

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/129361/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

O'Hagan, Lauren Alex 2021. A voice for the voiceless: Improving provenance practice for working-class books. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 53 (1) , pp. 16-28. 10.1177/0961000620909160

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0961000620909160>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



## Introduction

*“Until the lion has its own historian, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter”*

African proverb

It is widely recognised that formal institutions tend to provide a biased view of book ownership and readership because acquisitions have historically been weighted in favour of upper-class, wealthy figures (Lyons, 2007, 2013; Hall and Gillen, 2010). Not only did these individuals tend to be more educated, and therefore more literate, but they also had the necessary disposable income to afford books in the hand-press period.

In Britain, by the Edwardian era (1901-1914), the introduction of newspaper print methods to book production had dramatically decreased the cost of books, while more than twenty years of free, compulsory education had made a highly literate working class. This resulted in the democratisation of book ownership. Now, it was the working classes who “called the tune to which the writers and editors danced” (Altick, 1957, p. 5), bringing about opportunities for fresh genres and new modes of design and distribution. Despite these important changes, for much of the twentieth century, institutions continued to prioritise the books of ‘prestigious’ people and did not deem working-class books worthy of collection. For this reason, such books often reside outside of traditional institutions within community or specialist archives that are typically driven by social or political movements [e.g. Working Class Movement Library in Manchester; South Wales Miners’ Library in Swansea] (Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd 2009) or their survival depends on the good conservation practices of personal collectors or booksellers.

In recent years, institutions have become increasingly aware of the need to present a more diverse representation of society in their collections in order to challenge traditional historical narratives. Much research into the area has been led by the USA, where there is a long tradition of fighting for diversity and social rights (Jimerson, 2007; Seale, 2013; Caswell, 2017). The actions of libraries and archives shape public memory, so they have a social responsibility to wield their power in a safe and inclusive manner. Diversity and inclusion are now regarded as an essential part of archival work. However, while much has been done to improve the access to libraries and archives for marginalised groups, much work remains when it comes to cataloguing and recording provenance data. Librarians and archivists must periodically review collections and reflect on how items are described and how they might be implicitly biased, whether one group’s voice is privileged over another and how retrospective cataloguing can improve these practices. When dealing with new acquisitions, they must also be prepared to challenge traditional cataloguing procedures and policies to assess whether they are unintentionally perpetuating harmful traditions (de Klerk, 2018).

There have been some attempts to raise the profile of archival records by and about marginalised groups. The National Archives, for example, promote an annual Diversity Week, where they showcase ‘hidden’ histories from their records and share them with the general public. They have also produced specific research guides on Black British history, sexuality and

gender identity history, and women's history. More local-level initiatives include 'Queering the Archive' at Glamorgan Archives in Cardiff – a course to teach participants how to recognise and search for LGBT content in historic material – and the University of Leicester Library's University History Project, which aims to capture oral and written histories relating to women's experiences of living, working and studying at the University of Leicester. Nonetheless, within special collections, little attention has thus far been paid to another historically marginalised group: the working classes.

According to Sinor (2002, p. 185), working-class voices in libraries and archives largely "linger as shadows," whether channelled through other people and confined to names in records that frame them negatively, such as workhouse or Poor Law records, or reduced to 'talking upwards' to figures of authorities in letters. We have few opportunities to hear them directly. That is why the correct recording of provenance in books is so important.

Book inscriptions are valuable first-hand resources for documenting the personal lives of book owners, as well as the sociopolitical landscape of a particular time period. They are of utmost historical, bibliographical, literary and pedagogical importance. Edwardian book inscriptions are especially important because they provide unprecedented knowledge of working-class life and culture in early twentieth-century Britain, standing as important first-hand evidence of people's identities, social circles, jobs, hobbies, beliefs, hopes and fears. While some provide the formative voices of future Labour MPs, most capture the voices of those who passed their lives under the radar but made important contributions to Edwardian society in their own ways, whether through serving, sewing, mining, building or teaching. Libraries are likely to contain some examples of books owned by the working classes, albeit scant, but most remain uncatalogued and unrecorded, buried within collections. That is why I am part of an important project to unearth them and bring a voice to the voiceless.

### **The Reading, Writing and... Rebellion Project**

From 2015-2018, as part of my doctoral research, I gathered a dataset of 1,000 Edwardian books inscribed by or for working-class individuals. These inscriptions enabled me to build an understanding of the types of inscriptions in use between 1901 and 1914; who the inscribers were; what books they owned and how they acquired them; how book ownership and readership varied according to gender, age, location and class; what communicative and performative functions inscriptions had; and how Edwardian books survived and were passed on until today. Due to the previously outlined challenges regarding working-class books in formal institutions, these inscriptions were collected largely through a manual search of the shelves in a series of secondhand bookshops across Britain.

A key argument of my research was that the simple ownership inscription of a working-class servant, say, carried as much meaningful information and had as much historical importance as the upper-class armorial bookplate of a politician. Furthermore, with the support of other archival records, I demonstrated that these inscriptions have the potential to reveal novel insights into class relations in early twentieth-century Britain. However, without efficient

provenance practice, many working-class book inscriptions are endangered and risk permanent obscurity within collections. In my conclusion, I argued for the need for institutions to shine a spotlight on these inscriptions through a series of targeted measures aimed at increasing their presence and safeguarding their permanency.

I am now part of an ESRC-funded project – *Reading, Writing and... Rebellion: Understanding Literacies and Class Conflict Through the Edwardian Book Inscription* – to encourage a debate about the make-up of cultural heritage within institutional collections and how fair representation and lack of diversity can be addressed. Here, the issue is not why working-class books have not been collected, but rather why, when collected, their provenance information has not been recorded or given the attention that it deserves.

The current strand of the project has three central stages:

1. Interviews with archivists and librarians at the 36 institutions in the United Kingdom and Ireland that are members of Research Libraries UK;
2. The inclusive and fair cataloguing of the Janet Powney Collection – a working-class prize book collection in Cardiff University's Special Collections and Archives;
3. Impact and engagement events to promote the Janet Powney Collection.

### **Stage 1: Research Libraries UK Interviews**

Over a period of three months, I carried out a series of interviews via email and telephone with lead archivists and librarians at the 36 institutions that are members of Research Libraries UK.<sup>1</sup> Each institution was asked the same set of questions regarding what their current practices were for dealing with provenance, particularly in books from the Edwardian era; whether their practices varied according to the type of inscription or owner; whether any standardised guidelines for provenance existed and, if so, did they follow them; what challenges prevented the proper recording of provenance information; and whether they perceived a class bias in the provenance information recorded in their collections.

The information provided by each institution was subjected to a thorough content analysis where key themes were picked out and recurring patterns were noted across the 36 interviews. Overall, nine criteria were identified that had a specific impact on recording working-class provenance in Edwardian books. These criteria were given percentages based on the number of respondents who identified them as a challenge. They are ordered below in level of importance:

1. No standardised rules of terminology (73% of respondents agreed)
2. Past practices (70%)
3. Lack of time (65%)
4. Ambiguity between rare and modern (29%)
5. Staff skill/knowledge shortage (17%)
6. Lack of money (5%)
7. Researcher needs (5%)

8. Database constraints (2%)
9. Lack of importance (2%)

### **1. No Standardised Rules or Terminology**

Although most institutions agreed that recording provenance was important, 73% of respondents stated that the biggest challenge was a lack of standardised rules or terminology. Respondents identified four sets of guidelines that are most typically used – DCRM(B), CILIP, RDA and AACR2 – but admitted that, while there is a general agreement in basic principles, there are differing practices across the sector with no standardisation and no guidelines on which books within a collection should be prioritised for treatment. As one respondent claimed, “each institution just does its own thing using its own judgement.”

Of the 36 institutions, 26 follow the DCRM(B), or Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (Books), guidelines. The DCRM(B) was introduced in 2007 as a successor to the DCRB (Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Books) and provides guidelines for cataloguing printed monographs of any age or type or production. According to the Library of Congress (2007), it “gives expanded guidance and prescribes a more rigorous and consistent approach to transcription [...] and incorporates a sharp distinction between information transcribed from the source and information that has been supplied by the cataloguer.” However, as many of the respondents I interviewed pointed out, the DCRM(B) guidelines on provenance are “notably brief and vague,” with just half a page dedicated to provenance in a 235-page manual:

Make a local note to describe details of an item’s provenance, if considered important. In less detailed descriptions, it is advisable to summarize provenance information, without providing exact transcriptions or descriptions of the evidence. Include the names of former owners or other individuals of interest and approximate dates, whenever possible (DCRM(B), 2011, p. 146)

Here, the obvious problems lie in the words “if considered important” and “individuals of interest,” which can be interpreted in numerous ways, particularly in relation to social status. These guidelines risk turning provenance practice into a highly subjective procedure that is dependent on an individual’s own discretion.

Two institutions stated that they adhered to the CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) Guidelines for the Categorising of Rare Books. These guidelines were last updated in 2007 and were initially produced in response to a desire for national guidance on cataloguing rare books. CILIP provides more extensive notes on provenance than DCRM(B) and does not distinguish when signs of ownership should be recorded. It gives equal precedence to “all individuals or institutions who may have owned or handled a book up to and including the present time.” However, the two institutions interviewed did note that they tended to follow these guidelines more precisely when dealing with pre-nineteenth-century hand-pressed books.

Two institutions explained that they followed the RDA (Resource Description and Access) guidelines, which were released in 2010 to build on the strengths of AACR2, the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules. RDA includes information on recording relationships between people and items. However, respondents complained that its guidelines can be rather contradictory because, on the one hand, they encourage the use of specific vocabulary, but, on the other, they enabled institutions to make their own judgements on what metadata to be recorded. This meant that the ultimate goal of uniformity across institutions was not possible.

Of the remaining institutions, one said that they still followed the AACR2 rules despite being phased out in 2010, while the other five currently do not record any provenance information at all.

In addition to a lack of standardisation, many respondents also flagged up the issue of non-standardised terminology. As one rare books librarian stated, “We are relatively consistent in our use of terminology when recording signs of ownership, but there is no one straightforward answer and other institutions will follow their own house rules to a greater or lesser extent.” Despite these issues, some respondents mentioned a number of recent initiatives that have been taken to improve access to provenance information. The UK Bibliographic Standards Committee, for example, has attempted to establish specific terminology on provenance in their guidelines, while the Association of College & Research Libraries have also put together a terminology dictionary that some institutions follow. The Consortium of European Research Libraries has also created a central portal for provenance by producing a website with provenance resources organised geographically. However, this list remains heavily biased towards the marks of upper-class and wealthy figures. David Pearson’s (2019) *Provenance Research in Book History* was also mentioned by many as a seminal text that now underpins many of their approaches to provenance, particularly in terms of recording inscriptions as fully as possible, including the type of writing implement used and transcribing any uncertainties in brackets. Nonetheless, there was still some concern that Pearson’s book was weighted towards upper-class inscriptive practices and did not give enough attention to simple ownership marks.

Overall, the general consensus was that a shared and standardised approach to provenance would be desirable as an industry, but that there is still a long way to go due to institution-specific priorities and challenges.

## **2. Past Practices**

70% of the institutions interviewed claimed that past practices and attitudes towards provenance were a major reason why working-class inscriptions in Edwardian books may have been unrecorded or insufficiently documented. Most noted that recording of provenance has traditionally not been standard cataloguing practice and that it was not done systematically in most libraries or archives until about twenty years ago. This is because catalogue records were typically concerned with bibliographic description rather than copy-specific information.

A shift occurred in the late twentieth century as a result of a turn towards provenance research in book history, but some institutions still do not choose to record provenance information.

Most institutions agreed that, historically, if any provenance information was recorded, it tended to be of notable owners only because their inscriptions were easily traceable. As one rare books librarian stated, "Detailed copy-specific cataloguing was only carried out for easily identifiable provenances, particularly armorial bookplates or armorial bindings, which therefore was biased towards the wealthy and upper class." This information was typically recorded on separate paper sheaf bindings and, in many cases, has only just started to be transferred to online cataloguing systems. All institutions agreed that, of these marks of ownership, there was a strong preference to record bookplates over any other form of inscriptions.

In some institutions, provenance was typically only recorded when an entire and significant collection was donated from one source. Often, this donor allocated specific money to catalogue the material and produce provenance information in a manual index or card catalogue. Again, this information highlights the fact that recording provenance has been heavily focused towards institutionally-significant and historically-significant figures. Nonetheless, all libraries were keen to stress that this bias was not due to a deliberate class prejudice. Rather, it was the result of traditional procedures which tended to privilege, according to one cataloguer, "those whose annotations would be thought to have scholarly value, those who would have collected the sort of books that a great research library would be expected to hold, and those who could afford to own and use a bookplate."

Additionally, the institutions were unanimous in the view that there is currently no valid resource to go back retrospectively and enhance records, although this would be ideal. However, they recognised that this shortcoming did risk "a skewed vision of book ownership" and "unintentional bias." One curator stated that retrospective cataloguing would be useful because "it would allow collections curators to better manage the reclassification/relocation of main library collections into the rare special collections." Another cataloguer also claimed that retrospective cataloguing would "potentially reveal stories of working-class book ownership previously hidden" which would be "very exciting" and would help not to "perpetuate an upper-class history."

### **3. Lack of Time**

According to the interviewees, another major factor that determines whether working-class inscriptions in Edwardian books are recorded is time, or the lack thereof. 65% of respondents felt that too much time was needed to identify and research working-class inscriptions, which often resulted in them being neglected in collections. While diversity and inclusion are key priorities of libraries and archives, they are also under increasing pressure to balance these with open access and use. Therefore, discoverability and the facilitation of basic knowledge are often prioritised over the detailed recording of provenance information.

Most institutions noted that working-class inscriptions, in particular, can be challenging because it is not easy to identify owners. Therefore, considerable time would have to be dedicated to discovering who they were and there is just not the staff capacity to do this. One librarian also noted the possible tensions between what a librarian and what a researcher hope to get out of a collection: “We are there to make the basic information available. It is up to the researcher to use that information in whichever way they see fit.” In other words, most librarians will record basic provenance information, but it is beyond their job role to research the social history of the inscription, which is often what researchers wish to find out.

Other respondents argued that there is a huge amount of work to do already in terms of re-cataloguing early material, as well as cataloguing new stock. This means that large amounts of time cannot be dedicated to provenance. As a result, working-class inscriptions are unintentionally ignored because they take far longer to research. Furthermore, many institutions still prioritise the recording of provenance information for hand-press books because less effort is required to track down past owners. This inadvertently excludes working-class owners who may not have been literate or had the financial means to own books at this time.

Another issue identified is that the industrialisation of print in the nineteenth century resulted in an exponential growth in the amount of books produced. Consequently, institutions have found it “near impossible”, as one librarian claimed, to keep track of all Edwardian books in their collections and record provenance data for them.

All respondents expressed a desire to record working-class provenance if time allowed but agreed that it was not feasible with the other roles and responsibilities that they were expected to perform.

#### **4. Ambiguity Between Rare and Modern**

29% of respondents recognised that a major challenge when dealing with Edwardian books is whether an institution considers them to be ‘rare’ or ‘modern’. This categorisation will have a huge impact on the way in which its provenance is treated.

Most institutions stated that they define rare books as those printed before 1850. This means that most Edwardian books are treated as general, modern library books and appear on the open shelves rather than in rare books collections. Consequently, rare books standards are not followed when cataloguing them, which leads provenance to be unrecorded in most cases. As one librarian explained, “general cataloguing follows different standards and different priorities and many treat it as purely administrative information.”

The provenance indexing of Edwardian books was described as “patchy” by several cataloguers and heavily dependent on other definitions of rare beyond the book’s date of publication, such as whether it was part of a collection assembled by a particular collector or whether it exhibit some other special quality (e.g. the product of a private press, limited edition, etc.). Naturally, assigning a book as rare according to these definitions distorts the

available data in favour of upper-class book owners. Two institutions highlighted prize books as notable exceptions, which, despite being largely produced in the late Victorian/Edwardian era, were classed as 'rare' because of their interest to book and social historians. Nonetheless, both institutions stated that any provenance information on prize books has been limited to transcribing the information on prize labels rather than researching the particular individuals. The general assumption was that, as these individuals were largely working class, they did not have the time or resources to dedicate to researching them.

Some libraries stated that they regularly went through their general stock to identify items that could be transferred to special collections. However, they admitted that it would be very unlikely that Edwardian books would be moved. They also acknowledged that, although provenance information is updated when transferring stock, no time or resources are allocated to identifying the owners.

Three rare books librarians also stated that some Edwardian books, particularly family Bibles, were deliberately refused from Special Collections because they were too commonplace. However, they were keen to stress that this refusal was not due to class discrimination, but rather based on institutional collecting priorities. Equally, those that did not consider Edwardian books to be rare books pointed out that this decision was based on the physical properties of the book, not to whom the book belonged. Nonetheless, they did recognise that these rules ran the risk of discriminating and that "common sense should be exercised" when applying these guidelines.

## **5. Staff Skill/Knowledge Shortage**

A huge difficulty facing many libraries and archives across the United Kingdom and Ireland is staff shortages. For many years, library and archive staffing levels have remained stagnant or decreased, while the number of items to be catalogued has grown. Furthermore, as the importance of digital technology continues to expand, librarians and archivists are expected to learn new skills and gain new knowledge to improve users' access to items (Pinfield, Cox and Rutter, 2017). 17% of the respondents interviewed recognised these staff shortages in numbers, skills and knowledge as a major hindrance to the recording of working-class provenance information in Edwardian books.

Five of the 36 members of Research Libraries UK do not employ a specific rare books librarian, meaning that cataloguing is carried out by general library staff who may lack the expertise to record detailed provenance information. Furthermore, most other institutions only employ one or two rare books librarians. This means that librarians have to make difficult decisions on which collections to prioritise, which are often guided by institutional preferences rather than any class-based criteria.

Some librarians also acknowledged that they lacked the sufficient knowledge to describe provenance appropriately using expected terminology, or they might not be aware that an inscriber was somebody 'significant'. This often resulted in unintentionally excluding specific types of inscriptions or book owners.

The differences in practices between libraries also left some librarians feeling confused when moving from institutions. One librarian claimed that she had a good knowledge of the CILIP guidelines, but when she moved to an institution that used DCRM(B), she had to “start all over again.” She acknowledged that regular training on new guidelines in provenance would be useful, as well as discussions between research libraries on how they could move towards unifying processes in order to address any skill or knowledge shortages.

## **6. Lack of Money**

Another issue identified by a small percentage (5%) of respondents was the lack of money available to carry out specific cataloguing tasks. Librarians stated that there were very few cataloguing grants available for libraries. Most funding required libraries “to do something beyond cataloguing,” as one participant told me, which was not always feasible. The one exception is The National Archives who offers grants of up to £40,000 to catalogue items, but these items must demonstrate a “transformational impact on their archive services, their activities and their ongoing roles in the community.”

This lack of funding means that libraries have had to prioritise which collections to catalogue based on the potential funding for which they can apply, the interest they can attract from academics and the general public, and the income they can make from them. Many of these funded cataloguing projects also involve a commitment to digitisation in order to make these records increasingly available to long-distance users. The Glasgow Incunabula Project, for example, resulted in the creation of an electronic catalogue for the 1,000 plus incunabula in the University of Glasgow Library and other Glasgow institutions, as well as a complete revision of the existing records for the university’s incunabula. However, as one frustrated cataloguer explained, “opportunities are few and far between.”

Many of those interviewed agreed that there is an important case to be made for cataloguing grants to bring to light working-class inscriptions in collections because they can help transform the way that the public understands the history of reading. However, they recognised that they have such a backlog of stock to be catalogued that difficult decisions would have to be made in terms of prioritisation. One librarian stated that they had found a potential way to deal with backlog by encouraging volunteers and interns to enhance provenance information in records, but she recognised that this requires time and resources that many librarians just do not have.

## **7. Researcher Needs**

5% of the institutions interviewed agreed that their cataloguing was heavily driven by researchers’ needs. These institutions recognised that today’s book historians are far more interested in the unique journeys that books make between press and library, their use and ownership. Consequently, they are trying to make the inclusion of provenance information compulsory for all new acquisitions. However, they also acknowledged that there was a strong bias towards the recording of provenance in books from the Early Modern period because research on copy-specific annotations and book use is largely being driven by early

modernists. Other librarians stated that they prioritised the recording of armorial bookplates and bindings, not out of class bias but due to the fact that antiquarians and art historians have a particular interest in these artistic forms.

Librarians that have worked at the same institution for a long period of time and have a strong knowledge of its students and academics explained that they took a “reactive approach to cataloguing” based on what they knew would be of interest to researchers. Here, they would look at books on a “case by case basis” and record information if it was known to be related to locally or nationally important people, or if there was a connection to other people featured in the archive or special collections. They were aware of the potential pitfall this raised in terms of class bias, but said they were “optimistic” that they would ultimately manage the issue and it was important to keep it on libraries’ agendas.

In contrast, some librarians seemed to adopt a more proactive approach, engaging with academics who use their collections and asking them what they would like to see in the catalogue record. This helped them to fill in some copy-specific details that were omitted from the records. However, as one librarian rightly stated, “That’s only tickling round the edges” and much more serious work should be carried out on identifying researchers’ needs and responding to them with the provision of appropriate provenance information.

### **8. Database Constraints**

A very small number of respondents (2%) claimed that their inability to record working-class inscriptions efficiently was due to the limitations of the databases that they used. One librarian described their system as “clunky” because it was designed to give bibliographic data only, not copy-specific, which she agreed could be frustrating for researchers. Another librarian also explained that their software does not allow provenance information to be displayed publicly, so it is only available to staff. Therefore, even if efforts are made to record provenance information, this might not necessarily display in the end-user interface, which goes against the aim of making data freely accessible to all.

Another issue that some librarians identified is that the names of former owners are usually linked to the Library of Congress Authorities database. However, the names in this database are more likely to be identified if the owners were wealthy, middle- or upper-class. This poses a problem when encountering an inscription by a working-class person and has often resulted in librarians making the decision not to record the name.

### **9. Lack of Importance**

Surprisingly, 2% of those interviewed said that they did not consider it necessary to record provenance information. One institution openly stated, “The inscription is not of any importance to us,” while another claimed, “We tend not to pay any attention to inscriptions.” One archivist posited a possible reason for this: “I believe this is due to having a library cataloguer catalogue the collection rather than a rare book specialist who might be more likely to record that kind of detail.” However, in the other case, no reason was given for this decision.

Perhaps even more surprising is that one institution claimed that the inscription “was only worthy of mention if it relates to a person who has achieved some fame or of a certain social standing.” This view seems rather antiquated, considering the increased awareness of the need for diversity and inclusion in collections. When asked about working-class inscriptions specifically, the same respondent ruled out recording them, claiming, “I don't think you would ever be able to identify who had written them.”

Although these points of view were very much in the minority, they, nonetheless, show the continued reluctance of some librarians and archivists to record provenance information, as well as the incorrect suppositions that working-class inscriptions are either not important enough to be recorded or that it is impossible to find out anything about the inscribers.

## **Stage 2: Cataloguing of the Janet Powney Collection**

The second stage of this project involved the large-scale creation of detailed provenance records for the Janet Powney Collection – a working-class prize book collection in Cardiff University’s Special Collections and Archives. Taking place over a period of one year, this case study enabled me to challenge many of the traditional views put forward about the difficulties of cataloguing working-class books by using innovative research tools drawn from my doctoral and postdoctoral research. When approaching cataloguing, I was also guided by my past experiences as an antiquarian bookseller, records assistant and student, which made me aware of the different needs, expectations and challenges that user groups face. This enabled me to think about provenance holistically and take into account its ultimate purposes, values and functions for staff and end-users.

Janet Powney is an independent researcher based in Edinburgh, Scotland. In 2014, she donated a collection of 800 Victorian and Edwardian children’s books to Cardiff University’s Special Collections and Archives. The collection is now known as the Janet Powney Collection. Prior to my intervention in 2018, the Collection was entirely uncatalogued. The Janet Powney Collection is unique for three interlinked reasons: (1) The books were accumulated from second-hand bookshops and charity shops over a period of some 40 years; (2) 95% of the books contain book inscriptions; and (3) all the book owners are largely from the working classes or lower-middle class. These owners received the books as prizes for regular attendance or good behaviour at school or Sunday school.

The prize book movement was a direct consequence of the 1870 Education Act – the first piece of legislation to provide a national system of education in England and Wales. Books were awarded to boys and girls as a formal measure of competency. These books tended to be religious novels and were explicitly aimed at the working classes because they were seen to require protection and guidance from harmful influences (O’Hagan, 2018). All prize books contain a prize inscription or prize label with details of the recipient, the awarding institution, the reason for the prize and the date of inscription. This level of information facilitates the easy identification of working-class owners.

Prize books provide important information on the social goals of awarding institutions, particularly in terms of the transmission of appropriate moral codes to recipients. They can even shine a light on subtle differences in prize-giving practices across institutions (see O'Hagan, 2019). However, in some cases, they may also contain inscriptive evidence of working-class children's responses, both positive and negative. During my research, examples have been found of children crossing out incorrect spellings of their names and correcting them (often writing 'WRONG' or 'INCORRECT' alongside), copying information from the prize award to the back of the book yet removing any details of the awarding institution, overtly defacing or attempting to remove the prize inscription/sticker or scribbling through certain blurbs or titles in the catalogue at the back of the book (particularly common amongst girls who 'rejected' conservative depictions of them as meek and obedient). On a more general note, the fact that most prize books survive in pristine condition suggests that recipients valued them for their aesthetic appearance over their stories. This was particularly the case in poorer working-class households where children would have had few personal possessions and has been noted by educators in school and Sunday school logbooks of the period.

When recording provenance in the Janet Powney Collection, all inscriptions were categorised using specific terminology that I developed as part of my doctoral research. Prior to this research, there had been no previous attempt to compile a definitive guide on all marks of ownership in the years between 1901 and 1914. The full guide will appear in my forthcoming monograph *The Social, Communicative and Performative Functions of Book Inscriptions* (2020), but the prize inscription/sticker categories – which are relevant to this particular study – are summarised in Table 1 below.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Using standardised categories/sub-categories ensured uniformity and interoperability across the entire collection, thus improving the effectiveness of information exchange and enabling users to locate items easily based on their specific research goal or interest (Coyle, 2005, p. 373). It also demonstrated a clear hierarchy to users moving from a general to a more specific category (e.g. prize inscription – school – board school), which helps to organise information in a clearer and more efficient manner.

After each inscription was labelled, it was transcribed exactly as it appears in the book. Details were also given on the type of writing implement used or, in the case of prize stickers, the printing process and surface material. A full description was also provided of the decoration or imagery on prize stickers. The inclusion of these features is very important when exploring working-class book inscriptions because it can provide a sense of the entire industry that was forming around the commercialisation and marketing of books aimed at the working classes at this time.

The provision of this level of information already went far beyond that specified in the DCRM(B) and CILIP guidelines, as well as Pearson's (2019) *Provenance Research in Book History* handbook. However, it did not provide a sense of the social history surrounding the

book owner or the awarding institution. As has been already recognised, the typical role of a cataloguer is to provide basic information only. Nonetheless, I was aware that provenance for upper-class inscriptions contained, at the very least, details of the inscriber's occupation and birth/death dates. To not include a similar level of detail for working-class inscriptions would continue to bolster this historical bias.

With this in mind, I decided to use the historical and archival resources available on the genealogical website [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) to piece together an understanding of each working-class individual. Full-access annual membership to Ancestry costs approximately £100 a year. While public libraries and archives across Britain have subscriptions, this is not yet a service that many university libraries and special collections have considered. However, its benefits for this type of cataloguing work are considerable and offer novel opportunities to access first-hand documents related to working-class book owners. The records I consulted are summarised below:

- Birth indexes
- Censuses
- Christening records
- Death indexes
- Employment records
- Immigration records
- Marriage indexes
- Military service records
- Passenger lists
- Phone Books
- Probate calendar
- School admission records
- Trade directories
- University alumni records
- Valuation Office survey indexes

Of these records, the 1911 census was particularly useful because, unlike earlier censuses, records survive for all four countries of the United Kingdom. Moreover, it is the first census where the householder's schedule has remained the master entry rather than the enumerator's notes. It also contains detailed information on number of years married, number of children (living and dead), industry/service with which worker is connected, employment status, and infirmity. Residents in Wales and Ireland were also asked if they spoke Welsh and Gaelic, respectively.

Ancestry also has an interactive component that enables users to interact with others who are searching for the same individual. Forming connections with these users can open up access to more personal documents, such as photographs, letters and diaries, and, in some cases, even personal anecdotes. This information is essential in making cataloguing a more

humanistic process, moving it from the manual process of recording official information to a physical connection with and personal description of the book owner.

For book owners who lived in London, another essential resource was Charles Booth's Poverty Maps. Between 1889 and 1903, Charles Booth carried out a survey of poverty in London, classifying poverty into seven different colours from black (vicious and semi-criminal low class) to yellow (wealthy upper-middle and upper-classes). These maps have now been digitised and are fully searchable online. Searching them can provide an important insight into the living conditions of the book owner and enable details to be provided on their social environment. These maps can also be overlaid with current maps of the city to get a sense of how certain areas have changed over time. In addition, the Google Street View function can allow houses (if they still exist) to be physically viewed, while guidance in *The Story of Where You Live* (a practical handbook to assess the age and history of a house) can be used to assess the book owner's local area.

The British Newspaper Archive (which requires an annual subscription of £80) and the Welsh Newspaper Archive (which is free) were also consulted for any individual stories that mentioned inscribers, particularly within the context of prize-giving. Often newspaper articles are the only surviving evidence of particular clubs that no longer exist and did not leave an archive (e.g. the Telegraph Messenger's Christian Association). Therefore, they offered an essential way to explore some of the awarding institutions and how they were involved in the prize book movement.

One of the major obstacles to obtaining more information was geographical because not all information has been digitised. School and Sunday school logbooks, for example, could have provided important information on individuals and how prize-giving ceremonies were organised and books chosen. Nonetheless, for inscribers within the local Cardiff and Bristol area, relevant logbooks at Glamorgan Archives and Bristol Archives were consulted to gain a better understanding of specific individuals.

A sample record with full provenance detail can be seen below:

50p in pencil and prize sticker printed in offset chromolithography with decorative art nouveau border on front endpaper stating "High Town Primitive Methodist Sunday School Presented to Ellen Foxen for good conduct and early attendance during the year 1890 J. Harding, Mnister, J. Giltrow, Supt."

Ellen Foxen (1880-1959) was born and died in Luton, Bedfordshire. Her father was a straw hat blocker and her mother was a straw hat sewer. She had three siblings. In 1900, she married Harry Wilding Bates, a railway van man. They had three sons together. During this time, Ellen worked as a straw hat finisher. Ellen was widowed in 1910. She remarried in 1912 to Ernest William Lundy, a straw hat stiffener. She was widowed yet again in June 1915 when Ernest commit suicide after throwing himself into a lake. According to local newspaper reports, the couple had been arguing and

Ernest had been suffering from temporary insanity. Ellen remarried again in October 1915, this time to William F. Collins [1881, 1891, 1901, 1911 censuses].

High Town Primitive Methodist Church was established in Luton in 1852. By 1897, the congregation had expanded so rapidly that a new chapel was built and the old church was adjoined and became the Sunday school. The chapel cost £2,566 to build and accommodated 900 people. The High Town Methodist Church is still an active place of worship today.

Janet Powney Collection also contains two other books owned by Ellen Foxen: *In the Summer Holidays* (Jennett Humphreys) and *Maggie's Message* (Anon)

The benefits of having the entire collection recorded by one person are numerous. Not only does this ensure that terminology is standard across all entries, thus facilitating user access, but it also enables links to be picked up in the collection, whether between book owners or awarding institutions. In this way, several books within the collection that belong to the same person can be easily identified, as well as specific relationships within the collection between siblings, cousins, parents and children or fellow pupils.

While I am aware that it is unrealistic to expect libraries to record such detailed levels of provenance information, given the various time and resource constraints they are under, I wish to highlight how it is relatively easy to access information on working-class inscribers for books from the late Victorian/Edwardian period. Even a fraction of this information would offer a considerable improvement upon the current practice of providing no additional information beyond the inscribed name. Nonetheless, the promotion of volunteer and intern schemes specifically aimed at carrying out this type of research could be beneficial for both libraries and students. Students on English literature, history and conservation courses could all be trained to improve provenance records in specific collections or work on identifying working-class inscriptions using these innovative tools. The working-class focus may also open up more potential funding opportunities that will reduce the burden on staff of having to take on additional responsibilities.

### **Stage 3: Impact and Engagement Events**

In order to raise the profile of the Janet Powney Collection and provide local communities with opportunities to learn, explore and interact with it, the final stage of the project entails the organisation of a series of events. These events aim to foster a new understanding of working-class life in Edwardian Britain.

#### **'Prize Books and Politics' Exhibitions**

Between 5<sup>th</sup> March 2020 (World Book Day) and 1<sup>st</sup> May 2020 (International Workers' Day), a digital exhibition entitled 'Prize Books and Politics: Rethinking Working-Class Life in Edwardian Britain' will run on Instagram. Over a period of 58 days, an image of one inscription will be posted each day that encapsulates the life of the working classes in Edwardian Britain. Each image will be accompanied by a short written reflection exploring its main message, which

aims to encourage readers to rethink current perceptions of the working classes. A sample post can be seen in Figure 1.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Following the digital exhibition, a physical exhibition will be launched in Cardiff University's Special Collections and Archives on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2020. It will run until 1<sup>st</sup> October 2020. While we often tend to think of prize-giving as a middle-class practice that was 'imposed' on working-class children in schools and Sunday schools, this exhibition will demonstrate how members of working-class communities were able to appropriate and reinvent the practice to achieve their own goals. The Labour Church, for example, its associated Socialist Sunday School and the Clarion Club (a socialist cycling club) awarded Edwardian children and adults books on economics, citizenship and industrial history. Furthermore, to avoid competitiveness which was believed to "prey upon the roots of Socialistic effort" and strengthen "the anti-social principles of rivalry" (cited in Manton, 2013, p.104), these institutions gave prize books to everyone, not just those who had performed outstandingly.

This little known aspect of working-class history and the prize book movement will challenge traditional perspectives on the working classes as a "passive" and "mindless" group who was easily manipulated and provide further proof of the importance of recording correct provenance practice for working-class books. On the exhibition launch day, a series of workshops will be run in Cardiff University's Special Collections and Archives offering visitors the opportunity to design their own bookplates, explore the 1911 census and learn how to read historical handwriting.

### **Student Workshops**

The Janet Powney Collection has high pedagogical value and can be used to develop curricula and introduce students across a range of subjects to new learning resources. With this in mind, five specialist workshops will be piloted at Cardiff University with undergraduate and postgraduate students, with the aim of rolling out these workshops more generally should they be successful. Each workshop will be tailored to their individual study course:

1. Creative writing students: Participants will be shown a range of inscriptions from the Janet Powney Collection and encouraged to think about how they can develop a story, poem or play using the ownership mark as a starting point.
2. Book history students: Participants will be introduced to [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) and shown how its records can be used to research inscribers in the Janet Powney Collection. Each will then be given a specific book owner to track down using the website.
3. Literature students: Participants will explore how content analysis and corpus tools can be used to explore gender stereotypes in prize books in the Janet Powney Collection and track historical bias. They will investigate trends between the type of book and the gender of the recipient.

4. History students: Participants will use newspaper archives to conduct an investigation of one of the awarding institutions in the Janet Powney Collection and build up a general picture of their history and how they were involved in the prize book movement.

5. Linguistic students: Participants will carry out a multimodal analysis of a prize inscription/sticker, considering use of word, image, colour, typography and texture. They will also be shown how records on Ancestry can be used to ground analyses in primary evidence.

### **Future Plans**

Once the current project is completed, there are plans to digitise the Janet Powney Collection and offer a web-based interface through which users can search for inscriptions according to the recipient's gender, age, occupation, geographical location and religion. A digital archive would further increase awareness of the Collection and create an opportunity for academics and the general public to interact with its book inscriptions and their accompanying biographical and bibliographical information in new and innovative ways. In doing so, it would emphasise the high value that working-class book inscriptions possess.

### **Conclusion**

The need to draw attention to working-class inscriptions in library collections is of paramount importance, particularly in a world that is increasingly sensitive to equality, diversity and inclusion and in institutions that are increasingly aware of the need to counter historical biases in representation.

The interviews conducted in the initial stage of this project highlighted that, while there is not necessarily an intentional class-based approach to cataloguing today, perpetuating traditional practices can lead to unrepresentative collections that distort the history of book readership and ownership in Edwardian Britain. Furthermore, variations in guidelines and terminology, as well as ambiguity between what constitutes a 'rare' and 'modern' book, result in vast cross-institutional differences that sustain unfair cataloguing practices. Lack of time, money and staff are additional challenges that most institutions face, as well as specific database and software constraints. Another important challenge is the lack of importance that some librarians and archivists give to provenance. Targeted training must be used to change these attitudes and stress why the need to record provenance is so important, even in times of financial and time constraints. Librarians and archivists must also be prepared to interact with researchers and discover their needs in order to enhance current provenance information based on their concerns and interests.

Despite these many challenges, this project has also emphasised ways to respond to them, arguing that the advantages of correct recording of provenance strongly outweigh the disadvantages. Some of the benefits include:

- Gaining a better understanding of our cultural past and challenging current constructions of working-class life;
- Ensuring that collections are diverse and inclusive;

- Viewing books in a wider context of history and society;
- Increasing the voices of historically marginalised groups;
- Exploring and identifying changes in book ownership and readership patterns;
- Understanding the range of writing implements, printing techniques and surface materials in use at a particular time;
- Aiding collection assessment and asking new questions about its fair representation;
- Improving catalogue searches and access for end users;
- Developing new opportunities for impact and engagement;
- Assisting researchers with new avenues of exploration;
- Facilitating innovative teaching resources and the development of new curricula;
- Enhancing librarians' digital skills;
- Encouraging opportunities for student placements and skills development;
- Opening up possibilities for cross-departmental collaboration;
- Broadening access to different types of funding.

Overall, by recording detailed provenance in books, we can recover the voices of working-class individuals and give them agency as autonomous writers. In doing so, we are able to develop new narratives and fresh understandings of working-class life and culture, challenging harmful myths perpetuated by those in higher positions of power. Bringing personal experiences to the forefront enables a re-evaluation of how Edwardians navigated the emerging institutions of the modern state and how their behaviours helped shape these institutions. These inscriptions have the power to demonstrate that the working classes were not easily brainwashed and, in fact, were able to use literacy to take control of their own lives and improve their own circumstances. In short, they encourage us to look at the working classes in a new light. Without this knowledge of the past, it can be very difficult to challenge the class divisions that still exist in British society. Class is not an unchangeable part of the social order; it arises from conflicts between different groups who are defined primarily by their economic status. Understanding this complex history through the book inscription may give us clues to alternative ways in which the world might be organised to give a voice to the voiceless.

### **References**

Altick, R. 1957. *The English Common Reader*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Caswell, M. 2017. Identifying and Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives, *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 87:3, pp. 222-235.

Coyle, K. 2005. Libraries and Standards, *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 31:4, pp. 373-376.

de Klerk, T. 2018. Ethics in Archives: Diversity, Inclusion, and the Archival Record. Available at <https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/news/special-collections/ethics-in-archives%3A-diversity--inclusion--and-the-archival-record> (Accessed: 17<sup>th</sup> December 2019).

Flinn, Andrew, Stevens, Mary and Shepherd, Elizabeth. 2009. Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream, *Archival Science*, 9:1-2, 71–86.

Hall, N. and Gillen, J. 2010. 'Edwardian Postcards: Illuminating Ordinary Writing' in Barton, D. and Papen, U. (eds.) *The Anthropology of Writing*, London: Continuum, pp. 169-189.

Jimerson, R. 2007. Archives for All: Professional Responsibility and Social Justice, *American Archivist*, 70, pp. 252-281.

Jones, K. 2018. The Pedagogical Value of Provenance Research in Rare Books and Cultural Heritage Collections, *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, 37, pp. 82-89.

Lyons, M. (ed.), 2007. *Ordinary Writings, Personal Narratives: Writing Practices in 19th and Early 20th-Century Europe*, Bern: Peter Lang.

Lyons, M. 2013. *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1860-1920*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Manton, K. 2013. *Socialism and Education in Britain 1883-1902*, London: Woburn Press.

O'Hagan, L. 2018. Principles, Privilege and Powerlessness in the Edwardian Prize Book: Bridging the Gap between Two Opposing Worlds, *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, 60:3, pp. 506-529.

O' Hagan, L. 2019. The advertising and marketing of the Edwardian prize book: Gender for sale. *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920* 62:1, pp. 72-94.

O'Hagan, L. 2020. *The Social, Communicative and Performative Functions of Book Inscriptions: Taking a Multimodal Ethnohistorical Approach*, London: Routledge.

Pearson, D. 2019. *Provenance Research in Book History: A Handbook*, New Castle, DE and Oxford, England: Oak Knoll Press and The Bodleian Library.

Pinfield, S., Cox, A. and Rutter, S. 2017. *Mapping the Future of Academic Libraries: A Report for SCONUL*, London: SCONUL.

Seale, M. 2013. *The Neoliberal Library", Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Practice*, Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press.

Sinor, J. 2002. *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray's Diary*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> The 36 institutions are: Sir Duncan Rice Library, University of Aberdeen; University of Birmingham Library Services; University of Bristol Library; British Library; Cambridge University Library; Cardiff University; Durham University Library; University of Edinburgh Information Services; University of Exeter Library; University of Glasgow Library; Imperial College London Library; King's College London Library Services; University of Leeds Library; University of Leicester Library; University of Liverpool Library; University of London Senate House

---

Libraries; London School of Economics Library; University of Manchester Library; National Library of Scotland; National Library of Wales; Newcastle University Library; University of Nottingham Information Services; University of Oxford Libraries; Queen Mary, University of London; Queen's University Belfast Information Services; University of Reading Library; Royal Holloway, University of London Library; SOAS University of London Library; University of Sheffield Library; University of Southampton Library; University of St Andrews Library; Trinity College Dublin Library; University College London Library Services; University of Warwick Library; Wellcome Library; University of York Library and Archives.