

WILLIAM HUTTON

MASTER OF WORDS

Susan Whyman

William Hutton is a fascinating example of an eighteenth-century working man – lacking a formal education, but confident, industrious and enterprising. When he settled in Birmingham in 1750, most inhabitants were unable to read words on a sheet of paper. Yet the town needed people with writing and reading skills to participate in its emerging ‘industrial enlightenment’. Self-taught individuals like Hutton played key roles in Birmingham’s development.

Self-Education

When William Hutton (1723–1815) settled in Birmingham in 1750, most inhabitants were unable to read words on a sheet of paper. Yet the town needed people with writing and reading skills to participate in its emerging ‘industrial enlightenment’. Commerce, politics, and social life required informed citizens. But how were words on paper to be understood by an untrained populace?

Self-education, outside of formal institutions with help from personal networks, helped generate literacy in trading towns. Historians usually place the rise of self-education in the mid-nineteenth century, after Samuel Smiles popularised the concept in his book called *Self Help*. Yet Birmingham had been producing autodidacts, along with gilt buttons, for over a century. These self-educated individuals used their mastery of words to improve themselves and their towns.

A search of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* reveals scores of self-taught people, whose careers were centred on a new-found love of books – school teachers, itinerant lecturers, booksellers, printers, journalists, reviewers, and first-time authors. Their use of words, or literacy, to get on in life was particularly evident in manufacturing hubs, where book reading, selling, and lending had become systematised by 1750.

Self-Improvement

William Hutton is a prime example of someone whose involvement with words improved his standard of living. Hutton started life in abject poverty as a child labourer in a Derby silk



The author of Birmingham’s first history. Miniature *Portrait of William Hutton* by an unknown artist.

© Birmingham Museums Trust

mill. Though he lacked formal education, by the 1740s, with the help of siblings and local mentors, he was reading low-priced literature from market bookstalls. After a second apprenticeship knitting stockings in Nottingham, he imitated a local bookseller and learned to bind cheap volumes.

In 1749, he borrowed money from his sister and walked to and from London to buy bookbinding tools. When her former master, a dissenting minister, retired, he gave Hutton his old books for a promissory note of £1.7s. Summoning up courage, in 1750, Hutton rented half a shop in Bull Street, Birmingham ‘to begin the world’ as a bookseller. After some success, he moved to the centre of High Street – one of the best sites in town. He was determined to use his books as a pathway out of poverty.



1. St. Martin's Church.
2. St. Philip's Church.
3. St. John's Chapel.
4. St. Bartholomew's Chapel.
5. St. Mary's Chapel.
6. St. Paul's Chapel.

A South View of BIRMINGHAM from the Summer House, Cheapside, Bordsley.

7. Free Grammar School.
8. The Workhouse.
9. Theatre in New Street.
10. Hall and Assembly room.
11. Navigation Office.
12. Mr. Turner's Bridgework.

A South View of Birmingham from the Summer House, Cheapside, Bordsley. From William Hutton's *An History of Birmingham*, 1781.

The Word in Eighteenth-Century Birmingham

Birmingham was a booming commercial centre with about 24,000 inhabitants. Words were being hawked everywhere, from taverns and newspapers to debating clubs and libraries. The British Book Trade Index from 1720–60 shows 22 Birmingham booksellers – 12 during Hutton's first decade – clustered together in the town centre. Twelve taverns interspersed amongst them created a seamless web of conversation, sociability, and drink.

By 1752, Hutton was binding, selling, and lending books from his circulating library. In 1756, *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* noted:

Just Published and given
Gratis A CATALOGUE of

Entertaining Books, to be Lett out to Read at Two pence
per Week each Volume by Mr Hutton, bookseller in
High-Street... At the above Place is kept a Paper
Warehouse, where may be had... any Sort of... Paper.

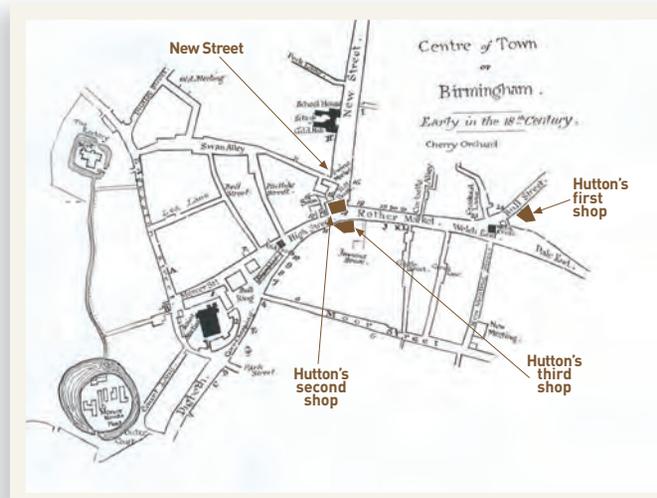
Taking advantage of cheap locally-made paper and an expanding provincial press, Hutton tailored his stock to meet

Birmingham's needs. A cashbook in the Birmingham Central Library records sales of 2,581 items for Hutton's first years in trade. 670 of 996 books with legible prices were heavily discounted for only 1–6d. There were also 712 charges for 'reading' – likely fees for borrowing books or reading items inside Hutton's shop.

Newly-literate readers could select Hutton's best-sellers: Almanacks, Magazines, Prayer Books, Bibles, Plays, Easy Readers, Battledores, Testaments, Primers, Chapbooks, and Reviews. School books, grammars, dictionaries and self-improvement guides let people master words and educate themselves with a minimum of external teaching.

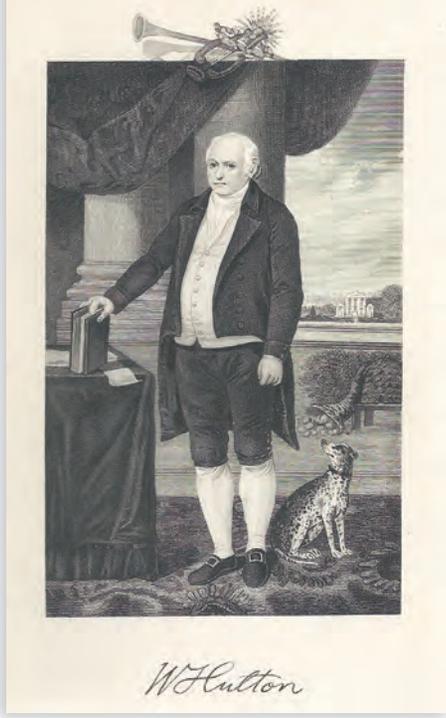
Paper was Hutton's most profitable product. Indeed, 65% of his sales were for paper, stationery, and binding. After greedily trying to make paper

himself in an unsuccessful mill in Handsworth, Hutton changed his focus from selling books to inexpensive grades of paper. This shift brought him 'an ample fortune'. Hutton's paper and notebooks, waiting to be filled with words, were symbols of the man and his town. They recorded Birmingham's business life and were vehicles of self-expression for future writers like Hutton.



Hutton's Birmingham bookshops based on a map from Joseph Hill's *The Book Makers of Old Birmingham*, 1907, with an overlay by Susan Whyman.

Courtesy Susan Whyman



William Hutton with his country house, Bennetts Hill, in the background. From *The Life of William Hutton*, Llewellyn Jewitt, 1872.

Author and Historian

After thirty years of providing writing materials for others, Hutton became a published author. In 1782, he published the first *History of Birmingham* (dated 1781). Its popularity was confirmed by the many editions, reissues, and abridged versions that followed the original work. 'To venture into the world as an Author without a previous education, was a daring attempt.' Yet the preface revealed a writer who publicly proclaimed his self-education. 'I have never seen Oxford', he admitted, and was 'obliged...to lay down the battledore, before I was master of the letters.'

'It is rather a jest book than a piece of topography', wrote the envious antiquary Mark Noble. 'The author came...a beggar and [cannot]...spell three words.' Yet Dr William Withering, a member of the Lunar Society, called it 'the best topographical history he had ever seen'. Hutton was made a fellow of the Scottish Society of Antiquaries on the reputation of his *History*. He could now sign himself: 'William Hutton the Historian, F.A.S.S.'

Though the *History's* statistics might sometimes err, Hutton captured the spirit of Birmingham (and his own experience) through brash, witty, plainspoken language. The book was a tribute to his adopted

town and praised its workers, 'who spread our tables and oil the wheels of our carriages'. They 'lay a stronger claim to civilization than in any other place'. To Hutton, Birmingham was not just a dirty industrial workplace. Blessed with skilled artisans, and energetic entrepreneurs, it was the 'seat of civility' and 'happy abode of the smiling Arts'. Hutton proudly chose the words that best described his town: 'grand, populous, extensive, active and humane'. Among the *History's* subscribers were 12 nobility, 28 esquires, 11 clergymen, 4 book societies, the Overseers of the Poor, Joseph Priestley and Matthew Boulton.

A Profusion of Words

Once the floodgates to authorship were opened, words flowed profusely from Hutton's pen. All of his writings were based on personal experience. They suited the nation's thirst for useful knowledge and entertaining new formats like biography, memoirs, travels and novels. His published works can be divided into poetry, life-writing, histories of institutions he knew well, histories of places where he lived, and accounts of travels that he took - some antiquarian in nature, others devoted to social and cultural customs.

In the decade following his *History*, he wrote six books: *A Journey from Birmingham to London* (1785); *Courts of Requests* (1787); *The Battle of Bosworth Field* (1788); *A Description of Blackpool* (1789); *A Dissertation on Juries* (1789); and *The History of Derby* (1791). He little suspected that his country house, shop, and writings, would be destroyed in the Birmingham riots of 1791. Devastated at his loss, Hutton wrote no more, except for two attempts at poetry. But after his wife's death in 1796, cognizant of the fragility of life and records, he turned to writing about the subject he knew best - himself.

In eight months he composed a remarkable manuscript, 'Memorandums from Memory'. He ruled a notebook into 365 rows, and entered a memory for each day drawn from earlier years. His creative powers refreshed and with new purpose, by 1798 he completed the history of his family (burned during the riots) and his autobiography, with annual updates thereafter. His daughter published it posthumously in 1816 as *The Life of William Hutton, F.A.S.S.* with an account of the riots and a history of the Hutton family.

In 1798, he started an alphabetical Commonplace Book and recorded references to his reading and deaths of celebrities and friends. It also contained poems lost during the riots, which he published as *Poems, Chiefly Tales* (1804). Hutton imitated the traditions of earlier learned scholars, who used calendars and commonplace books to record their reading, writing, and poetry. They helped him develop the arts of rhetoric and persuasion.

His last works reveal a confident author: *The History of the Roman Wall* (1802); *Remarks upon North Wales* (1803); *The Scarborough Tour* (1804); and *A Trip to Coatham* (1810).

A Self-taught Voice

Why did Hutton and other autodidacts long to become published authors? Part of it was the sheer joy of self-expression that only the self-taught could feel: 'I never wrote for profit', claimed Hutton, 'for the pleasure of writing is inconceivable.' He imagined how his *History* would sound to others: 'Pleased as a fond parent, I...had the whole by heart...Frequently...in the night I have repeated it in silence for two or three hours...without...missing a word.' Once published, his *History* brought status, even authority, to a man who had neither before he mastered the word. What is more, he wrote it in his own self-taught voice.

Hutton's style was to mix candour, humour, and blunt asides with opinionated digressions on topics he enjoyed. This breach of norms marked him as a literary newcomer and showed he was *not* a member of polite society.

Yet Hutton wished to inform, as well as entertain. He has not been praised enough as a new kind of writer. More learned historians stressed classical forms and wrote about elites and their politics. Hutton instead used his knowledge of all ranks to produce commercially-centred histories for a trading nation.

Since he understood human nature and economic drives, he brought Scottish Enlightenment authors, David Hume and Adam Smith, down to the level of unlearned

readers. He personifies a shift in history writing that expanded its scope to social life in an age of sensibility. 'I... would have you see, and feel, as I do', wrote Hutton, 'and influence your passions, as mine are influenced.'

Unsurprisingly, he owned Hume's *Essays*, William Robertson's *History of Scotland*, and works of sensibility by Tobias Smollett, Lawrence Sterne, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He proved that a person of low origin and inferior education could master words, write books, and sell history.

His own position as a social upstart is never addressed in his writings, but it underpins his interest in social structure and his travels to emerging sites near the Celtic borders. 'A spot, like Blackpool', he wrote, 'which is only rising into existence, cannot be expected to furnish those conveniences... found among... established assemblages of men.' His works record the story of a nation and its people in various stages of development.

For Hutton, authorship was an opportunity to proclaim the accomplishments of himself, his family, and his beloved town. That writing came late in life to an autodidact, made its rewards even sweeter.

A Culture of Reading and Writing

Written words flourished in eighteenth-century Birmingham and were crucial to the success of self-educated men like Hutton. They help us to understand why a culture of reading and writing was prized by aspiring citizens in developing towns. This culture was sustained not just by scholars and antiquarians, but by an expanding flow of people, some self-taught, who strove to gain useful knowledge. Their accomplishments arose from an openness to learn from experience, instead of from masters and traditional authorities.

Hutton, like John Locke, thought the mind was like the blank paper he sold, to be filled by the use of his *own* senses and observations. This idea had much in common with the empiricism, experiments and motto of the august Royal Society in London: *Nullius in verba* (Take nobody's word for it - a rough translation that championed the use of facts and resistance to authority). Self-taught individuals like Hutton have been neglected by historians. They should be acknowledged as a key element of Birmingham's provincial enlightenment. ●

Dr Susan Whyman, a historian of eighteenth-century England, is the author of *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* published by Oxford University Press. She is working on a biography of William Hutton. www.susanwhyman.com

Further Reading

Audrey Duggan, *A Lady of Letters: Catherine Hutton* [Brewin Books, 2000].

William Hutton, *The Life of William Hutton*, with introduction by Carl Chinn [Brewin Books, 1998].

William Hutton, *An History of Birmingham* [Pearson and Rollinson 1781] or later editions.

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Centre for West Midlands History

MA in West Midlands History

Delivered by the Centre for West Midlands History, this programme is designed for anyone who has an interest in any aspect of the history of the region. It runs part-time over two academic years to allow you to fit study around your existing commitments.

You take three taught modules each year, delivered over nine Saturday Schools (one per month during term-time). Teaching is based on a mixture of lectures, seminars, group work and day trips.

You will study:

- People and Places in the West Midlands c. 1000 – 1500
- Reformation, Social Change and Civil War: the West Midlands in the 16th and 17th Centuries
- Transforming the Region: Economy, Society and Politics in the West Midlands in the 18th and 19th Centuries

- Turmoil and Change: Economy, Society and Politics in the West Midlands in the 20th Century

You will also take two modules in sources and research techniques to prepare you for your own research.

You are assessed by six 4,000 word essays and a 15,000 word dissertation on a subject of your choice. There are no written exams.

Learn more

Dr Malcolm Dick

Email: m.m.dick@bham.ac.uk

www.birmingham.ac.uk/cwmh

