

# Final report on Middlebrow: A Transatlantic Interdisciplinary Research Network

## Themes explored

'Middlebrow' is a contested and provocative term, which continues to be widely used and debated. In the early-to-mid twentieth century, it referred to the art and culture which lay between high modernism and popular culture, and to tastes and lifestyle choices associated with the middle class. It also referred to aspiration and self-improvement, and to a set of institutions such as book clubs and adult education programmes which provided access to 'cultural capital'.

Hierarchies of culture, class and taste represent an increasingly important research theme in literary, historical and cultural studies, but until the Network was established, our understanding of these subjects was hampered by a lack of mechanisms for cross-disciplinary collaboration. This is a serious problem, since middlebrow culture can only be fully understood by bringing together (as we have done) perspectives from social and cultural history with critical analysis of literature, film, and the media. The tensions surrounding middlebrow are related to discourses of class and taste which range across the whole area of lifestyle choices and cultural consumption, from interiors, gardens, design and fashion to preferences in music, film and books.

Our events, publications and website have stimulated comparison not only across disciplines but across national boundaries. We have encouraged comparative transatlantic enquiry and expanded study of middlebrow culture into new national and colonial contexts, seeking to explore the inflection of social and cultural capital by categories such as class, gender, and nation.

There is real variety across the publications and presentations which have arisen from the Network, particularly in terms of the range of artists, texts, and artefacts used as case studies. But there are also clear overarching themes, and key ideas which are explored repeatedly in relationship to middlebrow. Examples include bohemianism, domesticity, empire, nation, and sophistication. In terms of modes of cultural transmission, broadcasting and print culture have received particular emphasis, but popular entertainment, music, drama, film, product design and architecture have also been extensively explored. An important aspect of the Middlebrow Network project is the investigation of the material and economic dimensions of middlebrow culture, and the nature of middlebrow audiences.

The study of 'the middlebrow' matters because it illuminates society and culture in the earlier 20th century, and helps us understand the relationship between elite, popular and intermediate cultures. It matters especially now because the emergence of middlebrow cultural products in the decades following the First World War was, primarily, a result of technical innovations in printing, distribution, recording, and broadcasting. Understanding these phenomenon can illuminate trends in our own time, as the internet has resulted in a vast renaissance of textual production and also created new channels for the transmission of images, broadcast programmes, and films. The internet has also generated new audiences and interpretive communities which echo the middlebrow cultural formations of the early twentieth century. Examples include electronic book clubs, new bohemian web magazines such as [thesmartset.com](http://thesmartset.com) or [feathertale.com](http://feathertale.com), and diaries and blogs which recall the Mass Observation project.

## **Description of Network activities**

Before the establishment of the Middlebrow Network, the research field was unstructured, with no regular conferences or publications, no professional association, and no organised web presence. There were no formal mechanisms for interdisciplinary collaboration, something which is crucial to advancing understanding in this area. The Network has established the required structure and facilitated collaboration via the following activities:

### Website and database

The Network website [www.middlebrow-network.com](http://www.middlebrow-network.com) is now the first item listed when 'middlebrow' is entered into Yahoo (second with Bing, third with Google). It has received over 63,000 hits (successful requests for pages) since its launch in November 2008. This reveals the high online profile of the Network and its impact within and beyond the academy. The site is noted or linked to on pages created by non-academic readers, including the Great War Fiction blog, the JB Priestley Society, the collectors' site OldMagazines.com, and the Kulturecafe Facebook group.

The website includes:

- an annotated bibliography of primary and secondary sources, currently including 260 items;
- a 'Resources' page, providing extensive lists of links to relevant archives, databases, scholarly associations, journals and publishers;
- an 'Events' page giving full details of past and future Network events (including downloadable presentations) as well as announcing events organised outside the Network;
- a 'Definitions' page with key quotations;
- links to the full text of articles published in our 'Working Papers on the Web' special issue;
- links to discussions of middlebrow culture in the media;
- an interactive database of members, which may be searched by name or keyword, and can also generate a list of all members.

For each Network member, the database includes fields for contact details, affiliation, research interests, research keywords, and publications. It also includes a field for areas in which PhD supervision is offered: this enables prospective doctoral students to identify supervisors. There are currently 115 members listed. New members can add themselves to the database (subject to review by the project team) and thereby join the mailing list. They can also log in to edit their profiles.

### Mailing list

We use our email list to circulate information on events and publications, calls for papers, requests for collaborators and research enquiries. Network Digests are sent out about twice per month and at present, 200 members located across Europe and North America receive the emails.

### Conference organising

The first Network conference was held at the Humanities Research Institute, University of Sheffield on 4 July 2008, hosted by one of the core members, the historian Dr Adrian Bingham. Entitled 'Historicising the Middlebrow'. It attracted 30 delegates from the UK, US, Hong Kong, Canada and Belgium; among them 6 PhD students. Erica Brown and I contributed to the organisation, and the Network subsidised the event, to keep registration costs modest.

The second Network conference, 'Middlebrow Cultures', was held at the University of Strathclyde on 14 and 15 July 2009. It was organised by Erica Brown and myself. It attracted 57 delegates from the US (12), Canada (3), Germany (2), Hong Kong (1), Australia (1), Belgium (1) and the UK. Among them were representatives from the British Library and the Sybil Campbell Library, as well as 9 PhD students. The conference was organised entirely in plenary or dual-strand sessions, and all refreshments and evening social events were included in the price. The purpose of this was to keep everyone together, and this was extremely effective as all delegates heard about two-thirds of the full set of panels, and had ample opportunity for informal discussion. Plenary speakers were Professors Ann Ardis (Delaware) and Phyllis Lassner (Northwestern).

### Sponsored conference sessions

The Network proposed and sponsored panels, seminars and presentations at 4 North American conferences:

- The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (Toronto, 2009) - 3 panels, 9 participants
- Modernist Studies Association (Montreal, 2009) – one panel with 3 participants, one seminar with 16 participants
- F Scott Fitzgerald Society (Baltimore, 2009) – one plenary presentation
- The Space Between (Portland, 2010) – one presentation within a panel

In addition, we organised and sponsored a 'strand' on Middlebrow at the Glasgow School of Art annual study day (2010), with two visiting speakers from the fields of literary and film studies.

### Publications

We have edited two special journal issues and one book.

- Volume 11 of *Working Papers on the Web* (2008), entitled 'Investigating the Middlebrow', ed. Erica Brown

This contains 5 essays by British and Australian Network members, focusing on middlebrow reading and literary genres. The issue is freely accessible, both via the WPW homepage and via the Network site, and this has resulted in wide citation of these essays.

- *Middlebrow Matters: Literary Cultures and the Battle of the Brows*, ed Mary Grover and Erica Brown (complete and under review at Palgrave).

The volume includes 14 essays by British, French, American and Canadian network members. They were commissioned (in consultation with Faye Hammill) to examine the ways in which tastes dismissed as 'middlebrow' were formed, complicated and challenged. The collection is distinctive in the transatlantic scope of its subject matter, and essays explore how the term was understood in particular geographical and temporal contexts. They also examine theoretical and pedagogical approaches.

- Issue 6.1 of *Modernist Cultures* (Spring 2011), entitled "The Middlebrow - With or Without Modernism", ed. Sophie Blanch and Melissa Sullivan.

This contains articles based on some of the best papers presented at the 2009 Middlebrow Network conference, including contributions by both keynote speakers, together with additional articles invited by the editors, in consultation with Faye Hammill.

## Development of research resources

- Dr Mary Grover and Professor Chris Hopkins have established a Special Collection, 'Readerships and Literary Cultures 1880-1950', at Sheffield Hallam University. The archive is freely accessible to members of the public. Its purpose is to collect out-of-print popular fiction in early, though not necessarily first, editions. It gathers fiction which may no longer be preserved in public libraries, sourcing some of it from personal collections and donations, as well as purchases from second-hand dealers. A full list of the archive's contents has been made available on the MN website, as a reference source. It currently includes 513 novels by 177 authors (e.g. Warwick Deeping, Phyllis Bottome, William Pett Ridge, EH Young). SHU Library is acquiring additional relevant secondary works, and these will also be included in the Special Collection catalogue. Undergraduates and postgraduates at Hallam are being encouraged to work on the collection, for example in their dissertations.
- Our website itself is recognised as a research resource, because it includes pages with definitions as well as links to academic and media articles and a bibliography. Scholarly publications have now started to cite the site directly. For instance, Liesl Olson's "'An invincible force meets an immovable object': Gertrude Stein comes to Chicago, *Modernism/modernity* 17.2 (April 2010) includes this footnote: "See The Middlebrow Network for how the term "middlebrow" has developed historically as well as its association with a female readership. <<http://research.shu.ac.uk/middlebrow-network/>> (last accessed on February 25, 2010)" (p. 359).
- We held a special session on resources at the Middlebrow Cultures conference, which was enthusiastically received. The conference itself provided the basis for an enduring online resource: the MN website includes slides and handouts from the Resources sessions and from seven selected presentations, as well as the full programme and all abstracts.

## **Overview of the people and organisations involved**

The Network is managed by Dr Faye Hammill, School of Humanities, University of Strathclyde (PI), in collaboration with Ms Erica Brown, doctoral candidate in English, Sheffield Hallam University (administrator) and Dr Mary Grover, Department of English, Sheffield Hallam University. They work closely with a core group of academics in the UK and US, and an advisory board which includes non-academic members:

### Core Group

Professor Ann Ardis, English, University of Delaware, US

Dr Adrian Bingham, History, University of Sheffield, UK

Dr Sophie Blanch, English, University of Surrey, UK

Professor Janet Casey, American Studies, Skidmore College, US

Dr Sarah Edwards, English, University of Strathclyde, UK

Dr Sharon Hamilton, Government of Canada / Archives & International University, Vienna

Professor Chris Hopkins, English, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Dr John Howland, Visual and Performing Arts, Rutgers University, US

Dr Mark Jancovich, Film, University of East Anglia, UK

Professor Dan LeMahieu, History, Lake Forest College, US

Dr Melissa Sullivan, English, Rosemount College, US

Dr Jonathan Wild, Centre for the History of the Book, Edinburgh University, UK

Dr Bruce Peter, Historical and Critical Studies, Glasgow School of Art, UK

Dr Jayne Waterman, English, Ashland University, US

### Advisory Board

Dr John Baxendale, History, Sheffield Hallam University, UK  
Dr Nicola Beauman, Persephone Books, London  
Professor Kristin Bluemel, English, Monmouth University, UK  
Dr Chiara Briganti, Arcadia University, US  
Dr Jenny Doctor, Music, University of York, UK  
Professor Rita Felski, Comparative Literature/Cultural Studies, University of Virginia, US  
Dr Stephanie Spencer, Sybil Campbell Collection Steering Committee, UK  
Dr Catherine Horwood, Bedford Centre for the History of Women, Royal Holloway, UK  
Professor Nicola Humble, English, Roehampton University  
Dr Karen Leick, English, Ohio State University  
Professor Alison Light, Raphael Samuel History Centre, University of East London, UK  
Professor Kathy Mezei, English, Simon Fraser University, Canada  
Dr Lawrence Napper, Film, King's College, London, UK  
Dr Stephanie Newell, English, University of Sussex, UK  
Dr Sian Nicholas, History, University of Aberystwyth  
Dr Jean Petrovic, British Library  
Brett Popplewell, journalist and editor, Toronto  
Professor Joan Shelley Rubin, History, University of Rochester  
Dorothy Sheridan, Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex

Core and advisory members of the network have taken roles such as: co-editing Network publications; organising or presenting in our sponsored panels at North American conferences; putting together panels and sessions for our UK conferences; advising on content for the website.

A further group of academics and non-academic participants have attended and presented at our conferences, joined our mailing list and added their details and specialisms to our database. The Network aims to facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration, and members include researchers in the disciplines of English, book history, cultural history, film and theatre studies, history of art and design, music, fashion and modern languages, as well as library professionals, archivists, publishers and editors. We also aim to encourage international partnerships. The Network was primarily designed to foster UK-US collaboration, but we now have members in Canada, Germany, Australia, Belgium, France, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Members of our core group have worked closely together in organising events and co-editing publications - e.g. Melissa Sullivan (US) and Sophie Blanch (UK) are co-editing the *Modernist Cultures* special issue, and each of our MSA/SHARP panels included speakers from both the UK and North America.

A great many productive interactions have taken place because of the Network, and it has been of especial benefit to graduate students. Shane Malhotra, a PhD student who attended the Strathclyde conference, wrote: 'As well as the pleasure of meeting and chatting with so many interesting people and listening to various papers which informed and challenged me in different directions, I was able to network and make specific contacts on behalf of at least five of my OU English PhD colleagues.' We have responded to several enquiries from students looking for PhD places. PhD students contributed to the organisation of both our conferences, and the MSA seminar included 5 PhD candidates. The 3 publications each include a contributions from a graduate student. Our 'resources' webpage and bibliography provide essential material for students starting new projects.

## Key advances in understanding of the thematic area

In terms of shifts in thinking about middlebrow, we have identified the following key changes which have been effected or consolidated through the Network's events and publications:

- a move away from the notion of a middlebrow genre or style and towards an understanding of middlebrow as a mode of production and reception. The notion that some texts/images/music/artefacts possess formal qualities which make them inherently middlebrow is very problematic, and we are increasingly talking in terms of the audiences and institutions of middlebrow culture, rather than about 'middlebrow novels' or 'middlebrow art'.
- talking about style itself in a new way. Rather than considering 'middlebrow' as a stylistic category analogous to 'modernist', we increasingly think in terms of the way particular narrative or representational styles determine the categorisation and evaluation of works of art. For instance, why are realism, humour, irony and decorative design associated with the middlebrow, and where does that leave 'modernists' who also use these modes?
- an increasingly comparative approach. One of the key aims of the Network was to further transatlantic comparisons and counteract the previous earlier tendency to treat British and North American middlebrow cultures as entirely separate. But we have moved far beyond this initial remit, in that presentations and publications arising from the project work across national boundaries, consider countries other than Britain and America, and explore colonial middlebrow. Several of our conference panels exemplified comparative study: for instance, one at MSA, The Middlebrow Lexicon, included papers on American, English and Australian-born authors (Anita Loos, Noel Coward and Elizabeth von Arnim). There is a paper on African writing in one of the special journal issues, while the *Middlebrow Matters* collection is explicitly structured as a transatlantic comparison. The Strathclyde conference offered panels on Welsh literary cultures, colonial fiction and Canadian middlebrow. (Indeed, Canadian academics, and Canadian topics, have become increasingly important within the Network. Since my own background is in Canadian studies, I have been able to draw the different strands of my work together by interactions with Network members such as Rifkind, M. Smith and Slemon.)
- We have strongly encouraged interdisciplinary thinking and cross-disciplinary collaboration. At the start, the group designing the Network was weighted in favour of literary scholars, but we soon brought specialists in art, music, film and social history into our Core Group and Advisory Board. We were able to access new constituencies of researchers through these groups, and have extended discussion of middlebrow into areas where it has not traditionally been a key term (e.g. design, modern languages, publishing history). Below are two email comments received after our 2009 conference, which illustrate our contribution to interdisciplinary thinking:

Dr Phil Ford, who presented in the panel on jazz, commented: 'the papers were great and I was very grateful for the opportunity the conference gave me to work out some ideas that would have been hard to present in a specifically musicological setting.'

Professor Stephen Slemon wrote: 'My goal in coming was to find some other ways - other than the ones I know, that is - for approaching "the space between" orthodox designations of social identity, and that really happened. One of the outstanding moments, for me, was listening to that guy in the archive session talk about what it meant to research home video use, and listening to him working through the genuine problems in understanding gender distribution in that practice.'

## **Future topics for investigation; future projects and plans**

### Plans for the Network itself

- We are organising a joint conference with The Space Between, an American society for the study of literature and culture between the wars. The Space Between has held annual conferences since 1997; this will be their first joint event. It will be in Montreal, 16-18 June 2011, and titled: "The Battle of the Brows: Cultural Distinctions in the Space Between, 1914-1945".
- We have sufficient support from Strathclyde to enable us to maintain the Network website and the mailing list for a further year without funding.
- We are exploring approaches to future funding, and looking at the way similar organisations are financed (e.g. Feminist and Women's Studies Association; Katherine Mansfield Society). We may transform the Network into a membership organisation: this would involve a small annual fee for access to mailouts and future conferences, but the website would remain freely accessible. Our American partners are also investigating funding options from US sources.

### Future publications

Two network members, Ann Rea and Kate Macdonald, have launched a book series focussing on middlebrow. [http://www.pickeringchatto.com/series/literary\\_texts\\_and\\_the\\_popular\\_marketplace](http://www.pickeringchatto.com/series/literary_texts_and_the_popular_marketplace) Their advisory board is composed of 12 members of the Network.

### Applications submitted for funded projects

Dr Grover and Professor Hopkins, in collaboration with Sheffield City Libraries, have now applied for Heritage Lottery Funding for an oral history project on the reading histories of the generation which came to maturity following WWII. It emerges from the intellectual concerns fostered by the Network, and aims to provide benefits for the Sheffield community, conserve their memories for future generations, and encourage links between the University and the city.

I have developed a collaborative research project, 'Magazines, Travel and Middlebrow Culture in Canada, 1925-1960' with Dr Michelle Smith. Dr Smith discovered my work, which is close to hers in theme, via the Network website. We submitted a standard research grant application to the AHRC which was graded 6 but unfunded in March 2010, and resubmitted in August. The project is a collaboration with 2 partners: Library and Archives Canada and the Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory, a major IT infrastructure initiative. Our research focuses on a range of mainstream anglophone and francophone magazines held by LAC, titles which were influential taste-makers and circulated fantasies of cosmopolitanism and upward mobility.

### Funded project already launched

In 2009 I was a co-applicant on a successful ESRC seminar series application, 'Nostalgia in the 21st Century'. This is a collaboration between Marketing and English Studies at Strathclyde. I was invited to participate because of the Middlebrow Network, as there are clear connections between middlebrow and nostalgia, and many synergies are developing between the two projects. I organised the second of 6 seminars, on Print Culture (April 2010), and this included a presentation on middlebrow and nostalgia in the context of publishing.

### Presentations by the PI

As a result of the high profile of the Network and its associated projects, I have been invited to give presentations on my work on middlebrow as a guest speaker in seminar series at other universities. Papers have already been presented at McGill, Sheffield Hallam, Cardiff and Liverpool Universities; upcoming presentations are at Glasgow, Newcastle, Nottingham, the Glasgow School of Art, and (as keynote) the Eccles Centre for American Studies, British Library.

## **Appendix: comments from Network members**

We have monitored our success in achieving our aims through the responses of Network participants. From a large quantity of email received, I excerpt the following, all received following the 2009 conference. They exemplify the types of influence the Network has on individual members:

DR JOHN HOWLAND (Visual and Performing Arts, Rutgers University): I very much enjoyed the conference, and it made me aware of a wide range of exciting work on class hierarchy topics. I very much hope that the Network can continue to expand and thrive--in terms of its present importance in literary studies, in its growing role in fostering cross-Atlantic scholarly dialogue, and in terms of our non-literature (and non-music) friends creating a growing interest in class-hierarchy discourses and middlebrow studies in their respective disciplines. I was very pleased to meet people from film studies, graphic design history, theater history, and other disciplines.

DR ANOUK LANG (American & Canadian Studies, University of Birmingham): I had a really wonderful time at the conference - thank you to you, and Mary & Erica, for such a friendly and well-organised and generally excellent occasion. As I said to you, it was really helpful to hear people thinking about mid-century (& contemporary) texts & reception contexts in terms of the theoretical concepts that have been developed by scholars of the middlebrow, so even though I felt out of my depth, it was still very illuminating. I need to rethink the way Canada Reads works in contemporary Canadian society, for instance! The Britannia music hall was a real highlight - so amazing it's lasted from the C19th - it was like walking into a piece of history. I've been telling people about it and one theatre prof who knew Glasgow really well had no idea it was even there.

DR CLAIRE DREWERY (English, Sheffield Hallam): I found the conference very useful, as having only 'found' the network so recently it's given me a much better understanding of the scope of the work you are doing. I only wish I'd been in it from the beginning! As soon as my interminable monograph is complete, I'm going to give serious thought to extending my research in this direction, & now have a much better idea of how to do that. I thought you and Erica put on a really well-organised conference. Not only were the papers of a very high standard but the whole atmosphere was relaxing, mutually supportive and enjoyable.

DR NICK HUBBLE (Brunel): It was a pleasure to come to the conference and there is much to digest. It seems to be an area which is getting more exciting the more I think about it.

DR STEPHANIE SPENCER (Sybil Campbell Collection / University of Winchester): Thank you very much for making me feel so welcome at the middlebrow conference. I have come away with some fresh perspectives on what I do - it's really good to get a different angle on things.

PROFESSOR PHYLLIS LASSNER (Northwestern): I'm just back from London and the XXX conference. I couldn't help but compare it to the Middlebrow conference. Although XX, who organized the conference, is a great scholar and very nice person, the general atmosphere was sooo cold and unfriendly and filled with people who were full of themselves. Compared to your conference, where there was so much sharing of ideas and great collegiality, in London, everyone seemed to be so tight lipped and even the structure of the conference highlighted how innovative yours was.

MR ANDY SIMONS (British Library): The papers were wonderful and my fingers are sore from all the notes. I learned rather a lot at the conference, but, with my non-academic starting point regarding fiction, that's not surprising. I've now got a list of books to buy. And I've come back to work with a few enquiries to fulfil; I seem to live to help others with their research.

**Dr Faye Hammill, Principal Investigator, University of Strathclyde**