

FRED INGLIS

The Uses of Literacy by Richard Hoggart

The Uses of Literacy has been continuously in print for fifty-two years. When Hoggart sent the manuscript to Chatto, the publishers let it lie for a long time, decided to publish, were told by the lawyers that it was dangerously libellous and predicted that when it finally came out it would prove to be a steady enough back-shelf seller!

It instantly became a *succès d'estime* and a scandal. What sort of thing, after all, was it? Was it sociology? No, not enough numbers. Was it autobiography? No, too much generalisation. If it was about working-class history where were the unions, the blackened faces and hobnailed boots; where was the General Strike? Was it literary criticism? Well, perhaps, but then who on earth would write criticism of sex-and-violence thrillers or agony columns?

Like all great works, *The Uses of Literacy* created for itself a quite new form. Hoggart had found the historical theory latent in the teaching of English literature he studied at University at once compellingly confident, and wrong. It taught that the old self-explanatory decorum and sacred rhythms of an agrarian culture were gone, and that mass commercial and subhuman forms of popular art had replaced them.

It was and is a powerful story; single-handedly, Hoggart rebutted it. He brought F R Leavis's practical criticism to bear on the moralising saws and dicta of his class ('landscape with figures'), on the great but living archetype of the working-class mother, on the goodness of 'a good table', its 'tasty' black puddings and tinned salmon, on the great swell of feeling accompanying the songs at the club, on 'the close-ribbed streets' (in Larkin's words) 'like a great sigh out of the last century'. There he found not a lost proletariat but a mighty continuity, a strong, living, and active culture, carried by the old big words, for sure – solidarity, neighbourliness, community – but also by its jokes, its tiny gestures, its biking excursions and seaside outings, its downright bloodymindedness before the facts of political life.

At the halfway mark the book changes tone. 'Unbending the springs of action' tells us of the softening of old resilience and uncovers on the page a new literacy of reflex cynicism.

Hoggart takes a grim but minutely careful rollcall of an imaginative class life nourished by a corrupt and phoney matiness in its daily and weekly papers, and distracted from boredom by the deathly fictions of brutal punchups and panting, pointless sexual sadism.

Accused of indiscipline, the book created a new discipline of itself. Cultural Studies sprang autochthonously alive at Birmingham. Worldwide it became a new sort of multicultural and industrial anthropology. The subject is nowadays liable to doses of moral hypochondria, sanctimony and dreadful prose no doubt, but it keeps alive Hoggart's originary vision of the evaluation of ordinary life, the cherishing and the sharp criticism of, in the master's later title, 'the way we live now'.

When the now fifty year old and international confederation falters, it needs only to go back to its founding father. Hoggart teaches by example how to shape and hold the defining practice of the human sciences. In his great book, we see and feel how judicious objectivity and loving kindness become synonyms, and feel directly how keen moral sympathy dissolves into historical understanding.