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Lives in Fact and Fiction: Hedonism, Arthur Seaton and *The Affluent Worker*

Peer Reviewed Article

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Abstract

Two, not unconnected, important events, respectively for sociology and literature, occurred during the British post-Second-World-War economic boom. For sociology it was a large, influential study of occupational relations by Goldthorpe and Lockwood et al. entitled *The Affluent Worker*. For literature it was the highly original, social realist novel of a slice of working-class life by Alan Sillitoe entitled *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Both these accounts of mainly male working-class lives were not only influential in their time but have remained so – each being separately a reference point for continuing academic study. Additionally, both works noted the importance for individuals of increases in disposable income and the associated pleasurable outcomes. In considering these works together it is not the intention, here, to take either work out of its own vital category or to reduce either to a version of the other but merely to bear in mind Roger Pincott's observation that, "There is no prima facie reason why the literature written in a given society should be less interesting or informative to the sociologist than, say, that society's stratification system" (Pincott, 1970: 177).

Keywords

Affluent worker, working-class, Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Arthur Seaton, maleness

Introduction and Background

The Affluent Worker is a sociological study by John Goldthorpe and David Lockwood et al. (from here referred to as G&L) that was published in three volumes in 1968/9 - the fieldwork for which having been carried out in 1962/3. One of its principal conclusions was that the well-paid factory workers it studied far from developing middle class attitudes (as many commentators assumed they would) remained firmly instrumental – wanting good pay for hard, manual labour

and being resistant to developing the kind of dispositions and outlooks congruent with middle class careers (Goldthorpe and Lockwood et al., 1968a, 1968b, 1969).¹

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning is a novel by Alan Sillitoe that was published in 1958 featuring episodes in the life of Arthur Seaton. Two years after publication the novel was turned into a successful film starring a young Albert Finney as Arthur. Arthur is a pleasure-seeking Nottingham factory worker who spends a healthy pay packet on his primary enjoyments of wearing smart clothes, of drinking beer and of relishing female company. For Arthur, Saturday night is all:

For it was Saturday night, the best and bingiest glad-time of the week, one of the fifty-two holidays in the slow-turning Big Wheel of the year, a violent preamble to a prostrate Sabbath. Piled-up passions were exploded on Saturday night, and the effect of a week's monotonous graft in the factory was swilled out of your system in a burst of goodwill. You followed the motto of 'be drunk and be happy', kept your crafty arms around female waists, and felt the beer going beneficially down into the elastic capacity of your guts (Sillitoe, 1958:8-9)

While Arthur Seaton and G&L's affluent worker are not entirely synchronous, they share enough commonality to make a comparison interesting and one that deepens an understanding of the times they represent.²

The period represented by *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The Affluent Worker*, taken broadly, is that between 1954 and 1963 – a period that began with the end of rationing and ended with the arrival of the Beatles. It was a period characterised by rising wages, low rates of unemployment, steadily improving social services, increasing educational provision, growing job security and a marked rise in disposable income for the working-classes. Also, there must have been considerable reduction in anxiety among much of the adult population for only a dozen years before the start of this period thousands of homes a day were being destroyed by German V rockets (Calder, 1992).

However, while there were marked improvements in the lives of most people in the post-war period things did start from a low base. The 1951 census for England and Wales records that 40 per cent of households did not have a fixed bath, 7 per cent were without a W.C. (internal or external) and 5 per cent did not have piped water. Twenty years later 88 per cent of households had a fixed bath and 87 percent had an internal W.C. (Nixon, 1952; Burnett, 1986). Although the Coronation of 1953 gave a huge boost to the sales of television sets most people watched the event on a set not their own. It was typical in a working-class street for the fortunate owner of a television set to find their small front room packed with friends, relatives and neighbours watching a black and white, eleven-inch screen with rapt attention. It was not until 1960 that 70 per cent of households possessed a television (Sandbrook, 2006).

For the period we are concerned with the last vestiges of wartime austerity were disappearing and a working-class geared to mass consumption was arriving.³ It was in 1957 that the prime minister Harold Macmillan gave his famous depiction of the period:

Let's be frank about it; most of our people have never had it so good. Go around the country, go to the industrial towns, go to the farms, and you will see a state of prosperity such as we have never had in my lifetime – nor indeed ever in the history of this country. What is worrying some of us is, "Is it too good to be true" or perhaps I should say "Is it too good to last?" (Macmillan, 1957).⁴

During this period the majority of those employed were working-class manual workers. They were in general tightly unionised and predominantly male. It was among such a sample that G&L carried out the study that became *The Affluent Worker* – a work that established itself as the reference marker for many future discussions of working-class occupational relations. The starting point for the study was to examine the *embourgeoisement* thesis which argued that growing affluence among the working-class would result in an increasing adoption of bourgeois outlooks and lifestyles.⁵

The two works

The research for *The Affluent Worker* was carried out during 1962/3 and was, “made up of workers in a number of selected high-wage occupations who were employed at the Luton plants of three major manufacturing concerns” (Goldthorpe and Lockwood et al., 1969: 36). The firms in question were Vauxhall Motors, the Skefko Ball Bearing Company and Laporte Chemicals. It was the male assembly line workers at Vauxhall that were to form the key sample of manual workers. The importance of the study was that it showed that there was little desire by such workers to acquire middle-class aspirations or middle-class life-styles. The mainly unpleasant work they undertook they did so for instrumental reasons – good wages and job security. Nor were they interested in advancement: “for the large majority of men in our sample the possibility of promotion was of no real significance” (Goldthorpe and Lockwood et al., 1969: 73). In short the authors conclude,

... the results of our enquiry are not at all what might have been expected had the thesis of *embourgeoisement* been a generally valid one” (ibid: 157). Additionally the study found that white-collar workers in pursuing their objectives were increasingly shifting away from their traditional non-union stance towards unionisation – in this respect, if decidedly not in others, there was a degree of blue-collar and white-collar convergence. However in both cases this reflected a concern with pay and conditions and did not carry through into left political alignment.⁶ For the workers it was their families and their material well-being that was the key *tout court* to the good life.

On the lack of sociality (both associational and interpersonal) G&L note of their assembly line sample that:

Apart from their membership in trade unions and in works clubs – the former being sometimes involuntary and the latter ... being often merely nominal – our affluent workers prove to have very limited associational attachments. ... The impression conveyed is very strongly one of husband, wife and children forming together a highly ‘individuated’ and self-reliant group ... (ibid: 94, 101).

Made possible by their good wages these workers often use what little spare time they have on home improvements. This is hardly high living but nonetheless it highlights the feeling of freedom and relief that comes with having money in the pocket and contrasts with the pre-war depression as the experience of Arthur Seaton’s parents clearly shows:

By God [Arthur’s mother] had worked hard and hadn’t had a good life until the war, and Arthur knew it. When [Arthur’s father’s] face grew black for lack of fags she had trotted around to the various shops asking for some on tick till Thursday dole-day. But just as nowadays [he] had endless packets of Woodbines and a TV panel, so she had access to week after week of solid wages that stopped worry at the source ... (Sillitoe: 45).

Of his current individuated self Arthur tells a workmate, Jack:

Do you think if I won the football pools I'd gi' yo' a penny on it? Or gi' anybody else owt? Not likely. I'd keep it all mysen, except for seeing my family right. I'd buy 'em a house and set 'em up for life, but anybody else could whistle for it. I've 'eard that blokes as win football pools get thousands o' beggin' letters, but you know what I'd do if I got 'em? I'll tell yer what I'd do: I'd mek a bonfire of 'em. Because I don't believe in share and share alike, . . . (ibid: 33).

Scaled down these comments are not all that far from Zweig's observing in his *The Worker in an Affluent Society* the emergence of what would later be termed neo-liberal individualism. Talking of the male worker he says:

Old slogans, old loyalties tend to leave him cold. The class struggle interests him less and less. . . . Class divisions are still there, but . . . the ethos of class solidarity, of group movement, seems to be weakened, as a man thinks primarily of himself and his home (Zweig, 1961: 209).

However perhaps the 'discovery' of new individuated lifestyles in both G&L and Zweig was overdone or was at least not the whole story. In his remarkable *The Unprivileged* (1967) Jeremy Seabrook gives in an account of his own working-class family over four generations a description of a family-focussed, narrowness of outlook and of an experience of abasement that is clearly to some degree generalisable. Upon its publication the *Times Educational Supplement* regarded it as a, "very beautiful, very bitter book: one of the few works which can be classified as sociology that has the impetus and poetry of a novel" and continued:

Seabrook is a member of the first generation [of his family] to question totally and to repudiate the values that embittered and embalmed his family for 100 years. Under-educated, and totally suspicious of everything and everybody, their own particular sort of humour and obstinacy is revealed without mercy. . . . This book should be read by anyone entering teaching or social work who has not really experienced working-class life (*Times Educational Supplement*, 1967: 1534).

Relatedly, Robert Roberts in his *The Classic Slum* describes the working-class families he grew up amongst as being not only grindingly poor but as seeing and judging the world from an almost exclusively family perspective with no talk of social solidarity:

The class struggle as manual workers in general knew it, was apolitical . . . They looked upon it not in any way as a war against the employers but as a perpetual series of engagements in the battle of life itself. . . All in all it was a struggle against the fates, and each family fought it out as best it could (Roberts, 1971).

These two examples by Seabrook and Roberts are not intended to show the entire working-class but only to note that the working-class is not a monolithic entity, nor are the examples given intended to provide any kind of excuse for acute, chronic and unspeakable underprivilege.⁷ The trend of family-first and a wariness of others noted by Seabrook, Roberts and others has been a deep-seated feature not only of working-class life, *but of all social classes*. The individuated, family-focussed working-class identified by G&L and Zweig and others was not a particular feature of the post-war working-class but the continuation of a trait with a long presence (Lawrence, 2013).

The Affluent Worker was not concerned with the working-class in general but with a predominantly male section of that class. The gradations within the working-class were many – stretching from the artisanal respectable working-class with its parlours and impeccable front rooms to the unskilled and deprived working-class living in squalor. Between these two

extremes there were many gradations.⁸ The Seaton family was somewhere in the middle. They would not have had a special parlour but by the 1950s they were never hungry, certainly far from penniless and not short of provisions.

Arthur Seaton regards himself as a harsh individualist who, beyond his family, has no further social obligations. He belongs to a trade union because the union protects him but rejects giving it any ideological allegiance. He takes the growing individualism of the worker noted by G&L and by Zweig to an extreme: he regards both unions and bosses with undifferentiated contempt:

Tek them blokes as spout on boxes outside the factory sometimes. I like to hear 'em talk about Russia, about farms and power-stations they've got, because it's interestin', but when they say that when they get in government everybody's got to share and share alike, then that's another thing. I ain't a communist, I tell you. I like 'em though, because they're different from these big fat Tory bastards in parliament. And them Labour bleeders too. They rob our wage packets every week with insurance and income tax and try to tell us it's all for our own good. I know what I'd like to do with the government (Sillitoe: 33-34).

Arthur's individualism is unlike that of the working-class Joe Lampton in John Braine's *Room at the Top*. The two novels published within a year of each and both to considerable critical acclaim are often bracketed together as foremost examples of the working-class social realist novel.⁹ In *Room at the Top*, Lampton, does all he can to remove himself from his working-class origins. While Seaton like the majority of respondents at G&L's Vauxhall Car factory have no plans to ascend to the middle class Lampton decidedly does, is contemptuous of those who don't, remorselessly and ruthlessly doing anything to join the rich industrial bourgeoisie. In the climb Lampton becomes a local government accountant in a town more prosperous than his own, but it is not enough. As he looks around the town his desires become compounded:

I wanted an Aston-Martin, I wanted a three-guinea linen shirt, I wanted a girl with a Riviera suntan – these were my rights I felt, a signed and sealed legacy. . . . I remembered the second-hand Austin Seven which . . . Dufton's Chief Treasurer had just treated himself to. That was the most the local government had to offer me; it wasn't enough. I made my choice then and there. . . . I was going to collect that legacy. It was as clear and compelling as the sense of vocation which doctors and missionaries are supposed to experience, though in my instance, of course, the call ordered me to do good to myself not others (Braine, 1957: 29).

This is far from Arthur Seaton's world of immediacy, hard work and ready gratifications. The idea of Arthur attending evening classes to improve his occupational status is risible. He takes a spartan attitude to his disagreeable working conditions:

Arthur walked into a huge corridor, searching an inside pocket for his clocking-in card and noticing, as on every morning since he was fifteen - except for a two-year break in the army - the factory smell of oil-suds, machinery, and shaved steel that surrounded you with an air in which pimples grew and prospered on your face and shoulders, that would have turned you into one big pimple if you did not spend half an hour over the scullery sink every night getting rid of the biggest bastards. What a life, he thought. Hard work and good wages, and a smell all day that turns your guts (Sillitoe: 27-28).

Seaton's world is one of graft and pleasure that also exhibits the deep male chauvinism of its time. He takes great satisfaction in dressing in his pricey clothes, in going out, and in consuming vast amounts of beer. This he especially enjoys in the company of women. Arthur likes women, has no interest in hurting them, and they and he relish the sex they share. Arthur is sleeping with Brenda the wife his workmate, Jack. He likes Jack but he also considers that he deserves being deceived because he is not a man like himself – roguish, good fun and lusty.

Large sections of the political left of the period did not find these attitudes agreeable and had considerable problems with the effects of growing affluence and consumerism upon the class they were most keen to represent. To put it simply much of the left intelligentsia, sizeable sections of the Labour Party and assorted Union leaders felt the working-class was not fulfilling its historical mission – of transforming Britain into a society where the workers owned the means of production and were led by a political party informing them of their best interests. As well as this political imperative looking under threat many in the Labour Party and others on the left were, as Dolly Wilson puts it, “fearful of a moral decay associated with affluence, [that] seemed to imply that it was somehow betraying the revolution to want a washing machine” (Wilson, 2006: 228). The Marxist left's imputed role for the working-class of the 1950s had often little appeal to that very class. As for Arthur Seaton, as Raphael Samuel says, “. . . the hero of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, is an unashamed hedonist, out to have a good time . . . and about as remote from the self-improving working man of the 19th century as it would be possible to imagine . . .” (Samuel, 1995: 7).

Richard Hoggart in his exposé by autobiography and social analysis of mass culture, *The Uses of Literacy* contrasts the pre-war working-class with the post-war working-class. While noting more hardship among the former he also notes more cultural integrity while amongst (the more affluent) latter he observes an increasingly ready acceptance of an unrooted, sensationalist popular culture (Hoggart, 1957).¹⁰ The new social effects of a profit-motivated mass culture appealing to cheap thrills was for Hoggart a reason for serious concern – a matter to do with impoverishing the quality of democratic discourse. While well aware of the advantages of a growing prosperity for the working-class he noted, as Ross Cole puts it, that “a ‘bloodless revolution’ appeared to have taken place, erasing the integrity of working-class culture” (Cole, 2017: 363). This was not so much a change in working-class political allegiance but was rather a general cheapening of sensibility and attitudes. The criticism of ‘mass culture’ was common among both the left and right intellectual classes.¹¹ These reasoned analyses were unlikely to have a noticeable influence on such as the Seaton family or the affluent workers of the Vauxhall assembly line.

If Arthur's reaction to affluence is one of self-first his view of gender relations was not greatly different and nor, was it uncommon for the period. He is primarily out for a good time, and little concerned with notions of constancy. Not long into the novel a crisis arises when Brenda finds herself pregnant by Arthur and wants an abortion. Arthur consults his aunt Ada and is supplied with the information needed. The abortion proceeds with the grim necessities of gin, scalding water and a zinc bathtub. Brenda is assisted by a friend and Arthur is present, but he and the friend fall out and he leaves the scene and heads off to a pub. When he arrives, there is an amateur entertainer singing badly into a microphone. This annoys Arthur, but not for long because a man approaches the singer and hits him, “dealing him a violent crack on the lower half of his face. . . . Arthur was glad it had happened, laughing so loud that he began to choke from the pain in his ribs” (ibid: 90-91). Arthur looks round and notices Winnie (Brenda's younger sister) arrive at the pub. She is looking for a friend who turns out not to be there. Arthur offers her a drink:

“No,” she said, “I’ve got to get going. I haven’t finished cleaning the house up yet for when Bill comes home. He’ll be in tomorrow night, and if the house’s scruffy he’ll have a fit and black my eyes.”

He persuaded her to sit down. “I’ll have a gin-and-orange,” she said (ibid: 91-92).

Arthur and Winnie drink and talk about Winnie’s life, about her husband, and about Brenda, Winnie making it clear that she knows Arthur is her “fancy man”. They leave the pub and walk to her house where she ascends the stairs:

He followed, loving her on every second stair, loins aching for her small wild body, remembering that he had recently ascended another set of stairs under different circumstances. The evening had begun, and the evening was about to end. She stripped to her underwear and lay in the bed waiting for him. Never had an evening begun so sadly and ended so well, he reflected, peeling off his socks (ibid: 94).

Violence, as witnessed in the striking of the amateur singer in the pub or Winnie’s fear of a beating, is regarded as a way of solving problems by Arthur and his group, and it is violence that symbolically ends the Saturday night of the novel. Arthur is at the annual Nottingham Goose Fair and roistering in his usual anarchic fashion with both Brenda and Winnie in a scene that is both the social realist and picaresque centre point of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Taylor, 2008). Arthur is seen by Winnie’s squaddie husband and his fellow-soldier friend. Sensing danger, Arthur kicks one the squaddies and disappears. Two nights later, in a graphically described scene the squaddies beat him up.¹² He stumbles into a nearby pub and collapses and is somehow assisted home by Doreen, a single girl he has also been seeing.

Sunday Morning

After several days Doreen visits him in his sick bed. He tells her he was run over by a horse and cart.¹³ However he soon comes clean and admits he has been beaten up as a result of his relationships with two married women but adds that he’ll put all that behind him. This is not contrition merely that he has decided to absent himself from a dangerous situation. Nonetheless Arthur’s Sunday morning has dawned and here we witness not a lessening of his rebelliousness but some customisation (as he becomes Doreen’s “young man”) to established social practice:

As they walked Arthur reflected on the uniqueness of his goings-out with Doreen, on the absence of danger that had tangibly surrounded him when he formerly met Brenda or Winnie. Each outing now was no longer an expedition on which every corner had to be turned with care, every pub considered for the ease of tactical retreat in case of ambush, every step along dark streets with Brenda taken with trepidation. He missed these things with Doreen, so much so that when out with her he felt a tug of excitement at the heart on approaching a corner, and conversation would lapse for a few minutes until they had turned it and he saw with a strange feeling of frustration mixed with relief that an avenue of safety lay before him (ibid: 198-199).

Such frissons will remain in the past. Arthur while losing none of his cheek, bravado or fearlessness is nonetheless planning to marry Doreen and move to a newly built council estate. As the novel ends Arthur is alone and out fishing. By contemplating the lives of the fish in the canal he ruminates upon the capricious nature of the fated life – freedom or capture? luck or loss? and is not unaware that like a caught fish he too is hooked – the fish by blind nature and he by social location:

With float bobbing before him once more he sat down to wait. This time it was war, and he wanted fish to take home, either to cook in the pan or feed to the cat. It's trouble for you and trouble for me, and all over a piece of bait. And trouble for me it'll be, fighting every day until I die. Why do they make soldiers out of us when we're fighting up to the hilt as it is? Fighting with mothers and wives, landlords and gaffers, coppers, army, government. If it's not one thing it's another, apart from the work we have to do and the way we spend our wages (ibid: 213).

Arthur Seaton is an affluent worker, and it is that affluence that allows him to live the life he chooses. Although G&L do not investigate in any detail the intimate lives of their respondents it would be wrong to suppose that many of their male respondents led lives quite like that of Arthur Seaton. Arthur is an ideal type representing hedonism, traditionalism and maleness. While these modes of conduct existed before the war it was the economic expansion of the 1950s that allowed male factory workers to enlarge upon them in an unprecedented way. The high-charged documentary expressionism of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and the studied and considered sociological study by G&L taken together deepen an appreciation of a unique period in British economic history and its most notable representative – the affluent worker.

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Notes

1. To avoid cumbersome repetition Goldthorpe and Lockwood et al will be given as G&L.
2. It is not the purpose of this article to discuss the theorisations related to the Sociology of Literature. For useful discussions on the subject see Templeton and Groce (1990) and Barnwell (2015).
3. The principal authorities used for the economic history of the period under discussion are Addison and Jones eds. (2005); Cronin (1984); Halsey and Webb eds (2000); Harrison (2009); Marwick (1990); Sandbrook (2005).
4. Macmillan's apprehensions concerning the future in the last sentences of the passage are less quoted than the earlier part, but he was right to show concern and demonstrated foresight: "In the mid-1970s, the economy was stagnating, inflation was high, unemployment rising, public sector borrowing unprecedentedly high for a period of peace, and the era of growing government came to an end" (Dilnot and Emmerson, 2000:335).
5. In some part *The Affluent Worker* was a reaction to Ferdynand Zweig's *embourgeoisement* propositions. Zweig's sociological approach was perhaps treated less generously than it could have been (*vide* Bacon, 1978).
6. This was likely less so on the case of the affluent workers' wives. Dolly Wilson writes: "While John Goldthorpe and others showed that workers did not necessarily shift political loyalties from Labour as their wages rose and affluence expanded, they studied only men, not women. In reality the bulk of existing evidence demonstrates that women voters in the 1950s found the Conservative message more appealing and credible than Labour's" (Wilson, 2006: 227).

7. Roberts is unflinching in his account of the capitalist system's cruelties: . . . *realists among the old working-class class today remember and with sadness . . . the many women broken and aged with childbearing well before their own youth was done. They remember the spoiled complexions, the mouths full of rotten teeth, the varicose veins, the ignorance of simple hygiene, the intelligence stifled and the endless battle merely to keep clean. Unlike many in the middle and upper classes fondly looking back . . . they weep no tears for the past. . . The tragedy was that in the most opulent country in the world so many possessed so little* (Roberts, 1971: 41).
8. The vast differences within the working-class during this period (as well as before and later) are well referenced in the material on social class. Two recent highly perceptive studies are Ben Jones (2012) and Jon Lawrence (2013). For a fictional treatment of the 'lace curtain' working-class see Stan Barstow's *A Kind of Loving* (1960).
9. *Room at the Top* was turned into a successful film in 1959 starring a young Lawrence Harvey. As well as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* two further important social realist working-class novels published around the same time and with some not unconnected themes to Sillitoe's work were David Storey's *This Sporting Life* (1960) and Stan Barstow's *A Kind of Loving* (1960). The film versions of all four (representing a British cinematic 'new wave') were critical successes.
10. While recognising the value of Hoggart's major study it is clear that Hunslett was not the same as Salford and that working-class experience varied markedly. On this specific issue Robert Roberts notes: *Richard Hoggart's personal intimacy with the working-class in its more 'respectable' reaches during the '20s and '30s of the century leads him into praising family unity and 'cosiness'. These qualities, however, do not, I think, appear either so evident or so laudable if one examines the working-class at more levels and over a wider range of time. Certain nineteenth-century traits, of course, ran far into the twentieth and affected longest the ultra-conservative lower working-class – among them, the gulf that stood between parents and children. From family to family there were naturally many variations in its importance, yet this division, I feel, made a profound impression on the minds and social attitudes of millions of manual workers. To ignore its influence is to distort any picture of working-class relationships in the first half of the twentieth century* (Roberts, 1971: 50.).
11. John Goldthorpe, one of the two primary authors of *The Affluent Worker* would write some twenty years later: *Although in certain respects mass culture might appear aesthetically repellent, to view it in an entirely negative light was seriously mistaken. Dismissive criticism from conservative quarters was often based on fallacious notions of some previous 'golden age' of popular or folk culture from which a supposed decline was traced; while on the left such criticism stemmed largely from the anguish felt at the working-class preference for mass culture over revolutionary praxis* (Goldthorpe, 1988: 41).
12. Sillitoe uses the dialect term 'swaddie' for squaddie.
13. This is not quite such a preposterous excuse as it might seem. Horse and carts would not have been an uncommon sight in the Nottingham of the 1950s.

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Author Biography

Michael Erben was for many years Director of the Centre for Biography and Education at the University of Southampton (UK). He was a founder member of the BSA Auto/Biography Study Group and has published widely in the area of biographical studies and narrative. His most recent book, co-authored with Hilary Dickinson, is *Nostalgia and Auto/Biography*. He is now largely retired and is, contentedly, an independent scholar while holding an Honorary Fellowship at the University of Southampton and preparing (with Jenny Byrne) an extensive study of British postwar (1945-51) lives.