

Richard Hoggart

Richard Hoggart – who has died at the age of 95 following a long illness – was the founder of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, the institutional origin of what has become the global field of cultural studies. Hoggart envisaged that the Centre would be a place where literary-critical analysis of the kind he was originally trained in would be applied to various forms of ‘mass’ culture: comic books, girls’ magazines and Hollywood cinema.

Hoggart was from a working-class family in Leeds and began his academic career as an adult education tutor and an expert on the work of W.H. Auden. But the book that would come to define him was *The Uses of Literacy*. Published in 1957 it was part a work of autobiography, part a work of literary criticism – a survey of the impact that new forms of mass culture were having on traditional working-class values and attitudes in the post-war period. The book marked a radical departure from the Matthew Arnold definition of cultural criticism, with its focus on ‘the best that has been thought and said’. By contrast *The Uses of Literacy* put the ‘living cultures’ of the working class – people’s languages, customs and everyday practices – firmly on the academic table.

Reviewers found the book famously difficult to categorise. It was in effect a work of cultural studies before cultural studies was ever formally articulated as a field of scholarly inquiry. Hoggart’s 1963 inaugural lecture at Birmingham was an attempt to do precisely this. He recognised that the critics would accuse him of succumbing to what he called the ‘cult of the contemporary’ but argued that the changes that were taking place in people’s reading habits, language and everyday practices were worthy of the same academic rigour previously reserved for the established literary canon. Hoggart provisionally called this new approach ‘Literature and Contemporary Cultural Studies’.

The radical nature of this intervention is illustrated by the fact Birmingham initially refused to fund Hoggart’s new centre, and he was instead forced to rely on contacts he had made with Sir Allen Unwin, the founder of Penguin Books. In 1960 Hoggart had been a key witness for the defence by Penguin against charges of obscenity that had been brought against the publisher following its decision to bring out an unedited version of D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Penguin was acquitted and in 1964 Unwin agreed to give Hoggart an annual grant of £2,400 to set up the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies as a ‘covert thank you’ for Hoggart’s role in the trial.

Hoggart spent the bulk of the grant on employing [Stuart Hall \(/research/impact/perspective/stuart-hall-hilton-and-connell.aspx\)](#) – who also died earlier this year – as his Research Fellow at the Centre. It was a move characteristic, one colleague recalled, of Hoggart’s openness to working with people who were from entirely different backgrounds to his own. The Centre was initially attached to the Department of English and was treated with hostility from those firmly rooted in the Arnoldian orthodoxy. It is ironic, then, that in this early period the Centre deployed relatively traditional literary critical methods – ‘close readings’ of various texts, or what Hoggart termed ‘reading for tone’. The radical intervention was to apply such methods to ‘mass’ cultural forms including women’s magazines, the provincial press and crime novels.

Michael Green, a colleague of Hoggart and Hall’s at the Centre, remembered Hoggart as an unusually caring Professor who would bring soup to the homes of junior colleagues with flu. As his grant from Penguin showed, he was also a skilled political operator, a talent that was particularly important in shielding the Centre from the hostility of academic colleagues in the traditional disciplines.

Such hostility was a feature of the Centre’s history right up until its closure in 2002. For Hoggart, however, a key turning-point proved to be the student sit-in that took place at the University in 1968, at which numerous Centre people – including Hall – were prominent players. Hoggart himself was sympathetic to the aims of the students’ calls for a democratisation of university decision-making. But the Centre’s visible support of the protests made it increasingly difficult for him to play a mediatory role. In 1969 he left Birmingham to take up a position at UNESCO in Paris, a position that was initially on a temporary basis but was eventually made permanent.

A disconnect had developed between the project of cultural studies as Hoggart had originally conceived it and the direction of travel at the Centre. Perhaps inevitably, cultural studies changed as those with different relationships to popular culture began to shape it. Younger generations who, unlike Hoggart, had been formed in close proximity to the counter-cultures of the 1960s increasingly turned to Marxist theory in order to explore what they regarded as its radical potential. Yet Hoggart and *The Uses of Literacy* remained critical influences, both on the Centre’s work and on the cultural studies project more generally. As Hall recently reflected, ‘without Richard Hoggart, there would have been no Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies...without *The Uses of Literacy*, there would be no cultural studies’.

2014 is the 50th anniversary of Hoggart’s establishment of the Centre. To mark this occasion an [archive of Centre material has been established \(/schools/historycultures/departments/history/research/projects/cccs/archive.aspx\)](#) at the [Cadbury Research Library \(/facilities/cadbury/index.aspx\)](#), and in June the University of Birmingham will host a major conference to examine the history and ongoing significance of the Centre’s – and Hoggart’s – contribution.

[Dr Kieran Connell \(/staff/profiles/history/connel-kieran.aspx\)](#) and [Professor Matthew Hilton \(/staff/profiles/history/hilton-matthew.aspx\)](#)