

## As others see us...

### Distinguished educator makes some hard-hitting comments

**R**ICHARD HOGGART has just reviewed W J West's book, *The Strange Rise of Semi-Literate England: The Dissolution of the Libraries* (Duckworth, 1991) in the *LA Record* for January 1992. Two correspondents independently brought this review to *inCite's* attention.

In his review, Hoggart notes that in this period of unusually rapid cultural change, the public libraries are both one of the main indicators of that change and among its prominent casualties. We know by rote (says Hoggart) the more obvious odds against them: shortage of money and so the closing-down of some libraries and shorter opening hours for very many others; and the wholesale disposal of books, often on the queerest of principles or prejudices.

Hoggart believes that three forces are bringing about the libraries' plight and, of those, the shortage of funds, though the most obvious, is the least important. The second, especially in relation to both disposals and purchasing policy, is the application by librarians and library committees of ill-thought-through notions in place of careful consideration of the profession's social duties. Hoggart says that West's book pays attention to these two obstacles but largely omits the third and most important: the populism which often does duty for democratic thinking in the library service (and in many other places) and which is itself a by-product of the relativism—the refusal to make judgements of

value—which runs through open commercial societies like dry rot through once sound timber.

Many librarians are, as always, hugely devoted. But most are at best muddled as to their own purposes, and unable to break clear of the present fog of misconceptions. They take refuge in what they mistakenly assume to be a value-free absorption in information technology, laced with that prevailing populism. Hoggart tells us that West's book has many horror quotations of this kind. Some librarians, he says, become aggressive before such criticisms, usually in terms which show just how confused they are; we are all most angry when most vulnerably under question.

In Hoggart's considerable file on all this, the apparently most confident but actually most insecurely self-defensive letter is from a director of library services for a very prosperous county. The least literate of the antagonistic letters—a pair of them—came from students at a college of librarianship. Before they could effectively engage in public debate about their chosen profession they needed a more adequate introduction to the nature of this culture and a reasonable semantic and logical training. It seemed they were getting neither.

When a writer of Hoggart's stature makes sweeping comments like these, we have to sit up and take notice. He was talking about conditions in Britain, but would his analysis be valid here? Can we learn from it? What do you think? □

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Entries close 15 December 1992.

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