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To cite this article: John Hodgson & Ann Harris (2022): The Genealogy of 'Cultural Literacy', Changing English, DOI: [10.1080/1358684X.2022.2081530](https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2022.2081530)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2022.2081530>



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Published online: 01 Jun 2022.



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The Genealogy of 'Cultural Literacy'

John Hodgson ^a and Ann Harris^b

^aFaculty of Arts, Creative Industries and Education, University of the West of England, Bristol UK;

^bDepartment of Education and Community Studies, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

ABSTRACT

The British government's current educational policy for England draws on E.D. Hirsch's writings on 'cultural literacy'. This paper aims to uncover the roots of Hirsch's influential views through a genealogical critique. Hirsch admired the Scottish Enlightenment educator Hugh Blair as a model architect of a hegemonic culture to unite disparate members of a nation. Following Hirsch, the government Department for Education in England called for 'shared appreciation of cultural reference points' and 'a common stock of knowledge on which all can draw and trade'. Consequently, the literature curriculum in England increasingly disenfranchises a significant component of the population in terms of both gender and cultural heritage. Recent 'culture wars' have highlighted the legacy of colonialism and have led educators to decolonise the curriculum and prioritise social justice. Continuing racism within civil society demonstrates the need for a general recognition that cultures are desirably diverse and internally plural.

KEYWORDS

Cultural literacy; genealogy; national culture; Hugh Blair; multiculturalism; knowledge curriculum; multilingualism

What did you learn in school today,

Dear little boy of mine?

What did you learn in school today,

Dear little boy of mine?

I learned that Washington never told a lie

I learned that soldiers seldom die

I learned that everybody's free

And that's what the teacher said to me

And that's what I learned in school today

That's what I learned in school.

Tom Paxton, 1964

Introduction: The 'Knowledge Curriculum'

Education policy of the last decade has seen a shift in England towards what is termed 'knowledge-led' or 'knowledge-rich' school curricula. This shift is apparent in the current iteration of the National Curriculum for England and the mission statements of

CONTACT John Hodgson  john.hodgson@uwe.ac.uk

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a growing number of schools and academy trusts across the country (Hand 2021). The term ‘knowledge’ may be accompanied by an invocation of Bourdieu’s (1986) term ‘cultural capital’: Ofsted’s 2019 Education Inspection Framework states that inspectors will judge schools on the extent to which their curricula are ‘designed to give all learners the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life’ (Ofsted 2019, 8). Eaglestone (2021) and other commentators (e.g. Janz 2019) trace the origins of these ideas to the US academic E.D.Hirsch’s (1987) concept of ‘cultural literacy’ as well as to Michael D. Young’s (2013) notion of ‘powerful knowledge’. Nick Gibb, then UK Schools Minister, made clear the direct influence of Hirsch’s ideas in his startlingly titled ‘How E. D. Hirsch came to shape UK government policy’ (Gibb 2015). What is not so well known is the genealogy of Hirsch’s view of ‘cultural literacy’, which we attempt to trace in this article. A genealogical approach to the roots of contemporary discourse has the power to reveal the resonant patterning of the past in contemporary ideas. It ‘makes history a journey, accomplished in successive stages, across the simultaneous patterning of representation and words’ (Foucault 2001, 120). The journey we have taken connects Hirsch’s ideas to those of the eighteenth-century belles-lettrist Hugh Blair, whose profound influence on language and literature studies in the UK and its former colonies continued into the twentieth century. Writing in the late twentieth century to assert the need for a national culture in the US, Hirsch drew on Blair’s work two centuries earlier to achieve a cultural hegemony over English education in Scotland. This article will consider the historical context of both Blair’s and Hirsch’s work and assess the significance and relevance of Hirsch’s ideas in the current context.

Cultural Literacy and UK Education

In 2015, Policy Exchange, which describes itself as ‘the UK’s leading think tank’, published *Knowledge and the Curriculum: A collection of essays to accompany E. D. Hirsch’s lecture at Policy Exchange*. According to the front matter of this pamphlet, Policy Exchange is an educational charity that develops and promotes new policy ideas to deliver ‘better public services, a stronger society and a more dynamic economy’. They claim that their research is ‘independent’, ‘evidence-based’ and ‘strictly empirical’; they claim to be ‘completely independent and make workable policy recommendations’. Given these prolegomena, it is surprising to find that *Knowledge and the Curriculum* contains a number of essays that are both polemical and highly personal in approach, such as that by Katharine Birbalsingh, which begins:

When my 3-year-old boy looks out of the tube window at St. John’s Wood, he will often say, “Saint John’s Wood, S – T for saint, not street.” And I will respond, “Yes, that’s right. And what do we call shortened words like this? Ah . . . bree . . .”, and he will continue, “vee . . . a . . . tion.” “That’s right,” I say. “Abbreviation, repeat after me, abbreviation.” “Abbreviation, mummy, yes, abbreviation.” Eventually the time will come when he will look out of the window and say, “S – T, abbreviation for saint.” The public will look on at him in wonder, as they often do now, thinking, my goodness, how is that little boy so clever? And I will want to explain to them that he only knows these things because I told him. (Birbalsingh 2015)

This personal and evangelical tone (and even the place-dropping) similarly mark Nick Gibb's introductory contribution to this Policy Exchange publication, 'How E.D. Hirsch came to shape UK government policy' (Gibb 2015). This begins:

No single writer has influenced my thinking on education more than E. D. Hirsch. Like any book which becomes seminal in one's intellectual journey, I distinctly remember the first time I encountered Hirsch's work. I was appointed shadow Minister for Schools in 2005. My researcher at the time, Edward Hardman, recommended that I read Hirsch's *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (Hirsch 1996), so I took it with me on my summer holiday to Savannah, Georgia. I began reading it on the beach and could not put it down. Back in my hotel room, I emailed Hirsch to explain my enthusiasm for his ideas. Ever since, Hirsch's books – filled with post-it notes providing access to my favourite passages – have come with me from opposition and into government.

A further stage in Gibb's putative intellectual journey occurred when Michael Gove, UK Secretary of State for Education from 2010–2014, explained his vision for reform in 'eminently Hirschian terms' (Gibb 2015, 13):

A society in which there is a widespread understanding of the nation's past, a shared appreciation of cultural reference points, a common stock of knowledge on which all can draw, and trade, is a society in which we all understand each other better, one in which the ties that bind are stronger, and more resilient at times of strain. (Gove 2009)

'Knowledge' is thus enlisted in a nation-building project to promote social harmony. Gove echoes Henry Newbolt's (1928) call for a national culture in his 1928 address *The Idea of an English Association*. However, Newbolt, who was speaking just two years after the conclusion of the UK National Strike, was explicitly conscious of social inequality: 'I ask you to hope with me for a national fellowship in which it shall be possible for everyone to forget the existence of classes' (Newbolt 1928, 9). Neither Gove nor Gibb demonstrates any awareness that 'cultural reference points' may not be held in common, and will be relative to region, class, gender, ethnicity, education, and other factors. Nearly a century after Newbolt, the question remains: if this national fellowship and culture is deemed desirable, how might it be achieved? Who will determine the common stock of knowledge on which we can all 'draw and trade'? How can a multicultural society, some of whose ancestors were inhabitants of former colonies, attain a widespread understanding of the nation's past? How can citizens agree 'cultural reference points' that can be readily shared across class, gender and race identities? To approach these extremely knotty problems, one would imagine that considerable 'independent, empirical research' would be required by Policy Exchange and, indeed, other agencies to frame 'workable policy recommendations'. However, educational policy in England is currently framed not by any such research programme, but by the shared conviction of a few ministers. 'Reading *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*', writes Gibb (2015, 13), 'I had the strange sensation that Hirsch had taken my own inchoate and disparate thoughts on education, and turned them into an articulate and intellectually robust case for action.'

The Influence of Hugh Blair

How did Hirsch come to construct this allegedly ‘articulate and intellectually robust’ argument that would shape government educational policy in England and Wales during the first decades of the 21st century? In *Cultural Literacy*, Hirsch expresses his admiration for Hugh Blair, whom he heralds as ‘perhaps the first definer of cultural literacy for the English national language’ (Hirsch 1987, 85). Blair was appointed in 1762 the first Regius Professor of Rhetoric and Belles-lettres at the University of Edinburgh. Like Adam Smith before him, Blair gained the Edinburgh lectureship through the patronage of Lord Kames, a lawyer (later a judge) who powerfully promoted the study of English in Scotland. Blair was engaged in the mid-eighteenth century with a project that prefigured Hirsch’s twentieth-century desire to construct a national language and a national culture.

There are obvious historical differences between the contexts within which Blair and Hirsch were writing. However, their relation to the culture they were concerned to promulgate was curiously similar. Hirsch, an American, was writing as a member of a formerly colonised country; Blair, a Scotsman, was writing after the contentious 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland, the survival of which was for some years in grave doubt (Devine 1999). The 45 Scottish MPs and 16 peers sent to Westminster found themselves (in the words of Sir John Clerk of Penicuik):

obscure and unhonoured in the crowd of English society, where they were despised for their poverty, ridiculed for their speech, sneered at for their manners, and ignored in spite of their votes by the ministers and government (Graham 1901, 82)

In the circumstances, Kames was convinced of the necessity for formal training in English, particularly in the professions, and the desirability of promoting ethnic English culture among the Scottish middle class. His motives were distinctly political: ‘taste’, as Kames understood it, meant cultivated English taste (Court 1992, 18). In 1748, Kames suggested to Smith that he construct a teaching programme at Edinburgh that included required reading of authors and literary selections taken predominantly from English literature (Court 1992, 18–19). When Adam Smith moved in 1751 to Glasgow University, Kames extended his patronage to Blair, who began in December 1759 to deliver public lectures three times a week at the University of Edinburgh. Initially appointed Professor of Rhetoric, in 1762 Blair became Regius Professor of Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres (Meikle 1945, 92).

Blair’s lectures at Edinburgh from 1760 to 1783 differed significantly from those given contemporaneously at Glasgow by Adam Smith. These two men’s differing views of the nature of language and literature study foreshadow contested concepts of English studies in the mid-twentieth century between Cambridge English (as influenced by Leavis and *Scrutiny*) and the remaining proponents of the belles-lettres tradition. Like Leavis, Smith regarded literary texts as engagements with life. Smith lectured his students on established writers and literary characters as examples of ethical behaviour, always connecting the writer’s style to the quality of their work.¹ He discarded the traditional teaching of rhetoric and focused on language in use, examining ‘the several ways of communicating our thoughts by speech’ and ‘the principles of those literary compositions which contribute to persuasion or entertainment’ (Stewart 1811, 16). Blair, however, emphasised ‘acquiring correctness and precision in the use of language’ (I.6–13) and adhered to the

traditional belles-lettres view of literature as a collection of masterworks whose beauties should be studied as a mark of educated taste. He was an early romantic proponent of the school of appreciation, in which interpretations and values exist largely for their own sake (Graff 1991). He preached the belle-lettrist gospel of taste and refinement that fed the increasing appetite among the upwardly mobile middle classes for ‘polite’ literature – that is, the kinds of book (history, travels, essays, poetry and other belles-lettres) owned by the well-to-do gentry (Kelly 2013, 3–4).

According to Belsey (1980, 2–5), Blair’s approach to teaching literature was an example of the school of criticism that evades any self-examination of its beliefs in favour of reinforcing unquestioned assumptions about traditional standards and intrinsic literary merit. It is clear from his *Lectures* that Blair saw himself as the embodiment of refinement owing to his assumed cultural and racial superiority:

If there be no such thing as any standards of taste, this consequence was immediately follow, that all tastes are equally good; a position [that] when we apply it to the extremes, its absurdity presently becomes glaring. For is there any one who will seriously maintain that the taste of a Hottentot or a Laplander is as delicate and correct as that of a Longinus or an Addison? (Blair 1965, I.27)

In contrast to Smith, Blair’s implicit message to his students was that the social hierarchy preferred a literary culture that ranked sensibility above practicality, cultivation above conduct (Court 1992, 35). Having successfully set himself up as a literary and cultural authority for the aspirational middle classes of Scotland, North America and eventually England itself, Blair had to do little beyond assert his judgements of taste and cultural value. He claimed, for example, that the neglect of Milton during the seventeenth century was the result of uneducated, disordered taste. Shakespeare was an ‘incorrect genius’ who resorted to bombast. To appreciate Addison, he argued, it was necessary to acquire correct ‘taste’: the reader would then see that one sentence was more ‘happy’ or ‘elegant’ than another (Blair 1965, I.413). Such was his confidence that, occasionally, he even acknowledged how personal his judgements were: ‘I shall follow the same method here that I have all along pursued . . . that is, I shall freely deliver my opinion on every subject; regarding authority no father, then as it appears to me founded on good sense and reason’ (II.246–47).

Blair was infinitely more successful than Smith in attracting popular acclaim and influencing the development of English studies over the succeeding century. Smith’s work and ideas were lost until two students’ notebooks were discovered over 200 years later which recorded in extraordinary detail Smith’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-lettres* in 1762–63 at Glasgow University (Smith 1763/1983). Blair’s *Lectures*, however, became among the most influential textbooks ever issued in Great Britain or the United States (Hirsch 1987, 84–85). Blair published them in 1783, shortly after retiring from the Edinburgh professorship; between 1783 and 1911 his *Lectures* went through 130 editions and were in such high demand that for years enterprising students sold manuscript copies of their class-notes, many of which are now held by the Scottish National Library (Court 1992, 32). As an early index of ‘literate culture’, writes Hirsch, Blair’s lectures became a core text for the teaching of English in universities throughout the nineteenth century (Hirsch 1987, 84–88). According to Hirsch, each sentence of Blair’s two volumes of more than a thousand

pages ‘conveyed commonly shared information that aspiring readers, writers and speakers would do well to remember’. Hirsch gives as an example Blair’s index entry on Achilles:

Achilles is passionate indeed to a great degree, but he is far from being a contemner of laws and justice . . . Besides his wonderful bravery and contempt of death, he has several other qualities of a Hero. He loves his subjects and respects the gods. This distinguished by strong friendships and attachments. (Hirsch 1987, 86-87)

According to Johnson (1988), the Blair tradition continued to hold sway in Canada even when the American rhetorical tradition began to move away in the mid 19th century from the aesthetic idealism of the English tradition towards a more pragmatic view of rhetoric. As late as 1890, academic rhetoric in ‘British North America’ placed a pedagogical emphasis on learning to speak and write the mother tongue with ‘elegance’ and cultivated a regard for the classics of British literature as exemplary models of rhetorical and cultural achievement (Johnson 1988, 862).

Nation Building

Chapter 3 of Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy* elaborates the author’s view of the importance of building national unity through a shared national culture. For nation builders, declares Hirsch, ‘fixing the vocabulary of a national culture is analogous to fixing the standard grammar, spelling, and pronunciation’. National systems of education, he claims, ‘use textbooks and readers that carry the national culture to outlying provinces’. As a historical illustration of this process, Hirsch cites Blair’s (1783) *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres*. Hirsch (1987) points out that Blair’s lectures, though written and delivered in Scotland, contained not one mention of a Scottish poet. Rather, Blair ‘gathered and codified for the Scots materials that literate Englishmen had absorbed through their pores’:

Blair created, in effect, a dictionary of cultural literacy for those who had not been born to English literate culture, for use by provincials like the Scots and colonials like the Americans. His book would later be used to educate native-born Englishmen as well. (Hirsch 1987, 85)

Blair, then, represents to Hirsch what he aspires to be: the architect of a shared culture that will provide common reference points for disparate members of a nation. Just as Blair had no compunction in omitting Scottish culture from his *Lectures*, Hirsch has no intention of including national or indigenous cultures other than English in the American ‘national vocabulary’. ‘The English tradition’, he declares, ‘is broad and heterogeneous and grows ever more so [. . .] We need to keep English culture as part of our national vocabulary for purely functional reasons’ (Hirsch 1987, 106–7). The parallel ironies of Blair’s and Hirsch’s position in relation to their ‘native’ cultures are patent.

Hirsch’s wider argument for a ‘national vocabulary’ is explicitly based on Ernest Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), in which Gellner argues that nationalism is a key functional element of modernity (Minogue 2001). Nationalism, according to Gellner, involves ‘the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases the totality, of the population. It means the general diffusion of a school-mediated, academy supervised

idiom, codified for the requirements of a reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication'. Gellner's account implies some ambivalence towards this 'anonymous impersonal society, with mutually sustainable atomised individuals' that replaces 'the previous complex structure of local groups, sustained by folk cultures reproduced locally and idiosyncratically' (Gellner 1983). Hirsch, however, adopts Gellner's view in an entirely positive spirit, declaring that 'every national language is a conscious construct that transcends any particular dialect, region, or social class'. This is a dubious view of British and US Standard English, which are both heavily inflected by the dialects associated with powerful regional and social groups. Hirsch then claims that national culture, like language, 'transcends dialect, region, and social class and is partly a conscious construct' (Hirsch 1987, 82–83). That 'partly' suggests that Hirsch himself doesn't believe that national cultures are entirely constructed from above; however, citing Gellner (1983), Hirsch claims that 'nation builders' use 'a patchwork of scholarly folk materials, old songs, obscure dances, and historical legends, all apparently quaint and local, but in reality selected and reinterpreted by intellectuals to create a culture upon which the life of the nation can rest' (Hirsch 1987, 83). Because language making has been studied more than culture making, declares Hirsch, this historical process of creating a national culture is perhaps less well understood; but he asserts that the need for a culture in building a nation is really just another dimension of the need for a language:

The American legend about Lincoln in his log cabin can be conceived either as part of our culture or, with equal justification, as part of our shared language. Americans need to learn not just the grammar of their language but also their national vocabulary. They need to learn not just the associations of such words as *to run* but also the associations of such terms as Teddy Roosevelt, DNA, and Hamlet. (Hirsch 1987, 83–84)

Hirsch claims that the publications of 'intellectuals' – American culture makers of the nineteenth century – created 'a culture open which the life of the nation can rest' (Hirsch 1987, 83). This includes the work of Mason Weems, who published an edition of Benjamin Franklin's autobiography expanded by anecdotes, and a biography of George Washington that contains the original legend of the cherry tree. 'There could hardly be a more attractive tale', exclaims Hirsch. 'In the most charming possible way [it] persuades young people to tell the truth'. Hirsch cites Abraham Lincoln's alleged literary self-education: Weems' *Life of Washington*, the *Bible*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Franklin's *Autobiography* and Pain's *Age of Reason*. This typical frontier education, states Hirsch, itself became part of American national mythology after Lincoln's assassination:

In the Lincoln story, as narrated inside and outside the school, Americans continued an ideal of a peculiarly American education, in which the reading a few central books could yield virtue, patriotism and prudence. (Hirsch 1987, 89–90)

Hirsch's national culture is thus a blend of the élite literature of the founding nation and the frontier mythology of the new country. Hirsch insists, however, that these 'traditional materials of national culture', constructed as they are, will be learned by all citizens only if the materials are taught in a nation's schools. The first step to universal literacy at a mature level, he insists, is that all citizens must become literate in their own national language and culture – to teach which, schools must have access to

‘dictionaries like Samuel Johnson’s and indexes to cultural literacy like [Hugh] Blair’s’ (Hirsch 1987, 91). It is striking that both of Hirsch’s suggested guides to American national culture derive from the British Isles. He asserts that a national language and culture should be ‘permanently fixed in grammars, schoolbooks, and dictionaries, and used in millions of books, magazines and newspapers’ (Hirsch 1987, 93). There can be no question, for example, that Hamlet is an important play by England’s greatest playwright, and that the meaning of the play should be ‘universally compelling and generally shareable’ (Hirsch 1967, 25).

Agreed Meaning

In arguing for teaching predetermined interpretations of cultural artefacts, Hirsch draws on the belles-lettres assumptions about taste that informed Blair’s *Lectures*. Blair generally supported his judgements by reference to the ‘common sense’ of an ‘unprejudiced public’ that had pronounced its verdict on the truly ‘great’ writers throughout history. The reputation of great writers was, he claimed, established upon the almost universal taste of mankind, proved and tried through the succession of so many ages (II.249–50). Any truly ‘great’ work stood ‘upon solid ground, because it has stood so long’. Works became classics and school texts through the admiration ‘paid to them by the best judges of the country and nation’ (II.251).

Blair’s class-based view of literary tradition had an immeasurable impact on the historical perpetuation of ‘taste’ and ‘refinement’ as the main elements of a literary education. In Blair’s world of formalised taste, belonging to a community of educated readers who represented a ‘liberal and elegant turn of mind’ guaranteed deliverance from corrupting economic and social practicalities (Court 1992, 37–38). However, for Hirsch, writing two centuries later, the epistemology of literary education had changed; he had to do more than assert an educational philosophy based upon the cultivation of universal taste. Hirsch was convinced early in his career by the importance of establishing an agreed meaning of great literary works. In his early work *Validity in Interpretation*, he decided that a ‘universally compelling and generally shareable’ (Hirsch 1967, 25) approach to literary interpretation was to determine the author’s intention. ‘If the meaning of the text is not the author’s’, he argued (1967, 5), ‘then no interpretation can correspond to *the* meaning of the text’.

Eaglestone (2021, 18) argues that Hirsch’s attempt to formulate common, agreed literary knowledge betrays ‘a form of scientism, the extension of scientific ideas to things outside their realm’. Eaglestone traces the steps of this process. Having chosen the author’s intention as the subject of knowledge, Hirsch (1967, 8) distinguishes between the meaning of a literary work – ‘what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence’ – and its significance, ‘the relationship between that meaning and a person, a conception, or a situation’. ‘Significance’ here appears to refer to textual connotations entertained by readers; ‘meaning’ is prior, as it is the author’s intention, and it can be validated by a court of literary critics presided over by a critic-judge. This is clearly an updated version – adapted for a time when literary judgement has become professionalised – of Blair’s suggestion that literary works become classics through the settled opinions of the best judges of the country or nation (Blair 1965, II.251).

Hirsch's argument here, weak and unconvincing as it is, runs against a movement of reader-response literary theory and criticism whose early proponents included I.A. Richards (1929), Louise Rosenblatt (1938) and D.W. Harding (1962). Wimsatt and Beardsley's *The Intentional Fallacy* (1946), quoted by Eaglestone (2021, 19) laid out a critical principle: 'the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a stand for judging the success of the work of literary art'. Structural criticism (Culler 1975; Fish 1980) recognised the immanent structure of the reader's responses, while phenomenology (Iser 1978) demonstrated that the reader's experience and description of the text itself contains an inevitable element of interpretation (Glover 2018). Hirsch will have been aware of these arguments, and his opposition to them cannot be attributed only to a scientific fallacy. Like that of his predecessor Blair, Hirsch's theory is in many respects bluntly authoritarian (Cain 1977, 341). Eaglestone (2021, 21–22) comments that Hirsch's court resembles the Soviet Writers' Congress in the 1930s which ruled which works were revolutionary, and thus good, or bourgeois, counter-revolutionary, and thus bad.

The authoritarianism of Hirsch's argument appears most emphatically in the final paragraphs of Chapter 3 of *Cultural Literacy*. The benefits of national literate culture will be lost, he writes, if we take our cultural traditions and national language too much for granted. Hirsch warns his readers against what he considers to be 'a complacent acceptance of multilingualism and multiculturalism'. It is contrary to the purpose of a national language, he claims, that a modern nation should deliberately allow more than one language to flourish within its borders. While toleration of diversity is notionally at the root of US society, encouragement of multilingualism is, Hirsch asserts, 'contrary to our traditions and extremely unrealistic' (Hirsch 1987, 93). Hirsch's use of 'our' here clearly excludes the traditions of the 7.4 million foreign-born speakers of Spanish and the more than 4 million foreign-born speakers of Indic, Asian and Pacific Island languages registered in the 1990 US census (Stevens 1999, 392).

The first step to universal literacy at a mature level, Hirsch insists, is 'for all of us to become literate in our own national language and culture' (1987, 93) – an ironically ambiguous formulation (who are 'we?') which must be interpreted according to Hirsch's criterion of authorial intention. His intended meaning is clear: to teach this putative national language and culture, schools must have access to dictionaries like Johnson's and indexes to cultural literacy like Blair's (1987, 91). Hirsch's inevitable (perhaps unconscious) meaning is the superiority of White culture. His proposed national culture is a retrenchment in the face of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Blair's élan, on the other hand, rode the wave of Empire-building and assured racial and gender superiority: great writers, he asserted, are established upon 'the almost universal taste of mankind' (Blair 1965, II.249–50).

The Reception of Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*

Academic reviews of *Cultural Literacy* appeared quickly because of the wide, largely favourable, publicity accorded to the book. In his appropriately titled review *What Does every American need to know?*, Donald Gray (1988) challenged Hirsch's 'fanciful' history of British and American education in the 19th century when students allegedly learned in school, mostly from textbooks, most of the information necessary to induct them into the

literate national culture. Most students, Gray remarks, did not advance far enough in school to encounter Hugh Blair's course in *Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres* or the books listed late in the 19th century by the National Education Association's Committee of Ten. Gray recalls neighbourhoods in 1930s Chicago when the language of the street and the store front was as often Yiddish or Polish as English (and is now as likely to be Spanish or Korean). A national language is much more capacious, Gray remarks, than the kind of national culture that Hirsch describes. *Cultural Literacy*, he concludes, is a book about authority.

Gray locates evidence of Hirsch's assumption of authority in 'The List': 63 pages of dates, names, titles, terms, phrases and proverbs that every American allegedly needs to know. Hirsch doesn't describe the criteria and resources he and his two collaborators used to make the list, nor does he identify the 'more than 100 consultants' who 'reported agreement on over 90% of the items listed' (1987, 146). Lynn Bloom of Virginia Commonwealth University (neighbour to Hirsch's University of Virginia) pointed out that not only the names but also the gender and occupation of these consultants were unspecified (Bloom 1988, 2). However, the List implies a great deal about the values and perspectives of the list-makers. References to men (almost all White, she points out, unless objects such as Big Ben are included) average 76%, compared to 24% (mostly White) women, including the poisoner Lucretia Borgia and Botticelli's painting of the Birth of Venus (Bloom 1988, 3). Taking Hirsch's list of works as representative of traditional literary canons, Bloom argues that these works which every literate American 'needs to know' de-emphasise the cultural significance of women and minorities. This canon, she notes, formed the basis of graduate education, nationwide, for most of the last century. She cites the doctoral reading list for preliminary examinations in English at the University of Michigan (circa 1958), which contained 245 men and 10 women, with not a single work by Black or ethnic minority writers (Bloom 1988, 10–11). Published criticism before the early 1970s, Bloom argues, reveals established parameters for appropriate readings of canonical texts. She quotes Judith Fetterley (1978) on *A Farewell to Arms*: 'If we weep at the end of the book . . . all our tears are ultimately for men, because in the world of *A Farewell to Arms* male life is what counts' (Bloom 1988, 12) Calling for the literary canon to be expanded – 'I would prefer exploded' – to include works of high-quality literature by women and minority writers (Bloom 1988, 13), she concludes: 'That literature by women and men speaks to both women and men, though at times in different moods with different messages, is truly what every American needs to know in order to be assured of cultural literacy' (Bloom 1988, 15).

Cultural Change and Multilingualism

Bloom points out that Hirsch's argument for a 'unified cultural literacy' – which he calls 'monoliteracy' (Hirsch 1987, 92) – is analogous to his argument for monolingualism. Hirsch asserts that a unified cultural literacy would provide 'significantly greater social and economic equity' (143). On the other hand, multilingualism would be 'extremely dangerous' for civil society. It 'enormously increases cultural fragmentation, civil antagonism, illiteracy, and economic technological ineffectualness'. It is, Hirsch asserts, 'contrary to our traditions and extremely unrealistic' (92–93). As Bloom points out, however, this model of cultural literacy erases the cultural significance and heritage of a very large component of the American population past, and passing, and to come.

Despite these trenchant early criticisms, *Cultural Literacy* became (according to the publisher) a best-selling and influential text, most evidently with respect to this article in its explicit shaping of government policy in England (Gibb 2015). In 2014, U.K. Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove's displeasure at the wide popularity in English schools of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* led examination boards in England to remove these texts from the GCSE syllabus (Kennedy 2014). Lee's novel, published in 1960 and popular over five decades in secondary English classrooms, directly addresses racial discrimination.

Seven years later, in 2021, the UK media reported the statement by Azeem Rafiq, a player for Yorkshire Cricket Club, that he had suffered constant abuse, including the use of racist language about his Pakistani heritage, during his time at the club. The revelation of continued racism in English cricket prompted Bhikhu Parekh, the former Chair of the Commission for the Future of Multiethnic Britain, to declare that the rejection of multiculturalism by successive UK governments had fuelled the behaviour and language experienced by Rafiq (Parekh 2000). This enduring racist violence imbues with a deep irony the 2009 call by Michael Gove (mentioned above, p. 3) for a 'shared appreciation of cultural reference points, a common stock of knowledge on which all can draw, and trade [...] a society in which we all understand each other better' (Gove 2009). Given the unifying power that Hirsch ascribes to monocultural education, Nick Gibb's confident chapter 'How E.D. Hirsch came to shape UK government policy' (Gibb 2015) appears equally presumptuous.

However, as Victoria Elliott concludes in her recent study *Knowledge in English*, 'the national discourse and therefore the necessary background knowledge for cultural literacy . . . are both changing' (Elliott 2021, 111). The Black Lives Matter movement in the US and the UK has raised awareness of the long-standing wrongs derived from slavery, the history of which been movingly illustrated by the *New York Times* 1619 Project (2021). In the manifestation of the 'culture wars' that followed the death of George Floyd in US police custody on 25 May 2020, numerous statues in the UK and US celebrating slave-traders and Confederate army officers were toppled or damaged by protestors or removed by civil authorities.

The Hirsch-influenced reforms of the GCSE English curriculum introduced in the last decade do not speak to our times. The narrowed English Literature curriculum is so unattractive to students that recruitment to A level English courses has declined by over 35% between 2012 and 2019 (NATE 2021). During the same period, educators have researched ways of decolonising the curriculum. The 'Why is my curriculum white?' campaign has informed curriculum development in UK universities (UCL 2014). The NATE Diversity Conference (2021) discussed both Black British writing and ways of approaching the nineteenth-century novels approved by ministers through a cultural lens, investigating their relation to colonialism (Snapper 2021). This journal changed its name to *Decolonising English* for one edition in 2021. A survey of English educators worldwide revealed that social justice and race were respondents' two highest priorities for research in English education (Elliott and Hodgson 2021).

The history and experience of the multicultural citizens of modern societies can no longer be occluded or erased. Tom Paxton's satirical song (quoted at the head of this article) reminds us that consensus views of national identity and history were fracturing in the 1960s. During that decade, people of colour in the US gained legal equality with

others and increasing numbers of Black and Asian immigrants from the former Empire began to settle in the UK. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Ought to Know* (1987) sought to restore a White narrative of American history, and Gove (2009) and Gibbs' (2015) adaptation of Hirsch's ideas to the curriculum in England and Wales similarly foregrounded a White British perspective on history and literature. But the naive and authoritarian views of E.D.Hirsch are entirely irrelevant to the culture (and cultural literacy) of a modern society, which is inherently multicultural and multilingual. It cannot be constructed by unseen 'intellectuals' or politicians with a nationalist agenda. What *did* you learn in school today?

Note

1. For a fuller account of Smith's approach to English literature, see Hodgson and Harris (2021).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

John Hodgson has taught English, cultural and media studies in secondary and higher education in the UK and abroad. Following 12 years as Head of English in a large rural comprehensive school, John wrote his doctorate on adolescent literacy at the University of the West of England. He has published widely on English education, including several articles with Ann Harris, and is General Editor of *English in Education*.

Ann Harris is Professor of Education at the University of Huddersfield. She has worked in schools and colleges in the UK and overseas and was Head of English in a sixth form college for 7 years. Ann has co-authored articles on English education with John Hodgson and has also published on education and popular culture and on cultural identity and professionalism. She is Associate Editor of *English in Education*.

ORCID

John Hodgson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4647-3834>

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