. The mechanics’ institute in the town served as the cultural centre of a built-to-order community.⁵²

Control of cultural pursuits demonstrated an acknowledgement and understanding of their importance to the intellectual welfare of members. The hand that sought to guide and instruct fed the imagination a carefully vetted diet of cultural fare in the process. Excursions such as the one to Oxford in the summer of 1848, which took the form of a

46. I. Inkster, “The Context of Steam Intellect in Britain (to 1851)”, in I. Inkster (ed.), *The Steam Intellect Societies: Essays on Culture, Education and Industry c. 1820-1914* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham Press, 1985), p. 6.

47. Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism*, p. 47.

48. Inkster, “Context of Steam Intellect”, passim.

49. M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1977), pp. 149-155, 170-176.

50. Crittall, “Swindon”, pp. 104-119.

51. *Reading Mercury*, 1 February 1851, p. 2.

52. C. Turner, “Politics in Mechanics’ Institutes, 1820-1850: A Study in Conflict” (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 1980), pp. 80-84.

guided tour of all the major colleges plus a walk around the Bodleian Library, allowed the “respectable” and “orderly” members and their families contact with the manifestations of high culture and learning. The tour and mass contact with culture was a means to an end, the improvement of working-class sensibilities through exposure to ideas – to poetry, drama and artworks – the objective.⁵³ The members were at all times being judged against the ideal model employee and community member which the Institute was established to create. Through exposure to such cultural material as the University of Oxford and the Bodleian Library, working people were being invited to share in the intellectual bounty of the ages in a whole new way.

Improvement through exposure to intellectual culture was closely related to contemporary cultures of morality. Workers were lectured on the moral imperative concerning work and duty, with the goal being the fostering of a culture of responsibility to both self and community.⁵⁴ Members who attended plays and theatrical recitals were more likely to be evangelised on the relative rewards of engagement with such a culture than they were to be entertained for the sake of it.⁵⁵ Such a culture of concern for the condition of collective morals was reinforced at every turn by public pronouncements in moralising tones.⁵⁶ Idealised specimens of virtue – such as aristocrats, nobles and royalty – were celebrated, with the goal being the promotion of a culture of emulation.⁵⁷

Male-dominated homosocial culture in the context of mechanics’ institutes can be demonstrated by examining the example of Swindon. Sports and “manly games” in the open air were followed by communal bathing “for the preservation of health.” Other examples from elsewhere indicate that such an attitude was commonplace among Institutes generally.⁵⁸ The Swindon Institute had a troop of players made up of members

^{53.} *Oxford Journal*, 17 June 1848, p. 3.

^{54.} *Swindon Advertiser*, 8 February 1864, p. 2.

^{55.} *Reading Mercury*, 31 October 1857, p. 4.

^{56.} *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 15 April 1847, p. 3.

^{57.} *Swindon Advertiser*, 6 February 1865, p. 3.

^{58.} *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 15 April 1847, p. 3.

who performed choral, dance and amateur dramatics material. Such cultural awareness and performance skills, learned and developed in the classroom, culminated in recitals before paying audiences. All such classes had among the highest and most consistent uptake and student retention rate on the curriculum.⁵⁹

Cultures of Language and Literacy in Mechanics' Institutes

The industrial revolution called for a revolution in language and literacy so that those who participated in the process of mechanisation and industrialisation could learn about it, describe it and understand it. The place of the working man within the new mechanical economy was changing.⁶⁰ Essay questions, set in competitions or examinations at Institutes, such as “Does the End ever justify the Means?”, “Is early marriage desirable or injurious?” and “Does morality increase with civilisation?”, published by the Yorkshire Union of Institutes in 1865 and adopted widely across the Institute network,⁶¹ suggest that the working-man was being encouraged to challenge existing truths – to exercise individual judgement. The rationale behind the attempt to create a culture of moral sensibility and reflection in mechanics' institutes, one which could be tested by such questions, becomes apparent once broader issues are considered.

Mechanics' institutes were locations where technical instruction was provided for the better functioning of a machine economy. Contemporary commentators noted the pace of change and the plethora of new inventions and techniques which were entering the workplace.⁶² That workplace was becoming a formal, structured, time-disciplined

^{59.} *Swindon Advertiser*, 6 February 1865, p. 3.

^{60.} M.P. Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, p. 124.

^{61.} *The Report of the Yorkshire Union of Mechanics' Institutes, Read at the Twenty-Fifth Annual Meeting* (Leeds: E. Baines and Sons, 1865), pp. 22-25.

^{62.} M. Berg and P. Hudson, “Rehabilitating the Industrial Revolution”, *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 45, No.1 (Feb., 1992), p. 26.

environment.⁶³ This in turn had an impact on language. By changing the language, technology changed the culture of the civilisation which used it. Different sub-cultures required different terminologies in order to function in the new industrial world – the mechanic was a member of just one such subculture, noted to be distinct from the engineer or philosopher.⁶⁴ As such, he had his own dialect, tailored to the demands and needs of his vocation, which was inherently technical in nature. Mechanics’ institutes both adopted and transmitted this specialist language for the needs of the new mechanised order of things.⁶⁵

Opponents of mechanisation deliberately chose not to use its terminology in their agitations, so comprehensive was the rejection of technology.⁶⁶ The Luddite North of England was home to the most virulent rejections of mechanics’ institutes, the Wakefield Institute for example being condemned in the local newspapers by staff and correspondents alike in the 1820s. The institute and its members were subjected to steadily increasing attacks over time, with attempts at appeasement only serving to fan the flames of hostility – irrational paranoia accused the Institute committee of fostering a “hidden darkness” at the heart of the community, with a culture of technological advancement being taken as the visible manifestation of a secret mechanical culture which was anti-Christian in form and objective.⁶⁷ The same kinds of apocalyptic anti-technology rhetoric was used in the South West of England when the Devonport Mechanics’ Institute committee issued a public challenge to the “flat earth” theory and its adherents in the mid-Victorian era – the respective language usage of either side sharply

^{63.} B. Godfrey and J. Cox, *Policing the Factory: Theft, Private Policing and the Law in Modern England* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 64.

^{64.} M. Berg, *The Machinery Question and the Making of Political Economy, 1815-1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 154.

^{65.} Berg, *The Machinery Question*, p. 228.

^{66.} Berg, *The Machinery Question*, p. 239.

^{67.} *Leeds Intelligencer*, 8th September 1825, p. 3.

contrasting between reasoned and almost rabid.⁶⁸ Institutes, as sites where exposure to technological culture took place, found themselves being criticised by the religiously conservative for being unholy, their “secret conveniences of esoteric discourse” coming under suspicion and being treated with distrust.⁶⁹

Mechanics’ Institutes, Literature, Learning and Libraries

Mechanics’ institutes libraries were often the only affordable library in a working-class community.⁷⁰ They were sophisticated operations, able to track circulations and borrowings of volumes with accuracy,⁷¹ suggestive of a cataloguing system advanced for the period.⁷²

A well-developed system of loans governed by strict rules, meticulous tracking of borrowings and procedural fines for non-compliance was in place at Bradford by 1836,⁷³ and a similar system operated in the library of the London Mechanics’ Institute by 1837.⁷⁴ A well-structured catalogue of volumes such as that found in Devonport Mechanics’ Institute mid-century (3, 266 volumes sub-divided by category) was normal.⁷⁵ Gateshead used a catalogue organised along thematic lines.⁷⁶ The organisational efficiency of mechanics’ institutes,⁷⁷ rather than the holdings, was the reason why their libraries evolved into the nuclei of free public libraries across Britain towards the end of the

^{68.} D. R. Watson, “The Battle of Plymouth Hoe” (Unpublished MRes thesis, University of Plymouth, 2012), pp. 30-35, 45-46.

^{69.} M. Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 39.

^{70.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 218.

^{71.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 238-240.

^{72.} P. Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge, Volume II: From the Encyclopedie to Wikipedia* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), p. 46.

^{73.} *A Catalogue of the Library of the Bradford Mechanics’ Institute; or, Society for the Acquisition of Useful Knowledge, with The Rules of the Institute* (Bradford: Keighley, 1836), pp. xi-xii.

^{74.} *A Catalogue of Books in the Library of the London Mechanics’ Institution* (London: J. Barker, 1837), passim.

^{75.} M.I. Lattimore, “The History of the Libraries of Plymouth to 1914: A Study of the Library Developments in the Three Towns of Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse which Amalgamated into Plymouth in 1914” (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1982), p. 244.

^{76.} *The Arranged Catalogue of the Library of the Mechanics’ Institute, or Literary and Scientific Society of the Borough of Gateshead* (Gateshead: William Douglas, 1842), passim.

^{77.} Bradford Library Catalogue, passim.

century.⁷⁸ The importance and primacy of libraries to members of the mechanics' institutes is borne out by the testimony of members – their autobiographies are full of the names of books and the authors of those books, which provide a glimpse into the library holdings, how the books were borrowed, how they were read and how the information was assimilated.

Even during the fluctuations in fortunes of the institutes nationwide⁷⁹ as a result of wider economic forces,⁸⁰ with a corresponding oscillation in membership numbers across many institutes,⁸¹ library lending remained broadly static.⁸² Therefore, even though there were at times fewer members, they were borrowing proportionately more books.

In 1839, the London headquarters of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge⁸³ issued *A Manual for Mechanics' Institutions* by Baldwin Francis Duppa which laid out, in detail, the ideal library catalogue for the ideal Institute.⁸⁴ The catalogue was structured by category: Moral / Political Philosophy and Law; History; Gardening and Botany; Political Economy; Anatomy, Physiology and Medicine; Education; Natural History; Voyages and Travels; Geology and Geography; Fine Arts; Fiction; Poetry;

78. Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 274-275. Kelly notes examples from Cumberland to Dorset, as well as on the North East coast, Lancashire, the Midlands, Scotland and the Home Counties. See Lattimore, 'Libraries of Plymouth', passim for the example in Devonport, Plymouth and Stonehouse. Devonport Mechanics' Institute in particular formed the basis of the free library there, as well as bequeathing the town its museum, as noted in Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 275n.

79. Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 148, 207, 224-225.

80. A. Andreades, *History of the Bank of England, 1640-1903* (Fourth Edition) (Abingdon: Frank Cass, 1966), pp. 248-253.

81. Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 207-209, 258-259.

82. Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 266; Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, pp. 70-73, 152-153, 300 (in Manchester, the trend in library books loaned is actually one of a steady increase, irrespective of fluctuations in membership numbers); "Report from the Select Committee on Public Libraries; Together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence and Appendix", *PP*, 1849, Vol. XVII, No. 548,), p. 153. Where borrowings are said to be diminishing, this is due to shortcomings in the range of books on offer rather than falling membership. Indeed, the library is, even by this time, stated to be the main attraction in many Mechanics' Institutes.

83. Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 160-162; Kelly, *Adult Education*, p. 164; R. D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 77.

84. B.F. Duppa, *A Manual for Mechanics' Institutions* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman, 1839), pp. 169-195.

Natural Philosophy, Mathematics and Theoretical Mechanics; Manufacturing, Civil Engineering, Handicrafts and Practical Mechanics; Agriculture and Miscellaneous (which on inspection was a primarily reference category including dictionaries, compendiums of Acts of Parliament, etc). Altogether, the suggested starter catalogue ran to 480 volumes.

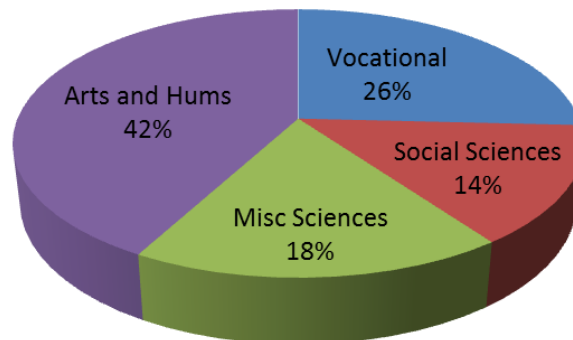
A comparison of mechanics' institutes' book catalogues reveals insights into the wider cultural landscape of mechanics' institutes. In order to ensure parity across a sample of libraries, however, a categorisation of the texts into broadly modern subject areas is required. This approach also assists with ease of reference. The selected categories – Arts and Humanities; Social Sciences; Vocational Sciences and Miscellaneous (or 'popular') Sciences – are familiar to the modern experience and assist with the interpretation of the data.⁸⁵

Removing miscellaneous reference works from the equation to arrive at a figure of 442 core suggested books, it is possible to express the relative subject area proportions as shown in the table below.⁸⁶

^{85.} Grouped as follows: ARTS & HUMANITIES – History, Voyages and Travels (as works of literature), Fine Arts, Fiction and Poetry; SOCIAL SCIENCES – Moral / Political Philosophy, Metaphysics and Law, Political Economy and Education; VOCATIONAL SCIENCES – Natural Philosophy, Mathematics and Theoretical Mechanics, Manufacturing, Civil Engineering and Practical Mechanics and Agriculture (as Mechanics' Institutes existed in rural as well as urban settings); MISCELLANEOUS SCIENCES – Gardening / Botany, Anatomy / Physiology / Medicine, Natural History and Geology / Geography.

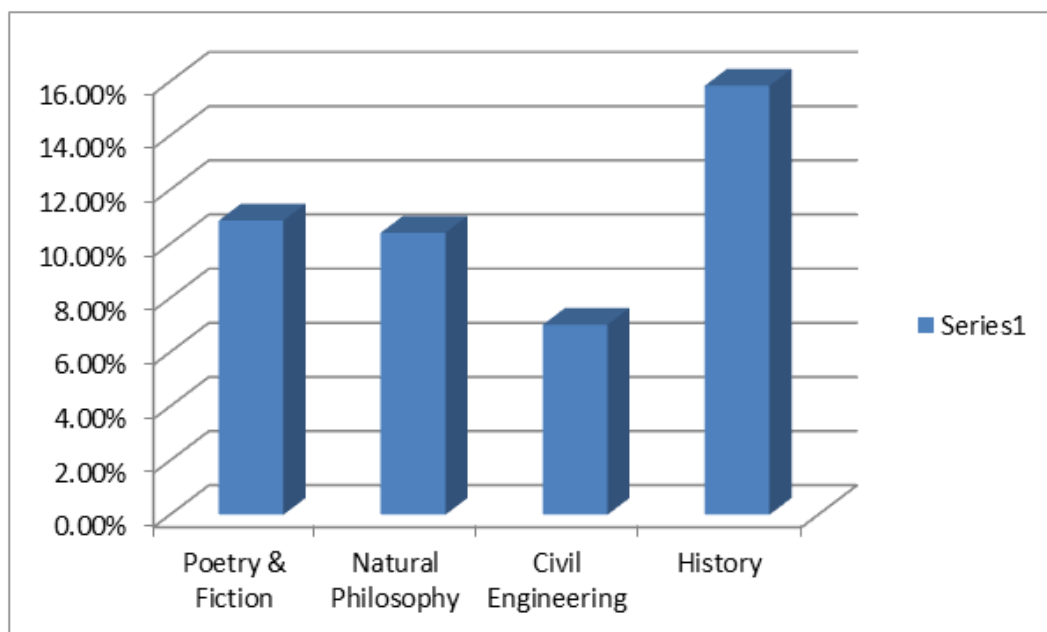
^{86.} See Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 88-89 for a reproduction of the 'Rules and Orders of the London Mechanics' Institute', including Article 1 which explicitly dedicates the Institute to the "instruction of Members in the principles of the Arts they practise" in the workplace. See also newspaper debates from the very beginning of the Mechanics' Institutes movement, such as *The Morning Post*, 11 October 1823, p. 4, which set out in no uncertain terms the primarily vocational mission of the Institutes.

B.F. Duppa, *Manual*, Ideal Library Composition by Subject Area



**Table 3. Recommended Library Holdings by Subject Area as Percentage
of the Total**

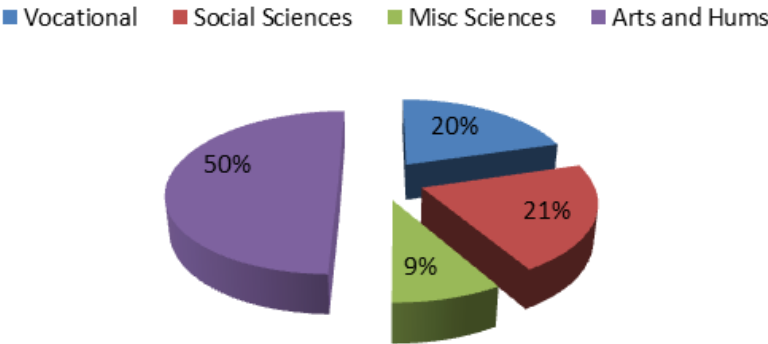
A sample of individual subjects with significant numbers of volumes is given below:



**Table 4. Suggested Major Holdings by Individual Subject (from B.F. Duppa,
Manual) as a Percentage of the Total**

Although on the surface of things the ideal mechanics' institute library *was* predominantly scientific in a manner of speaking, by a combined proportion of 57.92% to 42.08%, this in no way changes the fact that for an avowedly scientific, mechanical, technical, *vocational*, enterprise, the model mechanics' institute, as suggested by the London operation certainly, had an unmistakeable bent towards the Arts and Humanities. When the focus turns to the London Mechanics' Institute itself, the proportions are broadly similar.⁸⁷

London Mechanics' Institute Library Holdings by Subject Area



**Table 5. London Mechanics' Institute Library Holdings by Subject Area as
Percentage of the Total**

Devonport Mechanics' Institute's library of over 3, 200 volumes by 1852, was arranged into sections and headings similar to those proposed by Baldwin Duppa, for example 'Voyages and Travels', and also 'Moral and Political Philosophy'.⁸⁸

There are thematic similarities in book holdings across the movement. Using Lattimore's raw figures⁸⁹ as the basis for further analysis, in Devonport, the following values per classification are found:

^{87.} *London Library Catalogue*, pp. 1-74.
^{88.} Lattimore, 'Libraries of Plymouth', p. 244.
^{89.} Lattimore, 'Libraries of Plymouth', p. 244.

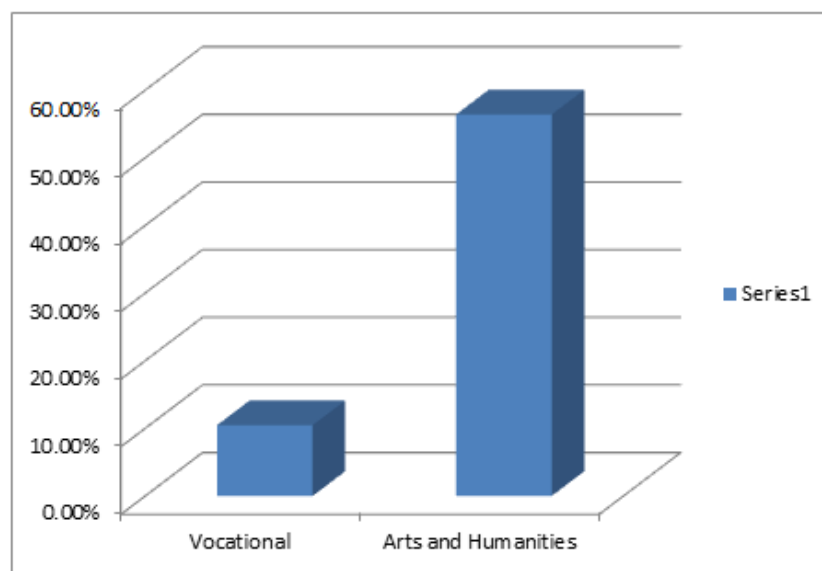


Table 6. Comparison of Library Holdings in Devonport Mechanics' Institute Library as a Percentage of the Total

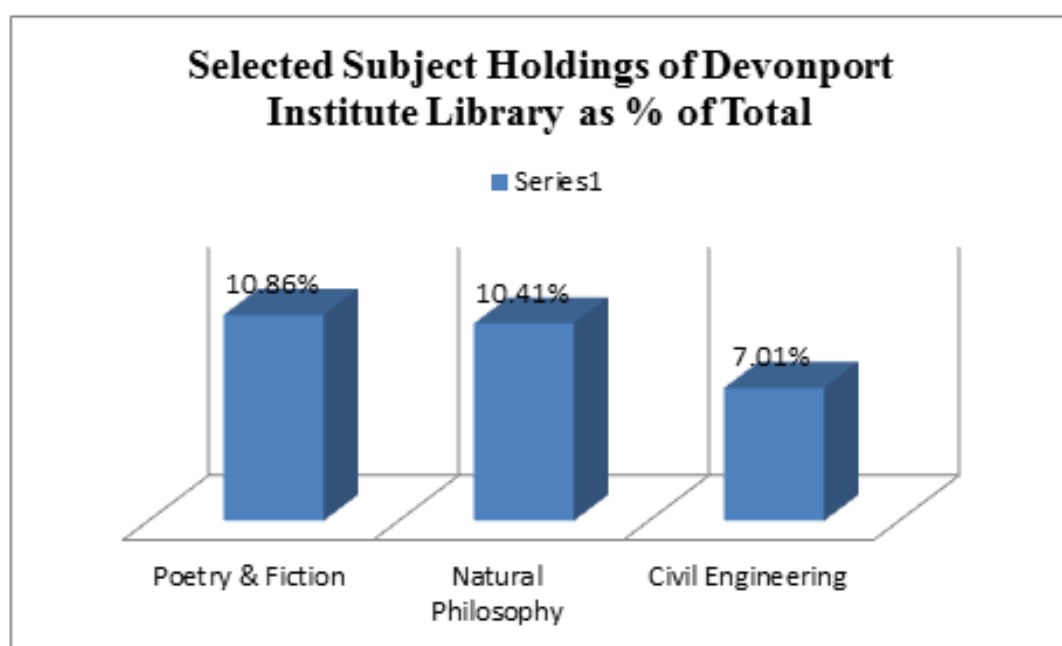


Table 7. Selected Single Subjects in Devonport Mechanics' Institute Library as a Percentage of Total

Despite being situated in close proximity to a large naval base and with a strong tradition of marine scientific, engineering and technical expertise⁹⁰ (when the Royal

⁹⁰. A. Kennerley, *The Making of the University of Plymouth* (Plymouth: University of Plymouth Press, 2000), p. 33.

Society of the Arts organised examinations in science in 1856,⁹¹ for example, the Institute in Devonport became the only place in Devon and Cornwall to offer those exams.⁹²) Devonport Mechanics' Institute library also had a strong artistic element, just like the London example.

The Bradford Mechanics' Institute library catalogue (1836) was far more complex than the later Duppa publication recommended. Whereas the Duppa scheme compiles various areas into composite categories, the Bradford system involved breaking down the larger categories into their constituent parts; for example, whereas Duppa treated Natural History as an overall category, Bradford used subsets of Miscellaneous Natural History, Conchology, Ichthyology, Ornithology, Zoology, etc. This tendency is apparent throughout the whole catalogue.⁹³ Arts and Humanities subjects were well represented in the Bradford collection in 1836:

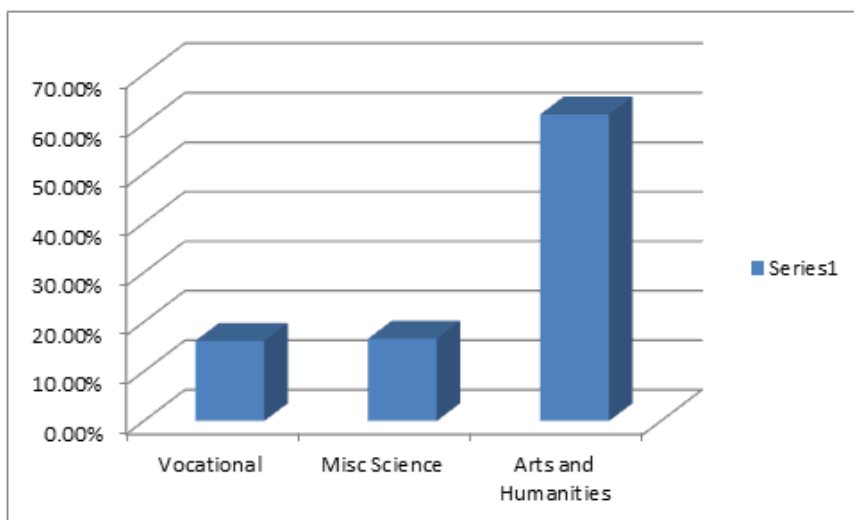


Table 8. Comparison of Library Holdings in Bradford Mechanics' Institute
Library as a Percentage of the Total

⁹¹. Kelly, *History of Adult Education*, p. 197.

⁹². T.J. Bickford and D. Hole, "Technical Colleges in the 'Three Towns'", in A. Kennerley (ed.), *Notes on the History of Post-school Education in the 'Three Towns', 1825-1975* (Plymouth: Plymouth Polytechnic Learning Resources Centre, 1974), p. 7.

⁹³. *Bradford Library Catalogue*, pp. 1-59.

History titles alone, at 31.8% overall, were far larger than the entire stock of Vocational Science works. Fiction, such as there was, tended to take the form of translated versions of classical literature with a smattering of general fictional material thrown in (this was just under 6%, overall). This may well have had something to do with the high price of new novels, indeed of new books generally.⁹⁴

The Gateshead Mechanics’ Institute Library (1842) catalogue by comparison, bears a resemblance to the Duppa model. The categories bear almost identical names and the numerical order is almost exactly the same.⁹⁵ Analysis of the proportions of holdings reveals the following:

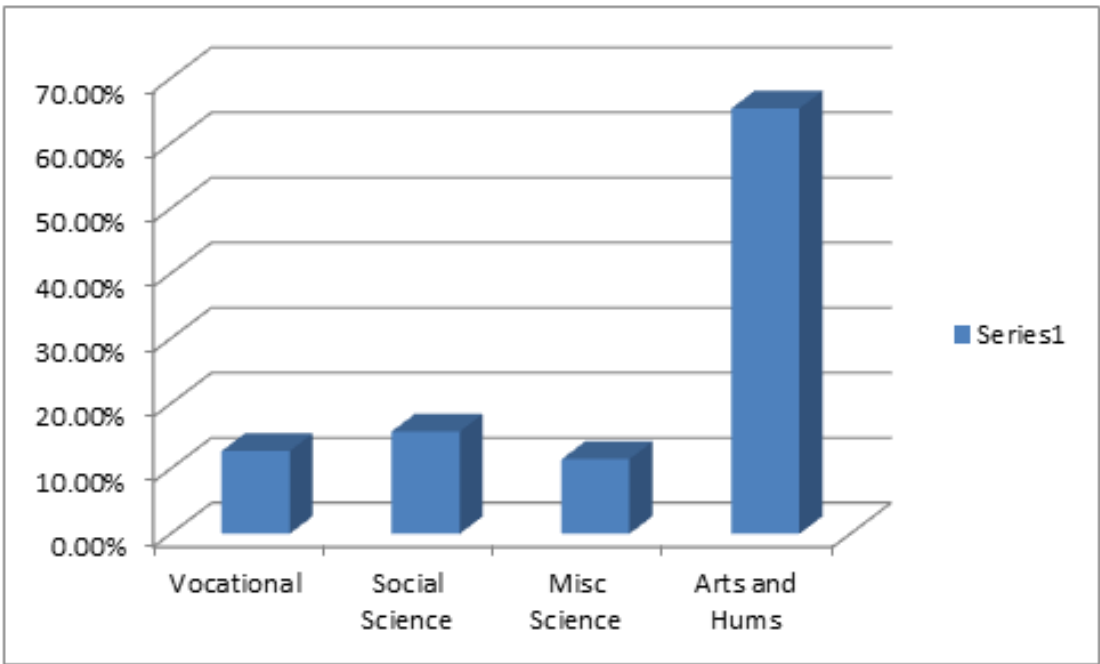


Table 9. Comparison of Library Holdings in Gateshead Mechanics’ Institute Library as a Percentage of the Total

⁹⁴. I. Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation in English Retailing, 1700-1850: Narratives of Consumption* (London: Ashgate, 2014), p. 104.
⁹⁵. *Gateshead Library Catalogue*, pp. 21-40.

History is again the single largest subject by volume of books, at just over 26 % of all material available to borrowers. Again, there is little in the way of general fiction, with most of the non-factual material comprising ‘Poetry and Plays’ and making up 13.20%.

In nearly every institute with a complete surviving record of library book holdings, therefore, the overarching tendency towards providing book was providing material that was less technical, vocational and practical, than it was artistic, creative and intellectual. Many would have been more accurately named “Intellectual Institutes” instead.

Borrowings varied from the low (such as in Bristol, where 1,100 books had a total circulation of 1,050 per year by mid-century) to the high (for instance Hanley in Staffordshire, where the 280 members borrowed an average of 128 books each per year, and Stourbridge in the West Midlands where the average member borrowed 24 books per year in the same period).⁹⁶ These differences expose regional variation. It can be estimated from available data that in 1851 in England alone, the 97,000 or so mechanics’ institutes members⁹⁷ had access to some 65, 5000 volumes⁹⁸ and borrowed 182, 0000 items.⁹⁹ That allows calculation of an average of nineteen books per year per member, rounding up. Considering that Baldwin Duppa’s *Manual* suggested a limit of one book at a time to be borrowed per member¹⁰⁰ and that this rule seems to have been adhered to fairly universally if the case studies are a representative sample,¹⁰¹ this is not as low a figure as it might first appear. When the statistics and the relative ratios are considered, the result is strongly suggestive of an – at the very least – unparalleled opportunity to

^{96.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 240.

^{97.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 265.

^{98.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 267.

^{99.} Altick, *English Common Reader*, p. 198.

^{100.} Duppa, *Manual*, p. 164.

^{101.} *Gateshead Library Catalogue*, p. 19; *Bradford Library Catalogue*, p. xii.

enhance the cultural sensibilities and individual sense of self-culture: an opportunity which was availed of by thousands of people every year.

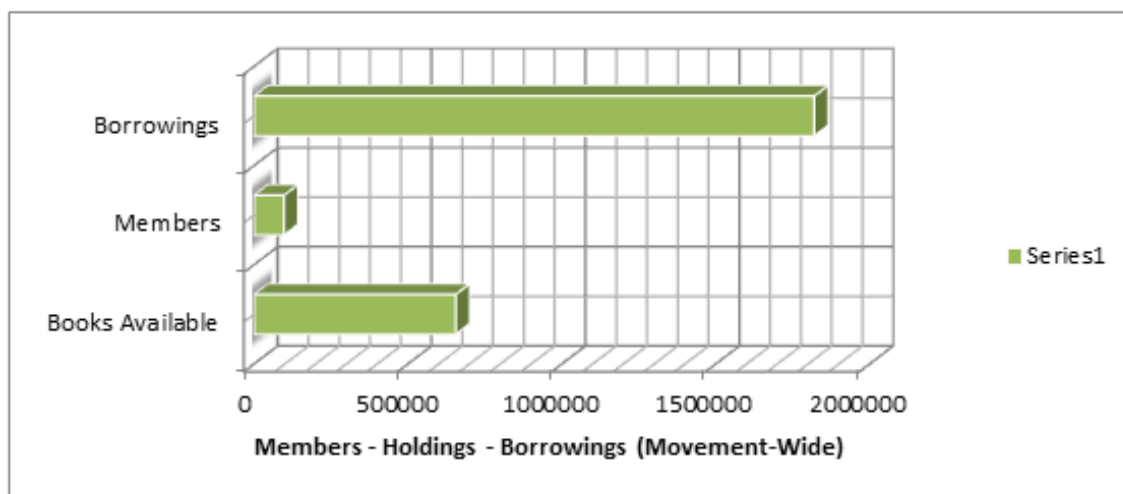


Table 10. The Relationship between Members, Library Holdings and Book Borrowing

The membership figure cited also includes honorary members, often contributors of books themselves or with the resources to buy them, who would not need the services of the library. It is therefore logical to assume that the actual average books borrowed per member per year was a much higher figure. The reading culture of mechanics' institutes went beyond the needs of vocational education from the beginning – library holdings and borrowing patterns demonstrate an engagement with the culture of working-class literacy which was much more nuanced than that.

The Culture of the Novel I: The Mechanics' Institute as Plot Device

Mechanics' institutes provided plot devices for books as well as providing facilities for borrowing them. One such novel was *Vivian Grey* by Benjamin Disraeli, published in 1826. The institutes were depicted as something transient, a phenomenon of stable

economic conditions.¹⁰² This is contrasted with the historian and social commentator Thomas Carlyle who, a decade later, declared that the opening of the first Mechanics' Institute would come to outshine the victory at the battle of Waterloo.¹⁰³ Institutes subsequently became plot devices in their own right. *Abbeychurch: or, Self Control and Self Conceit* by Charlotte Yonge (published in 1844) took an institute as a central plot thread – the main character of Lizzie ventured there regularly against the wishes of her father, an Anglican clergyman, causing some scandal in the community.¹⁰⁴ The generational and gendered friction regarding education, and the acquisition of what are, to the father's mind, controversial ideas are notable here – *Abbeychurch* was Yonge's first novel and she was, primarily, an author of historical novels with a keen interest in history as a subject.¹⁰⁵ It is plausible that Yonge was recreating a discourse she had witnessed in real life about these institutes, "black", "bad", and replete with "follies and mischiefs" as they were.¹⁰⁶ Recent scholarship has argued that Yonge's literary works are valuable as a transmitter of information about social and cultural conditions.¹⁰⁷

The late 1840s and the 1850s saw further examples of representations of institutes in contemporary literature, in terms of volume. Disraeli reversed his earlier scorn by having the Marquis of Hampshire sponsor an Institute in *Tancred* (1847).¹⁰⁸ The local institute plays host to "intelligent mechanics" who deserve the right to vote in William Thackeray's *Pendennis* (1850).¹⁰⁹ Mary Jennings, the blind friend of the eponymous heroine in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) earns a living singing along with the

^{102.} B. Disraeli, *Vivian Grey* (London: Henry Colbourn, 1827), p. 326.

^{103.} As reported in *The Penny Satirist*, 21 April 1838, p. 3.

^{104.} C. Yonge, *Abbeychurch: or, Self Control and Self Conceit* (London: Mozley, 1848), passim.

^{105.} S. Walton, *Imagining Soldiers and Fathers in the Mid-Victorian Era: Charlotte Yonge's Models of Manliness* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 181-183.

^{106.} Yonge, *Abbeychurch*, passim.

^{107.} L. Thorne-Murphy, 'The Charity Bazaar and Women's Professionalization in Charlotte Mary Yonge's "The Daisy Chain"', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Autumn 2007), pp. 881-899.

^{108.} B. Disraeli, *Tancred* (London: Henry Colbourn, 1847), p. 62.

^{109.} W. M. Thackeray, *The History of Pendennis*, Volume II (New York: Harper, 1850), pp. 309-310.

music lecturer at her local institute to popular acclaim.¹¹⁰ This novel is regarded as a classic of social fiction, with Gaskell's own experiences and observations of life in poor industrial areas informing her author's voice.¹¹¹ She speaks of the mechanics' institute as an inclusive communal space where the neighbourhood poor go to learn and be entertained, one which is very much anchored in its poverty-stricken community. A mechanics' institute where the members were supposedly keen to "promulgate very unsound opinions" of a social and political nature, meanwhile, was the proposed target of a covert spying mission by the local landed gentry in Francis Edward Smedley's *Lewis Arundel* (1852).¹¹²

Other novels of this period relate the transformation of mechanics' institutes from novelty and scene of potential threat to existing orders and norms, to acceptance as part of the wider fabric of everyday life. The popular novelist Wilkie Collins, in 1860 for instance, depicts a wealthy benefactor donating reproductions of Raphael's *Madonna and Child* mounted on the "finest cardboard" complete with "ostentatious red-letter inscriptions" to the mechanics' institute in Carlisle.¹¹³ Since this reference occurs in a novel which can be read as a critique of the credo of self-help,¹¹⁴ and given that the institutes embodied that credo, this gift of a reproduction of sacred art – designed as much to glorify the donor as anything else – reflects a wider cynicism towards self-improvement and its backers. It also seeks, perhaps, to introduce an air of the sacred into the secular cultural space of the Institute.

In *Framley Parsonage* (1862), meanwhile, Anthony Trollope perhaps delivered an altogether different critique of self-help, by showing what it had become – his novel

¹¹⁰. E. Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1848), pp. 144, 145, 149.

¹¹¹. N. Freeland, 'The Politics of Dirt in "Mary Barton" and "Ruth"', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Autumn 2002), pp. 799-818.

¹¹². F. E. Smedley, *Lewis Arundel* (London: Virtue, Hall and Virtue, 1852), p. 33.

¹¹³. W. Collins, *The Woman in White*, vol. 2 (London: S. Low and Son, 1860), p. 6.

¹¹⁴. N. Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists: Walking the Moral Hospital* (Cranford: Associated University Presses, 1991), pp. 81-91.

featured an Institute as the scene of a rather dull lecture on the South Seas delivered by someone who has never been there, to an audience of worthies who would rather be somewhere else and who indulged in some mild heckling.¹¹⁵

The Culture of the Novel II: Mechanics' Institutes and the "Evil" of Fiction Reading

Attitudes towards the contents of mechanics' institute libraries are illustrative of wider views about reading habits and popular engagement with literary culture during the period, especially – although by no means exclusively – on their working members. Institutes have been associated in one recent study with the “consolidation of the concept of English Literature” and the fulfilment of the drive for cultural education of working people, an ideal championed by such important Victorian cultural commentators as Matthew Arnold.¹¹⁶

Any form of reading among the working classes was regarded with suspicion in some quarters, with “every new reader in the lower ranks of society [meaning] another potential victim of radical contagion.”¹¹⁷ Employers (among others) were at times vehemently opposed to working-class consumption of books.¹¹⁸ Yet it should be noted that even the most hostile opponent of the institutes accepted the need for some degree of literacy among the working classes. That critic of working-class education, the Reverend Edward William Grinfield, for instance, in his response to Henry Brougham's *Practical Observations* from 1825, fully acknowledges the importance of literacy among the working members of mechanics' institutes.¹¹⁹ Grinfield instead takes exception to the lower orders having unfettered access to books, urging that such access is controlled by

¹¹⁵. A. Trollope, *Framley Parsonage* (New York: Harper, 1862), pp. 69-74.

¹¹⁶. B. Choudhury, *English Social and Cultural History: An Introductory Guide and Glossary* (New Delhi: Prentice Hall, 2005), p. 284.

¹¹⁷. Altick, *English Common Reader*, p. 76.

¹¹⁸. Rose, *Intellectual Life*, pp. 21-24.

¹¹⁹. E. W. Grinfield, *A Reply to Mr Brougham's "Practical Observations Upon the Education of the People, Addressed to the Working Classes and their Employers"* (London: C. and J. Rivington, 1825), passim esp. p. 15.

those with “superior knowledge”¹²⁰ and only works “of a religious and moral description” together with “the most popular travels and voyages” should be provided.¹²¹ Grinfield provides a catalogue of suggested works for mechanics’ institute libraries which further emphasises these priorities¹²² and, aside from Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), works of fiction are noticeably absent. These exceptions were noted at the time for their “moral” character.¹²³

Edward Grinfield is notable among critical voices in the history of mechanics’ institutes for allowing even these works of fiction into the catalogue, for there was a strong current of opposition to the inclusion of fiction in institute libraries. This was symptomatic of a broader distaste for novels during the period, which was not confined to literary preferences of the labouring classes. This fear of the novel was motivated by concerns which were moral, psychosocial and physiological in nature. In order to better understand cultural horror and indignation towards the inclusion of fiction in the libraries of mechanics’ institutes, it is necessary to reflect on these concerns.

Victorian culture was profoundly shaped by Evangelical qualms about imaginative fiction, which had their origin in Puritan anxieties about the evils of fiction consumption.¹²⁴ This anxiety was therefore almost as old as the novel itself. Preachers and cultural commentators alike had been warning their listeners and readers of the evils of novel reading for over a century by the time the first institutes appeared. In 1713, within the epoch of the earliest accepted true novels in the English language,¹²⁵ the London

^{120.} Grinfield, *Reply*, p. 17.

^{121.} Grinfield, *Reply*, p. 28.

^{122.} Grinfield, *Reply*, pp. 33-39.

^{123.} K.G. Hall, *The Exalted Heroine and the Triumph of Order: Class, Women and Religion in the English Novel, 1740-1800* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1993), p. 74; I. Watt, *Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 164-167.

^{124.} D. Rosman, *Evangelicals and Culture* (Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 2012), pp. 137-138.

^{125.} P. R. Backscheider and C. Ingrassia, (eds.), *A Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel and Culture* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 1-8.

Independent Minister John Nesbitt¹²⁶ was preaching to the young about the evils of reading them – such activity corrupted the mind, he argued, and led to other “profane practices” in opposition to the Scriptures which were the only good and proper reading material for the literate masses.¹²⁷ Charles Churchill argued later in the same century that if as much time was spent reading fiction as reading scripture then surely society’s salvation was assured.¹²⁸ John Trusler in 1775 considered fiction a ruinous thing which insinuated itself into the minds of the unwary.¹²⁹ The Reverend Vicesimus Knox called (1781) for the “prohibition” of novels from the classroom if not more broadly from society as a whole as they had catastrophic effects on the minds of young men,¹³⁰ while someone as different from Knox as Mary Wollstonecraft considered them ruinous to mental faculties and manners in young women.¹³¹ Fiction was evil, sinful, and a particular threat to the young. Popular consumption of fiction was regarded as something not only to be avoided and warned against, and those delivering that warning marshalled scriptural references and moral exhortations in support of their case. It is against the background of this tradition of criticism of fiction and those who read it that the Institutes appeared, offering affordable, accessible reading matter to their members and risking a moral backlash in the process.

In the nineteenth century, the primary mode of anti-novel sentiment moved from cultural commentaries and sermons to newspaper articles. Fiction was “known” to cause “vexation” and “vanity” while having the effect of debauching the reader.¹³² By altering the thoughts and behaviour of readers, novels caused civil disturbance and threatened the

^{126.} J. Farooq, *Preaching in Eighteenth-Century London* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2013), p. 152.

^{127.} J. Nesbitt, *A Sermon Preached to Young Persons, April 6, 1713* (London: John Lawrence, 1713), p. 4.

^{128.} C. Churchill, *Sermons* (Publisher Unknown: Dublin, 1765), p. 123.

^{129.} J. Trusler, *The Principles of Politeness, Part II* (London: John Bell, 1775), p. 31.

^{130.} V. Knox, *Liberal Education: or a Practical Treatise on The Methods of Acquiring Useful and Polite Learning* (London: Charles Dilly, 1781), pp. 234-235.

^{131.} M. Wollstonecraft, *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1792), p. 430.

^{132.} *Manchester Mercury*, 18 January 1825, p. 3.

existing order.¹³³ People who read novels risked mental illness,¹³⁴ marital problems,¹³⁵ sleep deprivation¹³⁶ or even accidental death from being too distracted.¹³⁷ Wider social and cultural attitudes were also reflected in the newspaper coverage of legal proceedings, with the consumption of fiction being associated with the character flaws of defendants in such actions as negligence law suits,¹³⁸ adultery cases,¹³⁹ fraud trials¹⁴⁰ and prosecutions for domestic violence.¹⁴¹ Although recent scholarship claims that these attitudes towards novels started to diminish in hostility by the third decade of the nineteenth century,¹⁴² there are still references to fiction being harmful throughout the century; blamed for general poor health (even by medical experts),¹⁴³ mental illness,¹⁴⁴ suicide¹⁴⁵ and murder.¹⁴⁶ The novel as a form of entertainment was considered unmanly.¹⁴⁷ Attitudes towards fiction during the century went beyond the newspaper, with Royal Commissions on children's employment, on the British Museum and on schools reporting on the undesirability of novel consumption well into the late 1850s.¹⁴⁸ However, during the 1830s and 1840s there was a reappraisal of attitudes towards fiction, and this reappraisal can be demonstrated through the debates concerning the contents of mechanics' institute libraries.

^{133.} *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 22 September 1825, p. 4.

^{134.} *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 14 November 1829, unpaginated.

^{135.} *Morning Post*, 18 November 1825, unpaginated.

^{136.} *Bath Chronicle*, 27 May 1824, p. 2.

^{137.} *Morning Post*, 2 April 1830, unpaginated.

^{138.} *London Standard*, 6 November 1829, p. 2.

^{139.} *Morning Post*, 30 July 1824, unpaginated.

^{140.} *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 16 June 1838, unpaginated.

^{141.} *Coventry Herald*, 27 August 1847, p. 3.

^{142.} Rosman, *Evangelicals and Culture*, p. 138.

^{143.} *Freeman's Journal*, 3 November 1831, unpaginated.

^{144.} *Worcester Journal*, 14 August 1845, p. 4.

^{145.} *Edinburgh Evening News*, 27 July 1887, p. 4.

^{146.} *Coventry Herald*, 7 December 1849, p. 4.

^{147.} E. Sutton, "Aestheticism, Resistance, and the Realist Novel: *Marius* and Masculinity" in P. Mallett (ed.), *The Victorian Novel and Masculinity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), p. 177.

^{148.} *Royal Commission on Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories, Second Report* (1843), p. 17; *Royal Commission to Inquire into the Constitution and Government of the British Museum, Report* (1850), p. 283; *Royal Commission to Inquire into Endowments, Funds and Condition of Schools Endowed for Purpose of Education in Ireland, Report* (1857-58), p. 939.

Mechanics' institutes were originally established as the means for the transmission of scientific, technical and scientific education to workers.¹⁴⁹ They were subject to a wide-ranging self-imposed edict prohibiting texts which were overtly political or controversially religious in tone.¹⁵⁰ Although there was no such explicit prohibition of fictional material, the popularity of novels was looked on as a sign of failure in the Institutes' core mission from as early as the 1830s.¹⁵¹ Novels quickly became a presence nationally in the libraries of institutes great and small, whether in the North of England¹⁵² or the South¹⁵³ – when Baldwin Duppa acknowledged the need to stock fiction in Institute libraries in his widely circulated *Manual for Mechanics' Institutes*,¹⁵⁴ this was not so much failure as an appreciation of the realities of supply and demand.

Duppa espoused the undesirability of fiction, promoting its inclusion only on the grounds of its popularity – it was therefore good for the balance sheet to keep such members happy. However, the reading and borrowing of fiction by members was still an “abuse of a library of a Mechanics' Institution” as such members borrowed only novels.¹⁵⁵ Duppa also noted that novel readers were not likely, because of their preferences, to have the necessary intellect to comprehend more worthy, serious, varieties of reading material.¹⁵⁶ At any rate, the recommended catalogue appended to Duppa's work included a small fiction section, with no notable works of literary controversy – Edward Grinfield would have been pleased that his recommendations of *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Vicar of Wakefield* had been included, and doubly-so given that nothing notable of any description, beyond the complete works of Sir Walter Scott, had been added to his suggestions.¹⁵⁷

^{149.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 56-57.

^{150.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 226.

^{151.} Walker, “Solid and Practical Education”, p. 12.

^{152.} C. Stockdale, “Mechanics' Institutes in Northumberland and Durham, 1824-1902” (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Durham, 1993), pp. 92, 333.

^{153.} Sims, “Mechanics' Institutes in Sussex and Hampshire”, pp. 27, 130.

^{154.} Duppa, *Manual*, pp. 49-50.

^{155.} Duppa, *Manual*, pp. 49-50.

^{156.} Duppa, *Manual*, p. 49.

^{157.} Duppa, *Manual*, p. 193.

Throughout, there is an evident awareness on Duppa's part of the popular attitude towards fiction, as well as a sharing of that disapproving attitude, framed against an acceptance of the growing cultural importance of novels. The inclusion of Sir Walter Scott is significant. Scott had come to be regarded as a writer of "morally instructive" novels in the wider Victorian world, and those novels enjoyed omnipresence within the holdings of nineteenth-century lending libraries.¹⁵⁸ Gateshead (1842)¹⁵⁹ and London (1837)¹⁶⁰ Institutes counted Scott among their stocks of fiction as did Keighley and Morpeth.¹⁶¹ Bradford (1836) however did not, instead stocking his historical biographies.¹⁶² As noted previously, Bradford's holdings were particularly lacking in fiction – even by the relatively acceptable Scott.

The period immediately leading up to, and then following, the circulation of Duppa's work saw debates taking place in Institutes up and down the country about the place of fiction in their libraries. These debates reflected the wider attitudes towards novels in the popular imagination. In Louth in Lincolnshire, for instance, the Vice Patron denounced the inclusion of novels as a distraction from the more serious fare on offer.¹⁶³ In Sheffield, a motion to include novels in the library there was the target of furious protest on the grounds that such material weakened the mind and led to murderous impulses.¹⁶⁴ The motion was narrowly carried. Efforts to include fiction in the Institute library in Preston met with the response that the facility was intended to inform rather than amuse.¹⁶⁵ At Northampton the complaint was that what fiction there was present was of too low a character; while at Bradford there was the growing acceptance that, although

¹⁵⁸. A. Bautz, *The Reception of Jane Austen and Walter Scott: A Comparative Longitudinal Study* (London: Continuum, 2007), pp. 89-90.

¹⁵⁹. *Gateshead Library Catalogue*, p. 31.

¹⁶⁰. *London Library Catalogue*, p. 69.

¹⁶¹. Bautz, *Reception of Austen and Scott*, p. 89.

¹⁶². *Bradford Library Catalogue*, p. 36.

¹⁶³. *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 16 November 1838, p. 4.

¹⁶⁴. *Sheffield Independent*, 6 November 1841, p. 6

¹⁶⁵. *Preston Chronicle*, 10 October 1846, p. 4

reading of such material was certainly undesirable, it was better that the members read something than nothing at all.¹⁶⁶ In Cupar in Angus, Scotland, it was the quality and morality of the work which counted.¹⁶⁷ At Leek in Staffordshire, a churchman on the committee of the local Institute led a campaign to have novels barred from the library there on the grounds that they were “evil” and that members borrowing such sinful works would inevitably lead to the reading of fiction on the Sabbath itself. The vote went in favour of admitting novels, but only just – there were only half a dozen votes in it.¹⁶⁸ In Nottingham by 1849, however, the annual general meeting of the mechanics’ institute in the city noted that most of the library’s stock of books and the vast majority of borrowings were novels. There was no backlash, no commentary, no criticism – it was as if this had always been the case.¹⁶⁹ This was at a time when a Royal Commission equated the desire to read novels with mental illness.¹⁷⁰ This may well have been a reference to the case of Daniel M’Naghten (1843), the benchmark trial for the legal definition of insanity in criminal proceedings. M’Naghten’s habitual reading of fiction was referred to during his murder trial in a negative light, and it was also noted that he frequently borrowed novels from the library of the Mechanics’ Institute in Glasgow.¹⁷¹

Lectures and the Mechanics’ Institute Cultural Mission

Baldwin Duppa’s manual also outlined a series of lectures which were to be delivered in mechanics’ institutes to the members there. These were on more traditionally technical and mechanical subjects, such as optics, hydrostatics and practical mechanics, and in political economy. Such lectures framed the world as it was from the viewpoint of the

^{166.} *Bradford Observer*, 20 April 1848, p. 8; *Northampton Mercury*, 27 April 1847, p. 3.

^{167.} *Fife Herald*, 1 March 1849, p. 3.

^{168.} *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 24 April 1847, p. 2.

^{169.} *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 15 February 1849, p. 1.

^{170.} *Report of the Royal Commission on the British Museum*, p. 283.

^{171.} *John Bull*, 6 March 1842, p. 133.

working person's appropriate, fitting and proper place within it.¹⁷² Although none of the library catalogues considered in this study included such lecture outlines, this aspect of the mechanics' institutes' mission can still be evaluated with some confidence as there are records extant of lectures and lecture programmes delivered all over the country throughout the period in question. These went hand in hand with the more rudimentary elementary classes in the basics of subjects, for the delivery of education within mechanics' institutes was generally a two-tier process whereby either lectures were for more advanced subjects beyond those taught in classes dealing with basic numeracy and literacy¹⁷³ or else were supplemented by, or were supplementary to, classroom sessions.¹⁷⁴

There was strong demand for each of these aspects, indicating engagement with the education that was being offered; at the mechanics' institute in Manchester for instance, nearly 63 % of all members taking classes were taking elementary courses in reading, writing and arithmetic by 1839.¹⁷⁵ At the mechanics' institute in Huddersfield a decade later, nearly 72% of all those taking classes were taking them in these basic subjects.¹⁷⁶ As has been seen from first-hand accounts, these skills could make a tremendous difference to lives. As Helen Rogers has observed, such improvements in literacy gave working-class people in the early and mid-nineteenth century new and powerful avenues of expression and connection with others, allowing the self to be represented in new ways by these writers, rather than merely constructed through the processes of reading and writing.¹⁷⁷ John O'Neill's standard of writing in his diary, for instance, speaks of the impact of these classes. –His grammar, the complexity of his

¹⁷². Duppa, *Manual*, pp. 196-321.

¹⁷³. Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 99-100

¹⁷⁴. Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, pp. 146, 156.

¹⁷⁵. Kelly, *History of Adult Education*, p. 128.

¹⁷⁶. Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, pp. 310-311.

¹⁷⁷ H. Rogers, "The Way to Jerusalem: Reading, Writing and Reform in an Early Victorian Gaol", *Past & Present*, No. 205 (November 2009), pp. 71- 104 (see especially pp.101-102).

sentences, his turn of phrase became noticeably more skilled and fluent after he became a member of a mechanics' institute.¹⁷⁸ One recent scholar has noted that "these educational establishments should take the place in history that they deserve"¹⁷⁹ and puts the lie to the assumption that what "working people wanted after twelve or more hours in factory or mill was diversion".¹⁸⁰

Political economy was a prominent subject in Institute lecture halls nationwide. For instance, in early 1825 a report from a lecture on this subject delivered in Leeds Mechanics' Institute was reviewed in glowing terms in the capital. Although the lecture itself, well-received as it was, was about the complex relationship between supply, demand, population and economy, what is particularly interesting is a passage near the end of the article. This passage speaks positively of knowledge being circulated rapidly among workers, and a single well-informed individual in a workplace being often enough to improve the "faculties" of every single person in there.¹⁸¹

Lectures on other core topics were also well-received and, in the case of one of the scheduled lectures on mechanics delivered by George Birkbeck himself in the summer of 1825, also well-attended – no fewer than one thousand people (according to the report in the *Derby Mercury*) cramming into the lecture theatre of the London Mechanics' Institute to hear him speak. The newspaper itself provided an in-depth summary of the lecture.¹⁸² Lectures on this topic were delivered elsewhere, attracting just as much praise and seemingly just as well-attended, such as in Bury St. Edmunds, Norfolk in early 1826.¹⁸³ Regular attendance at lectures and classes in technical, mechanical and scientific subjects was rewarded with internally issued diplomas, certificates of attainment and

¹⁷⁸. Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p. 81.

¹⁷⁹. Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn*, p. 184.

¹⁸⁰. Altick, *English Common Reader*, p. 194.

¹⁸¹. *The Morning Chronicle*, 15 March 1825, p. 2.

¹⁸². *The Derby Mercury*, 17 August 1825, p. 4.

¹⁸³. *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 11 January 1826, p. 2.

certificates of proficiency in many institutes.¹⁸⁴ Lectures delivered at larger Institutes, especially metropolitan ones, were effectively outsourced in print form to smaller institutes which could not afford to pay for expert lecturers to prepare and deliver the information in person, such as was the case at Bury St. Edmunds for example.¹⁸⁵ This was a matter of simple finances – even larger institutes in cities such as Glasgow might struggle with the resulting costs during times of wider economic problems.¹⁸⁶ It is notable that, especially in times of financial hardship, the political message and culture of the lecture programmes always got through, in one form or another.

Perceptions of Mechanics' Institutes in Popular Culture I: Satire

Although the eighteenth century is considered the high water mark of British satire in terms of popularity and in terms of volume of available material, the nineteenth century was not without its publications of both written and visual satire.¹⁸⁷ With the new century, satire became less sexually suggestive and more constructive, while remaining a form of social, cultural and political critique¹⁸⁸ and at once not merely “true” satire – licensed insult – but also a form of allegory.¹⁸⁹ It could be therefore read, not just as commentary, but as a tool to inform the reader of the editorial ideal by demonstrating its polar opposite. With the new century, the satirical comic press diversified and began to appeal to a broader audience rather than its original poorer and less educated market.¹⁹⁰ The most prominent of such satirical publications, *Punch, or The London Charivari*, was launched

^{184.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 243, 273.

^{185.} *The London Mechanics' Register*, Vol. 2 (London: Gifford and Co., 1825), p. 43.

^{186.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 226.

^{187.} For popular urban attitudes to satire and comedy, see V. Gattrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Atlantic: 2006).

^{188.} F. Palmieri, 'Cruikshank, Thackeray and the Victorian Eclipse of Satire', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Autumn 2004), pp. 753-777.

^{189.} E. D. Leyburn, 'Notes on Satire and Allegory', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (June, 1948), pp. 323-331.

^{190.} D. Kunzle, 'The First Ally Sloper: The Earliest Popular Cartoon Character as a Satire on the Victorian Work Ethic', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1985), pp. 40-48.

in 1841 and by 1850 was reaching approximately 16, 5000 issues per edition.¹⁹¹ It often carried satirical textual items coupled with visual material, which comprised a usable form in its own right not just for the transmission of an idea and the reinforcement of it, but one which can be utilised in the present day by the historian as a source to be analysed.¹⁹² Taken together, the text and the image form a source which can reveal the nature of wider attitudes towards social and political issues as reflected in the publication concerned, as well as that publication's own attitudes.¹⁹³ Neither those attitudes, nor those of the reading public, were passive. Instead, they informed each other and reached out into the wider public sphere, changing the reading public's perception of itself and the perceptions of those who sought to inform it, persuade it and govern it.¹⁹⁴ By seeking to educate and inform against such a background, the mechanics' institutes presented themselves as a subject for satire.

The popular magazine *Punch*, was a frequent source of such satirical coverage. It was aimed at an audience consisting of the educated, affluent upper social orders¹⁹⁵ and its attitude towards mechanics' institutes – which from their beginning had carried with them an association with the poor,¹⁹⁶ the uneducated¹⁹⁷ and the “great unwashed”¹⁹⁸ – was a reflection of their respective socio-economic backgrounds and sensibilities. *Punch* certainly had more of a leaning towards social commentary than previous satirical publications¹⁹⁹ and it brought this to bear on the institutes, mocking them almost as soon

^{191.} D. Janes, 'The Role of Visual Appearance in Punch's Early Victorian Satires on Religion', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Spring 2014), pp. 66-86.

^{192.} Janes, 'The Role of Visual Appearance', pp. 66-86.

^{193.} T. M. Kemnitz, 'The Cartoon as a Historical Source', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Summer 1973), pp. 81-93.

^{194.} J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991), p. 66.

^{195.} H. Fraser, S. Green and J. Johnston, *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 57.

^{196.} *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol 30, House of Commons, 18 August 1838, cols 649-55.

^{197.} *The Age*, 16 September 1832, p. 302.

^{198.} *The Age*, 24 February 1833, p. 60.

^{199.} S. Sen, 'Radical Satire and Respectability: Comic Imagination in Hone, Jerrold and Dickens' in, A. Krishnamurthy, ed., *The Working-Class Intellectual in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 150.

as it went into circulation. As noted in the chapter on social aspects, satire of this nature often took the form of lampooning the fictional Hookham-cum-Snivey Institute. Implied criminality was encoded in the name.²⁰⁰ Hookham Institute, for instance, celebrated its annual general meeting with a selection of pointless and impenetrable papers from its members, each seemingly in a contest to be more pretentious than the others.²⁰¹ The library there was stocked with rubbish which was mostly not even books.²⁰² This association with pointlessness was a common theme in the periodical's treatment of Institutes – a spoof report of a musical recital at Leeds, for example, claimed that the Institute choral society there had managed 9,998 key changes in two and a half hours²⁰³ while the secretary of Cheatham Mechanics' Institute witnessed a fall of frogs from the sky and reported the total volume as exactly 28, 427 creatures.²⁰⁴ *Punch* considered mechanics' institutes as a manifestation of "low" culture pretending to be "high" – while Eastern Counties Railways were laying on fine dining and complementary treats for the elites in First Class, they were providing Institutes for the passengers two classes below that.²⁰⁵

Mechanics' Institutes were not only a means for *Punch* to express its general attitudes towards the working classes and their perceived educational pretensions. They were also a plot device with which to continue its tradition of lampooning the elite.²⁰⁶ Figures of social standing who engaged with institutes were mocked by the periodical, with their motives questioned. When the Member of Parliament for the fictional town of Great Muddlewick, President of his local mechanics' institute, engages in lecturing the public on political economy, for example, he laments the increases in sanitation standards.

^{200.} *Routledge Dictionary of Historical Slang*, ed. E. Partridge (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 2577.

^{201.} *Punch*, 12 September 1841, p. 105.

^{202.} *Punch*, 18 September 1841, p. 118.

^{203.} *Punch*, 29 April 1843, p. 175.

^{204.} *Punch*, 3 October 1846, p. 136.

^{205.} *Punch*, 3 October 1846, p. 136.

^{206.} Sen, 'Radical Satire', p. 149-150.

These have lowered the levels of child mortality and this, in turn, has lowered wages all round due to the glut of workers looking for employment.²⁰⁷ The parallels with the political economy taught in Institutes, especially with regard to the link between employment levels and wage levels, are clear.²⁰⁸ The hypocrisy of the MP who would cling to his principles and see children die of poverty and disease is the target here, not the Institute.

Similarly, when the Earl of Carlisle's lecture tour of mechanics' institutes in 1853 is used as a starting point for a satire of other worthies touring the country pontificating on progressively ridiculous topics, the target is the speaker and not the venue or audience.²⁰⁹ The suggestion that, as so many politicians seem to be working as lecturers in institutes perhaps institute lecturers should, in exchange, take up the seats in the House of Lords is saying something broadly similar.²¹⁰ So-called "senator lecturers" were satirised in other publications as well.²¹¹ As *Punch* developed and evolved, so its attitude towards mechanics' institutes did likewise, shifting from one of simply poking fun at the lower orders who used them, to one of implicit recognition of their status within the national community and as enterprises which attracted the interest of other, more refined, targets for satire.

Perceptions of Mechanics' Institutes in Popular Culture II: The Press

Punch had its jokes repeated and transmitted to other audiences by the broader periodical market and it is this sphere, and its attitudes towards mechanics' institutes, which shall now be considered. In the days of the first institutes, the periodical press was hostile,

^{207.} *Punch*, 3 June 1848, p. 236.

^{208.} T. Hodgkin, *Popular Political Economy* (London: Tait, 1827), p. 126.

^{209.} *Punch*, 7 December 1853, p. 233.

^{210.} *Punch*, 18 December 1852, p. 264.

^{211.} *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, Art and Finance*, Volume 6 (1858), pp. 155-156.

denouncing them as places where “liberty boys” and “revolutionaries”²¹² were plotting to overthrow the existing order in their local “uncongenial hole”.²¹³ The rule of barring political discussion does not seem to have convinced many observers.²¹⁴ Meetings at institutes which were overtly political were reported to be taking place with disconcerting regularity; displaying an ability to plan and assemble on the part of the members which caused concern.²¹⁵ Supporters among the political elite knew well enough how the authorities could see such activities and had already taken steps to warn Institutes and members that such activities could be misconstrued as sedition.²¹⁶ The periodical press maintained this line of attack into the early 1830s.²¹⁷ However, once the first decade of their existence had passed without incident, or certainly without a revolution being hatched in any mechanics’ institutes, the periodical press settled into generally neutral reporting of matters involving them with occasional positive reporting. Institutes even came to be accepted as something no town should be without.²¹⁸

From early on in their history, institutes also generated their own periodicals – *The Mechanics’ Magazine*, *Mechanics’ Register* and *Mechanic and Chemist* to name but a few.²¹⁹ To this list we might add favourable coverage in journals such as *Penny magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*. Later there would be detailed reports and discussion in the journal of the Royal Society for the Encouragement

²¹². *John Bull*, 18 July 1825, p. 229.

²¹³. *The Age*, 15 January 1826, p. 284.

²¹⁴. *John Bull*, 10 March 1826, p. 93.

²¹⁵. *John Bull*, 11 June 1827, p. 182.

²¹⁶. *Caledonian Mercury*, 8 December 1825, p. 2.

²¹⁷. *The Age*, 11 December 1831, p. 398; *Figaro in London*, 7 January 1832, p. 19.

²¹⁸. *John Bull*, 9 April 1837, p. 76; *The Penny Satirist*, 22 April 1837, p. 1.

²¹⁹. See *The Mechanic and Chemist*, vol. VI (London: G. Berger, 1840); *The London Mechanics’ Register*, vol. 1 (London: Cowie and Strange, 1825); *The New London Mechanics’ Register and Magazine of Science and the Useful Arts embracing exclusive and authentic reports of the lectures delivered at the London Mechanics Institution, etc.* (London: Gifford and Company, 1825). Other titles include: *The Apprentice: a journal of mechanics’ institutes and general education. Edited by the Artizan Club*; *The Institutional Advocate: A monthly record of the proceedings of London and provincial literary, scientific and mechanics’ institutions*, published in London in 1845.

of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. There would be other mechanics' institute produced journals at a more local level.²²⁰

The attitude shown towards institutes and their culture in their first decade by the periodical press outside of their in-house productions may have been one of suspicion and hostility however this came to be replaced with a matter-of-fact acceptance which echoed the attitude shown by newspapers of the period.

Newspapers were a staple of mechanics' institutes, with newsrooms and reading rooms often proving to be especially popular with members.²²¹ These newspapers would often, from the earliest days of the movement and with increasing frequency and regularity as time went on, carry reports and content which reflected their cultural attitudes towards the Institutes themselves. Although national titles were stocked, local and regional newspapers were also well represented. In a major urban mechanics' institute like Manchester's there were newspapers from all over the North West of England and the wider North, together with the more popular national titles, were all available.²²² Most reports primarily concerned the annual general meetings, soirées and lectures taking place at local institutes.²²³ There was a semblance of local pride in some reports, with reflections of local tensions in others.²²⁴

Exhibiting and Handling Culture

²²⁰ For example, from Yorkshire see, *The Iris: or, the Addingham Mechanics' Institute Observer*, no. 1-12; *The Leigh Monthly Magazine of Instruction and Amusement. Conducted by a Committee of the Leigh Mechanics' Institution*, vol. 1 (Published at Wigan in 1845). In addition, the mass of local periodicals would include substantial discussion of Mechanics' Institutes, from the ProQuest database one can find sympathetic reports in Institutes in Liverpool, through *The Kaleidoscope*; 'Mechanics' Institute. Tom Anvil', *The Kaleidoscope: or, Literary and scientific mirror* 5.256 (24 May 1825), pp.396-396; 'Mechanics' Institutes', *The Kaleidoscope: or, Literary and scientific mirror* 6.279 (1 November 1825), pp. 137-138; and 'Necessity for Mechanics' Institutes', *The Kaleidoscope: or, Literary and scientific mirror* 10.483 (29 September 1829), pp.104-104.

²²¹ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 238-239.

²²² Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, p. 302.

²²³ *Hull Packet*, 11 November 1842, p. 1; *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 23 October 1858, p. 6; *Bristol Mercury*, 2 March 1833, p. 3; *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 15 December 1850, p. 1.

²²⁴ For local pride, see *Leicester Chronicle*, 23 July 1825, p. 1; *Carlisle Journal*, 18 May 1866, p. 6. For tensions, see *Leeds Intelligencer*, 18 August 1825, p. 3; *Leeds Intelligencer*, 25 August 1825, p. 3.

Mechanics' institute culture extended beyond that conveyed through the spoken and written word. The principles described and explained in the lecture room were actively demonstrated with members as active participants. Exhibitions and museums were provided by institutes for the benefit of their members and for the wider community.

The typical institute museum played a dual role. On the one hand, there were the physical accessories and sets of apparatus required in order to conduct lessons in the physical sciences,²²⁵ and on the other there were specimens and exhibits which were to be used for illustrating those lessons and also for the purpose of providing opportunities for experimentation on the part of the members.²²⁶ The museum was an interactive, and literally *physical*, experience where the items and apparatus could be handled, inspected, pondered upon and used. Science was as much about performance and entertainment as it was about practicality – its audience found itself in an immersive, theatrical, milieu,²²⁷ and occupied a cultural space where it was confronted with the physical trappings of its own modernity – and not always comfortably so.²²⁸

Contemporaries were aware of this. *The Mechanics' Magazine* originally included the word *Museum* in one of its earlier full titles, *The Mechanics' Magazine, Museum, Register, Journal and Gazette* (1823). An advertisement for an issue dating from the autumn of 1823 boasts of the publication being “embellished with ... spirited wood engravings” of the machines, inventions, instruments and apparatus described within its pages, these illustrations being used for the purposes of “Utility and Amusement Combined.” (See Figure 9 below)²²⁹

^{225.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, pp. 93, 100-101.

^{226.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 218.

^{227.} I.R. Morus, “Seeing and Believing Science”, *Isis*, Vol. 97, No. 1 (March 2006), pp. 101-110.

^{228.} M. Kaiser, “The World in Play: A Portrait of a Victorian Concept”, *New Literary History*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Winter 2009), pp. 105-129.

^{229.} *The Morning Chronicle*, 20 September 1823, p. 1.

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Figure 9. Advertisement for *The Mechanics' Magazine*, in *The Morning Chronicle*,
17 October 1823, p. 1.

Such material was included to appeal not just to the desire to be entertained but to what may today be termed “the visual learner,” inhabiting the space where visual and print cultures overlapped. George Birkbeck called *The Mechanics' Magazine*, with its one hundred or so such illustrations per volume, “the most valuable gift which the Hand of Science has ever yet offered” for its *physical* expressions of ideas.²³⁰

Even the smallest or most financially challenged of institutes would gather a collection of instruments and exhibits.²³¹ The popularity of ‘Miscellaneous Sciences’ in the various library catalogues considered in this chapter, together with lectures fused with live experimentation and museums where the apparatus could be seen and handled.

^{230.} *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post, or Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*, 16 September 1824, p. 2.

^{231.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 218.

Workers were being taught and then encouraged to observe, absorb, reflect, interact and experiment both in and with the physical world around them. This went beyond the culture of the workplace with its desire to create a more efficient, productive worker with a better understanding of their machine.²³²

At a time when truly open, accessible, public museums were unheard of in Britain and when museums in general were loath to admit the working classes as visitors,²³³ the Mechanics' Institutes, by allowing such access, offered the closest thing to a public museum system. The good conduct of the members of the institutes when visiting these museums, as well as when visiting cultural spaces on excursions, was remarked upon in Parliament.²³⁴ For instance, when the members of the New Swindon Mechanics' Institute (noted in the reports as "servants" of the company) were taken on an excursion to Oxford and its famous University in 1848, including being conducted on a guided tour which took in all the major colleges plus a walk around the Bodleian Library, there were no bad reports. Contemporary accounts from the city remark that the visitors departed:

... seated in the train, which steamed away, amidst great cheering and waving of hats and handkerchiefs, the band again playing and, and thus ended a visit which we doubt not will be full of pleasant recollections on both sides, for everything passed off as orderly and as satisfactorily as could have possibly been desired.²³⁵

Alongside the museums were the related phenomena of mechanics' institute exhibitions. Whereas the former were for members only, the latter were for engagement where the local population was allowed access to a range of exhibits, inventions, apparatus, art and other artefacts – some of which created by members themselves – for

²³². Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, p. 19.

²³³. Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, pp. 122, 180, 289

²³⁴. *Select Committee on Public Libraries* (1849), passim, especially p. iii for a summary of the good conduct and also for the positive outcomes of working people belonging to Mechanics' Institutes around cultural visitor attractions

²³⁵. *Oxford Journal*, 17 June 1848, p. 3.

a nominal fee.²³⁶ The income from these exhibitions went towards Institute running costs or projects such as purpose-built premises.²³⁷ The first mechanics' institute exhibition, in Louth in Lincolnshire in 1835, was modest but successful, attracting over one thousand visitors.²³⁸ Bristol and Manchester followed suit by opening exhibitions, the latter's first foray into the endeavour bringing in 50, 000 visitors over five weeks to see exhibits from sciences, the arts and natural history.²³⁹

Engagement with these exhibitions was shared across the class spectrum. A working man, who had a liking for drawing and art and had never crossed the threshold of a mechanics' institute before in his life, was so impressed with the works of the members which were on display and which had clearly drawn on, to his mind, an impressive level of instruction that he immediately joined the institute.²⁴⁰ Art from then on became an important aspect of institutes generally – a catalogue of the items on display during a follow-up exhibition at Manchester in 1837 shows art exhibits, including objects created by members whether on canvas or using metal, wood or glass, outnumbering technological and mechanical exhibits by a ratio of nearly ten to one.²⁴¹ Membership numbers of the Manchester Mechanics' Institute show an upswing which correlates to points in time either during or immediately after these exhibitions.²⁴² They were public advertisements and demonstrations of what mechanics' institutes could *do* for the individual, made accessible to the community. Mechanics' institute exhibitions turned that community into a cultural space in a very real sense.

This was not lost upon contemporary commentators such as “Alpha” of Sheffield, who wrote with praise for his local mechanics' institute exhibition, taking it upon himself

^{236.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 237.

^{237.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 237.

^{238.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 237; *The Sheffield Independent, and Yorkshire and Derbyshire Advertiser*, 8 October 1836, p. 2.

^{239.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 237; Duppa, *Manual*, pp. 79-86.

^{240.} *The Leicester Chronicle, or Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser*, 3 March 1838, p. 4.

^{241.} Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, p. 306.

^{242.} Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, p. 295.

to thank them on behalf of the whole town for sharing with them “the emanations of true genius”.²⁴³ Coverage in Manchester lauded the exhibitions for the community spirit and co-operative culture which they celebrated and fostered.²⁴⁴ Coverage of the exhibition at the town of Derby did likewise. The coverage in the Derby press noted that just over 10,000 people had visited in just two weeks and that was before a new rail link between Derby and Nottingham was expected to bring even more.²⁴⁵ These enterprises were visitor attractions and destinations for days out in their own right. Many of these aspects of the institutes exhibitions – the scale, the obvious public interest, the types of exhibits and the status as a visitor attraction – are reminiscent of the later Great Exhibition of 1851.²⁴⁶ It should come as no surprise then, that the Committee which organised the Great Exhibition sought inspiration by visiting a mechanics’ institute exhibition, in Devonport, in order to better understand how such enterprises were planned and executed.²⁴⁷ That project was eventually visited by over six million people from across the social spectrum, what Jeffrey Auerbach calls “the greatest defining occasion for nineteenth-century Britons between the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 and Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897”.²⁴⁸

Mechanics’ institute exhibitions continued. For instance in Manchester in late 1856 and in Newcastle a decade later where it was tied to fund raising for the building of a mechanics’ institute.²⁴⁹

^{243.} *The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 23 March 1839, p. 6.

^{244.} *The Manchester Times and Gazette*, 9 April 1839, p. 2.

^{245.} *The Derby Mercury*, 29 May 1839, p. 3.

^{246.} There were four Manchester Mechanics’ Institute exhibitions held between 1837 and 1842 by T. Kusamitsu, ‘Great Exhibitions before 1851’, *History Workshop Journal* No. 9, (1980), pp. 70-89; J.A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), passim. For other examples of contemporary coverage of Mechanics’ Institute exhibitions in the 1840s, see ‘Exhibitions of Mechanics’ Institutes’, *Penny magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, 9.507 (29 February 1840), pp.74-75 and also ‘Exhibitions of Mechanics’ Institutes’, *Penny magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, 10.575 (20 March 1841), pp.108-108.

^{247.} Lattimore, *History of Libraries*, p. 241.

^{248.} Auerbach, *Great Exhibition*, p. 4.

²⁴⁹ ‘Manchester Mechanics’ Institute’, *The London journal, and weekly record of literature, science, and art*, 24.608 (18 October 1856), pp.105-106. For further coverage, see ‘Mechanics’ Institute, Manchester’, *Art journal*, 20 (August 1856), pp.249-250; ‘The Manchester Mechanics’ Institution: Its Inauguration’, *Art journal*, 22 (October 1856), pp.317-318; for Newcastle, see the report in *The Times*, 22 September 1866, p. 10.

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Figure 10. Exhibition of the Manchester Mechanics' Institute,
the *London Journal*, 18 October 1856.

The Artistry and Industry of Science

The material exhibited in mechanics' institutes had an aesthetic aspect. Drawing for practical purposes in the fields of technology, mechanics or engineering, employed advanced techniques which are as much artistic as scientific. Similarly, the construction of physical exhibits such as models or full scale working apparatus also employs such techniques and skills. Every drawing associated with mechanics' Institutes is, in this context, a piece of graphic art and every physical construct a work of sculpture.²⁵⁰

Technological progress was not just to be utilised practically, but was meant to be *experienced* by the members of mechanics' institutes and the audiences they hosted

^{250.} F.D. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution* (St. Albans: Granada, 1975), passim, especially pp. 63-67 for engineering drawings as art; for models and drawings as art together, see R. Cardoso, "A Preliminary Survey of Technical Drawing Manuals in Britain, c. 1825-1875", in Romans (ed.), *Histories of Art and Design Education*, pp. 22-23.

during their exhibitions. The same appreciation of and experience of the broader artistic aspect of the industrialised world was likewise in evidence. The industrial poet Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), for instance, whose verses often dwelt on the beauty of such machines as steam engines, trains, water mills and pump engines²⁵¹ was closely associated with and venerated by the mechanics' institute in Derby, which held a bust of him as an exhibit as well as a tribute,²⁵² and which took his earlier educational works there as their example.²⁵³ His philosophy of betterment through education would have fitted in with the general intellectual atmosphere of the mechanics' institute movement, as would his own artistic sentiments and sensibilities.

The keeping of busts and other depictions of key figures was a significant element of the visual culture of mechanics' institutes. Portraits of key figures in the local and national histories of mechanics' institutes were commonplace – whether of sources of local benevolence and support such as at Ripon²⁵⁴ or figures of national prominence in the movement such as at London²⁵⁵ – and often served as items for display during exhibitions in their own right.²⁵⁶ The display of busts commemorating backers and supporters had a celebratory aspect as well as a memorial one.

It was not just busts or portraits of local worthies which were proudly displayed by mechanics' institutes during these events. The use of art produced by members in exhibitions has already been encountered, however this sat alongside other pieces. Original pieces and copies of well-known works were included for their individual merits or meaning. Some had been donated to the institutes by wealthy patrons or sympathisers.

²⁵¹. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution*, pp. 16-36.

²⁵². M. Keynes, "Portraits of Dr Erasmus Darwin, F.R.S., by Joseph Wright, James Rawlinson and William Coffee", *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (January 1994), p. 79.

²⁵³. *The Derby Mercury*, 30 March 1825, p. 2.

²⁵⁴. *Leeds Intelligencer*, 18 July 1857, p. 8.

²⁵⁵. *Morning Post*, 3 December 1824, p. 3.

²⁵⁶. *Hull Packet*, 14 October 1842, p. 5; *Sheffield Independent*, 30 March 1839, p. 2; *The Derby Mercury*, 22 May 1839, p. 3.

The use of the arts as a complement to sciences and physical mechanics in the institutes was commonplace.²⁵⁷ Paintings which formed part of the mechanics' institutes exhibitions were subjected to evaluation and criticism by both the local press and by members of those Institutes via the correspondence pages.²⁵⁸ The editor of the *Sheffield Independent*, in 1839, for instance, while admiring *The Gypsy Mother and Children* (undated) by Joseph Rhodes (1782-1854), the self-educated artist later dubbed the "Father of Art in Yorkshire", considered himself authority enough on fine art to announce that the artist, while capable, somehow lacked vigour.²⁵⁹ The same authority, meanwhile, was full of praise for *The Deserted Village* (1800) by the noted landscape artist Francis Wheatley (1747-1801), an opinion not shared by the Sheffield Mechanics' Institute member who wrote in to the newspaper with his views on the paintings included in the exhibition – the commentator noted that this painting may be "beautiful" and "clever" but contained "two or three instances of indifferent drawing".²⁶⁰ A work by Edward Ward (1816-1879) titled *Middleton Dale* (undated) was denounced by the anonymous correspondent as "not Middleton Dale, either in form or colour" along with scathing criticism of technique, whilst the editorial was more friendly, noting that Ward was second only to his former teacher Edwin Landseer (1802-1873) in his field.

Renaissance art was particularly well-represented and well-received in the exhibitions of the Institutes. In the 1839 Sheffield Exhibition just cited, there was a body of Renaissance art present. Exhibit 15 of the show, for example, was *Bacchus and Ariadne* (undated) from the Italian School. Both the correspondence and editorial already cited praised the work, the editorial even going so far as to compare it to the work of Titian himself.²⁶¹

^{257.} Harrison, *Learning and Living*, p. 87.

^{258.} *Sheffield Independent*, 30 March 1839, p. 2.

^{259.} *Sheffield Independent*, 30 March 1839, p. 2.

^{260.} *Sheffield Independent*, 30 March 1839, p. 2.

^{261.} *Sheffield Independent*, 30 March 1839, p. 2.

Such material was a recurring theme of institute exhibitions, and has the sense of institutes thematically aligning themselves with this period. In Derby in 1839, the institute there held its exhibition and displayed work by such artists as Titian, Nicolas Poussin and David Teniers. The newspaper reports of this exhibition only make mention of the work on display being the “most masterly productions” of such artists.²⁶² Again, no indication is given of these works being copies. Just as in Sheffield, these works hang alongside the productions of local talent, whether patrons of the institute, members of the organisation or local artists of renown. The latter applies to Joseph Wright (1734-1797), whose *Romeo and Juliet* (1790) was displayed alongside the old masters. The visual impact of all of these pieces of art can be gauged, perhaps, thanks to the national prominence of Derby’s exhibition²⁶³ as a local artist and lithographer named Samuel Rayner (1806-1879) depicted the scene in his piece *The Derby Mechanics’ Institute Exhibition, 1839* (Fig. 11).

The Exhibition was housed in the institute building, filled the main hall as well as six other rooms²⁶⁴ and was the latest manifestation of a local culture of middle-class patronage of scientific and artistic education which went back decades.²⁶⁵ It was organised in order to pay off the debts accrued from the construction of the institute building, and made a substantial contribution to the outstanding costs. Nearly 10, 0000 visitors enjoyed 5,000 exhibits lent by 400 individuals. The police, military and the poor were admitted free.²⁶⁶

^{262.} *Derby Mercury*, 22 May 1839, p. 3.

^{263.} A.F. Chadwick, “The Derby Mechanics’ Institute, 1825-1880”, *The Vocational Aspect of Education*, Vol. XXVII, No. 68 (Autumn 1975), p. 104.

^{264.} *Derby Mercury*, 22 May 1839, p. 3.

^{265.} P.A. Elliott, *Enlightenment, Modernity and Science: Geographies of Scientific Culture and Improvement in Georgian England* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 186-187.

^{266.} S. Glover, *The History and Directory of the Borough of Derby: A Guide* (Derby: Mozley and Sons, 1843), p. 59.

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Figure 11. *Derby Mechanics' Institute Exhibition (1839)*
By Samuel Rayner (Image Courtesy of Derbyshire County Council)

Rayner's work depicts the main hall, and the most striking thing about this image is the prevalence of art over scientific instruments. The latter was to the fore but outnumbered by the former. This was an Exhibition as entertainment as well as education – the statues are not behind glass, but could be touched, interacted with, not just appreciated but *experienced*. Interaction was encouraged. Even the scientific in this context became art. The paintings can be approached, the ones lower down on the walls closer to the eye, and overall it is possible to capture from Rayner's depiction a sense of immersion. Looking back at the list of artists and pieces on display in the hall, in the context of Rayner's print; the visitor was immersed in a cultural sea of Titian, Poussin, Teniers, Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), portraits of national and local figures, Wright's *Romeo and Juliet* as well as a depiction of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (1774) by the same artist.²⁶⁷ In a location which started out its life as a place of technical instruction,

^{267.} *Derby Mercury*, 22 May 1839, p. 3.

the mechanical and scientific was vastly outnumbered by the artistic, and where it featured at all it was itself regarded as artistic.

Art as a means of education and an opportunity for improvement, not just for artists but for the public at large, was an idea at the heart of the mechanics' institute relationship with art. This was a view shared on occasion by the popular press as well, with newspaper coverage of exhibitions in such locations as Hull talking of the "great utility", "opportunity" and "beneficial effect" of such enterprises.²⁶⁸ That important organisation for the mechanics institutes in this period, the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, provided practical help for Institutes by lending duplicates of artefacts from the mid-1850s onwards.²⁶⁹

Although there is no visual guide in the style of Rayner to show the Hull Exhibition first hand, there is – via the language of the editorial – the mental image of rooms, corridors and stairwells bedecked by paintings.²⁷⁰ Although some of these were copies, the coverage makes the distinction clear between these and originals, so that when it talks of works by Edwin Landseer and Alfred Chalon, for instance, it is obvious that these are original donated works rather than duplicates.²⁷¹ Exposure to art in this way inspired the creativity of the observer, in the form of poetry composed by visitors to the Exhibition,²⁷² and subsidiary lectures by the pioneer of experimental educational aids John Smith²⁷³ on the theme of "The Wonders of Creation" (which was illustrated by "dissolving view" magic lantern slides, themselves a new and wondrous creation²⁷⁴) running while the Exhibition itself was open, a different lecture every afternoon and

^{268.} *Hull Packet*, 14 October 1842, p. 5.

^{269.} *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* vol. V (London: Bell, 1857), p. 260.

^{270.} *Hull Packet*, 14 October 1842, p. 5.

^{271.} *Hull Packet*, 23 September 1842, p. 5.

^{272.} *Hull Packet*, 4 November 1842, p. 4.

^{273.} *Hull Packet*, 30 September 1842, p. 5; R.D. Wood, "The History of the Diorama in Great Britain in the 1820s", *History of Photography*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Autumn 1993), pp. 284-295.

^{274.} J. Marsh, "Dickensian 'Dissolving Views': The Magic Lantern, Visual Story-Telling, and the Victorian Technological Imagination", *Comparative Critical Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (October 2009), pp. 333-346.

repeated in the evening.²⁷⁵ Daily musical concerts were also added to the bill,²⁷⁶ and when the attraction was granted a two-week extension to its opening period in mid-November 1842, the musical provision was increased so that there were soirées every Monday and Thursday together with a “Grand Promenade Concert” every Wednesday and Friday.²⁷⁷ Such attractions, as well as being offered free to select groups, were bringing in around 2,500 paying visitors per day by November.²⁷⁸

This type of engagement was also seen at Liverpool. An average of 2,000 people visited the Mechanics’ Institute Exhibition held there in the summer of 1842, with art proving just as much an attraction as science, if not more so.²⁷⁹ The visitor was greeted not by mechanical apparatus or indeed any reference to technology but with works of art, including three gigantic statues of medieval knights and a painting of the Crucifixion loaned to the Exhibition by Liverpool Town Hall. Newspaper coverage indicates that here, as with elsewhere, paintings bedecked nearly every wall in the building during the event and although some rooms were dedicated to scientific exhibits, most of the space was turned over to works of art.²⁸⁰ Alongside works of members and local talent were works by such luminaries as Rubens, although the report does not specify whether these are originals or copies. The editorial mentions *An Interior* (1668) by Pieter Janssens Elinga in the context of it being considered inappropriate,²⁸¹ however there is no more detail in the article to enable identification of this work. It should be noted however that Janssens’ work was known for its revolutionary use of perspective and the science of

^{275.} *Hull Packet*, 30 September 1842, p. 5.

^{276.} *Hull Packet*, 30 September 1842, p. 5.

^{277.} *Hull Packet*, 11 November 1842, p. 1.

^{278.} *Hull Packet*, 4 November 1842, p. 4.

^{279.} *Liverpool Mercury*, 5 August 1842, p. 6.

^{280.} *Liverpool Mercury*, 24 June 1842, p. 7.

^{281.} D. Gaze (ed.), *Concise Dictionary of Women Artists* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 578.

Janssens’ speciality, beyond the experimental, was of lone women engaged in everyday tasks in empty rooms, while generally being painted from a point of view situated behind their backs. See also J. Hall, *The Sinister Side: How Left-Right Symbolism Shaped Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 55-57. Janssens’ employment of different perspectives may well have had something to do with the editorial’s critical tone.

optics²⁸², which shows again the fusion of art and science on public display right there in the heart of a mechanics' institute. Aside from a huge sculpture of a Triton, which showered real water from the tips of his trident to cool the room, the most prominent exhibits were busts of such revolutionary thinkers as Benjamin Franklin and John Locke.²⁸³

In a nearby room hung portraits of such men as the anti-slavery campaigner and non-conformist evangelical preacher Thomas Raffles (1788-1863), the Unitarian minister and local politician William Shepherd (1768-1847), and the radical reformer and anti-slavery campaigner the Reverend John Yates (1755-1826). These likenesses reminded the visitor of the moral credentials of the Institute, another layer of meaning behind the entertainment and instruction. Low level vandalism, plus isolated dishonesty on the part of visitors, was laid squarely at the door of "the vulgar rich".²⁸⁴ The members were certainly active in the promotion and guidance of the enterprise, more than one of them taking to local newspaper correspondence columns with their views to ensure that the Exhibition was as inclusive and open to the public as possible.²⁸⁵ This was an institutional emphasis as well, with ticket prices ranging from 6d to 1s, not counting concessions for members, exhibitors, the poor and public servants.²⁸⁶ There were magic lantern displays, a fully-functional model of Niagara Falls accurate to "every House, Tree, Rock ... in the vicinity of the Falls" to go with the water fountain trident, and a whole room (one of nineteen in the whole exhibition) dedicated to George Catlin's Museum of North American Indian Curiosities, inspired by Catlin's travels,²⁸⁷ came complete with

²⁸². M. Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes: Space and Meaning in Seventeenth Century Dutch Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 125-127.

²⁸³. *Liverpool Mercury*, 24 June 1842, p. 7.

²⁸⁴. *Liverpool Mercury*, 5 August 1842, p. 6.

²⁸⁵. *Liverpool Mercury*, 27 May 1842, p. 7.

²⁸⁶. *Liverpool Mercury*, 8 July 1842, p. 1.

²⁸⁷. G. Catlin, *North American Indians; Being Letters and Notes on their Manners, Customs, and Conditions, Written During Eight Years' Travel Amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians in North America, 1832-1839* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1926), passim.

attendants dressed in full Native American costume.²⁸⁸ The Liverpool Mechanics' Institute Exhibition of 1842, then, had a strong – and exceedingly popular – element of international cultural education from the outset, where native artistic expression had a key role.

Something similar graced the Manchester Mechanics' Institute Exhibition of 1838, where an entire room was devoted to the full-scale recreation of a "Moorish Temple", juxtaposed with paintings on the walls, including J.M.W Turner's *A View of Venice*. In the corner of another room was a sculpture entitled *Bacchus and Ariadne*, in the style of Titian.²⁸⁹ This classical and mythological motif seems to be a favourite of mechanics' institutes exhibitions.

Mechanics' Institutes and Classical Aesthetics

The very nature of an institute – structured, timetabled, committee run and governed by a set of rules and orders – lent itself to the exercise of disciplinary, institutional, power.²⁹⁰ The presence in the community of physical structures along the lines of the major mechanics' institutes was itself an expression of the prevailing culture. As many of these buildings shared a common architectural style – the Greco-Roman – the same statement was being conveyed and, in conjunction with the tuition going on within, the message went beyond aesthetic. Greek culture was being invoked along with the design.²⁹¹

²⁸⁸ For analysis of this kind of spectacle, see S. Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire and Anthropology in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

²⁸⁹ *Manchester Times*, 6 January 1838, p. 3. For a later exhibition by this Institution see *Catalogue of the Fourth Exhibition at the Manchester Mechanics' Institution, Cooper Street, Christmas, 1842-3: With the Names of the Contributors*.

²⁹⁰ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1977), pp. 149-155, 170-176.

²⁹¹ F.M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian England*, pp. 36-38.

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Figure 12. Wood engraving of ‘Manchester Mechanics’ Institution’, *Reynolds’s miscellany of romance, general literature, science, and art* 34.880 (22 April 1865), p. 280.

Set recommended essay questions in Institutes such as “Does the End ever justify the Means?”, “Is early marriage desirable or injurious?” and “Does morality increase with civilisation?” have been discussed already,²⁹² however they had a broader cultural significance. They were Socratic in tone, method and structure. The adoption of the deity Apollo as almost a patron of the mechanics’ institute movement evoked the same sense of classical rebirth. Apollo, or the Roman deity Mercury (as in the images from the Birmingham Mechanics Institute medal, reproduced above, in the Introduction; and the title page of the *London Mechanics Register* of 1825, reproduced in the first chapter in detail and in the context of the entire design, below), represented the communication of

^{292.} *The Report of the Yorkshire Union of Mechanics’ Institutes, Read at the Twenty-Fifth Annual Meeting* (Leeds: E. Baines and Sons, 1865), pp. 22-25.

the stabilising and civilising influence of wisdom and knowledge which was closely associated with art; and the visible and tangible exercise of learning.²⁹³

The art of mechanics' institute exhibitions was steeped in the accepted norms of contemporary political culture. The busts from antiquity, suits of armour, portraits of local and national worthies – the phenomena of the institute exhibition was one in which everyone was invited and everyone was a participant. The gender politics and triumph of reason over violence inherent in Rubens,²⁹⁴ for instance, were on display in the form of originals donated by benefactors or copies made by members. Art served as an exhortation to behave in a civilised way and to reject the impulse to radicalise.²⁹⁵

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Figure 13. Title page, *The London Mechanics Register*. Image taken from a digitized copy belonging to Leland Stanford Junior University, Google Books.

²⁹³. J.C. Fumo, *The Legacy of Apollo: Antiquity, Authority and Chaucerian Poetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), passim esp. p. 21.

²⁹⁴. L. Rosenthal, *Gender, Politics and Allegory in the Art of Rubens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 167-197.

²⁹⁵. Rosenthal, *Gender, Politics and Allegory*, pp. 63-112.

Cultural emphasis was on the perpetuation of the status quo. Artists such as Francis Wheatley adorned the walls, and such artists employed motifs of responsible masculinity and political moderation.²⁹⁶ Edwin Landseer was on display also, and his adoption as a motif by the mechanics' institutes was symbolic – in life, Landseer had fallen foul of the Royal Institution for claiming that some artisans – such as engravers like himself – were fine artists rather than mere manual workers.²⁹⁷ His political act was transformed into a potent visual political cipher. The proud display of works by such artists as Titian, meanwhile, speaks of allegory,²⁹⁸ of inviting the viewer to stop, to ponder the meaning, to reflect and to educate oneself. The fruits of such labours were, like art itself, unpredictable and uncontrolled. Encouraging such labour was in itself a cultural exercise, taking place in a highly visual, constructed, orderly and controlled space. Art in mechanics' institutes was laden with meaning and served as further means of control through cultural superiority.

Leisure Culture

There was, from an early stage, a leisure culture associated with institutes. Such places were “designed as much as spaces of entertainment as for political meetings and debates.”²⁹⁹ Although this has been referred to in the chapter on social aspects, the leisure element of institutes involved a strong cultural subtext. The visits to museums and to the University of Oxford, were not merely asides in an educational discourse – they were cultural exercises in their own right. Entertainment, whether within or without institute premises, was provided to members as a cultural pursuit for its own sake; at times in

²⁹⁶. P. Higgins, *A Nation of Politicians: Gender, Patriotism and Political Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press: 2010), p. 178.

²⁹⁷. J. Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences: Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 75-76.

²⁹⁸. J.L. O'Rourke, *Keats' Odes and Contemporary Criticism* (Miami: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 88.

²⁹⁹ Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space*, p. 207.

conjunction with instruction certainly, but often independently of it. When arrangements were made with the Midland Railway Company to operate a cheap day out along the newly constructed Buxton line for members of the Derby Mechanics' Institute and their families, for instance, strong demand was anticipated³⁰⁰ for what was a cultural and social rather than educational trip.

Institute activities such as music recital clubs, and the general interest in cultural entertainment rather than educational classes, were used as evidence by critics to support the argument that institutes had failed.³⁰¹ In areas such as Lancashire, rival organisations were established. Lyceums, with their emphasis on leisure and entertainment, were set up in the 1830s to cater for those who found the mechanics' institute fare uninspiring.³⁰² The rivalry ended within a few years with the absorption of the Lyceums by Institutes.³⁰³

Many Institutes adopted a leisure and recreation programme in order to enhance their membership.³⁰⁴ Carlisle Mechanics' Institute, having already experienced financial failure once,³⁰⁵ diversified in its second incarnation in the later 1840s to offer such recreational opportunities as a cricket team.³⁰⁶ New Swindon Institute, also in the same decade, emphasised the merits of the "manly games" it also provided opportunities to play on day-trips, after which members could indulge in "most salutary" baths "for the preservation of health."³⁰⁷ Communal recreation rather than individual leisure pursuits were the norm with the emphasis on self-help combining with the social element of shared leisure activity to promote a collective culture which played together in order to stay

^{300.} *Derby Mercury*, 24 June 1863, p. 2.

^{301.} J. Hague, *Recreation in Connection with Mechanics' Institutes* (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, 1864), passim.

^{302.} *Manchester Times*, 3 November 1838, unpaginated.

^{303.} *Leicester Chronicle*, 26 October 1839, unpaginated.

³⁰⁴ "Mechanics' Institutes and 'Works Of Amusement'", *National magazine* 3.14 (December 1857), pp.129-130.

^{305.} *Rules of the Carlisle Literary, Scientific and Mechanical Institution* (Carlisle: Jollie and Steel, 1833), p. 1.

^{306.} *Carlisle Journal*, 25 May 1849, p. 2.

^{307.} *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 15 April 1847, p. 3.

together.³⁰⁸ There was also a recognition that such activities were a necessary solution to the problem of keeping members interested in the institute during the summer and often generally.³⁰⁹

Gender and Mechanics' Institute Cultural Activity

There were clear differences in how the sexes engaged with institute cultural events and activities. In the picture below, from the leading graphical newspaper of the era, *The Illustrated London News*, of 1857 for example, can be seen the laying of the foundation-stone for the North Shields Mechanics' Institute.

Figure 14. Foundation Stone Laying, North Shields (1857), *Illustrated London News*, Supplement, 30 May 1857, p. 527.

^{308.} P. Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 170.

^{309.} W.H.J. Traice, *Handbook of Mechanics' Institutes* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green, 1863), pp. 88-89.

This event took place in May 1857. Local news coverage of the ceremony noted that several photographic exposures were taken of the event by local artists.³¹⁰ It is possible that the image is based on one of these photographs. From the image, it can be seen that any women present are accompanied. They are also at a distance from the laying of the stone itself, and are not active participants in the occasion. This is borne out by the coverage of the actual event, which does not include many references to women at all, instead they are simply included in the neutral collective nouns such as “crowd” and “throng”. Any gendered collective nouns were all male. The only mentions of women were in the rounds of speeches after the event, where named individuals – all married women – were thanked for their fundraising on the day by running a bazaar and where the actual special guest who laid the foundation-stone, William Schaw Lindsay, the MP for Tynemouth, apologised for his wife’s absence. He did so by delivering a message from her to the women present on the day apologising profusely for her missing the ceremony.³¹¹

Therefore, the absence of a high-profile female guest was something that was to be reported to other women – the ladies present on the day, the wives of significant social standing – and not to the townspeople in general. It seems to be the case that an absence from an event where one was expected to attend had to be reported to one’s direct peer group, at least among ladies of a certain social standing.³¹² In any event, the newspaper report corroborates the image and confirms the secondary role taken by women on the day and the distance from the key aspects of the ceremony which they kept. However, the laying of a foundation stone and a gathering of the social elites in a community, was not a typical cultural event but rather a special date in the social and cultural calendar. The ladies were there to be “seen”.

^{310.} *Shields Daily Gazette*, 20 May 1857, p. 1.

^{311.} *North and South Shields Gazette*, 21 May 1857, p. 3.

³¹² For a study of expected norms of etiquette in the period, see L. Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and the Season* (London: Croom Helm, 1973).

Samuel Laycock's poem suggests an environment that was generally masculine. The Swindon Mechanics' Institute boasted of its "manly" games. Yonge's fictional institute was a very male one. Most committee members in most institutes were male dominated. Most lecturers were male. All major benefactors, sponsors and backers were. As locations where social interactions between individuals and collectives took place, mechanics' institutes were naturally gendered spaces which reflected the gender norms. The expected cultural norms of gender were propounded in classrooms, disseminated in lecture theatres, integrated into the administrative infrastructure of Institutes and even influenced their physical form.

Consideration of mechanics' institutes as *gendered* spaces is overdue. Although recent scholarship references the interaction between women and institutes – for example Martyn Walker suggests that "females, daughters and mothers moving into the masculine public sphere" of the economy beyond the home³¹³ – most of this interaction is a discussion of the experiences of female learners, and where Institutes are described as gendered spaces at all it is in the context of educational history with barely any reference to social or cultural themes.³¹⁴ Scholarship on mechanics' institutes as gendered spaces tends to focus on learner experience. The institute has generally not been considered as a gendered cultural space in its own right. The "architectural and geographic spatial arrangements [which reinforce] status differences between men and women" in institutes have as a result gone unexplored, as has the wider relationship between spaces and gender.³¹⁵

Although membership of mechanics' institutes came, eventually, to be seen as a sign of respectability among the working classes³¹⁶ and although there was a significant

³¹³. Walker, "Solid and Practical Education", pp. 90-91.

³¹⁴. Sims, "Mechanics' Institutes in Sussex and Hampshire", pp. 254-255.

³¹⁵. D. Spain, *Gendered Spaces* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p.30.

³¹⁶. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 77.

female involvement with institutes generally, in general the wife stayed at home when her husband went off to the institute for the evening.³¹⁷ The example of Manchester, where the local working men encouraged classes for women at their institute in order to make them better wives,³¹⁸ may well have been atypical however the sentiment was probably the norm.

The gendered nature of mechanics' institute space – and the role of the female as learner (and thus receiver of cultural capital) within it – was recognised from the beginning as an extension of the world outside of the Institute.

At first, the early institutes were reluctant to admit women as full members. The London Institute led the way, first by admitting the female friends and relatives of members to lectures and allowing them the use of the library and then by allowing them membership in their own right under the same terms as apprentices. Their resulting lower membership fees reflected this. As was often the case, where London led other institutes followed.³¹⁹ By 1839, one third of lecture audiences at York Mechanics' Institute were female.³²⁰ Such female engagement with institute activities in the North of England ran contrary to the trend – it was more typical of the South.³²¹ This trend towards full recognition of, and numerical growth in, female members coincided with the first downturns in the fortunes of institutes, as was described in the chapter on Social aspects.

Nevertheless, there were prominent examples of female engagement with mechanics' institutes in the North of England. Huddersfield had its own Female Educational Institute set up and operated along the same lines as – and with the full support of – the local mechanics' institute.³²² Keighley had a female wing to its

^{317.} Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 259.

^{318.} Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 234.

^{319.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 126.

^{320.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 247.

^{321.} Kelly, *Birkbeck*, p. 264.

^{322.} Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, pp. 222, 264-266.

Institute.³²³ Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds Institutes all had well-attended classes for women members.³²⁴ Burnley institute's physical layout was constructed along gender lines, with separate classrooms for the sexes who were kept apart by partitions, as well as entrances to the facilities situated on different streets.³²⁵ This ordered use of space had more in common with the teaching of children than it did the provision of a service for adults. The conversion of an existing single structural space into self-contained gendered spaces nearly bankrupted the institute concerned.³²⁶ Huddersfield seemed to inspire a small-scale movement of Female Educational Institutes, most of which were too small to operate completely on their own – they enjoyed an informal pseudo-independence within the confines of mechanics' institutes in the larger towns of the industrial North, particularly Yorkshire in places such as Leeds, Halifax and Bradford.³²⁷

Conclusion

The cultural presence of mechanics' institutes was complex and took various forms. They pioneered practices as specialist as systematic lending-library cataloguing and as ultimately popular in the period as large-scale popular science and art exhibitions. They were spaces for the creation, consumption and dissemination of cultural capital. Through the examinations of their exhibitions, it has been shown that mechanics' institutes took the idea of popular education as entertainment to the masses and promoted popular awareness of and engagement with art, in ways that were more accessible and direct than galleries and museums. Mechanics' institutes could, and did, become important cultural resources within the spaces in which they operated.

^{323.} Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, pp. 222, 264-266.

^{324.} Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, pp. 222, 264-266.

^{325.} *Burnley Advertiser*, 19 January 1867, p. 3.

^{326.} *Burnley Advertiser*, 19 January 1867, p. 3.

^{327.} *Twenty-Fifth Report of Yorkshire Union*, pp. 100-111.

The spaces in which they operated included, as we have seen, purpose-built edifices. Little attention has been paid to the architecture of the mechanics' institutes by previous scholarship: most of the many thousand buildings housing institutes must have been modest structures but Mansfield notes the architectural pretensions of the institutes in cities such as Liverpool, referring to the Liverpool building designed by Holme in the 1830s with its Ionic portico, and the costly institute building in Manchester designed by Grogan in the 1850s and costing £20, 000 (a print showing the façade is reproduced in chapter 3).³²⁸

One of the mechanics institutes sampled in chapter one was Devonport. Before returning to the state of Devonport Mechanics institute in Duke Street today, in the final chapter, it is worth quoting from the press description of its appearance when opened in 1850, built to the design of its local architect Alfred Norman (1823-1893, son of the Devonport mechanics' institute erstwhile vice-president John Norman) and funded by donations which included 100 guineas from Edward St Aubyn, the Lord of the Manor:

The front of the new building towards Duke-street shows a ground-floor crowned by a complete Doric entablature, above which are two series of windows, the lower ones being the smallest—although they can hardly be described as mezzanine ones—they being intended to give light beneath the galleries of the Lecture Hall; and the elevation is terminated by projected bracketed cornice and eaves-roof. The composition has three windows in its width, the middle one of which on each floor consists of three openings. The divisions of the one on the ground-floor are formed by two doric columns immediately beneath the general entablature whose shafts are rusticated in correspondence with the quoins which form the dressings of the lateral openings, and of the two other windows, also of the angles of the front. In the upper part, the windows in one tier may be said to be coupled with those in the other, the cornices and consoles of the smaller or mezzanine ones serving to support the balustrades or balconies belonging to those which are immediately over them. Here, too, the middle window in each tier consists of three openings, the upper one being an arched Venetian window, with those central opening the other window on either side corresponds, it having pilasters a richly moulded arch head, and ornamented keystone.³²⁹

³²⁸ N. Mansfield, *Buildings of the Labour Movement* (London: Historic England, 2013), pp.70-71.

³²⁹ *Western Courier*, 17 January 1850, p.3.

CONCLUSION

Introduction: “Knowledge produces but a passing impression”

Mechanics’ institutes in the British Isles today are, for the most part, a shadow of their former selves. Many of the splendid buildings the movement built during its heyday are derelict. Some endured for a time, changing their names and functions over the years, and some have retained echoes of their original mission. Some of their buildings have changed use and purpose several times over, with a succession of tenants and owners calling them home since the days when workers, freshly come from the factory gates, dockyards and machine shops, walked their halls with books in hand on the way to lessons and lectures.

The crumbling buildings of mechanics’ institutes such as the one in Devonport which I examined in chapter one, as the first case study, symbolise the decline of the movement as a whole. The uninformed verdict has been that mechanics’ institutes failed, and were deserted and abandoned. Their doors closed, their ideas passed into history – an echo from an idealistic past, their buildings an eyesore and their original purpose barely remembered by most. Over the course of its history, from 1825 to 1881, Devonport Mechanics’ Institute was a vibrant, living cultural space within a bustling, growing community. It had served as a hospital during outbreaks of disease, as an exam centre for the Royal Society of Arts, and as one of the major inspirations for the Great Exhibition itself. Its reading room once hosted one of the finest minds in astronomy, its lecture hall which, as we have seen was designed by the local architect Alfred Norman and built in 1850, once rang to the voices of guest speakers whose names are still remembered – P.T. Barnum, Charles Dickens and George Bernard Shaw. A Grade II listed building, it is now a ruin, its owner seemingly content for it to fall down in due course so the land can perhaps

be developed or sold on (see Figure 15, below).¹ It is a powerful metaphor – a failing building standing as the decaying tombstone of a dead movement.

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Figure 15. Devonport Mechanics Institute, Devonport, Plymouth, published on the Victorian Society twitter page, <https://twitter.com/thevicsoc> .

In Swindon, there is a former mechanics' institute building which on first sight is a twin, in fate if not in exact appearance, of Devonport's. The planned social and cultural hub of a new town, it served its purpose for decades before, with the end of the Great Western Railway, it fell into disuse and then ruin. Its demolition has been suggested at times, but its planned restoration can be seen as a metaphor for the emerging new consensus in the study of mechanics' institutes. Restoration is planned, a few dedicated enthusiasts hope to rescue the building from obscurity and oblivion, and the structure may

¹ "Snookered: Owners of Plymouth's Pigeon Infested Snooker Hall Fined £1000", *The Plymouth Herald*, Online Edition, <http://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/Snookered-Owners-Plymouth-s-pigeon-infested/story-29200218-detail/story.html> [Accessed 30 April 2016].

have a long term future.² It has gone from failure to being seen by a whole new audience in an entirely new light.

Guests at the Banquet: Addressing the Question of Failure

By the close of the 1860s, mechanics' institutes were an accepted feature of the cultural, social and political landscape of Britain. Their physical structures, as demonstrated throughout this thesis, not only served their original purpose as halls of learning but had evolved to become community resources. The mechanics' institutes, by the late 1860s, were a British-wide, imperial and global phenomenon.

Yet the evolution and diversification of the mechanics' institutes are not typically interpreted as a sign of the movement's success. It is, instead, often attributed to a drive to encourage working people to use what had become, according to some contemporaries, failing enterprises – even by the mid-1830s, the label of failure had been applied in public discourses such as the popular press and in Parliamentary debates. In becoming such things as lending banks and exhibition centres, this narrative argues, the mechanics' institutes were adapting in order to counter the indifference shown towards them by their intended audience. As Robert Elliott said in 1861, “the banquet was prepared for guests who did not come”.³ James Hudson had drawn similar conclusions from his 1851 nationwide survey of the movement, with his findings reporting signs of decline amongst many respondents, although his sampling was far from complete.⁴ The steady diversification and expansion of what mechanics' institutes began to offer their members and communities is, in the traditional historiographical model, therefore framed and

² “Mechanics Institute Restoration”, *Forward Swindon*, Website, <http://www.forwardswindon.co.uk/built-environment/swindon-heritage/mechanics-institute-restoration/> [Accessed 30 April 2016].

³ R. Elliott, “On the Working Men’s Reading Rooms, as Established in 1848 at Carlisle”, *Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science* (1861), pp. 23-32.

⁴ Hudson, *Adult Education*, passim.

explained by an urge to attract and retain guests by expanding the menu on offer to such guests at the banquet.

The guests of Elliot's analogy were deterred from engaging with mechanics' institutes as a result of supposed unease at the level of influence and control exerted over the enterprises by their founders and backers. This control supposedly stifled political discourse and therefore led to working-class alienation – the guests declined the invitation to the banquet as the fare on offer was chosen to suit sensibilities other than their own. The apparent decline in reported numbers of working class members making use of institutes as suggested by James Hudson, together with the observed increase in middle-class membership has been taken as a key indicator of supposed failure.

“Failure”, as evidenced by the diversification of service provision beyond the educational, and by the apparent apathy of the working classes towards the institutes, has been the accepted historiographical label applied to mechanics' institutes for one hundred and fifty years. As early as 1842, the Quaker writer Mary Bowley had claimed that with regard to the operation of mechanics' institutes

the class character that was recognised might be distasteful to the sturdy independence of the English artisan; the exclusion of political and theological discussions might have been regarded as an unnecessary and an unwelcome restriction; the want of a popular style in the lecturers may have repelled those whose scientific attainments were necessarily of the humblest kind,—but they certainly failed. The domestic habits of the more respectable and steady portion of the industrial classes, and the love of dissipation and intemperance of others, were equally in the way of success, and comparatively few of the original institutions remain to the present day.⁵

Twentieth-century Marxist historians used this enduring label of “failure” to condemn institutes as tools of middle-class control and manipulation, while even the

⁵ Bowley, *Universal history*, p.412.

movement's advocates, Thomas Kelly and Mabel Tylecote, took that label as accepted truth and lamented its application rather than challenging it.⁶

More recent scholarship has gone some way towards revisiting and revising the narrative of institutes as failures. The contributions of social scientists such as Ian Inkster, Steven Shapin and Barry Barnes, together with the work of historians of education such as Jana Sims, Martyn Walker and Helen Flexner have been invaluable in reframing the story of the mechanics' institute movement. Flexner's recent work on the formative years of the London Mechanics' Institute is an example of how nuanced and complex the discourse has become. Walker's recent book has, through emphasising the development and growth of the mechanics' institute movement towards the end of the nineteenth-century and beyond, gone some way to establishing their credentials as successful enterprises. He uses measures as the volumes of technical patent filed at each institute in Yorkshire, for instance, as novel means of arguing that the notion of the mechanics' institutes as failures is less clear cut than has been accepted previously.

It is the overarching conclusion of this thesis that recent advances in historiographical thought and technique allow for the rejection of the narrative of failure by redefining success. It is enough for mechanics' institutes to have existed, endured and engaged with the world around them over decades. Instead of placing Institutes on a success-failure axis (where the only progress possible is a redefinition of these two outcomes), this thesis demonstrates that it is possible, instructive and desirable to dispense with that axis. Instead, the activities, priorities, fortunes and interactions of mechanics' institutes are revealed, examined and understood – their impact and influence detailed as outcomes in their own right, and as a vehicle for discovering wider cultural, social and political truths about their world. That they took their place alongside other progressive movements such as temperance, and disseminated knowledge alongside Sunday Schools

⁶ Kelly, *Birkbeck*, passim; Tylecote, *Mechanics Institutes*, passim.

and, less commonly, Owenite Halls of Science, is a manifestation of the diversity of nineteenth British community and civil life. The aim of this thesis has been to recognise and acknowledge that diversity by revealing and analysing new layers of it.

There are other conclusions related to the traditional narrative of the mechanics' institutes as failures. Firstly, the evidence presented in earlier chapters does not support the assertion that working people viewed Institutes as inherently middle-class enterprises. Similarly, desertion of Institutes for such reasons is not supported either. Accusations of class dominance were generally restricted to intellectuals and radicals, and expressions typically took the form of such critics urging working-class members to take a more active role in the running of their institute, such as in London and on Tyneside. Where middle-class involvement was a local fear, and was suspected or confirmed, the reaction was typically to establish a rival which claimed for itself the title of mechanics' institute rather than to desert the concept as a whole as at Manchester in 1829. Class-based criticism of mechanics' institutes by ordinary working members or by the working communities they served was conspicuous by its absence. The accusation that working people either deserted or shunned the institutes due to the socioeconomic differentials between patron and mechanic is not one which the workers themselves voiced.

Further evidence which refutes the failure narrative is found in the fate of the Lyceum movement. Mainly confined to Lancashire, and devised as a potential solution to the perceived problems experienced by mechanics' institutes in engaging with their intended users, Lyceums offered similar facilities to members – library, reading room, lectures, etc., – together with an additional focus on leisure – such as family rooms, entertainment nights, etc. The Lyceums subsequently formed informal alliances with mechanics' institutes as their initial successes turned to decline within only a few years.

Their eventual fate was either to be absorbed by the institutes they were intended to replace or to go out of business.⁷

The example of Lyceums has a wider implication which in itself constitutes a secondary conclusion of this thesis. As the middle-class backers of the Lyceums misjudged the demands and needs of the working people of Lancashire, this in turn is indicative of what was a broader misjudgement, or perhaps more correctly an unrealistic expectation, of potential working class interest in and engagement with mechanics' institutes. The interest in what was on offer was overestimated, and any shortfall between reality and expectation – although blamed on enforced artificial bars on debate and meddling from above by some observers – was the result of working people, short of spare time outside of working hours, spending that time according to other concerns.

That many mechanics' institutes experienced fluctuations in membership numbers, especially among the working classes, during the period examined by this thesis is evident. These fluctuations correspond to underlying national economic trends and the subsequent local impact of those forces. As the employment market in towns and cities up and down the country peaked and troughed, so did the fortunes of their local mechanics' institutes. Ordinary working members would be expected to be more vulnerable to such variations in economic circumstances, more likely to see membership of a mechanics' institute as an expensive luxury in times of trouble and more likely to divert resources elsewhere as a result. In some places, such as Birmingham, this is what appears to have happened. This was a choice made along lines of individual economic experience rather than class status, however. The prevailing failure narrative breaks down when the economic circumstances of members are taken into account. Given that working class members in places such as Carlisle were often the very last and most reluctant to cancel memberships when confronted with stark spending choices, the truth looks more

⁷ *Manchester Times*, 3 November 1838, n.p.; *Leicester Chronicle*, 26 October 1839, n.p.

like success in winning and retaining working members than as any kind of failure. The sense of community and camaraderie conveyed by Samuel Laycock's poetry – separated by distance in time and by second-hand observation from ourselves – is palpable and welcoming.

Flexner's study of the London Mechanics' Institute casts further doubt on the prevailing narrative although one has to sift the raw data to find persuasive evidence.⁸ There, hidden in the transcribed entries of seven years' worth of record books, are clear signs that working men adapted to changing economic circumstances by changing jobs with seeming ease, speed and regularity. As the job roles changed, the lines between different types and classes of occupation and status became blurred. Those employed in trades such as the manufacture and repair of luxury goods, for instance, would take up employment elsewhere as the economy waned only to go back to what they knew best as it waxed anew. Social mobility was a reality in mechanics' institutes, and was just as much a reaction to variations in the demand and supply dynamics of the working world as it was an end in itself.

The self-evident fact remains, however, that mechanics' institutes in their original form did not, in the British Isles, endure far beyond the end of the nineteenth century in any great numbers. This would suggest that the accepted failure narrative is correct and that the eventual decline and demise of the Institutes was long in the making and plain for all to see. If the movement was indeed a failure then the most widespread commentary on it as such would logically come from around the turn of the century, as the Institutes were disappearing. However, the institutes were not described during that epoch in terms of failure. They were instead regarded as a feature of the landscape, an accepted part of everyday life, the extraordinary banquet made daily bread and butter, exchanging roles and sharing functions with other bodies and organisations. They necessarily became

⁸ Flexner, 'London Mechanics' Institute', Appendices.

matters of interest to such leading politicians of the era as Lord Palmerston, Benjamin Disraeli, and W.E. Gladstone.⁹ Although Charles Kingsley may have spoken of them as an undesirable alternative to playing leapfrog in the open air¹⁰, Charles Dickens regarded them with more warmth, believing they were “vitally important to the well-being of society” and giving speeches in Institutes nationwide.¹¹

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Figure 16. Charles Dickens’ address at a soirée at the Liverpool Mechanics’ Institution, 26 February 1844.

⁹ ‘Disraeli and Stanley on Popular Education’, *Leader and Saturday Analyst* 10.502 (5 November 1859), pp.1228-1229; For Gladstone, see *Mechanics’ Institutes: their advantages, and how to improve them* (Leeds: Haymer, 1862); *The Times*, 20 December 1867, p. 7: editorial on Gladstone’s address at the inauguration of the Wernith Mechanics’ Institute.

¹⁰ C. Kingsley, *Sanitary and Social Lectures* (London: MacMillan, 1880), p. 212.

¹¹ C. Dickens, *Speeches: Literary and Social* (London: Hotten, 1870), pp. 274, 82, 271; for discussions of Mechanics’ Institutes in Dickens’ periodicals, see ‘The Labourer’s Reading-Room’, *Household words* 3.77 (13 September 1851), pp.581-585.

Samuel Smiles spoke of them, as a vehicle not just for learning from books but for learning the practical economic skills of life.¹² What united these very different commentators was their belief in mechanics' institutes as agents of profound change – agents which played a part in altering the social, cultural and political fabric of Britain forever.

“Heaw welcome they made a poor fellow loike me”¹³: Social Impact and Influence

Mechanics' institutes were social spaces. Although they were first and foremost places of education, that education itself evolved in new directions. Institutes became more than just libraries, reading rooms and technical schools. They were places where young women could learn to read and write, where young men could go to broaden their horizons, soak up ideas, and become more socially respectable as well as economically productive. They were places which could, through the often classical architecture and the hush of the reading room and library, take on the atmosphere of a sacred space, and serve as storehouses of moral guidance. Mechanics' institutes were of the community they were situated in. They were organisations which reflected the society around them; bathhouses, music halls, theatres, savings banks and mortgage lenders. A penny which left the pocket of a worker and was handed over to a mechanics' institute could go towards tuition to improve job prospects. Alternatively it could help pay for a day's excursion along a new railway line in a specially commissioned train. It could pay for entry to an evening's musical entertainment. It could count towards saving for a much wanted item or a financial emergency. It could even be part payment towards the price of that worker's own home. The mechanics' institutes were social enterprises in the context of their social

¹² S. Smiles, *Thrift* (London: Murray, 1870), pp. 155-158.

¹³ Laycock, *Th' Mechanics' o' Setterday Neet*.

activities can be considered the most far-reaching yet underestimated self-help movement in British history.

The mechanics' institutes have been denounced as an attempt by the middle-class to impose a social control agenda on working people in order to soften their manners, make them more productive workers and, by showing them a tightly controlled view of the world, lead them to new acceptance of their place within it. Recent scholarship has sought to distance the Institutes from this narrative.¹⁴ That is unfortunate. Mechanics' institutes *were* a means for social control. All that remains to be debated is the scale and nature of that control; the chapter on social aspects demonstrated a scale of that control which was broad, in-depth and stretching into every aspect of Institute business as well as all organisational dealings with the wider world. The mechanics' institutes were nothing less than an attempt to manufacture men and women for a brave new industrialised world, who would in time take their place as industrious and enfranchised – yet still junior – partners in it.

The utility of mechanics' institutes as a means of control through guided instruction was clear to those who wished to make use of it, and that some groups and organisations did for precisely this reason is another conclusion of this thesis. The accusation that Institutes were vehicles of social control goes back to Friedrich Engels in 1845 and was taken up vociferously by such Marxist historians as E.P. Thompson and Trygve Tholfsen. Although attempts were made by social scientists such as Inkster, Shapin and Barnes to look at the mechanics of this control on the level of a few regional examples, there has been no examination of broader scale attempts at control since Thomas Kelly in 1957.

Mechanics' institutes were perfectly suited to serving as the primary social space of a controlled community. Controlled communities could be company property or, in

¹⁴ Specifically Flexner, "London Mechanics' Institute", *passim*.

the case of the main example at New Swindon, a completely planned town built from scratch. As the only leisure space available to residents of that town, everything about it disseminated the agenda of the Great Western Railway, whether that agenda was behavioural or moral. The goals were productivity and the elimination of causes of lost productivity such as drunkenness and other forms of antisocial behaviour. Company values were the expected values of the employee, with the mechanics' institute the means of engendering, disseminating and reinforcing those values.

The new community at New Swindon included other essential edifices catering to religious needs. A more extended treatment of the religious dimension in British mechanics' institutes would explore their place as sites of lectures for or against organised religion and their relationship to infidelity, free-thinking and the secular movement. Lectures were presented at Institutes on questions of religion, despite formal prohibitions against such discussion.¹⁵

Control had other dimensions too, with the patriarchal attitude of judgement and remedy apparent at the small scale as much as on the national level. Elements of the social lives of the British working classes during the period in question were just as tightly controlled, as much by community expectation and accepted norms as by a drafted code of institutional rules. Mechanics' institutes delivered existing agendas of control as readily as new ones. Male members had to be kept occupied with "manly" games in order to keep them away from drink. Young apprentices and women were given limited membership rights and paid a reduced rate reflective of their lower earning potential, the latter only being admitted on those terms after lengthy debate on whether they should be admitted at all. Rules and orders reinforced accepted polite practice when dealing with the fraught prospect of the young men and women members spending too much time in

¹⁵ "The Philosophy of Atheism examined and compared with Christianity: a Course of Popular Lectures delivered at the Mechanics' Institute, Bradford, on Sunday Afternoons, in the Winter of 1852-3", *London quarterly review*, 1.1 (September 1853), pp.287-288.

close proximity to each other. Separate classrooms were the norm and separate entrances for the sexes were a common – and fairly expensive – feature of many Institute buildings. Some Institutes even had dedicated women’s buildings set apart from the male ones or as self-contained spaces on institute premises. The urge to segregate was a powerful one. Yet this segregation was set aside at social events on Institute premises, such as the annual soirées, when young unmarried couples were accorded a shared recognition and respect usually reserved for married ones. Control had its limits and was tempered with the flexibility to take account of the realities of life.

Institute involvement in the everyday social life of members did not just extend to control. It is a key finding of this thesis that the mechanics’ institutes, as a movement, delivered large-scale, organised, affordable and convenient social banking facilities to the working classes for the first time in modern British history. It first challenged, then rivalled, and at times dwarfed other providers of financial services including – with the advent of the Post Office Savings Scheme – the State. The Birkbeck Bank, operated by the London Mechanics’ Institute became the biggest mortgage lender in the Capital, opening home ownership up to the working classes for the first time. The Mechanics’ Institute Savings Bank in Annan, Dumfriesshire held a significant proportion of the collective available liquidity in the town and its environs. The mechanics’ institute movement in the North of England became synonymous with banking. Across Yorkshire, for example, people were more likely to visit the institute to deal with their everyday financial transactions than they were to borrow books or attend classes. The examples are numerous and demonstrate that the mechanics’ institutes, whether working in networks or as single entities, had a profound impact and influence on society by providing a level of access to financial services which has until now gone unexplored.

When viewed through a social lens, therefore, mechanics’ institutes had a clear impact and influence.

“People’s College”: Cultural Impact and Influence

The mechanics’ institutes had a tangible, cultural presence – not merely in relation to individual members but also, through the actions of those individuals, upon wider society and civilisation. This presence was complex. Institutes pioneered concepts as specialised as systematic lending library cataloguing and as ultimately popular in the period as large-scale public science and art exhibitions. They stored, created and disseminated cultural capital and facilitated the creation of more. As such, their contribution to the cultural landscape of nineteenth-century Britain is significant.

The connections between institutes and the cultures of their communities have been demonstrated. Through the examinations of their exhibitions, it has been shown that mechanics’ institutes took the idea of popular education as entertainment to the masses and promoted popular awareness of and engagement with art, in ways that were more accessible and direct at the time than either galleries or museums. By looking at a small, geographically isolated case-study, such as Swindon, wider truths about the movement have been revealed; what mechanics’ institutes could be capable of in terms of interaction with, communication with, as part of, and as an influence over popular local culture; what elements of infrastructure in terms of technology, transport, industry and population were required in order for Institutes to develop in remote, rural areas; and how mechanics’ institutes could serve as conduits for the dissemination of broader truths about the culture in such places. The nature of networks of communication and the sharing of resources, personnel and information which developed between institutes in such places is illustrative of how they engaged with local cultures and adapted to local circumstances.¹⁶

¹⁶ For a vivid example of how other such nineteenth-century cultural and political networks might develop and communicate their ideas in a national or even international context while also reflecting local concerns, see Caroline Bressey’s compelling analysis of the late Victorian anti-racist periodical *Anti-Caste*. This short-lived but influential had a significant transatlantic audience

Mechanics' institutes became important cultural resources within the spaces in which they operated – whether the aim was to inform, improve or control.

It could be argued that, as pioneers of modern library cataloguing systems, leisure excursions, package holidays, large-scale public exhibitions and public museums, mechanics' institutes were cultural trailblazers. The guests were presented with a cultural banquet without parallel. With their exhibitions, they tapped into a popular imagination and popular curiosity about the world which had not been evident on such a scale before. Those exhibitions saw thousands of visitors stream through the doors of even the smallest of Institutes on an annual basis, often for decades. Copies of works by Titian hung alongside pencil sketches by institute members, while scientific instruments were put on display for all to see, touch and experience in a way that would be, for many visitors, the first time they had seen such things. The Industrial Revolution had changed everyday life and living in a way that was fundamental and wide-ranging, with even the language changing to reflect the new mechanical reality. The world had altered and mechanics' Institutes played a part in helping the public make sense of those changes.

The mechanics' institutes also engaged with debates around cultural concerns. This thesis has included a study of the changing attitudes to fiction reading over the course of several decades. Fiction went from being a largely sinful exercise to a common practice, although acceptance was a long time coming and was never quite complete or clear cut. Exceptions, such as the kind of material morally acceptable to critics such as Grinfield – the Walter Scotts, Daniel Defoes and suchlike – proved the rule. The hostility displayed towards fiction holdings in Mechanics' Institute libraries from some backers, members and critics alike was vocal, enduring and influential. The decision to allow novels was taken grudgingly by many mechanics' institute committees and by no means

despite the fact that its editor Catherine Impey lived and worked all her life in rural Somerset: C. Bressey, *Empire, Race, and the Politics of Anti-Caste* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

all of them chose to allow such books. In some places, members were more likely to encounter someone bending the rules by reading political material than they were to encounter someone openly reading a novel. Criminality, violence, melancholia, insanity and suicide were all linked to reading fiction during the period of the debate around their inclusion, and this was during the same period when institutes were under suspicion of being hotbeds of radical agitation. Nineteenth-century fear of the imagination had the characteristics of a moral panic.

Control over what fed the imagination was related to the members' relationship with art and culture. It was a relationship that had its roots in the controlled, constructed and artificial. The exhibits and works of art were chosen by the committees and the backers. The working man's judgement was guided by the judgement of his social better as much as, and probably more than, the tastes and fashions of the age. While the working member might not be able to duplicate a Shakespeare sonnet, he was capable of copying an Old Master if taught about form, perspective and technique – uncontroversial paintings, prints and sculpture were exhibited, discussed, copied and the copies displayed anew. Given the association between fine art and intellectuality, and given that intellectuals and creatives were typically eloquent, civilised and well-mannered individuals, the mechanic was being shaped in the Institute and transformed into a piece of art. In some cases, such as the visit of the New Swindon Mechanics' Institute to the University of Oxford explored in this thesis, it could be shown off in public, a demonstration of the cultural potential of self-help and utilitarianism – the working man was worthy of respect and eventually even the franchise, for his behaviour as a result of mechanics' institutes was vastly improved, his manners softened, his mind fashioned in the image desired by his master.

A vehicle for this narrative of cultural engagement, judgement and attitudes was the popular press. As media that shaped and reflected public opinion, newspapers and

periodicals of the time were at once shaped by public opinion yet were also shaped by it. As the press first engaged with them when they were an unknown quantity founded (in London at least) by political radicals, the treatment of mechanics' institutes in the press was not especially welcoming in the early years of their existence. This began to change as the Institutes became a more prominent campaigning organisation; one which occupied common intellectual ground, as well as personnel, with those calling for the scrapping of the taxes on knowledge. As the tax was reduced and then abolished, so the coverage of mechanics' institutes in the press became more sympathetic. This in turn had an influence on art and literature, for with the phasing out of the 'taxes on knowledge', so the works of fiction from the period which mention institutes stopped seeing them as "holes" for "seditious trash." Instead, they came to be seen as a part of everyday life, an uncontroversial part of the landscape. Novels and newspapers joined in a cultural discourse that reveals as much about the world in which it took place as it does about the participants. Study of the cultural aspects of Institutes is study of the cultural context of their era.

“Wholesome Agitation”: Political Impact and Influence

Mechanics' Institutes were, despite the protestations of both supporters and critics alike, political organisations. They took part in the political process, hosted political activities and helped disseminate political ideas and instruction. As individual organisations and local collectives, they were involved in scandal and radicalism. As a national movement, they were part of a broader move towards securing an extension of the franchise, in which exemplified the inherent improbability of ordinary working people, or were active as petitioners and would-be shapers of policy. They served as transmitters of ideas, as challengers of political norms, yet also as reinforcers and defenders of those norms.

Taking a narrow definition of political impact and influence, the mechanics' institutes were just a small part of a broader fabric of various social and self-improvement enterprises which briefly flowered and flourished during the nineteenth century. Taking a broader view, however, reveals a far more nuanced, complex and wide-ranging picture. Personal involvement of career politicians spanning decades, the provision to thousands upon thousands of people of a space to learn, grow, adapt and change themselves and the world around them – the broader view speaks of a significance, of an impact and influence, that is difficult to quantify because it is so diffuse and widespread. It is difficult to see and measure because it was everywhere.

The Institutes were not merely concerned with the creation of a more productive worker. The intent was just as much about the sculpting of a politically educated and aware ideal of the manual worker than anything else – a worker who would one day take his rightful place as an elector. As has been demonstrated in the chapter on social impact and influence, the attainment of the franchise would be earned through the property qualification by means of affordable mortgages if not through direct enfranchisement. Given all of this, and the political nature of education itself, it becomes difficult to dismiss the notion that the intent of the self-help, utilitarian movement all along was to provide such an educational programme in order to bring about that kind of long-term, transformative and fundamental end. Mechanics' institutes were important and influential elements of that design. As such their inherently political nature is undeniable.

One of the key contentions of this thesis is that the accepted view of mechanics' institutes as static, forced and strictly apolitical spaces does not stand up to scrutiny. Only on the level of local studies does the evidence support such a view, and only in some places. Politics ran through the fabric of the mechanics' institutes even if it not always apparently and obviously so. Known radical agitators taught and lectured in mechanics' institutes. Individuals known for their political activism were instrumental in the founding

of the London Mechanics' Institute and remained influential throughout its early years, drafting rules and orders, suggesting books for institute libraries elsewhere and dispensing advice via written correspondence to new institutes all over the country. Such activity drew admiration but it also drew criticism.

Paranoia and suspicion dogged the early history of the mechanics' institutes and this thesis has contributed to the study of the fear of urban agitation by contextualising this aspect. The first true mechanics' institute, the London example founded by Henry Brougham, George Birkbeck and Francis Place towards the end of 1823, has been placed in its proper context and the interpretation of institutes as something to be feared has been explained – nearly every aspect of the founding of the London Institute was steeped in the symbolism of radical political agitation, from the location of the inaugural meeting to the list of initial financial backers – which in any event read like a who's who of London's radical scene and was in itself enough to guarantee suspicion.

The enmity of established political elites along the Tory-Anglican axis has also been explored and explained. Given the association of mechanics' institutes with Whig politicians, radicals, religious non-conformity and secular education, it should be expected that the reaction to Institutes from traditionalist quarters would be one of institutional dislike and disdain. This expectation is borne out by the evidence, with even similar organisations such as Peel's Tamworth Reading Room being criticised and condemned by thematic association.

Gender politics also found expression in mechanics' institutes, with lecture halls ringing repeatedly down through the years with calls for sexual equality aired in the voices of individuals of both genders. This thesis has revealed examples of gender politics in practice, including the different treatment of women members depending on marital status, and the sexual politics of performance in the gendered space of the institute hall. Attitudes towards gender in Institutes reflected wider concerns about gender relations in

society at large. Female involvement and engagement with Institutes was at once traditional and subversive, with examples including the sexes mingling together in a lecture hall to hear speakers like Clara Lucas Balfour deliver speeches on female empowerment using historical examples. Such speeches were given to rapturous applause, before the genders would leave the building by separate exits, paying different rates of membership subscriptions for the privilege and the women typically having limits on their benefits of membership which were not applied to those of men.

“Its members are among the most enlightened and public-spirited of the working classes”: Scope for Further Study

This thesis is an examination of mechanics’ institutes in the context of their involvement with everyday British life. However, there is scope for further study.

The initial intent of this research was to consider mechanics’ institutes in the Anglophone world. It was decided early in the project to limit the scope to the British Isles. That decision meant that a significant opportunity for research could not be exploited properly. The first suggested area for further study, therefore, is the international aspect of the movement.

The expansion of the mechanics’ institute movement beyond the British Isles began soon after the first examples had opened their doors in London and the other major cities. Within a few years, institutes could be found in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India,¹⁷ and elsewhere. There were regional differences in expression according to local priorities however in many places there was a strong Scottish Presbyterian connection. It was reported by contemporaries, for instance, that Scottish emigrants to Australia formed Institutes aboard ships in transit. The early

¹⁷ For more on the Mechanics’ Institutes in India, see S.N. Sen, *Scientific and Technical Education in India, 1781-1900* (New Delhi: Indian National Science Academy, 1991).

founders of the movement in Australia itself were typically Presbyterian churchmen. Those Institutes soon flourished into arts schools and centres of culture in the new land, and there was a degree of social mobility which attracted attention and comment in subsequent generations.¹⁸ As with the movement in Britain, the history of these activities can be understood through the newspaper and periodical discussion.¹⁹

This can be contrasted with Canada. Although the Canadian frontier was also settled by Presbyterian Scottish emigrants over the same time period, the similarities appear outweighed by the differences – the close association of the new Canadian Institutes with the Orange Order, for instance, of which there had been traces in Britain, found a more tangible expression across the Atlantic. Canadian institutes were also more focussed on fostering practical literacy and learning than arts, creativity and light-hearted pursuits. Exploring the differences may reveal much about attitudes and priorities among the Scottish diaspora.²⁰

¹⁸ For British reports of Australian Mechanics' Institute activities, see 'The Art of Conversation. A lecture addressed to the young. Delivered before the Members of the Mechanics' Institute, Launceston, Van Diemen's Land, May 18, 1849', *The Gentleman's Magazine: and historical review*, 35 (January 1851), pp.78-79. For relevant secondary studies on the history of the Mechanics' Institutes in Australia, see J.H. Thompson, *The Origins of the Mechanics' Institute Movement in Australia* (Darling Downs: Darling Downs Institute of Education, 1976); P. Baragwanath, *If These Walls Could Speak: A Social History of Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria* (Windsor: Mechanics Institute Incorporated, 2000). For the Australians Mechanics' Institutes in their broader educational context, see D. Whitelock, *Adult Education in Australia* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1970). For the history of Mechanics' Institutes in New Zealand, see D.O.W. Hall, *New Zealand Adult Education* (London: Joseph, 1970) and also R. Young, *Informing New Zealand: Libraries, Archives and Records* (Aotearoa: Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, 2007).

¹⁹ The databases of digitised newspapers, *Papers Past* for New Zealand and Trove for Australia have been briefly surveyed. For examples of the reporting of *British mechanics'* institute business and events in these places, see *New Zealand Colonist and Port Nicholson Advertiser*, 31 January 1843, p. 2, *New Zealand Colonist and Port Nicholson Advertiser*, 7 February 1843, p. 2, *New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator*, 17 January 1844, p. 3, *New Zealand Spectator and Cook Strait Guardian*, 18 May 1850, p. 4, and *New Zealander*, 26 November 1851, p. 3. For examples of the reporting of the beginnings of the Mechanics' Institute movement in New Zealand, see *Nelson Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle*, 21 November 1846, p. 151, *Wellington Independent*, 7 April 1847, p. 2, and *Wellington Independent*, 10 April 1847, p. 2. For Australia, the reporting of British Mechanics' Institutes business goes together with the calls for and the subsequent growth of home grown examples, for examples see *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 11 August 1825, p. 4., *Hobart Town Gazette*, 21 January 1826, p. 4, *Colonial Times and Tasmanian Observer*, 3 February 1826, p. 4, *Hobart Town Gazette*, 10 June 1826, p. 4, *The Australian*, 1 June 1826, p. 2, *The Australian*, 5 July 1826, p. 1.

²⁰ For secondary material which places the Mechanics' Institutes of Canada in context, see H.C. Prentice, *Labour and Capital in Canada 1650-1860* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1981) as well as D. Ferry, *Uniting in Measures of Common Good: The Construction of Liberal Identities in Central Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2008).

The mechanics' institutes of the United States also deserve scrutiny.²¹ They had links to Scottish Presbyterian culture and included frontier examples. Yet they differed markedly in approach from Institutes elsewhere. In the United States, the emphasis seems to have been primarily one of welfare, with both the New York²² (established in 1858) and the San Francisco Mechanics' Institutes²³ (established in 1854) originally serving as places where unemployed manual workers could improve their employment prospects through education while at the same time avoiding less wholesome pursuits.²⁴

The question of whether there was *international* network of mechanics' institutes, formal or informal, is one which suggests itself. There are some indications that leading figures from British Institutes visited institutes in France and gave lectures there – however the evidence for such contact suggests informality and intermittency. Beyond this, the issue of whether there was such a thing as an international shared identity between institutes in different countries is unresolved. Contact between institutes in Britain and those farther afield appears to have been at the very least sporadic, including such practical help as sending parcels of donated books to the new outposts at the ends of the earth. An investigation of the nature of links and contacts among mechanics' institutes worldwide may reveal much of interest about transoceanic communication links, as well as the attitudes of colonists to the mother country and vice versa.

²¹ For contemporary British coverage see, "The 'Mechanics' Institution of London,' and 'The Franklin Institute of Philadelphia'", *The Literary Chronicle* 6.274 (14 August 1824), pp.525-527; "The Franklin Institute", *The Literary Chronicle* 6.341 (26 November 1825), pp.764-765.

²² Private correspondence with New York Mechanics' Institute.

²³ Private correspondence with San Francisco Mechanics' Institute.

²⁴ For general scholarship which places Mechanics' Institutes in the United States in their social and cultural contexts, see both S. Beckert, "Bourgeoisie Institution Builders: New York in the Nineteenth Century", pp. 103-118, and E. Robey, "The Steady Supporters of Order: American Mechanics' Institute Fairs as Icons of Bourgeoisie Culture", pp. 119-134, in J. Rosenbaum and S. Beckert, eds., *The American Bourgeoisie: Distinction and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), as well as S.P. Rice, *Minding the Machine: Languages of Class in Early Industrial America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

There is a related *imperial* theme²⁵ with associated questions and scope for study. Mechanics' institutes were established all over the British Empire, predominantly in locations where there were significant numbers of British settlers – such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. However, institutes were also founded in places where settlement was secondary to the exploitation of resources – such as in India and Hong Kong. The British found institutes useful in Ireland for the “improvement” of the native population, and the question of whether institutes in the colonies and dominions were put to similar uses presents itself for discussion. There is evidence of criticism of British policy in the colonies within some mechanics' institutes on the British mainland, as has been demonstrated in the chapter on culture. It would be instructive to explore the nature of this criticism, its motivations and prevalence, in greater depth.

This thesis covers the period from the beginning of the mechanics' institute movement up to the eve of the Forster Education Act, and does not venture beyond the end of 1869. That date was chosen as the effective endpoint of this study in order to keep the scope of the thesis realistic and practical in terms of delivery, and it also marked a watershed moment – institutes, among others, had long been the only real organised and consistent providers of adult elementary education for working people. By the end of the 1860s, that state of affairs changed and education became a statutory concern of the State for the first time. However the institutes endured for several decades after this point. There is thus significant scope for further study covering the period between 1870 and the opening decade of the twentieth century, a period when the mechanics' institute movement in Britain entered the end phase of its history. This thesis studies the social, political and cultural history of the beginning and middle of the institutes' story, and there is clear scope for a history which tells how that story ended. Such a history would show

²⁵ For the British role in establishing Mechanics' Institutes overseas beyond the Empire, see “Mechanics' Institute in Turkey”, *Critic* 5.118 (3 April 1847), pp.273-273, where an English engineer was instrumental in founding an Institute.

that Samuel Smiles, whose books, lectures and status as a public authority on self-help, spoke wisely when warning about knowledge being the source of “but a passing impression”²⁶ if not disseminated properly was prudent but ultimately over-cautious. The impression has lasted, and those traces are visible as signposts along the road to learning.

²⁶ Smiles, *Self Help*, p. 324.

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| <i>Manchester Times</i> | <i>Sheffield Independent</i> |
| <i>Manchester Times and Gazette</i> | <i>Sheffield Independent, and Yorkshire and Derbyshire Advertiser</i> |
| <i>Mechanic's Weekly Journal (London)</i> | |
| <i>Monmouthshire Merlin</i> | <i>Shields Daily Gazette</i> |

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| <i>Shoreditch Observer</i> | <i>The Saturday Review of Politics,</i> |
| <i>South London Chronicle</i> | <i>Literature, Science, Art and</i> |
| <i>Staffordshire Advertiser</i> | <i>Finance</i> |
| <i>Supplement to the Liverpool Mercury</i> | <i>The Times</i> |
| <i>Swindon Advertiser</i> | <i>Transactions of the National</i> |
| <i>Taunton Courier</i> | <i>Association for the Promotion of</i> |
| <i>The Age</i> | <i>Social Science</i> |
| <i>The Champion and Weekly Herald</i> | <i>Trewman's Exeter Flying Post</i> |
| <i>(London)</i> | <i>Westminster Review</i> |
| <i>The Charter</i> | <i>West Middlesex Advertiser</i> |
| <i>The Congregational Magazine</i> | <i>West Middlesex Advertiser</i> |
| <i>The Examiner (London)</i> | <i>West Sussex Advertiser</i> |
| <i>The Gentleman's Magazine</i> | <i>Western Courier</i> |
| <i>The Institute: A Monthly Literary</i> | <i>Western Times</i> |
| <i>Journal</i> | <i>Westmoreland Gazette</i> |
| <i>The London Mechanics' Register</i> | <i>Westmorland Gazette</i> |
| <i>The Mechanic and Chemist</i> | <i>Wiltshire Independent</i> |
| <i>The New London Mechanics' Register</i> | <i>Worcester Journal</i> |
| <i>and Magazine of Science and the</i> | <i>Worcestershire Chronicle</i> |
| <i>Useful Arts</i> | <i>York Herald</i> |
| <i>The Northern Liberator</i> | <i>Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer</i> |

Non-British Newspapers and Periodicals

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| <i>The Australian</i> | <i>New Zealand Gazette and Wellington</i> |
| <i>Colonial Times and Tasmanian</i> | <i>Spectator</i> |
| <i>Observer</i> | <i>New Zealand Spectator and Cook Strait</i> |
| <i>Hobart Town Gazette</i> | <i>Guardian</i> |
| <i>Nelson Examiner and New Zealand</i> | <i>The Sydney Gazette and New South</i> |
| <i>Chronicle</i> | <i>Wales Advertiser</i> |
| <i>New Zealander</i> | <i>Wellington Independent</i> |
| <i>New Zealand Colonist and Port</i> | |
| <i>Nicholson Advertiser</i> | |

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A short listing

(Digitised catalogues available through Google Books and archive.org)

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