

Edited by
Simon Barker and Jo Gill

Literature as History

Essays in Honour of Peter Widdowson

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Simon Barker and Jo Gill



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Airmail

A Poem for Peter

When parrots pass by night they drop a note
to say they've been. You find it in the morning,
a white patch on your doorstep, and still sticky
should you be fool enough to step in it.

If you're not often visited by parrots
or not at all, count yourself lucky.
Many's the enterprise that's been left yawning
for want of a bird-scarer. To inherit

good fortune's no mean feat, with the migrations
scheduled to start. Soon, soon will Hitchcock's dreams
become reality, as the air darkens
with endless flocks filling the sky in swarms
that block out daylight, squawking as they go,
drenching the landscape in a gooey snow.

Stan Smith
© Stan Smith 2009

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Peter Widdowson

This collection of essays was conceived as a testimony to Peter Widdowson's life and work and was given to him in typescript a few weeks before his untimely death in June 2009. The editors and contributors decided to leave the text unchanged and to offer it to readers just as it was presented to him.

Simon Barker and Jo Gill

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Acknowledgements

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Proceeds from the sale of this volume will go to Cancer Research UK, P.O. Box 123, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, WC2A 3PX.

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Catherine Belsey is Research Professor in English at Swansea University. She first worked with Peter Widdowson on *Re-Reading English* (1982). Her books include *Critical Practice* (1980, 2002), *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (1994), *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (2002), *Culture and the Real* (2005) and *Why Shakespeare?* (2007).

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Simon Dentith is Professor of English at Reading University. He has published widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century topics. For 13 years he was a colleague of Peter Widdowson at Cheltenham and Gloucester College, later the University of Gloucestershire, where he learnt immeasurably from Peter's example.

Tim Dolin is Associate Professor in the School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, WA. He is the author of *George Eliot* (2005) and *Hardy* (2007), and is co-editor with Peter Widdowson of *Thomas Hardy and Contemporary Literary Studies* (2004).

Terry Eagleton is Professor of Cultural Theory at the National University of Ireland, Galway, Professor of English Literature at the University of Lancaster, and Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of Notre Dame. He is author of over fifty works of literary criticism and cultural theory.

U. A. Fanthorpe was an Honorary Fellow of the University of Gloucestershire. She died in April 2009 while this volume was in preparation. 'U. A.' and her partner, the poet and academic Rosie Bailey, enjoyed a close friendship with Peter Widdowson. Her poem in this volume, 'Another "Last Signal"', a tribute to Peter in the voice of Thomas Hardy, was one of her last compositions.

Jo Gill is Lecturer in English at the University of Exeter. She is the author of *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics* (2007), *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (2008) and the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* (2006). Her Ph.D. was supervised at the University of Gloucestershire by Shelley Saguario and Peter Widdowson.

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Philip W. Martin is Professor of Literature and Pro Vice-Chancellor at De Montfort University, and author of *Byron: A Poet before His Public* (1982), *Mad Women in Romantic Writing* (1987), *Reviewing Romanticism* (joint-ed., 1992) and *English: The Condition of the Subject* (ed., 2007). He is an editor of *Literature and History* (since 1989).

Martin Randall is Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Gloucestershire. His doctoral thesis on literary representations of the Holocaust was completed in 2005 under the supervision of Peter Widdowson. His book, *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* will be published in 2010 by Edinburgh University Press.

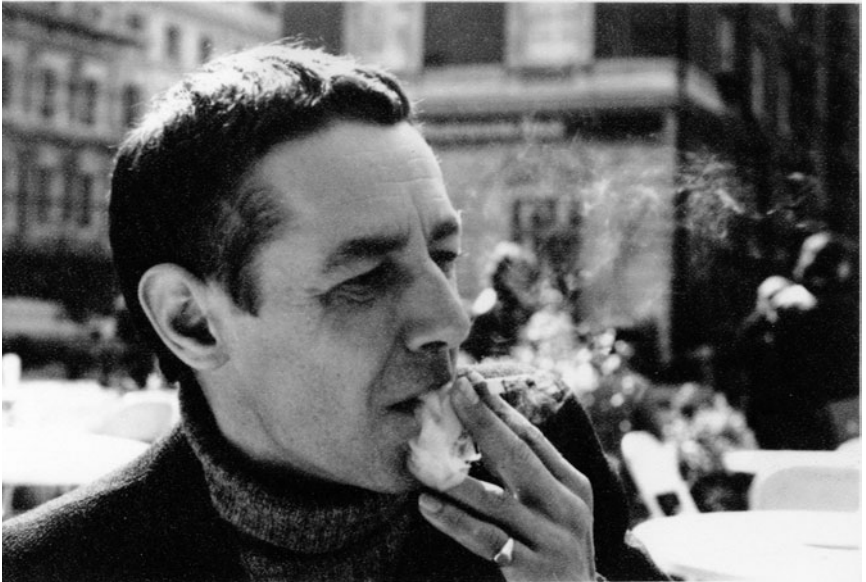
Professor R. C. Richardson began his career in 1968 at Thames Polytechnic where he worked with Peter Widdowson on *Literature and History* (of which he remains the longest serving editor) before moving to what is now the University of Winchester as Head of History in 1977. His publications include *The Debate on the English Revolution* (1998) and *The Changing Face of English Local History* (2000). His *Household Servants in Early Modern England* is forthcoming from Manchester University Press.

Shelley Saguario is Head of Humanities at the University of Gloucestershire. Her research has had a recent emphasis on post-colonial landscapes. She is the editor of *Psychoanalysis and Woman* (2000) and the author of *Garden Plots: The Politics and Poetics of Gardens* (2006). An article, 'Telling Trees: Eucalyptus,

“Anon” and the Growth of Coevolutionary Histories’, is forthcoming in the Canadian journal *Mosaic*.

Judy Simons is Professor of English and Pro Vice-Chancellor at De Montfort University. Her major publications include *Fanny Burney* (1987), *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women from Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf* (1990), *Rosamond Lehmann* (1992) and *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of Classic Stories for Girls 1880–1920* (1995), co-authored with Shirley Foster.

Stan Smith holds the Research Chair in Literary Studies at Nottingham Trent University. His publications include studies of W. H. Auden, Edward Thomas and Yeats, as well as *History and Twentieth-Century Poetry* (1982) and the *Origins of Modernism* (1994). Recent books include *The Cambridge Companion to Auden* (2004) and (with Jennifer Birkett), *Right/Left/Right: Revolving Commitments, France and Britain 1929–1950* (2008). His first collection of poems, *Family Fortunes*, was published by Shoestring Press in 2008. Stan’s poem for Peter evokes a 30-year intermittent correspondence about parrots following a joke Peter told at a boozy evening at Thames Polytechnic in 1978. No one can now remember the joke.



Peter Widdowson in London, 1984. Photograph taken and submitted by Jane Maxwell

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Introduction

Simon Barker and Jo Gill

Literature as History: Essays in Honour of Peter Widdowson takes the retirement of Professor Peter Widdowson from a lifetime of scholarship, teaching, mentoring and enthusiastic debate as an opportunity for a reappraisal of the academic field which, some 40 years ago, he helped to nurture into being. The study of English at universities and colleges throughout the English-speaking world owes a debt to the pioneering work of Widdowson and his contemporaries – many of whom feature, or are acknowledged, in this collection – as they fought to redefine and thereby to open out the discipline.

Literature as History: Essays in Honour of Peter Widdowson seeks to do justice to Peter's work – both in terms of the quality of its contribution to the scholarly field and in terms of its cross-disciplinary and multivocal approach. The chapters that follow represent the work of a range of key contemporary thinkers and focus on the interdisciplinary study of literature and history – exemplified by essays on the history of the discipline of English Studies, the rise of theory and the current state of the field. The main themes of the book are as diverse as Widdowson's own scholarship, ranging from Oedipus and Shakespeare to the representation of the 'servant problem' in the eighteenth century and the poetry of war, to the work of Dickens and Hardy and on again to modernist and twentieth-century writers including Rosamund Lehmann, Edward Thomas and contemporary novelist, Toni Morrison. The unifying theme is the interrelationship between literary or cultural production and its historical moment. The essays in the collection are astute and exciting in terms of their engagement with ever-changing developments in critical and theoretical practice while retaining an invaluable focus on familiar and engaging texts and authors. Each of the contributions owes a debt to Widdowson's work, and each – in its originality, depth and rigour – pays tribute to his example.

Peter Widdowson took his BA in 1964 and his Ph.D. in 1969 at the University of Nottingham. His doctoral thesis was on the poetry and painting of the First World War. In 1968, he became a lecturer in English Literature at the University of Umeå, Sweden, but returned to England in 1971 to take up the post of Head of the Division of English at Thames Polytechnic (now the University of Greenwich). He was Head of the School of English at what is now Middlesex

University from 1986 until 1992 and Head of the School of Historical and Critical Studies at the University of Brighton from 1992 until 1993. In January 1994, he was appointed Professor and Reader in English at the University of Gloucestershire, previously Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education. Here he was the founder and general editor of The Cyder Press, which continues to publish new scholarly editions and reprints of long out-of-print and little known literary works, especially by writers with local regional connections.

Peter became an honorary Fellow of the English Association (2001) and was for many years a member of the English panel at the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). He also served on the national Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) panel for English in 1992 and 1996. He taught in the United States, held a visiting research fellowship at the Australian National University, Canberra, and lectured in various parts of the world for the British Council.

He was a founder editor with Peter Stigant, Roger Richardson and Peter Brooker of the internationally known journal *Literature and History*, the first issue of which came out in March 1975. The initial editorial preface explained that the journal had been 'founded to meet a need, in universities and polytechnics, for self-examination within history and literary studies and for dialogue between them'. Now in its third series, *Literature and History* is currently published by Manchester University Press. A measure of Peter Widdowson's commitment to English in a range of institutions can be seen in the list of places where he continued to hold External Examining appointments virtually until the time of his retirement. These included the following: the University of Hertfordshire; King Alfred's College, Winchester; the University of Central Lancashire; the University of Sussex; the University of Salford; the University of Leicester; Falmouth College of Arts; the University of Sussex; and the University of Essex. He also examined upwards of 20 doctoral theses.

Peter's contribution to the subject will be remembered most widely by generations of people from their encounters with him as a teacher. As several of the contributors to the 'Personalia' section of this book note, he had a lasting impact on countless undergraduate students. He was hugely successful as a research degree supervisor, and it is significant that this volume includes material from his former doctoral students, representing the many – including one of the co-editors of this volume – who went on from studying with Peter to gain appointments in the profession that he loved.

Peter's influence has been felt both on a personal level and in terms of his scholarly legacy. His principal areas of academic interest were nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction (especially contemporary fiction), modernism, Thomas Hardy, literature in history, and contemporary theoretical developments and the current state of 'English Studies'. Among his publications are the following: *E. M. Forster's Howards End: Fiction as History* (Sussex University Press, 1976); (ed.) *Re-Reading English* (Methuen, 1982); (ed.) *Popular Fictions: Essays in Literature and History* (Methuen, 1986); *Hardy in History: A Study in*

Literary Sociology (Routledge, 1989); (ed.) *D. H. Lawrence: A Critical Reader* (Longman, 1992); (ed.) *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A New Casebook* (Macmillan, 1993); (with Raman Selden) *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (3rd edn, Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993 and revised 4th edn with Peter Brooker, 1997); *A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory* (ed. with Peter Brooker; Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996); a critical edition of *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poetry and Non-Fictional Prose* (Macmillan, 1996); *Thomas Hardy* (Northcote House/British Council, 'Writers and Their Work' series, 1996); a volume of his own essays, *On Thomas Hardy: Late Essays and Earlier* (Macmillan, 1998); *Literature* (Routledge: 'New Critical Idiom', 1999); an essay, 'Thomas Hardy and Critical Theory', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge University Press, 1999, ed. Dale Kramer); and an introduction and notes for a reprinting of Patrick Hamilton's 1939 novel, *Impromptu in Moribundia* (Trent Editions, Nottingham, 1999).

Among many other essays in books and journals, three professorial lectures appeared as 'Terrorism and Literary Studies' (*Textual Practice*, 1988, 2:1); 'New-stories: Fiction, History and the Modern World' (*Critical Survey*, 1995, 7:1) and 'Editing Readers: The Craft of Literary Studies in the 1990s' (*English*, 1996, 45:182). Later publications included a special issue of *Critical Survey*, 'Poetry in English, 1800–2000', guest-edited by Peter Widdowson in honour of John Lucas (2000); an essay on Graham Swift in *Literature in Context* (ed. Rick Rylance and Judy Simons, Palgrave, 2001); and an article on Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise* in the *Journal of American Studies*, 35 (2001), 2, 313–35. Both his co-edited collection of essays, *Thomas Hardy and Contemporary Literary Studies* (with Tim Dolin; Palgrave – including a long essay by Widdowson on film versions of Hardy) and *The Palgrave Guide to English Literature and Its Contexts, 1500–2000* (a work in timeline form containing individual entries on history, politics, culture and literature for every year since 1500) were published in the spring of 2004, and the revised 5th edition of Selden/Brooker/Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* in 2005.

'Thomas Hardy Goes Way Down East', an essay on early silent film versions of Hardy's fiction for the volume *Thomas Hardy on Screen*, edited by Terence Wright, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2006, and an essay on 'Contemporary Re-visionary Fiction' appeared in the summer issue of *Textual Practice* the same year. His volume on *Graham Swift* for the 'Writers and Their Work' series (Northcote House) was also published in 2006, as was his revised 2nd edition of *Thomas Hardy* for the same series. An essay on Hardy's short fiction and the late-Victorian literary market-place appears in the *Blackwell Companion to Thomas Hardy* (ed. Keith Wilson, 2009).

Over the course of his long career Peter was always busy. He always worked with a 'clean' desk rather than in the mess characteristic of many academics, but despite appearances there were always many projects being finished, underway or being planned, neatly arranged in folders or cabinets. Yet despite these commitments and his dedication to teaching and other university work, there

was also always time in Peter's professional life for the day-to-day traffic of humanity, the 'buzz' (as he once put it) of the institution itself. Peter was on hand to help colleagues with advice and wisdom. In times of trouble he was a comforting but endlessly rational figure in any department, with a prodigious capacity to recall the details of the events in people's lives. He would remember what you said you were doing for the weekend, as well as what you were working on, or if your great aunt was sick. He would also want to tell you about his adventures on holiday or the latest domestic project or a film that he had seen. His enthusiasms were varied, but only seemed meaningful to him once shared with friends and colleagues, and the common ingredient was Peter's humour. In the later years of his career, when he was faced with a series of medical challenges, it would be only minutes before narratives that to most people would bring despair and sonority, were turned into a joke which in turn would become an anecdote.

In spite of his prolific academic accomplishments, Peter has always been able to find time to enjoy other areas of his life – time with his family (children, Patrick, Emily and Tom, grandchildren, Daisy and Ruby, and his wife Jane), pursuits such as home-renovation, walking, gardening and travel, and sharing good food and wine in the company of close friends. Jane has remarked that Peter could have had an alternative career as a football commentator. In 2008 and 2009 he was appointed to an Honorary Fellowship and Emeritus Chair at the University of Gloucestershire, nominations for which came from his colleagues in the Department of Humanities. These, like this book, are the more-than-willing testaments to an inspirational scholar, colleague, mentor and friend.