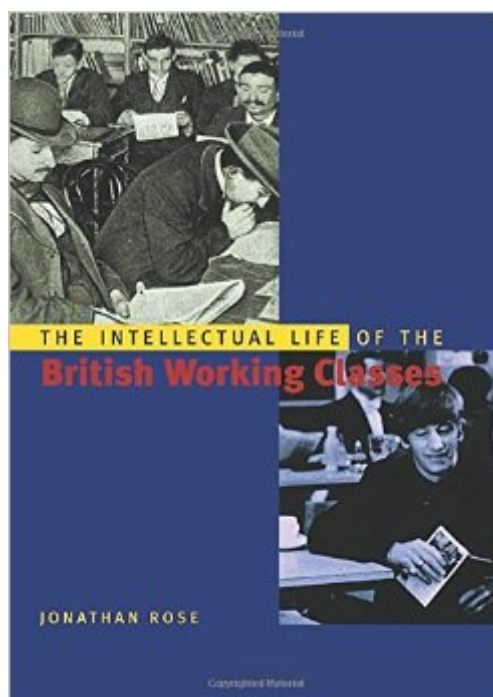


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# The Intellectual Life Of The British Working Classes



## Synopsis

Which books did the British working classes read - and how did they read them? How did they respond to canonical authors, penny dreadfuls, classical music, school stories, Shakespeare, Marx, Hollywood movies, imperialist propaganda, the Bible, the BBC, the Bloomsbury Group? What was the quality of their classroom education, as they experienced it? How did they educate themselves? What was their level of cultural literacy? How much did they know about politics, science, history, philosophy, poetry, and sexuality? Who were the proletarian intellectuals, and why did they pursue the life of the mind? These questions are addressed in this book.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Jonathan Rose has written a most enjoyable book looking at what British workers thought about the world, their schools, science, history, geography, literature, papers, films, plays, radio and music. He covers the period from the late 18th century to the mid-20th, using their memoirs, and also surveys, opinion polls, school records and library registers. A vast popular movement of voluntary collectivism created a hugely impressive working class culture - mutual improvement societies, Sunday schools, adult schools, libraries, reading circles, drama societies, musical groups, friendly societies, trade unions and mechanics' institutes. The London Corresponding Society, the world's first working class political organisation, met weekly; readings aloud provoked democratic discussion. Education's purpose is to teach us to think for ourselves. The working class's self-improving culture encouraged them to ask questions and voice their thoughts and feelings. The great classics, Shakespeare (often

described as the first Marxist), Handel's operas and Scott's novels, all stimulated thought, imagination and independence of mind. Rose writes well about Marxists' problem of relating to workers. The class described in these pages, complex, thoughtful, independent-minded, savvy, resent being told what to think or what it thinks. This alone explains why there is, as yet, no mass British Marxism, not external influences, or the efficacy of ruling class institutions, or, the ultra-left dogma, misleadership - get the right cutting-edge vanguard and the dim masses will at last play follow the leader. As Rose writes, "The trouble with Marx was Marxists, whom British workers generally found to be dogmatic, selfish, and antiliterary."

The spread of literacy to the masses is arguably the most far reaching cultural change of the last two centuries. One of the first countries where this took place was Great Britain. Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* uses much autobiographical material to tell us how the workers experienced their quest into written knowledge, roughly from 1760 to 1960. It is a historians' history, packed with information and references. It transforms our understanding of a driving force behind intellectual history. The urge to read literature did not come from the invisible hand of the market, from the pressure of government or even from education, but from the urge of working people themselves to understand where they stood in the world, and, most importantly, to become an individual. It started as an autodidact movement. Initially, individual workers, often wretchedly poor, had to make do with religious tracts, old newspapers and second hand books. First they had to develop an understanding of literary conventions, like the distinction between a factual and a fictional account. From about the middle of the nineteenth century mutual help became the norm. In clubs and production sites workers discussed often amazingly sophisticated literature, even when they also read what we now would call pulp fiction. The Education Act of 1870 was followed by universal compulsory education. In historiography schools often have been put down, but many children liked their heated and clean school buildings, a far cry from conditions at home. As teaching materials were out of date, being an autodidact continued to make sense. The highpoint of autodidact culture and the mutual help societies was in the years leading up to the first world war.

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