

Local Publishing & Local Culture

**An account of the work of
the Centerprise publishing
project 1972 - 1977**

I have lent this book to friends and they can tell me how they are living in the same manner as is mentioned in the book. Those who have read the book said they also had enjoyed it as much as myself. And I was told to compliment my brother on his wonderful achievement. After all, it is not everyday that an ordinary working class person writes a book.

W.M.





ISBN 0 903738 32 5

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Published by Centerprise Trust Ltd.,
136 Kingsland High Street, London, E.8.

Printed by Expression Printers Ltd.,
5 Kingsbury Road, London, N.1.

Centerprise receives financial support from the Arts Council of Great Britain,
the Greater London Arts Association and the Hackney Borough Council.

INTRODUCTION

What follows is a short history of the way in which the Centerprise publishing project has developed to date. It starts with a short account of how the Centerprise bookshop/coffee bar project was conceived and got off the ground in 1971. Without the bookshop there, as a base, I personally doubt whether local publishing in Hackney would have been conceivable at that time. What the Centerprise bookshop, and the workers in it, offered then, were funds to put into the initial costs of the books, and, equally importantly, an enthusiasm to provide new ways in which local people could become more involved with the work of the bookshop, and the bookshop could become more involved with the lives of local people.

For the most part of these five years of local publishing, that is until recent developments which are described later, the editorial policy of the publishing project was very much a matter of individual judgement within certain guidelines; politically different, economically different, but not structurally different really from the ways in which commercial publishers make choices. There was, however, one area of our publishing where quite different editorial decisions were made. This area of our work was publishing the local history books produced by an editorially independent group, a local history class run by the Hackney branch of the Workers' Educational Association, called 'A Peoples' Autobiography of Hackney'. In this group, decisions as to themes of Hackney's working class history to work on and make books about were decided by the group. The connection with Centerprise was made by choice and practically carried out by the convenor of the class for the first four years who was also the full time publishing worker at Centerprise. The section on the work of the 'Peoples' Autobiography of Hackney' group owes much to the comments of the current convenor, Richard Gray.

The ideas which originated the Centerprise publishing project did not arise in a vacuum. At the very time in which a few of us in Hackney were discussing the prospects for local publishing, we were aware of a lot of things happening in other parts of London, as well as other parts of the country. That is partly how change comes about. And clearly this process carries on because in the last five years, local publishing initiatives have occurred in a number of towns and cities, each rising up to meet particular local needs for working people to express themselves, but also each being spurred into existence by something decidedly lacking in the wider culture. At the present time, these groups are meeting together to form a federation of community publishing groups. The prospects, in this area of cultural activity at least, are very encouraging.

The opinions in this account are my personal opinions and understandings. Because the last five years of my working life have been spent involved with this project, it is impossible for me to disentangle private concerns and political investment from the development of the project as part of the wider work of the whole Centerprise project in Hackney. Even so, my account of what the publishing project means has been talked at and with a large number of people over the years and has consequently been modified and enlarged by other people's ideas; this applies particularly, of course, with regard to the other workers at Centerprise.

Ken Worpole

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I

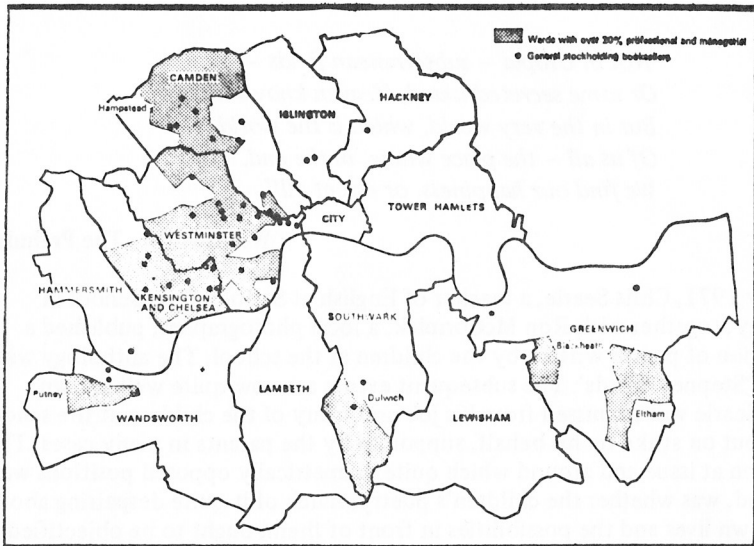
*'Not in Utopia – subterranean fields –
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of us all – the place where, in the end,
We find our happiness, or not at all!'*

Wordsworth, **The Prelude**

In May 1971, Chris Searle, a teacher of English at St John Cass School in Stepney, together with Ron McCormick, a local photographer, published a collection of poems written by the children at the school. The anthology was called 'Stepney Words'. The subsequent events are now quite well known: Chris Searle was dismissed from his job and many of the children at the school came out on strike on his behalf, supported by the parents in many cases. The question at issue and around which quite diametrically opposed positions were adopted, was whether the children's poetry, much of it quite despairing about their own lives and the possibilities in front of them, ought to be objectified in published form and thus become a statement in the political and cultural arena. The school authorities thought not, but many people thought the children's voices should be heard. A lone voice at the back of the crowd shouted, 'But is it Art?'

In the same month, on May 1st 1971, two youth workers*and a newly-qualified community worker opened Centerprise in Hackney, a community centre based on a general bookshop, a coffee bar and two meeting rooms. Stepney and Hackney are only three miles apart, yet at that time, neither initiative knew of the other's existence, although it didn't take long for them to meet up, and recognise the common ground on which they were working. Thought about carefully, it would be a mistake to describe the timing and place of these two projects as coincidence. Both had, in different ways, identified a real need in deliberately neglected inner city areas like Stepney and Hackney, which was a lack of any kind of provision by which working class people could participate in the world of books, either by having a wide choice to buy from locally, or having the chance to have published things they themselves had written.

The following map, published some time ago in *The Guardian*, shows quite clearly the large scale abuse of cultural rights that commercial priorities produce: whole London boroughs being without any provision for making a wide range of books available to choose from and buy. Remarkably, there isn't any embarrassment about this situation in the publishing and bookselling world, the attitude being that where capitalism's cultural super-tankers can't sail, all other routes are closed. An article in 'The Bookseller', the trade publication of bookshops, noted the opening of Centerprise in May 1971, and doomed it to fail within months. Six years later, the bookshop flourishes, selling a variety of books from almost every category that the publishers produce.



A few people in the past have asked why all of us associated with Centerprise have described easy access to a good, wide-ranging general bookshop as a 'cultural right'. There are a number of answers to this question, some of them relating just to bookshops and others relating to much wider questions of people's rights to be involved in all aspects of the culture of the society in which they live. A basic reason for seeing bookshops as necessary places in any community is because, in their absence, many people are condemned for not taking an interest in books. Time and again in the educational press, parents have been accused of not taking an interest in their children by buying books for them, whereas what the very clever commentators have failed to take into consideration is that it is impossible for most parents, usually in working class areas, to do so: there aren't any places to buy them from. The experience of the Centerprise bookshop has been that children's books constitute the largest selling section, and given the resources to do more bookstalls in schools and in other places in the community, this could potentially become an enormous area of work.

Secondly, since we all have no choice other than to live in the society we live in, it is important that we all have the right to know as much about its nature as possible. We regard education as a right, even if we don't all get the same opportunities and what we get doesn't tell us much. Similarly most of us feel that libraries are a right since it is through books that most aspects of what goes on in society are recorded. The right to buy books is simply an extension of these principles. This is particularly important in an area like Hackney since, ironically, many recent books on politics or sociology have been written about working class people who live in areas like Hackney, and we feel very strongly that people have a right to read what other people, invariably from a different class, are writing about them. Books, of course, are also entertainment, and to have the choice of another form of entertainment is also important. And, also, we have to resist at every opportunity the effects on our lives which commercial priorities engender. If the education service and the right to free medical care had not been fought for as rights, and still remained in commercial hands, then quite seriously there would be even today, hardly any schools in Hackney and certainly no hospitals. Access to books, both to be able to buy them easily, and to be involved in producing them, we regard as a right — amongst many other rights.

II

Between 1969 and 1973, I taught English at Hackney Downs School. One of the major frustrations I experienced then, as did many English teachers, was the lack of interesting reading material that related to the lives of the young people I was teaching. Generally one had no choice other than to use individual titles which were part of monolithic, finely graded reading schemes, whose subject matter for the most part, was far removed from the concerns and interests of the children who used them. Together with a friend, a local amateur photographer, we worked out the idea of a reading book that was specifically set in Hackney, illustrated with photographs of a group of young boys at large in the flats, streets and market-places of the area. The text was worked out in consultation with the children. We approached Centerprise in the Autumn of 1971 and asked the workers there if they were interested in publishing this book, if we produced it. They agreed, and in the spring of 1972, 'Hackney Half-Term Adventure' was published. It was received with immediate enthusiasm by many local teachers, and more importantly, by school-children in Hackney. We have since been told on many occasions that the book had been read with great excitement by children, who were only too delighted to find page after page of photographs of what they recognised only too well.

At the same time, I was sharing a group of children in a 'remedial' class with another teacher, Ann Pettit, and we quickly realised that one of the children, a young West Indian boy, Vivian Usherwood, was writing a series of very original poems, mostly about feeling rejected at school and in the children's home where he was in care. We both thought highly of Vivian's poems, and asked him if we could duplicate them and use them with the other children. He was pleased

about this and the response within the school was quite remarkable. We then thought they deserved a wider readership and again approached Centerprise to ask them to consider publishing them. The workers at Centerprise agreed, and within two months the first edition of 500 copies of 'Vivian Usherwood: Poems' had sold out. Subsequent re-prints within the last five years have brought the sale of Vivian's poems up to well over 6,000 copies. We know that in a number of cases, local school-children have suggested to their teachers that their school should buy copies of Vivian's poems so that they could read them in class.

The next Centerprise publication was made jointly with the Hackney branch of the National Union of Teachers. The Hackney NUT were celebrating their centenary in 1972 and Richard Whitmore and myself, both members, suggested putting together a Jackdaw-type collection of local history materials, with an emphasis on the social history of the borough. A collection of maps, facsimile posters, extracts from books about Hackney, transcripts of tapes made with elderly Hackney people about their school-days, photographs and so on, was produced called 'If it wasn't for the houses in between . . .' The interest this aroused, especially in bringing forth elderly people who had written about their lives, made us realise that local history, particularly the social history of the last hundred years, was a very activating subject to study, promoting quite the opposite of that 'apathy' which was supposed to be a 'condition of life' in the teaching of school history.

It was at this point that Centerprise workers and the policy-making co-operative to whom the workers reported back, started discussing the idea of making local publishing an intergral part of Centerprise's work in Hackney. A considerable part of the impetus for this had arisen out of the enormous local interest in the books, and the consequence of this is that many new local people were beginning to come into the bookshop, particularly those who had been specifically attracted to the local publications, which were selling in large quantities. These discussions resulted in the setting up of a full-time job at Centerprise with the responsibility for local publishing. This job I took up in September 1973.

Within the first two weeks of starting, two people brought in pieces of work they had written. Dot Starn had been a dressmaker for most of her life, but her autobiographical reminiscences were of her working class childhood in Stoke Newington, and her manuscript came to us as a bundle of pages torn out of an exercise book typed in capital letters. It was a detailed, affectionate account of a childhood within a close family which had had its share of hardship. Most striking, though, were her descriptions of her rebelling against the expectations of what, as a young girl, her interests should have been. As well, a number of now forgotten games and children's songs were recollected. In November 1973 we printed 1,000 copies of her pamphlet, 'When I Was A Child', and within three months, it was out of print. The other publication we produced before the Christmas of that year was a collection of poems by Christine Gillies, a nineteen-year-old woman who had left school at fifteen and who continued to move from job to job in the hope of finding one that interested her. They also

enjoyed a lot of local interest, and together with Vivian Usherwood's collection, occasioned quite a lot of comment as to how unusual it was to see poetry appearing in print that didn't seem to come from any kind of established literary culture. Then at the end of 1973, we published two small stories written by Hackney school-children. In many ways this had been one of the original ambitions, to put into print children's writing that deserved to get beyond the exercise book. On all levels, they failed to win any serious response; there wasn't much interest from teachers, and their unavoidable lack of any specific local significance did not cause them to be bought alongside our other publications.

When we had started publishing, we had left all the technical work in the hands of one sympathetic local printing firm. As we began to realise how the process of offset-printing worked, we took more interest in at least designing the books ourselves. All the design and lay-out for the history pack, 'If it wasn't for the houses in between . . .' was done by Tony Bacon while still a student at Hackney Downs school. Dot Starn's autobiography was designed by Neil Martinson, a regular user of Centerprise who had just left school and started work for another local printer.

The next person to turn up at Centerprise was Ron Barnes, a cab-driver who had lived all of his life in Hackney. He had been working for some months on his autobiography and having bought some of the Centerprise publications, had realised that we might be interested in publishing his book. Ron's book, 'A Licence to Live', was about a very bleak childhood, a set of appalling school experiences, and descriptions of a number of the thirty-seven jobs he had had before gaining his cab-driver's licence. What impressed me the most was the connections that had been made between the events that had happened to him and his continuous awareness of the questions that these experiences had raised; every incident in the book had been written about reflectively. In the introduction to his book he wrote:

'Since a child, living in the East End of London, life has always seemed a puzzle to me. I suppose I am not alone in this. But I think the reason I have written this is that all my experiences, good and bad, seem to have built up inside, and this is one way of giving vent to my feelings about life in general . . .

Another reason why I decided to write this is because I have never kept a diary. I don't think many people in the working class in Hackney keep diaries either. Yet haven't you ever wondered what life was like for 'ordinary' people centuries ago? Not only people in general but perhaps your ancestors, the people that you yourself have descended from. Haven't you ever wished that you could get a glimpse into the lives of your past relatives, and take yourself back to those past times, and get the feel of just what people were like then, their way of life, their pleasures, joys, disappointments, fears, and most important of all, their deep personal feelings and the impression of the world they lived in?'

For me especially, Ron Barnes' introduction helped clarify what I felt ought to define broadly the editorial principles which informed our kind of local publishing. The most important priority would be to give working class people, most of whom had probably failed to secure any opportunities for further or higher education, the opportunity now to describe their experiences as fully as possible and to share these experiences through the published forms of autobiography, the social history of their own lives, and the more distanced form of expression which poetry offers. For rather more complicated reasons, we felt that it would be beyond the resources of local publishing to provide facilities to publish individual collections of short stories or any kind of novel; largely these reasons were connected with the difficulty to balance the possible local relevance of these forms with the heavy production costs of books of short stories or of single novels; this was not the case with individual collections of poetry which we could produce cheaply.

Yet there were also more difficult criteria for choosing which manuscripts to publish, again connected with balancing priorities. We felt it important to weigh the quality of expression against the extent to which a particular individual's experiences could clarify, express with precision, stand for and carry the weight of the typical and common experiences of a much larger group of people who could find and recognise large parts of their own lives within a particular autobiography. Thus the autobiography of a local person who had led an especially unique life in the end for us could not take priority over the autobiography of someone who had described clearly and reflectively a life rooted in the localised and common experience of the majority of working class people in Hackney. This dual function of the autobiographical form, serving to express the feelings of both writer and reader, we found quite marvellously expressed in the conclusion of Stuart Hood's autobiography, 'Pebbles from my Skull':

'We may record the past for various reasons: because we find it interesting; because by setting it down we can deal with it more easily; because we wish to escape from the individual prison where we face our individual problems, wrestle with our particular temptations, triumph in solitude and in solitude accept defeat and death. Autobiography is an attempted jail-break. The reader tunnels through the same dark.'

One case of editing for political reasons should be described. One chapter of Ron Barnes' autobiography concerned a job he had as the chauffeur of an alcoholic, director of a large building firm. This man happened to be Jewish. The conditions under which Ron worked were not really any worse than many other jobs Ron had held, yet this chapter could have been taken up and used as anti-Jewish propaganda. Of course, nothing could have been further from Ron Barnes' intentions, as he is strongly against racism in all its forms and guises. However, we felt it had to be omitted because many people might feel

that because the experience had been printed in a book this could legitimise anti-semitic feelings, whereas we saw — and continue to see — the function of an autobiography to help people understand the pressures and forces which restrict our lives and thus help in some ways to free people from particular imprisoning and self-defeating attitudes like racism and the acceptance of sexual inequality.

The criteria for choosing which individual's collection of poems to publish was easier. We looked for poems that were accessible to readers not used to reading poetry, which avoided numerous references to Greek mythology or assumed on the part of the reader a knowledge of a wide range of literary references; in short we chose to publish poems written from people's felt experiences and communicated honestly with a demand of the reader to go through the experience with the writer. Some measure of the importance of these criteria, and their success, can be gauged by the fact that each individual whose poems we have published since we first produced Vivian Usherwood's collection had read and responded to the work of our other published poets; in two cases poems were actually written in response to poems by other local authors.

Of the other books which we have published in the last five years, one further one certainly needs to be singled out. This was the book 'The Gates', a joint autobiographical novel written by two school students about their experiences as determined school truants who had found themselves at an age of fifteen in a maladjusted school at which point they decided to write their version of what they had gone through. This book by Leslie Mildiner and Bill House we published in co-operation with the Stepney Basement Writers as it was too big a project for either of us. Perhaps the most important comment this book made about the process of writing was made by the two authors who said that when they had decided to write a book about their experiences they had sat down only to realise that despite quite some time being taught English, they had never actually been taught to write — at length or with any sense of purpose or development. 'We learned to write', they said, 'by writing a book'. Their very moving account of what it was about schools that frightened them and made them want to run away provided a much-needed corrective to the many 'official' views on truancy which always locate the fault within the attitudes and behaviour of the children. At least one head teacher in London banned the book from being used in her school.

III

'But Joseph was interested now in the district he was seeing. Three things came to him in this period; some idea of how events elsewhere affected his own home and village; some knowledge that other communities produced other manners and other men; and then the sense, to describe it as best I can, that under the wide acreage of grass and corn and woods which he saw daily there was a ghostly, ancient tessellated pavement made of the events and thoughts and associations of other times. This historical sense he shared with many of the men he met about his work. Their strong memory for the past was unimpaired by much reading or novelty of experience, and yet their interest had been sharpened by the sense of rapid change.'

M.K. Ashby, Joseph Ashby of Tysoe

Almost at the same time as the work started on local publishing in Hackney, in the early part of 1972, a number of people met together to discuss the lack of any kind of evening class provision in the borough, other than strictly vocational or for craft activities, and decided to set up a branch of the Workers' Educational Association. The intention was to provide classes directly relevant to local issues, linked with programmes of activity. These early meetings were very large, with something like seventy people, many of them from trade union branches and the wider local labour movement, and there was great hope of bringing out an ambitious programme of classes linked with housing issues, shop-floor economics, the increasingly felt impact of the women's movement, local history, literature and so on. We were not prepared to meet such resistance to our two major founding principles, which we felt essential if the programme was going to be seen by local people as relevant: the right of the branch to select its own tutors, regardless of their academic qualifications, and the need to link classes with local action where this was applicable. After at least one year of angry correspondence between Tavistock Square, WC1, headquarters of the London District W.E.A., and Dalston Lane, E.8, corresponding address of the Hackney branch, the branch was demoralised and near to collapse. Many people involved at the beginning understandably drifted away. Perhaps the most striking case illustrating the inability of the W.E.A. to think outside of its preoccupation with formal academic qualifications was that it took the Hackney branch four years to have one of its tutors accepted on to the W.E.A. Tutors Panel. This particular person, a retired clerk with a background of over fifty years in the labour movement, who had for many years been a prominent thinker and speaker within the Socialist Party of Great Britain, and possessed an impeccable knowledge of classical and marxian economics —

but who had left school at fourteen and had no formal qualifications whatsoever – was not considered by the then District Secretary of the W.E.A. qualified to conduct classes on economics in Hackney, where he had lived and been active for most of his life. Happily this situation has changed remarkably within the last two years and the W.E.A. in London is emerging as a much more positive force.

One of the early W.E.A. classes, on local history, was proposed after a few of the people involved in the W.E.A., including myself, had attended an extraordinarily chaotic conference at Ruskin College, Oxford, in May of 1972. It was called a 'History Workshop'. The texts preached spoke of making history an engaged mass activity, of building a new history based on the living experiences and memories of working class people who hitherto had been rendered invisible, 'hidden from history' in Sheila Rowbotham's phrase, and the technology which was going to be able to create a completely new kind of history was the tape-recorder. The scales fell away from our eyes; we were converted. We came back to Hackney and decided to start a W.E.A. class on local history which we would call 'A People Autobiography of Hackney'. The branch notified the London District of the W.E.A. that the class would start in September and that I had put myself forward to be the tutor.

Where is the syllabus, we were asked? Well, the class would read from a range of books on the social history of London in the last hundred years, to get some idea of context, and then talk to elderly people living in Hackney, using tape-recorders, and begin to build a comprehensive local social history. No good; and what about my qualifications? I had given up history at the age of twelve bored to tears. However, I had read quite a bit in the last three or four years. Recognition, it was decided, could not be afforded to such a vague and content-less course convened by an unqualified tutor. We decided to carry on nevertheless. At the first meeting there was a good attendance, a mixture of local teachers, one or two sixth form students, three or four elderly people, a dozen in all, and because everybody agreed that the basic aim of the class was a good idea, we set to work.

We sent a letter to the Hackney Gazette explaining what we wanted to do and asked people who wouldn't mind talking to us about their lives to get in touch with me as the convenor, at my address. Three or four people got in touch. These people, together with the older members of the group, told us a lot. We played extracts of the tapes, and listened often with something like horror at the details of working class poverty in many families in Hackney at the beginning of the century, and from listening to the tapes framed for ourselves new ways of asking people about their experiences, particularly in relation to certain themes.

One of the people who talked to us, Arthur Newton, a retired shoemaker, in the course of two evenings of tape-recording at his home gave us such a marvellous account of his own life in the industry on the bench, as well as telling us about his father who had made shoes at home and all of those nine sons went into the shoe trade, that we decided to convert Mr Newton's tape into a published autobiography. We transcribed what he told us, gave him the transcript back and he then rewrote the transcript as he wanted it, often adding new material, and returned to us an almost perfect manuscript in copper-plate handwriting. By common agreement in the group we agreed to publish it through Centerprise. 'Years of Change', Arthur Newton's autobiography, has in the last four years sold 4,000 copies, the majority of them within Hackney itself.

The group began with a strong feeling among its original members that working class autobiographies were worth putting into books. It was not a closely argued position, but a conviction that working class life should not just be reflected upon in the pub and the front room, but should be published in the long-lasting form of books, as a permanent record and as a means of maintaining an active local class-consciousness. We wanted to try to sustain and activate that kind of important local sense of history which is so wonderfully described in M.K. Ashby's description of her father's historical sense in the annotation at the beginning of this section.

Listening to the tapes we came across a number of references to a rather eccentric doctor who had lived and practised in Hackney between the wars and who had concerned himself with the health of working class people, often refusing to accept money for treatment, despite his very low charge of threepence a visit. We began to talk to people specifically about him, and Dr Jelley of Hackney, 'The Threepenny Doctor', emerged as an extraordinary character: A gruff-mannered man who would more often prescribe a piece of steak than pills, who sold clothes and meat in the same shop as he held his surgery, who fought a running battle with the police and the local authorities in defence of his eccentric behaviour, and who operated an abortion clinic in Homerton High Street for which he was prosecuted and imprisoned. We collected eleven short accounts of him on tape and published a little pamphlet, 'The Threepenny Doctor'. Some time after this publication we received a curt letter from the British Medical Association disclaiming any connection between Doctor Jelley and their honourable profession. In Hackney, though, he was always remembered with great affection.

The starting point of the group's next project, 'Working Lives', followed a substantial discussion within the group as to the political implications of carrying on as we were. The central issue was that if we only talked to elderly people and produced only books about working class life in Hackney in the early part of the century, we were reinforcing the assumption

that history is only about the past; that we were in danger of drifting into sentimentality about the past and ought to realise and encourage others to realise that the present was also historical experience. The aim of the 'Working Lives' project, which we have just finished after three years' work on it, was to produce a series of books which took people's experience of their work in Hackney from the beginning of the century up until today, and linked them as continuous and dominating experiences in working class life. The first volume, 1905-1945 contained twelve accounts, largely connected with the traditional industries of the area. The second volume which covers people's experiences between 1945 and 1975 attempts to give voice to a representative group of people at work in Hackney today.

This particular development affected the membership of the group and the content of its fortnightly meetings. We continued to meet to plan, listen to and discuss tapes, to collect and examine photographs and other relevant documents and to prepare books. But the 'Working Lives' project changed the people who did it and the way it was done. When we were working on individual autobiographies and 'Doctor Jelley', there was a clear division of labour between those who contributed the material and those who serviced the group. Our contributors were members of the group, personal contacts and people who answered our letters in the Hackney Gazette; those who serviced the group were Centerprise workers and members with more academic backgrounds. The 'Working Lives' project blurred this distinction. New outside contributors have joined the group and more group members have begun to take on servicing functions. These include recording, transcribing and editing tapes, collecting and copying photographs, arranging meetings, giving talks and slide shows to other interested groups and mounting exhibitions. Very importantly, group editing has begun to replace individual editing: for example, in a given meeting a postman and a teacher might find themselves leading a group discussion with an ex-demolition worker about his account of his work; then they might turn to deciding how to deal with the union censorship of one of the group's accounts of his job. This last case was a very important landmark for our work. What had happened was that one of the people in the group had been taped by another about his job. The tape was transcribed and edited jointly. The group member then took this account to his shop steward at work who unilaterally decided that it could not be published. The reason for this decision was important mainly that by honestly describing what he did at work, how he cut corners and with the other workers made the job endurable and human, this was to some extent 'giving the game away' to the employers. The group wrote to the shop steward explaining the aims of the whole project and how important he felt it was that working people should demonstrate how it was possible with a strong union to make work endurable. A compromise was reached. The shop-steward made his alterations to the text and then asked us to supply forty copies of

the final version. He explained that he would put the text to a shop-meeting and if the other workers were happy with it then we could use the piece. This we agreed to. The meeting of the workers agreed to its publication.

In 1975 the 'Peoples' Autobiography' group was invited by the Hackney Trades Council, who knew of our local historical work, to produce a history of the Trades Council to commemorate its centenary. This was largely done by Barry Burke, a member of the group and himself an active trade-unionist. Other members of the group were able to help by providing extracts from autobiographies which contained details of trade union involvement. In his introduction to the book, the Secretary of the Hackney Trades Council, Michael Knowles, wrote:

'This publication speaks for itself. It has achieved for the anniversary celebrations more than the Trades Council asked for. It is a permanent record of the great enterprising spirit of Centerprise bookshop and the Hackney Workers' Educational Association, whose interest and assistance makes local projects like this possible.'

Our current project is an attempt at a collective autobiography: 'The Island: Self-portrait of a community'. In this, shared experience is not only hinted at by the juxtaposition of separate individual accounts, but is the basis of the book since they know each other well. 'The Island' was an area of five streets in Clapton where the people formed a very close community. The streets were grouped in a circle and there was only one road leading into the circle. Consequently no through traffic ever passed through and outsiders were seldom seen. The streets were knocked down in 1970 to make way for local authority housing and Islanders were rehoused all over East London and Essex. But the reputation remained. Two members of the Peoples' Autobiography group knew of 'The Island' through friends and relatives and told the rest of us about it. Through word of mouth and the obligatory letter in the Hackney Gazette we are currently in touch with about forty Islanders, many of whom are keen to take part in preparing a book about The Island. In fact so great has been the interest that we have had to move out of Centerprise and use a school hall for full meetings of the Peoples' Autobiography group when there are special 'island' editorial meetings, at which there have been up to forty-five people. For the first time in the history of the group, we are using documentary evidence. For example, we have constructed house by house maps of the streets of The Island from rate-books in the borough archives which are a valuable stimulus to peoples' memories. And we have also collected over sixty photographs of The Island which have been enlarged and mounted as an exhibition for local events and this always brings new contributors in.

IV

'It comes back to the question we have already emphasised: is it sufficient for a philosophical movement to devote itself to the development of a specialised culture for restricted groups of intellectuals, or must it, in elaborating a thought which is superior to common sense and scientifically coherent, never forget to remain in contact with the 'people' and, moreover, find in this contact the source of its problems to be studied and solved? Only through this contact does a philosophy become 'historic', does it cleanse itself of intellectualistic elements of an individual nature and make itself into 'life'.

Antonio Gramsci, *The Study of Philosophy*

The more seriously I, and some of the other people associated with the publishing activities, took the work we were involved in, the more we realised that we had to go backwards and find out what had happened in the past in terms of possibilities of working class publishing: what had been tried before, what principles had operated and, what had been, at different times, the relationship between writing, publishing and direct political activism. It may seem a curious way to approach the past, and it could be argued that we would only find evidence that would support and confirm our present position, which was, briefly, that the encouragement of self-expression, the description and analysis of everyday life, our present history, was not a diversion from the 'real' struggle to change society, but an integral part of a wider dynamic for change.

Many of the books that we needed were quite difficult to come by in local libraries, so over the past three years we have built our own library at Centreprise. One important advantage of working in a centre which has its own bookshop is that we are able to buy books at the wholesale price, which softens the blow of having often to pay very large sums of money for expensive hardback books about British working class history.

We quickly came to realise that the great periods of political agitation always coincided with intense activity in the publishing of newspapers, periodicals and books, often produced at great risk. In Richard Altick's '**The English Common Reader**', we could see this process at work in the middle of the sixteenth century.

'It was not, however, only the Protestant, and especially the Puritan, emphasis upon private Bible-reading as a way to religious truth and thus to personal salvation which stimulated the spread of reading. The religious controversies that reached a climax in the Civil War played their part as well. They reached into the minds, and even

more the passionate emotions, of great numbers of ordinary people, who were stirred by them as later generations would be by purely political furore. And the controversies were carried on by floods of tracts and pamphlets, arguments and replies and rejoinders and counter-rejoinders; printed matter which found a seemingly limitless market among all classes that could read . . . The London bookseller George Thomason collected some 23,000 books and pamphlets printed between 1641 and 1662'.

We discovered that there had been a substantial increase in working class literacy during this period, which later declined as a result of the suppression of the independent presses. The direct relationship between literacy and the groundswell of a rising interest in new ideas, new political possibilities to be sought for, which happened at every key period when the working class movement was forcing its way into the political and cultural arena, was also important to those of us who as teachers of reading in our own working lives, insisted on the meaning of reading materials as more important than the 'scientifically' worked out suitability.

We understood that when a dying culture can no longer provide any hopes for living in a different way, can no longer generate a literature and an art that reflect and respond to a widespread demand for meaning, this was when in previous periods of crisis, the working class movement had seen the direct need to take on the responsibility for making a new culture. 'Go ye and write likewise . . . all join hands and heads to create a library of your own. Your own prose and your own poetry: you ought to be resolved to create these . . .' wrote the Chartist, Thomas Cooper.

In Altick's book, '**The English Common Reader**', in Patricia Hollis's '**The Pauper Press**', in Wickwar's '**The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press**', in J.F.C. Harrison's '**Learning and Living**', in E.P. Thompson's '**The Making of the English Working Class**', in Brian Simons's '**Education and the Labour Movement**', in R.K. Webb's '**The British Working Class Reader**', and more recently in Martha Vicinus's '**The Industrial Muse**', we discovered a continuing tradition of self-education on a mass scale, a limitless demand for political ideas and for literature. We also noted the counter-movement of persistent suppression of all forms of working class self-activity, either directly by state legislation (we read Collet's '**History of the Taxes of Knowledge**') or by large scale campaigns to divert this demand for knowledge into the safer channels of 'useful knowledge', 'economic literature' (as most mass production publishing was known as) and other forms of diversionary reading.

Nearly all of the books mentioned above are either out of print, published as expensive hardbacks, or in other ways difficult to get hold of; only one of them is in the more democratically accessible form of the paperback. A consequence of this difficulty in getting hold of such books is that a crucial

history, a major tradition that directly links to our own contemporary cultural crisis, is missing from nearly all current discussions on the relationship between culture and politics. Even within the labour movement, where one hopes to find more considered positions on these issues, for many the problem is spoken of in terms of dragging the working class (both children and parents) towards books after decades of intractable resistance, rather than seeing the issue as a result of two centuries of active suppression of working class people becoming too interested in politics and literature. The incalculable years of imprisonment spent by thousands of individuals in the last 150 years for daring to publish, or distribute writings on economics, philosophy, literature and other oppositional categories of thought, provide a major corrective to the notion that working class people have not yet appreciated the value of 'reading and cultural self-improvement'. In fact, this has been one of the most important lessons we have learned: that by producing books with the active participation of local people, thereby refusing to regard the same people as an undifferentiated mass, we have attracted and sustained an enormous local readership, which the figures at the end confirm. This belies many conventional notions about the 'apathy' of people in contemporary society with regard to the events which continue to determine the patterns of our lives, and hopefully provides some indication of one way at least of engaging people directly in discussing the nature of the society in which we live.

One of the factors which, in the eyes of the ruling class accentuated the subversiveness of particular radical books, was the question of price, and therefore economic accessibility.

R.K. Webb noted that in the 1790's:

'As the price fell, the liability of radical publications to prosecution became greater. The attorney-general stated that he did not prosecute the first part of 'The Rights of Man' because, reprehensible though it was, the circumstances of its publication would confine it to the judicious reader who could refute it as he went along. But, when the second part appeared, and when 'In all shapes, in all sizes, with an industry incredible, it was either totally or partially thrust into the hands of all persons in this country, of subjects of every description . . . ' he had no choice but to prosecute. Sir John Scott told Thomas Cooper that he might publish his 'Reply to Burke's Invective' freely in octavo form, but as soon as it was published cheaply, a libel action would be taken.'

The author of 'The Rights of Man', Thomas Paine, is quoted in E.P. Thompson's, 'The Making of the English Working Class', as writing to a friend in 1792, 'As we have now got the stone to roll, it must be kept going by cheap publications. This will embarrass the court gentry more than anything

else, because it is the ground they are not used to'. Martha Vicinus noted that one of the problems affecting the relationship of the working class poet to his own class in the 19th century was price: 'The costs of book production were generally high enough to cut a poet off from his working class audience'. This, however, was not true of the nationally recognised poets who also found a large and serious working class readership.

Louis James writes in '**Fiction for the Working Man**':

'Critics have largely ignored the lower class audience enjoyed by Byron, Shelley and Southey, although it is an important element in the relationship of these poets to their age. Romantic poetry was in fact one of the most consistently profitable lines of publication to lower class publishers at this time, catering as it did for both intellectual and political interests'.

David Craig in '**The Real Foundations**' has gone on to argue that the working class was more acquainted with the complete writings of the Romantics than were the bourgeoisie:

'In the 1840's it was noticed that Shelley and Byron were finding most of their readers among the city workers: 'the bourgeoisie owns only castrated, family editions, cut down with the hypocritical morality of today'. The same is true of Burns. The core of his work – his best satires on religion – were not in the more expensive Victorian editions. It was the working people, handing round their tattered re-sewn copies in stackyard and smithy, who were reading him whole'.

Sheila Rowbotham in '**Hidden from History**' has noted that in the later part of that century, the reason why Annie Besant was arrested in 1877 for republishing Knowlton's 'Fruits of Philosophy' was because of its cheapness:

'She pointed out in her defence that a cheap edition of Knowlton's pamphlet meant that working class women could purchase for 6d. what richer women were already buying at W.H. Smith's for a few shillings'.

The relationship between price and the accessibility of alternative forms of publishing is one which presses very seriously on us today. The central principle of the Centerprise publishing project is to only publish in paperback form, with perhaps 200 additional specially bound copies for libraries, and to produce the books as cheaply as possible whilst keeping them as attractive as their commercial counterparts. Some publications require a subsidy over and above that of the salary of the full time worker, yet others eventually produce small surpluses which are fed back into other books. The basic underpinning needed for this kind of local publishing programme is the salary of a full-time worker, an initial and non-repayable capital grant for stock, and

some running costs. For the past four years the Centerprise publications have been financially supported by the Greater London Arts Association, the Arts Council of Great Britain and the London Borough of Hackney. The money we have received as far as I know has not visibly drained the country's cultural resources; certainly not compared with other recipients of arts subsidies. And I doubt honestly whether the people of Hackney get back in the form of cultural facilities the equivalent of what they actually pay in.

We do not pay authors. We see this kind of local publishing as a service we offer and share with people as part of developing a common local culture. To begin paying fees and royalties could begin to encourage the professionalism of writing, the dangers of which were graphically described by Jack Common, the Tyneside writer, who in his book of essays, *'The Freedom of the Streets'*, perceived:

'You see, the present arrangements are so damn ridiculous. The proper study of mankind is man, but the moment any of us shows a bit of social awareness or insight, we at once make a gentleman of him, thus segregating him from his subject matter and compelling him to work by memory all the rest of his life.'

To argue that writing or the creation of a contemporary history should never become a specialised activity, but that it should be part of the same world as that of one's day to day work, is not to ignore the tremendous pressures this puts on people who have to write and study in addition to a full day's work. We would like to see a flexible system of awarding grants to enable working people to take periods away from work, or which would enable them to work part-time for a period, if they have a project in hand that requires a lot of concentrated work. The copyright for anything we publish is given to the writer so that any fees paid by other agencies for reproducing their work elsewhere is payable to the author.

We have observed what happens when commercial publishers take up contemporary working class autobiographies. They are produced as expensive hard-back books, edited and produced as commodities and destined straight for the shelves of libraries. No concessions are made to the localities from where the books originated and consequently there is no chance of the perspectives of particular autobiographies being challenged or modified by other people living through the same specific local experiences.

We also believe in following as far as we can the principle that all books published should be kept in print. In this way publishing becomes a process rather than a series of separate events. We think it is important that the building of a strong local class culture be a cumulative one, where books complement, contradict and reply to other books so that a more fully discussed and comprehensive description and analysis is elaborated. A culture cannot develop if the constituent artefacts appear and disappear sporadically.

Our central priority is a local readership. This is activated and serviced in a number of ways. To date all of our books have been featured or reviewed in the local newspaper, which doesn't generally carry book reviews, and this is very important for us. Sometimes a book will generate a series of correspondence in the letters page of the Hackney Gazette; this happened very recently when members of a family whose history had been written by one of them took sides as to why it was felt important to 'resurrect' the past. Other correspondents have used historical evidence published in our books to support assertions being made in other areas of local life. Following our early local history publications it was evident that these were being largely bought by elderly people in the borough, and it was partly through realising the dangers of addressing ourselves to just one generation that we broadened out to exploring all aspects of recent and contemporary history. We think it is important that our books get used in schools and where this has happened, although not nearly enough we feel sadly, interesting exchanges have happened. A common complaint made by local teachers is that where school children are using one of the local autobiographies as a text and have taken it home, the teacher has found it difficult to get the book back because the parents have retained it to read. And very importantly, a local autobiography can begin within a family a discussion between parents and children about history, and perhaps children may for the first time begin to see their parents and their grandparents as historical figures. This situation is naturally intensified within families, one of whose members has written a book or contributed to one of the collections.

Of course we are lucky in having our own bookshop in which our publications are a major feature, and we can support them and give them a wider context by stocking alongside them books on related areas of history and literature so that it is possible for readers to move outwards from one local book to a wider history of the same period and about the same class. We also sell though about twenty newsagents in Hackney. Between March 1976 and February 1977 we sold 6,922 of our local history titles in Hackney alone.

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'The mind industry can take on anything, digest it, reproduce it, and pour it out. Whatever our minds can conceive of is grist to its mill; nothing will leave it unadulterated; it is capable to turning any idea into a slogan and any work of the imagination into a hit. This is its overwhelming power, yet it is also its most vulnerable spot; it thrives on a stuff which it cannot manufacture by itself. It depends on the very substance it must fear most, and must suppress what it feeds on; the cultural productivity of people.'

The Industrialisation of the Mind,

Hans Magnus Enzensberger.

Two recent developments have occurred which promise to ensure that the work of the Centerprise publishing project will sustain the dynamic which has kept it moving forward in these last five years. Firstly, six months ago Neil Martinson joined Centerprise as the second full-time publishing worker, having been voluntarily involved with the Peoples' Autobiography Group almost since it started. A second worker was needed to cope with the increased work load engendered by maintaining the substantial administrative work which accompanied the developments described earlier, and also to help service the more complicated, but more democratic editorial procedures which the publishing project has moved towards.

Secondly, after some years of admiring the activities of the Basement Writers group three miles down the road in Stepney, we started the Hackney Writers' Workshop as a WEA class meeting fortnightly at Centerprise. The Hackney Writers' Workshop is open to local people interested in writing and sharing their work with others, with the understanding that individuals should be able to develop and grow within the framework of a sympathetic self-critical group. Already it is obvious that in fact the group has worked in this way since there has been a steady increase in numbers — to the point where we need to seriously consider starting a second group — and with hardly anybody dropping out. It has also been obvious how much individual writer's work has improved and extended in range since coming along; a judgement that most of the writers — including myself — have acknowledged openly. Out of the eighteen people who regularly attend, only two of us, both Centerprise workers, have any experience of further or higher education. At present we are working towards an anthology of our work to be published in Autumn 1977. We have also established a fraternal relationship with the Scotland Road Writers' Workshop in Liverpool; they have been down to read to us and we have been to Liverpool to read.

We hope quite soon to start a second 'Peoples' Autobiography of Hackney' group, using cameras rather than tape recorders with the aim of collecting old photographs — which we have been doing anyway for five years — and also recording with a camera the whole range of experiences connected with contemporary working class life in Hackney, thus building a visual autobiography of life in this century.

Finally, there are two developments in our local history work that we expect to be able to engage in quite soon. We hope to begin reprinting important books about the East End of London which have not been available for many years but which we think are crucial to deepening and strengthening the historical context of a 'cumulative' local culture. The reprinting of Arthur Morrison's 'Child of the Jago', now out of print, and his 'Tales of Mean Streets' would be priorities in this programme. We also hope to set going soon a detailed history of the Thames Lightermen which will be written by two lightermen and will

provide an account of the reasons behind the decline of the Thames Lighterage industry and conclude with proposals for revitalising that industry. This is a very exciting project since it could show clearly the way in which one can develop from history into a criticism of contemporary economic policies and go beyond that to making proposals for a radically different set of future choices.

The last five years have gone by very quickly. There is no way of measuring the impact that our books have made, within Hackney or beyond. Yet even if Centerprise collapsed tomorrow, it is reassuring to think that in many homes, in front rooms, on bookshelves or on mantelpieces there would remain pieces of tangible evidence that the people who live in Hackney have a history, have written about themselves, have tried to describe and understand the world they have lived in, and which they have wanted to share with others. A society without a memory is like an individual without a memory: it moves without reason or purposeful direction, activated only by forces or pressures outside of itself. I have avoided as far as possible the word 'community'; it is properly the right word to be used, but it has been so distorted by the process described in the quotation at the beginning of this section, that in some cases I think it is a word and an idea that we will have to re-appropriate at a later point in time, when it once again suits our needs and not the needs of those who are so concerned to impose the sense of 'community' upon us as a cheap substitute for a radically different, and better, society. Community, like history, is not something which happens by accident; not given, but made.

Sales of Centerprise Publications at May 1977

1972

		Number sold	
Hackney Half Term Adventure,	John Boler & Ken Worpole	6,500	In print
Poems	Vivian Usherwood	6,500	In print
If it wasn't for the houses in between	Richard Whitmore & Ken Worpole	2,600	In print

1973

Stepney Words	Collected edition	5,800	In print
Poems	Christine Gillies	1,500	Out of print
Poems	Roger Coles	500	Out of print
Poems	Derek Marlowe	500	Out of print
Elders	Anthology of poems by pensioners	3,000	Out of print*
Rabbit Island	Judith Anderson	1,000	Out of print
At the Cliff's Edge	Danny Morfett	1,000	Out of print
When I Was A Child	Dot Starn	1,000	Out of print
A Hoxton Childhood	A.S. Jaspar Paperback edition	4,800	In print

1974

Years of Change	Arthur Newton	3,700	In print
A Licence to Live	Ron Barnes	8,600	In print, 5,000 copies sold to Swedish Workers' Educational Assn.
The Threepenny Doctor	Local history anthology	3,800	In print
A Hackney Camera	Collection of old photographs of Hackney	4,500	In print
Home for Tea & other poems	Kay Toms	1,500	Out of print
Ferndale Fires	Chris Searle	2,800	In print*

1975

The Gates	Leslie Mildiner & Bill House	5,400	In print
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The Street	Harry Walters	2,000	Out of print
Rebels With A Cause	Barry Burke	1,800	In print
One Step Forward: Poems	Derek Porter	1,100	In print
1 The Good Old Bad Old Days	Lil Smith Adult Reading book	13,000	In print 10,000 copies sold to Swedish W.E.A.
George and the bus	Andy Fenner Adult reading book	12,000	In print, 10,000 copies sold to Swedish W.E.A.
A Second Look	I. Renson & Michael Silve	4,000	In print
1976			
Working Lives, Vol. I	Collection of twelve accounts of work 1905-45	2,300	In print
Daddy Burt's for dinner	Rose Lowe	1,300	In print
Millfields Memories	Doris Knight	1,300	In print
Talking Blues	Anthology of poems	1,200	In print
The Interview	Roger Mills Adult reading book	6,500	In print, 5,000 copies sold to Swedish W.E.A.
Coronation Cups & Jam Jars	Ron Barnes	1,500	In print

*Indicates local publication not originated by Centerprise but distributed by us.

A comprehensive list of publications currently in print, giving further details about the books including prices, can be obtained from Centerprise either by calling in at the bookshop or by writing to Centerprise, 136/138 Kingsland High Street, London E8 2NS, enclosing a stamped, addressed envelope.

