When I was at grammar school in the 1960s one of the teachers ran a club, ‘The Philistines’, for the sixth form. With the explicit intention of civilising us, the optional and extra-curricular club took us to the theatre, ballet and art galleries which were then broadly agreed to be ‘culture’. I guess I first came across ‘culture’ as a political idea rather than an afterschool activity when, at about the same time, I read Anthony Crosland’s *Future of Socialism* and grappled with his discussion of individual liberty and his contention that a gain in social justice would not lead to a cultural loss.¹ Now, over fifty years since its first publication, it is clear to see Crosland’s influence on the New Labour project and equally clear, in his concluding socialist vision, to see an elision of culture and what many, then and now, would see as a middle class life style:

We need not only higher exports and old-age pensions, but more open-air cafes, brighter and gayer streets at night, later closing-hours for public houses, more local repertory theatres, better and more hospitable hoteliers and restaurateurs, brighter and cleaner eating-houses, more riverside cafes, more pleasure-gardens on the Battersea model, more murals and pictures in public places, better designs for furniture and pottery and women’s clothes, statues in the centre of new housing-estates, better designed street-lamps and telephone kiosks, and so on *ad infinitum* (pp. 402-3).

Much of his polemic was concerned with the public sponsorship of culture and the arts that takes state responsibility well beyond the practical
provision of education and welfare and in the twenty-first century his socialist aspiration has become an expectation and, indeed, a demand as was made clear by Liz Forgan on January 15th 2013 when she left her position as the Chair of the Arts Council. She was widely reported to have expressed the view, in the context of government cuts, that the arts are a state service that should be actively promoted through the school curriculum. She was echoing the report of the 2009 Cultural and Learning Consortium (now progressed as the Cultural Learning Alliance and then as now with Arts Council representatives) whose first of ten key recommendations concerned the role of the state:

Central government and its agencies should recognise and promote cultural learning as a key element within the curriculum; as of core value in cross-curricular learning; and as the best way to fulfil the commitment to universal cultural entitlement for all children and young people, the Every Child Matters/Youth Matters vision and the Children’s Plan.²

Remarkably quickly ‘culture’ has become a somewhat ill-defined component of the curriculum to be transmitted explicitly in schools. My first professional encounter with a specific rather than implicit link between culture and education was in the early eighties when I was the Head of a large London comprehensive school and actively involved with the attempts by the then DES and my LEA to promote multicultural education. Courses and day-schools considered the languages, history, social structures and practices of the ethnic groups in the borough’s schools (in my case largely Afro-Caribbean and Greek Cypriot) and discussed how the curriculum could reflect and celebrate these differences. Powered by the best of motives to shift ‘culture’ from aesthetics to ethics (to paraphrase the ideas of Langston Hughes) the outcome was never the less sometimes confrontational or, at least oppositional: the indigenous culture was assumed to be monolithic yet, while often condemned, was largely unexplored. In practice the curriculum content was little changed and the tangible outcomes were in school organisation, teaching style, discipline and pastoral care and I became involved, for example, in NFER research that explored whether learning in setted, streamed or mixed ability classes best served different cultural groups. The debate about culture and the curriculum then shifted from race to gender and became engaged with the process of achieving equality of opportunity without a stringent analysis of what, in cultural terms, that opportunity might be. Implicit in these shifts was a
redefinition of ‘culture’ as, to quote Hobsbawm, ‘the critically evaluative bourgeois sense of the word [gave] way to “culture” in the purely descriptive anthropological sense.’ Shakespeare, perceived by some as a representative of a sexist, racist, white, male elite, sat uncomfortably in these movements and I recall a major row when Shakespeare received as much opprobrium as the exam board that set the question ‘Was Richard III as black as he’s painted?’

I use these personal examples partly as a shorthand reminder of the contentious issues that surround ‘culture’—class, politics, race, gender, education, the state—but largely because they are the issues that form the substance of much of the criticism levelled at the work of E.D. Hirsch and that he has found it necessary to address and defend firstly in *Cultural Literacy: what every American needs to know* and subsequently in *The Knowledge Deficit: closing the shocking education gap for American children*. His concern is that despite the huge and often successful efforts made to teach children the mechanics of reading, many disadvantaged young people (particularly those from non-English speaking homes) have their disadvantages reinforced because they lack cultural knowledge to comprehend what they read. Needless to say, such an ostensibly simple idea (despite the support of the clearly presented educational research of the problem that is an impressive feature of both books) has been attacked because of his contention that there can be a national or mainstream or traditional culture (which he is careful to say is not constant), that is valuable to transmit yet doesn’t require the uncritical acceptance of conservative values. Hirsch is equally careful to make a case that cultural competence does not reinforce a dominant monoculture and argues that while a child may be able to decode a passage (i.e., read) she cannot understand it without the ability to infer and ‘fill in the gaps’; to bring knowledge to aid comprehension. He concludes *Cultural Literacy* with a list of 5,000 dates, titles, names and phrases that he believes the culturally literate American should recognise and understand, and so in addition to the social critique—all those issues of class, race, politics and so on—he is condemned for being Gradgrindian, for focusing on facts rather than skills. His ideas crossed the Atlantic some years ago but have only recently come to public attention.

A couple of months after his appointment as Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove gave verbal evidence to parliament’s Education Committee and expressed his concern that, ‘In effect, rich thick kids do better than poor clever children, and when they arrive at school, the situation as they go through gets worse.’ His reference was to research
by Leon Feinstein at the Institute of Education but it’s the same argument that underpins Hirsch’s work. More recently, as Gove has announced plans for curriculum reform that will have a greater focus on knowledge than skills, the press and media have drawn attention to the Hirsch influence, to ‘Cultural Literacy’ and his list, and a polarity has developed with forcibly expressed opinions. I’m reminded of the blunt observation of one of the most intimidating headteachers in literature, Miss Mackay in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie: ‘Culture cannot compensate for the lack of hard knowledge’.6 And the headline grabbing sound-bite ‘The pub quiz curriculum’ that was the NUT’s response to Gove’s proposed history curriculum is an equally blunt reaction (if ignorant of what many would regard as a handy life skill). This points, in part, to the enduring difficulties surrounding a definition of culture. For some it remains the characteristics and values of the birth group or community; while for others it implies a competence or knowledge that goes beyond this boundary. Both are open to charges of prescription, exclusivity and elitism. The terms of the debate are fluid; culture is a site of meaning contested politically, educationally and socially with a growing terminology (cultural meaning, cultural capitalism, cultural competence, cultural curriculum, cultural value and so on) that is equally contentious. But rather than enter the argument (other than to comment that proponents of a cultural curriculum tend to privilege the arts over, say, languages or science and to promote personal experience and active learning) it is worth noting the areas of consensus. There is agreement that ‘culture’ is acquired rather than inherent and can therefore be taught and learned. The acquisition of culture is perceived to be of benefit to the individual but is of equal importance (and this is true for commentators on both the left and right) for its economic value and benefit to society. Hirsch’s conclusion to Cultural Literacy makes this explicit:

I hope that in our future debates about the extensive curriculum, the participants will keep clearly in view the high stakes involved in their deliberations: breaking the cycle of illiteracy for deprived children; raising the living standard of families who have been illiterate; making our country more competitive in international markets; achieving greater social justice; enabling all citizens to participate in the political process; bringing us closer to the Ciceronian ideal of universal public discourse—in short, achieving fundamental goals of the Founders at the birth of the republic. (p.145)
The purpose of this brief paper is neither to endorse nor condemn Hirsch’s purpose and vision (nor, indeed that of Crosland, Gove or the Cultural Learning Alliance) but to look pragmatically at how part of his solution might translate to the UK. The bulk of his volumes is devoted to evidence and educational theory, practice and research into attainment and reading skill but it is his practical examples that best make his point. Using passages that might be said to represent mainstream US culture—sports reports, history and the Constitution—he demonstrates how ‘cultural illiteracy’ (ignorance of points of reference, contexts or the knowledge deficit) is a barrier to comprehension. One of his most striking examples is an accessible prose passage about the conclusion of the American Civil War that was set to community college students many of whom found it extremely difficult to understand because of their ignorance of the identities of Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee. An English equivalent might be, say, a passage about the Second World War rendered inaccessible through ignorance of the identities of Churchill, Montgomery or Harris; or, to shift to literature, reading Yeats without knowledge of Maud Gonne or Easter 1916; or, to get to the point, aspiring to cultural literacy in Shakespeare without knowledge of the Globe, Blackfriars or James I. Shakespeare’s cultural position is much less contested than in the eighties: he is the National Poet, was the Man of the Millennium, a role secured and reinforced through the funding of theatres and their education departments, the National Curriculum, and the pioneering work of key practitioners, and as a cultural figure is the fashionable subject of recent academic research. There is greater consensus that he is worth knowing.

I set myself a series of questions: what might we expect a culturally literate young person (or adult) to know about Shakespeare? What knowledge is required to be able to converse confidently with others, to recognise reference and allusion, to process contextual information, share vocabulary, or understand key features of content and style? What information will facilitate cultural access and participation, socially, educationally or vocationally? I’m not asking how or when or even why Shakespeare should be taught or assessed but quite simply attempting to identify the key words or phrases, the markers, that indicate cultural competence. This is not the same as the skills required to pass examinations, study a text or engage in literary appreciation but is the knowledge required to access cultural heritage. Some may find the following Hirsch-style list too basic or reductionist but having taught Shakespeare from primary school to post-graduate level I am very aware...
how easy it is to take knowledge for granted and to assume an acquaintance with facts.

Hirsch’s list, headed ‘What Literate Americans Know’, includes scientific terms, geographical names, historical events, dates, famous people and what he calls ‘patriotic lore’ (p.146). It also contains approximately sixty-nine (or one per cent) of entries that could be described as Shakespearian; titles, characters and brief quotations. A prefatory note explains that literature is a special case and points out that information possessed by literate persons does not necessarily indicate knowledge of a text:

Judy Garland and Bert Lahr have fixed our conception of *The Wizard of Oz* more vividly than Frank Baum. Only a small proportion of literate people can name the Shakespeare plays in which Falstaff appears, yet they know who he is. (p.147)

I’ve been mindful of that note in compiling the list that follows so the inclusion of a character or title does not necessarily indicate knowledge of role or play. I found the inclusion of practitioners problematic; few would now argue that a knowledge of Shakespeare on the stage (or film or the new media) is less important than Shakespeare on the page but I suspect there is less consensus about who should be included. Key figures such as David Garrick, Charles Kean, Henry Irving and Ellen Terry have had major roles in the performance—even the survival—of Shakespeare but I decided to confine myself to twentieth and twenty-first century figures.

Hirsch’s list includes quotations (‘There is a tide in the affairs of men,’ ‘This was the noblest Roman of them all’, for example) but I’ve chosen to deal with them separately. As well as needing to ‘know stuff’ the culturally literate person should be able to ‘speak Shakespeare’ and recognise quotation, reference, allusion, lyric, parody, even elements of the Olympic opening ceremony. I don’t mean the sort of speaking that Bernard Levin so famously identified in the much reproduced passage from *Enthusiasms* in 1983 (‘if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger’ and so on), where the phrases are so common and familiar that any awareness of quoting or connection with their author is probably unrecognised and certainly not a conscious signifier. Nor, however, do I mean the sort of pedantic knowledge that can identify ‘I have not slept one wink’ as originating in *Cymbeline* (3.4.103) or know that ‘Mad world! mad kings! mad composition!’ comes from *King John* (2.1.561). I was looking for
quotations that might be used intentionally with a recognition of their Shakespearian origin but the list quickly became unmanageable and I chose to confine myself to perhaps the best known play, Hamlet. I suspect this second list is more contentious but I offer them both to encourage debate and should be grateful for any response.

The lists:

**Shakespeare: what culturally literate English people need to know**

1564—1616 (Shakespeare’s dates)
1603 (the death of Elizabeth I and the accession of James I)
1605 (the Gunpowder Plot)
1623 (the publication of the First Folio)

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*
Act
Actor
Anne Hathaway
Antony
*Antony and Cleopatra*
Ariel

*As You Like It*
Audience
Banquo
Baz Luhrmann
Ben Jonson
Blackfriars
Blank verse
Bottom
Boy actor
Brutus
Caliban
Cast
Character
Christopher Marlowe
Chorus
Cleopatra

Comedy
Cordelia
David Tennant
Desdemona
Epilogue
Folio
Fool
Genre
Ghost
Globe
Hamlet
*Hamlet*
*Henry V*
History
Iago
Iambic pentameter
Ian Mckellen
John Gielgud
Judi Dench
*Julius Caesar*
Katherina / Katherine / Kate
Kenneth Branagh
King James I
*King Lear*
Lady Macbeth
Laurence Olivier
Macbeth
*Macbeth*
Malvolio
Masque
Miranda
For this relief much thanks.
A little more than kin, and less than kind.
O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt.
Frailty, thy name is woman.
In my mind’s eye, Horatio.
He was a man, take him for all in all, / I shall not look upon his like again.
More in sorrow than in anger.
The primrose path of dalliance.
Neither a borrower nor a lender be.
To thine own self be true.
Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.
Murder most foul.
There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
The time is out of joint.
Brevity is the soul of wit.
Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.
Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither.
I am but mad north-north-west.
I know a hawk from a handsaw.
O! What a rogue and peasant slave am I.
The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.
To be or not to be: that is the question ...
Get thee to a nunnery.
The lady doth protest too much, methinks.
A king of shreds and patches.
I must be cruel only to be kind.
How all occasions do inform against me.
When sorrows come they come not in single spies, / But in battalions.
There's rosemary, that's for remembrance.
Alas! poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio.
Sweets to the sweet.
There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will.
There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come ...
A hit, a very palpable hit.
The rest is silence.
Good- night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

References

7. See, for example, the recently completed project funded by the AHRC and led by Prof KateMcLuskie at the Shakespeare Institute, 'Interrogating Cultural Value in 21st Century England: the case of Shakespeare', the forthcoming book based on the project, Shakespeare and Cultural Value (Manchester: Manchester University Press), and the essays in Shakespeare Survey 64: Shakespeare as Cultural Catalyst (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).