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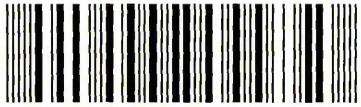
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The Authenticity of the Middlebrow: Warwick Deeping and Cultural Legitimacy, 1903-1940

Mary Grover

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
Sheffield Hallam University
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Abstract

My project has been to examine how the hierarchical structures of taste implied by the term 'middlebrow' were negotiated by the bestselling novelist, Warwick Deeping, 1877-1950. Deeping is my focus for three reasons: he was immensely popular; his popularity was perceived by such critics as Q. D. Leavis as a threat to the 'sensitive minority'; he was prolific. His 68 novels from 1903 -1950 thus give the cultural historian the unusual opportunity of tracing the development of an author's attempts to protect both himself and his readers from a process of cultural devaluation. After 1925, the best-selling *Sorrell and Son* and its immediate successors established 'a' Deeping as a product about which both admirers and detractors had certain expectations. Deeping's response to these expectations provide an exemplary site within which to examine how certain cultural distinctions were being negotiated and contested in England between the wars.

My introduction traces the genealogy of my theoretical approach. The theories of Pierre Bourdieu have informed my understanding of the ways in which any expression of taste reflects the class positioning of the consumer. However these theories are concerned chiefly with patterns of consumption. They do not account adequately for the generation of texts in response to perceived cultural hierarchies. Deeping's texts are increasingly explicit in the ways they dramatise their own questionable cultural status. I use this self-consciousness to test the limits of the usefulness of available theories of cultural production.

My first chapter historicises the emergence of the term 'middlebrow', using the contrast between its use on either side of the Atlantic to demonstrate the necessity of placing its use in a particular class and cultural context. My second chapter, therefore, is a short account of Deeping's own class positioning, focusing on the way in which his biographical constructions marketed the writer of popular fiction. My third chapter examines how his first twenty novels dramatise the kind of fiction that Deeping thought himself to be writing before the term 'middlebrow' had currency. My fourth chapter examines the group of novels, preceding *Sorrell and Son*, in which the writer is depicted as feminised and declassified. My fifth chapter concerns the nature of the extraordinary success of *Sorrell and Son* and what this implies about the gendered cultural and class positions both of Deeping and his loyal readers. My final chapter deals with the animosity to which *Sorrell's* success exposed the culturally beleaguered Deeping and with how consciousness of this animosity shaped his later novels.

My thesis seeks to demonstrate that the way cultural hierarchies are established shapes the nature of the products generated. Although commentators on mass culture have stressed the homogenous identity of popular texts, the mechanical nature of their production and the passivity of their consumers, Deeping's novels imply readers aware of and resistant to such characterisations. Q. D. Leavis identified this resistance, but she and other self-appointed members of the cultural elite, failed to recognise that the 'game' of drawing cultural distinctions blunted the exercise of the very quality on which the self-appointed umpires based their claim to cultural superiority: moral intelligence and discrimination. In a similar way commentators on the left, anxious to assert their affiliations with the working class, were only able to register the petit-bourgeois 'image' of Deeping's work from which they wished to distance themselves. They therefore failed to perceive that it is, amongst many other things, about class images. The project aims to encourage a greater attention to the particularity of cultural commodities consumed by the lower middle classes in the 1920s and 1930s.

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Introduction: The shock of a Deeping

‘The problem of petty-bourgeois taste, culture, and expression remains to this day a largely neglected question for cultural studies and a formidable obstacle to a left cultural politics.’¹

In 1925 *Sorrell and Son* was published. It gradually became one of the most enduring² bestsellers in Britain, Europe and the United States, ‘41 editions and innumerable impressions, read and re-read long out of its time’.³ It was last published in Britain in 1984 following a successful television adaptation in 1983. The familiarity of readers between the wars with the name of its author, Warwick Deeping, was principally with this one text but it was only one of a group of his novels to achieve bestseller status in the 1920s and 1930s.⁴ From the beginning of his publishing career, in 1903, his novels sold well. The sixty-eight novels of Warwick Deeping, published from 1903-1957, are a sequence of texts within which we can trace the development of an author’s bitter contestation of the place in the cultural hierarchy to which these texts are being consigned. The study of how cultural hierarchies are constructed and how texts are generated, within and in contestation with those hierarchies, poses problems for researchers not least because they are themselves operating within similar hierarchies. This introduction is a brief account of how I sought ways of addressing the questions posed by the salient feature of my material: the acute self-consciousness of the author whose chief subjects were shame and the threat of humiliation. The nature of my questions derive from Pierre

¹ Andrew Ross, *No Respect* (Routledge, 1989), p. 29.

² Rosa Maria Bracco in *Merchants of Hope* (Berg, 1993), describes *Sorrell and Son* as ‘one of the most enduring popular narratives of the inter-war years’, p. 137.

³ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 481.

⁴ Cader Books web-site, <<http://www.engl.virginia.edu/courses/entc312/s98/best20.html>> (19.04.99), lists the top ten bestsellers in The United States for 1920s. *Sorrell and Son* enters the list in 1926, stays there in 1927; in 1928 *Old Pybus* enters and in 1929, *Roper’s Row*. There is no comparable record of British bestsellers.

Bourdieu's analysis of the relation of middlebrow to highbrow culture but some of the answers may lead us to challenge certain of Bourdieu's assumptions.

A useful illustration of the increasing social sensitivity of matters of taste in the 1930s is the synchronicity of three texts, all written or published in 1932. One is an unpublished letter from Virginia Woolf, the second is Q. D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* and the third is Warwick Deeping's *Old Wine and New*, a self-justificatory dramatisation of the reception of *Sorrell and Son* (1925) which I discuss later, in Chapter Five.

Virginia Woolf's letter to one middlebrow novelist, Hugh Walpole, was about another, Charles Morgan.

I wanted to explain my violence about Morgan. I'm sure I'm wrong, at least I think it highly likely. I suspected him of wrapping up tame little reputable platitudes in words of twenty five syllables, and thus posing, and thus undermining the health of English letters, as Mrs Ward did and others: with their damnable pretence of fine writing: and so threw the book out of the window half read. But I explode so easily against fiction that I have hardly any trust in my own vehemence.⁵

The violence of her reaction to Morgan is matched by Q. D. Leavis' more sustained attack on the cultural pretensions of middlebrow authors. Published in the same year as Woolf's letter was written, *Fiction and the Reading Public* lacks Woolf's graceful self-awareness of the disproportionate violence of her response. Leavis assumes the authority of an 'impartial observer' and tries to sustain the apparently judicial tone of one who 'can hardly avoid concluding that for the first time in the history of our literature the living forms of the novel have been side-tracked in favour of the *faux-bon*.'⁶ Why did Leavis use the term, *faux-bon*?

⁵ Virginia Woolf to Hugh Walpole, Sunday 28th Feb 1932 from *The Sickly Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume V 1932-1935*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (The Hogarth Press, 1994), p. 25.

⁶ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Chatto and Windus, 1932; Bellew Publishing, 1965), p. 39.

Is the use of the French a rhetorical attempt to mediate the vehemence of her own reaction to popular fiction by lending it an air of cultured detachment? For Queenie Leavis and Virginia Woolf emerge as kin in the barely controlled violence of their response to popular middlebrow fiction which damnably pretends to fine writing. Woolf acknowledged her lack of emotional control (admittedly in the privacy of a personal letter); Leavis struggles to contain hers within the scholarly apparatus of a 'social anthropologist' and the high-minded concern of a guardian of the nation's cultural health.

The extensive work done by Pierre Bourdieu in the last thirty years to undermine an essentialist aesthetic and demonstrate that personal taste is, in his words, 'the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference'⁷ might have helped these two mutually antipathetic writers understand the intensity of their shared distaste. No wonder the expression of personal taste can be so violent for each taste, as Bourdieu says, 'feels itself to be natural - and so it is, being a habitus - which amounts to rejecting others as unnatural and therefore vicious.'⁸ Moreover Bourdieu asserts that the expression of taste is inevitably a class strategy and a reflection of class position and trajectory. Woolf, whose confidence about her own cultural capital rested on her family's dominance of the literary world for at least two generations, can afford to acknowledge the apparently non-rational violence of her negative assertion of taste.⁹

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* trans. Richard Nice (Routledge, 1986) p. 56. First published in French as *La Distinction, Critique sociale du jugement* (Les Editions de Minuit, 1979).

⁸ *Distinction*, p. 56. Habitus is a term used by Bourdieu to denote 'an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted'. *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 95.

⁹ 'Bourdieu defines cultural capital as a form of knowledge, an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artefacts.' Randal Johnson offers this succinct definition of Bourdieu's use of this term in his introduction to Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993) p. 7. See also Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Sage Productions, 1977), p. 30.

Leavis and her husband, whose class positioning and trajectory within the literary world were quite different from Woolf's, cannot afford such an acknowledgement. Their assertion of superiority is the more vehement because their cultural capital was of new coinage. The currency being established in the newly introduced English tripos in 1920s' Cambridge by I. A. Richards, the Leavises and others was based on the ostensibly meritocratic and scientific nature of their literary judgements. The tone and rhetorical strategies of both Frank and Queenie Leavis exemplify the truth of Bourdieu's dictum that those whose chief source of capital is cultural 'elevate its particular interests to a superior degree of universalization and invent a version of the ideology of public service'.¹⁰

Bourdieu suggests in *The Field of Cultural Production* that

It is legitimate to define middle-brow culture as the product of the system of large-scale production, because these works are entirely defined by their public. Thus, the very ambiguity of any definition of the 'average public'... very realistically designates the field of potential action which producers of this type of art and culture explicitly assign themselves.¹¹

Q. D. Leavis shares this view that the middlebrow writer reflects the prejudices of the 'average reader' or 'natural man,' as she puts it in a revealingly unguarded, and later amended, passage from the original thesis that was published as *Fiction and the Reading Public*.¹² She also

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 'The New Capital' (Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 24. This is the text of a lecture delivered at the University of Todai in October 1989. It was originally subtitled "Introduction to a Japanese reading of the State Nobility".

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu, ed. and intro. by Randal Johnson, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Polity Press, 1993), p. 125. This view is shared by Lawrence Napper who describes 'the middlebrow project of expressing the nation through consensus', 'British Cinema and the Middlebrow' from Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson's *British Cinema, Past and Present* (Routledge, 2000). He is describing J. B. Priestley's *Good Companions* so his view has justification in its context.

¹² In her thesis she writes, 'The same anxiety to avoid reminding the natural man that there are any other standards than his own is a part of the contemporary journalist' (Cambridge: PhD 468, 1931, p. 41) whereas in the book, possibly in response to the unease felt by I. A. Richards, this passage is replaced by a less Hobbesian and less offensive phrasing: 'The same anxiety to conciliate and flatter the "man in the street" is an essential trait of the contemporary journalist', *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 26.

argues, without supporting evidence, that the popular novelist who is able to satisfy the mindless taste of a large middlebrow readership is identical with his or her public in background of taste and intellectual environment.¹³ But if her assertion that middlebrow novelists such as Gilbert Frankau and Warwick Deeping were read by the governing as well as by the governed is true, then it is impossible that either author can be identical with the backgrounds of both classes. The focus of my fourth chapter, 'The Lamed Englishman: the compromised class position of the popular author' argues that the social isolation of Deeping's class position as a writer for a mass market and his construction of that isolation is one of the keys to understanding the nature of his cross-class appeal.

Both Bourdieu and Q. D. Leavis characterise the contemporary middlebrow author by setting up a significant Other. Anachronistically, Bourdieu contrasts Flaubert's assertion of artistic autonomy and distance from bourgeois standards of good taste with the position of a French television writer in the twentieth century who declared that his 'sole ambition is to be easily read by the widest possible public.'¹⁴ Unlike the structuralist Bourdieu, Leavis introduces a chronological dimension to her definition of the middlebrow. Authors escape the civilised censure they deserve in the 1920s partly, according to Leavis, because of the development of genre markets and the plural constituencies they create. She contrasts the absence of a common standard of good fiction in the 1920s with the

state of affairs round about 1820 when, though a number of quarterlies and monthlies existed, yet each with pretty nearly the same sense of responsibility and authority could be relied on to 'place' a novel fairly enough and preserve the standard of opinion.¹⁵

¹³ I will hereafter refer to readers of middlebrow fiction as female because the discussion of the middlebrow tends to do so and that was one of Deeping's problems.

¹⁴ *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 126.

¹⁵ 'Fiction and the Reading Public', PhD 468 (University of Cambridge: 1931), p. 34.

However, the inference to be drawn from Bourdieu's comments on the hierarchies of taste in France in the 1970s is that the cultural élite still has the kind of power and authority Leavis nostalgically ascribes to the network of periodicals published in the 1820s. The difference in the class positions of these two cultural commentators in part accounts for their differences in tone and rhetoric but in three important respects they seem to agree. Firstly, the middlebrow author, in contrast to an author with aspirations to high cultural status, cheerfully and slavishly meets the expectations of the 'average' reader; secondly this average reader is happy to be addressed as such; and thirdly, fiction that appeals to a wide audience is, in Leavis's words, 'all of a kind'.¹⁶ The central chapters of my thesis demonstrate that Deeping was neither cheerful nor slavish in his restless attempts to construct new fantasies which addressed his own anxieties as much as those of a hypothetical 'average reader'. Nor are his fictions 'all of a kind' as the shifts in the way he constructs class, women and Englishness demonstrate. Ruth Felski, in a recent article, explores the inevitably defensive nature of most academic discourse about lower-middle-class culture, rooted as it so often is, in one's own class backgrounds.¹⁷ Deeping, who consistently reveals himself to be anti-Semitic, terrified of the working class and often misogynist, is not likely to enhance a researcher's reputation by association, but it is not these attitudes that Leavis deplors. She patronisingly approves 'the absence of the disquieting' in the earlier 'great' names of popular fiction (Hall Caine, Marie Corelli, Florence Barclay, Ethel M. Dell and Gene Stratton Porter).¹⁸ But Deeping's fault was his power to 'debase the emotional currency by touching grossly on fine issues'.¹⁹ Middle brow culture became menacing once it attempted to engage with the complexities which the educated had decided were beyond its consumers. And what was the fine issue that

¹⁶ *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 27.

¹⁷ Rita Felski, 'Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class', *PMLA*, January 2000, p. 42.

¹⁸ *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 62.

¹⁹ *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 67.

Leavis targets as grossly trampled on? Not racial or gender prejudice but Deeping's hostility to her own class, the literary and academic.

Deeping came to Leavis' attention because of another assault on the authority of her class. In 1930 *The Sunday Dispatch* ran a literary competition inviting readers to identify the contemporary books they believed would live. Deeping was the author third most frequently mentioned by the paper's readers. When we examine the terms in which the organisers of the competition assert the value of an untutored response, we see that they are, in effect, the mirror image of Q. D. Leavis's rhetorical strategies and value system.

The *Sunday Dispatch* was a paper owned by Lord Rothermere who launched the short-lived United Empire Party, founded on the single issue of protection for British trade. Its rhetoric was coloured by disgust for what were perceived as the socialist sympathies of the Conservative Party. On the 19th January 1930 the paper boasted that 'The net sale of *The Sunday Dispatch* for 1929 shows marked progress and an increasing appeal to the best class of Sunday paper reader.' It accounted for its growing popularity by citing its use of 'all the finest writers, ... from Einstein to Mussolini,' and 'its frank and independent treatment of political issues.'²⁰

Q. D. Leavis, like the editor of *The Sunday Dispatch*, is writing for the 'best class of reader' though, unlike a newspaper editor, she is ambivalent about extending membership of that class. Most self-identified highbrows or commentators on the highbrow imply that the highbrow is a member of a sensitive minority and the consumers of mass-produced cultural products an insensitive majority. Yet to understand the appeal of Deeping's novels, we need

²⁰ *The Sunday Dispatch*, 19 January 1930, p. 1.

to entertain a notion of a 'sensitive majority'. The terms of the *The Sunday Dispatch* competition hesitantly try to establish something of the sort.

From the outset those terms were ambiguous. It was implied that the readers' favourite books would be the 'best'. The actual terms of the competition were that correspondents were 'invited to name one work they think immortal, and to give, on a postcard, the reasons why'.²¹ No explicitly literary criterion was suggested. The head-line 'PLUMP FOR YOUR FAVOURITE POST-WAR BOOK!' has a jolly feel which might suggest that the reader is invited to declare her preference on the basis of a 'I don't know whether it's good but I know I like it' kind of hunch. However, the sub-heads and text go on to suggest its readers are so superior that that they will instinctively 'plump' for the immortal. This may seem an inadequate way of establishing a canon but it is paralleled in F. R. Leavis' *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry*, published in 1936. As René Wellek objected, Leavis' 'aim was for everything to be implied by description but especially by quotation; valuation he wanted to be "irresistible". So Leavis evaluated, but did so without explaining his norms.'²² Similarly, in this competition; the middlebrow readership is being invited to construct a canon without establishing any basis for it except the superior instincts of readers already instructed that they are 'the best'. It is the presumption of such readers that so irritated Q. D. Leavis. When she looked at the books they valued, one author in particular seemed out to undermine the cultural authority of 'the best minds' and demonstrated a 'persistent hostility to the world of letters which is quite unprecedented'.²³ That author was Warwick Deeping.

²¹ *The Sunday Dispatch*, 13 March 1930. p. 13.

²² MacKillop's account of Wellek's views in Ian MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism* (Allen Lane: The Penguin Press, 1995), p. 171.

²³ *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 67.

To locate the sources of Deeping's 'persistent hostility', fully reciprocated by his detractors, I have been concerned with issues of text generation and how these relate to shifting structures of cultural status. We owe the fact that there is a debate about the nature of cultural production to the early Marxist tradition represented by Georg Lukács and Lucien Goldman.²⁴ Although the narrow way in which Althusser attempted to relate texts to the class position of the author has been largely discredited,²⁵ much more potent have been the ideas Gramsci sketched about the relationship between the culture of subordinate groups and the dominant bourgeois hegemony.²⁶ He understood culture as an instrument by which the bourgeoisie tried to reconcile subaltern groups to their dominated status.²⁷ Hegemonic culture persuaded these groups to accept their subordination as 'common sense' and proved more effective than violent coercion in persuading subordinated groups to accept their oppressors. The concept of a bourgeois hegemony must be seen in the revolutionary context of Gramsci's argument which was to empower the working class to set up a rival, proletarian hegemony. If this were to be achieved, a bourgeois hegemony could be replaced by a proletarian one but power would then be exercised by the working classes to serve ends as totalitarian as those of the

²⁴ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Merlin Press, 1962) and Lucien Goldman, *The Hidden God* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964)

²⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 1983), pp. 172-173. Eagleton points out Althusser neglects the process by which the text has often been a site of struggle to mediate ideology rather than to merely reflect it. Sara Mills, in *Gendering the Reader* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 9, observes that one 'of the problems now seen with Althusserian analyses of the relation between texts and readers is that the reader is conceived of as a passive (indeed captive) recipient of the text's ideology with little or no room for resistance'.

²⁶ See section 'People, nation and culture' in Antonio Gramsci, David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from Cultural Writings* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1985) and Walter L. Adamson, 'Hegemony, Historical Bloc and Italian History', *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory* (University of California Press, 1980).

²⁷ Roger Bromley's work derives from this view; see 'The Gentry, Bourgeois Hegemony and Popular Fiction: Rebecca and Rogue Male', *Literature and History*, 7:2 (1981)166-183.

bourgeois. Thus, Gramsci's attitude to working class culture, as he observed it, was bound to be coloured by the fact that he sought radically to change its status without addressing the questions of how that culture would change once its status changed. Would it be for ever tainted by its pre-revolutionary passivity?

Postwar French intellectuals, Janine Larrue and Jacques Frémontier for example, have been notoriously reluctant to concede that working culture is anything more than the product of false consciousness.²⁸ Bourdieu, in the 1960s and 1970s, though committed to the education of classes he perceives to be dominated, has been criticised for depicting working class culture as a handicapped culture.²⁹ He examines the way in which dominant social classes subordinate less powerful social groups by making it impossible for members of dominated social groups to fully assimilate and acquire the tastes of the socially dominant. Bourdieu sought to expose the class basis of the tastes which the cultural élite wished to assert were badges of natural superiority. He also suggests that this manipulation of cultural capital serves the interests of those with other sorts of capital. In this way he deepened our understanding of the way a hegemonic culture exerts its power. However, he does not communicate a value for working class, let alone petit-bourgeois culture. Instead he asserts the value of his own professional group or class, the academic. If only the working class, with the aid of the analytic tools given to them by their lecturers, could see through the game of cultural distinction so that they are not dominated by a sense of their own inferiority they would somehow (it is not clear how) escape their dominated status. It is not uncommon for teachers to overestimate the power of

²⁸ Brian Rigby discusses the readiness of such intellectuals 'of good will' towards the working classes to characterise them as 'passive': *Popular Culture in Modern France* (Routledge, 1991), pp. 68-95.

²⁹ For example by P. Besnard, 'La Culture populaire, discours et théories', in G. Poujol and R. Labourie, *Les Cultures populaires: Permanences et émergences des cultures minoritaires, locales, ethniques, sociales et religieuses*, (Privat, 1979) pp. 53-63 as discussed in *Popular Culture in Modern France*, p. 154.

increased awareness if they cast themselves in the role of gate-keepers to these superior levels of consciousness. Our social and intellectual strategies are nearly all bids for power, for ourselves and for our class.

So Bourdieu's cultural model, unlike Gramsci's, is not revolutionary. Whereas Gramsci sought to replace one hegemony with another, Bourdieu does not challenge the values of the tastes exhibited by the dominant hegemony. His is essentially a determinist model.

Dominated classes are doomed to produce culture which is robbed of cultural capital and Bourdieu does not establish another way of valuing culture except in the terms of the cultural élite. Eventually his cultural capital is that of the oppressors although his political sympathies are with the culturally oppressed.

If working class culture has been robbed of authenticity by its so-called friends, the fate of the culture of the lower-middle-classes or the petite-bourgeoisie is worse. Accused of 'bonne volonté', of falling over themselves to assist their social superiors in establishing a bourgeois hegemony and of sychophantically aping bourgeois tastes, members of the lower-middle-classes have been accused not of passivity but of excessively cultivating their own dominated status in the hope that they might improve their class position.³⁰ This is where academics are on particularly delicate ground. Rita Felski, in her article 'Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class,'³¹ suggests that the distaste on the part of academics to explore the nature of the culture of the lower-middle-class, can be connected with the pressures to escape the taint of a culture which is associated in educational

³⁰ For example the argument sustained by Alan Swingewood in *The Myth of Mass Culture* (Macmillan, 1977).

³¹ Ruth Felski, 'Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class', *PMLA*, vol. 115, January 2000, pp. 33-45.

institutions with conservatism, provincialism and traditional gender roles. An aspiring academic, especially if from this despised class background, may well seek to distance herself or himself from a culture with little cultural status.

Shame is thus a relevant concept for analyzing a range of experiences of dislocation, including those of class. Pierre Bourdieu, one of the few sociologists of culture to document the habitus of the petite bourgeoisie, notes its particularly strong investment in education as a means to social mobility. Many of this class's traditional values - hard work, deferred gratification, respect for culture - are closely linked to educational aspirations. Furthermore, because of its acute anxiety about status, it is hypersensitive to the most minute signs of class distinction. What happens, then, when individuals from such a background find themselves in an academic milieu that disdains lower-middle-class cultural values? How do they negotiate the tension between their old and their new class positions?³²

One negotiating strategy is to avoid the subject matter altogether. Another is to argue that the literature consumed by the lower-middle-class is not as conservative and inimical to the values of a liberal education élite as has been previously thought. Critics writing from a feminist perspective, such as Helen Taylor, Alison Light and Gill Plain (in her work on Margery Allingham, for example), have persuasively demonstrated that middlebrow fiction is constructing values that are not as conservative as they might first appear.³³ The authors they examine are women and it is relatively non-problematic to explore sympathetically the extent to which women negotiate, collude with or subvert a conservative hegemony when the limits of women's power have been so manifestly circumscribed. It is the gender rather than the class implications of these fictions that are foregrounded in the work of all three authors although Light illuminates the class implications of the Left's distrust of sentiment and their disparagement of the traditionally feminised sphere of the apparently apolitical domestic.

³² Felski, p. 40.

³³ Helen Taylor, *Scarlett's Women: Gone With the Wind and its Female Fans* (Virago, 1989), Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (Routledge, 1991), Gill Plain, 'A Good Cry or a Nice Rape: Margery Allingham's Gender Agenda', a paper given at a conference at Anglia Polytechnic University, 'The Literature of the 1930s: The Text in History', 18 November 2000.

These studies are exemplary in every sense but none of them can offer a direct model for my project because Deeping cannot be described as a representative of an oppressed minority. However, Rosa Maria Bracco, in her *Merchants of Hope* (1930),³⁴ deals with male and essentially conservative middlebrow writers. Indeed, she implies that to be middlebrow is necessarily to be conservative. Gender and class issues are not the subject of her book. It appears in a series 'The Legacy of the Great War'.³⁵ By placing her text alongside those of war and social historians, three of them French, Bracco distances her work from 'the literary field' and thus the taint that accrues within that field to the literature she deals with. She reviews a formidable number of texts, including some of Deeping's, and concludes that they are consistently apolitical and individualistic. Most commentators must agree that this is one of the most consistent features of texts which have been categorised as middlebrow. Unlike Light, Plain or Taylor, the tone of Bracco's discourse is one of cultivated distaste. She distances herself from her culturally ambiguous material by adopting the role of a historian rather than a pioneer of gender studies. The focus of her project is the subject matter of her texts, the war, while the focus of Light and Taylor's work is the gender of the authors and their readers. Their positions within these fields protect their cultural authority. None of these writers is therefore in danger of losing cultural capital themselves by dealing with such devalued texts.

Valuable though these previous studies of the inter-war middlebrow writer have been, they none of them, therefore, provide me with a direct model for my enquiry. I cannot say that I am sympathetic to the subject positions in the novels nor can I say that I am conducting this enquiry in the spirit of a dispassionate historian. Although I believe that my work has

³⁴ Rosa Bracco, *Merchants of Hope* (Berg, 1993).

³⁵ The series is sponsored by the 'Historial de la grand guerre Peronne-Somme'.

implications for gender studies and will make some contribution to cultural history my engagement with this deeply troubling author is dictated primarily by neither of these aims. Although I make no defence of Deeping's style it is his tone that interests me and in that sense the project is essentially a literary one.

It is what Deeping's tone and rhetoric tell us about the way that cultural hierarchies are set up, negotiated and challenged that engages me. It was the author and not the field which prompted my enquiry. It was my reading of *Corn in Egypt* (1941), pro-German and full of distaste for the England that the hero laboured to feed, that caused me to seek ways of accounting for the extremity of his positions, the extravagance of his rhetoric and the intensity of his fears. As I read more, I was puzzled at the way in which Deeping's repertoire of fears seemed to be dominated by anxieties about cultural legitimacy. I questioned why he, a commercially successful author, and his publishers allowed this theme to predominate in the inter-war years when, it would appear in retrospect, there were far more pressing fears to consume both writers and readers. If, as Alan Swingewood argues,³⁶ the middlebrow is imbued with the values of capitalism why should a commercial success, like Deeping, care so much about his cultural status and why should his readers be engaged by his anxieties?

There are many possible ways of exploring these questions. One is the apparently direct method of interviewing Deeping's original admirers, some of whom I sought out and whose revealing responses are used.³⁷ However a project on the scale of Jackey Stacey's *Stargazing*, which anchored her study of the way female spectators responded to the Hollywood stars of the 1940s and 1950s in hundreds of interviews, was unavailable to me.³⁸

³⁶ Alan Swingewood, *The Myth of Mass Culture* (Macmillan, 1977).

³⁷ My twelve principal informants are listed in my bibliography.

³⁸ Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing* (Routledge, 1994).

My original readers were now in their nineties and more concerned with other aspects of their personal history and present needs than with books which, though remembered affectionately, had been largely forgotten. However Stacey's concern to question 'universalist claims about female spectatorship and Hollywood cinema'³⁹ in order to challenge assumptions that such spectators are merely passive victims of a capitalist culture designed to reconcile them to subservient gender roles is a concern I share when exploring the possible response of Deeping's female readership to his apparent misogyny. I may not be able to elicit the response of his original readers but I do need to respect the individuality of Deeping's original readers, avoiding assumptions, often based on class, that such readers were in flight from reality; reality that is, as defined by those seeking to distance themselves from a suburban 'Other'.

Dealing dispassionately with the way in which popular fiction was produced and marketed Joseph McAleer offers another possible approach to the way Deeping dramatised the way he produced and marketed his construction of himself as a popular author.⁴⁰ However, since most of the fiction that McAleer deals with is lowbrow and overtly escapist, the process he describes is the most widely accepted one of popular fiction fitting a niche, directly reflecting the values of the class which consumed it.⁴¹ This Althusserian model cannot account for Deeping's peculiarities. It is Peter McDonald, in his study of the ways late nineteenth-century authors sought to improve their ambiguous cultural status, who comes closest to what I am trying to do in this study. He starts from a similar position, seeking to account for the explosive quality of Edmund Gosse's appalled distaste at the 'half-terrifying' contrast between the nobility of Tennyson's 'stately burial' in Westminster Abbey and the vulgarity of the

³⁹ Stacey, p. 79.

⁴⁰ Joseph McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain 1914-1950* (Clarendon Press, 1992).

⁴¹ McAleer, Chapter 3, 'The Quickest Way Out of Glasgow: Adult Reading Habits', pp. 71-99.

‘dense and inquisitive crowd’ outside the Abbey scrambling to buy his poetry. Gosse’s attachment to the existing structures of cultural hierarchy is echoed in the responses of Virginia Woolf and Q. D. Leavis to the middlebrow forty years later. McDonald uses the analytical tools offered by Bourdieu to reveal the ways in which such diverse figures as Arthur Conan Doyle, Joseph Conrad and Arnold Bennett seek to negotiate the structures of hierarchy to their own advantage. Though McDonald quotes Bourdieu’s comment that his style of cultural analysis is ‘resolutely historicist’,⁴² in fact McDonald’s case histories are themselves more resolutely historicist than any of Bourdieu’s own studies, which are essentially synchronic. Only John Guillory’s analysis of the way Thomas Gray’s *Elegy* was pitched to work in a particular cultural context⁴³ matches McDonald both for its grasp of the literary field at the historical moment in which their examined texts were operating and also their awareness of ‘the reciprocal antagonisms’ that exist between élite and popular cultures ‘and the hierarchically structured networks that make each possible.’⁴⁴

Throughout my study, I demonstrate the extent to which Deeping’s narrative strategies were related to his perception of his place in the literary field. However, my focus will inevitably be different from both McDonald’s and Guillory’s. They each deal with texts which, though of different and changing cultural status, do not raise the kind of problems which face the academic in dealing with such devalued cultural products as middlebrow fiction from the 1930s. The texts discussed by McDonald and Guillory are still in print and it is assumed that the reader is aware of their style, content and place in the cultural hierarchy. I can make no such assumptions about my material. If assumptions are now made about Deeping it is

⁴² Peter McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 173 quoting from Bourdieu’s *Field of Cultural Production*, p. 190.

⁴³ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (The University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 85-133.

⁴⁴ McDonald, p. 173.

probably on the basis of the way other authors have sought to place themselves with reference to him. Part of the purpose of this project is to try to account for the generation of texts which have entered other texts merely as commodities from which authors with aspirations to high cultural status wish to distance themselves. This study must therefore inevitably contain more exegesis of the texts themselves than is commonly the case in a work of this sort. Such exegesis represents an attempt to get alongside texts rather than perpetuating their commodification by assuming that they fit the categories about popular fiction that cultural theorists have bequeathed us.

For Deeping's fiction challenges various assumptions made by post-war writers about the appeal of popular fiction and the nature of these assumptions is rooted in the class position of each commentator. At every point, in the way Deeping constructed his debates about cultural capital, in the way his contemporaries valorised or despised him and in the way commentators like myself have attempted to place him, the status of lower-middle and middle-class culture emerges as a central issue. Like Light, I believe that the disparagement by the left drove the literature of sentiment into ever more conservative areas. In Deeping's case it will not be accurate, as we shall see, to label his retreat conservative. It was more radical and more anti-communitarian than that label suggests. Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum that 'There is no such thing as society' could have been Deeping's motto. In outlining the particular character of Deeping's individualism I hope both to establish the value, not of Deeping's vision, but of examining the individuality of a middlebrow writer and to try to break down a prevalent assumption that lower-middle-class and middlebrow culture was homogeneous and non-radical, seeking only to justify a bourgeois hegemony. Even Bourdieu, whose theories are indispensable to anyone studying the negotiation of cultural capital, makes statements about the middling cultures which do not account for the ways in which a middlebrow writer, such

as Deeping, did not merely fill a market niche, but constructed a new kind of fiction and challenged the existence of the hierarchies which assigned him his middling status. 'High', 'middle' or 'low', the words are only metaphors with no objective status and Deeping, who, like most of his fellow authors in the field, did not use the word middle or middlebrow, tries to negotiate an identity uncontaminated by the metaphors of hierarchy.

Yet the idea of victimhood at the hands of those in superior positions within the cultural hierarchy is integral to the power of Deeping's fantasies; the notion of an oppressive force, hierarchical or not, is essential to their construction. Theorists, like Gramsci, who equate the values of popular literature with those of a dominant hegemony cannot account for the fear of belittlement which characterises the middlebrow fiction of Deeping and his male contemporaries: H. M. Tomlinson, A. S. M. Hutchinson and Gilbert Frankau.

Where does this acute sense of vulnerability originate? If a writer like Deeping, himself of bourgeois origin, makes large sums of money peddling images of false consciousness for his slavish and deluded and lower-middle class readers why is he not more complacent? It is permissible for works of high culture to exhibit alienation, angst and pessimism about the human condition and the status of the artist but similar agonies in a popular author are rarely acknowledged. Bourdieu cites Flaubert as typical of the exponent of high culture who is self-reflexive, somehow set apart from the ideology of the culture of which he is a product. Despite his assertions to the contrary Bourdieu's is a Kantian aesthetic⁴⁵ which affords only canonical art and its consumers the dignity of making artistic choices which are liberated from their historical moment. Other reductive theories derive from the theories of Georg Lukács, the Frankfurt schools of criticism or Louis Althusser. All, as Tony Bennett puts it, advance

⁴⁵ *Distinction*, pp. 41-50.

the position that, 'Literature is not ideology and is relatively autonomous in relation to it, whereas popular fiction is ideology and is reduced to it.'⁴⁶ An essentialist aesthetic is as characteristic of Marxian as it is of open advocates of a cultural élite.⁴⁷ The sense of process implied in Gramsci's description of the establishment of a cultural hegemony as 'a moving equilibrium' has sometimes been forgotten by fellow Marxians anxious either to assert their own 'timeless' canon or to demonstrate that in a bourgeois hegemony popular fiction merely offers 'substitute gratification ... mass deception' which is 'turned into a means for fettering consciousness.'⁴⁸

Pierre Macherey seeks to demonstrate how consciousness is fettered at the level of text production. His essay on Jules Verne mines a classic bourgeois realist text for evidence of false consciousness by seeking the fissures that the text's illusion of coherence conceals.⁴⁹ Our job as intellectual fissure-detectors is to map the contradictions and incoherence that underlie the illusion of a coherent world view fraudulently constructed by the writer. Realism was, for Macherey, a bourgeois mode because it sought to make 'common sense' or coherent the inequalities and contradictions at the heart of a capitalist model of society. Macherey's suggestion that we examine a work by identifying 'what the work is *compelled* to say in order to say what it *wants* to say' is partially illuminating in Deeping's case.⁵⁰ Deeping prides

⁴⁶ Tony Bennett, 'Marxism and Popular Fiction', *Literature and History*, 7.2., Autumn 1981, repr. in Bob Ashley, *The Study of Popular Fiction* (Pinter, 1989), p. 176.

⁴⁷ I use the term 'Marxian' to refer to the work of cultural theorists, such as Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams and others, whose approach may derive from Marx's theories about the relationship between classes and culture but is not formally committed to Marx's theory of value. My thanks to Dr Paulo Farias for this clarification.

⁴⁸ T. W. Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', *New German Critique*, vol. 6, 1975, trans. by Anson G. Rabinbach, part reprinted in Bob Ashley, *The Study of Popular Fiction: A Source Book* (Pinter, 1989), pp. 52-59.

⁴⁹ Pierre Macherey, 'Jules Verne: The Faulty Narrative', *A Theory of Literary Production* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 159-248.

⁵⁰ *A Theory of Literary Production*, p. 94.

himself on creating a unique ideology, independent of the authority of religious, political or cultural legitimising bodies. The nature of that ideology will emerge in all succeeding six chapters. The constructs within novels are determined or 'haunted' (one of Macherey's favourite metaphors)

by the unconscious which is history, the play of history beyond its edges, encroaching on those edges: this is why it is possible to trace the path which leads from the haunted work to that which haunts it.it is not a question of redoubling the work with an unconscious, but a question of revealing in the very gestures of expression that which it is not. Then, the reverse side of what is written will be history itself.⁵¹

It could be argued that the forces constraining and shaping Deeping's constructs are the agents that determine the silences defining what he is 'compelled' to say. Deeping is always reacting to hostile intent. Freedom from determined behaviour is his goal (though it is arguable that reactive response is his fate). Macherey's words can be used to characterise the panic and anxiety that 'determine' Deeping's enterprise:

The book is furrowed by the allusive presence of those other books against which it is elaborated; it circles about the absence of that which it cannot say, haunted by the absence of certain repressed words which make their return. The book is not the extension of a meaning; it is generated from the incompatibility of several meanings, the strongest bond by which it is attached to reality, in a tense and ever-renewed confrontation.

What Macherey describes as 'fissures' in a set of value-systems are more likely to open and crack if the novelist aspires to 'realism', as Deeping says he does. 'The realist writer intends to unify all the elements in the text, but the work that goes on in the textual process inevitably produces certain lapses and omissions which correspond to the incoherence of the ideological discourse it uses.'⁵²

This approach tempted me because it was not hard to identify the incoherence of Deeping's constructions. However, this was the problem: it was far too easy. Deeping's over-insistent

⁵¹ *A Theory of Literary Production*, p. 80.

⁵² Selden and Widdowson, *Contemporary Literary Theory*, (Harvester and Wheatsheaf, 1993).

and hysterical tone did not suggest the smug confidence of the swash-buckling bourgeois (such as Deeping's contemporary Gilbert Frankau). It gradually seemed perverse to turn to a theorist so preoccupied with the 'silences' of a book when the writer being examined is so very 'noisy'. Macherey speaks of a book's 'unconscious': 'what the work cannot say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is acted out, in a sort of journey to silence.'⁵³ Not only did Deeping compulsively utter but he compulsively explained and justified his utterances, obsessed by what he was not and by what he saw himself as consciously rejecting. However, as Eagleton observes, when discussing Reception Theory, 'the more information the work provides, the more indeterminate it becomes'.⁵⁴ Each of Deeping's many explanations reveal how much more there is to be explained. Deeping's passionate floundering cannot be compared to the assured and apparently seamless yarns of Jules Verne or John Buchan. It may be fun to undermine the pretensions of those ambassadors of hegemony but Deeping's seams are all manifestly frayed. We lack the tools to understand certain texts because it has been assumed that our business is to demonstrate their inauthenticity.

One of the other barriers to understanding aspects of texts such as Deeping's has been the tendency of Cultural Studies research to focus on genre when discussing popular literature. This tendency too reflects the residual power of the Marxist 'common sense' view that mass produced fiction is inauthentic, a commodity produced to satisfy an ideologically imprisoned readership rather than a site of creative mediation. The extent to which genre determines the nature of individual products has combined with theories, such as Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, to depict the production of cultural goods and especially massively popular works as

⁵³ *A Theory of Literary Production*, p. 86.

⁵⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 1983), p. 77.

essentially uncreative. The public are conditioned to like certain kinds of art, therefore the commercial producers will produce artefacts that satisfy those desires. Jenkins has commented that Bourdieu's theory of the social functions of taste and cultural distinctions is curiously undynamic.⁵⁵ His work would seem to suggest that the writer of best-sellers would find his market and exploit it. But the process seems more dynamic, less mechanical, than that. However writers such as Roger Bromley have acknowledged 'the complex negotiations established in the mediations of popular fictions'.⁵⁶ And some of Gramsci's assertions suggest he recognised this.

The key issue raised by my individual enquiry is the problem of how texts are generated. The relationship between cultural production and consumption and of the 'oscillation' between the reader and the text⁵⁷ must necessarily be historicised. Cultural negotiation or the process of literary interpretation are determined not only by the historical context of producer and consumer but by the reader's sense of what she has come to expect from the author of previous products. His consumers read 'a' Deeping based on what they had come to expect but in fact the constructs in his novels are constantly shifting. To adapt Iser's comment on the sentence, every novel 'contains a preview of the next and forms a kind of viewfinder for what is to come; and this in turn changes the "preview" and so becomes a "viewfinder" for what has been read'.⁵⁸ Each of Deeping's texts is a commentary on his previous texts. Many other bestselling authors, Edgar Wallace, Dornford Yates or Edgar Rice Burroughs for example, maintained a constant flow of novels but the way the values within those novels are

⁵⁵ Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu* (Routledge, 1992), pp. 80-84.

⁵⁶ Roger Bromley, 'Hegemony and Popular Fiction' *Literature and History* 7, 1981.

⁵⁷ Discussed by Wolfgang Iser in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Johns Hopkins University Press).

⁵⁸ Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', *New Literary History*, 3, 1972 repr. in ed. David Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (Longman, 1988), pp. 212-228.

constructed seem to remain fairly consistent. It is interesting to note that the work of such authors has dated in an entirely different way to that of Deeping's. Modern readers may read the previous three authors as period pieces, and derive a kind of entertainment from them not unlike that experienced by their original readers. But *Sorrell and Son* was read in an entirely different way from the above authors. It does not match obvious genre specifications. Its class attitudes are both embarrassingly dated and irreducible to hegemonic conservatism between the wars.

To understand the power of a novel which had what McKibbin calls a 'talismanic' quality⁵⁹ for its world-wide readership what is needed is to recast the debate, to turn it upside down.

Instead of starting with the notion of a ghostly hegemony whose existence we assume and invoke to explain cultural phenomena we could start from the bottom up. Of course products are conditioned by the forms of the game, the syntax of the structures in which they participate. But in order to understand how those structures are changing, and might change, we need to examine sites of growth, even if those sites are morally, politically or culturally distasteful. And that word should remind us that our embarrassment and distaste are radar detectors of the process of cultural change and of where we place ourselves in the value systems we are examining.

In the introduction to *The Generation of Plays*, a study of a Nigerian travelling theatre company, Karin Barber discusses the notion of 'generative materialism'.⁶⁰ This is a term loosely derived from Henri Lefebvre's *A Critique of Everyday Life*.⁶¹ Although Lefebvre, like the other French theorists mentioned earlier, felt that the belief systems exhibited by dominated

⁵⁹ Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 482.

⁶⁰ Karin Barber, *The Generation of Plays* (Indiana University Press, 2000).

⁶¹ Henri Lefebvre, *A Critique of Everyday Life* (Verso, 1991).

classes exhibited false consciousness, he did not proceed as though this false consciousness was imposed from above. Instead he asked the question 'How did those illusions which were formulated into ideas ... take shape in the depths of the social sediments and 'strata', in the heart of the 'masses?'"⁶² I am not an anthropologist. Unlike Barber, I cannot live and work with the generators of the texts I am studying. But what I do have is sixty-eight novels and numerous short stories written over nearly fifty years which afford me an opportunity to track the shifting way in which a particular author evolved a set of constructs which were recognised as 'authentic' by their vast readership. The author was trying to resolve conflicts which were real to him. The satisfactions these texts offered were real. When Deeping started to write *Sorrell and Son* his choices as to what he would write were as endless or as constrained as they were for Dostoevsky. I am not arguing for the value of one over the other but for equal authenticity. I may, in some respects, find Deepings's texts repulsive but I also find them surprising. As Barber puts it, 'Generative materialism focuses on potentiality.'⁶³ 'All models of textual or cultural production which base themselves on the idea of permutations of existing, given elements' (such as formalism or structuralism) ... 'miss the thing that in some way that makes these ... texts worth listening to: the sense that in some way, however slight, they might surprise you.'⁶⁴ What the popular author who is the focus of my inquiry did was to surprise me and he continues to do so. That sense of surprise has been the spring of my research. My task has been to identify those 'living growth points', the 'meristem' as Barber terms it, where any writer, writing for any class, in any genre, seeks to exceed what has gone before.

⁶² Lefebvre (1991) p.146 quoted in *The Generation of Plays*, p. 6.

⁶³ Barber, p. 8.

⁶⁴ Barber, p. 9.

In my first chapter a comparison of the way the debate about the value of the middlebrow differs on either side of the Atlantic helps to set up a specifically English and particular historic context for my later discussion of Deeping's attempts to declassify himself. My second chapter further particularises the debate, demonstrating how Deeping's strategies for constructing his biographies both within and without his novels puts the status of the author at the centre of his project. Neither Deeping's life nor his works have been extensively mapped. Although my primary purpose is not to account for his life and works, an attempt to familiarise the modern reader with both will help us in future to read him, as much as is possible, in his own terms. My third chapter explores the extent to which his early fiction, relatively at ease with the place to which it is assigned by reviewers, nevertheless tries to free the author from the expectations which are being created about the kind of fiction the critics feels he is bound to produce. My fourth chapter is an explicit discussion of the class implications of Deeping's fictional strategies to free both himself and his readers from their stigmatised positions within the hierarchies of taste. My fifth chapter deals with the reception of *Sorrell and Son* (1925) and with the way in which Deeping's later novel, *Old Wine and New* (1932) attempts to mythologise the creation of his earlier bestseller, not to increase its cultural status but to set it apart entirely from the hierarchies that would diminish the text, its author and its readers. My final chapter illustrates the anguish which attended Deeping when dealing with the status of his authorship and seeks to challenge notions that the author of high cultural status has the monopoly on the travails of creation. My Appendix contains illustrations of images discussed within the text of the thesis.

Chapter One

The shame of the middlebrow: Deeping's cultural context

They are birds of passage, out of sight out of mind. Their influence is ephemeral, though they have an influence. On their social and ethical values are constructed the social and ethical values of the great middle-classes.¹

By setting the use of the term 'middlebrow' in the different historical and social contexts in which it has been used, this chapter aims to prepare the reader for my subsequent chapters which discuss Deeping's response to the ways in which he was being classified by diverse members of the cultural élites. By comparing the use of the term in two linked contexts, those of Britain and America, I hope to establish the cultural specificity of the term 'middlebrow' and to chart its shifting meanings.

'No laughing matter'

Pierre Bourdieu has dealt over a long period with the relationship between 'barbarous' and 'legitimate' culture and how this relationship relates to the economic and social patterns of dominance. His most useful work, for my purposes, is *Distinction* (1979)² which, as its title suggests, charts the process of making cultural distinctions in various fields and how this process relates to class and occupation. The consonance of patterns of taste in different fields (homologies) relate in a consistent way to patterns of occupation and trajectory, whether an individual seems to be declining or increasing in status within his class. Much of Bourdieu's work is concerned with the strategies with which a particular class attempts to legitimise itself

¹ Winifred Holtby, 'Why We Read It', *Left Review*, 1.4 (1935), repr. in *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication*, ed. by Peter Davison, Rolf Meyersohn and Edward Shils, 14 vols (Chadwyck-Healey; Somerset House, 1978) XII, 209-212 (p. 210).

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

by asserting canons of taste. Taste is therefore not a matter of simple personal preference, but of a social strategy related to class. The way in which Bourdieu has characterised the delimiting power of social structure over cultural tastes is suggested in a statement at the end of *Distinction*. Bourdieu says his work seeks to establish a 'social semiology' which attempts to decipher meanings and bring to light the cognitive operations whereby agents produce and decipher them. He aims 'at grasping, not "reality", but agents' representations of it, which are the whole "reality" of a social world conceived "as will and representation"'.³ Any cultural artefact is thus part of this whole 'reality', not merely a representation of it. It is authentic in that it is a personal negotiation rather than a passive reflection of a perceived reality.

It is for an acknowledgement of the authenticity of their negotiations that popular writers yearn when they haul the term 'reality' into the titles of what are obviously romances.

Deeping's mother, Marianne Davidson, had written a short story entitled 'The Dream and the Reality' rejected for publication by *Woman's Life*.⁴ Marie Corelli, with whose novels Q. D. Leavis linked Deeping's and Gilbert Frankau's, subtitled one of her many romances, *The Life Everlasting*, 'A Reality of Romance'.⁵ But whereas Q. D. Leavis supposes that the 'high-level reader of Marie Corelli and Mrs Barclay is impelled to laugh, so ridiculously inadequate to the issues raised is the equipment of the mind that resolutely tackles them' she finds that the similar claims made by Deeping are 'no laughing matter' 'for the sensitive minority' because he is read 'by the governing classes as well as by the masses'.⁶ She clearly sees the male novelists, Frankau and Deeping, as a far greater threat because they are being legitimised by

³ *Distinction*, pp. 482-483.

⁴ Marianne Davidson, 'The Dream and the Reality'. The story and *Woman's Life's* letter of rejection of it in Box 15 Item 7 #12 The Warwick Deeping Collection, Dept. of Special Collections, Boston University.

⁵ Marie Corelli, *The Life Everlasting: A Reality of Romance* (Methuen, 1911).

⁶ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Chatto and Windus, 1932; Bellew, 1990), p. 66.

the social class of some of their readers and, I suspect, because the 'reality' which Deeping in particular sought to represent was not one that Q. D. Leavis saw 'fit' for legitimisation.

Bourdieu argues that the dominant classes display their dominance by asserting the 'legitimacy' of any distinction they choose to make, hence the 'freedom' of the culturally dominant classes to find beautiful whatever subject they choose; it is their cultural standing that enables them to impose legitimacy on the basis of individual choice. Perhaps because of the Leavises' nostalgia for a pre-industrial society, it is difficult to find an author who deals with the urban or suburban lower middle class of whom they approve. They successfully helped to undermine the cultural value put on H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, for example, who, like Deeping in the 1920s, often deal with the anxieties of the lower-middle class and appealed to large numbers of lower-middle class readers.

It is the cultural distinctions made by this class that Bourdieu treats most exhaustively. The French petite-bourgeoisie of the 1970s is not entirely homologous to the English lower-middle-class in the 1920s but much of what Bourdieu says about their tastes is applicable to both groups. Bourdieu feels that the petite bourgeoisie is, in part, defined by its pretensions. 'The lower positions - and, correlatively, the dispositions of their occupants - derive some of their characteristics from the fact that they are objectively related to the corresponding positions at the higher level, towards which they 'pre-tend'.'⁷ This is true of much of the way Deeping constructs his characters' aspirations: a place of their own, land to do with what they wish, an income that is not dependent on the whim of an individual employer or an economic system which they do not understand. But it is important to note a position adopted by Deeping which Bourdieu does not fully explore perhaps because it is more a feature of the English lower-middle-class than it is of the French petite-bourgeoisie. That

⁷ *Distinction*, p. 123.

position is defined by resentment and an aggressive refusal to be embarrassed by a sense of the limitations which are imposed upon it by the 'legitimising' classes. Much of Deeping's venom, once he had established his commercial power base in the 1920s, is directed against those who seek to delegitimise him. Yet his most explicit critic, Q. D. Leavis, was herself encamped outside a bastion of cultural authority which sought to exclude 'the Leavisites' from any citadel of legitimacy. I note below some reservations I have about Bourdieu's methods, clarity and lack of historicity. However, his focus on the strategic function of taste in the battle of the individual to maintain class position and to justify the class with which he or she identifies reveals why the battle between a now-forgotten author and his spiteful detractor is significant. As Bourdieu puts it,

Tastes (i.e. manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes.Aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent. Aversion to different life-styles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes; class endogamy is evidence of this. The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated. This means that the games of artists and aesthetes and their struggles for the monopoly of artistic legitimacy are less innocent than they seem.⁸

This absence of innocence is apparent in the positions which both middle and highbrow writers take in the 1920s in relation to issues of class. Deeping and the Leavisites are in fact united by their refusal to own membership of 'a class'. This widespread reluctance to admit group membership is perhaps commoner in England in the 1920s than it was in the France of the 1970s, the subject of Bourdieu's analysis. In France, central legitimising bodies of various sorts have always had more authority than they have had in England. Although Rigby argues that centrist institutions like the Academie Francaise or the Gaullist Maisons de Culture⁹ have had less influence than the academicians or 'animateurs' would have cared to admit, nothing

⁸ *Distinction* p. 56.

⁹ Brian Rigby, *Popular Culture in Modern France* (Routledge, 1991), p. 6 and p. 134.

like these legitimising institutions has ever been established in Britain. The hysteria and venom of the debate between Deeping and his detractors perhaps stems partly from the inexplicit way in which cultural authority is exercised in England. It was, and still is, left very much to individuals to differentiate themselves from other individuals or groups who might taint them by association. Although class and group discourses emerged in the twenties and thirties, a rhetoric of individualism dominates the discourse of many groups who claimed cultural authority at the period. The structure within which cultural distinctions were made in the 1920s was particularly complex and fluid, the struggle to establish cultural authority therefore the more bitter and anxious. However, Bourdieu seems to define the cultural patterns of the groups he examines as though they were fixed and unchanging. It is true he relates patterns of taste to an individual's social trajectory, whether the subject's occupational or economic status is declining or advancing. But he seems to ignore the changing patterns of the legitimisation of taste. Richard Jenkins argues that weaknesses in Bourdieu's approach (both the neglect of any theory of cultural production and of historical process) stem from his grounding in structuralist anthropology:

as a synchronic method, concerned to identify or construct models of invariate or slowly transforming structure, structuralism precludes diachronic or historical analysis. It is a quest for law-like systemic or relational properties - binary oppositions, for example - rather than an attempt to understand social process over time.¹⁰

My analysis of the relationship between a middlebrow author, his readers and their detractors from the world of 'legitimate' culture must be a diachronic analysis. As I hope to make clear when I discuss how Deeping and his readers respond to one another, this pattern of response can only be understood as a developing process.

¹⁰ Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu* (Routledge, 1992), p. 31.

Deeping's novels reflect a significant set of *shifting* constructs which can usefully be placed in their cultural context. The extraordinarily prolific Deeping provided his readers with nearly seventy novels over a period of forty seven years. Though there are recurring patterns in his work, a 'habitus', which seems to be reflected in other forms of contemporary cultural expression, Deeping saw himself as struggling to change ways of thought and to combat values he felt to be alien and in the ascendant. In this struggle he maintained a shrewd sense of the tone his readers would find acceptable and of the values that his readers might share or be brought to share. When Kingsley Amis listed the range of popular prejudices to which *Sorrell and Son* appealed he commented that the

neatness with which all this is tailored for one kind of reader tempts another kind to think in terms of efficient market research, but any such imputation would be unfounded. "Sorrell and Son" fully upholds the tradition claim of the best-selling novelist that he writes straight from the heart.¹¹

It is not enough to see Deeping as the mouthpiece of a certain fraction of the lower middle class expressing a hegemonic and static 'ideology'. It is necessary to try to examine the extent to which he was shaping or championing the values of those readers and in so doing challenging the forces of legitimate culture, contributing to changing patterns of taste. Q. D. Leavis identified more accurately than anyone else the tone of self-righteousness and venom that revealed Deeping's perception of himself as a champion of the culturally dominated. To understand why this tone is also characteristic of her own rhetoric it is helpful to compare the way the conceptions of the middlebrow emerged on either side of the Atlantic.

¹¹ Kingsley Amis, 'Pater and Old Chap', *The Observer*, 13 October 1957, p. 15.

'The Second Multitude':¹² transatlantic comparisons

The term 'middlebrow' has become a web of conflicting meanings in which Deeping and so many others have been caught, fixed and destroyed. A brief historical account of how these meanings have evolved and how they relate to one another serves as a context in which to examine the resistance of both Deeping and his readers to the values implied by its use. This resistance endures to the present. Sebastian Faulks can still suggest the isolation of a fading French refugee, in a socially and culturally substandard London, by the Deepings and Walpoles on her landlord's bookshelf.¹³ Deeping is going to live on in the work of historical novelists for his name still has the power to evoke the fusty world of the inter-war middlebrow. Martin Amis tries to earn the reader's sympathy for the pathos of a professional literateur's task in 'backing his way into the first sentence of a 700-word piece about a 700-page book about Warwick Deeping',¹⁴ and Bill Bryson, always quick to date the cultural shelf-life of commodities, evokes the 'wonderfully gloomy English-language bookstore full of cobwebs and musty smells' by the presence of 'old forgotten novels by writers like Warwick Deeping.'¹⁵ The deadliness of Deeping (and presumably the poor author who has taken him seriously enough to write a book about him), serves to heighten the reader's sense of the wit, irony and vitality of the contemporary writer whose works we are privileged to be reading.

Our sense of the middlebrow emerges more frequently from the way writers place themselves in relation to what they perceive as devalued cultural commodities than it does from explicit discussions about what it is. Explicit discussions of the term are rare, either between the wars or now. Rosa Maria Bracco's *Betwixt and Between* (1990) and Janice Radway's *A Feeling*

¹² A. C. Ward, *The Nineteen-Twenties: Literature and Ideas in the Post-War Decade*, (Methuen, 1930), p. 190.

¹³ Sebastian Faulks, *Charlotte Grey* (Hutchinson, 1998), p. 57.

¹⁴ Martin Amis, *The Information* (Flamingo, 1995), p. 15.

¹⁵ Bill Bryson, *Neither Here Nor There* (Black Swan, 1991), p. 50.

for Books (1997) are valuable exceptions. How inexplicit an identity the term had, even in the early 1930s, is demonstrated by the absence of reference to any level of brow in the 1933 edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*.¹⁶ Of the ten different ways in which the noun 'brow' was used none of them included either high, middle or low brow although the 1976 supplement to the OED records that it was first used in a printed source by *Punch* in 1925.¹⁷ The OED does not reference the source exactly and its provenance is revealing. It occurs in the list of throwaway aphorisms that were compiled under the title 'Charivaria': "The BBC claim to have discovered a new type, the 'middlebrow'. It consists of people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like."¹⁸ The sneer is comprehensive: at the gullible middling sorts who demonstrate their pitiable lack of cultural confidence in looking to the BBC to guide their vain attempts at self-education; at the BBC for taking the cultural aspirations of such consumers seriously and at the assumptions of superiority amongst the highbrow guardians of British Culture. It exemplifies the truth of Furbank's remark that class terms 'are essentially, rhetorical concepts.'¹⁹ From its apparent inception the term 'middlebrow' is being used to heighten the cultural distinction of the users of such a term. The readers and authors of *Punch* are the careless inheritors of the traditions of good taste defending this privilege from those who, like the editors at the BBC, sought to widen access to established 'goods' or from those who, like the Leavises, presumed to redefine what those goods might be. The cultural manoeuvres at work in this, and most of the rhetoric in the *Punch* of the 1920s and 1930s, exemplify Bourdieu's argument that it is in the interests of the dominant class to portray their tastes not as class specific but as inherently superior to those of the classes.

¹⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1933)

¹⁷ *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 941.

¹⁸ *Punch*, 23 December 1925, p. 673.

¹⁹ P. M. Furbank, *Unholy Pleasure* (Oxford University Press, 1985) p. 5.

This unease at the threat represented to the cultural élite by the emergence of middlebrow culture is more often enacted in judgements about individual texts than in extended discussions about the nature of the middlebrow. Q. D. Leavis' is much the most extended discussion of the nature of the term. Virginia Woolf's often quoted definition of the middlebrow as 'betwixt and between' was never sent to the paper for which it was written²⁰ so cannot have contributed directly to the public debate. Leavis, whatever one might make of her cultural élitism, at least had the courage to raise a debate usually muffled by shame and class resentments. The basis of these resentments in class fears can be illuminated by contrasting the development of attitudes to middlebrow culture in America with its counterpart in English society. The distinctions between the two traditions need to be made, partly because my point is that each debate is rooted in a particular class structure, and also because much of the aggressive British rhetoric towards mass culture in general focused on the perceived Americanisation of British culture. *Deeping* himself was a bestseller in America, printed by a publishing house with very respectable cultural credentials, Alfred Knopf.

Joan Rubin has done the most comprehensive work on the notion of the American middlebrow in the first half of the twentieth century. It is clear from her *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992) that initially, in the late 1920s and 30s, American commentators were predominantly uncritical of the readership being designated as 'middlebrow'. Van Wyck Brooks, described a "genial middle ground" on which cultural life could thrive.²¹ In 1933

²⁰ Virginia Woolf, 'Middlebrow: unpublished letter to the editor of the *New Statesman*', *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (Hogarth Press, 1942), pp. 113-119.

²¹ Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992) p.xii. She is citing Van Wyck Brooks, 'America's Coming-of-Age' in *Three Essays on America* (E. P. Dutton, 1934), pp. 13-112.

Margaret Widdemer identified as middlebrow the ‘men and women, fairly civilized, fairly literate, who support the critics and lecturers and publishers by purchasing their wares’. These readers belonged neither to ‘tabloid addict class’ nor the ‘tiny group of intellectuals.’ The middlebrow represented, in Widdemer’s view, simply ‘the majority reader.’²² Rubin suggests that those educators who, like John Erskine, fostered middlebrow taste were animated by a belief that their Arnoldian enterprises would improve their readers, leading them ever upward towards more demanding reading. However, Rubin argues that Erskine was less concerned with helping his readers enter a superior cultural world than with fostering their intelligence, so that their reading might turn a ‘key to the lock’ that imprisoned them within the modern world. Their newly developed intelligence would enable his readers to escape the ‘prison’ of the ‘modern world’. This she sees as an Emersonian framework in which reading delivers self-realisation rather than self-advancement. The power of Erskine’s vision of an expanded readership is reflected in his popularity as a lecturer at Columbia University in the years leading up to The First World War. In Rubin’s words, ‘Erskine dazzled the Columbia undergraduates who flocked to his course on Elizabethan literature.’²³ One of those ‘dazzled’ undergraduates was Alfred Knopf, Deeping’s American publisher. When Storm Jameson persuaded Knopf to read and then to publish *Sorrell and Son* in 1926²⁴ he might well have identified it as a text offering a key from the prison of the modern world. However, when he published Deeping’s previous and subsequent novels after 1926, he is unlikely to have found the way that Deeping identified himself as a middlebrow author entirely consonant with Erskine’s public-spirited vision. In 1940 Deeping’s anti-Semitism was explicitly recorded by Knopf when he included J. L. Teller’s article from *The Jewish Chronicle* in his file on

²² Margaret Widdemer, ‘Message and Middlebrow’, *Saturday Review of Literature*, 18 February 1933, pp. 433-34.

²³ Rubin, p. 160.

²⁴ Curtis Brown to Alfred Knopf, 14 October 1925, The Alfred A. Knopf Inc. Collection, The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Deeping. However, there is no record, in the orderly and apparently comprehensive archive, that he passed this document on to Deeping. He cannot have put any pressure on Deeping to respond to such criticisms, since in the late forties there is no hint of discord in Deeping's warm letters to Knopf and his subsequent novels, of the late 1940s, are frequently anti-Semitic. It could be argued that the high-minded justification by Canfield, Erskine and others of what came to be called middlebrow literature was also moved in part by commercial reasons. They were all making a living from the Book Clubs which promoted such literature. It can also be argued (as Belgion was to)²⁵ that America's greater social fluidity meant that the kind of cultural capital that middlebrow literature could confer also had commercial value to its readers who hoped that their familiarity with such works might bring them closer to the culture of their employers.

The arguments about the debasement of taste due to 'mass culture' and the culture of the 'best-seller' need to set in the kind of context that Rubin, Macdonald and Guillory supply, the analysis of the way particular institutions such as periodicals, publishing houses, book clubs and authors negotiated the value of the literary product at a particular time. As Gans noted in 1974, 'the existence of the critique of mass culture' has less to do with changes in high and popular culture than with the position of intellectuals in society, particularly those intellectuals who are or feel themselves to be part of the 'Establishment'; over time, the critique has appeared when intellectuals have lost power and the status that goes with power, and it has virtually disappeared when intellectuals have gained power and status.²⁶

²⁵ Montgomery Belgion, 'British and American Taste', *English Journal* 17, (1928), repr. in *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication*, ed. by Peter Davison, Rolf Meyersohn and Edward Shils, 14 vols (Chadwyck-Healey; Somerset House, 1978), v, 207-215.

²⁶ Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture* (Basic Books, 1974), p. 7.

When the American attack on the middlebrow came, it came much later than the onslaught in Britain, because the class status of the intelligentsia waxed and waned at different times in the two cultures. In 1960, Dwight Macdonald's influential articles on 'Masscult and Midcult',²⁷ in Rubin's opinion, 'irreversibly heightened that term's pejorative connotations' and 'it also licensed the scholarly neglect of middlebrow efforts in the past.'²⁸ The desire of the American left-wing intelligentsia to be identified culturally with the avant-garde serves us with another example of betrayal in the cause of cultural distinction, analagous to that of Knopf in the cause of commercial capital. Andrew Ross chronicles the refined distaste with which American communists distanced themselves from the middlebrow qualities of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg as evidenced in his *The Death House Letters of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg*.²⁹

The positive connotations of the middlebrow as described by Rubin were peculiar to the early decades of twentieth century America, when culture was seen as another good, like material possessions, which could be acquired by, and signal, wealth. In the 1950s, writers for the left-wing *Partisan Review* began to be identified with the academic institutions which were rapidly constructing literary studies as a site of specialism. These writers may have been socialist guardians of the educational aspirations of the 'masses', but they were also gate-keepers to fields whose élite qualities it was in their professional interest to protect. Thirty to forty years earlier Henry Canby, founder of *The Saturday Review of Literature*, and John Erskine, proselytiser for his list of "great books", had more in common with Victorian men of letters in that they built the basis for their cultural authority outside the educational institution (though Erskine taught at Columbia University 1909-1927). Their democratic view

²⁷ Dwight MacDonald, 'Mass cult and Midcult: I', *Partisan Review* 27 (Spring, 1960) pp. 203-22.

²⁸ Rubin, p. xiv.

²⁹ *The Death House Letters of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg* (Jero, 1953) discussed by Andrew Ross in Chapter I of *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (Routledge, 1989).

of the desirability and feasibility of the middlebrow reader 'graduating' to the timeless classics was, of course, influenced by their commercial dependence on the appetite of the greatest possible number for a constant supply of new titles. It would be tempting to see the transition from the sages of the American Book Clubs to the scourges of mass culture in the *Partisan Review* as an accelerated version of the following process described by Collini in Britain between 1850 and 1930.³⁰

The British public moralist in the second half of the nineteenth century was able to adopt a sweetness, if not lightness, of tone because he (there were few female public moralists who were not novelists) had not yet been corralled into an educational institution whose specialist and élite status its members were bound to defend. The Victorian moralists of independent means could afford to offer the uneducated the hope that their present cultural goods did not debar them from acquiring goods of a higher status. When, in 1886, a public dispute broke out between Gosse, as defender of the culture of the 'man of letters' and John Churton Collins, as one of the new academics defending improved academic standards against the ageing dilettante, it was with the old man of letters that the popular novelist Rider Haggard sided. Haggard protested that though he did not know much about the eighteenth century, 'I do know what conduct one gentleman has a right to expect from another.'³¹ This kind of cultural alignment was to change as the power of the middlebrow grew. In the 1930s, in Britain, we find that that Leslie Stephen's heir to inherited cultural capital, his daughter Virginia Woolf, is as virulently hostile to the middlebrow as Churton Collins' successors, the Leavises. Only Hugh Walpole, whose modesty about his own accomplishments was matched by his delight at the accomplishments of his cultural betters, attracted Woolf's approval. In

³⁰ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930* (Clarendon Press, 1991).

³¹ Collini, p. 223.

America, the Walpole attitude to high culture was far more characteristic of the middlebrow throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In part this must be because there was a general consensus at this period that everyone was entitled to cultural goods as the reward of application and that these goods could be acquired through educational institutions, independent of the student's social background.

The situation in modern America has radically changed as Guillory points out.³² The loss of literature's symbolic value is reflected in the growth of a new professional, technical and managerial class who use the university to acquire vocational skills which will enable them make a living in institutions where cultural capital has no economic value. The chief consumers of literature courses are those whose economic capital is secure enough to allow participants the luxury of acquiring capital with negligible economic benefit. Thus the question of 'who reads what' is ceasing to generate debate or passion. The very notion of culture as capital is being undermined. However the boom in inspirational texts, fostered by American Book Clubs, such as Oprah Winfrey's, does perhaps suggest that the culture of the spirit rather than the mind still generates capital for the producers of such texts. The movement reflects the Emersonian rather than Arnoldian strand in literary middlebrow culture. Oprah's books tend to be offered as the means to self-realisation as an individual rather than as goods which will, in themselves, be a passport in themselves to a more powerful class. It is within this Emersonian rather than Arnoldian tradition that Deeping is most usefully placed.

³² John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

‘Without truth, without compulsion’: The British Middlebrow³³

In Britain, or rather England, the positive value of the middlebrow was never asserted as vigorously as it was in America. The geographical metaphors which characterise this debate are nearly all rooted in London’s urban landscape and the countryside of the home counties. Nearly all the best-sellers of the twenties were set in the Home Counties. Hugh Walpole is the exception, as he was in so many other ways. When Winifred Holtby tried to counter the value-laden nature of the debate about why people read what they do ³⁴ (by asserting the economic rather than moral basis of our tastes) she anchored her readers in London. Shoreditch reads ‘*Love - the Trespasser, Ealing Sorrell and Son, and Bloomsbury To the Lighthouse.*’ The concepts of the middlebrow and the suburban are never far apart.

In the late 1920s the debate about middling culture tended not to contain the term, ‘middlebrow’. Throughout the debate occasioned by Gilbert Frankau’s attack on ‘the highbrow’ in a broadcast lecture early in 1926,³⁵ it is the term ‘highbrow’ which is handled gingerly, with passionate attachment or contempt. The word middlebrow is used neither by the irate highbrow, Leonard Woolf, nor the genial but patronising Ivor Brown who distances himself both from Woolf and from the self-declared champion of ‘what-is-not-highbrow’, Gilbert Frankau. Unfortunately, the text of Frankau’s lecture does not seem to have survived. However, it must have been talked about sufficiently to be worth Leonard Woolf’s lengthy riposte, *Hunting the Highbrow*, produced by the Hogarth Press in 1927. In this uncharacteristically arch and irritating monograph, Woolf argues that

³³ Graham Greene, *Journey Without Maps* (Heinemann, 1936), pp. 14-15.

³⁴ Winifred Holtby, ‘Why We Read It’, *Left Review*, vol.1, 1935, repr. in *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication*, ed. by Peter Davison, Rolf Meyersohn, and Edward Shils, 14 vols (Chadwyck-Healey, 1978), XII, 209-212 (p. 212).

³⁵ Gilbert Frankau, ‘Mr Frankau and his Critics’, *The Saturday Review*, 30 January 1926, p. 123 and Ivor Brown’s discussion of Frankau’s views in ‘When Brow Meets Brow’, *The Saturday Review*, 26 March 1927, pp. 463-464.

nearly all the literature which is popular with those who are not highbrow fades and is forgotten within a generation or so; that it is the highbrow who recognises and acclaims the great author and goes on acclaiming him until the general public, for the sake of appearances, joins in the chorus and the great author's fame is firmly established among all men, though perhaps not many of them read him.³⁶

As an editorial from *The Bookman* points out, this simply is not true - in the case of Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth, for example. Woolf as much as Frankau (for Woolf quotes large sections of Frankau) argues by assertion. Woolf also tries to intimidate with his knowingness, setting up Latin terms for different species of 'altifrons'. Unsurprisingly, this bravura demonstration of the highbrow's capacity to establish the terms of the debate is most vituperative when Woolf turns his attention to the 'subspecies of real highbrow' whom he loathes more fiercely than any of the hunters of the highbrow.

The altifrons altifrontissimus var. adepheicus ... is a curious small subspecies which has made its appearance in recent times. An extraordinarily highbrow highbrow, it runs about all over the place attracting attention by proclaiming itself to be just an ordinary man, and how much better Life is than Intellect, and how deplorable highbrows are.³⁷

The debate in England continued to be characterised by this focus on drawing the boundaries against individuals or classes that most nearly threatened the authority of one's own, presumably, in this case, admirers of D. H. Lawrence. However, the term 'middlebrow' is notably absent from the debate.

It is also absent from Ivor Brown's response to Woolf which focuses on the aspect of the debate that so frequently escapes those engaged in it at the time: the way in which all participants lose their sense of the proportionate importance of the issues contested. The

present excursion was started by an alarm-bell whose ringer was Mr Gilbert Frankau. Mr Frankau, it seems, thinks poorly of High-brow, a judgement which is sometimes reciprocated with a disdainful knob or two attached. I am unfortunate in lacking acquaintance with Mr Frankau's fiction, which I understand to be rich in Human Interest. In the Press, however, I can read his pronouncements from time to time. From these I

³⁶ *The Bookman*, May 1927, p. 127.

³⁷ Leonard Woolf, *Hunting the Highbrow* (Hogarth Press, 1927), p. 52.

conjecture that he is magnificently John Bullish, a red-blooded, Anglo-Saxon he-man, a veritable John Peel who winds his horn and saddles his horse for the pursuit of all cranks, intellectuals, cosmopolitans, and other vermin. I picture him yoicking though life with the scalps of countless high-brows dangling at his waist. Let but one of those modern painters of ugly pictures leave his earth in Chelsea and Mr. Frankau will have his brush in no time. I lay down my paper blissfully convinced that while such a warrior is standing on the bridge we are all quite safe. The heathen cultures, the aliens and the intellectuals and the artists may rage, but they will not pass. But when I look at Mr. Frankau's photograph, which frequently accompanies his pronouncements, my knees are loosened. Can this be Nimrod and Horatius rolled into one? Is this the front of Jove to threaten and command? Can Philistia's Mussolini display so mild an eye? Surely not. He looks so kind, so wise. He might even be a crank, an intellectual, an artist.³⁸

The tone of this is important. Brown patronisingly laughs at Frankau (and the literature 'rich in Human Interest') but he quite seriously rebukes Woolf. The target of magazines such as *The Saturday Review* and *The Bookman* (both organs which the Woolfs might justifiably describe as middlebrow) is the highbrow. Both fit comfortably into the tradition of the American bookclubs, promoting both classics, some avant-garde fiction and giving praise to novels by authors soon to be labelled middlebrow. But at this time the term middlebrow seems not to have had currency with either its enemies or friends. The term 'mid-brow' makes a fleeting appearance in the exchange of opinions described above.

In 1928 Montgomery Belgion compared patterns of popular taste in Britain and America in a journal aimed at American teachers of English³⁹ Although his views are not mentioned by Rubin, the article reflects her sense that a popular readership was, on the whole, not an object of horror to American cultural commentators in the 1920s. The article is also helpful in placing the date when 'middlebrow' became popular currency. Although the kinds of fiction Belgion describes, (works by Deeping, Frankau and Hutchinson), were soon to be described

³⁸ Ivor Brown, 'When Brow Meets Brow', *The Saturday Review*, 26 March 1927, pp. 463-464.

³⁹ Belgion Montgomery, "British and American Taste", *English Journal*, 17 (1928), repr. in *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication*, ed. by Peter Davison, Rolf Meyersohn and Edward Shils, 14 vols (Chadwyck-Healey; Somerset House, 1978) v, 207-215.

as middlebrow, he nowhere uses the term. His account of the differences between English (sic) and American novel readers is dispassionate without the crusading passion of Erskine or the vituperative tone of Q. D. Leavis. He observes that: the American novel-reading public is more omnivorous than its English equivalent; it is also more fickle, seizing on the latest best-seller and then abandoning its author for another; newly rich Americans seize indiscriminately on any new novel in the hope that it will deliver them cultural goods commensurate with their newly acquired material goods. Warwick Deeping's success with his 'problem story, *Sorrell and Son*, which everybody simply had to read and discuss' is noted but he observes that Deeping, like Michael Arlen and Phillip Gibbs has not repeated his first success. However, in England these authors attract a more loyal audience which then forms a public separate from that associated with Forster, Woolf or Huxley. His explanation for the fragmentation of the British reading public is the lack of social mobility in Britain. Reading cannot deliver a change in social status. The terms high, middle or low brow are nowhere used. Deeping is neutrally grouped with authors who are perceived to be responsible for one best-seller but not others.

The debate begins to have a triadic structure from the 1930s onwards as cultural commentators reflect on the phenomenon of the 1920s. Although A. C. Ward still does not use the term 'middle brow', his notion of 'the second multitude' heralds the disparagement of the middlebrow rather than the lowbrow that is to flourish in the 1930s. In his 'Inquiry into certain popularities' he concludes that there are two multitudes (apart from the élite minority): the first is the innocent, naive multitude who buy because recommended by word of mouth but the repulsive

second multitude, smaller and more fickle-minded, reads whatever happens to be praised by the critics, or chosen by book societies, or talked about at the moment. It is only

entertaining in the speed with which it makes haste to depreciate an approved book that becomes popular with the larger multitude.⁴⁰

This is the same romanticism about the uneducated displayed by Q. D. Leavis. The totally uneducated are innocent of pretension but the semi-educated are denied the privilege of personal engagement with a text, driven, in the writer's view, simply by desire to ape their 'betters'. The pathetic first multitude whose female novel readers are 'visited by few save plain young butchers and plain young bakers' are excused their reading habits because they 'need' or 'deserve' escape.⁴¹ But the desire of the second multitude to increase their social status is regarded as disgusting. This seems to justify Belgium's characterisation of the differences between the American and English attitude to middlebrow culture.⁴² It also echoes the Marxist rhetoric of the time, for example Christopher Caudwell's contempt for the aspirational culture of the petite bourgeoisie that occasions their 'peculiar suffering'...that they are called upon to hate *each other* (sic).⁴³ There is a gender issue here: the lower class readers can be affectionately patronised because they are assumed to be female and desire only escape.

Defence of the middlebrow was, in Britain, usually indirect, more usually taking the form of deflating the pretensions of the highbrow as represented by T. S. Eliot, the Woolfs or the Scrutiny group. Wynard Browne, for example, focuses his attack on F. R. rather than Q. D. Leavis in the lengthy article, 'The Culture Brokers', in *The London Mercury*.⁴⁴ He echoes the

⁴⁰ A. C. Ward, *The Nineteen-Twenties: Literature and Ideas in the Post-War Decade* (Methuen, 1930), p. 190.

⁴¹ Ward, p. 193.

⁴² Montgomery Belgium, 'British and American Taste', *English Journal* 17, (1928), repr. in *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication*, ed. by Peter Davison, Rolf Meyersohn and Edward Shils, 14 vols (Chadwyck-Healey; Somerset House, 1978), v, 207-215.

⁴³ Christopher Caudwell, *Studies and Further Studies in a Dying Culture* (Monthly Review Press, 1971) p. 78.

⁴⁴ Wynard Browne, 'The Culture Brokers', *London Mercury*, September 1933, pp. 436-445.

many metaphors about monetary value in *Fiction and the Reading Public*, arguing that the Scrutineers are aiming to set themselves as cultural stockbrokers with the aim of securing their own marketability as arbiters. Just as Ivor Brown had devalued Woolf's claims for the omniscience of the highbrow, Wynard Browne comically exposes the claims of the Scrutineers as guarantors of a solid investment by exposing the flimsy investment for the future represented by the poetry of Ronald Bottrall. Both Brown and Browne are guarding the self-respect of the readers of the magazines in which they published, many of whom would unashamedly have called themselves middlebrow. Yet there are few explicit defences of the middlebrow.

However, in 1937 there is an interesting response to Q. D. Leavis's attack on the middlebrow in G. M. Young's *Daylight and Champaign*.⁴⁵ Young, like Leavis, also mourns the loss of what he calls a 'unitary culture'. Unlike Leavis he places the time when the educated shared a common frame of cultural reference in the 1850s. From the 1860s onwards, this common culture 'was doubly fractured: vertically, into professionalism, laterally, along its weakest stratum into - let us adopt the later word and call it highbrow and lowbrow'.⁴⁶ But unlike Leavis, Young insists on the central importance of what he calls a middlebrow culture.

A true, a sound, a social culture must be middlebrow, the highbrow elements serving as exploratory antennae, to discover and capture new ideas for the middlebrow mass to assimilate. The better it is fed, the freer, and more various its diet, the less likely it is to get poisoned or lose strength.⁴⁷

This analogy of the middlebrow readership as a flock of rather passive, but essentially harmless, sheep being fed by benign shepherds has much more in common with the conception of the middlebrow audience in America between the wars. Young sees Leavis not as a

⁴⁵ G. M. Young, 'The New Cortegiano', *Daylight and Champaign* (Jonathan Cape, 1937) repr. in Davison et al., V, 3-21.

⁴⁶ Davison et al., V, 9.

⁴⁷ Davison et al., V, 14.

shepherd but as a wolf, 'the standard bearer' of 'the terrorists of the higher culture'. Leavis's venomous denunciation of the middlebrow allied to the insistent difficulties of modernist texts unite to drive the middlebrow audience away from the springs of difficult but not inaccessible literature. By calling Q. D. Leavis 'a terrorist' Young deftly indicates the disproportionate and highly destructive effect of her intervention in the debate about the value of the middlebrow. Young is defending not the middlebrow as it is but as it might be, if it were not for the terrorists. Young deplores the success, for example, of Hutchinson's *If Winter Comes*. He owned that its popularity 'made me miserable, and what the Christ Child was doing in its blurbs I have never yet been able to make out.'⁴⁸ He suggests that there is something untrue, unsound about present middlebrow taste but he implies that it is the arrogance and nature of the attacks of the professionalised critics, like Leavis, which have contributed to muddy its waters. Certainly, when we read Deeping's *Blind Man's Year*, published in the same year as Young's polemic (1937) and which deals explicitly with a popular author beleaguered by 'terrorists', both from a non-literary family and the representative of the 'higher' cultures, we observe the process described by Young. We must ask why middlebrow readers should aspire to the tastes of Leavis when she so wholeheartedly despises everything about them.

Young's defence of the middlebrow is essentially a negative one in which the absence of tolerance and respect of different tastes amongst the highbrow community is held responsible for perceived deficiencies in the sensibilities of middlebrow authors. Thus this does not amount to the kind of sustained defence in the 1930s of the function of these middling sorts of literature that had been conducted in the 1920s in America.

⁴⁸ Davison et al., V, 15

The intelligentsia, on the whole, felt much more comfortable with fiction that did not pretend to deal with the serious issues with which they, the intelligentsia, believed themselves uniquely equipped to deal, because of their finer moral, intellectual or political purity. In the late 1930s and 1940s there evolves a common rhetoric on both sides of the Atlantic amongst left-wing critics which echoes that of Q. D. Leavis. Dwight MacDonald's enjoyment of his nightmare vision matches hers: 'There is slowly emerging a tepid, flaccid Middlebrow Culture that threatens to engulf everything in its spreading'.⁴⁹ He portrays the middlebrow as kitsch, so that all middlebrow art is simply a debased copy of the highbrow, presumably because its consumers, the petit-bourgeois are intent simply on aspiring to bourgeois taste. This is a model also used by Bourdieu and which this thesis hopes to challenge. However, because of his focus on the evils of the industrialisation of culture, MacDonald seems to conflate the low and middlebrow. He also deplors 'the chewing gum' of popular fiction like G. A. Henty who produces an article that is 'solely and directly an article for mass consumption'.⁵⁰ Both middlebrow and Henty (surely never to be regarded as middlebrow) are examples of mass culture which is the opposite of highbrow. MacDonald and English socialists like Guy Chapman deny authenticity to any sort of mass culture, unlike Leavis or Woolf who maintain their patronage of the lowbrow.

Virginia Woolf endows the lowbrow author with extraordinary qualities. By a 'lowbrow is meant of course a man or a woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life.'⁵¹ Whether by accident or not Rebecca West uses the same metaphor, lending the glamour of the equestrian landed gentry denied by Compton Mackenzie

⁴⁹ Dwight Macdonald 'A Theory of Mass Culture' in *Mass culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Macmillan, 1957), p. 63.

⁵⁰ MacDonald, p. 59.

⁵¹ *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, p. 197.

to the 'solid' Deeping.⁵² West is exasperatedly tolerant of the low-brow as exemplified by Ethel M. Dell.⁵³ But unlike Woolf she is not romantic about it; she observes that the establishment accepts the perverse behaviour of Dell's characters but bans 'the not for one second disgusting *The Rainbow*'.⁵⁴ West has no illusions about the nastiness of Dell's heroes but she, like Woolf and Q.D. Leavis, concedes a vitality to the lowbrow, wistful about the freedom their lack of aspiration to literary status allows them:

For even as one cannot walk on one's own trudging, diligent feet if one desires to attain to the height of poetry, but must mount Pegasus, so one cannot reach the goal of best selling by earnest pedestrianism, but must ride thither on the Tosh-horse.⁵⁵

'Sincerity and vitality'⁵⁶ are conceded by writers as diverse as West, Woolf and Leavis to lowbrow writers. But only West, with her passionate praise of the 'delicacy' and 'magic' of H. M. Tomlinson's *Gallion's Reach* (1927) offers an appreciation of a middlebrow text.⁵⁷ Positive attitudes to the middlebrow focus on a particular novel or author, usually in journals like *The London Mercury*, *The Bookman* or *The Saturday Review*, which had to aim at a wide readership and would have had no interest in drawing attention to the ways in which such a readership were increasingly despised by the intelligentsia. There appears to be no sustained defence in the 1930s of the function of these middling sorts of literature as there was in America in the 1920s. The debate is enacted, rather than conducted, by the implications that accrue from the increasing frequency with which middlebrow titles are used to characterise the

⁵² Compton Mackenzie, *Literature in My Time* (Rich and Cowan, 1933), p. 225.

⁵³ Rebecca West, 'The Tosh Horse', *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews* (Jonathan Cape, 1928), pp. 319-325.

⁵⁴ Perhaps it is a mark of the change in status of Deeping's fiction that in 1909 he was able to explore the plight of a woman whose physical gender is highly ambiguous and escape the censor relatively unscathed. Once *Sorrell and Son*, this 'solid book appealing to solid people' (Compton Mackenzie, *Literature in my Time*, p. 225), had established him as an author with social significance, his themes, though often transgressive, are less daring.

⁵⁵ West, p. 320.

⁵⁶ West, p. 320.

⁵⁷ Warwick Deeping also paid tribute to *Gallion's Reach* in *Exiles* (1930), p. 54. An alcoholic admires either the author or the hero, perhaps because of their greater manliness: 'There's a man who could take his medicine'.

suburban or petit bourgeois qualities of their readers. After 1932 Warwick Deeping's novels are particularly prominent on the shelves of characters depicted by authors who fear mass rather than explicitly middlebrow culture.

For example in Greene's *Journey Without Maps* (1936) on board ship 'one became conscious of people ...who preferred something comforting.'

Something like a *Village in a Valley* by Mr. Beverley Nichols, which was in the small library. One reads strange books in a ship, books one would never dream of reading at home: like Lady Eleanor Smith's *Tzigane*, and the novels of Warwick Deeping and W.B.Maxwell: a lot of books, written without truth, without compulsion, one dull word following another, books to read while you wait for the bus, while you strap-hang, in between the Boss's dictations, while you eat your A.B.C. lunch; a whole industry founded on a want of leisure and a want of happiness.⁵⁸

This feminised and class-conscious image of the consumer of both low and middlebrow fiction was to haunt the way Deeping viewed himself as an author. Such a reference serves to flatter the reader of Greene's text. The implication of Greene's words is that, unlike the mass consumer, the consumer of his text is of the classes that can afford to be leisured and are therefore endowed with a morally deserved happiness.

Perhaps the absence of extensive or explicit discussion of the nature and the value of 'the middlebrow' accounts for its frequent absence as a term in accounts of the reading matter of the period. Robert Graves, in a curious chapter entitled 'Reading Matter' from his review of English cultural life between the wars published in 1940, omits the term middlebrow entirely from his discussion, although low and high brow are cited as 'American terms first popularized in England by H. G. Wells.'⁵⁹ Instead, he uses a term unique to him, the 'mezzo-brow'.⁶⁰ This term is used to describe a level of taste to which the former readers of the lowbrow had

⁵⁸ Graham Greene, *Journey Without Maps* (Heinemann, 1936), pp. 14-15.

⁵⁹ Robert Graves, *The Long Weekend* (Cardinal, 1940).

⁶⁰ Graves, p. 52.

graduated, their critical sense sharpened by 'slicker cinema-pictures'. With the hauteur characteristic of those of his educational background, he comments that 'the mezzo-brow "Book of the Month" choice of the dailies became (through the Twopenny Libraries) the shop-girls' reading too - or such of them as did not sweep all modern fiction aside as "capitalistic dope"'.⁶¹ (Unlike Greene he is at least able to envisage that there are shop-girls with enough vitality to 'sweep all modern fiction aside'.) His complete neglect of the bestselling authors of the 1920s and 1930s is as eloquent as Leavis's and Woolf's full-frontal attack. His 'mezzo-brow' differs from the former lowbrow only in being less earnest and more sophisticated. His contempt for the reading habits of shop-girls extends to complete ignorance of what they read.

In 1923, before Deeping was a household name, he sketched a portrait of a man whose cultural tastes suggest that, at this point, Deeping was free of some of the cultural anxieties that will soon come to characterise his more successful fiction. At the beginning of one of his earliest novels dealing with shell-shock, Deeping sketched a portrait of the doctor who was to cure the hero of his mental disorder. This ideal physician, a type more common in the first half of Deeping's career, is represented as a man of broad cultural sympathies: 'Robin Beal spent his evenings in his library on the first floor, a room of cream and of old gold, calm, gracious and very still'.⁶²

This opening sentence leaves the reader in no doubt that the room's occupant is a paragon of good taste. Deeping's portrait is of the kind of Englishman whom Belgion⁶³ was to describe a

⁶¹ Graves, p. 52.

⁶² Deeping's *The Secret Sanctuary* (1923), p.14.

⁶³ Montgomery Belgion, 'British and American Taste', *English Journal* 17, (1928) repr. in *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication*, ed. by Peter Davison, Rolf Meyersohn and Edward Shils, 14 vols (Chadwyck-Healey; Somerset House, 1978), v, 207-215.

few years later, one whose taste in interior decoration infallibly accompanied sound literary taste.

The shelves were of oak, and Beal's visitors had often noticed the fact that there were no purely medical books upon these shelves. Everything worth reading in psychology was here, and beside the psychologists the novelists had a place. Or you could take down Mosso on Crete, or one of Stephen Graham's vividly personal pilgrimages, or the Life of Burton, or a volume of Keats, or a book on tapestry or English water-colour art. The humorists had a shelf to themselves in this varied and very human family of books, such masters of sly joy as Neil Lyons. If there was one thing Beal hated it was pedantry, especially the pedantry of superior people who will deign to write essays on the dead but lift a pompous leg over the living.⁶⁴

The passage also substantiates Belgion's opinion, that the cultivated English enjoyed travel books, evidently a manly taste along with the oak shelves. However, in two respects these ideal bookshelves differ significantly from the bookshelves of Deeping's future heroes. In the 1930s it would be difficult to imagine him finding a place for anything on psychology. 'The much abused Jung'⁶⁵ will be the only psychologist to survive in the library of one of Deeping's heroes. Freud, Adler and Havelock Ellis are vigorously dismissed.⁶⁶ Modernist or avant-garde literature, however, is never entirely dismissed. It is interesting to note the ambiguous treatment of D. H. Lawrence in *Smith* (1932). Lawrence's frank treatment of sexuality seems to attract Deeping but he is finally dismissed as a dreamer. In the first thirty years of Deeping's fifty year career he seemed to see himself as a modern. In *The First World War* an injured friend of Anthony Powell's was to find that the doctor on duty, Warwick Deeping, was to sneer at his patient's taste for Milton as 'strange old-fashioned stuff'.⁶⁷ At

⁶⁴ *The Secret Sanctuary* (1923), p. 14.

⁶⁵ *Blind Man's Year* (1937), p. 219.

⁶⁶ Freud and Adler in *The Memoir of St Johns* to be discussed in my next chapter. In *Fantasia* (1939), p. 121, the blackmailing villain hides his safe containing letters from the liberated manageress of a holiday development, with whom he has had an affair, behind 'half a dozen copies of Havelock Ellis'. It is implied that such works have provided a spuriously intellectual justification for his licentious behaviour. In the same novel the new woman (vulnerable to blackmail because of her promiscuity) 'belonged to a Freudian generation, and was all for self-analysis, and catching complexes as our grandmothers caught fleas', p. 227.

⁶⁷ Anthony Powell, *To Keep the Ball Rolling* (Heinemann, 1982; Penguin, 1983), p. 157.

this point, Deeping's perception of those of high cultural caste was of those who favoured 'stuffy' old authors rather than those who championed new ones. He seems to align himself with those open to the new and modern. The idealised reader has catholic tastes and certainly is not afraid of new science or literature. The shift in Deeping's attitudes, from the relatively open and excited response to the new in the 1920s to the bitter distrust of the late 1930s certainly parallels the retreat of the great missionary of the modern in popular visual arts, Frank Pick, who in the 1930s turned his back on his great projects in championing modern art on the London Underground in favour of the "old foundations" of good craftsmanship.⁶⁸ In 1927 Pick wrote 'The public like something above their heads, if only it is attainable.'⁶⁹ It is implied that the reader in Deeping's idealised portrait would have given a respectful sniff at the new rather than assume it was the work of 'a howling highbrow'⁷⁰ but nowhere in his later work does he present himself as an author who will assist his readers to aspire to 'something above their heads'. This change in how he conceived of his role in relation to the new is paralleled by the gradual death of the concept of a lower than highbrow audience who might aspire to highbrow taste. By the time Deeping wrote his novels of the late 1930s bitterly contesting the notion that the highbrow was in fact higher in value than the middlebrow, the word 'middlebrow' had almost ceased to be used neutrally; it was nearly always a term of disparagement.

Unsavoury companions

Deeping had some company amongst those popular authors who claimed high seriousness for the middlebrow in the 1920s. The four writers who most sincerely flattered a reader's

⁶⁸ Michael T. Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Inter-War England* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 154.

⁶⁹ Frank Pick quoted in Saler, p. 100, from LTM B6 Box 4, Copy A, 'Underground Posters'.

⁷⁰ *Fantasia* (1939), p. 192.

delusion that s/he was capable of thinking seriously about the world were Deeping, Gilbert Frankau, A. S. M. Hutchinson and H. M. Tomlinson. They all affronted the sensibilities of those who insisted that the middlebrow reader had no right to concern herself with issues beyond the comprehension of the petite bourgeoisie or the suburban masses.

Q. D. Leavis groups Frankau with Deeping as working 'to debase the emotional currency by touching grossly on fine issues'.⁷¹ However, she persuasively characterises Frankau's strident defence of his values as 'the business man's self-dramatisation'. She sees him substituting for Corelli's and Barclay's piety 'another set of strings, the loyalties of the club, the regiment, and the Public School'.⁷² *Peter Jackson, Cigar Merchant: A Romance of Married Life* (1922) attracted the same degree of venom from Q. D. Leavis as Deeping's novels and even the less agitated A. C. Ward described its successors as 'hectic and unsavoury'.⁷³ Frankau, with the confidence of his class, conducted a very public defence of the middlebrow.⁷⁴ It would be unproblematic to see the way Frankau resolves the mental and sexual crisis of the shell-shocked Peter Jackson as supporting a bourgeois hegemony. The wife temporarily assumes economic control of the family by establishing a chicken farm and, after applying to her father, an illustrious specialist in neurasthenia, is advised to act like a whore in the bedroom when she has finished tending to the chickens. Once restored to mental and sexual health the husband takes over the running of the chicken farm his wife has established. There is little in Frankau's fiction to challenge the notion that 'the middlebrow genre of fiction ... produced best-sellers that ... offered an interpretation of reality based on the upholding of middle-class world views'.⁷⁵

⁷¹ *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 67.

⁷² *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 198.

⁷³ *The Nineteen-Twenties*, p. 194.

⁷⁴ See the previous discussion, in this chapter, of the response of Ivor Brown and Leonard Woolf to his views.

⁷⁵ Rosa Maria Bracco, *Betwixt and Between* (History Department: The University of

A. S. M. Hutchinson's *If Winter Comes* (1921), like *Sorrell and Son* and *Peter Jackson*, deals with a crisis of masculinity. It appears to challenge conventional morality. However it does not trouble Leavis as much as the work of Frankau and Deeping. Hutchinson's work, like that of Wells, is done 'with a decent honesty'.⁷⁶ In spite of what A. C. Ward calls 'its fantastically bad literary style', Hutchinson's novel seems generally to have been regarded as 'innocent' because of its 'patent sincerity'.⁷⁷ (It also endorses the superior moral refinement of the upper class woman who is the object of the school-teacher's affections.) Deeping's style is more frequently grotesque and patently as sincere as Hutchinson's but is ignored entirely by a commentator such as A. C. Ward. (Graham Greene is the only commentator to comment in any detail on Deeping's style.)⁷⁸ Compton Mackenzie was frankly baffled by the appeal of Hutchinson's book to women readers and accounts for the success of best-sellers in the 1920s to the American epidemic of vigorous marketing, 'an influenza'.⁷⁹ However, the triumph of the bookish hero in *If Winter Comes*, in first challenging convention by taking in a fallen woman but still surviving the social storm to marry the local lady of the manor, seems a gender reversal of many of the romantic fantasies in which the bookish heroine outshines her more confident and extrovert competitors.⁸⁰ Hutchinson may have taken his story seriously but his autobiography suggests that he was surprised by its success.⁸¹ He never challenges the place to which he was assigned in the cultural hierarchy.

Melbourne, 1990), p. 75.

⁷⁶ *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 70.

⁷⁷ *The Nineteen-Twenties*, p. 195.

⁷⁸ 'Fiction', *The Spectator*, 22 September 1933, p. 380.

⁷⁹ Compton Mackenzie, *Literature in My Time* (Rich and Cowan, 1933), p. 222.

⁸⁰ There is more to be said about the way in which the inter-war masculinist fantasies reverse the gender roles of nineteenth century fantasies of female fulfilment but that is not the object of the present study.

⁸¹ A. S. M. Hutchinson, *Bring Back the Days* (Michael Joseph, 1958)

H. M. Tomlinson's venom and violence comes closer to Deeping's than any other author's.

His novel *Gallion's Reach*, the bestseller of 1927, asserts the value of his hero's lonely and tragic masculine dignity in contrast to the feminised metropolitan modernists who engulf the woman he loves. However, a discussion of his fantasies would demand a consideration of notions of gender and Englishness rather than the processes of cultural classification.

Tomlinson has been called 'a poor man's Conrad',⁸² and the bulk of his novel is concerned with bleak and exotic adventures in the sea and jungle where the author's masculinity is tested by the uncertainties of the terrain and the mysterious otherness of alien tribes and exotic women. His fiction challenges some of the stereotypes of middlebrow fiction but the exotic nature of his locations and a relatively assured tone perhaps explains why his novels slipped under the radar of the *faux bon* detectors. The quality of his fiction is not seen as contentious in the inter-war period. However, hackles rise at the mention of Deeping's name in a wide variety of texts in a way that appears to confirm his own sense of the vulnerability of his authorial status.

For the compelling quality of Deeping's fiction is the way it focuses on this unease about the status of his writing. Responses to Deeping's novels and the distinctions made within them seem to be generated chiefly by two emotions: embarrassment and resentment. The unease these linked emotions signal is chiefly social, for Deeping seems, despite his sentimentalisation of 'the inner man', preoccupied less with individual psychology than the anxieties of the individual within a group. Writers as diverse as Graham Greene, John Betjeman and Simon Blumenfield⁸³ use the possession of 'a' Deeping in order to characterise someone as part of the passive 'herd'. This suggests the embarrassment that might be felt by a reader who aspired to be part of the 'sensitive minority' at possessing one of his works. Even another 'middlebrow'

⁸² D.Y. Morgan (1919-2001), pers. comm. to Mary Grover in July 1998.

⁸³ I discuss these references more fully in my last chapter.

writer, Monica Redlich, characterises the shallowness of her heroine by her compulsion to read 'the new Warwick Deeping' instead of getting on with her studies of English Literature.⁸⁴ When Q. D. Leavis included Deeping amongst her list of 'the faux bon'⁸⁵ she was revealing not only where she placed Deeping in her hierarchy of the 'bon' but also where she placed herself in relation to the 'faux'. The Scrutiny group's assumption of the role as guardian of a literary and cultural gold standard has been well researched.⁸⁶ Less fully examined has been how the middlebrow authors and their readership responded to a growing sense that their tastes were not only inadequate by standards regarded as absolute by such groups as the Scrutineers, but actually regarded as a threat to them. The isolated wife of a commercial salesman who spoke to me of the way in which Deeping's novels alleviated the loneliness she felt in a remote Cornish village amongst her social 'inferiors',⁸⁷ would have been astonished to read of Q. D. Leavis's conviction that a taste for Deeping was impinging 'directly on the world of the [sensitive] minority, menacing the standards by which they live.'⁸⁸ My informant also perceived herself as one of a minority threatened by sub-standard people. Many of the consumers of Deeping's fiction, 'consumed' by their own sense of economic and social vulnerability, would have been incredulous of the notion that they were powerful enough collectively to threaten the culture of England by reading the 'superior' fiction of Warwick Deeping.

⁸⁴ Monica Redlich, *Cheap Return* (Hamish Hamilton, 1934), p. 45.

⁸⁵ *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 39.

⁸⁶ Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of Scrutiny* (NLB, 1979).

⁸⁷ From an interview with Mrs Mallett in Darwin House, Sheffield 28.03.97. She was born in 13.15.06 and read Deeping avidly in the thirties. 'The little grocer's there used to have a change-the-book every Monday morning ... I had as much as they would let me take and I was anxious to get there on a Monday morning. I don't know what other people did [read] because you don't mix with other people'. She and her only son took turns in reading to each other throughout his childhood. He eventually became a High Sheriff of Sheffield.

⁸⁸ *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 67.

Deeping's novels are apposite in examining both the vulnerability and power of such consumers and the way in which cultural distinctions in Britain between the wars were part of the struggles for dominance in economic and social spheres. The narratives are explicitly concerned with social validity and self-justification and the rhetoric is both defensive and aggressive, like that of the writers who dismiss them. Deeping and his detractors are condemned to define themselves in opposition to the enemy yet both sets of protagonists assert their 'freedom' and their value as 'individuals'. The assertion of the legitimacy of middlebrow tastes and values is bound to be undermined by the reluctance for members of the economic groups from which these readers were principally drawn to acknowledge their membership of any economic, social or class group.

Conclusion

The repackaging by Q. D. Leavis of 'simplicity' and 'ordinariness' as simple-mindedness and banality is a devaluation of the pretensions of middlebrow readers that the present generation has tended to endorse. One of the ironies of this research project is that the most likely reader of 'a Deeping' now is the cultural historian, a member of the very kind of establishment which sought to undermine his original readers' assertion of his value.

Of course Deeping, himself, lost his battle for cultural legitimacy as the use of his name in *The Information* illustrates.⁸⁹ But one of the uses of embarrassment to a cultural historian is the way it signals cultural change. Not only did Deeping assert the dignity of the middlebrow; he also challenged genre boundaries. On the one hand his novels seem to lie within the feminised genealogy of writers of sentiment but they also belong within the more masculinised tradition of 'the roman à thèse'. The fuzziness of the genre boundaries of his work, the tension between

⁸⁹ See the reference on p. 32 of this chapter.

the feminised and masculine narratorial positions in his narratives and his shifting sense of how he should address his readers all signal how fertile a field his novels are in tracing the provisional, contested and brittle nature of the cultural distinctions being made in the period.

Deeping's contemporaries used a triadic classification of culture: the low, middle and highbrow. The fact that he never 'takes on' the lowbrow in his novels suggests that he is secure that he will not be classified as such. The binary opposition with whose terms he struggles is that between the middle and high brow. Deeping seeks to evade classification altogether with increasingly wild gestures. I suspect that the extravagance of those gestures suggests not that they are mechanistically determined by historical context (as Althusser might have perceived them) but that they are driven by successive responses to a complex set of constraints and denials. His novels are full of contradictions, mutually incompatible assertions. In my subsequent chapters I will identify the pressures he was under to make such contradictory assertions. This will inevitably involve a discussion of the social, cultural and historical context from which these constructs derive and the readership which 'bought' them. My discussion will be governed by the awareness that we can never be sure what it is that a reader was 'buying'. Was it the illusion of coherence? The value system itself? Book jackets, reviews and above all, the relation of these to the way the novels are constructed and developed, give us a sense of what the reader thought he or she was buying. Deeping tried to construct a version of his life (through his brief autobiographical statements, his house and his non-literary pursuits) which may relate to the philosophy he thought his reader identified in his books.

Many other bestselling authors, Edgar Wallace, Dornford Yates or Edgar Rice Burroughs for example, maintained a constant flow of novels but their tone and the way the values within the novel are constructed seem to remain fairly consistent. An understanding of the nature of the

commodity they produced has also remained fairly consistent. All three, unlike Deeping, are still requested in secondhand bookshops.⁹⁰ These authors have dated but in a way that is entirely different to the way Deeping has dated; their period qualities possibly constitute part of their charm despite the fact that many of the attitudes (racism, homophobia and snobbery, for example) are as evident in their works as they are in Deeping's. They attract both the general reader and the academic in the way he does not. The pace and plotting of an Edgar Wallace still earns the respect of thriller readers; for some readers it is possibly the very lack of apology for his unabashed snobbery that lends to Dornford Yates a period charm⁹¹ and Disney's Tarzan has contributed to the cult of Edgar Rice Burroughs.⁹² Modern readers, familiar with the genres within which Wallace, Yates and Burroughs wrote, may read them as period pieces but may also derive entertainment from them that is not unlike that experienced by their original readers. Wallace and Burroughs have also attracted the attention of academics working on post-colonial, gender and feminist issues. Yet, as a spokesman for Rare and Racy (a secondhand bookshop in Sheffield) says, Deeping is 'a dog' while the other three are not.⁹³ *Sorrell and Son*, taken more seriously than any of the above texts both by its author and by its readership seems now to be 'of his period but 'embarrassingly' so.

Deeping's commercial success for half a century, and the spiritual value attributed to his most popular novels, made him 'visible' to a 'readership' which felt the need to engage in the

⁹⁰ The fashion for Dornford Yates seems to be passing, perhaps because he is the only one of the three not a precursor of any current product of popular culture.

⁹¹ The author of the UK Bibliography of Dornford Yates on the site sponsored by 'A Book for all Reasons', <http://www.abfar.co.uk/bibliogs/dy_bib.html>, emphasises the 'light and humorous' style and the charm of the snobbery: 'it is easy to lose oneself in the idyll that he creates'.

⁹² See the numerous Tarzan web pages on the internet.

⁹³ The bookseller used this expression to denote an author who would not sell. His discussion of the reasons why the other three authors maintained their place on his shelves was very helpful.

process of evaluation and therefore of interpretation. My examination of Deeping's novels is determined by my preoccupation with the interplay on the one hand: between Deeping, the implied authoritative author, and his 'dominated' readership; on the other, between Deeping and the cultural hegemony which sought to dominate and devalue him. To understand the increasing hysteria of Deeping's debate with the off-stage 'Other' it is useful to consider him as the purveyor of an artefact whose value is threatened by a group whose cultural capital is considerably higher than his own.

There are at least three interpretive communities⁹⁴ that Deeping is addressing in his novels and the way in which he interpellates⁹⁵ each is governed by anxieties which compel him into using frequently coercive forms of rhetoric. My next chapter will deal a readership of one, the author himself. Deeping himself, as this next, biographical chapter suggests, found constructing himself as an author problematic. His problems are closely connected with the feminised status of the word and the book in the class from which he came. Throughout his work he asserts the superiority of deeds over words yet he was a compulsive writer of books whose commercial success provided him with the money to establish and project himself as the 'doer', handyman and farmer. Another irony which haunts his work is that although he ignored his own family's origins in the brewing trade, he spent his life in trade himself, selling commodities which he produced, not in the leisurely fashion of a member of the landed gentry to which he hinted he

⁹⁴ I use 'interpretative communities' in the sense suggested by Stanley Fish: 'interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting the properties and assigning their intentions.' This definition is from Stanley Fish's, 'Interpreting the *Variorum*', *Is There a Text in the Class*, repr. in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge, p. 327.

⁹⁵ The passage in which Louis Althusser explains what is involved when ideology interpellates a subject is extracted from 'Ideology and the state', *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, (New Left Books, 1977) trans. B. Brewster, in *Modern Literary Theory*, ed. by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, (Edward Arnold, 1992), pp. 54-62. For my purposes 'interpellating' means 'addressing the reader in ways which imply assumptions about the identity and possible response of that reader'.

belonged, but at the fevered pace (frequently two books a year), of the industrialist. Trained as a doctor, like his much-admired father, he turned his back on the profession and, probably dependent on his father's financial support, initially set out to earn 'real' money from writing. Deeping implies that consumers of his novels share his own ambivalent attitude to the process of producing them. An important contradiction which this highly conscientious author attempted to resolve was that he was adopting a tone of high seriousness for an audience for whom reading and writing were not essentially serious occupations. His anxiety about this is particularly evident in the novels of the 1920s which often place the writer at the centre of the book, seeking reassurance from the older man who is a touchstone of morality and 'common-sense'. In *Old Pybus* (1928), the aspiring author rushes back from London with his manuscript in his natty modern car to receive a blessing for both novel and car from his long-lost grandfather, now a 'boots' in a hotel.

Deeping obviously did not alienate his readership in the thirties by his insistent exploration of this topic. The passages in which Deeping deals with questions of the value of the popular author seem to have been dictated by his need to persuade himself that his vision was coherent. The potential embarrassment of modern readers is at the author's overt vulnerability, at the nakedness of the confusion which he attempts to clothe. This embarrassment points another irony which is that the pathos Deeping works so effectively in his most successful novels, like *Sorrell and Son* (1925), *Old Pybus* (1928) and *Old Wine and New* (1932), is inadvertently created by the spectacle of the author enmeshed in the net of his own conflicting aspirations and his fears about the validity of writing any kind of fiction. A sense of the inauthenticity and triviality of any kind of writing may have been what drives Deeping, and so many other middlebrow authors, to assert not their verbal skill but their freedom from the need to acquire such skill because it was not the author 'who had set these words on paper, but

some other intelligence, a shadowy communicator speaking by and through him. Life was that communicator.⁹⁶

In his novels with a contemporary setting Deeping was to insist on the faithfulness of his stories to life as his readers knew it. His heroes responded to a hostile economic environment whose hardships many of the detractors of the middlebrow refused to acknowledge. By dramatising the stoic patience and detachment of these 'forgotten' men, Deeping attempted to establish himself as a source of moral and spiritual wisdom. To most modern readers, these claims would be compromised by his impatient venomousness and the embarrassingly intimate quality of his relationship with his readers. This intimacy is grounded in the extent to which the novels are dialogues with himself (his primary readership of one) but it contributed to the appeal of the novels to his original readers (thousands of them) who in their masses desired to be admitted into an exclusive world of 'ordinary' people, deriving a sense of personal value from significant intimate relationships with 'the chosen few' rather than from any sense of belonging to a dominant or supportive group.

One of my most useful correspondents has been Stanley Brain. He was only in his seventies and a passionate admirer of Deeping's novels. He not only identifies passages he calls 'Words of Wisdom' in the novels but has also collected anecdotal evidence about Deeping's life which seem to corroborate the image he has of the author of the novels. The first of Mr Brain's many jobs in the service sector was as a bell-boy in The Savoy Hotel, the same kind of job in which Deeping so often places his war veterans. The inspiration gained from the novels is reflected in the almost personal relationship Brain has with their author: 'I always imagined Warwick Deeping to be a very happily married man who possibly "gloated" over his wife. I may be

⁹⁶ *Old Wine and New* (1932), p. 270.

completely wrong but that's how he appears to me.'⁹⁷ Though he seems to have avoided literary journalism and was reported to declare that 'attending literary dinners' was 'one of his aversions',⁹⁸ Deeping still managed to communicate to his admiring public a biography consonant with the image it received of him from the novels.

It is this readership, consistently disparaged by those on the right and the left, that forms the second interpretive community, the community which Deeping is overtly addressing. Their loyalty to him grew gradually from the commercial success of his first novel *Uther and Igraine* in 1903, peaking in the late 1920s and early 1930s with the success of the group of novels dealing with ageing and economically vulnerable heroes. A man who felt a failure at school and seemed to make no mark in the medical profession, either when training or in the First World War, was more comfortable addressing a class whose position was inferior to his own. It is possibly this consciousness of class superiority that enables him to establish his rhetoric: vatic, authoritative and assertive.

The third interpretive community is that of his detractors, many of whom would never read these attacks upon them, thus adding to the author's sense of authorial impotence.⁹⁹ In his novels he frequently, after the phenomenal success of *Sorrell and Son*, abuses the detractors who, as he complained so bitterly, never read his books. There is a curious attempt to wound an enemy that is hostile by its absence. The resentment aroused by the contempt with which he was held by most of the literary establishment increasingly defines the tone of his novels in the early 1930s when the success of nearly every book is flaunted in the face of his critics. Writers

⁹⁷ Letter from Stan Brain to Mary Grover, 14 April 1998.

⁹⁸ 'Warwick Deeping: Author of Old Pybus', *Wilson Bulletin*, April, 1929, p. 562.

⁹⁹ See the story, 'Mr Verulam's Weekend', in the anthology, *Two in a Train* (1935).

of every political and artistic persuasion use him to place characters shallow, sentimental and lacking in engagement with the 'real' world.

There is another interpretative community, neither implicitly nor explicitly addressed by Deeping: his readership in Nazi Germany. The only other research done on Deeping is a thesis by Dr Ingrid Wotschke of Magdeburg University.¹⁰⁰ The thesis, entitled *Das Bild des Engleschen Menschen in Romanen G. W. Deeping's* (University of Halle 1969), is a survey of seventeen of Deeping's novels which deal with the notion of the English Gentleman. Dr Wotschke had the subject imposed upon her in the 1960s by a supervisor who defected to the West while she was writing it. She then became the object of political suspicion and failed her PhD in 1969, only to gain it in 1972 once she had introduced passages of Marxist discourse which, in her opinion, had no organic relationship to her discussion. She said that Deeping was one of the most popular English novelists in Germany before the Second World War, partly because he was so widely available. The translation and publication of many of his novels in Germany at a time when the translation of foreign books was tightly controlled by the Reichsschriftumskammer, set up by Goebbels in 1933 to supervise the production of culture, suggests further political and cultural implications of Deeping's work. There are elements in the way Deeping constructs his world which can be rather loosely described as fascist.¹⁰¹ The lecturer in English literature who inflicted Deeping upon Dr Wotschke in the 1960s was a genuine admirer of Deeping's works, presumably encountering them in the 30s when they were widely available in Germany.

¹⁰⁰ Dr Wotschke has been extremely helpful, not only in sending me the thesis but in talking fully about the background to it.

¹⁰¹ These are discussed in my fourth chapter which deals with individualism and class.

The way that Deeping's rhetoric does or does not respond to change during the 1930s and 1940s illustrates how important it is that my analysis of his cultural significance should be diachronic. Not only does his construction of Englishness and its relation to 'the foreigner' shift in response to historical events and social change but so does his construction of the feminine. During the 1920s and 1930s the images presented of powerful capable women from the lower middle class who support the vulnerable hero are increasingly replaced by more threatening images of powerful career women from whom the hero has to shrink. He rebuilds his fragile masculinity by breeding chickens, never children. The contradictory nature of many of these constructs not only reflect the incoherence of the 'common-sense' of the ordinary man who is the implied reader, they also reflect the struggle Deeping made to adapt to constantly changing evaluations and constructs within his own world and that of his consumers. It is here that we find the deepest contradiction of all. Deeping is introduced by the clergyman who asked him to write his 'memories' of the parish church where his father taught, as 'a keen observer and student of human values'. However, the observer in his novels is in no way detached and the tone is not that of the student, but of the teacher. The author and his heroes see 'through' the alcoholic, the modern woman, the homosexual; the perception of these examples of humanity as 'unreal' legitimises the violence which so often eliminates them (the wayward bus or an impulsive blow from the 'gentle' hero).

This shaping or deforming version of reality is, of course, like every version of reality, a personal and social construct. The shape of the narrative and the author's tone reveal that the author's 'realism' is another conjuring trick, used to flatter both the prejudices of the author and a certain readership. Deeping constructed myths more self-consciously than most of his contemporaries (except, perhaps D. H. Lawrence). However his skill as an author was in presenting this personal construct as based on detached 'scientific' observation. Of course,

there were those who (in Deeping's own defensive phrase) labelled him 'The Sentimentalist of the Slums',¹⁰² but it is an interesting reflection on the age that so many people felt that Deeping's world was theirs, that his reality reflected theirs. However it is his rhetoric, attempting to persuade the 'ordinary' reader that to be ordinary is to be both superior to and more 'real' than those in a more privileged social position, that must have been exceptionally persuasive at a time when the value of the individual was under threat throughout the world. I will examine where Deeping leads his readers, having endowed them with a sense of the exclusivity of the ordinary, common-sense sage. I think that we will find that he tucks them, like his heroes, into private utopias separate from a world which will continue to ignore and despise them. No wonder 'everybody read *Sorrell and Son*' in 1926, but no wonder that we cannot now echo the words of the relative who told the sister of the adapter of *Sorrell and Son* for Yorkshire Television in 1984 that 'if she read only one book, it should be *Sorrell and Son*'.¹⁰³

¹⁰² The phrase used to denigrate Scarsdale, Deeping's fictional author of the bestseller *Smith*, in *Old Wine and New* (1932), p. 375.

¹⁰³ Rosemary Wilson, pers. comm. to Mary Grover, 11 November 1996.

Chapter Two

‘Simple Simon’?: the strategic functions of biography

Unlike Gilbert Frankau, A. S. M. Hutchinson and Ernest Raymond, his middlebrow contemporaries, Deeping did not seek to justify by publishing an autobiography.¹ Nor did he attract biographers like John Buchan or Edgar Wallace whose works, though dated, still offer narrative pleasures acceptable to a modern reader.² This chapter seeks to construct a short biography of Deeping. The temptation to explore more fully material generously made available by Deeping’s copyright holder, Barbara Nickalls, was great. However the principal purpose of this part of my enquiry was to explore the way in which Deeping represented his life to himself. These representations, in brief autobiographical statements, vignettes of his life in style magazines and the house and garden he created, all reflect his anxieties both to protect and to market his privacy as a writer. The guarded nature of these representations (in marked contrast to Frankau’s flamboyant and accident prone self-dramatisations of himself and his craft) are also in marked contrast to the self-exposure that characterises the way Deeping, in his novels, dramatises the way his fictionalised authors are humiliated. Both biographical and fictional strategies reveal a huge sense of vulnerability.

Only the name can inherit

By dropping his Christian name, George Warwick Deeping may have hoped to construct a buttress against any hint of vulnerability. But the name which, when coined, had caused an

¹ Gilbert Frankau, *Self Portrait : A Novel of his own Life* (Hutchinson, 1940); A.S.M. Hutchinson, *Bring Back the Days* (Michael Joseph, 1958); Ernest Raymond, *Through Literature to Life* (Cassell, 1928) and *Please You, Draw Near: An Autobiography 1922-1968* (Cassell, 1969).

² Susan Charlotte Buchan, *John Buchan: By his Wife and Friends* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1947) and Margaret Lane, *Edgar Wallace: a Biography* (Heinemann, 1938; revised edition, Hamish Hamilton, 1964).

immediately successful author no problems can now provoke mirth even among people who know nothing about the commodity with which it is associated. When Martin Amis was asked why he used Deeping, an author probably unknown to the readers of *The Information* (1990),³ as the epitome of all that was tedious and least worth the attentions of a literary critic, Amis replied that 'The simple answer is that it was all in the name'.⁴ Is it the transparency of the name's pretensions to solid worth and depth that arouses hilarity in a social group which prides itself on its knowingness rather than its earnestness? In his confident dismissiveness Martin Amis echoes the contempt his father felt when he annotated the text of *Sorrell* with 'piss and shit' but the father's judgement was based on having read *Sorrell and Son* and Amis Snr. acknowledged its narrative power: 'Its sensibility was very crude but it delivered'.⁵ Kingsley Amis 'got engaged in the book and stopped writing things' in its margins. The son's amusement at the author's name will, like that of most of his contemporaries, probably be based on ignorance of the texts themselves.

Amusement today, can be triggered 'simply' by the name. Yet this coinage became a brand name which so aptly reflected the nature of the commodity it denoted that 'a Warwick Deeping' was repeatedly used by writers of every 'brow' as a prop to define the character caught reading one. When Derrida tried to redeem Nietzsche's name from its inheritance he called it 'a name of death'. In a less sinister way this is true of the name of any author whose name comes to inscribe a set of values. 'What returns to the name never returns to the living.'⁶ While Deeping was alive he constructed his authorial name, marketed his style of life and then created an authorial persona within his later novels in a bid for the kind of immortality usually

³ Martin Amis, *The Information*, (Fleming, 1995), p. 15 as discussed in my previous chapter.

⁴ Martin Amis, letter to Mary Grover, 16 October 1997.

⁵ Diary of Eric Jacobs for 3 November, 1992, extracts of which appeared under the title 'Amis on writers and writing', *The Sunday Times*, 31 March 1996, p. 2.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, (Schocken, 1985), p. 7.

denied authors so promiscuously industrious.⁷ In examining the ways Deeping fictionalised his own biography, we need to start with the name under which he wrote his first novel.

The transparent solidity of that name tells us a great deal about the uncertainties of the readers to whom Deeping was attempting to appeal; its lack of effectiveness today tells us much about the kinds of confidence implied by our distaste for transparency and scepticism about any claim to solid worth. The stigma of naïveté that the name now attracts was almost flaunted by Deeping. He dramatises the scorn heaped upon him by the highbrow in the novels about aspiring writers, and represents the so-called naïveté as honest straightforwardness which he markets in defiance of the tide of contempt rising around him. But in 'marketing' that naïveté and simplicity, Deeping demonstrates how acutely aware he was of the nature of his readership; in fostering their shared identity with the author as 'simple', 'common-sense' and exposed to the ridicule of those claiming cultural and moral superiority to both author and reader, he claimed kinship with his readership. He and they were to be stigmatised by the 'highbrow'. His significant function within the complex and often confused way in which the highbrow constructed the middlebrow can be illustrated by the inaccuracies of the way the left-wing author, Simon Blumenfeld, used Deeping's place on a bookshelf (along with Ethel Mannin, David Garnett, Arthur Symons, Shakespeare, Dickens, Shaw, Wells, Macaulay) to characterise the owner of such a selection of novels as a reader desirous of forgetting that 'there were such mundane things on earth as employment queues for example, and labour colonies, and filthy East End slums'.⁸

⁷ Dickens, often invoked by Deeping, may have been a model.

⁸ Simon Blumenfeld, *Jew Boy* (Jonathan Cape, 1935; Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), p. 133.

The potency of Deeping's fantasies depends upon the reader not forgetting what the hero is escaping from; the dole queue and the East End slum frequently threatens to engulf the identity of Deeping's heroes. The escape is frequently offered explicitly as a route out of the dole queue, for example in *Sorrell and Son* (1925), *Old Wine and New* (1932) and *Smith* (1932). Even George Orwell, who as a bookseller must have sullied his hands with hundreds of Deepings,⁹ uses his name in both *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *The Clergyman's Daughter* to brand a particular kind of reader but fails to identify accurately the kind of fantasy being marketed. He notes in 'Bookshop Memories' that Deeping was second only to Dell in popularity but seems to deduce from this fact that he offers a comparable kind of escape from the drab world of decay which both fascinated and disgusted Orwell himself.¹⁰ In 'Inside the Whale' Orwell denies Deeping's popularity any contemporary significance by lumping the 'Barries and Deepings and Dells' as part of 'a huge tribe' who 'simply don't notice what is happening.'¹¹ Although Deeping's historical romances may seem to have very little to do with anything, let alone the period in which they are set, the novels with contemporary settings not only deal with the threat of unemployment but with: social work and medicine in the inner city slums (*Roper's Row* (1929), *The Impudence of Youth* (1946) and *Paradise Place* (1949)), gender ambiguity (*The Return of the Petticoat* (1909)), alcoholism (*A Woman's War* (1907), *The Woman at the Door* (1937) and *The Dark House* (1941)), euthanasia (*Sorrell and Son* (1925) and *The Dark House* (1941)), wife abuse and justifiable homicide (*The Woman at the Door* (1937)), shell shock, (*The Secret Sanctuary* (1923)), rape (*The White Gate* (1913)) and the pollution of the civic water supply (*Sincerity* (1912)). The list could be extended in a way

⁹ In 1934 during his time at the Booklovers' Corner, 1 South End Road.

¹⁰ George Orwell, 'Bookshop Memories', *Fortnightly*, November 1936 repr. in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Vol. 1, An Age Like This, 1920-1940*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Penguin, 1970), pp. 375.

¹¹ 'Inside the Whale', *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*, 1940, repr. in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Vol. 1, An Age Like This, 1920-1940*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Penguin, 1970), pp. 570.

that would be beside the point if we were trying to characterise either Barrie or Dell, Orwell's other examples of authors who 'don't notice what is happening'. It is unlikely that Storm Jameson would have urged Knopf to publish *Sorrell and Son* if she had judged it to have a purely escapist appeal. Deeping's agent, Curtis Brown, knew that Deeping's appeal was partly as a 'problem' novelist. In his letter to Knopf, Brown points out that *Sorrell and Son* ends with 'a bang at the end that will probably cause a good deal of discussion in America.'¹² However, Orwell's inclusion of Deeping with the Barries and Dells in a 'tribe' of fantasists betrays the evolutionist colouring of Orwell's thought, characteristic of any discussion of cultural hierarchies between the wars.

Both Orwell and Blumenfeld are typical of most of Deeping's highbrow critics in that they are convinced that they know to what species Deeping belongs without having read any of his books. This was to rankle with Deeping so deeply that books like *Old Wine and New* (1932) and the short story, 'Mr Verulam's Week-end' (1935), dramatise the reviewer's failure to read the books he dismisses.¹³ Deeping seeks to persuade his readers that they are superior in judgement to his critics, because they are actually reading his texts. The readers of the *Daily Mail* and *Evening News* in the late 1920s and 1930s must have been so persuaded because the Fiction Editor at that time, Cecil Hunt, lists Deeping as one of a group of authors that demonstrate that, as editor, he had not been guilty of promoting 'tripe'.

Now my authors in serial and short story pages included O. Henry, Daudet, Milne, Wells, Wodehouse, Buchan, Coppard, Manhood, Margery Allingham, Pirandello, Sabatini, A. E. W. Mason, "Sapper", Wills Crofts, Dorothy L. Sayers, Frankau, Noel Coward, Wheatley, Deeping, Oppenheim, E. H. Young, Kathleen Wallace, Agatha Christie, Ronald Knox, and many others of similar distinction. Any of these authors would have been judged by the critics worthy writers for their library list. All the scripts I published were written as books,

¹² Curtis Brown to Alfred. A. Knopf, 14 October 1925 (The Knopf Archive).

¹³ *Two in a Train* (1935).

not as serials, and subsequently appeared in the first planned form. So much for the taunt of “tripe”.¹⁴

For the audience for which Hunt is writing the ‘branding’ process works to Deeping’s advantage. Three of these authors were, for Q. D. Leavis, the falsest of the ‘faux bon’ (Frankau, Deeping and Sayers), but Hunt nevertheless parades them as lending distinction to his taste as Literary Editor and to the *Mail*’s readers as consumers. Even Orwell, in 1935, acknowledges that Deeping had to be accorded more cultural status than the American popular author Gene Stratton Porter, for example. When Dorothy, Orwell’s eponymous Clergyman’s Daughter, cycles out to the Mothers’ Union tea, her many cares include the fact that there were no more Stratton Porters to read to these ill-educated women. She briefly considers Warwick Deeping only to dismiss him as ‘too highbrow perhaps’.¹⁵ Orwell, aspiring to offer a different kind of critique of contemporary cultural life, offers his readers the calling card of his status as a commentator of distinction: a mocking reference not only to Deeping but to the readers who suppose that, by reading him, they are superior to the uneducated who merely read Stratton Porter.

To his detractors, Deeping needed to remain ‘just the name’, a name with which to evoke an inferior species of culture. But to his admirers his name became synonymous not only with their literary taste, but, after the success of *Sorrell and Son* and the subsequent focus on the way in which Deeping lived rather than what he wrote, with a desirable style of living and set of values: both were identified as admirably English. This link with Englishness is reflected in the naming, in 1934 of the armed anti-submarine trawler, *The Warwick Deeping*.¹⁶ A more recent legacy of this commodification of the perceived Englishness of ‘Warwick Deeping’ is

¹⁴ Cecil Hunt, *Ink in My Veins* (Robert Hale, 1948), p. 71.

¹⁵ George Orwell, *A Clergyman’s Daughter* (Gollancz, 1935; Penguin 1964), p. 262.

¹⁶ Letter from J. R. Cranny to Mr Geoffrey Gillam, 21 August 2000.

the decision of Declan Kelly Homes to name their modest new estate of mews and 'cottage style' courtyard housing in Ottershaw, Surrey, 'Warwick Deeping'. The name, according to the present agent who had never heard of Deeping, conjures up a sense of age, 'a nice, rustic, old-world feel to it with nooks and crannies.' The estate is semi-rural; perhaps 'Deeping' suggests that the Memorial Field opposite is more 'deeply' rural than it first appears.¹⁷ Still a name to conjure with.

When George Warwick Deeping published his first novel, *Uther and Igraine* (1903), he replaced his Christian name with his mother's maiden name to create Warwick Deeping, a name which may sound excessively solid today but which at least two reviewers originally thought suggested a female author.¹⁸ Perhaps 'George' was abandoned because it failed to evoke the dreams suggested by the Arthurian title and pre-Raphaelite foliage on the cover of the handsomely produced romance. 'Warwick', on the other hand, has both the chivalrous connotations of the castle of the King-maker and the undisputed Englishness of its position in what the Tourist Board now call, euphemistically, the Heart of England. Deeping's forebears did indeed come from the Midlands, not from Warwickshire, with its associations with Shakespeare's forest of Arden, but from Newark in Nottinghamshire. In Newark the name Warwick is still well known because of its connection with the brewing firm, Warwick and Richardson's, successfully expanded by Deeping's great uncle Richard Warwick.¹⁹ Although Deeping continued to visit his relatives in Newark until the later years of his life,²⁰ Newark, also geographically in 'the heart of England', was not represented in his novels, unusual in an

¹⁷ Simon Stone, estate agent at Curchod Estate Agents, Ottershaw, 30 March 2001.

¹⁸ A reviewer of his first novel, *Uther and Igraine* (1903) was uncertain of his gender (*The Star*, 7 November 1903, Mrs Deeping's scrap-book).

¹⁹ Tim Warner, 'Novelist mentioned family brewing background', *Newark Advertiser*, 19 March 1999, p. 32.

²⁰ Midge Cuthbert, niece of Deeping's cousin (William Arthur Warwick), in conversation with Mary Grover, 1 November 1997.

author who let no other part of his life go to waste. When he does describe a Midlands town, the rain-soaked 'Navestock' in *Sincerity* (1912), it is a squabbling and divided community of ignorant working classes and exploitative middle classes. His only reference to his successful relatives in the brewing trade is to persuade his readers of the inferior quality of the hero's mother in *Valour* (1918) by reference to her gross materialism and wealth derived from her family's business interests in tanning, hops and malt.²¹ His name, his autobiographical statements and his novels were constructed to establish Deeping as profoundly English. Of course it was a partial and limited kind of Englishness but the rhetoric of the narrator attempts to persuade the reader that what is being described is 'the only Englishness' worth identifying yourself with or worth fighting for. The authority of this narrator is created by a rhetoric of the sage and visionary to which the surname 'Deeping' contributes. It lends an aura of profundity to the popular fiction being marketed. For his readers, the name 'Warwick Deeping' may have reflected both the 'common sense' and 'privileged sense' that Deeping's narrator assumes. The name was not a naive construction; it was a skilful platform for Deeping's aspirations as spiritual guide as well as best-selling novelist.

As we work with the facts of Deeping's life as we know them, reading the autobiographical articles which recycled the same limited number of biographical details, looking at the photographs of himself, his wife and his garden, and encountering what seem to be thinly fictionalised versions of his own experience in his novels, it is clear that we are dealing with a master of marketing. The bespectacled and bow-tied author who looks out at the reader of *The Wilson Bulletin* is the epitome of reliability.²² Like Tolkien's hobbit Deeping is inseparable from his pipe. He is often pictured alongside the pipe-rack that he made himself.

²¹ *Valour* (1918), p. 6.

²² Anon., 'Warwick Deeping: Author of Old Pybus', *Wilson Bulletin*, April 1929, p. 562.

Deeping frequently implies that, unlike 'bookish' authors who attend the literary dinners to which he has 'an aversion', he is creating worlds so close to 'real' life that they are scarcely fictional.²³ Their moral authority is rooted in the persona of the author living 'a regular, secluded life, cherishing his garden and his golf.'²⁴ The perceived realism of the contemporary novels also contributes to the sense that Deeping merely transcribed what he observed. Geoffrey Gillam, secretary of The Warwick Deeping Appreciation Society, has written an article that demonstrates how thinly Deeping fictionalises apparently trivial circumstances in his life.²⁵ The accretion of passages whose 'truth' could be attested underpins the faith of loyal readers that the wisdom accompanying such descriptive passages is as authentic as the topography of Islington or Southend. Because it is implied that this authority rests on practical observation rather than 'book learning', 'common' sense rather than arcane philosophy, the basis for this authority must lie in the author's life. Deeping claims that he 'met' Sorrell and Old Pybus, two of his most popular heroes.²⁶ It is the strategic purpose of such claims rather than their validity that is the focus of my enquiry in the rest of this chapter. Dea Birkett, in her biography of Mary Kingsley talks of the difficulties for the biographer in taking account of the gaps between what is written autobiographically by the subject and what she actually does.²⁷ In Deeping's case we are working with 'acts' which, like the texts, are constructed by the subject to protect what Deeping frequently termed a 'separative' sense of self.²⁸ The interplay between the public biographies, (with their stage-managed lack of

²³ *The Wilson Bulletin*, *ibid.*

²⁴ *The Wilson Bulletin*, *ibid.*

²⁵ Geoffrey Gillam, 'Locations used by Warwick Deeping', *The Warwick Deeping Appreciation Society Newsletter*, No.3., November 2000, p. 3.

²⁶ *The Wilson Bulletin* 1929, p. 562, 'At different times Mr Deeping met Sorrell and Old Pybus at country inns, and was so struck by their qualities as men that in each case a novel resulted'.

²⁷ Dea Birkett, *Mary Kingsley* (Macmillan, 1992), p. xxiv.

²⁸ In an undated autobiographical source entitled 'Simple Simon', Deeping describes himself as 'a happy child but "separative"' (item C in Box 15 of The Warwick Deeping Collection in Boston University).

inwardness) and the narratorial presence in the novels (which dramatises the sacredness of the private) construct the iconic status Deeping claimed and was, by many, granted. He was able, to an extent not possible for writers today, not only to coin the vocabulary with which he was to be described, but to construct an image of the smiling private man which would find a home in uncritical publications. This identity asserted an extra-textual authority for the status of an author whose childhood experience of bullying and intimidation was to be replayed just at the moment when he seemed to have gained the means to protect himself.

'Not gorging on municipal pleasures'; a childhood in Southend

Deeping's own class background appears, at first, less ambiguous than the bitterness and class consciousness of his novels might suggest. Yet both the society in which he grew up and the one in which he was schooled were unstable in ways that reflect the transitions occurring in Britain before the First World War. These instabilities and tensions are reflected in his novels before the First World War though increasingly so in the novels of the 1920s. Although the main focus of my research is the novels of the 1920s, the values constructed in those novels were the product of Deeping's Victorian childhood. Like many 'Edwardians', Deeping's acute anxiety was forged in the nineteenth century and found its voice in the 1920s when the fears of his childhood were proved to be demonstrably justified. That this experience is not peculiar to Deeping suggests that his particular experience was, in some ways, characteristic and revealing of the confusion and anxieties generated by the social structures of England in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century.

George Warwick Deeping was born in 1877. Although he described himself as 'the son of a country doctor'²⁹ and is described as coming 'from a family of country doctors' in *The Surrey*

²⁹ *Twentieth Century Authors*, ed. Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (The H. W. Wilson

County Journal in 1948,³⁰ in fact his family lived in Southend.³¹ Southend was undoubtedly more rural in 1877 than it is now, but Deeping is guilty of slight distortion in suggesting either that Southend was a country practice or that his family lived in the country.³² In fact, the houses lived in by the Deepings were not only in the middle of the town but were smart 'town' houses in the Regency terraces on the sea front. One is now a boarding house and the other a disused hotel. However in Deeping's childhood the houses in these terraces, on the whole, residences for the professional middle classes. From the window Deeping would have looked out on The Shrubbery, a sizeable bank between the terrace and the sea which insulates the residents of the terraces from the visitors to the beach and the pier below. In his personal memoir for the church of St. John's, Southend, Deeping included a sketch of himself as a winsome boy skipping down to the beach with his shrimping net by way of The Shrubbery gates (Illustration I). The town was, even by 1877, a popular holiday resort and not precisely what we might infer from his description of his father as 'a country doctor' in his autobiographical sketch for *Twentieth Century Authors*.

In 1909 John William Burrows wrote *Southend-on-Sea and District: Historical Notes*.³³ Written soon after the Deepings had moved away from Southend, it is a valuable document. Some of the attitudes Burrows adopts seem close to Deeping's own. The defensive tone of the preface echoes Deeping's own defensiveness at the strictures of the self-appointed guardians of good taste. Burrows wrote 'to counter the too prevalent and erroneous

Co. 1942) p. 361.

³⁰ *Surrey County Journal*, vol.1, January - March 1948, p. 183.

³¹ Mr Bernard Jacobs, *A History of Eastlands*, 1984, states that he was 'born in Southend to a family of local landowners'. How did this impression come to be created?

³² Jacobs, p. 13.

³³ John William Burrows, *Southend-upon-Sea and District Historical Notes* (Southend-on-Sea: John H. Burrows, 1909; n.p., S.R.Publishers, 1970)

impression that Southend and district possess little or nothing of interest relating to the past'. It is possible that, even today, those, for example, who mocked Southend as the lair of 1980s Essex man might be surprised to find the terrace where the Deepings lived still as described in the 1824 guide, as 'a handsome range of buildings standing on a bold and commanding situation, fronting the sea, and finished in a neat and uniform style'.³⁴ The embarrassment among 'the genteel' at the swiftly growing reputation of Southend as the playground of London's Eastenders was probably only matched by complacency at the money those visitors brought in. This tension between snobbish contempt for the visitors and delight at the commercial opportunities they presented is obvious in the novels about Victorian Southend which Deeping wrote in the last decade of his life.³⁵

By 1794 Southend was already an 'inviting spot' where 'commodious inns and lodging houses were quickly raised'³⁶ but it had aristocratic pretensions. An 1824 guide stresses the medicinal value of the waters.³⁷ The guide boasts of the 'Eminent medical men of the day regularly visiting the town with their families'. Perhaps it was this reputation which drew Dr Rollinson Warwick from Newark earlier in the second half of the nineteenth century. From 1833 to 1884 Disraeli stayed in Southend and defended the place against its early detractors. 'You could not have a softer climate or sunnier skies than at abused Southend'.³⁸ Burrows also quotes an extract from an advertisement for the sale of a farm which describes it as being

³⁴ Burrows, p.182.

³⁵ *The Dark House* (1941), *Slade* (1943), *Mr Gurney and Mr Slade* (1944) and *Caroline Terrace* (1955).

³⁶ Burrows, p. 5. The original source, 'T. C.' in *The Gentlemen's Magazine* stresses its aristocratic connections: 'even in its infancy, nobility had deigned there to join in the mystic dance'. This unexpected use of the word 'mystic' is a strange echo of Deeping's promiscuous use of it.

³⁷ Ironic in the light of all the problems Southend had, and still has, in disposing of its sewage.

³⁸ Burrows, p. 185.

'within one and a half miles of that increasingly fashionable bathing place, Southend'.³⁹ The claims to classiness were always bound to be in tension with the desire to attract a greater number of visitors, tensions to be paralleled in Deeping's novels which assert the exclusivity of the reader in order, paradoxically, to create a more extensive readership.

The sense of an exclusive retreat being encroached upon both by consumers and by those who grew rich in serving the needs of those consumers is expressed by Deeping in his guide to St. John's.

The old Southend front was - to my way of feeling - infinitely preferable to the new one. You were right on the sea at once, with the beach and the groynes, and the bathing-machines welcoming you.....The whole scene was more simple and natural. Development may become more commercial exploitation. When I look at the picture of old Regency and Georgian South End, and compare it with the modern splurge, the gorge of the artist rises in me.⁴⁰

From a man who commercially exploited his own anxieties about commerce this is disingenuous. However, his fantasies, that naturalness and simplicity are synonymous and that nature extends a personal 'welcome' to the discerning few, are not confined to middlebrow romantics.

The two events which undermined the reputation of Southend as exclusive were the building of its famous pier over a period from 1830 to 1908 and the construction of the London, Tilbury and Southend Railway, completed in 1889. The arguments for extending and improving the pier were usually based on the need to attract more people to Southend before the railway reached it. The Local Board bought it in 1873, with the approval of most of the ratepayers and in 1885 built the new pier, longer than the old in order to enable the

³⁹ Burrows, p. 185

⁴⁰ *The Parish Church of St. John's*, p. 11.

steam-boats to dock in greater safety. Deeping sneers at attempts to make it easier for 'modern' children to enjoy themselves.

I think that I and others were happier playing our own games in the Shrubbery, and running wild on the somewhat wild cliffs, and paddling, and digging on the beach, and being much nearer to Nature than many modern children who are gorged upon municipal pleasures.⁴¹

Presumably a child does not 'gorge' himself on the pleasures of Nature; the appetite for pleasure becomes gross only if the child is one of 'many' and is being offered that pleasure by the municipality.

However, once the railway reached Southend in 1889, there was no keeping out the 'many'. The railway ran from Fenchurch St. Station, so the visitors it attracted were mostly from the East End of London. Deeping would have travelled against the tide of day-trippers on his way to and from school in the City of London where he was probably a weekly boarder. Emerging from the elegance of The Shrubbery outside the Deeping house with his shrimping net 'Georgie', as Deeping frequently refers to himself in *The Guide to St. John's*, would increasingly have found a beach full of families very unlike his own. The encounter might have been as fascinating as it was frightening. It must have heightened Deeping's life-long obsession with and retreat from working-class English men and women as 'hordes' who provoke a fear which has to be exorcised.

Whatever the origins of Deeping's recurring horror of the urban working class, both the fear and the fascination may have been fuelled by the extraordinary speed with which Southend grew and changed after the advent of the railway. S. H. Bridge, in his Foreword to Burrows' book, writes, 'The extremely rapid growth of Southend-on-Sea is not always appreciated. In

⁴¹ *The Parish Church of St. John's*, p. 12.

the 1881 Census the population was only 7,979 ... whilst by the time this book appeared in 1909, it had increased ... to 61,268.⁴² This population explosion coincides with Deeping's early life in Southend and his response to it is reflected not only in the last few novels about Southend, but in every one of his novels which deals with the urban working classes. His most popular novels, those written after the First World War, deal with the trauma of the displaced in an era of rapid change. But Deeping's Golden Age was pre-railway rather than pre-war. In *Mr Gurney and Mr Slade* (1944) the sage Mr Slade reflects that 'Southfleet was ceasing to be pleasantly Victorian, and its flavour was that of the New Age. There were more first-class carriages on the Southfleet trains, but less first-class people in them.'⁴³ Slade chiefly deplures, not the working-class masses, but the men who have made their 'new money' out of them. The railway which plunged Southend into the 'New Age' also introduced Deeping to the kind of people who are both the subjects and potential readers of his most popular novels. However, Deeping's own family belongs firmly to Southend, or as Deeping is careful to place them, to 'Old Southend which was God's green earth before the later Victorians began to develop it.'⁴⁴

Both Deeping's father and his maternal grandfather, Dr Warwick, must have been, though not necessarily wealthy, of considerable means. They were respected doctors in Southend.

Deeping mentions Dr Warwick in the guide book.

It must have been in the forties when he came to Southend, for he worked through the last of the cholera epidemics ... Dr Warwick lived in Prospect House, a bow-fronted house opposite the Royal Hotel, and my father followed him there. I was born in Prospect House, now Mr Going's Oyster Palace - I believe.⁴⁵

⁴² Burrows, p. vi.

⁴³ *Mr Gurney and Mr Slade*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ *The Parish Church of St. John's*, p. 15.

⁴⁵ *The Parish Church of St. John's*, p. 11.

In a short story, 'A Waxwork Show' (1935) Deeping uses the Royal Terrace as the setting for a spectacular coup de théâtre staged by the son of an honest tradesman who 'had refused to sell anything that was not English' and who had been bankrupted by a cartel of shopkeepers in 'Barfleet'.⁴⁶ The son, now wealthy, drives the corrupt tradesmen out of business by undercutting them; his revenge also serves the need of the common man. The link between this story and Deeping's background is not merely topographical as the final flourish of the wealthy son illustrates. He fills the window of his Georgian house in 'Royal Row' with waxworks of the corrupt shopkeepers; if Deeping's novels demonise the working class they also demonise the world of commerce which was transforming Southend from the country town of Deeping's utopian memory to a thriving resort. The description of Royal Row at the beginning of the story illustrates how Deeping presented his childhood home. The sage-like Joshua T. Toil returned from America with his hard won riches and

appeared to have an affection for the gardens between Royal Row and the foreshore. He potted about them, following the paths as though they were familiar to him.... He talked to very few people, but he talked with a purpose. He and old George the head porter at the Queen's Hotel were often in conversation.⁴⁷

The honest porter serves the role of many head gardeners and porters in Deeping's fiction, members of the working class who can be relied on to provide the middle-class sage with authentic information on 'others' from whom the observer is detached by his peculiar and separate status. The porter lists for Mr Toil those who live in 'Prosperity Place'. These include the contemptuously named 'Smellies', 'old Huggins and young Huggins, sir, the big drapers', 'Mr Corf who's commodore of the yacht club, and Mrs Blower whose husband owned the brewery'.⁴⁸ The extent to which the Deepings themselves felt that the tone of the neighbourhood was deteriorating could explain their move to Hastings in 1900 as an attempt

⁴⁶ 'A Waxwork Show', *Two in a Train*, (1935), pp. 97-108.

⁴⁷ 'The Wax-work Show', *Two in a Train*, p. 97.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, p. 98.

were not going to be part of the public persona of Warwick Deeping.

However, the image of the doctor is one that recurs in Deeping's novels no doubt because of his affection for his father and his father's medical reputation in his community. On 6th February 1885 Dr Deeping is recorded as attending on the victims of 'experiments with shells' at Shoeburyness. He and other doctors 'rendered incalculable aid'.⁴⁹ In 1886 Dr Deeping is recorded as supporting the launch for the Memorial of the Queen's Jubilee - Southend Victoria Hospital, later to be named Southend-upon-Sea General Hospital. In 1887 he is named as one of seven trustees for the hospital and in 1889 initiated the funding drive for the hospital. This hospital is not only a memorial to the public-spirited Dr Deeping but its status as a voluntary aided rather than a municipally funded institution provoked a revealing response from Warwick Deeping in 1924. Peter Finch in his *Voluntary Hospitals of Southend-on-Sea 1887-1940*⁵⁰ describes the debate over whether the council should fund the hospital. A report from the Medical Officer of Health had recommended that the Borough should take responsibility for the hospital because voluntary subscriptions were failing to maintain it. The Council responded by providing a new hospital but to be supported by voluntary contributions 'to maintain it in the glorious tradition of the past by the free gifts of free people rather than by forced levies through the Rates'. Warwick Deeping obviously shared Peter Finch's distaste for municipal levies; Finch quotes him as saying in 1927,

If one thinks of such an object as a civic crown, I am convinced that a well-run hospital can be regarded as the crown on the head of any town or city. It is one of those universal things. It is neither class nor politics. It is man, woman and child. In it we lose, or should lose, all prejudice and littleness and discord. The penny and the pound note meet and are

⁴⁹ Burrows, p. 208.

⁵⁰ Peter Finch, *Voluntary Hospitals of Southend-on-Sea 1887-1940* (Southend-on-Sea General Hospital, 1948).

equal in the spirit. When hospitals are built, endowed, equipped, who need despair of humanity? ⁵¹

Perhaps it was his father's public-spiritedness which inspired what Greenslade calls Deeping's 'romantic essentialism', ⁵² an individualistic view of an ideal world which should exist with 'neither class nor politics.' Features of Deeping's description of his father's efforts to create 'a sacred thing' are entirely characteristic of the style of his novels: the vatic tone and the religious language to mythologise the individual. Deeping often endowed his father with priestly attributes.

'*The Parish Church of St. John's Southend-on-Sea* recollected by the late Warwick Deeping' was published by the church in 1950, after Deeping's death. Only twenty-four pages long, this is the longest and by far the most self-revealing autobiographical account which survives. It was more self-revealing than it need have been. Although the title directs the reader's attention to the church, the content is almost purely personal. It is as though the writer had been liberated by the privacy of such a publication which few were likely to read. It was written at the request of the vicar, the Rev. J. J. Whitehouse. ⁵³ Though in the last two years of his life and still producing two books a year, Deeping's letters to the vicar are business-like; he has a clear idea of when he will be able to find time to complete the task and meets the dead-line agreed. Deeping acknowledges the awkward mixture of personal and ecclesiastical history and, as so often in his novels, he apologises coyly for being personal and then claims universal significance for his individual experiences.

I had put the work aside for a week or two and in re-reading what I had written it seemed to me that there was too much Georgie Deeping in it, but perhaps Southend will forgive

⁵¹ Finch, pp. 20-21.

⁵² William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 1994) p. 240.

⁵³ Copies of the correspondence between Whitehouse and Deeping also survive in the Essex County Library.

me. After all, without personality and human gossip history is apt to be what it often is - dreary stuff made up of dates and murders, wars and regal indiscretions. One hears so little of the people, the people who worked and mattered, and they should be the live red blood of history.⁵⁴

'Georgie' Deeping is not only unashamed at being personal but swiftly identifies himself as one 'of the people', 'the live red blood of history'. This masculine metaphor for 'the people' is reflected in the prominence given in Deeping's Memoir and his Southend novels to men. To the author, his father and grandfather were impressive figures, his mother and sister less so. His sentimentalised vision of 'old' Southend in the Guide is full of rowdy and 'blokish' behaviour. 'The old Southend crowd was rougher and noisier, more apt to get drunk and fight, and to dance in the roadway, and swap hats, but - by Jove - it did enjoy itself.'⁵⁵ It is curious that the ageing author, protected from the crowds by his vast estate, should extol the virtues of a good drunken brawl. The 'by Jove' is typical of the narrator of his later novels in its forced manliness.

Within the family too, vitality and strength are associated with the masculine. There are no fictional portraits in Deeping's novels of a pair of parents of equal worth. Most novels have at their centre a strong single adult and often a single child. Where there are two parents, the father is invariably the one to be trusted. The mother is often gross, materialistic and unloving. Relationships between siblings are not depicted as happy or loving. Deeping's tributes to his own father are consistently affectionate and admiring. As well as teaching in Sunday school, Dr Deeping was also 'a fine shot' and 'a leader of men' but Deeping's mother is referred to in a coolly respectful but rather patronising way. When describing an incident from his childhood when he needed chastening he comments, 'My mother, dear soul, was the

⁵⁴ *The Parish Church of St. John's Southend-on-Sea*, p. 19.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, p. 15.

negative partner, my father the positive one'.⁵⁶ Yet, it was possibly his mother's failed attempts at writing that offered Deeping a model for his own efforts initially. The fact that she was serious enough to send off her work for publication and the fact that she failed,⁵⁷ may have contributed to his sense, explored in his early novels, that writing was a dangerously feminised occupation in contrast with the safer and more manly occupations of medicine and farming.

The portraits Deeping gives us of patriarchal figures in this memoir are not always as affectionate as that of his father; he was 'rather in awe' of his grandfather Warwick who rebuked young George for fidgeting. His remarks on Dr Warwick and the Rev. Mr Herbert, 'an autocrat in his way, and intolerant of interference' reveal an ambivalence towards the punitiveness of the Victorian patriarch. He obviously appreciates the gentle manliness of the vicar who commissioned the memoir. 'I rather wish Mr Whitehouse had been the Vicar in my boyish days. He is not the kind of man to ignore children'.⁵⁸ He contrasts the severity of his grandfather and his vicar, with the gentle firmness of his father and 'sundry solemn whippings' he received from him. Typically defensive are Deeping's assertion that he is not to be a 'subject for psycho-analysis' because he received these whippings. 'Nor did these whippings produce in me any signs of hysteria or neurosis of father-hatred'. Deeping dismisses Adler as well as Freud at the beginning of this, his most 'confessional' of published autobiographical pieces. 'Somehow, I cannot swallow Freud. I did not feel hostile to my father, nor was I besotted about my mother'.⁵⁹ He is afraid that even a guide to the church of his native town might be used by his detractors to dismantle the image of the healthy, wise, old man

⁵⁶ *ibid*, p.16.

⁵⁷ A copy of this story is in The Boston University Archive.

⁵⁸ *The Parish Church of St. John's*, p. 11.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, p. 1.

constructed over seventy years and sixty-eight novels. These references are also typical of the way Deeping struggled throughout his novels for a way of presenting both violence and gentleness as manly attributes, the relationship between the two qualities being constantly redefined.

The Parish Church of St. John's also mentions, 'A small sister of mine and twins who had died in child-birth'. 'I can remember the scene in the nursery when this small sister lay dying in her cot, my mother in tears and trying to feed the child with something in a spoon.'⁶⁰ The only sibling to have grown to adulthood was his younger sister Kathleen. Curiously, Deeping cannot bring himself to tell the reader that she was born with a hare-lip.⁶¹ Instead, he creates a fiction, possibly aimed to dispel any fears that his sister's son, of whom he was very supportive, might suffer from any genetic taint.⁶²

Nurse, I and my small sister were returning to No. 8, and at these steps my sister stumbled and fell and struck her face on a piece of rough brick. The result was paralysis of one of the 7th nerves, and in spite of treatment, permanent deformity.

Strange that a child's fall should haunt her all through life, but my sister never escaped from the consciousness of a drooping mouth and lost muscles. The disfigurement, slight though it was, gave her - I believe - a sense of vague inferiority.

She carried a stigma, and its secret humiliation was to affect her life in other ways, and not happily so.⁶³

Here seems to be a 'fact' which might help us account for Deeping's compulsion to maim or deform his characters. Kathleen married a farmer who was never successful. It was Deeping who paid for his nephew's education, enabling him to set himself up in farming. The able boy did extremely well, becoming the Principal of one of the biggest agricultural colleges in the

⁶⁰ *The Parish Church of St. John's*, p.12

⁶¹ Mrs Nickalls, May 2000, pers. comm. with Mary Grover.

⁶² Deeping was recorded in the Eugenics Society Annual Report, 1937, as being a fellow of the Eugenics Society, <http://www.eugenics-watch.com/briteugen/eug_d.html>.

⁶³ *The Parish Church of St. John's*, p. 16.

country, Plumpton, in Sussex. However, Deeping's inter-war fiction is full of failed farmers, blinded and maimed in some way.⁶⁴ Not only is Deeping's account of his sister's disfigurement unreliable, its tone is difficult to gauge. It is a strange mixture of the personal and impersonal. Its context in the Memoir is odd and perhaps accounts for the detachment of 'Strange' and 'slight though it was'. There is the same note of distant disparagement as we find in his reference to the 'dear soul' of 'the negative partner', his mother. All we can reliably take from Deeping's references to his mother and to his sister is that the women in his original family are perceived as very much the weaker vessels in comparison with the 'leader of men', his father, and himself, little Georgie Deeping.

The account that Deeping gives of himself in this memoir is strikingly 'self' conscious.

Throughout the memoir skips little Georgie, attacking strange men with his pea-shooter, sending love letters to a little girl via his younger sister, playing cricket: in other words doing all sorts of unremarkable boyish things. There is no attempt to present the author as unusually sensitive, talented or admirable. This assertion of normality is essentially a defensive posture; from the very first page there is the sense that the psychoanalysts and high-brows are waiting to fasten on any sign of moral or emotional weakness and undermine Deeping's own authority as 'a leader of men' and shepherd to the hungry sheep who have been despised and neglected by the highbrow illuminati. Deeping may well have had a happy childhood; what is interesting is his insistence on how happy it was. When we consider that the dominant image in his novels is of men damaged or under-valued in some way, we must either conclude that his

⁶⁴ For example in *Fox Farm* (1911) the farmer's marriage first fails and he is then blinded by his own incompetence in trying to dynamite a tree; in 'Jack and Andrew', *Two in a Train* (1935) two comrades from the war nearly kill each other when struggling to succeed as farmers and in 'The Wood', in the same anthology, an office worker is almost destroyed by his attempt to achieve self-sufficiency in the wood of the title.

insistence is masking some personal damage or that this acute sense of men's vulnerability has its source elsewhere.

Unlimited by the repression and futilities of the merely academic

Warwick Deeping was sent at the age of ten to Merchant Taylors' School, at that time in Charter Row within walking distance of Fenchurch St. Station. He was a weekly boarder in a the house of a master at the school, the Rev. W. Haines.⁶⁵ Merchant Taylors' was a day school (with limited facilities for boarding). It was founded by the City Guild in 1561 and maintained a high reputation for academic excellence. Deeping attended from 1887 to 1894. During the two decades leading up to 1895 Merchant Taylors' was expanding rapidly. The population of the school, like that of the town Deeping came from, almost doubled in size while he was there. The pattern of rapid social change characteristic of the later, inter-war period to some extent reflected rather than over-turned Deeping's experience as a child both at home and at school.

The headmaster of the school, from 1870-1900 was the capable William Baker.⁶⁶ A modest, competent and diffident classicist, he reinforced the bias of the school towards the classics, but strongly improved the teaching of French, Mathematics and History. Urged on by the governing body he extended the provision of science teaching. The school produced many eminent classicists, Gilbert Murray being the most famous.⁶⁷ It is unlikely that Deeping mourned the lack of adjacent playing fields. He seems to have excelled at neither sport or

⁶⁵ *The Tylorian*, December 1950 p. 227. Haines lived at 37 Highbury Grove.

⁶⁶ F. W. M. Draper, *Four Centuries of Merchant Taylors' School 1561-1961* (O.U.P. 1962), pp. 181-196.

⁶⁷ During this period of the school's life the provision of sporting facilities exercised the minds of the governors to the same degree as the disposal of sewage did the councillors of Southend: both problems caused by too many people in a confined space.

work and, to judge by his uniformly disparaging comments about teachers and education, he probably felt that he had not flourished at school. This comment from *Fantasia* (1939) is fairly typical. Formal education is dismissed as a 'process that persuaded you to wear a white collar' rendering you helpless if 'Nature turned on you'.⁶⁸ His school could not have been more remote from Nature.

While Deeping was at Merchant Taylors' the school was in the old Charterhouse buildings in the City of London. Contemporary accounts reveal a constant preoccupation with the lack of space, eventually only resolved in 1933 by the school's move to its present leafy site in Hertfordshire. For a man whose chief diversions from his professional pursuits were to be farming, gardening, woodwork and golf, the urban environment may well have been oppressive. However, the intellectual cultivation of a pastoral utopia would have been the stuff of classics lessons at any public school of the period and Merchant Taylors' was particularly strong on the classics. Deeping used his classical knowledge in the rather approximate way he made use of any history, in *The Man on the White Horse* (1934) and *The Man Who Went Back* (1940). In both novels, to be Roman (as opposed to Christian or marauding Saxon) is the masculine ideal. Deeping also made use of the classics in constructing his own myth of himself as both Stoic and priapic. He constantly alludes to Pan to suggest the strength of sexual instinct⁶⁹ and both his heroic porters, Sorrell and Old Pybus, are compared to Roman emperors or stoics.

During the time Deeping attended, the school was at the top of the league in the competition between the public schools to gain scholarships to Oxford and Cambridge. However Deeping

⁶⁸ *Fantasia* (1939), p. 253.

⁶⁹ For example in *Exiles* (1930), pp. 79 and 183.

himself seems to have been sensitive about its social status. In *Slade* (1943), Deeping describes the doctor's son Charles Richmond being replaced in his sweetheart's affections by Hector Hallard. 'Hector was two years older than Charles, and Harrow, whereas Charles was Merchant Taylors', and a boarder in old Makin's house.'⁷⁰ The structure of a boarding school like Harrow, was dependent on the loyalty of the boys to named houses which vied with each other for status. The name of a boarding house had a resonance lacking in the dismissive 'old Makin's house'. Old Makin would simply have been a master whose wife or servants would have offered board and lodging.

The defensiveness of the phrase is characteristic of many of Deeping's autobiographical references. In his fiction, for example in *Sorrell and Son* (1925) and *The Impudence of Youth* (1946), he launches bitter attacks on the privileged nature of the medical establishment and public schools. However, although his bitterness towards the elite culture fostered by the system of the public schools is apparent, he also occasionally introduces the powerful patron in the shape of a golden boy, a 'gentleman' who takes pity on the socially disadvantaged (and often physically disadvantaged) hero. Deeping's own precarious position within his school and university communities may explain why it is difficult to account for connections between the values in his novels and those of the ruling hegemony in Britain between the war.

The Public Schools in the late nineteenth century were one of the most significant institutions to bolster the cultural hegemony of the ruling elite. Miles and Smith argue in their essay on 'The Public Schools and the Great War' that, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the rapid expansion of the Empire meant that the aristocracy needed to recruit men from the

⁷⁰ *Slade* (1943), p. 79.

middle classes who would assume their values and be fit to serve their purposes in

administering the Empire. They comment

it was the development of the public schools which filled the gap. The public schools performed their role by teaching the values that came naturally to the aristocracy by virtue of their wealth and social position, the replacement, through the boarding system, of parental control by the spirit of loyalty to the house and to the school was reinforced by an elaborate system of pupil autonomy, with the senior pupils themselves administering the day-to-day affairs of the school outside the classroom. It was this system which produced that enormous group solidarity, the freemasonry of 'the old school tie'.⁷¹

The public schools of London, most of them day schools and founded, for the most part by City Guilds, did not fit this description exactly. The kind of group solidarity fostered by the boarding system described, was absent. The weekly boarding system meant that the pupil's experience of 'solidarity' was dependent on the nature of the family with whom he boarded and his prowess in his studies or, to a lesser extent, in sport. Deeping's absence from the lists of sporting heroes or from team lists in contemporary school magazines suggests that he is unlikely to have had his sense of identity with the group with whom he was educated bolstered by any personal success within it.

The register of old boys helps us understand the kinds of socializing forces and the class implications of Deeping's education. Out of a sample of 30 old boys contemporary with Deeping,⁷² the professions of the fathers are: merchants 5, vicars 4, doctors 4, lawyers 3, civil servants 2, teachers 2. The sons of the vicars and civil servants became either vicars or civil servants; the sons of doctors usually became doctors; but of the five sons of the merchants, one becomes a produce broker, one a bank clerk, two go to the colonies. They are the socially most mobile group.

⁷¹ Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith, 'Cinema, Literature and Society', Part One: Chapter 3, *The Heart of England: The Public Schools and the Great War* (Croom Helm, 1987), p. 60.

⁷² The sample was random to the extent that the surnames of all began with B.

Perhaps the vigorous development of the 'modern' side under William Baker reflected the interests of the parents from the world of trade. Proportionally the largest single occupational group, these sons invariably entered the occupation of their fathers to which a university education would not have been a key. In 1961 Draper, listing the eminent old boys during the period of Baker's headmastership, mentions nobody from the world of trade and no writers. Deeping must have been a household name in Draper's memory but is not mentioned, even apologetically. The way Draper lists the individuals he singles out is revealing: peers, bishops, scholars, a medical statistician, admirals, generals, knights and three actors including one W. H. Pratt, better known as Boris Karloff.⁷³ Surely some of these boys became eminent businessmen, financiers; many must have followed their fathers successfully into the city. They, like Deeping, are not mentioned. In this respect, Merchant Taylors' seems in the 1960s and possibly in the 1890s to have taken boys from one social group but educated them to believe that success lay in acquiring skills which would gain them entrance into another, probably less lucrative, field of activity. A school of this sort is not inculcating the ethic of a commercial elite to which its members already belong but encouraging them to aspire to enter the kind of institutions to which schoolmasters traditionally owe their strongest allegiances. Deeping's heroes, unlike Draper's list of illuminati, do not find fulfillment by joining one of the establishment's ruling institutions, the university, the army or the church; they retreat into the world of private enterprise just as Deeping retreated, unremarked by his contemporaries or successors, into the production of world-famous fiction.

⁷³ F. W. M. Draper, *Four Centuries of Merchant Taylors' School 1561-1961* (O.U.P., 1962) pp. 194 - 195.

The nature of the prevailing hegemony within this London private day and boarding school was full of contradictions and Deeping's relationship to it was almost entirely negative. Deeping's heroes, characteristically ill-at-ease in the social position in which they find themselves, might reflect the discordant nature of the community in which he was educated. The group within the school with which he would have had socially most in common was the significant number of doctors' sons yet, as we see from his novels about men from obscure backgrounds who attempt to become doctors, *Roper's Row* (1929) and *The Impudence of Youth* (1946) for example, he was fiercely critical of the privileged world of London doctors and his doctor heroes are those who work in the East End of London. The social priorities of this educational institution, at odds with those of the community it principally served reveals the difficulties with the argument of cultural materialists from the 1930s to the present who assume too direct a relationship between the values of popular fiction and a dominant hegemony.⁷⁴

The school offered a model of philanthropy in its large mission in Shacklewell in Hackney. Such philanthropy was part of the school's ethos within the context of its evangelical Christianity. Dr Baker was a clergyman and the activities of the mission are fully reported in contemporary issues of the *Taylorian*, the school magazine. So the school would have fostered a view of the working class as vulnerable and in need of the protection of professionals. Situated in Charterhouse Square the school was on the edge of the East End. Deeping's home town and school thus brought him into contact with the working class. His school appears to have offered him a model of how, as a doctor, he would be expected to

⁷⁴ Roger Bromley, in an article in *Red Letters*, No. 7, 1978, is particularly explicit. He pronounces that popular fiction is 'silent on questions which go beyond its boundaries, content to reproduce the key ideological themes and discourse of bourgeois society, in the fictional form of common sense', from Bob Ashley's *The Study of Popular Fiction* (Pinter, 1989).

relate to the working class. This philanthropic model was upheld by his father's involvement with the Southend Victoria Hospital. When we look more closely at how this doctor-patient relationship is presented in the novels we find a typically Deeping construct: the doctor is expected to dedicate himself to the poor, but the poor, on the whole, are presented as a repulsive and unappreciative sub-class who are liable to destroy those professionals who venture out amongst them.

It has been frequently noted that the dominating figures in the literary establishment of the inter-war years were from a small group of public schools and of inter-related families.

Valentine Cunningham in *British Writers of the Thirties*⁷⁵ shows how the lives and works of these writers were dominated by the image of society imposed upon them by school. It was a convention among the writing ex-public-scholboys in the 1930s that their prep schools and public schools had been prisons, and fascist prisons at that, totalitarian places resided over by militaristic dictators of headmasters.⁷⁶ Many of the so-called left-wing writers of the period claim that their political views derived from the horror of the system in which they had been educated, Auden's comment being the uncompromising 'The best reason I have for opposing Fascism is that I lived in a Fascist state.'⁷⁷

Deeping's experience of school was unlikely to have been traumatic in the same ways that his contemporaries of Lancing, Rugby or Eton were. A predominantly day school cannot imprison its students in the same way; the experience is less 'total', less sexually coercive, and the social composition of the student group cannot have been as intimidating as Orwell, for example,

⁷⁵ Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (O.U.P., 1988).

⁷⁶ Cunningham, pp. 106-211.

⁷⁷ *The Old School: Essays by Divers Hands* ed. by Graham Greene (Jonathan Cape 1934: O.U.P., 1984), p. 9.

found Eton's. The school's location in the heart of London would make it even more difficult for the authorities, had they wished to do so, to create the illusion that the school community was 'the world'. As an individual Deeping did not shine or even felt valued, but to some extent he was able to retreat, a strategy which he adopted throughout his life.

One of the aspects of Deeping's novels of the late 1920s, which modern readers are likely to find most unappealing is their racism. The culture of Deeping's school may have contributed to this attitude. There existed at Merchant Taylors' a society called 'The Semites'. As a boy who attended the school some fifteen years after Deeping described it,

There were boys who were in the Classical side, but not quite up to the Classical standards. It was no good their going on into the Upper Sixth or into the Head Form because they'd never be scholars enough to wipe up any of those scholarships that were going - and Doctor Baker didn't want to send inferior boys to St. John's, Oxford, on the closed scholarships, so we had this Hebrew Section. One or two Colleges had a demand for Hebrew Scholars and offered a scholarship now and again.⁷⁸

The tone of this description reveals the high status of Classics in the school. The Hebrew scholars must have felt themselves to be slightly inferior beings to belong to such a group. This may account for their unpleasant treatment of a W. H. Hayman in the years 1893 to 1894, the years when Deeping would have been in the Upper Sixth. 'The Semites' Bible' was a hand-written gazette featuring profiles of all the Hebrew scholars for that year, (eight in 1893) and a few poems which were usually affectionate tributes written (in English) by one student about another. The poems to Hayman dominate the 1893 issue and are neither affectionate nor funny. Four out of the handful of poems are about him. The first is titled 'On the Great Unloved One'.

Of all the many little lads
I know of none so base
As William Hayman, Prince of lads,

⁷⁸ The Old Merchant Taylors' Society News Sheet, Spring 1980, 'A Centenarian Remembers'.

Judge ye him by his face!

If you to him one word address
He'll never leave your side;
And him you never can suppress
Because he has no pride!

The class-room door we sometimes lock,
But he won't go away;
Outside he waits till three o' clock!
Thus wasting half the day.

All day, grimaces he doth make
This odious little boy!
Oh would that he his hook would take!
How great would be our joy.⁷⁹

The other two sets of verses are equally abusive and a Hebrew inscription from Isaiah in Hebrew is preceded by the question, 'Was the prophet Isaiah foretelling the coming of Hxymxn, when he said ...'.⁸⁰ Hayman is one of the few possibly Jewish names to figure in the list of boys attending the school between 1880 and 1900. William's father was called Samuel and there are two details in the first poem that suggest that Hayman's treatment was influenced by anti-Semitism: the reference to his face and a possibility that there is a play on the word 'hook'. Whether or not Hayman was Jewish it does seem odd that the school should condone abuse of this kind. It is bullying whether or not the victim was Jewish. The 'Bible' was sanctioned by the Hebrew teacher and bound by the school. It suggests a culture of small competitive cliques within the school. The school community may not have been totalitarian but it certainly seemed to have condoned bullying. Deeping's novels frequently figure subjects who are victims of bullying, usually of a working or lower middle class boy by a boy from a higher class group. The rhetoric of his own abuse of groups such as homosexuals or Jews is that of the bully.

⁷⁹ 'The Semites' Bible', The Library of Merchant Taylor's School. The pages are not numbered.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

In his published autobiographical accounts Deeping does not present himself as victim. His lack of distinction at school is presented not as evidence of a superior artistic temperament but as evidence of his superiority to the 'merely academic'. 'I was bored and idle at school, and so escaped some of the repressions and futilities of a merely academic education.'⁸¹ However, in an unpublished autobiographical text, of some length, a bleaker picture emerges. Geoffrey Gillam has transcribed 'Simple Simon', a hand-written document in the possession of Boston University. The descriptions of being bullied in the first year are graphic and the abusive nick-name he was given still causes the writer pain. Deeping was also humiliated by being moved down a class in his first year. From the age of twelve to sixteen he seems to have been a boarder in a house two miles walk from the school. The young wife of the master who took in boarders systematically under-fed the boys in her charge. Deeping also associates this house with 'unpleasant sex' and sheer loneliness. When he was sixteen his father removed him from the boarding house 'diagnosing an inadequate diet' and he commuted daily to school by train. While he was a boarder, the only relief from his sense of inadequacy was to play surreptitiously with his lead soldiers when he was meant to be having his bath and to read: Scott, Dickens and Thackeray. History was the only school subject which interested him and that had little prominence in the school time-table. Whatever the origins of Deeping's 'separativeness', boarding school, with its lack of any private space except that of the imagination, its exposure of any weakness to exploitation and bullying, can only have intensified a need to create a world which kept the bullies at bay and within which one has absolute power.⁸²

⁸¹ *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature*, ed. by H. Haycraft (Wilson, 1942).

⁸² 'Simple Simon', The Boston University Library, a manuscript typed up by Geoffrey Gillam and sent to Mary Grover in December 2001.

However, in 1942, in the public pronouncement quoted above, the author insinuates that his failure to flourish at school represented neither a flight from the cruel world nor a need to inhabit a world which was his entirely, but a judicious choice of what really mattered beyond the narrow confines of educational institutions. It was remarkable then, that, as Donald Brook puts it in 1946, he 'assimilated enough of the despised academic knowledge to take him to Trinity College, Cambridge' in 1895'.⁸³

Deeping attributes this achievement to a private tutor, Rev. Robert Griffith in Bury St. Edmund, who, 'with more brain power than social suavity' taught him, in seven months, more than he had learnt in seven years of school.⁸⁴ The closeness of the autobiographical portrait to the portrait of Kit Sorrell's tutor in *Sorrell and Son* not only reveals Deeping's gratitude to this man (and it is typical of Deeping to acknowledge it) but also confirms the extent to which Deeping used his life in his novels. It is not only the physical appearance of the 'little bull, massive, baldish, a Celt, with prominent blue eyes' that is shared by Kit Sorrell's muscular Mr Porteous with his 'vast bald head with its butter-coloured halo'.⁸⁵ They are also both failures 'as the world understands failure'.⁸⁶ The sense of power that this man gave to the withdrawn boy may be reflected in the attribution of boxing and fencing skills to the fictional tutor.

Deeping says little about his university experience. He came out with a second class degree in Medicine in 1898 and studied at the Middlesex Hospital where he gained his M.B. and M.A. in 1902.⁸⁷ He practised medicine for one year in Sussex and then, on the success of his first

⁸³ Donald Brook, *Writers' Gallery* (Rockcliff, 1944).

⁸⁴ 'Simple Simon' p.12 of Gillam's typescript.

⁸⁵ 'Simple Simon', p. 12 and *Sorrell and Son*, p. 114.

⁸⁶ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 115.

⁸⁷ J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (Cambridge University Press, 1944) p. 269.

novel, *Uther and Igraine* in 1903, gave up medicine for writing and only practised again in the First World War. University life is hardly ever mentioned in the novels. Being a medical student in London however recurs. Often the medical student is disadvantaged in some way, either poor or deformed, or both. The loneliness of the experience and the squalor of the areas in which the young doctor works recur as a theme as does the power of the privileged 'golden' boy who supports the outsider through his medical apprenticeship. Deeping's plots rarely rely on medical knowledge nor does he borrow forensic metaphors to buttress the status of the author. The powers of observation he claimed for himself were those of the 'ordinary' man, observing 'ordinary' men. When he wrote *Smith* (1932), a novel about a consumptive builder persecuted by his fellow workers in a Thameside town, it is not his medical knowledge about the condition that Deeping parades but that he 'talked to the colonists in the workshops, the shelter, in the garden and visited their homes'.⁸⁸ Only in *A Woman's War* (1907) is specialised medical knowledge (of venereal disease) integral to the plot. However novels such as *Sincerity* (1912), *Roper's Row* (1929) and *The Impudence of Youth* (1946), dramatise the doctor as outsider, a professional man in a working class environment, or, more frequently, despised by other members of the medical community on social grounds.

It is possible that though bitterly resentful of school, Deeping did owe his image of exclusive utopias built on spiritual rather than academic merit to the structure of his school community. In Mortmere, Deeping's highbrow contemporaries constructed a fantasy world that was a mirror image of the public school culture they were apparently rejecting. Deeping's utopias too mirror the world they reject. They are made up of dispossessed individuals, all victims of cliquishness in one form or another. It is likely that this sense of being outside any dominant group was instilled at school and likely to have persisted at Cambridge. Deeping's failure to

⁸⁸ Draft for article on *Smith*, mentioned in a letter to Knopf 15 July 1932.

shine at both school and university might have been difficult for the only son of a family which occupied an important place in the society of the town and church from which he came.

A quite new novelist

Deeping's first two novels were published by Grant Richards, a young publisher so spectacularly successful that though 'considerably under middle age', he had been able to build up his own business. In the month in which Deeping's first novel was published *The Pictorial Magazine* featured Grant Richards as 'Our Most Progressive Publisher' in a series entitled 'Successful Young Men'. In only seven years Richards had premises in 'the handsome building now looming up as one of the most imposing features in Leicester Square.' It is noted that the publisher is 'largely pinning his faith for the coming season on a quite new novelist, Warwick Deeping.'⁸⁹ Unfortunately, despite the success of both *Uther and Igraine* (1903), which swiftly ran into a second edition, and its successor, *Love Among the Ruins* (1904), Richards had to cease trading at the end of 1904. Although Deeping's attempts to find a solvent publisher angered Richards, Deeping's letters to him remain courteous though characteristically defensive.

P.S. You no doubt remember that I have taken increased responsibility upon myself, and that I am very naturally anxious as to the future.⁹⁰

The next few years might well have been anxious ones for Deeping as he sought a stable relationship with a publisher and negotiated his shifting social status in the rural community around Hastings, in which he lived with his new wife. His third novel, *The Seven Streams*, was published by Eveleigh Nash in 1905, his fourth and fifth by Harper in 1906 and 1907. Thereafter, with one exception, he was published by Cassells for whom he usually produced

⁸⁹ *The Pictorial Magazine* 24 October 1903, p. 407.

⁹⁰ Deeping to Grant Richards 28 November 1904, The Grant Richards Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas.

two novels a year until his death (and beyond). Newman Flower, Cassell's fiction editor, like his American editor, Alfred Knopf, was to contribute to Deeping's later sense of being supported in his profession. In 1923, Deeping dedicates his novel about shell-shock, *The Secret Sanctuary*, 'To my Friend Newman Flower' with the words 'To inspire and to help is to be happy'.⁹¹

Gratitude for support is evident in the dedications of Deeping's pre-war books to: a family friend from Southend, the novelist Coulson Kernahan; his wife's parents; his parents and his wife. It is likely that he had no need of financial support from these friends. The first ten years of Deeping's literary career appear to have delivered sufficient income for him to provide a comfortable life for the daughter of a Captain of the Hussars.⁹² The Deepings lived in a farm in the area of Battle thus establishing a dual status which Deeping was to cultivate throughout his career, as a gentleman whose income derived from his writing yet whose devotion to his land gave him social credentials which his literary work weakened. In this early stage of his life, as in much of his fiction, Deeping was risking more than is obviously apparent. The content of the pre-war novels demonstrates that he was constantly manoeuvring to establish himself in a society which his fiction invariably presents as narrow and parochial. The discrepancy between his status as amateur farmer and professional author generates tensions which are reflected in his fiction. His novels alternate between those which celebrate the cultivator of the land and those which defend the commercial author.

⁹¹ Ernest Raymond's expresses more directly the confidence Cassell's authors had their editor with his dedication of *A Family That Was* (Cassell, 1929) to Flower: 'On Whose Strong Wings We Travel'.

⁹² *Who Was Who 1941 - 1950* (London: Black, 1967)

An indication of the suspicion which his profession aroused in the society of which his father was a leading figure is given by the funeral address preached at his father's funeral. On retirement from medicine Dr Deeping Snr., having been active in medicine and the church in Southend, now dedicated his considerable energies to the Conservative party in Battle, Sussex, to which he had retired. The list of floral tributes and the messages attached reveal a man with many friends who were prominent in politics: an MP, numerous JPs and six members of the Primrose League. On the same page is a full report of the tributes to Dr Deeping from the West Hill Conservatives: 'Whenever there was FIGHTING TO BE DONE Dr Deeping was there.' Extracts from the funeral sermon at Ore church reveal that his politics seem to have been an expression of his Christian faith. As the Rev. G. H. C. Shorting exhorted his 'large and devout' congregation,

though public opinion may be aroused to a sense of national needs and social ills in other ways, through literature, the Press, and the pulpit, it must ultimately find expression in terms of current political action.⁹³

There was no doubt about which party 'a sense of national needs' would lead an eminent citizen to join. At the end of his sermon

The Rev. G. H. C. Shorting supplemented his remarks on national greatness and the future of their national life by a plea for the recovery of the sense of parental responsibility. He particularly urged parents and guardians to do what they could to lessen the output of pernicious literature.

In 1909, the year when Dr Deeping died, Deeping had produced *The Return of the Petticoat*, for which novel alone Deeping returned temporarily to Harper as his publisher. This novel has a contemporary setting and centres on the ambiguous gender of the heroine who believes she is biologically a man. Cassell reprinted a 'revised' edition in 1913. Given the unusual explicitness about the physical characteristics of the heroine and the surgery she seeks to confirm her sense of her masculinity, the revisions in the late edition are few. Apart from a

⁹³ *The Hastings and St. Leonards Observer*, 28 August 1909, p. 5.

Gothic image of a severed hand protruding from a dish, and an inoffensive but dull sentence there is only one other excision. This is an odd passage by any criterion, but especially in a novel written by a man of Deeping's social position, newly married and attempting to establish himself socially in a conservative rural town in the Home Counties.

A beautiful woman is one of those realities. Dress her in romantic fictions and impossible idealism, the beauty of her body still remains when all the spiritual fripperies have fallen in rags and left her naked. The Greek part of her remains so long as she loves youth. Even if she marries, she only loses one admirer. She may still appear desirable to the husbands of other women.⁹⁴

This dismissal of 'spiritual fripperies' is characteristic of Deeping's hostility towards the Church and its attitude towards sexuality. The authorial cynicism about marriage also recurs. The sense that *The Return of the Petticoat* might reveal a dissatisfaction with the milieu in which he found himself is suggested by the fact that this is the first of his novels not to receive a dedication. His first published novel was dedicated to his prospective wife, Maude Merrill, with chivalric 'homage'. *The Slanderers* (1907), a contemporary novel about the gossip surrounding an aspiring writer's rejection of his wife in favour of a pagan child of nature, was also dedicated to Maude, now his wife. However the accompanying verse, beginning 'Love's not Time's fool' from Shakespeare's sonnet, ends with the bleak comfort that Love 'bears it out even to the edge of doom'. It is early in the marriage to be so grimly stoical about the ravages which Time is visiting on the beloved, especially since Maude Deeping appears in portraits and photographs to have been a stylish and attractive woman. The next novel to be dedicated to Maude is the post war novel, *Second Youth*, 1919, again about an unhappy marriage to a materialistic woman. This time the dedication is the warmer but decidedly unchivalric: 'To the dearest of comrades My Wife'. It would be interesting to know whether Shorting and his congregation regarded Deeping's recent novels as examples of the pernicious literature against which his sermon inveighed. They certainly depict the society from which the

⁹⁴ *The Return of the Petticoat* (Harper, 1909), p. 212.

mourners came as materialistic and hypocritical about sexual morality and the church as irrelevant to the needs of the sensitive individualist.

Deeping not only turned his back on his father's churchmanship, he also distanced himself from the political parties. The only sign that Deeping inherited his father's formal connection with the Conservatives is Deeping's membership of The Reform Club. Maude Deeping comments, in a letter to Dr Wotschke, that, although a Conservative, Deeping had belonged to The Reform Club only in order to entertain. This suggests a manoeuvre, useful not only to Deeping but to many a son of a powerful father. Unable or unwilling to publicly challenge or shed the value-system of an admired parent, he steps sideways from under his shadow. In fact, in *Who Was Who 1941 - 1950* Deeping's club is listed as The Lansdowne, an apolitical and sporting club.⁹⁵ There is no mention of The Reform. In none of Deeping's novels does he deal with party politics; politicians do not feature and in none of the 'sermons' embedded in his later books does he exhort his readers to contribute to a reform of 'national life'. It is always the private and personal arena to which the hero or heroine attends. The church seems to have been associated by Deeping not with the inner life but with a society which crushed inner freedom. One of the few criticisms of *Uther and Igraine* was that the heroine 'is manifestly relieved when a ravaging heathen herd (sic.) eject the Sisters and raze the convent to the ground.'⁹⁶

In his rejection, not of his father, but of his explicit commitments to the Christian religion and to Conservative politics, Deeping's fiction shares with the nineteenth century popular fiction discussed by Dalziel a lack of allegiance to specific religious institutions.⁹⁷ Wide sales may be

⁹⁵ *Who Was Who 1941-1950* (Black, 1967)

⁹⁶ *Monitor*, 20 November 1903, Mrs Deeping's scrap-book.

⁹⁷ Margaret Dalziel, *Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago*, (Cohen and West, 1957), p. 159.

boosted by the extent to which a writer can free himself of any kind of specific religious or political allegiance. However, what emerges in Deeping's fiction at the time of his father's death is the way in which a particular kind of popular novelist presents himself increasingly as a sage, a moralist commenting on contemporary affairs. Religious ministers, political parties, a publicly respected father might well have seemed a rival to the moral authority which Deeping was to claim. Increasingly, he takes pains to construct an autobiography which will buttress that claim.

Finding it more splendid than sordid: not being a doctor in the R.A.M.C.

In 1914 The Great War reduced the extent to which anybody could shape their life or the way they wished that life to be perceived. Deeping obviously felt defensive about his war experience. His war novels, which I deal with in Chapter Four, focus far more on the process of being called up than they do with experience of the war itself. Married and 37, Deeping would probably not have been conscripted but he did join the R.A.M.C. as a medical officer, a courageous act in itself, since his medical skills were eleven years out of date. The brief biographical sketches of him, for example *The Wilson Bulletin* in 1929 describes him as serving 'through the Gallipoli Campaign, and afterwards in France, where he was for a time a liaison officer for a New York Division.'⁹⁸ *Who Was Who, 1941-1950* records that he joined the R.A.M.C. in April 1915 and lists the theatres of war in which he served: Gallipoli, Egypt, then France and Belgium. In a letter to the Commander of the 2/2nd East Lancashire Field Ambulance on 4 February 1918 he is more precise.

Early in 1915 I applied for a Temporary Commission in the R.A.M.C. and was eventually gazetted on April 1st, 1915. I went abroad in September 1915, served three months on the Peninsular, and the rest of the time on Lemnos and in Egypt.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ *The Wilson Bulletin*, April 1929, p. 562.

⁹⁹ Letter from Deeping to Officer Commanding 2/2nd East Lancashire Field Ambulance, 4 February 1918.

Valour (1919), Deeping's fictional representation of the Gallipoli campaign, puts a very different construction on the experience of war than does his autobiographical sketch published for the 1942 edition of *Twentieth Century Authors*.¹⁰⁰ Whereas the author/narrator of *Valour* presents the war as a feminine and establishment conspiracy to humiliate and compromise the highly individualistic hero, the sixty-five year old public figure smiling tentatively from his rhododendrons in the biographical dictionary is more positive.

The war, as a great human experience, launched me on deeper seas. Inevitably *Sorrell & Son* was a product of the war. One realized that a nice culture was less important than courage and character. One set out to see life and its realities, its pathos and heroism, and I have managed to find it more splendid than sordid. A negative cynicism seems to me to be a form of cowardice.

In fact, the fiction preceding *Sorrell and Son* often presents war as sordid, the dominant note being anger at the invasion by the military machine of the individual's autonomy and there is a great deal of cynicism about the bullying in the army in *Valour*. When, in 1936, Deeping returns, in his fiction, to the subject of the individual's fears on entering the army he writes in the first person.¹⁰¹ The journal form in which the narrator vows to be 'truthful' returns to the horror at the loss of autonomy that army life will entail but the sagacious tone of this 'journal' contrasts markedly with the bitterness and restlessness of the novels written during and immediately after the war. The war became in retrospect and in public 'a great human experience'. However what remains in the later fiction, *No Hero - This* (1936), is the sense that the chief terror of war was the army, another closed community, like school and the rural middle classes in Sussex which threatened the author's 'separative'ness.

I am a country doctor, aged thirty-five, in partnership with a man of fifty-three ...I am married ... My marriage has been a happy one ... As yet we have no children. We had

¹⁰⁰ *Twentieth Century Authors* (H. W. Wilson, 1942) eds. Stanley J Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, p.361.

¹⁰¹ A form that had served Frederick Manning very successfully in his bestselling novel, *Her Privates We* (Peter Davies, 1929: The Hogarth Press, 1986).

decided to wait for a time before having children. I suppose I am a somewhat unadventurous person. My work in this corner of Sussex has satisfied me.

I do not want to go to the War.

Let me be honest about it. What is that makes me shrink? Fear, yes, some fear, but of what? ... a strange new anonymous life full of alien faces, a kind of going back to school like some raw but sensitive child? Am I so old at thirty-five that I fear change, insecurity, the stripping of one's comfortable self on the edge of this sinister, dark sea? I am a somewhat separative creature.¹⁰²

The autobiographical links are scattered so liberally in this passage that it is tempting to take them as confessional, as Manning's first person narrative had been. Deeping must surely have also felt uneasy at his status in the medical corps. Evidence that he did not regard himself as wholly competent is suggested by the letter he wrote pleading an early discharge on January 12th 1919.

My experience has been confined to Field Ambulance work. I know practically nothing of pure surgery and medicine, not having practised since 1904. I should be useless in any General Hospital or C.C.S.¹⁰³

An officer in the Field Ambulance Corps must have been principally involved in logistics and planning but Anthony Powell's description of an encounter between the painter Henry Lamb and Deeping 'making routine medical enquiries' on a ward round in a military hospital suggests that he did practise as a doctor.¹⁰⁴ That must have been terrifying for both doctor and patients if he knew 'practically nothing of pure surgery and medicine'. If, on the other hand and is more likely, the majority of his war experience was in the administration of the Field Ambulance Units it is interesting that he does not project himself in fiction or in official biography as an administrator but as a doctor, a profession in which he acknowledges he had little competence. The R.A.M.C., like Merchant Taylors', was an organisation with a weak class identity. Both aspired to serve the needs of a class superior in status to their own. In his

¹⁰² *No Hero - This*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰³ Letter to A.D.M.S. 66th Division, 12 January 1919 in Public Record Office folder WO374/19169.

¹⁰⁴ Antony Powell, *To Keep the Ball Rolling* (Heinemann, 1982: Penguin, 1983), p.157.

history of the R.A.M.C., Colonel Fred. Smith emphasises the soldierly virtues of the medical personnel; it is their 'conspicuous gallantry' rather than their medical competence which are given prominence. His introduction defensively evokes the respect accorded to medicine in 'the ancient empires of Greece and Rome' to lend his subject dignity. The picture on the front of the cover is of a private in the Hospital Corps striking a noble attitude with a lance and directing, like a General, a distant couple of stretcher-bearers, while a patient lies neglected at his feet.¹⁰⁵ There are similarities about the class positions both of the particular kind of school attended by Deeping, his role as a commercial writer in the rural Home Counties and in a corps to which little public glory was attached. And in the army, Deeping's individual class position was compromised by his age and his misleading formal qualifications.

Sensitivity to his personal status is also demonstrated in the awkward matter of Deeping's military seniority. In 1918, Deeping was in dispute with the Director General of the Army Medical Service over the date from which he could consider himself a captain. The problem arose because of a lapse of two months in his military service. His account and the account from the Director General's office are discrepant and remained so. Deeping's argument that he had 'practically no control' over the circumstances which led to a two month break in his service were disputed by the Director General because he had resigned his first commission with the R.A.M.C. 'at his own desire', the phrase used by Deeping himself in his application for his second commission. However the consistent messages of support that his service be considered continuous for the purposes of promotion suggests that Deeping was certainly not attempting to deceive. Lieutenant Colonel Baxter of the 2/2nd East Lancs. Field Ambulance wrote,

¹⁰⁵ Colonel Fred. Smith, *A Short History of The Royal Army Medical Corps* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden, undated).

His one aim has been to render himself of service. He is a most efficient and reliable Officer....It was my lot to be D.A.D.M.S. of the 1st Mounted Division Capt. Deeping was in when his case was put up through Northern Army in England, so am acquainted with the circumstances and would respectfully submit that his case be reconsidered.¹⁰⁶

It is beyond the scope of this enquiry to try and establish exactly why Deeping mistakenly asserted that the 'Northern Army took the matter up and the War Office antedated my gazette by five months. This was a test case, and gave rise to an A.C.I.'¹⁰⁷ When Deeping was gazetted out of the army on 27th March 1919 he did so as Captain G. W. Deeping, relinquishing his acting rank of Major. However, he was granted the rank of Major on 30th September 1921 and thereafter was qualified to call himself Major. From the pained tone of his letter in 1918 it must have been a subject that rankled with him and cannot have lessened his sense that the army was yet another organisation that compromised his identity. Despite the extent to which his romances centre around retreat from existing hierarchies the retreat is born not of indifference but of acute sensitivity to matters of rank. His post-war *Seven Came Back* (1934), deals explicitly with reversals of rank; the central character is a Sorrell figure whom peace robs of dignity.¹⁰⁸ An essential component of the novel's appeal is that the rank accorded to Sorrell by his birth and war service is denied him in peace. Yet it is not at all clear that this mirrors Deeping's own experience. For it is the war rather than the peace which threatened the relatively fragile social identity as author and gardener that he had begun to construct for himself in the Sussex community in which his father had been such a dominant

¹⁰⁶ Letter from A.Baxter Lieut.Col., RAMC-T., Comdg.2/2nd East Lancs. Field Ambulance, 7 February 1918 to A.D.M.S. 66th Division. Deeping dedicated his next novel, *Valour* to Baxter.

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Deeping to Officer Commanding 2/2nd East Lancashire Field Ambulance, 4 February 1918. According to *A Dictionary of Military and Technological Abbreviations and Acronyms* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), an A.C.I. was an 'Army Council Instruction'.

¹⁰⁸ It was interesting that in both the German and Polish translations of *Sorrell and Son* the dignity of Sorrell (and his identity as an ex-serviceman) is reinforced by inclusion of his military rank: *Hauptmann Sorrell und sein Sohn* (Leipzig: Grethlein, 1927) and *Kapitan Sorrell I Syn* (Warsaw: Plomién, 1934).

figure. However, in the years to come, Deeping was to use his war experience to bolster his credentials as a hardened realist and as a man of action rather than a 'mere' writer.

Weybridge: Marketing privacy

In 1919 Major Warwick Deeping bought the house in which he and his wife were to live for the rest of their lives. It still exists much as he created it. In it, he enacted as fully as he could the myths constructed in his post-war novels. In this house, he was able to distance himself from Sussex, whose only merit, as far as the content of the novels is concerned, is its landscape of beeches, bluebells and bracken which flourish as the backdrop to scenes of meanness and mayhem in many of his early novels, both historical and contemporary.¹⁰⁹

'Eastlands' in Weybridge is a Georgian house set in the seven acres of woodland which Deeping gradually acquired over the thirty-three years he lived there. The lay-out and statuary in the garden dramatise the role of the author as Deeping wished it to be perceived and demonstrate the freedom to embody fantasies which to most of his readers would remain mere dreams. After the success of *Sorrell and Son* had made the home of the author a place of pilgrimage, the entrance to his house had to be moved to the right and an inner wall built to preserve the author's power to manufacture these dreams. For crowds of gawkers travelled down to Weybridge to peer up the long drive at the writer as he worked in his study (Illustrations II and III).

The house is not big. Fanny Kemble, who lived in it from 1825 to 1827 as a child, described it in idyllic terms.

¹⁰⁹ For example the historical *Bess of the Woods* (1906), *The Red Saint* (1909), *The House of Spies* (1913) and the contemporary *A Womans's War* (1907) and *The Slanderers* (1907).

The little plot of lawn on which our cottage stood was backed by the wild purple swell of the common and that was crested by a fine fir wood, a beautiful rambling and scrambling ground, full of picturesque and romantic associations ...¹¹⁰

Its historical associations are still visible in the little outdoor arena which the girl Fanny used as a theatre. The wooded theatre, with the classical urns Deeping placed at its entrance, forms another buffer between the author's study and the gateway to the outside world (Illustration 1V). The Scotch pines, which often lend a virile distinction to Deeping's horticultural heroes, tower above the gate.

However it is behind the house that the drama of the garden's conception unfolds, a suitable back-drop to Deeping's career as guardian of English spiritual values. Beyond the wisteria covered walkway along the back of the house lies a sunken garden. A 'jammy'¹¹¹ profusion of flowers encloses a pond of irises. At its edge a statuette of Pan plays his pipes (seen under Deeping's right knee in (Illustration V). This figure often makes an entrance in Deeping's later novels as a force to be reckoned with. Deeping's flirtation with the priapic culminates in one of his final novels, *The Impudence of Youth* (1946), which opens with the hero, triply diminished, a child, a dwarf and an orphan, dancing naked in a wood. Deeping also makes fictional use of the tennis court on the terrace behind the classical balustrade originally from The Bank of England (Illustration III).¹¹² The young and wholesome heroines of Deeping's later books are often Atalanta figures on the tennis court who bound off to the weary and ageing hero to rekindle his virility.¹¹³ The busts of two Roman dignitaries (one looking remarkably like Deeping himself) still gaze at the space where the tennis court used to be, a

¹¹⁰ Bernard Jacobs, *A History of 'Eastlands'* (Published privately, 1984), p. 3.

¹¹¹ Marion Cran, in her appreciation of Deeping's gardening skills in 'Warwick Deeping's Sanctuary', *Harper Bazaar*, December 1929, pp. 50-53 and 96, quotes Deeping as 'truly' saying 'I like a jammy mess of flowers!', p. 53.

¹¹² Mrs Gerry Newton, the current owner of Eastlands, in pers. comm. with Mary Grover, May 1997.

¹¹³ 'Atalanta' in *Two in a Train* (1935) and *Portrait of a Playboy* (1947).

stoic ideal of classical masculinity, like 'The Old Roman' Sorrell (Illustration VI).¹¹⁴ One of the paths that leads up the wooded hill behind the lawn leads to a glade in which a classical rotunda encloses a fecund nymph offering herself, or the fruit she holds, to the onlooker (Illustration V).

Deeping's taste in garden design is one that has not dated. He had already experimented in garden design in Sussex.¹¹⁵ The pictures in the style magazines of the 1930s which regularly featured both house and garden would not look out of place in their equivalents today. What Belgium called the 'feeling for the arts' of 'the cultivated English' led him to conclude that 'it is easy in England to find large numbers of men and women who know exactly how they would decorate their houses if they had an income ten times larger than they have'.¹¹⁶

Deeping's art, in landscaping, planting and decorating his garden would still please 'the cultivated English', whereas that same audience today would find the way he decorated his novels with images of Roman stoics, dwarf satyrs and erect red tulips painfully dated. It was an important part of the way Deeping was marketed in the 1930s that his fiction was seen to proceed from a stable of good taste. Magazine articles, such as Marion Cran's suggest the instinctive good taste of the gardener.¹¹⁷ This good taste seems to be embedded in the classical frame of reference to which Deeping takes pains to draw the visitor's attention. He did all he could to emphasise the historical associations that he had bought along with the classic Georgian proportions of the small house. It is curious that visually his taste still holds

¹¹⁴ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 389.

¹¹⁵ *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* (Wilson 1942) ed. by S. J. Kunitz and H. Haycraft, p. 361.

¹¹⁶ Montgomery Belgion, 'British and American Taste', *English Journal*, Vol. 117. No.3, 1928 repr. in Davison et al., v, 207-215.

¹¹⁷ Marion Cran, 'Warwick Deeping's Sanctuary', *Harper's Bazaar*, December 1929, pp. 50-53 and 96.

its value while in his fiction a similarly rhetorical use of classical and natural imagery suggests the kind of clumsiness Bourdieu would attribute to the autodidact, which Deeping was not.¹¹⁸

In addition to the house Deeping bought a nearby smallholding.¹¹⁹ His experience of gardening and of farming underpins his claim to realism in his many novels which deal with the lone gentleman fleeing or expelled from the world of the urban middle-class. He took a serious interest in his farm. Three of his novels, *Fantasia* (1939), *Corn in Egypt* (1942) and *Laughing House* (1946) dramatise his efforts during the Second World War to 'Dig for Victory' on both the estate and the farm. This was not mere attitudinizing. Entitled 'Twenty-Five Acres and a Lot of Food' (the origin of the additional acres is unclear) an article in *The Tatler and Bystander* featured Deeping with his employees producing about '15 tons of food - potatoes, wheat, oats, rye; 7 cwt. of fruit; 5 cwt. of onions; maize, beans, carrots, beets, greens, as well as thousands of eggs', plenty sanctified by the individual rather than municipal nature of its source.¹²⁰ The article goes on to note that the famous author

supplies his own household, his two men and their wives, the local hospital, and old people without gardens or means. His hay and grazing he lends to a neighbour.

This article must have prepared Deeping's readers to respond to his novel the following year, as though it were autobiography. Like the farmer in *Corn in Egypt* (1942) Deeping prudently bought stocks in 1938 to lay the basis for increased production should war break out. Like Deeping, the farmer is defensive about his role, so much so that at one point he breaks off from the narrative of events to combat potential critics of the 'complete egoist' who is the

¹¹⁸ Bourdieu asserts that the 'old-style autodidact was fundamentally defined by a reverence for culture which was induced by abrupt and early exclusion, and which led to an exalted, misplaced piety, inevitably perceived by the possessors of legitimate culture as a sort of grotesque homage', *Distinction* p. 84. At the risk of proving myself a cultural imposter in Bourdieu's terms, I can imagine Deeping's fictional use of classical imagery being described as 'grotesque' but not his garden ornaments: the rotunda, urns, busts and statuette.

¹¹⁹ Six acres according to Jacobs p. 14.

¹²⁰ *The Tatler and Bystander*, 28 May 1941, p. 323.

enthusiastic amateur farmer. The critics of the fictional farmer gradually metamorphose into critics of the author.

Moreover, those rather sterile and negative people, the critics, are very ready to damn any creative person as an unsocial creature, not realizing perhaps that your enthusiast must be absorbed in his labour. Such self-centred apartness may be necessary, inevitable even. One may begin as an egoist, but as one's conception of life enlarges itself with the work it performs, so, one may transcend one's egoism. The house that you have built may not be for yourself alone. The book that you have written may be a guide and an inspiration to scores of others who have been groping towards the same end.¹²¹

Readers of Deeping's novels, would, by this time, be unsurprised that a shopping list for agricultural equipment might be the text for his defence of himself as a writer. Increasingly Deeping's life in Weybridge was presented as evidence of his superiority to his critics. The move to Weybridge may have been prompted by a sense that Sussex society was hostile to the professional writer but, once in Weybridge, it was clear that that the world of letters might be an even greater threat to the writer's self-respect than the rural middle-classes.

At Eastlands, Deeping and his wife created a theatre in which the audience, unlike his readership, was carefully selected. Two groups of people were admitted into the estate: the employees, who by all accounts were loyal to and well rewarded by the Deepings,¹²² and the invited guests, few of whom were literary. It was at this stage of Deeping's life that we hear more of his wife, Maude Phyllis Deeping. She seems to have been well suited to her role as guardian of her husband's 'separativeness' and as hostess to the selected guests at tennis parties on the lawn and cocktail parties in the cottage adjacent to the house. According to the widow of Deeping's nephew, Mrs Barbara Nickalls, Deeping would appear at family dinners for the minimum amount of time, remain fairly silent and disappear as soon as he could, while Maude would take an interest in the children from whom Deeping kept a special distance. An

¹²¹ *Corn in Egypt*, p.50.

¹²² As the numerous bequests to employees in the wills of both Warwick and Maude testify.

active distaste for children is also recorded by Ann Harris, whose father was Commanding Officer for the R.A.F. in Scotland and at whose home 'Warwick Deeping was a frequent guest'.¹²³ Ann Harris describes him as 'being on an island, a moat around him.'¹²⁴ Jacobs records Deeping's ability to pull up the drawbridge.

He would intermittently walk in the woods, deep in thought, scarcely noticing the neighbours he passed who have vivid recollection of these and other, more affable, encounters, when he was less pre-occupied by his writing.¹²⁵

Maude, on the other hand, seems to have been sociable and to inspire affection in those around her. She dressed in style and had a collection of designer frocks, many of them fancy dress which she would wear on the Deepings' winter journeys to Biarritz, the south of France and Switzerland or on their occasional visits to London. There are two portraits of Maude, both attractive. Mrs Nickalls has a half-portrait of her as a girl wearing deep red dress trimmed in silver set off by a red taffeta hat. It is reminiscent of a Renaissance portrait. In 'Eastlands' there still hangs a full-length portrait of Maude with a coronet of gilt leaves and elaborate gold collar. She is dressed in a rich evening gown of sea-green which was to become her favourite colour. During her widowhood she developed an obsession with green commented on by everyone who knew her. When the Jacobs bought 'Eastlands' everything in the house was green. Maude was a skillful decorative artist and painted everything she could her favourite colour. Even her car was entirely fitted in green trimming and blinds. Like her husband, Maude constructed an image of herself which she projected consistently, he the steady worker both within and out of doors, she the artistic eccentric, with an interest in spiritualism, collecting and decorating china and playing soft music in the evening.¹²⁶

¹²³ Mrs Ann Harris, letter to Mary Grover, 16 November 1997.

¹²⁴ Mrs Ann Harris pers. comm. with Mary Grover, 21 January 1998.

¹²⁵ Jacobs, p.14.

¹²⁶ Mrs Barbara Nickalls pers. comm. with Mary Grover, June 2000.

In the 1930s when Eastlands and the life of the Deepings became the subject of many articles in style and women's magazines, Deeping's novels began to feature a new kind of wife, not the materialistic and emotionally damaging mother but an elfin icon of femininity and primal female wisdom, gentle, feminine and slightly fey. The following extract from *Exiles* (1930) describes the wife of the sagacious Englishman living in the hills of fascist Italy. The couple dispense wisdom to their confused compatriots from the sexually charged atmosphere of the sea-side resort below. Stella, the wife, has all the physical characteristics of Maude in the early thirties: 'a rather remarkable little person, with a face like a flower, two very large and expressive grey-black eyes, and copper-coloured hair that was just beginning to go grey.'¹²⁷ This paean of praise from the the musing husband for his psychic spouse is typical of Deeping's Nietzschean rhetoric at this period, veering between vaguely spiritual assertion and thuddingly concrete imagery.

Music, especially his wife's music when she improvised, was like some spiritual solvent reducing materialism to an impertinent absurdity. Yes, there were people who were unique and Stella was one of them. If you likened the average man or woman to a drum, then Stella was a violin. She gave what a drum could not give. There was no equality. You had this more sensitive instrument evolving, and something much more than an instrument, a creature of other consciousness, aware of other realities. Humanity was still in the becoming. The trouble was that it sweated furiously after money, and ate too much.¹²⁸

The achieved humanity of the Deepings, balancing the spiritual and the practical, is contrasted with the furious sweat outside the pale of their Weybridge estate. Marion Cran was moved to explore 'Warwick Deeping's Sanctuary' (as her article in *Harper's Bazaar*, is entitled) because of the practical knowledge of gardening revealed in the novel, *Doomsday* (1927). On visiting the Deepings she discovers that such practical virtues have spiritual resonance:

The fences are everywhere hidden under flowers and verdure - there are no hard lines anywhere, no sense of finality or of boundaries. There must be a world outside, one supposes there really must be a world outside, but it is mercifully and beautifully lost; and

¹²⁷ *Exiles*, p. 60.

¹²⁸ *Exiles*, p. 146.

in their garden -which is not, as acres go, very large - one gains the sense of unlimited space. There is room to stretch wings in that garden.¹²⁹

This paragraph offers the modern reader clues as to why Deeping's rhetoric succeeded in persuading his loyal readership that his spiritual claims were rooted in a context his readers could regard as ordinary. The rhetoric of the practical man is used by Deeping to obscure the fact that the individual gardens, farms and private spaces are essentially privileged constructions. The finality of social and economic boundaries is 'mercifully and beautifully lost' in part because it is Mrs Deeping who takes to herself the grace and her husband who is identified with the graft of creating the landscape in which they live. In most of the articles on 'Eastlands' and their garden it is Maude Deeping who appears to wear the spiritual wings while Deeping is photographed with his sleeves up or alongside employees dressed to dig (Illustration.VII). In an article on whether writers believe in immortality, in *The Queen*, February 14th 1934, Deeping maintains his distance from the vaguely spiritual: 'I must confess that, after many years and moods of questioning, I still stand on the edge of the dark sea - wandering.'¹³⁰

In 1935 it is Mrs Deeping's interest in astrology and Mr Deeping's in woodwork that are mentioned in the article on 'The Country Home of Warwick Deeping'. A photograph of Deeping planing wood is captioned, 'Some of the author's happiest hours are spent in his workshop.'¹³¹ Whenever a picture of Deeping appears (usually the same picture) the home-made pipe-rack beside him is foregrounded both by the photographer and the caption. Together Maude and Warwick dramatised the implication of the novels that the author is essentially a practical man who by observing life as it is and doggedly making it into good

¹²⁹ *Harper's Bazaar*, December 1929, pp. 50-53 and 96.

¹³⁰ *The Queen*, 14 February, 1934.

¹³¹ *Modern Home*, January, 1935.

stories inevitably reveals timeless truths. Maude, like the garden, is one of those graces that accrue to the 'realist' (Illustration VIII).

Maude's own skill in enacting this construction, that the fiction was the direct expression of the man, is amply demonstrated, by an article that came out in the Danish *Ekstra Bladet*¹³² about her stay at D'Angleterre, one of the most prestigious hotels in Copenhagen. Only a few months after her husband's death in 1951, Maude constructs the life of the author as a moral preparation for his fiction: 'when I say, "He was a good man", the answer is always the same, "Yes, he must have been that to have written such books" '. She emphasises his shyness and reserve and confirms the fact that, he 'lived in a quite isolated way. We saw many people at home and knew people but after half an hour of a get-together, my husband had to retire'. She suggests that this reserve is partly the result of bad health due to a poison gas attack in the First World War (the only place where this is mentioned).

It is when we come to her account of the origins of their partnership that Maude reveals that she too is a romancer.

From being a little girl I knew the tall blonde Warwick, the Doctor's son with the beautiful blue eyes. He came from an honourably old family line. He began to study on his own; my family is an old officer line. As I grew up my wonderment and girlish enthusiasm grew to love and this was mutual.

Even at the beginning of the twentieth century 5 feet 7 inches (the height recorded in his 1916 application for a commission) is likely to have appeared tall to few except the tiny Maude, and only as a child does Deeping's hair appear to be blonde. Mrs Deeping's Aryan fantasy of her husband's descent from an 'the honourably old family line', with its evolutionary or fancifully snobbish connotations, is a construction that Deeping bequeathed her in his final novels.

¹³² *Ekstra Bladet*, Tirsdag 10 Juli 1951, p. 2. trans. Graham Grover.

Whereas inter-war novels with a contemporary setting, such as *Sorrell and Son* and *The Malice of Men* (1938) had portrayed the land-owning classes as weak or as bullies, *Portrait of a Playboy* (1947), *Old Mischief* (1950) and *The Old World Dies* (1954) place at their moral centre an elderly representative of the old landowning classes who twinkles benevolently (or leers) at the young. Both the young and old are sentimentalised. Profiles of Deeping in the late 1930s increasingly stress his sympathy for the young.

As for the young people - I mean the young men and women of twenty-two to twenty-six, as apart from the insolent, bored, supremely selfish post-war generation - they are very pleasant and altogether admirable.¹³³

That this new enthusiasm for 'youth' might have been a consistent marketing ploy to boost flagging sales is suggested by the title and content of another article that appeared in *The Queen* March 12th 1936, entitled 'WISE WORDS TO YOUTH'. The wise words chiefly concern the relationship between the 'the really virile man' and his ideal spouse 'a mixture of femininity and comradeship.'¹³⁴

Maude was indeed the perfect comrade and foil to Deeping's construction of himself as a virile man of action. She appears as both feminine in her style and accomplishments and as primally female, endowed with wisdom beyond the reach of man. She also contributed to the evolutionary (or simply snobbish) myth of Deeping's ancestry. By Deeping's death, not only the Midland brewers but the Essex doctors had been written out of this myth. In her correspondence with Dr Ingrid Wotschke in 1964-5 Maude insists that Dr Wotshcke will find *The Old World Dies* 1954 'almost autobiographical'.¹³⁵ She almost gloats over the difficulties that Wotschke was experiencing in constructing a biography of Deeping. 'Yes you must

¹³³ *Weldon's Ladies' Journal*, March 1935, p. 33.

¹³⁴ *The Queen*, 12 March 1936, p. 16.

¹³⁵ Maude Deeping to Ingrid Wotschke 22 June 1964, of *Das Bild des englischen Menschen in Romanen George Warwick Deepings (1877-1950)*, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Halle-Wittenberg, 1969) p. 208.

find it difficult to make a story out of the meagre scraps I have given you.¹³⁶ Of course there was no story to be written because ‘His nature was happy and uncomplicated.’ In this respect it was Deeping’s transparency and lack of depth that was being constructed for the researcher’s benefit. Not only was he sceptical of digging ‘deep’ into character but, implies his wife, his own simplicity demonstrated that his admirable qualities proceeded from the lack of the kind of neuroses that the high-brows mistake for depth.

When we look at the ‘uncomplicated’ story that Maude offers Dr Wotschke in lieu of any biographical information, we find that it may be simple but it is certainly a story, quite remote from the facts of Deeping’s life as far as we know them. A quotation from the dust-jacket of *The Old World Dies* (1954) reveals the extent to which Maude and Warwick had consciously constructed an image of themselves and their ‘gracious’ life-style, not as a reward for the relentless routine of the commercially successful novelist but as an image of the moral superiority of the leisured squire.

Sir Roger Marrion, a country gentleman whose ancestors have enjoyed the charm of Wynyates since the days of Henry VII, whose gentle and leisurely life has been spent, until now, in a world fast disappearing, tells the story of the war years as he saw them tucked away in his quiet valley in Surrey at the foot of the Downs.

To him and his invalid wife, the clouds of 1939 loomed black and obviously menacing. But the England they so passionately loved refused to see the coming travail, and Sir Roger fumed in helpless wrath as he watched the storm approach. Nearing his seventies now, there was little he could do but concentrate all his energy on the preservation of his beloved Wynyates to withstand the ravages of the struggle to come. And this is as much the story of Wynyates as of Sir Roger Marrion and his lady, the story of their united efforts to meet the years in which the foundations of their existence were rocked by the thunder of war and the shifting sands of social change.¹³⁷

This passage projects the image of an Englishness that persists in whatever folk memory Deeping’s fiction still remains. It is one of the arguments of this thesis that Deeping’s

¹³⁶ Maude Deeping to Ingrid Wotschke, 22 June 1964, *ibid.*

¹³⁷ *The Old World Dies* (1954).

constructed autobiography obscures the nature of the novels which made him famous. His inter-war fiction constructed a more complex set of values than the simple conservatism represented by his final novels. The images of the house, the garden and the partnership between himself and his wife that Deeping constructed in the thirties and forties occlude the uneasiness of the relationship between his most popular novels and the social hegemony which he finally maintained he was representing. In his war-time letters to Knopf he attempts to adopt a vice-regal tone but, as in the novels the sense of bathos at the end of his attempt at Churchillian rhetoric is the result of the childish language of the threats that lead up to the attempt at noble simplicity in the final lines.

Here we prepare calmly for the possible Battle for Britain and I don't think it is complacency when we say we are confident. We would like to see the German come and smash their nasty faces. As my gardener says - "If they dare to plant their foul feet in this island we will throw them into the sea."

Well - that's the spirit. Our people have been happier since the debacle in poor craven, corrupt France. We know where we are. We stand.¹³⁸

The transparently manufactured quality of this adult identity characterises all the novels from the 1920s onwards. An examination of the strategies with which other male middlebrow novelists narrated their lives reveals the uniquely defensive strategies with which Deeping dramatised his.

Deeping's first defence was to avoid any explicitly autobiographical text at all. Most of the comparable authors of the period wrote autobiographies and seem at ease with the exercise. Ernest Raymond and A. S. M. Hutchinson both write self-deprecatingly about their lives; the drama of each volume of their autobiographies lies in their families. They implicitly accept their literary lack of status by declining to discuss the matter at all. It is clear that Raymond

¹³⁸ Letter to Alfred Knopf, July 1940, Alfred A. Knopf Inc. Archive, University of Texas at Austin.

felt the value of *Tell England* (1922) lay in its spiritual rather than its literary merits. None of his other novels, in his opinion 'had an idea within them so strong and so moving - however immaturely handled'.¹³⁹ Gilbert Frankau and John Buchan, who, within their novels are as hostile as Deeping to the highbrow, do not make claims for the cultural status of their own fiction in their autobiographies.¹⁴⁰ Buchan, financially and emotionally more secure than Frankau, (and never dependent on his writing for economic survival) quite calmly and convincingly asserts that he is 'an author who only writes to please himself'.¹⁴¹ Buchan talks about his popular novels as 'romances' and does not seem troubled that the purchasers of his 'serious' fiction were disappointed because it did not conform to the pattern of the romances. This assurance of tone, his consciousness that he was respected as a classical scholar, businessman, politician, family man and a model of Presbyterian probity, characterises Buchan's autobiography. He puts down his lack of responsiveness to modernist literature to the fact that, seriously ill during the First World War, he lost his ear for the modern idiom. He may be smug but he is secure enough to leave his own relation to contemporary literature alone. His confidence was justified for, despite their racism and imperialist rhetoric, Buchan's novels did look after themselves. Greene may have been repelled by the values of Buchan's heroes but he merely found Deeping's style 'delightfully grotesque' and did not even bother to deal with his values.¹⁴²

Deeping's autobiographical strategies all reveal that his literary status, or lack of it, caused him an anguish we do not feel in the letters of Hugh Walpole or Edgar Wallace, or the

¹³⁹ Ernest Raymond, *Please You, Draw Near* (Cassell, 1969), p. 5.

¹⁴⁰ Gilbert Frankau, *Self-Portrait* and John Buchan, *Memory Hold-the-Door* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1940).

¹⁴¹ *Memory Hold-the-Door*, p. 207.

¹⁴² Graham Greene, 'The Last Buchan', *The Lost Childhood and Other Essays*, (Penguin, 1951) and 'Fiction', *The Spectator*, 22 September, 1933, p. 380.

autobiographies of Hutchinson, Raymond, Frankau or Buchan. However his house and garden express a cultural confidence that is entirely absent in his fiction or in the awkward recycling of the catalogue of biographical facts and statements of personal philosophy that pass for autobiographical statements. Having created an environment that reflected the 'classic' good taste of the landed gentry, he then proceeded to fictionalise this environment. In doing this, he performed the kind of sleight of hand that Nietzsche had performed rhetorically.¹⁴³ Both celebrate the power of the individual to demonstrate his superiority to the masses by the force of his will; both try to maintain an ideology of aristocracy and an evolutionism which undermines the essential radicalism and individualism of the values they appear to promote. Deeping became wealthy by promoting fantasies of self-help and individual autonomy. He spent this money building a fantasy that he had inherited rather than achieved this autonomy.

James Olney argues that there are two kinds of autobiography, one built around a single metaphor and the other in which the subject views himself as he constructs that metaphor.¹⁴⁴ Deeping's fear of memory and self-reflection means that his autobiographical metaphor is single. That single metaphor is the house. It postulates what Seán Burke calls 'an unifying ego which assures the self-identity of the subject through time'.¹⁴⁵ Just as Deeping declines to attend to his past except in the unpublished fragment, 'Simple Simon' and the memoir of St John's, so in his novels memory plays little part, perhaps because the act of remembering argues that 'selfhood is not continuous; for it brings up one self here and another self there,

¹⁴³ See the discussion of these ideas in Bruce Detweiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

¹⁴⁴ James Olney, *Metaphors of Self* (Princeton University Press, 1972).

¹⁴⁵ Seán Burke, 'Writing the Self', *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: a Reader* (Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 304.

and they are not the same as one another.¹⁴⁶ After the First World War the titles of Deeping's novels repeatedly evoke bastions which protect, structures which enclose. Some are simply the name of a house: *Orchards* (1922), *Doomsday* (1927) and *Laughing House* (1946). None of his novels, except *The Dark House* (1941), is concerned with character development. In most of his post-war novels the drama depends upon the sheer obstinacy of the character's insistence on an identity that has been more or less clear to him from the beginning of the book. The hero's triumph consists in finding a structure which embodies this identity. The identity of the place may have been constructed by someone else but the hero earns the right to assume it, usually by tilling the soil around it, exactly as Deeping did in 'Eastlands' and his attendant properties around Weybridge. An important aspect of this visual image is that it should appear old, yet the point of Deeping's stories is that such a 'sanctuary' should be achieved not inherited. At a period when the wealth of the traditional aristocracy was declining and the social status of the newly wealthy was ambiguous, Deeping fostered the patina of tradition that would conceal the extent to which he too was, to some extent, one of the 'nouveau riche'. The sense of the past is evoked by the fabric of the house and the style and iconography of the garden. The 'tastefulness' of the final environment is in fact the product of individual endeavour but the illusion is that such taste was the product of genetic or social superiority. Deeping's fiction may have turned out to be 'Time's fool' but the stability of the decorative taste of the English upper middle classes might well ensure that his house and garden will enshrine an identity if not a name as long as the composition of that class endures.

¹⁴⁶ James Olney, p. 24.

Chapter Three

A reality of romance: resisting the constraints of genre

‘A romance at last! pure though subtle, virile yet tempered by the necessary sentiment’¹

The opening pages of *Joan of the Tower* (1911) dramatise the contradictory pleasures on offer to the reader of Deeping’s pre-war novels: a romantic repudiation of romance. In the twilight, through a ‘valley of shadows’, a restless monk walks towards ‘the Great Wold, that wilderness of forest, moor, and marsh’. He walks away from the monastic life, seduced by ‘the viper of a French romance’. The tales of the chivalric world pictured beyond the monastery are regarded as ‘poison’ by the monks. Pelleas, however, listens to the voice of romance ‘though he had been taught to call it the voice of the Devil’. The author endorses this subversive response in an unequivocal but curious way:

There was red blood under the white habit, a discontent that was generous, desire that had no carnal impulses.²

The associations of romance with unreality and the world of dreams are being explicitly countered by the associations of ‘red blood’ with assertive masculinity. Simultaneously the associations of romance with eroticism are countered by the assertion that the ‘red blood’ aroused had ‘no carnal impulses’.

The associations of romance with ‘real’ manhood released from the emasculation of monastic, or even of Christian ideals is intensified by the way in which Pelleas enters the world of the wilderness outside the monastery walls:

¹ *Delineation*, February 1904 (Mrs. Deeping’s scrap-book).

² *Joan of the Tower*, p. 6.

In his quaint thoroughness he was determined to go naked out of the Roding lands, keeping nothing but his oak staff, a linen cloth about his loins, and a sheepskin cap to hide his tonsure.³

The bucolic rather than knightly imagery fuses English and classical pastoral in a 'quaint' way that does not fully prepare the reader for the magnificence of the monk's final gesture of liberation. He dives into a river, swims across it, performs a kind of baptism 'as though cleansing himself of his old promises' and strides naked into a sunrise 'like a young Hercules with a club upon his shoulder....and the strength of an oak tree in his body.' The author characteristically attempts to check the possibility that the reader might find this image more ludicrous than heroic:

Pelleas was not cursed with self-consciousness, save in so far as his first quest was to be the quest of clothes. It did not strike him that he was an effective part of the landscape...; that he was a magnificent animal, and far more comely than the buck or the boar. His strenuous simplicity ran like a torrent into the wealth of the wild.⁴

That the nakedness of Pelleas is symbolic is made even more explicit by the author:

the great world does not desire to see things naked, Truth is often more shocking to it than a man's body. Life has to be covered and disguised. Men make a patchwork quilt for it, and call the patchwork religion and law.⁵

The opening to this, his thirteenth novel in eight years of publishing, exhibits many features of the early novels that make *Deeping* a challenge to those cultural commentators, both his contemporaries and ours, who assert that writers of popular fiction are unselfconscious about their art, evade complex issues and promise the illusion of a 'happy end'. Although *Deeping's* skirmishing with complex issues may seem confused, he by no means accepts the given terms of such cultural debates as the opposition of reality and romance, nor does he appear to be aligning himself with the hegemonically oppressive institutions of religion and law. As the

³ *Joan of the Tower*, p. 10.

⁴ *Joan of the Tower*, p. 11.

⁵ *Joan of the Tower*, p. 14.

passage quoted above demonstrates he poses as a fierce gazer at unstable and uncomfortable truths.

However the modern reader is made uncomfortable less, perhaps, by the rather vague outline of Truth as embodied by the naked monk, than by the nakedness of the author. The scale of his ambitions is not concealed by irony or subtlety. 'Truth' and 'Life' are his themes. And, despite the author's identification with the unselfconsciousness of the naked monk's 'strenuous simplicity', his awareness of the potential mirth that might be excited by the opening image of his novel is highly self-conscious and his defences are elaborate. Deeping sought to establish his fiction as unselfconscious, straightforward and free from the modern curse of introspection.⁶ In fact, his constant directions to the reader as to how he should be read, his awareness of potential accusations of sentimentalism or lack of realism and his posturing as a sage who is offering more than 'mere' romance reveal an author obsessed by how he was regarded. He is not naively oblivious of the cultural context within which he is writing but is constantly responding to it. His desire to escape the label of a romantic novelist is linked to his desire to achieve a cultural status which is superior to that of the merely popular novelist. The last of the pre-war novels is concerned explicitly with the status of what was soon to be labelled as 'middle-brow' before that coinage revealed that battle lines had become public. Deeping's commercial success was built on sensitivity to the cultural climate in which he wrote not on an innocent disregard for it. His early novels increasingly demonstrate that he was consciously offering some of the pleasures of romance to an audience whom he felt might or should despise such pleasures. His elaborate defensiveness about the

⁶ For example in his assertion in 'Warwick Deeping: Author of Old Pybus' in the *Wilson Bulletin*, April 1929, p. 562, that after his time as a doctor in the trenches, 'I felt I had to make a fresh start. I began in France - I scribbled in dug-outs, huts and billets. I came back feeling I had not got anywhere near where I wanted to get, but that I had to get there. I was after humanity, and the life of the day and how it would express itself thru [sic] me'.

nature of popular fiction, and romantic fiction in particular, serves not only to clothe his own embarrassment at his role but also to reassure his consumers that they have nothing to be embarrassed about in reading him. Even in his earliest work Deeping demonstrates his skill in allowing his readers pleasure in a form which was acceptable to them.

From romance to realism?

This chapter deals with Deeping's first eighteen novels, published between 1903 and 1913. After his first four, all historical romances, the remaining fourteen roughly alternate between those with historical and those with contemporary settings. Contemporary reviews tell us something about the way these novels were initially read and the novels themselves offer us a series of reflections and speculation about their reception. Deeping rejected his earlier novels,⁷ one of which he called in its dedication to his sister, 'This Dream Romance'.⁸ Though his early 'dream romances' made him his living he achieved his overwhelming commercial success with the novels of the 1920s which in 1929 he suggests are more realistic. The writer in *The Wilson Bulletin* (1929) commented, 'He somewhat deplores his earlier works, which did not exactly set the world afire. "I wish the work I did before the war had never been written," he once said. "I was living a self-absorbed, dreamy life".⁹ This may or may not have been true about his life, but the inference that the pre-war novels were 'dreamy' and unrealistic is not wholly justified. A number of them deal with socially challenging issues: *Sincerity* (1912) with the failure of the middle classes in a small Midlands town to offer citizens a clean water supply and *The Return of the Petticoat* (1909) with cross-dressing and the desire of a woman to change her sex. The reviewers in *The Times Literary Supplement*

⁷ As the article in the *Wilson Bulletin* makes clear.

⁸ The dedication to the vaguely Arthurian romance, *The Seven Streams* (1905)

⁹ 'Warwick Deeping: Author of Old Pybus', *The Wilson Bulletin*, April 1929, p. 562.

were not impressed by these attempts to break free from the genre of historical romance with which he was at first associated. The reviewer of *The Slanderers* in 1907 asserts that

Mr. Warwick Deeping, the author of *Uther and Igraine* and *Love Among the Ruins* is less successful as a social satirist than as a medieval romancer.¹⁰

But it is interesting that after the success of *Sorrell and Son*, Deeping, his publisher and the writers of small summary biographies do not acknowledge the existence, let alone the possible success of these pre-war experiments with contemporary social satire. His construction of the way he developed as a writer, that he moved from unreal historical romance before the war to realistic contemporary novels after the war, was a necessary one. It sharpened the image of the Deeping who in the 1920s became a manly exponent of realism with none of the feminised qualities of 'dreaminess' and self absorption characteristic of the despised romance.

However, Deeping was never to escape self-absorption or self-consciousness. For in the way he distances himself from modernism and introspection he is as self-conscious about the nature of his art as any modernist. This self-consciousness in part reflects the tensions generated by the social perception of the ineffectuality of writing itself which is explored more fully in the next chapter. It might also have been a response to the need that readers of popular fiction often have to be reconciled to their guilty pleasures. Deeping's early novels imply an author and reader rooted in reality who despise the ineffectuality of the purely romantic idealist. Yet, at the same time the 'dreamer' is often presented as having a better understanding of reality than the brutal 'realists'. In *Uther and Igraine* (1903), it is a dreamer who is instrumental in liberating the imprisoned Igraine from the ruthless war-lord of a grim rather than picturesque Tintagel.

¹⁰*The Times Literary Supplement*, 20 September 1907, p. 287.

John the bastard, a pathetic shred of humanity, thin and motherless, blessed with nothing save a dreamy nature that stood him in poor stead in such a hold as Tintagel.¹¹

It is this poor specimen who summons the man of action to release Igraine. It is inaccurate to read Deeping's early works, as he invites us to do, as unashamedly offering the pleasures of romance and his later ones as manfully facing reality. The rhetoric throughout the novels struggles to imply an author and a reader who are superior to those of 'a dreamy nature' who indulge either in abstruse thought or escapist fictions. However, it is this 'pathetic shred' with 'his dreamy nature' who saves the heroine from the brutal 'reality' of her husband's sexual humiliation of her. The tensions implicit in such narratorial positioning echo those noted in the opening of *Joan of the Tower* (1911). Arthurian dreams release the renegade monk, Pelleas, from sterile monasticism, to a life of action rather than of religious dreaming. From the beginning of his career Deeping is concerned with the questionable manliness of 'dreaming' and dramatising his own virility as a producer of a dangerously feminised product. *Joan of the Tower* itself at first seems to promise the picturesque delights of the Pre-Raphaelites, but in fact dwells relentlessly on the brutality of an anarchic rather than a chivalric world. Deeping was certainly marketed as offering the pleasures of romance. His third historical romance, *The Seven Streams* (1905), is explicitly described as 'This Dream Romance' in the dedication and was produced by Cassell in an expensive edition in 1911. It is ornamented with gold patterning suggestive of the Pre-Raphaelites whom Deeping explicitly evokes but from whom he also distances himself in the historical novels themselves.

Deeping's self-conscious positioning of himself as a realist possibly indicates a resistance to the categories he felt to be imposed upon him. This cultural defensiveness is linked throughout his career to an obsession with autonomy. In these early novels this is focused on

¹¹*Uther and Igraine*, p. 301.

the vulnerability of woman to rape and sexual humiliation. However, during this pre-war period the emphasis shifts. The first half of the final novel considered in this chapter, *The White Gate* (1913), shows the heroine as initially a victim of sexual humiliation. However, once rehabilitated as a respected wife and beauty in the Riviera she is subjected to cultural humiliation by fellow English travellers who despise the limited nature of her education. Despite the shift in emphasis, the common concern seems to be to the vulnerability of the individual, not only to physical threat but to the invasion of the social and cultural systems of classification. Cultural humiliation does indeed have the force of an assault for Deeping. As a novelist Deeping does not aim to be classified in a particularly desirable way, but to escape classification altogether.

This fierce insistence on the the cultural autonomy of an author is shared with Marie Corelli. Q. D. Leavis perceives Deeping to be one of Corelli's heirs but far more dangerous in that he and Gilbert Frankau 'work the spiritual-emotional responses in a more dubious fashion'.¹² Corelli sub-titles *The Life Everlasting* (1911) 'A Reality of Romance', asserting her independence from either category. She, like Deeping, resists the power of the critics to dismiss her as popular and therefore not serious. Her thinly fictionalised self-defence in *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) would surely have been read by Deeping who might have taken heart from Corelli's defiant assertion that "Miss Clare is too popular to need reviews."¹³ The construction of romance as opposed to reality is closely linked to the construction of the popular as inherently opposed to the serious. Both authors attempted to free themselves from being placed at the pejorative pole of either construct and neither was above flaunting their

¹² Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Chatto and Windus, 1932; Bellew, 1990) p.66.

¹³ Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, (Methuen, 1895) p. 172. This and the subsequent pages are worth reading in full for their vigorous defence of the popular novelist.

commercial success as a challenge to their patronising or contemptuous critics. Both authors demonstrate the extent to which the purpose and nature of fiction could preoccupy the popular author as much as it did authors who were accorded greater literary distinction. This chapter's final discussion of *The White Gate* explores the way in which bookishness and the culture which lends social distinction become disputed levels which the despised unbookish and uncultured both disparage and aspire to. It is a measure of Deeping's anxieties about his cultural status, that of all the areas of distress and social unease that he deals with in the 18 novels published before the First World War, it is the nature of cultural distinction that finally consumes him and dominates his fiction, as it will do after the success of *Sorrell and Son* makes his own status so exposed and the author so vulnerable.

A rich flavour of literature

Warwick Deeping's first novel, *Uther and Igraine*, was not a work of juvenilia. It was published in 1903 when Deeping was 26. Its success enabled him to abandon medicine and become a full-time writer. Although the sales of his 1925 bestseller eclipsed that of his previous novels, the first readers of *Sorrell and Son* picked up the book secure in the knowledge that the author's worth and cultural respectability had been established by 32 popular novels which, as the *The Star* observed of *Uther and Igraine*, had 'the rich flavour of literature'.¹⁴ From the beginning of his career the marketing of Deeping's books serves to allay fears that they might be culturally suspect. *The Bristol Mercury* assured its readers that despite 'the racy style', the book 'is well got up and is bound in a most artistic cover, and is very suitable for presentation.'¹⁵ Most reviewers casually mention the raciest incident where the naked Igraine is tied to a tree and rescued by the chivalrous Uther yet they are also at pains

¹⁴ *The Star*, 7 November 1903, p. 1.

¹⁵ *The Bristol Daily Mercury and Daily Post, Western Counties and South Wales Advertiser*, 3 November 1903, p. 8.

to assure the reader of the fastidiousness of the style.¹⁶ The illustration commissioned by Cassell for their new edition of the novel in 1909, (modelled on *The Knight Errant* by Millais)¹⁷ demonstrates the publisher's awareness that readers wanted to enjoy the eroticism of the image, but retain a sense of their own fastidiousness. In the only internal illustration to Deeping's works ever produced by Cassell the knight is as much tied up as the maiden. He holds up his shield to conceal the girl's modesty so is having to cut the rope virtually blindfold. The awkwardness of his manoeuvre is softened by the gracefulness of the heroine's hair and the coy subtitle, "The man saw only the white feet." Q. D. Leavis would have found in these early reviews plenty of material to examine how readers were enabled by reviewers to enjoy potentially suspect pleasures in the public space of their drawing room. The most striking example of the role of the reviewer in assuring the reader of the social acceptability of her own potentially transgressive pleasure is the review of *Uther and Igraine* in *The Folkestone Chronicle*:

It was a coarse age with its coarseness, [sic.] but little tempered by a thin veneer of civilisation. In order to give a faithful description of the period, a certain element of brutality has naturally been introduced; the scenes in the Castle of Tintagel are perhaps too realistically described.

However, after mentioning the tree episode the reviewer permits the reader to enter this coarse and brutal world by praising the 'extreme delicacy of the author in describing this scene' which 'alone stamps him as a cultured artist'.¹⁸

In setting his first novel in Arthurian England Deeping proved himself to be a shrewd judge of the market. Arthurian subject matter had inspired poetry of undisputed literary merit and popularity in Tennyson and more disputed merit in Morris and Swinburne. In the works of

¹⁶ For example *The Liverpool Mercury*, 12 November 1903, p. 12.

¹⁷ *The Knight Errant* is in Tate Britain, but the painting is chiefly of the nude while the illustration foregrounds the man against a background of hair and shield.

¹⁸ *Folkestone Chronicle*, 24 October 1903, p. 5.

Morris and Tennyson he also had a precedent for using this 'matter' as a vehicle for a response to contemporary Britain. The pre-Raphaelites had contributed to the fashion for images of Arthurian youth in the late nineteenth century but, during the period when Deeping conceived his first two Arthurian novels, 1890 - 1903, it was the dramatists, rather than the poets or painters that were preoccupied by 'the matter of Britain'. In 1895, J. Comyns Carr's *King Arthur* was produced, in 1895 Sir Henry Newbolt's *Mordred*, and in 1905 Ernest Rhys published *Gwenevere: a Lyric Play* performed in 1908. The cultural standing of these dramatists is interesting: they were all of them men of letters, in no way associated with the decadents of the 1890s. In writing a work set in Arthurian times, Deeping was associating himself with what had become a respectable and culturally conservative movement, but by writing an Arthurian novel, rather than a poem or play, he was doing something new to most of the novel-reading public. There had been few Arthurian novels since Thomas Love Peacock's satirical *The Misfortunes of Elphin* in 1829.¹⁹ Thus, by writing a novel rather than a poem or a play, Deeping showed from the beginning of his writing career his commercial acumen in exploiting a gap in an existing market.

Ten of his nineteen pre-war novels are historical romances; two are set in the sixth century with Arthurian subject matter and five are set in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, chiefly during the period when the Angevin kings were struggling to contain the English barons. Of the three remaining, *Bess of the Woods* (1906) is set in the second half of eighteenth century England, *The lame Englishman* (1910), in Rome during Garibaldi's campaigns and *The*

¹⁹ All the information about Arthurian Literature in the late nineteenth century comes from Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer, *The Return of King Arthur - British and American Arthurian Literature since 1800* (D. S. Brewer and Barnes and Noble, 1983), pp. 324-344. Lisa Hopkins has drawn my attention to the sustained set of Arthurian allusions in Bram Stoker's *The Lady of the Shroud* (1909), (Hopkins, pers. comm. 2001).

House of Spies (1913), in England threatened by a Napoleonic invasion. All except *Bess of the Woods* (1906), are set in a place and a period in which physical survival is threatened.

These novels, as much as the post-war bestsellers, convey a sense of the fragility of social stability, of human dignity and of fixed gender roles. Every novel of this pre-war period has in common a sense of human vulnerability and of the powerful threats both to our existence and identity. There seems to be a reluctance to assert the validity of any legitimising authority to whom the weak and vulnerable might appeal. Deeping's rejection of traditional Christianity and romantic feudalism is closely linked to a persistent sense of the absence of a legitimising authority.

There is little point in discussing the Arthurian romances separately from those set in the Middle Ages, because neither period is explored with great attention to historical accuracy. In fact, most striking about his treatment of both periods is what he is not interested in. In neither period is he concerned with narratives which culminate in a mission accomplished or a movement of history completed. There is no interest in the Grail motif in the Arthurian romances and no strong sense of order restored at the end of the Medieval narratives. In *Ivanhoe* (1819) and many of the Robin Hood ballads, the return of Richard I marks a restoration of a kind of order, but the absence of an idealised King Arthur or messianic figure in Deeping's novels is marked. The implication of Marxist theorists, for example in the work of Bertholt Brecht and Pierre Macherey, that bourgeois texts always focus on what happens in the end, is certainly not true of this apparently bourgeois novelist. Any 'peace' that might be restored at the end of the novel is felt to be merely temporary. It is the sense of chaos consequent upon the struggle between competing warlords that dominates the narrative. Indeed 'a strenuous age, with more riot in it than repose'.²⁰ Against this background of

²⁰ *Globe*, 5 October 1903. Mrs. Deeping's scrap-book. No record of this in *The British*

incessant struggle and insecurity two individuals will find, lose and recover each other. One or other member of the couple, sometimes both, will limp or grope their way towards the final embrace, diminished by the loss of eyesight, physical strength or youth and beauty. The narrative strains to dissociate the union of the couple from any symbolic significance linked to the historical events described. The survival of the couple will depend on stoic determination. The only union that ends with an image of the happy couple surrounded by children is that of Pelleas and Joan in *Joan of the Tower*, but there is a sense that we are sharing the temporary relief of a refugee camp rather than the permanence of a family home. The scarred and veiled heroine sits surrounded by orphaned babies, victims of the Barons' wars.

Deeping's early historical novels do not hold up the Middle Ages as a period of feudal coherence and order. Although Deeping's plains, like Matthew Arnold's, are 'Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight',²¹ and his couples' truth to one another becomes the only human value that can be asserted with confidence, unlike Arnold, Deeping does not suggest that 'the Sea of Faith' once made the world a different place. The church and most of its members are presented contemptuously or satirically. It would be a mistake to regard the author of these early novels as self-evidently a nostalgic conservative. There is no Golden Age against which the present age is measured. Both political and ecclesiastical institutions in all his historical novels are depicted as corrupt and out of touch with the needs of the people. Deeping has far more in common with Scott than he does with Victorian medievalism which, as Fleishman comments, 'made a misinterpretation of Scott's sceptical distaste for the obscurantism and hypocrisy of medieval society, particularly in religion.'²²

Newspaper Library's copy of *The Toronto Globe*.

²¹ Mathew Arnold, 'Dover Beach', *Poetical Works*, (Oxford University Press, 1950)

²² Avrom Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel* (The Johns Hopkins Press: Baltimore and London, 1971) p. 48.

However the couple at the centre of each novel do, to some extent, represent the ideals of the institutions which created them. The hero of each of Deeping's romances is a knight who is trying to behave chivalrously despite the treachery and self-interested behaviour of his peers. The heroine is often a nun who turns her back on the church partly because of its greed and corruption but also because she needs to fulfill herself sexually. She is 'spiritually clean', though not a virgin. Deeping does not idealise chastity. It is not the church's hypocrisy about chastity that is attacked, but the idealisation itself. The nunneries or abbeys in which Deeping's heroines take refuge are full of mean and manipulative men and women whose rejection of the sexualised heroine, in *The Red Saint* (1909), for example, demonstrates the distorting effects of the monastic life. To that extent, he shares the vision of Charles Kingsley who, despite his fervent admiration for early Christianity, had little sympathy for monasticism. However, Kingsley regards sexuality and sensuality as weaknesses, while Deeping, in these early novels, does not. His early medieval romances are full of earthy or wistful prostitutes who support the heroine when she is deserted by her 'purer' sisters. Deeping often dwells on the kisses between the prostitute and the renegade nun with a kind of prurient insistence.²³ Deeping's heroes too are full of 'clean' sexuality, a 'desire that had no carnal impulses'²⁴. As this phrase suggests, Deeping may not regard chastity as an ideal, but carnality is as repulsive as it was to the strenuously Christian Kingsley.

It is likely that Deeping would have read Kingsley's *Hereward the Wake* (1866) as a teenager. Deeping's muscularly Christian father may well have approved of Kingsley as suitable reading for his son although in none of his novels does Deeping seem to share either Kingsley's

²³ *The Red Saint*, p. 286.

²⁴ *Joan of the Tower*, p. 6.

strongly Christian values or his paradoxical sense that sexuality itself is a threat to true manliness. However, they both seek to depict the hero as specifically English and the French as villainous. Hereward battles valiantly to preserve England against the Normans. Ivanhoe might lie behind both Kingsley and Deeping's depiction of Angevin kings and their barons as threats to Englishness. However, in an entirely characteristic way Deeping's enemies are easier to identify than his friends. Though the Angevins may to be to blame for social disorder, the 'native' Celtic or Saxon communities are not idealised in any way. They are depicted as an easily roused rabble, prey to magicians, priests or mountebanks who work on their credulity. This fear and contempt both for ruler and ruled remains unchanged throughout his work. Both Kingsley and Scott use their fiction to establish a myth of the past which will validate their reading of the present. Deeping, however, projects the past as a chaotic arena for his fears. In this respect he is unlike both Kingsley and Scott. The early historical novels exploit the picturesque opportunities of the subject matter but also, to use Fleishman's comment on Kingsley, 'turn the historical setting itself into the hero's antagonist.'²⁵ Although the hero's stoicism is demonstrated by the way he weathers the continual storm, there is also a sense in which the brutality and chaos of the world around him is regarded as vital and as inspiring spiritual and physical vigour. Deeping may not have idealised the Middle Ages as a spiritual or political utopia but he does share Morris' fascination with the brutality of medieval conflict. As Brewer remarks about William Morris, 'By portraying such scenes so graphically, Morris in one sense refrained from idealising the Middle Ages. But in another sense, the very coarseness of his portrait idealised the vitality of medieval man.'²⁶

²⁵ Fleishman, p.155.

²⁶ Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer, *The Return of King Arthur* (D.S. Brewer, Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. 20.

In Deeping's early historical novels, the man's vitality is not in question. In his post-war novels the hero is often middle-aged and weary, but his pre-war heroines are more likely than the heroes to be tempted by the thought that the 'struggle nought availeth', a focus commented on in the review of *Uther and Igraine* in *The Times Literary Supplement* on 23 October 1903. It is worth quoting in full because, as a review of his first novel, it is the only response to be untainted by preconceptions about his cultural standing. The reviewer was under no pressure to position himself in relation to an author with an iconic reputation. He had no sense of what 'a Deeping' might be expected to offer.

Uther and Igraine is a good full blooded example of the tapestry novel as invented by Maurice Hewlett, with a strong dash of the twentieth century and a yet stronger dash of Swinburne. Into the strangely carved glass of Arthurian legend the wine of many different ages has been poured, and it gleams red or white according to the cup-bearer. There is life enough in Ygraine (sic) both to attract and repel. Despite her ancient name, she comes of the same stock as two or three of Ibsen's impatient and imperious heroines. She is a born rebel; and anyone who has the power to depict rebellion, especially feminine rebellion, is always possessed of such sympathy for the rebel that he can bring others to sympathise with him also. Uther and Galois are not so good, but the style, though often disfigured by such words as "queer" and "cataleptic", is full of poetry and carries one along like a flood. The lusciousness of it will send some readers back with renewed zest to the simple force of Mallory (sic), to the chaste vigour of Tennyson. The length of it may deter others. But, for the leisure of a long summer afternoon, the book would be an excellent companion.

I have yet to discover a review of one of Deeping's novels in which so many other authors are cited or another author who could be compared to both Hewlett and Ibsen. One of the reviewer's chief considerations, unlike later reviewers, is to place the novel, rather than the author, in literary and in cultural terms. In doing this, it is regarded as appropriate to compare a work which is finally patronisingly approved as being 'an excellent companion' for 'the leisure of a long summer afternoon' with the writing of Mallory and Tennyson, whose cultural capital was high and relatively undisputed and his heroine with the heroines of Ibsen, whose cultural capital, though certainly disputed, was being discussed with no degree of patronage. This review seems to suggest that cultural category boundaries were much less

fixed at this time than they were to be when Deeping became much more culturally visible with the success of *Sorrell and Son*.

The reviewer, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, ends where she begins, by consigning Deeping to the cultural drawer of 'tapestry novels' exemplified by Maurice Hewlett. Hewlett's non-Arthurian historical novels were popular in the 1890s and 1900s. In 1913 he was still sufficiently respected to be praised by the belle lettrist Holbrook Jackson as 'a new and subtle exponent' of 'the old romance'.²⁷ The novels can have only served as a model for Deeping to a limited extent. Hewlett's novels proclaim themselves to be based on original sources. The narrator confides in his reader, 'Jean-Marie-Baptiste Des-Essars! Keeper of the *Secret des Secrets* - where should I be without him?',²⁸ whereas Deeping's engagement with primary sources is perfunctory. Maurice Hewlett, in *The Queen's Quair* (1904), aims to animate historical figures without taking a particularly critical or partisan view of the events dramatised. Unlike Hewlett, Deeping is not concerned with colouring in the dim outlines of history's chief actors. He sets his stories on the margins of great historical events. Richard II, Wat Tyler or Charles II make guest appearances, but in such a shadowy form that the reader would be forgiven for mistaking them for look-alikes. We glimpse them behind trees in the twilight or overhear them talking. In *The King Behind the King* (1914), Richard II spends half the book under the bedclothes hiding from the mob while the hero, who resembles the recessive king in everything except his lack of vitality, impersonates the king in front of a hostile mob which is tamed by the impostor's virility. Both the King and Watt Tyler are demonised; there is no attempt at historical objectivity. After *Uther and Igraine*, Deeping uses historical figures to enhance the value of his protagonists who are the victims of the

²⁷ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties* (Grant Richards, 1913: Pelican, 1939) p. 228.

²⁸ Maurice Hewlett, *The Queen's Quair* (Macmillan, 1904) p. 19.

mayhem created by the inadequacies or vices of such figures as 'the Angevin kings', or the Stuarts, Charles I or Charles II. The only major historical figure Deeping refers to without criticism is Garibaldi in *The Lame Englishman*, (1910).

When Deeping does attempt an extended portrait of an historical figure about whom there is a mass of first-hand evidence, he uses only the hackneyed and therefore easily recognisable characteristics of the man. Samuel Pepys in *Mad Barbara* (1908) befriends the hero and spends much time ordering puddings from amenable serving wenches. Difficult to place in many other ways, Deeping's use of historical figures confirms the prejudice that authors of popular fiction reinforce rather than challenge stereotypes. Hewlett may not challenge stereotypes but crowds his pages with detail based on reading of available sources; his chief aim seems to be to make the reader intimate with the romantic figures from history. In that sense, his novels are aptly described as 'tapestry' novels, full of carefully stitched detail which are assembled on a vast canvas. The cartoon of the canvas is the commonly accepted version of events; Hewlett's inventiveness lies in colouring in and animating these figures. He would not have been guilty of the kind of anachronism about which the reviewer of *Bess of the Woods*²⁹ commented, 'A modern writer might be described as "that awful author fellow", but not Dr Johnson by his contemporaries.' Another reviewer, delighted by the 'prehistoric miscellany of anachronisms so skillfully inwoven as to defy criticism' in *Uther and Igraine* entitled his review 'The Kingdom of Anachronia'.³⁰

Deeping, in choosing Uther and Igraine as subjects for his first 'historical' novel, reveals how little the romance of history or its interpretation interests him. The events described in the

²⁹ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 29 June 1906, p. 234.

³⁰ *The Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 4 November 1903, p.3, not 26 October as annotated by Mrs. Deeping in her scrap-book.

novel are very loosely based on the opening pages of Thomas Malory's *The Tale of King Arthur*. Nearly every reviewer, even in the *Athenaeum*, notes but indulges this looseness. Only the *Manchester Guardian* spoils the general air of festivity, but chiefly because of the linguistic 'excess'.³¹ These events being the stuff of legend rather than history, Deeping is free to do what he wants, a freedom he similarly displays in his other Arthurian romance *The Seven Streams* (1905). Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer comment that Deeping

simulates a historical realism by depicting Arthur's world not as the chivalrous court of the late Middle Ages as found in Malory (followed by Tennyson and most nineteenth-century poets), but as the more appropriately rugged tribal society of the sixth century. Yet even this seeming realism soon yields romance, for the world of Deeping's novels depicts Roman elegance more than the crude realities of Saxon invasions and Briton resistance.³²

These authors identify, in passing, one of the key tensions in Deeping's work: between the desire to be thought of as realistic and the wish to deliver the satisfactions of romance. This tension is typical of 'a Deeping' from first to the last in his career. It is interesting chiefly because in attempting to resolve this tension Deeping infers a set of readers who are demanding pleasures which are not obviously compatible. Deeping often suggests that he and his readers know that life is not easy but he does claim to offer moral and spiritual guidance to a discriminating readership who can perceive the shallowness of escapist fantasies. These claims will only be endorsed by his readers if the novels are, in some way, perceived to be 'realist'. Superficially, the realism seems to be established in the Arthurian novels by a treatment of violence that is more graphic than anything in, for example, Hewlett. But it is the sense of pain and humiliation which is real rather than the historical detail of the way this humiliation is inflicted. This extract from *Love Among the Ruins* (1904) illustrates how very

³¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 4 November 1903, p.9, not 3 November as annotated by Mrs. Deeping in her scrap-book.

³² Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer, *The Return of King Arthur* (D.S. Brewer and Barnes and Noble, 1983).

vague this period detail is and, incidentally, how lovingly he uses archaic vocabulary and metaphor:

That Junetide Gambrevault rang with the clangour of arms. The Lord Flavian's riders had spurred north, east, and west to manor and hamlet, grange and lone moorland tower. There had been a great burnishing of arms, a bending of bows through all the broad demesne. Steel had trickled over the downs towards the tall towers of Gambrevault.³³

The rhythms of this passage justify the suspicion of Deeping's first reviewer that Swinburne might be an influence. We may be at a loss to imagine exactly how medieval archers and armourers may have prepared for war, how cold steel trickles and we may be puzzled at the indiscriminate spurring but it is possible to be seduced by the music of this passage, the rhythm set up by repetition of present participles and the alliteration in the third sentence. However, the attempt at purposive muscularity cannot conceal the 'confused alarms' and terrified agitation that characterise Deeping's battle scenes. At this point in his career he seems to have inherited not Arnold's bleak retreat from the ignorant armies, but Clough's desperate simulation of purposefulness. As *Love Among the Ruins* progresses the military skirmishes become increasingly squalid and the perpetual movement suggested by the imagery more agitated than purposeful. On the final pages of the novel, the castle is the setting for the reunion of the disfigured heroine and the blinded hero. As the hero approaches his wife's 'bower', 'Time seemed to crawl like a wounded snake in the grass. The figures on the arras gestured and grimaced'.³⁴ His characters, like the figures on the arras, writhe. They are physically disfigured by the picturesque instruments of war and emotionally in a torment of shame. The vitality and authenticity of these early novels lie not in the accretion of period detail but in the intensity of the protagonists' self-abasement. The arras is not used as a picturesque backdrop to the heroine's suffering in this chapter. She is constantly grabbing at it in her anguish in order that it might hide her disfigured face from her husband, of whose

³³ *Love Among the Ruins*, p. 170.

³⁴ *ibid*, p. 316.

blindness she is unaware. The constant agitation of Deeping's prose reflects his preoccupation with unease and distress, the most frequent form of which, in all his novels, is humiliation.

The potentially dangerous and unsettling quality of Deeping's fictional world is touched on by the reviewer when he compares Igraine to 'one of Ibsen's impatient and imperious heroines'.³⁵ It is interesting that, as the reviewer notes, it is the woman who is at the heart of this novel with her quest to find her lover and survive humiliation. This is a characteristic of Deeping's early novels that is shared by few of his later ones which all, except for the *Blind Man's Year* (1937), have at their centre a wounded and vulnerable man. *Love Among the Ruins*, *Mad Barbara* (1908), *The Red Saint* (1909), *The Return of the Petticoat* (1909) and *The Rust of Rome* (1910) all feature heroines threatened with humiliation. Their predicament is an indictment of the social anarchy which exposes them to indignity. The power of the male to rescue the woman is eclipsed by the power of the male to expose them to suffering, and above all, humiliation. Familiarity with images of passive female victims in medieval courtly literature and Victorian Pre-Raphaelite art may persuade us to find their heirs in Deeping, as Rebecca West found Dell's, dated 'tosh':³⁶ a legacy of Victorian voyeurism or a recurrent staple of erotic art. However, as we have seen, Deeping's heroines are too 'impatient and imperious' to offer themselves up as sacrifices to the reader's gaze. Although Burne-Jones is often evoked in these early 'romances', Deeping is far more closely identified with his heroines than these painters seem to have been with their blank icons of femininity. When women cease to be the main subject of his fiction, the increasingly feminised heroes, not-soldiers,

³⁵ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 23 October 1903, p. 304

³⁶ Rebecca West, 'The Tosh Horse', *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews* (Jonathan Cape, 1928) pp. 319-325.

not-leaders, not-captains of any enterprise, seem to subsume the vulnerability of previous genre-bound images of female imprisonment.

In *The Seven Streams* (1905) the hero is the protagonist. The issue is the extent of his responsibility for his sister's humiliation. Nearly every one of the Arthurian or Medieval novels makes rape a key element in the narrative structure of the book. *The Seven Streams* itself has a curious dedication, given its theme:

TO
MY DEAR SISTER
KATHLEEN
THIS DREAM ROMANCE IS DEDICATED.

It is tempting to speculate about whether Deeping's insistence on the 'dream' qualities of his romance are, in fact, an attempt to deal with the different kinds of humiliation experienced by himself and his sister, experiences which in a contemporary setting might not have been palatable to his readers or comfortable to himself.

The story is set in Arthurian Britain, with Christian powers warring against each other. Tristan le Sauvage has arrived from a neighbouring land to avenge the fate of his sister. He discovers she has been raped and murdered. His consciousness of her suffering dominates the book.

Both the vulnerability and stoicism of Deeping's later male figures are embodied in two contrasting women in this book. Tristan is helped by an intrepid warrior called Blanche who is an interesting blend of maternal and masculine virtues. She suppresses her sexual feelings for Tristan in order that he may pursue the noble Rosamunde. She only becomes available sexually to the hero when she has been raped by a Catholic bishop. Her humiliation thus intensifies our sense of women's sexual vulnerability but also, in Rosamunde's case, leads to a self-abasing

and visionary state in which she finds a phial 'with a fluid red as blood',³⁷ grail imagery which Deeping was to reuse in 1932 when his fictionalisation of himself as popular author declares that he has found the 'mystic fluid of realism'. In 1905³⁸ the literal fluid restores the wounded Tristran to health. The rape, by destroying Rosamunde's pride, makes her available to the hero.

This attitude to rape, not quite seen as deserved, but as purging a woman of the 'pride' which made her inaccessible to the hero recurs in slightly different forms both in *The Red Saint* (1909) and *Joan of the Tower* (1911). Both titles point to the centrality of the issue of female autonomy to Deeping. The idealisation of virginity in the case of 'the Red Saint' a raped nun, and the illusory impregnability of Joan's tower are seen to impede the availability of the two women to the noble knights who desire them. In Joan's case, she is not only raped by the murderous 'Goliath' but then comes to desire him. When confronted by the hero, Pelleas, whom she thought was dead, she is overcome by guilt at her sexuality and temporarily immures herself as a chaste hermit in a tower to be released to womanhood and the role of foster mother at the end of the novel.

The notion of rape or of sexual experience enabling women to be generous and tolerant is linked to the image of the generous prostitute in the early novels. In *The Red Saint* the contrast between the meanness of the nuns and the generosity of the prostitute to the raped heroine is made explicit. Marpasse, the whore ('a speckled apple is sometimes sweet under the skin'³⁹) is compared favourably with Ursula, the cold Prioress 'for Marpasse had a heart,

³⁷ *The Seven Streams*, p. 337.

³⁸ The year of publication for *The Seven Streams*.

³⁹ *The Red Saint*, p. 217.

and no belief in her own great godliness'⁴⁰. Virginity is seen as narrowing the sympathies. In his treatment of the sexuality of both men and women Depping emphasises the coercive and threatening potential of sexual desire. The prostitutes in his early fiction have usually lost their virginity either out of economic hardship or rape. In his later fiction, men become the victims of women who use their economic and sexual power to humiliate and entrap them.

The only other pre-war historical novel, besides *The King Behind the King* (1914), which seems to prefigure the later novels by making man the target of social contempt and social exclusion is *Bertrand of Brittany* (1908). Misprized because misshapen and a dwarf, Bertrand is the eldest son of a noble family in fourteenth century Brittany. His mother's coldness towards him leads him to make himself a social outlaw. He becomes the leader of a gang of bandits. To save the honour of the cowardly brother of the lady he loves, he fails to appear on the battle-field in his own colours, instead assuming the colours of the coward. By fighting bravely he redeems the name of the coward. By failing to appear in the roll call in his own name, he loses any reputation to honour, and therefore the love of the lady. The lack of maternal affection for the son and the injustice of seeing others taking credit for one's own efforts both prefigure *Sorrell and Son*. The role of the women in this novel is to protect and inspire the man. The prostitute enables the hero to be confident of his own sexuality. She then commits suicide so that the hero will not be impeded in his pursuit of the noble lady. The callous disregard for the incidental woman in his later novels is prefigured in the casual way the hero acknowledges her sacrifice: 'This child's blood shall make a new man of me.'⁴¹ The noble lady, when a girl, had publicly paid tribute to Bertrand's courage in the list of a tournament. The girl 'had found his soul for him and had stood by him when others mocked'.

⁴⁰ *The Red Saint*, p. 276.

⁴¹ *Bertrand of Brittany*, pp.152 and 50.

Neither of these figures is at the heart of the novel. It is sympathy for the man's humiliation and his courage when stripped of public honour that the author tries to excite. Women are merely instrumental in either humiliating or redeeming him.

In his treatment of women in these early historical novels Deeping may display an almost casual acceptance of the kind of sacrifices women make for men but, except in *Bertrand of Brittany*, he does place woman at the centre of the action. This is rarely so in his novels of the 1920s in many of which the greater economic and social status of his women deny them the role of victim and thus the sympathy of the author. After *Sorrell and Son*, women who might threaten the hero's status as victim are regularly paralysed or obliterated,⁴² thus enabling the bereaved or sexually deprived husband to take centre stage as uniquely isolated or victimised by woman's dependence upon him. In many respects, Deeping's sensitivity to humiliation and victimhood is disquieting. Its obsessive quality is exemplified in the almost unreadable *I Live Again* (1942).⁴³ John, the hero of one of Deeping's few experiments with time travel, is repeatedly reborn at different periods in history in order to be repeatedly humiliated and destroyed by a sexually predatory and economically more powerful woman. However, in these earlier novels the woman is as likely as the man to be the victim of humiliation. In both early and later novels, historical novels or fantasy, rather than realist fictions with contemporary settings, enabled him to dramatise fears of humiliation in a more uninhibited way than would be possible once he had begun to identify with the male protagonists of his fictions.

⁴² As happens in *Roper's Row* (1929), *The Road* (1931), *Seven Men Came Back* (1934) and *Corn in Egypt* (1941).

⁴³ Unreadable because of its nightmarish qualities. This work of fantasy could possibly be modelled on Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928).

The First Contemporary Novels

Although Deeping was to return to the historical novel occasionally after The First World War, *The King Behind the King* (1914) was his last medieval novel. The few that follow, a cluster in the early 1920s, set in seventeenth or eighteenth century England, and then the sequence of historical novels about Southend at the end of his life, are less obsessively concerned with sexual vulnerability. These later novels still construct society as unstable but the chaos is not as violent as the early novels. In using Arthurian and Medieval settings, Deeping may have been distancing his readers from the violence of his fantasies and fears, but in fact he has far less 'picturesque detail' to 'clothe' these fantasises than Scott, Tennyson or Morris. He is not given to long descriptions of medieval armour and cuirasses, instead attempting to create images which aspire to an epic timelessness:

The burning tower with its cracking walls bore witness of the extravagant malice of a rugged age.

Death, that flinty summoner, salves but the dead, yet wounds the living.⁴⁴

In this over-insistence at universalising the lessons of his narrative, Deeping shows that he was trying to do more than simply animate old narrative clichés or indulge a readership's taste for the picturesque. His sensational subject matter and his powerful sense of the 'malice' of any age (reflected in the title of his novel of 1938, *The Malice of Men*) was a dangerous commodity to market. In 'a tapestry novel' a depiction of society as extravagantly malicious was acceptable. However, by 1907 Deeping was confident enough to construct images of society not only close chronologically but close geographically to the one in which he was, at the time, living, the area round Battle and Hastings, in Sussex. The savagery of his attack on this society is all the more remarkable when we consider that not only did he live there but so did his father, with his leading role in the local Church and local Conservative Party as

⁴⁴ *Love Among the Ruins*, p. 2.

described in my previous chapter. In *Valour* (1918) and *Old Pybus* (1928) Deeping draws portraits of a father who supported his son financially while writing or taking an unpopular stand. His autobiographical references to his father are warm. It is possible that Deeping only felt he could expose himself to the local unpopularity that such novels must surely have caused once his father was no longer alive. His father's death in 1909 marks the beginning of the period when his contemporary novels begin to outnumber his historical. However, the first two contemporary novels that he wrote, *A Woman's War* and *The Slanderers*, both published in 1907 precede his father's death. *A Woman's War* is dedicated to, a minor literary figure with connections to Southend,

COULSON KERNAHAN
MY FATHER'S FRIEND - AND MINE
IN MEMORY OF
MANY GENEROUS WORDS - AND DEEDS.

This suggests that he did not see this novel as a betrayal of his father's support but perhaps a vindication of it.

A reviewer of *A Woman's War* (1907) marks the change of genre and pays tribute to

Deeping's narrative skill:

Mr. Deeping has tried his hand successfully at medieval romance...but he here turns with literary versatility to something very different. It is a medical novel - the rivalry of two doctors and their wives in a provincial town. It is written well and will hold the reader's attention; though, from the point of view of dramatic justice, it is not wholly satisfying - the right doctor, influenced by drink, undoubtedly bungles an operation; and the wrong doctor who routed him from the town, though his behaviour was certainly culpable, awakens some pity by catching a bad skin disease.⁴⁶

The focus on Deeping's sense of justice is interesting. His contemporary heroes usually have a sense of injustice (even more powerful than their sense of justice) which is seldom shared by the dominant community in his novels. His heroes increasingly adopt very unpopular and

⁴⁶ *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 June 1907, p. 191.

idiosyncratic moral positions. Those who thwart them are indeed often visited with peculiar punishments, perhaps an expression of the frustration Deeping increasingly expresses at society's moral inadequacies. Morality, in these early contemporary novels, is the result of individual integrity, not of shared social values. Indeed it is society, rather than an individual, which is malign. The skin disease mentioned is not visited on the hero's rival alone. His wife also gets it and it is she who is presented as ruthlessly pursuing the unfortunately alcoholic hero, urging the weak husband to chase him out of town. The figure of the self-sacrificing wife of the alcoholic doctor is balanced by the figure who drives her husband to his vindictive behaviour towards the alcoholic because of her social ambition. He presents 'a cringing, deprecating' figure as he tries to defend his attempts to conceal his medical condition from his wife, thus exposing her to the contagion. ' "It was for the sake of the home, the practice, everything." ' ⁴⁷ His morality is compromised by his connection with his wife and her social ambition. The skin disease is 'that which cannot be named'. However the wife 'spoke the word without flinching, with a distinctness that had that cold and terrible conciseness that science loves'.⁴⁸ The likelihood that the word was syphilis is borne out by the 'keen consciousness of shame' that then overwhelms the husband and leads his wife to fling 'aside from him with an indescribable gesture of passionate repulsion.' Both the doctor's wife who battles to integrate her alcoholic husband back into the society from which he has been flung and the doctor's wife who drives her husband to deceit and ungenerous behaviour because of her social ambition are concerned with their husband's status within the society. The men are morally passive or worse. It is the woman who fights the war either to subvert or to bolster not only the man's morality but the way the man is perceived by the society. The ambivalence

⁴⁷ *A Woman's War*, p. 335.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, p.310.

of this identification of the woman as the chief negotiator of the man's public and social status in a small provincial town is examined in a novel, also of 1907, *The Slanderers*.

It is with *The Slanderers* that Deeping begins his productive association with Cassell and later, in January 1913, with the new editor Newman Flower. His debt to Flower is surely only matched by the firm's debt to Deeping, both warmly acknowledged. Deeping dedicated *The Secret Sanctuary* to Flower with the words

To my Friend
NEWMAN FLOWER
To inspire and to help is to be happy.

Flower reveals the importance of Deeping's commercial success to the firm in his autobiography, *Just as it Happened* (1950).

When in January 1913 I took over the Cassell books there were no clerks sitting at office desks writing fine novels under *noms-de-plume* which were waiting to be published..... Cassells had not delved deeply into the fiction field of late years. It had to a great extent neglected the fiction side of publishing.

But it had a young and future "best-seller" coming up in Warwick Deeping - the only figure of promise on Cassell's fiction list in those days. Deeping was then writing only historical novels. His first book *Uther and Igrane* (sic), a romance rich in colour, had been published by Grant Richards. It was taken over by Cassells (sic) at a late stage, and every Deeping novel since - a fine string of over sixty - has appeared with the Cassell imprint.⁴⁹

A great partnership grew up between Deeping and Cassells (sic); one of those fine friendships that put happiness into publishing.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Untrue on two counts: *Love Among the Ruins*, like *Uther and Igraine* was published by Grant Richards in 1904, *The Seven Streams* by Eveleigh Nash in 1905 and *Bess of the Woods* 1906 and *A Woman's War* by Harper in 1907; Deeping had produced five novels with a contemporary setting before 1913. Flower is contributing to the myth that *Sorrell and Son* was an entirely new type of fiction in Deeping's career. It would be interesting to know whether it was Flower or Deeping who launched this construction..

⁵⁰ *Just as it Happened*, p. 43.

It is left unclear whether the friendship was between Flower and Deeping or Cassell and Deeping. Newman Flower's autobiography reveals a man more interested in personalities of authors rather than the nature of their works. However, never is he malicious or critical. His sensitivity to his authors' necessary personal fictions is illustrated by his response to Bennett's delight in being able to charge 2/6 a word.

"Kipling doesn't get that," he exclaimed. "Not so-so-much as t-that."

I knew that Kipling did, but I was not going to spoil a Bennett dream by telling him so.⁵¹

Flower seems to have inspired a sense of security in other authors besides Deeping and Bennet. In 1929 Ernest Raymond, author of the 1922 best-seller, *Tell England*, dedicated *A Family that Was* to Newman Flower 'ON WHOSE STRONG WINGS WE TRAVEL'. However Deeping, whose sales obviously meant so much to the commercial success of Cassell, only merits a few paragraphs in Flower's memoir while Bennett and Hardy command chapters to themselves. This obviously reflects the literary canon of the 1940s when Flower was writing his book. The book came out after Deeping's death but the nature of the capital Deeping represented to the publisher would have been clear; it was commercial rather than cultural.

The Slanderers (1907) betrays more explicitly than any of its predecessors Deeping's uneasiness over his cultural status. The over-writing of his earlier over-writing has a gusto that engaged critics who also found it 'over-gorgeous'⁵². But his lexical flamboyance is now more intellectually pretentious and his figures of speech more puzzling in their allusiveness. It would be interesting to know how a contemporary reader might have placed the hero's father whose 'prejudices were like caltrops strewn before the advance of any unfamiliar

⁵¹ *Just as it Happened*, p.160.

⁵² *The Irish Times* 3 November 1903, p. 7.

philosophy.⁵³ It is difficult to believe that Deeping's readers would have been familiar with the deterrent effect of spiky iron balls used to deter cavalry in the sixteenth century but it is possible that they were impressed by the cultural authority his such exotic vocabulary implied. This kind of archaism, 'the glowing pigments of the old masters', was appreciated by reviewers of *Uther and Igraine*.⁵⁴ It is not only the vocabulary but the range of cultural allusion which suggests that in turning to a contemporary setting Deeping is straining to retain his place 'on the highest plane of romantic literature'.⁵⁵ Deeping uses the clichés of nineteenth century literary allusion ('Celtic melancholy'⁵⁶ and 'a melancholy reserve that was eminently Byronic')⁵⁷ to help the reader fully understand the fragility of the hero's moral nature. Deeping also compares his bookish hero, Gabriel, to Maurice de Guerin,⁵⁸ a French Romantic poet who had a cult following in the 1860s and 1870s, some thirty years before the novel was written. Schopenhauer, another figure fashionable at the same time as Guerin, is invoked throughout the novel as Gabriel Strong's bad angel. Gabriel's familiarity with Schopenhauer seems to be held responsible for his inability to withstand his father's insistence that he marry the rich and beautiful daughter of a socially prestigious family. The philosopher's pessimism is also held responsible for Gabriel's inability to acknowledge his own sexual passion for a maiden whose spiritual purity is the product of social isolation and a diet of Shakespeare, Nature and History. Shakespeare 'had unbosomed to her, a god-man speaking to a precocious child'. Shakespeare and Schopenhauer are brought into curious opposition when Gabriel eventually realises that he is physically attracted to the lonely and instinctively literary Joan:

⁵³ *The Slanderers*, p. 12.

⁵⁴ *Brooklyn Eagle*, 23 November 1903. Mrs. Deeping's scrap-book. Confirmation not possible from British sources.

⁵⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 11 November 1903, p.6.

⁵⁶ *The Slanderers*, p. 13.

⁵⁷ *The Slanderers*, p. 20.

⁵⁸ *The Slanderers*, p. 13.

Gabriel climbed the altar mound, and sat down to wait. What was the remote melancholy of an Arthurian spirit to him, when he thought with some dread of a girl's clear eyes? There was a tragic note for him in the "ave - ave" of the wind amid the trees. If he had ever believed in Schopenhauer, faith failed him ignominiously at that moment. Nor did he believe Shakespeare to be a fool. ⁵⁹

The opposition between the values being represented here by Schopenhauer on the one hand (presumably pessimistic about the possibility of happiness and therefore paralysing the man's will to attempt to achieve it) and Shakespeare on the other (associated with affirmative, confident and natural behaviour such as 'unbosoming') is to be an essential characteristic of the way Deeping dramatises his moral constructs. He distances himself from his earlier novels by asserting the 'clear' reality of the girl's eyes with the 'remote' dream of Arthurian romance. Cultural icons are placed in relation to each other both in order that he might derive cultural prestige from his familiarity with them but also to give an air of solidity to these constructs by personalising them.

Deeping's assumption that his readers are familiar with the cultural icons to which he refers and assigns the same cultural values to them as he does makes them complicit with his highly eccentric value system. The syntax of the passage above and the shifting narratorial position within it suggest just how bewilderingly unstable these constructs are. The point is that the hero is at last feeling real feeling rather than reading about it in books, but it is at such a moment that the narrator plunges in to contextualise the experience in the world of books. It is Gabriel who feels the 'tragic note' but the narrator reasserts his presence with the conditional clause leaving us unclear as to whether Gabriel had ever believed in Schopenhauer. The negative way in which the affirmative Shakespeare is introduced into the construction of this moment of authentically emotional experience also undermines the reader's confidence that the hero is in fact being gripped at last by reality and real passion.

⁵⁹ *The Slanderers*, p. 86.

It is not coincidental that Deeping's efforts here to identify reality with romance are bound up with his desire both to lay claim to familiarity with books, but to distance himself from bookishness. Both contradictions, the desire to be regarded as realistic but to offer the satisfactions of romance and the desire to be regarded as possessing cultural capital but asserting the inferiority of such capital to values which are purely personal and non-social, are exposed here. The hero and the author's cultural status are enhanced by the familiarity of both with authors whose names might have been vaguely familiar to some but certainly not all Deeping's readers. It is unfortunately impossible to chart the extent of Deeping's readers' familiarity with the cultural references he makes. By claiming the prestige of familiarity with bookish icons whose value he then undermines, he is bound to alienate potential readers who assign value to the writers he dismisses. The use of such icons implies readers who must have a sense that these are authors with high cultural capital. Such familiarity must be vague if the reader is to accept Deeping's evaluation of them. In fact, Deeping flatters the reader by assuming that he or she attaches some meaning to any of these references. He then further assists the reader in negotiating the embarrassment attendant on ignorance by undermining the status of many of these icons, thus absolving the reader from guilt or embarrassment of such ignorance. Just as his name is to become a brand-name for the meretricious and second-rate to the canonical writers of the 1920s and 1930s so he turns the names of authors with high cultural capital into the brand-names to be assigned to a set of often dubious moral constructs. The process is particularly explicit in the following passage describing the state of mind of Joan's corrupt and dying father:

Atmospheric conditions exert an undue influence over minds that have wandered from the radiance of health in to the twilight of morbidity. The staunch, big-chested toiler takes the storm into his bosom, and laughs like a Norseman buffeting ice-brilliant seas. To those of feeble moral vitality the drearier passages of life are packed with intangible temptations, and imagined possibilities for sin. The man whose heart is warm and clean cares nothing

for rough weather. It is the bleached aesthetic (sic) who turns pessimist or sensualist to cheat his own shivering and hungry soul. Give the world a Tolstoy, rugged Viking struggling giant-like towards the truth, rather than some De Musset or Baudelaire hugging an impotent sexuality in the lap of a prostituted art. The world needs prophets, not pessimists. Pessimism is the result of moral dyspepsia. It is a nobler thing to lift some simple lamp of truth to light the hearts of men, than to build a brilliant philosophic system for the entangling of the intellect.⁶⁰

This is a much more confident passage than the previous one quoted. The narrator steps forward, asserting the 'world's' need for prophets and assuming the mantle himself. The series of statements and commands, the aphoristic constructions, the self-dramatisation of 'The staunch big-chested toiler' are typical of the kind of passages picked out by the Deeping reader who made a collection of his 'words of wisdom'.⁶¹ From this novel onwards Deeping, as narrator, constantly steps forward to comment. The narrator becomes a prophet. It is essential to the popularity of *Sorrell and Son* that this pretension to omniscience should be acknowledged and not challenged by the reader. One of the ways in which the narrator builds up the authority to claim omniscience is both by claiming such familiarity with 'high' culture that he can use an indefinite article when it comes to alluding to 'a' Tolstoy or 'some' De Musset (where 'some' has the effect of an indefinite article). He is also granting himself and his implied readers the freedom to use such names to construct personal systems of signification.

While it is in the early novels with a contemporary setting that Deeping begins to assert the autonomy of the individual in matters of cultural taste, in the historical novels the limits of autonomy are explored in the area of sexuality. However, all Deeping's novels, both contemporary and historical, are increasingly concerned with the nature of female sexuality in particular. Of the three historical novels written in the period between the publication of *A*

⁶⁰ *The Slanderers*, p. 70.

⁶¹ Letters from Mr. Brain to Mary Grover, 1998.

Woman's War (1907) and the next contemporary novel, *The Return of the Petticoat* (1909), only *Mad Barbara* (1908) explores the ambiguities of gender boundaries that so startlingly dominate the beginning of *The Return of the Petticoat*. At the beginning of *Mad Barbara*, the sexuality of the eponymous heroine is suspended. The reasons for this are many. The cynical debauchery of Charles II's court disgusts her; her unloving mother is the lover of her father's murderer and is attempting to arrange Barbara's marriage in order to distract her from inquiring into the circumstances of the murder and lastly, the frigidity is part of the mask of assumed madness which Barbara adopts in order to conceal her suspicions from her mother and mother's lover. This feminisation of Hamlet reveals Deeping's empathy with the feminine in these early novels. Disparaged by the licentious courtiers as 'a dull girl' from whom 'an atmosphere of dreariness and of apathy seemed to emanate'⁶² the sexuality of the girl is awoken by extreme suffering when she is imprisoned and starved by her father's murderer and her mother. 'Her altered womanhood'⁶³ is apparent to her rescuer,⁶⁴ who is the seafaring son of her father's murderer. His sexual interest in her is stimulated when he perceives her to be the victim of insulting sexual attentions in a grand social gathering. Her resistance to these attentions stirs the seaman, who also feels an outsider at court, to become her champion and eventually expose his own father to death. His reaction to the public insult sets them apart together from a corrupt society.

The uncompromising sincerity of her pride had turned a piece of fantastic fooling into insolence and dishonour. The call of solitary soul to soul is ever something of a riddle.⁶⁵

⁶² *Mad Barbara*, p. 91.

⁶³ *Mad Barbara*, p. 288.

⁶⁴ but not to William Morton Payne, the reviewer in *The Dial*, 16 September 1909, p.182, who ignores the preoccupation of the novel with female sexuality and instead gives a patronising account of the novel's 'historical trappings, the story is simply good melodrama'.

⁶⁵ *Mad Barbara*, p. 75.

Barbara's sexuality can only become 'virginal'⁶⁶ once she is apart from the court, her mother is dead, her lover has avenged her father's death and she is abandoned and starved. At the end of the novel she is no longer 'dull' but 'clean'. The attempt here to free sexuality from its social context in order to 'purify' it is of a feature of the book that came out in the year following.

The Return of the Petticoat (1909) has a mysterious publishing history. The original 1909 edition seems impossible to get hold of. It was, however revised and republished in 1913. The 1913 edition is remarkable for the frankness with which it explores the confused nature of the hero/heroine's sexual identity. The novel begins with a visit by the woman who is to become Mr. Richard Dathan to a physician. She asks him to remove her breasts so that she can live as a man. He will not perform the operation but encourages her to dress and live as a man. The reasons for the woman's sense that she is more man than woman seem to be both biological and the result of some sort of unspecified sexual humiliation. The Australian 'Dathan' is first described from the doctor's point of view.

The woman was dressed in a loosely-cut Norfolk jacket, with a shortish skirt of Harris tweed to match. She wore a man's straw hat and a man's collar.....But it was her face that seemed to hold up the problem "mirror" before Dr Habershone's eyes. It was one of those faces that might have served whether a man or a woman - a smooth, olive-skinned face, with features that would have looked well under a Ramilyes wig. Considered as a man's face - and there was a faint dark down upon the upperlip - it might have symbolised the spirit of Arthurian manhood as pictured by one of the most spiritual of the romanticists. Considered in relation to the skirt, the face seemed a little too virile, too purposeful, too determined. It was not difficult to see that the woman had suffered, and that she was one of those who would thrust the thorns of life aside, and push forward beyond the bounds of mere convention.⁶⁷

The sympathy with which the woman is described shows Deeping to be capable of writing outside 'the bounds of mere convention'. His sense of the value of the individual rather than of group identity extended to gender groups. Then Deeping typically blurs the point he seems

⁶⁶ *Mad Barbara*, p. 288.

⁶⁷ *The Return of the Petticoat*, p. 2.

to be making (that sexual identity can be biologically ambiguous) by accounting for the woman's sense that she is male in other terms as well. She explains to the doctor that her distaste for her own sex lies in some shameful experience:

When one has had the most sacred part of oneself humiliated and spoilt, one longs to throw it aside like a soiled dress, and take to something healthier and fresher.⁶⁸

The contrast between the allusive way in which Deeping refers to sexual violation in this contemporary novel with the more explicit way he dealt with it in the historical novels demonstrates the liberating effect of the period setting. However, the assessment of the heroine's sexual identity is fairly explicit. The doctor, having 'passed his hands over her figure, noting its slimness and its lack of pronounced feminine contours' decides that his client can pass as a man without the aid of surgery. 'Richard Dathan', buys a farm in Sussex and creates a sister whose identity she can assume if her experiment fails, as indeed it does.

She does not fail because of her inability to assume the man's role as farmer, even though she is not presented as particularly competent, especially when handling sharp instruments. An accident with a chisel precipitates the crisis, but not the failure of the enterprise itself, which is doomed because 'Richard's' sexual identity is not as clearly defined as she thinks it is. She discovers she is sexually aroused by the dispossessed farmer she employs to be the manager of her farm. As backdrop to their confused sexual response to one another, Deeping creates a sexualised landscape not unlike Mary Webb's:⁶⁹

The afternoon's work had brought that pleasant languor - languor that is of the body alone, while the mind soars above the satiated flesh. The grass seemed to thrill at times with slow, sinuous undulations that were hardly visible. The breath of June was like the sweet, tired breath of a passionate lover.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *The Return of the Petticoat*, p. 4.

⁶⁹ In *Gone to Earth* (1917) and *Precious Bane* (1924) for example.

⁷⁰ *The Return of the Petticoat*, p. 89.

The tools of their mutual labours are a source of contact and arousal. The description of Tom Swaine, the Sussex yeoman, teaching the Australian to scythe is extraordinarily suggestive and culminates in the observation,

What swift snake had glided through the grass that day and poisoned the blood of one who had walked blindly, looking towards the clouds? ⁷¹

The attitude to the sexuality of the pair of future lovers is ambiguous here. Sexual desire is a 'poison'; however the lady's desire to deny her real sexual identity is associated with a dream world of sorts, 'the clouds'. It is not the snake-like scythe but the chisel that wounds the woman thus shocking her into the realisation that she can contain her sexual feelings for the Yeoman no longer. She kills herself off, goes to a beauty clinic, probably to remove facial hair, and returns as Richard's sister to woo Tom away from the village hussy who tries to humiliate him. The cruelty of the ordinary village girl's instincts are contrasted with the tenderness of the outsider, Sybil Dathan, despite her 'manliness' which in fact is not insisted on once the petticoats have returned.

In the revised edition of 1913 the most significant aspect of the novel in terms of Deeping's later development is the incident that is created to bridge the social divide between the propertied Australian and her dispossessed swain. When Sybil perceives the slaughter of her own chickens by a fox she is united with Tom in his hostility to the ritualistic value ascribed by the landed elite to hunting the fox with hounds. She instantly sets herself apart from her landowning neighbours. "Then, were we to retaliate, it would be set down as a social crime!"⁷² Her sense that she is different from those around her is now transferred from her sexual to her social identity. When Swaine dynamites his arm while trying to slaughter the 'brute' fox

⁷¹ *The Return of the Petticoat*, p. 90.

⁷² *ibid*, p. 246.

(regarded by the despised gentry as the ‘sacred beast - almost as a cat was at Bubastes’)⁷³ he is marked by his wound as a social outcast. His emasculation also enables the masculine heroine to reestablish her femininity in her role of nurse. She is thus able to bridge the social distance between herself and her lover, a device to be used later in *Blind Man's Year* (1937). The sexual and social ambiguities of their relationship are evaded. The couple escape the social ostracism and occupational crisis caused by their marriage and Swain's disability by becoming archaeologists and escaping English provincial society altogether.

It is the only one of Deeping's novels where the East serves as the retreat. In *Valour* (1918)

‘this new country with its devilish beauty’⁷⁴ makes the hero homesick, but for the Swaines

in Syria, amid black tents and solitary palms, the elemental mystery of life seemed to have lost none of its strange and indefinable beauty.⁷⁵

‘The elemental mystery’ will make frequent appearances throughout Deeping's work, increasingly set apart, from the social beastliness, particularity and intransigence of English social life. Deeping's mysticism, which takes a more self-conscious form in his later novels, is here a rather vague signifier. The key word seems to be ‘indefinable’. After *The Return of the Petticoat*, the novels are increasingly the arena of resistance to definition. The point of the cross-dressing in *The Return of the Petticoat* is less a close examination of the ambivalence of sexuality (although Deeping's sense of the fragility of gender boundaries is acute) than of the freedom of the woman to ‘be’ what she chooses. Deeping will use any situation, genre or code of rhetoric to assert the freedom of a purely personal, non-social and therefore socially unclassifiable space.

⁷³ *The Return of the Petticoat*, p. 247.

⁷⁴ *Valour*, p. 100.

⁷⁵ *The Return of the Petticoat*, p. 310.

In 1912, Deeping returns to the medical novel in which the doctor represents the superiority of individual over social morality. The crusading spirit of the doctor hero of *Sincerity* (1912) is quite unlike the defensive stoicism of later heroes. It is the only novel of Deeping's to suggest that he could have written novels which might have been grouped with A. J. Cronin's. Its themes echo those of *Middlemarch* and perhaps of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1882). It is set in the Midland town of 'Navestock', possibly a portrait of Newark, the unacknowledged origin of both Warwicks and Deepings when both families were involved in the brewing trade. Throughout his novels, Deeping distances himself from this aspect of his family by suggesting that brewers were either despicable materialists⁷⁶ or, in this novel, corrupt landlords providing infected water to their tenants. The young doctor elicits the support of a cantankerous individualist, the one landlord with moral courage.

This is perhaps the only one of Deeping's novels where he attempts to map social structure in any detailed way. In comparison with the casual way in which social structure is sketched in previous novels, the earnestness and comprehensiveness of Deeping's analysis produces a novel far more realistic and engaged with social politics than any other of his novels.

However, the tone of generalised contempt, which always threatens to blunt the particularity of his analysis or attack, does characterise the way he presents the ignorant and degenerate working classes whom Dr Wolfe saves from typhoid, despite themselves. It would be interesting to know how Deeping's country readers reacted to statements like, 'If you want to find some of the meanest people on earth, you have only to live in a country town'.⁷⁷ The working people are hardly ever individualised but described as either victims or bullies, nearly always in groups. 'Wolfe had gone to work without ostentation, but in a town such as

⁷⁶ *Valour* (1918) p. 6.

⁷⁷ *Sincerity*, p. 309.

Navestock anything unusual attracted notice as sweetened beer attracts flies.’⁷⁸ However the landlords and employers are as unattractive as the ‘flies’. Navestock is described as ‘a thoroughly dirty and corrupt old town’.⁷⁹ Yet there are many forces which combine to support the doctor’s reforms and the way these forces are depicted reflect the confused nature of Deeping’s social analysis.

The gruff but benevolent landlord and the crusading doctor are presented as outside the classes to which they are regarded as belonging. Dr Wolfe’s superior does not, at first stand by his junior. The landlord Josiah Crabbe is only able to defy the pressures of his fellow landlords because of his wealth, a pattern we will see intensifying during the novels Deeping was to write in the thirties. However there are forces for reform which are identified closely with groups rather than with individuals. The ‘Jacobins’ of “The Crooked Billet” are presented as ‘vicious’ but sincere, the quality valorised by the novel’s title. Josiah Crabbe may not sit with these men but through one of their members he ‘drew all his intimate knowledge of the inner life of Navestock town’. Their knowledge animates his effectiveness in challenging the other landlords. Deeping may not present the Jacobins as attractive but they are certainly morally superior to the commercial powers in the town:

A species of grim, toil-stained idealism drew these men together. Some of them had been Chartists, and looked at life with that terrible sincerity that is born of suffering and disillusionment. But the fighting, upward element prevailed. They were hard-headed men thinking hard-headed thoughts. The gist of their philosophy was that bad things can be made much better, and that intelligent grumbling makes for reform.⁸⁰

Deeping, here and elsewhere, acknowledges the injustices inflicted on the helpless poor by the powerful rich. But his instinctive espousal of the victim’s cause is countered by his reluctance to acknowledge the existence of the structural inequalities of wealth and his distaste for any

⁷⁸ *Sincerity*, p. 47.

⁷⁹ *ibid*, p. 30.

⁸⁰ *ibid*, p. 223.

identification with a class, with power or without. In particular, the use of journalistic rhetoric to defend the victims of abuse is presented as distasteful. The radical journalist who espouses Wolfe's cause is repulsive to Wolfe. 'The man was too venomous, too wet about the mouth.' In this novel we see the first sign of Deeping's demonisation of the word. The lack of rhetoric in the 'toil-stained' Jacobins' 'intelligent grumbling' compares favourably with the 'spitting scorn' of the journalist. The journalist's saliva becomes a repulsive metonym for empty eloquence.

In contrast with both the Jacobins and the journalist is the moral, if not the romantic heroine of the novel, Ursula Brandon. Despite her chilly manner, she allies herself with Wolfe against the commercial and legal interests in the town, not out of love for the poor but because 'ugliness is my measure of immorality.'⁸¹ When, at Wolfe's suggestion, she descends from her country mansion into the town from which she took her rents she

found it horrible; grossly, even insolently dirty. Moreover, many of these sour and rickety alleys belonged to her. Money came from them to her, and she spent it. The thought shocked her as though she were taking the offerings of drunkards and low women.⁸²

Wolfe's attitude to her reflects Deeping's own confusion, (more apparent in his later novels) about how to present the privileged classes. The lady's aestheticism is seen to be the product of superior breeding. Despite her apparent indifference Ursula Brandon has,

the multitudinous soul that her ancestors have given her. Tradition counts, simply because it stands for brain tissue, blood, and breeding. Many a frivolous "garrison woman" showed greatness at Cawnpore.⁸³

She has not the narrow self-interestedness of the middle-classes who 'think of nothing but saving their own skins.'⁸⁴ Although Dr Wolfe is more powerfully drawn to the daughter of a

⁸¹ *Sincerity*, p. 231.

⁸² *ibid*, p. 250.

⁸³ *ibid*, p. 244-5.

⁸⁴ *ibid*, p. 246.

small farmer than he is to the proud landowner, whose hauteur contrasts unfavourably with the warmth and vulnerability of the farmer's daughter, the major thrust of the novel is towards a vindication of aristocratic paternalism on behalf of the inadequate poor against bourgeois materialism and selfishness.

On the one hand, stretched the estate of a magnanimous and enlightened man, bred in the best traditions, and inspired by the consciousness of aristocratic responsibility. On the other hand, men saw the slovenly and selfish cynicism of the mere bourgeois landlord.⁸⁵

This snobbishness and conservatism are often regarded as characteristic of Deeping but, in fact, in the thirties when the hero retreats from society to farm, the aristocratic landowner is absent from the picture. Possibly this reflects the fact that by the 1930s the aristocracy had less power in rural areas than they had had, but more probably because at this point in Deeping's life he was justifying his move from the countryside round the provincial town of Hastings to 'retreat' to Weybridge. At the end of *Sincerity* the hero, rejected by the town's inhabitants, despite saving them from the typhoid epidemic, moves to Harley St where he makes much more money than if he had stayed in the Midlands. His wife brings up their young family in Guildford. A letter from the cosmopolitan aristocrat, Ursula Brandon, is written from Florence endorsing Wolfe's value in the face of his rejection by the middle and working classes. This lengthy quotation serves to illustrate the way in which Deeping is beginning to construct his defences against the humiliation threatened by both the middle and the working classes.

Now - for our dear bourgeoisie - and the mob! Let me talk freely. why should a man of great ability - and with some ambition - waste himself upon inferior people? It is a sort of fashion at times to stand in awed admiration before the "patient poor," and to sneer and hurl accusations of immorality and selfishness at the aristocrats. Believe me - there was never greater nonsense. I know something of horses and of men. Breed is everything. We better-bred animals know how to restrain ourselves.....The English - in the mass - are barbarians. Heaven defend me from the comfortable, consequential dullness of the respectable middle-classes

⁸⁵ *Sincerity*, p. 206.

You ought to be busied with big things, big men, big ideas. You are too strong to fight with the little people in a provincial town. You hurt them, without meaning it, and then they go about, furtively, to hurt you in return.⁸⁶

Elsewhere in his novels, Deening rarely romanticises the aristocracy who are often portrayed as violent bullies, for example in *The Malice of Men* (1938) and *I Live Again* (1942). This passage suggests that he is co-opting the authority of the aristocrat to bolster a very personal sense of his own value. *Sincerity*, which seems to start out as a crusading novel of a reforming liberal turns out to be a story of the corruption and ingratitude of the English. What, in fact, this novel heralds is an increasing preoccupation with the inadequacy of the English, the superiority of the individual moralist and the desirability of retreating from engaging with social issues. The Harley St practice and the family nest in Guildford assert the value of the private and personal over the public and social. Perhaps this assertion of the value of the individual explains why this book and the three contemporary novels which preceded it, *The Slanderers* (1907), *The Rust of Rome* (1910) and *Fox Farm* (1911), helped establish the author's success despite attacking the provincial middle classes who might be expected to have read them.

The White Gate (1913) is the first novel in which the freedom of the individual to establish his or her own values is explicitly asserted in the area of cultural prestige, education and distinctions of taste. The novel describes the heroine (like the heroine of that earlier novel concerned with cultural distinctions, *The Slanderers*) as the child of an alcoholic. Despite her mother's loose morals Constance Brent grows up chaste, but because of her mother's reputation she is exposed to sexual attentions of a humiliating kind and becomes frightened of her own sexuality and feels valueless. Her arrested sexuality recalls the assumed 'dullness' of *Mad Barbara*. The author leaves it unclear whether or not she is actually raped, but the assault

⁸⁶ *Sincerity*, p. 310-1.

leaves her traumatised and suicidal. On her mother's death she becomes an invalid, crippled by a sense of vulnerability and inadequacies. Despite her misgivings she agrees to marry an older man, an inventor and engineer whose wife had killed herself, and he sets about trying to build her sense of self-esteem. It is round this struggle to construct a sense of her own value that the debate about the value of high culture revolves. The husband's therapeutic strategy is to enable his wife to enjoy normal youthful pleasures in the south of France, encouraging her to display her beauty and enjoy the innocent but sensual pleasures of sun, idleness and exercise. However, the young woman seeks her own salvation by educating herself. This challenge she imposes upon herself because she is intimidated by an intellectual family which seems to pursue her round France in order to humiliate her. Not only does Deening use cultural references to place his characters to an unprecedented extent in this novel, but he debates the value of familiarity with the hierarchy of cultural distinction explicitly. The confused nature of this debate and the terms in which it is framed prepares us for how Deening will attempt to deal with ways in which the cultural establishment will classify him: as middlebrow, 'dubious' and threatening the authority of the self-appointed cultural élite.

The first indication that *The White Gate* is to be a novel to some extent about 'bookishness' is the use of 'The books on the shelves' to characterise the hero as bookish but not thereby handicapped in his struggle with the real world.

The whole cottage told of a busy world - a man's world, full of ideas and of endeavour. The books on the shelves in the living-room evidenced a breadth of culture. William James, Chamberlain, Shaw, Nietzsche, Maeterlinck, Swinburne, Wells. There were volumes upon art, the painters of Florence, the Renaissance, old French clocks, Limoges enamels, the Pre-Raphaelites, Leonardo da Vinci. You found none of the half-baked books beloved of the British matron, little chocolate *éclair*s of history and biography, compounded by some dilettante gentleman, and sent forth in pretty little dishes for people who believe that, in consuming such stuff, they are accumulating culture.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ *The White Gate*, p. 44.

Presumably any 'British matron' reading the novel concludes that in 'consuming' a Deeping she is distancing herself from the feminine world of cultural *éclairs* and is being introduced to the man's world of James et al. This novel is the first of Deeping's consistently to disparage the feminine. Depression is feminised in a curious way when it tempts the heroic Skelton as a prostitute soliciting his custom: 'Sometimes it was like an importunate woman, whispering, ogling, plucking him by the sleeve.'⁸⁸ Most of the women in the novel are depicted as either over-bearing or as weak. It is the man who manages to combine sensitivity and strength, Maeterlinck and Nietzsche, a 'breadth' of feeling and culture. Indeed, the list of books upon the shelf is eclectic. The Chamberlain could possibly be Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1836-1914). Many of his views are echoed in Deeping's work, in particular his anti-intellectualist revival of paganism and his pan-Germanism.⁸⁹ If so, it is interesting to have him next to the liberal Shaw. The heroine also reads Maeterlinck but 'with passion'⁹⁰ rather than endeavour. Because of her psychological vulnerability, her reading seems to draw her to a dark pool in which she might have imitated Mellisaunde had not the manly hero rescued her. Constance's taste for the introspection of the symbolists and romantic music may be dangerous for her mental health but it is seen as superior to her mother's cultural preferences for songs 'such as "The Sandow Girl" and "A Monkey on a Stick."' Introspection is superior to vulgar materialism but it a dangerous, feminised quality which needs to be balanced by the more robust attitudes of Shaw and Wells. Wells is frequently held up for the reader's admiration in this novel. A 'stout' woman's condemnation of Kipling, Galsworthy, Wells and

⁸⁸ *The White Gate*, p. 58.

⁸⁹ H. S. Chamberlain's *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1911) came out two years before *The White Gate*. Its inclusion on the hero's shelf would demonstrate just how firm and contemporary was the hero's intellectual outlook; at this period of Deeping's career he was anxious to assert that he was not old-fashioned (see the first chapter's discussion of his attitude to the 'old-fashioned' Milton).

⁹⁰ *The White Gate*, p. 46.

Lloyd George and her admiration for Trollope reveal her inadequacies.⁹¹ Skelton, the hero, carries Mr. Polly's words like nostrums in his heart. When he hears an ignoramus calling 'The Territorials a pack of cigarette-smoking urchins; Germany, a bloody ogre; Free Traders, besotted fools', and Skelton a Socialist, he muses on 'Mr. Polly's cryptic but inimitable exclamation, "Oh, boil it harder!" There are so many egg-headed people in the world.' Thus the hero's taste for authors later to be labelled 'middle-brow', is valorised by the way in which their works nestle on equal terms with foreign authors who could never be described in those terms.

Skelton's 'breadth' of reading is contrasted with the culture of the villains of the story, a family of wandering intellectuals, the Trevors. The heroine is just beginning to acquire some self-confidence in France when she is cowed by the arrival of 'the superior people' who 'utterly crushed her sense of proportion'.⁹²

The Trevors depressed people who were at all sensitively modest and self-critical. They overpowered with a heavy perfume of culture, and they had the knack of making other minds feel empty. They had travelled here, there, and everywhere, and talked about Italy and Spain as though they knew every picture, church, and village. They appeared to be in intimate touch with the art and music of the day. Constance struggled against a smothering sense of intellectual inferiority....The Trevors had made her feel that she knew nothing - absolutely nothing.⁹³

Compare the directness of this passage with the vatic statements about 'caltrops/calthrops'; the 'luscious' and the unconvincing metaphors of trickling steel. Deeping had found the theme that would make him a bestseller. Few of Deeping's contemporaries or ours can fail to recognise the portrait. Most of his bestselling novels deal with the struggle to overcome social humiliation designed to make the individual inferior. This novel focuses on the conspiracy to humiliate intellectually the 'ordinary' man or woman. The heroine's strategy in the face of this

⁹¹ *The White Gate*, p. 307.

⁹² *ibid*, p. 325.

⁹³ *ibid*, p.326.

threat is interesting. She seeks the help of a French woman who will teach her French and Italian. This 'delightful' woman encourages her to distance herself from her Englishness.

"Ah, my dear, you are French, believe me. You have the light touch, the sparkle, the style of a French-woman. You do not play games - no. And it is a pleasure to see you walk."⁹⁴

Deeping frequently dismisses the French as shallow, materialistic and sensual but in this novel he co-opts them in his struggle to challenge the hegemony of bourgeois taste. It is not the tastes themselves that he decries (Skelton and his friend share them) but the establishment of a social elite on the basis of those tastes. However, just when the modern reader might be tempted to feel sympathy for Deeping's resistance to cultural snobbery, he reveals his own desire to exclude and disparage and to classify the other individuals as typical of the groups to which he perceives them to belong. The insistent use of 'They' at the beginning of every sentence describing the Trevors illustrates this, but not so baldly as an entirely snobbish passage in which Skelton and his newly confident wife mock the attempts of a man called Bunting to make Constance feel her cultural inferiority. Extensive quotation reveals how unattractive Deeping's heroes and heroines are once they forfeit our compassion for their isolation and acquire cultural confidence of their own. Having been snubbed by Bunting Constance finds Skelton in the garden reading "Tartarin of Tarascon",⁹⁵ thereby signalling at the beginning of the passage how eligible he is to be considered 'cultured'. She asks him,

"Do you know the Buntings?"

"Of rabbit-skin fame?"

"The people at that next table."

"Have you been making advances?"

"Yes; and I've been snubbed. And what do you think I heard afterwards?They are exclusive, Dick, ex-clu-sive, and I thought them so dull and commonplace! Isn't it delicious?"

"Commonplace people are always exclusive. You see, there are so many of them that they try to disown each other." "Don't you see the humour of being excluded by people called Bunting?"

⁹⁴ *The White Gate*, p. 335.

⁹⁵ Tartarin de Tarascon was a mock-heroic character created by Alphonse Daudet in *Tartarin de Tarascon* (1872).

The irony of this passage is not only that it is meant to expose the snob to ridicule but also that the rhetoric of exclusivity is to be cultivated by Deeping increasingly as his own name becomes shorthand for the commonplace, not by the Buntings perhaps, but certainly by the Trevors.

Even in this comparatively early novel, his defences are being built. Constance's mother, (like Corelli's young female reader in *The Sorrows of Satan* eighteen years earlier), has been debauched by alcohol and popular literature. The terms in which such literature is described by a cultured gentlewoman visiting the mother in order to save the daughter are revealing.

They are similar to the terms in which Deeping himself will be disparaged.

What stuff! Mock romance and mock realism, sentimental rubbish and cheap nastiness. She smiled to herself with intelligent compassion.⁹⁶

The only attitude that Q. D. Leavis might not have shared with this gentlewoman is 'intelligent compassion'.

However, she was not the first to disparage Deeping. In 1910 Deeping published the first of his three novels which dramatise the struggle of a popular author to have his authenticity recognised. The terms of the fictionalised review of an aging writer's now dated historical romances suggests that Deeping had read the reviews collected in his wife's scrap-books and smarted at the way in which his fiction had been classified.

It was not that these notices abused "Philarion" too roughly, not that they stung the romance with unjust contempt. Some of them were kind, casually kind. Most of them brief, perfunctory, and obscure. The few that carried any weight were inclined to be somewhat condescending. Ten lines in the *Parthenon* hailed Stephen Thorkell as a new-comer, advised him upon a few trivialities, and deigned to suggest an anachronism upon the cover. Two well-known dailies were heartily enthusiastic, if brief. Another accused Thorkell of rank plagiarism. A Scotch paper could find nothing better than a consequential sneer, advising the author to open his eyes to the world about him, abandon saccharine romances, and write the truth, perhaps concerning Glasgow and its drink bill.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ *The White Gate*, p. 107.

⁹⁷ *The Rust of Rome*, p. 164.

An example of casual kindness is the patronising review of *Bess of the Woods* (1906) by George Sydney Freeman in *The Times Literary Supplement*. He found this historical novel ‘an engaging story, full of entertainment for those who ask no more of a novelist than that he should entertain.’⁹⁸ However, that was four years before the publication of *The Rust of Rome* and since then Deeping had struggled to impress his readers with his ability to tackle real life with *The Slanderers*, *A Woman’s War* and *The Return of the Petticoat*.⁹⁹ That struggle had only been acknowledged by a reviewer of *Bertrand of Brittany* who comments,

Mr. Deeping’s progress as a novelist is interesting. His first misty, colour-shot, ultra-fantastic romances of pre-Arthurian days were followed by some modern tales of which one at least, “A Woman’s War” is markedly clearcut.¹⁰⁰

A Woman’s War, which does deal with drink, as the fictional reviewer recommends, though in the unreal Home Counties rather than the real Glasgow, does not seem to have weakened the association of Deeping’s name with ‘saccharine romance’. However, he has gained a victory of sorts. In planting a disparaging review of the fictional *Philarion* in *The Rust of Rome*, he contrives to set the terms of the debate within the novel that is being reviewed, a strategy that Bourdieu declares beyond the power of those at a subordinate level of cultural production.¹⁰¹ He might well have been gratified to read that the first line of the review of *The Rust of Rome* picks up the phrase he left within his text in order to distance the reader from his own earlier productions. The reviewer is impressed that

⁹⁸ George Sydney Freeman, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 29 June 1906, p. 234.

⁹⁹ The latter does not seem to have been reviewed at all and I have only been able to find the first edition in the British Library

¹⁰⁰ William Joseph Cosens Lancaster, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 14 May 1908, p. 57.

¹⁰¹ Bourdieu states categorically that ‘members of the working class ... can neither ignore the high-art aesthetic, which denounces their own ‘aesthetic’, nor abandon their socially conditioned inclinations, but still less proclaim them and legitimate them’, *Distinction*, p. 41. (The inverted commas around the word ‘aesthetic’ when attributed to the working class reveal how Kantian are Bourdieu’s instincts.) I have yet to find a passage where he attributes to other subordinate groups the capacity to proclaim the legitimacy of their own tastes.

Mr. Warwick Deeping has abandoned the saccharine romances of Wardour Street with which he began his literary career, and in *The Rust of Rome* he has at any rate tried to write a story of real life.¹⁰²

But although he may have asserted some control over the terms of the debate the patronising ‘at any rate tried’ cannot have been pleasing. His resentment about the confidence with which others should presume to determine the genre within which he should work animated this and future novels. When his fictional novelist Stephen Thorkell declares, having read the patronising review, that he ‘will make a book that will make people listen’,¹⁰³ the effect is pathetic for he is about to die. If in 1910 his reviewers in *The Times Literary Supplement* had said the same thing about Deeping, the intention would have been satirical. In fact, his ambitions escaped the reviewers. Twenty years later these ambitions were identified and deplored but could not now be mocked.

Conclusion

To some extent Deeping’s attempts to capture the terms, romance and realism, and redefine their status for his audience is one that is paralleled in the publishing houses of middlebrow fiction today. Rosamunde Pilcher’s sagas are advertised as being both ‘magical’ and about ‘real people’;¹⁰⁴ though the *Daily Telegraph* is reported on the back cover of *Winter Solstice* as praising Pilcher’s ability to persuade her readers to ‘care about characters not unlike themselves’ the dust jacket also offers readers assurances that they will experience the ‘warm spell’ of a tale that is ‘entrancing’.¹⁰⁵ Pilcher’s cross-generational fantasies offer the promise that the tensions of individualistic behaviour can be reconciled, usually by the mysterious powers of an earthy woman and inherited wealth. However Deeping’s world is bleaker than

¹⁰² Belloc Lowndes, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 10 February 1910, p. 42.

¹⁰³ *The Rust of Rome*, p.165.

¹⁰⁴ Rosamunde Pilcher, *The Shell Seekers* (New York: Dell, 1987), the dustjacket.

¹⁰⁵ Rosamunde Pilcher, *Winter Solstice* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2000), the dustjacket.

this. He is far more deeply critical of the status quo than the modern middlebrow bestseller writers such as Rosamunde Pilcher or Maeve Binchy. His pre-war fictions strain to be confined within either the genres of either romance or realism; they do not reconcile the pleasures of both. The next chapter examines how the author's unease with available genres is demonstrably linked with his unease about the social class of the popular author. The courage and authenticity of this early fiction lies as much in its dogged negativity as in its youthful exuberance. The value of self-reliance is asserted not as an essential requirement of the individual's success in a competitive world but as a goal in itself. His heroes have an increasing amount in common with the cussed hero of Richard Jefferies' *After London* (1885) and nothing in common with the triumphant English youth of Ian Hay or the wily Richard Hannay. Both Hay's and Buchan's heroes are placed within and consciously serve the social structures which produced them. Deeping's heroes are at odds both their antecedents and the England with which Deeping's novels are associated. Deeping exhibits more distaste than respect for the hegemony which his fiction is purported to maintain. My next chapter examines how this distaste for what Deeping experienced as an oppressive hegemony was intensified both by the way in which military conscription infringed the autonomy of the individual and the way the status of the popular author was classified.

Chapter Four

‘A Bitter Silence’: the compromised class position of the popular author

‘each ambitious writer is out for himself alone and will frequently betray or neglect his class in order to advance his own interests which centre entirely upon *individuation*.’¹

This chapter considers how Deeping’s fantasies of classlessness came to mirror the insecurities of those in class positions apparently dissimilar and subordinate to his own. The first part focuses on the possible relationship between Deeping’s fiction and the social and political anxieties of the lower middle classes and considers the association of both author and readership with fascist culture. The second part seeks to identify how Deeping’s personal and specific class and gender anxieties as a popular author found expression in a group of texts published at the end of the First World War. The chapter ends with a consideration of how Deeping’s sense of victimhood at the hands of other members of his own class of origin is linked to the nature of his individualism and his ambivalence about the value of the feminine.

Cleansed of class

Pelleas, the hero of Deeping’s pre-war novel, *Joan of the Tower* (1911), cleanses himself of his associations with a corrupt medieval monastery by plunging into the river of romantic realism. Paul Brent, the hero of *The House of Adventure*, published ten years later, attempts to cleanse himself of the taint of a corrupt middle class in the twentieth century by obliterating his identity papers in the mud of the Somme. Brent is a ‘jobbing builder, carrying on an obscure little business in a west-country town’, ‘the owner of an ambitious wife, a car, and a very passable library, until other people’s speculative cynicisms had brought him down with a

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 27.

crash.² The process of cleansing in this later novel shows Deeping moving towards a mode which is presented as more 'realistic' than his earlier novels and more explicitly concerned with the class position of the hero. Paul Brent immerses himself in trench warfare. His war ends as he is marooned amongst advancing Germans. Before being taken prisoner, he assumes the classless identity of a dead friend, a man with no ties with friends or family, by swapping his clothes and papers with those of the corpse. His new identity is completed by marriage to the patronne of the village cafe in the ruined French village he helps to rebuild. The apocalypse of the Somme is welcomed in that it releases Brent from the 'speculative cynicisms' of 'other people'.³ However, in a movement that will be repeated in later novels, the savagery of the enemy and the exoticism of a French lover, which initially offer release from a middle class identity, only deliver him into another set of 'speculative cynicisms', this time of the French rural bourgeoisie and the *canaille* they manipulate. At this point Deeping's realism abandons him. The hero and his French wife are only rescued from destruction by the arrival of Clemenceau himself who confers French citizenship on the hero, a pardon for his desertion, and disgrace to the enemies who have tried to destroy his position as owner of a prosperous business. The real subject of this novel is not war or the aftermath of war but constricting class identities. The war, in which Deeping participated as a doctor in the R.A.M.C., serves in this, and most of the other novels of this period (1914-25), not as a catastrophe which threatens men's physical and moral survival but as a device used to dramatise the extent to which a person can exercise autonomy in relation to his or her class. The extraordinary solipsism of Deeping's construction of The Great War also characterises his treatment of gender relations, and, above all, his construction of class and classlessness.

² *The House of Adventure* (1921), p. 33.

³ *The House of Adventure*, p. 38.

The only consistent feature of any system of social classification is that it is bound to be, in some way, rhetorical. That rhetorical purpose will be determined by the ‘aspect’ of the classifier. Furbank, in his analysis of the rhetoric of class, *Unholy Pleasure*,⁴ anchors his enquiry firmly in the discourse of a particular nation at a particular period and argues that every statement about class is strategic. Certainly Deeping shifts the way he uses class models as his class position changes. Having argued that the three most commonly used models of class are the hierarchic (ideally harmonious), the triadic (usually elevating the value of the middling classes) and the dichotomous (inevitably conflictual), Cannadine suggests that few people have a fixed perception of a single model.⁵ Instead ‘most people moved easily and effortlessly from one model to another, recasting their vision of British society to suit their particular purpose or perspective.’ During his career Deeping used all three of the traditional ways of constructing class difference: the dichotomous, triadic and hierarchical. But his fourth model, if model is the right word, to which his heart seemed to belong, reflected a social structure that he saw as a chaotic, Hobbesian battle-field and out of which the sensitive individual might remove himself altogether. The individual who is empowered to retreat in this way can only do so once he has devised a role or earned enough money to free himself from the power of the commercial, political and cultural authorities whose legitimacy this sensitive individual essentially denies. A key tension within his work is that to ‘earn’ the freedom to retreat, ‘the separative’⁶ has to engage with systems of value the validity of which his fictions, in some ways, attempt to deny.

⁴ P. N. Furbank, *Unholy Pleasure: The Idea of Social Class* (Oxford University Press, 1985)

⁵ David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (Yale University Press, 1998), p. 20.

⁶ A word Deeping uses to describe himself in ‘Simple Simon’, the autobiographical fragment discussed in Chapter Two, p. 20.

The class context of Deeping's readership

In discussing the class background of Deeping's readership before the publication of *Sorrell and Son* (1925), we have to make at least one non-verifiable assumption: that few of his readers were working class. McKibbin suggests that in the first half of the twentieth century 'England had no common culture' and that,

'Books', for instance, to most working men and women did not mean J. B. Priestley but the magazines, newspapers, and paper-backed stories read by a huge audience, few of whom were middle class.⁷

However Jonathan Rose's recent account of the intellectual life of the working classes reveals that Deeping's fiction was borrowed from libraries serving working class readers. The records of the Cynon and Duffryn Welfare Hall Library register 1927-1950 and of the acquisition list of Markham library, March 1935 suggest that Deeping (whom Rose groups with Jeffery Farnol and Edgar Wallace⁸) was highly borrowed in the early thirties. Borrowing of such fiction fell away from 1937-1940 when political activity increased.⁹ After 1940 the trend towards politically committed and intellectually challenging literature decreased and the popularity of what Rose calls 'escapist' literature increases again. However, Rose records no specific avowals of Deeping's appeal to working class readers and Deeping constructs virtually no positive images of the working class as a class. In his fiction, individual members of the working class are given the occasional commendable role as, for example, batman, gardener or porter, under the complete control of a social superior. The working class in groups are an object of terror, prey to manipulation by demagogues in *Sincerity* (1912), hostile to individual enterprise in *Smith* (1932) and depicted in the urban medical novels as a

⁷ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998), p. 527.

⁸ He misleadingly suggests that Q. D. Leavis characterises all three as 'low-brow'.

⁹ Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (Yale University Press, 2001) pp. 247 and 252. While recognising the extraordinary contribution Rose's research has made to our appreciation of the heroic efforts of working class readers to obtain and share books, the characterisation of the quoted readers as 'working class' is very loose and the project never attempts to map exactly who read what.

subspecies. Only at the end of his career, when Deeping has begun to reinvent his own class position, does he allow the working men round and about a fictionalised Southend any dignity. Here they are described as ‘a shrewd, English, working crowd’¹⁰ and function as a Hardy-esque chorus commenting with primeval wisdom on their social betters, divining the true ‘gentry’ in the community (one of whom is the doctor hero). The ‘shrewd working crowd’ may have read the discarded Deepings on the twopenny book stalls or have borrowed them from libraries but to have become a bestselling author on the scale that he did he would have to have relied on individual purchases in addition to his large sales to the public libraries.

It is less safe to make the assumption that Deeping was not widely read by the upper classes. This can be demonstrated by Leavis’ dismay at the fact that Deeping was being read by ‘the governing classes’¹¹ and the sketch offered by John Betjeman of the ‘officer’s lady’ curled round a Deeping.¹² An example of the way Deeping might have been unacknowledged reading by upper-middle class and intellectuals was the response of a reading group in Saffron Walden in the 1990s. I asked this group of Fabian and Quaker senior professionals, now retired, to list what they had read in the 1930s. They listed predictable authors such as Wells, Shaw and Dostoevsky. When asked why none of them had read Deeping the response from the group was ‘Well of course everyone read Deeping,’¹³ the implication being that ‘you did not list him as one of the authors who furnished your mind’.

However, one striking common feature of the few surviving original admirers of Deeping’s fiction was their membership of the aspiring lower middle classes. Jessie Robinson, an

¹⁰ *The Dark House*, p. 388.

¹¹ *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 67.

¹² John Betjeman, ‘Station Syren’, *Collected Poems* (John Murray, 1958), pp. 234-235, which is discussed in my final chapter.

¹³ Iris Willey on behalf of a Saffron Walden Reading Group, 1996.

upwardly mobile servant in the house of a vicar in Norfolk Park, Sheffield, talked to me about the education that reading in general had given her. Now surrounded by photographs of family members at their degree ceremonies, in the 1920s Jessie had been forbidden by the housekeeper to read the vicar's *Times* as unsuitable for one of her station. She was directed by the same housekeeper to Dickens as 'more suitable reading matter for one of her class.'¹⁴ Jessie presented Deeping as an author who had kept her supplied with a constant source of books, borrowed from the municipal library. From *Sorrell and Son* (1925) until *I Live Again* (1942), during the period when Deeping's preoccupation with the class and gender position of the popular author was at its most intense, he dramatises the particular humiliations to which the members of the lower middle class in service work were vulnerable.

The nature of the humiliations heaped on the lower middle class at a time in history when their numbers were growing in numbers but not in class confidence, contributes to our understanding of the possible appeal of Deeping's preoccupation with humiliation.¹⁵ At a time when Deeping was entrusting his financial future to his potential command of a mass readership, there was a huge increase in white collar workers, upwardly mobile thanks to the changes in the provision of education and shifts in patterns of employment. Crossick, in his pioneering work on the lower middle classes, evidences the growth of jobs in commerce, banks, insurance, real estate and teaching, during the years between 1860 and 1910. However he also notes that,

The paradox of the expansion of the salaried workforce in Britain was that as it grew so its frustration increased, based most concretely on a sense of unfulfilled ambition.¹⁶

¹⁴ Interview with Jessie Robinson, 20 June 1997.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Crossick, 'The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain: A Discussion', *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914* (Croom Helm, 1977)

¹⁶ Crossick (1977), p. 21.

This was still true in the 1960s, as Runciman's research indicated. He found that in terms of the income they said they had, 'manual workers and their wives are consistently less likely to feel relatively deprived than are non-manual workers and their wives who are earning the same'.¹⁷ According to Masterman, although the middle classes were growing in numbers during the nineteen twenties, their savings were declining.¹⁸ And though jobs were increasing in the new technological industries in the South, as Priestley points out in his *English Journey*,¹⁹ it was still impossible for new members of the lower middle classes to keep up with the rising cost of living and the increasing difficulty of getting the same level of domestic help that would have been available before the War to people on comparable wages. It is to this sense of expectation disappointed that Masterman ascribes the feeling of panic gripping the middle classes. His account of this panic strikes the same note as Deeping's account of Sorrell's own sense of living on the edge of annihilation, 'weaponless' clinging on to his 'niche in the social precipice'.²⁰ Masterman writes that

the general impression is that of a whole body of decent citizens slipping down by inexorable God-made or man-made or devil-made laws into the Abyss: as if a table was suddenly tilted slanting and all the little dolls and marionettes were sent sliding on to the floor. Some cling wildly to the edges, some get their feet into crooks and crannies and retain their hold for a moment; but in bulk the whole mass, despite resistance, is falling through the bottom of its world.²¹

One senses in this description Masterman's own panic at the demise of the old certainties.

There is a Kafkaesque sense that the laws are the more inexorable when their nature and source are unknown. If the very classes who have lived on the assumption that individual

¹⁷ W. G. Runciman, 'Relative Deprivation and Social Justice' (Routledge, 1966), p. 207, quoted in *Stratification: an Essay on Class and Inequality* ed. by K. Kelsall, H. Kelsall, and L. Chisolm (Longman, 1984), p.111.

¹⁸ C. F. G. Masterman, *England After War* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1922) p. 58.

¹⁹ J. B. Priestley, *English Journey* (Heinemann, 1934), Chapter Twelve and P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688-1914* (Longman, 1993), pp.114-115 for confirmation of Priestley's observations.

²⁰ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 6.

²¹ Masterman (1922), p. 58.

effort can overcome circumstance and circumvent the inexorable laws of economic determinism, succumb to despair and the refusal to breed, then what hope has England to avoid the conflict between the working and the landed classes that Masterman predicted? Masterman, in his chapter entitled 'The Plight of the Middle Classes', does become increasingly sympathetic to the little men he begins by patronising. There is an implicit recognition that even members of the cultivated observing classes might be swept away when the table under the middle classes is tipped up.

However, such sympathy was comparatively rare in contemporary accounts of class relations in Britain. Unlike the 'Mittelstand', in contemporary Germany, the English lower middle class at the beginning of the century was assigned no useful social role by those of higher class status. Crossick describes how, in Germany, the diverse set of white collar employees were lent cohesion by 'the traditional ruling class, who claimed the *Mittelstand* as a bulwark against social unrest and moral decay.'²² Such groups in England had insecure tenure of employment, were hostile to unionisation and were encouraged to adopt the domestic and social arrangements of those who were better able to support such lifestyles. They too, like Deeping, turned away from political and religious organisations to create private domestic units expressive of 'the individualistic ideology of the lower middle class that drove them inward into the security of a family life that was often incapable of bearing the strains imposed upon it.'²³

Writing autobiographically in 1957, Richard Church feels that the social revolutions of the first half of the twentieth century have not 'yet dislodged the lower middle class, the human

²² Crossick (1977), p. 43.

²³ Crossic, (1977), p. 27.

hedgehogs, and filled in their holes.'²⁴ The image of timid creatures almost paralysed by a sense of their own powerlessness but with the resources to furnish a retreat to their 'holes' reflects the movement of Deeping's heroes. Church comments on the range of individual identity in the lower middle class area of Battersea at the turn of the last century. In particular, he celebrates the individuality of his father, who though wary of advancement for himself and his gifted sons, nevertheless was utterly bold in his private passions: bicycling and his affection for his family. Although bitter about his treatment by the aristocrat who had seduced his simple-minded mother, a maid at the 'great house', Church's father did not turn to organised religious or political groups for release from the insecurities of his social position. Instead the private sphere was the arena of his fantasies. Church feels that the lower middle classes were uniquely able to explore and express private sentiment. They were neither drained of the scope for sentiment by the oppression of absolute poverty; nor were they able to put up the distances between members of family created by having paid employees in the house. His revulsion towards the harshness of upper class boys, 'hardened' by nurseries and the removal from home to public school, is countered by the vulnerability he perceives to be induced in himself at the 'over-warm emotional contact' with his parents.²⁵ The precariousness of his parents' confidence in their ability to create 'a golden cocoon of solicitude in which we lived secluded from the harshness of the world'²⁶ is inherited by the child. Despite his literary and artistic gifts he is encouraged to turn away from public expression of the sensibility fostered by his home and enter the world of service where those gifts have no publicly conferred value.

The men and women who entered the occupations which serviced the state, commerce, banking and retail during the first half of the twentieth century were, as Bailey puts it,

²⁴ Richard Church, *Over the Bridge* (Heinemann, 1955; Reprint Society, 1956), p. 23.

²⁵ Church, p. 141.

²⁶ Church, p. 38.

in the front line of engagement with modernity. Its men and women were both agent and casualties of modern mobility in its many forms and disjunctions.²⁷

Jobs in service and retail weakened family and inter-generational structures and literally deprived workers in these spheres of a space that could be called home. Christopher Hosgood²⁸ describes the despotic paternalism of shop-owners which served to infantilise shop-workers. It was common for shop-workers to live in dormitories governed by many petty rules frequently enforced by fines. These crippled such workers financially and geographically confined them to their workplace. In the 1920s and 1930s Deeping suggests the subdued and subjected quality of such female workers by describing them as pansies or violets: soft shrinking plants, 'a dusky thing' in *Roper's Row* (1929). The fate of these gentle women of lower class origins is precarious. Although Ruth Avery in *Roper's Row* becomes the wife of the medical student, in *Seven Men Came Back* (1934) a young dancing teacher, a 'dark violet, pale, with smoky eyes, and very black hair', is fatally dropped by the hero in a dancing accident. The hero has been tortured by the indignity of being economically dependant on his wife. Sorrell's son does not kill his first love, the 'flower-like' Mary, an usherette in a theatre, but his social dilemmas are eased when she is run over by a motor bus. The first love of a medical student or aspiring writer, in Deeping's fiction and the 1920s and 1930s, is often a female worker, isolated in a dormitory or cheap lodging house, her vitality fatally sapped by her servitude. Before the publication of *Sorrell and Son*, Deeping's desire to demonstrate the threat to the hero's self-sufficiency posed by 'the sex-thing' can lead him to cast the shop-girl as a predator²⁹ but in the later 1920s and early 1930s she is usually portrayed as an innocent victim and useful object to demonstrate the hero's wakening sexuality. The narrative rarely

²⁷ Peter Bailey, 'White Collars, Gray Lives', *Journal of British Studies*, 38 (July 1999), p.288.

²⁸ Christopher P. Hosgood, 'Mercantile Monasteries: Shops, Shop Assistants, and Shop Life in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Journal of British Studies* 38 (July 1999), pp.322-352.

²⁹ *The Prophetic Marriage* (1920).

offers her the opportunity of sharing the hero's sanctuary in this world. Arguably, Deeping's fiction exploits these female workers as thoroughly as their employers did. Relationships between the sexes were indeed difficult for both men and women in such occupations. Women were dismissed from employment in most stores on marriage and men could only afford to marry when they had reached a relatively senior position such as that of a floor manager. The 'want of leisure' ascribed by Graham Greene to the girls who read Deeping as they ate their A.B.C. lunch could indeed lead to 'a want of happiness'.³⁰

Hosgood notes the way that servitude and delayed adulthood was accepted by retail workers both because of the fear of dismissal and because of the potency of the fantasy of one day owning one's own business. Both these factors possibly explain the weakness of trade unionism in such groups. This perceived pusillanimity may have contributed to the absence of research on their cultural life. Hosgood's study does much to explain why unionisation, never easy, was even harder for these lower middle class groups than it was for a socially and geographically more cohesive working class. He describes shop assistants as 'divorced from the daily life of the street and unable to construct an independent life as citizens.'³¹ It is in the two novels that deal with the status of men in the service industry (*Sorrell and Son* and *Old Pybus*) that Deeping came closest to identifying with the class predicament of male members of the lower middle class. No doubt this has much to do with the fact that Deeping met men in this situation as he travelled. Much of his correspondence is from hotels, from the Riviera to Penrhyndeudreuth. He claimed to have 'met' Sorrell.³² And Sorrell met Deeping. Service,

³⁰ Graham Greene, *Journey without Maps* (William Heinemann, 1936) p. 15. See discussion in Chapter I.

³¹ Hosgood, p. 332.

³² 'Generally, my characters have been suggested by real people. I saw the originals of Sorrell and Old Pybus and Christopher Hazzard.' *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* ed. by S. J. Kunitz and H. Haycraft (Wilson, 1942) p. 361.

like shop-work, attracted people of both sexes because of its associations with gentility. But the nature of service and of shop-work robbed workers of solidarity with large groups of workers in comparable occupations and living and it exposed them to styles of life to which they could not reasonably aspire. If, as Bailey suggests 'it is disjunction that is a prime determinant of lower-middle-class experience'³³ it is not surprising that Deeping's anguished explorations of various kinds of disjunction formed the basis of his appeal to classes which included the despised shop girl and bell boy.

Deeping's anxieties about his own class positioning, to be discussed later in this chapter, may not merely be analogous to the anxieties of readers in very different economic and social circumstances. His readership may often have fostered literary ambitions themselves as a means to make them upwardly or imaginatively mobile. Bailey describes how escape

from the routine of regular life came with the liminality of the book, as a vehicle of imaginative mobility and the fantasy of a literary career. Though the autobiographical record is self-evidently skewed in that direction, the pre-1914 lower-middle-class world seems full of young literary aspirants seeking epiphanies as they rode the tramcar to office and warehouse, their minds in acute disjuncture with the banalities of the everyday.³⁴

Creating and entering any imaginative world lends the individual a dangerous degree of autonomy, at odds with any system of social control. Alison Light and Geoffrey Crossick have demonstrated the value put on interiority by the lower middle classes. Crossick and Haupt explicitly challenge writers such as Christopher Caudwell and Pierre Bourdieu who suggest that the petite bourgeoisie are an 'essentially imitative social group'³⁵ with all the mechanical and servile connotations suggested by the notion of imitation. Fictions like H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay* (1909) and Arnold Bennett's *The Card* (1911) or autobiographies like

³³ Bailey, p. 282.

³⁴ Bailey, p. 283-6.

³⁵ Geoffrey Crossick and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, *The Petite Bourgeoisie in Europe: 1780-1914*, p.191.

V.S. Pritchett's *A Cab at the Door* vividly record the exotic fantasies and activities enjoyed by lower-middle-class families. One of the reasons for the persistent popularity of Dickens among such families must partly be because of the *Daily Mail*'s Dickens Library offer but also because of the recognition of the wild interior life of such figures as the bank clerk, Wemmick and Pickwick's many friends and acquaintances. Deeping, 'the Dickens of his time, read and re-read',³⁶ certainly lacks Dickens' joy and celebration of the potential inventiveness and vitality of people whose lives are usually dismissed as drab, but he did recognise, in his fictions, their potential for dignified, even heroic behaviour.

How could the reader not be seduced by such recognition, when even a relatively sympathetic voice, such as that of the Right Honourable Charles F. G. Masterman, was making pronouncements in popular volumes, no doubt read by many members of the lower middle classes, that when such individuals succeed in gaining an independent existence in their 'little villas', all

the pleasant, affable little men and women who live there have the same manner of life, the same attitude towards life, the same combined cowardice and courage in contact with life, the same fundamental refusal to face life itself.³⁷

This passage, in marked contrast to the passage in which Masterman identifies with the insecurities of the class beneath his own, is from the lofty sanctuary of a 'superior' class mysteriously more face to face with 'life itself'. This type of discourse may now appear 'unscientific' and the patrician tone dated, but its attitudes persisted well into the 1980s. It was a handicap to the efforts of the intelligentsia, whether liberal or left, to combat Thatcher's project in persuading those hitherto categorised as 'little' that she, at least, neither patronised or despised them. In fact, a key member of the intelligentsia in the 1980s, Dr Jonathan Miller,

³⁶ John Osborne, *A Better Class of Person* (Faber and Faber, 1981), p.46.

³⁷ Masterman, *England After War*, p.50.

links her with her supposed constituency in terms that demonstrate that the lower middling classes are still tainted by the discourse of those with greater wealth and educational capital than themselves. Miller specified 'her odious suburban gentility' which catered, like her 'saccharine patriotism' to 'the worst elements of commuter idiocy'.³⁸ It is difficult to find such contempt in Deeping's writing about such classes, although he often sneers vaguely at those 'in trade', especially, as we have noted, in the trade in which the Warwick and Deeping families made their money, brewing.³⁹ In many ways, the enterprises of his heroes, the market garden, the café, the farm, the hotel, might well seem to satisfy dreams of autonomy to those who feel trapped in service industries or large offices.

When we examine how the values in Deeping's fiction might mirror those of families involved in small businesses we find many correlations but one major difference. Haupt and Crossick (1995) stress the way in which members of the petite-bourgeoisie, having gained sufficient economic independence to set up a business, relied on close family ties for their success.

Deeping shows no sense of the value or romance of the family or dynasty. Babies and children are not desirable. It is possible that the only infant conceived in love in his sixty-eight novels serves to demonstrate the virility of the tubercular hero.⁴⁰ The inter-generational fictions of Arnold Bennett, Hugh Walpole and Howard Spring, which might well have fascinated readers for whom the 'quality' of individual members of the family were crucial to economic success, are of no interest to Deeping. Deeping's images of the family are almost entirely of fractured units: fractured by the early death or desertion by one partner or by the alienation of a materialistic older generation and a more sensitive younger one. When he does portray a

³⁸ quoted in Hugo Young, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (Macmillan, 1989), p. 411.

³⁹ *Valour* (1918) p. 6. The hero's materialistic mother is tainted by her origins in the tanning and brewing trade.

⁴⁰ *Smith* (1932).

strong relationship between parent and child, as in *Sorrell and Son* (1925) and *Sackcloth into Silk* (1935), he depicts a child using the support of the low-status parent to star as solo performer whether as surgeon, or in the case of *Sackcloth into Silk* as popular playwright. In *Sackcloth into Silk*, a portrait of a Jewish family in the East End of London, Karl's mother furthers her son's career by making a success of her second-hand clothes business. She turns her back on her husband, a crude caricature of Karl Marx, and on her bestial second son, a Cain to her first son's Abel.⁴¹ Neither *Sorrell* nor *Sackcloth into Silk* (1935) dignify family and communal enterprise but celebrate solo performers and their loyal backers.

Many features of the shop-keeping classes, as described by Haupt and Crossick are, however, mirrored in Deeping's fiction, in particular their hostility to the working classes, the idle rich and 'the army of civil servants and pen-pushers'.⁴² Deeping's dramatisation of the defencelessness of the apolitical individual, with no class or common interest group to protect him or her, may well have found an echo among members of a class who perceived themselves as politically powerless and threatened both by socialism, with its threat to property and by the dominant classes with the economic power and social status to circumscribe their ambitions.⁴³ The only political views expressed by the heroes and narrators of Deeping's novels concern their hostility to taxation and municipal power.⁴⁴

In many ways the novels affirm other values associated with entrepreneurial success, usually on a relatively small scale. Two narratives, *Kitty* (1927) and *Sackcloth into Silk* (1935), offer striking images of the heroic qualities of the small business manager, both of them female.

⁴¹ Named Karl.

⁴² Crossick and Haupt, p.158.

⁴³ Crossick and Haupt, p.159.

⁴⁴ For example *The Impudence of Youth* (1946) p.258. After the hero's success 'The Inland Revenue ... did not regard him as a good citizen, but as a parasite to be plucked.'

Kitty's widowed mother is in charge of her own tobacconist's shop which is a centre for respectable and cross-class conviviality. Kitty's abilities, independence and resolution are thus rooted in family tradition. Her sense of her own power has not been sapped by dormitory life and the infantilisation of the regime in a large department store. Her power to plan and to manage her riverside cafe is contrasted with the infantilised young man from the upper classes with few skills and his manipulative mother whose conduct is motivated simply by a desire to inhibit the independence of her son and to obstruct his marriage to a woman from a lower class. This novel is a celebration of the values of the owner of a small business rather than a fantasy of classlessness. Karl, the popular playwright in *Sackcloth into Silk*, owes his success to his mother, Rebecca Slop, whose second-hand clothes shop forms the 'sackcloth' with which she produces the 'silk' of her favoured son. Karl confirms the fantasy that the world of the artist offers an escape constricting social classifications by achieving success under the name, 'Charles Kesteven'. In this later fantasy the world of the petite-bourgeoisie is to be escaped rather than celebrated and it appears to be tainted by its Jewish association. The entrepreneurial skills of both Kitty and Rebecca liberate each hero from the confines of a narrowly defined social class and from a particular racial group into the world of 'the artist'. The artistic world offers in the work of many middlebrow authors, from J. B. Priestley in *The Good Companions* to Rosamunde Pilcher in *The Shell Seekers*, a fantasy of classlessness. Sorrell's patron is a writer of popular songs who can therefore reach out to help the struggling Sorrell, uninhibited by barriers of class. But, as Deeping was to demonstrate throughout his career, the world of the artist is not in fact classless and is complicated, not only by the classificatory systems working within that field but also by the ways in which the artistic field is feminised by its detractors. Though Deeping appears to celebrate the feminine skills and the romance of budgeting, list-making and risk-taking that contribute to Kitty and Rebecca's success, these skills are laudable because they 'make' the man, in each case into a popular

entertainer. The shell-shocked Alex St. George becomes a banjo player in Kitty's cafe and Karl/Charles a household name as playwright.

Nevertheless Deeping is obviously fascinated by home-making. In a couple of novels he celebrates the romance of building one's own house⁴⁵ but more frequently it is the furnishing of the house or farm that engages his imagination.⁴⁶ The titles of fourteen of his sixty eight novels figure the name of a house or street and the pivotal point of many of his novels is the moment when the hero 'moves in' to the house of his choice. The growth in numbers of the lower middle classes in the first half of the twentieth century and the decline of the aristocracy saw large population movements and the growth of the suburbs. Masterman called their lower middle class inhabitants 'the Suburbans'.⁴⁷ The word 'Suburban' has no derogatory equivalent in the discourse used to describe the housing associated with other classes. The working class are defined by the nature of their occupation, the aristocracy by their blood ties, but the middle classes are often characterised by where they live. It would be interesting to know whether this was a covert strategy on the part of those with more secure claims to economic security or social power to project as homogenised the subordinate identity of the in-between classes whose heterogeneous character the upper classes and cultural commentators have done so much to obscure. Sally Alexander, contributing to the television documentary *Middle Classes: Their Rise and Sprawl*,⁴⁸ stresses the heterogeneous nature of the new suburbans whom she describes as 'pioneers'. She stresses the experimental and therefore the insecure nature of suburban communities. New occupations and new living patterns were creating, as Sally Alexander puts it, 'new kinds of people'. Though able, hardworking and relatively successful this social group were full of fears: of inflation, the Depression, a lonely death away

⁴⁵ *The House of Adventure* (1921) and *Smith* (1932).

⁴⁶ for example *Doomsday* (1927), *Kitty* (1927) and *Corn in Egypt* (1941).

⁴⁷ Charles Masterman, *The Condition of England* (Methuen, 1909), p. 56.

⁴⁸ *Middle Classes: Their Rise and Sprawl*, BBC 2, March 2001, Producer: Michael Poole.

from an extended family and above all the encroachment of the masses. The owners of private housing on the Leys estate in Oxford built a wall to exclude their council house neighbours. The makers of the television documentary suggested that this aggression was derived from this new community's lack of a cohesive and commonly shared set of social codes. Deeping's constant assertion of his moral authority as author might well have seemed attractive to a group without clear structures of moral or social leadership.

Only in his later fiction, such as *Blind Man's Year* (1937) and *Fantasia* (1939), does Deeping deplore the growth of the suburbs. E. M. Forster's repugnance for the 'red rust'⁴⁹ of such development is echoed in the disgust of the heroine of *Blind Man's Year* at Westbourne, 'a modern growth, or rather a town without traditions which had been perpetuated by the propertied classes.'⁵⁰ This popular female author equates the 'livid splodge' of these south coast suburban estates with her own livid birth-mark. At the end of his career, Deeping begins to convey the impression that he has been disfigured by his association with suburbans. However his bestsellers convey no such repugnance. He rarely mocks such potential readers and does not attempt to elevate his own cultural status by mocking lower middle class pretension. Pooterism might not have existed for Deeping. Many second or third generation suburbans, longing to escape from what seems a constricting world of narrow horizons, understandably find it hard to conceive that such communities were once sites of liberation fraught with the danger of the table tipping and hurling the 'marionettes' back into the abyss. The Grossmith brothers' *The Diary of a Nobody*⁵¹, the Punch cartoons of the 1920s and the elegant mockery of such writers as Nancy Mitford, combined to make it risible to dignify the lower middle class. *Smith* (1932), the only novel of Deeping which dramatises the heroism of

⁴⁹ E. M. Forster, *Howard's End*, (Edward Arnold 1910: Penguin 1941), p.316.

⁵⁰ *Blind Man's Year*, p.100.

⁵¹ This first appeared in Punch in 1892.

the new suburban, depicts as tragic the aspiring builder's attempt to escape the hostility of his unionised fellow workers by building his own house in a Thameside development. Before tuberculosis drives Smith to failure, he has also to escape sexual harassment from a female intellectual from a higher social class with whom the new community has brought him into dangerous contact. Deeping's fiction consistently offers frightening images of the way in which moving to a new community brings the sensitive individual into contact with people of higher and therefore threatening status. As always in discussion of any aspect of Deeping's fiction, the dominant experience explored in the novel is fear; this suggests that it was recognition of their own fears that attracted his readership, whatever their class of origin.

Are Deeping's class fantasies fascist?

So many of the fears shared by Deeping and members of the lower middle classes are those which drove the *mittelstand* in Germany into the ranks of the fascists that it is worth briefly examining whether Deeping's appeal can be linked to any shared fascist sympathies between himself and his readership. The reluctance of the lower middle classes to become involved in any overt political or religious activities except those which directly affect their interests is noted by Masterman, Haupt, Crossick, Cain and Hopkins. Crossick suggested in 1977 that the atomised nature of the British lower middle classes was also one of the reasons why these groups were never mobilised by the Fascists on the scale that they were in Europe.⁵² Almost twenty years later, he and Haupt comment, 'It is unfortunate that we still know so little about the social, economic and cultural dimensions of petit-bourgeois life during that period'.⁵³ They signal the extent of the work left to be done on lower middle class culture if the origins of Fascism are to be understood.

⁵² Crossick, 'The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain', *The Lower Middle Class* in ed. by Crossick (Croom Helm, 1977), p.41 and 42.

⁵³ Crossick and Haupt, p. 224

A brief summary of the ways in which the values that Deeping constructs could be described as fascist would include: hostility to socialism, to Christianity and to people considered to be of weak stock (including drunkards and homosexuals); a compulsion to stereotype by racial identity; specific anti-semitism; a quasi-religious veneration for nature (anything green is pregnant with value) and an endorsement of civil violence ('there are occasions when the crowd can only be confronted with truncheons or machine guns').⁵⁴

However, there are many significant differences. For example, Deeping betrays no fascination with the strong leader. There is no equivalent to Kangaroo in his fiction although the novels set in contemporary Italy, *Exiles* (1930) and *Two Black Sheep* (1933), do contain admiring references to Mussolini and the energy of the Italian fascists. In *Exiles*, the last of Deeping's admirably vigorous new women deplors the inefficiencies of the British rail service in contrast to what might have been achieved by Henry Ford or Mussolini.⁵⁵ The perceived energy of the Fascists is contrasted with the exhausted quality of Deeping's heroes at this period. But three years later than *Exiles*, in *Two Black Sheep*, also set in Italy, the vitality of Mussolini's Fascist movement is admired but the admiration is now hedged with qualification. It is the hero in his bitterness at having been the 'victim' of British justice who admires Mussolini. The heroine, a victim of British class snobbery, wanly agrees. However, Deeping appears to distance himself from the brutality that vitality assumes by identifying with the heroine's withdrawal from the hero because of his admiration for Mussolini. The poor oppressed governess, out for a walk in new Rome, agrees with her bitter and middle-aged protector 'dutifully', 'Yes - I suppose he really is a great man.' But it is her sensitive interiority with which the author aligns himself.

⁵⁴ *Sackcloth into Silk*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ *Exiles*, p. 177.

The shrinking woman is the measure of a man's manliness not the vital Italian. She 'was wondering what had become of the man in Mr Henry Vane.'⁵⁶

In his response to Fascism we are faced with another example of the strategic purpose of many of Deeping's attitudes to matters which belong in the public sphere. Although his attitudes to women's independence, to fascism, the nature of the French, German or Italians, all shift, these shifts serve a single purpose to establish a construction of English manhood which will directly or indirectly be a defensive strategy and will preserve Deeping's own sense of himself as a victim in the situation and at the time that he is writing. For example, Deeping's earlier romanticisations of pre-fascist Italian vitality, as exemplified by the lame hero's identification with the Garibaldi, accompanies his personal struggle, newly married and embarked on a new career, to establish his social status in a provincial society that seems to have been unimpressed by his literary aspirations. In his historical romance, *The Lame Englishman* (1910), heavily and self-consciously indebted to the Byron myth, Deeping's lame hero escapes his over-protective mother and a vacant, wealthy English maiden to find self-realisation in passion with an unhappily married Italian noblewoman and death fighting alongside the Garibaldi.

It was central to Deeping's conception of wounded masculinity that the hero should seem not only a victim of brutality but also the victim of class expectations. The Fascists' utopian fantasies may, like Deeping's, have had their roots in fears of emasculation but two important components never won Deeping's sympathy: the romance of the leader and the desirability of solidarity with other men. Deeping's profits derived from the romance of dignifying those who generate their own private utopias, not those imposed upon them. Had he revealed a

⁵⁶ *Two Black Sheep*, p. 122.

fascination with or admiration for the brutality of the successful leader this would have undermined his project of asserting the heroic dimensions of the reclusive and 'separative' image of the masculine, free from coercive pressures to conform to any man's vision but his own.

On race and nationalism Deeping's stance is complicated and confused. Given the importance ascribed by John MacKenzie and later post-colonialist critics to the imperialist dimension of the way Britishness was constructed in the first half of the twentieth century, it is interesting that there is an absence of reference to the imperialist project in Deeping's fiction. Britishness is defined, throughout his novels, as distinct from sensual and possibly shallow Frenchness, sensual but vital Italianness and manly, but possibly brutal, Germanness. But at no point is the Empire an explicit dimension of the way Britishness is constructed in these novels. The assumption by Jeffrey Richards that Deeping is imperialist in the way that P. C. Wren is, seems to be based on ignorance of Deeping's work.⁵⁷ The wide open spaces of *Beau Geste* (1924), the romance of which is undoubtedly derived from the world of imperialist rhetoric, is the antithesis of the enclosed spaces to which Deeping's heroes like to retreat. Deeping's heroes' response to the alien is a snail-like withdrawal which is the antithesis of the imperialist ideal of subordinating the threatening other. Macherey might argue that Deeping's silence argues the deep-seated nature of an assumption of imperial superiority. However it is equally arguable that the dimension of Empire played no significant part in the way either Deeping or many of his readers constructed the world. When one compares *Tell England* (1922), Ernest Raymond's rousing romance of the inalienable right of the public school-boy to commandeer the moral high-ground in war and conquest, with Deeping's contempt for the public school

⁵⁷ Jeffrey Richards, 'Boy's Own Empire: Feature Films and Imperialism in the 1930s' in *Imperialism and Popular Culture* ed. by John M. MacKenzie (Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 140-164.

élite in *Roper's Row* (1929) and *The Impudence of Youth* (1946), it is difficult to sustain the view that he was an apologist for the British upper classes in their imperial project.

Although, as MacKenzie's work demonstrates, British culture, at every level, was imbued with imperialist sentiment, the lower middle classes may have been particularly impervious to imperialist propaganda, despite their familiarity with the rhetoric of *Boy's Own* and occasionally, the BBC. Stephen Humphries, in his oral history of working class childhood and youth from 1889-1939, observes that the ideology of imperialism appealed to working class youth because it reflected and reinforced a number of its cultural traditions, in particular the street gangs' concern with territorial rivalry, and the assertion of masculinity.⁵⁸

Children from the lower middle classes shared neither these cultural patterns nor the grooming for imperial service or leadership fostered by the public schools. In terms of employment the Empire may very well have offered the lower middling classes less than either the working classes or the professional upper middle classes. The involvement of the lower middle classes in the imperial project is, like many other areas of lower middle class culture, under-researched. The very intensity of state efforts in the inter-war years to promote positive images of Empire may reveal an absence of popular interest in or commitment to imperialist ideals.⁵⁹ Certainly in Deeping's fiction not a single character achieves success or has a past in the colonies, except the aristocratic 'Suvla John'⁶⁰, who has been driven to South Africa by the treachery of a fellow Englishman; bitter at his betrayal by another member of his class, he has little in common with John Buchan's heroes, for example, whose manhood, class loyalties and

⁵⁸ Stephen Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels?* (Oxford, 1981), p. 41 quoted in MacKenzie's *Propaganda and Empire*, p. 194.

⁵⁹ John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: the manipulation of British public opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester University Press, 1984).

⁶⁰ *Suvla John* (1924).

patriotism are confirmed by service in benighted foreign lands. Though imperialist imagery must have affected British fantasies of racial superiority at every level of society there is certainly no evidence that Deeping, at any rate, asserted the desirability of British national supremacy. Two years before his father's funeral attended by so many representatives of local Conservative associations, including six members of the Primrose League,⁶¹ *The Slanderers*, published (1907), mocks politicians who play on 'the catch sentiments, the gallery rhetoric'....such as 'The grand and glorious future of our British empire! The splendid tenacity of the Anglo-Saxon race. Our stupendous commercial energy! The magnificent heroism of our army!'⁶²

Although Deeping may not positively assert the value of Empire, negative expressions of English racial superiority pervade his work. The increasing anti-Semitism in Deeping's work is, of course, shared by many other English authors of the time. It is one of the features of his fiction that make it so rebarbative to modern readers, and possibly to many of his contemporaries. It is perhaps indicative of how unexceptional such attitudes were that the portrait of Max Rubinstein in *Three Rooms* (1924), was ignored by the reviewer of *The Times Literary Supplement*, who merely noted that the pattern of the romance, though familiar, is given 'some freshness' by Mr Deeping's 'practised hand'.⁶³ The silence that greets the caricature at the heart of the book is surely one of those 'speaking' silences Macherey alerts us to. Indeed such explicit demonisation of the Jewish businessman and sexual predator were common in the popular fiction of Edgar Wallace, John Buchan, Dornford Yates and many others. However, in no other books of the period have I found such an obsessive

⁶¹ Deeping sneers at the Primrose League in *The Prophetic Marriage* (1920), p. 158. The narrator comments on the venal Millie's membership of 'that society cherished by old ladies in memory of a brilliant and cynical Jew.'

⁶² *The Slanderers* (1907), p. 175.

⁶³ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 8 May 1924, p. 289.

anti-Semitism. The level-headed spinster who is the reliable commentator in *The Three Rooms* also observes that the Jewish predator should be credited with ‘subtlety, brains, and a wisdom that was old as Nineveh.’ His ‘breed’ is to be ‘potent and triumphant’.

Oil and swarthinness are becoming dominant, and the yellow head is disappearing, And I shall go on hating you and yours, though I know most of you to be sleekly indomitable, sly and honest, successful, useful, and far more subtle than we poor Sussex tegs. I suppose the future is with you.⁶⁴

This terribly misplaced prophecy reveals just how much Deeping’s fiction is animated by fear. The Jew’s power is contrasted with the simplicity and vulnerability of the shell-shocked hero, here compared to a Sussex sheep, an absurdly cosy image of the elemental. What is desired is sanctuary for the sheep, the ordinary, defenceless Englishman. What is absent is the assertion of the value of British hegemony or imperial power in the face of the semitic ‘dominance’. Nowhere does Deeping voice support for the imperial project. Foreign wars do not excite his imagination. Deeping’s English, his ‘Sussex tegs’, are seen as victims, not from oppressors without but from corruption within. Perhaps this anxiety for the ‘breed’ rather than the nationhood of the English animated Deeping’s eugenicist sympathies. In his novel celebrating the product of miscegenation, *Sackcloth into Silk* (1935), Deeping launches a uniquely explicit attack on ‘the mixing of chromosomes between black and white’⁶⁵ in America. But the direction of his ‘cleansing’ fantasies are always inward and as such are inimical to a fascist or imperialist project.

A similar individualism, accompanied by a weak sense of their own worth as a class combined to give the English lower middle class their strong sense of individuality but weak sense of class identity. Such denial of the claims or desirability of communal goals may render individuals unable to combat a movement such as Fascism but would not seem to provide an

⁶⁴ *Three Rooms*, pp. 75-6.

⁶⁵ *Sackcloth into Silk*, p. 208.

ideological framework in which such subordination of the self seemed attractive. A fear of socialism and the working classes, whether conceived of as organised or as a mob, is omnipresent in the novels. But the grounds of this fear are the same as the fear of the military machine, the urbane intellectual or the arrogant landed gentry. Each group, in the perception of the novel's subject, seeks to impose a reductive identity on the individual. The socialists are constantly castigated for assuming everybody is a 'cabbage' but as the great surgeon in *Sorrell and Son* pronounces, ' "We are not - all - cabbages, Sorrell." '66

The class position of the writer

Although it is possible to identify parallel anxieties between Deeping and his probable readership, the origins of these anxieties in the doctor and would-be-farmer turned popular author depend upon an examination of the class position of an author. There is a group of novels which explicitly deal with this problem and which were probably written during The First World War. *Sorrell and Son* may have been the eventual product of the war's power to enlarge Deeping's social sympathies but the immediate effect of militarisation was to heighten his sense of his own social vulnerability as author.

To accurately define the status of the popular author in the first half of the twentieth century is to assess a complex range of factors without much theoretical support. Such has been the focus either on working class culture, in which, as McKibbin noted (and to some extent Rose's study also supports), novel-reading did not play a prominent part, and elite culture, which asserted modernist tastes, that the patterns of production of the middlebrow of literature have received scant attention. One of the elements of production that Deeping's

⁶⁶ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 247.

preoccupations illuminate is the status of the author of popular fiction and the effect that has on the tone heard and values constructed in such fiction.

The invisibility of popular middlebrow literature both to cultural materialists and to those for whom literature means canonical Literature has made questions about its production uninteresting to both parties. Recent summaries of thinking about class, such as Edgell and Joyce,⁶⁷ do not deal with the status of the producer of literature, whether popular or *élite*. Gary Day's account of the relation between class and literature, beginning, 'This book examines the relationship between "class" and "literature"', has no mention, in the chapter on the twentieth century, of the lower middle classes, the *petite-bourgeoisie* or the middlebrow. Nor does Day's Marxian work, which deplores the increasing tendency in the twentieth century to characterise class by its patterns of consumption, discuss the class dimensions of the way in which fiction of any sort was produced or consumed.⁶⁸

The class position of the male popular novelist at this period is problematic, however class is defined. It depended on so many variables: the class position of the readers who bought his books, whether or not writing was his only source of income, the nature of the community in which he lived and how he was perceived by its members. The problem of status must be partly derived from the author's relationship to the means of production. Deeping began to write when craft and limited production was being asserted as a mark of quality, in contrast to

⁶⁷ Stephen Edgell, *Class* (Routledge, 1993) and Patrick Joyce, *Class* (Oxford University Press, 1995)

⁶⁸ Gary Day, *Class* (Routledge, 2001), p.1. Day's chapter on twentieth century literature deals chiefly with the way twentieth century literature deals with working class experience. This may be as antidote to such studies as Valentine Cunningham's misleadingly entitled *British Writers of the Thirties*, which is disproportionately concerned with writers who were members of powerful literary coteries. Neither deals with the literature associated with the lower middle classes.

the increasing flood of mass produced commodities. Thirty years later, the emphasis of both Leavises on the uniquely distinguished grounds of their tastes is expressive of this resistance to the way mass production devalued any product which was available to 'the masses'. It is interesting that a key part of Deeping's representation of himself is as craftsman, joiner and gardener. These roles emphasised his uniqueness (and to some extent a strategic 'naturalness' and 'ordinariness'). But the economics of his situation dictated that, if he was to produce enough novels to maintain his position as landowner and quality car enthusiast, he needed to produce frequently and to sell in large numbers novels which would sell to groups of consumers from whom he distanced and distinguished himself. His early novels are informed by his sense of the economic insecurity that would attend his future career as a 'hired hand' of publishing houses which were themselves dependent on the whims of a readership over which they had little control. The bankruptcy of his first publisher, Grant Richards, discussed in my second chapter, must have heightened those fears. The contrast between the economic and therefore social insecurity of the professional author is constantly contrasted both with the professional bourgeois, (the lawyer or doctor) secure that his services will always command a high market value, and with the landed gentry who are only rarely depicted as 'earning' their secure economic position in these novels. However the absence of absolute values in discussions of class status is illustrated by the perceived vulnerability of doctors if they lack capital. In *Valour* (1918), the heroine's economic security is seen to be derived from the economic insecurity of her medical father: 'She was a doctor's daughter, and would have nothing.'⁶⁹

Three changes undoubtedly increased the economic power of the professional author at the time when Deeping was establishing himself as marketable: Forster's Education Act (1870),

⁶⁹ *Valour*, p. 59.

preparing the way for compulsory primary and secondary education; The Net Book Agreement (1900), which protected authors from booksellers intent on undercutting each other and The Copyright Act (1911), which protected the royalties of an author during his or her life-time and for fifty years after death. The enormous sums made by such authors as Deeping, Wallace, Wells and Bennett were only possible because of a rapid extension in public literacy and the protection of authors from either rapacious literary agents or booksellers. The publishing houses which marketed their works treated their authors with increasing respect as the prospects of vast sales increased. Newman Flower's great success in turning round the fortunes of Cassell derived from his ability to retain the loyalty of Chesterton, Wells, Bennett, Deeping and Ernest Raymond who 'stayed for fifty years, outstripping even Warwick Deeping's length of service which began in the doldrum year of 1907'.⁷⁰

But this power to earn money simultaneously wakened the hostility of those who had traditionally been the gate-keepers of the literary establishment. Long before Q. D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), the commercial power of popular authors agitated critics concerned to preserve the social distinction conferred by limited readership. Edmund Gosse, in particular, though occasionally soothing the fears of his fellow literati, was more commonly found deploring the fact that growth of literacy had spawned the publication of periodicals such as *Tit-Bits* and *Pearson's Weeklies*.⁷¹ When Deeping abandoned medicine to become a professional author after the success of his first novel in 1903, he did so at a time when the social standing of his chosen profession (never secure in any age) was increasingly perilous, partly because such authors as Marie Corelli and Hall Caine were flourishing despite

⁷⁰ Ian Norrie, *Mumby's Publishing and Bookselling in the Twentieth Century* (Bell and Hyman, 1982) p. 47.

⁷¹ McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice, 1880-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 9.

the animosity of the literary establishment. Marie Corelli disdained even to send review copies to critics. This attitude contrasts sharply with the attitudes of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, 'one of Victorian Britain's most prolific and popular female novelists' who dreaded the critics and changed the direction of her fiction in response to reviews. Chris Willis accounts for her great success by her decision to respond to critics' advice to omit her attempts at Dickensian comedy and to exploit, instead, the passion of her readership for melodrama.⁷² Deeping (or his wife) certainly collected his first reviews assiduously but when his later reviews tried to confine him to his earlier style and discouraged him from exploring serious contemporary issues, he resisted their direction and was eventually vindicated by the success of *Sorrell and Son*.

The class positions of other popular novelists illustrate how peculiarly vulnerable Deeping was to cultural devaluation generated by mass consumption of novels. John Buchan and Gilbert Frankau enjoyed high social status, Buchan by virtue of his professional and educational achievements, Frankau because of the wealth of his family, his Etonian connections and political activities. Edgar Wallace and Arnold Bennett, certainly owed nothing of their social position to their family background; their status was totally derived, not from their profession, but from the money that they had accumulated by the exercise of that profession. Both were aware of, but unembarrassed by, the low cultural status of their work, or, in Bennett's case, of some of his work. However Deeping's class position has little in common with that of any of these four contemporaries. Although his father (or his father-in-law) must have had enough money to set up his wife and himself in a farm in Sussex when Deeping took up writing in 1904, he presents himself in his brief autobiographical

⁷² Chris Willis, 'Mary Elizabeth Braddon and the Literary Marketplace: a study in commercial authorship', < <http://www.chriswillis.freeserve.co.uk/meb2.html>>, 11 November 2000.

sketches as a professional writer whose hobby was farming. His later fantasies of himself as a long-established land-holding squire suggest that if he could have presented himself as a man of means independent from his writing, he would have done so. Because of the class from which he came and into which he married, he was unable either to treat his writing as a gentlemanly hobby or as a splendid badge of the individual gifts that had lifted him out of a lower class.

The ten years before he published *Sorrell and Son* were, in terms of class status, the most unsettled of his life. Although Deeping seemed on good enough terms with his wife's parents to dedicate *The Red Saint* to them in April 1909, 'with all faith and affection', the military and somewhat dashing background of his father-in-law in the Hussars might have been intimidating to a man who was taking a great risk by exchanging a 'solid' profession for one with an indeterminate and feminised status and no certain financial security. Is the 'faith' an assurance that the daughter will not be a victim of misplaced literary ambition? Deeping's constantly asserted affection for his own father, 'the most kindly of men',⁷³ suggests that his father had some faith in his son's talent and did not undermine his attempts to establish himself in a new line of work. The frequent portraits of supportive fathers or father figures throughout Deeping's novels confirm this impression. In 1909 his father died. He had supported his only son morally and possibly financially through the first years of his career as a writer: the extent of Deeping's appreciation of this support is reflected in the dedication of his second novel, *Love among the Ruins*, in 1904 to his mother and father 'in gratitude' and of *Sorrell and Son* simply to his father. Welcome though support, both financial and social, may have been, nevertheless the status of his father and his friends in the community in which he lived might

⁷³ 'The Church of St. John's Southend-on-Sea, recollected by the late Warwick Deeping', proof for memoir to be printed in 1950, p. 19.

well have been daunting. Certainly all Deeping's early contemporary novels, written while he was living in Sussex, present the power of the local bourgeoisie of provincial towns in the Home Counties unsympathetically. The men are venal and the women are 'slanderers'.

By choosing to be an author, of uncertain social status, rather than a country doctor like his father, Deeping was apparently rejecting secure status in a provincial society and opting for a solitary occupation of potentially introspective endeavour. Throughout his novels 'the sensitive' and 'the solitary' are presented as being extended very low social tolerance. The group does not know how to classify such an individual and therefore 'slanders' or pushes him further outside the group.⁷⁴ When Deeping started to write novels which seem to be a thinly disguised condemnation of the provincial upper middle classes amongst whom he and his wife lived, he was also deprived of the protection of a powerful father. It was at his father's funeral in 1909 that he heard the sermon attacking 'pernicious literature' and in that same year he produced *The Return of the Petticoat* which must have severely shaken his neighbours in Sussex. *The Times Literary Supplement* gave it a scant eight and a half lines. It deplored the cross-dressing but, by describing this as a 'complication...not very happy in itself' failed, (no doubt deliberately), to signal just how 'pernicious' the book might be considered.⁷⁵ One of the many unsettling characteristics of this book is the uncertainty of precisely who is at the centre of the novel. Is it the upper middle class woman, turned man, turned woman or is it the Yeoman farmer, whose ancestors once owned the farm but whose descendant is merely a hired hand? Both characters become authors, the yeoman already a covert poet. Not only are their subject positions within the novel constantly shifting but so are their class positions. The lack of finality about the gender and class of this double subject possibly reflects the unease

⁷⁴ *Sincerity* (1912), *The Pride of Eve* (1914) and *Valour* (1918).

⁷⁵ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 9 September 1909, p. 327.

Deeping experienced at the indeterminate social status of the author who, like the heroine, aspires to assert a masculinity apart from that usually constructed by her or his society of origin.

'The author man' in the novels 1914-1924

When, in *The Return of the Petticoat* (1909), Deeping had turned his farming couple into authors, he had been at pains to emphasise the high status of the kind of writing being produced. The heroine's travel writing with its strong basis in practical archaeology lends her down-to-earth qualities recalling her manly farming days. The solid value of such activity is demonstrated by the independent means of the heroine. She chooses to write but is not dependent on the taste of the public for economic survival, just as the patron of the female artist in *Eve* chooses to encourage her art but is not dependent financially on its success. In 1914, the year after the publication of the revised and slightly sanitised revised edition of *The Return of the Petticoat*, *The Pride of Eve* is more explicitly concerned with the economic helplessness of the artist and the sexual vulnerability of the woman. Eve is a painter who struggles not to compromise her talent by economic dependence on a married gentleman-gardener who loves her and wants to launch her in a career of flower painting. Though flower painting could not be a more conventionally feminised form of creativity, Eve tries to assert her artistic and economic independence by rejecting male patronage. In London she plunges into poverty and is prey to sexually predatory men. Eve's first employer, the erudite and lecherous Hugh Massingham offers the reader an image of metropolitan high culture which is both feminised in its 'softness' and masculine in its sexual rapaciousness. This Pateresque aesthete's familiarity with 'monkish Latin' and 'every faded incident' of the Middle Ages belongs in his dark and airless London study which contrasts with the open air wholesomeness of the gentleman gardener and his masculine scientific experiments. Eve,

unlike her namesake, re-enters the garden of a male protector, on her own terms. She leaves her life as a suffragette and settles down to paint flowers amongst the Mendelian experiments of the hero. The gentleman's wife agrees to accept the special status Eve will have in their household as the real object of the husband's affections and to whose talent the house and garden will be dedicated. The wife accepts her husband's patronage of the artist because the nature of the relationship between the two lovers is to be non-sexual. As the hero declares,

In our case there is going to be no sexual, backstairs business. You are too sacred to me. You are part of the mystery of life....Do you think I want to take my flowers and crush them with rough physical hands? Should I love them so well, understand them so well? It is all clean, and good, and wholesome.⁷⁶

Deeping's use of words like 'sacred', 'clean' and 'wholesome' echoes Lawrence's concern to depict a sexuality which is 'above' a narrow provincial or puritanical morality and free from taint of materiality and gross sensuality.⁷⁷ Lawrence too is Deeping's concern to preserve the image of the male subject's masculinity despite what seem to be feminised qualities of 'sensitivity' or introspection. Deeping's agonised insistence on the virility of creativity gets into a particularly knotted tangle in this book. The artist-heroine has to remain 'full-blooded' though celibate, so there are constant references to her sensuous neck, (at one point both her neck and bosom dilate.) But the gentleman's masculinity is even more insisted upon than the heroine's vital sensuousness.

Had he less brawn, less virility, less humour, it is possible that he would have been nothing more than an erudite fool, one of those pathetic figures, respected for its knowledge and pitied for its sappiness.⁷⁸

The singleness of Deeping's purpose is obscured by a device he has already used in *The Return of the Petticoat*, the double subject. In adopting this device, he conceals the extent to which it is male creativity and male inwardness that he is seeking to protect from the censure

⁷⁶ *The Pride of Eve*, p. 343.

⁷⁷ An elderly lady met in Endcliffe Park, Sheffield, in 1995 told me she thought that Deeping was like Lawrence, but 'so much better because less long-winded'.

⁷⁸ *The Pride of Eve*, p. 127.

of those who would classify such qualities as ‘sappy’ or possibly womanish. By focusing on a female artist’s struggle to make professional a genre which had been established as a ladylike hobby, he chooses to assert the ‘value’ of a form of creativity less problematic, in terms of cultural status, than the practice of writing popular novels, for example. By making the creative artist female, single and childless, he frees the debate from the moral questions that would have attended the struggle of a male, married artist expected to support others dependent upon him.⁷⁹ However, the heroine’s aspiration to independence dramatises the economic vulnerability of creative artists of any sort and enlists the reader’s support in a way that the story of a Coleridge flinging his dependants on the mercy of his friends might not. In fact the unacknowledged key attribute of the artist’s patron is his wealth. Without it he would neither have been able to protect and promote the artistic talents of the woman he loves nor provide his wife with the material comfort and social position that would expose him to accusation of worse than sappiness. The fact that the female creative artist is offered patronage by a male who is both sexually attracted to her but who is voluntarily celibate seems to suggest that Eve is acting as a surrogate for the male artist. A middle class readership presumably accepted the dignity of a tame female artist at the cottage on the edge of the estate more easily than if that artist had been male.

In *The Pride of Eve* (1914), the heroine demonstrates the dignity of artistic endeavour, despite its economic unviability, but only because she is female. However, by subordinating her sexuality to the practice of her profession Eve asserts the unfeminine nature of her work. Deeping seems to be signalling that creative autonomy is more precious than sexual fulfilment which he perceives as locking an individual into a class which will inhibit creativity. Eve is

⁷⁹ In ‘Bitter Silence’ the male writer’s burden is seen to be the expectation that he should support his sister.

dependent as a wife might have been on the financial favours of her protector but she asserts her own terms as a man might have done, thus establishing the 'virility' of the creative process. A male version of the 'kept artist' in a much later novel, *Old Mischief* (1950), is sappy indeed. This 'Apollo' of a young author's ignominious decline into indolence is only halted by the robustness of his male protector and the creative energies of his young wife ('good London...and her like might have been met any day on Southend pier'⁸⁰) who writes his stories for him.

In Deeping's other early novels, he does not use his female figures to enact the uncertainties of the male artist's class status. Instead, they are used to demonstrate that women, as non-productive and dependent, compromise the autonomy of the male and lock him into class positions he would otherwise reject. Three post-war works, *Valour* (1918), *The House of Adventure* (1921) and 'Bitter Silence', a short story from a collection published in 1921, dramatise the bitterness he felt for both the class which would all too readily dismiss him as 'the author man'⁸¹ and for the way in which marriage bound him materially and socially into this class which he perceived to set no value on authorship or the author.

Valour (1918) and 'A Bitter Silence' (1919) must have been drafted in the camps behind the battle fields of the Western front and Gallipoli (where Deeping was for the duration of the campaign).⁸² The war indeed forms part of the mechanism of the plot but neither war nor the pity of war is foregrounded in these works. It is the class structure of the military machine rather than active war-fare that provokes the anger that animates both these novels. Despite

⁸⁰ *Old Mischief*, p. 10.

⁸¹ *The Countess Glika and Other Stories* (1919), 'Bitter Silence', p. 280.

⁸² 'Warwick Deeping: Author of Old Pybus', *The Wilson Library Bulletin* 1929 April, author unknown.

the 'chain' of command that characterises military discipline, Deeping is preoccupied by the tensions between members or potential members of the officer class. The other ranks are an undifferentiated mass. At this stage in Deeping's career, it is likely that it was the officer class, or more likely their wives, that would have made up his readership.⁸³ These war-time works take as their focus, and the target for their bitterness, communities who would have provided many of the readers of these works. He is writing for an audience who had, to some extent, been shielded from its realities. The market in which they were to compete had been shaped by non-combatants. Hynes points out that in 1918 'returning soldiers are very little represented in the new journals; it is the non-combatant civilians who fill the pages there.'⁸⁴ Both *Valour* and 'A Bitter Silence' are bitter texts but it appears that the bitterness is engendered not by what war has done to the body and souls of the combatants but by the way that war, and the classes that drove the war effort, compromised the autonomy of the men they sent out to fight. Both Deeping, and more famously, D. H. Lawrence,⁸⁵ focus on the humiliation of the moment when the prospective conscript is under scrutiny. It is interesting that Joanna Bourke, in her chapter, 'Inspecting',⁸⁶ does not explicitly comment on whether the numerous private records she consulted reveal horror at the invasive nature of this process. It is possible that the experience of the majority of men whose records she examined had led them to have no delusions about the limited nature of their value to those who employed them.

The Times Literary Supplement's review of *Valour* is one of the most dismissive Deeping ever received in that paper. The Supplement's reviewers had consistently praised his

⁸³ The novels were priced at 7s 6d and were available in the relatively expensive circulating libraries. His novels had not yet come out in cheap editions.

⁸⁴ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined* (Pimlico, 1990) p. 237.

⁸⁵ *Kangaroo*, pp. 242-7.

⁸⁶ Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male* (Reaktion, 1996) pp. 171-209.

'medieval romances' rather than his attempts at contemporary novels but this was his most damning review yet.

From the tales of medieval valour with which we used to connect Mr Deeping he turns to the "Valour" which flourishes in a far greater degree to-day, taking for his hero a rich manufacturer's son who is dismissed the service for indiscipline at the Dardanelles; returns home defiant; enlists again; loses a foot and wins the V.C. For so experienced a novelist as Mr Deeping it is a disappointing book. Pierce Hammersley is too unreal to get any sympathy from us. There are no half lights and a great deal too much perfection. Pierce becomes unnaturally perfect at the end; Janet, his love, is perfect all through; his father is a perfect dear; and his mother a perfect beast.⁸⁷

Though Pierce does indeed become 'unnaturally perfect' at the end of the book, the reviewer misses the interesting dilemma raised by the book and its title. At the beginning of the book Pierce's valour is demonstrated by his publicly avowed love for Janet, the daughter of a man in prison for fraud. In acknowledging her as his fiancée he braves the public disapproval of the society of Scarshot, a provincial town not far from 'Langridge Wells'. (Deeping's place names never stray far from their prototypes). However, the sense of integrity and obstinate self-will that supports his contempt for the narrow sympathies and snobbishness of the bourgeoisie of the Home Counties, also leads him to disobey a sadistic officer in the Dardenelles. Deeping raises awkward questions in this novel about the extent to which an individual's personal moral code is dependent upon his social context. It is interesting that reviewers of this novel did not perceive the echoes of Ibsen identified by the reviewer of *Uther and Igraine*.⁸⁸ As Pierce's father observes to Janet about an ancestor who had done 'a thing which was right morally but utterly wrong according to the regulations',⁸⁹

"It is a question how far the individual has a right to defy the law of the majority."⁹⁰

⁸⁷ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 February 1918, p. 70.

⁸⁸ Mary Elizabeth Coleridge' review of *Uther and Igraine* in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 23 October 1913, p. 304.

⁸⁹ *Valour*, p. 49.

⁹⁰ *Valour*, p. 52

In a novel that is fiercely contemptuous of 'the English', Pierce's passionately morality is initially perceived by his fiancée to be attractively unEnglish. She observes of her lover,

He was an egoist, with a sensitive temperament, generous, fiery, proud, much more impassioned than the ordinary Anglo-Saxon.⁹¹

However, the egoism which marks him out as morally superior to the other members of his class (except his benign father) is, at the end of the book, presented in an entirely different and pejorative light. And it is not the disobedience towards the sadistic officer that changes the reader's perception of the value of his egoism, as Janet calls it. It is the fact that in being cashiered he exposes the socially vulnerable woman to further disgrace as the fiancée of a disgraced officer. Janet remains loyal to him but there is a pained quality to her affection. Pierce's sensitivity ensures that he is aware of the depth of her suffering.

Pierce experiences an added source of humiliation in that by virtue of his membership of a class who have been consistently held up to be morally despicable, he escapes the punishment which a non-commissioned soldier would have received. On his return, in disgrace, from the Dardanelles, Pierce accidentally knocks over a market trader's barrow. In the altercation which follows the trader mocks him: ' "And who was kicked 'ome because 'e was a coward. That's class justice, that is; a pore man would a' bin shot." '92

It is as extraordinary that the reviewer from the *Times Literary Supplement* should have overlooked the uncomfortable nature of the issues raised in the first half of the book as it is that Deeping should have adopted the style of Ian Hay in his absurdly romanticised account of Pierce's war on the Western front that concludes the novel. For in his second war, in the ranks, Pierce encounters no bullies, no class war-fare. Instead the plucky Cockney Corporal

⁹¹ *Valour*, p. 47.

⁹² *Valour*, p. 228.

Palk describes the feelings of his fellow members of ordinary ranks for their improbably upper class new recruit, ‘“E’s a sport, and there ain’t no flies on ’im neither.”’⁹³ Although Pierce loses his foot in France the reader is not asked to imagine the reality of the physical suffering. For a writer obsessed with autonomy from classification, there is remarkably little attention drawn to the loss of physical autonomy in warfare and no reflection on the morality of invading someone else’s autonomy to the extent of killing him. This is all the more remarkable when the author is a doctor. Instead the moral good that is produced by trench war-fare is ‘the sexless love of man for man’.⁹⁴ The war on the Western front seems to make sense to the ordinary soldier. It made more sense to fight for the ‘women, children, homes, fields, even the dogs’ of France than for ‘the imaginary glitter of Turkish minarets and domes’.⁹⁵ The rhetoric is not imperial but domestic. He is fighting for the little woman back in Weybridge (or Hastings), for her social, not her physical survival.

The point of Pierce’s re-entry into the war is that it would not have happened without pressure from his woman. Janet exclaims, during the period of his disgrace, ‘“I want to be proud of you, and I can’t, I can’t!”’⁹⁶ Pierce’s father is sympathetic to her when she asks, ‘“If all our men had been too proud - or too clever - to soil their hands in this great cleansing, what would have happened to us - to all decent honourable people - to me?”’⁹⁷

A man must be willing to fight for a woman, ‘for her, and for all that she means.’⁹⁸ The ambivalence within this text of what a woman ‘means’ is apparent in all Deeping’s novels published during and immediately after the war. Her meaning seems to derive from two major

⁹³ *Valour*, p. 258.

⁹⁴ *Valour*, p. 294.

⁹⁵ *Valour*, pp .288-9.

⁹⁶ *Valour*, p. 245.

⁹⁷ *Valour*, pp. 207-8.

⁹⁸ *Valour*, p. 208.

demands: firstly, that her lover should be capable of physical violence and secondly that he should be acceptable to the society to which she would like to belong.

In *The Slanderers* (1907), *The White Gate*, (1913), and *Valour* (1918), the heroine has a romantic isolation from the mundane provincial society into which the hero eventually offers her a safe passage. However, the heroine's isolation is caused not by a morally neutral disaster but, in each case by the squalid behaviour of a parent which leaves her exposed to social insult and ostracisation. Joan's father in *The Slanderers* is an alcoholic miser, Constance's mother in *The White Gate* is sexually debauched, Janet's father in *Valour* is in prison for fraud. The second parent is either dead at the beginning of the novel or rapidly eliminated. Yet, the parent's moral failings seem to liberate the heroine from the constricting and compromising features of class membership. The struggle of the hero lies in freeing himself from the moral compromises enjoined by class membership in order to appreciate the heroine's qualities of naturalness, passion and lack of materialism. In each of these novels, the hero is of independent means, much more secure socially than most of Deering's later heroes. Whereas the later struggle will depend on achieving autonomy and moral dignity outside a closed social system, in these earlier novels the hero's moral autonomy and independence from his class background is revealed by his sympathy for the heroine's social vulnerability. However, the hero is forced into the role of social rescuer of the ostracised maiden. Despite his superior individualism in perceiving the inner nobility of the socially excluded lady, she is the agent of his final assimilation back into a society he instinctively loathes and tries to reject. In the contemporary novels his marriage entails a kind of violence to himself. In the historical novels of this period it is more common for the man to be the social outsider and for the violence to be visited on someone inside the class which excludes him.

The historical novels of this period, *Marriage by Conquest* (1915), *Martin Valliant* (1917), *Lantern Lane* (1921), *Orchards* (1922) and *Apples of Gold* (1923), are all conventionally romantic, in describing the need for a man to overcome his naturally gentle disposition in order to display the violence necessary to protect or arouse a woman. The most gruesome of this group is *Lantern Lane* in which a gentle country squire has to wade through the villain's blood to awaken the passion of the sophisticated lady of the court. Her response, however, makes the effort worth it: 'kill me; you are my master'.⁹⁹ In this novel, as in *Valour*, the unreality or hysteria of the emphasis on the virility achieved by the hero is reflected negatively in the increasingly casual reviews of Deeping's novels in *The Times Literary Supplement*. It must have been galling for the author of *Valour*, which attempts to deal with contemporary and complex issues, first to be told to stick to historical romances and then to have those same romances patronised by phrases such as 'highly coloured'.¹⁰⁰ His readers are told, 'These things are "all very capital," and, after all, an interesting hero and heroine are not everything.'¹⁰¹ The contemporary woman does not ask to be rescued or to witness the physical prowess of her lover. Instead, she sends the hero off to risk death, not for her sexual favours, but for 'what she means'. What did she mean?

Implicit in her demand that Pierce go out to fight again is Janet's assertion of Pierce's duty to restore her to the bourgeois society from which her father's criminal activities had exiled her. This is despite the fact that in their treatment of her that society has shown itself to be morally despicable. So what the woman 'means' in this context is that the hero should compromise his moral integrity to return to a war that is run by incompetent sadists. He should do this so that

⁹⁹ *Lantern Lane* (1921), p. 355. This carnage follows the hero's realisation that 'women ask for love to be baptized in blood', p. 292.

¹⁰⁰ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 8 June 1922, p. 382.

¹⁰¹ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 22 April 1915, p. 137, review of *Marriage by Conquest*.

the woman can be restored to society. The woman, in this context, is constructed as threatening both the man's moral and physical autonomy. She is the agent through which society effectively entraps the man and draws him back into the system of classification that he has sought to avoid. Deeping is raising issues which were faced much more uncompromisingly by authors such as Rebecca West in *The Return of the Soldier* (1918).

Deeping's other work of this period that identifies a woman with the oppressiveness of class expectations is 'A Bitter Silence' from a collection of novellas entitled *Countess Glika and Other Stories* (1919). The bitterness in this work is directed much more explicitly against the woman who demands that the hero enlist. The difficulty experienced by the hero is not presented by the military personnel but his own economic circumstances. He is an author upon whose writing many relatives depend, most significantly an able sister whose training he is supporting. In *Valour* the dual role of Janet as victim to be rescued and as maternal oppressor exacting physical sacrifice, has been taken by two women. Kitty, the sister, is a victim of economic circumstance who depends on the hero and ties him into writing to support her. Elizabeth Grenville, the beloved, is moved further up the social hierarchy than the hero himself. As her name suggests, she is an aristocrat with 'old' money and 'blood' thus her role in sending the hero to the killing fields becomes more clearly abusive. Her assumption that the hero (whose love she has returned) has not enlisted because he is a coward is the cause of the hero's bitterness and silence. The humiliation of being a non-combatant is compounded by the humiliation of being constrained to earn money in the lowly role of an author. This story is marked by the bitterness which attends the low social status of the writer who is repeatedly referred to as 'the author man' by the heroine's social equals.¹⁰² She herself despises him for

¹⁰² 'A Bitter Silence', *The Countess Glika and other stories*, p. 275.

sitting down and writing 'stories while men were fighting over there in France!'¹⁰³ Her contempt for him inspires both 'bitterness and self-scorn' for the compromises he has to make as wage-earner for his family. But the author's bitterness is mixed with admiration for the woman's hauteur. Her scorn demonstrates the superiority of her 'heritage'.

Tradition counted; it was in the blood. The Grenvilles were people who had never spared themselves when blood had had to be spilt and human sacrifices made. They had never been trammelled by the petty necessities of life. The great issues had always been open to them; their lives had been spacious, adventurous, proud.¹⁰⁴

The Yeatsian glamour of these noble patricians is undercut by the lady's lack of generosity towards the hero. There is a masochistic quality (frequently to be enjoyed by Deeping's heroes) in the knowledge that the lady's contempt is undeserved ; it increases the hero's spiritual stock. The lady's superiority is also undercut by the natural dignity of the author's sister, Kitty, on whose behalf James Arden sacrifices his romantic connection with the lady of the manor. The name of the sister, Kitty, is to appear again as the title of a novel which places at its moral centre a tobacconist's daughter who rescues a shell-shocked and infantilised soldier from a mother who has much in common with the lady in 'A Bitter Silence'. In both stories Kitty seems to stand for a natural and middle class womanliness and decency which is set against the curious 'motherliness' of the upper class woman. This motherliness is bound up with a sexual commitment aroused by the vulnerability of the man. The lady of the manor, having rejected the hero, James Arden, for apparently refusing to make himself vulnerable, develops feelings of a sexual and maternal kind for an upper class recruit who can 'afford' to expose himself to war. When this young man returns to Milford Hall, fatally injured in the spine, he is presented as shattered both morally and physically and the woman's love is now

¹⁰³ 'A Bitter Silence', *The Countess Glika and other stories*, p. 282-3.

¹⁰⁴ 'A Bitter Silence', *The Countess Glika and other stories*, p. 271.

explicitly and wholly maternal. 'It was not the lover, but the child that she saw in this poor, broken bit of youth lying in that English garden.'¹⁰⁵

The invalid, once 'splendid' is now 'peevisish' with 'frightened, childlike eyes.'¹⁰⁶ Arden too is injured. Having inherited money, he was free to enlist and lost an arm in a lorry accident but he is bitter that even in the scale of his own injury he is eclipsed by Hemmerde, 'one of the lucky ones who happened to do something that was spectacular.'¹⁰⁷ However, the hero as author has a kind of revenge in that, in a gesture of apparent magnanimity, he cheers the dying hours of this emasculated gentleman, with the tools of his despised trade: books, eloquence and a kind of fiction.

Arden played the rhapsodist, trying to soothe him with the spell of an heroic sympathy. He rallied the lad by reminding him perpetually of the fine deed that he had done for England. If flattery can be justified, then Arden was justified in flattering that dying man. He tried to drug Hemmerde with heroics, and he succeeded.¹⁰⁸

Still we find that there is a tension in Deeping's vindication of the author's skills. His packaging of the dying man's unquestioned heroism is not truth-telling but 'flattery'. Arden's art is associated with 'mere' romance since there is no sense in the story that the courage of the young men in battle was justified by the war's conduct or purpose. Arden, the hack, survives the naive gentleman and wins back the lady. The book, which Arden picks up for the dying man and reads to him, proves not mightier but more enduring than the sword. However the contempt of the gentry for his skills seems to have been internalised by the author. This is not the first time that the author is seen as the victim. Deeping explored the 'shame' of being an author long before he was publicly humiliated by Leavis.

¹⁰⁵ 'A Bitter Silence', *The Countess Glika and other stories*, p. 323.

¹⁰⁶ 'A Bitter Silence', *The Countess Glika and other stories*, p. 322.

¹⁰⁷ 'A Bitter Silence', *The Countess Glika and other stories*, p. 317.

¹⁰⁸ 'A Bitter Silence', *The Countess Glika and other stories*, p. 325.

In Deeping's other novels of this period, that shame is inextricably bound up with the need to demonstrate virility perhaps because writing is commonly perceived as feminised not least by the female characters, usually members of the provincial middle classes. In *Unrest* (1916), the new woman whose sexual assertiveness proves more attractive than the 'subtle sensitiveness'¹⁰⁹ of the author/hero's wife, offers the hero an escape from a world where younger men dismiss him as emasculated by authorship. The femme fatale dashes around Sussex in an aeroplane and a black car which she drives with 'skilful roughness'.¹¹⁰ She is presented as restoring the author's masculinity which has been sapped by his wife's sensitivities, 'her femininity and her deeper understanding of the more elemental aspects of life.'¹¹¹ The wife plays the piano soulfully in the twilight, as indeed did Mrs Maude Deeping.¹¹² As in *Valour*, the wise, patient woman eventually reclaims the errant fiancée or husband but the novel asserts the need of the creative male to escape the emasculating effects of femininity, domesticity and the links those qualities have with the mundanities of bourgeois provincial life. Of course, the new woman compromises the individuality of the author as disastrously as the old. The dilemma is essentially unresolved. The author has demonstrated his masculinity despite his effete occupation, by making a sexual conquest. This conquest makes him more vulnerable to the class to whom he feels superior because he is cast adrift socially in another world where he is forever competing to repossess his 'conquest'. Once adrift in expatriate society the representatives of the society to which his wife belong are suddenly presented as wise, forgiving and dignified.

¹⁰⁹ *Unrest*, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ *Unrest*, p. 56.

¹¹¹ *Unrest*, p. 31.

¹¹² Letter from G. S. Thomas to Mary Grover, 16.7.98. Maude Deeping 'played piano very softly but with loud pedal permanently down, and improvised the notes for left hand.' Graham Stuart Thomas, the national rose expert and nurseryman, supplied Deeping with his roses and rhododendrons and became a friend.

Like *Valour*, *Unrest* begins by representing bourgeois provincial life as shallow, materialistic and inhibiting male individuality. However Deeping's reluctance to identify the object of the hero's desire as either totally apart from this class or as sharing its characteristics, means that the novel is resolved by a transformation in the way that the society is presented. This failure of nerve on Deeping's part appears to be the kind of fissure that Macherey urges us to identify: the value set on male autonomy cannot be reconciled with the male's reliance on class membership to have his uniqueness and his virility recognised. Recognition of his high moral worth depends on conforming to class expectations, whether it be to enlist and to engage in matrimony with a woman of his own class. So instead of turning his back altogether on class expectations, Deeping transforms the way that he represents the class to which the hero is expected to belong. None of the tedium or triviality deplored at the beginning of the novel is evident at the end. The modern reader is thus confronted by the implausibility of Deeping's vision: that the individual male is free from class morality and yet can 'buy' into it when he needs to.

At this stage, both of his life and in his fiction, Deeping is still bound by the romantic conventions to portray the beloved as 'elemental', innocent of the taint of the class to which she belongs or aspires to belong. Only later does a more overtly hostile discourse towards women evolve. When she has stuck by him, but in so doing drawn him back into the class from which they come, a woman loses her sexual allure and is presented as a 'comrade', a word that Deeping repeatedly uses to describe his own wife, for example in the dedication of *Second Youth* (1919). And in *Valour*, the staunchest of the fictional wife's allies in this process of reabsorbing the creative man back into his class of origin is the representative of the old order, the hero's father.

In April 1915, when he joined the R.A.M.C. , in his late thirties, Deeping seemed to be free of the jingoism of many of his contemporaries. It is the heroine of *Valour*, not the hero, who asserts the value of the coming war. The men in 'Bitter Silence', 'these quiet fellows who hated anything that could be called swank', accept the opinion of the 'shrewd' solicitor that what the 'fellows will find hardest' about the coming war will be ' "Having some fussy old fool bullying you and not being able to answer back ... It won't be so easy for men who have been their own masters." '113 At this point in his career, the ennobling effect of confronting violence with violence is less obvious to Deeping than the injustice of the individualist having to conform to the military machine and the inferior types who control it.

Individualism on trial

When in 'Bitter Silence' Deeping describes The Great War as 'putting individualism on trial'¹¹⁴ it is clear that his heart belongs to the individualist but he acknowledges that the social constraints which curb him are irresistible. He gives his individualism a pedigree which raises interesting questions about the nature of the readership to whom Deeping appealed in his first, moderately successful, novels. This self-validating strategy aimed to associate the values which he wished to assert with the names of authors who had a cultural status higher than would normally be associated with the readership of popular novels. He takes pains, for example, to associate himself with the philosophy of Nietzsche, to whom his use of the notion of the Dionysian and of the superior individual must owe something.¹¹⁵ Whatever the nature of his knowledge of Nietzsche's work, Deeping regularly aligns himself with the values he identifies

¹¹³ 'A Bitter Silence', *The Countess Glika and other stories*, pp. 280-281.

¹¹⁴ 'A Bitter Silence', *The Countess Glika and other stories*, p. 286.

¹¹⁵ It is impossible to know the nature of his familiarity with the ideas or work of Nietzsche. Nietzsche was being translated into English at the end of the nineteenth century when Deeping was still training to be a doctor in Cambridge and presumably more in touch with intellectual fashions that he might be later in Hastings.

with Nietzsche, never making clear what he judges those values to be. In a novella, 'Countess Glika', (1919) he adopts the clumsy strategy he was to use even more frequently later in his career of using the disparagement of the villainess to signal the arrival of a reliable mentor. A wily German baroness, out to ensnare the eponymous Slav heroine into a marriage with a boorish German Prince in order to bring the Slav nation into the sphere of German influence, refers to 'That wretched Nietzsche', wretched because of his attitude to the Germans: 'he thought us beasts'.¹¹⁶ Although Deeping was to become strikingly pro-German in the novels he wrote both immediately preceding and during The Second World War, he leaves us in no doubt in 1919 that he shared Nietzsche's views on the Germans.

The Baroness Bromberg was more than a woman ; she was Germania personified. She was fat, with protuberant blue eyes and a double chin that hung down like a bag..overfed ... stupid ... furious gambler .. .notoriously mean.¹¹⁷

Deeping's admiring references to Nietzsche are never tempered by the qualifications with which he invokes Schopenhauer as inspiration to the hero of *The Slanderers*. The hero's individuality and sensitivity are enhanced by his admiration for Schopenhauer but his ability to respond sexually to the heroine is in danger of being compromised by the introversion that follows from his excessive intellectuality. Maeterlinck too comes with a health warning, often associated with the heroine or hero but in danger of leading them into excessive languor.

Deeping's use of these European intellectuals as cultural commodities is entirely characteristic. It is name-dropping, but of a contradictory sort. By 1907, the year of the publication of *The Slanderers*, Schopenhauer's reputation had been restored by thinkers such as Nietzsche and Freud. Reading of his works serves, in Deeping's novel, to lift the hero above the materialist and trivial provincial society who despise the girl who has grown up in the 'lusty and

¹¹⁶ 'Countess Glika', *Countess Glika and Other Stories* , p. 33.

¹¹⁷ 'Countess Glika', *Countess Glika and Other Stories*, p. 8.

superabundant liberty' of her neglectful father's garden. Schopenhauer's influence apparently enables the hero to respond to this child of nature but the intellectuality which led the hero to read Schopenhauer in the first place compromises him as an active lover. As in the later novels, Deeping uses icons of high culture to increase the value the reader should put on the uniqueness and cultural superiority of the hero while at the same time signalling that cultural superiority is not only inferior to natural nobility but actually a barrier to discovering such nobility. The foreignness of these preferred authors lends a romantic exoticism to the hero or heroine but the reader interpellated seems to be clearly anti-intellectual. A certain amount of Maeterlinck and Schopenhauer lends style and distinction; too much will either emasculate you (if male) or drive you to suicide (if female). However, Deeping himself seems to be driven to introduce his chosen intellectual mentors into his fiction in a way that seems more compulsive than strategic. More than any other middlebrow writer of his period, he is concerned with placing his characters by what they read and he arrests his own narratives (not otherwise characterised by digression) with meditations on the intellectual credentials of his heroes. In these early novels, Deeping seems to be challenging as well as reflecting the anti-intellectualism of his own class.

Although Deeping's references to Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Maeterlinck fade once he ceases to deal with pre-war English provincial life, his fascination with Mendel and eugenicist ideas is evident throughout his career. He is recorded on the Eugenics Watch web-site as being made a Fellow of The British Eugenics Society in 1937.¹¹⁸ In 1931 he had brought out *The Road*, a Mendelian romance. The struggle of the breeder of a superior strain of

¹¹⁸ <http://www.eugenics-watch.com/briteugen/eug_d.html> The source of this information on Deeping is the list of members' names printed in the Eugenics Society Annual Report 1937. As this list was not up-dated annually but only printed the annual reports in 1937, 1957 and 1977 it is possible that Deeping joined earlier and his membership and Fellowship were simply recorded in 1937.

delphiniums to preserve his specimens from the malice of a junior Clerk to the Collector of Taxes parallels the struggle of a magnificent specimen of English womanhood (sound of limb but susceptible to the temptations of sensuality, socialism and modernity in general) to survive the careless violence of the motorist who has crippled her. The gentlemanly gardener despite being derided as an effeminate 'toff' establishes his masculinity by the end of the book not only by demonstrating his ability to preserve the superior delphiniums from the motor-mad tax collector but also because he restores serenity to the wounded girl by reading to her. In this novel, a highly nostalgic account of semi-rural England being destroyed by the forces of modernity, the man devoted to Mendel's principles is presented as a gentle healer, protecting the superior specimen from the historical forces which threaten it. His heroism lies not in his ability to assert his will in an expression of Nietzschean individuation but in protecting rare and beautiful specimens, human and horticultural, from those representing the dominant strains.

The much earlier *Pride of Eve* (1914) draws rather more radical conclusions from similar principles. Eve and her lover, the gardener who breeds his specimens on Mendel's principles, agree that because of their superiority as individuals they can behave as they like without being subject to any other morality than their own.

"I suppose most people would say that we are utterly wrong."

"It would be utterly wrong, for most people."

"But not for us."¹¹⁹

It is the heroine who takes the ethical consequences of this assertion of the superior type's moral right to purge the species to its final conclusion. The author does not appear to distance himself from the way she deals with the drunken abuse of a Londoner: "I hope before long

¹¹⁹ *The Pride of Eve*, p. 341.

that we shall have the sense to put people like you in a lethal chamber. You would be better dead, you know.”¹²⁰

In both the earlier and the later novel, the man exhibits the maternal role of the eugenicist who nurtures life while the woman exhibits the destructive aspects of the ‘science’. The recurring image in his novels is of man as the maternal presence. In *The White Gate* and *Woman at the Door* he saves the heroine from nervous collapse. Sorrell, of course, takes the role of both parents. Towards the end of the 1930s the hero is increasingly a farmer or gardener nurturing the soil and a crippled wife with equal dedication.¹²¹ However the heroine of *The Pride of Eve* and the young Molly in *Sorrell and Son* are admired for their rejection of motherhood.

Despite his fascination with Mendel (more frequently mentioned than Darwin), Deeping’s refusal to entertain the romance of parenthood suggests that the creative rather than destructive implications of eugenicist views were focused on horticultural rather than human species. But Deeping does distance himself from the ‘lethal’ solutions proposed by the heroine of his 1910 novel when he explores similar ideas three years later in *The White Gate* (1913). Although the hero of *The White Gate* is fascinated by Mendelism and breeds exceptionally beautiful birds, the author explicitly distances himself from eugenicist solutions to the ‘problem’ of the vulnerable, unbeautiful and unfit. In the following passage we see how the ‘problem’ of depression is placed at a remove from the manly hero and rescuer of women. The author quotes Huxley to justify his hero’s compassion for the heroine’s depression and for the hero’s own experience of it on the death of his wife.

¹²⁰ *The Pride of Eve*, p. 262.

¹²¹ *Doomsday* (1927), *The Road* (1931) and *Corn in Egypt* (1941).

It was Huxley who said in his caustic, smiling way, when discussing the question of the elimination of “the unfit,” that there are times when the best of us would doubt our right to be included among the “fit”.¹²²

It is not merely acquaintance with Huxley’s ideas that is paraded but an acquaintance with his ‘way’ as though he was a regular visitor to Deeping’s own white house. However Huxley is soon replaced for all his ‘smiling way’ by different counsellors. Deeping’s implicit countenance for the possibility that the unfit might be eliminated is later given explicit, if qualified, approval, in *Old Pybus* (1928) for example when the hero, nicknamed ‘the Venerable’ counsels his nephew

“Violence may be useful -”

He arose to rid himself of a cream-soaked fly.

“Putting certain things and people out of the window. Wish I could do it sometimes.”¹²³

In this and other later novels, homosexuals and alcoholics are often seen to deserve and receive a violent end. This reluctance to accept the common applicability of the law is typical of Deeping and is not a feature of a man with a strong loyalty to a class morality. It is impossible to trace the genealogy of Deeping’s eugenicist views, complicated as they are by confused attitudes to the distinct roles of the different genders and fascination with the superior type rather than the superior species.

His somewhat apocalyptic vision of the way in which the superiority of certain types condones violence towards sub-standard specimens was shared by an English author whose works line the bookshelves of many of his heroes, throughout his novels. The nineteenth century naturalist and individualist, Richard Jefferies (1849-1887) was admired by both D. H. Lawrence and F. R. Leavis. Though the reasons why the three twentieth century writers admired Jefferies differ, the most tangible characteristic they share with Jefferies is their tone

¹²² *The White Gate*, p. 58.

¹²³ *Old Pybus*, p. 271.

and a relationship with the reader that is implied by that tone. All four writers are not only fascinated by what makes the superior individual superior but they all assert the superiority of the author, not only to his detractors but to his readers. Insistence, repetition and linguistic closure are features of these writers all of whom aspired, in their different milieu, to the status of sage. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this project to examine how the class background of each animated their vatic rhetoric but implicit in this rhetoric is a sense of the confining nature of English class structure and the writer's position outside it.

Richard Jefferies did have some status within the non-intellectual middle classes as a nature writer and also as the author of the boy's book *Bevis* (1882), which became increasingly popular in the first decade of the twentieth century amongst the middle classes who had already acknowledged the quality of Jefferies' nature writing. *Bevis* was popular reading for middle class children when Deeping was in his early teens. A fantasy of children surviving on an island in Hampshire outside the adult world, it prefigures the world of Arthur Ransome's children. *Bevis*, the superior boy and leader of other boys, has a natural authority and disdain for the servile. He seems to have a greater sense of what a boy of his superior abilities owes to lesser species than many of Deeping's heroes. His own social status is never in doubt and he imposes his will on animals and small boys with violence. He takes pleasure in demonstrating the inferior nature of the donkey and his own capacity for leadership by inspiring his henchman Mark to join with him in scourging 'this miserable citizen'.¹²⁴ 'They thrashed, thwacked, banged, thumped, poked, prodded, kicked, belaboured, bumped, and hit him, working themselves into a frenzy of rage.' No wonder, as Mark observes sullenly, "Everybody does everything for" *Bevis*. He is a terrifying figure but presented as superior because independent,

¹²⁴ *Bevis*, (Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1882: Duckworth, 1904), p.105.

clear about the basis of his authority and because he commands allegiance from other children and from his dog.

Another hero of Jefferies has more in common with Deeping's in that he is less socially secure than Bevis. Bevis is fiercely individualistic but he is presented as being at ease in a hierarchical rural society. Felix, the individualist of Jefferies' apocalyptic *After London* is completely rejected by the powerful feudal lords into whose class he has been born. An apocalyptic vision of the future, *After London* was first published in 1885 and, like Deeping's novels, published by Cassell. John Fowles, in his introduction to The World Classic Edition describes the book as attempting to find 'an answer to the insoluble conflict between the demands of valid private and valid public, or social, myth', ¹²⁵ words which could be used to describe the nature of Deeping's project. Jefferies regarded London as, literally, a sink of iniquity. After an ice age comes a flood which drowns the polluted city in a freshwater lake. When the hero, generations later, discovers the site of the drowned city, he floats across the sulphurous waters that hide its lower parts and walks across the phosphorescent bones of its inhabitants who have been poisoned on the polluted beaches that ringed the cauldron of toxic waters that had been London. Excluded by his own kind, he flourishes for a time as the hero of a barbaric tribe outside the feudal fastnesses of his own class. He owes his survival to practical application of knowledge that he has treasured from the era before the apocalypse. However he forfeits his social security as acknowledged leader of the tribe because of his love for a woman of his class who is untainted but inevitably bound to the brutal society of which she is a part. The novel ends with Felix re-entering the forests that surround the castles where another kind of barbarity flourishes: the barbarity of politics, materialism and petty jealousies.

¹²⁵ John Fowles, in his introduction to *After London* (O.U.P., The World Classics Edition, 1980) pp. xii-xiii.

Like the hero of *Valour*, Felix's individuality is seen as utterly admirable but completely doomed to be crushed by the inferior culture of his social peers. Both books avoid tragedy, Deeping's by changing the way he depicts the society in the latter half of the book, Jefferies by simply ending the book before Felix begins his re-entry into the dark. Fowles points out the bleakness of Jefferies' vision. His comment on Jefferies is true also of Deeping's scepticism about the redemptive qualities either of the primitive simplicity of the led or of wise guardianship of their leaders.

Jefferies never had time for the romantic view, then held by soft-centred middle-class intellectuals of all persuasions from socialism to Anglo-Catholicism, of rural innocence as a viable antidote to urban evil ... (Nor did he have any general faith in the intelligentsia. The main reason England relapsed so fast into barbarism, it will be noted in *After London*, is that the educated classes had emigrated en bloc once the catastrophe happened.)¹²⁶

This novel constructs class in a way that is very similar to *Valour*. It is the woman, still envisaged as innocent of taint by association with the community in which she lives, who unconsciously enmeshes the asocial hero in the web of class expectation.

Her own heart justified her

In the novels preceding and following The First World War, the primary goal of Deeping to protect his right to inwardness, what he called his 'separativeness', is more explicitly linked with feminine qualities and subaltern groups than it will ever be in any of the later novels except *Blind Man's Year* (1937). In *The Rust of Rome* the narrator describes the writer heroine as

an anarchist for the moment in the inspired and rightful sense. The world had no cause to meddle in the matter, to gather in conclave and put two characters through the ordeal of a

¹²⁶ John Fowles in his introduction to *After London* (O.U.P., The World Classics Edition, 1980) p. xvii.

cynical analysis. Eve refused to be bayed at by the social pack. She knew the truth, and her own heart justified her.¹²⁷

Analysis, cynical or otherwise, is above all what Deeping resists, (as he would no doubt have resisted my project) because it is inevitably linked to classifications and in the literary field, to fetters on the writer's freedom to write as he wants. And not only the writer. 'The justification of the heart' is the endorsement of the reader's right to enjoy what he or she liked. It could have been the title of the competition in *The Sunday Dispatch* in 1932 which attempted to establish what amounted to a middlebrow canon. The heart in *The Rust of Rome* is safely housed in the breast of an artistic young woman devoted to her ageing father. She is unlikely to throw a bomb into the conventional framework of the romantic novel because she is portrayed as the victim of the 'social pack', a perfectly standard condition of romantic isolation.

However this noble, 'anarchic' woman will, by the end of the book, be married to the hero, whose 'effeminate' drunkenness has led to anarchic violence and two years in prison. Deeping (like H. M. Tomlinson) is frequently sympathetic to individual acts of male violence which are the expression of ungovernable resentment.¹²⁸ In the man this anarchy produces either self-loathing, a sense of emasculation or the condemnation of the Law. Woman's private anarchy is perceived to be less harshly exposed to public contempt because her domestic servitude affords the liberty to feel what she desires. It is the woman's privileged access to the private anarchy of the world of sentiment that seems to be the basis both of Deeping's empathy with and resentment of the feminine. Drunkenness, one of the few states which offers men, of all classes, a socially acceptable way to express sentiment, both confirms and releases Heriot, the hero of *The Rust of Rome*, from his self-loathing. His inability to restrain

¹²⁷ *The Rust of Rome*, p. 380.

¹²⁸ *The Secret Sanctuary of John Stretton* (1923) and *Two Black Sheep* (1933), for example.

his impulses, like Pierce's refusal to obey his officer in *Valour*, is presented in an equivocal fashion. In exposing him to explicit exile from the world of bourgeois expectations the hero is liberated to take a path which, because off stage, conforms more closely to the ways of the heart and the needs of the individual.

This partial rejection of the world of his origins also enables the hero to extend his class sympathies. It is in *The Rust of Rome* that we find the only explicit endorsement of the lower middle class in Deeping's fiction. It is, however, endorsement of a characteristically convoluted kind. The hero learns from his drunken violence and his incarceration that he had had no right, as an Oxford graduate of modest private means to look down on members of such classes.

He- he- a man with no more self-restraint than a spoilt an foolish boy, had looked down upon this dull-coloured crowd that swarmed and toiled like thousands of black ants. "Commercial people," "the lower middle classes," "the great sea of mediocrity upon which the ships of the wise men sail." He had used such phrases of old, and he repeated them that morning, spitting them at himself with a kind of sneering ferocity. He had called these people "ants," but what was he himself? a May-fly, a bug, a veritable parasite.¹²⁹

Such a passage could be construed merely as the self-flagellation of a member of the leading classes who has failed to be worthy of leadership, but Deeping is not merely repeating in order to endorse the discourse of the saloon bar. The convoluted notion of spitting at oneself suggests he is trying to rid himself of that discourse¹³⁰ altogether while acknowledging the corrosive power of its ferocity. The venomousness of class rhetoric is coupled with an image in the succeeding paragraph of the road-sweeper (inevitably 'a little old cripple'), many rungs further down the ladder even than the 'ants' who had been 'disciplined' by 'necessity'.

¹²⁹ *The Rust of Rome*, p. 22.

¹³⁰ Deeping's equivocal attitude to the word is perhaps reflected in the frequency with which speech is associated with spit. See also *Sincerity* p. 228 where the agitator is 'too wet about the mouth'.

What Deeping seems to be envying those classes lower than his own class of origin is their very lack of opportunity to express their dangerously divergent individuality, just as women are envied their freedom to enter the private sphere in which they can safely enjoy the emotional anarchy of the heart. Perhaps one of the reasons why *Sorrell*, the subject of my next chapter, was written as though its story mattered, is the yearning Deeping himself hints at, to lose caste rather than to gain it. Or at any rate to remove himself from the public sphere where his class of origin constrains him to behave in ways that compromise his sense of himself. In making Sorrell, a middle-aged ex-serviceman alienated from his class of origin, his hero, Deeping creates a subject position that is situationally close to his own. But by placing Sorrell in the ranks of the struggling members of the service classes striving to obtain the prerogative of the upper middle classes, the opportunity of being the architect of an extensive private space, Deeping was able to come closer than he had ever done before to sharing the anxieties of a mass readership.

Chapter Five

Old Wine and New: the reception of Sorrell and Son

Mr Deeping is not an art author ... Mr Deeping is something rarer and perhaps more significant, the producer of a book to which several hundred thousand people came back in grateful relief after sampling the products of the art authors.¹

Though the gradual success of *Sorrell and Son* in Britain was not dependent on extensive advertising, in America Alfred A. Knopf left nothing to chance. The magnificent hoarding Knopf erected on a corner of Broadway identifies Sorrell with the mighty tree under which he sits, a source of natural strength and protection from the cruelties or trivialities of the city street below, (Illustration IX). The contrast, in the photograph,² between the plump and affluent New Yorker bending paternally over his poodle and the earnest Sorrell leaning, protective, but intent to inspire his dreaming son, is full of contradictions. The apparently trivial pursuit of the affluent gentleman on the street is in contrast with the profound importance of the impoverished father's power to enable his son to become a successful adult. The image of the city as emasculating would no doubt have appealed to Deeping. However the scale of the hoarding and its position demonstrates the crude realities of commerce: the book had to be an urban rather than a rural warrior if Deeping was to pursue his suburban and agrarian dreams. Sorrell may have been able to sit under a tree³ but the book itself had to go out and hustle.

¹ Elmer Davis, 'The Age of Impotence', *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 12 February 1927, p. 1.

² Probably taken in 1927, the year of Knopf's publication of *Sorrell and Son*, this photograph is in the possession of Mrs Barbara Nickalls. The scene is probably an illustration of Christopher and his father under 'a particular elm', loved by Christopher, in the Cathedral close, *Sorrell and Son*, p. 31.

³ It is interesting that the publicity focuses on the rural philosopher rather than the struggling porter.

This chapter examines not only the qualities that made *Sorrell and Son* such a marketable commodity, but also the ways in which the scale of its success complicated the way in which Deeping constructed the popular author in his later fiction. To understand how this novel came to achieve the status of a legend, I read *Sorrell and Son* in two ways: firstly, with Deeping, as he contributes to the mythologising of his text in his self-justificatory, if not self-reflexive novel *Old Wine and New* (1932); secondly, by engaging with the readings of my contemporaries, usually cultural commentators, most of whom are also reading *Sorrell and Son* in order to account for its power as fable or legend. Most of the latter readers picked up the book as an unpleasant professional duty whereas Deeping's reading of his own work is written as a priest attending to a sacred mystery, the distillation of what he called 'the mystical fluid' of realism.⁴ The large hole in the middle of this chapter is, of course, comprised of the readings which really matter: those of the men and women who bought his book in such large numbers. The closest I have come to hearing their voices has been my occasional interviews with original admirers of Deeping: my regular contact with Geoffrey Gillam, the Secretary of The Warwick Deeping Appreciation Society, and my correspondence with Stan Brain,⁵ whose thoughts I use both in this chapter and my conclusion.

⁴ Scarsdale, Deeping's fictional alter ego, declares on embarking on *Smith*, his Sorrell equivalent, 'his wine and his red ink were mystical fluids. He was going to dip his pen in life and extract reality.' *Old Wine and New* (1932), p. 320.

⁵ Stan Brain responded to my advertisement in *The Times*, or 'The Thunderer', as he called it in his first letter, 7 December 1997. He described, more fully than anyone else, his pleasure in reading Deeping.

The text

Like so many of Deeping's earlier novels, *Sorrell and Son* begins with an image of the fragility of social identity; but unlike the monk's naked plunge into the river that will liberate him from monastic life in *Joan of the Tower* (1911) or the soldier's appropriation of his dead comrade's papers in the wasteland of the Western Front, Captain Sorrell's loss of class, economic and marital status is involuntary. Deeping's most famous novel begins with the ex-serviceman slipping from the 'niche' he has found in the 'precipice' of lower middle-class respectability as an assistant in an antique shop into the squalor of life as a porter in an ill-run hotel to be bullied by a sexually predatory proprietress. The book's extraordinary success, translated into thirteen languages, including Hebrew, Arabic and Serbo-Croat, and as my introductory chapter mentioned, running to 41 editions, also confirmed Deeping's commercial and literary autonomy. His wealth would also enable him to protect himself from his society of origin, a society which could no longer dismiss him as 'that author fellow' but acknowledge him as the author of *Sorrell and Son*, a product whose success owed little to promotion either by his publishers or critics but whose sales grew gradually and over a period far longer than that enjoyed by most of the bestsellers of the twenties and thirties. This book 'earned' Deeping grudging inclusion in later cultural histories of the period.

Sorrell and Son, first published August 1925, describes the post-war struggle for survival of Sorrell, a man who, before the war, had 'sat at a desk and helped to conduct a business'.⁶ Three years after his demobilisation Captain Sorrell⁷ has been unable to find a post in the world of

⁶ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 15.

⁷ A temporary Captain, see the discussion of the notion of temporary gentlemen in M. Petter's '“Temporary Gentlemen” in the Aftermath of the Great War: Rank, Status and the Ex-Officer Problem', *Historical Journal* 37 (1994), pp. 127-152.

business for 'business had died in 1917'⁸ and his health has been impaired by his years in the trenches. His wife, sexually and economically dissatisfied, has deserted him for one of the 'the rich fellows who had stayed at home',⁹ leaving him with sole responsibility for his eleven year old son. Society 'had come near to pushing him off the shelf of his class-consciousness into the welter of the casual and the unemployed, but though hanging by his hands, he had refused to drop.'¹⁰ However, drop he does, when he discovers that the owner of the antiques shop in a small cathedral town in the south of England, has died the day before the arrival from London of the penniless Sorrell and son. Forced to abandon his hold on the 'shelf' of gentility Sorrell becomes the porter in the inn of a sexually predatory and bullying female employer. He is rescued from this situation by Mr Roland, a composer of musicals, on a mission to improve the quality of English hotels. However, again Sorrell is subordinate to a bully. The head porter at Roland's *The Pelican* in Winstonbury used to be Roland's batman Buck, who had saved Roland's life in the trenches and is going to 'have his chance'.¹¹ Buck tries to 'break' Sorrell physically, demonstrating Sorrell's physical inadequacies by forcing him to carry heavy luggage without help. Roland, a reliable *deus ex machina*, notices Sorrell's persecution and uses Buck's sexual harrassment of the female staff as the excuse to sack him. Once Sorrell has taken Buck's place as head porter his financial position is increasingly secure. His position of authority within the hotel is undisputed. It is implied that he quietly takes a fellow employee of the hotel as his lover. He is eventually able to remove his son from the town school and put him with a tutor who prepares

⁸ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 15.

⁹ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 2.

¹¹ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 59.

him for a public school. He ends his days as the owner of an antique shop. His financial security enables him to spend his retirement tending his cottage garden.

Although the struggle for financial security described in the first half of the book has been motivated simply by Sorrell's desire to educate his son in a way that will place him in 'a position to say 'Go to hell' to both capital and labour',¹² the focus only shifts to the son himself in the second half of the book. Christopher, or Kit as he is known to his father, has a varied educational experience. He suffers at the Council school in London which 'had meant contact with common children, and Kit was not a common child.'¹³ (While rejecting the constraints made upon him by his class Deeping retains the discourse of its snobbery, its 'class consciousness'.) Unlike 'common children', Kit has high standards of personal hygiene and a sense of fair play. However, he voluntarily goes to the town school when he realises that to go to the more prestigious school in Winstonbury will mean concealing his father's menial employment. When Kit is thirteen Sorrell removes him from the town school and sends him to a private tutor who teaches him how to box as well as to achieve the high academic standards which gain his entrance to a public school. Despite Sorrell's attempt to present himself as a retired Captain who is a resident rather than an employee of *The Pelican*, Kit's social origins are discovered, and expose him to mockery by the boys and rejection by the public school headmaster. Like the author Kit is prepared by a tutor for his application to read medicine at Cambridge. Unlike Deeping, Kit gains a first, becomes a noted boxer and goes on to success as a surgeon in a leading London Hospital. Kit's sexual development is complicated by his mother's attempt to ensnare him with flappers. His revulsion at the crudeness of his mother's sensuality and the threat that the 'fog of sex' should obscure his

¹² *Sorrell and Son*, p. 112.

¹³ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 4.

single-minded commitment to the pathway to professional success leads him to suppress his own sexuality. Lest the reader should think him a prig, (a possibility hinted at) or perhaps worse, Kit has an affair with an usherette in a theatre, 'plucking the red fruit from time to time'.¹⁴ Mary is presented as desirable, disinterested in her affection and undemanding, with 'something French in the logic of her emotions'.¹⁵ When the difference in social status between the two lovers comes to be perceived as a problem by them both, this "Shadow Woman" is conveniently run over by an autobus, a fate shared by her sisters in subsequent novels who serve to demonstrate the sexual 'normality' of the hero but whose social origins might hamper the stability of the hero's dearly won 'niche' in the professional world.

The last part of the novel concerns Kit's love for the liberated sister of a university friend. Molly Pentreath comes from a decaying aristocratic family. She is a popular author of novels which shock Kit but are presented as admirable in their uncompromising honesty and modernity. The clarity of her beliefs (she does not believe in marriage or in liberal attitudes towards the working class) contrast with the uncertainties of her sexually and socially inadequate brother. Even as a teenager she had dismissed her father's failure as an employer: ' "Poor old father has forgotten how to grind the faces of the poor."' She has a Nietzschean commitment to the 'whip' as a way of dealing with 'beastly workmen ... a lot of dogs'.¹⁶ As the object of Kit's affections she is less savage but uncompromising in her insistence that they can only be lovers and that she will never sacrifice her profession to become a wife and mother. She does, however, compromise this position when Kit poisons himself when he wields his surgeon's knife with less than his

¹⁴ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 271.

¹⁵ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 269.

¹⁶ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 232.

accustomed dexterity. When Kit says he would rather die than have his infected arm amputated, Molly agrees to marriage and the infection subsides. This marriage excludes children and is very much the partnership of two professional equals. The successful resolution of Kit's quest for professional success and sexual fulfilment is swiftly followed by his murder of his father. Unlike Paul Morel's 'mercy-killing' of his mother in *Sons and Lovers* (1913) this is presented as a morally unambiguous act leaving the son peculiarly untroubled. The novel ends by stressing the 'greyness' and 'stillness' of the world without the father.

The tale has been cast as an escapist fantasy designed to reconcile the economically helpless to their lot by 'tracing a thoroughly idealised social trajectory' for its deluded readers,¹⁷ or as a rancorous attack on the increasing power of the working class¹⁸ but the key to the understanding of what McKibbin calls its 'talismanic' significance is the end of the book.¹⁹ Sorrell ends his life, secure in a niche of more comfortable proportions, but the victory he achieves is that in his son he creates a creature who, on his behalf, chooses the moment when he will die. Sorrell's final drop is under his control. The conclusion of the book, the killing of a father by his only, loving son who has himself renounced future fatherhood, does not offer a victory in class terms (though a class struggle has been necessary to ensure the son has the power to eliminate the father without endangering the son's own security). The fact that the father has been, in the son's words 'both father and mother to him'²⁰ makes this an absolute image of the way in which the son eliminates

¹⁷ David Ayers, *English Literature of the 1920s* (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 44-51. 'The escapism of the novel lies in the manner in which it traces a thoroughly idealised social trajectory', p. 45.

¹⁸ Rosa Maria Bracco, *Betwixt and Between* (The History Department, The University of Melbourne, 1990), p. 42.

¹⁹ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford University Press, 1998), p.482.

²⁰ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 199

his origins but since, in the father's words, the son has been his 'job', the sole focus of his life, it also demonstrates the father's control over his own life: only his creation is allowed to destroy the creator. The power of death is assumed by the son, thus confirming for the reader the impression that, despite his vulnerability, Sorrell has an autonomy impervious to the systems and forces that have threatened his existence and identity from the beginning of the book. Sorrell's son, Dr Christopher, has himself been constructed by his father's efforts, into a warrior who has overcome the assaults of class prejudice and the sexually predatory women that nearly destroyed his father. By becoming his father's destroyer he fulfils the author's extraordinary fantasy of male autonomy, a father who assumes both parental roles and a son who is both deliverer and destroyer of the father. The extent of Deeping's solipsism is revealed in the way that death, like war in his previous novels, becomes not a tragic dimension of the limits of an individual's autonomy, but an expression of that autonomy.

The Legend: the reception of *Sorrell and Son*

Sorrell and Son was certainly not 'puffed' by Cassell which undermines Mackenzie's suggestion that the achievement of bestseller status is the result of a publishers' conspiracy or the weak-minded receptivity of their readership to favourable reviews.²¹ When it first came out it was not an instant bestseller. Cassell placed it almost at the bottom of their 7/6 list in their advertisement in October's *Bookseller*, after Ethel M. Dell and Ernest Raymond's new novels. However in October it was bought in such numbers by readers in Dunfermline that it was mentioned as a bestseller in that town. *The Bookseller* gave a monthly account of what was selling well which was, in fact, only a list of the best-selling books from any bookseller who cared to

²¹ See Compton Mackenzie's description of marketing as 'an influenza' in *Literature in My Time* (Rich and Cowan, 1933) p. 222 and discussed in my first chapter.

send in the information to the magazine. These lists suggest that, outside Dunfermline²² *Sorrell and Son* was only a modest success in the year after its publication. It is absent from the list of bestsellers in September but in November its sales began to increase with high sales recorded in London, Maidstone, Dunfermline (again) and in December in Hove, Scarborough and The Army and Navy Stores, London. In February it is a bestseller in Hull and Nottingham but thereafter there are no references to it until expatriates in Paris finally catch up with Dunfermline and buy it in large numbers in July of 1926.

This pattern is quite eclipsed by the number of references to other novels popular at the period, John Galsworthy's novels in the second half of that decade for example. Yet its sales were in fact prodigious; it went into ten impressions in its first twelve months and the 3s.6d. edition brought out in August 1926 went into six impressions in twelve months. It was also in print long after many of the titles which had eclipsed it in the *Bookseller's* list were forgotten. It was rarely out of print until Cassell's final and forty-first edition in 1973. Ten years later when YTV achieved a success with its serialisation, Penguin brought out an edition in 1984 which was reprinted in the same year. This gradual build up of large sales must have been chiefly reliant on recommendation of individual readers. Various commentators, John Osborne, for example,²³ refer to the fact that it was a novel read and re-read. This suggests a different pattern of reading from that enjoyed by the purchasers of an Edgar Wallace or Ethel M. Dell who both created a 'brand' of fiction but who offered a perpetual variation of a deeply satisfying formula. Their large sales were instant as though their admirers craved a quick fix of more-of-the-same. The narrative pleasure in both

²² Dunfermline is an industrial town north of Edinburgh with little in common with the genteel Maidstone, Hove and Scarborough where it also sold well.

²³ John Osborne, *A Better Class of Person: An Autobiography: 1929-1956* (Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 46.

these cases does depend on knowing the desired outcome but not knowing exactly how that outcome will be delivered. However, *Sorrell and Son* does not appear to have been bought in the expectation of comparable narrative satisfaction. It seems to have gradually acquired the status of a treasure to many readers. Beth Merryman, currently librarian at Sheffield Hallam University, recalls her mother (also a librarian) pressing *Sorrell and Son* into her hands in the 1960s, as she moved from the junior to the adult section of her local municipal library in Sheffield. *Sorrell and Son* represented, to Beth's mother, the new world of adult literature that her daughter was to graduate into; it was the first 'adult' book that Beth Merryman remembers reading.²⁴ It was the half-sister of Jeremy Paul, the adapter of *Sorrell and Son* for YTV who recalled that her grandmother, a wide reader, had told her that "if there was only one book I should ever be able to read it should be *Sorrell and Son*".²⁵ Rosemary Wilson was eight when her grandmother urged her to read the novel. The grandmother had herself been brought up in a single parent family. Her father had died in 1917 leaving her mother with six children to bring up. Despite growing up in poverty Rosemary's grandmother became a voracious reader. Both Rosemary and her mother became English teachers. Rosemary's mother had three thousand books at home. Rosemary felt that the appeal of the book to her grandmother derived from the importance of the theme of single parenthood, the characterisation of types who seemed real to her grandmother and because of 'the class thing':²⁶ that could be construed as its snobbishness or the model it offered of class mobility. Both the mother of Beth Merryman and the grandmother of Rosemary Wilson treasured *Sorrell and Son*.

²⁴ Beth Merryman, librarian at Sheffield Hallam University, in conversation with Mary Grover, 16 December 2001.

²⁵ Quoted in a letter from Jeremy Paul to Mary Grover 20 October 1996 and then confirmed in a conversation with Rosemary Wilson in November 1996.

²⁶ A phrase used by Rosemary Wilson in her telephone conversation of November 1996.

One characteristic shared by the few oral histories of Deeping readers whose responses have recorded has been their upward social mobility. The vicarage maid, the wife of an insurance salesman and the fatherless young reader were not simply diverted from their loneliness, insecurity and hard work by Deeping's fantasy; they were inspired by it. Jeremy Paul, in 1983, and in very different circumstances from the readers described, was struck by what he calls the 'spirit' of the book. There is obviously an inspirational appeal in the myth that a sensitive and apparently vulnerable member of the lower middle or even working class could succeed culturally and economically in a world where, as for Sorrell, 'life had been ... like some huge trampling beast, and he - a furtive thing down in the mud, panting, dodging, bewildered, resentful and afraid.'²⁷

The two readers who have left the fullest accounts of their appreciation of Deeping both felt themselves to be on the run, but for different reasons. The 'old, retired professor at Yale, A. G. Keller ... a sociologist and ... an old rugged individualist' as Knopf describes him to Deeping,²⁸ feels beleaguered by those who threaten the grounds of his personal taste, for example Wilbur Cross, the editor of the Yale Review who championed Wells, Mrs. Ward and George Eliot (according to Keller). Keller says 'I do not dispute Cross's taste but stand for my own' which includes 'the W. J. Lockes, or Oppenheims, or Deepings'. He defends his taste for Deeping in words taken from *Sorrell and Son*: '... a good novel is real, far more significant than most of the highbrow stuff - so called. It's like good surgery ... You get at tendencies, social atmospheres'.²⁹ Deeping has planted his own defence against the highbrow in his text in order to address a reader

²⁷ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 2.

²⁸ Knopf to Deeping, 3 January 1950, Texas Collection.

²⁹ A. G. Keller to Alfred Knopf, 22 December 1949, Texas Collection.

who, like him, disputes that any should assert the authority to guide a reader's taste (in Cross's case not necessarily in the direction of the high-brow).

The reader of Deeping with whom I have corresponded most extensively, Stan Brain, experienced a pattern of employment much closer to Deeping's hero than the academic Keller. He started his career as a bellboy in 1947 at *The Savoy Hotel* and finished in 1995 as a church caretaker. His economic insecurity is suggested by the fact that he had thirty-four jobs before he retired. But, nevertheless, it is as moral guide not as creator of an aspirational fable that Brain treasures Deeping. Brain, unlike Keller, never had any academic or cultural authority to lose, but is equally irritated that his right to construct a private canon containing Deeping is assailed daily.

Isn't it strange Mary how they sling this word "Classic" around these days. After Church this morning I cooked myself a meal, cleared up, then switched the T.V. on. And now on B.B.C.1 the "Classic" western: *The Sons of Katie Elder*. Well, I wouldn't call it classic - just a third-rate western as far as I am concerned. And you go in a Bookshop and head for "Classics". Dickens, Bronte, Hugo and many others but not Warwick Deeping. I wonder why? Who decides who is a classic writer?³⁰

Both readers treasured and collected numerous passages from Deeping's novels. Keller, in his letter to Knopf, calls them 'flashes of insight ... him knocking off terse characterizations along my line of social evolution'. Brain calls them Deeping's 'Words of Wisdom'. Molly Pentreath's characterisation of Sorrell as 'The Old Roman'³¹ suggests his sage-like status which is intensified in the recasting of Sorrell as Old Pybus, the hero of Deeping's next novel about a hotel porter, *Old Pybus* (1928). Pybus is more explicitly a cultural warrior. He is given the opportunity to construct a personal canon by long conversations with his nephew, an aspiring author, who is led

³⁰ Letter from Stan Brain to Mary Grover, 19 January 1998.

³¹ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 389.

to write 'real' novels by observing the dignified simplicity of his uncle's life and following his literary direction towards realism.

The emphasis on realism as the only fictional mode capable of enshrining serviceable truths to guide the reader through real life became entangled with the notion that Deeping himself was identical with this fictional sage. Keller describes Deeping as 'a human sort of cuss' (suddenly adopting an exaggeratedly demotic idiom to demonstrate his own humanness). Brain is fascinated by what he sees are real-life parallels between Deeping's novel and life. What he remembers now about *Sorrell and Son* is the euthanasia at the end of the book. His response to these perceived parallels suggests that he regards Deeping as an honest writer helping his readers to explore difficult problems, not, as the reviewers often suggest, that he is formulaic and hackneyed.

Now let me tell you about "Sorrell and Son". I believe it was the first book about "Mercy Killing". Kit was a G.P. and his father was in great pain with cancer. So he gave him an "Extra Dose" to put him out of his misery. Now that was in the book. But in real life Warwick Deeping was also a G.P. and his father did die of cancer. (When the "Legend" becomes a fact, print the "Legend".)³²

When asked about the source of this biographical detail Stan Brain suspected he learnt it from a well-informed bookseller in Croydon. Whatever its truth it suggests that, for Deeping's public, not only did his fictions have a 'legendary' quality that offered a philosophy to live by but that his life did too.

***Old Wine and New* (1932): chronicling the legend**

It is clear that Deeping felt, like Mr Brain, that in writing *Sorrell and Son* he created a legend. In 1932 Deeping wrote a novel which fostered his sense that in writing *Sorrell and Son* he had

³² Letter from Stan Brain to Mary Grover, 7 December 1997.

created a product which was timeless. In *Old Wine and New* (1932) he dramatises his success both with *Sorrell and Son* and with another bestseller, *Kitty* (1927). To increase the pathetic effect the author in *Old Wine and New* becomes a Sorrell figure, displaced by the war and certainly not returning from the war to an estate in Weybridge. Instead, Spenser Scarsdale, the hero of *Old Wine and New*, tries to survive in Grub St. He is rebuffed by the ruthless daughter of a dead comrade. His writing and his lovemaking seem doomed to be regarded as 'old wine' and unpalatable. However, thanks to the love of a type who is to frequent Deeping's novel in the 1930s, the rural woman, 'profoundly simple',³³ he is enabled to see that his subject is the 'raw meat' of reality. Scarsdale's best-seller, *Smith*, is indeed the title of the other of Deeping's novels to come out in 1932. Deeping's *Smith* is the only one of his novels to describe a man from the working classes. Scarsdale's other best-seller will be *Molly*, which appears to be modelled on Deeping's *Kitty* 1927, his popular account of the rescue of an emasculated young man from his upper class 'nursery' by the redoubtable tobacconist, Kitty. In identifying the success of Scarsdale's two novels with the two of Deeping's novels which deal with 'non-genteel' classes, Deeping seems to be acknowledging that one of the sources of his appeal to his readers is, not the possibility of upward class mobility in any spectacular sense (*Smith* becomes a handyman in a TB sanatorium and *Kitty* sets up her own tea shop), but freedom from the class structure to assert one's own tastes and to enjoy financial security. The books that Deeping is claiming are 'the stuff of legend' are not books where the romance derives from the ability of the son to achieve the success denied the father but books where the romance of the hero or heroine derives from their power to create their own world in a relatively modest way. An important part of Sorrell's

³³ *Old Wine and New*, p. 313.

achievement at the end of *Sorrell and Son* is his winning of the time and opportunity to garden, to take down a Dutch hoe and weed his violas with characteristic 'thoroughness and patience'.³⁴

Old Wine and New reflects Deeping's perception that the power of *Sorrell and Son* derived not simply from wish-fulfilment whether of recovered status or freedom from social competition altogether but from the comforts of recognition and validation of fear of total social extinction and starvation. When Scarsdale's first novel is rejected he loses, like Sorrell, his hold on gentility but, unlike Sorrell, is almost destroyed by his fear of annihilation.

The crowd frightened him. These thousands upon thousands of people! this desperate hanging on to the edge of existence! What chance had he? Life was a stampede, a panic rush of animals in a narrow place ... He felt a sudden urge to ... scramble up into some cleft where he would not be trampled upon and crushed ... His child's cry was 'I want to go home'.³⁵

These fears of annihilation are articulated and set in a society with which most would have had some relationship: hotels, cafes, shops the conduits which, to some extent, brought together diverse social classes, like the beach of the late nineteenth century Southend. In Alfred A. Knopf's 1927 reprint of *Doomsday* Alice Brown is quoted as saying of *Sorrell and Son*, "It is accurate in its conformity to the times, and, indeed, truly noble. One who sees in it only a treatise on 'success' needs to read it again under clearer lenses." This conformity to the times was remarkable in that it came from the pen of a man who seems to have been shielded from the extremities of economic insecurity experienced by a Sorrell, Scarsdale and Smith. His sense of common cause with those in an apparently totally different class position from himself may initially have been animated by his consciousness of the economically, socially and culturally ambiguous position of himself as a writer, but after he became famous his fears take a different

³⁴ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 376.

³⁵ *Old Wine and New*, p. 236.

form. Not only is Scarsdale terrified of not winning a vast ‘crowd’ of readers. Once he has gained them he is terrified of the attention he has generated: ‘He was conscious of his public, of a vast crowd-face looking up against him like a “close-up” on the screen. It goggled its eyes at him’.³⁶ This is a rare reference to the cinema in Deeping’s work. It indicates that a mass audience terrified this middle-brow author as much it did his detractors. And what he feared was that this audience might acquire ‘a face’. The success of *Smith* creates a series of demands on Scarsdale, to write articles, to lecture and to broadcast and Scarsdale, like Deeping, resists this pressure.³⁷ The cinema audience, so often depicted as passive and mindless at the period, is projected here as an active and intrusive pressure on the author’s consciousness.

Sorrell and Son was filmed twice, once in 1927 in America and then in England in 1933.³⁸ The pre-release publicity fictionalised in *Old Wine and New* reveals how much Deeping’s initial success as an author must have threatened his sense of inviolability. The American film producer in *Old Wine and New* can only understand Scarsdale’s shabby dwelling as part of a personal publicity stunt. ‘“Why, that’s just the location to put the public in your pocket. We’ll have pictures of this little place all over America. Smith at home ... You’ve staged it to the last cent.”’³⁹

In fact, Deeping here is outflanking the normal publicity machine. By writing *Old Wine and New*, which in so many other ways accurately reflected the success of *Sorrell and Son*, Deeping skilfully contributed to a personal legend which was a useful distortion of the truth. His creation, Scarsdale, suggests an identity between the author Deeping and his creation, Sorrell, by making

³⁶ *Old Wine and New*, p.3 65.

³⁷ See Deeping’s absence from the literary gatherings described by *The Bookman*.

³⁸ Directed by Herbert Brenon (Feature Productions U.S.A.1927) silent and by Jack Raymond (British and Dominion, U.K. 1933) silent and a reissue in 1938 with sound.

³⁹ *Old Wine and New*, p. 383.

Scarsdale close in background to Sorrell. His account too of the steady progress of the book's sales means that the book itself assumes the virtues of the hero, steady and persistent and eventually successful. Once *Sorrell and Son* had achieved bestseller status Deeping's novels were promoted enthusiastically by Cassell. But its growth in sales were independent of the efforts of either his publisher, the critics or of Deeping's promotional efforts.

Once the author of *Sorrell and Son* had achieved his sage-like status, the glories of his retreat in Weybridge were celebrated by numerous style magazines.⁴⁰ In *Old Wine and New Deeping* skilfully nudges the personal legend by depicting the bestselling author's leafy estate as the personal choice of the modest Mrs Scarsdale who pines for the greenery of her rural origins. The couple is distanced from the crude desire for the ostentatious symbols of wealth envisaged by the 'oily' film producer. In the novel the film of *Smith* gives the fictionalised author little satisfaction; it has become 'Mr Blaney's *Smith*'.⁴¹ Deeping uses the novel, *Old Wine and New*, to substitute for the mechanisms of a publicity machine over which he would have little control. The novel became an instrument to ensure his autonomy from the modern publicity machine. He did this to a degree that was unusual at the time. Bennett and Galsworthy were happy to lecture, broadcast and be interviewed. Even the reclusive Ethel M. Dell loved to surprise her readers by introducing herself to buyers in a bookshop. But *The Bookseller* records no mention of Deeping speaking at literary functions. His fears may be reflected in the fictional account of such a function, a nightmare of social humiliation. in *Blind Man's Year* (1937).

⁴⁰ For example: 'Warwick Deeping's Sanctuary', *Harper's Bazaar*, December 1929, pp. 50-53 and 96; 'The Country Home of Warwick Deeping', *Modern Home*, January 1935, p. 22; Margery Fyvie, 'Meet Warwick Deeping', *Weldon's Ladies' Journal*, March 1935 amongst others.

⁴¹ *Old Wine and New*, p. 385.

It is not really surprising that the author of a fiction that has been animated by the individual's fear of being 'swallowed' up by the crowd should shun the attention of that crowd's embrace that threatens this apartness. Scarsdale has rescued himself from the obliteration threatened by the neglect and indifference of that same crowd. Commercial success ensures physical survival, but once that is achieved, the individual then seeks to keep inviolate what Mrs Scarsdale calls 'the little silent sanctuary of your self'.⁴² In intruding upon the 'silent sanctuary' of Deeping's study in Weybridge, the members of the 'goggling' crowd who wished to partake of the private world of an author who celebrated privacy and separateness from the crowd caused Deeping to move the entrance to his driveway.

Separateness as a mark of superior individuality, ('Scarsdale did not fit into any of her frames'),⁴³ is part of the solace to the lonely and disprized offered by both *Old Wine and New* and *Sorrell and Son*. In the case of Scarsdale, it helps combat the self-loathing of the author in war when recognition of an individual's worth depends on his effectiveness as a man of violence. Writing is linked in Scarsdale's mind with ineffectuality. 'Had he not been a creature of ink instead of man of blood?'⁴⁴ In order to combat his contempt for himself as a member of the R.A.M.C., Scarsdale had deliberately gone up to the front line to eliminate the physical distance between himself and the 'real' business of fighting. It is there that he encounters the rough soldier, Marwood, who leads Scarsdale towards the sexual feelings that are aroused by the soldier's daughter. The capacity for violence that seems to be linked to both sexual and social success seems to be denied to the writer.

⁴² *Old Wine and New*, p. 385.

⁴³ *Old Wine and New*, p. 89.

⁴⁴ *Old Wine and New*, p. 67.

Yet the violence of war, the test of manhood for four years, was a taboo subject for writers after the war. Scarsdale is told: 'for God's sake keep off the war'.⁴⁵ In referring to The First World War Deeping does not echo the pre-war rhetoric of Edmund Gosse, for example, that war 'is the sovereign disinfectant, and its red stream of blood is the Condy's Fluid that cleans out the stagnant pools and clotted channels of the intellect'.⁴⁶ During the war Deeping stresses the threat the war posed to the autonomy of the individual rather than the invigorating effect of violence. In retrospect, Deeping talks about the war as though it had stripped rather than purged him. *Sorrell and Son*, *Old Wine and New* and *Smith* dramatise the nakedness of ordinary men once the military machine has erased individuality. Scarsdale is haunted not by 'broken bodies, but broken souls!'⁴⁷ It is the nakedness experienced in the demobilisation inspection that sears itself upon his flesh.

He had been passed in nakedness to the new world. The cold and observant eyes of the doctor had stabbed into him a consciousness of himself as an insignificant and anonymous body, mere flesh, a carcass. The war had stripped him of spiritual garments, and peace had insisted upon seeing him stripped again before admitting him to its world for heroes...the secret soul of him felt humiliated. He found himself wondering what would have happened to him had the examiner found him unclean.⁴⁸

Unlike Lawrence's account of the intrusiveness of the medical inspections linked to conscription, this inspection takes place after the war but in both cases inspection seems to reduce not only the subject's respect for his own 'carcass' but also his sense of his own spiritual uniqueness, essential to the creative confidence. Somers is spiritually more robust than Scarsdale but his fears are the same: 'let the fools peer at it and put me down undeveloped chest and what they like, so long as

⁴⁵ *Old Wine and New*, p. 97.

⁴⁶ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (Bodley Head 1990; Pimlico edition, 1992), p. 12 quoting Edmund Gosse, 'War and Literature', *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 220 (October 1914), p. 313.

⁴⁷ *Old Wine and New*, p. 6.

⁴⁸ *Old Wine and New*, p. 49.

they leave me to my own way'.⁴⁹ It is ironic that in Bourke's account inspection is the one stage of war's process that was in fact a catalyst for a change in the way the bodies of ordinary men were viewed.⁵⁰ The measurements of men's chests led to better rations for the forces and a sharpening of awareness in the governing classes of the way poverty dismembered the male. However, in the fiction of both Lawrence and Deeping the war's violence is presented principally as the violence of a social process rather than one that physically dismembers. Although Lawrence's homo-erotic descriptions of the naked collier or the naked recruit suggests the writer's awe and horror at the physical vulnerability of the working man at work or at war, Deeping's post-war victims are not maimed by war but aged by it. Sorrell is forty, Scarsdale is 'old wine' and Deeping in his late forties when he wrote *Sorrell and Son*. The reviewer of *The Times Literary Supplement* noted unsympathetically the special pleading offered on behalf of the ageing Scarsdale: 'One may not feel as affectionate as his creator evidently does towards Spenser Scarsdale, that cup of rather thin old - or rather middle-aged - wine.'⁵¹

Though the war may be presented as sapping the vitality of his ageing heroes, it is also presented as purging their perceptions. Hynes quotes Selwyn Images' 'proposal that War was .. good for Art.'⁵² Deeping took the same line: 'the novels I wrote before the war were dreamy stuff'.⁵³ The success of this propaganda can be measured by the certainty with which E. F. Edgett declares that in *Sorrell and Son* 'Mr. Deeping chose modern days and modern people for his subject, and immediately the reading public took to him much more readily and more universally as a depicter

⁴⁹ *Kangaroo*, p. 245.

⁵⁰ Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male* (Reaktion, 1996), pp.171-4.

⁵¹ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 28 September 1932, p. 328.

⁵² Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 34.

⁵³ *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* ed. S. J. Kunitz and H. Haycraft (Wilson 1942), p. 361.

of the romance of today than as a chronicler of the romances of yesterday.’⁵⁴ In fact, *Sorrell and Son* had been preceded by more than a dozen novels with modern settings and dealing with modern issues. However, Deeping uses Scarsdale’s story to bolster his construction of *Sorrell and Son* as new realism. When Scarsdale does manage to find a writing style that will sell in this post-war world, it is striking how violent is the language used to describe it the ‘rawness’ of his new novel. It is not merely that he will describe types ‘in conformity with the times’ (old soldiers and new women) in order to establish his fiction as new rather than as an old wine, it is also the style that is new. *Old Wine and New* is as much concerned with the anguish of evolving a style that will escape classification as it is with protecting a private self that will not be identified with ‘the crowd’. In trying to identify the stylistic virtues with which Scarsdale’s writing is endowed Deeping entangled himself in debates about sentimentalism, realism and simplicity which are as engaged as any modernist manifesto and probably no less contradictory.

Bearing in mind that this debate is in part a dramatisation of the critical reception of *Sorrell and Son* a close look at the terms set up by Deeping helps to clarify the style and genre he felt he was creating in writing that novel. His self-conscious sense that he was doing something innovative challenges assumptions that the popular novelist is artistically unreflective and simply fills a market niche. Deeping did, in some ways, create a product that created a market and tried to challenge current assumptions about the cultural worthlessness of popular fiction. Yet the terms in which Deeping conducts his cultural defence confirms rather than undermines Bourdieu’s observation that ‘dominated lifestyles are almost always perceived, even by those who live them,

⁵⁴ E. F. Edgett, ‘About Books and Authors’, from the Transcript Station W.B.E.T. Delivered Friday evening, 11 November 1927. The nineteenth of a series given on successive Friday evenings.

from the destructive and reductive point of new of the dominant aesthetic'.⁵⁵ Deeping's rancour and confusion are a reflection of the dominance of 'the destructive and reductive' terms in which he is being attacked. For the most striking feature of the way Scarsdale struggles to write and then to win acceptance for his novel is that it is presented predominantly in terms of what he should not do. It is 'raw' in the sense not only that it is free from pretence or convention but that it is unclothed by any genre classification.

The first half of the novel depicts his rejection of potential styles and editors rejection of his work. Taggart, the editor of the *Sabbath*, disparages both the magazine's pre-war fare of 'nice little pious pifflings for the multitude' and the current taste of the crowd for writing about 'Money and women and sensation'.⁵⁶ His cynicism is deplored by the innocent Scarsdale. The innocent author, vainly trying to interest the hard-boiled daughter of the dying soldier he met on his one foray into the front, fantasises about another literary incarnation, this time as 'a secret Conrad in disguise, ... he, - who, with a precise pen, had spent his life tickling other men's creations, a Fleet Street highbrow who had always been afraid to admire anything too eagerly lest he should be found out'.⁵⁷ This enigmatic homage to Conrad perhaps derives from the inwardness and earnestness of Conrad, the sense of 'secret' and 'shadow' at the heart of Conrad's construction of heroism. Deeping's homage to Conrad is elaborated in *Old Pybus*. However, even if Scarsdale had been a second Conrad he would have been unable to impress the young Julia, whose taste was for a play, which was 'highly coloured, and vulgar and truthful'⁵⁸. Despite its truth the play alienates Scarsdale because 'It filled him with a kind of dazed weariness. It was so full of stupid

⁵⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason* (Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 9.

⁵⁶ *Old Wine and New*, p. 63.

⁵⁷ *Old Wine and New*, p. 168.

⁵⁸ *Old Wine and New*, pp. 148-9.

nudities.' However the pre-war subtleties of Scarsdale himself, a 'gentle, credulous sort of creature' who 'had believed in love and the lamb and the lily' are also rejected. The author who had devoted much of his pre-war writing to establishing himself as a 'romantic realist' now recasts that previous virile reincarnation of himself, as the 'sentimentalist' who 'had read his Matthew Arnold and his Ruskin in front of a bachelor fire in Canonbury Square while eating buttered toast.'⁵⁹ For, of course, Deeping was never to win the battle to free himself from the sneers of the cynical 'Fleet Street highbrow' despite his stirring description of Scarsdale's heroic efforts to create a new kind of novel.

For years he had scribbled in black, and his mood was for colour, new means and methods of self-expression, a more virile fancifulness. Red ink was to him more than red ink. It seemed to transmute itself into wine, blood, nectar' ...'both his wine and his red ink were mystical fluids. He was going to dip his pen in life and extract reality.'⁶⁰

Once again, realism is the literary mode that Deeping wishes to be identified with, but it is a realism that is all his own. Like the 'Fleet Street highbrow' he deplores the pre-war 'Wife Of A Dean' novels⁶¹ full of 'religious experiences and unborn babies'⁶² Deeping distances himself from such feminised sentimentalism but also from the masculine 'nudities' of modern drama and cynicism of critics and editors. His unease with the way literary genres are sexualised reflects the kind of unease at gender classifications that we saw in *The Return of the Petticoat* (1909). The violence with which Deeping asserts the value of his realism, echoes his comments on the violence of post-war society in which 'even the young faces looked hard..the insurgent sex, the raw flesh that is uncovered when war and pestilence and upheaval tear away the clothes of conventional

⁵⁹ *Old Wine and New*, p. 18.

⁶⁰ *Old Wine and New*, p. 320.

⁶¹ *Old Wine and New*, p. 64.

⁶² Possibly a reference to the clergyman's wife and hugely popular Florence Barclay whose spiritually uplifting romances are a prelude to fecund marriage?

repression'.⁶³ In dealing with this harsh, contemporary reality Scarsdale projects himself as 'a man of blood.' His new writing 'was like raw meat, but it was meat, not mere wood pulp.'⁶⁴

This phrase which seems to prefigure the notion of 'pulp fiction' demonstrates the resistance Deeping has to being classified, because of his prodigious sales, as 'pulp' in terms of genre or quality. Bourdieu characteristically assigns the concern to assert his⁶⁵ individuation to the writer who aspires to distance himself from the bourgeois. The more artists affirm their autonomy and produce works which contain and impose their own norms of evaluation, the greater their chances of pushing the 'bourgeois' to the point where they are incapable of appropriating these works for themselves.⁶⁶ But in Deeping's case we have an author trying to impose his 'own norms of evaluation' and who, most of his contemporaries would have accepted, was negotiating these terms on behalf of those despised by intellectual élite.

One of the terms Deeping tries to redefine, in order to escape being labelled escapist, is 'realism', a term Bourdieu would say is inevitably associated by the intellectual in the twentieth century with a bourgeois aesthetic. So in this attempt to negotiate an aesthetic outside the existing cultural hierarchy Deeping inadvertently betrays his subordination to it. In *Old Wine and New* we are given few clues, apart from its sanguinary character, as to how the 'real' realism of Scarsdale's second post-war novel differs from the artificial realism⁶⁷ of his first post-war novel. Ironically we have to take the word from the 'mouth of a priest'⁶⁸ of the fictional literary élite that this is

⁶³ *Old Wine and New*, p. 59.

⁶⁴ *Old Wine and New*, p. 252.

⁶⁵ (Bourdieu would, one feels, use the masculine pronoun if writing in English).

⁶⁶ *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 168.

⁶⁷ *Old Wine and New*, p. 152.

⁶⁸ *Old Wine and New*, p. 276.

the 'real' realism: 'Extraordinary bit of work. Rather crude and emotional in places. A kind of innocent book, and yet so damned real'.⁶⁹ Deeping depicts Scarsdale as having the innocence and simplicity of a child, the world of the child being beyond the reach of the corrupt 'adult' world of the critics.

The efforts with which Deeping tries to put Scarsdale's fiction into realms beyond which the critics cannot touch it are also apparent in the status he claims for the genre of his novel: 'the epic of the ex-serviceman'⁷⁰. The time-scale of Sorrell, dealing as it does with two generations suggests that Deeping is claiming epic status for his own best-seller here as is his celebration of '*Smith*'s success in the States.

"Smith" was published in the United States by the New York firm of Duggan & Muller, and for the first two months "Smith" exhibited an elusive slowness, but his deliberation was that of the stranger exploring new worlds. In a little while "Smith" was multiplying himself at an astonishing rate. He was English and national, and yet he had a universality, the red earth of Adam. For three successive months in a number of States "Smith" headed the list as a best seller.⁷¹

The painstaking way in which the book, like the author establishes its success is an attempt to establish the deep-rootedness, the ur-quality of this realism. The spiritual address: England, Britain, USA, the World, the Universe reads like the lonely schoolboy's assertion of his unique importance in the front of a text-book that has been and will be used by hundreds of others. The multiplication of "Smith" both advanced the cause of the author to prove his worth and simultaneously diminished it.

⁶⁹ *Old Wine and New*, p. 348.

⁷⁰ *Old Wine and New*, p.3 58.

⁷¹ *Old Wine and New*, p. 368.

When Scarsdale brings out his next book, *Molly*, Deeping takes pains to establish just how many copies were sold and that these sales were independent of whether critics praised or condemned it. The author has slipped into a realm in which the critics are powerless.

“Molly” was published in the early autumn. Its reception was patchy so far as the applause was concerned, and one eminent critic who had praised “Smith”, described “Molly” as a gross literary lapse. *Punch*, who had treated “Smith” with benign playfulness, displayed a little petulance in its playfulness toward “Molly”. But Mr. Malcolm collected a sheaf of good reviews, and was able to quote them lavishly in his advertisements. Moreover, neither praise, dispraise, nor a studied silence appeared to make any difference to the popularity of the book. The advance sales in England had been round about thirteen thousand copies, and in America some thirty thousand, but within a month of publication Malcolm could advertise that over seventy-five thousand copies had been sold.⁷²

This concern with the exact numbers sold reflects the importance of book-keeping in all Deeping’s novels. When Scarsdale realises *Smith* is becoming a ‘boom’, comparable to the success of “Trilby” and “Main Street” and “If Winter Comes”, the first thing he does is scribble figures on the back of envelopes at his table in the shabby little house in Astey’s Row where he and his wife had struggled to survive. The sums would appear to remove the author’s vulnerability to the judgement of the critics and what they added up to put the author into a social group to whom the cultural depreciation inflicted by critics might not be as significant as the kind of distinction conferred by a house, estate and furniture which were visible evidence of ‘good taste’ as well as ‘solid worth’.

The acquisition of these emblems of distinction is precipitated by the resentment of the Scarsdales’ London neighbours who, ‘growing class conscious’⁷³, throw rubbish into the front garden of his house. The snobbish note struck when the Scarsdales, on their first holiday find ‘Loch Lomond rather too full of Glasgow’ is countered by the depiction of their removal to a

⁷² *Old Wine and New*, p. 375.

⁷³ *Old Wine and New*, p. 372.

comfortable country house as, to some extent, being inflicted on them by the resentment of their London neighbours and the importunate demands of the London world of women's clubs and literary dinners (one of Deeping's stated aversions).⁷⁴ The finding of the 'little old white house with its green shutters' is echoed in most of Deeping's subsequent novels where 'finding the right house' is as much part of the romance achieved as the totting up of tips, royalties or the sales figures of vegetables. Perhaps the most inviolate of Deeping's sanctuaries was the private world of domestic finance. By choosing to turn his back on a professional medical career with an assured income, which would have been left to the wife to administer he entered the world of precarious and intermittent revenue. This fascination with and attention to the minutiae of the domestic ledger (particularly striking in *Sorrell and Son*) must have struck a chord with the Smiths, Mollys and Sorrells who are the subject of his best selling novels. Both Scarsdale and Deeping do not end up with an estate on the scale of Xanadu but with a house in Surrey, in reach of the town, something on a scale imaginable if improbable to most readers. Finding the house that 'seemed somehow to have been waiting for them'⁷⁵ suggests that this fantasy is not merely the dream of security and rural 'freedom' the house itself a confirmation of the owner's uniqueness and distinction.

The importance of finding 'the' house at the end of most of Deeping's later novels reveals the extent to which the author, whatever his cultural status, enters the feminised or domestic world. He works at home. Both Scarsdale and Deeping 'play at house' by creating miniature sanctuaries from this domesticity in another space, Scarsdale's garden house and Deeping's little cottage reached from the main body of 'Eastlands' either by a wrought iron gate from the garden or a

⁷⁴ 'Warwick Deeping: Author of Old Pybus', *Wilson Bulletin*, April, 1929, p. 562.

⁷⁵ *Old Wine and New*, p. 387.

classical arcade from the house. Over and over again the interior of a room is simply celebrated or dwelt on. Like the house it confirms the uniqueness of the creator's taste, in practice a pleasure more often experienced by women, especially in the 1920s and 1930s when the newly built suburbs offered scope for increasing activity in DIY and interior decoration. While Deeping is insisting that Scarsdale has, like the hunter, carried the red meat of life into the sanctuary of his study he simultaneously emphasises the source of the 'birth' of the novel in the uncritical support of the wife which leads in Scarsdale's case to the supposition that 'A mystic might have said that his spirit had re-entered the womb of a woman and been born again.'⁷⁶ Eleanor Scarsdale muses on the novel's quality 'No doubt words were to him what her simple, daily household doings were to her. She would not have felt herself without them.'⁷⁷ Writing is presented simply as a domestic activity and work as the principal source of personal identity. The labour of Deeping's writer, is dignified by its his connection with 'working woman; she used her hands.'⁷⁸

The reward for Scarsdale's labours is that he will become 'the Spenser Scarsdale' to the sales assistant who sells his wife a fur coat. He overturns the expectations of the reviewers who suspect that 'Scarsdale was a man of one book, and that he would never write anything else worth reading.'⁷⁹ By prowling round London in the years following the publication of the 'Smith' he gathers the copy that will ensure that a subsequent novel will become 'a Scarsdale'. With his high and steady earnings Scarsdale is able to buy his wife luxuries and a pleasing house in the country.

⁷⁶ *Old Wine and New*, p. 251.

⁷⁷ *Old Wine and New*, p. 272.

⁷⁸ *Old Wine and New*, p. 271.

⁷⁹ *Old Wine and New*, p. 362.

The economic liberty to exercise taste in a personal way is only available to members of the dominant class into which Deeping re-entered with the outstanding success of *Sorrell and Son*. If the figures that he gives in *Old Wine and New* are an accurate reflection of those for *Sorrell and Son* (lost in the Blitz) he had an income of fifteen thousand pounds a year, having settled £6,000 on his wife. Scarsdale is as reluctant to publicise personal details of his life and character as Deeping was.

However, despite this refusal ‘a bright young fellow in search of copy’ concocts

a character study of Scarsdale, a mildly sensational caricature. This young gentleman started a number of superstitions about Scarsdale; he christened him “The English Tolstoy”, and hailed him as the author who lived among his characters in their natural and shabby surroundings. Scarsdale was the Slum Magician. And so, a number of quaint rumours circulated concerning the eccentricities of the creator of “Smith”. He lived in a slum, and dressed to the part; he had married a woman of the people; he refused to be photographed; he consorted with cab-washers and coquettes and Covent Garden porters...Also, it was whispered by the wise that “Smith” was autobiographical.⁸⁰

However the way Deeping dramatises himself and his cultural detractors, insinuating that the suburban gentleman in Weybridge partakes both of the social distinction represented by his gracious house and of the common humanity outside that charmed circle shows that he had no need of ‘bright young fellows’ and the publicity machines. He was Magician enough to introduce and dispatch his own critics within his fictional world, converting ‘the Sentimentalist of the Slums’ into ‘the Slum Magician’.⁸¹ The fictional Mr Verulam, who is tries to stem the tide of Scarsdale’s popularity by categorising him as the Sentimentalist of the Slums is also dispatched in a short story published in the 1935 collection *Two in a Train*, ‘Mr Verulam’s Week-end’ in which the

⁸⁰ *Old Wine and New*, p. 362.

⁸¹ *Old Wine and New*, p.375.

fictional Mr Verulam is exposed by a female author as a critic who condemns fiction without having read it.

The Critical Response

Not surprisingly, the few post-war writers who have dealt with Deeping have at least read *Sorrell and Son*. However most of these writers, again unsurprisingly, only take up the novel because they perceive a social, rather than a literary, trend which they believe the novel might exemplify. Of the four writers considered here, Ingrid Wotschke and Claud Cockburn both consider the novel on its own terms, seeking to identify the values it constructs; the more recent writers, William Greenslade and Ross Mckibbin, are principally cultural historians. Their cursory readings, though illuminating, are necessarily partial, and therefore sometimes misleading.

Ross Mckibbin in his wide ranging *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (1998) notes the anti working-class rhetoric in *Sorrell and Son*, which he perceives to be ‘an essentially Edwardian novel’.

This unpalatable concoction of snobbery, fear, and wish-fulfilment can only be understood by the circumstances in which it was written: that it so obviously spoke to so many in middle-class England suggests how powerfully its socially explicit images - of profiteers, of uncouth working men, of a heroic code of virtuous behaviour - were shared by them. Even the images were Edwardian: the profiteer differs little from the plutocrat: the heroic individual differs little from the masterful empire-builder.⁸²

Although most modern readers would undoubtedly find the snobbery of *Sorrell and Son*

‘unpalatable’ the assertion that this is an Edwardian novel needs to be challenged. The

domestication of the heroic individual in the figure of Sorrell is fundamentally different from

⁸² Ross Mckibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 67-8.

the Edwardian image of the 'masterful empire-builder'. That this is so derives both from the greater awareness, after The First World War of the dignity and potential value of female labour and from the changing patterns of readership. Deeping's novel did not simply appeal to the secure and complacently snobbish middle class but also to the economically and socially insecure lower middle class (as its place in the bookshelf of Greene's *Ida* suggests). The intimacy of the private 'little', servantless worlds he evokes are the utopian fantasies of the new suburban family units and are distant indeed from the flamboyantly snobbish and public dramas enacted by the heroes and heroines of Buchan or Dornford Yates. New money is not despised by Deeping at this point in his career, hence the glamour of the popular songwriter Mr Rowland and his leading lady while the perception of the moral decline of the 'old' families, such as the family into which Kit Sorrell marries, is typical of the post-war period.

There is generally much more sympathy for modernity than McKibbin acknowledges. The ambition of the female author who wishes to write rather than have children is presented sympathetically in *Sorrell and Son*. However McKibbin's description of the book as 'profoundly misogynist'⁸³ is certainly borne out by the account of female sexuality in the first half of the book, as is his assertion that 'there was scarcely an English prejudice to which it did not appeal'.⁸⁴ McKibbin quotes the passage in which Deeping sneers at the 'so-called 'Oedipus Complex' to exemplify the hostility to psychoanalytic theory which is apparent in most novels and in the memoir for St John's Southend, already discussed.

⁸³ McKibbin (1998), p. 482.

⁸⁴ McKibbin (1998), p. 482.

However there is no nostalgia for imperialism in Deeping's book. The racial 'Other' is not conquered or subsumed, it is retreated from, sneered at from a position of private superiority. The only active domination is the subsuming of the maternal role in the paternal, where, as Cixous describes the instance of masculine filiation in Christianity, the mother herself becomes 'unthinkable, unthought of'.⁸⁵

McKibbin's exasperated observation that Deeping's misogyny 'did not seem to worry Deeping's huge female readership - even if they noticed it',⁸⁶ identifies one of the chief problems for anyone trying to describe the implied reader of this novel.⁸⁷ As modern readers our purposes are so removed from those of the readers for whom the novel was originally intended that even a casual aside, such as McKibbin's, can lay itself open to charges both of mild misogyny (a horde of indiscriminating female readers cannot be expected to notice much) or of mere speculation about the nature of female pleasure which exhaustive studies such as *Stargazing*, Jackie Stacey's analysis of female spectatorship⁸⁸ and Janice Radway's of the readership of American romantic fiction,⁸⁹ should guard us against. McKibbin's apparent contempt for this implied reader, female and obtuse, may betray the cultural prejudices of his class and demonstrates that the culturally defensive postures of Deeping must have been as welcome to his

⁸⁵ 'Sorties' in E. Marks and I. de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981), p. 92.

⁸⁶ McKibbin, p. 482.

⁸⁷ For example it is impossible to know what Jewish readers, like the mothers of Geoffrey Crossick and George Melly, make of Deeping's anti-Semitism, of socialists, like Kenneth Mankelov, the father-in-law of Michael Warboys, made of Deeping's hostility towards socialism, yet they all enjoyed *Sorrell and Son*. See Acknowledgements and George Melly's *Scouse Mouse* (Futura, 1984), p. 195.

⁸⁸ Jackie Stacey, *Stargazing* (Routledge, 1994).

⁸⁹ Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary taste, and Middle-class Desire* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

readers as they were instinctive in him. Despite the wealth of information about both class and culture in McKibbin's book, in some ways it fails to deliver the promise implicit in its title. It is indeed about class and culture but it makes no extended attempt to root the cultures described in the classes of which they were a feature. Perhaps such an attempt can only be made if the scope of social enquiry is limited to the production and consumption of one cultural artefact. The factors which connect a cultural artefact with the class origins of its producer and consumers are so many and so interdependent that no general analysis is possible. Hence the need for more studies like the present.

A more extensive examination of *Sorrell and Son* is to be found in William Greenslade's *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880-1940*. Greenslade's book is principally concerned with the fantasies of degeneration prevalent at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. He discusses the lure of biological determinism and the influence of such writers as Lombroso and Nordau's on authors such as Hardy, Gissing, Forster, Woolf and, finally, Deeping. In 'the sentimental *Sorrell and Son* ...middle-class snobbery and the romance of self-reliance join hands to contest the forces of modernity'. Greenslade observes that Deeping 'skilfully exploits the obsessive resentments and rancour of post-war society'. Deeping's degenerationist fantasies are reflected in the contempt for the rottenness of the 'blotched bodies' of the urban poor. Greenslade quotes an account of Sorrell Junior's attitudes to the London's sick

that Fate herded ... like cattle into white-tiled galleries and the out-patient rooms, poor stupid cattle sinned against, ignorantly sinning. It was the problem of the ignorant, of the unfit, of the people with uncontrolled lusts and greed, of ugly lives and ugly souls and bodies growing out of them, of children who should never have been born.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 246.

It would be difficult to disagree with Greenslade's conclusion that this 'is a world predicated on the principle of struggle and greed (it is essentially a social-Darwinian world).'⁹¹ However, it is interesting that Deeping's repulsive and nightmarish fears do not inspire fantasies of utopian and eugenically sound nurseries. The only tiny feet that patter through Deeping's novels are those of the multitude of orphaned casualties of medieval carnage left to the hero and heroine of *Love Among the Ruins* to protect. Despite the pathos of the central relationship between a father and his son *Sorrell and Son* is consistently hostile to children. Although it would appear that Christopher Sorrell is good breeding stock, superior to the 'cattle' to whom he ministers, his future wife is emphatically unmaternal.

She made him realize that she disliked children and childishness, that she was not temperamentally made to be a mother. Noise, and napkins, and little raw egotisms, and disorder, and the eternal struggle of the mature mind with the little savage selfishnesses. "A woman who loves her craft has to choose, Kit. I have chosen. Intelligent egotism makes life intelligible. Children would drive me mad."⁹²

Both women who knew Deeping when they were young confirm that Deeping himself disliked children. Ann Harris, who met him as a child, describes him as being 'on an island' of his own⁹³ and definitely communicating his lack of interest in children to herself and her brother. Mrs Barbara Nickalls, the wife of Deeping's nephew met Deeping when she was in her twenties, towards the end of his life and confirms this lack of interest. Deeping's degenerationist fantasies, are unrelieved by any corresponding fantasies of regeneration. Although the heroines of the novels in the 1930s tend to be 'cow-like',⁹⁴ come of farming stock with no ambitions to do anything except nurture the hero, her maternal embrace does not extend to children. The

⁹¹ William Greenslade, *Degeneration and the Novel* (CUP, 1994), pp 238-40.

⁹² *Sorrell and Son*, p. 354.

⁹³ Ann Harris, in a telephone conversation with Mary Grover, 9 January 1998.

⁹⁴ see the representation of such women in my next chapter

important thing is to preserve the 'intelligent egotism' that makes life 'intelligible'. And in *Sorrell and Son* this shaping intelligence is a woman's, as it is to be in *Blind Man's Year* (1937).

Both McKibbin and Greenslade, struck by the virulence of Deeping's anti-working class rhetoric overlook his apparently radical critique of the English class system as a whole and the institution of inter-war bourgeois marriage. Christopher Sorrell suffers as much humiliation at the hands of the public school headmaster as he does from the kicks of the boys in the playground of the town school. The social and economic decline of Molly's family is contrasted with the success of Mr Roland and his lover, the leading lady of his musicals. This couple, the centre of the patronage and power within the novel, do not suggest that Deeping was nostalgic for the stability of a pre-war social hierarchy. They are both entrepreneurs, Roland at first dealing in real estate and then writing musicals. Roland and Cherry live together unmarried at first. When they do marry their 'splendid baby' is a rare specimen in Deeping's fiction. The future as envisaged in *Sorrell and Son* does not lie with the stoic Sorrells holding on or gaining professional prestige or with a revitalised Pentreath dynasty, it seems to lie with the entertainers, those who can make money by exploiting a wide range of class members. The properties that Roland deals in are hotels where the gentlemanly can feel at home but are not actually at home; his musicals presumably appealed to classes which include but extend beyond the gentlemanly; gentlemanliness is merely one of several commodities that he sells. His vitality and commercial acumen are celebrated as much as Sorrell's stoicism and 'gentlemanliness'. When a film star crashes outside the hotel, Roland first conceals the victim's identity from the press, thus demonstrating he has gentlemanly discretion but he soon gains the recovering star's permission to use her stay there as a publicity vehicle to increase trade. This stunt rescues the hotel from the economic doldrums. The gentlemanly

Sorrell's descent into the abyss exploits post-war fantasies about the 'old-fashioned' values of loyalty, stoicism and patriarchy but the book as a whole celebrates the success of the post-war world of increased economic and social mobility. If the snobbery, degenerationism and misogyny that characterises this and most of Deeping's novels were the basis of his appeal to his readers then it is unlikely that *Sorrell and Son* would have survived the period. In fact Molly's fantasies about whipping the working class and rejecting marriage remain only fantasies. But her ability to make money out of her fantasies is very real. Her novel, *Broken Pottery*, sells thirteen thousand copies. The reader of Buchan's *Mr Standfast* (1919) can envisage Richard Hannay and his spirited Mary, 'cleverer than you or I', breeding a splendid family in the Cotswolds, or, like the Tweedsmuir, in the Dominions, but not the Sorrells. They appear to be embarking on life as a working couple. Despite his eugenicist sympathies Deeping resists the prospect of a dynasty of noble/clean little Sorrells.

Unlike Greenslade's book on the literature of degeneration, Claud Cockburn's book is not thematic. His entertaining *Bestsellers* (1972) may be modest in its ambitions but it is a remarkably unpatronising response to popular fiction between the wars. He makes many apparently obvious but important points about the value of bestsellers to the cultural historian. The first is that many of the attitudes of the bestsellers in the first half of the century are indeed repulsive (the anti-Semitism in particular). The second is that works of 'light' fiction are seriously significant sociological phenomena which its many readers will defensively try to deny. Thirdly, that bestsellers are effective pieces of writing and to that extent 'well' written. Lastly that the relationship between a reader and a bestselling author is no more passive than the relationship between the reader of more acceptably literary works. This last point, in particular, contrasts with

the more common assumption underlying Mckibbin reference to the unnoticing female reader that the readership of bestsellers were indiscriminating and easily manipulated. This spirit of open criticism for the values of much of the fiction he is discussing is accompanied by an equally open spirit of enquiry about what it was that attracted readers on a vast scale. Bruce Bartels, a modern American who wrote that Deeping was 'Sententious at times, yes, but I like that'⁹⁵ and Stan Brain who copied out Deeping's 'Words of Wisdom' both recognise that he is a propagandist but are knowingly assenting to accept the author in that role. The nature of Cockburn's response to popular fiction would seem to respect the autonomy of such readers and not assume that they had been mesmerised by machinations of the mass market.

The chapter in which Cockburn introduces *Sorrell and Son* to the reader is entitled 'A Long Hard Winter'. This is an accurate reflection of the essentially bleak nature of the world envisioned in it and indeed in every one of Deeping's novels. Cockburn groups the novel with A. S. M Hutchinson's *If Winter Comes* (1921) and Robert Keable's *Simon Called Peter* (1921). These novels may seem to have little in common. Sorrell would not have been impressed by the 'puzzle-headed' and liberal musings of Hutchinson's hero, Sabre. The hero, 'Simon called Peter' seems to have even less in common with either Sorrell or Son. Keable's hero discovers religious faith by way of sexual fulfilment with a French prostitute. Mr. Roland's affectionate but gently disparaging reference to a cathedral with 'a full choir, half a dozen priests, three lonely women, a verger and a forest of empty chairs' in *Sorrell and Son* accurately reflects the sense that Deeping, at this period, thought institutionalised Christianity part of an irrelevant pre-war establishment.

⁹⁵ Bruce Bartels, <@esu2.esu2.k12.ne.us>, 23 February 2000.

As for the 'fog of sex', Christopher manages to achieve fulfillment despite its befuddlements, not because of it.

However, all three novels deal with men who have lost their youth in The Great War and have to deal not only with the change in the social structure of the England to which they returned but the unsatisfactory nature of middle-class marriage. Cockburn quotes five lengthy passages from *Sorrell and Son* and links them with text that is little more than a fairly neutral plot summary.⁹⁶ Two of the passages reveal Deeping's hostility to the truculent working class but his patronising acceptance of the working man who accepts his value as 'a back' and trusts the master with 'a head'.⁹⁷ The third passage is particularly pregnant one describing how Sorrell uses the 'poetry of figures' (the patient accumulation of his tips) to arm 'his son against a world that babbled of socialism but still clutched a knife or a club.'⁹⁸ These savings will be used to buy his son the opportunity to acquire a skill which will make him one of 'the indispensable and individual few' who 'would be able to rise above the scramble of the industrial masses.'⁹⁹ Though Cockburn does not reflect upon this passage it does suggest Kit's surgical knife is the modern equivalent of the medieval knight's sword, excising the diseased part of a putrefying state. The next couple of passages concern Kit's education. What is clear from these extracts is that Deeping had little respect for education in any institutionalised form. As always, his primary concern was for a Rousseauesque 'Natural Growth.' Mr Roland advises Sorrell that 'The healthy young idlers often do best in the end. They don't get all their individuality compressed into a mould.'¹⁰⁰ This

⁹⁶ Claud Cockburn, *Bestseller* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972; Penguin, 1975), pp. 125-135.

⁹⁷ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 109.

⁹⁸ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 110.

⁹⁹ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 110.

¹⁰⁰ *Sorrell and Son*, p. 71.

hostility to formal education is always a feature of Deeping's work, finding its most virulent expression in *Fantasia* (1939): 'Education! ... A process that persuaded you to wear a white collar...but which, if Nature turned on you, might leave you as helpless as a motherless pup.'¹⁰¹ Whatever the current object of Deeping's rancour, helplessness is his nightmare and retreat his theme. The vulnerability induced by marriage is the subject of the last passage quoted by Cockburn. Sorrell confides in his son that he does not believe in marriage 'not till the job is launched. After that - a comrade -. But the other thing - like one's morning tub. Not a sort of cement pool in a zoo with two bored animals swimming around'.¹⁰² Deeping, like many other writers, is at his most opaque when trying to describe sex. Here he seems to be inferring that as an animal urge it cannot be ignored, for reasons of physical hygiene. However to institutionalise marriage as a mechanism for ensuring 'the morning tub' reduces human individuality and autonomy which are Deeping's preeminent values.

Cockburn, like Mckibbin, wonders at the persistence of the appeal of the novel and asks which of the values constructed by Deeping in this novel were shared by readers when the problem of 'the ex-serviceman' had ceased to be topical.

It is as though in 1946 someone had written a topical novel in which the motivations of the characters arose principally from the human problems produced by rationing. That could have been a bestseller at the time, but it would be surprising if such a book continued to retain its popularity today. Extreme enthusiasts for Deeping's work might claim that the book's continued success results from it being a story so gripping that it transcends the circumstances of its origin. I find this impossible to believe. It is not as gripping a story as all that.¹⁰³

This final point is worth making. The book is not a page turner (despite Amis's discovery that his desire to find out what happened next became stronger than his pleasure in inscribing 'scholia of

¹⁰¹ *Fantasia*, p. 253.

¹⁰² *Sorrell and Son*, p. 208.

¹⁰³ Cockburn, p. 133.

facetious or obscene import').¹⁰⁴ The gentle pace of the 1933 film version accentuates the tale's power as a fable to invite reflection rather than as a narrative which creates suspense. Lionel Collier in *Picturegoer Weekly*,¹⁰⁵ found it too 'drawn out' but felt that it brought out the 'underlying tenderness and nobility of the theme'. The reviewer in *The Kinematograph Weekly* also focuses on the improving quality of the tale: 'the nobility of the theme is always held in fine perspective, and the building up of the story is carried out with a quiet, refreshing and moving dignity.'¹⁰⁶ The way Jack Raymond, the director, lingers on the image of Sorrell's hands depersonalises and mythologises the story. So too does the extended sequence following Sorrell's laborious ascent of the hotel stairs carrying on his back his ex-wife trunk, packed with the booty bought her by her second husband. The film's reveals the extent to which the novel almost presents a series of tableau on which the reader is invited to meditate. Once the reader is confident that Sorrell and his son will not starve to death, the directions their lives will take are fairly predictable. The book lacks the narrative suspense of John Buchan, the psychological drama of Gilbert Frankau's *Peter Jackson*, the exotic solitariness of H. M. Tomlinson or the fervent religiosity of Ernest Raymond.

Cockburn concludes that the novel's persistent popularity was because it was uniquely explicit about the menace posed to the middle class by the rising working class.

In pointing his finger at the menace of the rising working class, Warwick Deeping was carrying out on the home front a task roughly analogous to that performed by Erskine Childers when, in *The Riddle of the Sands*, he pointed to the gathering menace beyond the North Sea.

¹⁰⁴ Kingsley Amis, 'Pater and Old Chap', the second article in a series entitled 'Best-sellers of the Century', *The Observer*, 15 October 1957, p. 15.

¹⁰⁵ Lionel Collier, 'On the Screens Now', *Picturegoer Weekly*, 28 April 1934, p. 24.

¹⁰⁶ 'Sorrell and Son', *Kinematograph Weekly*, p. 38.

But this sense of menace, in Cockburn's view, persisted well beyond the twenties.

What seems to emerge is that although the class situation of which Deeping was writing was specifically of his time, the plight of Sorrell and his like was only a vivid dramatization of what the middle class felt about its general situation, and - this is the nub of it - has gone on feeling right up to our own day.¹⁰⁷

It is difficult to argue now that the middle class feel menaced, as they did in the sixties or seventies by the increasing cultural or economic power of the working classes. In 1992 a highly critical reader, Kingsley Amis, at first wrote "piss and shit" against particularly snobbish passages in *Sorrell and Son* but although 'Its sensibility was very crude, he said, it delivered. Having included Deeping amongst his 'List of Twelve Bad Men' in a letter to Larkin in 1946,¹⁰⁸ Amis is not disposed to entertain any respect for Deeping. He started out disliking its snobbery -But he got engaged in the book and stopped writing things.'¹⁰⁹ Though it is possible Amis responded positively to the misogyny in Deeping's treatment of Kit's mother, he is explicitly according Deeping respect as a craftsman, a rare example of a writer acknowledging Deeping's professional skills. And one of the supremely crafty things that Deeping achieves in this novel is that Sorrell is on the margins of every social group, not only threatened by engulfment in the working class, but by the disparagement of the upper middle class. There is no social group to which he obviously belongs. This seems to be the ever appealing fantasy, not that one social group is superior to another but that the individual can never be identified by class or economic position. This is curious in a novel which is so consumed by the nature of work. But there is an undeniable egalitarianism about the attitudes to work within *Sorrell and Son*. It is the thoroughness with which Sorrell shines shoes that first attracts the attention of his future

¹⁰⁷ Cockburn, p. 133.

¹⁰⁸ Amis to Philip Larkin, 29 April 1946, *Letters of Kingsley Amis*, ed. Zahary Leader (London: Harper Collins, 2000) p.59. Deeping is in the prestigious company of Chaucer, the author of *Beowulf* (Captain) and Milton.

¹⁰⁹ Eric Jacobs, 'Amis on writers and writing', *The Sunday Times*, 31 March 1996.

employer, Mr Roland. His own material circumstances at the end of the novel, though comfortable are still modest, and the quality of his happiness is reflected in his freedom to hoe his violas. He doesn't escape the demeaning role of an employee in a hotel but, by virtue of his stoicism and professionalism lends that role dignity. This is obviously an appealing fantasy to women in particular, that domestic drudgery can be dignified by the superior moral qualities of the drudge and that at some level emotional independence and autonomy from a world of limited choices, can be achieved. Cockburn's over-emphasis on the basis of the book's appeal in the class fears of the twentieth century is, like Mckibbin and Greenslade's, coloured by his understandable revulsion at the way in which the working class are described, particularly at the beginning of the book. However in the second half of the book, the part in which Amis scribbled no expletives, the focus of the book is much more on the threat of sexual demands. It is Sorrell senior's resistance to the threat to his autonomy by both class resentment and sexual demands that is heroic. It is his ordinariness, the unspectacular nature of his potential tragedy and his stoic husbandry that are at the heart of the novel's pathos and appeal. However, virulent though the hostility towards the working class is, Sorrell does not seem to represent a beleaguered middle class but the reader and writer who wish to inhabit a world of their own that resists invasion from any external force whatsoever.

The most thorough account of Deeping's novels has been that of Ingrid Wotschke in her doctoral thesis, 'Das Bild des englischen Menschen in Romanen George Warwick Deepings' (1877-1950),¹¹⁰ 'The Portrait of the Englishman in the Novels of George Warwick Deeping', first submitted to the Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg in August 1969. The choice of

¹¹⁰ (Magdeburg, August 1969)

subject for this thesis is a reflection of Deeping's popularity in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. Deeping's novels were widely available in Germany at a time when the translation and publication of foreign books were tightly controlled by the Reichsschriftumskammer, set up by Goebbels in 1933 to supervise production of culture. In Leipzig translations of *Blind Man's Year* was published in 1937, *The Bridge of Desire (Unrest)* in 1939, *The Malice of Men* in 1939, *The Woman at the Door* in 1938 : in Berlin *Doomsday* in 1938, *Kitty* in 1939 and in Bremen, *The Prophetic Marriage* in 1935, *The Road* in 1937 and *Smith* in both 1934 and 1937. As for *Hauptmann Sorrell und sein Sohn*, its publication in Germany extended, virtually uninterrupted, in Germany from 1927 to 1960.¹¹¹ The 1927 translation by Curt Thesing was brought out by ten different publishing houses in cities throughout the German speaking world: Leipzig, Bremen, Berlin, Heidelberg, Bern, Stuttgart, Vienna and Frankfurt. Other titles were translated into German during that period but published in Switzerland so might well have been circulated in Germany at the time.¹¹² Donald Brook who includes Deeping in *his Writers' Gallery*, 'Biographical Sketches of Britain's Greatest Writers, and their views on Reconstruction' commented on this popularity in 1944:

Sir Newman Flower, of Messrs. Cassell and Co., Ltd., tells me that before the war Mr. Deeping's books were very popular in Germany and Austria, *Sorrell and Son*, his masterpiece, still sells very well when copies are available, and there is a constant demand for all of the sixty novels he has written.¹¹³

Deeping was favourite reading of Wotschke's supervisor, and the subject of his novels was to some extent imposed upon the aspiring academic. When in 1959 her department was politically tainted by the Professor's defection to the West, Wotschke was left to defend her thesis (on an

¹¹¹ I owe this information to the comprehensive Bibliography compiled by Dr. Wotschke.

¹¹² The details are contained in the Bibliography of Ingrid Wotschke's thesis.

¹¹³ Donald Brook, *Writers' Gallery*, 'Biographical Sketches of Britain's Greatest Writers, and their views on Reconstruction' (Rockliff Publishing Corporation 1944), p.47.

author who gave her little pleasure) to a wary department and the Stasi. It took her three years to rewrite the thesis within a sufficiently Marxist-Leninist framework to satisfy the political authorities and nineteen years to regain a post within the university.¹¹⁴

Despite the bleak circumstances of her research Wotschke was meticulous in her 'portrait of the English man' in Deeping's novels. She dealt with seventeen, most written in the decade after *Sorrell and Son* was published and her focus is very much on the bestseller itself. Her chief concern is to identify the values exemplified by Deeping's heroes at this period. Though she makes no attempt to trace changes or developments in the way heroic value is constructed within Deeping's novels, her portrait of Deeping's 'English gentleman' identifies many common characteristics shared by novels published between *Sincerity* (1912) and *The Malice of Men* (1938). Although Deeping's attitude to landed gentry and the professional middle classes shifts during this period, many of the characteristics of the heroic male do persist.

Like all other commentators Wotschke is struck by the violence of the hero's distaste for the working class and for socialism. However, unlike the other commentators she accurately perceives that the carpenter's hostility for unionisation in *Smith* (1932), is rooted not simply in fear of an economically or politically assertive working class but in all social organisations which threaten the autonomy of a man and in particular threatens the way he chooses to work. She discusses the alienation felt by Smith from fellow members of the skilled working class and his fear that unionisation will threaten the standards of his workmanship. This concern to maintain professional standards is characteristic of all Deeping's heroes often leads to the social alienation

¹¹⁴ A salutary reminder to academics that the disputes about cultural capital in Britain in the last century, however vicious, rarely threatened a writer's life and livelihood.

of the individual from his less high-minded peers. The inner isolation of these heroes also reflects an aesthetic sense which is superior to his contemporaries. The novel usually ends with the hero able to create a physical environment, house, garden or farm which expresses this aesthetic sense.

Unlike any of the other commentators on Deeping, Wotschke identifies the profoundly anti-establishment values these novels construct. Not only do working class social structures, such as the unions, threaten the individual's autonomy so does formal education (in *Sorrell and Son*), the tax system (nearly every novel in the thirties has a dig at the iniquities of taxation), state bureaucracy (which in *Blindman's Year* is regarded as illegitimate interference in the lives of individuals) and the whole apparatus of the law. This is the final example used by Wotschke. She quotes a revealing reflection on the hero's protection of the abused wife who has murdered her husband in *The Woman at the Door* 1937: 'We were outside the conventions - from the moment we came together: Well, ... in a little world of our own'.¹¹⁵

The apparatus of the law is seen as morally irrelevant to a man who redefines his act of murder in *The Malice of Men* as 'good wholesome slaying'.¹¹⁶ The passages from the posthumously published autobiographical novel *The Old World Dies* (1954), chosen by Wotschke to demonstrate Deeping's horror of organised control also reveal a deficiency in Deeping's moral sensibilities already noted in his response to The First World War. In *The Old World Dies* the hero is appalled by the threat of fascism in England because 'Totalitarian methods, hordes of officials' will probably mean 'no freedom, income tax at ten shillings in the pound. And perhaps -

¹¹⁵ *The Woman at the Door*, p.138 quoted by Wotschke, p. 143.

¹¹⁶ *The Malice of Men*, p. 411 quoted by Wotschke p. 143.

starvation.¹¹⁷ The black holes at the centre of this account of what fascism ‘means’ are breath-taking. The gardening image used in a passage later on in the same novel quoted by Wotschke is a woefully inadequate device to suggest the horrors of fascism perhaps because Deeping’s moral sympathies are trapped by his heightened sense of his own vulnerability. As a response to Hitler and the nature of his ‘planned community’ this must rank as one of the most grotesque.

Yes, I suppose a planned community might be something like that, with a very energetic and voluble Man of the People playing the part of Head Gardener. He would give us our begonias, and we should be ordered to like begonias. A minority that dislike begonias, would have to be coerced. The new Freedom! The freedom for all to be alike and to like the same thing, by order.¹¹⁸

The greatest evil that fascism is to inflict on Britain is the limitation of personal taste.

Though she does not comment on Deeping’s response to Fascism, Ingrid Wotschke draws attention to many passages which illustrate the profoundly individualistic nature of Deeping’s work. She also analyses the nature of his snobbishness and his attack on snobbishness. Snobbishness is condemned when it is calculated to humiliate, but is never condemned when directed at the ‘crowd’ or the working classes. However the qualities of ‘a gentleman’ are demonstrable whether the hero is porter, doctor or farmer. These gentlemanly virtues are the capacity for hard work, sincerity and courage. The biggest blow to the hero’s self-esteem is the inability to find work. But the value of that work lies not simply in that it is hard and therefore virtuous, but that it is creative.

Jede Art praktischer Tätigkeit erscheint in Warwick Deepings Romanen als Ausdruck menschlicher Schöpferkraft.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ *The Old World Dies*, p. 21.

¹¹⁸ *The Old World Dies*, p. 107.

¹¹⁹ Wotschke, p.60.

In Warwick Deeping's novels every type of practical activity is presented as an expression of human creativity.

Ingrid Wotschke has here identified one of the key components of Deeping's concept of heroic endeavour: the non-intellectual is presented as creative and conversely Deeping suggests that creative work, the writing of popular novels, for example, is presented as practical.

She also points out that few of the characters in these inter-war novels live in prosperity. Most characters are attempting to secure and improve their situation but the extent of their ambitions is usually a simple style of life in modest circumstances. Their survival depends on hard work and careful husbanding of often scarce resources and the novels are full of the romance of house-keeping lists. David Ayers in his short essay on the appeal of *Sorrell and Son* suggests that part of the appeal of the novel is that it is a 'rags to riches fantasy'.¹²⁰ It functions 'as a moral lesson to the returned soldiers that if they only knuckle down and work hard their value shall be recognised and rewarded.' This may appear to be consistent with the novel's hostility to unionisation and the fact that Sorrell seems to be passive in the face of bullying and injustice. However, this passivity, in itself, is not presented as admirable but as forced upon him by the necessity of providing for his son. Part of the novel's appeal was more probably that it reflected the lack of scope for choice for many of his readers who were left, like so many of Deeping's heroes with the limited romance of adding up their living costs in the hope of finding a disposable few pence with which to assert their individuality. When, at the end of a novel, the hero has a garden or a house as an arena for his self-expression it is not the extent of the domain acquired

¹²⁰ *English Literature in the 1920s*, p. 46.

that is the focus of the romance, but that the hero has the scope to choose the furniture he installs in the house or the begonias he plants in the garden.

Wotschke seems to come closer than any of the few commentators on Deeping's appeal to identifying the nature of the escapist fantasy being offered. Not every hero follows an upward trajectory. Once economic survival is assured the movement is usually one of withdrawal from rather than dominance of society. However, the essentially puritan image of admirable masculinity sketched by Wotschke does not owe as much to medieval ideals of chivalry as Wotschke suggests. Deeping does create images of the faithful maid but his heroes are animated less by a crusading or questing spirit than by the desire to survive or retreat. The ideal is stoic rather than chivalric. Nor is there, either within the medieval novels or those using a contemporary setting, a sense that right conduct is a group ideal; the concept of medieval chivalry, or of gentlemanly conduct in the sixteenth, eighteenth or nineteenth centuries based on a shared social code. It is precisely the acknowledgement of a moral community that Deeping finds so difficult.

Conclusion

What marks *Sorrell and Son* out from its predecessors is not its fictional mode but its theme and its tone. The prejudices have not changed a great deal: the 'clever' are disparaged, sex is a bestial instinct, the exploration of the sub-conscious is dangerous and unnecessary and the Inland Revenue are the fifth column. It is Kingsley Amis, rather than any other writer, who identifies both what is profoundly odd but compelling about the central theme of the book: the intensity of the bond between father and son.

A rapturous wish-fulfilling dream of perfect filial love lies at the core of the book, involving absolute rejection of the mother and absolute devotion to the father, and hinting at a disturbance in the author of dimensions normally reserved for figures of pan-European stature.¹²¹

Amis deftly alludes to the mistaken assumption that the authors of bestsellers have psyches which are less complex than their high-brow equivalents. His review begins and ends with an explicit warning against the over-simplifications of 'Mrs. Leavis'. Unfortunately, Amis does not go on to suggest why this fear of engulfment, which as he suggests is abnormal, should have had such a widespread appeal. Instead he ascribes its popularity to 'the bad teaching of good lessons': that 'there comes a time when a man must put his pride in his pocket, that any kind of job should be done as well as possible'. This might indeed be 'painful' to those critics who feel that what seems to them bad writing should also be morally bad. However, I am not convinced that it was the admirable stoicism of Sorrell that was the key to its success, although it must have been a component. I would rather stay with Amis' suggestion that it was the expression of an abnormally intense fear of engulfment that lent the book its strange intensity and authority. For it is in this book, that Deeping begins to adopt the vatic tone which betrays his ambition to be the father to his readers, to be the kind of moral exemplum that Sorrell was to his son. It is arguable that by destroying Sorrell at the end of the book (the only one of Deeping's novel's to end with the death of his chief subject) Deeping freed the reader to entertain Deeping as the spiritual guide that the father had been to his son. In my final chapter I examine how Deeping struggles to maintain his authority for his readers in a story that is even clearer evidence of 'a disturbance in the author of dimensions normally reserved for figures of pan-european stature.'

¹²¹ Kingsley Amis, 'Pater and Old Chap', the second article in a series entitled 'Best-sellers of the Century', *The Observer*, 15 October 1957, p.15.

Chapter Six

Blind Man's Year: the deforming constructions of hierarchy

She sat with a Warwick Deeping,
Her legs curl'd round in a ring,
Like a beautiful panther sleeping,
Yet always ready to spring.¹

My final chapter considers the extent to which, in the second half of Deeping's career, both Deeping and his critics were using the existence of the other to establish their own cultural authority. The ways in which the Leavises asserted their cultural authority is mirrored in the terms and tone of the middlebrow author they despise. The failure by the intelligentsia to afford any kind of authenticity to the middlebrow in the 1930s narrowed the sympathies of a writer who felt diminished by the way he was categorised. The appositeness of Deeping's texts to this enquiry is borne out by the last novel to focus specifically on the cultural vulnerability of the popular author, *Blind Man's Year* (1939). It is with a consideration of this novel that I will end my thesis because it seems to write large the fears about bullying and the anxieties about the status and gendering of popular authorship that continually surface in Deeping's fiction. It is his last work to deal exclusively with the pain of authorship; there are few pleasures to be contemplated in this text.

Assertions of authenticity: the kinship of Deeping and the Leavises

When we read John Betjeman's 'Station Syren' we sense the poet's patronage of the kind of girl who might 'curl up' with a Deeping in the absence of the real thing. The foetal position suggests everything that is half-developed. Greene's Ida Arnold, in *Brighton Rock* (1938),

¹ 'Station Syren', *John Betjeman's Collected Poems* (John Murray, 1958), p. 245.

though of a different social class from Betjeman's 'officer's lady', is placed as shallow for having not only J. B. Priestley's *The Good Companions* but Warwick Deeping on her shelves. Deeping's novel is not even dignified by its title. In fact, it is conspicuous by its absence for the 'char' has borrowed it, thus confirming the reader's sense that the author's name denotes a cultural product associated with low status groups. This twilight world of 'greedy', self-indulgent and impoverished people is evoked merely by a name in a way that the name of few other authors would have served to do. It is not merely that these people are lacking the superior taste of their betters, they are denied any kind of authenticity. The unpromising student in Monica Redlich's *Cheap Return* (1934) brings herself to the threshold of prostitution and alcoholism by neglecting her preparations for her studies in English Literature for the feverish consumption of the next Warwick Deeping. The idle and self-indulgent English undergraduate goes upstairs to pack but

before she had begun, she remembered that she simply must finish the new Warwick Deeping, because, once she got back to college, she was not going to allow herself to read any novels at all until after finals. It took rather longer than she had expected, and the next thing she noticed was the dinner gong.²

Redlich, like Q. D. Leavis, suggests that reading a Deeping blunts a girl's appetite for 'real' literature (and of course sets her own fiction apart from the already devalued Deeping). In Chapter One I discussed the lack of authenticity Greene ascribes to shop-girls as they hang on to luggage straps, wearily yearning for Warwick Deeping and mistaking such reading for 'real' leisure.³ Betjeman represents Deeping as a substitute for 'real' sex.⁴ The ways in which these

² Monica Redlich, *Cheap Return* (Hamish Hamilton 1934), p. 45.

³ Graham Greene, *Journey Without Maps* (Heinemann, 1936), pp. 14-15.

⁴ Two readers, Margaret Morgan and Mrs. Butler, of 81 Rutland Ave, Southend-on-Sea, describe the extent to which Deeping was regarded as 'naughty' (Margaret Morgan, Mary Grover's mother, in conversation with Mary Grover, July 1998) and 'steamy' (Jennifer Butler, the author of the entry on Deeping for *The Dictionary of National Biography*. in a telephone conversation with Mary Grover, 28 February 2000). Jennifer Butler's grandmother was an avid reader of Warwick Deeping and was teased on this account. His novels were called 'Granny's dirty books'.

and other members of the intelligentsia sought to rob this author of his authenticity may be mutually contradictory (Betjeman's lady has too much leisure and Greene's girls too little) but their starting point is the same. Deeping is tainted by his associations with people who refuse to acknowledge their readerly pleasures are inferior to those of the intelligentsia.

1932, the year of Woolf's private outburst against Charles Morgan, *Fiction and the Reading Public's* public denouncement of 'the faux bon', the launch of *Scrutiny* and the self-justificatory *Old Wine and New*, seems to mark a crisis in the way the cultural hierarchy was being negotiated in Britain. It is the tone rather than the terms of the debate that change radically at this time. A cartoon from a 1931 edition of *Punch* depicts two female best seller writers talking to each other back to back at an elegant party (Illustration X). One, particularly boyish, with a bob and round spectacles is saying to the other, prettier and more obviously feminine, 'So lovely to have this marvellous long chat, darling; *so* refreshing to hear you just being your dear natural self and not saying *any* of those clever things you write.'⁵

The word 'clever' had long had perjorative connotations, especially when applied to literary women. The energy with which these powerful and unladylike women are tearing each other apart contrasts with the limpness of the shrinking male onlookers. However, the chief targets of the cartoonist are firstly, the ugly, ungentlemanly competitiveness of the process of writing in order to outsell others and secondly, the hollowness of any pretensions that bestselling authors might have to 'cleverness'. In her article on Ethel M. Dell, 'The Tosh Horse', Rebecca West takes the lack of cleverness, the absence of knowingness as the reason why Dell's lurid romances are not regarded as pernicious by the literati nor the censors who

⁵ A. Wallis Mills, Cartoon of two female bestseller writers, *Punch*, 25 March 1931, p. 321.

overlooked the sado-masochist delights she offered, while deploring the more wholesome pleasures of Lawrence, for example.

When the bestseller 'pretends to' moral or intellectual virtues the intelligentsia take fright. Leavis herself placed Deeping in the lineage of Marie Corelli who fictionalised a bestselling female novelist, Mavis Clare, in *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895). Mavis Clare, as the counter clerk in a book-store comments, 'is too popular to need reviews. Beside, a large number of the critics, - the 'log-rollers' especially, are mad against her for her success, and the public know it.'⁶ Corelli explicitly asserts that the appeal of her bestseller writer is moral and spiritual and that decadent modern literature, (Ibsen in particular) have corrupted the unfortunate Sybil who tragically confesses, 'I cannot feel. I am one of your modern women, - I can only think, - and analyse.'⁷ John Buchan frequently takes up the same theme, for example in *Mr Standfast* (1919). The secret agent under cover in a 'demented modish dining-room' full of potentially traitorous literati has to maintain his cover by colluding in high-brow chatter though he 'didn't understand half the language.'⁸

They were talking about some Russian novel - a name like *Leprous Souls* - and she asked me if I had read it. By a curious chance I had. It had drifted somehow into our dug-out on the Scarpe, and after we had all stuck in the second chapter it had disappeared in the mud to which it naturally belonged. The lady praised its 'poignancy' and 'grave beauty.' I assented, and congratulated myself on my second escape - for if the question had been put to me I should have described it as God-forgotten twaddle.

This is a defter version of what Deeping was doing at the same period in his novel *The White Gate* (1913). Buchan's plot makes the moral vulnerability of the high-society high-brow and high-minded Fabian equivalent. Their exaggerated evaluation of the clever and introspective enables the master-criminal, of course a foreigner, to exploit those English men and women

⁶ *The Sorrows of Satan*, (Methuen, 1895; Methuen, 1931), p. 172.

⁷ *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 200.

⁸ *Mr Standfast* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1918; Wordsworth, 1994), p. 10.

who are his dupes. Buchan's novel warns against the danger of the 'leprous' Russians, Corelli against the French and the Norwegian Ibsen, while in Deeping's *The White Gate* the heroine nearly drowns herself after over-dosing on the Belgian Maeterlinck. The sense of imminent threat, not merely to a sensitive individual but to the nation as a whole, combines with the superb plotting of the thriller writer, to make Buchan's a more barn-storming attack on the high-brow than Deeping's pre-war plaint. Deeping's high-brow family, the Buntings, are merely guilty of socially humiliating the heroine rather than destroying the fabric of the nation; but it is part of Deeping's power that he invests an individual's social humiliation with a significance that, one must presume, seemed proportionate to his thousands of readers.

The degree of that lack of proportion is matched only by the critics of the middlebrow. What unites Deeping and those writers who loathed the middlebrow was their shared conception of a vulnerable, 'half-developed' reader who stood in urgent need of their guidance. The rhetoric of both Leavises and Deeping reflects that view of the reader's dependent state. Applicable to Deeping are the terms in which Gross describes F. R. Leavis' 'effective demand for unqualified allegiance; the ritualistic use of approved or disapproved names; the need to exaggerate the outside world's hostility or neglect'.⁹ The method of argument, the uses of touchstones and a gift for nominalisation combine to make the rhetoric of each coercive.

Haunting the rhetoric of both Deeping and F. R. Leavis are the fears that his chosen calling was effeminate. Unlike the study of the Classics which 'is saved from the effeminacy of many aesthetic pursuits by its linguistic difficulty, from muddleheadedness by the clarity of the classical mind, from critical crazes by its remoteness'¹⁰ the study of English Literature was

⁹ John Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters: English Literary Life since 1800* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969; Penguin 1991), p. 298.

¹⁰ F. L. Lucas quoted in Mulhern p. 31 but not sourced. Probably from Tillyard *Principles of*

feminised by its accessibility, as was middlebrow literature. Although Leavis sought to construct qualifications of entry to the sacred pursuit of literature, while Deeping flaunted his appeal to everyman, both shared a desire to assert the vigour and masculinity of their occupation. Both represented themselves as warriors for civilisation itself. Deeping and both the Leavises present themselves as moral leaders in the face of similar hostile forces: 'herd prejudice',¹¹ evanescent political allegiance, the forces of industrialisation. All three valorise craft, celebrate the integrity of the misfit and cast themselves in that role, as an individual of superior insight who has never been given his or her due. Above all, their professional insecurities led them to cast themselves in the role as a leader of superior insight upon whom individuals seeking to distinguish themselves from the herd might rely.

One of the methods of argument employed by both Leavises and Deeping was the use of touchstones of excellence to substitute for debate. It would be difficult to find a touchstone used by Deeping to endorse an opinion of value that was not also used in a similar way by one of the Leavises: Richard Jefferies,¹² W. H. Hudson,¹³ Conrad¹⁴ and D.H. Lawrence¹⁵ were

Literary Criticism, 1967.

¹¹ F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment* (Chatto and Windus, 1960), p. 103.

¹² Q. D. Leavis praises his 'vitality and genuineness', p. 445, as compared to Hardy in a review of a number of texts by and about Jefferies, *Scrutiny* VI, pp. 435-446; Deeping contrasts the callow young hero with Hudson and Jefferies who obviously represent the grand old sages of nature mysticism. The young author is sensitive to nature but lacks their stature. *Old Pybus* (1928), p. 272.

¹³ Q. D. Leavis, it is true distances herself from 'the Bloomsbury cult of W. H. Hudson, but typically appropriates a single text of his (or choice parts of it), *The Shepherd's Life*.

¹⁴ In *Old Wine and New* (1932), as discussed in my previous chapter, Scarsdale, the fictionalised author, aspires to be a 'Conrad in disguise', p. 168.

¹⁵ F. R. Leavis' evaluation of D. H. Lawrence is well known. Deeping circles, fascinated, around Lawrence. The admirable Boots in *Old Pybus* (1928) reads Lawrence. In *Smith* (1932) Lawrence represents the glamour of new thought to the tubercular carpenter who is introduced to him by the new woman who tries to tempt him into adultery. However she introduces Lawrence only to dismiss his inadequacies, in the Deeping manner exposed by Leavis and Thompson in *Culture and Environment*, p.40. Her admiration for Lawrence is diminished because 'he would have made a devil of a mess of running a Lyon's tea-shop',

used by Deeping and at least one of the Leavises as touchstones of authenticity. All three writers tend to construct their argument by placing the touchstone alongside his binary opposite: Jefferies not Hudson in Q. D. Leavis' essay, Jefferies and Hudson not the callow young author in Deeping's *Old Pybus*.¹⁶ All three writers proceed in this way, claiming the validity of their own assertions by aligning them with the qualities associated with commodified 'names'. And inevitably the names of the Leavises and Deeping become commodified.

The use of touchstones of aesthetic, moral or cultural superiority is often spoken of as Arnoldian, which in Leavis's case it explicitly was. However, unlike Arnold, Leavis emphasised his personal distinction in the process of reading and establishing the texts he asserted as touchstones of excellence. Leavis was establishing the touchstones he used by processes he presented as being as unarguably persuasive because scientific but implicit in his reading of Keats' *Ode to Autumn*, for example, is the superiority of his divining rod.

Although he passionately believed that his skills could be 'taught', there was an element of shamanism in his method and manner which links him to the antipathetic Deeping. Leavis is defending his function as critic and the role of the teacher in the university in inculcating these quasi arcane and quasi scientific skills. But the extent to which they can be acquired devalues the exclusivity of the master who holds the key to an understanding of the sacred mysteries. In his clumsy way Deeping is treading a similar tight-rope in relation to his reader. He has to demonstrate that he is on common ground with his common reader but also that he is a high priest whose authority challenges that of rival authorities who seek to denigrate both himself

p.142. However five years later, in *Woman at the Door* (1937) the wanderlust of the hero is compared with Lawrence's, but it has not 'the genius and the brilliant and tragic temperament of D. H. Lawrence', p. 301.

¹⁶ *Old Pybus*, p. 272

and his readers. As a teacher Leavis had to communicate a sense to the reader that he could become his pupil in the sense that he could acquire his teacher's skills. Deeping, as a popular author who, after *Sorrell and Son*, explicitly marketed himself as someone in touch with the shareable reality of his readers increasingly filled his fictions with prophetic and apocalyptic statements which laid claim to vision and insight superior to that of his readers.

Deeping's changing use of cultural touchstones

The changing and increasingly ambiguous nature of the way Deeping implies the nature of his readership can be traced by looking at the way he uses cultural touchstones over his fifty year career. In Deeping's novels, we see an attempt to impose a social value on his patterns of taste. Deeping seeks to undermine icons of highbrow taste with increasing stridency and explicitness in the 1930s as compared with his qualified respect for figures like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche who were fashionable when he started writing.

The first four books published by Deeping were historical novels. The cultural innocence of this enterprise is marked by the absence of evaluative cultural touchstones or defensive authorial statements. References to, for example, Virgil, Ovid and Boethius, serve as part of the 'tapestry' of the novel; there is little attempt to delineate a set of values associated with such names. The author is establishing his knowledge and thereby asserting his credentials to be an historical novelist. However in his first contemporary novel, *The Slanderers* (1907), the reader is not only going to be impressed by the flood of references to classical literature but more significantly is being guided morally as to the deleterious effect of reading more recent foreign authors, such as Baudelaire and De Musset who complicatedly hug 'an impotent sexuality in the lap of a prostituted art'.¹⁷ Already the status of the bookish is

¹⁷ *The Slanderers*, p. 70.

beginning to trouble Deeping. As discussed in the earlier chapter the heroine escapes the constrictions of her father's miserly household by reading works regarded by the author as liberating. Shakespeare had 'unbosomed to her, a god-man speaking to a precocious child'.¹⁸

The hero is distinguished from his mean-minded fellow citizens by reading Schopenhauer (dangerous to the hero's manliness though this introspective author is). The term 'Philistines' would, at this point in Deeping's career, be appropriate to describe the literary hero's enemies. It is implied that the reader will share the author's familiarity with classical figures such as Demosthenes and Cordiflamma and warm to the hero's cultivation of the imagination and intelligence. The author emerges as a robust fellow who shares the vaguely classical education of his readers and is strong-minded enough to cope with such complex and dangerous exotics as Schopenhauer. Baudelaire and De Musset share the crude abuse that Deeping is in future to deal out to the Jewish thinkers: Epstein, Einstein and Freud (never explicitly on the grounds of their semitic origin).¹⁹ But in the earlier novels it is generally true that the bookish may be vulnerable but that they are morally superior to those who despise them. In *Return of the Petticoat* (1909), *Rust of Rome* (1910), *Valour* (1918), and 'Bitter Silence' (1919)²⁰ the heroes and heroines are castigated by their insensitive neighbours for inwardness and independence of thought.

In *Rust of Rome* (1910), whose reception is discussed in Chapter Three, Deeping's increasing confusion about the values and dangers of individualism, introspection, nature and culture is enacted in his use of cultural touchstones. The first half of the novel concerns the commercial failure of the old Hewlett and early Deeping school of romantic historical novel. The failure of Thorkell, the fictionalised Hewlett or early Deeping, to make a commercial success of

¹⁸ *The Slanderers*, p. 3.

¹⁹ *The Slanderers*, p. 70. See discussion in Chapter Three.

²⁰ *The Countess Glika*, pp. 266-327.

historical romance leads to his inability to protect his daughter from the sexual bullying of the local landowner. The decline of this kind of writing is therefore not presented as merely a passing fashion but as a moral failure of a sort. In order to protect his women the man's products must be saleable. In order to be saleable he must, to some extent reflect the more brutal values of the world that threatens the integrity of his women. The game of cultural distinctions is taking on a dangerous edge and leads to Thorkell's suicide. The extent to which Deeping identified with the despairing author is reflected in the way he models the physical appearance of the failed novel, 'Philarion', on his own (successful) first novel. *Uther and Igraine*, like 'Philarion', was 'covered with arabesques in gold' by Grant Richards, his first publisher whose business declined and finally went bankrupt from 1904-1905. In describing the dismal notices of Thorkell's novel 'Philarion', Deeping describes accurately the tone of the reviews of his novels subsequent to the enthusiastically received *Uther and Igraine*.

Thorkell's bitter response, "I will write a book yet that shall make people listen",²¹ reveals the aspirations of a popular author, not simply to acquire enough personal wealth to protect himself from the social contempt of his neighbours, but sufficient moral influence over his public to undermine the literary judgements of the professional critics. However the youngish Deeping was wise enough not to demonise the professional critics in this early novel.

Thorkell's compassionate wife deplures

This flood of fiction! Who could help being wearied by it, or being convinced of its ephemeral nature? She had often marvelled that these men had the patience to deal so generously as they often did with an eternal mob of books, and yet more books. For the men of the reviews are not made up of jealousy and spleen. Many a generous word is written, many an honest hour given. The most earnest of critics cannot cope with a literature that descends upon him like a horde of Huns. It is only when a good book is lost in odd lumber corners that the pity of it might strike author and critic alike.²²

²¹ *The Rust of Rome*, p. 165.

²² *The Rust of Rome*, p. 164

Deeping, at this point, has not the sales of Corelli who could afford to deride the critics who patronised her. Instead he begins to buttress the position of himself as popular novelist by increasingly giving his heroes the virtues of a world outside a literary world. The hero is a man 'revelling in the new craft of his own hands.'²³ The heirs of the suicide, Thorkell, are this athletic farmer whom the author's daughter admiringly compares to Thoreau's Walden (thus bolstering the status of the non-intellecual with a literary reference) and the daughter who is also an author, and associated by the hero with Hardy's Tess, 'the more vital' because Tess is fictional and Deeping's Eve is 'real.'²⁴ In comparing Hardy's 'fictional' Tess with his 'real' Eve, Deeping is embarking on his life-long mission to escape the sentimental and therefore 'unreal' by presenting his fiction as reality. Deeping was risking alienating some of his readers by his admiration for Hardy, whose novels, Tess in particular, had attracted the opprobrium of 'the average matron'. He is suggesting that his fiction too will appeal to a reader who is superior to 'the average matron'.²⁵ Heriot, the hero of *The Rust of Rome*, admires Hardy's novel, not simply because the situation of its heroine reminds him of the situation of his lover, but because of its honesty and moral authority. Here, unlike the Deeping of the later novels, the author pleads to be identified with the shocking Thomas Hardy who is more 'real' than the Virgil under the bed.²⁶

It was one of those very human tragedies that compel the few people who are neither hypocrites nor fools to open out their hearts to one another. "An indiscussible [sic] book," says the average matron; "we must keep it out of the girls' hands." But the girls read the book none the less, and take poor Tess into their hearts, because she was real and human, and not a prig out of the "Sunday Companion." Even so, Heriot left Virgil's "Georgics" under the bed, and lived through the book a second time, thirsting often to kick Angel Clare and laughing with cynical passion over the final pathetic brutality of a thing called English Law.²⁷

²³ *The Rust of Rome*, p. 167.

²⁴ *The Rust of Rome*, p. 129.

²⁵ *The Rust of Rome*, p. 129.

²⁶ This is reminiscent of the incident described by Anthony Powell and mentioned in my first chapter.

²⁷ *The Rust of Rome*, p. 129.

Deeping's dismissal of the sensibilities of the English matron and his disdain for the law persist throughout his fiction.²⁸ This is one of the reasons why his texts are such a useful vehicle for interrogating assumptions that popular culture is merely a vehicle for a notional bourgeois hegemony. But on the other hand, it is arguable that this distrust of public systems in general, and public justice in particular, is closely linked to the heightened value he puts on individuality, a value inseparable from the competitive individualism of nineteenth and twentieth century Europe. To that extent, his fiction can be read as exemplifying the fissures in the society of which they are a product, a more persuasive reading than one which suggests they merely reflect what could be described as hegemonic values.

The ambivalence of his attitude to individualism is reflected in Deeping's revealing use of Landor as a touchstone. The villain in *The Rust of Rome*, a brutal owner seen to crush the tender integrities of the literary family, is himself seen to exemplify the dangers of an excessive individualism:

Melodramatic! the word suited Roger Burgoyne, though this melodramatic spirit of his had some of the read ardour that flares on one out of the pages of Victor Hugo. Burgoyne might have discovered himself in Scott, and he acknowledged a certain sympathy with Landor. In late nineteenth-century life he was an archaic and singular figure, a fiery fragment of individualism, utterly lacking in the saving grace of humour.²⁹

Like Milton's Satan, Burgoyne perhaps glows with too bright a fire to be a wholly negative portrait. Certainly another admirer of Landor, the insubordinate soldier in *Valour* (1918), the value of whose intransigent individuality is the subject of the book, is superior to the

²⁸ Deeping's acceptance of lawlessness which serves the needs of the superior individual is a feature of many of his tales, for example the hero's murder of the drunken wife-beater in *Woman at the Door* (1937).

²⁹ *The Rust of Rome*, p. 152.

materialist provincials who condemn him. This spirited hero 'had always admired Landor, and the serene arrogance of that brilliant egoist recurred to him with personal suggestiveness.'³⁰

Landor, like Leavis and Deeping, and unlike Arnold, asserted the value of his personal tastes without invoking a system of traditional values within which to justify them.

The anarchic implications of this method of establishing value and authority are exemplified in the last of Deeping's novels to be published before The Second War, *Fantasia* (1939).

Throughout this text there are fevered efforts to put a value on a range of cultural and political figures. The communal ideal of an agrarian utopia, based on non-competitive endeavour, is counterpoised to the suburban development of a new sea-side country estate, built for profit, prophetically named Bluewater. The satiric portrait of this second community, full of warring individualists is a middlebrow version of Wyndham Lewis's *Apes of God*: its inhabitants include an androgynous and bossy female manager, a pacifist who lispily and improbably describes himself as a 'passy-passy'³¹ and a homosexual who 'combined the duties of radio and gramophone expert, gigolo, and doorkeeper'.³² Deeping's sympathies for the domestic policies in Germany and Italy are reflected in his comment that 'a totalitarian community would have taken the homosexual and made something of a man of him by setting him to dig ditches'.³³ Hitler has also done the right thing by the intellectuals. In the following passage the perspective of the author and the hero are confused as the young hero ruminates on the characteristics of 'Youth'

Why did youth whimper and join some rotten little intelligentsia clique or claue? The Intelligentsia! Hitler and Hitler's Germany had tidied them up into the dustpan, and perhaps the Germans were right.³⁴

³⁰ *Valour*, p. 188.

³¹ *Fantasia*, p. 320.

³² *Fantasia*, p. 85.

³³ *Fantasia*, p. 110.

³⁴ *Fantasia*, p. 110.

(Note that precautionary 'perhaps'.) The hero is a 'dreamer' and poet but is saved from being a member of the Intelligentsia because of his distance from key demons like Freud and Havelock Ellis, his taste for farming and his metaphors of good housekeeping. The community he joins is created, like the hotel in *Sorrell* and the sanatoria in *Smith* (1932) and *The Secret Sanctuary* (1923), by the philanthropy of a wealthy individual. At this time Deeping was Vice-President of the therapeutic community for tubercular patients at Papworth, on which he modelled the community in *Smith* (1932). It seems to be one of the many examples of Deeping fictionalising his own enterprises in order to dramatise their value, presumably on his own behalf since he took pains that, apart from his horticultural activities, his private life was not publicised. Deeping is both the dreamer, Skelton, and the materialist, Jekyll, who is able because of his wealth to protect those worthy of being saved from the storms that were about to engulf England.

The community established by the philanthropic Jekyll and the 'dreamer' Skelton, is the only one of its kind in Deeping's fiction. It is founded by Jekyll in opposition both to the suburban and the highbrow. It is initially a community of men, indeed it is called 'Sons of Sussex'. Skelton's future wife is admitted entry to this select community chiefly for what she is not. Her value is defined wholly by reference to touchstones which are rejected as tainted. She is not a cat, like the 'aseptic' first love of the hero. If she is not a cat, 'Nor was she the mere ruminating cow, nor the idly subjective dreamer'.³⁵ Deeping flounders spectacularly in trying to establish exactly what kind of cow John's Rachel is:

If she were just a cow, or suburban - If she couldn't understand why I get silly about apple blossom and the new moon and all that -A green lap and quiet eyes, and a voice that isn't always talking. If a woman can sit and look at things and be silent, not like a cow, but -

³⁵ *Fantasia*, p. 63.

The puzzle over why Deeping should become so agitated over what kind of cow he should choose to represent his ideal woman may derive from Nietzsche's attempt to define the ideal woman as a cow in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.³⁶ The reader senses the author's Yeatsian compulsion and ambition to construct a set of touchstones derived from personal rather than commonly shared experience.

Fantasia (1939), more than any of Deeping's other novels, is shot through with cultural touchstones whether negative or positive. During the war he measures the saintliness of the heroes of his historical Southend novels by using Christian terms of reference. When the war is over, his unctuous country landowners are not obsessed by their cultural status; it is implied that that they stand superior and aloof from the cultural quicksands of the metropolis.

Fantasia is the last of Deeping's novels to crackle with the degree of cultural anxiety that characterizes his other novels in the thirties. We know what everyone is reading. The benefactor of the utopian farming community looks and talks like Sherlock Holmes. He reads A. J. Cronin's *The Citadel*. The villain, the lecherous and unscrupulous property developer, Mallison, hides the letters with which he intends to blackmail the female manager of his country club behind half a dozen copies of Havelock Ellis, presumably his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* which came out in seven volumes from 1898-1928. Freud is constantly invoked to be dismissed. The new woman who loses the real man to the nearly-cow-like Rachel and The Sons of Sussex is afflicted by Freudianism.

She belonged to a Freudian generation, and was all for self-analysis, and catching complexes as our grandmothers caught fleas.³⁷

³⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (Penguin, 1961), p. 84. 'Woman is not capable of friendship: women are still cats and birds. Or, at best, cows.'

³⁷ *Fantasia*, p. 227.

Despite, or perhaps because, many of Deeping's heroes have depressive problems which are presented as relating to their mothers, Deeping is insistent that Freud is irrelevant in his world. In fact, in *Fantasia* it is not particular works of highbrow literature that are vilified but those names which have authority in a highbrow world: Marx was seen off in *Sackcloth and Silk*, Havelock Ellis and Freud in this.³⁸ The shallowness of all philosophies which have offered all the answers, what might be now termed meta-narratives, is dismissed in *Fantasia* by the solid Stout as he pulls at his beer. Deeping is now doing exactly what Q. D. Leavis accuses Deeping and Hugh Walpole of doing, parading their own mastery of cultural 'knowledgeableness' in order to dismiss it and enabling their readership to 'get the best of both worlds'.³⁹ Deeping's sage sees through the 'mere cleverness'⁴⁰ of the lecherous and modish writer Mallison.

Hume settles everything, then Kant lays out Hume, and some Johnny lays out Kant. Now it's all Einstein & Co., though Einstein seems to be rather an old dear, and not a promiscuous prig like Mallison.

This generosity towards Einstein may owe something to the photogenic qualities of 'the old dear'; also his status as a scientist is higher than that of the philosopher. Deeping's reduction of Einstein to a cosy commodity for the peace of mind of his readers has indeed the effect that Punch attributed to middlebrow writing helping readers 'get used to the stuff they ought to like',⁴¹ but also, as Q. D. Leavis suggests, releasing them, to some extent, from the burden of having to like it. However it is arguable that this is not how Deeping uses such touchstones before he was so explicitly demonised by what he would have perceived as the literary establishment. As long as Deeping himself was targeted as stuff that no-one ought to like he was bound, given his aspirations to the status of moral leader, to release his readers from allegiances to rival gods.

³⁸ Yet Sorrell was allowed to read the polemical Edward Carpenter, with respect.

³⁹ *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 197.

⁴⁰ *Fantasia*, p. 74.

⁴¹ *Punch*, 23 December 1925, p. 673.

‘Sententious, yes, but I like that’

Another quality that Deeping and the Leavises share is their passionately educative relationship with their readers. Their attempts to act as brokers for the values attached to an author’s name accompanies a sense that the authority of any kind of writer is being weakened in a culture that was marginalising both writers and writerly authority. Their tendentiousness is related to their sense of the vulnerability of those readers. All were aware that this educative role of the writer was being threatened: the vicious Oscar Slade⁴² in *Exiles* remarks approvingly of ‘the elder Landor’s attitude to life’... ‘his pose was less sententious [presumably than his son’s]. It was better to be amusing than sententious.’⁴³ As Stan Brain’s collection of Deeping’s Words of Wisdom suggests, the portable philosophy of Deeping was one of his attractions. Bruce Bartels, (mentioned in the previous chapter), when asked why he enjoyed Deeping, replied,

every once in a while (actually several times per book) I find a flash of insight that is beautifully expressed. Sententious at times, yes, but I like that. So he’s an author I read and am very aware of the author while reading ... I read 3 or 4 of his books per year.⁴⁴

The need to apologise for a taste for the sententious is of recent origin. Stephan Collini has charted the decline of the public moralist from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. In the 1860s and 70s, the heyday of the academic periodical, authors tended not to owe their living to their writing. Their tone reflects their assumption that they were doing their readers a service but that both they and their readers were free to put down pen or book. The acceptance by a wide public of the moral authority of the man of letters was characteristic of most of the nineteenth century. A final expression of this climate of gentlemanly moral and literary authority is reflected by the fact that Leslie Stephen saw no need, in his biography of

⁴² His name possibly reflects the frequently dismissive comments about Oscar Wilde.

⁴³ *Exiles* (1930), p. 22.

⁴⁴ Bruce Bartels to Mary Grover, 23/02/00, <bbartels@esu2.k12.ne.us>.

his brother, to gloss the Membership Rule II of the Athenaeum. Members elected under Rule II were 'of distinguished eminence in Science, Literature, or the Arts, or for Public Service.' As Collini puts it the 'allusions an author does not feel called upon to gloss provide one obvious way for the historian to reconstruct the assumed community of readers'.⁴⁵

Stephen's daughter would have grown up knowing what Rule II meant. It is unlikely that Q. D. Leavis would; if she had, it is doubtful that she would have accepted the moral authority of a group of gentleman whose decisions on who were 'the best' were so 'unscientific'.

Although she repeatedly mourns the death of a homogeneous set of literary values she does not want to restore the gentleman's club as moral authority but to replace the source of that authority by a specifically educated literary elite. However, as Collini points out, it was the establishment of academic specialisations of such subjects as literature, philosophy and history that led to the decline of the public moralist. Both Leavises certainly wielded great moral influence but not directly on the non-specialist community. The fact that middlebrow pretensions to moral authority so angered both an heiress of the dying moral and literary elite and a crusader for the claims of a new kind of elite, reflects the fact that the constituencies that each spoke for were losing their power amongst the wider public. And as that power waned so the claims to moral authority on the part of both Deeping and the detractors of what he was held to represent, intensified and began to mirror the rhetoric of their ideological Other.

We sense in Deeping's syntax and use of metaphor that desperation to command the terms of the argument and to adopt an authoritative tone. The narrator and the sententious sage in his novels establish a discourse which is liberated from the meanings inherited from those despised 'British matrons' discussed in Chapter Three. A desire to be the author and origin of a unique language may be the origin of Deeping's many neologisms in his early work. During the

⁴⁵ *The Public Moralists* (Clarendon Press, 1991).

thirties his ambitions become even wilder, his syntax and use of metaphor extraordinarily odd and coercive.

The Road (1931) is an extended and tortuous musing on celibacy. Each metaphor is defiantly flung down as though it were the literal truth; each image attempting to anchor profundities in the world of the ordinary: 'the body of beauty .. a mere turgid white turnip',⁴⁶ and the ordinary universalised by mythological reference, so that a middle-aged gardener gazing reverently at a girl about to be paralysed in a motor accident is 'the flower man looking at Eros.'⁴⁷ Throughout the 1930s these mannerisms persist, serving to create a personal palette of attributes (the 'turgid' and the 'easy-osy' negatively loaded), pregnant images (the apple and the cow representing the feminine) and classical deities (Pan and Bacchus representing male sexuality) from which Deeping mixes his colours. And although Deeping may have hoped that the positive associations of Nietzsche or W. H. Hudson might accrue to his name, his aim is not to align himself with any school or system of thought but to construct a unique set of bi-polarities which will establish his authority within his novels as a body of work.

Many of these stylistic devices, serving to buttress the solidity of the author's moral universe, are also characteristic of Lawrence and the Leavises. Indefinite determiners are used to nominalise and objectify what are highly eccentric and personal constructs, for example, 'I don't want to be a mere bath-tap'.⁴⁸ Nominal phrases are often used to describe 'the sex thing': 'the sex-dream',⁴⁹ 'the sex precipice',⁵⁰ 'the sacrosanct honey-pot'⁵¹ or 'the turgid stalk

⁴⁶ *The Road*, p. 173.

⁴⁷ *The Road*, p. 31.

⁴⁸ *Fantasia*, p.166.

⁴⁹ *Fantasia*, p. 296, 'It was little more than the desultory act of a man whose inner self was lost in the sex-dream'.

⁵⁰ *Second Youth* (1919), p. 142.

⁵¹ *Sackcloth into Silk* (1935) p. 172

of sex'⁵² in *The Road* again. Such insistent nominalisation requires the reader to accept that, for example, the author knows what 'the' sex-dream is and that we need to trust that he will make us privy to his private code of signification. A neat device to ensure this dependence on the author is the nominalisation of adjectives to leave the reader trying to figure what kind of ripeness or waviness the author is envisaging, as in 'a ripeness',⁵³ and 'a waviness'.⁵⁴ Even when we are given more data to narrow the associative field we are left adrift. The heroine of *Roper's Row* was 'one of those sensitive creatures who are designed to be hunted by little round-headed savages'.⁵⁵

As its name suggests, *Fantasia* (1939), Deeping's novel about the dream of a suburban utopia by the sea as opposed to a true rural utopia is a kaleidoscope of references, allusions, associative clusters which suggest Deeping's ambition to be the sole source of signification in his fictional world. This description of the heroine conveys such urgency to escape any conventional set of associations that the reader struggles to follow the narrator: 'Where a Victorian might have simpered and looked coy, and a modern been pert, [the heroine] just remained put like a comely black cat, yet without the suggestion of any feline qualities.'⁵⁶ The Deeping world is presented as unique, constantly predicated by what it is not, but rooted in the world of the ordinary: cats, bath-tubs, turnips.

The banality of these images (in marked contrast to the exoticism of his earliest novels) is asserted defiantly. By virtue of his success, he was able to wear his heart upon his sleeve not only for professional critics to peck at but to become the common property of the whole

⁵² *The Road*, p. 171.

⁵³ *The Dark House* (1941) p. 36.

⁵⁴ *Exiles* (1930), p. 56.

⁵⁵ *Roper's Row* (1929) p. 6.

⁵⁶ *Fantasia*, p. 11.

population. The nakedness and clumsiness of his enforced intimacy with the reader is bound to repel when the reader rejects the author's right to invade and colonise his or her world of reference. A writer whose fictions seem to stem from a fear of engulfment nevertheless threatens to engulf his reader, leaving no distance between the reader and the text. Perhaps this is the reason why Deeping has been so systematically reified. Even the fiction of the ubiquitous John Galsworthy, whose name appears if anything more frequently in descriptive passages attempting to identify the middlebrow, is never referred to as 'a Galsworthy'.

Deeping achieved the status of those writers with whom it is so misleading to compare him, Genre writers, like Agatha Christie, and Edgar Wallace, who were indeed producing a quantity of books all of which offered the same, almost formulaic, satisfactions. But in commodifying him in this way, the authors who use him nearly all reveal their lack of familiarity with him, perhaps because it would have been embarrassing to acquire that familiarity. All the publicly known writers who publish such reifying references to Deeping are male and behind many of these contemptuous and inaccurate representations of Deeping one can hear the misogynist tones of the hard-boiled 1930s. These authors seek to distance themselves from an author who invites a snigger at the idle and feminised pleasures of popular literature.

The commodification of the '*faux bon*'

The overwhelming majority of references to Deeping by his contemporaries are to be found in the years 1930-35. Not only had *Sorrell and Son* been followed by half a dozen other bestsellers but the thirty-two other novels he had written before 1925 were reissued and avidly read. It must have seemed to admirers and critics alike that a tidal wave of Deepings had suddenly crashed upon their shores. It is difficult to tell how influential *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) was in persuading the intelligentsia to regard him as a culturally malign

figure. Whatever the reason, perhaps because fiction was decreasingly concerned with patterns of taste in the forties, it is not until the last decade of the twentieth century that Deeping re-emerges as a marker of taste and class, in the works of Martin Amis, Sebastian Faulks and Bill Bryson. This may not be a coincidence. The 1990s, like the early 1930s, was a period in which the emergence of new media threatened the privileged position of the printed word and in which established canons were being radically questioned. Just as the novels of the thirties showed far more interest in patterns of book consumption than their counterparts in the early twenties, novelists in the eighties and nineties also focus on the bookshelves to characterise their novels' inhabitants.

Whether or not books will continue to be culturally as significant to chroniclers of taste is an open question. But a comparison between Hugh Walpole's *The Inquisitor* (1935) and his earlier cathedral novel *The Cathedral* (1922) reveals the increasing significance which writers in the thirties ascribed to bookshelves. The inhabitants of the fictional cathedral town in the 1920s live, love and die and barely turn a page but in the thirties, as apocalyptic social breakdown threatens to engulf them, these same citizens sit down to simultaneous good reads, minutely chronicled by Walpole.⁵⁷ Walpole, like the young librarian Billy Brown in *Exiles*, learns 'to grade people rather like books and apples.'⁵⁸ In Deeping's novels too, people are graded by means of books and apples. But, as we have seen, his own books became one of

⁵⁷ *The Inquisitor* (Macmillan, 1935). On page 165 Lampiron is distracted from town affairs by the debate about whether Norman Douglas' *South Wind* is or is not a novel. On page 545 mob rule threatens the town, but Elizabeth Furze reads Wilkie Collins' *Armada* to her mother. 'She sat there, reading on, and subconsciously she was living in a world strangely compounded of love and fear.' On page 572 the announcement of the riot follows a paragraph which details lovingly the various cultural pursuits of different sections of Polchester Society.

⁵⁸ *Exiles*, p.197.

the most common means by which other authors graded their own characters and in so doing graded themselves as authors in relation to the increasingly devalued and reified Deeping.

John Hampson's *Saturday Night at the Greyhound* (1931) seems to be the first novel in which Deeping's name connotes a clearly defined cultural commodity. The metropolitan and high-brow Ruth Dorme is about to be exposed to the social realities of a bleak pub in the Midlands. Her inadequacy in the face of the suffering and limitations of the 'ordinary' Englishman, as conceived of by the left-wing Hampson, is exemplified by the inadequacy of the reading matter she faces in the room of her hotel in Matlock. Whereas her 'fat-headed maid' had packed her high-brow fare, *Sodome et Gomorrhe* and *Prancing Nigger*, the hotel library 'discovered nothing more exciting than the works of Michael Arlen and Warwick Deeping.'⁵⁹ In the context of the novel, both sorts of fiction seem utterly beside the point. Hampson is claiming a greater authenticity for his own fiction beside the mannerisms of the two modernist texts or the frivolity of Arlen or the dullness of Deeping, the two latter characteristically denoted by their brand-names rather than by the names of any individual products. The individuality of their products is therefore erased, the bright, modishness of Arlen being lumped together with the earnest and self-consciously unmodish Deeping.

Simon Blumenfeld, like Hampson, uses mistaken assumptions about the contents of Deeping's novels to buttress his prejudice against 'the conventional middle class'. On entering an empty room the bookish Alec focuses on the bookshelves of the absent inhabitant.

Nothing very interesting. The usual stuff, middle to three-quarter brow. Amongst others, Warwick Deeping, Ethel Mannin, David Garnett, Arthur Symons: Several Shakespeares ... A Dickens set (probably from the *Daily Mail*) ... Bernard Shaw ... H.G. Wells ... Macaulay ... Professors Lode and Jeans ... A fat Nuttall's dictionary ... Fowler's *Modern English Usage*.

⁵⁹ *Saturday Night at the Greyhound*, pp. 129-130.

Just what he might have expected. A catholic taste. Quite conventional middle-class, even to the ready-made guides to the Universe, handy keys to the problems of the eternal whys and wherefores. A whole library of escape. You had only to pick up one of these books, and your mind soared into the vast empyrean, and you forgot there were such mundane things on earth as employment queues for example, and labour colonies, and filthy East End slums.⁶⁰

Of course it was what Alec expected. But had Deeping come across this characterisation of his fictional universe he would have been understandably affronted. He had based his appeal in novels such as the pre-war *Pride of Eve*, the post-war *Seven Men Came Back*, *Smith, Old Wine and New*, not to mention *Sorrell and Son* itself, on the consciousness that the employment queues contained just these 'middling' sort of people. (Ethel Manin too cannot be described as escapist in the terms that Blumenfeld applies.) It is clear that the left-wing Blumenfeld has used an author's name as short-hand for a set of values he despises.

Patrick Leigh Fermor too, in his reminiscences of his wanderings in Europe in the thirties, uses the possession of a Deeping to denote the shallow understanding of his readers. In *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986), Fermor recalls dancing with an English student in Bucharest before the Second World War,⁶¹ who enthuses about English literature.

"I love English books very much. Wells, Galsworthy, Morgan, Warwick Deeping, Dickens. And Byron's poetry, if ..." she stopped, smiling thoughtfully. I waited, wondering what reservations were coming, and after a few seconds' silence, ventured to say, "If what?" "If," she said, "you can keep your head while all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you."

This passage is all about the head, in particular Fermor's, who like the reader is superior to this giddy East European girl who so amusingly confuses the cultural status of authors which are only superficially available to her. How fragile is this complicity between the author and reader is revealed by the reference to Dickens, however. The circulation wars of the thirties

⁶⁰ Simon Blumenfeld, *Jew Boy* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1935), p. 133.

⁶¹ Patrick Leigh Fermor, *Between the Woods and the Water* (Murray 1986: quoted from Penguin, 1987), p. 214.

which had caused *The Daily Mail* to introduce complete sets of Dickens into thousands of homes also conspired to devalue his cultural status. How much was the Leavises' early dismissal of Dickens the product of the ubiquity of cheap and ugly editions of Dickens in the thirties? Is this why Osborne links Deeping and Dickens? Is Fermor, like the modern reader, amused by the disparity in cultural status between Dickens and Deeping or did he regard his companion's enthusiasm for Dickens as a mark of shallow taste?

Nearly sixty years later Malcolm Bradbury is to be betrayed into a similar error but through an academic rather than a political prejudice that what has become a brand name for a set of values is not actually worth referring to accurately. When Bradbury, in *The Modern British Novel*, groups Deeping's pre-war novels with Henty's under the category of 'boyish or manly adventure'⁶² he might just as well have grouped him with the pre-war Condition of England novels which include *The Pride of Eve*, *The Return of the Petticoat* and possibly *Sincerity*. But Bradbury might be excused his oversight of these works since Deeping himself implied that *Sorrell and Son* was the first novel he had written which dealt with contemporary problems.

The only positive references to Deeping in print are from his two editors, Cecil Hunt of *The Daily Mail*⁶³ and Newman Flower of Cassell, both of whom had good financial reasons to be grateful to him. Redlich is the only female novelist I have discovered who uses Deeping to enhance her own cultural status. Marjorie Sharp, who could be described as a middlebrow herself, playfully subverts the very notions of cultural hierarchy in *The Nutmeg Tree* (1937). The heroine, a not-particularly successful musical hall artiste, finds herself having to make an impression on the daughter whom she cheerfully abandoned in her infancy to the loving care

⁶² Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (Secker and Warburg, 1993), p.71.

⁶³ Cecil Hunt, *Ink in My Veins* (Ebenezer Baylis, 1948), p.71.

of her genteel mother-in-law. Twenty years later, the daughter, now a priggish graduate in English from Newnham, demands her mother's appearance. Hoping to impress her highly educated daughter the heroine respectfully clutches *The Forsyte Saga* (not 'a' Galsworthy) on her journey to France thus confirming the daughter's opinion of her mother's intellectual inadequacies. It is the heroine's innocence and clumsiness in playing games of cultural consequence that endears her to the man who eventually, in conventional middlebrow fashion, rescues her from penury.

But perhaps it was only in the 1950s when the stigma attached to the 'middlebrow' had begun to fade that Elizabeth Taylor's *Angel* (1957) could have succeeded in making the figure of a bestselling author tragic as well as ridiculous. This extraordinary book explores the way in which class insecurities and critical ridicule fuel the obsessions which give the fiction of *Angel*, the entirely self-centred author, their fire and powerful appeal. Q. D. Leavis at one point grants that the

great bestseller, the bestseller that is, whose writing goes straight to the heart of the public, unlike the literary novelist, is actuated by as authentic a passion as the artist, if it is judged by volume and temperature; hence the degree of conviction that such authors carry to their readers.⁶⁴

She then goes on to undermine acknowledgement of this authenticity by citing as typical of such fiction 'the hysterical climax and conclusion, evidence of an overwhelming excitement, to be explained by the pervasive self-dramatisation'. As always there is as much truth as there is distortion in her observations. It is difficult to reconcile this image of the driven writer, authentic because compulsive, with ubiquitous characterisations of the popular author as writing mechanically 'studying the market in order to exploit it.'⁶⁵ However in Deeping's

⁶⁴ *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 236.

⁶⁵ *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 207.

case it would be difficult to deny that we are aware of the hysteria underlying his 'pervasive self-dramatisations'.

***Blind Man's Year* : a conclusion**

Blind Man's Year, published in 1937, is the last of his novels I shall discuss and exemplifies the way in which the establishment of cultural hierarchies, certainly in the 1920s and 1930s, intensifies the very qualities which their construction purports to undermine. This novel is both about the recognition of his own fear of humiliation that a popular novelist is able to give the middlebrow reader, and the punishment such a novelist receives for according such a reader recognition. The fictionalised author is a woman and the fictionalised reader a man, the same configuration that Deeping uses in 'Bitter Silence' (1919). However whereas that tale had a naturalism and a critique of class which could be described as subtle this story is a bizarre and confused dramatisation of a range of anxieties: professional, sexual and social.

The stigma attached to the figure of the author is, in *Blind Man's Year*, exemplified by a birthmark so hideous that she refuses to leave the 'veritable fortress' of the 'old Sussex farmstead' which is protected by 'high dense hedges' and 'close meshed' fences. This sanctuary she has bought with the profits from a bestseller, *A Pilgrimage of Pain*, a plausible pseudonym for *Sorrell and Son*. Published under a man's name, Douglas Gerard, Rosamund manages to repel an intrusive journalist who suspects that the author is in fact a man, but her defences are penetrated by a young airman⁶⁶ who crashes in her extensive shrubbery blinding himself in both eyes as he makes his entrance.⁶⁷ Because of his blindness he enables the disfigured writer to acknowledge her femininity not only sexually but domestically. He is

⁶⁶ Deeping's admiration for Jung might have inspired his use of this archetypal aviator. See his admiration for Jung on p.219 of this novel.

⁶⁷ A repetition of the face-saving device in *Love Among the Ruins* (1904).

already an admirer of 'Douglas Gerard's' books and recovers, in part, because of the way she reads these books to him. However the writer temporarily abandons writing to care for the patient in more practical ways. A large proportion of the book is taken up with the pleasures of house-keeping for a blind man and the imagination that must be applied to making the simplest of tasks possible.

Like *Sorrell and Son* and *Kitty*, this book gives house-keeping an heroic dimension. Unlike Deeping's farming novels, where the solemn discussion of rain and the cost of agricultural equipment might have meant little to a predominantly, but certainly not exclusively, female suburban audience, this novel gave 'the trivial round and common task' a dignity usually only found in children's books, such as Richard Jefferies' *Bevis* or Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, where the question of survival on an island or a boat makes the management of the ordinary of absorbing importance. In this respect many of Deeping's novels offered, not the escape from the daily, but the celebration of it. The reviewer of *The Wichita Eagle*, 4 September 1937, found *Blind Man's Year* 'a stimulating, engrossing story, one of the best Warwick Deeping has ever done'.⁶⁸ The drama that engrosses the reader in the first half of the book is the romance of the domestic. The reader is invited to contemplate the shopping lists and practical arrangements made by the writer for the needs of the disabled man.

What is curious is the ambiguity with which Deeping views the situation of a helpless man in relation to the domestic competence of a woman. In both *Kitty* (1927) and *Portrait of A Playboy* (1947), the illness of the man delivers him up to the malign nurturing of the mother in the earlier novel, and into the arms of a French housekeeper whose heavy sensuality is more maternal than erotic: 'She would wrap man in the swaddling clothes of a deliberate and careful

⁶⁸ Cutting from Maude Deeping's scrap-book.

possessiveness.⁶⁹ This indeterminate 'man' is later 'to be succoured and dominated by 'woman' again with no determiner. And the 'the child in him cried: "Mother - mother." '⁷⁰

The admirable Sorrell, of course, finds self-fulfilment by taking on that sustaining role himself and in so doing freeing himself of the need for dependence on a woman. His son, like the writer in *Portrait of a Playboy*, is liberated to work by the companionship of a vigorous and modern woman. But these ideal companionate marriages exist outside the framework of the book's main narrative. They succeed the struggle of the man to free himself from the bullying of a female partner. We can only guess at the reasons why the son of a doctor who can never have had to deal with domestic household duties himself should have been so absorbed by domestic routines. The erotic potential of a blind man nursed by a woman whose chief charm is her voice Deeping seems to have borrowed fairly shamelessly from *The Rosary*, Florence Barclay's 1909 bestseller, in which a wholesome but unalluring amateur singer allows herself to be loved by an ardent artist only when he is blind and she is able to become his nurse. Until his blindness the singer feels she is bound to disappoint an artist because of her appearance. Though Barclay's romance can be seen as successor to *Jane Eyre*, a woman's fantasy of taming a man's potency by infantilising him, Deeping's tale is a male writer's fantasy of being loved as a female author whose gender, as author, is ambiguous. The fantasy's potential erotic charge is overlaid by the greater agitation over the gender and status of popular authorship. It has more in common with Walter de la Mare's nightmare of diminishment, *Memoirs of a Midget*.⁷¹

⁶⁹ *Portrait of a Playboy*, p. 25.

⁷⁰ *Portrait of a Playboy*, p.133.

⁷¹ Walter de la Mare, *Memoirs of a Midget*, (Faber and Faber, 1932)

In *Blind Man's Year* the dramatic justification for 'Douglas Gerard's' persistent justifications of her own fiction is that she is measuring the 'reality' of the pain within her novels against the pain of her patient. The reader hears her critics: 'They call me sentimental'⁷² and 'they call me the parlour-maid's novelist'.⁷³ Modernism's attempt to depreciate the literature of sensibility and sentiment,⁷⁴ must be held partially responsible for the need felt by Deeping to rescue his readers from the charge of sentimentality, a responsibility never shouldered by Dickens, for example. The jealous sister of the author describes Strange's fiction as 'refined sob-stuff'⁷⁵ and the novelist herself condemns her own fiction as she reads it to the pilot she considers to be dying.

This April evening she was conscious of her creation's mechanism. Rather dull, superior stuff! Or was it that she was more conscious of the unknown book whose pages were turning to their finis in the room below.⁷⁶

Deeping attempts to persuade the reader that these accusations of sentimentality are misjudged by two strategies. Firstly the airman, in 'real' pain, trusts the woman because she is author of *The Pilgrimage of Pain*. It is her understanding of real pain that makes her fiction acceptable to the reader in his real pain. The novel which, like *Sorrell and Son*, 'sold nearly a million copies in England and America', had been translated into every language 'with the exception of Russian and, I think, Chinese.'⁷⁷ The implication is that the dying airman's validation of the book's authenticity also validates the millions of purchasers of this painful tale as unsentimental. Secondly the author's groundedness in reality rather than sentiment is demonstrated by the scale of her own priorities. She puts aside her writing in order to lend her imagination to the practical task of making the house available to a blind man. The author's

⁷² *Blind Man's Year*, p. 80.

⁷³ *Blind Man's Year*, p. 296.

⁷⁴ Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Clarendon, 1996), p. 2.

⁷⁵ *Blind Man's Year*, p. 251.

⁷⁶ *Blind Man's Year*, pp. 44-45.

⁷⁷ *Blind Man's Year*, p. 6.

empathy is harnessed to the task of imagining how a blind man can overcome the obstacles to coping with the ordinary. Conversely the blind man talks about his efforts in taking exactly the right amount of butter on his knife in the same terms as the the author talks about her writing, 'I shan't be satisfied till I'm a bit of an expert at my craft'.⁷⁸ The craft of learning to spread butter is equated with that of writing.

The ambiguities both of Deeping's class positioning and gender identification of the popular author are exemplified by the way in which he deals with the author's relationship with her audience of 'ordinary', 'real' people. As Douglas Gerard she receives letters from readers asking for advice because 'she was a kind of literary priestess and seer.'⁷⁹ This prophetic role is contingent on the feminisation of the author despite her pen-name. Rosamund Strange trembles in her cultivated fastness at the thought that her readers' interest in her will result in an intrusion of her privacy. Nevertheless she derives her subject matter from 'the refreshing sincerity' of a select few of the many letters that she reads out to her blind husband who observes that the 'more naive and clumsy the story, the more did it appear true. These sensitive people stammered out their story. The professionals were too damned glib.'⁸⁰ Her husband then comes to a firm conclusion that many of the female correspondents think the author is a man and that they are using her as their analyst. Basing his conviction on his reading of 'extracts' of Freud (reading whole books would presumably reduce him to the status of a glib professional) he agrees with his wife that they will go up to London. This they do and the blind husband proceeds to acquire copy for his wife by accepting the guardianship of the honest Jack who can lead him into 'slums and doss-houses and queer clubs' where he

⁷⁸ *Blind Man's Year*, p. 193.

⁷⁹ *Blind Man's Year*, p. 14.

⁸⁰ *Blind Man's Year*, p. 241

learns things that 'a toff is not supposed to know'.⁸¹ When Clive comments that 'one can learn a lot outside a Labour Exchange' a modern reader might grimace at (amongst other things) the naked voyeurism of such an observation but the implied reader of this narrative was presumably meant to conclude that Warwick Deeping, by now established in the pages of *Harper's Bazaar* and *The Queen* as every bit a toff, had some hot line to the ordinary which gave him credence, perhaps with the inhabitants of slums and doss-houses but certainly with those who feared that, but for the improving effect of the Deeping uplift, they might descend into those places.

The novel's preoccupation with house-keeping is, in part, an attempt to demonstrate that the wealthy popular author has not lost his or her connection with his readers. The virility of the airman masculinises such traditionally feminised activities as coping with household tasks. His blindness makes the overcoming of each domestic obstacle an heroic act. As with matters of class and genre so it is with matters of gender. Deeping wants to have it all. The popular author of his imagination is both man and woman, as Rosamund Strange the guardian of an earthly paradise associated with a land-owning middle class and as Douglas Gerard the guardian, in a more paternal or maternal sense, of the pain of the readers outside. For though Rosamund and her husband are in no danger of descending into economic destitution, they have a real and justified fear of social ostracism.

The dramatic conclusion of *Blind Man's Year* is precipitated by a savage cartoon in a magazine, a thinly disguised *Punch* of 'a popular lady novelist dancing with a little pet monkey of a husband dangling from her bosom.' In fact the cartoon is a graphic illustration of Deeping fears of the predatory and emasculating effect of a powerful woman on the man she

⁸¹ *Blind Man's Year*, p. 306.

loves. It 'portrayed a tall, lean, predeaceous woman dancing with a little male figure attached to her like a homunculus.'⁸² This image combines two apparently disparate fears. The first is that the popular novelist has to be feminine in his sensibilities in order to possess the mysterious power of empathy, perhaps because his audience is principally female. The second is that the notion of femininity is, nearly always in Deeping's novels, inextricably linked with the female's power to smother and emasculate the male. The congruence of these two notions of femininity at the conclusion of *Blind Man's Year* tells us as much about what was currently assumed about the nature of popular fiction as it does about Deeping's fear of the feminine both within himself and without.

The grisly climax of this tale is unique amongst Deeping's novels in that it involves a birth. The pressure to demonstrate the femininity of his heroine despite her masculine name and earning power, leads Deeping to plunge her into the agonies of childbirth. This is depicted as a terrible process, not only physically but mentally. The author's predatory sisters are massing at her gate to destroy her precarious mental balance. That this balance has been disturbed is partly due to the viciousness of the metropolitan cartoon and partly to the mother's fear that her child will inherit her birth mark. This is an anguished piece of writing, the loyal servants, manly but disabled husband and suffragette female doctor physically barring the way of the predatory sisters into the rural sanctuary of the woman in labour. Deeping acknowledged that he would never forget the grief of his mother at the death of her second daughter, Constance Eleanor in 1885, aged 7 months. The birth of his sister Kathleen with a hare-lip might also have fuelled his horror at child-birth and his distaste for children. However in this text the process of a painful birth, accompanied by shame and fear that the disfigurement of the author is going to be visited on her child, is embedded in what is presented as the nightmare of

⁸² *Blind Man's Year*, p. 308.

popular authorship. The image of the mother in labour guarded by a phalanx of loyal comrades and spouse is not far distant from the image we have from Maude Deeping and Barbara Nickalls of a man protected from a world which he imagined would do one of two contradictory things: engulf him, erasing a constructed identity felt to be fragile or expose him as disfigured, morally or spiritually, to the public he had courted.

Reflection on the way this novel is trying to negotiate an authenticity for the popular novelist shows us how the critical climate in which Deeping worked in the late 1920s and 1930s intensified his fear of bullying, whatever form it took, and dictated many of his fictional strategies to preserve his sense of himself as immune from his tormentors. This fantasy of immunity is perhaps the most escapist feature of Deeping's work. Deeping simultaneously presents the kind of fiction produced by 'Douglas Gerard' as both a mystery that demonstrates the author's unusual powers of empathy but also a purely practical exercise which 'fed the cat and paid Will's wages'.⁸³ The touchstone of both notions of authorship is its connection with the 'real'. This insistence on the reality of the so-called sentimentality of Gerard's novels is linked to that touchstone of *The Sunday Dispatch* readers, 'simplicity'. Again Deeping brings the despised critics upon his stage in order to dismiss them with his own definition of the way a popular novelist can achieve 'depth' through simplicity. After she had successfully nursed her airman, 'Douglas Gerard's' novels were to be transformed by greater simplicity (much as Deeping insisted his were by his care of the wounded and dying in The Great War). In *Blind Man's Year* this quality of simplicity is feminised in comments such as 'her critics were to complain that Douglas Gerard had sacrificed an iridescent sophistication for an almost virginal simplicity.'⁸⁴ Sorrell's Roman stoicism, the conscript's resistance to the authority of the

⁸³ *Blind Man's Year*, p. 32.

⁸⁴ *Blind Man's Year*, p. 214.

military machine, the writer's independence from his critics, the girl's vulnerability to sexual violence are all images representing Deeping's assertion of the desirability but fragility of personal autonomy. Therefore, experience of hardship, pain and suffering, within the novel, must be seen to certify the 'reality' of the fictional experience, and hence the non-escapist nature of the reading experience. But such pain must not alter the subject's consciousness. Deeping's novels do not follow the model of Oprah's choices. His characters do not develop but survive. His fiction, on the other hand, did develop, in response to the tone and terms of his tormentors.

Deeping's fiction struggles, like the Kleinian self, 'for composure in response to its own contradictory and conflictual formation.'⁸⁵ Obscure though the psycho-sexual origins of these struggles may be, we can see their traces in the way Deeping's fiction constructs an image of the popular author. Deeping's many mystifications: of racial otherness, female sexuality and individualism may all require what Lefebvre prescribes: 'a study of how ideological transposition can operate in men's consciousness; for ideologies and mystifications are based upon real life, yet at the same time they disguise or transpose that real life.'⁸⁶ The chief focus of this project has been the way in which judgements of taste are in practice based on defensive class positioning and as a result disfigure goods produced by individuals who feel themselves to be subordinated within the cultural hierarchy. It also reveals that the real life of these subordinated cultural products can be disguised by the desire of cultural commentators to maintain their distance from contamination by products tainted by their class associations. Critics of Deeping's work dramatised the extent to which it was embarrassing rather than identifying the authenticity of the fears it expressed, the pleasures it sought to deliver or the

⁸⁵ Graham Dawson, *Imagining Masculinities* (Routledge, 1994), p.35

⁸⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *A Critique of Everyday Life*, p. 146.

ways it was noxious. The lack of such scrutiny is itself a denial of the authenticity of Deeping and his readers. Imbued with the notion that bourgeois fiction represented false consciousness and therefore was not worth examining, critics have failed to examine the consciousness it did reveal.

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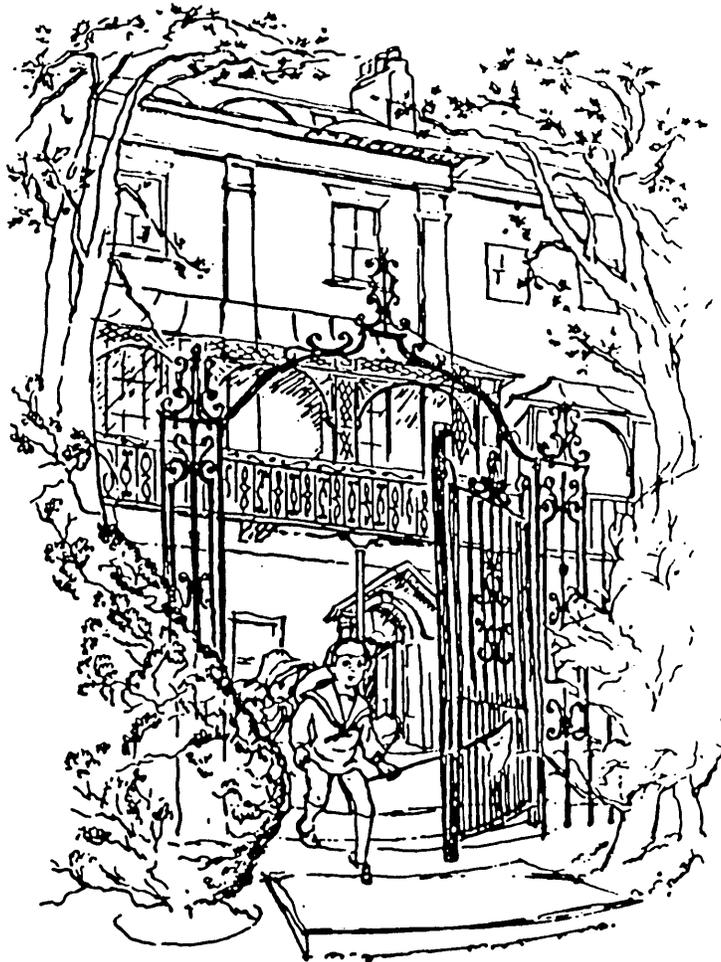
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A sketch showing the entry to the Shrubbery.
The Deeping home is in the background.





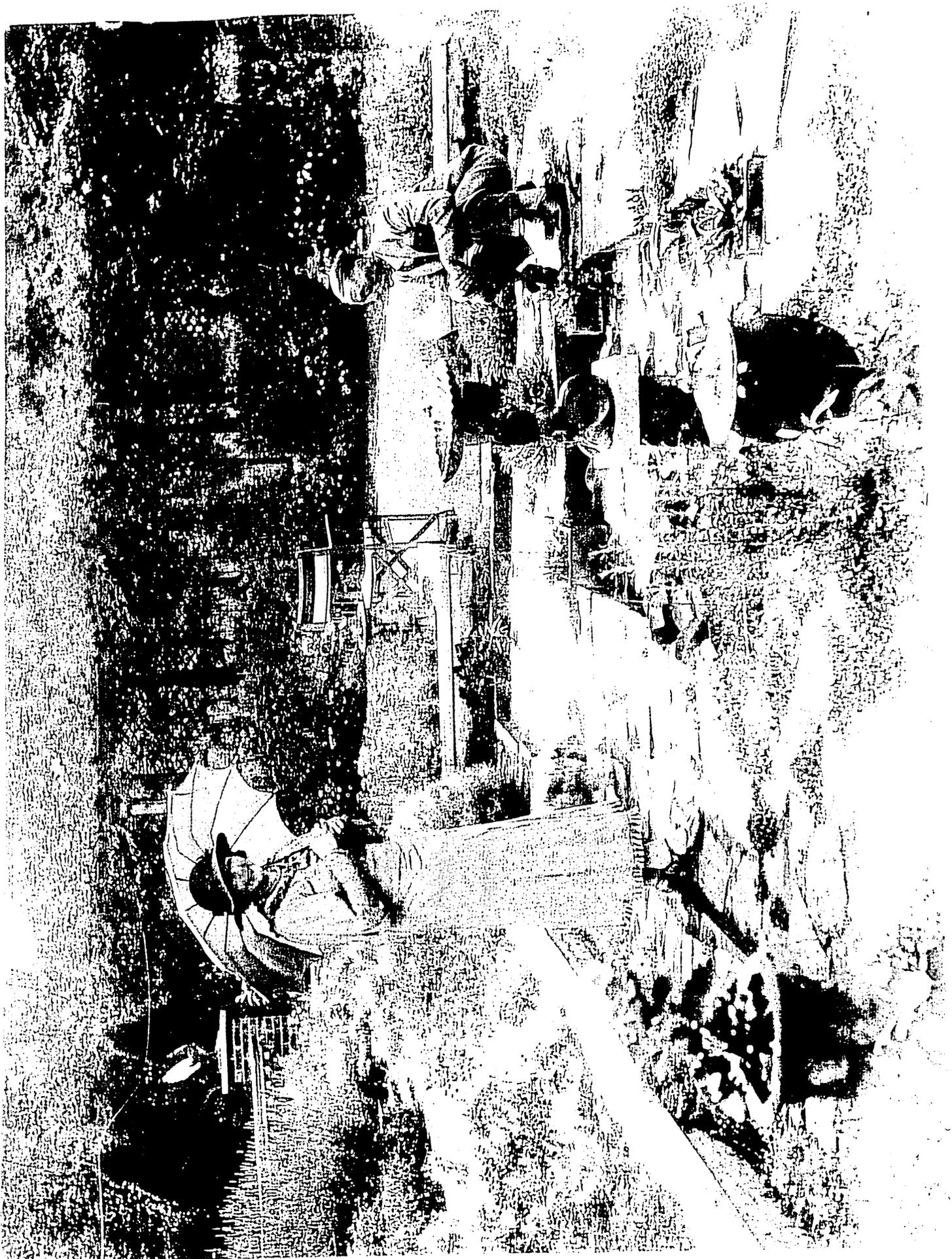


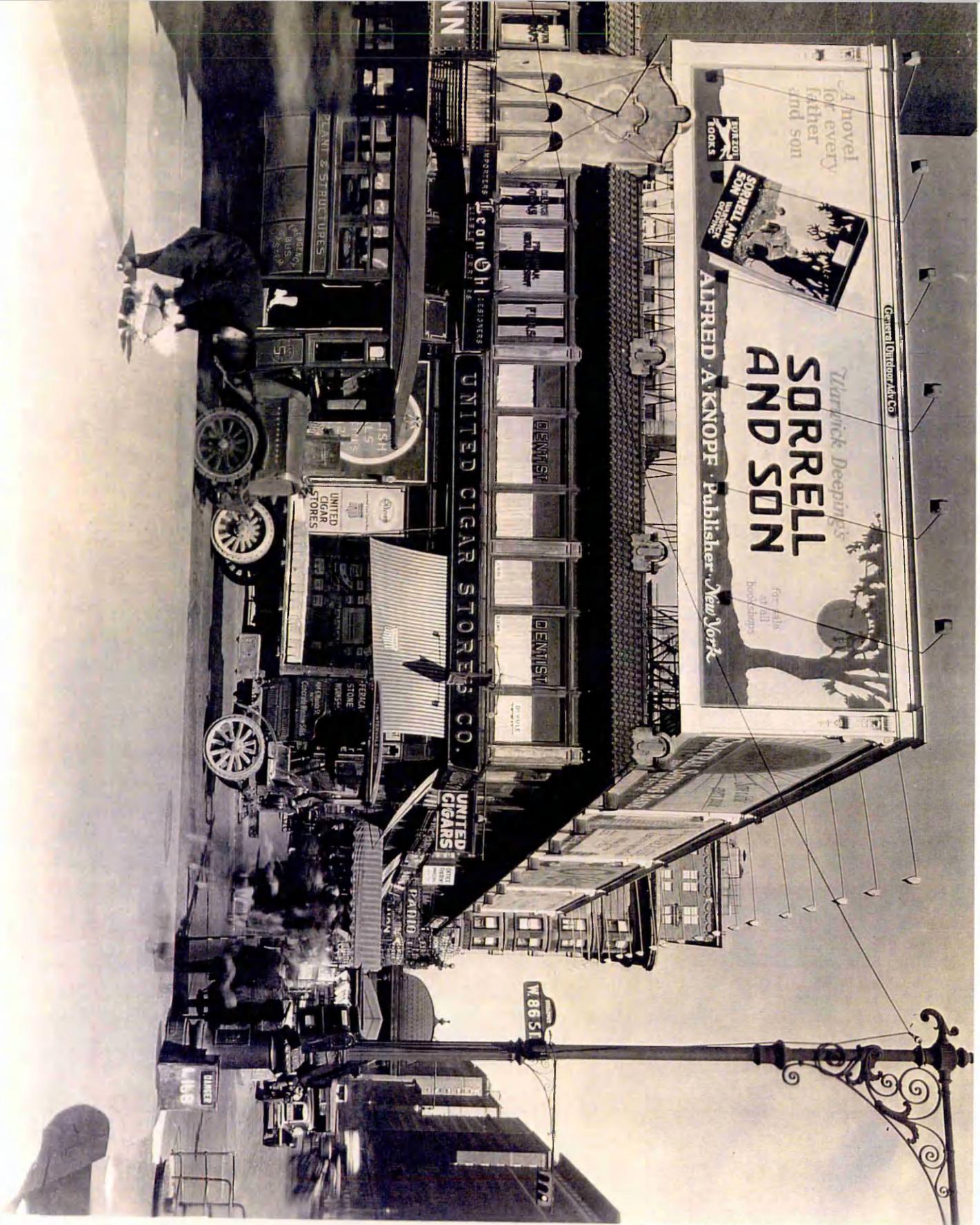




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